

## Urban Confrontations in Conflict-scapes: The Case for Lal Chowk, Kashmir

*“In old pictures, Srinagar is elegant...But elegance is granted little space in an age of wars. Those wooden bridges have either collapsed or were murdered. Their skeletons remain, in the shadow of new arcs of concrete.”*

— Basharat Peer, Curfewed Night

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## I. Abstract

Renowned urban squares around the world seldom have a past that has not been marked by political upheaval and trauma. Tiananmen Square in Beijing or the Red Square in Moscow are examples that attest to this. Urban designers and architects approach politically volatile squares in varying ways that may or may not consider their complex histories. For instance, the urban fabric of Berlin adopts a design approach that confronts its past by integrating structures such as the Berlin Wall within its present context, thus honoring a collective memory.

The paper focuses on the context of Kashmir and more specifically, Srinagar, which has witnessed increasing political tensions ever since India gained its independence in 1947. These heightened tensions have hurled Srinagar into a constant state of political volatility.

With competing political narratives and multiple religious sentiments, Srinagar’s central square (Lal Chowk) has emerged as the focal point of historical turbulence. Increased political volatility encodes its built fabric and consequently alters the various personal associations it holds. Today, town planning proposals for Lal Chowk aim for urban solutions that veil its troubled past and opt for a seemingly modern approach that mimics dissimilar contexts.

Through chronological mapping between political events and transformations in the built fabric, this paper draws attention to how Lal Chowk serves as a political archive for Kashmir. It therefore argues for urban planning possibilities that confront Srinagar’s past. Following this, it emphasizes the importance of recognizing and commemorating collective memory while supporting a progressive future.

## II. Keywords

Kashmir, Lal Chowk, confrontational urbanism, collective memory, politically encoded spaces

## III. Introduction

*“I remember I watched Genghis Khan and lots of Bollywood films...It used to be normal and even routine to go to a cinema and watch movies but now it’s like we have forgotten there even used to be a cinema. The younger generation has no idea that a cinema even existed here”* said Imtiaz, recalling his memories of the Palladium.<sup>1</sup>



Image 1- A crowd of movie buffs seeking tickets for a 1979-release, Suhag. (Source- <https://pbase.com/noorkhan/srinagar>)

REGAL TALKIES SRINAGAR	
(Director: UNIVERSAL PICTURES INC.)	
PROGRAMME FOR THE MONTH OF JULY 1943.	
JULY	NAME OF PICTURE
1st to 3rd	"YOU'LL NEVER GET OLD"
4th to 6th	"TARDY'S SECRET TREASURE"
7th to 9th	"THE ABOVE ALL"
10th to 12th	"HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY"
13th to 15th	"BARGE"
16th to 18th	"GOLD RUSH"
19th to 21st	"WHO DONE IT?"
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Located in the heart of Srinagar, in the Indian state of Kashmir, the Palladium was the first cinema hall in the Himalayan valley. It was a popular spot for locals and eventually led to the emergence of the central city square known as Palladium Chowk. Screening a wide range of films, including Hollywood films (Image 2), The Palladium catered to a diverse audience. Inevitably, it emerged as a major attraction point not only for the locals but also for the British audience (Image 1).

As India gained independence in 1947 and was partitioned with Pakistan, the atmosphere in Srinagar took a political turn. At the heart of this was the Palladium Chowk, later renamed Lal Chowk (inspired by the Red Square in Moscow; *Lal* means Red, and *Chowk* means Square) which became synonymous with Kashmir's political turbulence. Lal Chowk has undergone several drastic shifts ranging from being a cultural hub, business district, and entertainment hub to being at the confluence of political volatility. Thus, present-day Lal Chowk has a symbolic presence that is different from before India gained independence. Consequently, it emerges as an archive of collective memories and political conflicts that have inevitably imprinted its built fabric such as the Palladium.

The question arises then- how does political turmoil affect the built fabric and urban spheres? More importantly, how do we treat these spaces in future town planning and urban development proposals? Should we build from scratch or adopt a confrontational approach that is sensitive towards collective memory and does not veil a complex and painful history?

