

Gentrification of the Walled City of Lahore: Contesting Heritage, Power and Belonging

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the ongoing process of gentrification in Lahore's Walled City, situating it within broader debates on access to urban space and state-driven heritage conservation. This process has proven contentious, as redevelopment has been selective and arbitrary: areas are prioritised based on donor funding and perceived economic potential, while community voices and interests are often excluded. This phenomenon raises concerns that gentrification is transforming the city's heritage into an arena of power and exclusion. Methodologically, the study combines secondary literature with primary qualitative research. A review of global scholarship maps key debates on the social, economic, and political impacts of gentrification. At the same time, semi-structured interviews and interpretive analysis of community narratives reveal tensions between official redevelopment discourse and residents' lived realities. The findings suggest a top-down, exclusionary model of development, advanced by state authorities, which is framed as an effort to harness the area's tourism-driven economic potential. Although mass displacement has not occurred, residents report feelings of alienation and restricted access, citing the proliferation of upscale commercial development, rising living costs, and tighter state regulation of business activity. The paper argues that gentrification in the Walled City extends beyond physical redevelopment, representing a struggle over belonging, cultural representation, and power. It shows how a donor-funded, bureaucratically driven process privileges certain actors while marginalising others, underscoring the urgent need to balance heritage conservation and urban development with social inclusivity in urban policy.

Keywords: Gentrification; Heritage Preservation; Urban Redevelopment; Walled City of Lahore; Community Displacement; Urban Policy.

Introduction

Urban landscapes are never static; they are continuously reshaped by shifting socio-economic, cultural, and political forces. Among the most widely studied yet deeply contested processes of urban transformation is gentrification—a phenomenon that encompasses not only physical redevelopment but also complex negotiations of class, culture, and belonging (Smith, 1979; Hamnett, 1991). While scholarship on gentrification has expanded considerably in recent decades, ranging from structural-economic explanations to more nuanced explorations of identity and place (Bondi, 1999; Billingham, 2015), much of this literature remains anchored in Euro-American contexts. By contrast, the dynamics of gentrification in South Asian cities

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remain underexplored, despite the region's rapid urbanisation and heritage-led redevelopment initiatives (Pervaiz et al., 2018).

The Walled City of Lahore, a centuries-old urban settlement and cultural landmark, provides a distinctive case for examining these tensions. Recent state-led interventions, particularly under the Walled City of Lahore Authority (WCLA), have combined heritage conservation with urban renewal, aiming to transform the city's historic core into a site of tourism, commerce, and cultural display (Auditor General of Pakistan, 2015; Rab, 1998). While couched in the language of preservation and development, these initiatives simultaneously reshape social relations, economic opportunities, and the very meaning of urban belonging. The juxtaposition of heritage conservation and displacement pressures raises important questions about who benefits from redevelopment, who is excluded, and how notions of identity and power are renegotiated in the process.

This paper situates the gentrification of Lahore's Walled City within broader global debates. However, it foregrounds the particularities of the Pakistani context, where colonial legacies, postcolonial governance, and neoliberal development agendas intersect. By examining contestations over heritage, power, and belonging, it becomes clear that redevelopment projects operate not merely as technical or aesthetic exercises, but as deeply political interventions. In doing so, the study contributes to expanding the geographical scope of gentrification research while offering critical insights into the socio-cultural stakes of urban transformation in historic cities of the Global South.

Literature Review

Scholarship on gentrification is vast, yet its application to postcolonial South Asian contexts remains sparse. This review situates the present study within four interrelated strands of literature: (1) the gaps and limitations in existing research on Lahore, (2) dominant Western frameworks of gentrification and their applicability, (3) the role of state policy and heritage-led redevelopment, and (4) comparative insights from Johannesburg, another postcolonial city in the Global South. Together, these strands highlight both the relevance and the necessity of an ethnographic engagement with the Walled City of Lahore.

