Wooden Symphonies of Bygone Times: The Perishing Legacy of Traditional Havelis in Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

For centuries, wood has remained a primary material contributing to the evolution of built environments – employed for structural solutions as well as decorative and iconographic expressionism. The façades of traditional havelis in Shikarpur (Sindh, Pakistan) hold witness to an exquisite form of wood craftsmanship; a style that evolved and remained in vogue during 18th–19th century; commissioned by wealthy merchants. These surviving remnants of bygone times reflect on the socio-cultural, religious, and political spirit of urbanized Sindh – concurrently forming a unique traditional fabric, today struggling for its survival. Post-Independence (1947) demographic and socio-cultural transformations adversely impacted the city’s historic environment. Residential mansions, once a pride of the elite gentry, changed hands to an economically impoverished stratum of society, leaving them vulnerable to exploitations by a growing market of antique dealers. Recognizing their threatened status, the Government of Sindh declared “Shikarpur Historic Town” a protected heritage in 1998. Furthermore, 1203 properties were given protected heritage designation in March 2012 – over 80% of which are privately owned residences. However, mere notifications, unsupported by active monitoring and administrative systems, or economic incentives to property owners, leave historic havelis still at risk. The presented research attempts at developing an in-depth understanding of fast disappearing woodwork from historic façades, and reinstate a pride in indigenous building traditions to stimulate a sense of ownership and motivation for preservation.
Keywords

historic woodcraft – iconographic representations – Shikarpur – Sindh – traditional building

1 Introduction

The region of Sindh in Pakistan, due to its strategic geographical location, has historically remained a gateway to foreign influences from all cardinal directions, yet holding a profound identity of its own, which distinguishes it from other socio-cultural, linguistic, and ethnographic groups in the sub-continent (Fig. 1). The eventful historic timeline of Sindh includes a series of invasions as well as active networks of trade and commerce linking certain cities as pivots on crossroads of caravan and sea-river routes throughout the 17th to the 19th century, and perhaps earlier. Due to prospects of economic growth offered by the region, it attracted migration of various communities from adjoining regions that settled here and contributed to the evolution of a multi-ethnic socio-cultural society, more profoundly in towns that served as hubs of trade networks.

A case in point is the city of Shikarpur, located in the north-western quarter of Sindh. Established during the early 17th century by the “Daudpotas” (a tribe with Abbasid origins), it was then taken over by the “Kalhoras,” who were succeeded by the Afghans for over eighty years; this was then followed by two decades of rule under the Talpur Mirs, finally experiencing the impact of British colonization for almost a century before becoming part of Pakistan. Much of the credit for the city’s prosperity as a trade hub goes to the Afghans, who after taking full control of Shikarpur towards the mid-18th century, encouraged Hindu merchants to settle here and carry on trade through Afghanistan to Central Asia and India. Bearing a pivotal status on caravan trade routes during 18th, 19th, and the early 20th century, the city prospered and emerged as the pride of an affluent community of merchants, moneylenders, and landlords who left no means unexplored in embellishing the city for over three centuries.

1 The Daudpotas laid the foundation stone of Shikarpur in 1617 AD. In 1739, under Nadir Shah, the city was annexed to the Persian Empire; in 1747, Ahmed Shah Abdalee annexed it to Kandahar State; and in 1824, Talpur Mirs of Sindh had its peaceful possession. In 1839–1840, Shikarpur served as base and frontier post for the British army during the Afghan Wars; and after 1843, Sindh was maintained as a Cantonment till 1861 and District Headquarter until 1883.
The extensive transit and local trade routes from Shikarpur towards N-W, through the Bolan Pass, Quetta, Khelat, Khojak Pass, Kandahar, Kabul, Balkh, and Karshi to Bukhara; towards north with Multan, Peshawar, through Khyber Pass to Kabul, and onwards to Bamean linking with Samarkand and the rest of Central Asia; in the east through Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Pokram, and Pali into India and in the south through Karachi and via the sea into Persian towns of Kerman and Mashad (Fig. 2). These routes were in use until the end of the 19th century, after which they were increasingly superseded (Pithawala 1936; Markovits 2000). Even though Shikarpur never possessed the distinction of being a capital or seat of administrative power, it still enjoyed an influential position from the time of its creation till Partition in 1947; not only as the most important town in Sindh in matters of trade, commerce, banking, and political interests,
but also as one of the only two cities of Sindh (the other being Karachi), having a Hindu majority, in an otherwise Muslim dominated region. At a point in history, it actually became the largest town in Sindh, exceeding even the capital of Hyderabad in size.

