

Privatization of Public Spaces in Karachi, Irani Cafes and the future

The role of public spaces is trans-dimensional, they do not offer only one opportunity but instead are a social dimension which effects everyone. They are catalysts for urban renewal, they act as the trigger for urban regeneration, ‘potential areas for community revitalization’ and even as simple places for interaction and amenities of the city.¹ In recent years, the approach towards public spaces and urban design has a faced a lot of criticism due to its exclusionary tendencies. Critics have argued that the public in a capitalist system cannot be truly inclusive as it places a lot of power in the hands of ‘market’. Most these criticism is directly related on the grounds that the public space is an arena of public interaction, debate, activities and serves a civic purpose as well as a commercial purpose.²

A visible effect of the ‘capitalist urbanism’ has been the privatization of public spaces, where the space has become semi-public and exclusionary to certain segments of society. David Harvey describes it as a place “where ambiguities of proprietorship, of aesthetics, of social relations (class and gender in particular) and the political economy of everyday life collide.”³ The effects of these privatization aren’t probably nowhere as apparent as they are in the city of Karachi.

¹ Carmona, Matthew. “Re-Theorising Contemporary Public Space: A New Narrative and a New Normative.” *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 8, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 373–405.

² Ibid.

³ Harvey, David. 2005. "The Political Economy of Public Space." *The Politics of Public Space* (Routledge).

The city of Karachi was born a fishing village which then transformed into a multi class cosmopolitan. Throughout the decades, Karachi developed itself in to a thriving cosmopolitan. Arif Hasan, a prominent architect and urban designer points out that, the Doxiades' plans of 1958 segregated the city by pushing the lower income classes out of the city, to the satellite towns of New Karachi and Landhi-Korangi, the city transformed from the multi-class city to a fragmented city.⁴ This had a direct effect on the kind of activities that were taking place. The cultural activities that were once taking place amongst the downtown areas of Saddar now shifted to luxury hotels and closed ballrooms.⁵ The poor were completely cut off from the cultural activities in the city or found their own separate means of recreational activity. This lower-classes, after being pushed to the fringes of the city developed a separate connection to the public as opposed to the upper-class. This is probably the most evident if one is to study the trends of Irani Cafes or restaurants in Karachi.

These Irani Cafes were once established throughout the coastal areas of South Asia at the turn of the 19th Century. The Zoroastrian of Iran, fleeing from Muslim persecution in the latter half of 19th century established themselves in the coastal cities of Indo-Pak.⁶ These cities included, Karachi, Bombay (now Mumbai), Pune, Hyderabad in India among others. These immigrants established a number of bakeries which became cultural hub in the middle of the 20th Century. According to the owner of the Khairabad Tea Shop, Haji Abbas, 'Karachi at one point boasted not less than 100 Irani restaurants'. These cafes became a cultural hub of Karachi. Located strategically in Saddar, the downtown Karachi, and along important thoroughfares, these café

⁴ Hasan, Arif. 2004. "Karachi: Past, Present and Future." *Dawn*, August 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Noorani, Asif. 2016. "Looking back at Karachi's Irani cafe culture." *Sunday Magazine*, September 4th.
<https://images.dawn.com/news/1176209>

thrived in the multi-class environment of the early Karachi. From students to office workers, the café served as a shelter from hustle bustle of everyday life. As Haji Abbas, whose café is serving for the past 75 years recounts, “these cafes were unique because everyone from everywhere could walk in, we had no doors and the street almost flowed in”. Even inside, these cafes were built around the idea of interaction, where one could sit and talk without having to order anything. It is even reported that inside these cafes poets, authors, statesman, businessmen, politicians, activists congregated, debating for hours. Right now in Karachi only two of the original Irani cafes survive and that to face threats.

One can argue that emergence of the new eateries all over the city have replaced the Irani Cafes of the old but this would be a gross interpretation of the role that the cafes played as opposed to the new eateries. The new eateries are almost entirely situated in middle-class to upper-class localities. They have become the new face of privatized public spaces. These eateries, surrounded by boundary walls, manned by a security guard become nucleated public spaces which only allow certain members of the society in, on the other hand the Irani cafes were almost an extension of the footpath. During my visit to Khairabad tea shop, it was not uncommon for a person to walk in just to drink a glass of water and leave. This welcoming nature of these spaces is lacking in the new eateries, probably because they are commodifying public spaces, and view them through the idea of how much profit they can earn.

