SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES
ISSN Online: 3006-4708
ISSN Print: 3006-4694
https://policyjournalofms.com

Commercial Centrality in Islamabad: A Data-Driven Evaluation of Blue Area as the City's Functional Downtown

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1004

Abstract

Islamabad's rapid spatial expansion over the past two decades has produced a series of emerging commercial and mixed-use clusters, prompting renewed debate over the location and function of the city's true downtown. While several peripheral developments have adopted downtown-oriented branding, the question of whether these areas exhibit the empirical characteristics of a central business district (CBD) remains unresolved. Drawing on a multi-year dataset of commercial property valuations (2018–2024), locality-level price-per-square-foot trends, index trajectories, and short-term market momentum indicators, this study evaluates whether Blue Area and its planned extension, the New Blue Area, continue to constitute the functional commercial core of Islamabad. Using comparative case analysis, the findings demonstrate that Blue Area consistently records the highest land-value density, greatest long-run appreciation, strongest short-term growth, and the most stable commercial performance among all examined districts. These trends align with globally recognized features of CBDs, including agglomeration economies, vertical development, institutional clustering, and transit centrality. Peripheral localities, by contrast, display value patterns associated primarily with residential-led expansion rather than metropolitan commercial centrality. The study concludes that Blue Area remains Islamabad's de facto downtown, both theoretically and empirically, and that policy emphasis on vertical densification within the central corridor is consistent with observed market dynamics. The research contributes to the understanding of commercial hierarchy in planned capitals and offers evidence-based insights for urban development policy in Islamabad.

Introduction

The 1960 master plan of Islamabad aimed to create a low density, sectoral urban layout and did not specifically assign an official CBD. channels ran counter, business was scattered in local markets and federal administrative offices were gathered elsewhere (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics [PIDE], 2021). This spatial rationale derived from an early assumption of a staged evolution of population growth; expectations were significantly contradicted by Islamabad's demographic trajectory. As of the early 2020s, its population had grown to over two million people and with-it higher demand for housing, as well as services, and commercial infrastructures (PIDE, 2021). In the course of time this demographic pressure led to extensive lateral sprawl. Previous remote sensing work has found that Islamabad's built-up area expanded from about 58 km² in year 2000 to a nearly 256 km² by the year of 2020, reflecting more than four times growth in urbanized land over past two decades (Ahsan et al., 2022; Iqbal & Ullah,2017). A

swath of this expansion has occurred along the city's southern and southeastern growth axis, as ambitious residential development has culminated in the creation of mixed-use commercial corridors. Increasingly, these periphery districts describe themselves as budding economic areas in the metropolis – they may even call such emergent commercial footprints "centres or downtowns".

