

# RADICAL RESISTANCE OR ACTIVE AGENCY — THE CASE OF KORANGI TOWN

## Abstract

This paper explores the idea of housing the masses as a modernist agenda of social reform, starting from two key notions that are related to both the World Wars: the concept of postcolonial nation building and the need for accommodating refugees through re-settlement projects. The mass housing schemes were presented as universal solutions by the developed West to the under-developed South during the inter- and postwar era. This research posits that the modernist approach of architecture and planning aspired to fix the problems through the ‘normalization’ of the physical space to reorganize society. For this purpose, the case of a particular post-World War II refugee resettlement project of mass housing — Korangi Town in Karachi, Pakistan — has been examined.

The project has existed for more than half a century now. It has not only become a part of the urban fabric in this region but also has changed overtime, through users’ own efforts and forces outside the professions of architecture and planning. A morphological analysis of land use and building typology is conducted. From the analysis, it is concluded that the alterations reflect the reaction of the residents to the planning objectives and can be seen as forms of resilience of active agents. This study adds to the literature on the subject, especially to the critique on modernist planning and architecture, that mostly portrays the communities for whom the projects were designed, as passive recipients of the urban visions imposed upon them from outside.

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## Keywords

Mass housing, postwar modernism, nation-state, identity, refugees, resilience, active agents

## Introduction

The paper presents a part of my PhD Research that examines the idea of housing the masses as a critical moment in modernism that was closely related to both the World Wars and their exigencies that were: post-colonial nation building and housing the refugees through resettlement projects. A historical exploration of this topic is relevant in the current context to both the professions of planning and architecture, considering the fact that at the moment there are at least 65 million people who live under the status of being refugees or as displaced people around the globe (Edwards, 2016).

The history of mass housing projects reveals that they mostly took place after the second World War until the 1960s. It was during this time that mass housing came onto the International Development agenda. The key players in the international development programs or projects were the United States, the Ford Foundation, the Harvard Advisory Group, the World Bank, and the United Nations. Housing was mass produced for a large number of people in many of these projects. A look at the ideas that led to mass housing will tell us at least two things: that mass housing was a model created in the West and transported to the non-West, and that it is linked to the novel ideas of modernism about social equality and reforms.

'Modernism' as a philosophical movement had come into existence with the promise of emancipation of the oppressed by overthrowing the old social order of feudalism and imperialism. However, after the two World Wars, the dismantling of the old social order and the territorialization of the world into nation-state left scores of people as stateless refugees. Modernity came to face many new challenges and accommodating the refugees was one of them. To overcome these problems, scientific methods were deployed leading to universal strategies that took big data of complex variables into account and converted them into simpler variables through a process of picking and choosing. However, in this process anomalies were often ignored and even discarded. The approach tended to create a generalization of problems and offered solutions as normative prescriptions. The key features of mass production of housing were repetition and predictability making the model economically efficient.

In this paper, I present the case of a particular post-WWII refugee resettlement project called Korangi Town in Karachi, Pakistan. This case is studied in the light of the concepts presented earlier to see what was proposed, designed, and predicted by the professional architect and how it had evolved in the past 60 years. The objective is to see how the universalist strategies and the scientific methods devised in the West were received in the non-Western culture.

## Background

The history of Korangi town and its residents is entwined with the events linked to Pakistan's independence in 1947 that accompanied the migration of 7 million Muslims from India to Pakistan. They were labeled as *muhajir*, which means those who migrate. This title (still used today) lumped a diverse group of people into a homogenous entity; although, the group represented many distinct ethnicities from different parts of India and with their own languages and culture. The arrival of 650,000 *muhajirs* in the port city of Karachi alone increased the population, altering the social and political dynamics of the city. Ethnic and linguistic conflicts arose when each group tried to create a political

space for itself, while the newly born country was still in the process of defining her national identity both internally and internationally.

When Army General Muhammad Ayub Khan came to power as the president through a coup in 1958 to "control" the situation, the foremost priority of his early urban policies was to relocate the *muhajirs* away from the city center. Korangi, a housing scheme with one- or two-room quarters, was planned outside the city, binding the *muhajir* ethnicity to the specific space at the outskirts of the city. (Karim, 2016; Daechsel, 2011; Muzaffar, 2012; Wakeman, 2016).

