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Lahore is No More Lahore: The New Noun Architectural Skyline of the City

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Abstract
This research paper interrogates the architectural evolution of Lahore. It silhouettes its metamorphosis from an experiential urban setting where architecture was considered as a verb into an assemblage of secluded, iconic monumental buildings where architecture is practiced as a noun. Based upon phenomenological framework of Sarah Robinson alongside theory of Critical Regionalism put forward by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, this study examines how historic built environment of Lahore which was once described by sensory depth and communal integration is being replaced by globalized, consumerist typologies. In order to investigate this shift, the paper synthesizes the historiography of Kanhaiya Lal and Ihsan H. Nadiem with the colonial critiques of William J. Glover and the semiotic theories of Francesco Proto. After relating these theories to real-world developments like the Emporium Mall, Packages Mall, Defence Raya, and the expanding horizons of the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), this study determines how the modern skyline of Lahore depicts a manifestation of Baudrillardian simulacra, where industrially and technologically produced architectural forms erase indigenous spatial identities. Ultimately, this paper suggests a critical regionalist framework to harmonize glorious heritage of Lahore with the inevitable pressures of Capitalist Urbanization.

Key words: Lahore, architecture, urban design, vernacular, corporate aesthetic.

1. Introduction

The Inherently, architecture exists between two ontological states: dynamic process of human inhabitation and static material artifact. According to Sarah Robinson, built environment should not be interpreted as a show case of static and isolated objects but as dynamic and living relationship that shapes human experience and at the same time gets shape by it. (Robinson 2021, 14). When architecture is produced to experience, it acts as a verb and produces movement, sensory connect, and civic dialogue. Conversely, practicing architecture as a noun shall reduce architecture to a commodified spectacle: an independent, iconic and isolated object designed for visual pleasure rather than embodied existence.

The contemporary urban transformation of Lahore needs to be analyzed through a critical lens based on the above-mentioned theoretical tension. Historically, Lahore progressed as a prototypical verbal city where the urban core i.e., the Walled City was not perceived as an assemblage of unique and independent architectural monuments but as a series of interstitial network of bazars, *kūcẖās* (streets), *katŕās* (communal space) and *ḥavelis* (residential unit). In this traditional setting, architecture was defined by its capacity to facilitate social rituals, manage microclimatic conditions,

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and foster a collective spatial identity.



Figure 1: SHOPPING IN WALLED CITY, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE



Figure 2: COMMUNAL SPACE INFRONT OF HAVELI NAUNEHAL SINGH, WALLED CITY, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE.

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However, in the 21st century, the skyline of Lahore in in the process of structural shift. The architecture of Lahore seems to be determined by forces like neoliberal economic policies, real estate development speculations and a craving for being caught on a larger global canvas. Resultantly, the city is rapidly becoming a collection of "noun architecture". The contemporary skyline of Lahore is gradually subjugated by gated housing societies like Wapda Town, Abdalian housing society, TECH society, Bahria Town etc., high rise and extravagant corporate towers and shopping malls like Emporium Mall, Packages Mall, Dolmen Mall, Fortress square etc., and imitated monumental structures. These structures exist on the skyline of Lahore with aesthetics disconnected from the context, history, culture and ecological reality of the region.



Figure 3: CONTROLLED GATED ENTRANCE OF WAPDE TOWN, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE



Figure 4: CONTROLLED GATED ENTRANCE OF ABDALIAN SOCIETY, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE.

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Figure 5: GATED ENTRANCE OF TECH SOCIETY, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE.

This research paper examines the socio-political, historical and philosophical dimensions of the new "Noun skyline" of Lahore. After synthesizing literature on architectural theory, architectural and urban history and philosophy, the paper traces the genealogy of the built environment of Lahore. It records the disruption of rich history detailed by Kanhaiya Lal and Ihsan H. Nadiem by the Colonial modernity recorded by William J. Glover. The paper also proposes a critique on the contemporary mass-reproduced architectural identity of the city based on the concept of Critical Regionalism by Lefaivre and Tzonis and analysis of Jean Budrillard by Francesco Proto. After comprehensively examining the contemporary iconic monuments including Emporium Mall, Packages Mall, Defence Raya and urban planning of Defence Housing Authority (DHA), it pursues to comprehend the loss when a city seizes to function like a verb and converts to an assembly of spectacular monumental nouns.

