

Inhabiting Flyover Geographies: Flows, Interstices, and Walking Bodies in Karachi

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Abstract

Flyovers have featured in critical urban planning scholarship in the Global South as fetishized symbols of modernity, often fragmenting urban environments, fracturing space, exacerbating inequalities, and embodying “worlding” aspirations of city planners. Acknowledging the role of such infrastructure as technologies of (dis)connection in increasingly enclaved cities, I seek to situate the flyover, its material form, and attendant gaps, characterized by raised ribbons of “smooth” flows, leftover spaces, and proliferation of informal practices, as important sites of encounters. As such, I take “borderland urbanism” as an impetus to think flyover geographies anew by locating the flyover as a particular place in the city that is transient, contested, and constantly re-made. Through ethnographic vignettes and interviews, I sketch out everyday urban experiences over and under a flyover in Karachi, Pakistan. I illustrate how the flyover as a spatial and temporal leap is perceived and experienced by a range of differently mobile urban dwellers, paying particular attention to how walking bodies inhabit an infrastructural landscape that heavily privileges cars and motorcycles. Furthermore, I trace how life in the interstices under the flyover is assembled through social collaboration, resisting eviction, and a politics of visibility.

Keywords

flyovers; infrastructure; inhabitation; Karachi; mobilities; urban space

1. Introduction

In a news article in 2013, journalist Mahim Maher wrote about Karachi’s tryst with flyovers and sharply noted that while the first one may have been built to save lives, “the ones that came after it *took them*” (Maher, 2013, emphasis added). Tracing the history of the city’s first flyover in conversation with various

municipal engineers, she reflected on the proliferating web of elevated concrete lanes. The engineers she spoke with unequivocally declared the city's flyovers dangerous and incapable of solving its traffic and transport woes. My interest follows Maher's problematization nearly a decade ago. The network of over 50 flyovers and underpasses in Karachi, Pakistan continues to grow in a city of approximately 17 million people, further distorting and fragmenting urban life. Scholarship on flyovers, scarce as it may be, has foregrounded segregation, elite imaginaries of a world-class city, formalization, and social ordering as potent forces shaping urban trajectories (Graham, 2018; Harris, 2013, 2018; Tadiar, 2000). Extending this line of work, I am interested in the afterlives of flyovers in Karachi. Given that these structures contribute to further entrench ethnic divisions (Gayer, 2014) and have replaced public transport in planning decisions (G. Khan, 2022), I seek to examine how flyovers meant to benefit elite and middle-class mobilities in the city as a form of "entitled urbanism" (Moatasim, 2019) are socially and materially embedded in everyday life. I reflect on how differently mobile urban dwellers relate to and inhabit a single flyover. Following "borderland urbanism" (Iossifova, 2015), I consider the flyover, its material forms, and attendant gaps as a place in the city that is transient, contested, and constantly remade. Borderland urbanism, as a conceptual frame, attends to the in-between spaces in cities marked by segregation and enclavisation where forms of "contestation and dismantlement" emerge in the "co-presence of the other" in the production of alternate forms of dwelling in the city. While Iossifova (2015, p. 104) makes a distinction between borders as "physical manifestations of political will" and borderlands where formal planning sits alongside other emergent possibilities of urbanity, I consider the flyover as both a border and borderland that amplifies differences in the city. As a border(land) that connects and disconnects people and places, the flyover constitutes complex forms of copresence that are at once conflictual and collaborative. Co-presence here does not necessarily constitute moments of resolve between members of different social classes but is a relational process that reproduces hierarchical relations. Interactions (or lack thereof) between members of different social classes are therefore patterned by uneven development that continually privileges wealthy car-driving citizens. Even as physical separations exist in the form of these elevated road exchanges, encounters take shape through perceptions of the other. Therefore, the material politics of the flyover as it dissects space and bypasses areas is important in understanding how social difference is constructed, lived, and experienced by individuals in Karachi.

Research on the politics of infrastructure offers an extensive understanding of how infrastructures coalesce around state formation (Akhter, 2015; Akhter et al., 2022; Khalili, 2017), mediate political struggles, belonging, and sociality (Amin, 2014; Anand, 2017; Anwar et al., 2020; Becker et al., 2020; Holston, 2009; Speer, 2016), perform aesthetic functions of gesturing modernity and positioning the "global" city (Anand et al., 2018; Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2000; Larkin, 2013; Wu, 2000), subsume gendered bodies in socio-material networks (Truelove & Rusczyk, 2022), and imbricate the lives of human and non-human dwellers alike (Barua, 2021; Roos, 2022). Enfolding my inquiries in this "infrastructural turn" and extending into the hyper-visible and worlding modes of "infrastructure space" (Easterling, 2014), I examine how flyovers in the increasingly enclaved city of Karachi (Kaker, 2014) function as "juxtapositions of difference" (Iossifova, 2015, p. 104) where infrastructure unhampers the mobilities of certain car-driving urban citizens whilst decelerating and marginalising others. Beyond physical dimensions, I consider how flyover geographies encompass competing imaginaries of urban problems that rub against each other to produce different political positions enabled by class. Moreover, in the concrete and asphalt constellation that emerges, I reflect on how walking bodies, left out of the planning imaginary, dangerously straddle the interstices.

