

The Building

Adeela Suleman | *Photographs by Razin Rubin*

For the residents of Karachi, including the barricaded city elites, violence has become part of the order of things. This is not to say that violence has become acceptable to *Karachiwalas*, but simply that they cannot imagine a future without it.

– Laurent Gayer¹

The building—from its walls to furniture, from its narrow passages to classrooms, from its entrance to the courtyard—echoed with horrors of its dreadful past. Violence in its myriad manifestations had left its marks on this site; traces of which were visible in wall chalkings, broken windows, and an absence of human beings, all encapsulated in dust and cobwebs.

I first encountered the building, Vocational Training Centre in Khadda Market, near Abdullah Haroon College in Lyari, during my visit to the area to watch the screening of a documentary film, *Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist*.² As I drove in and around Lyari to locate the site, I witnessed remnants of violent gang wars, crime, and neglect that have coloured our perception of this part of the city.

According to Laurent Gayer, “Lyari derives its name from the word *lyar*, a tree said to bloom in graveyards [...]. According to the legend, it is here that Mai Kolachi, the fisherwoman who gave her name to Karachi, lived with her seven sons, six of whom lost their lives to a gigantic crocodile”.³ It is believed that the dead sons are buried at a site, which is now a busy intersection under a flyover, near Lyari. The first residents of Lyari were Sindhi fishermen and Baloch nomads from Makran, Lasbela, and Kalat districts. The signs of settlements are from the early 18th century. Historically, the inhabitants of Lyari were among the first settlers in Karachi. Even though Lyari is considered Baloch in local imaginaries, according to sociologist Nida Kirmani, “Lyari is actually multi-ethnic and includes Punjabis, Mianwalis, Kutchis [...], Memons, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and a small number of Urdu speakers at its outskirts”.⁴

One enters the building through a large barren ground, surrounded by shuttered down and broken windows, signalling an absence of human life. A man guides me to the staircase, leading to the first floor. The place starts to transform with each step of the staircase; still the same, but markers of life, of human presence, slowly become visible.

Abdul Latif Dorai—a local resident of the area, manager in the morning, and *kebab* seller in the evening—took over a portion of the Abdullah Haroon Vocational Training Centre to offer classes to girls in sewing, computer skills, beautician courses, and English language. Latif says, "We started this small Centre (Latif Bhai Centre) within the Vocational Training Centre as a small window for the girls to breathe. In their tiny apartments, they are not even allowed to stand in the balcony. Their movement is monitored by their fathers and brothers. They are not allowed to watch TV programmes of their choice as the remote of the TV is in the hand of either the father or brother."⁵

I learned over many conversations upon my later visits that the Vocational Training Centre is working under the umbrella of the Sindh Technical and Vocational Authority, Government of Sindh, and is in the process of revival after being non-functional for a long time. However, no efforts have been made towards activating it.

Prior to Operation Lyari, the institute was used by Ustad Taju and Uzair Baloch's group of gangsters as a torture cell, for nearly six years, to hide persons kidnapped for ransom.

Uzair Jan Baloch, a scorned young man powered by the thirst to take his father's murderer to task, a crime lord originally from Lyari, a key front man of Karachi's organised crime has been long associated with the disreputable gang war in his hometown. According to a report published in *The Friday Times* on the history of gang war in Lyari in 2012, Ali K. Chishti writes:

[...] [I]n 1964, Dad Muhammad, also known as Dadal, formed a gang with his brother Sheru, who worked at Rex Cinema, and began to illegally sell Hashish. Dad Muhammad was the father of Rehman Baloch, now known as Rehman Dakait. Together, Dadal and Sheru took on the biggest drug peddler in Karachi, known as Kala Nag. Nag was later killed in a police encounter.

Nag's son Fazlu (or Kala Nag II) and Iqbal Dakait aka Babu competed with rival Haji Lal Mohammad aka Lalu, who was Rehman Dakait's godfather. In the 1990s, Rehman consolidated his power in Karachi with the support of PPP-backed Khaled Shahanshah and others.