During the second half of the 19th century, Shikarpur became the Headquarters of the Sindh Army and also of the district of Upper Sindh until the end of the century, when the district was divided and Sukkur and Jacobabad usurped Shikarpur’s position. Concurrently, Shikarpur suffered a decline in its trade activities, owing largely to the introduction of the railways (1858–1861) and the development of Karachi port (1870s), resulting in a shift of transportation means.

The Indo-Pakistan Divide of 1947 became the next major turning point in its history as the mass exodus of the city’s Hindu patrons created a void in traditional community-based systems. Consequential demographic and socio-cultural transformations had an adverse impact on the city’s historical fabric, particularly its privately owned residential properties that suffered from change of ownership from rich merchants to the hands of economically impoverished inhabitants with a rural background, having insufficient resources for their maintenance and lacking appreciation of their historical, cultural and antiquarian values. The result was the emergence of an antique dealers’ market.
exploiting economically impoverished property owners. Hence, the city's built heritage assets are reduced to the status of an inexpensive quarry to serve the demands of elite collectors. Sixty years of weak planning and development controls made things much worse, resulting in drastic reversal of the city's historically high standards of urban sophistication.

The history of Shikarpur spans across more than 350 years, wherein the influences introduced by political changes, along with ideas and inspirations (traditionally not practiced in Sindh) transpired by merchants travelling back and forth between regions of Persia, Central Asia, Punjab and other far off lands, resulted in the evolution of a rich historic fabric, going on to shape the city's urban environment. Based on what remains, the urban fabric of Shikarpur can still be viewed as a unique case demonstrating the urban history of Sindh; it reflects the numerous contributions of the migrated Sikh and Hindu communities and evidence of creative local traditions and socio-cultural norms. The traditional haveli mansions are a representation of religious, political, social, and cultural dialogue, given expression through the media of built form, echoing the multi-faceted orientations and symbiotic co-existence of a diverse community. Today, only a small fraction of the resident community can relate with the city's glorious past and its fascinating historic background; newer immigrants belonging to a rural background remain largely indifferent to their responsibility of being custodians of an illustrious heritage legacy.

2 Traditional “Haveli”: A Symbol Of Status

A haveli has been defined as a “house form [that] dominated the urban fabric of Northern Indian towns for about five centuries (1550–1950 AD),” reflecting a lifestyle “significant in human terms”; epitomized under the influence of the Mughals, Rajputs, and other rulers of princely states during the 16th century, it went on to become a symbol of aristocracy while providing the ideal accommodation for courtiers and nobles (Pramar 1989; Jain 2004). The tradition of the haveli lifestyle prevailed across Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, parts of Bengal, Lahore and Sindh; it retained its original form up to the last decades of the 19th century, after which, strong colonial influences instigated an inter-penetration of identities between the “haveli” and the "bungalow"; thus, evolved a hybrid form of residential architecture that integrated the ethos of a traditional lifestyle, while adapting to technological advancements in construction and the use of new materials and European elements of architecture (Pramar 1989; Hosagrahar 2001).

Under the British rule, for financial reasons, the patronage for such residences shifted into the hands of an emerging class of prospering mercantile groups,
burgeoning professionals, or landlords; during this period, the traditional haveli underwent variations – transforming from an aristocratic princely mansion to a more “rational and efficiently designed house” (Hosagrahar 2001). The haveli, redefined as a colonial-oriental hybrid, reflected a struggle between retaining the “customary ways of living and building” and the aspiration to “depart from them.”

The commissioning patrons who felt obliged to assert “their loyalty to the British and their commitment to progress,” used the haveli as an open expression of their willingness to break away from tradition and reconstitute new identities (Hosagrahar 2001), while also displaying their newly acquired wealth and position in society.

The surviving historic residences in Shikarpur largely fall under the category of the transformed haveli, showing colonial influences pertaining to the architectural vocabulary of physical form; nevertheless, it cannot be challenged that they represent the traditional lifestyle and culture. It would also not be justified to label these residences under the term “colonial-hybrid,” because of the many inter-regional influences they represent, which was perhaps due to the experiences gained by merchants from Shikarpur travelling to regions of Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia and India for trade.

