

“If you look at Karachi and who plans it, the decisions are made by those who do not understand the problems of the ordinary people” – Arif Hasan

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*With its fast-growing population Karachi is typical of many South Asian megacities that struggle to meet the needs of low income citizens. The eminent Pakistani architect **Arif Hasan** has been involved in urban development for over 40 years. Here he talks to **Mukti Jain Campion** about his home city's post-Partition evolution.*



MJC: Can you describe what happened to Karachi at Partition?

AH: Before Partition Karachi was a Hindu-majority city and a Sindhi-speaking city. The architecture of the old quarters of Karachi resembled old Bombay, a port city with which it shared many similarities of culture, languages and food. But Karachi's demography underwent huge change in 1947. Within a few months of Partition, 80,000 people arrived from Delhi, including me. That was the beginning of an exodus from India which continued until around 1955 adding over half a million people to the city's population. By the time the first wave of refugees had settled in, Karachi had become a predominantly Muslim city and more than half of its population was Urdu-speaking. Very few cities in the world have undergone such a rapid change.

At the time of Partition Karachi was capital of Sindh, but it became capital of Pakistan and the capital of Sindh was pushed out to Hyderabad. That was when the link between this Sindhi-speaking city and its hinterland was broken. Many of Karachi's ethnic problems are related to this fact. Today Karachi is the capital of a Sindhi-speaking province but Sindhi is not the main language.

We've had major increases in population ever since. After Partition the next wave came with industrialisation in the late 1950s when huge building projects were implemented and Pashtun labour was brought from what was then North West Frontier Province and from what we call Azad (Free) Kashmir. This started a chain of major migration from those areas. However this migration was not resented.

Was there housing and other provision made for the expanding population at that time?

Remarkably, the federal and provincial governments were able to accommodate this quadrupling of Karachi's population. They were able to supply water, lay plots where people could live, begin a transport system and extend the electricity lines.

Karachi is not an unplanned city. It has unplanned areas and extensions. The first planning was done by the Swedish firm MRV and to this day the inner structure of the post-colonial city follows their plan. But the plan was not fully implemented.



Image: Arif Hasan speaking at LSE. Credit: Tim Aldcroft

The university was being constructed next to the planned federal capital area and in 1953 there were student riots in which the refugee population took part and they were able to topple three governments in one year. This sparked a whole debate around whether Karachi should be capital of Pakistan given the violent nature of its politics. Then General Ayub Khan came to power and he took the decision that the capital should shift from Karachi and the working class population (including the refugees) should be housed in two satellite towns about 20km outside Karachi so they would create no further problems.

This plan was conceived by [C.A. Doxiadis](#) the renowned Greek urban planner who went on to design the new capital, Islamabad. An essential part of his vision was that there would be industries in these two new towns which would offer employment, but the industries didn't develop fast enough so the "barbarians" kept coming back to the city to work. This marked the beginning of Karachi's transport problems. It also changed a multi-class, multi-ethnic city into an ethnically-segregated and class-segregated city. A lot of Karachi's ethnic problems and conflicts were born from Doxiadis's plan.

You went to England to study architecture at Oxford Polytechnic and then trained in practices in Europe. What was Karachi like when you returned in 1967?

The Karachi I found in 1967 was living on colonial kinetic energy. It was governed by a brown colonial elite who were the custodians of that culture. Like most port towns it had bars, billiard rooms, many cinemas, and a fairly vibrant folk culture which was a product of the city itself. A lot of multi-class space was available at that time in the city centre. There were no traffic jams, a reasonable public transport system including a tramway that linked the important parts of the city.

But the city was divided and underneath all of that you had the political assertion of a populist culture emerging in protest against the brown-skinned remnants of colonial rule. There was anger against the alcohol shops, the nightclubs, and against what was conceived as obscenity on television. So that was very much there in the vernacular press and Bhutto cashed in on it. That was the Karachi I found on my return.

How did your career in Karachi develop?

My work as an architect in Karachi was initially for rich people. I think I made the homes for the richest people at that

time. I also worked for developers. But a few things upset me.

There was one case in 1974 relating to people I had known as a child, because we had lived in an area where refugees had settled and rich and poor were all mixed up. Their homes were to be bulldozed for an infrastructure project. They were not told why. They had been promised they would be given land nearby but did not materialise.

I had an important client who was a very high government official. I told him what was happening and he said: "Oh, these people they are vagabonds, their women are prostitutes. They just cause harm to the city". I was shocked because I had known these people since they were kids. So the settlement was bulldozed and they were packed off to a remote desolate area in the hills north of Karachi. I helped them with whatever advice I could give with building their homes there. It was the beginning of my understanding of land issues and of what housing was all about. My very conservative Oxford education hadn't prepared me for any of this.

You are known for social empowerment and sustainable approaches to urban development, how did that come about?

