



Dhanmondi: Reviving a lost haven

Deliberations at The Daily Star -BUET-Bangladesh Scouts Workshop held in collaboration with Dhanmondi Poribesh Unnayan Jote on 24 January 2003

This is the concluding part of the deliberations. The first part was published last week, 4 April 2003

Moderator: Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed, Professor, Dept of Architecture, BUET, Dhaka.



ASM Feroze, Baridhara Society: I'll just pick up on the university issue. You may recall that a former President inaugurated the Independent University campus in Baridhara. I don't know how his protocol could allow such an illegal act inside a residential area. Maybe that might not have been the case had an opposition party leader tried to do the same.

On a lighter note, I would like to give you an idea about what we at the Baridhara Society are trying to do for the area and the Baridhara Lake. I will also tell you in which areas we have failed.

We have really managed to address the waste disposal issue in Baridhara. There are no dustbins there. We take all our kitchen waste outside and have them disposed off by the DCC.

We have tried to develop a security system in Baridhara and it is working very well.

We try to maintain civic amenities like street cleaning, drainage, lights, etc. as best as we can. We have formed a very good working relationship with the local administration of the DCC. Even the DCC sweepers cooperate with us in a coordinated manner and report to a member of the Society with their duty roster.

We are prepared to share our experiences over the past three years with those who will be working in Dhanmondi. We are ready to give our input into waste management, security, civic amenities and in any other area.

We have totally failed to protect the lake despite our relentless efforts alongside the environmentalists. So many influential people have their own selfish interests surrounding the lake. If you go there today, you can see that a portion of the lake being filled up to erect a building. Still, I believe that if the citizens unite, then even these powerful people can be defeated. We just have to stand up to them. The question is whether there are people among us who are in that same interest group and are prepared to shift their priorities?

We have also failed in maintaining Baridhara as a residential entity as various institutions and offices have started moving in. There was one guesthouse in the beginning, now there are six. From one clinic three or four have now sprouted. The university has taken 10 or 12 buildings and you can imagine the kind of disorder 1000 cars of around 1200 students can create in a small place like Baridhara. It's virtually impossible for anyone to lead a peaceful life. There's even a big hospital in the name of the foundation of an ex-president. So who are you going to fight against, who are the people whom you are sitting with, what are their interests, who are flouting the law and whether these people are above the law... these are some very important factors that needs to be considered.

Good luck to the Dhanmondi society and I welcome them to visit Baridhara. If you want we can sit down and have discussions regarding common problems. There are some fine people working for the Baridhara society most of who are ladies and they are doing a wonderful job.

Saiful Islam, Gulshan Society: The issue is commercialisation of residential areas. I want to talk about Gulshan...there's a provision that if you pay a certain fee to RAJUK, you can get permission to use residential buildings along the Gulshan Avenue for non-residential purposes. So what is this 'un-residential' thing? We have to find out what this status really means.

Next, I believe the most formidable weapon against this transformation into commercialisation is an organised civil society and it should be organised in interacting with the agencies such as RAJUK, City Corporation, etc. If the City Corporation stopped giving away trade licenses, then I think that could have been a deterrent to commercial use of residential areas.

Mofazzal Karim, former Government Secretary: I have been a resident of Dhanmondi for the last three years. The strange thing about Dhanmondi is that it's basically a government property but you can't see the government anywhere.

There seems to be a duel governance running Dhanmondi. If you ask the RAJUK they'll say that Dhanmondi is not under their jurisdiction, go the ministry. The ministry will say that they don't deal with small matters like Dhanmondi and send you back to RAJUK or the City Corporation. This must stop otherwise you'll end up running from the pillar to the post. I don't understand why the government doesn't make RAJUK responsible for Dhanmondi like other areas of Dhaka.

My second point is that the government should tell us where to complain. We in Dhanmondi don't know who to talk or where to go with our problems and complaints or whether any action would be taken based on those. I've personally suffered from this situation.

