Architecture and planning in Pakistan – then and now

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ABSTRACT

Architectural and planning education and practice have undergone significant changes since the 1960s and 70s, particularly in Developing Countries. This includes the adoption of an anti-poor vocabulary and the marginalisation of the state’s role in providing low-cost housing for low-income groups and ultimately resulted in a change in the goals of planning. However, placing the blame solely on the growth/adoption of neoliberalism would be reductionist since architects like Le Corbusier were promoting their ideas of modernist communities well before the former emerged onto the scene. The paper outlines the ways in which this change has impacted society and suggests that the values of equity and justice be promoted through architectural and planning education and practice so as to create a more sensitive and pro-poor society.

Over the years, I have seen major changes in architectural and planning practice and the manner in which architecture and planning is taught. In this small paper, I will try and identify some of the changes that I have experienced.

Architecture

| Clients then:          | Isms then:          |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| State                 | Modernism          |
| Elite                 |                    |
| Rich                  | Modernism          |
| Corporate sector      | Postmodernism and its various isms |
| Developers            | Critical regionalism |
| NGOs working with the poor | Community architecture |
| The poor themselves   |                    |

After attending four years at an architecture school in the UK and an additional three years in architect offices in Europe, I returned to Pakistan in 1968 and established my private practice in Karachi. The architecture school I attended was conservative, to say the least. The masters of modernism were considered gods, and architects were supposed to fashion a beautiful new world, which was to determine how people were to live. I, too, believed in all this until I had to deal with the reality of Pakistan.

All the important architects working in Karachi at the time when I started to practice were also modernists. So, it was alright to bulldoze squatter colonies and old buildings and construct new modernist developments on their land, as Le Corbusier had proposed for his famous plan for Algiers. No architects protested the bulldozing, but the bulldozed residents and those living in the old quarters where buildings were demolished, did protest, and often violently. The profession did not notice this.

At that time, the architect really had only two clients: the elite and the state. The elite were refined, did not exhibit their wealth, were involved in city affairs and their children visited the local museums and zoos, both through their school and as a result of family outings. This was because Karachi then had a colonial port culture and the elite were its custodians. Housing was the domain of the state which produced constructed ‘core’ houses for its poor and for the lower level staff of state

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institutions. It also made grand low-income housing schemes which were never fully implemented because of a lack of institutional capacity and financial viability. Reducing costs of construction was a passion with architects working on housing at that time. This, it was believed, could only be done through technical innovation and by using indigenous materials. I also spent many years doing this. Small Islands of expensive success, around this belief, were created and glorified. However, because they were expensive and did not address the land issue, they could never be 'scaled up'.

Today, the practicing architect has many more clients than just the state and the elite. The state is still there, but it is receding. The elite have been replaced by the rich. In addition, there is an expanding corporate sector, developers, NGOs serving the poor, and the poor themselves. All these groups have different requirements, different cultures and different world views. The rich have far more money than the elite did, and they wish to flaunt it. The emergence of populist politics and its culture has replaced the colonial port city culture and marginalised them in the life of the city. So they live in gated ghettos surrounded by security systems and armed guards. Their ghettos contain all that they require for the education of their children, health facilities, entertainment, recreation and shopping. Meanwhile, developers serve the rapidly emerging middle classes. They are different from the developers of the 1960s and 70s who were mostly engineers turned entrepreneurs. The majority of present-day developers are a part of the messy real estate world, and their investments, like themselves, are of dubious origin. The architecture they produce is dominating the city. It is architect signed but draughtsman designed and copied from models in Singapore and Dubai. I call it the new vernacular and notice that even when architect designed, it is seldom better than the draughtsman designed projects.

The state is still building education and health facilities, regional offices and housing for its staff. It follows the designs, rules and regulations of the past (with questionable modifications) even though the world has changed. It continues to survive in the ruins of a collapsed colonial empire. The corporate sector, meanwhile, has become a major investor in buildings of various types, including those of health and education, apart from its offices and showrooms. This architecture is far removed from the modernist tradition. It seeks to convey the image that the corporate enterprise has of itself. It seeks to impress and dominate the surrounding landscape. Elements of its architecture are borrowed in a big way for the civic architecture of the city and also for residences, not only in middle class and elite areas but also in the informal settlements. These elements are replacing the traditional elements and motifs that were used earlier.

Architects also work today for NGOs and CBOs who are engaged in providing housing or support for the upgrading to low-income settlements. Much of this work is supported by funding from international agencies and/or NGOs. Such work is project related and has very little to do with policy issues. Architects plan and build for the poor but the existing sociology, economy and technology of the process through which housing is built in poor settlements is unknown to them and also untaught. As such, they design in their own image and do not help in improving the existing process and having a wider impact. This issue has surfaced in a big way in architects’ work in the earthquake and flood disaster zones. There are, of course, a few notable exceptions to this.

There have been other changes too. When I began my practice, there was only one ism: modernism. Today, in addition to modernist revival, we have post-modernism and its various isms; green architecture; regionalism; and community architecture. Among all these isms, modernism is the only one that has a clear view on man, society, governance, housing, and planning. Others have yet to develop this, although in philosophical and conceptual terms, there is clarity. Regarding green architecture, there is much talk of conserving energy, yet architects keep producing glass cages and badly oriented buildings. Why? Again, there are a few notable exceptions, very few!

Architectural education has not yet come to terms with the changes I have described above. It still lives in the past. It is not easy to come to terms with so many conflicting isms. There are so many clients with different cultures and adversarial demands. And then there is the politics of these cultures and demands, with a whole new vocabulary and terms, such as ‘it is not the business of the state to do business’, world class city, direct foreign investment, investment friendly in infrastructure,
event city, cities as engines of growth/socially responsive architecture, built environment, upgrading, regularisation, etc. These and related terms are unknowingly determining the stylistic and functional aspects of the work of architects in our society and also societal values which feed into teaching concepts and methodologies.