In the mid-1990s, Rehman Dakait abducted Saleem Memon, a trader from the Kharadar area, for ransom. Lalu asked Rehman to release the man for free, but secretly took the ransom himself. Ties between the two men broke down after that.

Later, Lalu's son Arshad Pappu abducted businessman Faiz Muhammad—who was Rehman's cousin—and killed him. Faiz's son Uzair Baloch eventually became Rehman Baloch's successor.

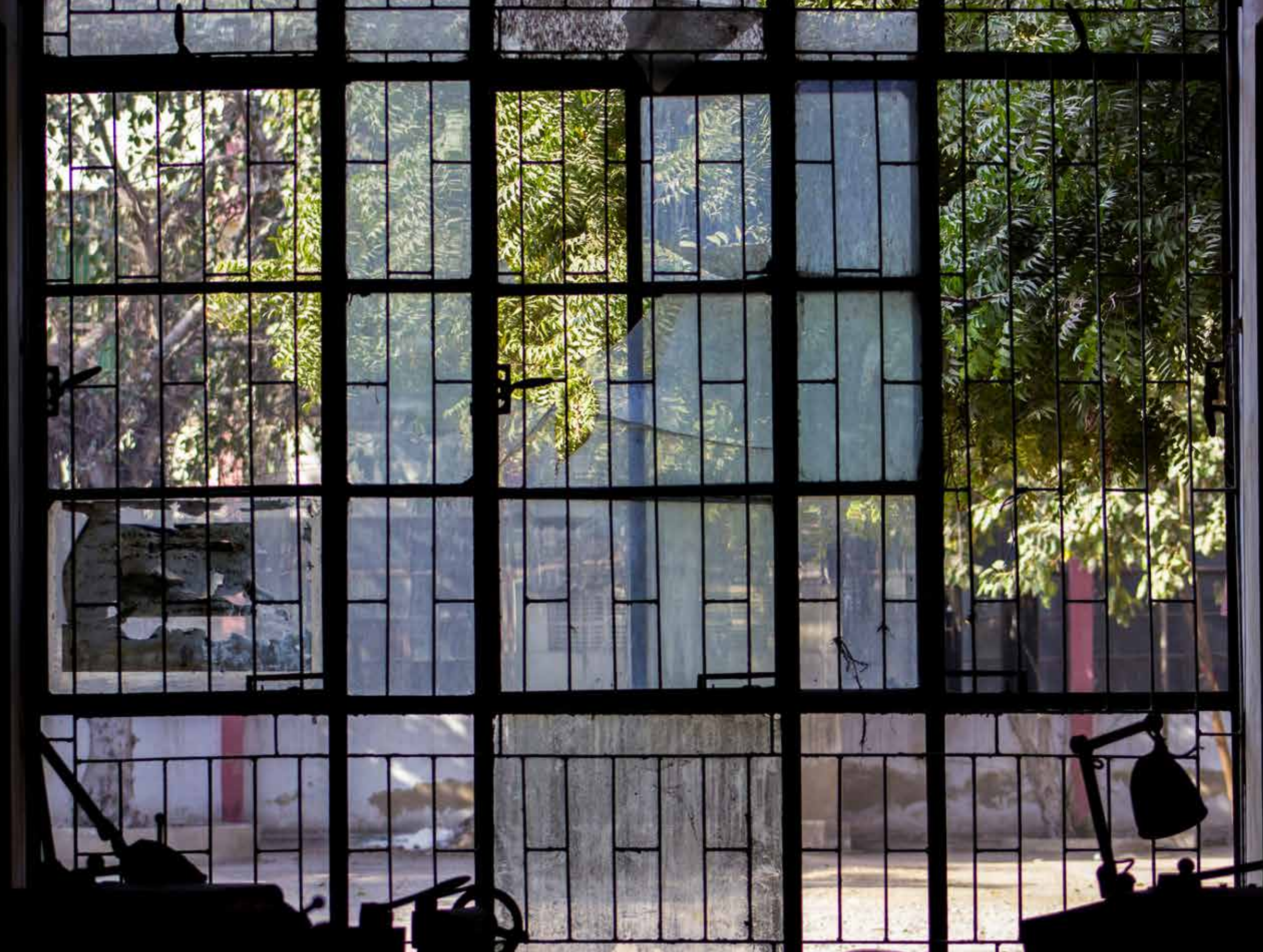
Uzair now heads the controversial People's Aman Committee (PAC) in Lyari, Lalu operates from Dubai, and his son Arshad Pappu was recently released by the police. Both the groups claim links with the Pakistan People's Party.⁶

