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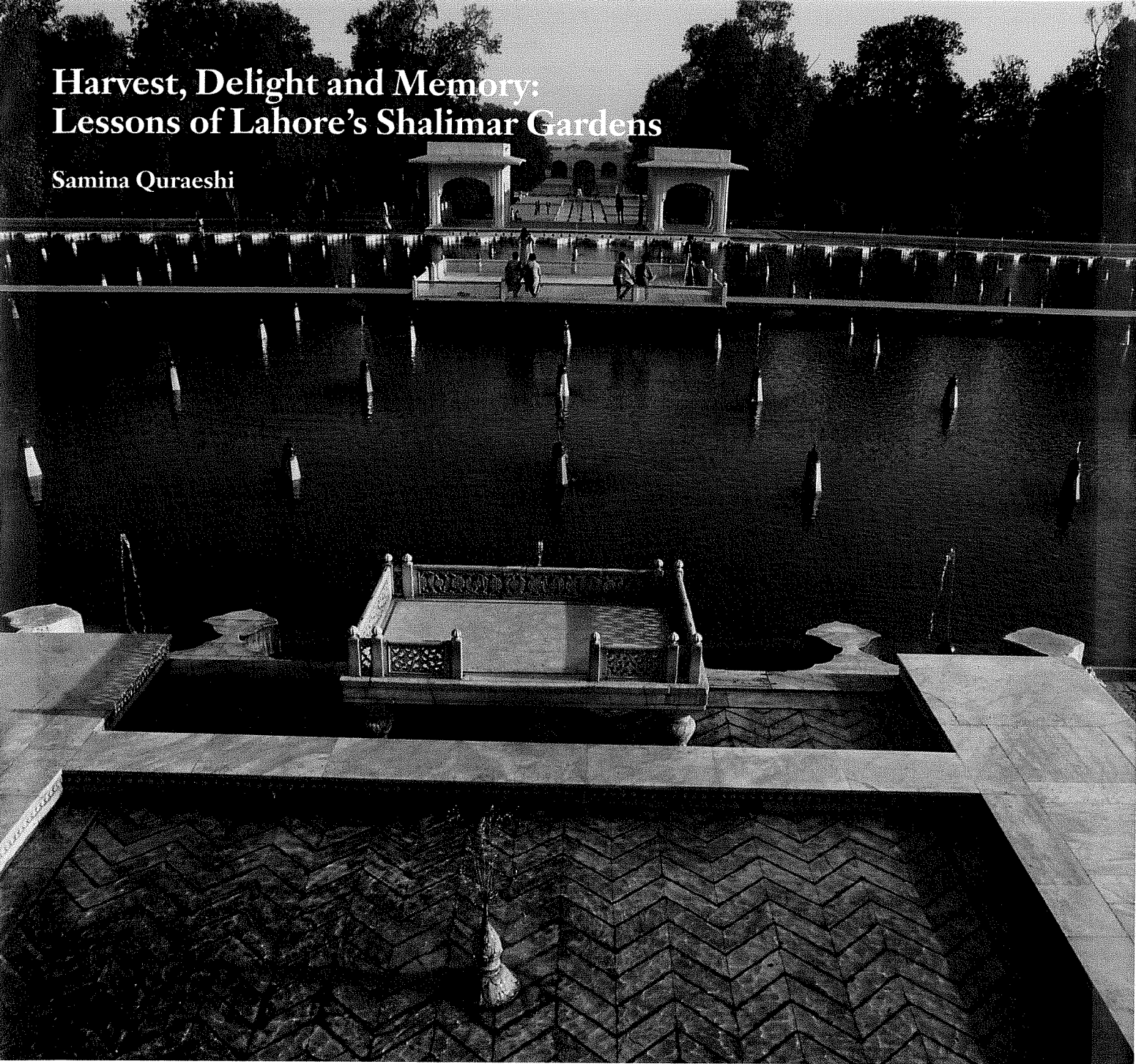
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Harvest, Delight and Memory: Lessons of Lahore's Shalimar Gardens

Samina Quraeshi



To Plato's axiom "Philosophy is born of wonder — about our place in the cosmos, about the ground of our relation to nature," Robert Harrison has responded: "human beings, unlike other living species, live not in nature but in their relation to nature. Even the belief that we are a part of nature is a mode of relating to it." Throughout history, such self-awareness has led philosophers to separate "the natural" from "the social." And today such a binary is central to disciplines ranging from genetics to landscape architecture.