Ethnographic fieldwork for this research was conducted in two trips to Karachi in December 2021 and November 2022 that lasted a total of five months. The case study in this research is the Gizri flyover. Constructed in 2010 by the Defense Housing Authority (DHA), a powerful developer controlled by the military, the flyover connects the DHA neighbourhoods that surround the locality of Gizri. The flyover is suspended over the Gizri commercial area, a diverse market with expensive shops selling bathroom tiles, light fixtures, and kitchen appliances, to stores in disrepair offering tire repairs, ice, and construction materials. Nestled in the interstice underneath, every day street hawkers sell fruit, sugarcane juice, and curries. I conducted interviews with residents, street hawkers, and shopkeepers who encounter the flyover in their everyday lives. The interviews took place in homes and on the road. All interactions and interviews in this article have been anonymised to protect interlocutors at risk of facing displacement in their places of work and residence. Moreover, ethical considerations guiding this research espoused the sparing use of photography in data collection, especially in documenting scenes under the flyover due to the risks posed to street hawkers and residents of Gizri. I also spent time sitting, talking, and walking under the flyover. Even as I tried my best to blend into the everyday rhythms of this site with invariably more men than women, as a woman I was perceptibly visible. This visibility made the work of hanging out around the flyover certainly challenging as I received many stares, but also because the more vulnerable dwellers initially grew wary of my presence and practices of observing, talking to others, and note-taking. Over time and with respectful engagement, I earned their trust. My academic and class background also made me an outsider. Despite my familiarity with Karachi as a home for many years, I was an outsider to the worlds and relations underneath the flyover. As a private vehicle user in the city, I was much more used to taking these sterilised lanes to move from one location to the other, as opposed to inhabiting this landscape without a car with the intention to walk, dwell, loiter, and engage. To reflect on experiences of walking in the city, I walked on some of the city's other flyovers, major roads, and expressways.

2. Locating Flyovers in Bordering Practices

Flyovers dissect urban space and differentiate urban citizens in significant ways. At times their morphology, sans footpath, with restrictive bollards and visual barriers, is implicated in wresting public space exclusively for automobile flows and the urban middle class. Resonating in Karachi's constellations of roads, flyovers, underpasses, and expressways is what Jones and McCreary (2022, p. 19) identify as "zombie automobility," scaffolded by the car that is "so deeply entrenched in our social imaginary," in which transport authorities selectively invoke sustainability only to advance further infrastructural projects privileging private automobiles.

Other times, flyovers as physical borders are forcibly enacted by planners to separate urban space through infrastructural segregation and fracturing of mobilities based on racial and nationalistic lines, a process Graham (2018) calls "flyover apartheid" in his analysis of infrastructural politics in the West Bank. Indeed, as Ashoub and ElKhateeb (2021) examine in the case of Cairo, enclave urbanism is shaped not only by the creation of gated communities but also by the obstructions and limitations wrought by flyovers, highways, and expressways on people's mobilities and capacities to assemble. Such socio-spatial segregation serves to entrench social disassociation. Flyovers, therefore, constitute forms of social and spatial ordering in the governance of traffic (Baviskar, 2020; Tadiar, 2000). By design, they pull areas into zones of connection and disconnection, searing onto the vertical urban landscape singular or multiple concrete conduits through which the city is traversed, lived, and experienced.

As scholars have noted, ideas of congestion, wielded to justify flyovers, construe the problem as more than just the overabundance of automobiles on the road. In urban planning imaginaries, congestion marks the city's unrealized experience of modernity and reflects the desire to formalize what is conceived as uncontrolled and informal (Anand, 2006; Harris, 2018). De-congesting, in developmentalist imaginaries (Robinson, 2006), appears as a perpetually incomplete project that requires unrelenting infrastructural mediation. As such, flyovers are not simply a "technocratic response and remedy to the pressures and demands of rapid urbanization" but configure in significant ways the desires to construct a "world-class city" whereby state resources are directed towards funding projects that privilege the mobility of elite groups with private vehicles (Harris, 2013, p. 344). Graham (2018) notes that urban mobility is structured by a distinct fetishisation of flyovers and expressways that encapsulates promises of growth, progress, and arrival on the "global city" stage. Dominating global city imaginaries, these technologies are confounded by the exaltation of a few urban examples and "the assumption that some degree of interurban homogeneity can be assumed" (Amin & Graham, 1997, p. 417). This manifests in various ways, often in patterns that are situated and bound to flows of capital (Perl et al., 2015). In Bengaluru, India, Gopakumar (2020) considers the techno-politics of a cyclical "regime of congestion" formed by the interlinkages between material, institutional, and political actors that produce congestion in the city as a site of intervention through flyovers and other mega-infrastructure projects that centre on profits and simultaneously re-produce conditions of vehicular congestion.

Moreover, flyovers as symbols of modernity bear significantly on arranging urban temporality and are regarded as assimilating the postcolonial nation into practices of global consumption. In Karachi, Gayer (2016, p. 148) writes that the city government in 2009 promoted its projects by lauding flyovers for providing "the driving pleasure, which had been a dream in the past." Such affective conceptions of flyovers are meant to impart these structures as milestones that are important to achieve for Karachi and its citizens in order to perform progress and rise in the proverbial global city hierarchies. Driving and driving well, therefore, are the performative forces signalling those shifts.

