

## Urban land reform

Arif Hasan

---

**Much has been lost because of the greed of Karachi's elite.**

---



The writer is an architect.

**OVER the last two years, there have been numerous seminars, workshops and happenings around Karachi issues. The dominant theme has been one of nostalgia. Senior citizens have spoken about a once liberal city of bars, night clubs, tea houses and cinemas. This was a colonial port city with a colonial port culture and governed by the residue of a colonial elite. It is doubtful if it could have survived (Zia or no Zia) the onslaught of populist politics in the absence of an effective alternative.**

There were also tears shed for the destruction of the built heritage of the city that has been converted into badly needed space for warehousing, wholesale and manufacturing activities. This is because 'we' were unable to plan and develop alternative spaces for these activities. There was also concern for the loss of the Malir oasis and destruction of the mangroves and their flora and fauna. All this has been swallowed up by the insatiable greed of our elite for land and the absence of affordable homes for our poor.

These trends are alive and have multiplied over the last two decades. They have produced serious social injustices and ecological damage which can only be contained through urban land reform. But, before we discuss this issue, a few statistics are necessary.

Sixty-two per cent of Karachi's citizens (estimated at 13 million) live in informally developed settlements on 23pc of the city's residential land. Many of these have densities of more than 4,500 persons per hectare (1821 per acre) with more than six to 10 persons per room and up to 20 persons sharing a toilet. As such, they face serious overcrowding problems of which the main victims are family cohesion, women, children and old persons. These settlements, in the absence of housing options, continue to densify. Conversely, 36pc of Karachiites (estimated at 7.5m) live in formally planned settlements on 77pc of the city's residential land. Here, densities can be as low as 84 persons per hectare. Such low-density settlements continue to increase.

There are over 200,000 vacant residential plots in Karachi and over 62,000 unoccupied apartments. And yet, we are developing high-middle income low-density settlements on over 24,200 hectares of land on the city's periphery, which is destroying (apart from agricultural and pasture land) drainage channels, hillocks, archaeological sites belonging to the Stone Age and Buddhist periods and sites linked to Sindh's intangible cultural heritage. Already Karachi floods, not because of climate change as some would have us believe, but because of encroachment on the major outfalls to the sea (once home to mangrove marshes) by elite housing societies. With some of these developments, Karachi will flood even more.

Another major ecological devastation has been the ruination of the city's rural economy and the continued dislocation and induced poverty of its population. In 1985, 70pc of Karachi's vegetable and fruit requirements came from its rural areas. In 2013, this was reduced to 10pc due to our failure to implement the provisions of the Karachi Master Plan 1975-85 which sought to preserve and develop these areas as agricultural belts.

The rural areas have also lost their shallow rainwater aquifers due to over-extraction of water and because about 60 billion cubic feet of sand and gravel has been illegally lifted for construction purposes from seasonal riverbeds. Due to this, water run-off can no longer be contained and aquifers cannot be naturally recharged.

An urban land reform to contain the social and physical devastation described above would ideally consist of the following.

One: a land ceiling act whereby no one individual can own more than 500 square metres of developed residential urban land. Two: a large enough non-utilisation fee on developed urban land to discourage speculative investment. Three: minimum density for any urban development project (including elite colonies) would be 450 persons per hectare to conserve land, protect the environment and promote equity. Four: no loans will be provided for housing to those who have received loans previously. Finally, all available government land would, as a priority, be made available for housing for low-income groups.

The market mantra, which we have adopted, and the rich who live off land speculation, will not agree to such reform, nor will the developer's lobby although it has a lot to gain from it if a proper governance system is put in place. But then, governance systems are increasingly controlled by speculators.

The fear is that if there is no reform to conserve land and contain speculation, then senior citizens of the Karachi of 2030 will be explaining, with tears, to their younger generation as to how wonderful the city was in the first decade of the 21st century.

*The writer is an architect.*

[arifhasan37@gmail.com](mailto:arifhasan37@gmail.com)

[www.arifhasan.org](http://www.arifhasan.org)

*Published in Dawn, July 15th, 2015*