

POSTSCRIPT: THE ISLAMIC DEBATE

Today, when for a variety of reasons "Islamic" architecture is a focus of discussion in Pakistan, it is necessary to clarify some of the terms and concepts used in the debate. To distinguish, for instance, between the terms, "Islamic" and "Muslim", and to recognise that "architecture", be it Islamic, Muslim, or Pakistani, contemporary or traditional, is a complex of several sub-categories.

If "Islamic" pertains to the religion of Islam, and "Muslim" to the people who profess Islam, then the term "Islamic architecture" would apply to buildings inspired by Islamic religious thought and practice, and intended to serve an Islamic religious purpose, whereas, "Muslim architecture" would be the more appropriate term applicable to all buildings associated with Muslims as a people or peoples.

Terms such as "Saracenic" and "Islamic" were introduced by the Orientalists as catch-all phrases which they applied to the architecture of the Muslim world from "Mogul India" to "Moorish Spain". Western-educated Muslim architects were among those who protested most strongly to such labels. Fired by the "scientific" theories of culture current in a post-Darwinian, post-Marxian world, they rejected the notion of architecture defined on the basis of religion. Architecture, as much as religion, they argued, was part of the superstructure of any culture. The base was economic and material. Architecture as much as everything else evolved in progressive stages. But terms like "Islamic" suggested a fossilised view of their national cultures. Their own architecture had to be understood in terms of climate, materials, social relations and economic bases, not in terms of religion. Any attempt to do so was discredited as reactionary, obscurantist, and smacking of imperialism. In any case, they pointed out, it was difficult to find any common denominators within the diversity of Muslim cultures.

More recently, however, a new generation of scholars have begun to rediscover the "Islamic" bases of Muslim cultures. Among them are Muslims who have been schooled in the best Western academic traditions and can scarcely be dismissed as narrow-minded bigots. These scholars are discovering that there is indeed a genre of artistic expression which can only be classified as Islamic, in the sense that it is inspired by the religious philosophy of Islam and is intended to serve an Islamic

religious purpose. More specifically these forms are directly related to certain Sufi doctrines and methods, to the esoteric or mystical tendency within Islam.

Having found the operative Islamic principles behind such buildings as tombs, *khanqahs*, and mosques, and what indeed had often been important elements in many a secular design — of gardens, palaces and the like — they went on to assert that these were the principles, the common denominators which applied equally to architecture in all Muslim cultures. Their theories were immediately and easily demolished by the functionalists who could point to any number of secular urban and rural building forms which were patently not inspired by any religious sentiment. The term has, of course been further discredited by the misguided enthusiasm of lay patrons — politicians, bureaucrats and private clients alike — who have insisted on applying the term “Islamic” to certain specific forms associated with a particular period, location or dynasty, in the belief that they are thereby championing the cause of Islam.

While Islamic architecture is certainly one of the unifying factors in the diversity of Muslim cultures, not all Muslim architecture is necessarily Islamic. This fact is often overlooked both by those who recognise the reality of an Islamic architecture and try to explain all Muslim buildings as Islamic, and by those who, finding nothing Islamic in some Muslim buildings, reject the validity of an Islamic basis of architecture altogether.

Much of the confusion in the current debate has no doubt arisen out of the use of the word “architecture” itself. When used with such prefixes as Pakistani, Muslim and contemporary, it suggests a single, identifiable, homogeneous entity, capable of being identified by certain characteristics which are typical or common to all buildings in that culture. It would, however, be more accurate to consider architecture, as much as any other aspect of a given culture, as a matrix of several sub-categories. Architecture in Pakistan may be divided into three horizontal or hierarchic layers and two distinct vertical streams or currents. The first layer may be called the core, or mainstream or leading edge, that is, the dominant, but not necessarily predominant forms in a given culture which reflect the patronage and world views or values of the socially, politically and economically dominant elite. The second layer may be called the fringe, or flank or trailing edge. That is, the area of expression which reflects the material and intellectual condition of a class which aspires to the values and position of the dominant class without the material or intellectual resources to dominate, but with every pretension to producing architecture with a capital “A”. The third layer or outer ground of vernacular traditions would refer to that area of building activity in which the primary concern, purpose or intent is utilitarian with no pretensions or aspiration to produce “Architecture”, but which does employ a developed building tradition.

The two vertical streams or currents spring from fundamentally

different bases, world views or philosophies. One is secular, temporal and materialist; the other is religious, spiritual and metaphysical.

