Urban Identity Under Pressure: Placemaking Interventions for Inclusive Development Around Johar Town, Lahore

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Abstract

Private educational institutions located within residential neighbourhoods are devices that often lead to urban transformation at a fast pace. Unfortunately, the majority of residents do not control these changes. Expansion around institutions like Minhaj University, University of Management and Technology (UMT) and other in Lahore has changed its land use pattern adversely. The surrounding areas has become congestedd and has started acting as a magnet for informal trade, which is gradually leading to decline in its identity as a residential zone. This research traces the changes and asks the question of how placemaking can be used to recover spatial coherence and inclusivity in the academic district after the gentrification process. The research used satellite imagery (2005, 2025), mental mapping, field observations, and stakeholder interviews to gauge the size of the area covered by the park, which it had increased seven times. Moreover, the research reported a simultaneity of commercial pressures. The research found that there are continuous conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles, while students have insufficient public spaces. Furthermore, vendor activities remain unregulated, and conversation of residential units into hostels has become widespread. The study offers a detailed account of gentrification caused by education in Pakistan and the strategies of design to democratize the redevelopment of similar high, pressure university areas.

***Keywords*:** placemaking, gentrification, urban identity, mental mapping, land use

Introduction

Universities located in urban localities tend to change rapidly and unevenly compared to other areas. While universities contribute to the economy of the area, provide jobs, and are a source of innovation, their presence in any

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locality also standardizes the area which results in the change of local people's perception of the place (Moos et al., 2019). University neighborhoods in Boston, Seoul, and London, for example, are all following the same trajectory, increasing property prices, establishment of more commercial enterprises, and the gradual disappearance of the old communities. These trends have also been observed in South Asian cities as well, which are sometimes more abrupt because their planning frameworks are lagging behind their development pressures.

In a rapidly urbanizing county like Pakistan the challenge is much severe. Lahore which is a hub of universities, is undergoing similar identity crises in its newly developing urban areas (Rana & Bhatti, 2018). The position of UMT in Block C, Johar Town, Lahore, is a condensed instance of such a phenomenon. The area had initially been planned as a low, density residential sector but over the last 20 years, it has been transformed into a combination of academic and commercial zone. Properties have gradually been turned into hostels to accommodate students, street, facing shops have taken over residential areas, traffic has increased, and the original social fabric has got thinner as the student population has grown (Ali et al., 2022). The residents often refer to this process as "losing the neighborhood" while students equate the same processes to increasing convenience. These opposing views highlight the latent tension which remains unresolved between the growth of institutions and the residents' welfare.

The concept of placemaking helps in dealing with such issues (Strydom et al., 2018). Instead of considering gentrification as a consequence which cannot be avoided of educational expansion, placemaking sees the area as a common environment where its open spaces can be redesigned to achieve a balance of different aspects like inclusiveness, identity, and functionality (Pervaiz et al., 2025). This study aims to discover how the use of placemaking ideas can help the reinterpretation of the neighborhood around UMT into a more connected urban district that would be equally beneficial for students, vendors, and the rest of the residents.

Literature Review

Urban identity is the central idea in placemaking and is closely linked with the phenomenon of gentrification. Together, they play a significant role in shaping urban dynamics and influence how cities evolve and are perceived by their residents. Serreli, (2013) introduces placemaking as a participative

style of urban development where citizens are directly involved in reinventing the urban spaces based on their personal experience, which creates a strong sense of place and identity among the locals (Wyckoff, 2014). Emotional and social bonds between people and their environment are enhanced by urban fabric that puts people and their welfare ahead of economic development and infrastructure (Bond, 1999). This helps in developing a separate identity of a particular city. Conversely, the process of gentrification disrupts this balance because new social, economic forces come in to play by destroying the age-old place identity (Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Lees et al., 2013; Open Science Framework, 2025). It leads to the displacement of the long-term residents. It is essential to know the interactions and reciprocity between placemaking, urban identity and gentrification (Ellery et al., 2021). Despite the fact that gentrification is most often associated with better infrastructure and economic development, it often leads to the displacement of inferior classes of citizens and the destruction of old-established.

This paper discusses these relationships with the emphasis on the way in which placemaking can support the urban identity and contribute to minimize the negative outcomes of gentrification that can make urban development benefit all stakeholders (Chatterton, 2010).

