

Are the Colors Fading from Peshawar?

Truck Art and the Changing Face of Public Transport

Shahan Ahmed
PhD Student
Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
August 2026

The [short research documentary](#) accompanying this paper explores the changing truck art industry in Peshawar, highlighting the experiences of the artists whose work has long shaped the city's visual identity.



Conventional buses along a main Peshawar route before the BRT system was introduced. Source: Mashriq TV

I started seeing glimpses of Pakistani truck art far from home, on the streets of New York City, splashed across food carts, tucked into the décor of restaurants, printed on fashion accessories. The go-to Pakistani restaurant around Rutgers, Chai Chenak on George Street in New Brunswick, is covered in it. Everywhere I went from a small tea spot in Sedona, Arizona, to famous eateries in Los Angeles, I found it again and again.

It was all too clear: Pakistani truck art has become a national symbol that the diaspora has embraced.



Truck art inspired interior decoration of Chai Chenak. Photograph by Astha Negi.

Once this realization settled in, I began to notice it everywhere: ads from Pakistan for floor mats, wall hangings, mugs, shirts, sneakers, jackets, home décor, truck art in every possible form circulating across social media and beyond. Writing about this phenomenon, Kazmi & Ghani-ur-Rahman (2021) called it the “cross between mass and folk culture”. Truck art, an authentic, grassroots art form, is being appropriated and commercialized as a mainstream, widely consumed product.

But during my trips back to Pakistan, particularly to the northwestern city of Peshawar, I encountered a stark contrast. This art form, one that many Pakistanis raised in urban areas grew up associating with public transit, seemed to be disappearing from the very spaces that once defined it.

Public transportation in Pakistan has long been dominated by informal transit systems, variously described as paratransit, intermediate public transport, or, more recently, "popular" transport. These networks are typically characterized by their entrepreneurial nature, small-to-medium scale operations, limited standardization, and independent management.

In cities such as Peshawar, public transit has historically been among the most visible and interactive public spaces. The city is also widely regarded as a major center of truck art, with many tracing the movement's distinctive aesthetic and cultural spirit to the region.

The origins of this artistic tradition extend back to the Mughal era, when royal chariots were adorned with elaborate decorations (Ansari & Nawaz, 2024). Over time, this culture of ornamentation expanded to horses, camels, donkeys, and the wooden carts they pulled. With the advent of motorized transport, these decorative practices migrated onto freight trucks and buses, eventually evolving into what is now widely known as Truck Art.

For decades, the buses that carried people across Peshawar and from its rural peripheries were adorned with this vibrant artwork. They were beautiful, but they came with their quirks. A quick head bump into the sharp edge of a thin decorated tin sheet wasn't unusual; neither were ripped clothes from a loose nail or screw holding the panels in place. If you were tall, your hair would often get caught in the chiseled patterns on the ceiling of the buses. Visibility was minimal; the windshield was so crowded with decorative pieces that conductors, leaning half out of the vehicle, would act as the driver's eyes for slow, careful maneuvers in bumper-to-bumper traffic of the rush hours.

Imperfect as they were, these buses were where this art lived, woven into the fabric of the city.

Peshawar has a new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system now. It's positioned as a step toward "modernism": fast, efficient, and aligned with the future envisioned across many Global South cities. But as Peshawar embraces this shift, it also seems to be losing a defining element of its past, the art that once animated its public transit. You can still find it in the rural peripheries and neighboring towns where formal mass transit hasn't taken hold, and on the highways where freight trucks continue the tradition. But on the roads of Peshawar City, it seems to have completely vanished. The construction and freight trucks that enter the city are restricted to late evenings, so unless you're out in the middle of the night, you're unlikely to encounter one of the aesthetic characteristics that once shaped the city's visual identity.

It made me wonder whether truck art is slowly migrating from the rickety buses where it once was lived, shared, touched, bumped into, and collectively experienced, into private homes and

consumer spaces, turning a public cultural expression into a personalized commodity. And it raised a larger question about how transit reforms and “modernization” reshape more than mobility; they reshape culture, industry, and the right to the city.