Thus, the havelis of Shikarpur are a juxtaposition of a variety of influences, expressed through a range of architectural language and elements used in their construction. They represent an evolution of period styles and trends. The havelis also exemplify the rich experimentation with construction materials, use of technology and decorative details (Fig. 3); including among a range of other historic materials, the extensive use of decorative timber elements on façades, such as carved doors, roundels, colonnaded or arcaded porticos, verandas and timber carved screens in wall openings/balconies. These historic façades are a reflection on the wealth of their original owners and their patronage to arts and crafts. These havelis contribute to the unique character of Shikarpur’s urban fabric.

The existing literature on Shikarpur largely covers the aspects of its socio-economic, cultural, and political history while lamenting on the grandeur of its buildings due to generous contributions of its patrons. However, it does not cover any details on building traditions and the built urban fabric. When this

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2 The traditional architecture comprises of mud and/or brick construction having mud-plaster or ornately carved stucco renderings on exteriors, in combination with wrought iron/cast iron metalwork. The interiors are also embellished with colorful geometric floor patterns, carved timber doors, marble fireplaces, and timber-glass decorations on ceilings.
gap was identified, extensive research was undertaken between 2007–2009, producing a comprehensive inventory and maps of Shikarpur, which laid the foundation for the official enlistment of 1203 historic properties in 2012 and the publication of their inventory monograph in 2013 (Naeem 2009, 2013).

Almost 80% of these enlisted properties represent the residential architecture of historic havelis and mansions – adorned with elaborate woodwork that bears witness to the creative genius of master craftsmen.

In spite of the heritage designations, this wealth of traditional wood-culture is fast disappearing. These buildings urgently need to be studied in detail within the context of a changed demography, the economically impoverished group of present owners, and the indifferent attitudes of other stakeholders.

3 Wooden Façades – Silent Expressions Speaking Volumes

Historical accounts based on oral traditions recorded by Hughes (1876) establish that the city’s foundation stone was laid after a battle between the Daudpotas and Mahars over the possession of a stretch of hunting grounds. It ended in the favour of the Daudpotas, who in celebration and following the advice of a holy saint whose blessings brought them victory, cleared the forest which remained a cause of contention, and built Shikarpur – literally meaning “hunting grounds.”

This narrative on Shikarpur’s foundation is based on a hypothetical presumption that being a forested area, construction timber was locally available in ample quantities. A substantial use of timber, both for structural elements and decorative detailing, (Fig. 4) has been reported, which was supported by
evidence of the few surviving examples of early constructions that were categorized as belonging to the oldest construction style. However, the quality and craftsmanship indicate basic standards. This shows that local timber was of inferior quality than the wood used in the later period constructions.

Sindh is primarily categorized as an arid region, with less than seven percent of its area covered with natural forests; and of these only the riverside forests of hardwood in the province – sixty percent of which is Babul that “attains

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3 The oldest architectural style is of simple façade composition with mud and straw plaster, having rectangular openings. Woodwork used is of simple design and crude workmanship quality, limited to fixed timber latticework screens of intricate geometric or floral patterns at the upper and/or lower part of window openings, timber brackets, and doors with simple carvings.
unusual size and luxuriance” only along river banks (Postans, 1843; Hughes, 1876; IUCN 2004) – were considered useful. Postans (1843) described the wood of Sindh as “inexhaustible in quantity,” however, “small in size.” Thus, the construction needs were fulfilled from the north or from Bombay. Extensive timber trade, primarily of teak wood, through the sea route from Malabar Coast and Burma to Britain flourished during the 18th and 19th century and Karachi served as a major depot for this activity, thus supplying good quality timber to Sindh (Troup 1921; Howard 1922; Mann 2001).

In addition, the commercial exploitation of Sindh’s own forests was also initiated for the first time by the British between 1857–1895 (IUCN 2004), creating opportunities for better quality timber in the local markets. These facts indicate that the last few decades of the 19th century were a benchmark for the evolution of timber architecture in the Sindh province.