Methodology

Research Design

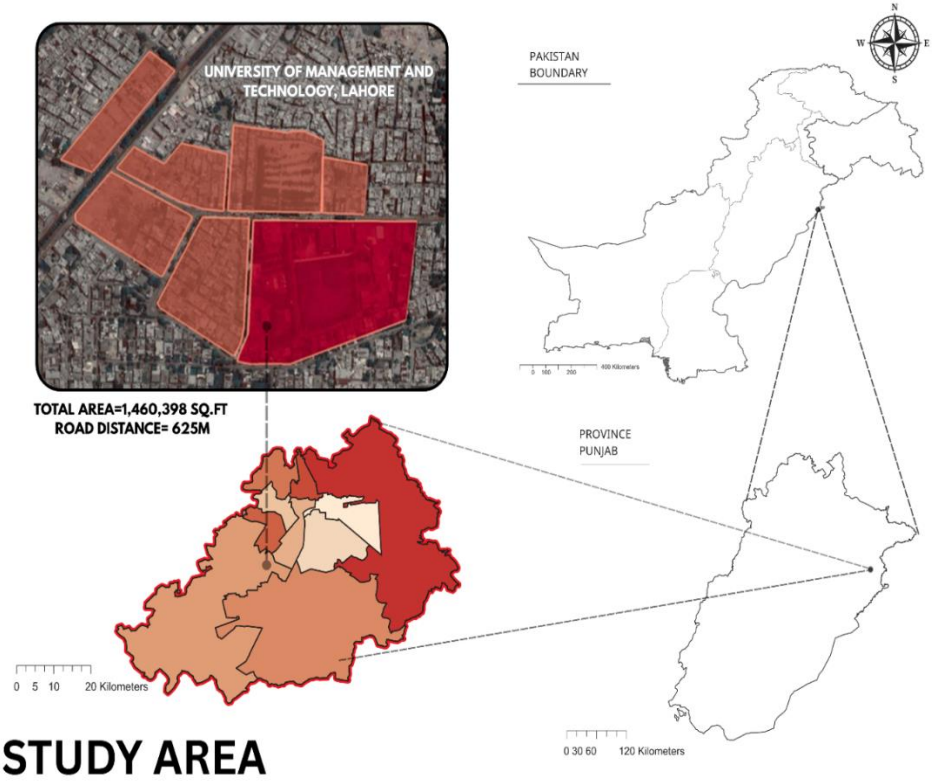
This research employs a qualitative research (Pathak et al., 2013) design and is set in a post, gentrification context. The University of Management and Technology (UMT), and Minhaj University in Lahore are used as an example to reflect a local area that has undergone a change from a residential zone to a heavily commercialized and congested academic district. The study aims to examine the role of placemaking in revitalizing urban identity and enhancing inclusiveness in the areas that have been so radically transformed.

The research process is divided into three main parts: site analysis, community engagement, and design intervention. The site analysis stage includes field observations, photographic surveys, and spatial documentation aimed at assessing the physical conditions and the extent of informal development. One of the prominent methods of data collection is mental mapping where students, vendors, and users of the area literally draw

their understanding of the space. This method helps to understand how the community comprehends and moves around their environment.

