

Lake works take the flak

DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

LAKES in Dhaka City have been in the news over the past several years for always the wrong reasons: land creation, encroachment, dead fish, pollution, and development works incongruous with the environment. Slums, shops and sewerage too have seen to the destruction of the water bodies and open parklands.

There was gradual and deceitful plunder of Gulshan and Baridhara Lake. Only after fifteen stories of a building were built did a building in the middle of a lake make news. Photographs, interviews, TV crew, letters to the editor... and then silence, until the building added a few more stories. Then there were bad stories and better photographs in the newspapers. Later there was another silence until another building shot up in the middle of the lake.

Dhanmandi Lake the first water-body in Dhaka around which a residential area was designed and built was handed over to the entire nation as a place of entertainment and recreation without the permission of the Dhanmandi residents, who (let us not forget) had to pay premium price because of the existence of the lake.

Lake-facing houses were overnight facing a house that sprouted from nowhere. For them the lake, or whatever existed of the meandering trail of water, was now gone. They had paid a hefty price for the land and the location for naught. Suddenly they have new neighbours whom they detest.

There are two features common among the lakes of Dhaka. Firstly, they are all under attack, alarmingly almost simultaneously. Only the mode of obliteration is different. The second common factor is that residents of the lake areas are united in their

resolve to resist any further deterioration of the environment.

Architect Dr. Shayer Ghafur today talks fervently about Kahn's Crescent Lake, which is unique in that it is not built to a housing area. That also could be the sole reason why the lake has been able to maintain its primary crescent despite the land gobbling elsewhere. The demarcation executed by brick also lends a helping hand.

The residents of Dhanmandi, Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara all having lakes have declared their disapproval of a government suggestion that residential areas could be declared semi-commercial areas, (DS January 2003); that to many would appear as institutionalising the reality. Today, we also present to the readers the view of *Dhanmandi Poribesh Unnayan Jote* (Dhanmandi Environmental Protection Coalition). In fact, the news release is an ardent appeal to the Honourable Minister to save a residential area from further ruin, a view, according to the *Jote*, the minister himself holds. The stance of the Dhanmandi residents should help the government decide how best to serve the people of residential areas. An elected democratic government does not opt for any other alternative.

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Crescent Lake: Third face of land grabbing

DR. SHAYER GHAFUR

LAND grabbing denotes forceful/illegal occupation of public land. This article reveals the third face of land grabbing, one that has been taking place under active or passive state support. The recent start of construction of a bridge over the Crescent Lake, at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Capital Complex - Architect Louis I. Kahn's magnum opus, leads us to believe that destruction of valued public places occurs due to state intervention, for alleged beautification or conveniences. What disturbs us most is our feeling of a development of an unholy 'client-patron' relationship. In this instance, the roles of the concerned quarters call for non-partisan public scrutiny for none other than to uphold their professional integrity. Design approval of public spaces of national importance is too big a task to be left only to a select group of designers, public servants and politicians. Greater procedural transparency is required to ensure meaningful civic involvement to safeguard the public interest. A brief introduction to the other faces of land grabbing would give us next a necessary background to start arguing in defense of these contentious views.

The media and civic protests have made us aware of the first two faces of land grabbing, taking place under individual and corporate involvement. An individual, rich or poor, illegally occupies a piece of land besides a road or lake, for example, for construction of a shop or house. In the process, the individual perpetrator may or may not manipulate public authorities to his vested interests. Secondly, a corporate body grabs khas land or vast tracts of flood-prone wetlands for large-scale real estate businesses either forcibly or through 'definitional' loopholes. Fortunately, the state responded against both these cases. Evictions of squats and demolition of makeshift shops had been pursued with no mercy. Although, high profile lake grabbers and their accomplices are yet to face similar consequences in a scale that we would have expected. Most often they get away with impunity.

Poverty of Logic
It is appalling that no protests have yet been made, especially from architects - alleged torchbearers in the production of the built environment, against the ongoing construction of a bridge over the Crescent Lake. Architects as specific professionals have been mentioned for their double standards and self-contradictions in taking stance against tacit land grabbing. This is indeed a serious acquisition that, although belated, has to be put on record.