2. Architecture as a Verb vs. Architecture as a Noun

In order to comprehend the contemporary urban design crisis of Lahore, one needs to refer to the phenomenological critique of space put forward by Sarah Robinson in her book, "Architecture is a verb". According to her the Western architecture is obsessed with the phenomenon "eye catching architecture" thus gives priority to eye over the rest of the human senses. (Robinson 2021, 32). When architecture is designed entirely for being eye catching, it becomes disconnected to subliminal and corporeal experiences of the human body thus becomes a stationary and inert object, mere geometric composition or a corporate logo. More precisely, a noun.

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Figure 6: DOLMEN MALL, Department. Of Architecture, Punjab University, session 2023-28, JPEG IMAGE



Figure 7: EMPORIUM MALL, Department. Of Architecture, Punjab University, session 2023-28, JPEG IMAGE

Architecture is not something for visual pleasure only but we actually live it with all of our senses. (Robinson 2021, 58). "Live architecture" means that it should involve tangible response from the materials, the echo of the courtyard, changing shadow patterns of the natural light and thermal transition between indoor and outdoor spaces. Traditional urban design of Lahore used to adhere to this experience as for centuries the urban environment of Lahore remained aligned to multi-sensory experience model. The brick paved streets of the Walled City used to restrain one's footsteps thus forced the passersby to connect to the intricate building facades and feel the cooling effect of brick masonry walls built in lime mortar.

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Figure 8: A STREET IN WALLED CITY, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE.



Figure 9: COMMUNAL SPACE BETWEEN HAVELI NAUNEHAL SINGH AND OTHER RESINDENCE, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE.

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When the domain of architecture gets shifted to “noun”, the above-mentioned phenomenological dimensions are rejected. Noun architecture seems to adhere to “the geometry of exclusion”. (Robinson 2021, 91). It demonstrates architecture as stand-alone objects cladded with globally mass-produced materials like reflective glass, aluminum panels and prefabricated steel structures. These buildings do not respond to the context rather impose themselves upon the local urban environment.

The contemporary architecture of Lahore depicts the noun-centric model. Take the example of Emporium Mall, a huge commercial architecture structure, built in Johar Town area, Lahore.



Figure 10: EMPORIUM MALL, Department. Of Architecture, Punjab University, session 2023-28, JPEG IMAGE.

It was designed as a monolithic structure with angular walls made of massive non porous concrete panels. It completely rejects the contextual streetscape by acting as an introvert architectural object that can truly be called as a noun that was perceived to be approached through vehicles rather than pedestrian pathways. The inside of the building is completely detached from the climate of Lahore through hermetically sealed building envelope in order to achieve world-class sterile aesthetics.



Figure 11: EMPORIUM MALL, Department. Of Architecture, Punjab University, session 2023-28, JPEG IMAGE.

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Likewise, Packages Mall on Walton Road is an attempt to reconsider architectural spatial relationship through indoor consumerist labyrinth.

Though, Packages Mall enjoys an adaptive re-use from a historic industrial site but the all-around asphalt parking bays act as a buffer zone to isolate the indoors from organic, outdoor city life of Lahore. Human scale was neglected rather replaced by hyper-visual aesthetics designed to enjoy isolation from the context and technological abstraction. The building is designed to be viewed from fast moving vehicles and can be referred as a monument to capitalism.



Figure 12: PACKAGES MALL, Department. Of Architecture, Punjab University, session 2023-28, JPEG IMAGE



Figure 13: PACKAGES MALL, Department of Architecture, Punjab University, session 2023-28, JPEG IMAGE.