Figure 1

Location Map Case Study Area

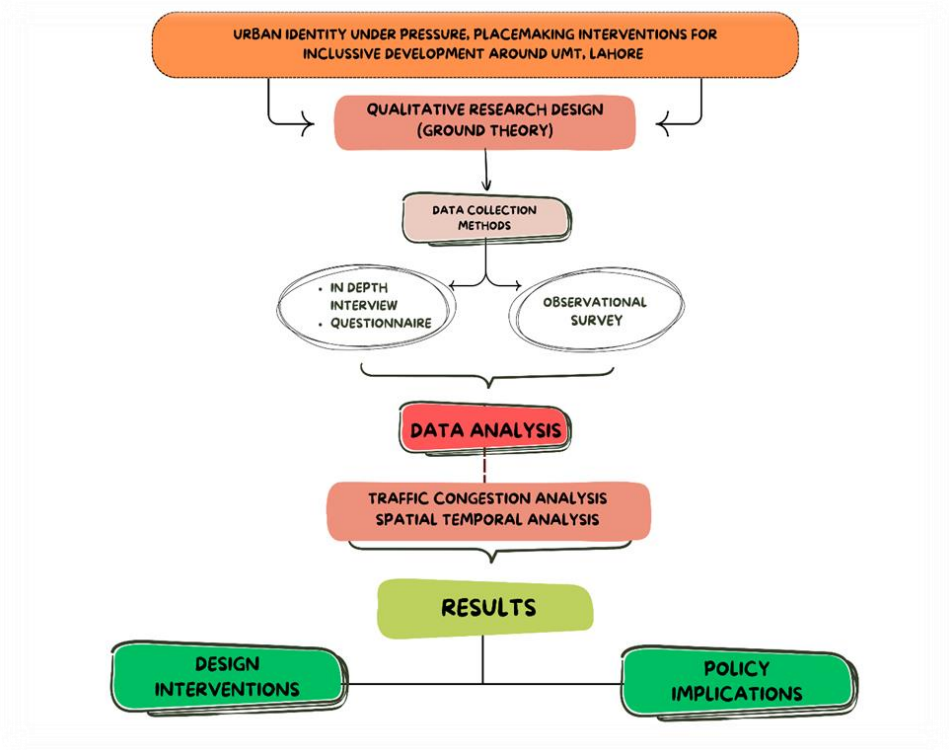


The second stage involves gathering the stakeholder input through informal interviews and discussions with students, vendors, and users from the vicinity to gain a better understanding of the needs, challenges, and aspirations. These results are then combined to guide the third stage: the design proposal that initiates placemaking strategies like pedestrianization, public spaces, and student, friendly zones with a view to reviving a cohesive and inclusive urban identity.

This research design allows for the integration of real-world conditions, public perception, and design thinking, leading to a spatial intervention that is not only community informed but also contextually grounded.

Figure 2

Research Design



Consistent with the qualitative character of this study, the sample size was decided upon the principle of data relevance and saturation, instead of statistical representation (Fossey et al., 2002). 60 participants in total were chosen through judgmental sampling, thus the focus was on those people who have the first, hand experience of the spatial and social change around Johar town, Lahore. The sample covers 25 local residents who represent the original residential character of the area, 10 vendors and 25 university students who are now the main occupiers and influencers of the

neighborhood. This equilibrium was designed to elicit differing views of identity, change, and space usage in a post, gentrified academic zone.

Table 1

Stratified Proportion Sample Sizes

Participant Group	Total	Male (60%)	Female (40%)
Students	25	15	10
Residents	25	15	10
Vendors	10	10	0
Total	60	40	20

Primary Data

Primary data was collected through the following methods:

- *Semi-Structured Interviews:* Conducted with residents, vendors, students, faculty, planners, and community leaders to gather in-depth perspectives on urban change, gentrification, and placemaking opportunities.
- *Mental Mapping:* Mental maps were prepared by UMT students, local residents (including displaced households), and area vendors to understand how users perceive, navigate, and prioritize the neighborhood. Sixty maps were collected, and four detailed student maps were selected for focused analysis. These maps highlighted spatial needs, conflicts, and potential zones for design intervention.
- *Observational Surveys:* Systematic on-site observations documented land-use patterns, development activity, and the use of public spaces. This visual assessment provided contextual support to the qualitative narratives gathered through interviews and mental mapping.

Secondary Data

Secondary data was used to contextualize findings and trace long-term urban changes:

- *Satellite Imagery:* Used to analyze spatial growth, land-use changes, and the physical expansion of the university's influence over time.
- *Academic Literature:* Reviewed to build theoretical grounding on gentrification, placemaking, and urban identity, and to connect the case study to broader urban trends.

Data Analysis

The investigation is organized to present the major spatial, functional, and social difficulties that have an impact on the liveability, accessibility, and identity of that area. Different tools and methods like mental mapping, photographic surveys, congestion count studies, human density observation, and spatial documentation through site sections and land use mapping were used. Together, these analyses bring to light the unchecked spread of institutional dominance, the insufficiency of infrastructure, the informal commercialization, and the absence of pedestrian, friendly design.

