

Heritage Preservation and Urban Transformation: The Case of Gujrat (Pakistan)

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Abstract

The paper will discuss the overlap between heritage conservation and urban development in Gujrat, a secondary city in Punjab, Pakistan, using the community practice and cultural memory. The research is anchored in the positionality of the author as an artist and historical theorist. The study examines how built heritage is being constantly transformed under the influence of the lived realities of the urban life of the city, where preservation regularly competes with informal adaptation, spiritual practice, and institutional neglect. The study highlights three major locations, including the Gujrat Fort, Akbari Hammam, and the Shrine of Hafiz Hayat, as they mark different stories of architectural contentment, social change, and engagement between individuals. Based on observational approaches, as well as historical records and interpretation, the paper will look at the way these spaces operate in the daily activities of local communities, and how their physical structures have changed to accommodate religious, social, and commercial forces. Instead of perceiving heritage as something fixed or frozen in time, the study views it as an active cultural process where decay, appropriation, and resistance co-exist. The results indicate that in cities such as Gujrat, where institutional conservation is minimal, the community use is a threat to the heritage, as well as a means of heritage survival. The article recommends preservation models that are no longer static restoration models but adaptive models that are community-oriented to acknowledge the varying complex temporalities and symbolic meanings within historical sites. By so doing, it can contribute to the larger discussion on heritage management, identity, and urban sustainability in developing environments.

Keywords: Heritage Preservation, Urban Transformation, Gujrat.

Introduction

The city of Gujrat, a long-established city in Punjab, Pakistan, is a good example of the dilemma between conserving heritage and adapting to changes in urbanization in a secondary city setting. Gujrat is the treasure chest of the cultural monuments as it was founded by the Mughal Emperor Akbar at the end of the 16th century (c. 1580 CE), which includes the forts and baths of the Mughal period, and the Sufi shrines (Ahmad, 2024; Chowdury, 2025). Secondary cities, such as the city of Gujarat, unlike major metropolitan cities, which have had their heritage sites given special consideration to ensure their preservation, are quickly urbanizing at the cost of their old buildings. The architecture of the city indicates a mixture of Mughal, Sikh, and British styles, but nowadays most of these legacy resources can be found interwoven by the outline of a new and developing city (Kabir et al 2017; Lewis, 2025). The paper will discuss the way the urban development and community activities in Gujrat have

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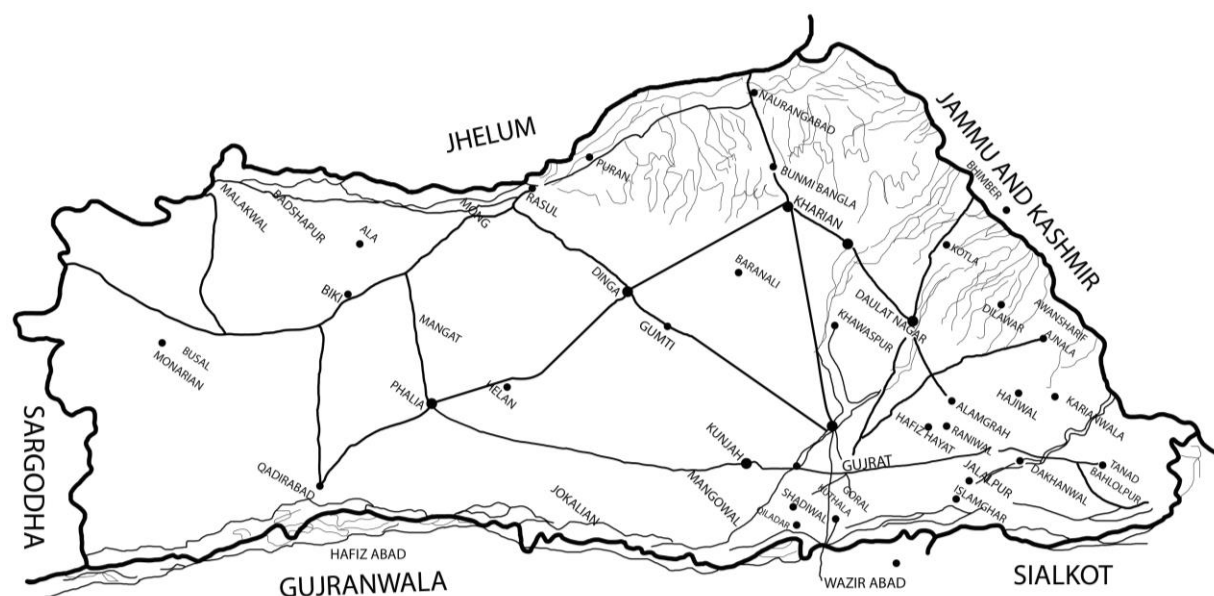
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influenced three major heritage sites in the city, namely the Gujrat Fort, the Akbari Hammam, and the shrine of Hafiz Hayat, and how each site is experiencing a tug of war between community activities and conservation activities. In this way, the cultural context of these monuments, their role in a shifting urban environment, and their symbolism are also analyzed through the lens of an artist and historical theorist, focusing not merely on the physical condition of these monuments but also on their own cultural contextualization.

