**Urbanisation priorities**

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January 27, 2022

An aerial view of a city instantly informs us about its liveability standards. The salient characteristics are a well-planned road network, housing architecture and green spaces that provide us with the planning standards of any urban area. It is an irony that the view of many of our towns and cities is punctuated with muddled spaces, non-uniformity in cityscapes, an irregular road network and scrambled housing. It also shows that our lives lack green spaces and trees. Though a number of measures are taken to upgrade the look of our towns, the cumulative result is always a failure. I was curious to dig out the root causes for this. I therefore ended up making certain observations as there is no doubt in the fact that urban design and architecture of any area is mainly governed by its topography and climate, but other key factors are the economic and socio-political system in a country. For instance, to have an understanding of this, if we look back at ancient civilisations, the social system comprised of only two classes, the ruling monarch and the slaves. If we take the example of the greatest Egyptian civilisation, there was either an acropolis, the king’s palace or there were slave quarters. Then later in medieval times, when there were frequent wars and recurrent invaders attacks, towns were planned in a manner that they were surrounded with fortified walls with an irregular street pattern, for defence purposes. Such towns were the manifestation of the social and political system prevailing in contemporary times.

[Somali military kills 28 al-Shabaab terrorists in 48 hours](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2022/somali-military-kills-28-al-shabaab-terrorists-in-48-hours)

In contrast, in Pakistan, the country had no specific direction immediately after its birth. The socio-political system was confused or under dictatorship. Successive governments did not prioritise developing a vision for the country and consequently the planning laws were either bought from abroad and blindly imposed without having any understanding of the same. The economic policies adopted in the initial years after the establishment of Pakistan led to resources being towards a few families despite attempts for fair distribution. The most famous criticism was made by Dr Mahboob ul Haq when he alleged that “Twenty-two industrial family groups had come to dominate the economic and financial life-cycle of Pakistan and that they controlled about two-thirds of industrial assets, 80 percent of banking and 79 percent of insurance assets in the industrial domain.”

Dr Haq’s criticism of the policy to create a class that had extreme resources to act as an engine of the economy to create employment and opportunities was on point. His analysis held true, now there are way more than 22 families that dominate wealth and resources while on the other hand, the rising gap between the rich and the poor widened with each passing day, which ultimately created two highly-skewed economic classes.

[Western Balkans see highest COVID deaths per 100,000 globally](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2022/western-balkans-see-highest-covid-deaths-per-100-000-globally)

For this reason, since planning laws were not a priority for successive governments, our cities and towns were left at the mercy of land mafias, haphazard and random planning decision making and no vision for the country. The uncontrolled urban sprawl, congestion and degraded infrastructure remain the greatest challenges in the liveability of our cities. Similarly, our towns have no distinct character in terms of architecture and space utilisation.

Our towns and cities speak of tragedies and the turmoil of our problematic decision making and shabby economic policies. A lack of harmony in housing architecture is in fact the reflection of class segregation on the basis of income levels and the lack of control of government over planning and equitable development. The government, when unable to provide housing to its people, gives a free hand to the people to build as per their income levels and aspirations and financial status. This paves the way for individual decision making that destroys the essence of cities and forms. People having more resources and financial status exercise their respective will in construction of their houses regardless of the collective scene. This culminates in the form of distinct architecture for each individual house, ranging from the most expensive, to middle- and lower-income residential societies. Though in developed countries, such allowance is only for huge mansions and peripheral areas.

[4.5 magnitude earthquake jolts parts of Swat](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jan-2022/4-5-magnitude-earthquake-jolts-parts-of-swat)

Similarly, the main roads or arteries of metropolitan cities should be mandated by law to have a façade that ensures coherence in the street scene that would improve the individuality and uniqueness of the spaces in a city. Cities are the face of a country, a demonstration of its citizen’s choices and their imagination. Well-planned cities add to economic development through an increase in tourism. We should make our cities presentable and liveable, not only for the entire world, but to provide a good life to their inhabitants.