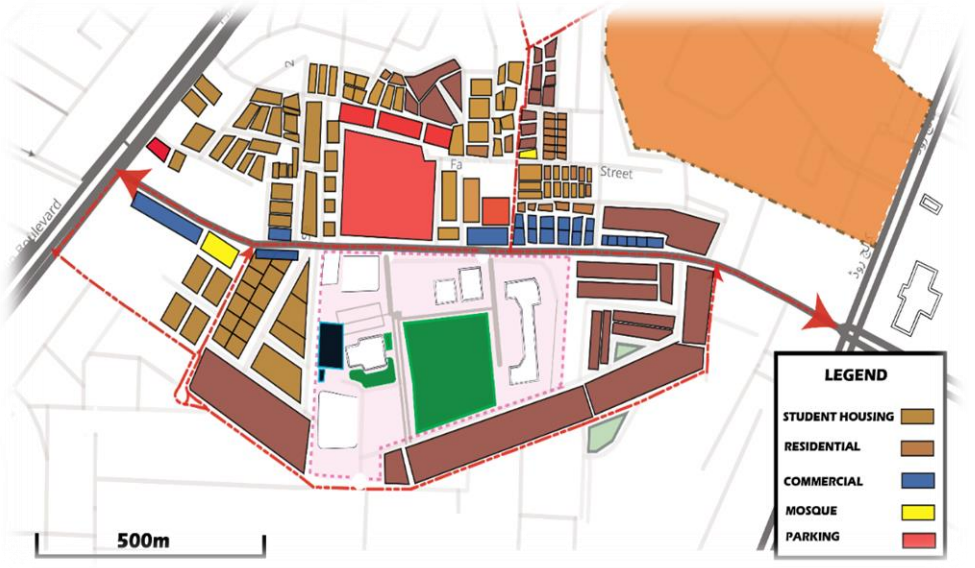
Existing Land Use around UMT

The land use around the Johar Town depicts a mixed-use character with a dominant institutional influence. The area is generally occupied by the student's housing which has gone through the informal change of the residential plots into private hostels. These hostels are spread throughout the nearby areas, especially in the inner streets besides UMT Road, where they have caused functional and spatial issues in the residential environment.

Besides student accommodations, the locality is endowed with some public buildings, among which a mosque situated within a walking distance of the main gate of the campus stands out. Commerce has been initiated at different places along the UMT Road as well as at the neighboring corners where businesses mostly consist of the small shops, food vendors, photocopy services, and convenience stores that are students' need to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, a significant portion of these commercial activities is still at the stage of informal and unregulated, which results in the congestion and spatial disorder of the area.Some of the land is still devoted to residential use, but the student hostels and the commercial activities have changed the residential character. There are also parking places in unplanned ways, for example, at roadside spaces or on some empty land without a formal layout or access control. The overall pattern of land use points to the unplanned growth of the institutional and commercial functions in a mostly residential area and thus shows the necessity for precise zoning, regulation, and spatial reorganization.

Figure 3

Land Use Map



Built-up Area Expansion

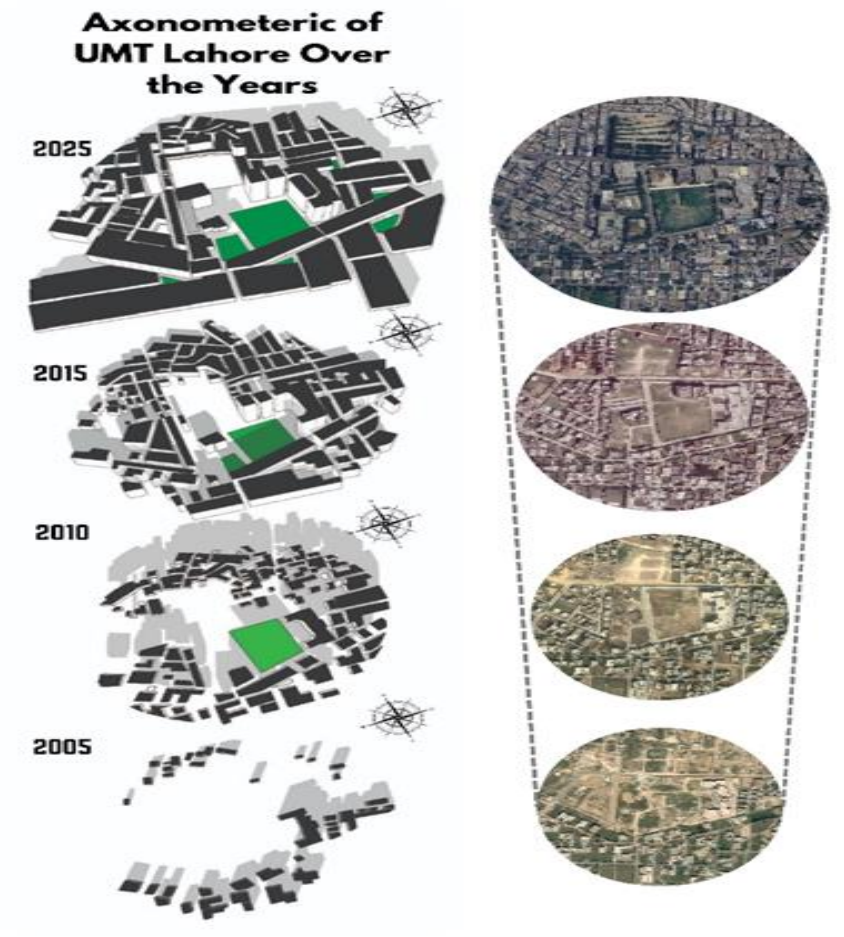
The spatial transformation the University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, between 2005 and 2025 demonstrate a significant rise in the institution's campus area and its effects on the nearby urban environment. In 2005, the campus area of UMT was roughly estimated to be 276, 063 sq.ft based on the analysis of the Google Earth historical imagery. The area had grown to around 2, 209, 635 sq. ft in 2025, a total increase of 1, 933, 572 sq. ft, which is an increase of 700.41%. So, the area that was initially used for the built-up in 2005 was only 12.49% of the whole development seen today, while the remaining 87.51% had been newly developed in the last 20 years.