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2.2 Traditional Lahore and the Vernacular Fabric

In order to understand the extent of this architectural shift, the contemporary skyline needs to be compared to the historical architectural heritage of Lahore. According to Kanhaiya Lal as described in his chronicle *Tareekh-e-Lahore,* the architecture of Lahore was primarily connected to spiritual, social and imperial heritage. The urban topography of Lahore was meaningful where every urban space including mosque, gateway, garden and haveli etc. was designed in response to the above-mentioned factors (Lal 2006, 45). The architecture that was discussed by Lal was organic. It did not lack the sense of planning yet had the capacity to respond to the requirements of its inhabitants. Mughal monuments like Badshahi Mosque, Shalamar Garden, Lahore Fort etc., were not just stagnant and fixed iconic structures but vistas for public gatherings, imperial ceremonies and spiritual devotion. These buildings acted as verb by actively responding to the daily needs of the people.



Figure 14: GARDEN IN LAHORE FORT, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE.



Figure 15: GARDEN IN JAHANGIR'S QUADRANGLE, LAHORE FORT, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE.

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Ihsan H. Nadiem talks about the syncretic nature of the built form of Lahore and describes how different architectural languages based on different religions including Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist and Islam cross-pollinated over a period of many centuries to produce a unique vernacular architectural vocabulary (Nadiem 1996, 12). This indigenous architectural language was based on vernacular construction techniques like kiln baked *Lakhori* bricks, lime plaster, intricate wood carving and *jharokas* etc,

According to the analysis carved by Nadiem, the built environment of Lahore attained social and climatic effective responsiveness through its collective dense nature. The shared walls of the buildings built in Walled City minimized solar heat gains. On the other hand, the narrow streets ensured everlasting and uninterrupted shadow during the scorching summers when mercury rises to 48 °C. architecture was used as a tool to mitigate the climate and social solidarity.



Figure 16: A RESIDENTIAL STREET IN WALLED CITY, K.A.MUIZ, JPEG IMAGE.

The analysis of Robinson's theory along with the findings of Lal and Nadiem depicts the philosophical disconnect presented by the contemporary "Noun" skyline of Lahore. Traditional Lahore did not showcase isolated corporate monumental buildings; the buildings, even of monumental scale, were deeply rooted with in the mixed-use residential setting. The structural conversion of the city from a cohesive and well bonded regional eco system into a split archipelago of architectural icons and brands e.g., transition of indigenous *muḥalla* setting into branded gated residential communities symbolizes the erasure of the historic indigenous identity of the city that was recorded so subtly by the historians.

2.3 Colonial Modernity

The conversion of Lahore from a verbal, experiential urban-scape into a collection of monumental architectural nouns did not commence from twenty first century globalization. It is rooted in the conscious efforts made during British Colonial rule. This systematic dismantling of indigenous spatial hierarchy of Lahore to introduce western concept of modernity was critically analyzed by William J. Glover.

He was of the opinion that the vernacular urbanization of Walled City Lahore was perceived by the British with bias based on horror and fascination. The colonial lens looked at the densely populated winding streets bounded by interconnected houses as unhygienic, unmanageable and chaotic which was rather a spatial metaphor for the locals (Glover 2008, 34). In order to solve the issue, the British administration proposed and implemented an urbanization plan based on detached structures, categorized precincts and hygienic neighbourhood. On the basis of colonial fascination, Civil Lines and Cantonment areas were developed outside the Walled City. These areas were equipped with wide and rectilinear roads, grid-iron layout and detached bungalows planned within large private green spaces.

