

## Ahmed Hussein Agha, Architect and Surveyor, Karachi



Mohatta Palace, one of the masterpieces of A.H. Agha, built in late 1920s, currently housing museum

### Introduction

**A**hmed Hussein Agha, the licensed surveyor and architect, had his practice on water-course road, near Globe Cinema, Karachi. He is considered the first Muslim architect of Karachi and is especially celebrated for adopting the Mughal-Revival style in architecture.

A.H.Agha was born in Agra and studied architecture there. He was appointed as the Surveyor for the Karachi Municipality in the late 1910s (Lari 1996:308). Later he started his own practice. His contribution to the architecture of Indian subcontinent is remarkable. He has some of the monumental Mughal-Revival buildings such as Mohatta palace, Hindu Gymkhana (currently housing National Academy of Performing Arts) and Karachi Chamber of commerce and industry (previously Karachi Indian Merchants Association building) to his credit. These works were patroned by elite Hindu businessmen.

Apart from these much appreciated projects, there are many small scale projects that were accomplished by him. Most of these are mixed use buildings, commissioned by modest clients. These buildings are mostly R.C. framed structures and show compact planning and simple forms. Though stylistically these works are simpler, but depict his capability to provide good spatial solutions to diversified clients.

The works so far discovered includes:

- 1925-1926:** Building on plot #89, sheet # A-6, Old Town Quarter, Building on plot # 2C, Sheet C-04, Bunder Quarter
- 1930:** Workshop on plot # 26, Sheet # E-11, Lawrence Quarter
- 1930-1931:** Building on plot # 1/19, L.R-5, Lawrence Quarter



A zoom-in from the letterhead of Architect A.H.Agha's office      Signature of the Architect

The records also contain submission drawings related to additions and alterations in several buildings. These include buildings on plot#2, sheet 16, west-76, Garden quarter; plot# 29-B, D-3, Tehilram Quarter; plot # 28-A, sheet # K-04, Lyaree Quarter and plot# 1/19, L.R-5, Lawrence Quarter.

### Building on plot #89, sheet # A-6, Old Town Quarter, 1925-1926

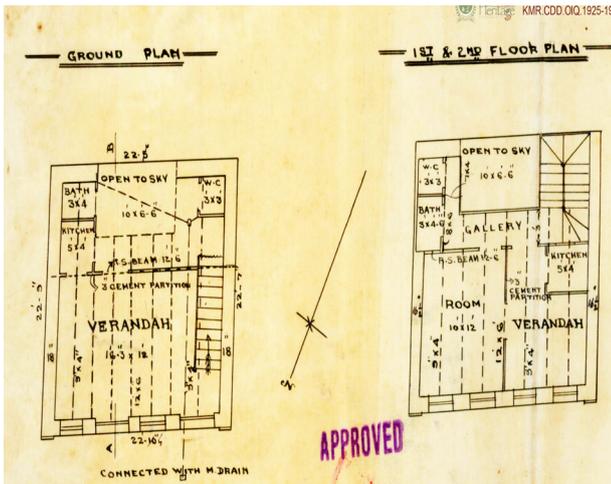
Reference No.KMR.CDD.OIQ.1925-1926.01

**T**his three storey mixed-use building is situated along Plajmull Karamull lane and was owned by Basomal Versimal. There is a 14'-3" X 12'-0" verandah on the ground floor with stairs leading up to the upper floors. A 3" cement partition separates the veranda from kitchen & bath on the left corner and W.C. on the right. There is also a 10'-0" X 6'-6" open to sky space at the rear. The typical 1st and 2nd floor plans show a small 10'X12' room with a gallery. This room is separated from the veranda by a 3" cement partition wall. There is a 5'X4' kitchen in the veranda and 3'X3' W.C and 3'X4'-6" bath accessed through the gallery. The straight run stairs leads from the ground to the 1st floor, while a U-shaped stairs with winder steps at the landing links the 1st and 2nd floors.