Srinagar's politically volatile nature has inspired extensive literature on its history, conflicts, and architecture. Sumantra Bose (Bose 2003) examines Kashmir's contested status post-1947, highlighting Lal Chowk's significance but lacking detailed event analysis. Andrew Whitehead (Whitehead 2007) addresses this through oral archives, reassessing Kashmir's early conflict and colonial legacies. Srinagar's urban design and architecture are also well-documented. Feisal Alkazi (Alkazi 2014) explores historically significant sites, detailing Lal Chowk's evolution. Deepika Raina and Hina Zia (Zia 2023) analyse conflict's impact on the built environment through abandoned cinema halls, exploring collective memory and trauma. Their research focuses on how conflict alters public perception of spaces.

This paper explores the overlooked intersections of politics and architecture in Kashmir, focusing on the built fabric around Lal Chowk (such as The Palladium). Using oral archives, maps, and images, it links conflict to the built environment and advocates for a 'confrontational urbanism' that integrates these historically and politically charged spaces into future urban planning.

Lal Chowk is first situated within Srinagar's cultural and political landscape before introducing the concept of 'confrontational urbanism', drawing on scholars like Robert Bevan (2006) and Brian Ladd (1997). It then traces the impact of political events on Lal Chowk's built fabric through archival images and recordings, identifying key structures shaped by turmoil. By situating these identified spaces in future urban plans, this paper ultimately advocates for an approach that acknowledges Lal Chowk's layered history, ensuring its past informs its future.

## IV. Background

In the heart of the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, India, lies the summer capital city <sup>2</sup>of Srinagar. Nestled within the Himalayas, along the banks of the Jhelum River, it is known for its natural environment and architectural styles influenced by diverse communities.

Additionally, a major part of its identity has resulted from the tumultuous politics that surround the region. Kashmir has been a subject of political volatility for decades, rooted in territorial disputes between India and Pakistan. These conflicts coincided with India's independence from British rule in 1947 and its consequent partition with Pakistan. Both nations are divided by the Line of Control (LOC) that runs through Kashmir, and geopolitical tensions constantly affect the region. As the capital city, Srinagar (within the Indian territory) is a hotbed for protests and is representative of the political state of Kashmir.

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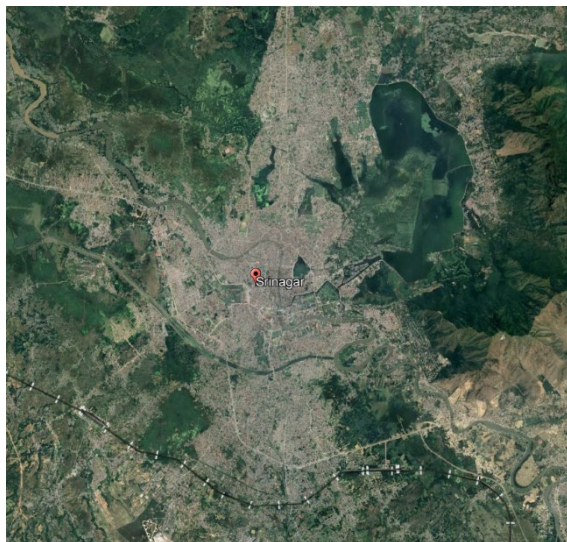
<sup>2</sup> A summer capital is a city designated as an administrative centre during prolonged periods of especially hot summer weather. The term is primarily relevant in historical contexts of political systems where ruling classes would relocate to a summer capital, making it less common in contemporary times. Srinagar has been referred as the summer capital of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The region's politics have inevitably affected the urban fabric of Srinagar. Lal Chowk, a square in the city center, has borne testimony to Srinagar's political upheavals and has emerged as an essential landmark in Kashmir. As India gained its independence, Lal Chowk's political relevance escalated. Lal Chowk's increasing political connotations can be traced back to a singular event in 1947, where the Indian Prime Minister gave a momentous speech at the square, offering a plebiscite<sup>3</sup> on the destiny of Kashmir (see Image 3). Soon after the announced plebiscite, Kashmir encountered innumerable militant attacks, which postponed the plebiscite. This led to increased militarization, which only grew more intense with the repeal of Article 370<sup>4</sup> in August 2019 and was a focal point for protests during the insurgency in the 1980s. The square became a place for flag hoisting, staging protests, and displaying power. Consequently, militarisation increased, which only grew more intense with the repeal of Article 370 in August 2019.



*Image 3- In front of the Palladium Cinema in 1948, Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru promising plebiscite to decide Kashmir's future (Source-kashmirconnected.com)*

This complex political context becomes pivotal for tracing the evolution of built spaces around Lal Chowk by correlating it with the archival records.



