

## TERRITORIAL RE-ARRANGEMENTS: A CHALLENGE FOR PAKISTANI CITIES

**Zahra Hussain**

University of London

*Zahra Hussain explores the architectural and social challenges facing cities and their inhabitants under circumstances of chronic warfare.*

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary war poses new challenges to the built environment; this paper will explore the accelerated transformations that have been triggered in Pakistan's urban areas as a consequence of war. I will briefly discuss urban conditions in Pakistan by examining the political and cultural ramifications of social and institutional networks present in different cities responding to a situation of war. By reading the current condition through the lens of geo-politics, this paper engages these configurations by highlighting the regimes of authority performed through spatial assemblages within cities, and which threaten the concept of a modern democratic city.

In what follows, I will probe the effects of geo-politics on local spaces with regard to populations in urban settings, the extensive application of security apparatus and what this means for the survival of the city as a space of constant exchange.

### HOW DO URBAN SPACES TRANSFORM THEMSELVES WHEN ACTING IN A THEATRE OF WAR?

Contemporary war poses new challenges for populations in urban areas, for this space is fragile yet resilient. It cannot be fully controlled by state-authorities nor fully bombarded by the insurgents. Events in



Source: [www.hdnux.com](http://www.hdnux.com)

*Contemporary war poses new challenges for populations in urban areas, for this space is fragile yet resilient. It cannot be fully controlled by state-authorities nor fully bombarded by the insurgents.*

Iraq and Afghanistan have expanded this discourse of city and warfare to a great extent. A calculated warfare that has incalculable effects in contemporary urban spaces in particular, brings to the surface the concept of *asymmetric warfare* - planned strategies adopted by governments and the international community, such as low-intensity operations and international aid supply in conflict zones.

The North Western area of Pakistan shares a soft border with Afghanistan, and has encountered considerable turmoil in the last decade. As a result of this porous border's geographic proximity to the war being fought in Afghanistan against the Taliban, conflict has gradually spilled into Pakistan, thus giving rise to a huge zone of instability. The export of violence and terror to the cities of Pakistan has resulted in extreme measures taken by the state and

military to wipe-out terrorism from the cities and villages, by declaring military operations in targeted villages, and by introducing security systems in the cities.

A geo-politics that transcends the limits of borders and territories is increasingly becoming a contested notion where the sovereignty of states is seen to be at stake. The notion of "Contingent Sovereignty"<sup>1</sup> has brought state sovereignty under increased pressure in the last decade. This espouses the idea that a state does not have an absolute right over its territory, but must fulfill certain responsibilities and obligations; failure to do so may result in international intervention. The international community's "right to protect"<sup>2</sup> is the principle that allows foreign humanitarian intervention on grounds of operation and military presence on the basis of instability that poses a threat to the country itself or international peace and security. Boundaries and territorial borders are disappearing; their functions and roles are also transforming as they become open to trans-boundary movements and flows. Although the borders are becoming permeable at a certain level, regional and local groups are aiming to claim authority over their geographic territories. The so-called "War on Terror" declared in Afghanistan has had far reaching effects that transcend its national boundaries.

The relationship of war in Afghanistan to instability in Pakistan is no-doubt complex, and involves more than one factor or party. As cities become increasingly vulnerable to suicide bombings and bomb blasts, one might want to question the active making of the contemporary city alongside emergent forms of collective subjectivity. The scale of violence and trauma makes the whole situation more complex or



Source: The Gaurdian

different from the kind of violence associated with, for example, a street stabbing. Here the enemy is not known – the enemy is working on a large scale and large areas have to be modified in order for it to be contained. Mustafa has explicitly explained the nature of terrorism occurring in Pakistan:

“An act of violence, different from other acts of violence, e.g., genocide, war, war crimes, political assassinations etc. In that it is (1) a spectacle directed towards a wider audience than the immediate victims, (2) directed towards place destruction and/or (3) place alienation.”<sup>3</sup>

Those cities not dealing directly with the main area of war, and only used as a platform for acts intended to induce terror, behave differently. Sassen explains:

“With asymmetric war, the pursuit of national security has become the making of urban insecurity. Asymmetric war - war between a conventional army and armed insurgents, has made cities one

site in the map for warring. Cities worldwide are becoming a key theater for asymmetric war, regardless of what side of the divide they are on— allies or enemies.”<sup>4</sup>

It is a shared space of intense networks and exchange as the urban space lends itself to the theatre of war— so the task of urban design, planning, development and control becomes enormous.