The comparison of a historic undated image of Shikarpur’s Covered Bazaar with its present roofing, mentioned by Hughes (1875) as being built by the municipality (Figures 5a and b), clearly represents the advancements achieved during colonial period in timber construction; both because of availability of quality timber and knowledge of better joinery techniques. This also transpired

Figure 5

The infamous covered (Dhak) Bazaar of Shikarpur originally had a crude form of timber trusses, which were replaced during the Colonial period with a more sophisticated timber truss system that still exists intact.
into domestic architecture where the creative genius of master craftsmen produced an array of features including ornamental embellishments, decorative fenestrations, and even iconographic expressionism.

4 Iconographic Representations

The most fascinating revelations about the socio-cultural, religious, or even political aspects of Shikarpur’s original community can be seen in the iconography adorning the façades of buildings. This can be observed particularly on the tympanum of the entrance doorways, exposed strut ends, and brackets supporting upper floor cantilever or balconies. Few examples of such figurative woodwork are also seen on pelmet bands or side-boards nailed along protruding sharp edges of balconies, upper floors, and chajjas. The variety of observed compositions and woodcarving reflect the quality of craftsmanship and creative design capabilities, using techniques of chip carving, flat-pattern carving, relief carving (low or high relief), and carving-in-the-round.4

A detailed study of over fifty-five panels embellishing the tympanum of main entrance doorways of havelis brings to light a range of iconography themes and the experimentation in carving techniques. In Hindu culture, the main entrance needs to be ‘specially guarded’ in order to avert evil and enhance “auspiciousness,” thus particular care is taken to decorate it with symbols such as garlands, leaf motifs and most importantly, the image of their worshiped deity (Pramar 1989; Thiagarajan 1992). Different cities of India are known for different motifs depending on the deities worshipped. However, the examples from Shikarpur reflect an interesting array, endorsing the diverse multicultural and religious orientations of the city’s population, indicating a symbiotic co-existence, balanced by inter-cultural tolerance, integration and respect for individual choice. The themes or motifs observed in the panels form 5 distinct groups.

The first group represents the Nanakpanthi tradition, constituted by the original disciples of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Even though the Sikhs revere all their 10 gurus, often depicted in iconographic representations in gurdwaras, nevertheless all eight examples from Shikarpur forming this

4 The chip carving technique that was known since the 13th century, became popular in the 16th century; often used for repetitive geometric patterns drawn on surfaces and cut out one chip at a time using a sharp skew chisel with its cutting edge set at 60 degrees; using the flat-pattern carving technique, a two-dimensional design is revealed by working in three dimensions; the relief carving technique creates a 3-D effect on flat surfaces by cutting back the background and rounding the projecting forms; moreover, carving-in-the-round produces a sculptural effect that can be viewed from all sides (Sentence 2003).
group were based on a singular theme: inspired by *janamsakhis* (birth and life stories of Guru Nanak) and showing the trio of Guru Nanak, *Bhai* Bala, and *Bhai* Mardana.

Around 25 years of Guru Nanak's life were spent traveling and preaching on social reforms, drawing traditions from Bhakti (Hindu) and Sufi (Islam) beliefs (Singh 2011); following doctrines earlier practiced in the Santh tradition across North India (McLeod 1989). On his journeys, he was accompanied by two close companions: *Bhai* Bala – a Hindu initially appointed by Guru Nanak's father to assist him in trading, and *Bhai* Mardana – a Muslim belonging to the Marasi tribe of musicians whom Guru Nanak befriended at an early age.

The carved panels following this theme (Fig. 6) show Guru Nanak, in the center, seated cross-legged on a rug, with a big cushion (*gao takia*) behind his back, sometimes under a tree. The figure of Guru Nanak is depicted with a beard, holding a rosary, and wearing a turban – sometimes with a halo over his head. To the left of Guru Nanak sits *Bhai* Bala holding a *morpankh* (peacock feathers for fanning). To the right of Guru Nanak sits *Bhai* Mardana playing the *Rubab* (stringed musical instrument). The composition of hymns accompanied with music in the *Rubabi* Tradition of *Shabad Kirtan*5 was instituted by Nanak in the 15th century (Purewal 2011). One of the panels even engraves the three names “Guru Nanak,” “*Bhai* Mardana,” and “*Bhai* Bala” above the respective figures in the Gurmukhi script.