The scholarly literature on Lahore's urban history and development remains relatively sparse, particularly with respect to gentrification. William Glover's *Making Lahore Modern* (2008) provides a detailed account of transformations in Old Lahore's built environment and social life; however, it predates the creation of the WCLA in 2012, the key institution spearheading heritage-led renewal. Similarly, Samia Rab's (1998) and Samuel Noe's (1980) analyses provide important historical perspectives. However, they rely heavily on secondary sources and were written at a time when Pakistan was still grappling with postcolonial urban shocks. These works, while valuable, fall short of addressing how state-led gentrification and heritage conservation have reshaped social dynamics in more recent decades. This lacuna underscores the need for grounded ethnographic work that captures lived experiences in the post-WCLA era.

Most gentrification theories have emerged from Euro-American contexts, raising questions about their applicability to the Global South. Freeman (2016) distinguishes between a "first wave," characterised by physical renovation of deteriorating housing, and a "second wave," oriented toward cultural and symbolic transformation. However, in Lahore, the WCLA's efforts remain incomplete, even in terms of physical renovation, suggesting that the city cannot be neatly slotted into these Western temporal "waves." Similarly, research in the West has frequently linked gentrification to declining crime rates (Ellen et al., 2016). While police records indicate a drop in reported crime between 2011 and 2014, subsequent increases complicate any straightforward causal claims in the Lahore context. These divergences

highlight the limitations of directly applying Western theories of gentrification to postcolonial cities.

Another critical body of scholarship explores the state's role in shaping gentrification through policy and redevelopment agendas. Hamnett (1991) and Smith (1979) highlight how governments often instrumentalise gentrification as a strategy of urban renewal, while Greenberg (2008) critiques the redirection of public resources away from social services toward heritage and tourism-oriented redevelopment. In Lahore, budgetary allocations reveal a similar pattern: in fiscal year 2013–2014, significant funds were directed to the WCLA, while allocations for education, environment, and public safety declined (Government of Pakistan, 2014). Tourism, often framed as a means of generating cultural and social capital (Hampton, 2013), has likewise been a central justification for the WCLA's interventions. However, ethnographic accounts suggest that residents remain indifferent, if not sceptical, about the benefits of increased tourism. This tension complicates the narrative that heritage-led development uniformly enhances community well-being.

Comparative studies of cities in the Global South highlight both similarities and divergences in the trajectories of gentrification. Research on Johannesburg's Parkhurst neighbourhood has documented outcomes such as rising property values, displacement, and the conversion of residential areas to commercial uses (Monare et al., 2014). While Lahore shares some parallels, such as selective redevelopment, it diverges in critical respects: displacement has been limited and subsidised, residential-commercial hybridity predates gentrification, and demographic shifts are less pronounced. Moreover, while Johannesburg's gentrification intersects with shifts in sexuality and cultural politics, Lahore's WCLA interventions prompted the evacuation of Heera Mandi, pointing toward a distinct trajectory shaped by moral politics. These divergences raise the possibility that Lahore's gentrification represents not a variant of existing models but a *sui generis* phenomenon requiring new conceptual tools.

Taken together, the reviewed literature underscores the unevenness of gentrification research. While Euro-American frameworks dominate the theory, South Asian contexts, such as Lahore, remain marginalised. The limited scholarship on Lahore itself predates key institutional changes, while comparative Global South cases highlight both similarities and important departures. This ethnography, therefore, contributes to filling a critical gap: by foregrounding the lived experiences of residents in the Walled City, it interrogates how heritage-led gentrification is reshaping identity, belonging, and power in ways that both align with and diverge from dominant paradigms of gentrification.

Heritage-Led Redevelopment and Uneven Displacement

The gentrification of the Walled City of Lahore has unfolded primarily through state-led, heritage-centred redevelopment initiatives. Framed under the rubric of cultural preservation, these projects—spearheaded by the WCLA (WCLA)—have selectively targeted specific neighbourhoods for conservation and renewal, while leaving others neglected or vulnerable to displacement (Auditor General of Pakistan, 2015; Rab, 1998). This selective approach produces uneven urban outcomes: while parts of the city are elevated into curated sites of cultural display and tourist consumption, long-standing residents face pressures of exclusion, rising costs, and the erosion of community networks. In this sense, heritage conservation becomes a double-edged process—simultaneously preserving the physical fabric of the city while unsettling the social fabric that sustains it (Mumtaz, 1999; Glover, 2007).

