

# Karachi is Hard to Love

Gulraiz Khan

## **Karachi has not always been a miserable place to live, and it didn't become one because of lack of planning. Is there any hope for its future?**

Karachi is hard to love<sup>1</sup>. Its treacherous seas tried to devour Sanval, the husband of the city's founding matriarch, Kolachi<sup>2</sup>. Its lush mangroves lured the city's first colonizing fleet, only to disappoint as a "gloomy portal of a desolate and uninteresting country."<sup>3</sup> Lady Lloyd felt so sick during her stay that she had her husband make a pier in Clifton that would take her, every evening, as far away from the city as possible. TE Lawrence, of the Lawrence of Arabia fame, was so unimpressed by the "sorry place" that he barely ever left his garrison at Drigh Road in a year and half of being posted here.<sup>4</sup> Fehmida Riaz wistfully longed for a liver firm enough to bear the city.<sup>5</sup> Perveen Shakir swore that it was "a whore."<sup>6</sup>

But Karachi is also hard to ignore. Shah Abdul Latif bemoaned the city's metaphorical whirlpools. "Whoever goes to Kalachi, never comes back," he lamented.<sup>7</sup> Legions of peripatetic saints, from the 7th to the 20th century, made this unremarkable pitstop their home. One Pir, Mangho, and at least seven Shahs—Abdullah, Ghaiban, Hassan, Yousuf, Misri, Ali & Mewa—retired along the sea and riverfront, like true city elites. Millions have followed in their footsteps since, including my family, in waves after waves. Today, anywhere between 15 to 20 million people, depending on who you ask, live here precariously, suspended between the city's promise and peril.

This essay, and the accompanying set of maps, are not a descriptive history of Karachi's public transit or a prescriptive proposal for its future. This is a story—of a colonial hangover, a race to the bottom, a fever dream and a future set right. It is a manifesto for a more accessible and equitable city. It is an invitation for a conversation on why we, the residents of Karachi, deserve better. If nothing else, it is a reverie for a city that is not impossible to love.

## **Prologue**

Cities are abstractions—ideological, material, and social. For all their shrines and temples and claims to divine origins, they are essentially human: sites for flows of people, their ideas, and goods. The more easily people, goods and ideas can flow through, and within, a city, the more successful they become. No one moves to a stagnant or decaying town, no matter how beautiful

the landscape. Karachi's prosperity and promise made it the destination of choice for migrants not just from the length and breadth of Pakistan, but from Iran and Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

After the shock of partition, when the population swelled from 400,000 in 1941 to a million in 1950, Karachi galloped at an average growth rate of around 5% for the next 50 years. At the turn of the century, in the year 2000, the city clocked in roughly 10 million residents.<sup>8</sup> In this half century, Karachi was to south and west Asia what New York was to a war-torn Europe in the first half of the 20th century. From 1890 to 1945, the newly consolidated New York City grew from a regional powerhouse of 1.5 million residents to a 7.5 million strong global metropolis.<sup>9</sup> Despite this similarity in population growth, their trajectories could not have been more different. New York harnessed this half century of migration to become a global financial capital. Karachi squandered this opportunity and ended up being an inglorious regional backwater.

In 1948, the two cities briefly collided in a fortuitous and almost foretelling encounter. Ghulam Ali Allana, the first mayor of independent Karachi, visited New York during a larger official visit that he documented in a travelogue. Like a fish out of water, he was unable to grasp the complexity of post-war, diverse, eclectic New York. With all the energy of a middle-aged, privileged Pakistani man, he was most impressed by Times Square and the synchronized traffic lights, and hoped to bring the latter to Karachi. The city's lifeline and engineering marvel, the subway, merely got a passing mention.<sup>10</sup> A more perceptive administrator would have picked up on the transformative power of rapid mobility, but alas, not Allana. He took taxis everywhere and frequently tripped over his racist, classist and moralistic ideals, as he uncritically navigated New York's youthful post-war exuberance. By the time his trip ended, it was painfully obvious that Karachi and New York exist in two wildly divergent worlds and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

## Colonial Hangover

When the first post-partition migrants arrived in the early 1950s, Karachi was the city worth moving to. The city had a centuries-long maritime tradition, cemented by the thriving seaport, an airport and rail connections to up-country. There were robust municipal services, public transport, and an air of cosmopolitanism. A 1930 colonial town planning consultant's report termed Karachi "one of the cleanest and best kept cities ... in India."<sup>11</sup>

The shock of partition was still raw, and the bulk of the city's non-Muslim population had left. Their markers, however, were aplenty. Standing at Eidgah on Bandar Road and looking south through the dust-specked late afternoon light, the domes and spires of municipal buildings,