That also is related to a number of things that happened around the same time. I used to travel up and down the Indus in a boat, belonging to Mohanas who are fishermen and load carriers. I got to know them well. Then I heard they were going to be removed to the other side of the river where the fish were not available in same numbers. So I did some drawings and I wrote a letter for them to argue their case. They took it to their Member of National Assembly who asked them "Who did this for you?"

I was summoned to see him and he asked me: "Why are you spoiling these people?" We had a conversation and he became very sympathetic; I don't know if it was our conversation but the fishermen were able to remain on their land.

A few things like this happened. One of the first articles I wrote said an architect has to deal with these things because there are people who can benefit from such advice. The article was read by the chairperson of the Appropriate Technology Development Authority and he invited me to join as a consultant. We travelled all over Pakistan and I would say that he was my mentor because from him that I learnt the relationship between human beings and technology.

That was my first education in dealing with communities and led to the pledge I made in 1983:

"I will not do projects that will irreparably damage the ecology and environment of the area in which they are located. I will not do projects that increase poverty, dislocate people and destroy the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of communities that live in the city. I will not do projects that destroy multi-class space and violate building by-laws and zoning regulations. And I will always object to insensitive projects that do all this, provided I can offer viable alternatives."

I have tried to keep my pledge over my career since.

Can you describe an example of your approach to self-empowerment?

In 1981 I was invited to work with [Akhtar Ahmeed Khan](#), the very famous South Asian social scientist, on the [Orangi Pilot Project](#). Orangi was an unofficial settlement on the northern fringe of Karachi, which was not that big at that time. It was very near a large government development which is empty to this day whereas Orangi has prospered and developed.

I worked with Akhtar Ahmeed Khan from 1981 until the time he died in 1999. My work was to develop a sanitation model which could incorporate his concept of self-help. In the settlement there were lanes of 20-40 houses. You went there and said if you want sanitation, these are the benefits of our approach. So if you can elect, select or nominate a leader for the lane, he can come and apply to us for help but you all have to be a part of this.

We would work out the estimates in labour and materials, we gave them a plan with calculated levels and provide technical teams who supervised the work. They collected the money, we never touched their money at all. The citizen groups had constant quarrels amongst themselves and we didn't interfere. The project was very successful and we had literally thousands of applications. We couldn't deal with them all so we began a training programme of masons who could build the sanitation system and the people could approach them directly. It became a very big movement and as a result, out of the 108,000 houses, approximately 105,000 have a sanitation system.

Orangi made me understand many things. In particular that we will never be able to provide homes for our people. It is simply not possible, given the rate of growth. It is not a matter of resources. Even if we had the resources, we could not do it. Firstly it would require a very different planning approach with architects and engineers trained to work to lower standards. Secondly there is the land issue. If you look at Karachi and who plans it, the decision-making is done by people who do not understand the problems of the ordinary people. The government planners who have worked in informal settlements do understand – but they are not the decision-makers.

Over the decades that you have been working in Karachi have you seen this understanding improve?

The understanding has improved but other things have since happened. Neo-liberalism has captured academia, planning and politics. The new mantra became: "It's not the business of the state to do business" so the distance between state and people increased substantially. The new focus on direct foreign investment means projects have replaced planning.

Do you think Karachi can still improve living conditions for its citizens?

Certain parts of Karachi have already improved for its citizens but for the majority of the city's population, the conditions have certainly not improved. Transport, housing, the general environment, health, they have not improved. They have deteriorated. In percentage terms you can say we have done wonderfully but if you look at real figures we have not done well.

But you have a younger generation and the social indicators in the current 15-24 group in Karachi have improved enormously. That is change that is bound to happen when a city expands as a result of new ideas, the media and so on. Just to give you two figures: in the 1961 Census 63% of women in this age group were married and 38% men. If you extrapolate the 1998 Census figures to 2006 then 17% women in this age group are married and 8% men. It's the first time in history of Karachi we have an overwhelming majority of unmarried adolescents whose literacy percentage is in the 80s.

This is a very big difference from the previous generation, but at the moment I think they are too scared to be demanding because the city has had a rough time with targeted killings and bomb blasts, so there is fear. The figures I've given you have changed gender relations and family structures and with these two changes there is bound to be a systematic organised demand, I think it's just a matter of one more generation.

How do you feel about the changes that have taken place to Karachi's architecture over your lifetime?

I am not a conservationist but I am afraid that we will cause enormous harm to our built heritage if we are not able to

rein in the greed and power of developers. I sit on the Sindh Heritage Committee and I see the power they have and I think this power should not lie with developers, it should lie with the state. Everything that happened in the American Wild West in the rush for gold, is now happening for land.

Arif Hasan spoke at a joint South Asia Centre/[LSE Cities](#) event on Urbanisation Trends in Karachi in November. Listen to the podcast [here](#).

The first LSE Pakistan Summit 'Pakistan @ 70' will take place in Karachi on 10-11 April 2017. Read more about the panels [here](#). Registration details will also be posted on the event page in the new year.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Arif Hasan is a practising Pakistani architect-planner, writer, teacher and activist working in Karachi.

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