The project was funded by Ford Foundation and designed by a Greek architect and town planner, Constantinos Doxiadis, who is considered as one of the late moderns by some scholars.

The project was planned to house 500,000 individuals. During its construction years it generated much international acclaim. It was visited by U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Queen Elizabeth. It was applauded for being the biggest and the most successful project of its kind.

Doxiadis had promoted the ideology that everything that is touched by human footprint is a part of a human settlement. In this way, all the land on earth is connected to settlements. He proposed a way to study the settlements and called it *Ekistics*, which he claimed was a science. He suggested that only science could sort and classify the vast number of human settlements to give a better sense of the meaning behind their appearances. By sorting and grouping things that are alike based on the way they function creates order and creates the orderly language to examine and describe events and predict future events. He also proposed that human settlements are living organisms that continue to grow and that a dynamic settlement is one that grows on an axis and encompasses the whole continent until the whole world is urbanized. He suggested that in such a system everything is connected through the five basic elements: man, shells, society, nature, and networks. He used these categories to classify everything.

Doxiadis defined the basic unit or the cell of a settlement as the *sector*, which contained the DNA of a settlement, guiding its development and growth. However, he suggested that the cell itself should not grow, otherwise the settlement will be mutated. Therefore, the sector needs to be self-contained with all the intrinsic features like houses, schools, markets, and places of worship within it. The proposed sectors were slightly different according to the income level of the residents. He used the universal cell for the arrangement of settlements in all his plans in the different parts of the world where he was working at the time. He proposed that the settlement should grow with repetition of the sectors.

## Placing the Displaced Through Class-Based Separation of Work and Housing

In 1959, about 100,000 *muhajir* families needed to be housed in the city of Karachi alone. Doxiadis envisioned Korangi Town as a rationally planned, self-sustaining settlement that would house 500,000 people belonging to different economic levels where all necessary functions could be performed (Doxiadis, 1959). Korangi was primarily designed for a (future) labor class of *muhajirs* who would work in the (intended) industrial area adjacent to the residential sectors of Korangi. The resident population was

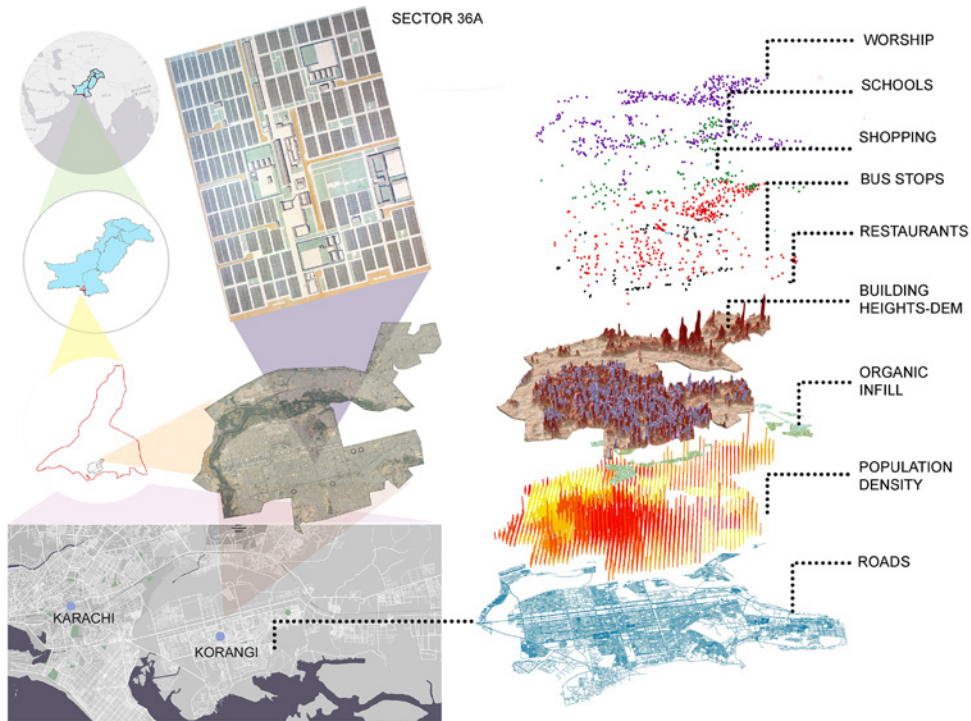


Figure 2: Korangi Town - Location-Plan of Sector 36A  
(Source: MIT Dome © Richard Langendorf). Analysis Maps (Source: Author).