For the purposes of urban economic theory, a CBD is an intensive concentration of commercial use at the core of a city, often characterised by clustering of financial institutions, headquarters in corporate towers, large department stores and high-rise development (Pacione 2009). These are districts that have the most desirable locations and attract the highest land values, as well as producing agglomeration economies to a greater degree than any others because of their centrality and accessibility. These are attributes which fit with the monocentric city model, in that commercial value and development intensity peak at the centre of a city and diminish with increasing distances from this core (O'Sullivan 2012). In Islamabad, the area commonly known as Blue Area along Jinnah Avenue is the closest functional analogue to a CBD. While the original Doxiadis plan only conceptualised a mid-rise, mixed-used commercial strip (PIDE, 2021), Blue Area has naturally transformed into the city's main commercial artery. It is now home to many large businesses, including the headquarters of several international firms and governmental organizations as well as several high-rise corporate towers (Chakor Ventures, 2024a). Its value densification, strategic location and economic agglomeration make it the most dominant urban commercial area in Islamabad. At the same time, the growing presence of various outlying commercial nodes along the south corridor and foothill regions have also come to play a significant role in recent years. These neighbourhoods are mainly the result of urban expansion driven by residential use, they provide services for local commerce, offices and local commercial establishments. Increased prominence has led some to cast themselves as the potential "downtown" rival. Public sector discourse has occasionally reinforced this ambiguity; for example, the CDA referred to new mixed-use plans as "blue area-x d business hubs" (Dawn, 2024a). Nonetheless, such narratives pose crucial questions regarding how commercial centrality is perceived and gauged within a newly emerging planned capital. Concurrently, government policy has begun shifting toward vertical urban development as a strategy to contain lateral sprawl. A recent master-plan review emphasized the urgency of "building high-rises to address the lateral spread of the capital city," marking a deliberate turn toward densification of the established core (Dawn, 2024b). This policy direction reinforces the strategic significance of the Blue Area corridor, along with its planned extension, referred to as the New Blue Area, as the axis most suitable for sustained commercial intensification consistent with CBD theory. In this context, the current paper examines whether the traditional commercial spine of Islamabad remains de facto downtown in both theoretical and empirical senses. Comparison of the performance of Blue Area and its urban extension versus that of peripheral commercial clusters is carried out based on long-term commercial-estate data, price-per-square-foot trajectory, and market index indicators. The study challenges the proposition that Blue Area maintains the characteristic traits of a CBD high valued density, depth in markets and adaptability, while developing peripheral nodes exhibiting localized commercial activity influenced by predominantly residential expansion.

Accordingly, the study pursues three core objectives:

1. To map Islamabad's commercial geography by comparing land values, development intensity, and market behaviour across central and peripheral commercial zones.
2. To evaluate the commercial centrality of Blue Area by examining whether its empirical characteristics align with established definitions of a CBD.

3. To assess competing "downtown" narratives by determining the extent to which emerging peripheral commercial clusters exhibit attributes consistent with metropolitan-scale commercial cores.

These objectives frame the following research questions:

1. What are the spatial distributions of commercial real estate values and growth rates across Islamabad's commercial districts?
2. Does Blue Area, including its planned extension, exhibit value density and agglomeration patterns consistent with CBD theory?
3. Do empirical data support the emerging perception that peripheral mixed-use districts may serve as alternative downtowns?

By aiming to answer these questions, the research contributes toward a more nuanced understanding of Islamabad's changing commercial hierarchy and offers policy recommendations considering empirical evidence for every stakeholder involved in planning and determining the future course of the city.

Literature Review

The spatial organization of commercial activity in urban environments has long been examined through the lens of central business district (CBD) theory. Classical urban economic models describe the CBD as the highest-intensity commercial node, where land values peak due to agglomeration economies, accessibility advantages, and concentration of employment and services (O'Sullivan, 2012). A defining characteristic of CBDs is their capacity to generate competitive pressures for land, resulting in vertical development, dense office clustering, and the aggregation of financial and corporate institutions. In global urban studies generally, CBD and downtown are commonly conflated. McDonald 2007), who writes that the CBD is often also known as the 'downtown", highlighting that this part of a city forms its conventional commercial heartland. Likewise, Knox and McCarthy (2012) describe downtown as the city's major concentration of high-density offices, financial institutions as well as retail activity equivalent to CBD. Authors such as Harvey (1973) and Hall (2002) support the same condition when stating that downtown is (North American term, Central Business District - CBD), at one and the same time, both the economic as well as being the symbolic heart of the city. These are theoretical ideas crucial to understanding the commercial stratification of Islamabad, for determining which is the working downtown requires comparing those districts that most nearly assume the functional characteristics of a CBD.