Figure 1: Map of District Gujrat



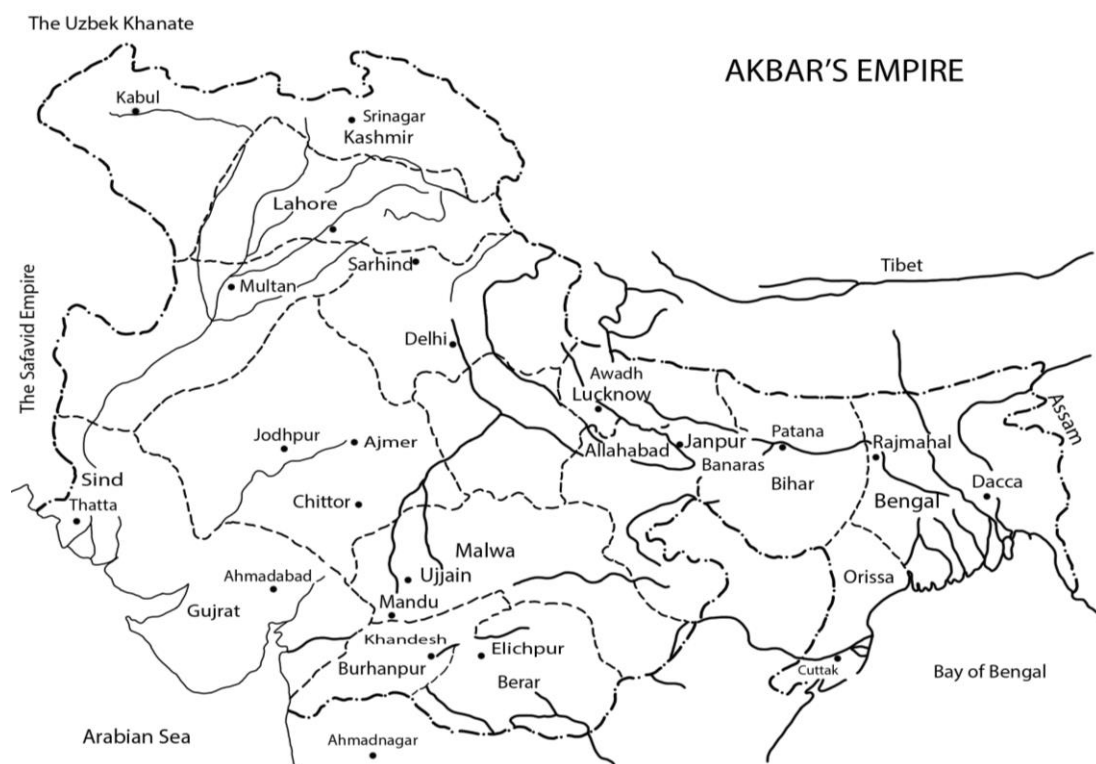
Heritage and Urban Transformation

Secondary cities are also characterized by urban change that is often not accompanied by regulatory controls and preservation funds compared to primary cities. The situation in Gujrat is representative of challenges encountered in many other locations: threats of unregulated urbanization, poor infrastructure, lack of proper stewardship, and lack of knowledge of the heritage (Afridi, 2025). The growing population and economy of the city have seen new construction and informal developments taking over old structures, literally building around and over them. The immediate needs of the community, such as housing, trade, and religion, often overshadow abstract heritage values when no effective conservation framework is established. However, from an art-historical perspective, these heritage sites represent palimpsests of the urban collective memory; the walls and courtyards of these buildings have witnessed centuries of life and transformation. The major dilemma in these secondary cities is the trade-off between growth and conservation, between the incorporation of historic buildings into contemporary purposes without obliterating the cultural sense that they convey. In Pakistan, the past few years have witnessed more awareness of provincial heritage, yet protection measures are patchy. The experience of Gujrat is therefore an example of a microcosm on which to study how community use may threaten and revitalize heritage sites and what can be done to reconcile the two.

Historical and Urban Context Gujrat, Pakistan

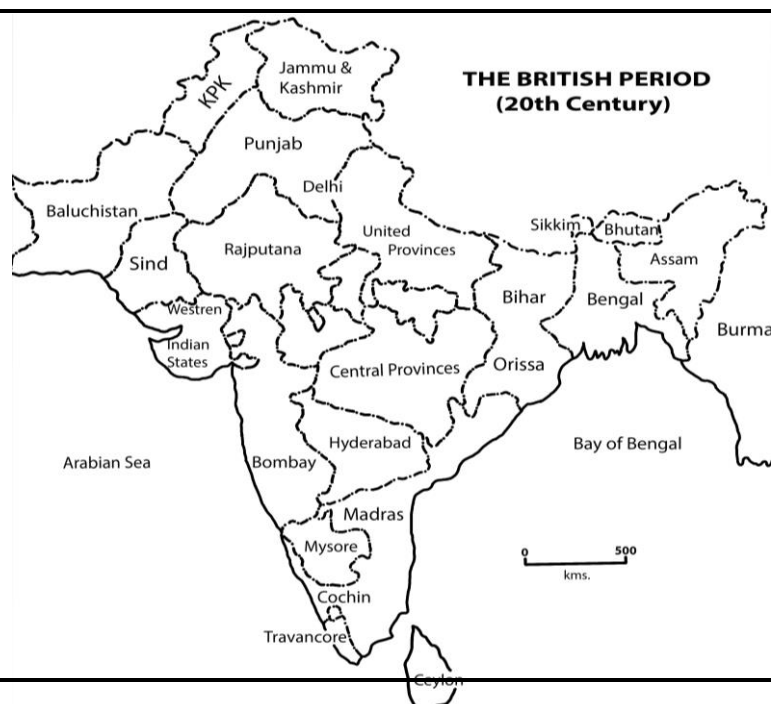
Gujrat is strategically situated between the Chenab and Jhelum rivers and has been a meeting point of civilizations. The history of the city, as Akbarabad (City of Akbar), is captured by Emperor Jahangir, who wrote that Akbar established a fort and placed local Gujjar tribes on the commanding mound and established order in the area (Singh, n.d.).

