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Architectural Synthesis at Gurdwara Punja Sahib: Mughal, Rajput and Sikh Elements in a Nineteenth Century Shrine at Hasanabdal

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ABSTRACT
Gurdwara Punja Sahib at Hasanabdal occupies a distinctive place in the architectural history of Sikh sacred space in the western Punjab. Raised during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and later rebuilt as a three-storey sanctuary in grey sandstone, the shrine gathers forms that belong at once to the Mughal court vocabulary of Shah Jahan, to the projected jharoka and chhatri traditions of Rajput palaces, and to the liturgical requirements of a living Sikh congregation. This article examines the plan, elevation, dome, kiosks, bay windows, sermon hall, sarovar, hostel ranges and glass mosaic interiors of the complex. It argues that the building is not a late copy of any single prototype but a deliberate synthesis whose closest monumental cousin is the Samadhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Lahore. Field observation, measured description and photographic recording conducted at the site are combined with a reading of published accounts of Sikh and Mughal architecture in order to locate Punja Sahib within the broader cultural landscape of Attock district. The analysis shows that decorative techniques such as tukri or sheesha giri work, cusped arches, fluted double domes and inverted lotus finials operate as both aesthetic devices and theological signs, while the four doorways of the sanctuary enact the Sikh claim of openness to every visitor.

***Keywords**: Sikh Architecture, Gurdwara Punja Sahib, Hasanabdal, Mughal Influence, Jharoka, Glass Mosaic, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sacred Space.*

Introduction

The architecture of Sikh gurdwaras has long been described as a meeting ground of Hindu and Islamic building traditions on the soil of the Punjab. That general statement is true and yet it remains too broad to explain why a particular shrine looks the way it does, why its dome is fluted rather than plain, why its windows project like palace balconies, or why its inner hall is sheathed in coloured glass. Gurdwara Punja Sahib at Hasanabdal offers an unusually rich case for testing such questions. The shrine stands in a town already marked by Mughal gardens, tombs and step wells, and it commemorates an encounter that Sikh memory places in the early sixteenth century between Guru Nanak and the Sufi Baba Wali Qandhari. The present buildings, however, belong mainly to the first third of the nineteenth century and to a further campaign of reconstruction after 1928, when the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee assumed management and replaced an earlier two storey structure with a more ambitious three storey sanctuary (Khan, 1962; Shah, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to isolate the architectural programme of the shrine and to read that programme against the sources from which its makers drew. The argument proceeds in five movements. First, it sets the problem of documentation and the method of field recording. Second, it reviews the literature on Sikh architecture and on the monumental setting of Hasanabdal. Third it describes the plan and the principal masses of the complex. Fourth it

analyses individual elements including the Nishan Sahib, the jharokas, the fluted dome, the kiosks, the sermon hall, the school and hostel ranges, and the glass mosaic interiors. Fifth it returns to the question of origin and influence and asks what kind of synthesis the building actually achieves. Throughout, the discussion treats ornament not as surplus decoration but as a language through which Sikh patrons translated imperial forms into a house of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Hasanabdal lies on the Grand Trunk Road some forty kilometres from Rawalpindi and twenty miles east of Attock city, at 33 degrees 49 minutes north and 72 degrees 40 minutes east. The town takes its name from the Sufi Hazrat Abdul Hassan, remembered locally as Baba Wali Qandhari, and it served Mughal emperors as a station on the road to Kashmir. The gurdwara occupies ground immediately west of the so-called Tomb of the Hakims and the platform associated with Lala Rukh. That proximity is not incidental. The same masons, the same lime plaster, the same taste for arched openings and water tanks that shaped the Mughal monuments of the valley also informed the Sikh builders who worked here under Hari Singh Nalwa between roughly 1800 and 1835 (Nadiem, 2006). To study the architecture of Punja Sahib is therefore to study a building that was never isolated from its neighbours.