Implicit in the morphology of flyovers, alongside the privileging of automotive mobilities, is a deep anthropocentrism. How the lifeworlds of non-human urban dwellers may be affected often does not feature as a concern. Attempts to re-think flyovers to "accommodate, foster, and modulate other-than-human life" are taking shape in contexts of great tension between the demands of development and conservation (Barua, 2022, p. 37). Yet, it remains unclear whether such forms of "reconciliation infrastructures" will prove to be little more than an "engineering fix: a techno-managerial intervention for a problem created by infrastructures, colonial violence and dispossession in the first place" (Barua, 2022, p. 40). Drawing together these registers that constitute flyovers as a bordering practice in urban planning foreground how the material politics of a flyover splits and fragments the city spatially based on identity and border conflicts, ecologically by privileging anthropocentric mobilities, and temporally by extolling flyovers as harbingers of modernity whilst stunting capacities of growth for areas that are bypassed.

This article aims to evoke flyovers as more than just frontiers in increasingly segregated cities. Paying attention to the multi-dimensional geography of flyovers reveals how social differences are infrastructurally maintained and reproduced by residents who are able to drive over neglected neighbourhoods. The surrounding interstices and the social life they make possible unravel attempts to homogenize urban space, particularly roads as simply spaces of transit. In the case discussed below, I highlight how attempts to

alleviate traffic congestion through the construction of a flyover rests at odds with socio-economic processes, lives, and livelihoods that hinge on the possibilities that the road offers. Drawing on interviews with DHA and Gizri residents, I argue that flyover geographies represent competing imaginaries of urban life enabled by class positionalities that reflect everyday struggles over the right to the city.

3. Flows and Their Discontents: The Case of the Gizri Flyover

The Gizri Flyover was opened to the public in January 2010 after failed attempts to resist its construction in the form of protests by residents of Gizri and a court petition by the NGO Shehri-Citizens for a Better Environment (Alam, 2009). Funded by the DHA, it was designed to “ease residents of DHA” as they crossed the “main Gizri bazaar,” described as a “sore point for traffic congestion” in the organisation’s annual newsletter (Hussain, 2009). Costing Rs. 560 million, the project was initiated without the legal prerequisite of an environmental impact study and was still declared lawful by the Sindh High Court. The DHA, therefore, managed to build the flyover for its residents and it has been funnelling people over Gizri for the past 13 years (Figure 1).

Ehab, a 39-year-old project manager at a multi-national company who lives in a bungalow with his wife, daughter, and parents in DHA, is one such resident. He was fond of the flyover as he took it every day to his office in Clifton. He called it “absolutely necessary and good planning from DHA.” In our go-along interview, I accompanied Ehab to his workplace on a December morning in 2022 in his white Honda Civic, symbolic of his upper-middle-class positionality. Ehab drove without his seatbelt on, which is common practice on Karachi’s roads and his speed hovered between 50 to 60 km per hour. He overtook other vehicles often, eager to find an opening that would let him rush through. At the traffic light before we turned to follow Ehab’s route through Sunset Boulevard, he turned away a young boy hoping to clean his windshield for a small price by turning on his windshield wipers. While Ehab looked straight ahead, avoiding meeting the boy’s eyes, the waving wipers spoke for him: No, not interested. As we turned left from Punjab Chowrangi, infamous for its traffic jams, where despite an underpass, traffic at the intersection is difficult to navigate, Ehab referred to it as one of the “worst places to get stuck,” due to “motorcycles, rickshaws that come in every direction” and have “no patience,” and because the “underpass fills with water every year” during the monsoon. All this was evidence for Ehab that “the government is sleeping.” As we drove on Gizri Road, the two-lane Gizri flyover appeared somewhat awkwardly out of place in the middle of two narrow roads on either side that took users in and out of the busy commercial area underneath. A restrictive metal bollard hung over its mouth, with signage indicating that heavy vehicles are not allowed and only light vehicles (the image shows a car) can pass through (Figure 2). On the flyover, we were surrounded by metal sheets that ran along the walls like horse shades. For 1.6 km of the length of the flyover, we saw only the stretch of grey sky and the tops of two high-rise buildings: Bahria Complex 4, a concrete and glass office building, and a shiny new block of apartments.

Ehab said, zooming through the flyover while tapping his thumb on the steering wheel:

Before this flyover was made, I would try to avoid this route as much as possible because it could easily take you 30–45 minutes. The market is extremely congested. Buses stop every few minutes and people get in and out, shopkeepers are using donkeys to transport steel bars, it’s a total mess. No traffic police, people park anywhere....Suffocating. It’s hard to believe it’s DHA. I don’t know what you think but we needed this flyover. Otherwise, we would still be choked down there.

It was not unusual for DHA residents to mistake Gizri as a part of DHA and it is likely that the flyover built by the elite residential developers over Gizri cemented this in their spatial imaginary. I asked him if traffic signals could have been another solution to managing traffic and he responded:

What would the signal do? The same swarm of beggars collecting and who stops at signals anyway? If there was a signal there would have been terrible jams. And now look, no traffic lights, no beggars, no minibuses stopping in front of you suddenly, so many times I have almost gotten into an accident because of them.

He added reflectively:

But it's not perfect....Sometimes I have gotten stuck in a traffic jam on this flyover after work. Even with the flyover, there's just too much traffic. Too many cars. You see, even London has a traffic problem but they *also* have buses and trains. Here, nobody wants to give up their comfortable cars.