There was a two-storied building adjacent to the six-floor apartment I live in. A few months ago, I saw that they were laying bricks on the roof but without any pillars. Several days later there was a whole new building with CI sheet on its roof. Just when I was wondering if RAJUK allows roofs of CI sheet in this area, I woke up with the loud bang of a school bell one day and learnt to my astonishment that they have started a school there the name of which is the European Standard School. I couldn't help thinking has European standard stooped to such low that they are now building schools with tin-roof?

Anyway, I called up the RAJUK chairman the next day and he assured me no such permission was given and they would demolish that building immediately. A month has passed since and nothing has happened.

That's why I feel that someone should be held accountable. The government should let the residents know where to contact to report an illegal structure, an environmental damage or any subversive activities.

There should be an authority taking care of these things and residents should get answers and they should get the assurance that prompt action would be taken. At the moment we in Dhanmondi don't know whether the government has any accountability on these matters. This communication gap must be bridged.

Md Abul Khayer Bablu, Ward Commissioner, Ward 49, Dhaka City Corporation: I would like to narrate to you some of my experiences over the last eight years. The lake area is a part of this Ward and the total residential area too is under Ward 49.

In 1994 when we had our first board meeting, I first placed the issue of our ill-fated lake to the then Mayor of DCC. The Mayor then asked his chief executive officer to look into the matter and subsequently the development programme started. But we have not been able to complete the work we had begun. There were proposals like the

effort can do. Look at the playground on Road No. 4. It was in shambles a few years ago. When I asked the DCC's chief executive officer to provide me with a caretaker for that ground, he said that it couldn't be done. Rather he told me to take care of it through the community. You can go and see what a beautiful space we have turned it into and how we can play there up to even 10pm.

Today I am sorry to say that I am not even allowed into the management committee. Nobody seems to care that I too might have some observations



PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

double walkway, which never saw light.

I'll hold some of the residents of Dhanmondi responsible for destroying the residential nature of the area.

They have rented their houses to schools, universities, clinics, hospitals, restaurants, shops, supermarkets and what not. There are even some people here who have rented their houses for commercial use.

A few days ago, I saw that the pavement in front of the Meena Bazaar was being encroached. I initiated protest by assembling a number of people but that move failed as some government ministers told me to stop it. Now ten or twelve more supermarkets are being constructed on the Sat Masjid Road and there will be more encroachments.

In Dhanmondi we see bus stoppage at intersections. This creates acute traffic jams. At the same time you find two passenger sheds in the same stoppage, which is totally unnecessary.

These bus stops are home to temporary tea stalls, and criminals often assemble there. But the police never evict those illegal shops, as that would stop their earning.

We have a number of community centres in the area. Although they don't have any trade license, they are still doing business by paying the landlords a hefty sum as advance payment.

On the other hand, when we have a meeting we are forced to rent one of those community centres, as there are no such structures for us in Dhanmondi.

We have proved what community

and proposals for the development of Dhanmondi...

Dr Nizam: One of the basic issues coming up is the ownership of this lake and the area. I have a feeling that the Dhanmondi people are feeling left out from what is happening. Maybe your lake has turned into a national lake from a private lake. Because of that, your baby has been snatched from you. So you have to get it back...

Sultana Alam, Dhanmondi Poribesh Unnayan Jote: Let me just interrupt... Commissioner Bablu has talked about the double walkway. I just want to tell him that we don't need such things just for the sake of a few members of the Walkers Club. Our lake has already become a zoo and the more concrete you put around it, the worse it is for us. I'll request you to take out the all the concrete and plant trees and grass in its place. That will give us our privacy back.

Engr. Kazi Mohammed Sheesh, Chief Engineer, Dhaka WASA: I'll get straight to the point, my views could be a bit different though. The kind of awareness we are seeing in the residents of Dhanmondi in the 90s, had they been as conscious back in the 70s or the 80s, then we wouldn't have had these problems. As a government employee associated with Dhanmondi, I want to point out the lack of awareness on their part.

In 1950 the DIT created Dhanmondi as a model residential area where the houses will be built on one-bigha plots and won't exceed four stories. In the reality of the 70s, that DIT plan was no longer practical. However, there was no need to change the residential pattern of Dhanmondi but the local citizens changed it. At that time the first commercialisation started with owners renting their houses to clinics. The theory was that if a resident were sick, he wouldn't have to go too far. The economic aspect was important too as the landlords found a profitable way of earning money.