Problem Statement

No comprehensive architectural study has been published on Gurdwara Punja Sahib as a standing monument. Existing surveys of Sikh shrines in Pakistan list the site, retell the legend of the hand print, and note the date of construction under Sikh rule, yet they stop short of measured description, analysis of individual members, or a sustained comparison with Mughal and Rajput prototypes. General histories of Sikh architecture concentrate on the Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar or on the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh at Lahore and treat the western Punjab gurdwaras as a residual category. As a result, students of Asian civilizations, of Islamic art, and of living religion in Pakistan lack a detailed account of one of the most visited Sikh buildings on Pakistani soil. The present article confines itself to architecture. It does not attempt a full ethnography of ritual, though it recognises that plan and liturgy are inseparable. The problem is therefore specific: to document the forms of the shrine, to identify their origins and influences, and to explain how those forms work together as a single sacred complex.

Objectives

The article pursues three objectives.

To record the main architectural features of Gurdwara Punja Sahib in sufficient detail to support later conservation and comparative work.

To trace the origin of those features in Mughal, Rajput and early Sikh building practice.

To interpret the influence of those sources on the finished monument as it stands at Hasanabdal.

Research Questions

Two questions organise the inquiry.

What are the principal features of the architecture, and from which traditions do they come.

How do those features combine to produce a building that is recognisably Sikh and yet visibly indebted to the imperial and courtly languages of the region.

Literature Review

Muhammad Waliullah Khan (1962) remains the starting point for any study of Sikh shrines in what became West Pakistan. His inventory established locations, patronage and a brief historical note for each site, including Punja Sahib, but the architectural commentary is short and the photographs serve identification rather than analysis. Dr Safdar Ali Shah (2011), working with the photographer Syed Javed A. Kazi, widened the frame to include havelis as well

as gurdwaras and offered a more generous visual record of Sikh buildings across Pakistan. Neither work, however, isolates Punja Sahib for a monograph length reading of plan and ornament. Mohinder Singh (2002), writing on the Golden Temple with photographs by Sondeep Shankar, supplies the richest available account of how a major Sikh shrine actually functions from dawn to night, and that account is indispensable for understanding why a gurdwara needs a diwan hall, a sukhasan room, a sarovar and a langar even when the present article is concerned with stone and plaster rather than with ceremony.

On the side of architectural history, the literature is stronger on Mughal than on Sikh monuments. Ihsan H. Nadiem (2006) has mapped the gardens, baolis and tombs of the Taxila and Wah valley and thereby given Hasanabdal a documentary neighbourhood. John Burton Page (2008) and related studies of Indian Islamic architecture explain the genealogy of the fluted dome, the chhatri, the jharoka and the cusped arch as they moved from Central Asian and Persian practice into the courts of the Mughals and then into regional workshops. Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro (2010) has drawn attention to Hindu and Sikh architecture in Rawalpindi and Islamabad and has shown that Sikh patrons in the Pothohar continued to employ Mughal masonry habits well into the colonial period. T. S. Randhawa (2000) and Daljeet (2004) treat Sikh visual culture more broadly, reminding the reader that architecture belongs to the same world as painting, textile and the illustrated janamsakhi. Cole and Sambhi (1978) and later handbook treatments of Sikh belief (Nesbitt, 2005; Singh, 2009) are used here only where a liturgical requirement, such as the four doors of a gurdwara or the presence of the Nishan Sahib, has a direct bearing on built form.

The gap that remains is local and empirical. The literature tells us that Sikh architecture is a blend. It does not tell us, member by member, how that blend was achieved at Hasanabdal, which workshop habits were chosen and which were refused, or how the 1928 reconstruction altered the nineteenth century fabric. The present article works inside that gap.

Methodology

The research was designed as a single site case study that combined field recording with a reading of published sources. Repeated visits to Gurdwara Punja Sahib were made with the permission of the Evacuee Trust Property Board. Informal interviews with sewadars and residents of the complex, including Talwinder Singh, Heera Singh and Sardar Hukam Singh, were used to clarify the names and uses of rooms rather than to collect statistical samples. Photographs were taken of elevations, interiors, decorative details and associated buildings. Sketch plans of the sanctuary, the diwan asthan and the relationship of the hall to the sarovar were prepared on site and later redrawn. Secondary material on Sikh history, Mughal architecture and the monuments of Hasanabdal was consulted in order to place the recorded forms in a comparative frame. The method is therefore both descriptive and analytical. It is descriptive where the task is to say what is there. It is analytical where the task is to say where a form comes from and what work it does in the finished building.