As we try to understand the role and place of urban parks in contemporary society, we must come to terms with such ways of thinking. In particular, we must understand the implications of the distinction between "city" and "country" that has long served as a crucial extension of the social/natural divide.

Across the world, art and literature have played an important role in mythologizing this city/country dichotomy. But nowhere is this more evident than in America, where our national mythology is founded on romanticization of the frontier and lionization of its settlers as pioneers of freedom and Manifest Destiny. The other side of such a morality of place, of course, is a mistrust of cities as the loci of sin, corruption and excess. Best known among those who have held such views was Thomas Jefferson, a gardener par excellence, who went so far as to characterize cities as "sores on the body politic."²

Above: Water flow provides a main theme within all Mughal gardens. View of the great basin with its central platform on Shalimar's second level. Photo by Richard Shepard.

Inasmuch as the social world of human kind is constantly urbanizing, however, other moral values have attached to the city/country dichotomy. Early-twentieth-century European Modernism, for example, celebrated the city as the repository of knowledge, and disparaged the country as a reserve of unchanging tradition. Even in America, Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York's Central Park, acknowledged that "in all our modern civilization, as in that of the ancients, there is a strong drift townward," and rejected the opinion that this "drift" was symptomatic of "moral epidemic."³ Instead, this seminal figure in American landscape architecture chose to focus on the "intimate connection . . . between the growth of towns and the dying out of slavery and feudal customs, of priestcraft and government by divine right, the multiplication of books, newspapers, schools and other means of popular education."⁴

Clearly, thinking about the meaning and design of urban parks lies directly in the path of such views about city and country as opposite poles of human experience. And in this regard, we would be correct to ask: What are we trying to achieve by bringing little bits of manmade "nature" into our cities? In answering this question, we should no doubt heed urbanists like Jane Jacobs, who cautioned, "City parks are not abstractions, or automatic repositories of virtue or uplift, any more than sidewalks are abstractions."⁵ Yet we should also examine why, as human beings, we feel compelled to locate a sense of virtue and uplift in manmade "natural" environments. We should further recognize that societies have often tried to locate the foundations of their cultural development in the refinement of a "proper" relationship to nature.

In America, the idea that urban parks may inspire spiritual repose and renewal is often misunderstood as involving a nostalgic desire to insert facsimiles of rural life in the midst of metropolitan bustle. This view may derive in large measure from a particularly American interpretation of the distinction between city and countryside. However, such a position fails to engage many of the themes that have governed the design of great parks through history. That these themes are timeless and open is evident in the continued vitality of these places.

Indeed, the park designs of the ancients were often based not on abstractions, but on literal, yet evocative, expressions of nature's real uses. Reconnecting nature to its social applications can likewise inform the spirit of park design today. To learn from the many ways residents of a city actually use their parks does not preclude a park's ability to represent more symbolic design themes. On the contrary, as the case of Lahore's Shalimar Gardens shows,

connecting use with symbol can be a powerful, and lasting, method of allowing a park design to continue to reflect the disparate and evolving needs of a populace. Only a varied environment has the capacity to sustain meaningful use by a diverse population over time. And in my memories, Shalimar was always a prime example of how best to interlace diversity of use with the resonance of symbol.