The Census of Bombay in 1901 mentioned Sindh as the only other province, aside from Punjab, in the Bombay Presidency that comprised of a Sikh population; this is endorsed by the presence of Nanakpanth iconography in Shikarpur. However, it should not be assumed that these were commissioned only by Sikhs, as Sindhi Hindus were also known to revere Guru Nanak alongside their other deities.

Furthermore, the contributions of *Bhai* Mardana and after him his sons and several generations of Muslim musicians to the *Shabad Kirtan* tradition indicates a close relationship between Muslims and Sikhs during the formative decades of the Sikh religion.

The second group represents Hindu deities, and comprises of two subgroups; one corresponding to “Vaishnavites” or followers of Vishnu (god of sustenance) and “Shaivites” or followers of Shiva (god of destruction). Out of the fifteen studied panels in this category, seven belong to the first sub-group (Fig. 7)

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5 Bhai Mardana had two sons, Rajada and Sajada; the latter's sons Bhai Banoo and Bhai Saloo performed at darbar of Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das, and their sons Bhai Balwand and Bhai Satta performed at darbar of Guru Arjan Dev. The family line of Bhai Mardan ended after three generations; however, offshoots from this originating line continue to present day through distant relations (Purewal 2011).
Figure 6 Iconography representing Nanakpanthi tradition: the trio of Guru Nanak (centre), Bhai Bala (right) and Bhai Mardana (left). These panels made in relief carving show intricate details that resonate stories on life of Guru Nanak.
depicting Vishnu in the form of his avatar/incarnation as Krishna (the cowherd) or Murlidhar, symbolized as holding a flute with two hands. One of these panels shows Krishna with two “gopis” (female cowherds), one on each side, and their goat behind them, whereas another shows him standing atop a lotus flower and a cow behind him. In a third panel Krishna is shown in a sitting position atop a lotus flower, playing a flute. This particular ‘sitting position over a lotus flower’ is associated with Vishnu (Das 2012), however in this case the flute indicates it being meant as Krishna. Chiseling out the figure in the center has disfigured the remaining four panels, however traces of the image indicate that these panels belong to this group of Vaishnavite iconography.

The eight carvings representing Shaivite iconography (Fig. 8) include: one panel depicting Shiva as the householder seated with his wife Shakti (in the
The group of carved panels depicting the Shaivite traditions, comprising of images of Shiva with his main symbols, the snakes and trishul (trident); sometimes seated with his consort, the goddess Parvati. Shaivites also worship Ganesha (son of Shiva) as their primary deity, represented with having an elephant head and a rotund body.
this sect is the river saint Jhulelal or Khawaja Khizr; the reconciler of religious differences, endowed with a dual personality, simultaneously worshipped by Muslims as a Sufi saint and Hindus as a Nath Yogi and deity considered to be the avatar of Varuna (the god of waters) (Khan 2004; Ray 2012). The lifeline of Sindh has always been its river, thus worship of Indus remained the most ancient form of religious practices in the province, perhaps practiced since over three and a half millennia (Khan 2004; Ray 2012); continuing to have a deep imprint on religious beliefs of the Sindhis, regardless of residing in Sindh or elsewhere. The post-Independence socio-political and religious manipulations within Sindh and across the border strengthened Jhulelal/Khizr as a powerful symbol of threatened Sindhi identity, particularly for migrated Sindhis (Khan 2004; Kothari 2004). Of the three panels in this group, two have been disfigured; however, the only surviving piece shows the bearded figure of Khawaja Khizr seated on a fish (signifying the infamous Indus pala) holding a book in his hand (Fig. 9).

The fourth group comprises of floral/foliate motifs in combination with birds or animal forms. Some recurring themes in this group of eleven studied panels include: a creeper emerging from a lion's face, spreading outwards in meandering form, and birds entwined with dense floral/foliate mesh or potted plants. The species of birds depicted in different panels include peacocks, falcon, parrots, and the singing bird chatak/koel (Fig. 10).