Whether driven by outright legal bans, fleet modernization, guidelines, or the expansion of formal mass transit, cities across the Global South are experiencing a massive loss of cultural capital. By equating “safe, sustainable and modern” with the blank, uniform, and sterile, authorities do not merely upgrade transit fleets; they police the aesthetics of the streetscape. This “bureaucratic sanitization” effectively silences the visual literature of the working class, accelerating the corporate homogenization of public space.

This loss is manifesting globally through state-led standardization initiatives that systematically dismantle informal transit art. In the Philippines, the Department of Transportation’s Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP) mandated the phased replacement of iconic, traditional jeepneys; highly individualized public transit vehicles originally converted from surplus United States military jeeps after World War II and renowned as moving canvases of urban folk art, with standardized modern buses, effectively phasing out a historic form of urban transit art (Quilantang & Quilantang, 2024). Similarly, in Nairobi, the enforcement of stringent traffic amendments has led to crackdowns on *matatus*, forcing operators to strip custom artwork seen as thuggish from vehicles under the guise of safety (Ashivende and Gachie, 2019).

These transitions are often framed as infrastructural, technical, or managerial upgrades, but they carry deeper implications tied to questions like: Who gets to shape the visual and cultural landscape of a city? Whose aesthetics, relationships with the city and livelihoods survive institutionalization?

I spoke with the painters and decorators, locally known as *body makers* or *fancy body makers*, who once worked on the buses that roamed the streets of Peshawar. In the process, I also decided to try my hand at directing a short research documentary that is the center of this piece.

I interviewed five artists who had worked on the informal transit system before the introduction of the BRT. Three of the five agreed to appear on film. Through an inductive content analysis of these interviews, several recurring themes emerged.

The conversations pointed toward a changing industry grappling with the disappearance of one of its most important canvases. The artists spoke not only about the decline of decorated buses in the city but also about the broader transformations taking place in the economic, cultural, and spatial dimensions of their craft and livelihood.

They pointed towards a broader shift in the political economy of their industry.

Interviews revealed a growing trend of socioeconomic elites commissioning decorated buses for farmhouses, mansions, and private estates, particularly those owned by overseas Pakistanis. These buses are increasingly used as “cultural fixtures”, events or wedding attractions rather than

as public transportation. This demand has contributed to rising prices and accelerated the movement of truck art from the public realm into the private sphere.

This transformation echoes broader processes of commercialization, where a localized, working-class street art turns into a standardized commercial fashion trend (Kazmi & Ghani-ur-Rahman, 2021). What was once a living, mobile expression of everyday urban life is increasingly becoming a commodity to be consumed, displayed, and owned.

In addition to fashion accessories and the commodification of truck art, cultural events organized by institutions like the archaeology department occasionally deploy decorated buses for heritage tours catering to foreign visitors. Similarly, expensive hotels display Vespas adorned in truck art within their luxury lobbies, while high-end restaurants incorporate these vibrant folk motifs into their spaces as static cultural fixtures.



A truck-art adorned tea shop serves as a cultural fixture within a high-end Peshawar restaurant. Photograph by the author

The clientele has also shifted geographically. Today, many vehicles come from regions across Pakistan rather than from Peshawar and its surroundings. While this has helped the artisans sustain a customer base, it also raises questions about whether the distinctive aesthetic traditions of Peshawar are gradually being absorbed into a more homogenized national truck art style. At the same time, the bulk of work now comes from freight and construction trucks, where decoration tends to be less intricate and less personal.

My work on this topic is ongoing. I plan to speak with bus owners who once took a personal interest in the aesthetics of their vehicles and invested considerable thought into the designs they commissioned. Many artists suggested that contemporary work increasingly relies on stock imagery and established templates. Perhaps these are answers I will find when I venture back into this world once more.

Another recurring theme was the consensus among artists regarding the one-directional nature of government-led projects. The prospect of working with the institutions that design, operate, and manage the city's transportation systems is associated with strict instructions and narrowly defined terms of reference. Such work is viewed as commissioned labor rather than an opportunity to exercise creative agency over the cityscape and its changing visual identity. Most saw only a distant possibility of contributing meaningfully to the formal transit system, and even then, only as contractors rather than collaborators. One artist, who preferred not to be recorded on video, reflected:

“This (work) has become just the source of livelihood for us, (and the) thought of being part of the progress of this city takes a back seat.” (Translated from Pashtu)

The artisans also spoke of the geographic exodus of their industry. Workshops that were once located in the urban core have gradually moved toward the city's edge and now largely exist in peripheral areas. The relocation mirrors the changing nature of their work itself, from decorating vehicles that animated the streetscape of the urban center to serving freight transport and peri-urban mobility occurring on the urban fringe.