This incredible physical growth has affected not only the university but also the social surroundings of the area. It has completely changed the residential environment around the university because these changes have caused landlords to convert their vacant or rented property into into student hostels without prior approval from the concerned authorities. This has led to the growth of fast-food outlets and retail shops catering largely to students. As commercial activity increased, areas once used for everyday

walks by people of all ages have become heavily trafficked public spaces in these new neighborhoods. The changes have led to rise of land prices, the eviction of old residents and the social transformation of the area which are the most obvious indicators of gentrification. Residents in informal interview showed concern over institutional spill over into residential neighbourhoods caused by the rapid expansion of student hostels and unregulated commercial conversions. The expansion of the built environment, while reflective of institutional growth, has outpaced planning controls and spatial integration measures.

Figure 4

Growth and Building Footprint



Mental Mapping

To comprehend the spatial requirements, goals, and experiences of important stakeholders at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore, such as students, locals, and surrounding vendors, mental mapping was employed as a qualitative technique. Drawing supplies were provided to participants so they could sketch an enhanced campus environment with an emphasis on interventions that would improve liveability, accessibility, and functionality. Instead of reproducing current conditions, four student-drawn maps were chosen for analysis based on their clarity, applicability, and thorough suggestions for problem-solving.

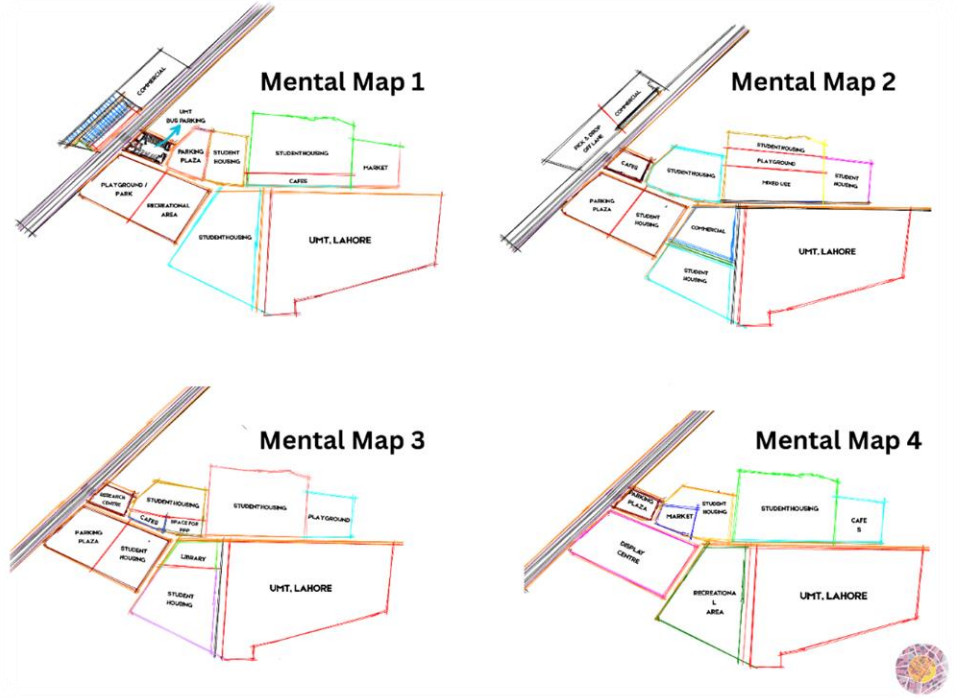
Every plan emphasised how on-street parking and vehicle traffic prevented pedestrianisation. Participants in the interviews suggested green spaces, activity zones, and sidewalks with seats beneath trees for students, particularly those who lived nearby. Underground or submerged electrical wiring was suggested by a student as the currently the poles are hampering the pedestrian flow on the footpaths.

The preference for hostels with shared common areas, pedestrian connections, green courtyards, and proximity to academic buildings over dispersed informal units was another recurrent theme. Several students voiced concerns during interviews regarding the dearth of open spaces that are specifically accessible to them. After more conversation, it was discovered that while there are green spaces in the nearby neighbourhood, hostel students are not allowed to use them. Even a morning walk on the designated tracks is prevented by on-duty guards as a result, the hostel zones which offer no open green areas thus leave students with no accessible open spaces.