The limits of the method should be stated plainly. No excavation was undertaken. No laboratory analysis of plaster or stone was possible. Dates for particular campaigns of repair after 1928 remain approximate because workshop accounts have not survived in a form available to the researcher. The drawings are schematic rather than fully dimensioned measured surveys. These limits do not prevent a responsible architectural reading. They do mean that the article should be treated as a documented interpretation rather than as a conservation specification.

The Gurdwara as a Building Type

Before the parts of Punja Sahib can be read, the type itself must be recalled. In the Guru Granth Sahib, the word guruduara refers first to the grace of the Guru understood as the voice of Akal Purakh. Only later did the same word name a building (McLeod, 2009). Early congregations met in a dharamsala, a room of spiritual refreshment. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the installation of the Adi Granth as Guru transformed that room into a gurdwara, a doorway of the Guru, and the building acquired a stable set of parts: a hall in which the scripture rests under a canopy, a flagstaff for the Nishan Sahib, a kitchen and dining hall for the langar, a tank where one exists, rooms for pilgrims, and a place to leave shoes. Historical gurdwaras mark sites associated with the Gurus. Community gurdwaras serve the daily needs of a sangat. Punja Sahib is both. It is historical because it guards the rock and the spring of the Nanak narrative. It is communal because it houses a living congregation, a school, hostels and a kitchen that feeds whoever arrives (Cole and Morgan, 2000).

The architecture of the type is not bound to a single plan. Square, octagonal, rectangular and cruciform halls all occur. Heights range from a single storey to nine. What is constant is a raised plinth, a domed sanctum, a decorative pinnacle often in the form of an inverted lotus, arched openings, kiosks and small domelets on the parapet, and projected windows. These constants are themselves borrowings. The dome as a sign of the vault of heaven and of the superiority of God entered the Punjab through Islamic tomb architecture. The chhatri and the jharoka entered through Hindu and Rajput palace design and were naturalised by Mughal builders. Sikh patrons of the early nineteenth century inherited that mixed language and used it to honour the Guru Granth Sahib rather than a dynastic tomb (Shah, 2011; Page, 2008).

Setting, Patronage and Construction History

Sikh memory places Guru Nanak at Hasanabdal around 1521, travelling with his companion Mardana. The local spring was controlled by Baba Wali Qandhari. When water was refused, a new spring is said to have risen at the Guru's feet. The angry saint rolled a boulder down the hillside. The Guru stopped the rock with his palm and left an impression that disciples later called Punja Sahib, the revered hand (Salim, 2009). The architectural history of the shrine begins much later. In the prosperous years of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs received royal patronage and undertook a wide campaign of shrine building that later writers have called a cultural renaissance. At Hasanabdal the work is attributed to Hari Singh Nalwa in the period 1800 to 1835. A two-storey building with frescoes of the Gurus was later replaced. In 1928 the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee took over the management and constructed a splendid three storey sanctuary in grey sandstone (Khan, 1962). The spring that issues beneath the rock still feed the holy tank and is treated as sacred water.

The choice of grey sandstone rather than the red brick of the neighbouring Mughal tombs is itself a statement. It aligns the shrine with a family of Sikh monuments that prefer a cooler, more austere outer skin and reserve colour for interiors, flags and gilded finials. The four doorways of the sanctuary, one on each side, announce the Sikh principle that the house of the Guru is open to every direction and every visitor. The southern doorway leads most directly into the Guru Granth room. Around this core the builders disposed a sarovar on the eastern side, a sermon hall to the south, hostel and school ranges to the west, and a basement storey of cusped arches that lifts the sanctuary above the tank. The resulting ensemble is compact, inward looking and richly silhouetted against the Attock sky.



Figure 1. Principal facade of Gurdwara Punja Sahib from the south, showing the fluted dome, corner kiosks, projected jharokas, cusped entrance arch and the Nishan Sahib. Photograph by the researcher.

