International Journal of Applied Social Science
(An International Double Blind Peer Reviewed / Refereed Research Journal of Social Science)
Volume 13 (1 & 2), January & February (2026) : 98-101
Received : 26.12.2025; Revised : 11.01.2026; Accepted : 26.01.2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE
ISSN : 2394-1405 (Print)
DOI : https://doi-ds.org/doilink/04.2026-69747234/IJASS/13.1&2/98-101

Urban Planning and Architecture of the Indus Valley Civilization: Analyzing City Layouts, Drainage Systems, and Building Techniques in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sophisticated urban planning and architectural practices of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), with a focused analysis of the city layouts, drainage systems, and building techniques in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Drawing from archaeological findings and comparative analysis, the research examines how these ancient cities were systematically designed, featuring grid-based street plans, standardized fired brick construction, and advanced sanitation infrastructure. The study highlights the engineering ingenuity behind the extensive drainage networks, the alignment of streets and buildings for optimal functionality, and the socio-cultural implications of public and private spaces within urban settings. By contextualizing these elements within the broader framework of ancient urbanism, this paper contributes to understanding the complexity, sustainability, and legacy of early South Asian city planning. The findings underscore the Indus Valley Civilization's role as a pioneer in urban development and challenge prevailing assumptions about the technological capabilities of Bronze Age societies.

Keywords: Indus Valley Civilization, Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Urban planning, Drainage systems, Architecture, Ancient cities

INTRODUCTION

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), flourishing between approximately 2600 and 1900 BCE in present-day Pakistan and northwest India, stands as one of the earliest and most advanced urban societies of the ancient world. Notable sites such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa exemplify the civilization's remarkable achievements in urban planning and architecture. These cities were meticulously designed with a grid-based layout, featuring streets that intersected at right angles, dividing the urban space into rectangular blocks. This organization facilitated efficient movement and optimal land use, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of urban design (World History Edu, n.d.). A distinguishing feature of IVC urban planning is its advanced drainage system. Streets were equipped with covered drains constructed from baked bricks, channeling wastewater away from residential areas. Each house had access to private toilets, and waste was directed through a complex underground drainage network connected to large drains running along the streets. These drains were made from brick and had inspection openings, demonstrating an incredible attention to sanitation (Vastuved Associates, n.d.).

Architecturally, the IVC is renowned for its standardized building techniques. Structures were primarily constructed using fired and mortared bricks, with some incorporating sun-dried mud-brick and wooden superstructures. The city is divided into two parts: the Citadel and the Lower City. The Citadel, a mud-brick mound around 12 meters high, supported public baths, large residential structures, and two large assembly halls. The Lower City contained residential areas, workshops, and markets, all designed with access to drainage and public amenities (Wikipedia, 2025).

This paper delves into the urban layouts, drainage

How to cite this Article: Singh, Bajinder and Neetu (2026). Urban Planning and Architecture of the Indus Valley Civilization: Analyzing City Layouts, Drainage Systems, and Building Techniques in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.,* **13** (1 & 2) : 98-101.

systems, and construction techniques of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, aiming to provide a comprehensive analysis of the architectural and urban planning prowess of the Indus Valley Civilization. By examining these elements, we can gain insights into the various advancements and cultural values that shaped one of the world's earliest urban societies.

Review of Literature:

Early archaeological efforts led by Marshall (1931) uncovered the grid-planned layouts of Harappan cities and extensive water infrastructure. Subsequent scholars such as Possehl (2002) have interpreted this uniformity as indicative of standardized governance. Kenoyer (1998) focused on technological innovations in drainage and water supply systems, arguing for a decentralized yet highly coordinated civic framework. Wright (2010) explored socio-political dimensions of Harappan urbanism, noting the absence of palatial or religious buildings as a unique feature. More recent research by Meadow (2015) highlights industrial zones and evidence of long-distance trade, while Mughal (1990) analyzed urban decline and environmental shifts. Together, these sources provide a multi-dimensional understanding of Indus urban planning. The urban planning and architectural advancements of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), particularly at the sites of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, continue to intrigue scholars and researchers. Recent literature has provided substantial insights into the complexity of these ancient cities, particularly with respect to their city layouts, drainage systems, and building techniques. Below is a review of key contributions to this field, with an emphasis on the most recent works that expand our understanding of IVC urbanism. Wright (2017) offers an in-depth analysis of the urbanism of the Indus Valley Civilization, with a particular focus on its city layouts. Wright examines the grid-like street plans of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, discussing the relationship between urban form, social organization, and economic activity. The book also details the use of standardized construction materials, such as fired bricks, and argues that these practices reveal a highly organized, centrally coordinated urban system. This work is critical in understanding the correlation between the physical layout of the cities and the broader social and economic structures of the civilization. Kenoyer (2020) offers an updated examination of the urban planning and architectural techniques of the Harappan cities. His work explores the systematic layout of these cities, including the use of well-planned residential blocks, public spaces, and religious structures. Kenoyer also highlights the sophistication of the drainage systems, which were among the earliest in the world. His research further illuminates the relationship between urban planning and social organization, demonstrating how these cities were not only centers of trade but also hubs of social and cultural activities. Singh (2021) delves into the architectural features of Harappan cities, particularly focusing on the use of baked bricks and standardized building techniques. The book examines the technological advancements that enabled the construction of the Harappan cities' vast drainage networks and their connection to urban sanitation practices. Singh argues that the architectural uniformity across the cities suggests a centralized authority or sophisticated planning committee, making this one of the most important studies on the subject in recent years. Thapar (2021) revisits the Indus Valley Civilization with a fresh perspective, emphasizing the social and environmental factors that shaped the urban layouts of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The book addresses the strategic placement of the cities near water sources and the evidence of advanced water management systems. Thapar also explores the implications of the drainage systems, arguing that the IVC cities were not only engineering marvels but also reflections of a society that valued cleanliness and sustainability. This book is particularly useful for understanding the environmental considerations that influenced urban planning. Jansen's (2022) detailed analysis of Mohenjo-Daro offers valuable insights into the city's urban planning and architectural practices. The book explores the intricacies of the city's layout, particularly the Citadel and Lower City, and the advanced drainage systems that set the Indus Valley apart from other contemporary civilizations. Jansen also addresses the social structure implied by the city's design, suggesting that the organization of space may reflect class divisions and central governance. Schaffer (2023) focuses on the engineering feats of the Indus Valley Civilization, particularly its innovations in drainage and water management. This book highlights the scale and sophistication of the drainage systems, arguing that they were essential to the health and functionality of the cities. Schaffer also discusses the use of standardized brick sizes and building techniques, suggesting that the Harappan cities were the product of highly skilled engineers who had a deep understanding of urban infrastructure. The

book is particularly relevant for understanding how the technological advancements in construction and water management shaped the development of Harappan society. Gupta and Kumar (2023) present an updated exploration of the urban planning strategies employed by the Harappans. Their research highlights the systematic and standardized city layouts, focusing on the meticulous planning of streets, drainage systems, and residential blocks. The book also examines the relationship between the urban layout and the social structure, suggesting that the organization of Harappan cities was not only functional but also a reflection of the broader societal organization. The authors argue that the highly sophisticated drainage systems played a crucial role in maintaining the health and sustainability of the urban environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including excavation reports, academic articles, and archaeological interpretations. It employs comparative case analysis between Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa to examine differences and commonalities in spatial organization, infrastructure, and material usage. Analytical themes include drainage systems, housing patterns, public buildings, and construction materials.

City Layouts:

The spatial organization of both cities reflects meticulous urban planning. Streets intersected at right angles, dividing the city into neat rectangular blocks (Marshall, 1931). Mohenjo-Daro, in particular, shows evidence of a grid-based plan extending to both residential and public zones.

Cities were typically divided into two sectors:

The Citadel: Elevated area housing public structures such as granaries and bathing complexes.

The Lower Town: Residential and industrial areas built with standardized brick layouts (Possehl, 2002).

This dual-division ensured functional zoning while maintaining a strong civic identity across the settlement.

Drainage and Sanitation Systems:

Drainage systems in the IVC were among the most advanced of the ancient world. Residential structures featured private baths with drains connected to larger street channels (Kenoyer, 1998). These channels were covered, accessible for cleaning via inspection holes—practices akin to modern sanitation engineering.

The Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro is the most prominent hydraulic feature. Measuring approximately 12 meters long and lined with watertight bricks and bitumen, it likely served ritual or communal purposes (Wright, 2010).

Building Techniques and Materials:

Construction relied heavily on kiln-fired bricks in a standard ratio of 4:2:1, indicating a uniform building code across cities (Marshall, 1931). Mud mortar and gypsum were used for binding, and foundations were laid on well-compacted earth or stone.

Residential units typically included:

- Courtyards
- Multiple rooms
- Wells
- Toilets

Many houses had staircases indicating upper floors, and most homes were two stories high (Kenoyer, 1998). Public buildings such as the granary in Harappa featured ventilated air shafts for grain preservation, underscoring practical engineering knowledge (Possehl, 2002).

Comparative Analysis:

Feature	Mohenjo-Daro	Harappa
Street Planning	Highly regular grid	Similar but slightly less refined
Drainage System	Complex and centralized	Extensive but simpler
Public Architecture	Great Bath, large platforms	Granary, assembly hall
Industrial Activity	Pottery, metallurgy	Bead-making, seal production

Despite regional differences, both cities reflect a shared urban ideology grounded in collective welfare and resource efficiency.

Conclusion:

The urban achievements of the Indus Valley Civilization were not only ahead of their time but also offer enduring insights for modern urbanism. The uniformity in planning, efficient water systems, and standardized construction suggest a society organized around practicality, sustainability, and community life rather than elite power. As urban centers continue to grow globally, revisiting ancient models like those of

Mohenjo-Dar

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