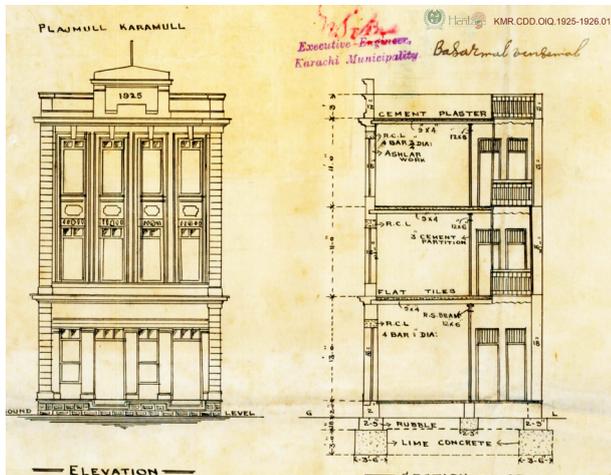
The front façade is characterized by absolute symmetry, with the cornices between ground and first floor level and at the parapet. The corners of the building are defined by pilasters which reach the height of the cornices. Between the windows there are pilaster strips. The façade is crowned by a modernist miniature pediment with a finial, above the parapet cornice, bearing the year of construction of the building.

On ground floor, sash windows and doors in 2 alternate bays, with full height pilasters at the ends of the elevation and between each bay, distinguishes the floor from the upper ones. Fanlights are provided on the windows and doors at each floor. Sturdy piers between the windows on 1st and 2nd floors and keystones on the lintel level on the second floor give the building a completely framed look.

A letter from N.J.Modi, the land manager and architect (Karachi Municipality) to the owner, Basomal Versimal dated 28-11-1925, identifies few requirements to be incorporated in the plan for approval. He pointed out that the exterior walls of bath and W.C must be of full thickness similar to the main walls. Also the side dimensions of the plot to be corrected as they didn't tally with the city survey. A.H.Agha responded to the letter on 05-01-1926 with the corrected side dimensions of the plot. With regard to the walls of



Plans of building on plot #89, sheet #A-6, Old Town Quarter, 1925-1926



Elevation & section of building on plot #89, sheet #A-6, Old Town Quarter, 1925-1926

bath and W.C., he replied that these cannot be built in thick walls. R.C. beams are provided to build the thick walls. As the area in front of W.C will then be less than the allowable area.

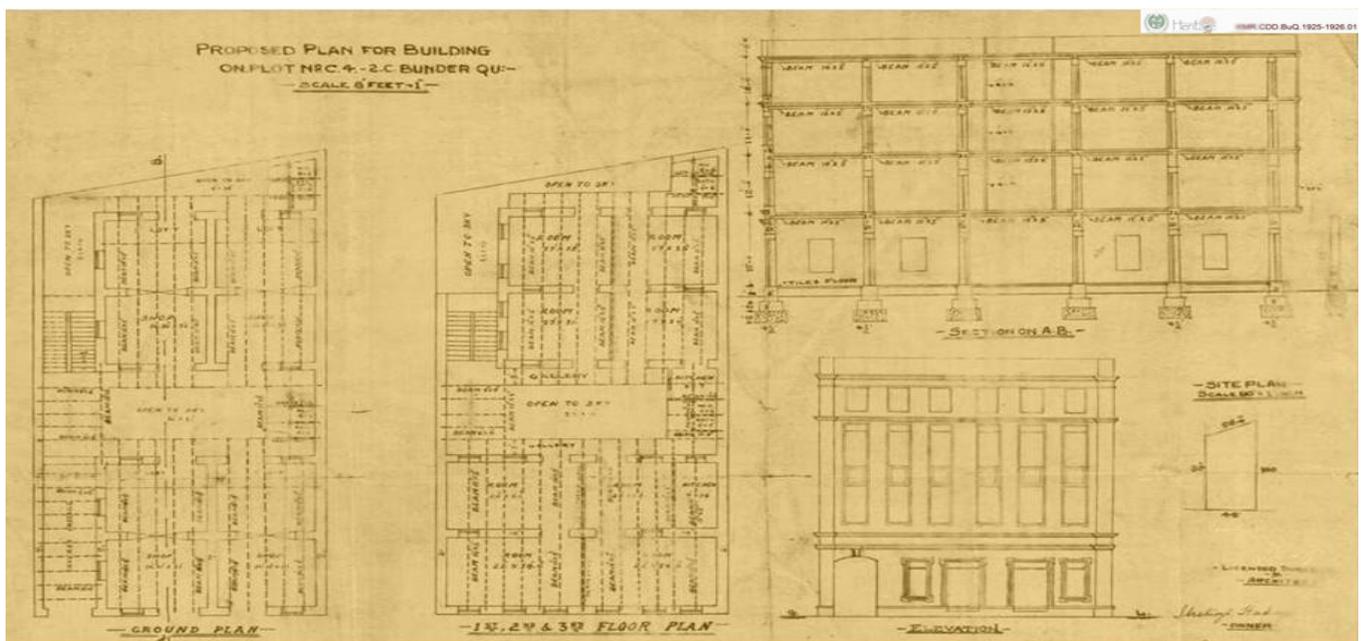
## Building on plot # 2C, Sheet C-04, Bunder Quarter, 1925-1926

