

Book Review

Moatasim, Faiza. *Master Plans and Encroachments: The Architecture of Informality in Islamabad*. 248pp. University of Pennsylvania Press 2023.

Dr Aisha Ahmad¹

¹ Shaikh Ahmad Hassan School of Law, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)

E-mail: aisha.ahmad@lums.edu.pk

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Chaos, complexity, confusion—anyone who has spent time in metropolitan Pakistan will know that ‘city planning’ seems all too often to be an exercise in wishful thinking. A growing scholarship on urban governance in Pakistan paints a picture of too many cooks spoiling an already-bad broth—overlapping jurisdictions between a flurry of urban authorities, unclear mandates for various governing bodies, and rent-seeking urban actors are markers of city governance across the country. Faiza Moatasim’s book is a welcome addition to a much-needed conversation around governance and planning in urban Pakistan.

Master Plans and Encroachments is a book about how citizens in Islamabad negotiate formal planning regimes to carve out suitable spaces for themselves, ranging from modest squatter settlements and sprawling peri-urban mansions to roadside kiosks and places of high-end business. Placing Islamabad’s master plan at the centre of her analysis, Moatasim argues that ‘spatial non-conformity’ (3) is an urban strategy that individuals from all class backgrounds employ to survive in the city. This non-conformity does not flout the law entirely. Indeed, some semblance of compliance with formal planning instruments is performed by enterprising citizens, either through cherry-picked and partial adherence to process or through the clever use of architectural design to indicate ‘perceived and physical impermanence’ (6). State institutions like the Capital Development Authority (CDA) also facilitate spatial non-conformity by permitting, employing and/or ignoring violations of Islamabad’s master plan in order to achieve a plethora of social, economic or planning objectives. Analytically, the book seeks to further scholarship on urban informality by highlighting how ‘territorialised flexibility’ (Roy 2009:81) in urban planning environments is achieved through

creative comingling of legality with illegality rather than an outright dismissal of, or faithful adherence to, formal instruments such as master plans. To do this, Moatasim (an architect by training) employs a variety of methodological tools to explore planning in Islamabad, including archival study and qualitative interviewing of a vast array of interlocutors.

The book comprises five empirical chapters, each contributing to the central argument of urban informality in rich but contrasting ways. Chapter 1 details the origins of Islamabad as a high modernist capital city, providing vivid historical accounts of the elaborate thought that went into its construction, framed by rewarding discussions of architectural theories. The chapter’s main argument is that Islamabad’s urban planners treated the vicinity as a *tabula rasa*, frequently invisibilising pre-existing settlements or ignoring socio-topographical complexities, thus rendering future violations of its master plan almost inevitable.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Moatasim explores the dynamics of existing encroachments in depth, with emphasis on their perpetrators, collaborators, architectural strategies and legal ploys. Chapter 2 on ‘ordinary informality’ dislodges the popular conception that informal housing settlements (like Islamabad’s France Colony, the chapter’s empirical focus) exist in contravention of planning laws. Rather, ‘ordinary informal spaces’ (89) often receive various forms of official sanction from urban authorities who pragmatically accept certain forms of encroachment to be socially necessary. Residents of informal settlements have similar attitudes towards the law, mimicking its letter and ignoring its spirit to access state services, transfer land, or collect rents. Chapter 3 on ‘long-term temporariness’ focuses on commercial encroachments

on public land by vendors and hawkers who strategically employ specific building materials and design elements to indicate temporariness and hence, consensual vulnerability to regulatory control. The state, in permitting these ‘temporary’ encroachments, postpones decisive action in the hopes of future resolution, ossifying departures from the master plan in turn. Drawing on her disciplinary background, Moatasim expertly weaves the materiality of architectural elements with urban governance modalities in what is the book’s strongest chapter.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift focus away from the urban poor and towards the elite. In both chapters, Moatasim’s analytical mission is to demonstrate how strategic (mis)use of the law to both follow and circumvent Islamabad’s master plan transcends class lines, with the city’s most privileged citizens enmeshed in everyday encroachment. Chapter 4 on ‘*elite informality*’ surveys the construction of Bani Gala, luxury peri-urban housing extra-legally built on protected parkland while Chapter 5, ‘*non-conforming uses*’, examines the widespread practice of turning residential properties into commercial premises against zoning regulations. These final empirical chapters both affirm and depart from the book’s preceding analysis in key ways. The rich employ similar juridical strategies when engaged in construction practices that contravene the master plan, including the exploitation of regulatory loopholes and institutional complexities to paint a veneer of procedural legitimacy over infrastructural infractions. However, their access to power and prestige offer additional safeguards against regulatory oversight. Indeed, infringements of the law are justified on the pragmatic grounds that state institutions like CDA are corrupt, a rhetorical move that transforms illegal action into admirable uphill battle. Furthermore, proximity to power through the use of networks, connections and mutual friends often means that regulatory frameworks evolve over time to cater to elite illegality, sanctifying violations of earlier laws in the process. The book concludes with a restatement of the larger argument around urban informality, with Moatasim emphasising that many of the dynamics she observed in urban Pakistan have their counterparts in cities of the global north. In doing so, she hints at an internal instability inherent to urban planning regardless of context.