Plan and Massing of the Sanctuary

The main sanctuary is square in plan and is built of burnt brick masonry finished with lime plaster on some surfaces and with grey sandstone facing on the principal elevations. The complex as a whole has been described as measuring about one hundred metres on each side when the courtyards and ancillary ranges are included. The sanctuary itself is a triple storey shrine. Eight large windows of about five feet square and six smaller windows of about three by five feet light the mass. The ground floor is dominated by the Diwan Asthan, a hall of roughly forty feet square in which the Guru Granth Sahib is installed under a marble canopy about five feet square, itself enriched with glass mosaic. Four doors open from this hall. A smaller room of about twelve by six feet on the left is reserved for Akhand Path, the continuous reading of the scripture that a family or a devotee may sponsor. A stair leads to the first storey where a room of about twelve by eight feet, the Sukhasan Sahib, receives the scripture at night before it is brought down again at dawn.

This arrangement is liturgical before it is formal. The scripture must have a public throne by day and a place of rest by night. The congregation must have an unobstructed floor on which to sit. Musicians must have a flank for the singing of kirtan. A wooden dais is needed for addresses. Karah prasad must have a table. A charity box must stand where offerings can be made without interrupting the reading. All of these fittings are visible in the Diwan Asthan at Punja Sahib, together with the displayed symbols of Ik Onkar, the Khanda and a group of kirpans. The architecture does not invent these needs. It houses them with a clarity that later visitors can still read from the plan alone (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002).

Marble paving in large square blocks with white lining covers the floors of the complex. The same material, used in black, red and white in a checked pattern, appears in the sermon hall. Marble is both practical and honorific. It takes the wash of many feet, it cools the summer interior, and it belongs to the same family of finishes that Mughal builders used for courtly floors. Names of sewadars are cut into marble tiles on the stairs of the holy tank, so that the very walking surface becomes a register of service. Architecture here is not only mass and void. It is also a surface on which memory is written.



Figure 2. Elevated view of the sanctuary showing the raised basement of cusped arches, twin stair flights, projected central jharoka, parapet kiosks and the surrounding hostel and courtyard ranges. Photograph from the site record.

The Nishan Sahib

No gurdwara is complete without the Sikh flag. At Punja Sahib the Nishan Sahib rises on a tall staff beside the sanctuary, a saffron cloth bearing the Khanda. The emblem itself is a double-edged sword, two curved swords and a circle. The double-edged sword speaks of readiness to defend truth by the weapons of the spirit and, if need be, by the arm. The curved swords recall the temporal and spiritual authority that the sixth Guru bound together. The circle reminds the congregation that God is one and that the believer remains attached to that oneness (Cole and Morgan, 2000). Architecturally the flagstaff is a vertical counter to the hemispherical dome. It marks the site from a distance on the Grand Trunk Road and converts the silhouette of the shrine into a recognisable Sikh profile even before the visitor can read the inscriptions on the gateway.

Jharokas

On the second storey of the sanctuary some eight jharokas project from the facade. A single jharoka measures about seven feet in width and ten feet in height. The type is unmistakable. An upper half dome dressed with inverted leaf ornament and small domelets sits above a run of dentils. A shaped eave steps up and down across a series of small multi cusped arches carried on miniature columns with base, shaft and bracket. The lower bowl of the balcony ends in overlapping leaves and a half-opened flower. Colour is used sparingly on the exterior, cream and ochre against the grey stone, so that the jharoka reads as a piece of jewellery pinned to a sober wall.

The genealogy of the form is not Sikh in origin. Mughal builders brought the projected window from Central Asian and Persian practice and used it in forts and mansions as a place from which a ruler could show himself to the public. Rajput palaces had already made the jharoka a sign of rank. At Punja Sahib the same form is emptied of dynastic display and filled with a different honour. No emperor sits in these balconies. They thicken the wall, catch shadow, and announce that the house of the Guru deserves the same architectural courtesy once reserved for kings. The borrowing is therefore not naive. It is a translation of prestige from court to congregation (Page, 2008; Nadiem, 2006).

