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# Impacts of Private Urban Mega Projects: Case of Bahria Icon, Karachi

**Suneela Ahmed, Rahat Arsalan**

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**Suneela Ahmed** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture and Planning, NED University of Engineering and Technology (NEDUET) Karachi, Pakistan. She received her PhD from Oxford Brookes University, UK in 2016.

She has bachelors in Architecture from Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi and a Masters in Urban Management from University of Canberra, Australia. She has been involved in local and international urban planning and design research. She has also participated in national and international conferences and symposia and has authored and contributed to urban and architecture publications.

✉suneela\_mail@yahoo.com



**Rahat Arsalan** is an architect with an MS in Urban and Regional Planning from NED University of Engineering and Technology (NEDUET), Karachi. She is a lecturer at the Department of Architecture and Planning, NED

since 2009, where she is a part of Urban Design and Research team.

✉rahatarsalan@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Privately executed urban development in an area can bring upon its dwellers major social and economic change, especially if undertaken without public consultation. The development of the 62 storey Bahria Icon in Karachi is a case in point. This paper investigates by way of semi structured interviews, its urban impact and ways to address the fall-outs. On face value, this development is supposed to represent 'progress', 'modernization' and 'change', but many aspects of physical and social development have either been compromised or overlooked. Negative impacts of the development are loss of heritage, burdening of infrastructure and the change in skyline of the city, besides many hidden fall-outs of the project. With the Bahria Icon's development, the informal economy in the vicinity, the livelihoods of minorities, public recreational areas and the equity of the low-income settlement in the neighborhood, have also been affected, and their future is uncertain.



**Figure 1:** The mixed-use neighbourhood of Clifton in Karachi  
 Image Source: <http://dhatoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/>

### The Locality of Clifton in Karachi

Clifton emerged as a residential suburb in the southern part of Karachi in 1960s, having a distinct character of planned modern architecture. While the extensive growth of unplanned “infill developments”, existing low-density low rise land parcels and its reallocation into commercial districts of high-density high-rise developments, stands as an indication of new movements of goods, capital, people, and cultural sensibilities (Figure 1). Clifton’s built environment co-exists with vastly different histories, a range of competing and coexisting systems of value and meaning, with an upcoming demand for transforming social and material context barely respecting historical or socio-cultural settings and the systems of livelihood.

Long term residents of Clifton, have witnessed a radical change in the area through the so-called logic of a new bureaucratic state apparatus, politics, and large-scale developments. It is necessary to analyze what the developers do in practice, and examine the problems inherent in their project planning approach. They always consider the poor as passive recipients and try to play with the dynamics of their representation. Survival of the poor is put under a question in contested urban settings of complex interplay of economic and land strategies. Municipal

institutions become important, not only from a functional point of view, but also from the point of view of representation and political access.

Clifton covers an area of about 1950 acres and was sanctioned by the government in 1964, as a self-financing scheme costing approximately 100 million Pak Rupees then. This scheme was meant as a recreational cum high-income residential scheme for two storeyed bungalows and multi-storeyed apartment blocks on plots varying from 600 to 4500 sq.yards. It incorporated the Old Clifton housing and recreational spaces of Clifton, as well as the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi. This scheme was meant to extend the city right up to the Arabian sea, eliminating marshes and sandy wastes, providing space for a population of 150,000. This scheme was launched for middle and upper middle-income groups. A well-established network of main streets, service lanes, pedestrian paths and connector roads assigned a distinct morphological bearing to the scheme (Figure 2).

The idea was to develop residential zones along the beach and provide multi-storied high-density housing on the pattern of similar beaches in other parts of the world. It was also meant to provide accommodation for various foreign diplomatic missions in Karachi. The boating basin was to be developed as a special feature of the scheme. Thus, the very inception of the area of Clifton was elitist in its profile.