Few weeks ago, an attempt to construct two residences besides the parliament building attracted significant civic protests, including architects. Those who opposed the construction justly argued that any addition (by the government architects) to the existing environment would destroy a world-renowned piece of architecture. It was also noted, in defence, that Kahn himself had not suggested this possibility. To protect Kahn's work forever, a delegation of a few local architects appealed to a concerned UN organisation to declare it as 'World Heritage Site'. Noble effort, beyond doubt. But we ask what is this site? Kahn was known to work on 800 acres of land. Are we discussing a World Heritage Site of this size? No. We get a hint of the delegation's idea of the size (*Prothom Alo*, 23.12.02): A site starting from Manik Miah avenue to the Crescent Lake, i.e. around one third of 800 acres. No new construction on this one-third of the site, however good, is required to ensure the purity of Kahn's architecture. If this high profile site, as a setting for 'architecture', is embraced to forget our previous loss of lands from 800 acres for reasons other than Kahn's plans, we have now reasons to descend. It seems a section of our architecture community has developed a selective amnesia of the recent past, regrettably under possible spell of bi-partisan politics.

Kahn's 'architecture' in Dhaka has certainly served well for numerous degrees, publications, seminars and exhibitions. We are, however, yet to bring the urban design and planning philosophy of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar to the benefit of the future development of Dhaka. When this has been a specific manifestation of a gap between 'architecture' and 'urban design and planning', two thirds of the 800 acres have been made an orphan. Lands have been utilized for construction of the Prime Minister's residence, final resting-place of late President Zia and NAM convention centre.

As we protest against the construction of residences, why have there not been any arguments against the bridge over the Lake Crescent? Had Kahn wanted a bridge he would certainly shown it anywhere in his numerous sketches. A recent publication titled "Sher-e-Bangla Nagar: Louis I. Kahn and the Making of a Capital Complex" (Ashraf & Haque, 2002) does not give any indication of a bridge over the Crescent Lake. We also take note of the fact from this reference that in different phases of design development of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, the assembly building complex had changed in form and composition but had always been accompanied with an unbroken Crescent Lake. We wonder why have our Kahn crusaders gone oblivious of these facts? Only they can explain whether it is due to ignorance or strategic silence when the design of the bridge under construction was awarded from among 1718 submissions, by a jury board. Distinguished jurors had given *de facto* legitimacy to this bridge. We are perplexed by this whole affair that suggest "the only going thing in the profession is to keep the profession going". No one would certainly mind at that if it had not been at the expense of the public interests. Rootless design and planning professionals often do more damage than good. A key treatise *Toward an Urban Design Manifesto* (Jacobs & Appleyard) notes *This floating professional culture has only the most superficial conception of particular place. Rootless, it is more susceptible to changes in professional fashion and theory than to local events. There is too little inquiry, too much proposing. Quick surveys are made, instant solutions devised, and the rest of the time is spent persuading the clients.*

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Crescent Lake

physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer". Paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks are the five key elements that help us construct our image of the city. Cities try to overcome their (visual) image crises, and conserve whatever good ones they have. Dhaka, sadly, has opted to go opposite direction. She decided to shuff off whatever good enduring images already exist in people's mind.

The location of the Crescent Lake between architecture and nature is critical in Kahn's planning of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. An undisturbed Crescent Lake is of utmost importance as it plays both separating and binding roles between the hard architecture in the south and soft

of the two residences, I reckon a bridge over the Crescent Lake would definitely raise him from his grave. To appreciate the role of the Crescent Lake, we should never forget that Kahn's notion of 'city' has always been present in the conception and construction of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. Here his understanding of city, in tangible and intangible terms, was in no way secondary to his architecture. Kahn had to confine only within 800 acres, and could not design another 2000 acres due to his sudden death. From urban design perspective, construction of a couple of residences far away from nearby streets by blending with the surrounding in terms of materials, height, and form can be a lesser intrusion to any passer-by. We oppose these additions despite their chance to remain in obscurity. On the contrary, we decided to build a bridge over the Crescent Lake before our eye! It is good in one way; the bridge will be a symbolic reminder of our insanity. Placing Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in its locality, above all political parties, their priorities and projects should come first. What William Curtis, a noted architectural historian, had said in 1999 during celebrating 50 years of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh City seem pertinent for Kahn's Capital Complex in Dhaka.