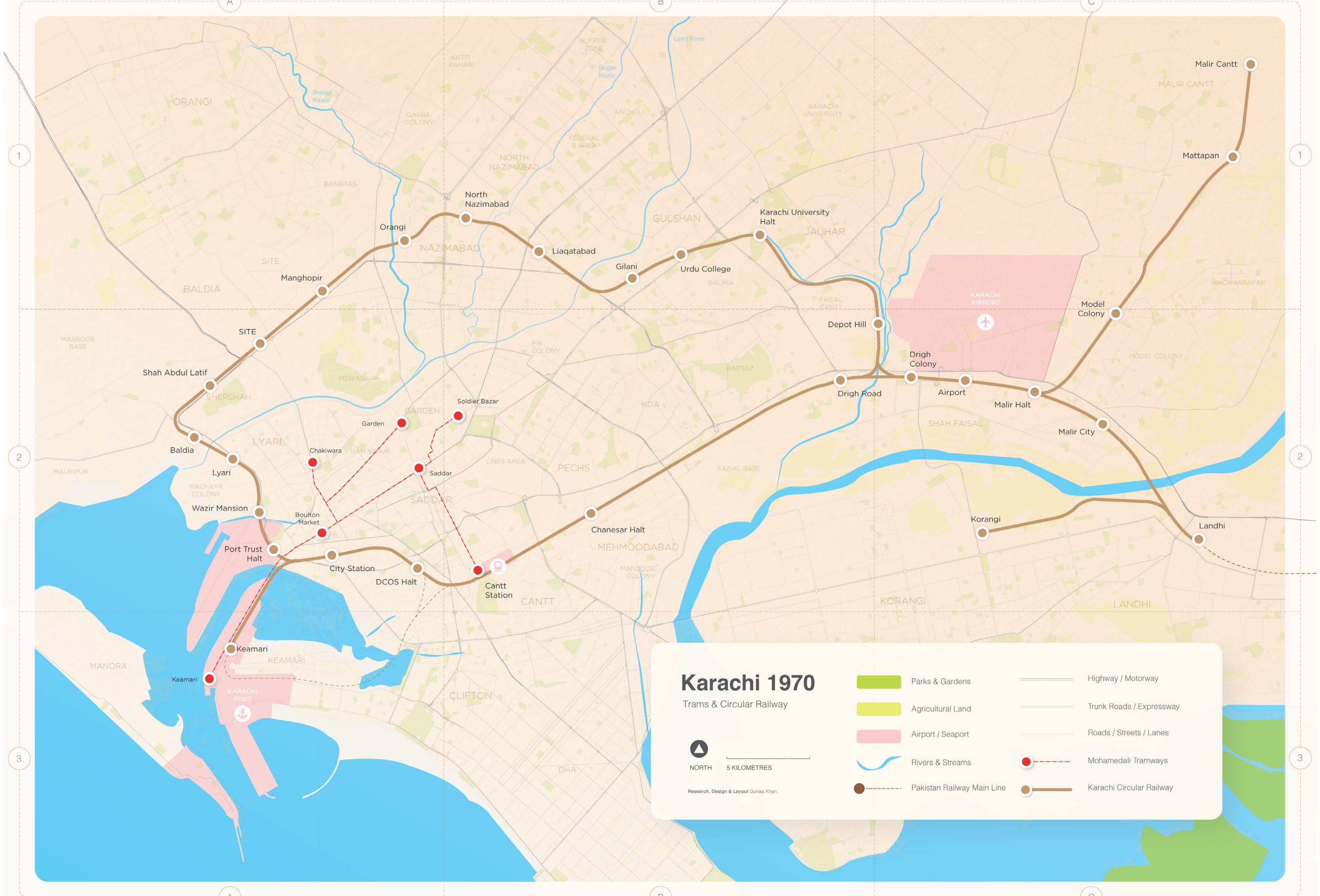
commercial offices, clock towers and public halls, the shikhara of the Swaminarayan Temple and the tapered minarets of New Memon Masjid must have been both a spectre and a spectacle. It left an indelible mark on at least one immigrant from Hyderabad Deccan, Ahmed Rushdi, whose preppy song "*Bandar Road se Keamari*" would immortalize the road and jumpstart Rushdi's career as a playback singer.

While Rushdie set out in his horse-drawn carriage, Bandar Road bustled as the spine of the country's only urban transit system. Sixty-four petrol-powered trams shuttled citizens from Cantt and Soldier Bazar to Saddar, and down Bandar Road all the way to Keamari, all for an anna. A branch line from Gandhi Garden along Lawrence Road brought residents of the old, dense quarters—Bhimpura, Chakiwara, Ramswamy, Ranchore Lines—all the way down to the boisterous Boulton Market junction. In 1949, the East India Tramway Company was sold to a Karachi merchant, Sheikh Mohamedali, and became the Mohamedali Tramways Company.<sup>12</sup>

Karachi in the 1950s was a dense, multi-ethnic, multi-class city, and both my sets of grandparents set roots in close proximity to Bandar Road and Cantt Station. It was a worthy capital of this new country and the energy was palpable. The city was bursting at its colonial seams, and foreign consultants had been summoned to develop a Greater Karachi Plan to accommodate the influx of migrants and the demands of a new capital. A 1952 masterplan by a consortium of British and Swedish firms, Merz Rendel Vatten (Pakistan) (MRVP), expected Karachi to treble in population to 3 million by the year 2000. The Report on the Greater Karachi Plan consolidated the primacy of Bandar Road and extended the administrative center of the capital further north-east along the same axis. For future growth, it proposed dense, self-sustaining satellite spurts in all four directions, all connected by a robust light rail public transport system and supplemented by rapid and local buses.<sup>13</sup> In comparison, mass transit did not feature in any of Lahore's master plans until the 1990s.