Figure 2: Map of Akbar's Empire (This map is taken from the book *The Sikh of the Punjab*, by J.S Grewal.)



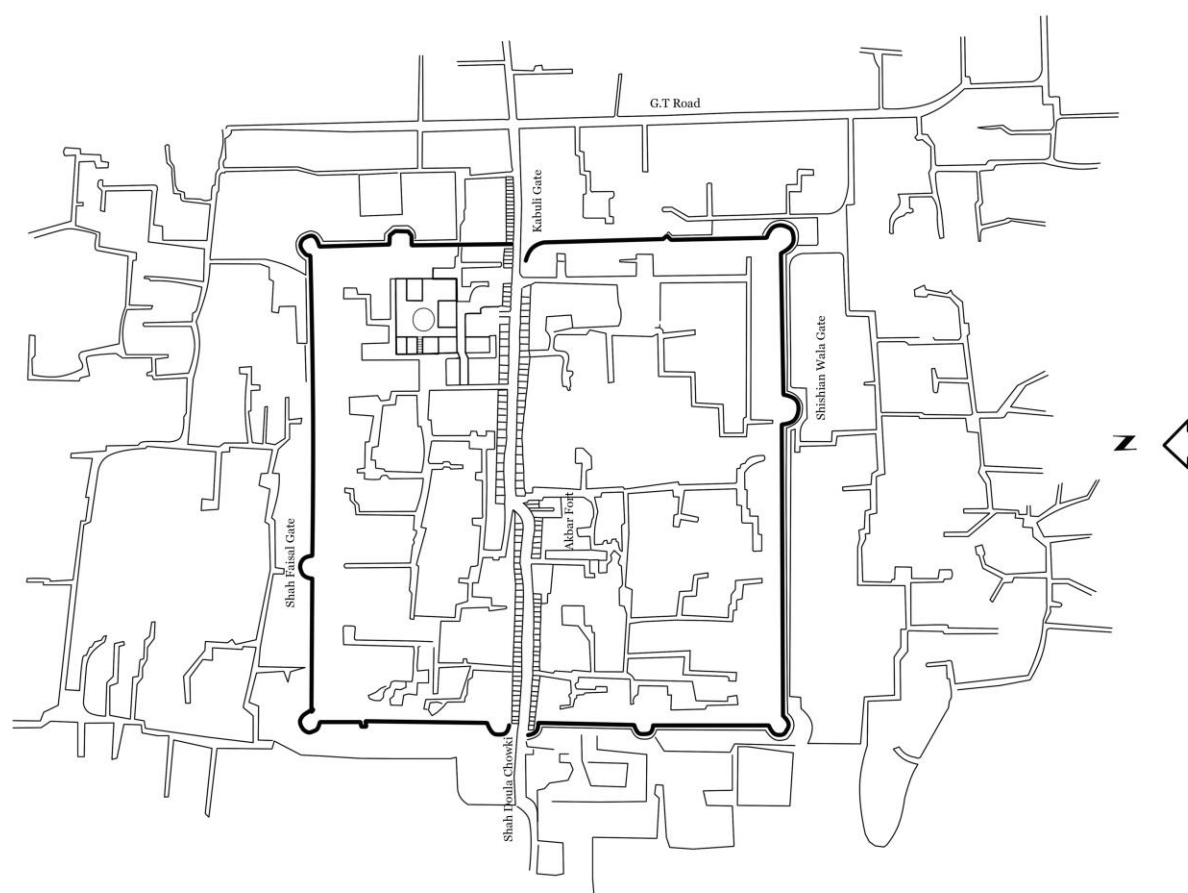
Gujrat expanded over centuries beyond its fortifications, particularly under the Sikhs and the British colonial rule. It became a sort of secondary urban center, which is characterized by its craftsmanship (pottery, textiles, furniture), but not a major tourist destination, with an export-oriented type of economy based on small industries.

