

REIMAGINING

# KARACHI

Restoring forgotten treasures



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# *Reimagining Karachi*

## *The Story*

Reimagining Karachi is a heritage preservation project by SEED. It is an endeavour to preserve the historic character of the city and to bring about a positive change in the mindsets of people. It is about retracing our footsteps and taking measures to restore and preserve the glorious architecture. We are aiming towards prolonging the life of such assets, reinvigorating historic neighbourhoods and instilling a sense of belonging in our people. What makes this project unique is the effort to bring together all those associated with conservation as well as those sympathetic to the cause.

The project was initiated as we felt the need to develop an extensive, timely and methodical program to save our heritage, rejuvenate historic areas, create awareness about what we own, and revive our cultural identity. However, we strongly believe that this project should not be just about aesthetics, but should also have a direct and very strong impact on the environment, the economic, social and cultural activities in and around these sites.

The last year and a half has been an interesting journey, where a lot of realities dawned upon us. On the one hand, we got a chance to further explore these historically and architecturally rich quarters and were enthralled by the intricacies of design and their old world charm. On the other hand, we realized the dilapidated state these areas were in, their facades echoing tales of negligence and indifference. The mesmerizing beauty of these stone structures has been marred by decades of smog and smoke, and the surrounding areas are faced with a plethora of carts, buses, and seemingly insurmountable issues of traffic congestion and encroachments. However, a number of thorough surveys and detailed discussions with some of the leading names in the fields of architecture, conservation and urban planning led us to understand the measures that need to be taken in order to find a solution to these issues and to preserve the architecturally and historically rich buildings and sites.



## *What is Reimagining Karachi?*

Once the 'walled city', Karachi might not have a history of more than a century and a half, but it does not lack in architectural heritage and has its own unique and interestingly dual identity. It is the fact that it is a port city and the most important business hub in the country, yet has quaint historical neighbourhoods, which gives it that duality.

The old neighbourhoods are mostly located in densely populated areas and upon entering them one is delighted with breathtaking works of stone masonry of different styles, remnants of the past. Once you enter these old districts, you are greeted with a plethora of textures and craftsmanship. But the surviving structures suffer at the hands of urbanization and the effects are evident from their dilapidated state. Moreover, if extreme measures are not taken to preserve and restore them, it will not be very long before we will lose most of our architectural heritage due to indifference, negligence and demolition. Hence Reimagining Karachi was born - a one-of-its-kind initiative to save the nation's heritage and instill a sense of belonging and responsibility in all sectors and bring a cultural revival.



*"Heritage is a repository of knowledge that enables us to learn from the past to brace the future."*

*Dr Noman Ahmed  
Professor and Chairman  
Department of Architecture and Planning  
NEO University of Engineering and Technology*

*"There is an urgent need to conserve Karachi's rich architectural heritage and to rejuvenate the neighbourhoods in which it is located."*

*Arif Havan  
Architect and Planning Consultant*

*"Reimagining Karachi is likely to develop a sense of ownership of architectural heritage in the common men."*

*Ar. Yasira Naeem Pasha  
Assistant Professor, Chairperson  
Department of Architecture and Planning  
Dawood College of Engineering and Technology, Karachi*



## *Reimagining Karachi* *The Journey*

What started with an extensive research to identify the reasons for indifference to heritage and conservation, understand the gaps, find solutions and to decide the way forward, became a full-fledged cultural movement in a very short span of time. From architects to conservationists, artists to heritage writers, government bodies to academia, Reimagining Karachi has been very well-received in all quarters. The support does not just come in the form of appreciation for what we are doing from the platform of SEED for safeguarding our architectural heritage, but also invaluable input, sharing of ideas and previous research work as well as providing accessibility to archival materials to a certain extent.

The journey so far has been remarkable as not only have we discovered new facts about Karachi, but have also managed to evoke interest in the corporate sector. As our approach to conservation is very realistic, we avoid looking at individual buildings in isolation; we have developed practical, long-term programmes to rejuvenate the neighbourhoods in which these heritage properties are located. At the same time, we have been working tirelessly and vigorously on developing awareness programmes that need to be introduced at all levels, be it architectural schools, business schools or at the elementary and secondary level.