Reference No. KMR.CDD.BuQ.1925-1926.01

The building was designed during the year 1925-1926 for Embrahimji Hakimji. This mixed use building is situated on a 50' wide Lakshmidas road. The plot is narrow irregular quadrilateral: 80'-100' in length and 45'to 50' in width. There are four shops on the ground floor, measuring 16'-10" X 31'-0", and a central 32'-0" X 12'-0" open to sky space. The typical plans of 1st, 2nd and 3rd stories show 4 equal sized rooms on either side of the central open space. There is U-shaped staircase accessed by covered terrace on the ground floor. The plans and sections show the details of equally spaced structural beams.

The façade of the building is treated quite simply and is reminiscent of the 20th century modern architecture. The ground floor being designed for commercial purpose can be easily identified from the rest of the elevation, owing to its round-arched doorway with keystone and pronounced window surrounds. There are cornices between ground and first floors as well as second and third floors, dividing the building into three distinct parts. The pilasters mark the corner of the building elevation. The fenestration of the building has been treated symmetrically on each floor, with rectangular windows.

A letter from N.J.Modi, the land manager and architect (Karachi Municipality) to the owner, dated 28-11-1925, identifies few requirements to be incorporated in the plan for approval. It says that the galleries in the middle open space need to be removed and open space to be increased. It also asks for 2 more copies of the drawings. This objection letter has been responded by A.H.Agha on 30-11-1925.



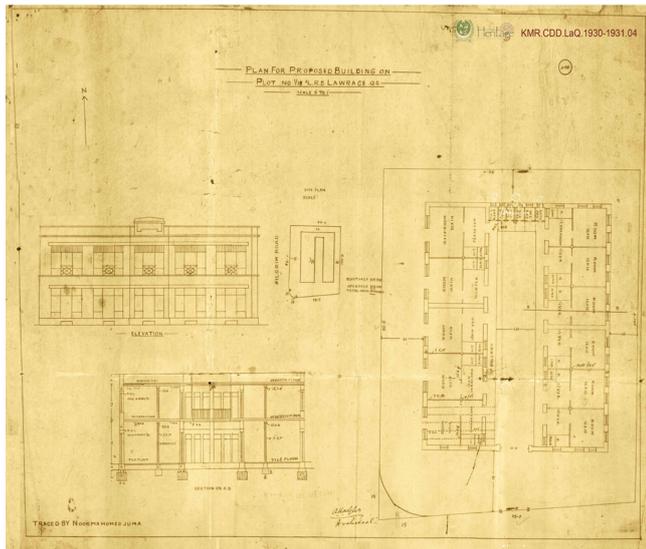
Proposed plan for building on plot # 2C, Sheet C-04, Bunder Quarter, 1925-1926

Addressing the issue of galleries, he writes that they cannot be removed as they provide the passage to the rooms. However he increased the central open space and provided 2 more copies of the revised drawings for approval, but still the construction of the building didn't start till December.

## Building on plot # 1/19, L.R-5, Lawrence Quarter, 1930-1931

Reference No. KMR.CDD.LaQ.1930-1931.04

The building is U-shaped, with a central open space, situated on a lot, along Pilgrim road. There are 6 rooms measuring 12'X 12' and 5 measuring 12'X14' having a 7.5' X 12' and 7.5' X 14' verandah space at the entrances respectively, with kitchen sink. There are also some shared baths and W.Cs on the ground floor. Though there is no first floor plan and neither a staircase on the ground floor, but through sections and elevation it can be stated that the first floor plan will be the replica of the ground floor.



Plan for proposed building on plot # 1/19, L.R-5, Lawrence Quarter, 1930-1931

The front façade, facing west, is symmetrical and very simple. Cornices marking the levels and a parapet adorned with a pediment are the only decorative features of the building. There are continuous bands on lintel levels, emphasizing the horizontality of the structure. The balconies are small and repetitive with minimal ornamentation.

