



The pulse of a people

DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED 18 MARCH 2003

RECENT developments taking place in and around Dhanmandi Lake in the City compelled the disturbed residents of the residential area to fall in under the banner of Dhanmandi Poribesh Unnayan Jote (Environment Improvement Alliance).

The Agenda for Urban Concern, a three-year old endeavour of The Daily Star, BUET and the Bangladesh Scouts, organised a workshop 'Dhanmandi Reviving a Lost Haven' on 24 January in support of the cause of a community that not only is in distress but feels threatened.

The concern at the raw deal meted out to the Dhanmandi residents in the form of development has prompted residents of other areas with lakes to rally around their own associations to counter enthusiastic developers, private and public, from undertaking similar counter-green programmes. They too attended the colloquium.

The developments for Dhanmandi Lake, furnished in brick, concrete and metal, interspersed with what remained of the verdant nature have had mixed reactions. While a somewhat ambulatory walkway doubling at places as welcome demarcation has been lauded as sensible, the invitation to further commercialise the area, the inclination to build in every open area, the reduction in greenery, the making of a car park by filling up the lake, and in general making the lake busier has been justly criticised.

From the comments of the residents at the workshop it was also apparent that the community was not consulted before or during the works. On that count the consultant of the project would have failed in delegating its responsibility to the public.

Today we present extracts from an academic seminar paper on Dhanmandi by Shawn Podder, Sharmin Afroz. It should give us some idea about the prevailing situation in what was the first residential area designed by the government for private citizens in the city.

Also, we reproduce some guidelines that Dr. Khandker Shabbir Ahmed helped me to prepare on how a lakeside development should be executed.

We understand that the recommendations of the working groups carried on this agenda should be considered as the pulse of the people; following them can only pave the way in reviving a lost haven.

The author is Professor, Dept. of Architecture, BUET, Dhaka and Consultant to the Editor on Urban Issues.



The transformation of Dhanmandi

SHAWN PODDER, SHARMIN AFROZ

DHANMANDI Residential Area is one of the high-class residential areas of Dhaka city. The area was planned and developed from 1953 to provide residential accommodation for high and higher middle-income groups of population in the city of Dhaka. After liberation in 1971 the characteristics of the residential area started to change and the area was gradually overtaken by non-residential uses (50% of the total), such as commercial and professional offices, private clinics, community centres, educational institutions etc.

Expansion of Dhaka City has created demand for spaces for new urban activities and Dhanmandi gained importance being located in the central part of the city. As a result some higher order activities (central functions) of the City invaded the area. The non-residential uses have taken place in an uncontrolled, unregulated and haphazard manner, much to the detriment of the residential environment.

Dhanmandi is the first planned residential area in Dhaka developed by the Public Works Department. According to Ahmad Hasan Dani in his historical book 'Dacca', it 'opened a new opportunity to the house builders to rent out their houses on exorbitant rates. The tenants were soon found in the ever-increasing number of the Americans in the city..'

Planning aspects of dhanmandi residential area

The Government of East Pakistan acquired rice fields in Dhanmandi to plan a residential area in the sites and services scheme. Total area of the site including water bodies and roads is about 485.9 acres. It is the first designed Residential Area in Dhaka city, developed by the Public Works Department.

The area was originally divided into 1000 nos. of plots ranging from 15 decimal to 33 decimal. But in the layout plan, found in the present PWD the number of total plots is 1083 (PWD 1985). Plots were arranged along a systematic road arrangement, set in a gridiron pattern of three types: Major thoroughfare (Mirpur Road & Satmasjid Road) of more than 30-metre width, Secondary roads 15-metre width and Access roads 10/15-metre width.

Secondary and access roads also had provision of footpath on both the sides. In the plan no space was earmarked for corner store, community centre, club, etc. although there was provision for playgrounds and such other open areas. New Market was planned as the area's shopping centre.