Figure 3: British Period Map (This map is taken from the book *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, by J.S Grewal)



This position implies that Gujrat has a wealth of heritage sites, among them the Shahi mosque, Sikh period architecture like the sixth dynasty (constructed by Ranjeet Singh), colonial mansions and architecture like Raam Pyari Palace and Palace of Rai Bahadur Kidarnath, and Sufi shrines, but has not had significant preservation efforts as other cities such as Lahore. A great part of the old walled city of Gujrat nowadays is covered with concrete buildings, and only some remains of the ancient city can be seen. The old gates of the city, like the Shah Daula Gate on the east, are all but lost, other than that which remains a monument, the Kabuli Gate, the Sheeshiyan wala Gate, and the Kabuli Gate, whose names and few small remains only are still kept in memory (Iqbal & Ali, n.d.). The case studies of Gujrat Fort, Akbari Hammam, and the Shrine of Hafiz Hayat are discussed in this fast-changing urban environment. They both depict a different dimension of the interface of community use and the demands of conservation.

Figure 4: Map of Gujrat City (The above picture is taken from the book *Pivot of Punjab* by Abdul Rehman)



Case Study 1: Gujrat Fort (Akbari Qila)

Gujrat Fort was constructed at the bequest of Emperor Akbar in 1580, and it used to be the center of the city's defense and rule (Singh, n.d.). This fort was an almost square block (some 1600 feet on each side) with strong brick walls, bastions at the corners, and two gateways to the east and west, united by a middle bazaar street. The historical writings show that the fort complex had an Akbari Hammam (bathhouse) by the western gate and a central baoli (stepwell) to house the travelers and residents. This fortress of great strength was a symbol of the Mughal domination, and it was later to become an issue of dispute in Sikh domination and the 1849

Battle of Gujrat in the Second Anglo-Sikh War. Nevertheless, the history of the 20th and 21st centuries of the fort is the history of gradual change under the pressure of urbanization.

Figure 5: Akbar fort: Picture is taken from the book *Pivot of Punjab* by Abdul Rehman, Source by Rizwan Ul Haq

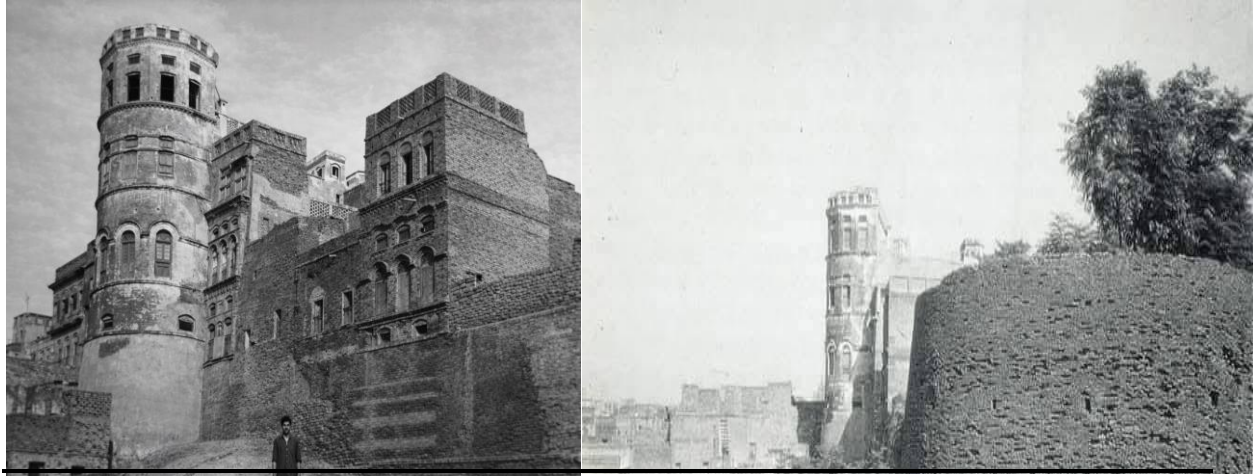


Figure 6: Akbar Fort: This picture was taken by Rizwan Ul Haq in 2016



The Gujrat Fort is today absorbed within the urban structure of the city. Its previously powerful walls are now lost in visibility or covered by new constructions of the modern world. The local name of the place, Dhakki or Qila, is a jumble of small streets, houses, and stores, with which it is impossible to make out the trace of the old fort. Actually, the fort is widely known by the name of the Naqvi Building, a tribute to an eminent building or family staying in the fort, and the fort is being used in a residential capacity and not for any kind of heritage purpose. Hundreds of households are located where the fort used to be located and even a police station is situated near one of the old gateways, signifying the extent to which the site has been reused.

The remains, such as parts of the outer wall or a single gateway arch, are the only indicators of what it used to look like in the past. An example is the Shah Daula Gate, still extant and still commemorated locally, whereas the western Hathi Gate (also known as Kabuli Gate) has been extensively lost or built into subsequent structures (Gupta et al., 2002). Citizens have constructed dwellings on and surrounding the bastions of the fort; throughout the ages, the people have come to regard the fort as no longer an archeological preserve, but rather as a normal part of the housing inventory.