Affected cities are located in the northwestern and upper Punjab in Pakistan. Peshawar happens to be one such city that is interlocked in local, national and international affairs due to its strategic location; on the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia in a valley on the eastern end of Khyber Pass. Peshawar is a densely populated city in Kyber Pukhtoon-khwa (formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province) and the administrative centre and central economic hub for the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. With war close by and situated several miles from the area of military operation, it serves as an important station for armed forces, migrants, internally displaced persons and aid agencies. The national highway and NATO supply line [N5 highway], also pass through the city exacerbating the threat to Peshawar’s safety and security. In upper Punjab, Rawalpindi being the military headquarters and Islamabad being the capital city of Pakistan are similarly strategically important cities where a large number of international, national, military and governmental bodies are present. In the recent past, these cities have been the site of numerous bombings targeted at military hubs or security personnel. Within this exchange of violence, the urban population has been extremely vulnerable. There have been several instances where

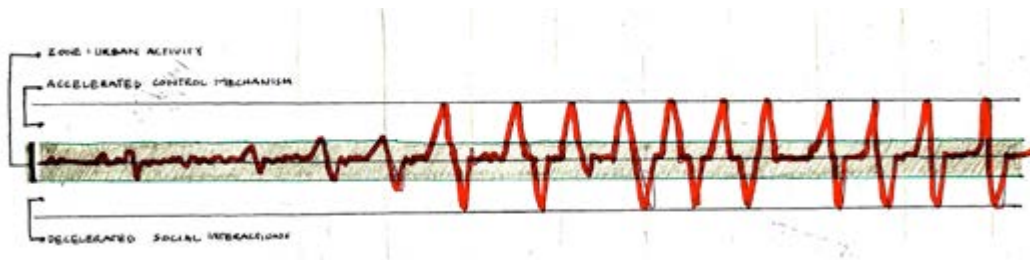
insurgents have inflicted violence upon a festive or religious gathering.

The threat to “gathering spaces” is alarming for a society that celebrates these spaces as religious and traditional domains, for the mosques and market squares are filled with men every Friday afternoon and the streets and main roads with processions on significant dates from the Islamic calendar – tradition calls for festivals such as *Mela Charaghan* (Festival of Lamps), *Basant* (celebration of the harvest) and *Urs* (gatherings and processions at Sufi shrines). Under current conditions, the task of urban governance is challenging, and cities redefine each other in complex, but poorly explored ways. Deep shifts can be traced out in the ways in which time, space, technology, mobility and power are constructed and experienced in our societies as a whole (Virilio 1986).

It is interesting to trace how urban inhabitants are affected by socio-spatial transformations. When crowds become the target of large-scale violence and public gathering spaces are endangered, seasonal festivities decrease. One conducts the body in certain ways of self-control, and these actions of self-control have developed collectively; people behave alike and share the same feeling as they move about the city:

“War has entered the city again – the sphere of everyday, the private realm of the house... we find ourselves nervous when we use public transports or mingle in crowds, due to frequent bomb scares.”<sup>5</sup>

Reading urban gathering spaces provides productive points of analysis as they disclose the multiple



Pulse of the city: *Diagram shows Rhythm of Urban Activity*

ways in which urban actors build a particular emotional field in the city by trying to restore the physical sense of connection to one another.