The Mughal Tradition

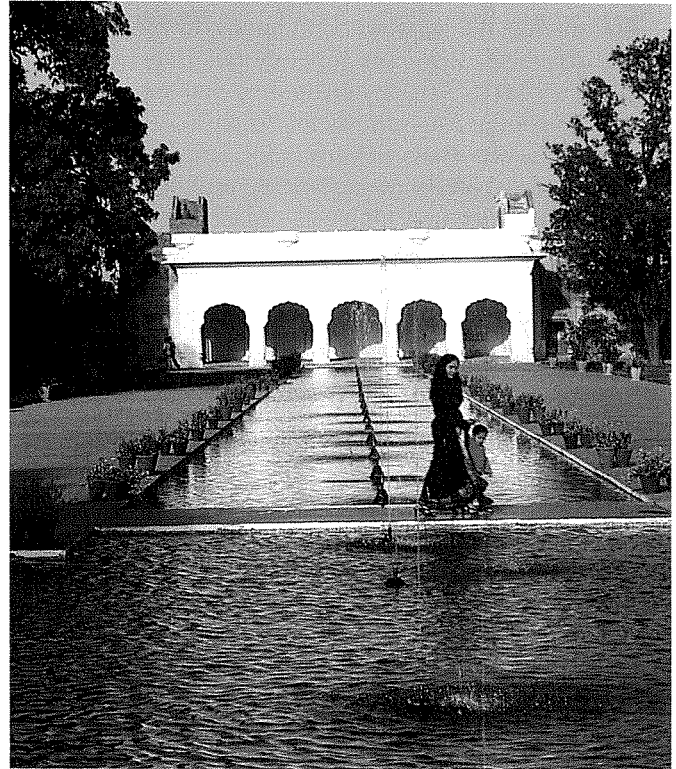
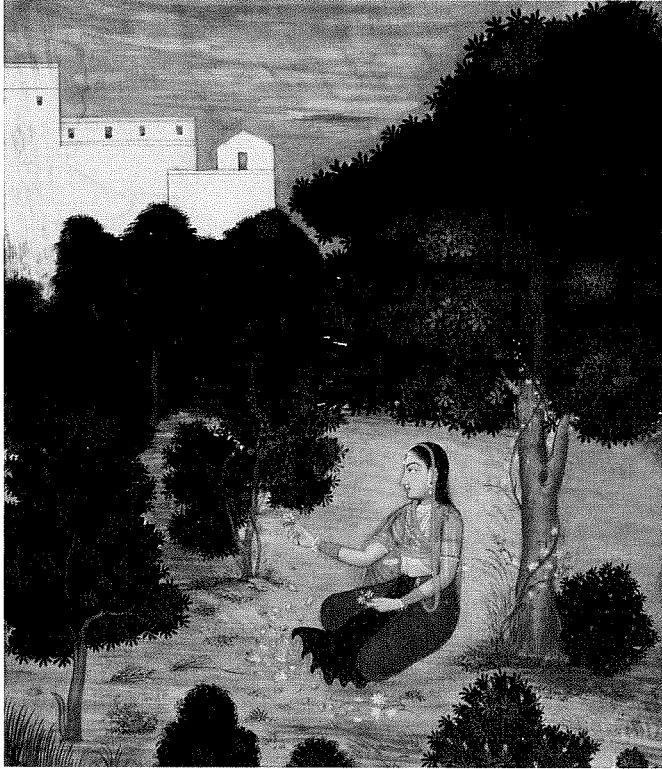
When I was young, I conceived of Pakistan as a desert on the sea. Then, as I grew up, my home city of Karachi was transformed before my eyes from a fishing village to a bustling metropolis. But the cultural capital of Pakistan has always been farther up the Indus Valley, in the city of Lahore. And Lahore is, above all, a city of gardens.

The story of Lahore's gardens is intertwined with that of the great Mughal emperors of what is today northern India and Pakistan. These rulers were heirs to a tradition of garden-building that originated with their Persian ancestors. Over the centuries, Cyrus's "gardens of paradise" were reinterpreted by succeeding Sajavid and Timurid dynasties in such Central Asian cities as Samarkand and Kabul. The tradition finally arrived in the Indus Valley in 1526 with Babur, the first Mughal emperor.

