

London, London Hai, Aur Green Hai

(An article on London visit waiting publication)

By DAZ, November 2011

With apologies to Lahore Lovers who cherish the oft-repeated phrase of 'Lahore-Lahore Hai' culminating in the phrase 'Jin-ne Lahore nei dekhia-O jum-miaya i nei' (One who hasn't seen Lahore- is yet to be born). I am quite tempted to use this much loved cliché for London as who can possibly deny falling in love with this most beautiful and the most cosmopolitan city in the World. Despite all the troubles, falling standards and general decline that one reads about in the UK, London still thrives like a magnet. It's not just an anthropological delight with an unending show of beautiful people from around the globe but also an indefatigable architectural splendor. Not to mention the entertainment districts, night life and a year round plethora of events organized at private and public places, Galleries, Museums, Parks, Palaces and tourist spots, seems like London is ever awake, and it's been centuries.

One has to be cautious while writing about the great city of London which has a history of more than 2000 years and has been a financial and cultural capital of the world, as tomes and tomes of appreciation are readily available, therefore in this article I will just confine myself to some aspects of Urban design and touch only briefly on some developments in public sectors that I observed on a recent visit. The vantage point is not of glamour and glitter but of public comfort and convenience which remains rather inconspicuous, but I found it really fascinating to see how the busiest city in the world treats and touches its citizens and its visitors.

The word 'Green' is not a cliché for the British as they; I feel, know the meaning of austerity in social and environmental planning and design. Unlike the developing countries, who boast and build their urban centers for a tiny minority of 'Car owners' quite blindly and neglect the majority of its so called under-privileged citizenry, the pedestrians and the bicycle owners, London seems to be unique in a sense that it challenges the 'Car culture' up front. On the contrary it invests heavily for the 'Non-car owners'. It shows extraordinary care for the convenience of the general public.

The public transport system is absolutely amazing in its design and function, almost perfect. The world is all too aware of the famous Red Buses of London, the 'underground' and over ground trains network but what is remarkable is the new look buses and its people's friendly design. Besides the general commuters it now fully caters for the wheel chairs, prams and extra luggage, with plenty of docking spaces. The design of the buses is greatly enhanced with ergonomic seats, grip bars, made more safe and secure with CCTV cameras, (so are trains and the famous 'Tube', the underground train). People's comfort and safety seems to be on top of the agenda with the city managers.

The buses stop (only) at well designated and well designed stops, adorned with location maps, displaying available routes and guides, electronic ticket dispensers and LED timing panels and of course the service functions with its traditional impeccable timing. The tickets are dear for an occasional traveler but cheaper day passes and other package facilities are also available.

As in our society, the wheel chair people are not treated as outcasts. Some older buildings may not have the wheel chair access but all new buildings and public buildings cater for the wheel chairs. I sneaked into a toilet for the disabled people in a movie theater and what a splendid surprise it was. Talking about the wheels, If you think that the London Taxi will cost you an arm and a leg from the airport, all you have to do is take the 'tube' as soon as you get off the plane, and 'tow' your suit case all the way to your house almost anywhere in London, (that is if you are not carrying those 50 year old trunks without wheels), as even the pavements are well maintained and 'wheels' friendly. The design of kerb-edge of all pavements allows for wheel chairs, prams and wheeled luggage. No lifting of heavy cases. On crossings, either the road level is raised to the pavement level or the pavement kerb is lowered for ease and

comfort of the pedestrians. The roads are intersected by a network of 'Pelican crossings' (perhaps invented by the British) and the Zebra crossings.

In the olden times one had to carry the famous 'A to Z' guide map book of London city for directions, which was a guarantee that one would never get lost, but now almost every exit and entry of transit points have guide maps available. The 'car owners' predominantly use the latest gadgetry of GPRS system of electronic navigation, in which all one has to do is enter the area code or address of the destination, and voila! Just sit back and follow the audio visual directions. Destination is guaranteed. Has quite a space age feel about it.

The pedestrians have an important place in the heart of city managers. Not only the pavements and walkways are unobstructed but are well maintained. The under-construction or renovation buildings are not allowed to encroach on the pavements so as to obstruct the pedestrians but special measures are taken to make the passage easy. Yes, no flying debris from building works, the buildings under renovation by law, have to be properly masked off with hoarding boards, which are adorned with graphics or ads. Even the external scaffolding pipes at the lower level, are clad with softer timber material for aesthetic reasons and also that they do not pose a problem for the pedestrians.

While on the subject of public convenience let me cite an example which was a bit bizarre to our taste in the east. Open public urinals designed as island units placed at different spots, one such urinal unit was right outside a famous theatre which for a moment looked quite shocking. Reminded me of our own roadside relieving gentlemen which we all abhor, but after a while it did not look all that absurd and was quite busy....yes right in the middle of an open space outside a theatre! Besides these stand alone urinals, London provides state of the art; coin operated self cleansing toilet units for its citizens, all strategically located.

The British seem to be following a strict environmental agenda and a green policy all the way through. It's not just talk of austerity, which is associated with personal change for the benefit of the entire society. While tightening their belts they would grow their own vegs, switch to 'staycation' instead of vacation, bicycle instead of drive, even impose heavy 'congestion charges' for motorists in busy districts in certain times of the day. Having potable water through your kitchen tap is a dream which every city mayor in the world dreams of, and London has it. This means fewer plastic bottles in the landfills etc. It dejects the energy guzzling car culture by encouraging walking and bicycling. I was pleased to see a brilliant public-private transit scheme for the public, yet another Green feather in the cap for Londoners. It's called Barclays 'Bicycle hire scheme' that dots many London districts. One can hire a bicycle from coin operated docking stations (self help) from one location and leave the bicycle at a docking station near one's destination. Each docking station is well maintained displaying a code of conduct, hire rates and operation methodology.

There is a special treat for the people who enjoy walking and feeling the land marks and historically important places. There are several such walking trips and planned 'walking excursions'. Many areas and localities have been declared 'car-free' and successfully 'pedestrianised' and turned into exciting tourist spots and promenades.

I would like to end with another earth friendly and people friendly endeavor that I accustomed in England. London, on one end boasts it's most luxurious and expensive hotels in the world but, in my opinion the true pride in hospitality is its chain of 'affordable' yet very comfortable hotels and Inns. An overnight trip to Brighton took us to a Hotel (Premier Inn), which was very comfortable, as good as any normal five star hotel. As far as Brighton is concerned, I did not appreciate the new pier on the beach as it was littered with games and gambling machines. This killed the beautiful seascape; one could not feel the sky or the seagulls. Clearly it was money making gimmickry but what really had a lasting impression

on me was the hotel's design philosophy where we had stayed. Its salient 'green' features are worth a mention.

Heating and cooling of the building done with a special pump that uses earth's natural energy and uses 'piped' sunlight. All kitchen equipment, dish washing machines, hobs and energy efficient refrigerators save about 50% energy. High yield acoustic and energy insulation achieved by using natural and recycled materials, cutting heat loss by 60%. Heat recovery through state of the art ventilation. The use of energy saving LED lighting system and sensors for auto switch off systems. Collection of rainwater and showers, baths and recycling it for toilets etc.

I found that quite remarkable for a small scale hotel's overall design policy. I am already missing London. London, London Hai.