[**Heritage lost**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1685261/heritage-lost)

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LAST month, a beautiful heritage building on Karachi’s Campbell Street was torn down illegally. After the publication of news reports and social media alerts, the provincial authorities sprang into action. An FIR was registered and legal proceedings began. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Not long ago, Jufel Hurst school was targeted by some ambitious builders. Administrative and legal proceedings began only after a sizable portion of the complex had been destroyed.

Sadly, thousands of building and archaeological sites in the country have been either destroyed or damaged beyond repair, deliberately or through wilful neglect, with no thought given to the conservation of heritage, or to the latter’s importance to the crucial task of nation building. There have been sporadic attempts to reverse this tide of destruction, and the print, electronic and social media have promoted the cause of the country’s built heritage for some years now. However, despite this exercise in awareness-raising, little action has been observed in terms of solid measures to protect our heritage.

Heritage management is low on the list of national priorities. Politicians or technocrats responsible for budgetary allocations consider heritage to be a near worthless area of spending. They fail to see that cultural and built heritage is an important part of our national assets. Promoting the physical artefacts of a common culture, that reflects the history and traditions of generations, helps society bond. Official recognition of this fact would be a good beginning.

Buildings from our past are falling fast.

As explained elsewhere, successive governments and regimes have taken a diverse approach towards heritage. Until the 1970s, the situation was acceptable. True, there was no major programme to guard heritage, but at least there was a level of tolerance and a code of conduct vis-à-vis buildings and artefacts, adopted by both governments and society, that prevented any negative impact as such. Unfortunately, weak buildings or those that required particular repairs, either crumbled on their own, or were razed by their owners. Matters started to get worse in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the acceleration of commercial projects in Karachi, Lahore and other major cities. Prominent edifices were pulled down to make way for new structures. In Karachi, the Palace Hotel was demolished to create a ‘modern’ five-star hotel.

There are many sites and heritage buildings in Pakistani cities that face different types and degrees of threat. The danger of demolition after a heritage building is sold to a real estate developer is very real, and officially recognised edifices often fall prey to clandestine partnerships between owners and potential builders whose only ambition is profit. Wilful neglect also plays a part, as well as the gradual destruction of parts of a building, often in connivance with the building control officials. Meanwhile, pressure on the authorities to delist buildings that are a part of an officially notified heritage list is unending. The lust for profit is so great that heritage buildings are disappearing fast, as cities, robbed of history and tradition, become a mass of ugly concrete.

Conserving heritage requires the expertise of conservation architects. Unfor­tunately, there are few such specialists in the country who can carry out detailed assessments and suggest and implement restorative steps. The ones who exist are bypassed. Ordinary contractors cannot do this kind of work.

At least the government can act to save the monuments and buildings that have been lucky enough to survive so far. In partnership with interested stakeholders and the provinces, the federal government should evolve and implement a national heritage management policy. Besides the corporate sector, the development assistance agencies of other countries can also be approached, as many have shown an interest in restoring historical sites of great national importance such as the Rohtas Fort.

A serious effort by the government can also attract the interest of international agencies such as Unesco, the Monument Fund, the International Council on Monuments, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, etc. which can provide resources for training and documentation. But it is imperative to act fast before we lose everything that stands as a testament to a shared history.

One of the reasons for taking urgent measures is the rising pressure from the real estate market as cities expand, as well as the general apathy towards heritage, which unfortunately is ignored even in our classrooms. Professional groups and civil society organisations will have to take the lead in making a difference. Otherwise there will be no tangible link between posterity and our past.

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