While this matrix presents us with several categories which are more or less distinct, there is also a continuous process of cross-fertilisation between them. Moreover, of the two streams, secular and religious, sometimes one and sometimes the other tends to prevail as the dominant current in a particular culture, with the roles changing from time to time. Thus until about a hundred years ago the ethos of Pakistani culture and society was religious. It was not conceivable, for example, that a person should be educated without first being schooled in the Qur'an and Sunna. In the case of the master builder and building craftsman this would imply, in addition, the formal induction into a Sufi order. It is not surprising that the building activities based around the Sufi circles, the *khanqahs*, mosques and tombs, became the laboratories and powerhouses which generated so many of the dominant architectural forms, structural systems, and decorative techniques of the period. Thus even the most secular of buildings were seldom without elements which owed their inspiration to the mainstream of religious architecture. Today, however, the secular materialist current exercises the dominant influence over a significant section of our culture, particularly that of the educated professional elite. Thus the design of many religious buildings today is based on concepts of architecture derived from the secular mainstream.

That there seems to be as yet no consensus on the definition of Islamic architecture may due in part to a problem of methodology. Attempts at defining Islamic architecture have often employed either a "formal" framework or the evolutionary framework of the environmental determinists and functionalists. That is, generalisations based on formal characteristics, such as plan, massing, structural elements, materials, and so forth, which establish a definable "style". A more accurate understanding or appreciation of Islamic architecture requires some other framework than the formal, stylistic or historical. It needs the framework of Islamic cosmology and ritual. This is no less true of the various other art forms of Pakistan. For example one of the strongest living traditions in Pakistan's culture is the gnostic or *arifana* poetry of the Sufi saints. An analysis of the literary style, structure and poetic form can no doubt help explain the poetry of Lal Shah Baz or Khawaja Ghulam Farid but will bring us no closer to an appreciation of its beauty, power and ecstatic evocative effect unless we are familiar with the meaning and content of its message and purposes. This requires the framework of the Islamic concept of *Wahdat* and *Haq*, of Reality and man's role in the universe.

Islam views reality as existing on two planes or levels — two worlds — the apparent and the hidden, the transient and the permanent, the physical and the metaphysical. Underlying the apparent physical reality of discrete phenomena it sees a Divine

Unity. The unique role of man in this cosmology is to reflect, to contemplate, to know and, through enlightenment, to be united with the Absolute, the One Reality.

While other religions conceive of the Absolute as an unattainable mystery or tend to divorce the path to that mystery from the conduct of life in this world, in Islam unity with the Absolute is attainable, and the path is revealed through knowledge, love and correct conduct of life in this world. In other words, Islam integrates the dual aspects of reality — the spiritual and material — and prescribes a ritual to help live the life of this world, yet be constantly reminded of the other.

Awareness or consciousness of the larger Reality through the contemplation of physical elements of the universe is one of the central concerns of Islam. It is not difficult to comprehend and be reminded of the Cosmic Unity through contemplation upon natural objects. To look upon a tree and be aware of its roots, the soil and the earth. To see in a flower the fruit and the seed, the process of life. To recognise the ocean in a single drop of rain; the structure of matter in a single snowflake.

But this nexus becomes less obvious in man-made objects, materials removed from their natural environment and transformed by man. They provide nothing to help transport the mind beyond the object's own immediate materiality. Art and decoration, however, can make even of these objects an occasion to reflect to see beyond their immediate materiality, to remember and to focus upon the greater eternal reality. Thus even as he gives shape and form to material objects, the artist reminds himself, and us, that the artifact is merely a means, a prop to be used to support and sustain us on the right path to our real goal.

In Islamic architecture the formal elements (plan forms, structural elements, materials, and design motifs) are the variables that change through time and place, reflecting the diversity and multiplicity of Islamic cultures. The constants are the building types peculiarly related to Islamic ritual — mosques, tombs, *khanqahs*, *madrassahs*, *hammams*, and so forth — and the underlying meaning, message, content or purpose which derives from the cosmology of Islam.

The earliest archaeological remains of Muslim architecture in Pakistan, excavated at Bhambore (109 AH, 727 AD) include a mosque, a *mektab* and a *serai*¹. These are three of the building types common to Islamic architecture. While the form of these buildings is no longer fully obvious, there is sufficient evidence to indicate a square plan with covered cloisters and corridors on three sides, and a prayer chamber on the fourth, but no *mehrab*. The roof of this hall was supported by finely carved timber columns on carved column bases. Of the three entrances the principal, eastern, entrance was emphasized with a porch and steps. Facing the north entrance is what appears to have been a *mektab*, and to the east of the mosque was probably an attached *serai*.

The earliest surviving structures of the Muslim period in Pakistan are at Uchch, Multan and Ajudhan (Pakpattan). At Uchch these are in the form of large rectangular, hypostyle halls with richly decorated timber columns, beams and ceilings. In the brick domed tomb chamber at Multan, (Baha ul-Din Zakaria, Rukn-i-Alam, Shams Sabzwari) we witness the introduction of Tughlaq architecture into the sub-continent². Thus even at this early stage Islamic architecture in Pakistan is seen to employ a variety of plan forms, structural systems, materials and finishes.