*"The launch of Reimagining Karachi lights a new hope for Karachi's historic areas."*

*Dr. Anila Naeem, Prof. &  
Co-Chairperson, DAP-NED*

*"It is with great interest that I have studied the information on Seed Ventures and its ambitious project Reimagining Karachi, which aims to document, restore and preserve selected heritage buildings to their original glory."*

*Syed Akeel Bilgrami  
Chairman*

*Najmi Bilgrami Collaborative (Pvt) Ltd.  
Co-founder Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture*

## • Objectives

The reason behind initiating this project on such a massive scale was two-fold. The need to take up social responsibility as well as to create awareness in the general public, especially the youth, regarding our historic and architectural assets was one of the main objectives. There are several aspects of this one reason, all of them interconnected. The responsibility does not just lie with the initiators of this project, but also with the youth, the corporate sector, the government bodies, to name a few. The second reason is to develop a timely program and take up a systematic approach to preserve and restore our heritage and come up with long-term, low-maintenance sustainability plans for future. The objectives are very clear and will benefit not only the stakeholders but the overall environment as well as our future generations. Some are as follows:

- Prolonging the life of historic treasures
- Preservation of historic urban character
- Beautifying the city
- Instilling a sense of belonging in the common man as well as the youth
- Diverting minds towards more meaningful things in life
- Helping people find beauty in things they overlook
- Changing the general perception of Karachi

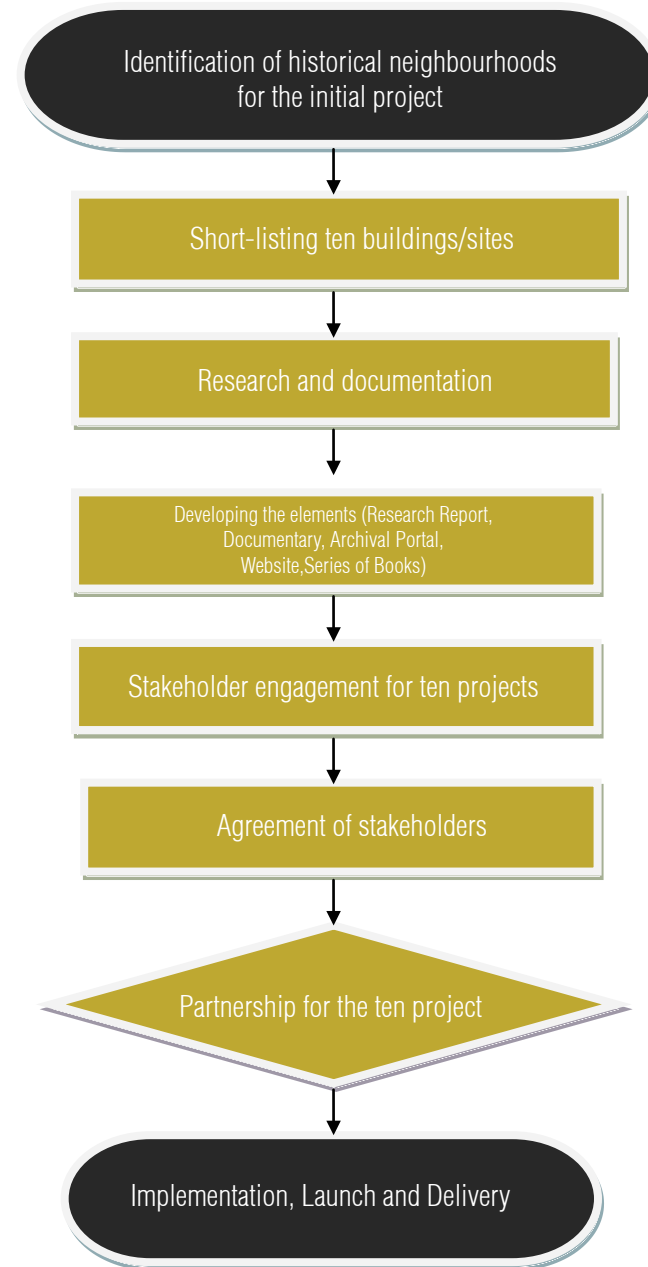
## • Strategy

- Identify threats to clusters as well as individual buildings and respond with practical, realistic and effective solutions
- Develop timely, focused programs and provide general public access to what is theirs to value and enjoy
- Set a trend, for museums, libraries, archives, historic preservation, not only to safeguard our treasures but also to provide healthy entertainment options
- Involve individuals and organisations in caring for our endangered heritage
- Take special initiatives with highly extensive reports and programs to make decision makers, conservation professionals, and general public aware of the immediate attention required to reduce the risks of losing our cultural heritage





