

The urban design

An outcome of thoughtful public sector initiative, public-spirited private investment, people's participation and a sensitive urban design, Gawalmandi Food Street has become a noteworthy and popular place

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Photos by the writer

The different shops of the Food Street carry a similar decor theme

ILLAN B. JACOBS in his classic work, *Great Streets*, has outlined characteristics of great streets: places for people to walk safely, physical comfort, a defined form and character, memorable qualities, transparency, maintenance and a distinct quality of construction and design. Few streets in Pakistan fulfil this criterion. However, one example that is now evolving to join the cadre of truly outstanding streets of the world is the Gawalmandi Food Street, in Lahore. An outcome of thoughtful public sector initiative, public-spirited private investment, people's participation and a sensitive urban design, the Street has become a noteworthy place, popular among all categories of people. Its popularity is observed to be increasing by the day.

Branching out from the Railway Road, Gawalmandi Food Street is located in the vibrant urban setting of Lahore. Historically, this place was a small village famous for milk trade, obvious from its name. Around Partition, in 1947, Gawalmandi became a part of the urban setting, and it soon became a busy street. In fact, the whole area of Gawalmandi

encompasses an all-absorbing context of various urban activities, including eating outlets, cinema houses and other recreational pastimes.

With the rise in public movement in the area, congestion, pollution and vehicular-pedestrian conflict emerged as the most pressing problems. Repercussions to this effect had a direct bearing on the space quality of the street, which was in desperate need of planning and an urban design input. The local authorities concerned, in consultation with the various stockholders, initiated a pioneering project: urban renewal of Gawalmandi Food Street. The objective of the exercise was to create a lively street, free from environmental and physical hazards that could provide a conducive context for people to walk, eat and enjoy its ambience.

In order to attend to this challenging preservation/upgrading project, the work was awarded to a Karachi based architectural practice, run by architect Hanif Daud and his colleagues. Hanif is a graduate of Dawood College of Engineering

Technology, Karachi, and has specialized in the subject of Architectural and Urban Preservation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. The project was sponsored by a leading corporate house of the country.

The Food Street has been entirely pedestrianized for the evening and night hours, to create a unified space for movement of people. In conformity with the project guidelines, the shopkeepers have undertaken basic refurbishment of their respective premises. However, the architect has devised a distinct theme for the design of the various objects and spaces to weave out an all-encompassing suavity in the space. Thus, shops and restaurants of varied character, cuisine, orientation and clientele are now part of a common urban tissue, sensitively conceived and diligently executed.

The entrance gate is the first element that unveils the design concept. It creates a threshold and enclosure for the street space. Local traditions are depicted through the composite construction in

The island

reinforced concrete to enhance the space.

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The island on the Street are tastefully designed

reinforced concrete, and the metal work enhance the space quality.

Hanif explains: "Designed and executed in mild steel, the gate simply enriches the quality and texture of the street, awarding a sense of pride to the entrants. The design retains a flavour of the Mughal tradition, pertinent to the historic architecture of Lahore, and the creation of a gateway entrance is both functional, and compatible with the street configuration. Vertical, mild steel members, with proportionately embedded details, provide a fascinating combination. This ambience is derived from skillful ornamentation that fully realizes the potential of local craftsmen, displaying the finest quality of workmanship. Explicitly detailed bollards are installed at regular intervals, which control the flow of the people. Railings, cast in aluminium and brass finish, demonstrate fine workmanship and are also a direct outcome of inspirations from Mughal architecture."

Contextually, aluminium-cast carved light brackets and poles in wrought iron finish are an elegant addition. These lamp posts envelope the entire street into the design bond, which is aesthetically complete and mature in composition. Corporate images of the sponsors are so incorporated that they add to the visual quality, avoiding negative superimposi-

tion that are otherwise commonplace in commercial areas. The architect's aim, in his own words, was to "... make an extremely calculated and careful architectural intervention, which compliments the existing historic urban themes rather than compete with it".

The street also has two kiosks for the sponsors. The kiosk design hinges on the parameters of functionality, appropriateness and composite construction under a modern language. It strongly relates to the activity profile, providing a clear direction to the users. Its curvilinear space delineates a uniform relationship between the vendor and the vendees. The red-coloured walls firmly place the kiosk in its surrounding, not letting the passerby miss the charm of the corporate image. Its hovering roof, done in semi-circular profile and metallic outfit, renders a unique experience for its audience. The kiosk is purposefully juxtaposed to ensure high visibility.

This project proves the fact that when popular aspirations are understood and translated through design, local traditions and crafts are thoughtfully applied and diligent supervision is involved in the execution, the result is truly brilliant.

Certain aspects, however, need consideration for the success and sustenance of the project. Heavy vehicles, for instance,

should be prohibited from plying on the Street as they can cause damage to the pavements and curbstones. Loading and commercial vehicles also need to be controlled, especially the animal-drawn carts, for the overall safety of the embellishments. Gradually, the suspended overhead electric and telephone wires must be put in underground conduits to remove these hazards and visual obstructions. Regular disposal of solid waste and sweeping needs to be ensured, mainly under the active management of the area operators. Most importantly, to conserve the indigenous feel of the project, fast food chains should not be allowed to enter the street.

In addition, some facilities must be added later, maybe as a second phase of the project. These include public toilets, hand wash areas and waste

bins. The architect also stresses the need to respect the old structures and, thus, controlled and monitored alterations in the exterior finishes and shop renovations. A system of standardized signages should also be implemented.

He concludes with a remarkable suggestion: "While Gawalmandi Food Street Project is a beginning, many streets of Pakistan, with a similar orientation, can be revitalized. Burns Road, Zamzama Street or Marine Drive along Seaview in Karachi, streets leading to Ghanta Ghar in Faisalabad, and parts of Blue Area in Islamabad, are a few options that require careful exploration and investment. City authorities, urban planners, architects and private investors should join hands for such projects."

His proposal matches closely with Stanford Anderson's comment in his book *On Streets*, when he says: "The actual and potential characteristics of streets are too little considered. Architects often bury themselves in individual building projects, ignoring any responsibility to the public space of the city; planners work at a scale where the street is seen only as a traffic channel, or emphasize social and economic factors that cut through urban phenomena in such a way as to allow streets to remain unrecognized and lost in their negative connotations."