Before the full flowering of Mughal architecture, the Suris had already begun to evolve a new expression from the Afghan and Indian repertoire of building techniques and forms. In Pakistan this can be seen in the Fort, gates, and tombs at Rohtas³, and also in the mosque tomb and *serai* of Sarang Khan at Rewat and in the so-called Akbari *Serai* at Shadara.

The buildings of the Mughals and more specifically of Shah Jahan have become synonymous in the popular mind with Islamic architecture. They are indeed magnificent and impressive, as no doubt they were intended to be. But they were also, after all, built for one imperial dynasty over a relatively short span of time in one part of the Islamic world and cannot be equated with or taken as the model for Islamic architecture generally. We cannot forget that Mughal architecture in Pakistan was restricted essentially to the monuments in and around the Lahore Fort, Shadara, Sheikhpura and Attock. More typical of the architecture of the same period in Pakistan are the buildings constructed in the numerous local or provincial styles. These include the glazed-tile mosaic, brick architecture of Lahore, of which the mosques of Dai Anga, and Wazir Khan, and several garden gates, pavilions and tombs are well-known examples. The more flamboyant, sculpturesque style of the lower Punjab, with its use of patterned blue and white glazed tiles, is well illustrated by the tombs of Bibi Jawindi at Uchch and Tahar Khan Nahar at Muzzaffargarh. The two distinct styles of the Lower Sind, the one employing a trabeated structural system with richly carved limestone, and the other, glazed tilework with arcuated brick structures, are seen in the Chawkandi and Makli tombs and the Jami Masjid at Thatta. The taller-proportioned brick and glazed-tile architecture of Upper Sind is best preserved in the tombs of the Mirs and the Kalboras, and in the group of monuments at Sukkur, associated with the family of Ma'sumi Sayyids⁴.

The concern of the Muslim artists and craftsmen with the Islamic concepts of *Tawhid* and the essential nature of Beauty, of apparent and hidden Reality, and of man's quest and goal, and the relation of these concerns with the motifs and schema of Islamic art and design, have all been convincingly established and demonstrated in recent literature by Burchkhadt, Nasr, el Said, Ardalan, Bakhtiar and others⁵. These characteristics are no less true for the Islamic art and architecture of Pakistan than for Islamic cultures elsewhere. The metaphoric use of natural forms, the more abstract symbolism of geometry, and the literal

message of calligraphy are now beginning to be better understood as a result of these publications

The brilliant painted-timber columns, beams, and ceilings of the tomb of Jalaluddin Shah Bokhari or of Makhdoom Jahania Jahangasht at Uchch, the delicately patterned brickwork of Shah Rukn-i-Alam at Multan, the lacelike stone carving of Jam Nizamuddin at Makli, the glazed-tile mosaic panels of Wazir Khan's Mosque, or the floral frescoes on the walls and ceilings of Begum Shahi Masjid in Lahore, the *pietra dura* and marble inlay patterns of Jahangir's Tomb at Shadara, and the geometric glazed-tile patterns of the Jami Masjid of Thatta, all reveal a common concern with de-emphasizing the materiality of physical surfaces, with remembrance of God through His abstract attributes and qualities, and through the Word made manifest in calligraphy.

The compositional schemes of these buildings are always designed to emphasise Unity. Thus as the observer moves through a building, the elements in his field of vision at each stage are appropriately scaled up or down and framed to establish a single universe of members, knit into a web of harmonious relationships. A garden, a court, a facade, a panel, a rosette, each becomes a microcosm of a macrocosmic, "metacosmic" Unity.

Thus the essential concepts of Islam have provided a great reservoir of inspiration which guided and nourished the grand tradition for some thirteen centuries. Today the tidal wave of modernity has overtaken the mainstream of architecture in Pakistan, converting it into a backwater on whose surface the flotsam of the international style mingles aimlessly with the debris of the grand tradition.

Will the present interest in Islam end up in "instant" stick-on architecture from a catalogue of domes and arches, or will it lead to a rediscovery of the theoretical bases of the grand tradition? The latter will require courage to swim against the tide, patience to carry out methodical research, and conviction in the role of a genuine and vital architecture in Pakistan tomorrow.