The exuberance, however, was short-lived. The capital was shifted to the north, and the rug was pulled from under the aspirations of the 1952 MRVP Plan. Instead, irked by the presence of refugees in the city center, the martial law administration commissioned a Greater Karachi Resettlement Plan in 1956, this time by a Greek firm Doxiadis Associates (DA). The firm proposed two satellite townships, Landhi-Korangi in the east and New Karachi in the north. General Ayub, desperate for visible signs of progress, ran with the idea of Korangi before Doxiadis Associates could even finish the detailed plans, and built 15,000 houses by 1959.<sup>14</sup> But once the dust settled, there was little of the promised industry to support the residents and the Korangi dream started falling apart as quickly as it had been conjured into being.<sup>15</sup>

Before the lights went out though, Karachi experienced a flash of public works brilliance the likes of which it will not see for decades. The city built the country's first urban rail transit



# Karachi 1970

Trams & Circular Railway



5 KILOMETRES

Research, Design & Layout Gulraiz Khan.

- Parks & Gardens
- Agricultural Land
- Airport / Seaport
- Rivers & Streams
- Mohamedali Tramways
- Pakistan Railway Main Line
- Karachi Circular Railway
- Highway / Motorway
- Trunk Roads / Expressway
- Roads / Streets / Lanes

system, the Karachi Circular Railway (KCR), a scaled-down version of the local railway system proposed in the MRVP Plan of 1952. It was initially launched for goods and limited internal service in 1964 but, when the loop was completed in 1969 and service was opened to the public, it was an instant hit. Ridership soared almost immediately. At its peak, over a hundred trains would shuttle people constantly across the loop and main line of the KCR.<sup>16</sup>

It was an urban marvel, both in its essence (rapid mobility for everyone) and ambition (a well-connected, growing city), but unfortunately it arrived at the wrong place, at the wrong time. Globally, the private automobile was ascendant and cities were rapidly reconfiguring themselves to accommodate this new beast. Under Robert Moses, New York had been shaped in the image of the automobile—highways running down the east and west coast of Manhattan, connected to bridges strung over the East River to Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. The impact was not limited to private transport only. After a 30-year building spree, subway construction in New York City came to a halt and the dense network of electrified streetcar lines connecting Brooklyn to Queens was replaced by a fleet of buses.<sup>17</sup> Rail-based public transport would take a back seat for some time now.

Karachi's tram network was a casualty of this broader shift in mobility patterns. Under local ownership, the system was unable to keep up with the city's growing demand and shifting dynamics. Maintenance was poor, as reported by concerned citizens,<sup>18</sup> and while the number of trams had increased significantly, not a mile had been added to the system even as the city had rapidly grown all around it. Increasing automobile traffic led to congestion along tram routes and the trams were routinely involved in accidents. The local administration shifted its focus to buses, in line with global trends. In April 1975, exactly 90 years after it first opened to service, the Mohamedali Tramways Company which had been chugging along privately since 1949, unceremoniously shut down.<sup>19</sup>

This was the city that the second wave of migrants arrived in, from a now-independent Bangladesh. The center was crowded, so they camped at Orangi. The state turned a blind eye to their needs. The city had already crossed the 3 million mark in 1970 before their arrival. Seven years of the Bhutto government and rapid nationalization of industries, an inordinate proportion of which were based in Karachi, brought more migrants from within the country. The population swelled to 5 million before the decade was over.<sup>20</sup> The music had stopped playing and the party was beginning to end, but you couldn't tell above the feverish din of the decade's popular politics.

## Race to the Bottom

Shifting demographics and simmering grievances created ethnic flashpoints that blew into a full-scale multi-ethnic conflict in the 1980s. The third wave of migration, from neighboring Afghanistan, added a new dimension and plenty of ammunition to the conflict. When a young woman, Bushra Zaidi, was run over by a minibus in Nazimabad in 1985, it hardly mattered what the ethnicity of the bus driver was. The bus was burnt, riots ensued, and the city was charred<sup>21</sup>. Altaf Hussain rose from the ashes of popular grievances and captured the imagination of the city's Urdu-speaking residents. His party and workers were beaten to a pulp in the early 90s, but his iron grip over the city persisted. For decades, he would be able to shut down the city in minutes, over a croaky, scratchy phone call from London.