Ehab's relationship with the flyover emerges from his class positionality (Castells, 1979) and his automobilized urban aesthetic. Automobility, as Urry (2006, p. 18) argues, is a "complex amalgam of interlocking machines, social practices and especially ways of inhabiting, dwelling within, a mobile, semi-privatized and hugely dangerous auto-mobile capsule. The car is not simply a means of covering distances between A and B." Indeed, automobiles significantly shape how people experience and relate to the urban conditions around them. As Ehab gets in his car, the two are simultaneously transformed (Latour, 1994) into a car-driver (Sheller & Urry, 2000), with its own politics, practices, and forms of knowing the city. Ehab's experience of the city, therefore, is shaped by the struggle to enact and maintain flows, as he makes his way through it. Material functions of the car are equally implicated in the process as an extension of the body to relay messages to deter undesired interactions on the road. Speed is produced not only as an operation of the car, but through the body's manoeuvring; braking and accelerating, cutting across, and in front of other moving body-machine assemblages (Gandy, 2005). Driving, as an embodied practice and engagement with the road, hinges on such skills and forms of spatial awareness (Merriman, 2009) that have wider implications for urbanicity. As a car-driver, Ehab relates to urban space through the function of movement and time spent on the road and to non-car users by their inability to move fast. Infrastructure's purpose, therefore, becomes one of unhampering the privileged body in flow. This purpose is materially and socially enacted through easing the stagnation of traffic signals via infrastructural interventions, avoiding interactions with panhandlers who are perceived to pester and disturb the driving citizen, limiting access to public mobile forms such as minibuses that stop often and therefore rub against the inscribed codes of appropriate road behaviours that car drivers may set and urban planning in their favour may enforce. Furthermore, for Ehab, relations with the state hinge on whether infrastructure exists and remains accessible, unblocked, unbroken, and unflooded. Infrastructure, therefore, is the site where perceptions of urban authorities oscillate between "good planning" and a "sleeping" government.

Despite the physical separations elevating those on the flyover, DHA residents often evoked what was underneath in interviews to affirm their feelings of "relief" and "comfort" in being on the flyover. For middle and upper-class residents, the flyover offers an alternative landscape. Landscape is understood here as what Gillian Rose (Merriman et al., 2008, p. 200), reiterating Denis Cosgrove's work, notes as "a particular way of spatially and visually organizing a view, which produced not only a landscape in front of a viewer but also

the viewer as a subject position.” Others like Ehab, for whom the flyover cut travel time, referred to the area underneath as “dirty,” “busy,” and “messy” and contrasted the flyover route as “clean” and “comfortable,” sure signs of a city that is “progressing.” In making this contrast, often in response to my questions regarding the need for the flyover, interlocutors relied on representing moving through Gizri Road as undesirable. The flyover, as a space of comfortable movement, was therefore always referred to in relation to the congestion perceived underneath. Two points are significant to make here. Firstly, how the flyover is experienced as a landscape hinges on the “presence/absence” of the market and “sits precisely on this tipping point, both joining *and* dividing. It tears things apart, and maybe even threads them together again” (Merriman et al., 2008, p. 203). Visual and physical separations withstanding, the flyover triggered a variety of affective encounters: with the flyover itself, as object and landscape, and with the market underneath. The flyover created feelings of relief, precisely because what is underneath is still imagined, “felt,” and “seen.” The second point relates to these imagined perceptions of the market landscape that is not physically encountered but affectively recounted as dirty, messy, or ugly. The flyover prompted these “regimes of feeling” (Thrift, 2004, p. 12) reminiscent of the descriptor “guilty pleasures” used by journalist Mahim Maher to refer to flyovers, in ways that are actively “engineered” (Thrift, 2004, p. 12) to maintain spatial and class disparities. Affective, spatial, and imagined encounters on/with the flyover for DHA residents, therefore, reproduce hierarchical relations between elite locations and marginalized areas, further augmenting inequalities that are infrastructurally replicated. Simply put, the flyover does not only produce segregation in the city through its material form but also in the ways that some elite residents “feel” about it and the area of Gizri underneath.

Sometimes, however, the promise of the flyover in alleviating the stresses of traffic is left unmet. As Harris (2015) notes, the relationship between verticality and power escapes straightforward assumptions of the location of power in height. The daily tensions and transformations of the flyover space from a site of flows to a place of blockages exemplify this. At times, the flyover asserts itself as a site of power as it expels pedestrians and buses, hides away parts of the city deemed congested and ugly by the city’s privileged residents, and enables flows for DHA’s car drivers who are able to escape being “choked down there.” At other times, car drivers themselves become the problem of traffic that they so desperately want to overcome and can no longer blame on impatient “motorcycles, rickshaws,” as the flyover becomes full, chokes, and stagnates. The verticality that frees car drivers from the interferences of the road then becomes an entrapping device that no amount of bodily manoeuvring can overcome. These moments upset the relations that some car drivers carve with flyovers. As a space meant for smooth flows, therefore, the flyover and its vitality in the city is regulated by the at once transient and constant motions of the city’s motorised urban dwellers.