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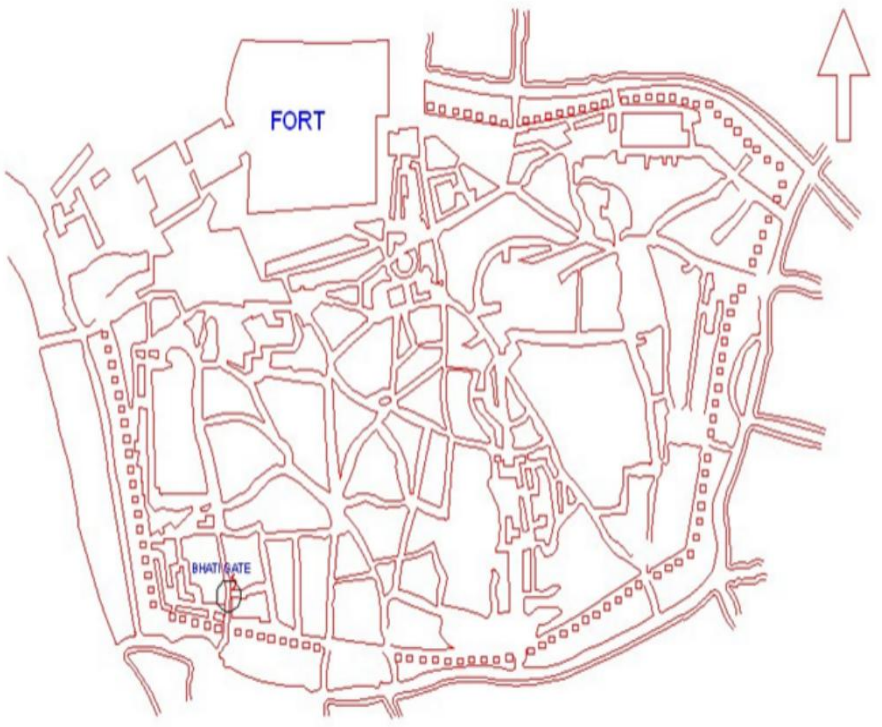

Figure 17: ORGANIC STREET PATTERN OF WALLED CITY, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE

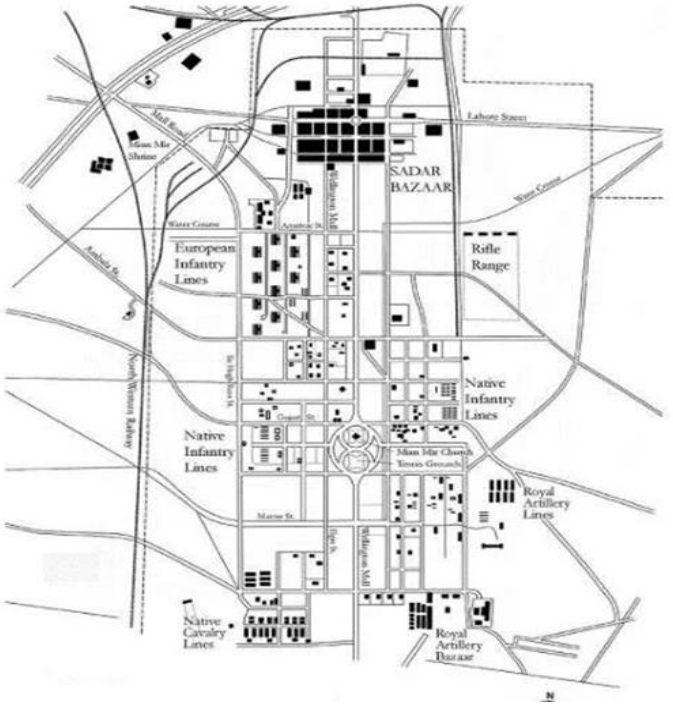

Figure 18: *GRID IRON STREET LAYOUT OF LAHORE CANTONMENT, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE.*

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This intervention by the British laid foundations for "Noun" architecture in Lahore. The detached buildings, for the first time, were treated as independent objects situated within an inert and abstract site. According to Glover the new epistemological framework introduced by the British was used as a tool to instruct the British discipline to the natives (Glover 2008, 78). This institutionalized shift replaced traditional craftsmen like master builder (miʿmār) with institutionalized and bureaucratized architects and engineers where architecture and construction were codified into standard text books containing imported literature and construction techniques (Glover 2008, 112).

