Contingency and Architectural Speculation

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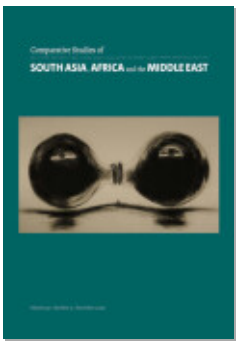

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The tallest skyscraper and the oldest Sufi shrine vie for space and attention in Pakistan's largest city, Karachi. The newly constructed Bahria Icon Tower looms above the dome of the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, both structures etching a distinctive profile against the horizon (fig. 1). They have been forced together through suspicious real estate deals, kickbacks, and the sale of public property.[1] The sacred precincts of the shrine have been encroached on, and the homeless and indigent have been forced to sleep under nearby flyovers or seek shelter in the large lot that used to be a popular amusement park.

The skyscraper is at once a sign of prosperity and of national pride; the slum stands in contrast, as a marker of current, if hardly new, political and spatial realities. Such stark polarities are not surprising, when deep and insurmountable inequities define contemporary life across a region and a globe riven by disease and environmental degradation, where outside massive gated communities there are drying riverbeds, and at the foothills of new eco-lodges are refugee communities displaced and rendered subhuman.

Architectural histories highlight such complexities, along with the manners in which stakeholders inscribe often conflicting strategies within the built environment. Interrogating the relevant histories and archives is an exercise that is at once bounded and political; it is also often dependent on numerous factors—on accidents of survival, the availability of sources, or the formation of a new body of knowledge. Like the spaces studied, their archives are linked to the past and yet are prophetic; their meanings are mutable and contingent on the users; and, most importantly, they are expressive of particular moments in time. Such is the case of this collection of essays on a region construed as South Asia and a discipline broadly defined as architecture. The period covered is from the second half of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, in other words, the late colonial period and the era of the fully formed nation-state. The essays delve deep into intangible motivations (for example, of an émigré and an architect), personal effects (such as sketches and letters), and ephemeral materials (film and vegetation), to expose architecture as both a field of inquiry and a process of interrogation.

The aim of this afterword is to serve as an addendum to the chronological and typological breadth of the collection, by focusing on a contemporary moment in what could be called a "global" city, Karachi.[2] The aim is also to highlight an important aspect of the articles, the transnational connections that bring the term *South Asia* itself into question. That is to say, there are no absolutes in terms of regional or nationalist narratives that cannot be subverted when looked at closely. Instead, what may better define the region's built environment is its dependence on mobility—of people, technology, capital, and ideology—as probed in the preceding articles. Here, I add two other dimensions—financial speculation and religion—which are not often juxtaposed together in the discourses of architecture or modernism, although they certainly define the ways in which cities in the South Asian subcontinent are inhabited, altered, and imagined.

Karachi does not, of course, represent the whole of Pakistan, nor do the South Asian nation-states represented in this collection (that is, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, but also including Afghanistan, Bhutan, the

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Figure 1. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi and Bahria Icon Towers, Karachi (2020). Photograph by the author.

Maldives, and Nepal) satisfactorily account for all the populations and communities for whom the region is home (for example, those claiming independence, such as Kashmiris, or refugees and displaced people, such as the Rohingya). Indeed, the term is clumsy and ambiguous, supposedly describing a land mass but also geopolitical realities. Set up against the "Middle East" for example, South Asia is presented as a collective that, although heterodox in terms of traditions, languages, and religions, is connected through shared histories of trade, empire, and colonialism. What had once seemed like arbitrary lines drawn by colonial rulers have over the past three-quarters of a century hardened into more and more distinct territorial identities. Jokes once shared across regional languages (such as Pashto, Punjabi, and Bengali) are now replaced by nationalisms predicated on military aggression and religious violence.