Apart from definitional clarification, agglomeration economies research has revealed the mechanisms that drive the dominance of CBDs. Fujita and Thisse (2013) posit that clustering creates increasing returns to scale through common infrastructure, learning spillovers, and Labor market pooling. Glaeser (2011) argues that density boosts productivity by simplifying face-to-face interactions and providing institutional proximity, features that still underpin high-value economic activity within core areas of cities across a wide range of spatial scales even as urbanism spreads. Comparative studies of planned cities suggest that in some cases planned capitals like Washington, Canberra and Abuja inevitably develop along functional lines of activity to become linear commercial corridors that evolve into functional CBDs despite initial sectoral planning (Madanipour 2017). South Asian metropolitan growth complicates this further. In these elevated urban hierarchy, the CBD of cities like New Delhi, Dhaka, Colombo etc. have tended to grow as corridor type CBDs due to transportation connectivity, state-controlled zoning and clustering of high value commercial functions (Shaw & Sathe1 2020). The emergence of secondary commercial clusters on city peripheries is often associated with residential expansion rather than metropolitan-scale economic restructuring. These dynamic parallels Islamabad's development

trajectory, where outward expansion has led to new mixed-use clusters that support local demand but do not necessarily function as competing CBDs. Islamabad specific literature highlights that minimal high-density development in the core and its consequent impact on urban sprawl is one of such pressures. Ahsan et al. (2022) observe a significant peripheral growth over the last twenty years, due to housing shortage and low vertical development in the central sectors, despite construction regulations. PIDE (2021) also points towards restrictive regulations, inflexible land-use and disjointed commercial zoning as contributors to the horizontal expansion of Islamabad. The literature recommends focused densification policies and vertical growth along designated corridors to halt peripheral sprawl and promote central commercial activity (Imran & Niazi, 2020). Finally, literature on place branding provides insight into why emerging urban development's often market themselves as "downtowns" despite lacking the structural characteristics of a CBD. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) describe such branding practices as "manufactured urban identities," shaped by competitive real estate dynamics rather than empirical indicators of centrality. This distinction between narrative positioning and functional urban structure is directly relevant to contemporary debates in Islamabad, where several peripheral developments employ downtown-oriented branding despite their location and market orientation. Taken together, there is a strong theoretical basis in previous literature that could be used to measure the commercial hierarchy of Islamabad. The interchangeability of CBD and downtown as terms, the definitional criteria for identifying what is a CBD, and patterns across regions of corridor generated commercial clustering provide analytical tools to determine if Islamabad's Blue Area, or its future extension bears on whether it is still functioning as the city's true downtown in light of advancing peri-urban development.

Methodology

Drawing upon a comparative quantitative-method research design, this article asks whether Blue Area (and its planned expansion area, the 'New Blue Area') retains its status as Islamabad's de facto central business district (CBD) amid an evolving urban periphery. The method has its origins in classical urban economics and spatial analysis where longitudinal market data with cross-sectional comparisons were used to extrapolate the economic significance of various urban qualities (O'Sullivan, 2012; McDonald, 2007). Building on methodological recommendations for case-based urban studies, the research utilizes a multi-case analytical approach to compare Islamabad's historic central business district and its newer peripheral neighbourhoods (Yin, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The selection of cases follows purposive and criterion-driven logic. Blue Area is included based on its historically recognized role as Islamabad's primary commercial corridor and its structural position within the 1960 master plan. Its extension, the New Blue Area, is incorporated because of its proximity, functional continuity, and planned regulatory alignment with the CDA's vision for vertical expansion in the capital. Peripheral localities included in the analysis are those that have become prominent in public discourse, marketing narratives, and policy discussions as potential new commercial zones. Their selection is justified not by qualitative judgment but by their documented presence in market reporting, real-estate indices, and media discussions that frequently portray them as active or emerging commercial centres. Comparative case selection of this type aligns with widely accepted methodological standards for evaluating competing spatial hypotheses in urban research (Ragin, 1987; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The empirical component relies on publicly accessible uniform and single source, secondary data obtained from Zameen.com, provided the availability of systematically organized indicators including average plot prices, price-per-square-foot series, and locality-level real estate indices for major areas of Islamabad. These datasets have been increasingly recognized in academic research and policy analysis as reliable proxies for tracking market dynamics, particularly in contexts where official

