The Concept of Colonial Decorative Schemes, Motifs and Elements: A Case Study of Lahore Museum

Saima Tahir and Tauqeer Ahmad Warraich

Abstract

Lahore the cultural heart of Pakistan is known for its monuments which are rightly enhancing the beauty and tote up its unprecedented splendour. It is noteworthy for diverse legacy and the legendry grandeur of its architectural heritage. It has been ruled by different dynasties and each one of them magnificently contributed in term of decorative arts and architecture. However, the British Raj marks a great contrast with already prevailing architectural and artistic traditions as they brought new ideas, conceptions and taste. The authors would discuss the concept of different decorative schemes and stylistic forms that manifests the ideals of Imperialism in Lahore in subsequent pages.

Keywords: Colonial, Polygons, Fresco, Engraving, Stalactite, *Muqarnas*, Soffit, Spandrel, Arabesque,

Introduction

Right from the beginning, in the art of building, the concept of ornamentation has always been appreciated and it played a very vital role. People living in any part of the world had been decorating their building either under religious inspirations or secular perspective and forthrightly materialized their concept of beauty, aesthetics, traditions and taste according to environment and availability of the sources (Khan, 1990). Thus, the decorative arts including sculpturing, engraving, paintings, inlay, frescos and mosaics emerged as the child of the science of building, irrespective the nature of its architecture. It mainly represents a language or a tool of communication which indicates the mindset and diverse standards of beautification. However, the objective of decoration does not only mean to embellish/ornate, to emphasize a specific quality or a way of beautification, rather, it is a proper morphology which demands be learnt, read, understood and reveals something comprehensible (Baer, 1998).

The history building ornamentation in the subcontinent may be traced back to the early historic ear as the earliest evidence has survived in stone. It seems quite possible that the wooden architecture would also have lavishly been decorated with different sort of geometrical and abstract designs but due to its organic nature it couldn't survive (Brown, 1942). The artists used their creative skills and innovatively adorned the structures with different patterns, motifs and schemes. These decorative elements reflect the impact of several indigenous artistic traditions as well as foreign influences and had been subject to variations in taste, throughout the history of Indian subcontinent. In other words, all these ornaments gradually underwent considerable transformations and changes. However, the Hindu and Muslim periods are characterized by an era of strong and most satisfying ornamental production and creativity.

So far as the colonial architecture of Lahore is concerned, it was conceived as an expression of British power and manifests distinctive imperial

ideology (Metcalf, 2002). British produced a number of utiltarian buildings and each one of them is moderately decorated as per requirement. Apparently, colonial decorative arts seem to be an imitation of old traditions, previously appeared on Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim monuments, but certain motifs/designs were rearranged according to the needs, aesthetics, available skill, and limitations of artist. They devised entirely a new way of decoration which was economical and not sparingly employed. However, the decorative scheme of Lahore Museum marks a blend of harmony and innovation. It forthrightly reveals a synthesis of foreign and local artistic traits in a new environment and political regime.

Material

Different kinds of material have been employed for the decoration of Lahore Museum building, depending upon the availability, resources, skills and political stability. However, it is characteristically ornamented by means of stucco, brick, terracotta and wood. The execution of these materials in the building of Lahore Museum forthrightly owe to the artistic traditions of Islamic art. Somehow, stucco is more extensively used in embellishing the internal features of Lahore Museum in lieu of stone as it is economical, easy to handle and most preferred material for carving. Its major component is plaster which is principally prepared by adding sand, gypsum and powdered marble into the water (Hussain, 2011). Besides this, brick and terracotta constitute the second major material of Lahore Museum ornamentation. However, the wood occupies the last rank in Lahore Museum decoration and is not so profusely used. The use of all these decorative materials along with a variety of ornamental patterns gave birth to a perfectly harmonized model.

Classification of Decorative Schemes

The decoration of Lahore Museum which drew inspiration from Indo Muslim and to some extent Gothic models can be classified into different categories/groups. Its classification mainly based on the method, motifs, decorative elements as well as material by which it is composed of.

Methods and Decorative Techniques

Lahore Museum decoration is organised by different methods which reflect the ideas and concept of British Raj. These methods primarily determined the forms and material expression of all decorative motifs which shaped the British aesthetics. They are basically divided into two groups i.e. linking and framing and enclosed spaces or intricate network. The majority of decorative schemes in Lahore museum are designed by framing and linking. The patterns or manner of embellishment in this category is geometrically organized in the form of continuous bands or ribbon. These bands are based on the grid of closed shapes which are linked by their borders and spread out horizontally and vertically on any given surface (Baer, 1998). The closed shape of the grid as well as spaces are elegantly filled with vegetal and floral motifs.