Students also suggested adding designated market zones along pedestrian corridors, making everyday essentials like laundry, stationery, groceries, pharmacies, and banking easily accessible without the clutter of informal trade. Beyond convenience, they placed strong emphasis on recreation and community life.

Figure 5

Mental Maps



Traffic Congestion Analysis: Vehicular and Pedestrian Count Survey on UMT Road

To really get at the problem of how UMT Road mobility is affecting people here at the university, a one, week traffic count survey was initiated to measure the pedestrian and vehicular volumes from the main university gate to the PIA Road edge. The observations of the survey looked at two daily blocks: 7:00 AM, 12:00 PM and 12:00 PM, 7:00 PM, with the main objectives of the survey being to identify peak hours and understand spatial pressures from uncontrolled vehicles and high pedestrian activity.

Results indicated that the highest congestion period was from 12:00 PM to 7:00 PM, which coincided with change of shifts, lunch breaks, and student movements to markets and hostels. So on average throughout the day the number of pedestrians was between 1, 000 and 1, 200, motorbikes were 700, 900, private cars between 500 and 600, university buses/vans40,

50 (especially at the main gate), and rickshaw/ride, hailing activities 200, 250.

About 25, 30 vendors who were engaging in informal encroachments on the roadside were blocking the footpaths most of the time, especially during the peak hours, thus pedestrians were forced to walk on the vehicular lanes. The absence of drop, off zones, parking that is structured, and pedestrian corridors have made it worse to have conflicts arisen from vehicles that have stopped arbitrarily and motorbikes that are parked.

Figure 6

Human Congestion Points

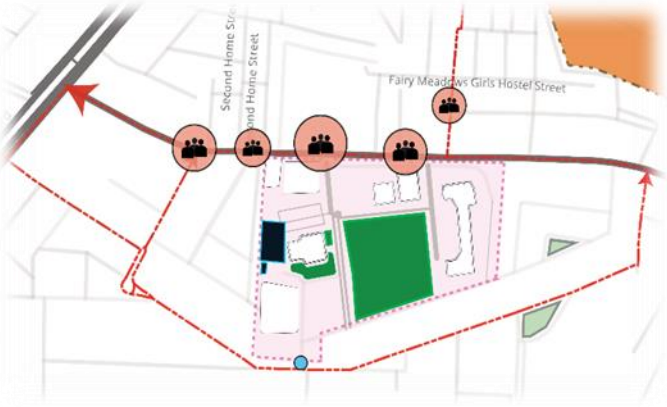
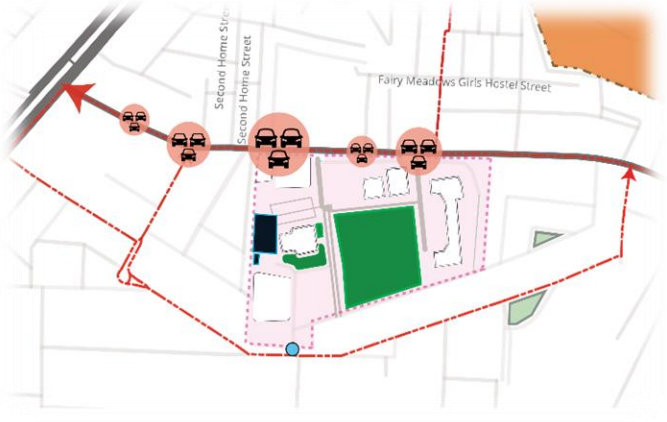


