

UNDERSTANDING KARACHI'S ARCHITECTURE; A Documentation of Public Buildings

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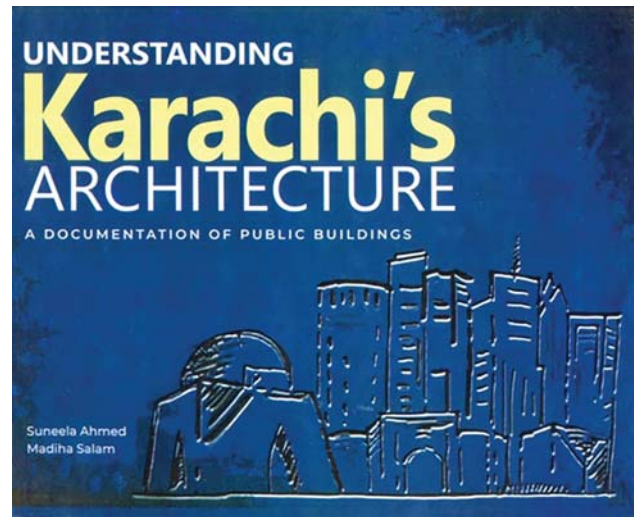
A Review by Sarah A. Khan*

BOOK REVIEW

Globalization has played an important role in shaping the world in contemporary times. On one hand, cultural homogenization is transforming the world into a global village, and there is a rising concern about the preservation and continuation of local identity. This book, which addresses the ongoing global and local identity debate, is a generous contribution to literature for students, academics, researchers, and individuals. It focuses on the role of public buildings in establishing a city's visual identity and character, as well as the various forces, individuals, and institutions that influence this process. Understanding the contributors to Karachi's evolution is a challenging task in itself, and one may always struggle to define Karachi's architectural identity. Encountering the dearth of available literature on Pakistan's built form in general and Karachi in particular, this book establishes a reference point for understanding the evolution of Karachi's visual identity.

Dr Suneela Ahmed and Ms Madiha Salam, from the Department of Architecture and Planning at NED University of Engineering and Technology, collaborated on the book. Their full biographies can be found in the book, but they share a common interest in the social, political, and environmental influences at work in architectural and urban planning and in bridging the gap between academics, research, and practice.

The book's first appearance is very handy. The dedication is inclusive, encompassing everyone who has contributed to Karachi's rich diversity, and the acknowledgement pays tribute to all the individuals and institutions who have, knowingly or unknowingly, contributed to the city's academic and built landscape. The book is organized into two sections: theory and folios. Roughly 40% of the



content is dedicated to the background, evolution, language, influences, and design paradigms of Karachi's public architecture, with the other 60% devoted to a portfolio of 80 notable public buildings in Karachi, organized chronologically.

Chapter One establishes the book's scholarly, pragmatic, and rational tone. The objectives clearly define the reasoning for the exercise, as well as how and in what ways this research may be useful to all professional architects, students, and academia. Chapter one presents a full summary of the book for the reader's convenience, brilliantly summarizing each chapter and its value to the reader. There is also a detailed description of the research methodology used for this study, which can be used as a reference for future researchers.

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Chapter two is a bittersweet account of Karachi's built form, and the plural powers behind the regulation and control of its production. Chronologically organised, it discusses the effects of local power systems, both institutional and political, on who selects what gets built and what design vocabulary is used. The narrative is divided into three important sociopolitical eras in Karachi's history: Karachi as Pakistan's capital, the shift of capital to Islamabad, and Karachi as Pakistan's economic hub. The text includes the factors behind the formation of the city's image, design movements embraced as styles of expression, and key landmark buildings, as well as the social, political, and economic decisions behind this process. It discusses the incorporation of postmodernist theories into the local context, the Islamization of architectural imagery, and the shift in building typologies from public to cooperative and commercial, before concluding with a discussion of the creation of a new culture of capitalism, class, and consumption, as well as its expression in the dominant building typology in a global image clad in glass and steel.

Chapter three is a condensed literature review establishing a theoretical framework for comprehending the built form. This chapter contains several key terms and concepts influencing a city's aesthetics and values. The second portion of this chapter is a list of noteworthy buildings chosen based on the criteria outlined above. The matrix is organised chronologically, starting with structures built in 1928 and progressing through ongoing projects in 2023, including the building's name, design paradigm, typology, date of construction, and the designer architect/firm. The matrix depicts a diverse paradigm of architectural styles in Karachi ranging from Classical Art Deco, Bombay Style, Mannerism, Modern, Early Modernist, Modernist, Post-Modernist, Regional Modernist, Regionalist, Critical Regionalist, Regional, Regional Manifestation, Regional Modern, and Islamic Architecture Influence, establishing a visual vocabulary for Karachi's amenity, commercial, corporate, education, healthcare, hospitality, recreation, and religious architecture.

The third section is another rich trove of literature, debating the role of public buildings in developing an identity for the city, separated into two sections. The first section goes into great detail about the causes and consequences of the shift in the role of government institutions from decision maker to facilitator, with a

highly influential private developer persuading and deciding what will be built and how, with no regard for the context's infrastructural and social realities. It offers a peek of the many theoretical paradigms that may be found in Karachi's built environment as the city seeks a visual identity. The last half of this chapter emphasizes the significance of localization in the construction of identity through public buildings, while also discussing the architect's responsibility, technology, materials, commercialization, and context in developing this identity.

Chapter four, along with the folios of 80 landmark public buildings, is a comprehensive account of all the public buildings constructed in Karachi from 1947 to date. It is the most important addition to the literature discussing individual buildings at length. This section is well composed to investigate the significant landmark public buildings erected during that period, the important architects and their design philosophy, major institutions overseeing public architecture, social and cultural paradigms, and their reflection in the built landscape. Several public constructions, including their planning, design, and construction, are thoroughly documented. The text is followed by a colorful portfolio of famous public buildings that includes images of the projects retrieved from the architect's archives, a summarized description of the building, the name of its architect, the date of construction, typology, location, and the construction style paradigm. Projects with architectural drawings are also featured, and others have a Google Earth image displaying their present footprint. This section will undoubtedly assist all architecture students and researchers in visually identifying famous buildings, reading their elevations and plans, and comprehending each project through the enormously rich description provided in Chapter Four.

The conclusion identifies major concerns about Karachi's public architecture, where most buildings are concentrated in the city center in modernist style and serve as a display of various aesthetics with no examples of green architecture or contextual revivalism. The corporate identity is currently taking over, demonstrating the presence of global capital looking for investment opportunities. It also highlights the importance of an urban design statutory body and bylaws for the design of built form at the urban design scale.

Finally, this significant publication extensively tackles the formally planned built form of Karachi, particularly public buildings, the impact of local power structures on what is

built and how, and an extensive categorization of the buildings into a matrix highlighting various in paradigm, typology, and lists the architect and date of construction, as well as debating the role of public buildings in developing a city identity. The bibliography at the end is a comprehensive account of all the reference material available on public architecture, particularly Karachi architecture; however, the book lacked a detailed glossary of terms and concepts used in the discourse, which I found lacking as a reader. The book cover could have been a

better representation of Karachi's rich diversity of architecture, but since they don't judge a book by its cover, the book is worth reading and a significant contribution to literature, and it is highly recommended to all professional architects, students, and academia.

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