Eventually, Babur was followed by his son Humayun, his grandson Akbar, and three more generations of rulers: Jehangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. And as the size of their courts and the extent of their power increased, so did the sophistication of their gardens. According to Milo Beach:

The construction of gardens on a large scale began with the coming of Emperor Akbar to power, and particularly between 1584–98 when he made Lahore the capital of his empire. . . . All important nobles of the Mughal empire, serving in whatever region, built pleasure gardens and fruit gardens in all directions. . . . Babur was also a talented designer who built numerous gardens inspired by his love for the lush and beautiful cities of Samarkand and Herat. Babur's last and most important conquest was Hindustan, and one of his first acts, when he arrived on the subcontinent to stay in 1526, was to construct gardens; he sought thereby to make "that charmless and disorderly Hind [India]" (as he himself described it) more like home. Eventually the image of the garden became all-pervasive in the Mughal world.⁶

Within an Islamic worldview, the principles of Mughal garden design were based on the image of paradise as promised in the Koran, which consisted of several terraces, each more splendid than the last. It was believed that



earthly gardens could provide both a foretaste of such paradise and a respite from the harsh realities of life. Their central dynamic element was normally a channeling of water through various levels of pools, waterfalls and fountains. Other typical elements included a geometrically ordered layout of plantings, gates and paths, and massive walls to provide a sense of peace, keep out marauders, and protect the garden from hot winds and blowing sand.

Granted, gardens, and especially the fountains that were their centerpieces, were symbols of wealth, meant to demonstrate control of that most precious of desert commodities, water. But this was largely a byproduct of the politics of the time. The cultural impetus behind Mughal park-building was one of spiritual rejuvenation.

As a designer, I look for themes to illuminate my designs through reference to relevant contexts, images and ideas. And with regard to the gardens of Lahore, I have identified three most prominently: harvest, desire and memory.

When the gardens of Lahore were first created they were intended to serve both as places of harvest (“fruit gardens” and orchards) and personal delight (“pleasure gardens”). The theme of harvest connected powerfully with a people who had migrated to the area from desert steppes, and for whom irrigation and agriculture were a divine wonder. Likewise, delight was closely associated with the

shade such places provided from the harsh sun of the Punjab plains. Eternal respite from heat and work was also a central promise in the Koran, and such a motif was continually reinforced in park designs.

A sense of memory can be considered as contextualizing these other themes. In the case of Babur, gardens served the nostalgic purpose of honoring memory, reminding him of the more fertile land from whence he came (present-day Uzbekistan).

In America today such ways of thinking are often absent from our understanding of urban parks. If we strain, we can still see how concepts such as harvest, delight and memory may survive from previous times. But they no longer serve as organizational strategies. For example, in the twenty-odd years I lived in Boston, I was often struck by the fact that Olmsted’s grand design for the city’s parks was referred to as “The Emerald Necklace.” What could provide a more direct reference to the capacity of parks to

Above left: A visitor to Shalimar as portrayed in a Mughal Miniature. Courtesy of the British Library.

Above right: Shallow pools have provided inspiration and cooled visitors to Shalimar for centuries. View from the garden’s first level. Photo by Samina Quraeshi.

Opposite: Bridges and pathways allow both participation and repose. View from the waterfall between Shalimar’s first and second levels. Photo by Samina Quraeshi.



adorn a city than an image of jewelry? Yet I soon learned that, despite Olmsted's own interest in a range of emotional and aesthetic responses to imagery (responses that he compared to an appreciation for music), this metaphor was more one of spatial arrangement than aesthetic decoration.⁷

In America, we tend to frame our discussion of parks according to health and economic concerns. By contrast, the kind of recreation envisioned by the great parks and gardens of Lahore was one that could inform the life of the spirit, evoking such powerful imagery as the oasis — and ultimately, the divine.

A Design on Three Levels

One of the greatest of the Mughal gardens was Shalimar, constructed in 1634 by the Emperor Shah Jahan to serve as a place of refreshment and amusement for the royal family. The project was the combined work of Mulla Ala-ul-Mulk and Ali Mardan Khan, a brilliant canal engineer. It is traditionally reported to have taken one year, five months, and four days to complete. Traditional reports also relate that on a date carefully selected as auspicious, the emperor lifted his eyes to a miracle — a fantastic display of technological wizardry and aesthetic marvel.