¹ "Bhambore", Pakistan Archaeology, No 5, 1968, pp 179, 180

² Brown, Percy, Indian Architecture (the Islamic period), Taraporevala's Bombay, 3rd Edition, p 34 See also Chughtai, Dr Abdullah, Muslim Architecture in West Pakistan, pp 3, 4

³ Brown, Percy Op Cit , p 93
Also Rajput, A B Architecture in Pakistan, Pakistan Publications, Karachi, 1963, p 7

⁴ Baluch, Nabi Bakhsh, editor Tarikh e Ma'sumi Urdu translation, Sindhi Adabi Board, Karachi, 1959, pp 1-26

⁵ Burckhardt, T Art of Islam, language and Meaning, World of Islam Festival, 1976

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NOTE

This index lists names of people, places (cities, regions, etc.), buildings and groups of buildings and also certain building types (educational, mosques, etc.)

Peoples names (when not referring to a building bearing a person's name) are underlined. Names are given by first name (not surname) but are cross-referenced by surname if they appear several times in the text

Building types are indicated in **bold** type

Foreign terms (not in common English usage) are *italicised*, as in the main text

Numbers refer to pages. Numbers in **bold** type indicate an illustration

A

Aga Khan University Hospital (Karachi) 182, **183**.

Abdul Hussain Thariani 164

*Administrative buildings.

Bhambore 35

Punjab High Court 117, **122**.

Secretariat (Islamabad) 184

Sind High Court 119

Aitchison College (Lahore) 123

Akbar 51, 56

Akbari *serai* 66

Alamgiri Gate (Lahore) 66, 67.

Alexander 18

Alhamra Arts Council (Lahore) **170**, 171

Ali Mardan Khan, tomb 85

American School (Karachi) 181

Amri 7, 8, 17

Anarkali, tomb 80

Anglo-Indian style 117

Angoori Bagh housing (Lahore) **174**, **175**.

Anwar Saeed 172, 179

mosque (Islamabad) **178**.

Apartments — see Houses/Housing

Architects — see under individual listings

Architecture after Independence — Chapter 8

Arjun Dev, *samadh* 89

Asif Khan or Asif Jah 66

tomb 69

Asoka 27

Attock Fort 51, **54**, **55**.

Aurangzeb 51

mosque (Khar) **158**.

B

Babar 51

Badshahi Masjid 51, 73, **74**, **75**, 76

Bagh — see Gardens

Baha Ul-Din Zakariya, tomb 44

*Bazaars (markets)

Kashmiri (Lahore) **81**.

Khawjagan mandi (Uchch) **94**.

Sarafa (Peshawar) **153**.

Bhambore **33**, 34, 35

administrative building 35

city gates 34

fortification wall 34

grand mosque **34**, 35

other buildings 35

Bhong, village mosque **161**.

Bibi Jivinda, tomb **48**.

Birdwood 109

Bloomfield 164

Brahamanism 27

British colonial architecture—Chapter 6

Buddhist architecture/stupas 21-28

Butkara stupa (Swat) 24

C

Campbellpur 129

Capital Development Authority (CDA) 185

cave dwellings **129**, 130

Chandragupta Maurya 18

Chauburji **84**, **85**.

Chaukandi Tombs (Makli) 95-99

Isa Khan Tarkhan **97**, **98**.

Jam Nizamuddin 96

Jan Baba 97

Jani Beg Tarkhan **97**.

Mubarak Khan 96.

Shurfa Khan **97**, **98**.

Sultan Ibrahim 96

Cholistan desert 137

Commodore Haq, house (Karachi) **172**.

D

Dada — see Nayyar Ali Dada

Dagbir mosque 99

Dai Anga

mosque 84

tomb 86

Darra Adam Khel 130, 132.

Dawood Centre (Karachi) 180.

Debal 32, 33

Denis Brigdon 184

Government Officer's hostel
(Islamabad) 184, 185.

Dera Ismail Khan 28

Dir 17

D J College (Karachi) 120.

Doors — see Gates

Doxiadis Associates 182

Islamabad Master Plan 186

Punjab University 182, 183.

E

Early communities — Chapter 1

Early Muslim architecture — Chapter 3

Echochard

Karachi University 181, 182.

Mohenjadaro museum 183.

***Educational buildings.**

Aga Khan University 182, 183.

Aitchison College 123.

American School (Karachi) 181

D J. College 120.

Ismailia College 120.

Karachi University 181, 182.

National College of Art 169.

Punjab University 182, 183.

Edulji Dinshaw Fountain 114.

Edward Durrell Stone 179, 187.

Presidency (Islamabad) 186, 187, 188.

WAPDA House (Lahore) 179.

Elphinstone Street (Karachi) 149, 150.

“Engineering Forum” magazine 165

Exhibition structures (Lahore) 163.

F

Fida Ali — see Habib Fida Ali

Firoz Tughlaq 46

***Forts, fortification walls.**

Attock 51, 54, 55.

Bhambore 34

Hyderabad 106, 108

Lahore 51, 55

Mahmudpur 37

Kot Diji 108.

Rohtas 52, 53, 54

Frere Hall (Karachi) 119.

Frontier House (Islamabad) 171.

