



## Chapter 17: Sustainability, Karachi, and Other Irreconcilables

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When I was an ugly little kid growing up in Karachi in the 1980s, my upwardly mobile mother used to hound me to get straight As so I could eventually go to a top university like Harvard. (“Look at Dolly Aunty’s daughter Naila. She’s going to Oxford!”). “Why can’t she just let me be?” I inwardly fumed. All I wanted to do was read Anne Frank, listen to Wham!, and climb the Eucalyptus tree in the backyard. It ran up against our house’s boundary wall, so I’d climb the tree, run along the top of the wall, and jump down into the alley below. I didn’t want *total* freedom – just enough to have a bit of a romp in the neighborhood and loop around to let myself in at the front gate.

I wanted to be left alone but my mother’s decade-long nagging persisted and eventually produced an intense revulsion in me for any exhortations to improve intellectually, morally, Islamically, physically, or domestically. At college my favorite book was Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* with its splenetic anti-hero. When I returned to Karachi after graduating (from McGill University, the “Harvard of the North”), I drove around listening to the “menacing leer” of P.J. Harvey.<sup>1</sup> When I started working as a journalist, all I wanted to do was drink chai in the “slums” with the boys, or ruffians. I was drawn to ugly. I was going in the opposite direction of progress.

It was, therefore, with great unease that I received the words “sustainability” and “resilience” when I began to cover Karachi as a journalist heading the metro section of a daily English newspaper. A fellowship on urban growth and conferences abroad brought me in touch with urban planners who kept talking about “smart” cities. (Just to spite them, a friend of mine and I created “The Dumb Cities Project.” It never took off.) I didn’t know enough urban planning theory to unpack “sustainability” or “resilience,” and, of course, I agree that going forward these are crucial considerations for our global megacities. But somehow, I just wanted Karachi to be left alone. When the politicians running

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Ben Hewitt’s article ‘P.J. Harvey: 10 of the Best’ in *The Guardian*, Jan 14, 2015. [www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/jan/14/pj-harvey-10-of-the-best](http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/jan/14/pj-harvey-10-of-the-best).

the city would talk about “improving” it and making it like Dubai, I would recoil inside. “Let us be,” I’d say. I’d return from conferences with urban planners from New York and feel shame. It was with dread that we’d run news on how Karachi ranked 160th yet again on the green cities index. It didn’t make sense for the city government to try to clean the city by removing the pushcart vendors it described as “encroachments.”

And so it was from this position of ire, shot through with anxiety, that I approached this provocation. Before writing it, I began by looking up the meanings of “sustain” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Sustainable: able to be maintained at a certain rate or level. Sustain: bear the weight without breaking. Undergo or suffer. Cause to continue for an extended period or without interruption. These are semantics that fit Karachi. We keep going. We are. We will kind of be like this for a while.

No, we don’t have enough water, housing, mass transit, sewage systems, or parks. We hitchhike.<sup>2</sup> We don’t recycle unless Afghan rag-pickers are involved.<sup>3</sup> We regulate our bus schedule with paper tokens.<sup>4</sup> We suffer from “project-itis” instead of “long-term vision.” We haven’t had a census since 1998, so we don’t even know how big we are.<sup>5</sup> But we continue to grow as one of the world’s megacities. We don’t have enough housing for the poor, but we have space for Burmese migrants and hungry villagers whose fields have dried up. We know. We know.

And so, perhaps the meaning of “sustainable” that fits is the one that lets people be. Karachi can’t be prodded into progressing. Perhaps it will happen in time, organically. I’ll never forget the comfort provided by Eugénie Birch after I was bummed out at a conference. She is the codirector of the Penn Institute for Urban Research and knows a thing or two about cities. She reminded me that cities like New York or London only very recently got their act together. I thought of the movie *Gangs of New York* and nodded. That’s Karachi today.

We can learn from New York, of course. But perhaps Karachi can’t apply “sustainability” or “resilience” in the same way. Our systems are different. We have grown to be a city run on informality, as has been brilliantly explored by

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<sup>2</sup> Mahim Maher “What the Hitchhiking Women of Moach Goth can teach the Sindh Govt,” April 3, 2015, *The Friday Times*, [www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/what-the-hitchhiking-women-of-moach-goth-can-teach-the-sindh-government/](http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/what-the-hitchhiking-women-of-moach-goth-can-teach-the-sindh-government/)

<sup>3</sup> Farhan Anwar “Solid Waste Management: Need for a Cohesive Approach to Make up for Failed Attempts,” November 11, 2013, *The Express Tribune*, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/630124/solid-waste-management-need-for-a-cohesive-approach-to-make-up-for-failed-attempts/>