On the other hand, enclosed spaces or intricate networks reveal a striking contrast with the first one as it is marked by the expansion or continuous subdivision of the motifs into smaller units. These sub units provide space for additional decoration, even being smaller. They are skillfully executed inside the framed and linked shafts of the pillars, spandrel and soffit of the arches etc.in the interior of the building of Lahore Museum. Thus, the surfaces are thickly enclosed with decoration that even the background is concealed.

Elements of Decoration

The decoration of Lahore Museum comprises of different elements such as geometric, vegetal, floral, figural, and epigraphical or the combination of two or more of these elements. Moreover, it shows some architectural elements as well, such as niches, arches, arcades and columns which equally enhance the beauty of decorative schemes applied to the body of museum. However, these elements may be divided into different groups for further discussion.

Geometrical Ornaments/Schemes

Geometrical ornamentation is basically designed with precise measurements as it involves the discipline of geometry, arithmetic and mathematical forms. Before the application of geometrical designs on the body of any building, they are worked out on paper and finally with the help of some hard/soft material or tool later on carved or engraved at their required places. So far as the decoration of Lahore Museum is concerned, geometrical schemes are predominantly applied at different places to enhance the beauty and grace of the structure. Different mathematically defined forms are combined in an elegant manner to produce something of distinctive character.

However, the whole geometric scheme of Lahore Museum is principally accomplished by using two patterns. One is the configuration, displaying new figures created by the combination of basic geometrical figures. It is in fact, in the form of closed design which is confined to its own border (Clevenot, 2000) (Fig.1). Whereas, the other one is named as network or geometrical interlace as it is based on combination/interlace of different geometric motifs which mathematically divide the surface and form a new design. In other words, equilateral geometric lines are unified and interlaced at different angles, creating more or less complex network— originally a hallmark of Islamic decoration (Fig.2 & 3).

However, a variety of geometric forms have been used in embellishing the different parts of the Museum externally as well as internally. These forms are further classified as squares, lozenges, circles, triangles, polygons and star patterns, stalactite or *muqarnas,* varying from simple lines to highly complexed interlacing. Moreover, these geometrical ornaments are designed either in the form of continuous bands or ribbons, or in enclosed spaces (panels) and unlimited flat patterns. Each one of them is skillfully employed to embellish the spandrel and soffit of the arches, border of arched frames, terra cotta and wooden screens of windows and balconies, interior of domes, mouldings and traceries.

Squares, lozenges, circles and triangles

Squares are the most common and simple geometric motif which are abundantly used in the exterior and interior of the building to eliminate the monotony of the surfaces. They are either employed in the form of regular four-sided square with equal sides or divided diagonally (oblique lines connecting the angles) and inscribed within each other (Fig.4). Whereas the lozenges slightly differ from Diagonal Square in shape and constitutes a major portion in decoration. The oblique outlines of lozenges predominate the pattern in the form bands above the arched frames of interior wings and cover the top of second storey of vestibule (Fig.5). Besides this, a simple band of perforated lozenges covers the pediments of arched entrances of wings in an elusive manner (Fig.6). Squares and lozenges are easy to handle

for perforation that's why the artist of Lahore Museum used them in the grills and screens of windows as well (Fig.7).

However, in contrast to square and lozenges, circles are the most rarely used decorative motif in Lahore Museum decoration. The craftsman employed simple circles only around the lotus flower to form a medallion on the spandrel of main arched entrance (Fig.8). Moreover, continuous wavy lines forming triangles are also used on different parts of the building of Lahore Museum in a simple and refined manner. These triangular lines are externally executed to decorate the lintels, top of the plinth and cornices (Fig.9). Whereas, internally they are used to embellish the upper part of beam and bracket arch entrances of vestibule and central gallery (Fig.10). Besides this, on some parts, the symmetrical combination of these forms is also used, alternating each other. To eliminate the monotony and repetition, the empty areas between these forms are filled with small flower and buds (Fig.11 & 12). A band of lozenges and circles filled with small lotus forms the outer border of high frame on the northern wall of central gallery (Fig.13).