transaction-level data are not publicly available (Rafay & Alam, 2021; PIDE, 2021). In this study, information from Blue Area, New Blue Area, Gulberg and Park View City were used to construct multi-year longitudinal trends (2018–2024) and short-term change indicators. The incorporation of peripheral areas allows for empirical contrasts between the established urban core of Islamabad and those parts that came to be associated with outward residential and mixed-use growth. Analysis methods Descriptive longitudinal analysis is performed using comparative indices. The annual price per square foot trends are calculated to consider the long-run appreciation behaviour and then quarterly, yearly percentage changes represent the near-term market momentum and speculation. The relative performance among localities is measured using index values after normalizing each area to the same reference. This combination of trend comprehension, index-referenced comparison and momentum analysis aligns with urban-market quantitative approaches devoted to examining spatial centrality and commercial primacy (Einav et al., 2016; Koster & van Ommeren, 2021). Comparative readings emphasise whether Blue Area exhibits the empirical signs of CBDs, formative and persistent value intensity in land markets, market adaptability and consistent upwards price predominantly: upward direction of price dynamics relative to its peripheries (Chakor Ventures, 2024b). To improve their validity and reliability, all the indicators were cross-checked to verify internal consistency for different periods of time as well as consistency between indexes movements and price variations. Several types of triangulations have been used (methodological -across trend, index and momentum measures-; data triangulation through cross-collation with policy documents, planning reports, media). These are approaches that both conform with best practices for enhancing construct validity in case-based urban research (Yin, 2018). The research follows ethical standards as they apply to secondary data analysis. All data utilised are publicly available and non-identifiable. Comparison across areas purely for academic reasons and not to denigrate or downplay or promote any developer, project or commercial organisation. The peripheral scenes are motivated by its popularity, rather than market-based activity and all the comparison is framed in a neutral manner of data analysis. The analysis excludes normative language; it instead adheres to academic practices that separate empirical comparison from reputational judgement (Bierer et al., 2024). The study operates within the typical boundaries of urban market research, relying on publicly available valuation data and spatial indicators to assess commercial patterns. Its focus on Islamabad's principal commercial zones is appropriate for examining questions of centrality and downtown formation. The findings are therefore intended to offer descriptive and comparative insights rather than predictive or causal claims.

Results and Analysis

Overview of Analytical Approach

Having established the methodological foundations in the preceding section, this chapter now turns to the empirical findings and explores what they reveal about the way Islamabad's commercial landscape is taking shape. Drawing on multi-year property value trends, short-term market movements, and comparisons across major commercial and mixed-use localities, the analysis examines how different parts of the city are evolving. Islamabad has grown rapidly over the past decade, and new commercial areas have appeared along its expanding edges. The key question, however, is whether these emerging zones are reshaping the city's commercial hierarchy or whether Blue Area continues to anchor Islamabad's economic activity. The evidence suggests that Blue Area, along with its planned extension in the New Blue Area, remains the strongest performer across multiple market indicators and continues to benefit from a centrality shaped by both historical planning decisions and its long-standing commercial role. Rather than indicating direct competition between localities, the findings point to a complementary urban pattern in which

peripheral areas support the city's outward growth, while Blue Area continues to function as the metropolitan core.

Longitudinal Value Trends (2018–2024)

Area	Item	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Blue Area	Avg Price (Crore)	117	126	135	148	178	244	346
	Price/Sq. Ft (Thousand)	130	140	150	164	202	271	385
	Index	127	137	146	160	194	247	377
Gulberg	Avg Price (Crore)	9.27	10.55	12.52	15.77	20.64	23.44	24.3
	Price/Sq. Ft (Thousand)	21.17	24.07	28.58	35.99	47.12	53.51	55.4
	Index	130	147	175	221	289	328	340
Park View City	Avg Price (Crore)	3.89	4.07	4.65	5.45	5.7	7.22	11.7
	Price/Sq. Ft (Thousand)	20.5	21.46	24.55	28.77	30.08	38.06	61.9
	Index	94	98	112	132	138	174	284

To understand how the commercial geography of Islamabad has transformed over time, multi-year valuation trends were examined for Blue Area, Gulberg, and Park View City. These reflect structural shifts, long-term investor confidence, and the evolution of commercial demand.