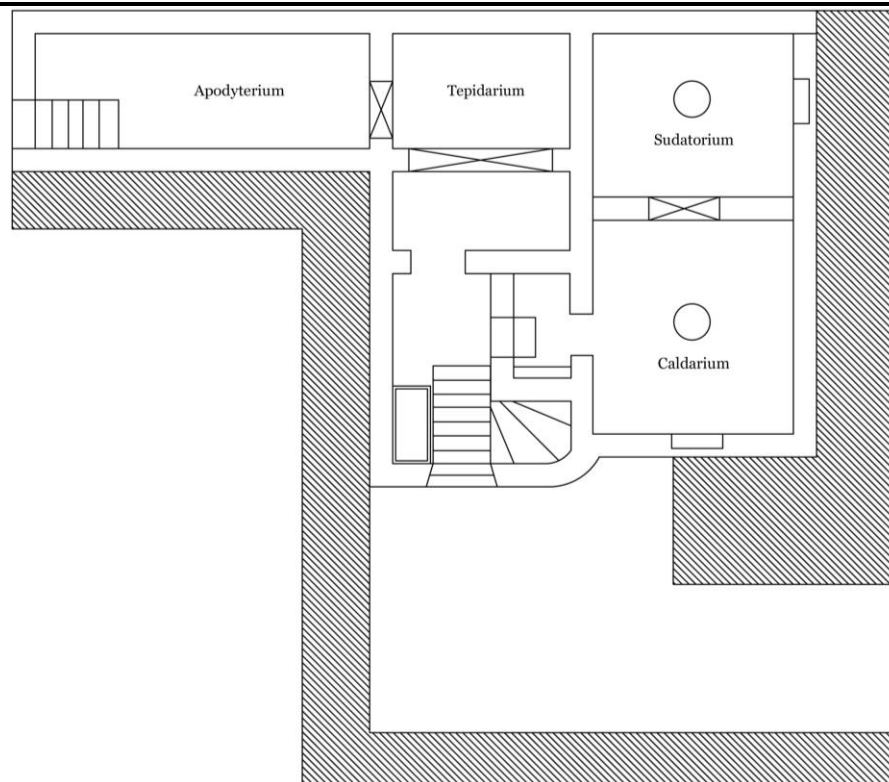
A part of the brick walls of the Gujrat Fort that survived is now integrated into urban constructions. It was one of the symbols of imperial power; unfortunately, it does not seem like it anymore with the stores and houses all around, and that is the way the heritage sites of Gujrat are covered by the big city that keeps growing.

It has been preserved and endangered as the community uses the fort as a housing place. On the one hand, there was never a pure abandonment of the site to decay; there are still buildings (such as the durable timbered roofs of the Mughal period in the Naqvi Building), and remains of it after 400 years. Alternatively, there has been a major decay due to uncontrolled alterations and the absence of maintenance. The eight bastions (burjs) of the fort, each, in former times, containing a small mausoleum of some saintly person(s), are in a ruined or ruinous condition, by local report (Ali, 2011). The fort has been encroached upon, and its historic integrity has been destroyed by urban development (Wilkinson, 1998). In terms of conservation, the fort presents a sad paradox: its physical heritage worth is lost due to being used as a simple piece of real estate, but a more personal heritage, the stories and the sense of belonging to this place, continues to exist in the community that dwells in it. Still, older citizens will name some parts of the old fort by historical names, and tell stories of how it was in the old days (one of the bastions is remembered as having been used by the troops of Akbar himself, when there was war abroad). There has been no governmental effort to restore the site, as any conservation or excavation would necessitate relocating residents and tearing down buildings, which is both expensive and socially unacceptable. Consequently, the Gujrat fort remains a living monument significant in historical memory, yet physically altered by the ongoing life it supports.

Case Study 2: Akbari Hammam (Royal Bathhouse)

Akbari Hammam of Gujrat is a unique resource of a public bath during the Mughal period in a secondary city. This hammam was erected outside the western gate of the fort at the end of the 16th century in the style of the Turks, reminiscent of the similar baths of that time (Ahmad et al., 2024). The bathhouse had initially consisted of a progression of rooms in a sequential structure of bathing rituals; apodyterium (changing room) followed by warm room (tepidarium), then steam room (sudatorium), and then hot bath chamber (caldarium) (Hashemi & Asgari, 2023). The domed roofs were pierced with little holes in order to allow light to penetrate, and a furnace with an internal hypocaust system kept various temperatures in the various rooms. Water was provided through a well, which was located along the southern wall of the hammam, and there was a fuel store that could be accessed through the tepidarium. Local folklore also provides some color to the history of the hammam: the elders at Gujrat say that there was an oil lamp (diya) in the hammam to keep it warm, and of a secret drainage system where the wastewater would disappear into the ground and have no apparent exit, which contributes to legends about the miraculous engineering hidden in the hammam. These kinds of anecdotes help to emphasize the cultural interest attached to the place.

Figure 7: Plan of Akbari Hammam (This plan is taken from the book *Pivot of Punjab* by Abdul Rehman)



During its prime, the Akbari Hammam was not only used to meet the royal demands (there are reports that Akbar Ghazi Hakeems recommended the baths to one of his queens when she had a condition) (Pradines et al., 2024) but also by the common citizens, improving the hygiene and social life in the town. With the passage of time and the introduction of modern plumbing, which made common baths unnecessary, the hammam became a thing of the past. It had already fallen into neglect by the end of the 20th century, appearing only in scholarly surveys as a footnote. Stunningly, the hammam continues to operate, albeit sporadically during winter seasons up to this date, and is utilized by some of the locals who believe in the therapeutic use of hot baths in the hammam. Actually, an extreme example of community utilization versus conservation is playing out in the Akbari Hammam (Sarmiento & Kazemi, 2014). The location has been overrun by a local merchant who has integrated the historic building into his shopfront, and there are plans underway to demolish what is left of the hammam and put a small shopping mall in its place. This is raised in a research study published in 2025, which is an alarm that Gujarat can soon lose the hammam to uncontrolled commercial development.