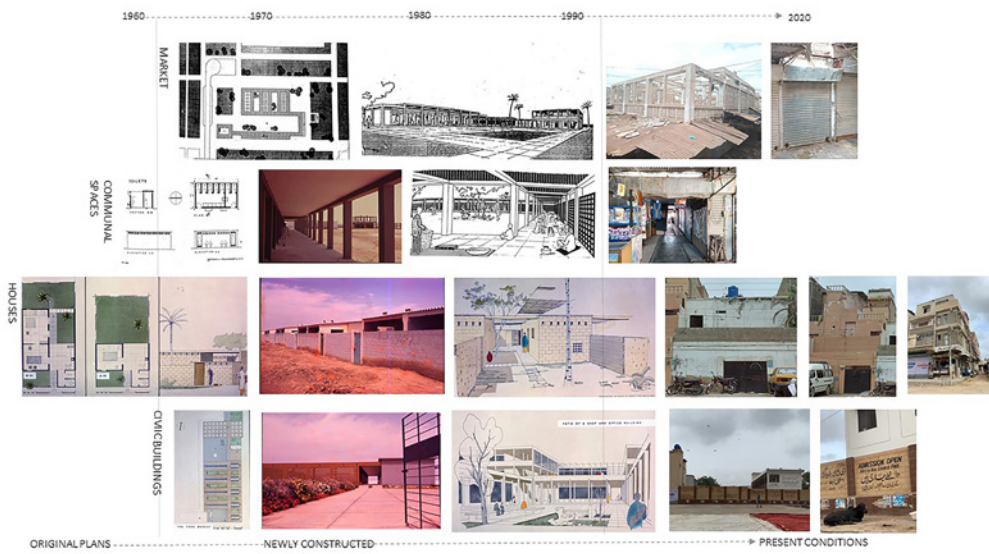


Figure 3: Timeline of the Study of Elements in Sector 36A.  
(Source: Slides 9576 / no. 575 from Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation and Author's Photographs.)

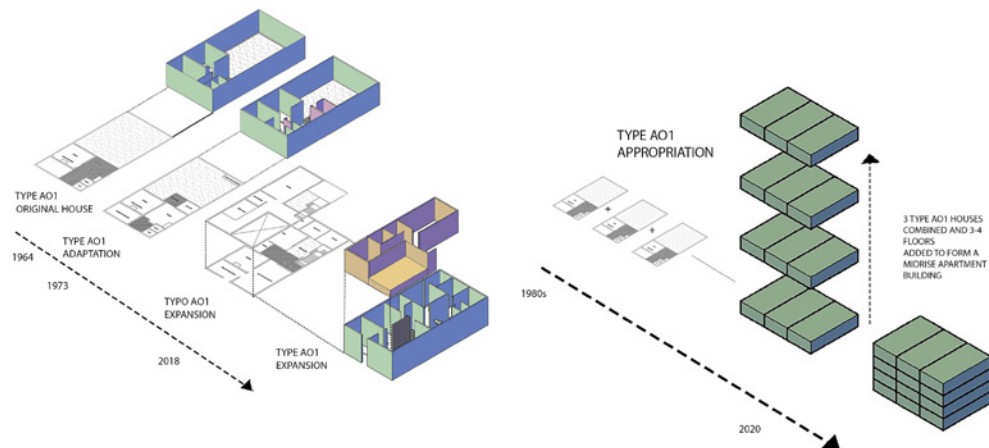


Figure 4: Process of Adaptation, Expansion, and Appropriation to Korangi Town. (Source: Author.)

divided into classes based on income levels. Each class had its own sector equipped with all amenities like bazaars, teahouses, mosques, and schools, accessible without cars. The commercial area with shops and bazaars in the center of Sector 36A was envisioned as a common area with amenities shared by at least two income classes. Cars were restricted in the commercial center by design. The sectors comprised rows of artfully arranged units placed around shared community facilities, such as water taps, shops, and primary schools. The first houses were half-built with a roofed room, a courtyard, and space for future expansion. The idea being that the house would grow with the growth in the income of the family.