Table 1: Multi-Year Change in Commercial Property Value (2018–2024)

1. Blue Area's price per sq. ft rises from 130k to 385k (+196%), representing a sustained, compounding growth trajectory that is unmatched by any suburban or peripheral area.
2. The Blue Area index nearly triples, reflecting unmatched investor confidence and a mature commercial ecosystem that consistently enhances land value.
3. Gulberg and Park View City, though rising, show suburban expansion patterns, not the high-density, high-value commercial escalation characteristic of metropolitan downtowns.
4. Gulberg's total volume gains reflect horizontal expansion rather than vertical commercial consolidation.
5. Park View City's uptick accelerates with residential demand and developmental announcements, not commercial core strength.

Thus, while peripheral areas grow due to Islamabad's outward expansion, only Blue Area demonstrates the valuation pattern of a true, high-density, metropolitan downtown.

Short-Term Market Movements: Reading Momentum and Stability

If long-term growth reflects structural centrality, short-term changes reflect *market sentiment* and *real-time investor confidence*. The data shows a striking contrast among the areas.

Table 2: Relative Increases in Short- and Medium-Term Periods

Area	Increase Since 2015/2018	6 Months	1 Year	2 Years
Blue Area	277%	22%	52%	102%
New Blue Area	48% (Since 2020)	4%	15%	48%
Gulberg	197%	-8%	-14%	-15%
Park View City	167% (Since 2018)	6%	39%	93%

1. Blue Area shows the strongest positive momentum, with a 22% increase in only six months. Such rapid positive movement in a mature commercial locality indicates very high liquidity and demand pressure.
2. New Blue Area's positive but modest short-term growth reflects early-stage consolidation, like early phases of Blue Area in earlier decades.

3. Gulberg shows negative growth across all short-term horizons, reflecting market correction after speculative inflations.
4. Park View City's gains are strong but rooted in residential demand, not commercial density.

Overall, the data reveals that while peripheral zones fluctuate with market cycles and speculation, Blue Area remains the most stable, resilient, and upward-moving commercial zone in Islamabad, both in absolute and relative terms.

Present-Day Comparative Snapshot

To contextualize the 2024 landscape, contemporary high-value blocks were compared based on price, density, and index.

Table 3: Change in Value of Key Commercial Areas (2024)

Area	Price (Crore)	Price/Sq. Ft	3-Month	1-Year	Index
Gulberg Civic Centre	25.23	90k	3%	-4%	172
Blue Area – Block C	45.14	500k	15%	63%	558
Park View Downtown	14.46	81k	6%	26%	123

Blue Area Block C alone demonstrates:

- Price per sq. ft nearly six times that of Gulberg and Park View.
- Fifteen percent gain in the last quarter, indicating aggressive market confidence.
- Highest index (558) among all commercial areas in Islamabad.

This is classic urban economics: when a locality commands the highest value per sq. ft, it is not merely a commercial centre; it is the city's central business district (CBD).

Discussion: Interpreting the Urban Geography - Why Blue Area Qualifies as Downtown

To determine the legitimacy of a "downtown," urban scholarship identifies several criteria:

Criterion	Islamabad's Reality
Historical Centrality	Only Blue Area has served as the city's nucleus since its inception.
Corporate Density	National and multinational headquarters are clustered in Blue Area.
Administrative Presence	Ministries, government directorates, and major agencies surround it.
Highest Land Value	Consistently highest prices per sq. ft across decades.
Transit Centrality	Metro corridors, widest commercial boulevards, and traffic convergence meet here.
Vertical Expansion	Blue Area leads in high-rise activity and zoning for vertical commercial growth.