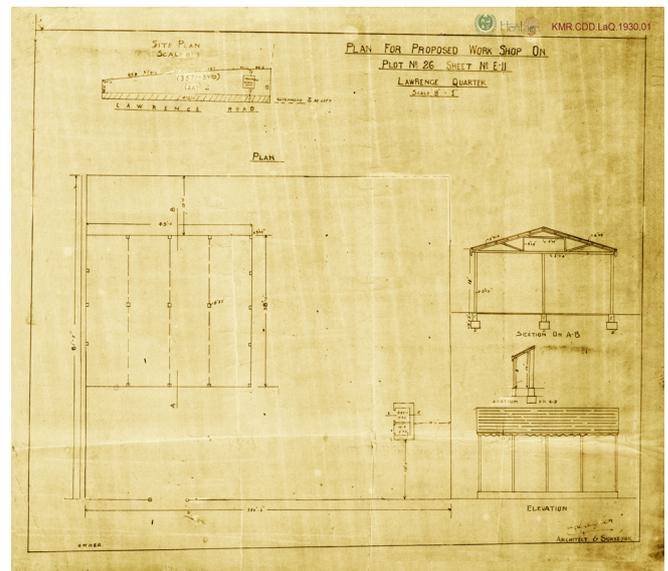
A letter from N.J.Modi, the land manager and architect (Karachi Municipality) to the owner, dated 14-11-1930, identifies few requirements to be incorporated in the plan for approval. These included the instructions to provide 10"X 5" and 15"X9" beams, instead of the given 9"X 4" and 12" X6" beams respectively, providing door and windows leads and showing gallery posts on plan. Calculations on built-up area were also asked to be submitted.

Revised drawings are not found but according to one of the documents, completed drawings were submitted by the architect on 18th November 1930.

## Workshop on plot # 26, Sheet # E-11, Lawrence Quarter, 1930

Reference No. KMR.CDD.LaQ.1930.01

A 45'-0" X 38'-0" workshop was designed by A.H.Agha in 1930 on an irregular quadrilateral lot (of 3571 syds) along the Lawrence road. The shed was planned in accordance with the requirements highlighted by the Land Manager and architect at Karachi Municipality, N.J. Modi. This utilitarian structure seems to be of temporary nature, built out of bamboos. There are 4'X4' bath and 4'X3' W.C. towards the lower right corner of the site.



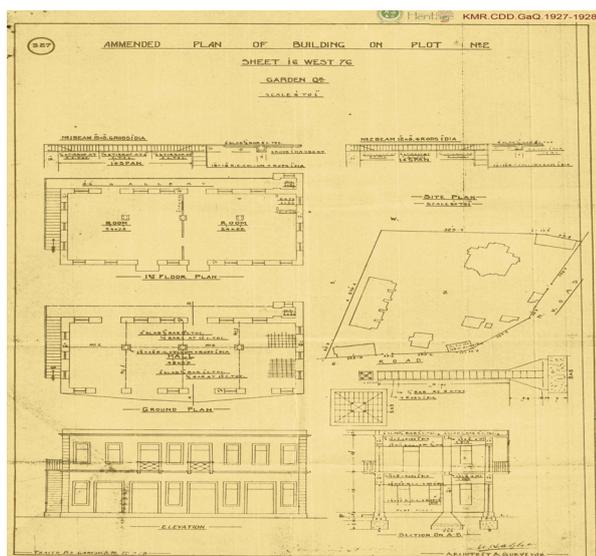
Plan for proposed Workshop on plot # 26, Sheet # E-11, Lawrence Quarter, 1930

## Additions and Alterations:

### Amended plan of building on plot#2, sheet 16, west-76, Garden quarter, 1927-1928

Reference No. KMR.CDD.GaQ.1927-1928.01

This building was proposed on the eastern side of a fairly large plot. It has been designed with an open plan and symmetrical layout. On the ground floor a large hall, measuring 48'-0" X 22'-0", and a 4'X 3'-6" W.C have been proposed. On the first floor, this large space is divided into two equal sized rooms, measuring 24'X22', divided by a 3"th. c.p. wall. Three 15"X18" R.C. columns support vertically running 15"X 9", and horizontally running 12"X 8" beams, which in turn supports the slab, where 1/2" bars are placed 5" c/c.