The "divide and rule" mantra of British colonialism left behind deep fissures but few strategies for

shared prosperity. For the countries constituting South Asia, issues of economic growth and social progress are discussed in intergovernmental organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), even as cross-border aggression and refugee migration serve to destabilize their sovereignty. Multinational development organizations have field offices in every major city of the region, combatting poverty as well as environmental devastation; the World Bank steps in every so often to bail out corrupt institutions; conglomerates, from Proctor and Gamble to Nestle, sell everything from drugs to water, their factories often subsidized and protected by governments indebted to them for their contributions to the national GDP. Equally imbedded are transnational ideologies, from Wahhabism to communism, weaponized by extrastate actors to sow discord and division in once multiethnic, multiconfessional communities.

The urban and architectural landscape of the region is similarly intertwined and contingent. Construction companies based in Dubai, specializing in building malls and gated residential communities, are transforming the ways in which people live, in South Asia and across the world. Companies such as the Emirati Emaar Properties, a real estate development firm, showcase field offices in Pakistan and India as well as Egypt and Morocco, and its projects span the globe, from Istanbul to Los Angeles. Although the COVID-19 pandemic may temper the firm's ambitions, its signature blend of luxury and exclusivity has already found local imitations that cater to an upwardly mobile middle class seeking prestige markers, and an upper class that values signature brands and the Dubai association. Emaar is building a large multitower, mixed-use development, Crescent Bay, on a sparsely populated beachfront of Pakistan's largest city, Karachi (fig. 2). Replicating the luxury lifestyle industry that has become the United Arab Emirates brand, the residential-cum-retail and hospitality towers overlooking the Arabian Sea are marketed to a growing upper middle class returning from the Gulf, but whose roots may be traced across the subcontinent.

Karachi, like its counterparts across South Asia, is a site of loss and uncertainty. Buildings are preserved or destroyed, transformed or discarded, as socioeconomic forces much stronger than cement and concrete vie for power and authority. Thriving markets and landmarks give way to real estate speculation that more often than not fails, leaving behind substandard construction even as it lines the pockets of corrupt officials. As the city evolved from colonial to federal government in the mid-twentieth century, its edges grew into massive suburbs,

Figure 2. Crescent Bay, under construction (2017). Courtesy of Developing Pakistan Facebook group.

Figure 3. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi and Bahria Icon Tower (under construction, 2018). Photograph by the author.

Figure 4. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi, Karachi (2005). Wikipedia Commons.

catering to migrants from the agricultural hinterland as well as from cities across its borders.[3] The wars in Palestine and then Afghanistan, and then the Iranian revolution, brought refugees: some able to assimilate and prosper and others struggling to survive in shantytowns and camps along the borders. At the same time, the oil wealth of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf attracted millions away from the city, sending back paychecks and electronics, and bringing with them the new consumerism that would define South Asian neoliberalism at the end of the twentieth century. Today, Karachi's urban fabric is shredded by flyovers and segregated by exclusive enclaves and, soon, massive gated communities.[4] The rising skyscrapers express that segregation on a different axis, but are even more troubling as they homogenize the skyline and leach resources at an exponential level.

A striking example of the interrelated speculation and social and economic divisions is presented in a project overseen by Bahria Town, an Islamabad-based company that has built large gated communities in the capital and in Lahore. More recently it has undertaken a controversial new development located off the Karachi-Hyderabad Motorway. The development will effectively be a semiautonomous township with the capacity to house over a million people (on a plot of land that is approximately 40,000 acres), and will also include malls and shopping centers, schools, and a massive grand mosque.[5] Speculating on economic growth and upward mobility, Bahria Town projects an aspiration of modernity and prosperity. The most visible marker of these aspirations is not remote or hidden off the highway, but visible in one of the oldest parts of Karachi, the posh Clifton neighborhood. The recently completed Bahria Icon Towers, a sixty-two-story pair of high-rise buildings, rise above the Arabian Sea. The two-pronged construction, open for occupancy in 2020, houses commercial offices and residential apartments in addition to a megamall, cinema, and several expensive restaurants. Designed by the Karachi-based firm Arshad Shahid Abdulla, the towers slice through the skyline of the city, joining a growing number of waterfront developments that turn their backs to the old city and its socioeconomic diversity.[6]