The Fluted Dome

The crowning member of the sanctuary is a circular fluted double dome about twenty feet in diameter and fourteen feet in height. Flower leaf ornament runs on the curvature. A band of dentils marks the edge. Four small domelets occupy the corners of the drum. The finial rises from an inverted lotus and is reported to be of gilded bronze. The structural reason for a double dome is well known in Indo Islamic architecture. The inner shell can be shaped to the proportions of the hall while the outer shell can be raised to the silhouette required by the skyline. The visual reason is equally clear. Fluting breaks the surface into vertical ribs that catch light and make the dome seem to grow rather than to sit. The inverted lotus is a widely shared finial in the Punjab and carries associations of purity and of a blossoming that is turned toward heaven.

Writers on Islamic architecture have long treated the dome as a sign of the superiority of God and as a form first perfected in tombs before it migrated into mosques and then into other building types (Page, 2008). Sikh builders accepted the form and changed the occupant. Under this dome there is no grave. There is a book that the community has installed as Guru. The architectural honour that once gathered around a buried saint or a buried king is here gathered around a living scripture. That transfer of honour is one of the central operations of Sikh sacred architecture and Punja Sahib performs it with unusual completeness.

Kiosks and the Parapet

Kiosks or chhatris stand on the parapet of the sanctum, twelve cupolas disposed so that each side of the square is marked. Each kiosk is a small vaulted canopy on four pillars with a heavy projecting eave or chhajja. The little domes are fluted and end in inverted petals and gilded bronze. The type is among the most recognisable Mughal features to pass into Sikh hands. On a tomb the chhatri marks corners and dignifies the skyline. On a gurdwara it does the same work while also echoing, in miniature, the great dome that it surrounds. The eye is led from the small to the large and back again. The parapet becomes a crown rather than a mere wall head. In this respect Punja Sahib stands close to the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh at Lahore, a comparison already made by earlier observers of the site (Khan, 1962; Shah, 2011).

Sermon Hall, School and Hostels

South of the main entrance stands a rectangular sermon hall about sixty-eight feet long, thirty-eight feet wide and forty feet high. It is a double storey building with true arched windows and openings and a large lantern of white bulbs at the centre. The hall comes into its own on festival days when Baisakhi, Bandi Chhor or a gurpurb swells the congregation beyond the capacity of the Diwan Asthan. The facade of the hall is treated as a second frontispiece. Glass mosaic and floral painting enrich the bay window over the entrance. Two statues of Sikh men stand in attendance. Tiers of arched openings on both storeys are fitted with designed woodwork. An upper railing runs on wooden brackets. The floor is paved in a checked pattern of black, red and white marble. The sermon hall therefore repeats, in a more public and less ornate register, the same language of arch, lantern and marble that the sanctuary speaks at a higher pitch.

Within the precinct there is also a government primary school, coeducational and open to children of different religions, housed in a three-storey range of cusped arches. The old hostel is a double storey building with true arches on the first storey and cusped arches on the second. A newer three storey hostel on the western side provides some sixty guest rooms for pilgrims. The basement of the sanctuary itself is a run of cusped arched openings facing the tank, with two stair flights rising to the main platform. These ranges matter architecturally because they show that the Sikh idea of the gurdwara as a complete social world, a place of

learning, lodging and feeding as well as of worship, was given built form at Hasanabdal and not merely asserted in texts (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Ralhan, 1997).



Figure 3. Ceiling of the main sanctuary with tukri or sheesha giri work in star and floral geometries. Photograph by the researcher.

Glass Mosaic and Interior Ornament

If the exterior of Punja Sahib is a study in grey stone, cream plaster and ochre trim, the interior of the sanctuary is a study in light caught by glass. Sheesha giri or tukri work is a Punjabi craft in which coloured glass is set into a gypsum plaster known as gach. The plaster is prepared by mixing water with squeezed gypsum at a controlled temperature until it becomes a paste. It is spread on the wall or ceiling and the glass pieces are pressed into it and shaped with tools. When the glass is painted as well as cut the work is called tukri. Mughal palaces, above all the Sheesh Mahal, made the technique famous. Sikh patrons adopted it with enthusiasm, and the upper storey of the Golden Temple remains its most celebrated sacred application (Kang, 1988).