The case of the Akbari Hammam is problematic from a preservationist's perspective. In contrast with Lahore, where a Shahi Hammam located in the Mughal period has been lovingly restored as a project recognized by UNESCO, there is no conservation of the hammam in Gujrat, as even minor cities are more focused on heritage preservation. The hammam itself is ambivalent to the community: some nearby residents consider it a place of legends, such as a healing facility or just a feature of the neighborhood, whereas others (such as the present encroaching owner) are ready to regard it as just an old building that takes valuable retail space. Conservationists are concerned that a 400-year-old architectural treasure will soon become a permanent casualty without a strong defense and the historical value that the building is supposed to house.

The case is an illustration of how community use can result in misuse unless it is actively conserved. However, here too, some element of intangible heritage conservation can be found: the very fact that humans still bathed in the hammam and discussed its cozy lamp and hidden drains is evidence that the cultural value of the hammam was not forgotten by the locals. The point of view of an artist can be the crumbling domes of the hammam and the bazaar surrounding it, forming a poignant contrast to the extinction of time, a visual storytelling of time draining a once-grandiose bath, and life continuing without it. At this point, it would take immediate measures to save the Akbari Hammam, which could be a community buy of the site and a restoration effort, accompanied by community outreach to make local stakeholders feel the Akbari Hammam holds value to them, rather than serving to commercially benefit them in the short term.

Case Study 3: Shrine of Hafiz Hayat

Hazrat Hafiz Muhammad Hayat was a 17th -century Sufi saint whose contribution has significantly defined the culture of Gujrat. History tells us that Hafiz Hayat came with him out of Delhi and founded a spiritual resort in a hillock extra-territorial to Gujarat, in a forested land (Quraishi, 1995). The Mughal authorities patronized him, and indeed, according to local legend, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir and his wife, Noor Jahan, gave him the land around it, and his khanqah (spiritual center) became the source of knowledge and tranquility (Baig, 1867; Khan et al., 2020). Settlement was established around this hub, and the location has been named after him. The center of the site consists of the tomb (shrine) of Hafiz Hayat and some more recent buildings: this is a mosque in the Mughal period, a huge traditional baradari (pavilion or palatial hall), and some ruins that could be believed to have housed students or visitors. The mound on which the shrine complex is built is approximately six feet higher than the ground around it, making it commanding. This shrine has been the location of pilgrimage of devotees over the centuries, particularly on the anniversary day (urss) of Hafiz Hayat (death anniversary), which demonstrates a strong component of community utilization pegged on spirituality.

Figure 8: Tomb of Hafiz Hayat: This Picture was taken by Majid Ghaffor in 2016

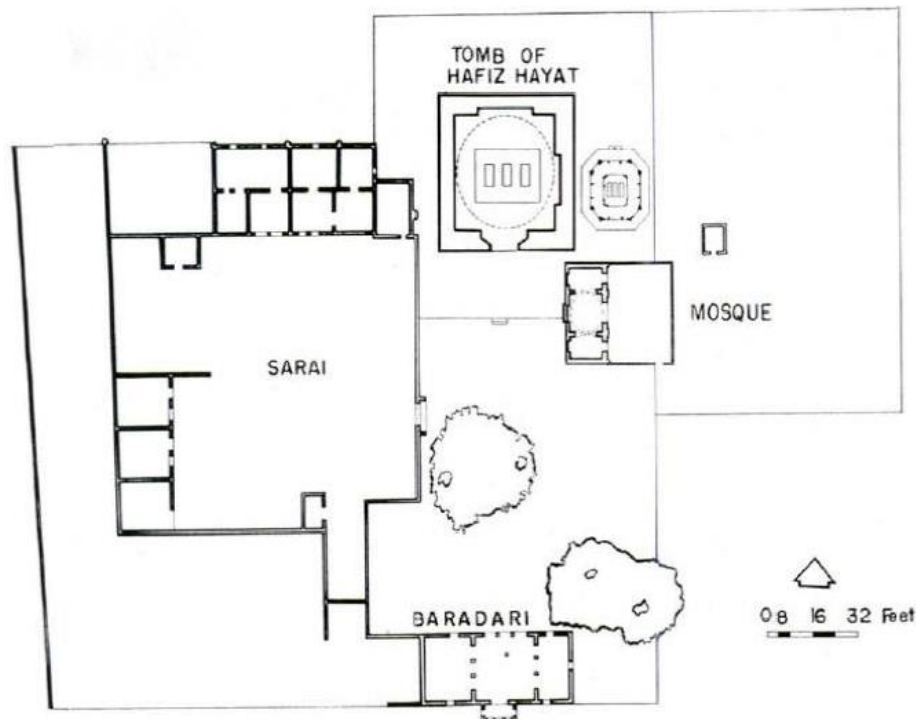


The Hafiz Hayat tomb faced another form of urban transformation in the 21st century. It was not swallowed by the accidental building construction, but was engulfed in a well-considered institutional building: the main campus at the University of Gujrat. The University of Gujarat

