

CONSERVATION IN THE VALE OF KASHMIR:

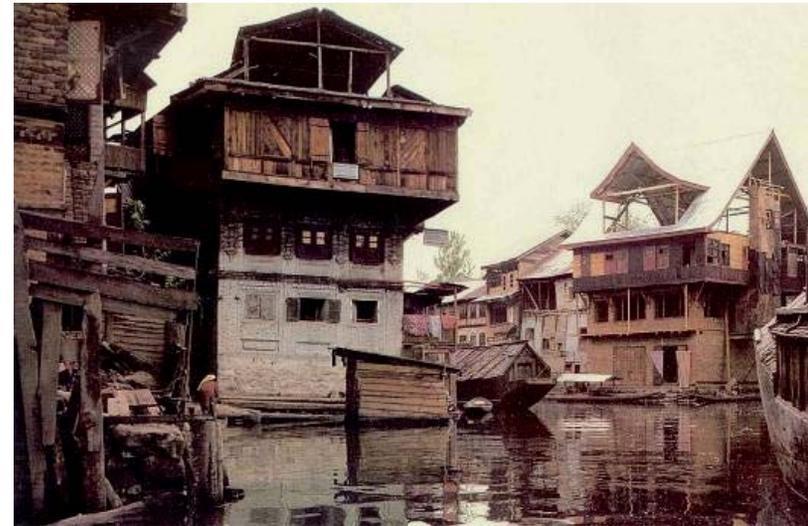
Concept Paper on a Proposal for a Conservation Initiative in the City of Srinagar

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Almost a quarter of a century ago, after my first trip to Srinagar in 1981, I reported the following observation in an article in Historic Preservation Magazine, published by the U.S.-based National Trust for Historic Preservation:

As I arrived, I gazed upon a wonderland of winding canals and picturesque lakes surrounding the city, flanked by the towering Himalayan Mountains. Initially, the central area of Srinagar seemed a jumble of rickety buildings and houses, narrow congested streets and a constant bustle of activity... [but] the architecture of Srinagar with its steeply pitched gabled roofs atop brick and wooden structures reminded me of a medieval European city – not a restored city like Marburg in Germany – but a medieval city still alive and lived in as it has been for centuries. Buildings have been added, others removed or radically altered – but what we see in Srinagar is a mixture of buildings built and rebuilt over the last 300 years in a compatible style. Never, until recently have new buildings clashed with the older structures. And, with its economy based on handicrafts and carpet weaving, Srinagar has never had the local wealth necessary to undertake a massive rebuilding of the city.¹

¹Randolph Langenbach, *India in Conflict, Urban Renewal Moves East*, Historic Preservation, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington DC, USA, May/June, 1982, pp 46-51.



1. The Rainiwari Canal, Srinagar, 1981.

In October, 2005, I returned for the first time in sixteen years, after years of military and social conflict have had their impact on the environment and quality of life. I found that much had changed. New roads had been carved through the old city, many buildings have been abandoned or deteriorated, and many others have been modernized in ways that have destroyed their traditional character. Many of the fabled winding canals along the interface between the city and Dal Lake have been filled in or horribly polluted.

Surprisingly, the political conflicts have not stopped re-development, but there was little attempt to integrate the newly constructed buildings into the city fabric in a way that sensitively respects the older architecture. In addition, there is

evidence of a disturbing trend in the old city – the owners of some of the most historic houses have remodeled them by plastering them with concrete stucco, replacing the windows with new windows of differing design and locations.

Fortunately, the earthquake that so devastated Pakistan and Kashmir further to the west has not damaged the buildings in Srinagar. However, it was also clear that any effort to preserve the rich qualities and texture of this ancient settlement would have to be undertaken now, if ever, because in years to come the incremental losses would be so great that the city will lose its chance to maintain its character that is unique to Kashmir.

The question, then, is how best to define and approach an initiative that can help begin the process of both educating the public on the value of the architectural and environmental heritage of the Vale of Kashmir, and begin the process of restoration and rehabilitation that is necessary to ensure its survival.

In societies where modernity has been elusive because of the severe degree of economic and social problems like those that have afflicted Kashmir over the past generation, historic preservation efforts are particularly challenging because of the resident's understandable desire to obtain the comforts and material benefits that have been so elusive for them. Nevertheless, the preservation effort is all the more important because, as the social and economic situation improves, destructive changes will be rapid and irreversible, and then the demonstrated long-term social and economic benefits of heritage conservation and interpretation will no longer be possible.

The Proposal

The concepts here are intended to build on the substantial work that has already been undertaken by the Indian Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), with their publication of the remarkable multi-volume inventory of heritage structures in Srinagar. The initial ideas for how to approach this historic preservation effort can be divided into two basic parts:

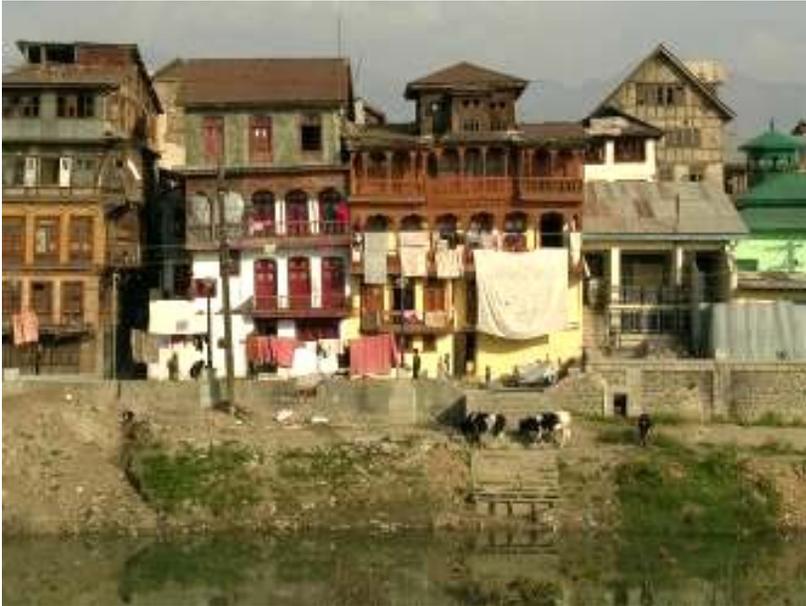
1. Education of local residents, including both adults and the younger generation.
2. Hands-on restoration and repair of environmental damage.

Both sets of activities are, of course, related. The restoration activities can themselves provide the context for the educational activities. Education, however, lies at the foundation of this effort, because it is essential to providing the human context for heritage conservation. This is the case simply because the most essential part of any heritage activity is motivating people to become interested, aware, and knowledgeable about their heritage, and thus developing a vibrant constituency for the preservation of the area's physical manifestation.

Potential concepts and approaches that were discussed with Saleem Beg, Director General of Tourism of the Jammu & Kashmir State Government, and with Hakim Sameer and others at the Srinagar office of INTACH during the week of October 24, 2005 include the following:

1. **Historic Preservation in Srinagar:** The identification, acquisition, and restoration of one or more historic houses in the central area of Srinagar. These houses would be

selected for their state of conservation and because they are representative of the houses of the common people, rather than palaces or mansions of the rich.



2. Houses north of Jelum River near 1st Bridge, 2005

3. Narrow lane near 4th Bridge, south of river, 2005.

One of these houses could then be restored as an historic house museum whose purpose is to bring local people and school children to visit it, rather than being focused towards the needs of non-resident tourists. Another house could be restored for occupancy (rented or sold). The purpose of this second endeavor would be to show how a heritage house can be suitably renovated for present day living, while preserving its character and the important cultural aspects of the way it is used. This project could then be the leading example of a series of projects of restoring houses

for family living. Both projects are intended to be educational because it is important that the people of the city, especially the school children, see the historic city in a positive light, so as to overcome the current negative image of the older buildings as being antiquated, decrepit, and unsuitable for modern life.

This restoration project could be accompanied by an oral history project, where the opportunity to interview the older citizens of Srinagar, and of Kashmir as a whole is afforded by their visits to the historic house museum. In that way, memories of life in the Valley before the recent conflicts can be documented and recorded, tapping what historically had been a culture of oral traditions that will be soon lost if not captured at this time.



2. **The environmental and heritage restoration of Dal Lake and the Rainiwari Canal.** The Rainiwari Canal that connects Dal Lake near to Dal Gate to Nagin Lake had been in recent years one of the most magical of passageways for the chikaras navigating to Nagin Lake from the houseboat area between the edge of the city of Srinagar and the floating garden settlements. Many of the large houses are now abandoned and in ruins, and the canal itself is polluted and used as a garbage dump, yet the potential for the restoration of this canal and Rainiwari itself still exists – but perhaps not for long unless pro-active action is taken soon.



4. The Rainiwari Canal, Srinagar, 2005.

A project at this location would include a study of the ecology of the lakes and canal system in order to implement an environmental restoration of the area, including a reduction in the pollution and reclamation of the living hydrological system of the lakes and canals, and the establishment of a conservation plan for the settlements in the area, which would include the restoration of the heritage structures that line the canal.

The overall ecology of Dal Lake and the network of lakes around Srinagar is threatened with pollution and with the gradual filling in around the floating gardens alongside the canals, and even the elimination of some of the canals themselves. Prior to the recent conflicts, Dal and Nagin Lakes were the symbol of the Vale of Kashmir, and provided an attraction to visitors from around the world. At that time they were not only fabled for their beauty, but they also served as an economic engine for a substantial part of the economy of the region.

Any restoration plan must understand the biological and ecological balance that must exist in order for the lakes to remain healthy. This will require research that is specific to the region, and not dependent on large capital expenditures for elaborate sewerage treatment plants and other facilities. A large part of this effort is educational, as it must be designed to transform the current culture of exploitation and destructiveness that has increased in recent years. Indeed most of the recent planning efforts have denied the importance of the human heritage of the settlements in the lake, threatening their future, and thus have removed any incentive for the people to treat their environment with the kind of respect that had existed over the prior centuries.

Conclusion: Cultural heritage restoration and conservation can be both a peace-making and an economic development activity. In the right context, it can be undertaken in a way that is respectful of social diversity, and it also can help build a basis for bringing people together to rebuild their quality of life founded upon an understanding of the value of a place for its history and culture, and thus begin to appreciate their own importance within that history.



5. Ca. mid 20th C map of Srinagar showing earlier size of Dal Lake (INTACH).



6. 2005 map of Srinagar and Lakes showing present encroachments into the lake, and also marking heritage structures (INTACH).

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