DRAFT

Rethinking the Urban in Pakistan at NED University

The turn of the New Year found several AIPS members in lively conversation with friends and colleagues in Pakistan at the collaborative workshop, “Rethinking the Urban in Pakistan,” held at NED University’s Karachi campus on January 1-2, 2013.

The workshop theme brought anthropologists, planners, historians, artists, and activists together to discuss the change of Pakistan’s cities over time, and the differing human costs and possibilities those changes have enabled.

Day one of the workshop began with presentations by Fariha Ubaid and Nausheen Anwar who each looked at the issue of violence and insecurity in Karachi. Fariha Ubaid urged participants to broaden their understandings of what counts as “violence” in the city, attending to ways the city’s physical architecture embodies manifold evidence for, and sometimes offers resistance to, the various forms violence takes. Nausheen Anwar’s research on migration and settlement construction on Karachi’s urban fringe placed new constructions within a dynamic of reciprocal exchange between the city and the countryside in which the city is fundamentally about mobility.

Cornell University professor and AIPS member Iftikhar Dadi opened the second session of the day by discussing aesthetic strategies of intervention that characterize site-specific art practices in contemporary Karachi. For Dadi, this new wave of art practice offers the opportunity to think of the city as partially produced through the intense circulation of images. Among the works Dadi discussed was the “Henna Hands” project by artist Naiza Khan, who served as a discussant for the panel. Professor Noman Ahmed, Chair of the Architecture and Urban Planning Department at NED, closed the session by presenting his ongoing research on graffiti in Karachi. He raised the durable contests between freedom of expression versus rights to private property that make graffiti more significant than simply “writing on the wall.”

The afternoon of day one began with a talk by AIPS president Kamran Asdar Ali on cinema in 1960s Karachi, a paper that reminded the audience of how the city reveled in its newfound modernity during the decade. This is perhaps especially true of the spaces and surfaces that comprise the city’s beachfront, a setting that formed a recurring point of reference in early films set in Karachi. Writer and critic Asif Farrukhi contrasted the filmic city emergent in Ali’s paper with Karachi’s presence in Urdu novels and short stories. Despite the wealth of material available with which to explore this theme, Farrukhi emphasized how little research has been done so far, and pointed out promising directions for future research. Princeton University historian Gyan Prakash finished out the panel with a paper on Mumbai that suggested interesting parallels with the Karachi papers. Arguing that recent efforts to turn Mumbai into a “world class city,” on the lines of, say, Shanghai, overlook the many ways that residents in the city orient their dreams towards more local—though no less “world class”—destinations. In both Mumbai and Karachi, the promises and perils embodied in sea-front modernity have long formed a stable substrate of urban imagination.

The afternoon session of day one concluded with presentations by Naiza Khan on her recent work on the island of Manora, in Karachi harbor. Several of the photographs, sculptures, and paintings Khan has developed through this research are currently on exhibit at the Eli and Edyth Broad Gallery at Michigan State University in Naiza’s first solo exhibition in the US: “Karachi Elegies.” This exhibit has been curated by Professor Karen Zitzewitz, and partially funded by AIPS. Archaeologist Asma Ibrahim, director of the National Museum in Karachi, closed out the day by exploring the ways that museums help define the character of the city, and may even shed light on the dynamics of urban growth.

The second day of the workshop began with presentations by University of Texas doctoral student Noman Baig, urban planner and architect Arif Hassan, urban planner Farhan Anwar, and Sindh Department of Antiquities Secretary Kaleemullah Lashari. Baig presented excerpts from his dissertation research on moneylenders and traders in the Tariq Road area of Karachi. There he has been exploring the unstable intersection of neoliberal economic practices with temporal and moral orders derived from the esoteric religious practices of his respondents. Arif Hasan followed with a masterful synopsis of planning and development history in Karachi, arguing that “planning” has now been replaced by a logic of self-contained “projects,” a result of which is an increasingly segregated city. The absence of pro-poor activism within Karachi’s dynamic and growing new middle-class has led to the poor being pushed out to the margins of the city. It has also produced a city changing faster than the values its residents uphold, leading to conflict between generations, classes, and genders that sometimes take violent forms.

Farhan Anwar, an urban planner based in Karachi, argued that existing urban governance frameworks no longer serve the goals of sustainable urban development in the city of Karachi. Rather than trying to repair them piecemeal, Anwar challenged workshop participants to imagine the implications of a radically different governance model, one partially exemplified today in the city of Los Angeles. Kaleemullah Lashari closed the morning with a paper tracing the volatile world of heritage conservation in Karachi. He pointed out that “notified” and protected buildings are sometimes lucrative objects of desire for private capital. Using a case study of several older market buildings on Karachi’s M. A. Jinnah Road that were partially damaged by Moharram riots in 2009, Lashari showed that despite government protection, private owners had the strongest say in how these buildings were restored. This questions how the “past” assumes a form of value in tangible heritage, yet has to compete with other (monetized) forms of value.

The second session on day two was initiated by Professor Will Glover, from the University of Michigan, who presented ongoing research into the governance of small towns in colonial Punjab. Noting that “small towns” sometimes became larger municipalities in the 1920s and 1930s, but often petitioned to revert back to being “villages,” Glover outlined how urban categories in South Asia were partially forged by the politics of small town finance while the subcontinent was under British power. Sarosh Hashmat Lodi followed with a fascinating paper on the precariousness of life in Pakistan, as most of the country’s built structures sit astride one of the world’s most active earthquake zones. In a statistic that stunned many in the audience, Professor Lodi estimated that over 90% of all structures in Pakistan, due to poor construction, are at risk of seismic failure. Given the risk to life and limb such a statistic represents, it is no wonder he referred to Pakistan’s houses, shops, and apartment buildings as “weapons of mass destruction.”

The workshop finished on day two with afternoon presentations by artist and educator Durrya Kazi, author Rumana Husain, and independent research scholars Haris Gazdar and Hussain Bux Mallah. Durrya Kazi asked workshop participants to reflect on the fact that most of Karachi’s 8000 acres of officially-designated “open space” has been encroached on by government or private developers, leaving only slivers and gaps of urban respite available to the city’s millions of residents. In such a context, she argued, the activism of artists in the realm of urban landscape interventions holds more importance than many assume. Rumana Husain reminded workshop attendees that Karachi has long been a refuge for cosmopolitan communities. Drawing on her recently published book *Karachiwala*, Rumana suggested we think of Karachi as containing an “entire subcontinent” of ethnicities and different cultural styles, an idea that resonated with an audience sensitive to ethnic strife as a condition of Karachi city life. Professors Haris Gazdar and Hussain Bux Mallah closed out the workshop with a fascinating study of how ethnicity and kinship shape—and sometimes fail to predict—political behaviors within Karachi’s informal settlements. Their innovative methods promise to add theoretical and empirical rigor to discussions about how migration, inter- and intra-ethnic solidarity, and the city’s urban form combine to produce new forms of identity and political affiliation in Karachi.

“Rethinking the Urban in Pakistan” was organized and jointly funded by AIPS, the University of Texas at Austin’s South Asia Institute, Habib University and NED University of Engineering and Technology in Karachi. Faculty, staff, and students in the department of architecture and urban planning at NED University were superbly gracious hosts throughout the event, making workshop participants and observers alike feel at home on NED’s beautiful historic campus.