When my parents married in 1984, they moved out to an apartment in Shadman Town on the northern edge of North Nazimabad. My father wanted to start fresh, with some breathing space. But after a few months of a frustrating daily commute to Chundrigar Road and back, they packed up and moved back into an apartment in Lighthouse, off Bandar Road, close to my father's work and extended family. In the mid 90s, we moved to another apartment in Araam Bagh which was fairly unremarkable except, while I was growing up, it gave us an unenviable front seat to Altaf Hussain's phone calls that were broadcast in the Araam Bagh mosque grounds late into the nights.

The 90s were a blur of military operations, shutter-down strikes, targeted killings, and bodies in gunny sacks. The ethnic strife boiled over and sectarian groups jumped in, adding a religious zeal to this macabre ballet. Against this bonfire, the city literally came to a grinding halt. A few seminal events in this period from the mid-80s to 2000 would transform urban mobility for the worse and bring Karachi to the brink.

After several failed attempts to run a bus-based mass transit system, the provincial government deregulated and privatized public transport. What this basically translated into was that the transport department would only issue route permits, after some palm greasing, and look the other way. Private transporters, backed by loan sharks, snapped up permits as public transport was ghettoized along ethnic lines.<sup>22</sup> During strikes, the minibuses were the first to be torched. This deregulated transport model was eminently unsustainable, and the number of buses plummeted as the quality of service and vehicles nosedived. It was a race to the bottom, but with the kitsch amped up.

For all the initial enthusiasm, the Karachi Circular Railway started losing steam soon enough. There was a constellation of reasons cited for its decline: fare evasion leading to financial losses, reduced service frequency, competition from private buses and rickshaws, lack of integration with other public transit modes, lack of investment for upgrades, lack of interest from the military regime, dilapidation, petty crime and so on<sup>23</sup>. The system declined steadily through the 1980s and in December 1999, a mere thirty years after it first opened to the public, the Karachi Circular Railway was packed up completely. That probably qualified it for the dubious distinction of being the shortest-lived mass transit system in global urban transit history.

But these challenges were only for the city's millions of poor. For the handful of rich, a new era was about to dawn where their mobility needs would trump everyone else's. The city built its first flyovers—at Drigh Road, Nazimabad, and NIPA<sup>24</sup>. Earlier, bridges were built over bodies of water and railway lines to overcome natural or man-made obstructions to the flow of all traffic. These new bridges, or flyovers, were built to overcome the congestion caused by automobiles themselves. They were monuments to, and for the explicit facilitation of, private automobiles. It was the beginning of the erosion of the city.

Throughout the 1990s, several plans for mobility corridors in a vastly expanded city were drawn and even officially notified, but the exorbitant price tags and political instability meant the plans never left the papers they were printed on. They did, however, form the backbone of all future transit plans, decades later. Karachi topped 10 million in population,<sup>25</sup> at probably the most precarious point in its recorded history, as it limped into the new millennium.

## Fever Dream

9/11 thrust Karachi as a transit node in the global War on Terror. As the region's largest seaport, Karachi had little choice but to bend over for American and NATO military supplies headed to the Afghan war theatre. Driven primarily by this logistical need, General Musharraf decided to micromanage Karachi through federal agencies and two rounds of hand-picked local governments. Armed with a shovel and a blank chequebook, Karachi was about to get a total facelift.