- The Process





## • Reimagining leads to Rebuilding Karachi

It is important to understand at this stage that it is always either a dream or an idea that lays the foundation of a mega project like Reimagining Karachi. In this case however, it is a combination of both. What started as a dream was merged with an idea of creating a platform that would provide the expertise, the research, a strong ideology and a clear path to move forward in a direction that will help rebuild Karachi.

Rebuilding is a term with a broad connotation, which can refer to various forms of working on revamping or development projects. However, this initiative is focused on not just the architectural heritage of Karachi, but also restoring Karachi to its former glory. There are various steps that need to be taken in order to carry out a project of this scale.

- Survey the selected/marked areas
- Assess the current situation
- Tally with the past condition of the marked area or building
- Evaluate the situation of the surrounding area, such as traffic management, encroachments etc.
- Identify threat level to the building/buildings
- Decide on the interventions
- Formulate a plan or the way forward in terms of conservation

## *Conservation*

### • The Impact

- Economic Impact

If we just consider the case of bazaars located in the city such as Jodia Bazaar, Bolton Market or Khori Garden, we would all agree that it is only a particular segment of people that frequent these markets. Most of the population here might have heard the names but has never visited them. It is the need of the day to create awareness in people from all parts of the city regarding our old bazaars, wholesale markets and quaint shops. However, just introducing people to these markets does not serve the purpose. It is only by rejuvenating the area while keeping the historic character of the place intact, that attention can be drawn towards these gems. Once they have been restored and traffic management has been improved, more people will be encouraged to visit these parts of town owing to a better shopping environment, resulting in a rise in sales.

## - Social Impact

### Decrease in Crime Rate

Many of the heritage properties are located in densely populated areas which fall under these three categories:

a) Commercial      b) Residential      c) Residential-cum-commercial

Out of these three categories, it is the residential-cum-commercial clusters that have the lowest crime rate as per surveys, as the pedestrian traffic flow is constant due to the residents of the area. It is also important to note that the reason behind comparatively lower crime rate is that, unlike any commercial avenue, these areas do not shut down after 9 o'clock. Hence street crimes that mostly take place in dark alleys and isolated areas tend to occur less frequently in a residential-cum-commercial area.

### Bridging the Gap

As mentioned earlier, not many people are aware of the architectural jewels present in all parts of Karachi, some in clusters, some as majestic buildings and some, the last of the historic ones cramped in between modern structures. Those who know about their existence either lack the interest and motivation to explore those areas or are reluctant due to a number of reasons. The reasons could be poorly managed traffic, congestion, law and order situation, encroachments etc.

It is only through conservation that these areas can be provided with better streets, better environment and an efficient traffic system which would draw larger crowds thus enabling people to mingle with different ethnicities regardless of class or age.

At the same time these neighbourhoods often have vacant heritage buildings, some of which after have the potential of being converted into a:

a) Theatre      b) Museum      c) Library      d) Recreation spot      e) Art Gallery

## - Cultural Impact

The past few years have brought some major changes as far as Karachi is concerned. On the one hand, the political rifts have increased but on the other hand there has been a series of cultural events that take place on a regular basis now. These include Karachi Literature Festival, revival of theatre, art exhibitions, book readings and book launches, some literary activities for children to name a few. It is imperative to support and participate in these activities as well as introduce our children to a variety of literary and cultural activities. With the conservation of heritage properties, more space can be provided for such activities.

## - Environmental Impact

Most countries all over the world have realized the impact of conservation on environment. It is a fact that conservation and environment are interlinked. When a building is selected for conservation, it is always advisable to work on the surrounding area also and rejuvenate it along with the conservation/restoration of the building if it is located in an old neighbourhood. It inevitably leads to a cleaner environment, often a better sewerage system, and in the case of badly managed traffic, measures are taken either to reroute the traffic or to manage it better. Some areas can also be pedestrianised and that itself lessens the effect of smog and smoke that the vehicles exhume.