4. “Who Is It Even for?”: False Promises of Development and the Trials of Walking

Lived from underneath, the flyover shifts from being an object of “good planning” observed from the car-driver positionality (Sheller & Urry, 2000) to a “mirage” of urban development for those the flyover bypasses. For Suhaib, born in Gizri, whose family has lived there for decades and owns a shop in the market, the flyover is an unwanted imposition. I met him in the heart of the market, at the edge of the road just outside of his father’s shop overlooking the space underneath the massive structure. As his voice and my ears strained against the cacophony of roaring engines, sputtering exhausts, and honking horns, he told me that before the flyover was conceived in 2010, DHA had wanted to build a wall to split the road to “fast-track the traffic.” These plans provoked some shopkeepers into action who formed an informal alliance, the Gizri Shopkeeper’s Association,

to resist the wall. A heavy price was paid for that initial resistance, he said, because instead “they built this monstrosity.” Since the flyover, Suhaib said the market has struggled to grow, potential customers from the affluent DHA simply drive over, and the shops are not increasing in value at the same rate they used to. “Even though you see all around you where we are. Surrounded by DHA. Considering the location, the market value should be very high.” He recalled the negotiations that took place as the flyover plan was being developed:

When this flyover was being built, a lot of people had a grasp on the process. We didn’t have any association and the association that existed at the time was being run by people on that side [motions to the opposite side of the market, across the road]. We were duped [*Hamaray saath game hua*]. They told the association on that side that they are going to have to demolish their shops....The shops are taking more space illegally. It’s unauthorised.

Suhaib pointed to the non-linear occupation of space across the road, where the structure of some shops protruded out further towards the road than others: “The *paanwala* [betel leaf seller] is also coming out of its allotted space, so is the *barafwala* [ice seller], then the shop next to it is pressed backwards....People have taken more space.”

As we spoke about what transpired in the negotiations between the “association,” Suhaib’s side of the market, and DHA officials, Suhaib grew agitated. He said that the association on the “irregular” side of the market was threatened with “demolitions” (*torr phorr*) to make them all “level” (*barabar*). Suhaib shared that when the threat of demolition loomed over the association, they withdrew their opposition to the flyover and became “silent” to save their shops. As for his father and the market along his shop, they were “sold development”:

Well, we thought if the flyover is made, it will be in our favor. They told us that too, and after that, we were silenced [*khamosh kara diya*]. And the mirage [*sabz bagh*] we were shown was that when the flyover is made, there will be a small footpath in the middle, there will be a proper system of parking. There will be potted plants in the middle. Atop the flyover, there will be lights, the walls will be painted, the pillars will be colourful, and DHA is making it so you know it will be great. They made all these promises and the unfortunate thing is... the people in the market who mediated for them to convince the others got nothing in return. They were just the muscles to make it happen. They painted a wonderful picture for us, and we bought it. We were here legally. If you look at this side of the market, it is ordered evenly. But the market on that side isn’t. Whoever wanted to take more space and come out front has done it. So, they were threatened and we were sold development. After the flyover was built, they [the shopkeeper’s association] got nothing from DHA. They put these lights under the flyover worth millions. They have never been turned on and have decayed. The colours on the walls never appeared. People started putting up their posters, shop owners put up their signs....A mess was made [*gand mach gaya*].

Surely, this road exchange which did not cater to the mobilities of the people of Gizri required a different form of development framing by the developers. It was no longer about necessitating flows, but aesthetic upliftment even as Gizri was being reduced to an interstice—a shrinking neighbourhood quickly being “eaten up by all sides” by the powerful DHA. Where earlier Gizri was connected to its surroundings by forms of passing through and residents and shop owners elicited some material benefits from proximity to DHA, the flyover made sure that Gizri’s future would be made dubious; as Suhaib disparaged, “It has left us

behind”—a clear expression of how residents experience a temporal abandonment in the city’s development trajectory. The aesthetic upliftment pledged to “trickle down” the material benefits of the flyover never appeared. To Suhaib, it stands as a reminder of intimidation and unfulfilled promises. I asked him if the flyover helped him save time coming to and fro Gizri. He scoffed: “Our lives are here. We live here and work here. I am always under this *bala* [monster].” The practices that enshrine the flyover as an imposition (passing over, development lies, intimidation) produce a different version of its reality for the dwellers of Gizri. Here, it is not the market that is entangled in imaginaries of deterioration but the flyover itself.

Rehana, another resident of Gizri and a 63-year-old Quran teacher working for an upper-middle-class family in an apartment building across from her neighbourhood, had a similar opinion. I first met her walking on Gizri Road as she was out looking to refill her gas cylinder for her stove during an acute shortage. She lives in a small room, approximately 12 m², in a house she shares with her son and his family in a small neighbourhood of densely compacted concrete houses and narrow lanes, designated by city authorities as a *katchi abadi* (informal settlement). Inside Rehana’s room, an electric fan whirred next to a small, dusty television and a wooden shelf. Tucked amongst her things on the shelf was a Ludo board, a popular board game which she played against herself to pass the time. She crossed Gizri Road three times a week in the afternoon during peak rush hours to teach her students in their home. Rehana shared that she did not leave her house frequently. She sometimes took a rickshaw to go see her daughter in the north of the city, but the journey is too costly for her. Sometimes, her son takes her on his motorcycle but she does not feel comfortable asking him to spend the fuel for her sake. So, she stays home most of the time, leaving the house only when she needs something from the market or to teach her lessons. Her family has never owned a car and she has never driven a motorcycle herself.

