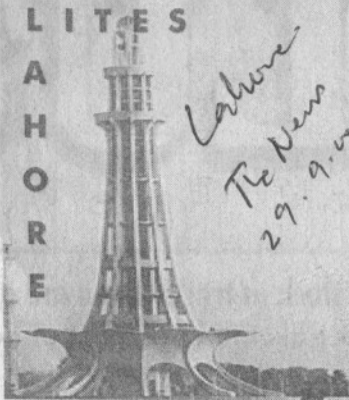


Saving history from future



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If Lahore were a zoo, its cultural heritage would be the endangered species, threatened by extinction.

The true essence of Lahore has always been its rich culture and exotically delicious cuisine and the city has always proudly thrived on its historic significance. The gaudy rows of cinemas on Abbott Road, the barbecue vendors in Lakshami, things as big as historical monuments and as trivial as individual *samosa*, *mithai* or even tea shops have lent it its identity. It is unfathomable for foreign tourists to visit Pakistan and leave without paying homage to the magnificent Mughal sites. Yet this enthusiasm is not being shared by our living generations.

The heritage that has given Lahore the fame it enjoys today is rapidly withering away and authorities and citizens both are responsible for pushing it towards deterioration and death. The love for the Shalimar Gardens, Front and Badshahi Mosque is being replaced by the new

blazing rage for building white elephants: plan as upon plazas. Builders are dumping them upon the city, and are suffocating the life of it.

Lahorites have entered an interminable rat race, which they hope might lead them into the 21st century. Their motto: "discard the old, hail the new". They have conveniently forgotten that successful nations build upon the past, not the future. This upcoming "plaza culture" has taken the city by storm. These buildings attempt to scrape the sky as far as they can. But they don't have a life! They are just modern day tombs. These plazas stand isolated once completed, and become parts of the never ending "slump" along with the rest of the nation. There is no conceivable purpose or need for their existence.

The list of unnecessary projects is endless. One example is "Pace", which was constructed as the first modern shopping mall in Lahore, supposedly meant to sport a number of foreign labels for the elite. Gradually, its self-sustaining powers began to weaken and now it has become a concrete version of the Anarkali bazaar. The escalators don't work, the cooling isn't effective, localised stalls have taken over a majority of the floors, and consequently it has lost its short-lived pomp and show.

While millions are spent to prune and polish these useless structures to perfection, our beloved old buildings are growing weedy and rusty. The Badshahi Mosque, Shalimar Gardens, Nur Jahan's, Asif Khan's and D'ai Anga's Tombs, Gulabi Bagh and Chauburji are only a segment of the wealth of heritage that is screaming for attention. Funds accumulated for them fall into black holes or pockets.

Although Shalimar Gardens are enlisted in the World Heritage and receive funds (which mysteriously disappear) from UNESCO, they are terribly neglected. The entire "new" city boasts of spluttering fountains at every corner, park and square, yet the majestic fountains of the Shalimar Gardens are almost always dry, dusty or silted. The previous government thoughtlessly ordered the desilting and filtration plant to be

ing and tearing down of roundabouts and building plazas and other white elephants, which seep up millions of rupees through their trunk. The answer to this imbalance in maintaining different parts of the same city lies in dishonest management of funds.

The hue and cry raised over issues like the Tollinton Market and Pak Tea House fall upon stone-deaf ears. Authorities are bent upon

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brought down, in order to expand the main road. This has resulted in algae and fungus infections all over. It is quite a sorry sight.

Driving from the inner walled city down to the posh developed localities is a transition from the past to the present. Yet the past was ever so neglected, congested and filthy. While one unfortunate half of the city lives in darkness, the other half celebrates highly illuminated trees and buildings. The patch of the canal bank between the Mall and Jail Road displays a horribly ugly set of brightly-lit characters that are supposed to be decorative. These "little" projects are meant to benefit a specific group of people who take on these projects on contract or *theka*.

One man is responsible for the management or rather mismanagement of the entire city. This one-man show includes the maintenance of already maintained roads, cyclic build-

building a cultural centre in Tollinton market, whereas this centre was intended to be incorporated within the Lahore Museum. It's another Lok Virsa Museum in the making, another money-making scheme. No one visits the Lok Virsa in Islamabad and no one will want to go to see a bunch of tired artifacts here. It's just a project to pocket funds.

There are so many remedies to these problems, if anyone would sincerely take notice. Funds given by the government and UNESCO should be put to constructive use. Capable people should be employed to monitor the conservation of these heirlooms. Lahore has the highest number of old monuments in the entire country; they should be preserved and developed into major tourists attractions. Many Taj Mahals are hidden behind the walls of the inner city, waiting to be discovered and appreciated by the world. It is time to cleanse out the pests that inhibit this vital development.