While the high-rises await their final destiny amid a global pandemic and likely economic collapse, their effect on a historic part of Karachi has already been

Figure 5. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi, Karachi (2020). Photograph by Paul-Mehdi Rizvi.

felt. The issue is not simply in regard to a luxury real estate development, but more its alteration of the rituals and devotions that took place in a centuries-old sacred precinct that it now overshadows. In 2011, a meeting was held in the house of the chief minister of Sindh to consider the renovation of Abdullah Shah Ghazi's shrine. Since at least the eighth century CE, the shrine, named for the patron saint of the city, has stood on a hilly outcrop extending into the Arabian Sea. In the mid-twentieth century, with funds from the custodian and devotees, the modest structure was expanded and embellished with an eclectic mix of local Sindhi tilework and ornament.[7] Even though the endowment of the shrine was "nationalized" by coming under the municipal Awqaf administration in 1962, in the next century its care and management was to return to the private sector.[8]

The Wahhabism espoused by Saudi clerics in the wake of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was, thirty years later, well established in Pakistani madrasas as well as the army, and had infiltrated both militant as well as mainstream Sunni belief. Waves of sectarian violence in Pakistan were fed by cross-border aggression by the Taliban as well as polemics by Saudi clerics in Yemen and Riyadh. In 2010, the shrine of Shah Ghazi was bombed by a militant group that also attacked two large and popular shrines in the Punjab province, that of Fariduddin Ganjshakar in Pakpattan and that of Data Ganj Baksh in Lahore. In October 2010, the *Guardian* newspaper reported that the perpetrator was the "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a Sunni sectarian group that has previously targeted Shias. In recent years it has developed ties to the Taliban and al-Qaida."[9] The bombing of Sufi shrines came on the heels of targeted attacks on Shi'i Muslims, as a form of intimidation and civil unrest. After the bombing, the Sindh government entered an agreement with the real estate developer Bahria Town to renovate the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, which would adjoin the planned Icon Towers (fig. 3). In a departure from religious custom in which pious individuals seeking salvation in the afterlife endowed shrines and paid for their renovations, this rebuilding project was undertaken by a development company aiming to ingratiate itself to the regional

Figure 6. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi, side entrance, Karachi (2020). Photograph by the author.

Figure 7. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi, interior tilework, Karachi (2020). Photograph by the author.

Figure 8. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi, interior, showing mausoleum, Karachi (2020). Photograph by the author.

government and offset a massive commercial project by performing a "public service."

Abdullah Shah Ghazi's shrine, on its perch above the Arabian Sea, had once sat amid a dense thicket of stores and food kitchens, as well as a vast entertainment complex called Playland, which, from 1965 onward, attracted families to one of the few public places shared by all the citizens of Karachi.[10] The pilgrimage rituals blended with the celebratory air of the amusement park: religion and entertainment were seamlessly intertwined. The shrine was reached by a monumental stairway cutting through throngs of merchants selling garlands of fresh roses and devotional banners to lay on the tomb.[11] The tall, multilevel square tomb was clad in deep blue and white tiles and topped with a large green dome visible from miles away (fig. 4). The interior was brightly

Figure 9. Shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi, interior, showing mausoleum, Karachi (2020). Photograph by the author.

colored and lit by colorful neon lights, the cenotaph enclosed in a metal lattice, embellished with gold and silver ribbons and scented with roses. With the renovation, the shrine's eclecticism and colorful ornamentation was replaced by a corporate exterior design (fig. 5). Beige stone cladding was embellished with traditional Quranic verses, the tile work generic and unassuming (fig. 6). The interior decoration no longer reflected local Sindhi craftsmanship as it once did, but, with its floral Iznik tiles and generic blue and white calligraphy, seemed sourced from a design pattern book of Islamic art (fig. 7). The cenotaph, however, remained the focus of the space, majestic and resplendent in colorful textiles and covered in flower petals and garlands (figs. 8–9).