*Image 4 – Locating Srinagar (left) and Lal Chowk (top) (Source-Google Earth)*

## V. The Case for Confrontational Urbanism

While the confluence of political conflict and spatial fabric has been widely studied by architects and researchers, the context of this paper demands a theoretical background that examines the imprint of political upheaval on urban fabric. More importantly, it is vital to look at studies that analyze how these urban imprints with political history

<sup>3</sup> It was in front of the cinema in 1947 (India gains independence) that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, made a solemn pledge to Kashmiris of holding a plebiscite to determine the future of Kashmir once the situation was normalized

<sup>4</sup> Article 370 came into effect in October 1949 and acknowledges the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in terms of autonomy and its ability to formulate laws for the state's permanent residents.



operate within the fabric of a city. This political “imprint” has been extensively explored by Robert Bevan (Bevan 2006) where he argues how the destruction of buildings, erection of walls and fences, or urban policies reveal the ‘physicality’ of politics.

A city that has a plethora of these political and historical imprints within its urban fabric is Berlin. In the light of its spatial and political confluence, Berlin has been cited quite extensively for its acceptance of the past and its consequent embodiment in the urban fabric. For instance, Brian Ladd’s “The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape” (Ladd 1997) explores how the city’s urban landscape reflects its complex and often painful history. He argues how the architecture in Berlin goes beyond aesthetics and function and points to competing historical narratives and national identity, thus leading to an urbanism that is confrontational in its nature. Bevan and Ladd both argue through different contexts, for urbanism that is reflective of the region’s complex and often painful past.

Srinagar, although a vastly different context than Berlin, has a history that is similarly complex and turbulent. However, due to the rushed nature of the Indian independence and its subsequent aftermath, urban planning and development was not a major priority especially in geopolitically sensitive regions like Kashmir. Developments that took place aimed to solve practical issues usually on a superficial level and lacked the time or resources to adopt a sensitised and inclusive design approach. It is important to note that modern planning trends in India such as the “Smart City”<sup>5</sup> approach tend to overlook historical and cultural nuances and often advocate for a seemingly modern city that lacks contextual depth. Considering Srinagar’s tumultuous history that has affected its urban fabric and spatial practices significantly, the notion of development may not lie in erasing the past and adopting a tabula rasa approach. On the contrary, like Berlin, the solution may lie in accepting a troubled past and situating it in a sensitised manner within redevelopment frameworks. Therefore, the concept of “confrontational urbanism” becomes increasingly pertinent for the course of this paper.

Consequently, it becomes necessary to trace the lifecycle of several significant structures and its associated communal values over a multitude of political developments. The paper attempts this chronologically over significant political time periods through a combination of images, interviews and articles.

## VI. Lal Chowk’s Shifting Nature

As elaborated previously, Lal Chowk had been a major cultural square before 1947, but soon after, it turned into an emblematic political space. Through archival images and records, this section attempts to analyze parallels between political events and built spaces from 1947 (independence) to the present time. The specific timelines chosen for the analysis are based on key political events that shaped the future of Srinagar. More specifically, these are- **Pre-1947 (before Independence), 1947 (During Independence), 1960s – 1980s, 1990s-2000s.**

The analysis is then used to map a series of spaces that have borne witness to and have been affected by the political volatility in Kashmir. As satellite images of Lal Chowk dated before the 2000s are not readily available, the analysis of this period is conducted through aerial photographs, drawings, newspaper clippings, etc. In order to spatially orient the reader, these spaces have been marked on a google earth map (see Image 5).



*Image 5-Locating spaces around Lal Chowk (Source: Google Earth)*

<sup>5</sup> The Smart Cities Mission was launched on 25 June 2015 by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi. It aims to enhance the quality of life in 100 selected cities by providing efficient services, robust infrastructure, and a sustainable environment

### a) Pre-1947 (Before Independence)

Archival images and records from before independence depict Lal Chowk as a hub of bustling culture and infrastructure. Most photographs from this time include cinemas and theatres with large gatherings. It is important to note that during this time, Lal Chowk was known as “Palladium Chowk” (the background for this is explored below). This period marks the origins of Lal Chowk as a central square before it became synonymous with political unrest.