Development control measures

The gradual degradation of residential character of Dhanmandi

Land-use of Dhanmandi Residential Area

tioned shall be permitted:

- Books, Papers, Stationary and Medicine
- Goldsmith, Watch and Spectacles
- Antiques and Curio
- Travel Agencies
- Bank and Insurance
- Show Room of Car and Filling Station
- Office of commercial institution (with the permission of the authority)
- Snacks Bar (not Hotel and Restaurant) and Posh Restaurant
- Photo Studio
- Show Room: Ceramics (with the permission of the authority)
- Electronics equipment
- Clinic: up to 10 beds (but not of infectious disease)
- Commercial uses for the requirements of the local community and that are socially acceptable may be considered to get permission.
- Small shops for daily necessities may be considered to get permission with the condition that:
 - The shops have parking arrangement
 - The shops shall face the road.
 - The shops shall maintain distance from footpath according to the rules.
 - The plots allotted for residential use shall apply to the authority and the buildings shall be made usable for commercial purpose.

All commercial institutions except offices, schools, colleges and mosques situated in Dhanmandi Residential Area (except those on the four mentioned roads) shall close their activities within 30 days from receiving the notice; otherwise, due to violation of the terms and condition, the agreement may be cancelled.

Circular of January 1996

Total area (not partial) of plots on both sides of Mirpur Road, Satmasjid Road, Road No. 2 and Road No. 16, (old 27) may be used for commercial purposes with 15% Conversion Fee. This permission was effective from December 1995.

As per original plan buildings more than three stories were not permitted.

In January 1996 the authority withdrew the ceiling on dwelling density of 10 flats per bigha (33 decimal). Accordingly,

- The maximum permissible number of stories was six but the number of flats may be as many as may be served by the service organisations.
- The building shall have lift facilities and parking arrangement within the plot area.
- The size of a subdivided plot shall not be less than 5 katha.

In June 1995 the 16-member Zahiruddin Committee (Ministry of Housing and Public Works) recommended for Dhanmandi R/A building height

- up to 10 stories for commercial plots
- up to 12 stories for residential plots

In May 1996 the Ministry of Housing and Public Works decided as follows:

- Present rule of building height of maximum six stories would continue.

b) The service organisations would assess the problems in providing services due to increased height of buildings and will recommend to the ministry whether the heights of the buildings could be increased further.

However, till 2002 there was no new decision to increase building height:

It seems that the authorities are interested to increase the intensity of land utilisation by increasing the height of the building without bringing any adverse effect on the services.

Present trends in land use: Residential uses:

Plots are subdivided and multi-storied apartment buildings are being constructed. In 2002 one-fifth of all structures of the area were apartment housing.

Commercial uses:

Multi-storied large shopping complexes, snacks bar and posh restaurants, bookshops, newsstands, stationers, pharmacies, goldsmiths, watches, opticians, antiques and curio dealers, travel agents, banks and insurance companies, car showrooms, filling stations, commercial offices, studios, boutique shops, gift shops, grocers, electronic equipme-nts, clinic, supermarkets, etc.

Recreational spaces:

Playground, swimming complexes, art galleries and parks

Socio-economic status of Dhanmandi

In the 1960-70s the distinctive character of the area was maintained by a very high rent level. About 70% of the houses were tenanted occupied. In the mid-1970s Gulshan and Banani developed as residential areas, and a new diplomatic zone was established at Bari Dhara in the late 1980s. Dhanmandi began to lose its status as an exclusive area of high-income residents in Dhaka City. Having lost the standard and status of the area, house owners yielded to the offer of high rents from the non-residential users.

Land use pattern of residential plots

According to the HBRI study of 1984, about 28% of the total houses were being used for non-residential purposes. The types of non-residential uses were government and semi-government offices, private offices, professional offices, international organisations, diplomatic missions, NGOs, educational institutions, private clinics, commercial enterprises, shops, etc.

Three non-residential uses (medical facilities, educational institutes and offices) are most dominant in the area.