Figure 7

Traffic Congestion Points



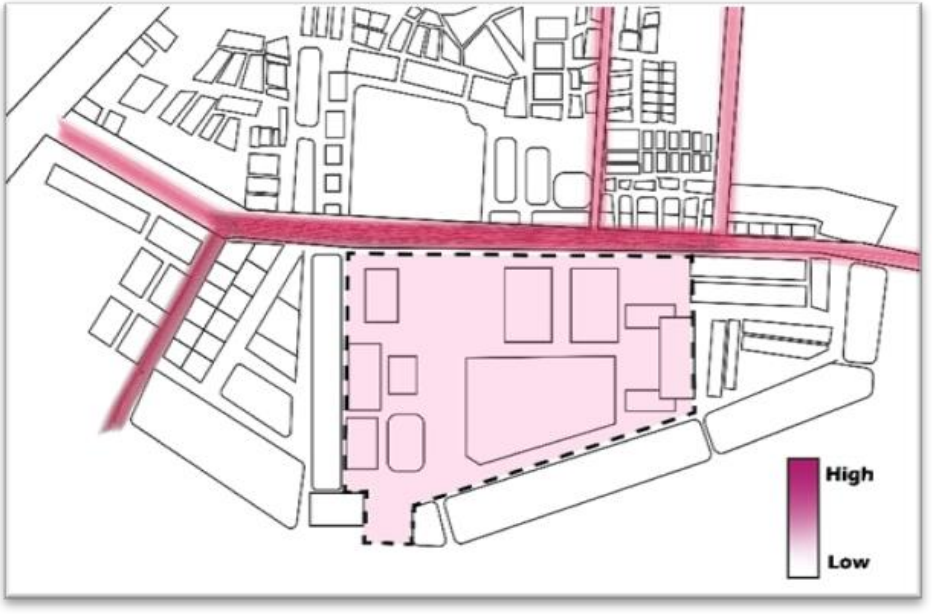
Human Walking Intensity Map

As part of the congestion analysis, human intensity was observed and mapped along UMT Road during peak hours, specifically between 12:00 PM and 7:00 PM. The highest concentration of pedestrian activity was recorded directly in front of the UMT main gate, where movement was continuous due to university entry as shown in figure, commercial activity, and informal vendors. This zone showed the most intense clustering of people throughout the day.

A slow decline in human density with increasing distance from the university was observed especially towards the PIA Road junction and side streets. This variation was envisaged by means of a human density map, based on an intensity scale varying from high (near the gate) to low (outer edges). The mapping helped identify areas of most pressure, reinforcing the need for targeted pedestrian infrastructure, vendor regulation and space for public gathering around the campus entrance.

Figure 8

Walking Intensity Measured by Scale



Photographic and Spatial Survey

An integrated photographic and spatial survey was conducted along UMT Road and the residential and commercial areas to document the onground conditions that exist and assess the spatial changes affecting the study area. The photographic part documented the congestion, informal land use and infrastructural deficiencies as the photos were taken at different locations and times of the day in order to show the daily movement patterns and user behaviour.

The pictures, in fact, brought to light overcrowded corridors, widespread On, street parking, informal vending activities, lack of pedestrian space, and non, existence of any kinds of drop, off or recreational areas. A good number of the pictures also marked out the decaying elements of the public realm and a very obvious lack of green buffers.

Figure 9

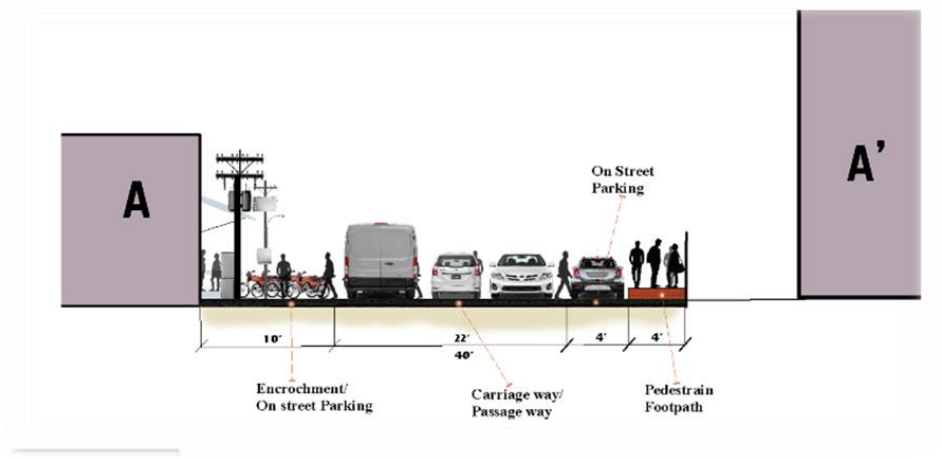
Photographic Survey

The photographic documentation was coupled with two respective sections of UMT Road in order to understand the spatial configuration of a street and the function distribution. Both sections represent a typical 40-foot right of way but are different in the level of spatial inefficiency.

Section A–A' illustrates a very congested corridor. Informal mobile encroachments like motor bikes and rickshaws parked on the road occupy nearly 10 feet of the available width on one side while another 4 feet is taken up by on-streetcar parking on the opposite side of the road. Footpath circulation is affected by electrical poles which reduce the circulation area on each side of the pole to less than 2 feet which is less than the bare minimum required for a single person to pass. Meanwhile, the road itself is reduced to 22 feet, which is insufficient to accommodate mixed and heavy vehicular flow during the peak hours.