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6 A shrine associated with Jhulelal/Khawaja Khizr is located on an island near Rohri, built partly as a Muslim mausoleum and partly as a Hindu temple but without any image; having 952 AD inscribed on it which is marked as his birth date by Sindhis, and celebrated as the Cheti Chand festival at the beginning of the lunar year (Khan 2004; Ray 2012).
The fifth group conforms to using only floral, foliate and geometric patterns, because for Muslims, the use of figurative compositions is forbidden by their religion. Over 20 panels form this group, indicating a variety of stylistic trends. Even though calligraphy is widely employed in the glazed tile tradition of building decoration, there were no examples found in Shikarpur. Only one example with Arabic inscription was noted, wherein an inscription was engraved on the frame around a tympanum panel. The carving motifs within this group can be broadly classified into those in the block printing tradition, those inspired by Persian carving traditions, and finally those based on Europeanized design aesthetics (Fig. 11).

Other than tympanums, brackets are a frequently used, prominent feature on buildings façades displaying extensive use of figurative iconography. Their strikingly visual impact reflects the creativity and imaginative genius of the craftsmen, and the surpassing excellence of their craft. Serving dual purposes; primarily as structural supports for projecting upper floor or as roof projections for the parapet wall, these brackets also have ornamental, antiquarian and artistic values due to the intricate carvings.

Commonly among design motifs, there is a wide range of animal depictions including different fish species (eel, pala), alligator, otter, wild boar, lion, birds of different varieties (fish eating heron and smaller ones like the finch), and peacocks; mostly derived from characters of Hindu mythology (Fig. 12). One repeated theme is the flying human figure with wings, seen in both male and female versions – the male playing the musical instrument vina depicts "Narada," the celestial sage and messenger between gods and humans.
Figure 11: The carvings associated with Muslim traditions make use of only floral, foliate, and geometric patterns.

Figure 12: Timber brackets supporting upper floor cantilevers are among the most striking features of historic façades, depicting a wide range of characters from Hindu mythology.
The strut ends are treated three-dimensionally, round carved with animal heads including a lion, elephant, panther, and owl (Fig. 13). Some buildings have used brackets with different designs, placed alternately in a series. Most brackets also have patterns with multiple intertwined animal figures. A large variety of intricate floral and foliate motifs are also observed to be in common use.

The multifaceted iconographic representations of Shikarpur’s *havelis* reveal a richness of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity nurtured within the society prior to the 1947 Partition. They are also a reflection of Sindh’s age-old tradition of tolerance and cordial co-existence as practiced through an imbedded culture of Sufism. This is evident from examples where iconographic representations of different inclinations were found in the same residence. These residences were not only a statement on socio-economic standing and religious
orientation of the original occupants, but also evolved to become symbols of political proclamation, as reflected from an interesting example employed in woodcraft (other such examples are with use of wrought iron grills) where the traditional form of colonnaded arched spandrels is transformed into a statement of loyalty to the British crown (Fig. 14).

5 Forms and Features of Façade Fenestration

A brief chronological study of properties with known construction dates led to the identification of an architectural style, which used timber elaborately, as corresponding to Shikarpur’s period of prosperity; spanning over the last two decades of the 19th century and the first half of 20th century (Fig. 15).

**FIGURE 14** Carving details on historic façades also evolved to become symbols of political proclamations
Buildings in this group indicate two distinct sub-groups; first those having extensive timber details in fenestration of external (street facing) and/or court-yard facing façades, and secondly those representing an architectural expression distinctly characterized by use of stucco plaster as the primary material for creating ornate decorations and carvings on façade, combined with use of ornate iron-grills, and lesser use of decorative woodwork. The use of wood in this latter group is limited to doors, windows, and other minor details of façade elements such as pelmet bands, ceiling decorations, and simple brackets. The wooden doors and windows in this sub-group, themselves form a highly ornate feature of façades, using elaborate geometric forms, particularly in the treatment of the tympanum area of arched openings, where use of colourful and textured glass greatly adds to the aesthetics and elegance.