Amended plan of building on plot#2, sheet 16, west-76, Garden quarter, 1927-1928

Façade of the building is symmetrical and is treated with cornices marking the levels. It is adorned with large sash windows and is further accentuated by pilasters. The simple treatment of façade clearly demonstrates the prevalent influence of international modern movement on Agha's work.

### Amended plan on plot # 28-A, sheet # K-04, Lyaree Quarter

Reference No. KMR.CDD.LyQ.1928-1929.01

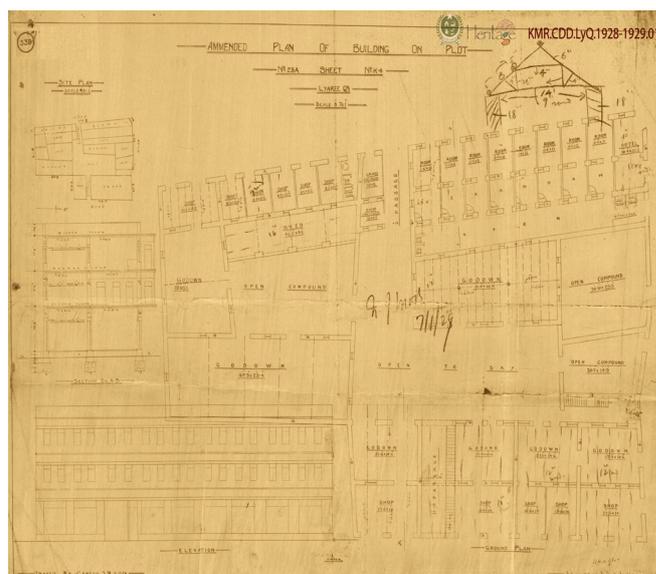
For the owner, Mulamal Mulchand, Godowns and shops (in the front) proposed to the existing structure. Red pencil marking and sketch shows the proposed additions in the drawing.

N.J. Modi (Land Manager and architect at Karachi Municipality) informed A.H.Agha on 16th April 1928, that the size of the beam must be 12" X 6" and not 11" X 5". Also he mentioned that the nature of the walls of the sanitary works must be mentioned in plan. A.H.Agha responded on 17 April 1928 that, the area marked A is covered for the purpose of 1st floor sanitary. The nature of the wall for the sanitary block is 3" C.P wall.



Survey plan of Lyaree quarter

Only few alterations were made in the front shops. The proposed additions and amendments by the architect didn't alter the elevation of the building in anyway.

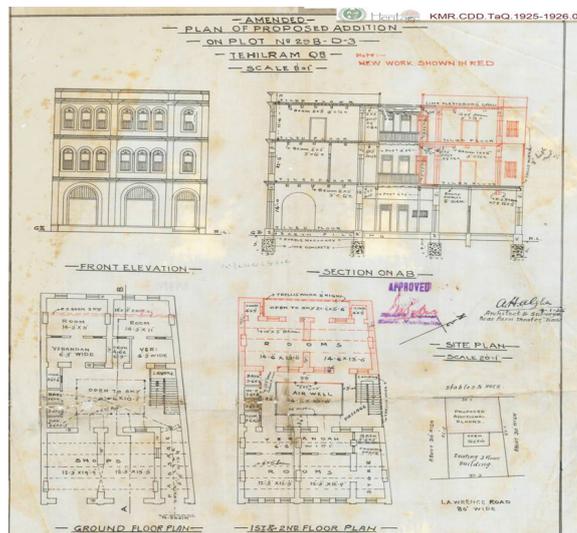


Amended plan on plot # 28-A, sheet # K-04, Lyaree Quarter

### Proposed addition on plot# 29-B, D-3, Tehilram Quarter

Reference No. KMR.CDD.TaQ.1925-1926.01

Additions were proposed by A.H.Agha to an existing 3 storey mixed-use building along the Lawrence road. The additions are made in such a way that the on ground floor, only a beam has been added, while on the upper two floors on the rear side, two rooms measuring 14'-6" X 13'-0" and an attached cook room measuring 4' X 5' were added. As a result, a 16'-6" X 10'-0" air well is now centralized. The sizes of the beams differ from the ones already present.



Amended plan of proposed addition on plot# 29-B, D-3, Tehilram Quarter

Reference: Lari, Yasmeen, and Mihail S. Lari. (1996). *The Dual City: Karachi During the Raj*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 308-9. Research, layout and image assistance: Ar. Sana Iqbal & Madeeha Badar.

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