When originally built, Shalimar consisted of 80 acres

of exquisite gardens, arbors, waterways and pools, enclosed in a high wall of red sandstone with white marble inlay. Its layout took the form of three great terraces, each twelve feet higher than the last, the entire space divided down the center by the Shah Nahar, or Royal Canal. The canal was Ali Mardan Khan's masterwork. The engineer had brought the water for it in from Madhupur, and it flowed down from the top of the garden over the three terraces, a drop of some forty feet. Amazingly, at each level the water was maintained at precisely the desired height. Even more amazingly, the waterworks were so sensitive that when additional flow was let in at the top, all four hundred and fifty of the gardens' fountains flowed at once.

The gardens themselves took the form of a glorious green tapestry of walks and promenades, flowering bushes, fruit trees, pools and fountains, pavilions of white marble and red sandstone, and summer houses of agate — all protected by a high wall with five tall towers. After the hot, dusty trip to the site, the contrast between its cool green beauty and the burning Punjab plain must have been staggering.

The entrance to these royal pleasure grounds was on the lowest level. This was planted with avenues of magnificent fruit trees — mangoes, peaches, apricots, pears, almonds, pomegranates, quince, mulberries, lemons and oranges —

and visitors were encouraged to pick and eat as much as they pleased. From here, raised brick walkways, or *kbayabans*, led upward to the second level, which was dominated by the heavy perfume of roses, planted there in profusion. Otherwise, the emphasis on the second level was on providing shade, and its walkways and *kbayabans* were framed by rows of cypress, poplar, and plane trees. In the center of this terrace, the Royal Canal emptied into an enormous marble basin, from which more than a hundred water jets threw up a glittering, cooling mist. Although this level was much smaller than the other two, this magnificent main reservoir created the illusion of great space.

Together, the first two levels were known as the Faiz Bakhsh, meaning “Bestower of Plenty.” Above, Shalimar’s third level was known as the Farah Bakhsh, “Bestower of Pleasure.” Only the most trusted courtiers were allowed to accompany the royal family to Shalimar, but even they were normally forbidden to ascend to this highest terrace. Instead, visitors had to content themselves with casting cautious, eager glances up to the carved marble screens which set it off from the world below — and avoiding the warning glances of its eunuch guards.

Only flowers were planted on the third level: a fragrant profusion of roses, irises, cyclamen, crown imperials, lilies, pinks, narcissus, jasmine, lilacs and lotus. On visits to the garden, the emperor would make his residence there. And when he was not accompanied by his wives, he might entertain guests in a spectacular marble pavilion that was open on all sides and cooled by a series of fountains. From behind its white pillars the emperor and his guests could gaze down to the fountains, marble pools, and splashing, sparkling water below.

The flow of water was a main theme of Shalimar. From a marble reservoir in the center of the emperor’s terrace, a waterfall spilled through a carved screen into a pond on the level below. And after passing through the central reservoir there, it spilled over a second fall into a pool at the bottom of the garden.

On its way from one level to the next, the water tumbled over inclined planes of white marble called *chadars*. Carved into delicate curves, chutes, ripples and scallops, these were designed to break the flowing water into a cool spray and create a pleasing noise — hence their name, which means “shawl.” Behind the cascading water the garden designers located niches known as *chimi-khanas*, to hold golden vases of fresh flowers during the day and candles at night.

An Enduring Spell

A visitor to Shalimar once remarked, “outside all is glare and dust; within all is green foliage, white marble, cool

reservoir, and rippling cascade.”