At Punja Sahib the work is said to have been offered as sewa by an anonymous donor some years before the field visits. The palette is green, red, yellow, navy blue and dark blue. Floral stars, interlaced vines, squared medallions and running pattis cover ceilings, door arches and wall panels. Verses from the Guru Granth Sahib are inlaid in a stylised Gurmukhi hand beside the entrance doors and around the Khanda. The effect is not illusionistic. It is accumulative. Thousands of small reflecting planes break the incoming light so that the hall seems to generate its own shimmer. In the Dewan Asthan a crystal lantern hangs above a mosaic canopy, and the combination of electric sparkle and glass inlay produces an atmosphere that photographs flatten and that only a visitor standing in the room can fully receive.

Ornament of this density has a theological use. Sikh teaching refuses the worship of images and directs reverence toward the Word. A hall that is covered in pattern rather than in figural icons respects that refusal while still offering the eye a richness equal to any painted chapel. Where figures do appear, as in the two statues on the sermon hall facade or in the oil painting of a historical incident that hangs in the langar, they remain outside the throne room of the scripture. The architectural hierarchy is therefore also a doctrinal hierarchy. Glass and verse surround the Book. Narrative painting and portraiture serve memory in adjacent spaces (Singh, 2002; Salim, 2009).



Figure 4. Interior of the Dewan Asthan with glass mosaic walls, Gurmukhi inscription, mosaic canopy over the scripture and hanging lantern. Photograph by the researcher.

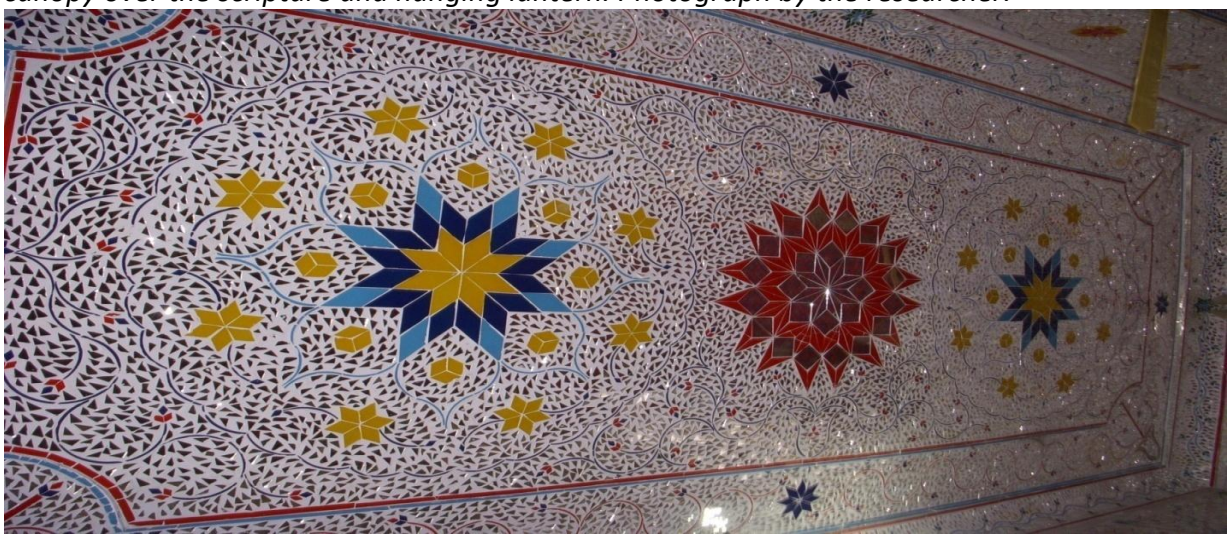


Figure 5. Another ceiling panel of floral star medallions in coloured glass set in gypsum plaster. Photograph by the researcher.

Origins and Influences

It is now possible to return to the question of origin. Mughal architecture itself was already a synthesis of local Hindu construction, Persian Central Asian design and the Islamic architecture of the subcontinent. Features that later writers treat as Islamic, including the chhatri, the chhajja and the jharoka, had Hindu monumental ancestries before they were absorbed into imperial practice. Sikh architecture of the Ranjit Singh period inherited that mixed language at the moment of its greatest fluency, the moment associated with the taste of Shah Jahan, and redirected it toward gurdwara building (Shah, 2011; Nadiem, 2006). Punja Sahib is one of the clearest provincial demonstrations of that redirection.