Polygon and Star Patterns

Polygons and Stars patterns are frequently used in Lahore Museum decoration as they occupy a significant position among other geometric motifs. The artist has elegantly subdivided basic geometric forms (squares, lozenges, circles and triangles) into different units. As a result, the shape of these forms receded and new forms appear known as polygon and star patterns. Such geometric interlocking is the most remarkable ornamental system which was developed in the Islamic art. However, the artist employed at Lahore Museum transformed these typical Islamic intricacies into their own style according to the available space and need. The basic mathematical scheme behind this pattern is a framework of straight lines created by the division of an original circle into equal parts. These parts are usually a multiple of four or six in number, thus causing either squares and octagons or hexagon or equilateral triangles to appear. (Clevenot, 2000). In other words, the star and polygon decoration in the building of Lahore Museum is produced from many sided geometric shapes such as triangles, pentagons, hexagons, octagons and decagons. Moreover, vertical, oblique and horizontal lines are also added to enhance the complexities and intricacies of this pattern. This decorative scheme is specifically used in the form of intricate network on the spandrel of the main arched entrance, perforated screens of windows, traceries and grills of balconies externally as well as internally.

The spandrel of the main arched entrance is incongruously carved by successive overlapping of squares and pentagons. Each square is connected to a regular pentagon on its all sides and the whole scheme repeats itself again and again. Whereas, the empty spaces between these shapes are filled by adding different interconnected oblique lines in the form of petal, thus whole taking the shape of a flower. The imbalanced interlocking of all these polygons creates a puzzling effect and does not add delicacy to the structure (Fig.14). However, the perforated screen of arched window on the lower storey of entrance square tower is elegantly dominated by the star and hexagon pattern. Six hexagons are interlaced in such a manner that it forms a shape of a six-pointed star. This pattern allows indefinite repetition in the form less complex network (Fig.15). The lower arched window on the corner turrets of main entrance

is marked by a terracotta screen. It shows a careful juxtaposition of hexagon alternating with six pointed stars and lozenges in a harmonized manner. (Fig.16).

Moreover, the balcony on the northern wall of the central gallery is decorated by five intricate networks of polygons and stars (Fig.17). In the central network, the interlocking is based on the division of a circle by polygons into eight equal parts. The inner surface of the circle is marked by lozenges in an elegant way. Whereas the five-pointed stars are placed in symmetrical order around the circle (Fig.18). The central space of the flanking networks is occupied by an eight-pointed star. It is skillfully ornamented by a circle in the centre, divided into eight equal segments along with interlocking of lozenges and five pointed small stars. Whereas, the outer surface of the central star is decorated by interlacing of squares, lozenges and circles. The shapes are further divided into smaller units by overlapping of oblique and vertical lines. However, the corner networks of the balcony show a tessellation and intricate geometric pattern is produced by the harmonized placement of hexagons. These hexagons are further divided into sub units with lozenges and horizontal and oblique lines (Fig.19). Moreover, the corners of each network are designed by a series of small squares. The same scheme of polygons and stars is used for decorating the wooden balconies of vestibule as well (Fig. 20)

Besides this, the tracery on the upper part of main arched entrance is dominantly ornamented by harmonized overlapping of octagons and hexagons. These octagons and hexagons are further elegantly divided into squares and irregular tringles with the help of several oblique lines. The voids between the interlocking of octagon and hexagons takes the shape of four-sided polygons which enhance the grace of the design (Fig. 21). Whereas, the whole design is bordered by a series of angled polygons which are linked with each other in the form of a band. The tracery is flanked by recessed triangles. Each one further accommodates another triangle, decorated by interconnected lozenges, hexagons and six pointed stars and bordered by angled polygons (Fig. 22).

Stalactite or *Muqarnas*

Stalactite or Muqarnas is another pleasing form of decoration which is created by the fusion of different geometric forms. It was originally produced by the Muslims as a three-dimensional architectural feature. It mainly consisted of tiers of miniature quarter domes or cells, whose projecting apices support the cells of the next tier (Baer, 1998). But later on it was transformed into a purely ornamental feature for decorating domes, cupolas, squinches and moulding etc. The artists of museum building adopted this graceful scheme of decoration from the Muslims and employed it in a convenient and less intricate manner. It is mainly used in the building of Lahore Museum to decorate the inner surface of dome above the vestibule, concave mouldings of interior walls and lower side of balconies. The *muqarnas* of the dome comprises of squares and equilateral triangles along with lozenges being narrow and to some extent wide. The underside of the interstices or the apex of these forms is marked by six pointed large and five pointed small stars (Fig. 23).