Interviewing the restaurant manager of Buon Cibo, a Mexican restaurant located in DHA, a posh locality, it was evident that the most important aspect of the restaurant was the ‘table turn-over’, or the rate at which customers visited the restaurant. He considered the restaurant a ‘private space’ and was only interested in the idea of how to increase its sales. This attitude is marked

different from the owner of Khairabad Teashop who considered his restaurant to be part of the ‘public’ domain, and their experience as having utmost importance.

For once, a turn towards technology might allow for us to break away from this trend of privatized public spaces. The communal space, the physical communal space, is also rapidly changing. A traditional communal space is now not the *only* common space for people. The virtual world provides them with such an alternative, where one can be in a common space with millions if not a billion humans. According to Facebook’s 3rd Quarter, 2017 report Facebook had daily active users of 1.37 billion, while monthly active users were 2.07 billion.⁷ This meant that almost 27.6% of world population occupied one common virtual space.⁸ Even a traditional communal space can be radically transformed through use of virtual technologies. An example of one such transformation was the augmented reality game ‘Pokémon GO’. When the hype of Pokémon Go was at its peaks, numerous public spaces around the world were drastically morphed in to more active spaces. For instance museums registered a significant increase in footfall as points of interest from the game were created inside the museums.⁹ It highlights how public spaces can accommodate functions which were never anticipated for. Patrick Lynch refers to ‘democratic processes’ of space building when he describes why the spaces in Pokémon Go were so successful. He points that as opposed to traditional communal spaces which were ‘created around points of cultural and economic interest’ the space in Pokémon Go were around the places where people actually lived. Thus the ease of accessibility was a major factor in their success.¹⁰

⁷ Facebook. 2017. *Facebook Reports Third Quarter 2017 Results*. November 1. Accessed February 8, 2018.

⁸ 2017. *World Population Clock: 7.6 Billion People (2017)*

⁹ Voon, Claire. 2016. *Pokémon Go Users Flock to Museums, Passing Picasso in Search of Pikachu*.

¹⁰ Lynch, Patrick. 2016. *21st Century Nollis: How Pokemon GO and Augmented Reality Could Shape Our Cities*

Lynch while describing the choice of spaces in Pokémon Go writes that the spaces had ‘a nice open environment, have comfortable places to sit, and be easily accessible – nearly all of the same qualities of what makes any public space successful.’¹¹ What this point illustrates is that the design of the virtual spaces doesn’t differ much from that of the physical spaces.

The virtual world can act as a point of interest, an activity, like Pokémon Go or it can serve more specific purposes such as demonstrated by BC “Heavy” Bierrman, a computer programmer and trans-media scholar, who created virtual artworks in physical public spaces around Los Angeles, viewable only through a tablet or a smartphone. His works were aimed revitalizing public spaces and showcasing how the overlap between the virtual and physical world can have a positive effect on the physical communal space.

According to Pakistan Telecom Authority’s (PTA) 2016-17 report, 78% of Pakistan’s population has access to Mobile subscription and at Mobile internet penetration rate of 20.6%, a 5% increase from 2015-16.¹² What this suggests is that Pakistan’s population is getting connected to the internet at a faster rate than ever before and Karachi being the biggest cosmopolitan of Karachi, it is evident that the Internet is a truly democratic space at the moment in the city.

Using technology, the urban spaces of Karachi can be revitalized and the trend of privatization reversed. In the cases of eateries, who exploit the internet to reach their consumers farther off, the urban spaces can also be used to attract the masses towards public spaces in Karachi. This will allow for a more multi-class and democratic experiences as the internet doesn’t differentiate between the classes, and secondly it will create inclusive areas in the city.

¹¹Ibid.

¹² PTA Annual Report 2016-17, https://pta.gov.pk/assets/media/ann_rep_2017.pdf

For instance through online communities, one can allow for more inclusive debates and ideation about the city's future. The online communities can even materialize in social action, as shown during the Famous Fixit campaign in Karachi, which started off as an online movement. A more designed approach towards using the internet as a tool for creating public spaces can be the difference between a private public space and an inclusive public space.

Considering the rate at which technology is occupying our daily lives, it is inevitable that the physical communal spaces around the globe will need to be rethought. This might even force our understanding of communal spaces to be reevaluated. Regardless, one thing is certain, that the future of a *successful* communal space doesn't lie only in the physical space. Especially in a city like Karachi which is fragmented on layers of ethnicity, politics, class, sects and economics, using the internet as tool to connect the different groups of the society might be a revolutionary step in creating the public spaces of future in Karachi.

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