After some thirty years however, Clifton experienced a rapid change in land use. The houses / residential spaces facing the main roads gave way to multi-storey real estate development, offices, and schools. Over the



Figure 2: Road network of Clifton, Karachi



Figure 3: Landuse of Clifton



Figure 4: Shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi and Temple of Mahadev in Clifton, Karachi



Figure 5: Lady Lloyd Pier and Band Stand, Clifton, Karachi

years, Clifton has consolidated as a mixed use development offering diverse land uses ranging from residential, commercial, institutional and recreational. It serves as a recreational center for the entire city as it has the advantage of being located on the beachfront. (Figure 3). The residential areas provide a variety of housing typology, ranging from apartment blocks to town houses to detached bungalows, to people from different income groups. Clifton's proximity to the Sea Port and Chundrigarh



*Figure 6: Bahria Icon under construction, look of the towers when finished*  
Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/>, <http://www.thenewstrack.com/>

Road, which is the Central Business District of Karachi, is another location advantage that it enjoys. Recently Clifton has seen the construction of a number of shopping malls, parks and educational institution facilities, which have consolidated the morphology of the locality, and draws visitors and residents from the rest of the city.

The locality of Clifton houses the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, a saint venerated throughout the sub-continent, attracting thousands of visitors daily. This Shrine dates from 9th century, and has acquired a landmark status over the years. There is also a temple next to the Shrine, named Mahadev Temple, which is venerated by Hindus and is believed to be 150 years old. Both the shrine and the temple have been a part of the indigenous settlement of Karachi, and have continued to be a major part of its history (Figure 4).

The roots for the development of Clifton's urban morphology were laid during the Colonial times and some important landmarks and recreational buildings came into existence in the 19th century, like the Band Stand and the Lady

Lloyd Pier, which with the receding sea, has now become a walkway (Figure 5).

### **Bahria Icon, a Mega Project in Clifton**

The Bahria Icon skyscraper is located next to the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, in the heart of Clifton. The two towers are 62 storey high (Figures 6), and are the tallest buildings in Pakistan. In order to allow the execution of Bahria Icon, the Sindh High Density Board Act was enacted, which revised the allowable floor area ratio (FAR) for this particular parcel of land. The previous land use of this piece of land was residential but it was changed to mixed land use. Bahria Icon also acquired a parcel of land, which was previously an amenity plot. The Bahria Town development stretches over both the residential and amenity plot. There have been many objections to this from the civil society but to no avail.

The entire project of Bahria Icon comprises of a flyover and two underpasses constructed by Bahria Town Management in collaboration with Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC). The design of the underpasses violated heritage laws, as the heritage site of Jehangir Kothari



Figure 7: Public recreational spaces in Clifton likely to see impact of new development- Fun Land, Bagh-e-ibn-e-Qasim and the Clifton beach.

Parade was encroached upon and the roof of the Mahadev Temple was damaged. On completion,

**The construction of the Bahria Icon has two major impacts on its immediate surrounding. Firstly, the structures of historical and heritage value have been badly affected. Secondly, it will burden infrastructure while inducing changes in the local life as well as skyline of the city.**

the Bahria Icon is to contain a shopping mall, an international hotel, cinemas, restaurants, health clubs, and corporate offices besides residential flats. This new commercialization trend, which mainly targets the high income group, has disturbed the inclusive nature of the vicinity and has raised questions about equity, especially because of its location between the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi and the beach, and within the proximity of places like the Fun land, Bagh-e-ibn-e-Qasim and the Clifton beach frequented by people belonging to middle and low income groups (Figure 7).

The aim of this study is to document and analyze the impact of the development of Bahria Icon, and question the equity of such an addition in a city like Karachi. The premise that more of such developments will be seen in the future was established, and the possible

direction, where the equity of public space is not compromised and the development is inclusive, has been explored. Information has been gathered through semi structured interviews of stakeholders, architects, planners and government body representatives.

### Evident Impacts of the Development of Bahria Icon

The Bahria Icon boasts to be the tallest building project in Pakistan. As a building finished in glass and steel, it is supposed to project a 'progressive' image of the city. The construction of the Bahria Icon has two major impacts on its immediate surrounding. Firstly, the structures of historical and heritage value have been badly affected. Secondly, it will burden infrastructure while inducing changes in the local life as well as skyline of the city.

The structure of the Mahadev Temple, which according to local legend is a temple mentioned in the Mahabharat (the Holy Hindu epic) has been damaged due to construction of the underpass to facilitate traffic flow around Bahria Icon. Similarly, the Jehangir Kothari Parade, also a part of the city's history has been physically damaged and is now visually hidden from the road by the new underpass.

