

Reflections on Karachi — Past, Present and Future

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Images by Students of Indus Academy, Karachi Pakistan
<http://unesco.sjsu.edu/gallery/070110/malik/index.html>

The concept for this project was not only for our group to come up with a final art piece about our city, but how to do it using techniques that others could also use and come up with similar solutions to their design needs. That is one aspect of sustainability. Thus I conceived the whole five weeks that we would have to work on the project as a constant give and take between myself and the other students, respecting each other even if ideas and values are different and creating a final piece of work that is new and truly has impact. Not only have the young artists learned from me during this time, I have learnt a lot about a generation that has seen much more violence and blatant disrespect another in close surroundings and on media. We have grown together and I hope that a lot of the excitement and vigor which filled our sessions is visible in the final piece. I had to play the part of editor as there was so much material that we came up with that it was impossible to include everything but the attempt has been not to exclude anyone yet show each person's style and message in the context of one piece about the city of Karachi.

These days, the city of Karachi is receiving a lot of funding from the government to give it a face lift, but a lot of core issues have been ignored like adequate water, sanitation, pedestrian crossings and project planning. This results in power breakdowns that last hours, traffic jams that never end, dust and unfinished drains everywhere. In a city of over 25 million people this means a lot of serious suffering. In addition to this, Karachi is often targeted by unknown bombers and the sounds of explosions and sirens are always taken with a sign of yet another tragedy. How do young people growing up in this kind of environment react when they are asked to represent their city first in words then in images and sounds?

The final sequence of images for the project submitted for the Unesco Digiarts Awards 2007 is a result of a five-week workshop held by me, a digital artist and scholar at the Indus Academy school. Ten teenagers attended the workshop which was conducted after Doyun Lee gave me permission to participate in this project with the young

artists who were interested. The school administration allowed us to use the school premises after school hours on Fridays from 12.30pm to 3.30pm. The procedure for selecting the students was a general announcement at assembly followed by distribution of parental consent forms and a few details of the Digiarts website and award to interested students. All ten who showed up the first day were registered. No fee was charged for this workshop and the Indus Academy computer lab was at our disposal for the weekly meetings.

From the start the students, aged between 11 to 13, were introduced to UNESCO, the digital arts portal and the Sharjah Biennial. I described how we would be working as a team to create the final piece and that I was not a teacher to them but a mentor who would be teaching them the tools and then leaving them free to explore. This created a sense of purpose to the whole workshop and incredible motivation among the students to suggest ideas, help each other out and be vocal in discussions. I feel this in itself was one great remarkable achievement as far as this whole project went. Getting a group of highly distracted students to give 100% attendance each week and come up with incredibly well thought out pieces, while juggling other classes, has been really rewarding for me.

Also realizing the limited amount of creative and analytical thinking encouraged in the tight school curriculum I made it a point each week to show the students digital or electronic artwork recently displayed at exhibitions and symposiums worldwide. We would view slides shows and I would ask the children at the start of the workshop to comment on each piece, "do you like it?" "what techniques have been used in this piece?" Many times I got this question "Miss, how can this be art?" These critiques helped greatly for the students to comment on each others' work and figure out which style they wanted to follow for their own pieces.

I followed the Unesco "Young Digital Creators" hand book as far as the lesson plans and descriptions of phrases such as "copyleft" were concerned so that we



could move fast and cover all that was needed to cover in an introductory digital creation session. The book was invaluable to me as a resource.

I set up a blog at <http://malikimage.spaces.live.com/> and handed out my email address to the workshop participants so that we could all keep in touch over the days that we were not meeting. In addition, references to websites were given out at each class which would help the artists develop their skills or create new art work. This openness in communication leaves a lot of room for artists to work on their images whenever they were free. All kinds of image collection methods were described

and encouraged, from free hand drawing then scanning to mobile phone captures, newspaper cuttings etc. also I explained to everyone the issues surrounding copyright and how someone else's image if used either had to be credited or changed in such a way that it did not look like the original any more. This could be done either by cropping, changing the hues, cutting and pasting, writing over, etc.

For the students who had no access to computers or digital cameras at home, I provided my USB, digital camera and sound recording devices in school. I also had a CD of the YDC handbook with the softwares:

Karachi, city of...

Past	Present	Future
City of Abuse	City of Ignorance	City of Enlightenment
City of Order	City of Innovation	City of Progression
City of Peace	City of Racism	City of Peace
City of Destitution	City of Corruption	City of Living Hell
City of Oppression	City of Hope	City of Poverty

Tux paint, GIMP, Audacity, Inkscape which I asked the students to pass around and copy on their computers at home as it was freeware.

One student, Azaan was a musician and was very keen to compose a piece to go with our final images. I gave him the go ahead and at each session he would play the section he had composed for us. He would walk around and view everyones work so that he had an idea of what kind of images were with the music. I think the final result is astounding.

One Friday, just as we were about to start our computer work, the lights went off and I was told that they probably would not come back on till evening. All the school staff had gone for Friday prayers so we had a really hard time finding someone who could go and get diesel for the generator. Once the fuel arrived, the switchboard caught fire and then it was confirmed that even a backup supply would not work. This is quite normal in Karachi so none of us were too fazed by this, just disappointed. Rather than waste time, I organized a storytelling session where each person told their story about Karachi and how they ended up in the city. I started off with my own story. As we went around I was amazed to learn that 6 out of the 10 students had moved to Karachi from various countries less than 5 years ago. Each of them described what they liked — the open spaces, no boredom, lots of events, and disliked — pollution, lack of freedom of movement and construction everywhere about the city. I thought about the displacement that so many young students go through as migration becomes a fact of life in the new order of the world. How does it affect them, how do they adapt, how should schools cater to make adjustment easier for students like these? While our

story session was going on, a beautiful deer was spotted running past the computer lab. Everyone, including me with my camera, rushed out not believing our own eyes as deers are common to this area but not at all in the city! Turns out one of the staff members had brought it and was going to take it home that day.

A back up plan is very necessary in a place where it is possible that technology will fail you. We must rely on technology but not to the extent that without it we become silent and unheard. Human struggle can be expressed in numerous ways and we must remember all of history and at times improvise when necessary. That is another aspect in creating sustainable environments. They cannot be rigid but have to evolve when the need arises.

This piece was presented also as artists submissions for the Web Biennial 2007 (to hear piece with sound please visit link in internet explorer).

Names of student Artists:

- Angelical Huang
- Azaan Bakhtiar
- Bilal Nisar
- Sahar-Fatema
- Tanya Tanveer
- Urmia Abbas
- Murtaza
- Hannah Dehradunwala
- Ali Abbas
- Arisha Akhtar

Accompanying Picture made by Murtuza