was founded in 2004 on this historic location, specifically to be close to the saint and possibly to enjoy the benefits of a large piece of land that has long been traditionally linked to the saint. They constructed the campus between the pre-existing structures and tombs. Consequently, now the shrine of Hafiz Hayat and some of the graves of his followers are within the university grounds, which can be accessed by both the students and visitors. A baradari in the Mughal style, which is probably the guesthouse or summer lodge of Hafiz Hayat, remains in quite a fine condition close to the main shrine, to the south. Remains of walls and foundations, believed to belong to a madrasa or inn that served travelers and those in quest of knowledge, may be found adjacent to it. The placement of a sacred heritage site and a contemporary educational institution together in a co-location is a rare occurrence and a special case of community use that is mixed with preservation.

The Shrine of Hafiz Hayat (building in the middle with green domes) and neighboring baradari (building to the right) belong to the contemporary University of Gujrat. The fact that these old buildings have been converted into a modern learning space is an indication of a deliberate attempt to retain the past and, at the same time, provide it with a new meaning.

Figure 9: Plan View of Tomb of Hafiz Hayat made by Majid Ghaffor



The university's existence has been both positive and negative for the conservation of the Hafiz Hayat complex. On the one hand, the site has enjoyed some protection; the university, as a state organisation, is aware of the shrine's importance and has not allowed it to be destroyed. Planning on the campus ensured there were open spaces around the major heritage buildings, effectively creating a haven amid the new development. Academic projects have also appeared in the past few years, such as the Hayatian Historical Society, an active initiative to study and conserve Gujarat's heritage, created by faculty and students in 2023. This group is also developing appreciation for a new generation of sites, such as the shrine of Hafiz Hayat, through seminars, field trips, and workshops, and, thus, community use has become a means of fostering conservation consciousness. This type of community involvement, rooted in an

educational institution, has instilled a sense of pride and responsibility in young people in the area to preserve their cultural heritage.

Conversely, the shrine's context has changed due to its incorporation into a contemporary campus. The place where students could find a peaceful spiritual retreat is now engulfed by educational institutions, car parks, and the paraphernalia of everyday student life. The changes have been necessary: the influx of students and staff means the shrine and the surrounding area face increased foot traffic and need renovations to accommodate visits from traditional pilgrims and visitors who do not necessarily have to be pilgrims. The university must have needed to liaise with religious leaders (the Auqaf department or local caretakers of the shrine) to handle shrine operations, including campus security and schedules. As historians, we can say that the meaning of the shrine has expanded: it is a place of worship, but also a pedagogical instrument and a source of pride for the region's heritage. Immediately after it was donated, the land was subsequently gifted to an institution of learning by Hafiz Hayat, which can be regarded as the saint's fulfilment in line with education and enlightenment in modern times. Notably, the physical preservation of the site can use some work: the key buildings are in place, but complete archaeological documentation and extensive conservation (which can include stabilising the ruins or repairing the fabric of the old mosque) remain current requirements. Nonetheless, this case study presents a fairly optimistic display of community use (in this instance, an academic community and devotees) in line with heritage preservation. The shrine was not only preserved but also given a living purpose within the community, thereby avoiding the decay that afflicts most minor monuments.

Discussion: Community Use vs Conservation

The three case studies in Gujarat illustrate the complex relationship between community use and heritage site conservation in secondary cities. Each site represents a different point along the spectrum between public use and preservation priorities.

Gujrat Fort

This is one of the places where conservation has been abated by communal use. This conversion of a historical landmark into residential and commercial development is a case study of how local people, out of need or habit, can use a historical site as a normal space. Its plus is that the site is still used in everyday life (as living heritage), but without conservation supervision, it has deteriorated. The historical identity of the fort is slowly fading, and only experts or older generations may remember which structures were originally there. Such a situation raises policy questions: must the government resettle people to restore and rehabilitate the fort? Or can the residents be brokered as custodians of the site? As it stands, with no official protection (theoretically, it is an officially recognised monument), there is no control over communal use, and the preservation of the site is left to individual decision rather than the community.

Akbari Hammam

A case of a heritage site being on the edge, where the local people have become its abusers. The fact that the hammam is still, in part, used as a traditional healing bath indicates that the community still values it, yet the intrusion of a shopkeeper shows how easily economic incentives can take precedence over preservation in an uncontrolled setting. It is a clash between the common good of historical architecture (as a common bath and cultural artefact) and a personal good of the commercial development (a mini-mall). The hammam would be lost forever if destroyed, which is all too common in secondary cities where heritage legislation is not effectively applied. This case highlights the importance of legal awareness. The local authorities or heritage departments could have asked the community to help conserve the

hammam had they approached the community earlier, for example, by trying to turn it into a tourist attraction or a health spa of historical value, so that the shopkeeper could have been persuaded or compensated to maintain it. Regrettably, the case today is an example of failed top-down preservation policy and bottom-up community stewardship.