The ceremonial procession of devotees paying homage at the adjoining shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi has also been impacted, because of the construction of the Bahria Icon.

According to Architect and Planner Mr. Arif Hasan, also a city activist who views the development critically: “Changes in the neighbourhood of such important heritage sites are normally discouraged so as to keep a link with history... However, when such changes are required they are made by seeking public acceptance. This is done by making presentations of the project at its initial design stage to the citizens and relevant interest groups and modifying the designs on the feedback from the presentations.”<sup>1</sup>

The construction of the Bahria Icon, which has seven basements and is designed to accommodate 2300 vehicles, requires major traffic engineering intervention, and a localized traffic solution in the form of underpasses and overpasses, that only serve the Bahria Icon, is not sufficient. According to Arif Hasan: “In the entire KDA Scheme-5 of Clifton, large pockets have been marked for densification in which the floor to area ratio has been increased from 1:2 or 1:5 to 1:12. The Bahria intervention is a local initiative to solve a local problem created by the 59 office floors of the Icon Tower. It does not solve the problems that will be created by the increase in floor to area ratios in Clifton Scheme-5 as a whole.”<sup>2</sup>

The Environmental Impact Assessment -EIA report states that focus groups could not be conducted with the residents as ‘it was not

possible to arrange a Focus Group Discussion at some central place with a group of 6-8 people together, as the people were busy and did not have time for more than 15 minutes’<sup>3</sup>. The report claims to have taken feedback via interviews of individual people, but only issues of infrastructure traffic and transport were pointed out as the ones bothering the stakeholders in the context of Bahria Icon. In the EIA report, the urban design impacts of the development on the heritage site, resultant increase in traffic and transport, burdening of the infrastructure and the change in skyline of the city, unclear role of the municipal operations, impact on the informal economy of the Shrine, impact on adjoining public recreational areas like the Fun Land and Bagh-e-Ibn-Qasim and the pedestrian access of the Shrine, are overlooked. Thus, the report has rightly been termed as of ‘poor standard’ by Sehri (a local NGO) and the fact that the commencement of the project initially took off without any EIA has been pointed out.

### **Non Evident Impacts of the Development of Bahria Icon**

There are many hidden impacts of the Bahria Icon development on the general environment and more specifically on the non-resourceful stakeholders in the area. These are conveniently ignored but need to be brought out, some of which are discussed here.

#### **Impact on Regulatory Checks**

Bahria Icon has set precedence in the city that a private developer can twist the arm of the state and regulatory bodies to get a law passed to develop a parcel of land, as per its will. The Sindh High Density Board

Act, which revised the FAR for this particular parcel of land and allowed Bahria to construct a 62-floor building, is an example of this.

### Environmental Impacts

The precedence set by the development of

**In this paradigm of privately executed urban design projects, the role of the government as a facilitator and provider for public good is diminished, where the developer goes beyond the site of development, and shapes the immediate context according to a private vision for its own benefit.**

Bahria Icon will also lead to loss of green spaces in the city and burdening of traffic and transport infrastructure. The close proximity of the beach, which is a much frequented public space, will be impacted if more of such elitist developments are seen in the vicinity, as accessibility to the beach by common people may be restricted under the guise of security issues. Although the Bahria Town has its own municipal management team but they are only responsible for upto 500m within the development. It has not planned any larger waste or sewerage disposal facility to address the outflow generated by their scheme. This may lead to the waste and sewerage entering the sea untreated and the seashore might become a garbage-dumping site.

### Equity and Municipal Operation

Over a dozen management authorities, with little coordination between them, manage the city of Karachi. The local government structure is unclear and the residents are often unaware of the municipal agencies responsible

for the operation and maintenance of an area, as established through interviews conducted in the context of Bahria Icon. In this context of unclear definition of the role of municipal service providers, Bahria Town has installed urban furniture, benches, dustbins, street lights, paving, trees and is responsible (on a self-appointed basis) for its maintenance and upkeep. These issues raise questions of equity and whether a real estate developer should be allowed to determine not just the shape of the city but also the way in which the municipal operations should run in a city. In this paradigm of privately executed urban design projects, the role of the government as a facilitator and provider for public good is

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diminished, where the developer goes beyond the site of development, and shapes the immediate context according to a private vision for its own benefit.