Figure 10

Section AA'



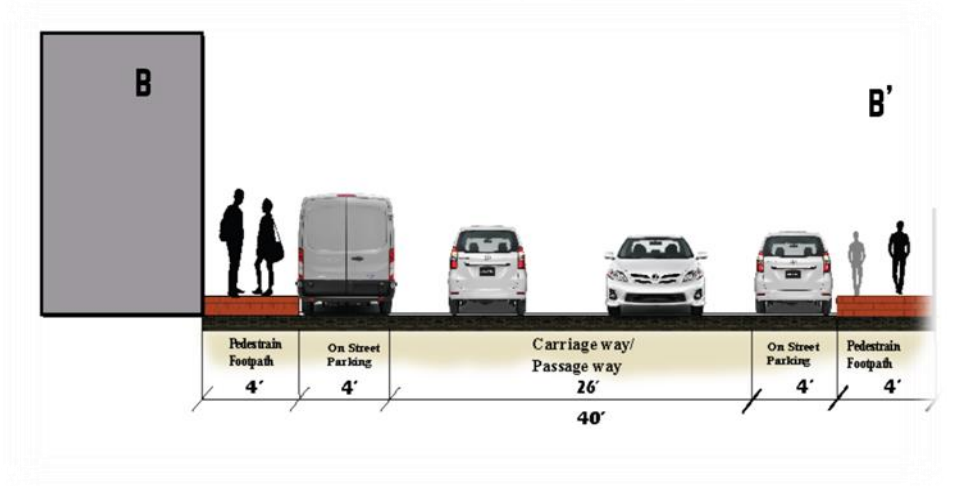
Section B-B' has a more structured layout and has 4-foot pedestrian paths and 4-foot parking strips facing the 24-foot vehicular circulation. However, the narrow sidewalks with no dedicated drop-off zones is often obstructed for months by piles of leftover construction debris and waste and affects the utility and efficiency of the foot paths. on-street parking remains a concern in this zone as well and results in breaking of lanes and disrupting the normal traffic flow.

The cross-sectional analysis and photos show how congested the UMT Road has gotten. Inadequate infrastructure and lack of a distinct street

hierarchy make the road rushy and disorganised. As evident from the section, redesign of the UMT road to facilitate the students and pedestrian should be a priority of the concerned department. Streets where pedestrian comes before the vehicles makes the public space more hospitable and people tend to congregate comfortably

Figure 11

Section BB'



Recommendations

Given the urban changes observed in the area around UMT Lahore, this study emphasises the critical need for a more deliberate and community-centred approach to managing the transformation of education-led urban districts. Unchecked institutional growth may cause the social and spatial fabric of the neighbourhoods to deteriorate, as evidenced by the current trends of unchecked commercialisation, fragmented land use, and traffic congestion surrounding the university (Revington et al., 2023). Placemaking should be deployed as a main criterion of urban planning and governance rather than as an afterthought to overcome these challenges. All Planning stakeholders should work together to integrate placemaking practices into zoning laws, design guidelines, and urban redevelopment plans (Moran et al., 2022).

Stakeholders should be actively involved in the decision-making process when interventions are proposed. Their needs and aspirations should be considered rather than focusing only on the provision of

infrastructure. Introducing some pilot project at neighborhood level like tactical urbanism and participatory charrettes on a small scale offer valuable insight before formal intervention. This will allow planners to test ideas in real conditions, gather stakeholder feedback, assess social and spatial impacts, identify potential conflicts, and refine proposals based on actual community responses rather than assumptions. Not only this, it will also offer valuable insight to possible resistance at various levels. Local communities after experiencing the impact of the pilot project might take ownership of these areas and form a pressure group to persuade the authorities to devote time and allocate resources to implement a full-length intervention as well.

Policy Implications

Pedestrian safety design heavily relies on restricting vehicle access and eliminating on-street parking. Regulated entry points and off-street parking increase pedestrian accessibility without increasing traffic. Small businesses like cafés, bookshops, and student hangouts should be located in the pedestrian zones of mixed-use developments, which will serve as an academic-commercial mixed-use strip.

Reducing displacement and formalising informal economic activity can be achieved by regulating and assisting current vendors through designated zones and reasonably priced permits. In addition, the University's social and environmental character will be strengthened by setting aside a certain amount of land for green and public areas, such as 15–20% of the land for green buffers along commercial edges. When considered collectively, these measures demonstrate a gradual shift from reactive urban control to a more proactive, location-sensitive approach in which policy is used as a tool for balanced growth rather than exclusion.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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