In coming to terms with these changes, education has also to consider the changes that have taken place at the building site and in the construction industry. When I began practicing, the contractors building the residences I designed came from a strong building tradition. Most of them belonged to a bradari (guild) of masons and some of them could trace their lineage as masons back to seven generations. Their bradari punchayats (five-member council of elders) were alive and well at that time but are only ceremonial in nature today. Their younger generation has, for the first time in the last decade, gone into new professions. In addition to being contractors, they also knew how to work with their hands, something they had learnt through the shagirdi (apprenticeship) system. They venerated their teachers and called them ustad (master). They used many local terms, which have now become obsolete, such as naw for plinth; sitoon for column and dehlees for the floor near the entrance door. The terminology used today is almost all English.

Construction materials when I started practising were all locally produced and there was very little variety available. This guaranteed a similarity in finishes, both internally and externally, for both high- and middle-end residential and non-residential buildings. Today, thanks to neo-liberalism, imported materials are easily available and the cheaper ones are sometimes cheaper than their Pakistani equivalents. Also, a whole range of industrially produced imported building materials are available and extensively used. They differ from each other. Their use has increased the cost of construction and finishes, although they have not necessarily helped in producing better designed and/or more technically sound buildings. They have also introduced a variety and often discordant surface finishes and issues of scale. However, they have made it easier for architects and developers to copy international designs out of magazines and from their visits to foreign countries.

The contractors I work with today have not come from a building tradition. They have never worked with their hands. They are investors and entrepreneurs. Some are engineers and/or architects, heading small construction firms. For larger projects, a number of medium-sized companies created by enterprising engineers, sometimes backed by investors, have also emerged and are expanding. They seem to be replacing the smaller entities. In addition, their owners are training their children as architects and project managers. A new hereditary contracting system on a turn-key basis is emerging which will have a major impact on the way architectural designs are conceived, implemented, and projects are delivered. Meanwhile, the poor will continue to build as they have in the past, yet, borrowing elements and images from the changes are taking place in the higher income areas of the city. And given the multiplicity of clients and isms, there will be more divisions, more disparity and a divided profession. I feel a serious discussion is needed.

Planning

Like architecture, planning education and practice has also undergone a change. When I started working in the early 70s, the concept of the welfare state was deeply embedded in the various plans that were developed for the city of Karachi. Housing, health and education were all supposed to be developed by the state for its people. Unfortunately, due to financial and managerial resources, and an absence of political will, this could not be achieved. However, small Islands of such development did evolve, often to be swallowed up by the chaos of informal development around them.

By the mid-1990s, a new world of thinking had emerged. New terms such as ‘direct foreign investment’ (which replaced planning by projects), the ‘world class city’ concept (which introduced the concept of investment-friendly infrastructure, malls instead of Sunday bazaars, branded cities, etc.) changed the objectives of planning.

This change was best expressed by architect Fazal Noor at a recent seminar. Fazal was my student, and at the seminar, he pointed out that when
I taught him in the late 1980s, I told his class that there were three important players in the planning process – politicians, planners, and people and that the scale of the space of interaction between them determined the appropriateness of the plan. The Karachi Development Plan 2000, formulated in 1989, also accepted this concept and in theory promoted it. Fazal Noor then picked up the terminology of the under-preparation Karachi Development Plan 20147 and quoted it. Instead of ‘people’, there were ‘stakeholders’; instead of ‘government’, there were “donors; and instead of ‘planners’ there was ‘public-private partnership’. Fazal further stated that these were the new realities to which we have to adjust because with our old thinking, planning is no longer possible. So, public–private partnership, powerful stakeholders, and politicians dependent on IFI funds, have to somehow overcome their contradictions and work together for the welfare of the ‘people’. People have also changed. There is now a powerful middle class whose interests are in many cases in conflict with those of the poor, especially in relation to land, environment, and the use of resources, and to top it all, there is digital technology, consumerism, climate change and COVID-19. So it is all the more important today to promote the values of equity and justice and to support the idealism of young people rather than crush it under the weight of, what is essentially, an anti-poor vocabulary.

Academia and professional organisations have a long way to go before they can come to terms with these conflicting realities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Arif Hasan is an architect and planner, activist, teacher, researcher and the author of a large number of books, research papers and monographs on urban development issues. He has been the Principal Consultant of the Orangi Pilot Project-Research and Training Institute from 1981 to 2017 and is the father of the technology and extension process for its sanitation and housing programmes. He is also founder Chairperson of the Urban Resource Centre, Karachi, and a founding member of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, Bangkok. These projects, and their hundreds of spinoffs, are being replicated in a number of cities worldwide and have received international recognition. Arif Hasan has also taught at Pakistani and European universities, lectured worldwide, has been a member of various UN committees, and his activism has led to the modification of a number of projects and policies in favour of equity and justice. He has been a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development, UK, and is currently on the editorial boards of a number of international peer-reviewed journals. He was a celebrity speaker at the UIA Congress in 1987 and a member of the Steering Committee and Jury for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture 1992-98. He has received a number of national and international awards for his work and writings including the Hilal-e-Imtiaz, the UN Year for the Shelterless Memorial Award, the Prince Claus Award, and he is a member of INTBAU, India Committee of Honour, 2007. He is currently an Advisor to the Research Cell at the Dawood University Department of Architecture and Planning, a member of the Sindh Government Heritage Committee, and a Board member of the Sindh Infrastructure Development Company, and Sindh Solid Waste Management Board.