G

Gandhara 18, 21, 25, 26

***Gardens (Baghs)**

Dikusha (Shahdara) 67

Huzuri (Lahore) 90.

Jinnah (Lahore) 115

Paien (Lahore fort) 62

Shalamar 52, 70, 71, 72, 73

***Gates, gateways.**

Alamgiri (Lahore) 66, 67.

Bhambore city 34

Chauburji (Multan Road) 84, 85.

Gulabi Bagh (Lahore) 85, 86.

Masti (Lahore fort) 57

Shah Burj (Lahore fort) 60

traditional doors 157, 158, 159.

Ghaznavid sultans 36

Ghazni 37, 38

palace mosque 37

Ghias-ud-din Tughlaq 45

Ghulam Shah Kalhora, tomb 106

Gio Ponti 184

gidan — see *kodal*

gopa 137, 138

Government Officer's Hostel
(Islamabad) 184, 185.

Graeco-Indian — Chapter 2

granary (Harappa) 9, 11.

Growsc 110

Gujjar Khan, mosque 162.

Gulabi Bagh Gateway 85, 86.

Gurdwara Damdama 90.

Gymkhana club (Karachi) 121.

H

Habib Fida Ali 172

PBS office (Karachi) 172, 176, 177.

Hammam-i-Shah (Lahore Fort) 62

Hanu ka Chajja (Multan) 152.

Harappa 8-11, 139

granary 9, 11.

wall 9

Hasan-Uddin Khan — see Unit 4

H.H. Khan 164

Hindu temple form 27, 28

Hiran Minar 70

***Houses, housing.**

Angoori Bagh (Lahore) 174, 175.

cave dwellings 129, 130

Dara Adam Khel 132.

doors 157, 158, 159.

earth 141.

gopa 137, 138

(Commodore) Haq (Karachi) 172

Karachi apartments 147.

Kalra estate (Sargoda) 142, 143

Khyber Pass clan dwellings 131.

Lari (Karachi) 171, 172.

Machi (Chinot) 150, 151, 157.

Mohammed Farid Khan (Peshawar) 144

Mohenjadaro 14, 15.

neighbourhood (*mohalla*) 139

Pathan 138

Peshawar 140.

Rehman Gul (Niphalpura) 145.

Riwaz Garden (Lahore) 162, 168, 171

Subedar (Madyan) 158.

Sultan Zarin (Swat) 133

Talpur (Hyderabad) 159.

tents 135, 136.

thatched 140.

Thatta 127.

Wali Melman (Kohan) 134

Zoo Employees (Lahore) 168.

Housing, social patterns

Feudal 139

Tribal 138, 139.

Humayun 51

Huzuri Bagh (Lahore) 90.

Hyderabad forts 106, 108

I

Ibrahim (Sultan), tomb 96

Indus Valley — see Harappa,
Mohenjadaro

Institute of Architects 164

Isa Khan Tarkhan, tomb 97, 98, 100.

Islamabad

Master Plan 185

Presidency 186, 187

Secretariat 184

Islamic architecture — see Postscript

Ismaili 36

Ismailia College (Peshawar) 120.

J

Jahangir 60

tomb 66, 68.

quadrangle 57

Jain architecture 27

Jalaluddin Shah Bukhari, tomb 46.

Jam Baba, tomb 97

Jam Nizamuddin, tomb 96

Jami Masjid (Khudabad) 104, 105.

Jamsetji Jijibhoy School 112, 164

Javed Najm 172

K

- Kalam, great mosque 155.
 Kalra Estate (Sargoda) 142, 143
 Kamil Khan Mumtaz
 farm house (Kot Karamat) 163.
 worker's housing (Kot Karamat) 163.
Kanishka 18
 Karachi Plan 185
 Karachi University 181, 182.
 Kashmiri Bazaar (Lahore) 81, 87
 Kashmir style 30.
 Khaliq or Khalid Walid, tomb 39, 41
 Khyber Pass dwellings 131.
 Kile Gul Mohammed (Baluchistan) 6.
Kodal 133, 135.
 Kot Diji 7, 108, 139
 Kot Karamat 141.