Many reminisced about earlier times: all-night work sessions fueled by passion, intense competition between artists, and bus owners eager to distinguish themselves through increasingly elaborate designs and a personal identity. Their memories reflected not only nostalgia for a particular craft but also for a social world that once revolved around it.

As I write this, city authorities have commissioned truck art-inspired murals on walls and underpasses across Peshawar. This, coupled with the buses arranged for foreign tourists and truck art used as cultural fixtures, means that the art may still remain visible in Peshawar, but increasingly in curated and institutionalized forms.

The artists I interviewed, however, did not believe that the art itself would disappear from the city where it has long been present. Rather, they saw it as evolving, much as it has before, from decorated horse carts to buses and trucks.



An underpass in Peshawar is adorned with traditional truck art. Source: Peshawar Development Authority (PDA).

Yet as cities continue to "progress," it remains an open question where this art will ultimately find its home. Perhaps it will survive primarily as a tourist attraction. Perhaps it will continue its commodification into mugs, cups, wall hangings, and decorative pieces found in private homes or cultural fixtures in high-end establishments. Perhaps it will persist as murals on walls and underpasses. While some might argue this represents a natural cultural evolution or a form of preservation, stripping the art from its original ecosystem is ultimately what I call "taxidermy of truck art".

As an urban planner and someone who grew up in Peshawar, I find it troubling that it is not finding its way back into what was once its natural home: the public transit system of Peshawar. A space owned, shared, shaped, and curated organically by the people of the city rather than through top-down institutional initiatives.

Transportation infrastructure in Pakistan is often a deeply political project, showpieces through which political parties demonstrate their commitment to development. The visual language of many transit projects reflects this reality, with infrastructure frequently adopting party colors or projecting aspirations of a "world-class city."

Politicians often speak of making Pakistani cities resemble London or Paris. Yet such visions sometimes overlook the legacies of modernization projects there and abroad. Ideas of urban modernity, and the infrastructure and policies that follow them, are never neutral. They reshape cities, redefine whose practices belong in public space, and often come at the cost of just transitions.



A wall in a high-security zone in Peshawar with traditional truck art panels. Photograph by the author

Bio

Shahan Ahmed is a PhD student at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University. His doctoral research examines the interaction between informal and formal transit systems in Peshawar, Pakistan. His broader research interests lie at the intersection of governance and just transitions, with a particular focus on the social and operational dimensions of modernization and institutional reform in the Global South.



Shahan Ahmed

References

- Ansari, A., & Nawaz, M. S. (2024). "Colorful images on Rear Panel" (Truck Art): Truck art in South Asia. *Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies*, 2, 1127–1142.
- Ashivende, I. S., & Gachie, S. (2019). Matatu design culture in Nairobi Kenya: An iconological analysis. *Africa Design Review Journal*.
- Kazmi, S. M., & Ghani-ur-Rahman. (2021). From folk to popular: The evolution and diffusion of truck art in Pakistan into mainstream culture through fashion industry. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 3(1), 66–79. <https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v3i01.188>
- Mashriq TV. (2022, March 25). *Govt orders to clear BRT route from aging buses*. Daily Mashriq. <https://mashriqtv.pk/en/2022/03/25/govt-orders-to-clear-brt-route-from-aging-buses/>
- Peshawar Development Authority. (2025, November 29). *[Beautification work continues at major junctions under the Peshawar Beautification Project, including the Pir Zakori Flyover]* [Facebook post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18gqa9X6C9/>
- Quilantang, R. F. C., & Quilantang, K. N. P. (2024). "Para po! (Stop, Please)": The cultural significance of jeepney decorations in the Philippines in the context of modernisation. *Mobility Humanities*, 3(1), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.23090/MH.2024.01.3.1.009>