

Lahore's disappearing heritage

Cantt's antique water towers must be preserved,
says **Faiza Cheema**

Think about Lahore's architectural heritage, and most likely the Badshahi Mosque or the Shalimar Gardens will come to mind. However, it's not only grand monuments that make up the city's heritage; lesser-known historic sites also define its character, if more subtly. The eclectic architecture of Lahore reflects hundreds of years of history - from the grand Mughal monuments to the Indo-Gothic structures of the British era - defining the very essence of the city. It is this historic quality that makes Lahore a dreamland for architects and a haven for artists.

But if Lahore is to retain its charm, historic buildings, both grand and small, must be preserved. No one is more aware of this than David Alesworth, an art teacher at Beaconhouse National University (BNU), who regularly visits the city's various architectural sites with his students.

David was excited to find a stunning example of British colonial architecture on Sarwar Road, not far from where he lives in the Cantonment: Cantt's old brick water towers rise high above the residences of non-commissioned Military Engineering Services employees. But the pleasure of the discovery proved to be short-lived when David found that the colony was being relocated elsewhere, and that the towers were scheduled for demolition. More room was needed, it seemed, for modern development.

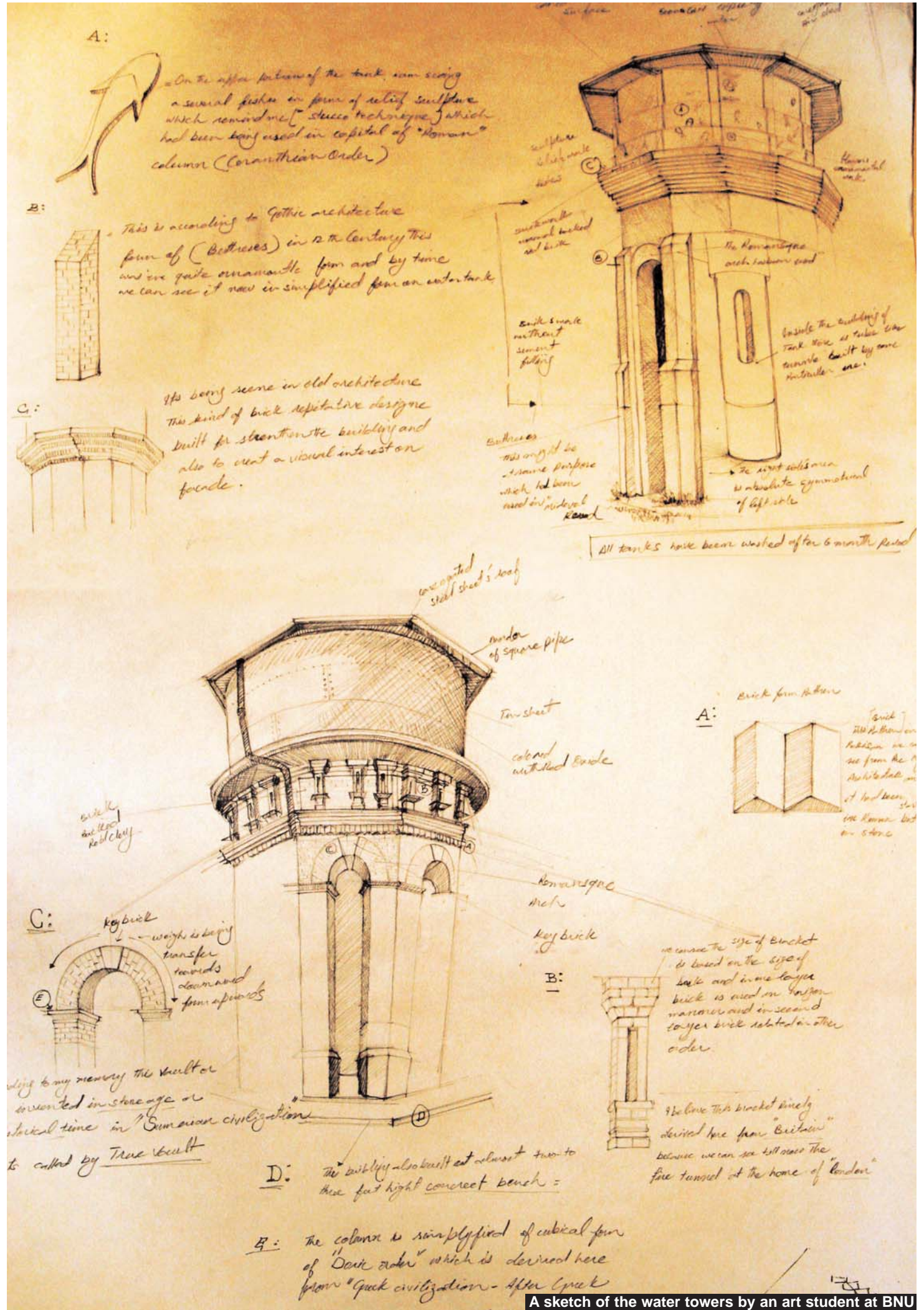
"It will not merely be the demolition of a few towers; it will be the demolition of history and culture. Who has the right to take that away from us?"