Following civil unrest stemming from religious tensions, philanthropist and businessman Bhai Anant Singh Gauri built Kashmir's first cinema hall, The Palladium in the 1930's (see Image 6). It was claimed that the Palladium was the oldest movie hall in North India and would screen Hollywood movies before they were released elsewhere in India. It soon became a popular spot for locals, eventually leading to the emergence of the central city square known as *Palladium Chowk*. This sparked the construction of multiple cinema halls across the city, such as the Regal Cinema, around the corner of the Palladium. The Palladium was built in the classic art deco style, which was popular in the country at the time. It consisted of four tall pillars in the front and a grand entry way porch with movie banners often pinned to the front walls. On the first floor, it also consisted of balconies where people would often stand and watch the crowds go by. While interior pictures are not widely available, oral archival interviews suggest there were interior balconies reserved for women (Mistri 2017). This segregation of space was prevalent in Indian theatres at the time.

Palladium's growing popularity led to many cafes and restaurants around the square. This led to a mixed-use development wherein the ground floor was commercial, and the floors above were residential (see image 7).

In terms of architectural styles, the Palladium stands apart from its surrounding buildings, which adopted mostly timber construction systems. Most of the residents had long balconies that looked on the street, which probably added to the feeling of a community. The transportation system majorly consisted of cycle rickshaws, bicycles, and very rarely, automobiles. Locals mostly commuted on foot. It is not clear if there was a division of transportation modes, as one can see bicycles and people in the same lane.



Image 6 (top and bottom) - Palladium 1947 (Source: Chinar Shade.com)



Image 7- Lal Chowk before 1947 (Source: Facebook)



The other end of the square is called the “Amira Kadal”. Built in 1774, this was the first bridge over the Jhelum river that connected the banks of the city and marked a turning point in the city’s infrastructure and development. Built entirely out of timber, the structure resisted high footfalls and vehicular traffic. It also served as a community space with sprawling markets. These “kadals” (Hindi for bridges) were constructed in several locations across the Jhelum following the Amira Kadal.

These were also historically significant as they adopted local construction techniques, developed the economy, and resisted various natural disasters. This bridge has witnessed brutal Afghan rulers preceding British rule as well as the “Quit Kashmir” movement right before independence. These political events often caused disruptions in the markets and affected businesses.



Amiran Kadi, Srinagar

Image 8(left and right)-The Amira Kadal in the 1900's  
(Source: Photograph by Francis Firth)

## b) 1947 (During Independence)

The Indian-Pakistan partition and independence from the British rule in 1947 resulted in significant political changes, the effects of which were evident in Kashmir. The images above are popular records of Lal Chowk in 1947. In all these images, the presence of the Palladium is apparent. However, it now lies in the background and the foreground is no longer crowds of people gathering to watch a film. The crowd now turns their backs to the Palladium and the focus shifts. Image 9 and 10 mark an important turn in the history of Lal Chowk wherein Jawahar Lal Nehru (the Prime Minister) delivers a speech promising a plebiscite to the Kashmiris. He stands in front of the Palladium on a raised platform with an additional podium and a carpet. His security officials and other politicians stand on the ground behind him. Crowds gather on the balconies of the Palladium and surrounding cafes to watch Nehru decide their fate. At this time, a popular film called “Kismet” was showcased in the cinema but unlike previously, the crowd turned their attention away from the screens. As per oral archival records, this event marked the onset of a major shift in Lal Chowk. This was also a time when left wing parties, inspired by communist Russia renamed Palladium Chowk as Lal Chowk (direct translation- Red Square). Therefore, a mere change in its name is indicative of the change in times.

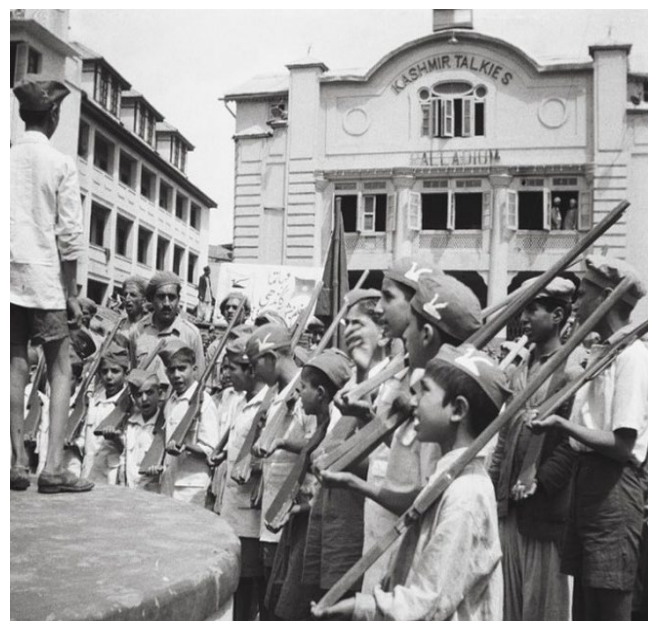


Image 9- 1947 speech delivery by Nehru  
(Indian PM) at Lal Chowk (source-  
KashmirConnected.com)