Both these styles possibly developed simultaneously to their respective peaks of refinement. Examples from the first subgroup, being the more elaborate odes to usage of timber for façade fenestration, are dealt here in more detail (Fig. 16). Some examples have their entire façade from ground to top, completely covered with timber decorative details; whereas others make use of timber decorative details in select areas, having the most visual exposure or only at topmost floor, whereas rest of external masonry is left without any decoration except for window, ventilator or roundel openings where timber details are used.
The salient feature, which characterizes this architectural style, is the use of “mohari” – a timber colonnaded arcade at one or more levels. When used in upper floors it is often, but not necessarily always, embellished with cantilevers and supported on a series of timber brackets; creating a loggia overlooking the courtyard and/or a long continuous covered balcony running along the entire length of the street facing façade. When used on ground floor, the “mohari” creates a verandah that either buffers between the living room area and courtyard of building or forms a porch like space overlooking the street. The “mohari” is a composition of a series of equally spaced slender timber posts, with lintels forming the main framework; the divided panels within are treated with a variety of details including timber trellis or fret/latticework, iron grills, and carved panels of timber (Fig. 17). In larger havelis, this element is

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7 Openwork fret or lattice work is produced by using thin panels of wood pierced with cut or sawn out patterns, and then mounted on a timber framework; a cheaper substitute to carving that reached its height of popularity during the 19th century (Sentence 2003).
used in combination with plain brick masonry walls, sometimes covered with simple plaster. The motifs of fret/latticework used in *moharis* are always geometric patterns created with small thin panels that slide into the main frame using tongue-groove detail. The delicate effect of latticework, and it being a more cost-effective option than carved panels, made its use more extensive. However, timber panels with intricate relief carvings of floral motifs are also seen in frequent use. The surface of horizontal structural members, including wall plates and beams, have delicate linear carvings, either done directly on them or using thin carved planks nailed over them. The columns are also treated with details that appear to be inspired from Mughal architecture.

Another feature attributed to influences from the Islamic world is the treatment of ceilings, believed to originate either from Persia where this craft is known as *"qab-sazi"*\(^8\) (Floor 2006) or from Bijapur (India), where it was in use during the 17th century, and from there came to Gujarat (Pramar 1989). Since Sindh had close relations with both Gujarat and Persia, it cannot be said for certain, which of the two was the real source of influence. Ornamented ceilings are primarily a feature of interior decoration, however in Shikarpur’s *have-lis* it is also employed as an exterior decoration for treating underside of upper floor cantilevers. Intricate geometric patterns are created by joining small

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\(^8\) The ceiling is created on the floor by fitting the small thin pieces superimposed upon a flat background creating the geometric pattern; when completed it is raised to the ceiling and supported on the structural columns (Pramar 1989; Floor 2006).
pieces of different varieties of wood having different shades (Fig. 18). The use of multiple patterns in different panels of the same building is also seen. The timber pelmet bands at the edge of cantilevers add to the delicate aesthetics. These are of carved or fretwork strips, often having rounded details produced by the turning\(^9\) technique, to finish off the lower edge.

6  **Volumetric Principles and Design Variations**

The basic volumetric principles followed in traditional *havelis*, in terms of plot parcels and composition or the relationship of solid-void spaces and the placement of timber façade elements on the two prevalent plot types (sandwiched and corner plots), reveal repetitive design principles. Schematic layouts of existing derivatives corresponding with presented forms of façade fenestrations (Fig. 19) imply that investments in decorative detailing were not always for the pleasure of inhabitants, but also meant as a means of displaying wealth and patronage to arts and crafts. In most cases, the aesthetics of intricate timberwork were enjoyed by both the inhabitants and the passers-by, and contributed to the urban fabric. However, examples where complete focus is on external visibility without having any visual connect with interior spaces also exist. In any case interiors were never completely devoid of ornate detailing, often using timber, in combination with a variety of other materials such as glazed tiles, iron grillwork, and richly ornate furniture pieces.

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\(^9\) Turning technique uses a lathe that spins the wood against a tool supported against a rest; producing rounded objects (Sentence 2003).
Pillage of History – Ignorance vs Greed

The *havelis* of Shikarpur still remain vulnerable to a growing demand of wood antiquarian enthusiasts despite being given protected heritage status by the Department of Culture, Government of Sindh, way back in 1998, and furthermore in March 2012, under the “Sindh Cultural Heritage Preservation Act 1994.”

The growing market and demand for salvaged woodwork details from demolished structures is created by recent architectural trends in large cities like Karachi, where the élites pleasurably install these in their expensive modern residences, flamboyantly claiming them as prized collector’s items. The professionals involved in promoting these trends, are seemingly oblivious of their irresponsible attitudes. And those who facilitate this trade are no other but the sons of this great historic city, exploiting the impoverished state of fellow city residents. A fearless violation of law continues to be in practice, with increasing number of showrooms, shops and go-downs doing business in historic materials within Shikarpur and other cities including Karachi, reflecting on the apathy of local administration, conveniently shrugging off any responsibility to curb these illegal activities.