Vegetal Ornaments

Vegetal ornaments occupy second major portion of Lahore Museum decoration. This sort of decoration has a long history but however, it attained the maximum attention in Islamic

art. Islamic vegetal decoration takes its basic vocabulary from Middle Eastern, Greco- Roman, Sasanian and Byzantine artistic traditions (Clevenot, 2000). An enormous variety of vegetal motifs have been used in Islamic ornamentation such as naturally conceived acanthus leaves, vine plants with or without tendrils and bunches of grapes, palmettes, half palmettes and palmettes trees, pine cones, pomegranates, buds, rosettes, lotuses and other floral motifs. (Baer, 1998). The artists of Lahore Museum adopted these motifs from the Muslims and transformed them to a great extent, according to their taste and requirement. They did not use vegetal motifs only as secondary decorative element which was confined to the embellishment of a cornice, a capital or a shaft. In fact, they used vegetal ornamentation as a primary decorative element to cover large surfaces which includes spandrel and soffit of the arches, border of arched entrances, frame of windows, brackets and pediments.

The first basic element of Lahore Museum vegetal ornamentation is leaf or plant form, which is nearly used in every pattern. However, its shape or appearance is stylized by bends or curves according to the laws of rhythm, uniformity and symmetry. The second basic element of museum vegetal ornamentation is the stem which is elegantly employed in the form of scroll. The scroll covers the available space of ornamentation as a line of definite thickness. Its growth extends along the horizontal and vertical axes, forming overlapping waves and curves with no beginning and no limit of extension. Leaves, flowers and fruits are either employed in museum decoration singly or combined with stem in the form of complex designs. On some parts, they are directly imitated from nature, retaining the original form. It reveals the concept of naturalism. Whereas, some vegetal motifs on the building of Lahore are organized according to the strict rules of rhythm in an artificial manner. The formal stylization of these motifs by adding curves and whirls transformed them in an abstract design which marks a contrast with naturalism. The combination of naturalistic concept and abstraction gave birth to a new design commonly called arabesque.

Floral Pattern

Lotus and abstract design of flower petals are extensively used in Lahore Museum decoration. They are usually employed to decorate the cornices, brackets, mouldings, projected lines of brick masonry, spandrel and fringe of the arches, upper border of main arched entrance and frames of arched windows. These lines of foliage are stylistically adding the beauty and grace to the composition (Fig.24, 25, 26 & 27). The border of main arched frame is gracefully marked by abstract flower petals. Each petal skillfully accommodates half petals. The same design is applied on the upper corners of the frame of arched windows (Fig. 28 & 29). Moreover, the combination of two or more patterns is also executed in the form of bands. Borders of beam and bracket arched entrance of vestibule are formed by undulating trefoil blossom and lotus buds which are linked with each other by curving lines or bands (Fig. 4.30.). Besides this, a border of foliage incorporating abstract palmette blossom is placed above the ground floor of vestibule. It gives a requisite finish to the composition of this storey (Fig. 31)

Arabesque

The vegetal patterns of Lahore Museum decoration mostly marked impression in the form of arabesque. Arabesque is artistic surface

decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils" or plain lines (Celevenot, 2000). This ornamentation is followed by a number of plastic principles. Arabesque used in Lahore museum are of two types. One is in the form of an undulating stem from which pairs of acanthuses, palmettes and other vegetal motifs branch off. While the other comprises of split leaves from which another palmette emerges (Baer, 1998). In both patterns, abstract vegetal components merge into a continuous pattern which embellish the interior of museum building. It gracefully covers the shafts of the pillars, capitals, brackets and spandrel of arches and pediments of frames.

The spandrel of the beam and bracket arch of vestibule is ornamented by lotus and acanthus leaves while the undulating branches intersect each other a number of times to form a spiral. The curvilinear arrangement of branches tightly encircles the leaves that even the back ground disappears (Fig.32). The shaft of the pillars of vestibule is elegantly decorated with vegetal forms, leaves and flowers. Acanthus takes the centre of decoration which is encircled by tendrils, palmettes blossom and lotus. These motifs are interconnected and spread out vertically as well as horizontally in the form of sinusoidal curves (Fig.33). Whereas, the spandrel of arched on the northern wall of vestibule is primarily marked by a lotus which is encircled by a rolling scroll of varying thickness. Moreover, depth to the design is added by placing windy half palmettes and abstract leaf forms (Fig.34) However, the upper part of the arched frame of northern gallery is ornamented with a tightly interwoven design (elaborately carved arabesque). The pattern is created by adding half palmettes, lotus buds and reciprocating trefoil blossom along with undulating horizontal and vertical scrolls (Fig. 35). The beam and bracket arched frame is decorated with a highly stylized arabesque. It is marked by the repetition several abstract motifs which includes flowers, leaves, buds and spiral scrolls (Fig.36).