L

- Lahore Fort 51-66.
 Athdara Pavillion 57.
 Diwan-i-Am 56, 57, 66.
 Diwan-i-Khas 57, 60, 61.
 Hammam-i-Shah 62
 Hati Paer or Pol 63, 64
 Jahangir's Quadrangle 57, 58.
 Kala Burj 63.
 Khilcoat Khana 62.
 Khwabgah 57, 58, 60
 Lal Burj 61, 62.
 Maktab Khana 57, 58, 59
 Masti Gate 57
 Moti masjid 60, 61.
 Naulakha 65.
 Paien Bagh 62
 Picture Wall 59, 60, 78
 Shah Burj 64.
 Shah Burj Gate 60
 Sish Mahal 57, 64, 65.
 Lal Shahbaz Kalandar, tomb (Sehwan) 102, 103.
Lari — see Yasmeen Lari
 Lari house (Karachi) 172, 173.
 Lashkari Bazaar
 palace mosque 37
 Lawrence Hall (Lahore) 118.
 Lawrence Hall Garden — see Bagh-e-Jinnah.
Lockwood Kipling 109, 113, 115

M

- M.A. Ahed 164
 Machi, house (Chinot) 150, 151, 157.
 Madyan, mosque 156.
Mahmud Ghazni 56
 Mahmudpur, fort 37
 Makhdoom Jahania Jahangasht 47.
 Makli 95, 96
 tombs — see Chaukandi
 Makran 27, 32
Malik Ayaz 37.
 Mallot Temple 28
 Mansura 35, 36
 Markets — see Bazaars
 Maryam Zamani Mosque (Lahore) 78, 79, 80
 Master Plans
 Islamabad 185, 186
 Karachi 185
 Mayo School of Arts 112, 113, 168
Mehdi Ali Mirza 164, 165, 166, 168.
 Abid Ali house (Lahore) 166.
 Babar Ali house (Karachi) 165.
 Babar Ali house (Lahore) 167.
 Qizilbash house (Lahore) 166.
Minoo Ministry 164.
Mir Ma'sum 103.
 tower or Aram Gah 104
Mirza — see Mehdi Ali Mirza
 Mirza Jami Beg Tarkhan, tomb 97.
 Mirza Tughril Beg, tomb 99
 Modern Movement 160-164, 180
Mohammad ibn - Qasim 32
 Mohammad Farid Khan, house (Peshawar) 144.
 Mohenjadaro 12-17
 citadel 13
 great bath 15, 16.
 houses 14, 15.
 museum 182.
Monasteries
 Buddhist 21
 Takht Bahi 24.
 vihara 26
 Montgomery Hall 118.
Mortimer Wheeler 16
Mosques, Masjids.
 Aurangzeb (Khar) 158.
 Badshahi (Lahore) 51, 73, 74, 75, 76.
 Bhambore 35
 Bhong village 161.
 Dagbir 99.
 Dai Anga 84
 Ghazni palace 37
 Gujjar Khan 162.
 Jami (Khudabad) 104, 105.

- Kalam 155.
 Lashkari Bazaar palace 37
 Madyan 155, 156.
 Maryam Zamani (Lahore) 78, 79, 80
 Moti or Pearl (Lahore fort) 60, 61.
 neighbourhood (Islamabad) 178.
 Shahdare 67
 Shah Faisal (Islamabad) 188, 189, 190
 Shah Jahan or Jami (Thatta) 101, 102.
 Sonheri (Lahore) 87, 88.
 Swat 153.
 Wazir Khan (Lahore) 81, 82, 83, 101.
 Mughals — Chapter 4
 Multan 32, 36.
Mumtaz — see Kamil Khan Mumtaz

N

- NAFDEC Cinemas 171.
N.A. Faruqi 186, 187
 Nal culture (Baluchistan) 8
 National College of Art (Lahore) 168
 Naunihal Singh, haveli 91, 92.
Navaid Hussain — see Unit 4
 Nawankot 86
Nayyar Ali Dada 169
 Alhama Arts Council 170, 171
 Rivaz Garden flats 168, 171
 Shakir Ali auditorium 169, 171
 studio block, National College of Art 169.
 neighbourhood mosque (Islamabad) 178.

O**Offices.**

- Dawood Centre (Karachi) 180.
 HBFC House (Islamabad) 171
 Institute of Business Administration (Karachi) 181.
 NAFDEC House (Islamabad) 171
 Pakistan Burmah Shell (Karachi) 172, 176, 177.
 WAPDA House 179.

P

- Pakistan Burmah Shell, office (Karachi) 172, 176, 177.
 Palace Hotel (Karachi) 119.
Palaces.
 Ghazni 36
 Sadiqgarh 121.
 Sirkap 22.
Pavillions.
 Kala Burj (Lahore fort) 63
 Lal Burj (Lahore fort) 63.
 Naulakha (Lahore fort) 65.

Shah Burj (Lahore fort) 65.
Sheranwala Bagh 90.

Payette Associates

Aga Khan University (Karachi)
182, 183.

Pakistan Environmental Planning &
Architectural Consultants (PEPAC) 171
Frontier House (Islamabad) 171.
HBFC office (Islamabad) 171.
NAFDEC Cinemas 171.

Peter Powell 164

PIA Squash Complex (Karachi) 172, 178.

Pir Mohammed 164

Presidency complex (Islamabad) 186,
187, 188

Provincial architecture — Chapter 5

Punjab Exhibition Building 124.