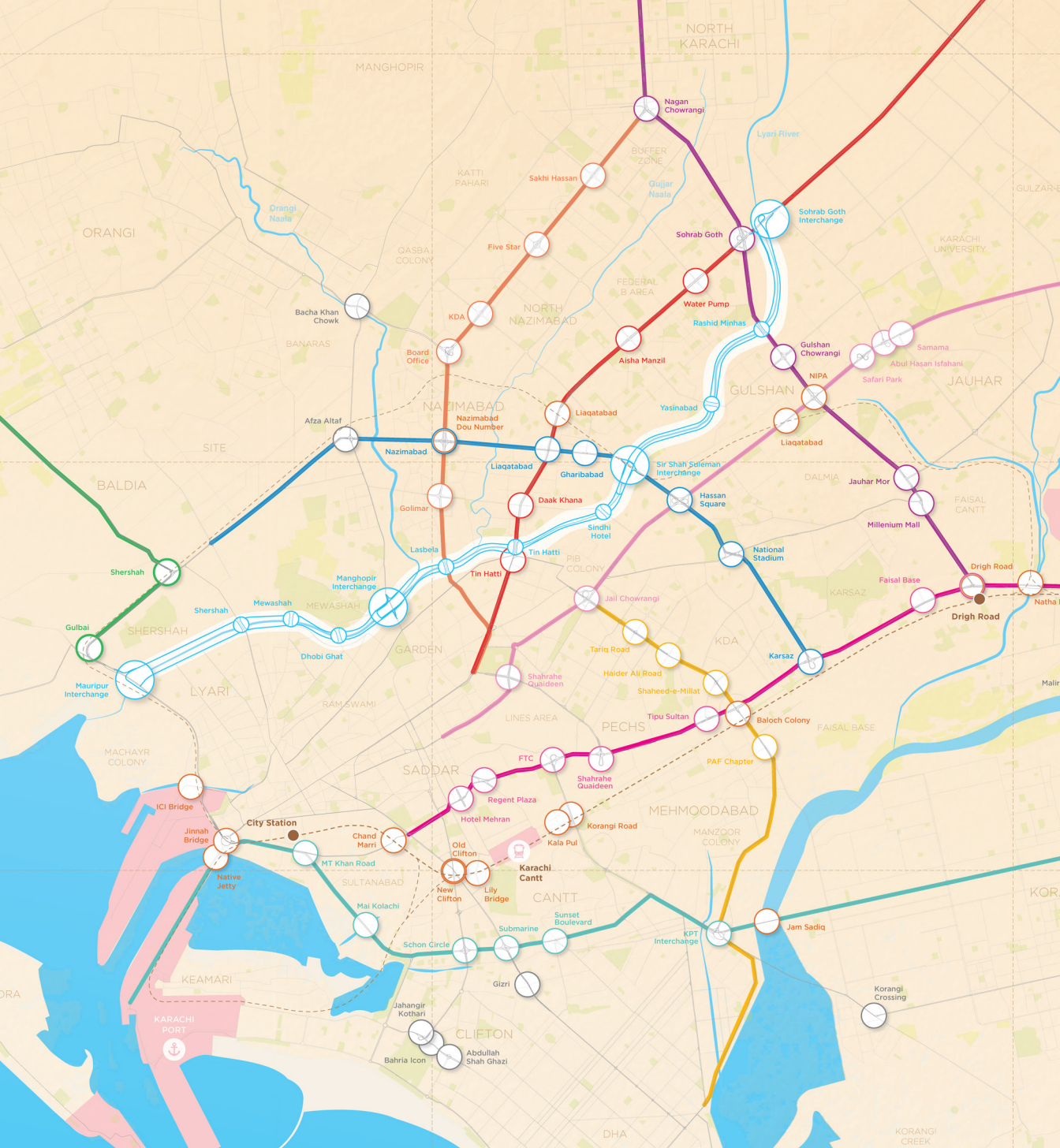
It started innocuously enough with a Rs29 billion "Tameer-e-Karachi Package," a much-needed investment in the city's infrastructure after decades of neglect.<sup>26</sup> A flyover here and a bridge there to ease traffic congestion. Parks. Sewage lines. But it wasn't long before the steroids kicked in. Signal-free corridors rolled off everyone's tongues. SITE to Karsaz. Surjani to Drigh Road. Saddar to Toll Plaza. Metropole to Malir. Northern Bypass. Southern Bypass. Lyari Expressway. Flyovers on Underpasses. Flyovers on flyovers. Dinosaur sculptures in city parks and traffic medians. Conocarpus trees all around.

For the first decade of the new century, Karachi was a fever dream, fueled by cheap consumer loans, "enlightened moderation," a "benevolent dictator," and a "representative, empowered" city government. All this road building was not for nothing. The number of registered cars in Karachi doubled: from a million in 2004 to over 2 million in 2011. The number of motorcycles trebled: from 400,000 to over a million.<sup>27</sup> Except for a few dozen deep green Swedish buses, and outlandish MOUs with obscure foreign companies for monorails and Maglev trains, there was no work or investment in public transport. Karachi was being definitively shaped in the image of the automobile.

Our family was caught up in this euphoria too. My father was able to take a home loan from his bank, and we moved out from Aram Bagh to a more spacious apartment in PECHS. A car followed, and so did a handful of credit cards. We had cheap money, and a car to go around and spend it. We shopped at Park Towers and dined out at Zamzama. It was all heady until he had to take an early retirement in 2009, and spent half his retirement funds to pay off the maxed-out credit cards.

When Musharraf departed in 2008, the elected PPP government threw out the local government baby with the dictatorship bathwater. The locus of decision-making shifted, but not the development direction. The PPP took a leaf out of the MQM and Musharraf book and plunged head-first into building roads and bridges and underpasses. In the world of electoral politics and public works spectacle, it made sense. For instance, few city arteries have received as much love from politicians and administrators over the last two decades as the 15 km-long Shahrah-e-Faisal: eight flyovers, two underpasses, two remodels of older bridges, and an overall widening project. That's thirteen foundation laying ceremonies and thirteen ribbon cutting ceremonies. Twenty-six public work spectacles for political mileage. Each flyover or underpass takes three to six months to complete. The total rupee cost of this two-decade-long serial spectacle: about Rs5.4 billion. Adjusted for inflation: roughly Rs10 billion. Political mileage: priceless.