The comparison with the Samadhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Lahore is not a casual resemblance. Both buildings raise a square sanctum on a platform, crown it with a fluted dome and a family of kiosks, project jharokas from the upper walls, and reserve the richest inlay for

interiors. Both treat the skyline as a cluster of white and gilt verticals rather than as a single massive dome. The difference is as important as the likeness. The Samadhi houses the memory of a sovereign. The gurdwara houses a scripture and a spring. The plan of Punja Sahib therefore adds what a tomb does not need: a sarovar fed by a sacred source, a langar, a sermon hall for festival crowds, hostels for yatrees and a school. Influence here is not imitation. It is the adaptation of a courtly silhouette to a congregational programme.

Local Mughal monuments supplied a second pressure. The Tomb of the Hakims, built in Akbar's reign for Hakim Himam Gilani and Hakim Abu al Fateh Gilani, stands a few dozen metres to the east. It is a square lime plastered brick tomb with four arched doorways and an inner dome under a flat outer roof. The so-called Tomb of Lala Rukh occupies a garden platform nearby. Wah Garden, Chitti Baoli, Saidan Baoli and Losar Baoli complete a landscape of water, arch and plaster. A builder working at Hasanabdal in the 1830s could not have been unaware of these neighbours. The arched openings of the gurdwara basement, the taste for tanks reached by flights of steps, and the comfort with lime plaster and small brick all speak that local dialect even when the silhouette of the sanctuary looks toward Lahore (Nadiem, 2006).

Architecture and the Hypothesis of Spatial Worship

The larger thesis from which this article is drawn proposed that the gurdwara and its different portions are aimed at different forms of worship and that the performances have meaning only in that context. The architectural evidence supports the claim. The Diwan Asthan is shaped for seated congregation, kirtan and the presence of the scripture. The Sukhasan room is shaped for rest. The Akhand Path room is shaped for unbroken reading. The sarovar and the rock chamber are shaped for bathing and for the veneration of the hand print. The langar is shaped for cooking and for sitting in pangat. The sermon hall is shaped for overflow and festival. The hostels are shaped for sleep. None of these rooms is interchangeable. A visitor who treated the tank as a hall or the kitchen as a throne room would not merely be rude. That visitor would have failed to read the building. Architecture at Punja Sahib is a script of use, and the script is Sikh.

Discussion

Three conclusions follow from the description. First, the architecture of Gurdwara Punja Sahib is diverse by design rather than by accident. Square plan, triple height, four doors, fluted double dome, projected jharokas, parapet kiosks, cusped basement arches, marble floors, glass mosaic interiors and ancillary ranges of school and hostel do not belong to a single imported package. They were assembled from a working vocabulary that Sikh patrons shared with Mughal and Rajput workshops and then ordered according to the needs of sangat, sewa and scripture. Second, the most precise monumental comparison is with the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh, but the comparison must include difference as well as likeness. Third, the building cannot be understood if ornament is treated as afterthought. The tukri ceilings, the Gurmukhi verses in glass, the gilded finials and the saffron flag are as structural to the meaning of the shrine as the brick and the dome.

The discussion also has a conservation implication. Because the shrine is a living gurdwara, repair is constant and often undocumented. Glass panels are replaced. Plaster is renewed. Hostels are added. A future measured survey should distinguish nineteenth century fabric from the 1928 reconstruction and from later sewa. Until that survey exists, photographic records such as those presented here remain the most detailed public account of the monument as it stood in the early twenty first century.

A comparison that remains under used is the comparison between Punja Sahib and the lesser gurdwaras of the Pothohar rather than only the comparison with Lahore. Kalhoro (2010) has

shown that Sikh and Hindu patrons in Rawalpindi and Islamabad continued to employ cusped arches, projected windows and lime plastered brick well into the colonial decades. Those buildings are smaller and often more domestic. Punja Sahib shares their masonry habits and exceeds them in silhouette. The difference is patronage and pilgrimage. A local sangat can raise a hall with a modest dome. A historic station on the Nanak map, backed first by a Sikh general and later by a central committee, can raise a three-storey sanctuary with a family of kiosks.