Colonial modernity established such a spatial hierarchy that associated development with detachment, privatization of space and visual individuality. Thus, a groundwork was laid for contemporary urban development of Lahore. The colonial desire to escape the "chaos" of Walled City, though it was a vernacular style of development, was inherited by the modern elite and the phenomenon directly leads to the development of Defence Housing Authority (D.H.A.) and societies like Bahria Town etc.

D.H.A. displays post-colonial exhibition of the analysis proposed by Glover. It is developed on different phases ranging from phase 1 to 11 and beyond, dispersed over whole of the city of Lahore. D.H.A. is developed on the concept of grid iron. Wide roads and strictly enforced by-laws dictate detached residential setting. The organic continuity of the land was compromised by enforced, extensive and artificial grid. Life at D.H.A. is car centric that divides the settlement into disintegrated and isolated residential sectors. The design philosophy of D.H.A. systematically executes the same division of class and function as portrayed by the British in the Civil Lines.



Figure 19: CAR CENTRIC STREET LAYOUT OF D.H.A. LAHORE, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE.

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Figure 20: STREET COMPARISON OF D.H.A. LAHORE, INTERNET SOURCE, AND WALLED CITY, K.A.MUIZ JPEG IMAGE.

2.4 The Contemporary Corporate Aesthetic

As Lahore progressed through the post-independence period to the 21st century, the objectification of architecture augmented. The psychological and semiotic dimensions of the contemporary architectural development of Lahore can be well understood in the light of the theoretical analysis of Jean Buadrillard by Francesco Proto in his book *Mass, Identity, Architecture.*

According to the analysis of Baudrillard's claim put forward by Proto, objects in the contemporary society are no longer consumed for their usefulness or physical value but for their sign-value (Proto 2006, 23). During the late capitalism period, architecture went through such a process of drastic generalization that it lost its connection to real human needs and became a simulacrum. According to Proto, contemporary architecture is part of a system of signifiers that generate a hyper-reality. The artificial environment offered by such buildings appears more real than the actual reality.

Defence Raya, a high-end luxury development within DHA Phase 6 depicts the absolute realization of the analysis described by Proto. It is developed around a pristine 18-hole golf course, high rise extravagantly designed corporate and commercial buildings. The architecture was developed as a signifier of trans-national luxury. The modern facades, manicured spaces and artificial lakes remain alienated to the climatic, geographic and ethnographical realities of Lahore. It depicts an imported hyper-reality and localized imitation of Dubai or Florida real estate imposed on vernacular architecture and urban design of Lahore. The space is altogether disconnected to the actual identity of Lahore. It attracts the global elite by offering architecture as a "Noun", a place that offers safety, status and isolation from the general city.