Thirteen gates were constructed to regulate entry into the city; although many were demolished during the British colonial period, several were reconstructed in the 19th century. These gates—Akbari, Bhati, Delhi, Kashmiri, Lohari, Masti, Mochi, Mori, Roshnai, Shahalmi, Shairanwala, Taxali, and Yakki—remain central to Lahore's urban memory. This section focuses on the historical and cultural significance of selected gates, examining how their

contemporary treatment under heritage-led redevelopment reflects broader patterns of selective gentrification.

Shahalmi Gate was one of the most prominent gateways of the Old City. Originally named *Bherwala Gate*, it was renamed after Mughal emperor Shah Alam in 1720. Historically, it served as a bustling commercial hub, controlled mainly by Hindu and Sikh merchants, with Muslims often relegated to subordinate economic roles. During the partition riots of 1947, the gate was destroyed in communal violence when Hindu and Sikh properties were targeted. Despite its turbulent past, the Shahalmi area remains Asia's largest wholesale market today. However, many historical structures—such as the "Masjid Shab Bhar," reportedly built in a single night—remain neglected due to insufficient preservation efforts (Talbot, 2006).

Yakki Gate, formerly known as *Zakki Gate*, derives its name from the saint Pir Zakki, who, according to local lore, died defending the city from Mongol invaders. While the gate itself was demolished during the colonial period and never reconstructed, the site retains symbolic significance as it houses two shrines associated with Pir Zakki. Unlike other gates, Yakki has avoided heavy commercialisation and remains residential mainly, containing several Mughal-era havelis such as Haveli Nadirwali and Lal Haveli. However, despite its rich architectural and religious heritage, including remnants of demolished Hindu temples, the site has received little official attention to preservation (Sheikh, 2012).

Mochi Gate, situated in the southern part of the city, also suffered significant destruction during the 1947 partition riots. Urban encroachments now obscure the gate's exact location, though it remains a vibrant neighbourhood associated with Lahore's Shia community. It hosts major Muharram processions, with sites such as Nisar Haveli and Mubarak Haveli serving as important religious and cultural landmarks. The area also includes the mosque of Maulana Muhammad Saleh Kamboh, tutor to Emperor Aurangzeb, which was once praised for its beauty but is now severely deteriorated. Despite its cultural significance, the lack of state-led preservation has left much of the area in a state of neglect (Khalid, 2015).

Masti Gate was similarly demolished during the colonial period, with its remains eventually replaced by a road that evolved into the bustling Rim Market. Historically, this gate had close links to Mughal royalty, serving as an access point to the Begum Shahi Mosque and nearby gardens. Today, the area is home to important religious and architectural heritage, including the *Gurdwara Janam Asthan Guru Ram Das*, the birthplace of the fourth Sikh Guru, as well as remnants of Hindu temples such as the *Hanuman Mandir* and *Mai Mandir*. Mughal-era havelis, including those of Khushal Singh and Dhian Singh, also survive.

Figure 1: Religious Pluralism in the Walled City of Lahore



Note: A gurdwara is visible behind the mosque (right), while Shia households display religious flags and symbols (left). The city's Hindu past, however, has largely disappeared from public space. Despite the history of sectarian violence elsewhere in Pakistan, such conflict remains absent within the Walled City.

In contrast, Delhi Gate, located on the eastern side of the city, has been extensively restored and stands as the hallmark of the Walled City's redevelopment under the WCLA. Named for its orientation toward Delhi, it was the main Mughal-era entrance to Lahore and houses significant monuments, including the Shahi Hammam and Masjid Wazir Khan. Before 2012, these structures were encroached upon by illegal shops—Shahi Hammam alone contained 57 commercial establishments—but state interventions relocated the encroachers and restored surrounding houses and streets. Today, Delhi Gate exemplifies the state's heritage-led gentrification, characterised by cleaner streets, modernised infrastructure, and enhanced tourist appeal (Auditor General of Pakistan, 2015).