Compare this to the proposed transit projects. The Green Line BRT will probably finish around Rs30 billion<sup>28</sup>. The KCR, when last checked with the Japanese who completed a detailed feasibility in 2012, was going to cost over \$2.5 billion<sup>29</sup>. That's Rs425 billion today. The Red and Yellow Lines, loans for which have been secured from the ADB and World Bank, will each cost roughly half a billion dollars.<sup>30</sup> And if the current execution capacity is any indication, each of these projects will take upwards of six years to complete. What is the 2021-22 budgeted development allocation for the Sindh government's transport department? A paltry Rs8 billion.<sup>31</sup> The city's needs do not match its fiscal, electoral, and administrative reality. The provincial government knows the best they can realistically do right now is a flyover here and an underpass there, while keeping the political-builder gravy train running. There is no appetite, or aspiration, for anything more ambitious. Why take a political risk?



## Karachi 2020

Bridges, Flyovers & Underpasses



Research, Design & Layout Gulraiz Khan

- Lyari Expressway**  
Mauripur — Sohrab Goth
- Northern Bypass**  
Gulbai — Toll Plaza
- Southern Bypass**  
National Highway — Karachi Port
- Corridor 1**  
SITE — Karsaz
- Corridor 2**  
Surjani — Drigh Road
- Corridor 3**  
Saddar — Toll Plaza
- Corridor 4**  
National Highway — PIDC
- Corridor 5**  
Bandar Road — Toll Plaza
- Corridor 6**  
Bandar Road — Nagan Chowranghi
- Corridor 7**  
Jail Chowranghi — DHA

## Pakistan's Sick Man

It seems avoidable until you can taste the despair—brackish—at the back of your throat. Karachi's days of preeminence as Pakistan's most vibrant and diverse metropolis, and an economic juggernaut, are numbered. The reckoning came in the 2017 census. Karachi's population growth rate has slowed down over the decades, which is not surprising given that this usually happens as income levels rise. It's a global pattern. What was surprising to most observers though was that this was only true for Karachi. Lahore, Islamabad, and a host of other cities have been growing much faster than Karachi.<sup>32</sup> Some observers chalked this up to statistical errors,<sup>33</sup> or deliberate undercounting of the city's migrants,<sup>34</sup> but it should not have been all that surprising.

What hubris was it to think that decades of divestment, violence, and plummeting quality of life would not make Karachi an undesirable place to live? The signs have been all around. The World Bank's City Diagnostic Report looked at night-time light intensity, along with data on labour productivity and economic growth, and argued that there is evidence that "Karachi's economic growth may have stalled" from 2004 onwards.<sup>35</sup> The dimming lights in the city's core point to reduced economic activity, corroborated by declining rates of labour productivity when compared to the rest of the country. The city is still big and growing, but it's not growing qualitatively. The report argues that the city is losing competitiveness, especially in manufacturing, and there is a definitive shift from formal, high-productivity jobs to low-productivity informal work across industries. This is again corroborated by the speculative property and construction boom, especially at the periphery of the city, where night-time light intensity has grown and where low-wage, low-skill labour is employed. The report also highlights extremely low female labour force participation, driven, among other things, by "inadequate, unreliable, and unsafe public transport for women."<sup>36</sup>

The provincial government, meanwhile, has little to show in improved governance and municipal services for its decade of absolute control over Karachi. The city consistently bottoms out on global Quality of Living indices.<sup>37</sup> Are we surprised that all the investment in signal-free corridors did not make Karachi a more livable, vibrant and desirable city? Who could have predicted that destroying the city's public transport infrastructure wouldn't just hamper poor people's mobility, but would eventually slow down the city's economic engine? Restoring Karachi to health requires, at the foremost, restoring flow for millions of its residents and their goods, quickly, cheaply, and strategically. The city needs a blueprint for its final act. Fortunately, it already has one.

A Karachi Transport Improvement Project 2030 study by JICA built on the mass transit corridors proposed by the ADB in 1995 and suggested a revival of the Karachi Circular Railway, supplemented by eight bus and rail-based rapid transit lines.<sup>38</sup> By the time the study was made

public, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had already built the country's first Bus Rapid Transit line, the MetroBus, in Lahore and started work on the Orange Line Metro Train. The Sindh government took the JICA plan to donors and agencies, but the only money that came through was from the Nawaz-led federal government that dropped Rs15 billion in the bank and kickstarted the building of the 35-kilometre long Green Line BRT in 2016. Red-faced, the Sindh government coughed up enough money to add a small 4-kilometre appendage, the Orange Line.

It's been five years, and both those corridors are yet to open. Shahbaz Sharif, meanwhile, built BRTs in Rawalpindi-Islamabad and Multan, and his Orange Line trains, despite court cases and delay tactics by opponents, rolled onto the tracks in October 2020. Even Peshawar managed to launch its scandal-prone BRT. All this while, from Gurumandir to Surjani, Karachi residents wistfully look out from their apartment balconies at the almost complete tracks and dust-covered stations of the Green Line, wondering when (or if) they will get to use it. What is also gathering dust is Karachi's future, and its continued existence as a significant city. Pakistan's sick man is terminally ill.

