The Walled City, Lahore

The achievements described in this article should be compared with the broader intentions outlined in "Blueprint for Conservation in the Third World" (page 19 of this issue). Area conservation to be successful must be a many-sided effort carried out simultaneously. Lahore is a good example of an international agency's helping with the upgrading of the infrastructure and so tackling the problem of urban conservation and its roots. It is also a lesson of what may happen if the action is too one-sided, dangerously postponing those positive conservation measures and incentives which are finally the only means of saving old buildings and putting them to appropriate and viable uses. The Walled City, moreover, is still grossly overcrowded, despite its declining population, and it will be essential for the Lahore Development Authority to put into effect its complementary programme of building a sites-and-services area outside the Walled City for the overflow population.

The Walled City of Lahore, whose founding dates some 800 years ago, is a vital, dynamic part of the economic composition of this northern Pakistani metropolis. Capital of Punjab State in India before the partition creating Pakistan and dividing the region in half (Chandigarh was built as a result, to be the new capital of Indian Punjab), Lahore is a rapidly expanding city with a cultural and political life whose impact is felt throughout the country. Lahore’s historic importance, strategically located on the route of caravans and invasions from the West, is reflected in the number and richness of architectural vestiges from the past, often emanating from a variety of religions or sub-cultures that coexisted or succeeded one another: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, etc. Many of these monuments are situated within the confines of the Old Walled City, and include temples, schools and vast residences, a large number of which have been abandoned (at the time of partition), transformed or allowed to fall into ruin.

Text by Brian Brace Taylor. Plans were reproduced from a folio presentation by BKM Associates (K.K. Mumtaz) and the Metropolitan Planning Wing of the Lahore Development Authority.
Over the centuries the population of the Walled City has dwindled from a peak of 500,000 inhabitants in the 18th century to some 260,000 today. However, there is a continuing commercial vitality in the old district, which has both positive and negative ramifications. The production and exchange of goods encourages people to remain there although the social composition has changed, with the poorest classes replacing the wealthier ones that have moved out of the Old City. Both manufacture and commerce bring the need for adequate, appropriate spaces to meet contemporary needs. On the negative side, this vitality has endangered the existing building stock and especially the monuments.

Kamil Khan Mumtaz, architect in Lahore, was a key figure in a group study undertaken some eight years ago, entitled Lahore Urban Development and Traffic Study, which attempted to uncover and analyse the essential forces at work. The result was a series of proposed strategies to be pursued in upgrading, renovating, and preserving the physical environment and services of the Walled City.

Among the crucial factors contributing to rapid deterioration, and hence impeding long-term physical and economic development, was the water supply, drainage and sewer systems in this congested area, where densities average about 1100 persons per hectare (compared to only 160 persons per hectare elsewhere in Lahore). The Lahore Development Authority (LDA) had neither the funds nor the specialised managerial staff to devote to the upgrading of these basic facilities as a first step towards improving the overall fabric of the inner core, and so at the request of higher authorities in the Pakistan government, the World Bank agreed five years ago to participate in funding such efforts. The first results of this upgrading programme, among the first ever undertaken by the Bank with local authorities for inner city redevelopment, are now in place and being assessed.

The alternative approach to wholesale urban renewal on a large scale has been a piecemeal one focussing on pilot projects which the local development authority could manage easily and which would demonstrate the economic and social advantages to inhabitants of the Walled City. The policy behind these measures for improving the existing infrastructure first, and then making loans available to individuals or groups, is aimed at eliciting ultimately the participation of the people

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Top: Plan of one district in the old city showing the condition of buildings, either dilapidated (solid colour) or vacant/ruined (hatching) premises.

Above: Plan of the existing water supply network of the Walled City in 1979 but which originally was installed by the British in the 19th century. The network of mains also follows quite closely the location of principal regional markets and bazaars.

Below: Fine architecture in the Walled City are often neglected. Photograph: H.U. Khan.
themselves. Several streets within the bazaar were selected by the LDA to test the feasibility and practicality of the Mumtaz group's original proposals. The narrower ones had an open drain down the middle of the street, while wider ones often had drains on both sides and all were mostly unpaved, so that during the rainy season these overflowed, turning the bazaar into a muddy refuse heap — compounding poor health standards with poor circulation of people and goods. Because it was impossible to locate new water mains and sewers below grade, the work entailed placing these at grade level and covering them. There were large amounts of good brick on hand in the rubble of collapsed houses in the Walled City and this was used for paving over the streets, with concrete drains and catchpits for surface refuse. Individual houses were connected up to water mains (reducing the jungle of small exposed pipes) and to the new sewers, so that water closets could subsequently be installed. The LDA found, for example, that this paving work could be accomplished in a matter of hours on a given street; the World Bank financing has allowed them to cover extensive areas.

Upgrading of the street network in the Old City by removing myriad pipes and open drains and by improving the surface has nonetheless left other problems unresolved and even created new ones. Narrow lanes in the bazaar are still encumbered above one's head with a jumble of electrical power lines and transformers, partially hidden or not by the succession of projecting shop awnings of corrugated tin, plastic, etc. mounted at differing levels. In addition, while ease of access for rubbish collection has been obtained, this basic public service is still unreliable in parts of the Old City, and consequently drains become clogged.

Of the new "fall out" effects following the upgrading, two have particularly caught the attention of planners. Better paved surfaces and fewer obstacles have meant an increased presence of motorised vehicles, especially scooters, in the already densely-populated commercial areas. These bring both greater noise levels and threaten bodily harm to unattentive pedestrians. A second effect of improved access has the potential to undermine efforts at conservation and adaptation of the architectural monuments: these properties have gained in economic value, real or potential, for their owners and the previously perceptible trend towards ripping open and then subdividing ground-floor of beautiful old palaces in order to create small new shops along streets has been accelerating recently. The pressures now for conversion of this kind, or for outright demolition to make way for new buildings may have the unforeseen and unfortunate result of hastening the disappearance of a rich cultural heritage unless urgent measures are taken by the authorities: to inventory and to classify structures for preservation as well as for rehabilitation and new uses.

As one evaluates the various outcomes of having begun to touch just a few key elements in an immense, complicated aggregate of interrelated elements, there is growing awareness of the inevitable need to involve the local population in efforts which will include conservation as part and parcel of an integrated urban redevelopment scheme for the Walled City.
The vital economic interests present in the City, and on its immediate periphery, must be convinced and then rallied to such a scheme. Public authorities at all levels in Pakistan, and in Lahore specifically, will need to redefine their policies on behalf of saving Lahore's ancient heritage, by allying their resources with those of local groups of residents to find common objectives or, the losses will be permanent. Outside groups or even international organisations can help, through guidance, incentives, or technical expertise, but only when the economic interests, political will and active participation of the people have coalesced. The World Bank's financial help during this first phase has provided some firm indications of how to go about this, but the next phase will have to include input from the "bottom-up" and not simply from the "top-down".