## *The Elements of Reimagining Karachi*

Reimagining Karachi has been developed sensitively and has been a unique learning experience. It also comes with great promise of a beautifully restored heritage and revival of cultural activities. A venture of this scale will do the city a service that will not be forgotten for times to come.

This takes us to the first few and very important elements of Reimagining Karachi apart from the conservation of the buildings/sites.

- Research Report

A comprehensive documentation of ten shortlisted sites with emphasis on their architectural style, features, issues as well as some solutions makes it easier to narrow it down to five most doable projects to start with. The main objectives of the initiative and the report are clear from the first few chapters, and case studies and strategies will help move forward. This report will form the basis of all the work that will branch out of it and make this project an exclusive endeavour to preserve the character of the city.

- Documentary

An 8-minute documentary on the architectural heritage of Karachi, focusing on old neighbourhoods, small clusters of beautiful craftsmanship embedded in stone structures and the true colours of Karachi. The documentary aims at evoking interest in Karachi as a multi-faceted city and the uniqueness it brings with it as the only city in the country that is a delightful fusion of history and modernism.

- The Archival Portal

It is unfortunate that there are no public libraries with an archives department in the city that are worth mentioning. Perhaps in the technology-driven world today, it would not be one of the priorities for most organizations. However, the need to maintain archives of the city and to provide easy access to those who require this information is imperative. We advocate the initiation of an Archival Portal for it would be a great service not only to those working in the relevant fields but also students and anyone interested in our history and architecture.

The main intention of this element of the project is to preserve or create collections of materials with significant historical or cultural value thereby assuring long-term access to these collections. It is also to compile research, findings and architectural designs of all those who are willing to contribute to the archives. In certain cases, rights to the research can also be acquired to add to the portal. This can result in people exploring ways to work together and can take conservation to another level. The portal should be open to anyone inclined towards furthering the archives or adding their own research to it, as well as those who want to make use of it for any future research or conservation projects.



- The Website ([www.reimaginingkarachi.com](http://www.reimaginingkarachi.com))

Think history and most people associate it with dry, uninteresting, extensive details of the past. This assumption has also led to the indifference and oblivion that is present in our nation towards heritage. We find modern, new, glossy structures far more appealing than those of the by-gone era. We have conditioned ourselves to look away when we pass by charming clusters in old neighbourhoods. We refuse to see the intricate designs of old buildings, the now rare materials used and the master craftsmanship that are dying a slow death.

If one does want to explore the virtual world and find out more about the historic areas of Karachi, such as Elphinstone Street, Old Town Quarter (parts of the walled city), Aram Bagh, Soldier Bazaar, Burns Road to name a few, there is very little or no information available online. While the archival portal will cater to more specific and professional readers, the website will be a combination of general information on individual buildings as well as historic areas of the city; fun anecdotes and heart-felt experiences of architecture students, surveyors and conservationists (also open to submissions); an in-house blog which will also include Spanish guest blog posts written by a community worker from Argentina working for KRT (Karachi Relief Trust), based on her experiences of Karachi and her understanding of our history and architecture; articles by some of the leading writers and historians; a carefully updated photo gallery and quotes from leading conservationists, architects, planners and heritage writers, endorsing the initiative.

Reimagining Karachi website changes the perception of history and of Karachi. It is a fun, animated, informative and engaging online device to not only interact with the readers but also provide a one-stop site for anything even remotely related to Karachi, its history, culture and architecture.

- Reimagining Karachi - The Series of Books

When any organization takes the uphill task of enabling people to reimagine history, it creates a portal to another world. It brings hope, beauty and peace to a nation starved for them. It brings everyone closer to their city or country for that matter. But what needs to be understood is that not everyone has a very vivid imagination. For such people, we create an impact through visuals and texts, is created through: a series of six comprehensive books with complete documentation of Karachi and its architectural heritage.

The first book of this series will be carefully sectioned to show the different colours of Karachi, its mesmerizing architecture and its cultural activities; and presenting breathtaking shots by some of the leading photographers in the country; this coffee-table book will be taking a giant leap towards bringing people together to realize the true worth of Karachi.