Unexpectedly, a few months after Nehru's speech, Srinagar had faced a tribal invasion<sup>6</sup> which inflicted chaos in the city. During this time, a children's militia was formed to fight the tribesmen. The Palladium again serves as the backdrop of this gathering (see Image 11). Following severe political unrest, the Palladium was turned into a temporary hub for emergency administration led by the chief minister and his party. This is also partly evident by the lack of film posters on the façade which signifies the first shift in Palladium's typology as a cinema hall. As per journalistic records, many adjacent hotels and other buildings were also used as offices of different wings of the Administration (Ahmed 2018). However, names and images of these are presently unknown.



*Image 10- 1947 speech delivery by Nehru (Indian PM) at Lal Chowk (source- KashmirConnected.com)*



*Image 11 – Children's militia in front of Palladium (Source- andrewwhitehead.net) (Photographed by Ram Chand Mehta in 1947)*

This time depicts a hybrid phase wherein the cultural operations of a building occur parallel to the new political operations. This would have probably entailed structures such as the Palladium being closed at certain times for political speeches or gatherings which would have inevitably affected local businesses to a certain extent.

### **c) 1960s-1980s**

From the 1960s, Srinagar began witnessing increased political upheaval as the plebiscite was paused and the fight for Kashmir continued. Politicians took to Lal Chowk in increased numbers as the square became a symbol of power and dominance. A notable instance is when Sheikh Abdullah, the Chief Minister of the State at the time, delivered a significant speech to a large gathering at Lal Chowk, demanding a plebiscite. While the Palladium still stands with its architecture intact, Lal Chowk now becomes synonymous with protests (see Image 12).

During less volatile times, Lal Chowk's atmosphere still retained a certain calmness, and cultural activities continued (see Image 14). One can see cycle rickshaws, horse carriages, and mostly pedestrian-dominated streets. According to archival records and



*Image 12- Sheikh Abdullah delivering a speech at Lal Chowk in 1975*

<sup>6</sup> In the excited political atmosphere of late October and November 1947, when the maharajah had fled and Sheikh Abdullah came to power and straight away faced an invasion of Pathan tribesmen, thousands of people of Srinagar took up arms in some fashion or another. (Whitehead n.d.)



interviews, this cultural and communal aura remained significant before the 1980s, and Lal Chowk was a significant part of people's daily lives.

Towards the 1980's the symbolism of Lal Chowk drastically changed. Its association shifted from the Palladium to the bell tower (see Image 15). In 1980, Bajaj Electricals raised a clock tower at Lal Chowk with the company's logo and clock to advertise the company's products in Kashmir. In 1988, when militancy erupted in Kashmir, many rallies were held by separatists in and around Lal Chowk. Often, the supporters of militant groups would hoist flags of Pakistan and the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) on the clock tower. Later, the security forces constructed a bunker at the spot to deter separatists from housing flags atop the clock tower (see Image 16).

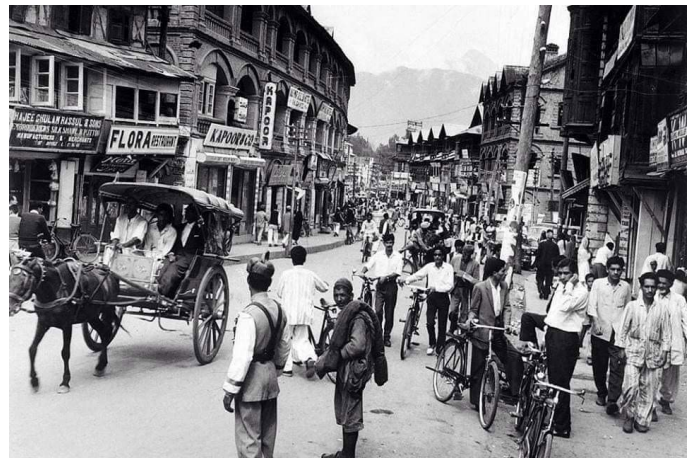


Image 14- Lal Chowk in the 1960s (Source: andrewwhitehead.net)

A pattern can be observed from the decades leading up to the 1980s - structures that were merely built for communal or cultural purposes were initially politicised through speeches or protests, followed by an onslaught of violence which eventually led to a high degree of militarisation. This can be observed in the case of the bell tower (see Image 16), many movie theatres, including the Palladium (described further in subsequent sections).