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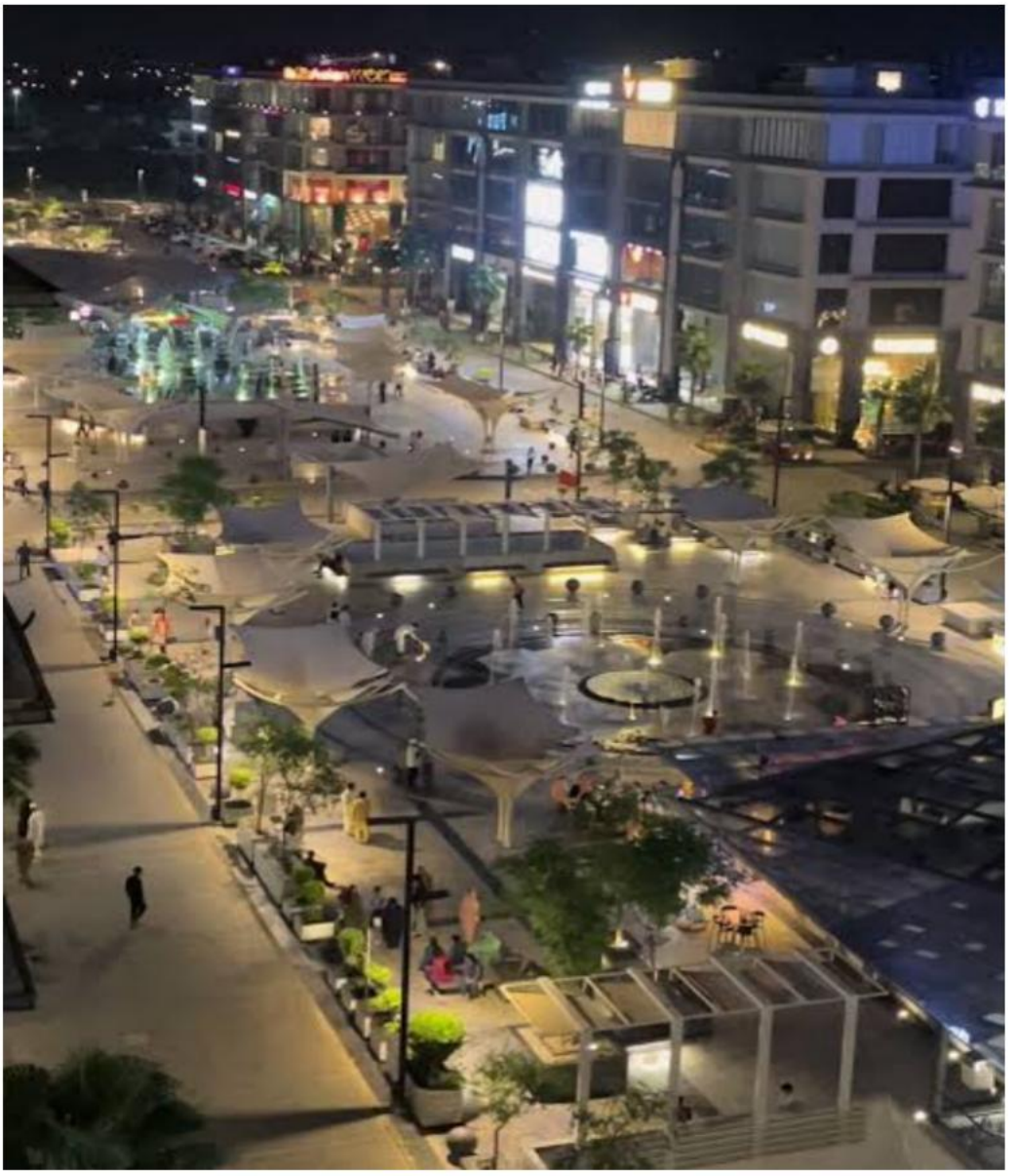

The phenomenon discussed in para-ante can also be linked to contemporary domestic architecture that prevails in gated communities and in areas that are operated under different authorities like D.H.A. Here, the builders and the owners are dragged by market trends and stylistic regulations that lead them to limited vocabulary of hyperreal signs to choose from: Spanish Villa, Classical Euro-Pastiche, Minimalist glass box – the European style etc. These designs are based on superficial signifiers like imitation of terracotta tiles, non-functional pseudo classical columns, large glazed façade irrespective of solar orientation in order to show off economic power.

Proto described the above-mentioned phenomenon as liquidation of identity through mass production (Proto 2006, 57). The actual design requirements of a building designed in Lahore like cross ventilation, thick walls for better time lag and courtyards for family gathering etc., are sacrificed in order to enhance visual value of the façade. Thus "Noun" architecture, where building is treated as an object, becomes a tool to achieve social distinction and at the same time nullifying the organic and ethnographic relational potential of social life.