— **Salima Hashmi**

As it turned out, the land, along with the towers, was recently put up for auction by the government, with advertisements published in national dailies and on the website of the Land Disposal Cell (LDC). According to the LDC website, the "Land Disposal Cell (LDC) has been established in the GHQ to generate funds for the construction and shifting of the Ministry of Defence, the Joint Staff Headquarters, and the GHQ to Islamabad through the disposal of surplus military lands and prime properties of the Army spread over the entire country."

Ahmad Rafay Alam, an advocate of the high court and a member of the adjunct faculty at LUMS, points out an important aspect of the issue. The water towers are, by law, the property of the Cantonment Board, so the Ministry of Defence does not, in fact, have a license to sell them. "The GHQ and the Ministry of Defence are using these properties [many others in the Cantonment area are also going under the hammer] to finance themselves, which may be fine as long as there is oversight of the process and the utilisation of the funds," he says.

For David, the towers and other aspects of period architecture make up the character of Cantt; without them "it may as well be Defence or any other undifferentiated place in the modern city of Lahore." These landmarks are of significance for the city as a whole. The towers are not merely an amenity



A sketch of the water towers by an art student at BNU

for providing water to the Cantonment; they are the work of an artist and, as such, worth preservation.

"If you study these unusual towers carefully, you will find that they are not just structures of civil engineering; someone has constructed them with much love and pride," David explains. "They are unique examples of brick engineering, rare in Lahore. These are irreplaceable period buildings."

There are four towers in all, two built in 1917 and two in 1928. Each has a capacity of 50,000 gallons and is washed once every six months. The upper portions of two of the tanks are ornamented with flow-

ers and fish in stucco relief.

"The structures are remarkable and in perfect working condition," says Shahid Chaudhry, a local resident who grew up nearby. In spite of their age, the water towers have not degenerated, and function better than the modern tower erected next door. In fact, the fifth concrete tower in the complex is literally a white elephant that has never been used, according to local residents.

Salima Hashmi, former principal of the National College of Arts, says that historic structures such as the water towers play an important role in our lives. "It will not merely be the demolition of a few towers; it will

be the demolition of history and culture," she protests. "Who has the right to pull down these significant buildings and take that away from us? Ill-considered decisions like these will strip the city of its cultural flavour, and Lahore will then be like any other ordinary, third-rate city."

The buildings are of particular interest to art students, Salima adds. "They are visual evidence of architectural development in Pakistan that the students can refer to." If they were anywhere else in the world, she says, they would be legally protected as architectural heritage.

Pakistan does have heritage legislation in



place, according to Ahmad Rafay Alam: the Punjab Special Premises (Preservation) Ordinance of 1985 is one among many pieces of antiquities legislation. But the authority concerned (the Governor in the case of Special Premises and the Archaeology Department of the Government of Punjab for antiquities) must specifically identify properties as worthy of preservation; and the million dollar issue, according to Rafay Alam, is budgetary consideration. If the water towers are declared to be an antiquity or historic site, not only will the GHQ lose out on the opportunity to raise funds through the sale of the land, but the money for preservation work will come from government coffers.