A series like this will be an enjoyable experience for those involved in the production of this piece of art as well as those who open it to embark upon a new journey, transporting them to another world during the few minutes that they spend leafing through the pages or browsing it. The rest of the five books will be a visual documentation of more than 1800 declared heritage properties in the historical quarters of Karachi.

To produce a series like this that leaves a lasting impression on the readers is part of the delightful experience that brings us closer to our goal: to preserve our architectural treasures, rejuvenate our historic districts, uplift our environment and bring out the cultural identity of Karachi and let it blossom.

## *Creating Awareness*

It is imperative to create awareness in this regard at all levels, from the public and private sectors to students to masses. It is to instill a sense of pride and belonging and in all quarters and to evoke a sense of responsibility in individuals and organizations. We realize the need for conditioning our youth to feel a sense of association and attachment to their roots and to understand that it is important to have strong ties with their past.

At the same time organizations, big and small, have a responsibility to help save the heritage and to promote awareness – creating programmes so that future generations can continue on with preserving our forgotten treasures.

- Subtle and Aesthetically Pleasing Information Sources

Information can be provided in any form, sometimes in an unassuming, subtle manner.

- It can be as vocal and high-profile as a billboard
- It can also be quietly effective as a calendar
- An aesthetically designed giveaway box with an attractive and informative booklet and a set of postcards can be a unique souvenir, and will also draw in more people to take an interest in our forgotten treasures

Spectacular shots of architectural features, intricate grille work, Juliet balconies, exotic murals and majestic buildings in the forgotten, overlooked, dense areas of the city, taken by one of the leading photographers in the country who is also endowed with a deep and meaningful understanding of our heritage, would be enough to grab anyone's attention. Combine it with interesting blurbs, and we have created a novel way of taking our cultural movement a few steps further.

Karachi has a unique local flavour that needs to be re-introduced.

With its delightful spice bazaar, chalia bazaar, dry fruit market; the magical Botal Gali, the enticing Kitaab Gali; the streets, the bazaars; are just one part of it. Attention also needs to be drawn to the majestic buildings on Elphinstone Street with Old Ilaco House and Mohammad Ali Building taking the lead; the neglected Manora Island with remnants of temples and old architecture; the three corridors of Old Town Quarter with remains of the wall of the once 'walled city' and the quaint clusters in old neighbourhoods. With beautiful visuals, intriguing bits of history and architecture, and the cultural identity of Karachi being re-introduced and re-evoked, all captured through the lens, will be something to cherish for many years to come.

- Awareness Programmes

Reimagining Karachi was initiated not just as a conservation project but also with the objective of creating awareness at all levels, be it corporate, public sector, youth or the masses. It is in this regard that we have developed the following programmes:

- Partnerships with all Architecture schools nationwide
- Media partnerships
- C.H.A.P. (Children's Heritage Awareness Programme)
- A string of heritage awareness events held at heritage buildings
- Heritage walks
- Walkways turned into art and history precincts on weekends

"Between the past and the future, we must today, acknowledge the need to belong, adjust, plan and give meaning to our existence, give it familiarity and cohesiveness."



“If the cultural capital represented by historic sites is completely mutilated or annihilated, coming generations will be impoverished. We shall be responsible if nothing has been done to prevent this cultural suicide.”





## *The Pilot Project and its Impact*

The buildings/sites short-listed for conservation have been selected not only because they fall in the criteria for conservation or that they are more accessible or doable, but because conserving and /or restoring them will have a much larger and noticeable social impact.

Historical Quarters of Karachi

The listing process of Karachi's heritage properties was carried out in 1994-1997, during which 22 historical quarters were identified and 600 buildings were marked as heritage, protected under the Sind Cultural Preservation Act. Later, another 685 buildings were added to the list bringing it to 1285 listed heritage buildings. The process of listing and documenting heritage properties is ongoing and it is estimated that there are about 3000 listed and unlisted heritage properties in Karachi.

## *Historical Quarters of Karachi*

Another research project in collaboration with the Department of Culture was carried out in the 2000s with the following steps:

- 1st phase: Re-survey  
All 19 quarters that were initially marked were re-visited and the 1061 properties left out were now added to the list.
- 2nd phase:  
It was acknowledged that in the next 2-3 years more historical properties will be marked increasing the number of quarters from 21-30.
- 3rd phase:  
Peripheral properties will be documented and added to the list.