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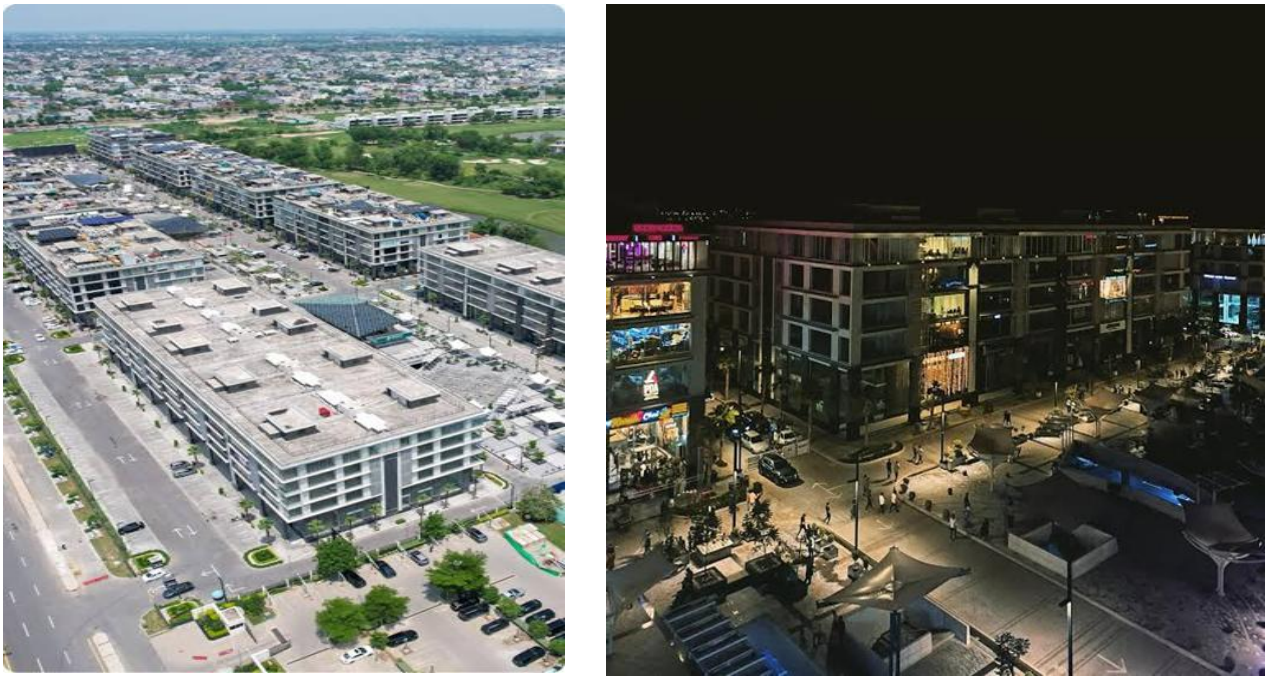

Figure 22: VIEWS OF D.H.A. RAYA, INTERNET SOURCE, JPEG IMAGE.

2.5 Critical Regionalism: An Architectural Strategy for Lahore

In the presence of challenges like globalized homogenization and imitated historicism, how can a city like Lahore reclaim its architectural identity? An effective theoretical alternate can be the concept of *Critical Regionalism* put forward by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis. According to the authors the solution lies in an architectural practice that at the same time resists global modernism and vernacular revivalism.

They argue that Critical Regionalism is not the revival of the past but a conscious effort to engage with local conditions that may involve identification and usage of vernacular design elements that have been a solution to many ecological and social challenges and defamiliarizing them according to contemporary aesthetic (Lefaivre and Tzonis 2003, 44). Applying the concept of Critical Regionalism to the contemporary buildings does not mean at all to embellish the façade of Emporium Mall with Mughal tiles or converting the gates of Defence Raya to Islamic arches. It means to analyze how traditional vernacular forms and elements performed thermodynamically and ethnographically and then translating the core concept into contemporary architectural practice.

