[**Losing heritage**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1654081/losing-heritage)

[Dr Noman Ahmed](https://www.dawn.com/authors/7476/dr-noman-ahmed)Published October 26, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer is an academic and researcher based in Karachi.

AS per a recent Sindh High Court judgement, Karachi’s Mohatta Palace will be converted into a medical and dental college to honour the wishes of Ms Fatima Jinnah. This verdict has caused enormous anxiety in the ranks of civil society, architects and cultural experts. Most of them oppose the conversion of the palace into a college. They point out that the complex has been revived and converted into a museum and art gallery. A trust has been there for more than two decades to see to its upkeep and has done a good job.

As the court has ruled, there are complex legal and inheritance issues involved. Besides, the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings is a scientific matter. Mohatta Palace has already passed through several stages of conservation and management to be able to perform its present functions. It is a building of extraordinary architectural and historical importance.

The edifice was designed by architect Ahmed Hussain Agha for Rai Bahadur Seth Shiv Rattan Mohatta in the late 1920s. The premises accommodated the foreign affairs ministry offices after partition. The property was allotted to Fatima Jinnah in 1964. She led her presidential election campaign from this building against Ayub Khan, making the palace the centre of political activity for politicians in the opposition. Ms Jinnah passed away in 1967. In the 1970s, Shirin Bai, her sister, came to live in the building. Upon her death in 1980, the building complex was sealed. The building remained in a dilapidated state till 1995. After its acquisition by the Sindh government, it was renovated under the supervision of late architect Habib Fida Ali and turned into a museum. It is now managed by a trust comprising public-spirited citizens with the Sindh governor as its chair.

Mohatta Palace possesses some unique architectural characteristics. The complex exists on a 2.47-acre plot. Its actual built-up area is about 1,718 square metres) in two levels. The site has seen additions and demolitions. Originally, the palace was laid out with a chahar bagh (quadrilateral garden) between two outhouses. However, during the renovation exercise, some additions were knocked down.

It’s not a good idea to turn Mohatta into a college.

According to the various documentation reports that were prepared during the pre-renovation phase, the external walls are of fine ashlar masonry done in Gizri stone. The red decorative features comprise Jodhpur stone. The entrance steps are of white marble while the floor shows off fine mosaic work. The barsati (covered rooftop spaces) and the corner pavilions have concrete domes.

In the pre-renovation phase, there was wild growth all around the structures. This botanical menace not only affected the wall and facings but also the steps and projections. Stucco plaster in varied patterns was applied abundantly in the interior spaces, much of which were discoloured due to long neglect. Coloured glass was also used in different patterns in the openings. Woodwork was done in fine quality teak. The result is a subtle Indo-Saracenic architectural style.

Mohatta Palace had been a forgotten space. In the early 1990s, the Heritage Foundation, a Karachi-based non-governmental body, decided on a campaign to revive it. A support group of notable citizens and professionals was formed under the patronage of Kamal Azfar, then Sindh governor, to revitalise and restore the premises. A group of architects and students led by the late Prof Kausar Bashir Ahmad from Dawood Engineering College (now university) prepared the basic documentation needed to start the restoration exercise. Later, the work was supervised in a commendable manner by Habib Fida Ali.

The site has now been converted into a museum with a full-time curator. Whereas the relevant government departments lent a helping hand, sizable contributions were made by multinational firms as part of their corporate social responsibility goal. The efforts of the organising committee helped mobilise funds and human resources. Mohatta’s lush and well-manicured lawns have been used for several open-air cultural events. The turnaround of a once desolate palace has been a success story thanks to public-spirited citizens.

A medical and dental college would have many requirements. Given that Mohatta Palace was transformed from a residence to a cultural space, it may not be a practical idea to now convert it into a health education facility. It may be appropriate for the museum management to consider holding specific events on Ms Jinnah’s anniversary. Two universities already exist in Punjab bearing Ms Jinnah’s name. A new medical and dental college to commemorate her name may be set up somewhere else in Sindh. But if Mohatta Palace is converted into a college, it will be huge cultural loss to the city of Karachi.

*The writer is an academic and researcher based in Karachi.*

*Published in Dawn, October 26th, 2021*