Figural Motifs

Figural motifs are not frequently used in Lahore Museum decoration as it is greatly influenced by Islamic artistic principles. The craftsman of Lahore Museum did not show any interest in the manifestation of imagery to embellish the surfaces of building. However, the only exception is the pediment on the upper part of the arched entrance of northern gallery. It is naturalistically rendered with a peacock. The peacock takes the centre of the pediment with a slight abstraction in the depiction of its feathers (Fig.37)

Conclusion

The concept behind the decorative schemes, motifs and elements applied in Lahore Museum clearly manifests the amalgamation of old-age artistic traditions which were profusely found in Muslim architecture of India. However, descendants of these artists carried Muslim decorative elements as legacy which was exploited by colonial masters according to their requirements but seems to be poorly imitated. As far as the decoration of Lahore Museum is concerned, stucco being the cheapest and easily available material was immensely applied of which the artist had sufficient skills. Thus, instead of brick, wood and terracotta, the stucco was lavishly used. They fashioned and beautified the interior walls, pillars and screens of museum with the blankets of stucco ornamentation in an absolute delicate manner. Different decorative elements such as geometrical, floral,

vegetal, arabesque and figural are in the form of bands, ribbons and intricate network to accentuate the grace of the structure.

On the whole, the decoration of Lahore Museum can be categorized into three groups. Each differs on account of theme and style. The first group is distinguished in style as it shows carving in low relief which hollows out from the plaster coating to create patterns of vine leaves and bunch of grapes, tightly intertwined with geometrical forms like lozenges, triangles, hexagons, rectangles, etc. However, the second one seems more developed as it emphasizes greatly on abstraction and mark the tendency to interlock palmettes and stylized flowers, so tightly arranged that even the background is disappeared. Whereas, the third and the last scheme used in the decoration of Lahore Museum greatly resembles to beveled style which recalls a typical early Muslim art tradition. It is totally abstract and brings into play the multiple repetition of curved symmetrical lines on the surface.

The detailed analysis of different decorative schemes and elements of Lahore Museum reveals the attitude as well as approach of the colonial masters towards the art of building they started to display in South Asia. In spite of having rich and strong architectural traditions at home Britishers showed very formal as well as utilitarian aptitude towards the art of building in Lahore. Although, politically they were very ambitious but at the same time business oriented as well. That's why they could not display their aesthetics in an extra ordinary manner as did the Mughals. Thus, the colonial architecture of Lahore is less lavishly and frugally embellished in an unimpressive and unpretentious way, totally neglecting the basic aesthetics principles of the land.

References

Baer, Eva. (1998). Islamic *Ornament*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Brown, Percy. (1908). *Lahore Museum Punjab: A Descriptive Guide to the Department of Archaeology & Antiquities*. Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press.

Brown, Percy. (1942). *Indian Architecture: Islamic Period*. Bombay.

Brow, Percy. (1994). History of Lahore Museum: *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, 7(1&2), 17-18.

Clevenot, Dominique. (2000). *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Architecture*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Gupta, Samita. (1985). *Architecture and the Raj: Western Deccan (1700-1900)*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation.

Hussain, Talib. (2011). *Traditional Architecture Crafts of Pakistan: History and Techniques.* Islamabad: Lok Virsa.

Khan, Ahmad. Nabi. (1990). *Islamic Architecture of Pakisan: An Analytical Exposition.* Islamabad: National Hajra Council.

Khan, Ahmad. Nabi. (2003). *Islamic Architecture in South Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kleiner, Fred. S. (2010). *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History (13th Ed)*. Boston: Cengage Learning.

Metcalf, Thomas. R. (1989). *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj.* London: Faber and Faber.

Vandal, Pervaiz., & Vandal, Sajida. (2006). *The Raj Lahore and Bhai Ram Singh*. Lahore: Research and Publication Centre, National College of Arts.