An alarming rate of ongoing demolitions were recorded, with more than twelve percent of the properties identified for heritage listing in 2007, confirmed as demolished in the following three years (Naeem 2011, 2012). The seriousness of the matter is reflected well by the fact that most officers of...
the city administration do not even know about Shikarpur’s designated status. Till recently, all decisions regarding demolition permits were singularly at the discretion of the Town Officer (TO) – Infrastructure Engineering at the Town Municipal Office (TMA). However, with the extension of the Karachi Building Control Authority over the entire Sindh province in February 2011, it was hoped that matters related to enlisted properties will be better monitored and brought to the Heritage Advisory Committee of the Government of Sindh. This in turn has so far not succeeded in preventing further destruction of the historic environment.

Mere notifications, unsupported by active monitoring systems or sufficient administrative support to ensure strict implementation of the law is primarily the root cause of unchecked and ongoing demolitions, without any regard to significance and value of the city’s heritage assets and the consequent loss it suffers in terms of potentials related to cultural heritage-based economy. The temporary and short-term gains of a growing market for woodwork antiques, largely comprising exterior woodwork and decorative ornamental features adorning historic façades, benefits only a handful of people. The larger community seems oblivious to the gains that few individuals reap at their expense, depriving their city of prospects in economic growth, which could be beneficial to the larger community. The environmental crisis of the present times, where the use of natural building materials, particularly wood, is becoming scarce and is principally dissuaded, adds to the antiquarian values of the unique characteristics of the historic environment. This understanding and appreciation need to be developed within the resident community, and efforts in this direction would be the only way to rebuilding a sense of pride for a heritage that is at present being undermined. Progressive efforts to curb the pressures of development and modernization, and a focused attempt to alleviate the presently impoverished societal context are major challenges to be tackled for setting trends towards preservation of the historic environment, providing alternate “economically feasible” choices to property owners willing to preserve the city’s heritage assets.

8  Future Prospects – Challenges as Custodians of a Fading Heritage Legacy

A campaign to safeguard traditional havelis initiated in 2008 by Heritage Cell – Department of Architecture and Planning, N.E.D. University, conveying waves of alarm to concerned authorities and engaging international support through the inclusion of “Shikarpur Historic Town” in the World Monuments Fund Watch List in 2008, 2010 and 2014 – instigated a day long community
motivational program in November 2014 and 2016, through local collaboration, and succeeded in bringing out enthusiastic response from the community.

The challenge, however, remains in keeping the momentum building. The gap created by administrative lapses, as against the strong mafia built on commercial interests, is too large to be filled with only minor attempts. Unless there is a serious initiative involving all stakeholders to realize their responsibilities; and simultaneously a forceful implementation of the law, the chances for survival of Shikarpur’s historic havelis continue to remain very bleak. With the ongoing destruction of Shikarpur’s historic character, a fascinating chapter of Sindh’s urban history is fast disappearing.

Encouraging socio-cultural revival and economic regeneration that benefits associated communities is singularly the most crucial aspect for long-term sustenance of the city’s heritage assets and preservation of historic environment in its entirety. This requires serious steps towards establishing a monitoring system, developing appropriate regulations, creating supportive technical and financial resources, organizing programs to inculcate a sense of pride and appreciation among residents and administrators, and encouraging them to take up their responsibility as custodians of their inherited legacy.

Focused programs to support the revival of historic building traditions and their associated crafts persons are the need of the day and must be approached with “community participatory activism” to address the issues of a declined sense of ownership/custodianship and reinstate the lost pride in indigenous building traditions. Effective long-term policies and strategies should seek collaboration between government departments and educational institutions for ensuring continuity in management, training, and local capacity building for heritage conservation. The city government and provincial administration needs to urgently address the crisis of historic built environments by developing policy guidelines that would steer new development processes towards carefully gauged directions that bear sensitivity to the historic fabric. Only with a balanced approach for nurturing both of these directions that the history of unique living cultures can remain intact in their true essence for future generations to cherish.

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