..... Surely if there is one area that should be frozen in its form but not in its functions, it is the Capital Complex as a landscape. This, I think, should be announced and protected now as a World Heritage Site. I say this without hesitation. However, the condition is to complete it as it was intended. Now, those intentions do not stop where the buildings stop because it is a landscape. The buildings are part of a rhythmic, metaphorical piece of land art full of complex, cosmic, and political implications, which do not necessarily contradict one another; implications full of meaning for a foundation document of a nation. ... So keep your beautiful landscape, it belongs to us all. Complete it, but take it hundreds of yards beyond, preserve that magic relationship with the Himalayans.

Politics of Public Space
When a given regime in countries like Bangladesh fails to achieve on objective grounds like poverty, economy, education, civic security etc., alternative routes are explored to glorify its tenure. Constructions of

was but a sleepy provincial capital. With the rapid rise in urban population since our independence, gradual erosion of open spaces for housing alone has been making Dhaka more congested than ever. Dhaka is now left with only a few great open spaces (Ramna Park, Osmani Uddayan and the Tejgaon Airport) with uncertain future.

Living is related to land. Land, however, has varying qualitative attributes. A piece of land beside a lake or other place of scenic beauty or of commercial potential will fetch more price in the market than lands without (or lesser) qualities. In cities, there are posh planned residential areas with better civic amenities as well as illegal squatter settlements without facilities. Competition among city dwellers to get access to land is arguably most intense. In Bangladesh, especially Dhaka, one's access to land in relation to these polar-opposite realities has been a factor of his/her earnings, status and power in society. Consequently, the commodity status of land at a time of its limited supply has effectively precluded the poorer section of society from gaining access to land. Dhaka has long been an unfairly structured city in this regard.

During the pervasive commodification of land, the state need to ensure all urban dwellers unfettered access to quality public open space, at least for en masse socio-cultural interactions. But how? To ensure land of equal quality for all city dwellers, for physical, social and spiritual well-being, is at best a utopia impossible to implement in real terms. However, state can and should play a role to regulate an exclusionary land market. This regulatory role of state as played in economic and social sector is well known, advocated by Amartya Sen et al. First but not the least of all, the state has to think available public lands as public assets whose collective consumption would be a key part of city dwellers' civic rights. From this right-based perspective, quality public land need not be seen as a commodity with its 'exchange value'. Instead, lands 'use value' should be brought into focus. It should be this use value of public open spaces to which city dwellers would be entitled to have access to for leisure, recreation and cultural exchange. A democratic state should not deprive its citizens from this right to public open spaces for collective consumption.

Conclusion
Louis I. Kahn's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar capital complex, urban design and planning wise, is arguably the best gift the people of Dhaka have ever been given. The visual image of this part of the city in relation to the Crescent Lake, among others, imparts a sigh of relief in our otherwise stressed urban existence. It is time that we appreciate Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in its totality, conserve it for our future generations as a living entity without defacing it, and take inspiration from its genius for future development. Here we have to make a choice between loyalty to a political ideology and moral commitment to society. Production of space, in particular public open space, is crucial in any given society. Henry Lefebvre, a French philosopher, notes *To change society, to change life means nothing if there is not production of space ... for new social relations there must be new space and vice versa*. Dhaka really needs production and retention of some 'spaces of hope'.

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Residential area for residential use

Dhanmandi Poribesh Unnayan Jote (Dhanmandi Environmental Protection Coalition) News Release, 4 January 2003

W e, the members of the Dhanmandi Poribesh Unnayan Jote are aghast at the recent comments made by the Hon' Minister for Housing and Public Works regarding the legalization of commercial activities in areas such as Gulshan and Dhanmandi. To us, to propose legalizing the hundreds of illegal schools, colleges, hospitals, clinics and shops that have invaded residential areas is equivalent to decriminalizing a specific offense in order to create a rosier picture of the law-and-order situation in the country.