### Speculation, Gentrification and Lack of Affordable Housing

High density, high rise development in the southern part of Karachi is going to accelerate with time, and it can be expected in the near future that this trend will be facilitated by investors, real estate developers, formal and informal banking channels and also through the interest of prospective buyers both at home and overseas. One of the reasons for



*Figure 8: Metal grills blocking the pedestrian flow towards the Ghazi shrine.*

this trend is that people don't have many options to invest their excess capital except real estate. Sizeable numbers are investing in these properties for speculative purposes, not as first generation users. Another reason for such developments being favoured is the notion of making Karachi a 'world class city'.

On the other hand, according to a recent study by International Institute for Environment and Development on Karachi,<sup>4</sup> unplanned and sporadic real estate development, land speculation, land grabbing and ineffective governance are some of the issues plaguing the city. Many publically owned plots exist within the city but are not used for developing housing for the urban poor, who account for almost 70% of the city's population. The poor are being pushed to the periphery, which results in long commutes. What the city of Karachi requires is to develop housing for all income groups in close proximity to the work places in order to attain sustainability and smart growth.<sup>5</sup> A capital intensive housing development like the Bahria Icon, targeted for the elite does not address the housing and commuting issues of the larger section of the society, and is bound to lead to speculation and gentrification of the society.

Bahria Icon is a vertical gated housing for the elite, and will lead to a change in the character of the immediate context, which is frequented by the masses. A guest house for the pilgrims to the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi functioning for past sixty years has been omitted in the new master plan because of perceived security threat from the pilgrims. More of such developments in Clifton would lead to further gentrification and exclusion of the common man from their vicinity.

#### **Impact on the Visitors to the Ghazi Shrine**

Majority of the pilgrims at the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi come by public transport, dismount at a bus stop across the shrine, take off their shoes/ slippers in respect and walk across the road and up the stairs of the shrine. There is a high pedestrian influx around the shrine as a lot of these pilgrims also visit the Fun Land and the beach during their day trip. In the design of the Bahria Icon precinct, this huge inflow of pedestrians is not taken into consideration. The direct access to the shrine has been blocked off by placing metal grills (**Figure 8**). A couple of pedestrian subways have been designed, but these are under lit and people are not comfortable using them to approach the shrine. Besides, many of the devotees arriving at the Shrine have a physical disability, and there is no design consideration for universal access. The new infrastructure layout has limited the access of buses on the main arteries around the Shrine, causing further problems for devotees to access the complex.



**Figure 9:** Direct access to Fun Land is blocked and the redefined approach to Funland



**Figure 10:** Secondary Street next to the Bahria Icon

### Impact on the Informal Economy

An informal economy operates in the vicinity of Bahria Icon in various forms, ranging from small-scale vendors, to beggars, to alms collectors, to encroachers and food kiosks owners to entertainers. Many of these informal operators have been displaced with the development of the Bahria Icon. Firstly, the entrance to the Shrine has been redesigned and no space has been allocated for them. Secondly, these informal operators are not seen as fitting the image of a ‘progressive’ Bahria Town.

### Impact on the Recreational Spaces

The two recreational spaces in Clifton-Fun Land and Bagh-e-Ibn-Qasim, have seen better days, when people from all over the city frequented them, as they housed affordable joyrides and food kiosks. Initially with the development of Bagh-e-ibn- Qasim from an open ground into a designed park, and now with the construction of Bahria Icon, the access to these spaces is blocked; they have shrunk in size and have become a backdrop to the Bahria Icon (**Figure 9**).

The Bagh-e-ibn Qasim Park was redesigned in 2007 and a boundary wall erected around it. Previously, this piece of land was an open

ground which was used by various groups (mostly young men) ranging from school children playing cricket, flying kites to people having go- cart races. Introduction of an entry fee, restricted access. The previous frequenters no longer visited the Park as the landscaped areas did not facilitate their interests and because the entry to the Park was restricted to families only, young men were not allowed to enter if not accompanied by their family members.

The Park was however still crowded on Sundays and public holidays and was frequented by people from all walks of life. The nearby residents used it for morning walks and exercise. Families from other parts of the city frequented the Park and it provided a healthy resting space for families making a day trip to the adjoining shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi. Recently, the Park has fallen prey to neglect and no government body is willing to maintain it. As a result the landscape areas have been eradicated and the Park has become an area of many problems like mugging.