One of the most famous visitors was Zeb-un-Nisa, the daughter of Aurangzeb. A talented poet, she spent as much time as possible at Shalimar. There, surrounded by other princesses and her own handmaids, this dreamy, intense artist wandered along the *kbayabans*, finding endless inspiration in the beauty around her. Once, seated by the waterfall among her light-hearted, chattering companions, she is said to have startled — and moved — them all with this mystical piece:

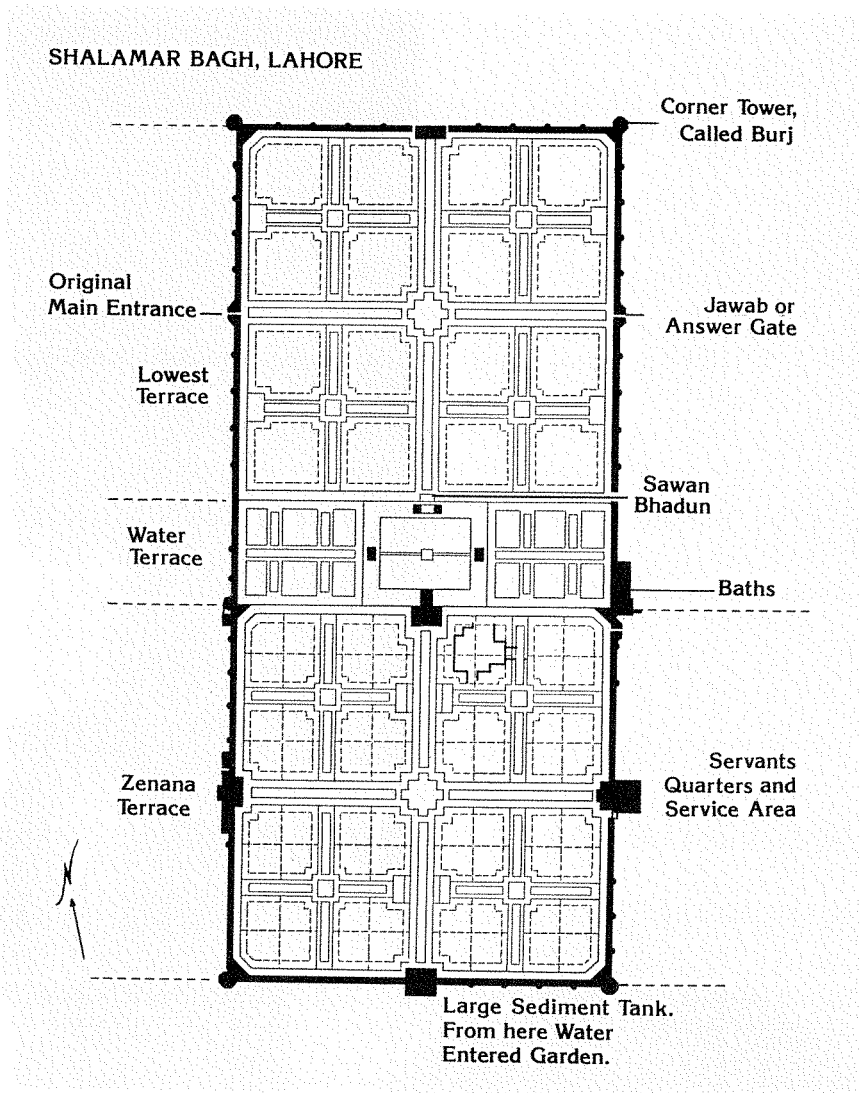
*Ob waterfall! For whose sake art thou weeping?
In whose sorrowful recollection hast thou wrinkled thy brows?
What pain was it that impelled thee, like myself,
the whole night,
To strike thy head against stone and to shed tears?*

Shalimar literally means “House of Joy,” and the passing centuries have done little to dispel its atmosphere of peace and happiness. I can still remember how, as a child wandering there, I felt deeply connected with history and with the sense of magic that inspired its design. Moving around the huge square pool on its second level, I could imagine musicians sitting on the white marble platform in the center playing ragas in the moonlight.