Figures

Figure 1. Border of close geometric designs on arched frame

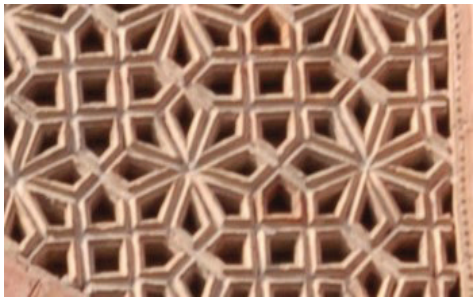

Figure 2. Network of interlacing geometric motif on the spandrel of arch

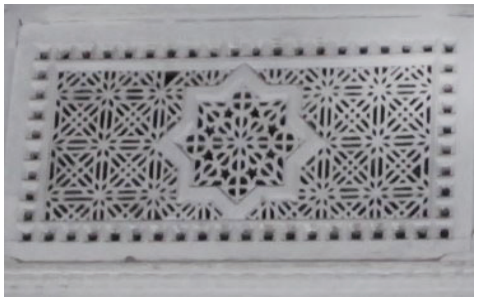

Figure 3. Network of interlacing geometric motifs on balcony

Figure 4. A band of diagonal squares

Figure 5. A band of lozenges on the second storey of vestibule

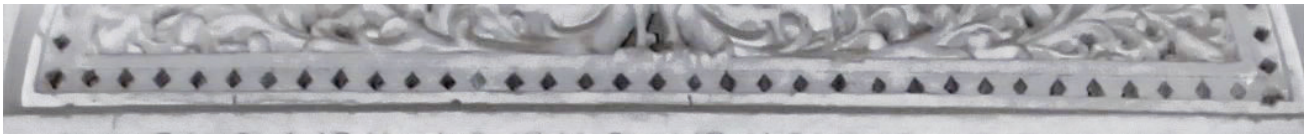

Figure 6. Band of perforated lozenges around the pediment of interior arched entrances

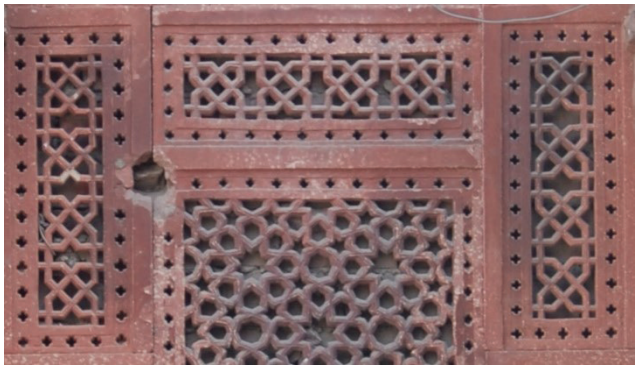

Figure 7. Network of perforated squares and lozenges in the screen of arched window of right entrance tower

Figure 8. Lotus medallion on the spandrel of main arched entrance

Figure 9. Triangular wavy lines on the plinth

Figure 4.10. Triangular lines forming the border on the upper part of beam and bracket arch of vestibule

Figure 11. Geometric decoration on the Soffit of beam and bracket arch of vestibule

Figure 12. Abstract geometric decoration inside the Lahore Museum

Figure 13. Border of circles and lozenges on the northern wall of central gallery

Figure 14. Polygon and star patterns on the spandrel of main arched entrance

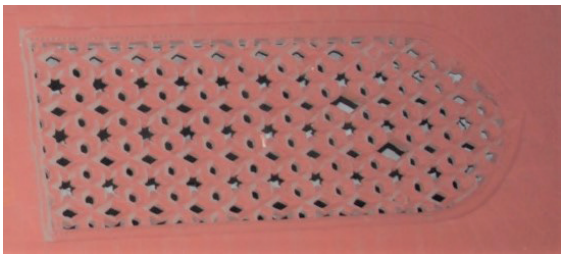

Figure 15. Hexagon and star pattern on the screen of arched window of entrance tower