By providing a legal cover to illegal business operators we do not solve the horrendous problems that we residents in Dhanmandi face. The traffic jams, the air pollution, the noise pollution, the taking over of footpaths by crowds of vendors and drivers, the health hazards posed by urine and excreta along boundary walls and the indiscriminate disposal of medical waste, the rising crime rate will not go away. All that the Ministry of Housing will accomplish is to open the floodgates to hordes of others wishing to violate and distort city laws to their own ends. All it will achieve is to forever enshrine abuse of the law, the rights of communities to cohere, and the basic human rights of residents to healthy and livable environments. In these days where concern for good governance takes precedence over economic growth, is this the path for any ministry to take?

Again, providing a legal cover to illegal business operations in residential areas will not solve the problems that different types of commercial operation themselves confront on account of the horrendous lack of urban planning. Even commercial institutions need to be separated from each other. For example, schools and hospitals need to be set off from each other and from the noise, traffic and pollution associated with heavily trafficked commercial areas. Does legalization mean that schools will be allowed to continue in the shadows and waste of trauma centers and kidney hospitals?

The Hon' Minister suggests that, in the long term, the pressures on residential areas might be relieved by opening up a new commercial area. The question to the Hon' Minister is why not demark a commercial area 'NOW' instead of waiting for the future?

More importantly, why does the Hon' Minister appear to think that Dhaka city has only one designated commercial area? What about

similarly designated areas in Banani, Chawk Bazaar, Elephant Road, Farm Gate, Gabtoli, Gaosia, Green Road, Ismailpur, Jatra Bari, Jigatola, Kakrai, Kawran Bazaar, Khilgaon, Lalbagh, Malibagh, Mirpur, Mohakhali, Mohamedpur, Mouchak, New Market, Purana Pallan, Rayer Bazaar, Sadar Ghat, Shahbagh, Shamoli, Shantinagar, Shourighat, Tantibazaar, Tejgaon, Tongi, Uttara, etc?

When these other commercial areas are considered, a number of interesting questions arise. What is the ratio between the available commercial floor area to population in Dhaka?

Don't people in Dhaka also need places to sleep and live? Or, is shopping and visiting commercial establishments all that Dhaka-ites do?

Do the children of Dhaka not need open spaces to play? And fresh air to breathe?

What kind of minimum infrastructure support do different types of commercial areas (garments districts, wholesale and retail food distribution centers) need by way of fire fighting, waste disposal, loading and unloading of trucks, parking space, etc? How will these minimum infrastructure provisions be met once a residential area is further opened up to commerce? Will residents even have a place to sleep after such infrastructure has been built? Or, will they have to accept that trucks and buses have the right to ply and park within the inner streets of Gulshan, Banani, and Dhanmandi because they are now deemed legal?

It is obvious that the Hon' Minister does not whole-heartedly believe his own proposal. He suggests that steps need to be taken "to prevent further deterioration" of residential neighborhoods, which he attributes to over-commercialization. Yet, he is opening up the same areas to more commercialization? Aren't these contradictory objectives?

The Hon' Minister rightly notes that civil society should have shouldered its responsibility and protested the process of illegal commercialization years ago. While we accept this, we also ask: Where were the authorities in charge, as well???

Instead of legalizing this rampant commercialization, and legitimizing lawlessness and injury to the environment, why don't we work towards a planned process of phasing out commercial operations within the framework of the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (1995-