Punjab High Court (Lahore) 117, 122.

Punjab University Campus 182, 183.

Pushkalavati 26

R

Ram Singh 113, 115, 116

Aitchison College 123.

Lawrence Hall, cricket pavillion 115.

rammed earth (*pisé*) 130

Ranjit Singh 56

samadh 89

Rehman Gul, house (Niphalpura) 145.

Riwaz Garden houses (Lahore) 162,
168, 171

Rohtas Fort 52, 53, 54

R.S. Rustumjee 164.

Ruby Jewellers, Elphinstone Street
(Karachi) 149.

Rukn-I-Alam, mausoleum 44, 45.

Rural Vernacular 126-146

Alpine 132.

Arid mountains 130

Delta region 126

Foothills and Plateau 128, 129

Indus plain 128

Nomadic 134

S

Sadiqgarh Palace (Dera Nawab Sahib)
121.

Salt Range temples 28

Samadhs

Arjun Dev 89.

Ranjit Singh 89.

Sarafa Bazaar (Peshawar) 153.

Sarwala Maqbara 87

Schools — see Educational buildings

Schools of architecture 110

Calcutta 112

Jamsetji Jijibhoy School of Art 112,
116

Madras 112

Mayo School of Art 112, 113, 168.

National College of Art 168.

University of Engineering and
Technology 169

Secretariat (Islamabad) 184.

Services Hotel (Peshawar) 116, 117.

Shahdara 52, 66

Akbari serai 66, 67

Dilkusha garden 67

Jahangir's tomb 67, 68.

masjid 67

Nur Jahan's tomb 69

Shah Faisal mosque (Islamabad) 188,
189, 190.

Shah Jahan 52, 60

Khwabgah (Lahore fort) 60

masjid (Thatta) 102, 103.

Shah-ji-ki-Deri (Gandhara) 25

Shaidu, village 144

Shakir Ali auditorium (Lahore) 169, 171

Shalamar Garden 52, 70, 71, 72, 73.

Shams Tabrezi, tomb 43.

Sheikhupura 69, 70

Sheranwala Bagh 90.

Shurfa Khan, tomb 97, 98.

Sikh period 88.

Sikrap — see Taxila.

Sind High Court 119.

Skardu 154.

Sonheri Masjid 87, 88.

Stupas.

Buddhist 21

Butkara 24

Dharammarajiki 24

Taxila 23.

Subedar, house (Madyan) 158.

Sultan Zarin, house (Swat) 133.

Sultanate period 36, 37

Sung Yun 25

Swat mosques 153

T

Taj Muhammad Khan building
(Naushera) 148.

Tajuddin Bhamani 164

Takht-e-Bahi 26.

monastery 24.

Talpur 106, 107, 159.

Taxila 18, 27

Bhir Mound 19

Dharammarajiki stupa 24

Jhundial Temple 19, 20.

Royal Palace (Sirkap) 22.

Shrine of the Double-headed Eagle
25, 26.

Sirkap 19, 20, 21.

Sir Sukh 21

stupas 23.

Temples.

Hindu 27, 28, 29.

Jhundial 19, 20.

Mallot 28

Salt Range 28

tents 135, 136.

Thatta, houses 127.

toba 137.

Tombs, mausoleums.

Ali Mardan Khan 85

Anarkali 80

Asif Khan 69.

Baha UI-Din Zakariya 43, 44

Bibi Jivinda 48.

Dai Anga 86

Ghulam Shah Kalhora 106.

Isa Khan Tarkhan 97, 98, 100.

Jahingir 66, 68.

Jalaluddin Shah Bukhari 46, 47.

Jan Baba 97

Khaliq or Khalid Walid 39, 40, 41, 42.

Makhdoom Jahania Jahangasht 47.

Mirza Jani Beg Tharkhan 97.

Mirza Tugril Beg 99

Mubarak Khan 96

Nur Jahan 69

Rukn-i-Alam 45.

Sarwala 87.

Shams Tabrezi 43.

Shurfa Khan 97, 98.

Yar Muhammad Kalhora 104

Yousuf Gardezi 42, 43, 44

U

Uchch 37, 38

monuments 46

University of Engineering and
Technology (Lahore) 169

Urban Vernacular 146-153

Karachi apartments 147.

Town house tradition 152.

Unit-4 172.

PIA Squash Complex (Karachi)
172, 178.

V

Vedat Dalokay

Shah Faisal mosque (Islamabad)
188, 189, 190.

Vernacular — Chapter 7

rural 126-138

urban 146-153

vihara or monastery 26

Waihind 36

walls— see forts

WAPDA House (Lahore) 179.