1.	Artillery Maidan Quarter	12.	Napier Quarter
2.	Civil Lines Quarter	13.	Old Town Quarter
3.	Frere Town Quarter	14.	Preedy Quarter
4.	Garden Quarter	15.	Ramswamy Quarter
5.	Jail Quarter	16.	Rambagh Quarter
6.	Jamshed Quarter	17.	Runchore Quarter
7.	Karachi Cantonment	18.	Saddar Bazaar Quarter
8.	Lawrence Quarter	19.	Serai Quarter
9.	Lyaree Quarter	20.	Soldier Bazaar Quarter
10.	Market Quarter	21.	Strachan Quarter
11.	Machi Meanee Quarter	22.	Tahilram Quarter

## *The Short-Listed Buildings*

Karachi might not have a history as old as that of Lahore or Thatta, and might not be known for its old world charm; but it is still a treasure trove of beautiful heritage sites and old, historic neighbourhoods. It was a difficult task to narrow down to ten sites out of so many declared heritage properties, but with the help, support and guidance of some of the veteran architects, urban planners and conservationists, the following buildings/sites have been short-listed as they match the criteria that had been set for selection by the experts. Each of these sites is unique and has rich historical or architectural value and it is very important to preserve them and rejuvenate the neighbourhoods before these structures, that are already crumbling, perish at the hands of time.

### I. Elphinstone Street

1. Mohammad Ali Building (Elphinstone Street)
2. Nusserwanjee Building (Elphinstone Street)
3. Old Illaco House (Life Insurance Building)(Elphinstone Street)
4. Victoria Furniture Mart (Elphinstone Street)

### II. Khori Garden Area

5. Murad Khan Road (main Khori Garden Road)
6. Marriot Road
7. Khori Road (Kitaab Gali)

### III. M.A Jinnah Road

8. Khalikdina Hall
9. Tikona Park

### IV. Preedy Quarter

10. Empress Market

The following chart provides a breakup of what we intend to achieve by restoring ten short-listed buildings/sites.


Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To conserve and restore these very important heritage buildings/sites</li> <li>• To rejuvenate surrounding neighbourhoods</li> <li>• To provide a cleaner, healthier environment</li> </ul>
Situation	<p>The selected buildings despite their interesting architectural features and in some case, historical significance, are in a dilapidated condition due to indifference and negligence. The lack of maintenance is causing difficulties for the occupants of the buildings. Often it leads to the residents moving out, and some of the areas such as Khori Garden are now home to partially vacant buildings only used for commercial purposes. That itself leads to another issue – rise in crime rate; since the commercial activities cease after 9 pm, the neighbourhoods become isolated and the lone pedestrian becomes a target of street crime. This also has an adverse effect on street children as they are often the ones who are still around; often homeless, they are subjected to abuse by criminals loitering in the area.</p>
Strategic objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To facilitate the improvement of old districts in terms of cleanliness, a better layout and better managed traffic</li> <li>• Involve individuals, organizations and communities to participate in rejuvenation of the neighbourhood</li> <li>• Preserve architectural heritage with long-term sustainability plans</li> </ul>
Overview	<p>Reimagining Karachi has risen as a platform for all conservation activities and those involved in them and sympathetic to the cause, to unite together. It is setting a new trend in conservation by creating awareness and the vast capacity of the project.</p>
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Countless employment opportunities during and after conservation work</li> <li>• Dying craftsmanship saved by making use of artisans to work on the heritage buildings and training more in the process</li> <li>• Cleaner environment</li> </ul>

## *Conclusion*

The justification of rehabilitation of heritage sites can be done only after having understood the importance of our historical and cultural identity. The need to revitalize such neighbourhoods is stronger than ever and it has been recognized and realized all over the world. The dire need of protecting heritage is being felt in the global community. The motives behind any such project should be very clear, as they are in this project; and the outcome noticeable enough for communities to want to join in any such endeavours. Both macro-level planning strategies and micro-level design strategies have to be formed considering the unique situation of Karachi as a city that caters to diverse ethnicities. With the correct assessment, evaluation and strategies and cooperation from all sectors including the relevant government bodies, a project of this scale can be the foundation of many such future endeavours.







[www.reimaginingkarachi.com](http://www.reimaginingkarachi.com)