Material choice deserves a slower look. Grey sandstone on the principal elevations, burnt brick in the mass, lime plaster on secondary surfaces, marble on floors and tank steps, gypsum and glass on interior vaults, timber in the sermon hall fittings, and gilded bronze on finials form a palette that is both regional and hierarchical. Stone faces the public road. Glass faces the scripture. Marble faces the feet. Timber faces the festival crowd. Each material is assigned a moral as well as a practical task. Conservation that replaced glass with paint, or marble with ceramic tile, would not only change appearance. It would change the hierarchy of honour that the builders encoded in finish.

Light is another member of the architecture that photographs under represent. On the exterior the fluted dome and the projecting jharokas are machines for shadow. Deep eaves keep the upper windows in a moving shade that changes hour by hour. On the interior the tukri work is a machine for sparkle. A shaft of sun that would be ordinary on a white wall becomes a scatter of colour on a glass ceiling. Electric lanterns, added later, intensify that scatter after dusk and allow kirtan to continue when the sky has gone. The shrine is not the same building at noon and at night.

Sound belongs to the same dimension. The Diwan Asthan is sized so that an unamplified reader can be heard by a seated congregation of ordinary weekday size. The sermon hall is sized for a raised voice and, in later decades, for loudspeakers. The courtyard between tank and sanctuary takes the overflow of both and adds the sound of water and of conversation. Architecture here is acoustic as well as visual.

Gendered space is handled with a quietness that should not be mistaken for absence. The sarovar has a separate portion for women. The langar floor does not. The Diwan Asthan does not. The hostels can be arranged by family and by group. The architecture therefore draws a line at the water and refuses a line at the Word and at the plate. That pattern is consistent with a wider Sikh ethic.

The school inside the precinct raises a last comparative point. A gurdwara that teaches children of several religions in a government primary school is not only a Sikh monument. It is a civic room. The three-storey range of cusped arches that houses the school looks like the hostel and like the old residential court. Architecture refuses to mark the school as a separate style. The message is that learning belongs to the same family of arches as sleeping and praying.

If the preceding pages have done their work, the reader should now be able to walk the precinct in the mind and name what is seen. The saffron staff names the site as Sikh from a distance. The four doors name it as open. The raised basement and double stair name it as a platform of honour. The jharokas name a debt to palace architecture. The fluted dome and corner kiosks name a debt to the imperial skyline of the Punjab. The marble floor names a debt to courtly finish and a practical answer to many feet. The glass interior names a refusal of figural icons and an acceptance of splendour. The side room names continuous reading. The upper room names night. The tank names a miracle and a bath. The sermon hall names festival overflow. The school and hostels name a community that sleeps and learns as well as prays. A building that can be read in this way has succeeded as architecture even before it is judged as art.

That readability is the strongest argument for treating Punja Sahib as a key monument rather than as a regional curiosity. Many gurdwaras possess some of these parts. Few possess them in such compact and photographable relation, and fewer still possess them beside a Mughal tomb platform and a named spring. The article has tried to keep that relation in view without allowing context to dissolve form. Form remains the subject. Context is the grammar in which form became possible.

Conclusion

Gurdwara Punja Sahib is a beautiful and demanding example of Sikh architecture in the western Punjab. It presents a marvel of forms borrowed from Rajput and Mughal practice and reordered around the Guru Granth Sahib and the sacred spring of Hasanabdal. The builders took their most refined cues from the architectural taste associated with Shah Jahan and from the silhouette of the Lahore Samadhi, yet they produced a building that is not a copy of either source. Four doors, a living tank, a kitchen, a school and rooms for pilgrims turn an imperial language into a congregational house. Fluted dome, jharoka, kiosk and glass mosaic give that house a splendour equal to its sanctity. The shrine therefore deserves to be read not only as a station on the Sikh pilgrimage map of Pakistan but as a key monument in the history of architectural synthesis in the Pothohar. Further work on materials, workshop organisation and post 1928 change will refine the picture. The picture already available is clear enough. At Hasanabdal the Sikh community built a doorway of the Guru in the full inherited language of the Punjab, and that doorway still stands.

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