And, says Attiq Ahmed, a socially conscious architect, with the increasing density of the city, there is need to create more public space in the city. "Currently, plots in Cantonment Board are selling faster than Big Macs, without an apparent realisation of projected crowding or densification. Dispensing of these plots without an overall master plan is most likely going to result in chaos (or Gulberg, in other words)."

David and Attiq Ahmed both propose that the cluster of towers should be surrounded by an urban park where they will be the main attraction. There is an agreement amongst artists and architects that a public park, perhaps stretching from Tufail Road to Sarwar

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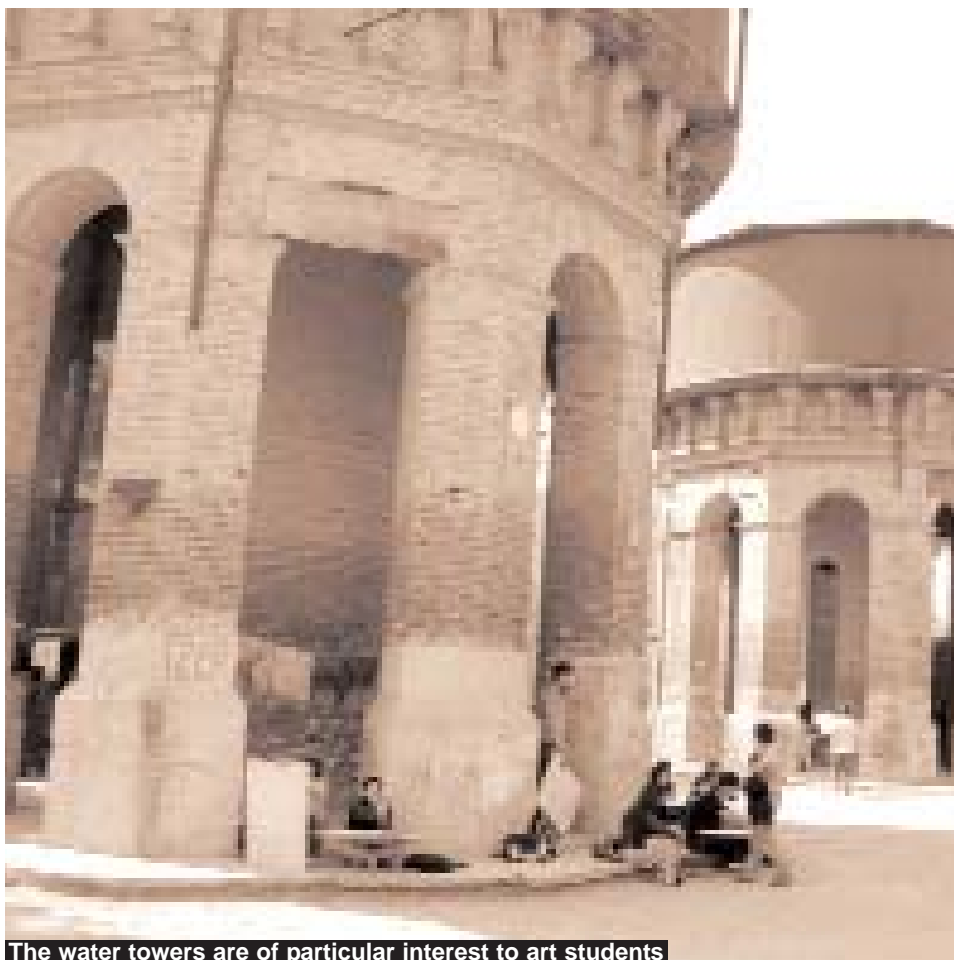


The upper portions of two of the tanks are ornamented with flowers and fish in stucco relief

Road, would enhance the character of the locale. "This is a way of saving the towers, raking in the income, as well as giving the city something beautiful," suggests Attiq.

The Cantt water towers, seen through an artistic lens, are stunning artefacts that add to Lahore's heritage. If they are not preserved, the city will eventually lose its cultural identity as its history disappears under bulldozers. A few years down the road, art students will have very little to study outside the old city. The rest of Lahore may very well be overrun by housing societies and shopping malls. ■

Faiza Cheema is a features editor at TFT



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