Furthermore, the road from the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi and Fun Land to the beach once had *tangawalas* offering *tanga* (horse-cart) rides. This street next to the Shrine used to become a pedestrian route to the beach, extremely crowded on the



Figure 11: Shah Rasool Colony, Clifton Karachi

weekends, but now it has become a deserted street (Figure 9, 10). The activities offered on the waterfront included camelback rides, horseback rides, snake charmers, amusement parks, restaurants, or just a plain old dip in the sea. With the construction of the Bahria Icon and the redesigning of the access to the Shrine, this route of the day-trippers is blocked and informal vendors and entertainers are removed. Because the entrance to Fun land is now hidden behind the mega project, it has shrunk in size, and the overall business has reduced.

### Impact on Low Income Settlement

Two of the low-income areas in Clifton, Shah Rasool Colony and Neelum Colony are located just across the road to Bahria Icon (Figure 11). The residents of these colonies work as labourers, domestic workers and valet boys. These colonies have existed in the vicinity since 1970s. These neighbourhoods have robust communal structures and a strong sense of community, where people know each other personally. The urban morphology in some of the areas is organic. Majority of the houses have been built through incremental process, with one plot accommodating up to

three generations. The streets are lively- men, women and children come out to interact or to purchase from vendors.

Although there are issues of lack of privacy and adequate ventilation within the houses, the residents value the social capital within the locality and its central location in Clifton. Says Sajid Ali, working as a valet boy, “We don’t have to travel to distant places for work, it saves time and money.”<sup>6</sup>

The residents also value the physical and economic investments made in the locality over the years. At the same time the residents are also conscious of the threat they face because of the central location of the neighbourhood and view the Bahria Icon development with contempt, as they fear possibility of eviction of the entire neighbourhood, despite being a leased settlement.

The residents of these low-income areas complain of lack of recreational or interactive spaces, as according to them all the spaces being built are for the elite. They complain of being restricted from visiting the Ghazi Shrine because of the new plan, which is not pedestrian friendly and has reduced the number of vendors who used to operate within the complex. Many of these vendors were residents of these colonies.

According to Najma from Shah Rasool colony, “If we had parks in our own area, it could have been better”,<sup>7</sup> and according to Naeem from same the area, “government parks charge tickets and in our salaries we cannot afford to go to these parks weekly so we go to the beach instead.”<sup>8</sup>

## Ways to Address Fall-outs of Elite-centric Developments

Currently the process of development by a private developer in Karachi is undertaken in a fuzzy manner, where the regulatory authorities are in collusion with the builders and are unable to determine the nature of these real estate developments. In order to take control of the shape and direction of

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these developments, some steps need to be taken which are discussed here.

A long-term growth and renewal plan needs to be developed for the city, keeping in view the inevitable occurrences of developments like Bahria Icon in the future. This plan should embrace diversity of economic, ethnic, religious and social groups dwelling in the city. It should propose areas for affordable mixed-use neighbourhoods, identify public spaces with multiple uses and prioritize connections between built form and open/ green areas. High-density areas should be designed along with green buffers.

Laws like the Sindh High Density Board Act should be repealed immediately, because it prohibits the possibility of any effective land use zoning and the development of a larger land use plan for the city. Adequate urban design exercises should be undertaken, identifying land

for high-rise development, which fits in with the larger vision for the city.

Incentive based development promoting equity should be undertaken. Development incentive programs which facilitate and regulate such growth should be implemented. Some of the common incentives are grants, tax cuts, site advantages, public utility rate break and infrastructure improvements. The goal of these incentives should be to induce growth in targeted areas, providing new jobs and construction in stagnant areas, while generating long-term positive tax revenue for state and local governments.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Bahria Icon also, the local government has adopted an incentive based approach in which it has negotiated with the developer to develop the transport infrastructure, street furniture and landscaping as a response to mega construction. However, the improvements are to favour and benefit their own project and do little for the neighbourhood. The public bodies must be inclusive in terms of representation and must be vigilant towards common public good. There is a requirement to regulate the real estate market to control speculation and address shortage of housing in the city. Internationally, many models are adopted to regulate the real estate market. For instance, real estate development in the west is facilitated by a financing mechanism called as Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT).<sup>10</sup> These trusts are institutions that are developed through mutual financing and are registered with their respective stock exchanges. They draw capital directly from the public so they fall under the regulatory control of the security and exchange commission, which regulates investments in

the formal sector. Thus, the private sector or a small-scale individual investor, they are all partners in this scenario. According to Architect/Planner Dr. Noman Ahmed: “If we want to create a decent residential profile amongst these areas then we will have to undertake some of these exercises on a pilot basis and use the demonstration effect of these exercises to other similar neighbourhoods”<sup>11</sup>