The preliminary estimate and growth pattern of Blue Area Block C stands out substantially from other commercial sectors being analysed. At a price of approximately Rs500,000 per square foot, it is six times more valuable than what the market has observed in comparative scenario. This gap is more than statistical, denoting a different market structure. This level of high-price density is typical in mature central business districts the world over where a combination of land scarcity, institutional concentration and locational centrality has placed upward pressure on commercial property prices. In addition to its exceptionally high valuation, Blue Area Block C has recorded a 15 percent increase in just the last quarter, reflecting heightened investor activity, consistent demand from end-users, and strong transactional liquidity. Short-term appreciation of this magnitude, occurring within an already high-value zone, signals a market that is not merely active

but deeply confident in the locality's future economic significance. Furthermore, block c also has the highest index in Islamabad, for peripheral commercial corridors with an index value of 558. The index represents a compound of appreciation, stability in growth and the extent of commercial engagement within the area. An index of this magnitude suggests a market that witnesses not just occasional inflows of cash but continued and structurally based growth. The region of highest value per square inch, (and higher appreciation rates and liquidity), also has the strongest "reach" to people who are willing to pay and pay capital which becomes revenue; we simply call that the city centre, or CBD. By these internationally benchmarked measures like those seen in midtown Manhattan, Dubai's DIFC, London's City and Kuala Lumpur's KLCC, Blue Area; Block C represents the classic features of a bona fide CBD. It doesn't compete in Islamabad's market; it is the benchmark against which all other commercial locations are gauged.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate if Islamabad's Blue Area and planned expansion the New Blue Area still operate as the actual downtown of the city in such expanding cosmopolitan setting. Using multi-year commercial property value information, like-for-like price per square foot rankings, index performance and short-term momentum terms the investigation delivers unambiguous and consistent empirical proof of Blue Area's key role in Islamabad's commercial marketplace. And on all the measures dusted, from pure density to long run appreciation; short term market momentum to index volatility Blue Area is on a level of commercial intensity and structural stability not matched by other parts in this city's ever rolling urban development ball. Results verify that Blue Area still has the empirical traits of central business districts in some literatures about world cities, including continuous high land values, strong agglomeration forces, intensive agglomerations of corporate and institutional functions as well as top-ranking transit and infrastructural centrality. Its high psf cost of space values, far ahead of the emerging peripheral commercial clusters, are not just a function of its established economic ecosystem but also from demand pressures that typify metropolitan-scale downtowns. Even the yet-to-develop New Blue Area has value paths closely following an extension of this nucleus, in line with government strategy to push vertical growth and concentration of commercial activities along central axis. In the case of peripheral mixed-use developments, expansion has been dominated by residential development like luxury apartment and condominium complex (Chakor Ventures, 2024c), and property valuations, density characteristics and market stability have not proven to demonstrate the same patterns found in urban cores (Eraut & Hughes, 1993). Their appreciation patterns are instead symptomatic of suburban commercial development, not the high-value and high-liquidity processes that characterize central business districts. Crucially, this is not to suggest that these peripheries are not central to the broader urban economy of Islamabad. Instead, it translates them into spatial and functional hierarchies that correspond to the evidence of history rather than the rhetoric of history. In general, the findings confirm that Blue Area still represents the leading commercial downtown and is comparatively more in line with theoretical and empirical properties of a real downtown. While Islamabad sprawls outward, the study flips focus on to strategic densification, vertical growth and restructuring of infrastructure in the central corridor to support metropolitan efficiency and contain horizontal displacement. Future studies could be improved with use of transaction level data, stakeholders' interviews or spatial simulation models to understand the commercial dynamics in Islamabad's changing urban landscape better.

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