Shalimar succeeds as part of a living tradition because it is still able to evoke the themes it was designed to express: its trees still bear fruit; their shade still provides shelter from the sun; and as a sanctuary of natural beauty, it still brings to mind the previous generations who have experienced its delights. I often think of it as embodying a sense of past, present and future — the past in its mature trees; the present in its world of sensual pleasures (its fragrances, sounds and textures); and the future in its promise of attainment in heaven.

The park continues to reinforce these ideas because it demands use by the citizens. One of the loveliest festivals of Lahore is Mela Chiragon, the “Festival of Lamps.” This is held on the last Saturday in March and the following Sunday. At this time, Shalimar’s pavilions are outlined with glittering colored lights, an echo of former times when the entire garden would be illuminated with colored paper lanterns, scented candles would be placed in the niches behind waterfalls, and fireworks would light up the sky.

That Shalimar can continue to allow such rich interpretations is due to its natural evolution of use. People no longer come to Shalimar specifically to pick fruit. But the presence of fruit-bearing trees still reminds them of this basic function of plant life. Its sensory experiences no longer contrast with the sere Punjab plains. Yet its ordered



abundance of water, trees, marble and grass is just as apt as a refuge in a modern city. Today the theme of memory also plays itself out in a different way. No longer a royal enclave, Shalimar connects modern city dwellers to their cultural roots — both through decorative elements illustrative of Mughal history and design features that have retained their meanings after many generations.

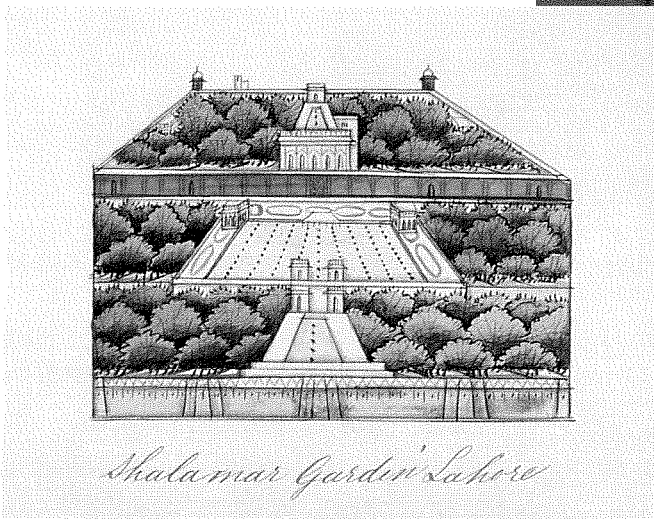
Today the garden's spell remains as potent as when it moved royal princesses to tears and poetry. To express the divine with constant reference to the current needs of human life and the history of human culture is truly to inform the life of the spirit. These are goals we should try to rediscover in the design of our urban parks today.

Above: Plan of Shalimar (the third, most exclusive, terrace is at the bottom). Mughal garden designers took pride in their mastery of geometry, architectural detail, hydraulics, and botany.

Notes

Parts of this article first appeared as a chapter in my book *Labore: The City Within* (Singapore: Concept Media, 1988), pp. 225-47.

1. Robert Harrison, "Towards a Philosophy of Nature," in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 426.
2. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "Jefferson, Thoreau and After," *Landscape* (Winter 1965-66), p. 1.
3. Frederick Law Olmsted, "Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns," in S.B. Sutton, ed., *Civilizing American Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 52-99.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Jane Jacobs, "The Uses of Neighborhood Parks," in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 116-45.
6. Dr. Milo Beach, as quoted at www.mughalgardens.org.
7. See especially Frederick Law Olmsted, "Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Parks for . . . Boston . . ." (1881), in S.B. Sutton, ed., *Civilizing American Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971).



Left: A British colonial officer's drawing of Shalimar.
Courtesy of the British Library.

Right: The name Shalimar has been variously interpreted as "Abode of Bliss" or "Light of the Moon." Now the most common translation is "House of Joy." View from between Shalimar's first and second levels: when in full operation, water cascades in front of the lotus-shaped niches, which hold flowers by day and candles at night. Photo by Richard Shepard.