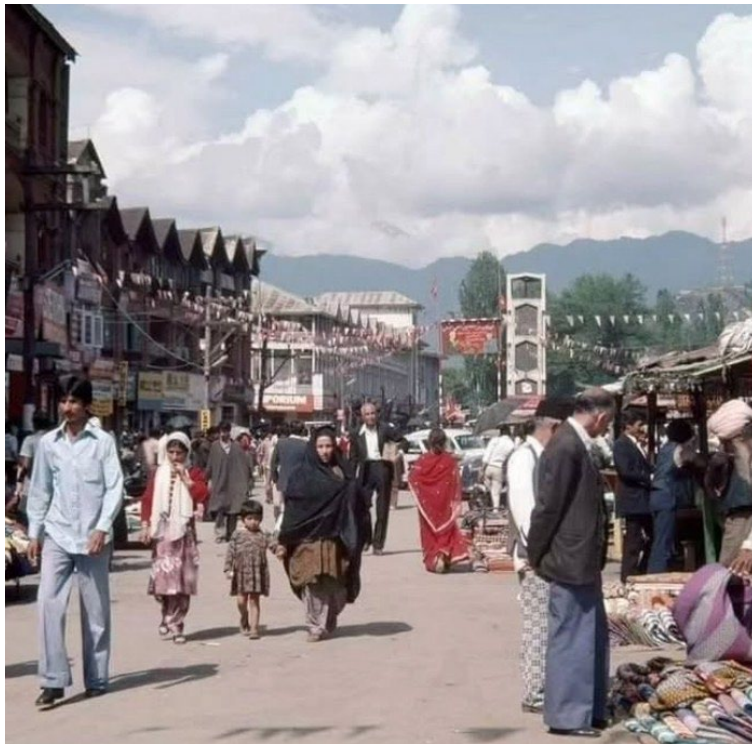


Image 15- The bell tower in 1980's (Source- KashmirPulse.com)



Image 16 (top and bottom) – Security forces taking control (Source – BBC.com)

#### d) 1990s-2000s

Following the onset of the armed insurgency in Kashmir in 1989, when a militant group known as the Allah Tigers demanded the closure of liquor stores and movie theaters in the Valley and threw grenades at a few of them, all of them were closed on January 1, 1990. Although it was a brief success, the State Government's attempts to reopen movie theaters and associate it with the restoration of normalcy in Kashmir failed. In 1999, three movie theaters in Srinagar reopened, but they soon closed due to grenade attacks. Today, paramilitary soldiers occupy most movie theaters, while others have been transformed into commercial buildings, including a hospital (Ahmed 2018).



*Image 17 – Lal Chowk under security control and curfews (source- Hindustan Times)*



*Image 18 – Amira Kadal under curfew (source- Hindustan Times)*

The Palladium inevitably got caught in the political crossfire and was reduced to debris. It now partly houses security forces and is partly overtaken by the Himalayan horse chestnut (a native tree) (see Image 19). The impression of the front patio remains but is shrouded by security vehicles. The road beside Palladium is still called the Palladium Road.

The various cafes and restaurants with balconies facing the streets that were visible in the 1960's can no longer be observed. Most of the local timber architecture has been replaced by brick and concrete construction and glass facades following several attacks. This probably stemmed from a need to build faster to recover businesses quickly. However, the unpredictable nature of Kashmir resulted in various lockdowns that interrupted the recovery process. Most recently following the abrogation of article 370 (described in background), Lal Chowk and Amira Kadal were often subject to lockdowns and curfews which impacted several industries and trade flows. The bell tower also witnessed a renovation amidst the chaos and was built in a “Kashmiri vernacular” style with the typical pitched roof profile. This was part of a Smart City plan (explored further in the next section) which aimed to redefine Lal Chowk entirely and make it a thriving commercial hub. It is to be noted that redevelopment plans often placed the bell tower at its center but not the Palladium.