Rehana walks wherever she goes. She liked her job but did not know how long she could keep it. She was getting old and slower, she said, and crossing the road had become more difficult due to the “innumerable” cars. She reflected on the shifts that the flyover brought: “One road became two. An old woman like me, when I go to teach....I have to cross two roads now.” She is generally “stressed” by the traffic she encounters, the speed, and the “impatience” with which people drive. She had been in accidents, never badly hurt, but she is generally afraid. She tends to walk onto the road with her arms raised and palms open towards the oncoming traffic. Without zebra crossings, traffic signals, or traffic police, Rehana has to navigate and weave her way through the tumultuous surge of cars, buses, motorcycles, and rickshaws on her own. As she steps onto the road, she carefully shuffles through the moving traffic, her body poised in imploring people to stop. Some do, others weave past her, almost grazing her as they go. Some others honk, gesturing towards her to rush. In those chaotic moments when Rehana’s body comes in contact with traffic, she shared she felt “weak” and traffic sounded like “screams.” Often, she tries to cross the road when someone else is, hoping to trail in the path made by the crossing person. She is much slower, however, than the mostly young men who are able to dash across daringly. She noted acerbically that the flyover serves no purpose for the people in her locality who cannot afford cars. Due to the flyover, the road underneath was narrower than it used to be and traffic had not abated, but worsened. On her way back home from her lessons, Rehana gestured to vehicles in what is supposed to be a one-way road, but bemoaned that “cars come from everywhere,” as people go the wrong way to “shortcut.” She blamed the police for the lack of traffic governance and for not holding people accountable. She recalled a gruesome accident she had heard about at the Punjab Chowrangi underpass, a busy intersection a few kilometres away that connects to Gizri Road. The accident took place on December 19, 2021, when a speeding car ran over a woman as she was crossing. Rehana heard from witnesses that the woman’s “stomach

and intestines spilled out everywhere” and a couple on a motorcycle were badly hurt. She expressed little hope for the driver’s arrest:

Now to catch the killer and take the case to court....Who will do all this? Whatever the police want will happen. Whoever’s child did it, he will grease the palms of the police and that will be it. Our law is such. We get hurt, no matter what....If the police were doing their job, so many lives would not be lost on the road.

While ethnic violence in Karachi has frequently served as a frame for scholars to apprehend urban politics (Gayer, 2007, 2014; N. Khan, 2007; Kirmani, 2017; Verkaaik, 2016), the role of urban planning and infrastructure in producing forms of everyday violence have also gained attention (Anwar et al., 2020; Gazdar & Mallah, 2013; Kaker, 2020; Kaker & Anwar, 2022; Mustafa et al., 2019). Much like those who drive, Rehana’s walking experiences deeply inform her relationship with the city and the state. While gender norms certainly shape her regimented movements in the city, the striking lack of infrastructure and road safety practices further restrict her capacities to move freely. Taking on the road with only her body as a manoeuvring agent, Rehana embodies constant risk. On Karachi’s streets, threat to life is unevenly distributed. Like Rehana, pedestrians on Karachi’s roads negotiate daily risks of bodily harm and sudden death as they traverse its hostile geography (Lateef, 2011). In 2016, an estimated 27,582 fatalities occurred on Pakistan’s roads (World Health Organization, 2018). In 2022, traffic police are cited to have counted over 300 fatal accidents in Karachi (Abro, 2022) whereas Edhi Foundation, an NGO providing emergency services in the city, is said to have recorded 780 deaths (Desk, 2022). In 2023, health professionals cited that nearly 500 people are injured every day on Karachi’s roads (Ayub, 2023). To make sense of the extent of the perils of Karachi’s roads for pedestrians, I relied on observations of how people managed to move in the city and my own experiences of walking. Following Merleau Ponty’s conception of being-in-the-world as body-subjects, I considered how walking as an embodied activity, “based in ‘habit’ (i.e. acquired skills, schemas, and techniques)” constitutes human beings in relation to their world (Crossley, 1996, p. 101). Furthermore, extending Mauss’s (1979) ideas of walking as a culturally specific technique of the body, I found walking bodies in Karachi to be conditioned by infrastructural specificity, resulting in embodied risk. Pedestrian mobility in planning logic hinges largely on foot bridges that hang over roads (Figure 3). The flyover boom of Mayor Mustafa Kamal’s administration enjoined the construction of a vast majority of the city’s current 165 bridges, as counted by the cited reporter (Mehdi, 2023). Walking in the city therefore means climbing up and down aluminium, cement, and steel bridges with 50 to 60 steps that are in varying degrees of neglect and decay and completely inaccessible for persons with disabilities (Figure 3). Along thoroughfares, the bridges are few and far between. Without bridges, people, mostly men, resort to dashing through fast-moving traffic and jumping over concrete dividers of two-lane roads. People also often needle their way across roads through gaps in concrete dividers where streetlights were meant to be installed but never were (Figure 4). On thoroughfares with fast traffic, clusters of pedestrians often collected on the edge, waiting for gaps in the onrush of vehicles to make their way across as fast as possible. In one rather dangerous walk on the Lyari Expressway, which is tolled and accessible only to cars, I happened upon rudimentary concrete stairs connecting the expressway to the locality it has effectively bypassed (Figure 5). Built by the people of the neighbourhood, I read the material interventions of the stairs as forms of rendering the city navigable by the urban poor who are deliberately marginalized by its infrastructure. Such practices made apparent that an undercurrent of pedestrian flows take varied and dangerous paths in the city, meaning that walking bodies are always at risk.



Figure 1. Map of Gizri flyover and adjoining areas.



Figure 2. Gizri flyover.



Figure 3. Pedestrian bridge at Shah-rae-Faisal Road.



Figure 4. Walking pathways through gaps at the Gizri flyover.



