

City and plans

Arif Hasan December 10, 2018

5

THE recent demolitions of formal and informal businesses in Karachi have raised some important questions. What is a city? What are encroachments? What is culture and heritage and law?



Urban Resource Centre

A-2/2, 2nd Floor, Westland Trade Centre,
Commercial Area, Block 7 & 8 Shaheed-e-Millat Road, Karachi Pakistan
Tel: +92 21 – 3431 5656 E-mail; urc@cyber.net.pk, Web Site: urckarachi.org

City and plans

Arif Hasan December 10, 2018

5

THE recent demolitions of formal and informal businesses in Karachi have raised some important questions. What is a city? What are encroachments? What is culture and heritage and law?

The city is where people live, work, come to study, trade and fulfil their dreams. These activities require wholesale markets which we did not provide, and so they expanded in the old city and destroyed almost all our built heritage. They required cargo terminals which we also did not provide so they developed wherever there was space without workers' homes, toilets, and other social requirements, causing not only social problems but also immense problems for heavy vehicles exiting the city.

We have not provided bus terminals, depots, and workshops, and so by paying bhatta they have established themselves on the roads of the city creating unbearable congestion. We were unable to provide affordable and accessible housing to our working class so they live in katchi abadis in perpetual insecurity without access to proper education, health, family planning, and jobs.

People work and at lunchtime they need places to eat cheaply. Formally, these do not exist so pavement restaurants and hawkers develop to cater to their needs. The working classes have a desperate need for cheap bazaars but there are no spaces for them, so they occupy the pavements of the city. All that we were unable to give to the city, and which the city has acquired itself out of necessity, is known as encroachments.

Heritage is not just buildings. It is much more than that.

However, we have developed huge housing societies with lots of big plots for the elite and the middle classes of this country but here too we were not able to provide sufficient space for entertainment, recreation, health and education facilities. So today, they function out of houses and commercial areas not meant for them. These are also encroachments.

Heritage is not just buildings. It is much more than that — it is living tradition which is added to as the city evolves and which is related to the history of the neighbourhood in which the buildings are located. It is nihari, sajji, Baloch ice cream, Ghaseetay Khan Ka Haleem and public spaces to have them at an affordable cost. Such spaces too, we have not provided.

In the narrow lanes of Karachi's settlements, young people create libraries, arrange mushairas, qawwalis, variety programmes, practice the musical instruments that they have secretly learned to use, and young singers desperately try to find a place in the

world of music. There are no spaces for them to learn, practise, develop and perform. As such, many aspiring artists fail to fulfil their dreams. We have never thought of these issues or of multi-class spaces where popular culture can evolve and take root. And then there are no places where we can protest against the real or conceived tyranny of the state, international events and social customs and biases.

Cities are living entities. They do not wait for formal plans to acquire what they need. True, they acquire it in an ad hoc manner, shaped by the limitations of the financial and planning capabilities and capacities of their informal planners. And if the planning does not accommodate and support this informal process, the city bursts and eats up that which was formally planned.

But why did Karachi's planners and politicians not plan for all that was required? One of the possible reasons was an absence of anthropological research on socioeconomic relations which did not feed into the planning process. As such, the planners were unable to understand the social dynamics of the city. The other aspect is related to the fact that the planners and the politicians were more interested in the form of the city than aspects of livability, the product of class biases in their education and society. The development of large-scale industrial estates was undertaken, but again, in most cases, without space for workers' homes, and the informal support facilities that they required.

Architects are supposed to be the conscience of society for the development of a humane city. However, Karachi's architects have sought patronage from the rich and the powerful and catered to their needs. With the exception of a few, they have not worked or lobbied towards accommodating in a humane manner the needs of an evolving city. Hopefully, as a result of the demolitions that have taken place, they will come closer to the ethics of their profession and try and integrate the needs of Karachi's citizens into the larger planning process.

As far as law is concerned, there should always be a possibility to appeal against its procedural aspects so as to protect the functions the city has acquired out of necessity in the absence of planning or official indifference and corruption.

Published in Dawn, December 10th, 2018

Download the new Dawn mobile app here:

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1450561/city-and-plans>