Wazir Khan

chowk (Lahore) 83.

masjid (Lahore) 81, 82, 83, 101

Wheeler— see Mortimer Wheeler

William Perry 180, 181

American school (Karachi) 181

Dawood Centre (Karachi) 180.

IBA Offices (Karachi) 181.

wind catchers 127

Y

Yar Muhammad Kalhora, tomb 104

Yasmeen Lari 172

Angoori Bagh housing (Lahore) 174,
175.

Haq house (Karachi) 172.

Yousuf Gardezi, tomb 43, 44

Z

Zaheeruddin Khawaja 164

Zoo Employee's housing (Lahore)

168

This glossary includes only those terms used more than once in the text or are unexplained. Most of the terms are used in Urdu except for the European terms which are not commonly known in the Third World. The translations should not be considered definitive and are included as a matter of convenience.

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>abshar</i> | cascade | <i>gopa</i> | round shelter |
| <i>aedicule</i> | small construction inside a larger building, decorative part of a facade (relief), small edifice standing on a public way (From aedes, house, Latin) | <i>gumbad</i> | small dome (usually solid) |
| <i>aina kari</i> | glass mosaic workmanship | <i>gurdwara</i> | Sikh place of worship with hospice and school |
| <i>andarkot</i> | inner sanctuary | <i>hammam</i> | bath (turkish). |
| <i>antarala</i> | internal beauty (Hindi translation) | <i>haveli</i> | dwelling, monastery or retreat |
| <i>aramgah</i> | rest house | <i>hujra</i> | (Pushto) walled area of a clan compound for males only |
| <i>ardhama-nandapa</i> | half protected (Hindi translation) | <i>jali</i> | literally 'net', screen, lattice or perforated pattern |
| <i>bagh</i> | garden | <i>jharoka</i> | window, opening |
| <i>baoli</i> | stepped well or water tank | <i>khana</i> | place, dwelling, house, room. |
| <i>baradari</i> | literally 'twelve pillared' pavillion, portico, columned building | <i>khanqah</i> | monastery, retreat, hospice |
| <i>braderi</i> | clan | <i>khwabgah</i> | bedroom, literally 'place of dreams' |
| <i>burj</i> | tower, bastion | <i>kodal</i> | (Pushto) elongated vault structure |
| <i>chajja</i> | eaves (overhang used as a shading device) | <i>madrasah</i> | school, college |
| <i>chaitya</i> | archway. | <i>mahal</i> | palace |
| <i>dar</i> | door | <i>maktab</i> | clerks room, translation or recording place. |
| <i>da'wat</i> | invitation | <i>khana</i> | |
| <i>dewrhi</i> | forecourt | <i>mandapa</i> | pillared assembly hall |
| <i>diwan</i> | audience hall | <i>manzil</i> | building, palace, apartment. |
| <i>ewan</i> (or <i>iwan</i>) | corridor, verandah or hallway | <i>masjid</i> | mosque, literally 'place of prostration' |
| <i>garbha</i> | filled, contained (Hindi translation) | <i>mehrab</i> (or <i>mihrab</i>) | niche or arched recess denoting the direction of Makkah for prayer |
| <i>gidan</i> | (Baluchi) thatched vault construction | <i>mimar</i> | builder, architect, mason, craftsman |
| | | <i>minar</i> (or <i>manara</i>) | minaret, pillar |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>mohalla</i> | neighbourhood. |
| <i>muharirs</i> | clerk |
| <i>munabat</i> | stucco tracery |
| <i>kari</i> | |
| <i>mungh</i> | windcatcher. |
| <i>muqarnas</i> | honey combed cornice. |
| <i>musallah</i> | prayer mat. |
| | |
| <i>namdah</i> | woollen felt mat. |
| <i>naos</i> | interior of temple. |
| | |
| <i>pietra dura</i> | inlaid mosaic of hard and expensive stones |
| <i>pronaos</i> | sort of porch, colonnade standing in front of a temple |
| | |
| <i>qutb</i> | axis or pivot, stake, highest state of sanctity among Muslim saints. |
| <i>qila</i> | fort |
| | |
| <i>rivaq</i> | vault, arcade |
| <i>rukni</i> | pillar. |
| | |
| <i>sang</i> | stone |
| <i>sang-e-abri</i> | river-bed stone. |
| <i>serai</i> | inn, halting place, caravanserai |
| | |
| <i>tah khana</i> | basement |
| <i>takht</i> | seat, imperial throne. |
| <i>toba</i> | waterhole. |
| <i>torona</i> | gateway |
| <i>tawhid</i> | belief in Allah |
| | |
| <i>urdu</i> | camp |
| | |
| <i>vihara</i> | monastery. |
| | |
| <i>zanana</i> | women's private quarters. |
| <i>zavia</i> | side point of view. side one is looking towards |