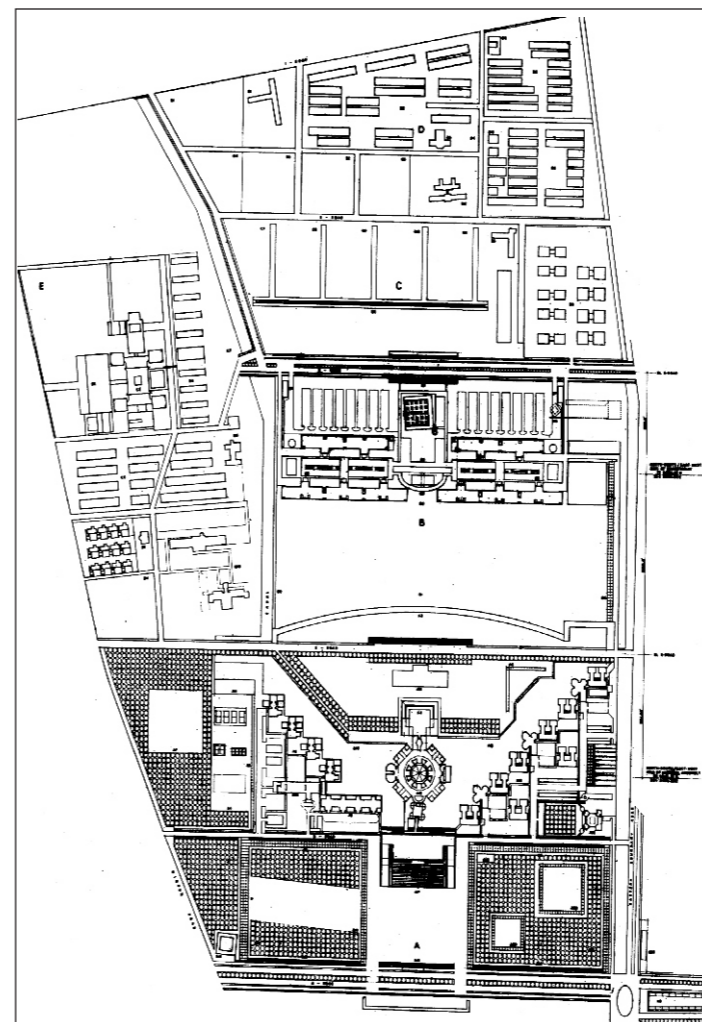
2015)? After all, we spent Taka 16 Crore on developing it. Also, while the Plan had the good sense to acknowledge that people need quiet, healthy, restful neighborhoods to survive the wounds of everyday living, it also foresaw the need for

some commercial establishments in residential areas. Indeed, by having neighborhood schools, neighborhood libraries and neighborhood shops life becomes more convenient for residents, dependency on cars declines, air pollution is averted, and both children and adults have more time for leisure. However, this limited commercialization is intrinsically different from the slap-dash use of an area like Dhanmandi as the dumping ground for the schools, colleges, medical facilities etc. of Dhaka.

Again, instead of further commercializing residential areas, why don't we bite the bit and attempt a serious take at good governance? Why don't we consider taking firm disciplinary action against individual house-owners who operate business establishments without permits? Why not equally firm disciplinary action against representatives of official agencies who are responsible for this sorry state of affairs? Why don't we strengthen the country's laws so that such representatives are prevented from using retirement as immunity? Instead of legalizing crime, why not enact new laws that allow courts to attach the assets and pensions of dubious officials even if they are officially retired?

It is clear that the hodge-podge approach that passes for urban planning in Dhaka has to come to an end. We have to stop the pattern of "solving" the problem of residential areas, allowed to disappear into the jaws of commerce, by cheerfully opting to open up new residential areas that soon degenerate into precisely the kind of neighborhood they were designed to replace. We have to finally reckon with our colossal lack of taste and common sense, and stop viewing every road and sidewalk as an excuse for throwing up yet another string of shops. With the imminent prospect of losing considerable areas of land to global warming, it is high time that we stopped our wasteful ways.

We need long-term solutions to the problems of Dhaka City instead of misconceived stopgaps.

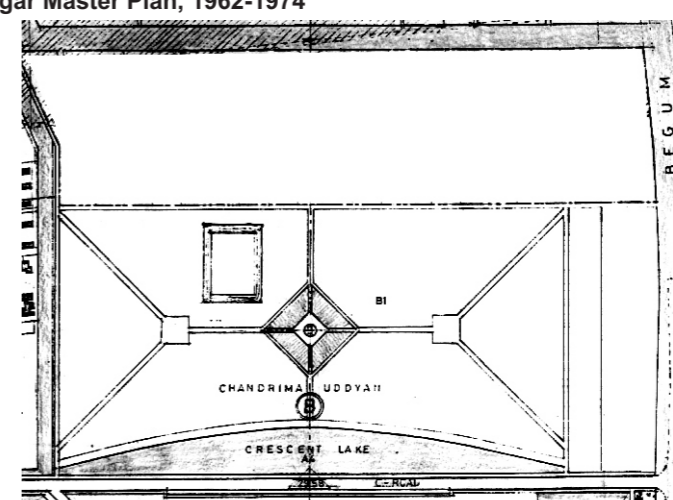


Lois Kahn's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Master Plan, 1962-1974