Figure 5. Stairs leading to Lyari Expressway.

5. Life in the Interstices

Casting a long shadow over the Gizri market, the flyover is lived and experienced differently by the area's residents and frequent dwellers. Many people I spoke to hardly went over the flyover but used it in other ways. Eateries, auto-repair shops, electrical stores, and other businesses advertised their business through posters plastered over the walls of the flyover (Figure 6). Taking more space and sown into this visual collage were political posters with faces of elected officials and party symbols (Figure 7). Lines of daily wage workers (men) sat underneath, facing the road on each side, the tools of their trade placed in front of them, positioned to be visible to passers-by and shop owners who might hire them for a day's work. Street hawkers sold fruit, fresh juice, fried goat liver, chickpeas, and egg curry. Drivers of parked lorries waited for delivery jobs to transport construction materials like concrete blocks, steel, and wood. A flurry of motorcycles stood in sections that were informally reserved for their parking. At other spots, shops stored their wares (electrical generators, sand, concrete blocks, and paint cans). Near "flower street" (*phool gali*), every day shiny new cars owned by DHA residents would be decorated with stemmed and unstemmed roses. Garlands made of marigold, daisies, and roses were carefully placed on bonnets or hung from the roof of the car (Figure 8). The space underneath the flyover, therefore, figured significantly in everyday work. Majid, a stove repairman, hung the frame of a stove on a protruding metal nail from the flyover to catch the eye of people driving by underneath. He sat under it, working on a small corner of the flyover's column. He had a shop in a building a few hundred feet from where he sat, but preferred to sit here to "catch customers." I asked him about the stove hanging over him and he explained that it was to signal his position to drivers from afar so they can plan to stop when they reach him, instead of accidentally passing him by.



Figure 6. Flyover columns feature many layers of advertisements, notices, and political posters.



Figure 7. “The symbol of Karachi’s built progress,” reads a Jamaat-e-Islami poster amidst a throng of parked motorcycles and cars.



Figure 8. Floral embellishments are added to a customer’s car in preparation for a wedding.

In the teeming, crowded, and diverse scenes under the flyover, such forms of producing visibility were habituated by the market itself and the people who passed through it. All actors and their activities under the flyover faced the road, in clear view of the shopkeepers and those driving by in cars and motorcycles. Shopkeepers sometimes relied on the workers for small jobs and fixes. Majed, for example, often did repair work for the shopkeeper of a high-end brand of stoves in the market. Staying visible in that shopkeeper’s view was an everyday strategy. Knitted in these relationships, therefore, is the role that visibility plays in entreating livelihood in the interstice.

For street hawkers, however, visibility sometimes stirred the threat of eviction. Many I spoke to were glad to have the flyover as the area underneath extended the space they could take up. Before the flyover was made, it was arduous to exist along the road’s edges in the sweltering sun. The flyover affords both shelter and space. However, some shopkeepers frustrated with congestion on the road saw street hawkers as obstructions to traffic and referred to them as an illegal “mafia” taking up unauthorised space. Vendors under the flyover were painfully aware of this rhetoric and took measures to undo this representation. Sarwar and his teenage sons, who operate a lunch cart carrying an assortment of curries, were careful to stay under the flyover and off the road. Sitting on a chair on a platform of the flyover’s column while his son stood behind the cart a few feet away attending to customers, Sarwar did not allow cars to park near his cart, making sure that the road space remained free. He bemoaned the blame cast on street hawkers and pointed to the cars parked along the shops: “Look how much their Prados and Landcruisers block the road.” Indeed, much of the road space was taken up by cars, particularly large SUVs. In the absence of traffic governance, many street hawkers sought to manage traffic independently to stave off criticism of their presence. Some kept bricks and concrete blocks to stop cars from parking in areas where they did business. Their daily presence and work folded into ordering traffic. Sarwar also made efforts to maintain good relations with the shopkeepers around him. Across the road from him was a restaurant whose owners were Pashtun. Sarwar, identifying himself as Punjabi, said that he and everyone around him practice “cooperation” and that Gizri is not mired in ethnic conflicts typical to Karachi. Indeed, this was an ethnically diverse space where life was ordered not by identity politics but by the rhythms of everyday work and evading municipal interventions. Sarwar, for example, served *chapatis* (flat bread) to his

customers that he acquired from the restaurant. Sarwar's cart, therefore, ensured that a steady demand for bread flowed into the restaurant and these economic ties softened his presence. The owner was less likely to complain to the municipal authorities if he benefitted from Sarwar's business. Many street hawkers in this way were able to draw out acquiescence and construct forms of collaboration (Simone, 2004).