Fortunately, cities are an abstraction. A human construct. Karachi can, and should, be revived, and there could not be a more opportune moment. The next 25 years are symbolically significant. Eight years from now, in 2029, Karachi will celebrate the third centennial of its founding as a native fort. A decade after, in 2039, the second centennial of its declaration as a modern port city. Eight years after, in 2047, the city will mark the first centennial as the workhorse of a post-colonial, independent nation. Will Karachi make it to 2047? Will we have a city worth living in, let alone one worth celebrating? What follows from here is pure fiction.

## Tripping Over the Last Mile

The Green and Orange Lines opened to much fanfare in early 2022, albeit six years too late. Karachi finally has good quality public transport, 23 years after the last one, KCR, shut down. Hassan Raheem and Talal Qureshi shoot a music video on it, and it's a total bop. Pakistan's largest bank wraps every square-inch of available surface on the stations in its corporate colours, supporting the project and promoting PSL 8.

The enthusiasm is short-lived though. Ridership is limited, and the impact on congestion imperceptible. Traffic still snarls every evening at Patel Para and Golimar. This isn't surprising. People don't change their mobility patterns overnight. It took decades for people to shift to motorbikes and shape their lives around it. They are not going to give it up because a 39-kilometer corridor has opened in a city with over 10,000 kilometers of roads. Meanwhile,

ground has broken on construction of the Red and Yellow lines, and the digging up of University and Korangi roads is causing hours-long bumper-to-bumper traffic jams. The projects threaten to become a political liability for the provincial government, right around the election year. The routinely meddling and perennially anti-poor Supreme Court takes a suo moto notice.

How does the government justify the exorbitant cost of the project and a continued subsidy to the tune of Rs2 billion per year, given low ridership and continued congestion? More importantly, on what grounds does it justify taking foreign loans worth \$1 billion for the Red and Yellow BRTs? The BRTs are a costly public nuisance, and why should they not be shut down and dismantled immediately? There is, after all, a precedent for this in Delhi, where the BRT was dismantled in 2016, eight years after it was opened, after public pressure and a court case which argued that the badly designed and implemented BRT worsened the traffic conditions.<sup>39</sup>

The provincial government fumbles before the Court's questioning, but fortunately for the people of Karachi, Arif Hasan is around. Pensively hunched over in his trademark safari suit, Arif looks up unamused and, in his authoritative voice, says the one thing he has repeatedly said for decades: transit corridors need to be rezoned for high density, with provision for low-income residents. If the people who will use the buses cannot live and work close to it, why would anyone use it at all? This logic is simple and universal but has eluded Pakistani politicians and policy makers across provinces: Shahbaz never rezoned the Lahore Metrobus or the Orange Line corridor. To this day, PTI tries to run the project to the ground on Twitter, citing low ridership. At home in Peshawar, the PTI provincial government faces the same accusation when it comes to the Peshawar BRT. The Zu bikes across Hayatabad are fun, but not a scalable last mile solution.

Last mile connectivity is a serious challenge for trunk transit projects. Without feeder services and deliberate rezoning, these projects become white elephants and a drag on scarce public resources. The time to rezone is not after the project is completed, but when the route is finalized and the construction begins. Incentivized by better connectivity and available space, businesses will move closer to major transit nodes first. People will follow suit, living close to stations along the corridor. The shift happens over years, if not decades.

The provincial government is forced, against its will, to table a bill rezoning the Green, Yellow, Orange and Red Line corridors. There is much arm-twisting behind the scenes. Federal agencies and cantonment boards are now legally bound to give up un- or under-utilized land along the transit corridors. They won't give it up without a fight. The provincial government finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. The Red and Yellow Lines finish in 2029, five years behind schedule and billions of rupees over budget. They are jointly opened at the 300-year celebration of Karachi's founding as a native fort, Kolachi. It is now possible to go from Surjani to Landhi, or from Korangi to Orangi, quickly, affordably, and with one's dignity intact.

## Ephemeral Infrastructure

It is 2030 and images of flooded subway stations from across the world are a recurring feature on the news cycle.<sup>40</sup> As cities everywhere grapple with more frequent hurricanes, storms, and heavy downpours, they struggle to keep their underground public transit infrastructure dry. The global opinion on large, fixed infrastructure is shifting, much like it shifted on large dams a few decades ago. Multilateral agencies, such as ADB and the World Bank, have pulled the plug on all such investments. Without foreign funding, the Blue, Brown, Aqua, Purple and Silver Lines are non-starters.

Rahul Mehrotra, Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, had published a book titled *Ephemeral Urbanisms* in 2017, exploring uncertainty and ephemerality in the context of planning. He cites the example of the world's largest human gathering, the Kumbh Mela, for which a city of 100 million people in the Ganges floodplain is assembled, inhabited, and then dismantled, all within the space of five months, once every twelve years.<sup>41</sup> The idea of dynamic and ephemeral, as opposed to static and fixed, infrastructure takes on a fresh urgency in this climate ravaged world.