Public interest is served best if initiatives are conceived, designed and constructed outside 'power-patronage-profit' nexus. Procedural transparency, therefore, should be the demand to ensure public interest. If results of a recent design competition for North South University can be displayed publicly, why cannot we display our public projects of national importance? Why these projects (including Suhrawardy Uddayan project) have to remain classified documents? What is the problem to publish the results at least within the limited professional circle of architects? Procedural transparency is all we want. We do not want to believe that design anonymity gives flexibility in project expansion, at the cost of taxpayers money and to the benefit of a few.

Significance of the Crescent Lake

We perceive a given city from roads crisscrossing its landscape. Visual, olfactory and auditory experiences and stimuli, in varied combination, gained from roaming the street matter for the city dwellers. They contribute to the development of an image of a part of a given city. These images, according to Kevin Lynch, are vital to help us orient in a city. City images are unique in their identity and meaning. 'Imageability' is a term Lynch refers to this uniqueness of a place: "that quality in a

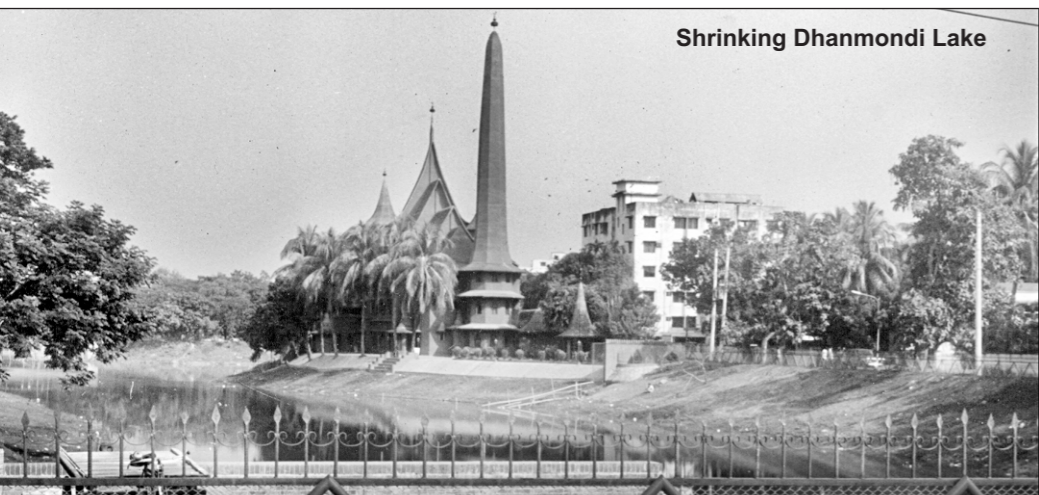


Crescent Lake and Zia Mazar, December 2002

nature in the north. It is needless to say that the Crescent Lake contributes to create a unique image of that part of the city, not comparable to any other images. Try naming a similar place where viewers have been offered a chance to observe the six seasons, drawn directly by the palette of nature. You wouldn't find one in Dhaka today. A bridge, however glittering, would destroy this image: the bridge is a visual obstruction against both the assembly building and the nature beside the lake.

If Kahn twitches his eyebrow at hearing the proposed construction

grand civic spaces and buildings have been pursued. Architects, no offence, are hired. One can well argue whether *Ayub Nagar*, later Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, had been a product of this intention of General Ayub Khan, the infamous preacher of 'basic democracy'. Besides political scoring, these projects usually create opportunities of material gains for a chosen few. Those who rank high include political partisans involved in the project construction one way or the other. One major victim of these (false) image-building drives has been the public open space. This had not been a major problem when Dhaka



Shrinkyng Dhanmandi Lake