The evolution of new security paradigms has redefined urban zones not only in terms of a transformed visual culture but also in their capabilities to sustain social urban life. To elaborate upon visual culture, we may refer to the barricades and bomb-proof walls, known as the *naka-syndrome* (temporary barriers placed on roads to channel movement), that constantly disrupt movement in the city and also act as a reminder of the bleak conditions under which urban residents must live. A city choked with security alarms and gated compounds narrows the psychic spaces of that city with extensive mental barricades. Yet the driving force of modern city planning remains “conflict avoidance” and the “smooth space” of flows. In *Traffic and Democracy*, Michael Sorkin writes:

“Flow seeks to increase speed (and save time) by prioritizing faster means of movement. Safety is often foreground as the reason for this system of preferences; the potential for danger, confusion and slow-down resulting from undisciplined mix gives rise to elaborated structures for vetting what traffic engineers call ‘conflict’ between

modes. Typically, this means slower vehicles yield to faster ones and pedestrian to all, walkers deferring to cars, cars to trains, trains to planes and so on. Modern city planning is structured around an armature of such conflict avoidance.”<sup>6</sup>

The security apparatus has been plugged into our urban domain as a crucial agency that redefines the role of a boundary wall and the sense of place of a public space. With increased surveillance and check posts around the city, one may assume that the modern dream of a democratic city is dead when the movement in the city is controlled by the military.

Ten years of instability have ensured a conflicting rhythm between the life of urban dwellers and the evolution of the urban fabric. A market or a bazaar cannot be secured like an office building or a housing compound. The over-lapping activities in a mixed-use public space are open not only to economic exchanges but also, social engagements. The idea of a city can be analyzed by looking at the diagram of a market. The market offers a showcase to choose from, an opportunity of engaging in a possible exchange, a probable advancement. Market allows you freedom to roam around, to choose, to interact at will, to conduct your self in various ways. The multiplicity of this space lies in exchange and interaction,

The promise of the city— betterment, advancement, speed and opportunity— is visible in the market. The city happens in the market. Accordingly, this space can be understood as an accumulation of efforts, skills and energies that combine to counter economic social and political challenges.

economic and social ties, uncertainty and chance but most importantly the perception of opportunity. The promise of the city — betterment, advancement, speed and opportunity — is visible in the market. The city happens in the market. Accordingly, this space can be understood as an accumulation of efforts, skills and energies that combine to counter economic social and political challenges.

Democratic notions of the city are perhaps compromised when the sense of being able to conduct yourself in several different ways is delimited by strict security in our urban spaces. Although it ensures movement and is necessary to retain urban life, the *naka-syndrome* has implanted fear and stress across urban environments in Pakistan. How sustainable is the city when the markets, offices and mosques are bombed? How vibrant can social life be when fear enters the urban domain and brings to halt most social engagements? How are diverse urban actors assembled and how do they act? What is in the making as people constantly construct paranoid boundaries due to fear and how do they break certain boundaries and exceed categories in pursuit of everyday desires and needs? What sort of a collective subjectivity do we see emerging in the constant process of re-defining private and public territories in a space laden with war, politics and precarious life? How are we challenged to rethink

our urban future? These questions come to mind as we begin to think about the faculty of architecture and urban environments. What is at stake here, is not only the governance but also the sustenance of the urban environment. The challenges facing urban sustainability in Pakistan today are immense. We should not fear our urban populations, but the fear instilled in them that is making our cities affectively and psychically smaller.

## NOTES

1. Elden, Stuart. (2006) 'Contingent Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and the Sanctity of Borders', *SAIS Review*. XXVI (1) p. 11-24., p 14
2. Elden, Stuart. *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) pp. 153
3. Mustafa, Daanish. 'The terrible geographicalness of terrorism: reflections of a hazards geographer', *Antipode*, 37, 1: 72-92, pp.79
4. Sassen, Saskia, 'The City: Its Return as a Lens for Social Theory' *City, Culture and Society*. 1:3-10, 2010. pp 36
5. Misselwitz, P. and Weizman, E. (2003) 'Military operations as urban planning.' In A. Franke (ed.) 'Territories'. *Berlin: KW institute for contemporary art*, p, 272-85. pp 272
6. Sorkin, Michael. *Traffic in Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) p, 1-2.
7. Virilio, Paul, *Bunker Archaeology* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1986).