

**EXHAUSTED GEOGRAPHIES**

*by*

*Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani\**

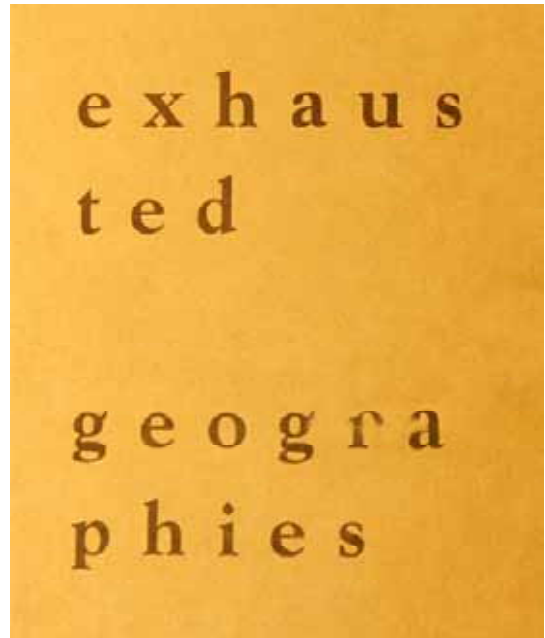
A Review by

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This new book, edited by Karachi artists Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani, explores the complications attached to mapping of Karachi. The authors shed light on the history of the city, in terms of the memory of space, urban fabric, social and economic patterns and political and ethnic tensions. Many faces of the city are presented, as authors belonging to various professions view the city, highlighting the various facets of the city and the complexity it offers. Some of the texts are based on extensive research exercises, whereas others are personal observations and experiences which are presented abstractly.

Not only is the concept of the book fresh, its packaging has also been done quite uniquely. It comes in a charming box pack, and contains seven booklets, each with a different author. Each of the booklet in turn has a flip-out map or a graphic image which illustrates the text. The contributing authors to the book are Nausheen H. Anwar, Yaminay N. Chaudhri, Zahra Malkani, Shayan Rajani, Shahana Rajani, Fazal Rizvi, Anam Soomro and Sarwat Viqar. Some authors, like Nausheen Anwar, map the city scientifically, whereas other authors, like Yaminay Chaudhri, present a very personalised account from her early childhood days. Fazal Rizvi, presents a photographic documentation of the city.

Nausheen Anwar, a prominent sociologist, and Assistant Professor at Department of Social Sciences, IBA, reviews the city through the lens of an urban anthropologist, and dwells on the role of cognitive mapping and cartography in documenting the city. She highlights the role of maps in reinforcing the political visions in a complex city like Karachi, bringing together the cartographer, state and non-state actors



and the non-state power dynamics. Thus, mapping for her ‘becomes a key means of territorializing state control and excluding/ including particular people by reference to a specific piece of land marked on a map’. The illustration in her booklet maps Karachi in terms of the effects of political dynamics of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over Karachi.

Rajani and Soomro, an artist and a lawyer respectively, map the city in terms of political decisions and their urban impacts. Their essay is entitled ‘a geography of exclusion’ and discusses the urban processes through which different groups

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\* Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani are Karachi based artists.

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of people have been excluded from the decision making process in the city. Their focus is on the first two decades post-independence of the sub-continent. They have also included a map documenting the shifting and relocation of early migrants from 1947 to 1967. They question the basis on which these decisions about shifting the refugees was undertaken, and touch upon the notions of equity and right to the city of the people belonging to low income groups. Yaminay Chaudhri, an artist from Karachi, questions the ‘visual architecture of longing in projections of Karachi’ and the process through which it is built and represented. Her personal account deviates from an academically oriented discourse, and weaves a relationship between urban spaces and the memory of its users. Her account is based on her childhood memories from her residence in Darakshan Housing Scheme, on the beach front in Karachi. Starting out with the description of an ordinary morning, she goes on to describing how many design elements of Darakshan Scheme were never built. Her maps in the booklet document the housing scheme, her daily routes and different types of construction that have taken place in the neighbourhood over time.

Fazal Rizvi, in his attempt to explore the relationship between colonial identify and migration presents his understanding of the city as visuals. These visuals range in scale, chronology and topography from a room, to a building, to a street, to a landscape element in the city, belonging to different chronological periods.

Malkani, has divided her booklet entitled, ‘Seeing the missing: Four Landscapes’, into four geographies, namely Ghost Geographies, Memorial Landscapes, Disappearing Images and Cybergeographies. She discusses the issue of the disappearance of Baloch people and the struggle of the Baloch nationalists. She does not state confrontational facts but she maps the disappearance of the Baloch people as time and locational maps, with perhaps the objective of visually presenting the issue, which professionals and the government is not very comfortable in discussing in public space. She also discusses how with the shrinking of public space, and because of suppression from the government, the movement of the Baloch nationals has shifted to cyberspace - the new geography, and is continuing through social media websites like Twitter and Facebook.

The essay by Shayan Rajani entitled ‘Naqsha-i-Vilayat-Sindh’, maps the cultural evolution of Sindh and attempts to understand the political and historical connection. This account is a historical map of the evolution of various cities in Sindh and their influential families. This is a value-neutral

account, presenting thought-provoking facts about the province, and the impact of the historical evolution of the different cities from within Sindh.

Sarwat Viqar’s mapping of the Old Quarter of Karachi discusses the sense of place and the inability to map the social aspects in the form of a tangible map. Her essay discusses the various layers of the Old Quarters that give the locality its complexity and uniqueness.

The series of booklets included in this publication approach to instill an understanding of the city from various different perspectives, which is interesting, but the intellectual contribution of the publication could have been greater, had more meaningful literature been included in the publication and had the research base been stronger. Nevertheless, the publication provides a fresh way of looking at the city and hints towards various ways in which people engaged with the design of the city and the built form can develop an understanding of the various layers of cultural, social, economic, governance and physical aspects of Karachi. Lastly, this book is a good resource for people wanting to understand and reflect upon various social, political, economic and physical phenomena impacting Karachi on a daily basis, for the dedicated researcher, to the casual seeker of knowledge about the city.