In the courtyard outside, instead of games and amusements or densely packed shops selling toys and seashells, there is an austere mosque. The new "Dargah" mosque is certainly redundant, as it is placed within a holy sanctuary, and just a few hundred meters from the regularly visited Madina Mosque. However, in placing a mosque within the shrine precinct, the developers bowed to the new conservatism, which aims to either destroy popular Sufi shrines, or bring them under control—in this case, by adding a normative feature, the mosque. The mosque offers both protection to the shrine and transforms it from a deeply rooted religious site imbedded in the everyday life of the city, to a symbol of transnational corporate and religious forces that seek to homogenize and regulate urban life in Karachi. Both the shrine and the adjacent Bahria Icon Tower are crisscrossed by massive flyovers that wedge both structures into small demarcated zones, thus also foreclosing their accessibility to pedestrian traffic (fig. 10). What could be a vibrant public space is instead reduced to a branding opportunity, bringing great wealth to contractors and real estate investors, while displacing local histories and rituals.

The experiences described here of a single city are shared across South Asia, perhaps across the global South. Transnational financial networks intermingle with political and religious ideologies in ways that often

Figure 10. Aerial view showing shrine of Abdulla Shah Ghazi and Bahria Icon Tower, Karachi (2019). Courtesy of Developing Pakistan Facebook group.

hamstring local forms of urban and architectural innovation. Yet, as the articles in this section so eloquently demonstrate, architectural knowledge remains one of the most important vectors for understanding the built and intangible heritage, the psychic and physical dimensions of political change, and the speculative and resurgent power of nations and corporations as they represent their own interests, often at the cost of the public. In such contexts, the archive is no longer simply a collection of documents, not only the revelation of a story, but an agent uncovering unexpected rituals, motivations, and forms of inhabitation.

These interventions also remind us that architecture is itself Janus-faced—it looks backward to an ambition and it is frozen in time as soon as the first brick is laid. Yet in that first idea is also a projection into the future, whether of social change or financial reward. It is by looking at the traces of those aspirations and future projections that the historian and the architect can construct a narrative of what happened and what might be. In so doing, they, like the authors in this collection, also evoke the power of Janus to open up new vistas and to bring about change in the disciplinary and intellectual spaces they occupy. Writing today, as the world shutters itself against an invisible enemy, new ways of living must be discovered in these imaginings.

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Notes

1. As reported in the leading English-language newspaper: Asad, "NAB Failure to Trace Malik Riaz Irks Judge."

2. The discourse on the global city is associated with the 1991 classic text by Saskia Sassen, *Global City.*

3. For an architectural and historical mapping of the colonial history of Karachi, see Lari, *Dual City*.

4. On the "enclavization" of Karachi, see Kaker, "Responding to, or Perpetuating, Urban Insecurity?"

5. Bahria Town's website gives an overview, but much of the information about the development projects is in newspapers that report on the fines and controversies surrounding the projects. www.bahriatown.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=63&Itemid=103 (accessed April 4, 2020).

6. See also the case of Port Grand, a high-end retail and restaurant complex, which is discussed in Anwar and Viqar, "Producing Cosmopolitan Karachi."

7. Shaw, *Pakistan Handbook*, 59.

8. The relationship between shrines and the state is explored in an example from the Punjab province in Philippon, "Ambiguous and Contentious Politicization."

9. *Guardian*, "Pakistan Bomb Kills Several at Sufi Shrine," October 25, 2010, www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/25/bomb-sufi-shrine-pakistan.

10. By the 2000s Playland was replaced by a massive park, the Bagh-i Ibn Qasim, which remains a well-manicured, but now inaccessible site.

11. A poetic response to the changes described here is given by the novelist and journalist Mohammed Hanif; see Hanif, "Saint and the Skyscraper." See also the commentary Hasan, "'Future' of Karachi's Public Spaces."

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