MUD DWELLINGS IN LAHORE

Hassan Kausar examines the beautiful and functional designs of mud houses in two villages in central Punjab.

Lahore’s diverse urban morphology with its interwoven activities, social groups and mixed land uses has had a pattern of expansion along its north-south axis with planned schemes being filled up by unplanned indigenous communities and squatter clusters.

Approximately 23 per cent of the city’s population live in squatter clusters, mostly in neglected corners or on unviable strips of waste-land along drains and railways. Out of the need for survival the urban poor sometimes come up with brilliant, innovative solutions for construction and for improving their surroundings aesthetically.

With the physical threat of the River Ravi in a low-lying area of the district and no room for expansion in the north, Lahore has been growing steadily towards the south. In the northern parts of Lahore along the Grand Trunk Road from Gujranwala and other roads that radiate from the city, there are several clusters of settlements and different services and commercial activities, amongst which are squatter clusters.

The form of the squatter clusters varies from a cluster of jhuggi (hutments), semi-permanent (with some use of kiln-baked bricks), to mud dwellings in rural Punjabi style. These abadis settlements have become semi-urban in their employment base, with the workers doing many different jobs such as hawkers and rickshaw drivers. Several of these dwellings start by having control on some land for agricultural use, which they often lose due to the tide of urban expansion.

Illustrated here are two squatter clusters – Bilal Nagar and Jabbo – near the River Ravi, both with ‘Bradari’ clan groups and different patterns of employment, but similarities in the aesthetic and functional design of their dwellings.

The people of Bilal Nagar formerly lived in a village called Jamal Nagar in Shahargarh, Sialkot District. After the war between Pakistan and India in 1971, they migrated and took refuge outside Lahore next to a bridge on the Grand Trunk Road, about four kilometres away from the River Ravi. Later they developed a mud village in their own traditional style and having no access to farm land they took up a variety of professions such as hawkers and rickshaw drivers.

Jabbo, (5) named after a Muslim Rajpoot prince, comprises a group of nine families living next to a floodable area near the River Ravi, regularly reconstructing their houses. With access to land and water they have survived by producing agricultural goods, such as sugar cane, rice and maize and by selling milk in the nearby areas. Another source of income is an illegal fee which they charge for truck-loads of sand near their dwellings.

Attitudes differ in the two settlements. The people of Bilal Nagar with their unavoidable contact with the urban dwellers are more approachable and humble, often discussing their problems and asking for help as they are aware of their dependence on the city people. By contrast, the Jabbo inhabitants have a more secluded, agricultural existence and are consequently more self-sufficient and proud.

These mud dwellings in urban fringes or offshoots of the city are an extension of the rural villages forming 40.64 per cent of the entire building stock of Pakistan. On the whole, the vernacular architectural tradition of Pakistan takes a variety of forms, techniques and materials according to its varying climates.

In the riverine plains of Punjab with extremes of hot-dry and hot-humid weather, earth is the most easily available building material. Thick walls are built, due to their insulating qualities, and timber is reserved for the roof structure. Openings are usually kept to a minimum to reduce heat gains.

The mud dwellings of Bilal Nagar and especially Jabbo, with their molecular settlement pattern and use of vegetation in most courtyard houses blend beautifully with the landscape. The spatial organization of the dwellings is usually around one or more meandering street. These streets are full of surprises, broadening and narrowing at different points; sometimes there are entrances through gateways in mud and level differences at various places. The typical hierarchy of the houses consists of a courtyard, veranda and two small rooms. Verandas are not used in the houses of Bilal Nagar.

One of the most interesting aspects of the dwellings is their decorations of functional elements such as openings, niches, storage spaces, kitchen cabinets and especially boundary walls. The boundary walls are very low, to emphasize the communal, clan feeling which prevails among the dwellers, with very little requirement for privacy.

The decoration of the dwellings is done by women with the help of their children, during building. In these endogenous societies, the building process is one of the areas in which women have the opportunity to express their creativity and ingenuity. Some of the motifs represent the tree of life, the goodwill swastika, sun signs etc., while others are seemingly derived from the flora around the dwellings.

Out of the various techniques of wall construction available, such as cob, wattle and daub, teroni and adobe, cob was used in the dwellings illustrated here. Houses are built and maintained by the whole family two or three times a year during the dry season and after the monsoon.

The construction of a wall with opening illustrates the building process well. The opening studied is in the house of Mr Dilawar Hussain (6) who is a tonga (horse and cart) driver in Bilal Nagar. Soil is first moistened and mixed with water and straw (traditional binder), and left for curing. Prepared soil is piled in lumps to a height of one foot six inches to two feet and left to dry. The same process is repeated leaving the required space for the opening. Kiln-baked bricks are used to make the screen and then a wooden beam is placed on top of the screen. Later the walls are plastered with mud and straw. The roof comprises a layer of thatch on wooden beams and purlins. In Jamalpur the residents of Bilal Nagar were making similar openings, but instead of bricks they were using branches tied together. Here in the city they have adapted to the available materials but the transmission of their traditions continues.
1. A house in Bilal Nagar. With less available space the courtyards are quite small. The houses do not have verandas.

2. Street scene, Bilal Nagar.

3. The exceptionally beautiful boundaries of Bilal Nagar. Virtually any available material is used by the women for building these boundaries. In this case, clay pots for water have been used.

4. Detail of mud stove, Bilal Nagar.
5. Plan of Jabbo, (Paul Oliver, original drawing by Yasmeen Cheema).

6. Plan of Mr Dilawar Hussein’s house, Bilal Nagar.

7. Detail of a boundary wall, Jabbo.

8. The highly decorative indoor and outdoor kitchen area in the house of the nambardar (clan leader), of the village. The small openings on the lower part of the right side wall are meant for women to look out, while cooking.

9. A section of the verza courtyard of the leader’s house in Jabbo, showing storage cabinets and entrance to one of the rooms.

10. A courtyard house in Jabbo. The sizes of the courtyards vary according to the availability of space.
This study was conducted in the summer of 1987. However, in the monsoon season of 1988, with heavy floods in the Ravi, the settlement of Jabbo was badly affected. Fortunately there was no loss of life, and the people of Jabbo, started reconstructing their houses quite rapidly, in exactly the same manner as before, with their symbolic motifs and usual methods.

Notes
2. A 'biraden', is a patrilineage, i.e. all men trace back their relationship to the same common ancestor.
3. The name 'Rajpoot', means prince (literally 'Raja's son'). The 'Rajpoots' are by tradition warriors, rulers, landowners and cultivators.

11. The low boundaries of Bilal Nagar, are not only beautiful but functional; there are storage spaces wherever possible.

12. Diagram. Functionally the element is very well thought out according to the resident's needs. The screen provides privacy and security as no one can reach in through the small holes. Climatically it works very well, allowing in the breeze and giving shade from the sun. In winter, pieces of cloth are stuffed into the small holes to help keep the wind out.

13. The finished look of the opening. Cracks are caused as soil swells up by thermal expansion and contraction, absorbing water and shrinking on drying.

Selected Bibliography

HASSAN KAUSAR OBTAINED A B. Arch. FROM THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ARTS, LAHORE. SINCE 1987 HE HAS WORKED WITH PAKISTAN ENVIRONMENTAL AND ARCHITECTURAL CONSULTANTS LTD. ON THE WALLED CITY CONSERVATION PROJECT FOR LAHORE.
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