Change in Dhanmandi's skyline

Rise in non-residential uses in Dhanmandi R/A

Spatial pattern of development

The internal roads are laid out in a regular pattern, more or less in grid-iron system. Because of wide internal roads and regular pattern, Dhanmandi has got more or less

Building type:

are many. For example, comparatively lower rent in Dhanmandi than in commercial areas, availability of large plots and sufficient floor spaces for the suitable accommodation of educational institutions, offices, clinics and hospitals and community centres. The other

attractions are better environmental quality, easy accessibility, transportation and parking.

Six-storied apartment buildings are not compatible by the side of single or double storied buildings in terms of privacy, sunlight and air. Clinics bear the vulnerability to spread infectious disease to the residential area. Clinics have 24-hour functions, which are likely to disturb the residential environment of the area. The same thing is also applicable for community centres. College and universities are incompatible to the residential environment in that they create noise, disturb privacy and curtail accessibility. Distribution and marketing activities are also incompatible for noise, privacy, traffic safety and pollution.

The whole process of planning and re-planning an existing area is to give it a character of its own, and to guard against possible deterioration. Planning should be done for the people, not for the planner. Community based organisations and local community participation can play a great role in safeguarding and protecting the environmental qualities of residential areas.

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How a Lake area should be handled?

ARCHITECT DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED, ARCHITECT DR. KHANDAKER SHABIB AHMED

Agencies involved in the lake development project should involve the local community in all stages of design, evaluation, implementation, operation and maintenance. This is more critical if it is proposed that the works be executed in an existing community.

Developments should enhance the disposition of the lake as being an integral part of a residential area. The bias would largely be environmental. The lake should be enjoyed visually by residents of the vicinity and those who pass along it, its fresh air inhaled to celebrate the glory of the Creator. The design proposal should be such that the area may also be enjoyed by the old and the disabled, and can be regarded as a barrier free design.

The lake should not be turned from one belonging to a community to

that of the whole City and the suburbs. Unlike human beings, upgrading of natural elements can have dire reversal effects on the environment and Man.

The lake should be enjoyed visually by residents of the vicinity and those who pass along it, its fresh air inhaled to celebrate the glory of the Creator.

Microclimatic and hydro-geological factors of the lake region should be given priority in any development proposal. Connections of the lakes with the eastern river system (Balu river) via various channels to be improved and no development plan should impede such continuity.

The lake should never become a commercial eyesore, however lucrative the money spinning offers may appear to be. Government should seek other avenues to earn revenue, not from one from which it has already earned by drawing buyers to a

lakeside development.

Developments should in no way pose any threat to the existing privacy, safety and security of the residents, or the active flora and fauna.

As a policy no permanent structures/shelters should be built in the lake area. Structures should be minimal and only opted for if absolutely essential. Structures, if any, should be low, perhaps not more than 8'-0" high and the total area of unit should not exceed 100 sft, such that, as kiosks, they can amalgamate with the lake gradient and the greenery.

In keeping with a Cabinet decision for environmental balance no part of the lake should be land filled.

The lake should not become a receptacle for sewage and garbage. Existing sewers leading to the lakes should be redirected. All activities and installations that may further contaminate the lake should be removed. Necessary dredging

should be carried out.

For shade and reasons of aesthetics, suitable plantations should be introduced by sensible landscaping, such that they amalgamate with the lake gradient and the greenery. In the selection of plants and shrubs, vegetation attractive (fruit trees and nectar bearing plants) to wild life should be given due importance.

The existing noise level of the area should be lowered by strategic planning and design and in no way increased by new and extra activities, and/or gathering. Acceptable level around 45-50 dB.

On completion of the works, the feeling and visuals should be such that nature has not been tampered with, that bustle has been reduced and that the lake presents herself as an object of tranquillity.

The authors are Professor and Associate Professor respectively of the Dept of Architecture, BUET

Dhanmandi -- reviving a lost haven

Workshop held at The Daily Star Conference Room on 24 January 2003

Participants opted to work in different groups, each tackling a particular topic

Transcript of the deliberations will be published later