*Image 19 (top and bottom) Palladium today stands in ruins. (source- rajsuri.net)*



VII. Smart City Plans- A Band-Aid Approach?

Amidst the turbulence Lal Chowk has witnessed, the government and town planning organizations developed various plans envisioning the future of Lal Chowk. One such organization is the -Srinagar Smart City Limited (SSCL); a Special Purpose Vehicle created under Smart City Mission. Its mission is to transform Srinagar into an eco-friendly, resilient and socio-economically vibrant city that celebrates its natural and cultural heritage creating harmony and opportunities for all (Development 2017).

Within the Srinagar Smart City framework, the vision for Lal Chowk stated – “The plan aimed to transform Lal Chowk into a grand, unified public plaza that would extend from one building line to another on all sides, creating a seamless & expansive open space. At the heart of this envisioned plaza stood the iconic Clock Tower, serving as a pivotal landmark & focal point for the entire area.” (Development 2017)



Image 20 – Smart City proposal for Lal Chowk (Source - <https://srinagar.nic.in/smart-city-strategy/>)

This project has since been executed as proposed. It placed the bell tower in the center of Lal Chowk’s renovation and created a variety of public spaces with new pavements, renewed lighting systems and urban furniture. However, it is to be noted that places like the Palladium or the Amira Kadal, despite having borne testimony to Srinagar’s complex history and holding a strong communal value, do not feature in the Smart City vision.

In addition to being excluded from modern development plans, Palladium lacks any geotags in satellite imagery. Therefore, the erasure of Palladium’s identity ventures beyond the physical. While governmental town planning agencies in Srinagar advocate a modern and “smart” Srinagar, it adopts a band-aid approach that almost veils its dark but meaningful history.

Srinagar, at one point, experienced an era of cinema which started with the Palladium. This created a respite for the locals that could escape from the otherwise chaotic state of matters in the country. Amira Kadal served as a connecting bridge that expedited their economy and trade and often served as a communal space. However, the smart city project shifts the focus to the bell tower and new public infrastructure while turning a blind eye to the value system that embodied Lal Chowk (or what was known as the Palladium Chowk).

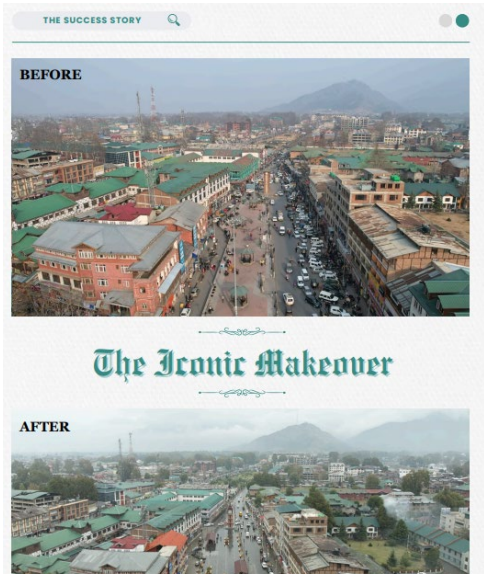


Image 21- A snippet from the smart city document showing transformations. (source- JKHUDD\_Newsletter\_Urban Insights\_April\_2024)



## VIII. Reflections and Future Potentials

Cities with complex and contested histories often overlook their imprint on spatial structures and how it affects spatial practices. Urban planning agencies in Srinagar have adopted an approach that fails to consider a disturbed past and adopts an approach akin to any metropolitan city in the country. This paper thus posits an argument for urbanism that is confrontational and that does not rewrite collective memories.

Exploring how political turbulence in Kashmir over several years has encoded its architecture has revealed the shifting spatial symbolism of Lal Chowk. The shifting symbolism can be witnessed in the shift in various structures ranging from the Palladium to the Amira Kadal. While the former lost its identity as a landmark to the bell tower, the latter lost its communal nature.

The Smart City Plan lacks an approach that is participatory and community centric in nature. Including the community in the decision-making process can lead to valuable insights into the communal values of significant spaces such as Lal Chowk. Even though it can be assumed that the demise of several structures can be too painful a reminder for people, it could be a means to accept a past albeit one that is painful. While this acceptance and recognition could lead to conservation or adaptive reuse projects, it would more importantly preserve the space that the structure held and commemorate an eroding collective memory.

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