In order to counteract the destructive propagation of noun architecture, a critical regionalist theory is crucial for cities like Lahore. Lefaivre and Tzonis claim that the critical regionalist theory is responsive and in harmony with the specific requirements of site, topography, natural light and microclimate (Lefaivre and Tzonis 2003, 89). Instead of building gigantic, car centric structures with vast spread of metaled road network like Packages Mall, a critical regionalist approach would focus on high-density and low-rise structures that may share walls and shaded courtyards to lower the ambient temperature naturally.

Furthermore, critical regionalist theory aims to restore the tangible and physical qualities of architecture admired by Sarah Robinson. Instead of using flat, synthetic aluminum composites in contemporary iconic structures that may alienate human touch, architecture of Lahore should prefer to exhibit vernacular materials e.g., mud brick, terracotta tiles and *jālis* etc. The irregularities of the local craftsmanship and climate responsive design shall produce human centric design and will have an edge over machine produced, perfectly cut and mass-produced imported materials. This will transform the city from an object to be seen into a space to be felt.

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2.6 The Re-Objectification of Lahore's Urban Memory

A clear picture of the crisis of urban amnesia of Lahore becomes clear when these distinct historical and theoretical trajectories are synthesized. The transformation of the architectural skyline of Lahore is not purely an aesthetic issue but an ontological redrafting of the history of the city. The transition from an experiential urban setting as recorded by Kanhaya Lal and Ihsan H. Nadiem to the contemporary commodified real estate as stated by Glover and Proto depicts a methodical re-objectification of urban memory.

The analysis of the traditional architecture of Lahore depicts that the urban memory was attained through a collective and experiential architecture. Heritage of the city was maintained through the constant adaptive reuse of spaces (Nadiem 1996, 47). However, the neoliberal contemporary architecture of Lahore weaponizes history as commercial capital on the bases of which the mega projects of contemporary Lahore manipulate historical facts to brand hypothetical real estate endeavours. Projects like Defence Housing Authority and Bahria Town etc. merchandize their project on the bases of contemporary concept of neatly designed living with separate and isolated sectors of corporate ventures that altogether present an imitation of western commercial spaces.

The “Noun” architecture of Lahore depends on dissociation of form from memory. On the bases of critique of visual bias posed by Robinson, it can be inferred that projects like Dolmen Mall, Emporium Mall and Defence Raya etc. rely on the fascinating power of the visual image. The people of Lahore are encouraged to become insensitive to the democratic relational qualities of urban space where the streets were designed for public interaction. Contrary, projects discussed above want artificial prestige that is associated with consumerism within isolated structures. These visually iconic structures and settlements do not offer memory but urban amnesia as these hide the conversion of agricultural land into urban settlements and the destruction of natural flood plains of River Ravi behind impressively designed high-tech high rise corporate structures.

3. Conclusion

The contemporary architecture and urban design of Lahore appears confused and direction less. The rapid growth of visually and technologically iconic buildings like Emporium Mall, Dolmen Mall, Packages Mall etc., luxurious urban spaces like Defence Raya and vast Defence Housing Authority settlements designed on grid-iron concept has socially and physically split the urban fabric and converted the historical memory of the city into hyperreal imitated image.

However, as this research paper has pleaded, the course of action described above is evitable. In order to regain architecture and urban design of Lahore as a verb does not mean an anachronistic imitation of the Walled City. Rather, the concept demands a fundamental redirection of architectural design. Architects, planners and urban designers of tomorrow need to surrender the pursuit of iconic, individualistic, isolated architectural monuments. There is a need that architecture should be designed as embodied human experience that give respect to multi-sensory engagement, sustainability and public porosity over privatized usage.

The historical truths compiled by Kanhaiya Lal, critiques by Ihsan H.. Nadiem, structural patterns exposed by William J. Glover can be respected and the simulated hyperreality acknowledged by Proto resisted only by sticking to a self-aware critical regionalism. In this way contemporary architecture worthy of the heritage of Lahore can be constructed which can convert Lahore into a city where architecture is lived as a dynamic, collective verb and not as a collection of alienated and isolated corporate nouns.

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