Sometimes, however, municipal authorities conducted raids. Hafez, a third-generation Afghan immigrant who took over his father's fruit cart, told me that even though most vendors are compelled to pay an illicit fee to municipal officers to occupy space under the flyover, eviction drives happen when a new and zealous "senior officer" comes into office eager to "clean up" the area or when someone complains. Most hawkers I spoke with receive word of the impending eviction drive from their contacts and temporarily relocate to smaller streets. Hafez seemed unbothered by the threat of eviction. He has figured out a way that works for him: upending municipal borders. When he "received information" from his informant, he simply moved over to the west of the market which is controlled by a different municipal authority, Karachi Municipal Corporation. Hafez therefore utilizes the fragmentation in Karachi's land control by an array of cantonment boards, trusts, and authorities to resist eviction. By crossing over to where the jurisdiction of the raiding municipal authority does not apply, Hafez is able to keep his cart and his livelihood intact. He chuckled as he told me: "What can they do when it's not their area? They leave me alone. And I come right back when they leave." These matters are not always smooth for everyone and at all times, however. Sarwar's cart was violently confiscated during lockdown on account of the Covid-19 pandemic because he was not wearing a mask. He was made to pay heavy fines to reclaim it. Sarwar shaking with anger at the memory of it, said: "Why do they allow us to set up here if they are going to remove us after all? They shouldn't let us set up in the first place!" Sarwar felt that the mask was simply an excuse to evict him. For him, it is an everyday struggle to navigate the uncertainty that results from how the municipality governs the space through a complex interplay of extortion and eviction drives. Yet, he too, many a times, was saved from eviction by receding to nearby less policed streets when he was warned ahead of an eviction raid. Street hawkers under the Gizri flyover, therefore, resist eviction by being on the move, receding, and hiding when they need to and are entangled in complex relations with figures in authorities that are simultaneously extorters, evictors, and collaborators.

Even as human interactions gripped my focus, I was resolutely reminded of the flyover's non-human dwellers by their frequent interventions. Swooping in and around these material and social arrangements under the flyover were dozens of pigeons. They made their presence egregiously known when during conversations their droppings splattered all over my notebook and hair. This would often invite laughs from my interlocutors who knew very well the dangers of unassumingly standing under the flyover. People waiting for the bus underneath often cast furtive glances upwards to make sure they were safe from any surprises. The pigeons interacted deftly with the people and the environment they inhabited. Crevices in the underbelly of the flyover formed their concrete dovecot and morsels of food that could be found on the ground made their diet. They fluttered to the ground when they spotted a person with a fresh plate of food, eliciting the tossing of some bread and rice. When I asked Hafez if the pigeons bothered him, he was surprised by the question and said no: "They're searching for their place, we are searching for ours." In his understanding, pigeons and street hawkers were cast in a similar struggle for space in the city, both inhabiting its interstices, sustained by its flows but left largely marginalized in city planning imaginaries. The space under the flyover, therefore, as a site of multispecies copresence, unravels anthropocentric renderings of the city's infrastructure and public spaces. It calls to attention the minor modalities through which "other-than-human forces and intensities co-compose urbanicity" (Barua, 2023, p. 2). Installed to

resolve traffic congestion for residents of the elite neighbourhood of DHA, the Gizri flyover corresponds to the “in-between” and “complex surrounds” (Simone, 2012) conjured by its “relational location” (Simone, 2022, p. 6) and diverse articulations as a space of circulation and breakdown, opportunity and precarity, and human and non-human inhabitation.

6. Conclusion

Dwelling on stories of how a flyover figures in the lives of Karachi’s human and non-human residents, I propose paying attention to infrastructure as spatial entities that may cut through, open, and transform urban space. By “seeing between enclaves” (Iossifova, 2015) and considering the socialites producing these “non-places” (Augé, 1995), flyovers emerge as crucial spaces in-between, shaping practices of driving, walking, working, and inhabitation. The case discussed here has resonance beyond Karachi. In cities across the Global North and South, flyovers, underpasses, and other road exchanges have been and are drastically changing how cities are lived and experienced. Visions of “modernising” and making traffic uniform often underlie the investments and interventions in infrastructure in planning logic. What is at stake in the political arrangements of these lanes and the urban potentialities they open for some and close off for others is the very diversity and vitality of cities (Jacobs, 1961/1992). This article shows that as cities grow more and more fragmented in the constellation of flyovers, expressways, and underpasses, urban actors are enrolled in specific and unstable relations with these interstices based on class positionalities. It highlights how material, spatial, and affective encounters in and with flyover geographies in the city of Karachi reflect struggles over the right to the city. I have argued that infrastructural inequalities are maintained and reproduced not only through the physical separations rendered by the flyover but also by the affective forms by which some upper-middle-class residents may valorise the flyover and further marginalise and stigmatise undesired areas. Central to this argument is also the notion that the flyover as a spatiality of comfort and speed is a misnomer, identified by drivers like Ehab for whom the flyover straddles the boundaries of convenience and hindrance as these circuits shift from functioning flows to blocked and jammed corridors. Furthermore, this article recollected interactions with and around the flyover from below to emphasize the strains and violence of uneven development as lived and felt by Gizri’s residents and street hawkers. Firstly, it relates to the affective experience of “being left behind” due to the (unfulfilled) promises and intimidation tactics employed by the developing authority. Secondly, it identifies how visibility on the road for street hawkers and daily wage workers in seeking employment is crucial but also carefully mediated by forms of hiding to avoid eviction by a municipality that roleplays in contradictory forms as collaborator and evictor. Thirdly, it reflects on how walking bodies left ejected from roads altogether by design are forced to forge liminal paths and inhabit constant risks as they inevitably touch traffic. Crossing the road, without any exaggeration, is a matter of life and death. Fourthly, as spaces of more-than-human dwelling, this article casts a light on how pigeons inhabit flyover geographies and the human-pigeon interactions taking shape through commensal practices. The multiplicities of social life in and around the flyover, therefore, produce it as more than a space of transit. These sites are also spaces of contrived opportunity for humans and non-humans that are maintained through a complex interplay of visibility and invisibility, collaboration, and patronage.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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