In the face of increasing demand following the success of rezoned Green and Red corridors, and limited fiscal capacity, the provincial government in Karachi is forced to innovate. They convert the remaining BRT corridors into busways, an experiment pioneered on 14th Street in New York City a decade ago.<sup>42</sup> High quality buses travel in marked lanes along existing roads, separated from the remaining traffic by plastic bollards. Instead of concretized grade separation that earned BRTs their moniker "jangla bus," busways are enforced through traffic cameras and good old Karachi Traffic Police officers, now with their NFC-enabled mobile challan devices for pesky bus lane violators. Stations are precast and modular, and can be shifted along the corridor if required. There are no more flyovers and underpasses at every intersection. Priority signaling allows buses through, while holding back turning traffic. With the hard, civil infrastructure removed, project costs plummet and execution takes a few months rather than years.

The provincial government takes a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) approach, used for decades in digital product development, to public infrastructure. They test out the first MVP on extensions of the Green and Orange Lines. It is a hit. They scale it up to the extensions of Blue Line and the Common Corridor, before going back to the drawing board to redesign the Brown, Aqua, Pink and Purple lines as ephemeral transitways. The work is groundbreaking, and for the first time, Karachi is noticed in global urban conversations as an innovative leader. In 2039, Karachi builds nine of the ten transit corridors proposed in the JICA plan. The only one missing is the Circular Railway. Density within the city swells as corridors are rezoned and people move closer to stations. The city is much more livable than it has been in decades.

## Karachi Consolidated

The Karachi Circular Railway continues to be a non-starter. The wrestling between federal and provincial governments over ownership of the land has made it a toxic project for any funding, even from lenders of the last resort i.e. the local banks. The transit corridor rezoning bill has been a thorn in the sides of the city's various landowning agencies. It started with the pesky progressives, but the centrist and center-right parties are also jumping onto the bandwagon. Popular opinion has shifted. Karachi's fragmented governance problem can no longer be brushed under the carpet.

To build and rehabilitate large scale infrastructure, including water, sewage and garbage collection, the city's governance needs to be consolidated under a single authority, much like it was done in the case of New York in 1898.<sup>43</sup> It's an old demand but is now reaching a crescendo. Land-owning agencies, including cantonments, need to forfeit their municipal functions within defined city limits. The battle is dirty, drawn out, and mostly behind the scenes. Provincial governments collapse frequently. There is a stalemate, and a compromise is brokered by the city's financiers and industrialists who have much to gain from this shake up.

On January 1, 2040, Karachi, Clifton and Faisal Cantonments are decommissioned, as had been recommended in the city's first masterplan by MRVP,<sup>44</sup> and handed over to civil administration. Malir Cantt is merged with DHA City and incorporated as a new satellite city, administered by retired brigadiers. They're all too happy to leave the swampy peninsula in the south anyway. The navy keeps strategic locations along the coast and returns the rest for public development. A ferry service has started, with stops along Hawkes Bay, Sandspit, Manora, Keamari, Boat Basin, Clifton, Sea View, Do Darya, Gizri Creek and Ibrahim Hyderi. Millions in the city by the sea can finally easily embrace the sea. It is possible to go to Hawkes Bay from a ferry station in Clifton, without driving through the loaded trucks on the cratered Mauripur Road.

Bahria Town, meanwhile, has defaulted on its Rs456 billion fine to the Supreme Court and has been annexed by the Greater Karachi Metropolitan Authority. The arc of the moral universe was long, but it bent north of the Super Highway.

The KCR revival is the first test of city-province partnership under this new consolidated arrangement. After a few initial hiccups, the project gets underway in 2042. The timeline is tight, but monumental. There can be no slippages.

The Karachi Circular Railway re-opens on August 14, 2047. I'm almost 60 and live in the PECHS apartment that we moved into in the early 2000s. Late afternoon, when the sun goes down a bit and the inauguration crowds have thinned, I walk down to the Chanesar Halt station and take



my first ride south to Tower. There is a hum and a fresh train smell, and the articulated electric carriage snakes south on dedicated tracks. I get off at the cavernous Tower station. I walk out and cross the road, passing by Merewether Tower, and look at glorious Bandar Road in the dust-speckled golden light. Karachi is hard to love, but not impossible if you try.

Pages 36-37: Karachi 1970: Trams and Circular Railway Map

Pages 42: Karachi 2020: Bridges, Flyover Et Underpasses

[Insert between pages 48 and 49 Karachi 2047: Public Transit Map](#)

## Notes

1. The title for the essay is inspired by the title of the 2015 Whitney Biennale, *America is Hard to See*. Like the exhibition, the essay suggests the impossibility of a simplified, universal emotional relationship with the city's past, present and future.
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