Up until 1964, only 10,000 units had been built and allotted on subsidized installment plans to the designated families. When the U.S. funding was pulled out, as the Ayub Khan regime met a violent end in 1969, accompanying ethnic uprisings, the project of Korangi Township lost its momentum. However, by this time the Doxiadis grid had been laid and the lot sizes had been organized in lanes, demarcating the direction in which Korangi Town should expand in the future. Doxiadis's approach as a post-war urbanist was to develop a framework in the Global South through city planning. The framework was to guide the constantly expanding twentieth century city that he called the *Dynopolis*, based on an ever-escalating system of grids and neighborhood units as sectors, eventually creating an *Ecumenopolis* — described as a borderless global city.

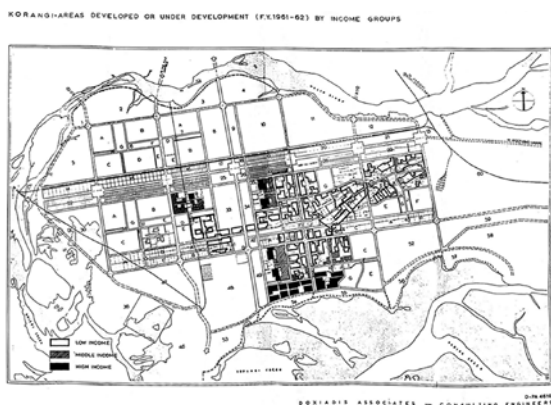


Figure 1: Korangi Town Master Plan-Division of Sectors per Income Levels. (Source: The Development of Korangi Area (1962). Periodical Report 2, Doxiadis Associates.)

| Phases                         | Phase 1                                                           | Phase 2                                          | Phase 3                                                   | Phase 4                                         |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Description                    | Literature Review, Concerned Institutions and Archives Consulting | Field Work                                       | Analytic Phase: Diagrams and Drawings, Data Visualization |                                                 |
| Length                         | May 2018– June 2020                                               | June 2018– August 2018 and June 2019–August 2019 | June 2018–2020                                            | June 2018–2020                                  |
| Korangi Town, Karachi Pakistan | Data Retrieving Census 1980, 1998, 2017                           | Photography, Videos                              | Land Use, Building Process, Building Typology             | Section and Context Building Plans Mapping Data |

Table 1: Methodology Phases - Archive consulting, fieldwork, analytic diagrams, and drawings. (Source: Author.)

A study of the elements or features of the sectors in Korangi Town was done for this research to see how the elements were perceived and constructed and how they are being used now. For this purpose, a morphological analysis was conducted to map the changes in land cover, land use, building typologies, and population densities. The indicators of appropriations to land uses are considered as the number of buildings added or appropriated to the sectors for schools, markets, transportation (bus stops), and for religious purposes.

### Scope and Methodology of the Research

The methods that were used for the morphological analysis involved archival records, field studies and remote sensing. The pictures and plans of housing types were retrieved from the Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation. This paper includes an analysis of the first sector (Sector 36A) that was delivered in 1960 to its first residents. The field studies conducted in the summer of 2018 and 2019 helped in generating the new plans and building types with changes over time so that a comparison could be made of the current housing scene with the original plans and proposals.

The study also involved remote sensing using satellite imagery at two levels: Landsat 5 and Landsat 8 data was used to observe land cover changes over the years, and TerraSAR-X and TanDEM-X data was used to create Digital Elevation Models to get building height information at 30 meters (pixel range).

The field studies captured three processes of change in housing Type AO1 of Sector 36A, which was a one-bedroom house with open-to-sky patio for the lowest income group. The three processes were *adaptation* (original house was changed internally to fit the needs), *expansion* (house was expanded internally by adding rooms and floors to create space for the expanding family), and *appropriation* (three or more houses were combined to form a mid-rise apartment building with or without shops on the ground floor).