The benefits of working through REIT are that property prices remain under control, and the transactions are recorded. In Pakistan, the real estate market is not regulated and the speculator investors use their undeclared capital in such

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situation. By keeping the prices under the regulatory check, speculation can be minimized.

Currently the density of Clifton is intensifying and it can be considered as a pilot case, as it was planned by Karachi Development Authority (KDA) to have specific densities, and many of the basic infrastructural standards were high having the possibility of expansion and addition. Once the planned and targeted densification of Clifton is complete, similar exercises can be repeated in other parts of the city with adequate guidelines for equitable development.

The status of the neighbourhoods, which are earmarked to be densified, and the status of the

infrastructure in these localities should be examined along with the plot profile, urban morphology and street networks and based on this study future densities and interventions need to be proposed.

The government should initiate a public-private partnership approach, where the state takes on the role of the facilitator, and guides the development of the city within the larger vision that is required for an inclusive urban development. The residents of the area should have rightful information about what is taking place and how. A process of consultation and registration of complaints should be established. The involvement of a ‘provincial ombudsman’ for sending out complaints related to the development should be ensured. Building regulations and byelaws should be applied and infrastructure agencies should provide no objection (NOC) and security completion certificates.

Lastly, an independent body comprising of professionals and representatives from the civil society need to be put in place to ensure that new development follows the overall development vision for the city, and to check any uncontrolled development. There was such a body in existence - Karachi Building and Control Authority (KBCA) Oversee Committee, which was a twenty member board and it operated in 2004. It comprised of architects, planners, engineers, builders and civil society representatives and had the authority to stop any non-compliant development taking place in the city. This committee was headed by the Chief Minister’s adviser on local government and the city government’s District Coordination Officer was the secretary. Revival of such an overseeing body will be a right step towards an equitable growth of the city.

## Conclusion

Cities will continue to develop and densify, this should however be addressed in an equitable and planned manner. Ad-hoc densification, as seen in the case of Bahria Icon project, can lead to many urban issues, ranging from questions about governance, equity, usage of space and social, physical and economic impact on the immediate context. In order to mitigate negative impacts of any urban development and densification, urban design and impact assessment exercises should be carried out and their results should be incorporated in the urban design process. Stakeholders from all walks of life and different income groups should also be part of these exercises.

The new commercialization and densification trend in Karachi mainly targets the high-income brackets and raises questions about equity of the development. This paper documents and analyses the impact of one such development, the Bahria Icon in Clifton. The questions addressed in this paper revolve around addressing the new role of the government, planning and civic authorities for an equitable socio-economic vision to minimize the negative impacts of such mega projects.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Hasan, A. (2014). Karachi's Densification. DAWN. Karachi, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1102536>. Accessed 6/4/2014

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Karachi Municipal Corporation. (June 2014). Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Grade Separated Traffic Improvement Plan from Park Tower Intersection to A.T. Naqvi Roundabout. Karachi Environmental Management Consultants, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> Urban Resource Center, Arif Hasan, et al. Responding to the transport crisis in Karachi. (The International Institute for Environment and Development Working paper, July 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Interview by the Authors of Sajid Ali, 37 years old valet boy, a resident of Neelum Colony.

<sup>7</sup> Interview by the Authors of Najma, housewife and resident of Neelum Colony.

<sup>8</sup> Interview by the Authors of Naeem, resident of Shah Rasool Colony.

<sup>9</sup> BLS & Co. (2015). "New York Economic Development Incentives Program." Retrieved 10/9/2016

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Interview by the Authors of Architect/Planner Dr. Noman Ahmed, Chairman Department of Architecture and Planning, NED University of Engineering and Technology. 6/9/2016