According to Abdul Latif Dorai, the stains of terror were visible on the walls when he first entered this building. "The centre had become a symbol of fear and people were scared to even cross the street [where it is located]"⁷ Ustad Taju and Uzair Baloch's name—both notorious gangsters, with the former now serving time in prison—are still engraved on the walls in the Centre. These engravings register as ghost marks, hovering between presence and absence, bearing witness to countless lives lost and persecuted. Despite the discolouration of the markings, their presence is palpable. When violence seeps into the very existence of architecture, it leaves traces that can never be forgotten, erased, diminished.

According to Abdul Latif Dorai, "the classrooms that you see with machines and furniture are the responsibility of the Sindh Technical Board, inhabited by ghost students and ghost teachers."⁸ Admissions take place every year; students come and sit outside their classrooms. Gulzar Bibi, caretaker of the Centre, un-shutters the classrooms, sweeps the floor, lets the air in, and all the new students wait for their teachers. Gulzar Bibi knows the reality, but the new students do not, not yet. They wait only to realise that the teachers will never show up. The wrinkles on Gulzar Bibi's face tell a thousand stories that can only be experienced and not entirely shared. She took over her husband's job in 2002, after his accidental death by electrocution in 1989.

Upon request from Abdul Latif Dorai, I initiated a weekly art class in the grounds of the Centre, which has continuously deepened my association with the place. Some of the rooms that were once used as torture cells are now utilised as classrooms for various courses. This small initiative in the landscape of violence has become a refuge for girls in the area. It is a space within a space, same as Lyari—a state within the *state*.















Notes

1. Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 4.
2. *Perween Rahman: The Rebel Optimist*, produced and directed by Mahera Omar (Karachi: 2016).
3. Laurent Gayer, *Karachi*, p. 127.
4. Nida Kirmani, "Life in a no go area: Experiences of Marginalisation and Fear in Lyari," in *Cityscapes of Violence in Karachi: Publics and Counterpublics*, ed. Nichola Khan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 107.
5. Abdul Latif Dorai, interviewed by Adeela Suleman, Vocational Training Grounds, Khadda Market, Lyari, Karachi, 17 March 2018.
6. Ali K. Chishti, "The Story of Lyari: A History of the Gang Wars in Karachi's Oldest Town," *The Friday Times*, 4–10 May 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120512225956/http://www.thefridaytimes.com/beta3/tft/article.php?issue=20120504&page=5>.
7. Yusra Salim, "Changing Fates: Lyari Torture Cell Building to Become Vocational Training Centre," *The Express Tribune*, 24 December 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1273082/changing-fates-lyari-torture-cell-building-become-vocational-training-centre/>.
8. Abdul Latif Dorai, interviewed by Adeela Suleman, Vocational Training Grounds, Khadda Market, Lyari, Karachi, 17 March 2018.

Chishti, Ali K. "The Story of Lyari: A History of the Gang Wars in Karachi's Oldest Town." *The Friday Times*, 4–10 May 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120512225956/http://www.thefridaytimes.com/beta3/tft/article.php?issue=20120504&page=5>.

Dorai, Abdul Latif. Interviewed by Adeela Suleman, Vocational Training Grounds, Khadda Market, Lyari, Karachi, 17 March 2018.

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