<sup>4</sup> Mahim Maher, “Timekeeping and Transport: The Minute Men of Karachi,” May 22, 2014, *The Express Tribune*. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/711471/timekeeping-and-transport-the-minute-men-of-karachi/>

<sup>5</sup> “Census Not Put Off Indefinitely, Says Qaim,” March 2, 2016, *The News*, [www.thenews.com.pk/print/102248-Census-not-put-off-indefinitely-says-Qaim](http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/102248-Census-not-put-off-indefinitely-says-Qaim)

Laurent Gayer in his book *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City*.<sup>6</sup> We need our own understanding of “smart city” based on our own knowledge. I keep going back to what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued: We have to speak for ourselves and not be spoken for. That can only come from our own people, the city government we elect – we just got a new one after a six-year void – and our home-grown urban planners. These professors need to be in elected office instead of in the classroom.

There are disconnects. Our people are just beginning to enjoy a relatively crime-free Karachi after decades of bombings, murders, gang wars, and terrorist attacks. We’re making mistakes, of course, some of which perhaps can’t be undone. We’re building flyovers instead of transit lanes, and we prefer malls to open bazaars. But didn’t Seoul rip out a highway and run a river through it?<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps cities like New York and London, Seoul and Singapore have become what they wanted when their people started knowing what their city should be (even if through debate and dissent and the push and pull of big business interests). Or perhaps it is the vision of one person who can implement it that counts. Karachi has neither right now. We have just elected a mayor, but even if he drives forward a vision acceptable to all in Karachi, he only controls one-third of the city – Karachi has 13 land-owning agencies, a majority of which are army-run cantonments. If sustainability is about resources, then we need to stop fighting over them before we can even think of renewing them. Knowing is key – knowing beyond just the basics of needing, perhaps starting with simple information and transparency in our transactions, especially the people-to-government kind.

I’ve often marveled at how building sites in London would have clearly displayed information about the entire construction project and permits. In Karachi, illegal buildings spring up overnight in parks, and even if journalists go digging, they can never really find out who permitted it and who is behind it. Sometimes it’s simple information, such as the address of the town office where you can get a copy of your birth certificate. No map exists of the jurisdictions of Karachi’s police stations (which is why we have cases of cops chucking

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<sup>6</sup> “I decided to adopt a synoptic perspective, which would try to make sense of the wonder that is Karachi, as a whole. Journalists and scholars alike denigrated it as a ‘chaotic city’, an ungovernable, utterly unpredictable urban mass. If I wanted to counter these dominant narratives, I had to adopt the same wide frame of analysis and show that, as a whole, Karachi does work despite and sometimes through violent unrest,” says Laurent Gayer in his interview with *Mid-Day*, July 3, 2014 ([www.mid-day.com/articles/the-shiv-sena-and-mqm-share-similarities-laurent-gayer/15421151](http://www.mid-day.com/articles/the-shiv-sena-and-mqm-share-similarities-laurent-gayer/15421151)).

<sup>7</sup> Cheonggyecheon is an 11-km modern stream that runs through downtown Seoul as an urban renewal project. The stream was covered with an elevated highway after the Korean War (1950–1953). Then in 2003, the elevated highway was removed to restore the stream to its present form today ([http://english.visitseoul.net/attractions/Cheonggyecheon-Stream\\_/35#](http://english.visitseoul.net/attractions/Cheonggyecheon-Stream_/35#)).

bodies over the “line” to avoid the workload of investigating cases).<sup>8</sup> When I went hunting for a map of the city’s electoral constituencies, I had to sneakily take photos of a handmade one from the election commission’s office because none existed online and they weren’t allowing me to take a copy.<sup>9</sup> Women find it hard to get around town because there is no publicly available and reliable information on the bus routes and schedules.

Don’t get me wrong. The burden rests solely with us to make Karachi “liveable” and “sustainable.” It’s just that liveable and sustainable don’t make sense to me right now. My instinct says that solutions lie in our informality, in our “ugliness.” (To me Karachi’s ugliness and informality is beautiful, but I am acutely aware that I speak of Karachi from an extremely privileged position.)

And so I search not for a way out and upwards, but by going around to return – just like climbing the wall of my house and letting myself in by the front gate.

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<sup>8</sup> Faraz Khan, “Police Inspector Caught Leaving a Corpse in Another Station’s Limits,” *The Express Tribune*, January 12, 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/320395/police-inspector-caught-leaving-a-corpse-in-another-stations-limits/>.

<sup>9</sup> Mahim Maher, “The Hunt for Karachi’s Constituency Map,” December 22, 2012, <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/15312/the-hunt-for-karachi%E2%80%99s-constituency-map/>.