Hafiz Hayat Shrine

The case of the shrine is more harmonious than the above. The site still retains its original community (religious worship and gathering); however, it also benefits from an institutional structure that encourages conservation. The University's participation provided resources and an encroachment buffer. Instead of pushing the community use aside, the new development added it, a method that is similar to modern heritage conservation principles, where the focus is on adaptive reuse and community participation. The difficulty in this case will be maintaining the shrine's sanctity and integrity as the University grows. To date, projects such as the Hayatian Historical Society propose a template for positive participation: students and locals are being trained as stakeholders in the preservation. This creates the sense of ownership, which is essential for sustainable conservation. Whenever the community (in this instance, the university community and the residents) attaches values to a site, it is likely to protect it. The case of the shrine shows that the community's use need not be antithetical to preservation; rather, it can ensure the site is not neglected and will not be forgotten. The key to preserving the site is the use of a framework that reflects its heritage value.

In a larger context, the experiences of Gujarat are reflective of the issue of heritage debates around the globe: Who is to determine the use of a historical site, the local community residing near it, or the heritage experts and authorities? Preferably, the solution would be a joint venture between the two. Community use offers the human experience that maintains the life of a heritage (a fort that is occupied, a bath that continues to be curative, a shrine that continues to be worshipped), whereas conservation offers the standards and the means to make sure that the physical structure and the historical importance of the place are not destroyed through community use. The artist-historian perspective would emphasise that such places are not only bricks and mortar, but they are also narrative places that evoke fantasies and a sense of belonging. Their loss is a part of the community's story. Simultaneously, turning them into the untouchable ruins can also avert the community. Therefore, a moderate stance is required.

In practice, such an equilibrium might include actions such as Legal protection and the cataloguing of sites (to prevent random modification or destruction, which is urgently required in the case of the Akbari Hammam), along with incentives to preserve historic buildings in the hands of their owners. Local custodians (e.g., by providing residents of the fort area with knowledge and small grants to repair and display the historic features of the fort, rather than seeing them as an impediment to development). Adaptive reuse proposals that permit the new use of old buildings without losing their identity, e.g., some section of the Gujrat Fort or even the hammam, might be repurposed to a small museum, library, or cultural hub that benefits locals and teaches visitors. Education and awareness for the population (similar to those conducted by the Hayatian Historical Society) on pride in heritage. According to a recent study, the involvement of young people and the local community may help instil a sense of pride and responsibility in protecting cultural heritage. Government-private sector partnership in financing restoration. A good model has been seen in Gujarat, where the colonial-era Ram Pyari Mahal was restored as a museum with the authorities' help. Equivalent models may be used on sites of the Mughal period.

It is also worth noting that heritage preservation in secondary cities such as Gujarat can yield tangible benefits, including cultural tourism and economic opportunities, provided it is well managed. A restored Gujrat Fort or an Akbari Hammam that is carefully maintained would appeal to people with a historical interest, thereby increasing business in the area and civic

pride. On the other hand, when heritage is constantly being washed away, there is a risk that the city will be left without a unique selling point and even some identity.

Conclusion

The example of Gujrat, Pakistan, summarises the difficult connection between the preservation of heritage and the urban transformation of the territory of a secondary city. The Akbari Hammam, Gujrat Fort, and the Hafiz Hayat shrine are all stories of how historical places may be altered by the pressures and practices of community life. The fort shows how the integration of communities over a few centuries, in an unplanned way, can almost destroy a monument. The bathhouse warns that the failure to preserve and use a heritage asset, and the impulse to put the property on the private market, can destroy it in its entirety. In contrast, the shrine demonstrates that, through careful incorporation and community involvement, heritage can endure and even flourish amid contemporary development.

In the case of Gujarat, a concerted effort by all stakeholders is needed to salvage the road ahead: government bodies, historians, local communities, and even artists and theorists who will reimagine the value of these sites. The combination and concerted effort, as stressed in recent studies, can be the only way to protect such heritage: a unification of authorities, local players, cultural activists, and the community is necessary to preserve architecture and improve civic pride and historical awareness. This is achieved through the adoption of protective laws, the provision of resources to restore, and, most importantly, engaging the community at every step so that preservation is perceived not as an external project but as a group endeavour.

As an artist and a historical theorist, the heritage of Gujarat is a living canvas, a time stratum layered that may even come into conflict with the present. The element in the juxtaposition of a Mughal fort wall supporting a modern house or an old bathhouse full of market stalls has a deeper story. These sequences raise concerns about what we remember, who we are, and what we decide to take with us. Conservation of heritage in such a site is not about preserving the city in time, but rather about fostering a dialogue between the past and the present. The sites are brought to life through community use and conservation. As the example of Gujarat shows, heritage conservation in a secondary city is both a social and a technical issue; it requires compassion, innovation, and teamwork to ensure that urban modernisation does not entail cultural eradication. In the process of valuing its historic sites through change, Gujarat will, in turn, not only be changing physically, but also evolving in the context of acquiring a more solid personality and a more multi-faceted and accommodating history for its future.

In the end, what Gujarat taught me can also be summarised in one universal truth: the soul of the city is its heritage, and how it is handled during such a period of change will be the marker of the city's character that future generations will live in. It is hoped that as the awareness increases and people work together, in Gujarat, the community and conservators will be able to write a new chapter, one in which ancient forts, baths, and shrines remain not only as silent observers of the past, but as active, loved members of the changing narrative of the city.

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