### Some Key Findings

Here are some key findings:

- Many of the original residents are long gone; however, Korangi continues to absorb most refugee populations from all other provinces through internal displacements in the country as well as from other countries. However, they do not reflect the homogenous group of people that Doxiadis had thought they were or had aspired them to become by placing them in organized row housing confined in their own isolated sectors.
- The population of Korangi had grown to 2.5 million by 2017, now accommodating a population density of 10,000 people per square mile.
- Korangi Town has pockets of infill informal development in those sectors and areas that remained unbuilt before the construction was abandoned by 1964. In the past 70 years of independence, Pakistan saw three dictatorship regimes, and, whenever there was democracy, the elected government was formed by political parties representing particular regional or ethnical sentiments.
- There are no venues for the poor to get mortgage or loans to buy land; therefore, they remain excluded from the land-owning sector of the society (Hasan et al., 2015). Under such conditions, the alternate informal system of land control and building construction continued to

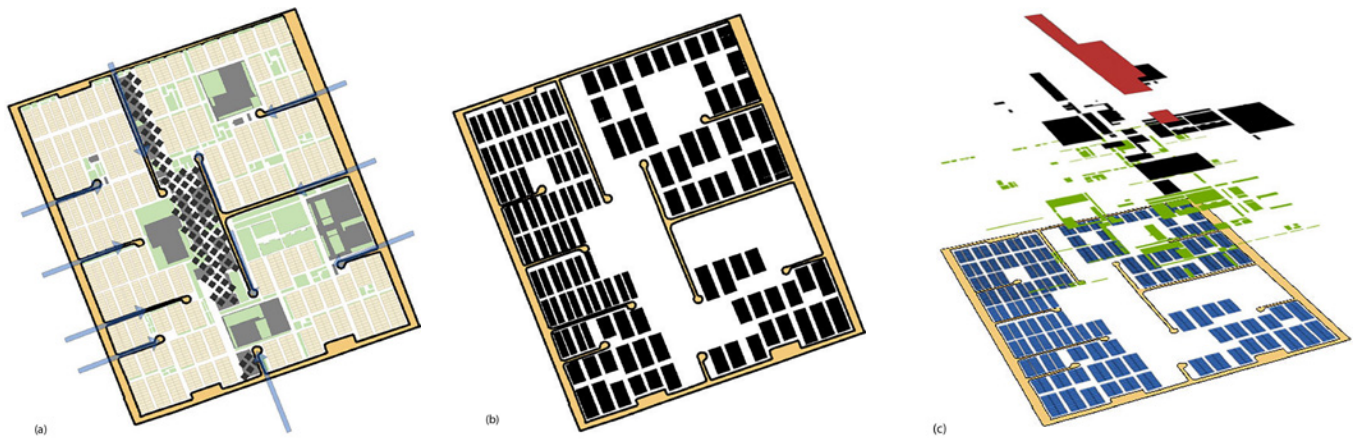


Figure 5: (a) Original plan and concept Sector 36A; (b) Private houses versus public spaces in black; and (c) Pedestrian oriented central commercial core in red. (Source: Author.)

provide affordable housing in Korangi as in the rest of the city. The houses that were built on 80 square yards and 120 square yards continued to grow vertically to create more space for the expanding family size. The proposed single-family units now house an average of two to three families.

- Commercial activity like the shops and restaurants have emerged outside of the designated parcels with shops commonly opened in a part of the house. Almost 20% of all residential parcels now engage in some home-based industry.
- The proposed pedestrian commercial core of the sector has been taken over by cars, motor bikes, and rickshaws. The proposed cul de sacs are not present anymore, allowing the vehicular traffic to pass through all parts of the sector.
- Bus stops have sprouted up at the discretion of the private bus service provider.

### Conclusion

The objective of this study was to find out how universalist strategies and the scientific methods, created in the West, are received by the non-West. In this case, we observe that the DNA of the basic unit cell, proposed by Doxiadis as the sector, did alter.

The settlement continues to grow either as infill development or vertically but not so much by the repetition of the unit cell. The initial socio-political marginalization of the refugees by the state helped in the emergence of a new ethnicity under the title of *muhajir*, later the ethnicity organized in a political identity claiming spatial hold and expansion; the violence that entails this process is not captured in this article, but is mostly explained elsewhere by the exchange of power between the militarized political parties and the state.

In the absence of governance and a stable political environment, the residents continue to make their lives happen in Korangi town through adjustments and appropriations.

In some recent studies, Korangi Town has been quoted as a failure of the modern project. However, I conclude that the appropriations made by the residents over the past 60 years should not be conceived as resistance to the Western thought but as actions of their active agency. This attitude will help us realize that the non-Western users or any users are not just dormant recipients of the proposed models, but they are also active agents.

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