

Vertical urbanization

By Obaid Khan

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Since its inception, Islamabad has been committed to horizontal rather than vertical urbanisation. A one-kanal plot in sector E-7 costs upwards of Rs15 crore. In F-6, it costs between Rs11-15 crore. Comparatively, in the most expensive area in Pakistan's second most expensive city – in terms of real-estate prices – Karachi's DHA Phase 8, a one-kanal plot costs Rs8-10 crore.

One explanation for why real estate in Karachi's poshest area costs around half of what real estate costs in Islamabad's most upscale area is the relative abundance of high-rise apartments in the former. Islamabad seems to have never adopted this model. What is stranger is that the few apartment buildings that have sprung up in recent years continue to be marketed as 'luxury' apartments and are geared towards the elite.

Had Islamabad embraced this model of affordable, high-rise buildings and apartment living, property prices would not have ballooned the way they have. Except the elite, everyone has been priced out of the real-estate market in Islamabad.

Given the limited availability of space in the city, lack of forward thinking in its planning and the 'seth' mentality of the people who want to hold onto their mansions, Islamabad has become a city reserved for the elite. Had some of these mansions on Main Margalla Road been converted into high-rise buildings, Islamabad would have been a more affordable city today.

Margalla Hills National Park sits at Islamabad's outskirts. In addition to the greenery it provides, its hiking trails serve people from all classes due to its non-existent entrance fee. Moreover, it is home to 600 plant species, 402 bird species, 27 reptile species and 38 mammal species including the stunning 'common leopard'. Unfortunately, the common leopard is not common anymore as the city has encroached on its territory and people have hunted the species to near local extinction – a mere seven common leopards have survived according to the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board (IWMB).

Currently, just two species of 'big cats' are found in Pakistan: the leopard and the snow leopard. However, the geographical region that we now call Pakistan has observed the local extinction of three other big cats over the years. The Asiatic lion was hunted to extinction in 1842 in Sindh, the Bengal tiger in the early 1900s and the Asiatic cheetah, which once roamed across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, is now confined only to Iran.

This means that out of the five big cats that we were gifted with, today, unfortunately, only two survive. Similarly, other majestic creatures such as the Asian elephant and the Indian rhinoceros once roamed the land that we today call Pakistan.

Initiatives such as the ‘Asian Leopard Preservation Zone’ set up in Margalla Hills National Park are essential to ensure the survival of species on the brink of extinction to prevent them from being lost forever like so many before them. Let us suppose that initiatives such as this are abandoned, and we construct thousands of houses on every square yard of Margalla Hills to accommodate Islamabad’s growing population, in the process killing off all the species of plants and animals it houses. As a short-term fix, this strategy may seem viable but what happens in 30 years when Islamabad’s population has grown even more? How will Islamabad be expected to accommodate its increased demand for housing when it will not be left with any National Parks to prey upon?

Why can’t humans and animals co-exist in Islamabad? Why must the debate revolve around encroaching on the territory of critically endangered species, and repurposing it to build more unsustainable housing societies? Vertical housing will allow flora and fauna to thrive, while simultaneously lowering the exorbitant real-estate prices in Islamabad. It is the only solution in terms of making Islamabad a more affordable and sustainable city. If metropolitans such as New York, Toronto, Sydney, and London have all adopted vertical urbanisation to cope with their growing populations, why cannot Islamabad?

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