

KARACHI FROM THE PRISM OF URBAN DESIGN
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A Review by
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Karachi is a city that has been well-documented — mostly from a historical perspective or in sector-specific context such as, for example, covering matters of land management or water supply. However, for a city as large and complex as Karachi, issues in development and growth find connections and interfaces in a complicated mesh of physical, social, political and economic constructs that need to be understood in their entirety for clarity to be achieved. An effort to structure such a holistic canvas has been made in the publication ‘Karachi From the Prism of Urban Design’. It is a chronological study of 50 urban design cases (human settlements, infrastructure projects, planning interventions, processes) in Karachi undertaken by the Department of Architecture and Planning at the NED University of Engineering and Technology, as part of the Asia Link Project of the European Union in which a number of European universities also collaborated. Covered are housing neighbourhoods and settlements evolving over the years, industrial estates, road networks like Sharea Faisal, beaches and coastal land, urban parks, master plans and projects dealing with water, housing, transport, etc.

The authors at the very beginning identify the features that they feel make this study unique in the context of the development discourse in Karachi. The study is placed within the academic understanding of the urban design approach that is explained as the professional discipline which encompasses scenario development around urban problems and issues. This understanding seems to underwrite the makeup and DNA of the study where an attempt has been made to focus a holistic lens on the urban planning and development process in Karachi. It is therefore, stated that “urban design can be defined as a discipline that helps the



citizens, professionals and urban managers to understand the relationship among social, economic, spatial and political dynamics”. In addition, the authors feel that a case study-based approach assists in conducting research in a broad manner within multiple contextual settings. The study has tried to achieve this by decade-wise listing of projects and by classifying them in terms of being state driven, community driven or market driven. In addition, the corresponding political, institutional and social events have also been listed.

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This is evident in considering case studies that cover the diverse typologies, socio-economic profiles and administrative models of growth evident in Karachi. For example, there are case studies on housing societies, settlements like the Pir Illahi Bux (PIB) Colony, high-income localities like Kehkashan, predominantly middle-class neighbourhoods such as Gulshan-i-Iqbal, etc. The phases of development are then linked with the various planning interventions witnessed in Karachi — the master planning process — to assess the direct or indirect impacts of planning with actual development. Other than these clear categorisations, what makes this an interesting read is the standardisation and structuring that provides the same framework for analysis for each case study, starting from documenting the historical and physical context and concluding by assessing the impacts on the city.

An interesting evolving pattern of growth in the city has thus been identified where it is indicated that the initial phases in the growth of Karachi were marked by a strong government mandate manifesting in the role of a welfare state and provider to the masses. Then as the writ of the state starts diminishing, such as in the 70s, the communities and the informal sector fill the vacuum — a phase in development that is then succeeded by the market-driven approach. Critical infrastructure development projects have been synced with analyses on human settlements to evaluate how they have shaped or de-shaped the city. These include the KCR, Lyari Expressway, Port Qasim, Karachi Storm Water Drainage, KPT Underpass, Mai Kolachi, etc. For example, on Lyari Expressway the analysis leads to interesting conclusions; the study states that “when the Lyari Expressway project is eventually completed, its beneficiaries will not be the local residents or even potential users but the contractors who have acquired the works, builders and developers who have grabbed cheap land along the Lyari river bed and big investors who may construct storage and warehousing facilities in the future”.

However, it is felt that while analysing the impact on the city of the case study subjects, there could have been more of a connecting of the dots than has been the case. The impact analysis is in most cases inward-looking and the study could have benefitted much if this analysis could have

looked into the larger footprint of the projects, processes and plans under study. For example, the case study on Khuda ki Basti ends with a listing of the programme successes when analysing impacts.

Regardless, the level of research that has gone into drafting this study is to be commended. Data on Karachi is not to be found in any central database and is scattered here and there, distributed among various entities — government, private, civil society. A good effort has been made here of assembling this data, collected from various sources, in one document — particularly the relevant maps. A lack of attention to detail, however, shows in referencing and sourcing data; graphics, images, maps, and tables are, in some cases, not properly referenced. In identifying locations Google Maps have been used quite frequently and it is felt that a more authentic, academic manner could have been utilised. Then in some cases, maps are not readable.

The study, however, retains its larger credibility throughout as the language is academic, arguments have been made with supporting facts and logical analysis and no particular bias is visible. While the study ends with recommendations and conclusions, this aspect falls short of addressing fully the vast scope of the narrative brought out in the case studies. So it is felt that the main strength of the study is in the analytical content that is expertly handled. The scope of the study is vast as it tries to capture in one document a very complicated evolutionary process in the design and development of a very complex city. The authors have, however, managed to organise the data and analyses that offer a sharp insight to a wide range of stakeholders. As has been mentioned earlier, this continued narrative that capsules Karachi’s growth, connecting various aspects of development, provides readers the chance to — for example, as is stated in the study — “highlight the paradigm shifts during different political eras outlining how the shifts are related to the important events in history which brings an awareness of the interrelatedness of politics and urban development and design”. This is where one feels the study has added significant value to the urban development discourse on Karachi city.