The uneven preservation of these gates highlights the selective nature of gentrification in Lahore's historic core. State efforts have concentrated on sites associated with Mughal Muslim heritage, such as Delhi Gate and Wazir Khan Mosque. In contrast, Hindu and Sikh sites have largely been neglected or left in ruins. This selective approach raises questions about whose heritage is prioritised, whose histories are silenced, and how redevelopment reproduces hierarchies of cultural belonging. While officials claim that financial limitations necessitate a phased approach to conservation, the prioritisation of specific sites over others suggests a deeper politics of memory and identity in Lahore's urban renewal (WCLA, 2016).

Negotiating Gentrification: Local Voices and Everyday Experiences

To better understand the local dimensions of gentrification in the Walled City of Lahore, we conducted twelve interviews with residents and business owners. Most participants, however, declined to have their interviews recorded to avoid controversy. We aimed to capture how the native population perceives ongoing redevelopment in their neighbourhoods. Recognising that many would not be familiar with the term *gentrification*, we framed our questions around the impact of the Walled City Program on tourism, business, and daily life.

A striking example is the well-known shop *Halwa Puri of the Taj Mahal*, which authorities have identified as historically significant and designated with signage to attract tourists.

Figure 2: Heritage Information Board Installed by the Walled City of Lahore Authority



Note: The Authority has placed numerous boards explaining the history and significance of different sites to attract both local and foreign tourists.

Contrary to our expectation that such visibility would boost sales, the shop owner reported a decline in business since the implementation of the Walled City Program. He attributed this to the creation of the new food street and to changes in the circulation of visitors: the closure of the Fort's gate and the installation of a new gate separating the food street from the wider commercial area diverted customer flows away from his shop. He further emphasized that the food street catered to a "business class" clientele—those who could afford its offerings—leaving many locals feeling alienated from the process of redevelopment.

The same shop owner also argued that practical adjustments, such as reopening the closed Fort gate, could simultaneously benefit both his business and the food street. His perspective illustrates how local concerns are often excluded from planning decisions, despite the direct consequences for livelihoods.

Interestingly, a number of residents expressed little awareness of the redevelopment program, offering responses such as "nothing has changed" or "things are exactly the way they used to be." While these statements initially seemed evasive, further reflection suggests they reflect the highly selective nature of gentrification. Much of the Old City remains untouched, and only those in close proximity to the designated sites—such as traders in Delhi Gate Bazaar—directly experienced its effects. Others resented that while areas like Delhi Gate received attention, places such as Mochi Bagh were neglected.

Another garment shop owner articulated dissatisfaction despite not suffering tangible losses. He observed that the renovations were cosmetic, with little benefit to the community: "this renovation is not for the local community but only for tourism. Our shops are the same way as they used to be. The authority did not ask for our approval and started working. They destroyed our roads and then remade them in a way which would attract tourists." He further connected the program to shifting political practices, noting that the renovated streets facilitated political rallies following the return to democracy after 2008, whereas rallies were previously confined to Mochi Bagh. Such comments reveal how locals read political motives into urban redevelopment.

Concerns also emerged over the program's foreign funding. Several interviewees argued that heritage preservation should be the responsibility of the national government, not dependent on international donors. A particularly vocal segment of religious residents criticized the use of foreign funds, especially when applied to sacred sites such as the Wazir Khan Mosque.

Figure 3: Banner Displayed at the Entrance of Badshahi Mosque



The case of the Shahi Hammam further illustrates displacement linked to heritage redevelopment. Once used for community gatherings and weddings, and encroached by local shops, the Hammam has been restored as a site for official state events and tourist visits.

Figure 4: Shahi Hammam Used as a Restricted-access Official Venue



Note: During official events, the historic Shahi Hammam is closed to the general public, limiting its accessibility as a heritage site.