There is a great deal one can learn about urban planning in Pakistan by reading *Master Plans and Encroachments*. The book offers rich anecdotal accounts of the obstacles and opportunities flexible planning regimes offer urban citizens, both rich and poor. It also highlights a deep truth about law and legality in Pakistan—its concurrent absence and presence in almost every instance of exercised citizenship. While these reasons and others form compelling grounds to pick up the book, there are two broad areas where it is relatively less successful: first, the choice of ‘informality’ as theoretical framework and second, an insufficient explanatory analysis to shed light

on why urban governance looks the way that it does in today’s Pakistan.

Urban informality is a popular theoretical lens through which researchers study law, planning and accumulation in cities of the global south. Conceptualised less as a sector of the economy and more as a modality of planning in and of itself, urban informality is generally seen as a “state of exception from the formal order of urbanisation” (Roy 2005:147). An obvious question follows: what precisely is this ‘formal order’? If informality has become so ubiquitous in southern cities so as to become a ‘mode’ of urban planning, what is this unadulterated sphere of ‘formality’ that acts as its analytical foil?

Moatasim expresses her own doubts, ultimately choosing to adhere to the framework to build on an already rich scholarship on urban informality in developing contexts. However, the choice to call urban planning environments marked with creative configurations of the legal-illegal dialectic ‘informal’ has significant implications for our understanding of law, governance, and accumulation in countries like Pakistan. Indeed, ‘formal’ artefacts like master plans and planning laws are themselves embedded in extra-legal forces of nepotism, bribery and patronage. Capitalist states the world over are organized upon edifices of “legality shot through with illegality” (Poulantzas 2000:85). Calling this ‘legal-illegal continuum’ informal (Moatasim 2023:4) fetishises juridical process and precludes a robust analysis of actually-existing law in southern contexts (and perhaps even beyond).

Furthermore, legal grey-spaces such as the ones found scattered across the pages of *Master Plans and Encroachments* should not be seen as vacuums of informality where both the powerful and marginalised have equal opportunity to engage in the willful cherry-picking or surreptitious subversion of law. Rather, these playing fields are intrinsically unequal, with rich urban dwellers having greater access to legal process, personnel and influence. Lumping together instances of *katchi abadi* residents attempting to access electricity with nuclear scientists building their ‘forever-homes’ on protected parkland under the same theoretical rubric of ‘informality’ renders the term analytically anaemic. It also risks obfuscating on-ground power relations and hierarchies of urban exploitation.

This is the second area where the book could have sharpened its otherwise textured insights on city governance in Pakistan. Upon reading it, one forms delightfully vivid pictures of everyday urban life in Islamabad but is also left asking—who are the winners and losers of development in the capital city? Why are certain forms of encroachment tolerated and others crushed? Why do authorities and citizens alike make appeals to the law? What overarching logics are shaping cityscapes and to what degree does

law facilitate or obstruct these broader forces of political economy? Moatasim's account of urban administration in Islamabad flattens out hierarchies and antagonisms, reifying the 'master plan' as a determinative urban force and even, at times, painting entities like the CDA in an overly-sympathetic light. We are left with an amorphous landscape dominated by cleavages between the clever and the dull, the enterprising and the servile rather than rich and poor, state and citizen, the powerful and the powerless—relations that I and many others would argue determine urban futures to a far greater extent in cities of the global south (see Akhtar and Rashid 2021; Soliman 2021; Mouton and Shatkin 2019; Sassen 2014; Harvey 2008; Roy and AlSayyad 2004)

Master Plans and Encroachments is a book for a great variety of readers, ranging from architects, legal scholars and urban researchers to laypeople interested in learning more about daily life in Pakistani cities. Its textured illustrations of city life in Islamabad are coupled with lively narratives around urban survival from an array of voices across gender, age, professional and class lines. While at times leaving readers with more questions than answers, it boasts moments of analytical incisiveness and elevates inquiries that deserve greater academic engagement. As Pakistan urbanises at a frenetic pace, books like *Master Plans and Encroachments* allow observers to step back and reflect on the complex dynamics that shape their lives and decide their futures.

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