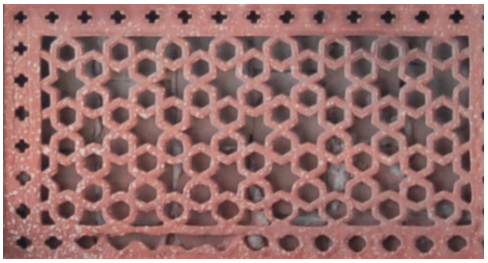

Figure 16. Polygonal shapes on the screen of arched window of turret

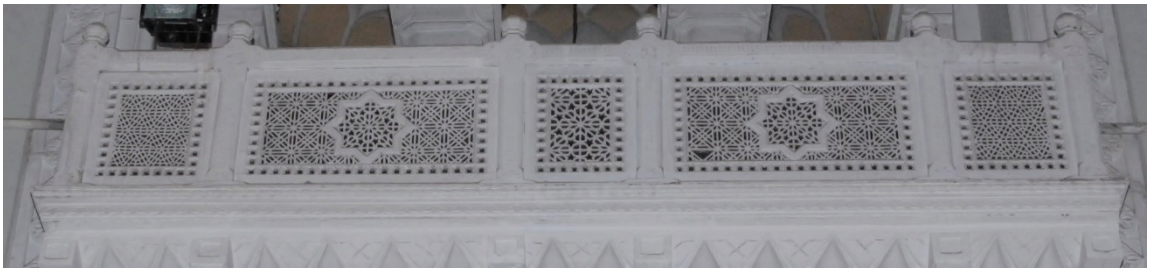

Figure 17. Polygonal and star networks on the Balcony of central gallery

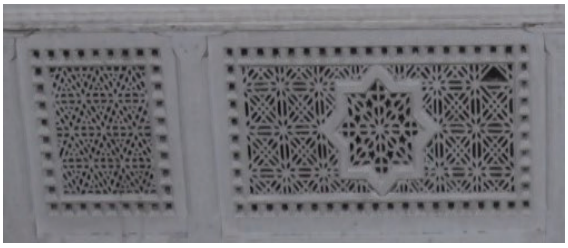

Figure 18. Central polygonal network of balcony

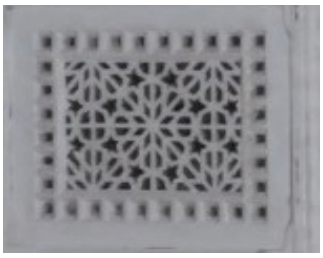

Figure.19. Second and corner polygonal network of balcony

Figure 20. Polygonal and star pattern on the wooden railing of vestibule

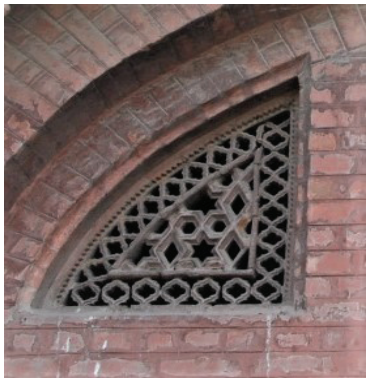

Figure 21. Tracery on the upper part of main arched entrance

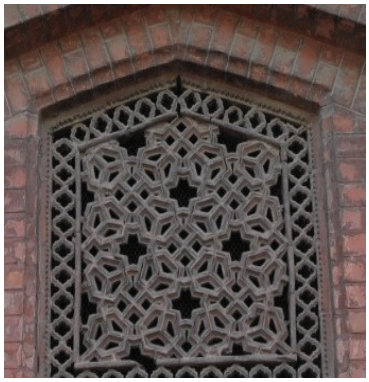

Figure 22. Tracery on the upper part of main arched entrance

Figure 23. Muqarnas inside the dome of vestibule

Figure 24. Fringe of blind arch decorated with miniature petals

Figure 25. Inverted Flower petals below the moulding of eastern end gallery

Figure 26. Line of foliage below the cornice of verandagallery

Figure 27. Lotus on the brackets of main entrance

Figure 28. Tier of flower petals incorporating half lotus on the upper border of main arched frame

Figure 29. Floral decoration on the upper corners of blind arched frame

Figure 30. Border of trefoil and lotus blossom on the beam and bracket arched frame of vestibule

Figure 31. Border of foliage above the ground storey of vestibule

Figure 32. Arabesque decoration on the spandrel of beam and bracket arch of vestibule

Figure 33. Arabesque decoration on the pillars of vestibule

Figure 34. Overlapping vegetal ornaments on the spandrel of high arch of central gallery

Figure 35. Undulating scroll on the upper border of arched frame of northern gallery

Figure 36. Highly stylized arabesque forms on beam and bracket arch

Figure 37. Figural decoration on the pediment of arched frame of northern gallery