Shopkeepers were relocated with compensation, and one dry-fruit seller we interviewed described the process as fair. Although his business initially suffered after relocation, he acknowledged that the land had been illegally occupied and ultimately expressed no resentment. Other perspectives were more supportive. The President of the local Trade Union praised the Walled City Program for improving infrastructure, attracting tourists, and even installing underground sewage and power lines. His only grievance was unresolved traffic congestion.

Overall, our interviews reveal that there is no single or unanimous perspective among the residents of the Old City. For some, gentrification brought tangible benefits, including improved infrastructure and increased tourism. For others, it represented exclusion, political manoeuvrings, and disregard for local needs. Several residents felt alienated, perceiving that the renovations primarily served tourists and elites rather than the community itself. Still others, particularly in untouched neighbourhoods, were indifferent or unaware. What emerges, therefore, is a fragmented landscape of experiences—marked by uneven gains, selective neglect, and contested belonging.

Official Narratives on Heritage-Led Development

Officials involved in the planning and implementation of the gentrification of the Walled City of Lahore emphasised that Lahore is the undisputed cultural capital of Pakistan. According to them, the project does not seek to revive culture but rather to present it to both local and international audiences in accordance with global standards. A key objective, they explained, is to attract tourism, inspired by international precedents where city economies thrive primarily on cultural tourism. Lahore's heritage sites, they noted, hold immense potential, and the central aim of the initiative is to capitalise on this asset.

Regarding foreign funding, officials stated that external assistance was not solicited but rather voluntarily offered by countries such as Britain, Australia, and Norway, as well as by international institutions like the World Bank, due to the significance of the undertaking. They further clarified that foreign involvement does not render the initiative a foreign-driven project with hidden agendas. They dismissed apprehensions—particularly among religious groups—that the program harboured ulterior motives.

In reflecting on public engagement, three out of four officials interviewed placed significant responsibility on the local population. First, they argued that residents failed to appreciate the benefits of the project and exhibited unwarranted mistrust of government initiatives. Second, they emphasised that community members share a responsibility to preserve heritage sites. Instead, instances were cited of residents illegally occupying important spaces, including mosques, for private gain.

Authorities also acknowledged that development often comes with costs, particularly for local populations who may be displaced. However, they emphasised that such large-scale adverse impacts have not yet been witnessed in the Walled City. For example, international franchises such as McDonald's, which in other contexts have displaced local businesses, have not been permitted to operate within the Walled City. Officials highlighted that such decisions are strategic, requiring extensive planning and consideration of long-term implications. For this reason, they argued, it is not feasible to include every stakeholder in decision-making regarding subsequent steps.

As to why the rehabilitation process has been so selective, officials provided two primary explanations. First, there is an acute shortage of resources, and such projects are prohibitively expensive. Second, the security situation in Pakistan makes it challenging even to manage existing heritage sites, rendering the creation of new ones impractical. Nonetheless, they clarified that only Phase I of the process has been completed, and assured that neglected sites will be gradually included in future phases.

Conclusion

The gentrification of the Walled City of Lahore has neither followed a prescribed Western path nor is it fully comparable to experiences in other cities of the Global South. Instead, it represents a hybrid model, selectively applied and centrally directed. Decisions are made mainly at the top level, a process which inevitably distances and alienates the local population. While the widescale displacement of residents — often the hallmark of gentrification elsewhere — has not occurred here, many locals have nonetheless faced adverse consequences. Some have experienced restrictions on long-established practices, while others have been economically sidelined, and many have felt cultural dislocation. At the same time, there are also beneficiaries. These include upper- and upper-middle-class visitors who enjoy the new facilities, the broader economy that gains from increased foreign tourism, and a smaller number of residents and businesses that have managed to adapt and profit from the changes.

In summary, the case of the Walled City illustrates how gentrification in Pakistan has resulted in a selective, uneven, and hybrid outcome. It has created both winners and losers, revitalised spaces while eroding certain aspects of local ownership, and foregrounded the tensions between heritage preservation, economic development, and community inclusion. Ultimately, the experience of Lahore underscores how struggles over heritage are also struggles over identity, belonging, and the city's claim to its role as Pakistan's cultural capital.

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