House owners who did not live in Dhanmondi were happy to rent their homes while those who lived there didn't protest as they thought that a hospital or clinic nearby would be convenient for them. By 1990, there were as many as 60 clinics in the area.

Sometime later kindergartens sprang up in residential building, as the local people didn't want to send their children to far-off schools. Then came the Chinese restaurants and more recently, the shopping malls.

When traffic jam results from so many commercial establishments, the residents complain that the government is doing nothing. But it is they who have started it. In every major city around the world, citizens who live in model residential areas have to sacrifice a few things in exchange of its advantages like going to far-off schools and shopping complexes.

We are making shopping complexes today like the One Stop Mall.

Look at the New Market, built 50 years ago on a vast piece of land. Its specialty is its sprawling bookshops. Is there any place for books at the One Stop Mall? My point is that our society, awareness and culture have gone down so much that we can only think of money these days.

Another trend that had begun in the 90s was building of high-rises. I'll give you an example. In 1.5 square kilometre of area with Mirpur Road, Road No 27 (old), Sat Masjid Road and Road No 2 being its four boundaries, 272 apartment buildings were under construction in 1998. Now there could be more.

As the residents have become conscious of their surroundings now, they have to make a combined effort to save whatever is left. The government alone can't do anything, as there are influential people who can make things difficult to be implemented. With that note I wish to end.

Chief Executive Engineer of Dhaka City Corporation: I am executive

aware and conscious, but they can't take action. What they can do though is pressurise the regulatory body to regulate or the enforcing body to enforce.

I don't think it is the government's failure, your failure that you didn't fine that landowner Ten lakh Taka or sentence him to a two-year prison term. You cannot now pass it on to us saying that when you were in the government, you too broke the rule. Here we mix things up. Try to understand that the government has rules and regulations, and it is a failure of the government that it can't enforce these.

What went wrong I believe is that if Dhanmondi had been planned in the 50s or 60s, then perhaps we need to improve the law. The citizens could have sat down and decided on more floors, etc. But there has to be a participation of the stakeholders.

I don't think the stakeholders were consulted properly regarding the lake. I must say that the development plan was made thinking of it as the lake for every citizen of Dhaka whereas it should have been for the residents of Dhanmondi.

ABM Mohiuddin, Landscape designer and urban planner: I am from the surrounding area. I am a freelancer. I was invited here to talk about open spaces. I believe there is a general misconception about open space and park system. This is very important when you are discussing the lake and its surroundings. This is a government land and public route. My question is how do you prevent the general public from using it? You should have a very carefully formulated and defined programme before you can even think about it.

Now let's see what is an open space. In terms of planning, any kind of un-built and accessible land is an open space. When we say that it should be publicly accessible, how are we going to protect it? You have to proceed with that consideration.

Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Baridhara each have its different characteristics. If a landowner in Dhanmondi wants his property developed in whatever way he wants, he will get into a confrontation with RAJUK. It ultimately always wears down to politics and economics. Who will resolve this situation? It should be the public who should intervene and they have to force the politics to go in their prescribed direction.

You have a lake in Dhanmondi. Mrs. Alam asked me if I could say something about the open space and give some alternative ideas.

Recently, during one of our construction works, we had to spend a huge amount of money to pull out and clean up a 10-12 year-old pipe, which had been blocked by soil when an apartment was being built on Road No. 5. We also found out that one side of the pipe had been deliberately blocked to make a sewerage line for the apartment.

The owner of that apartment is an educated and sophisticated person, and he should have had the civic sense to keep that service line out of harms way.

Another major problem we face is in construction waste disposal. Many residents think that construction debris is responsibility of the Dhaka City Corporation. Wrong. It is they who should make sure that the debris are taken to their appropriate dumping ground outside Dhaka as the DCC has clear guidelines on materials to dispose off. So if you put the construction waste in dustbins and expect the DCC to clear it, you are making a mistake.

Dr Nizam: May I interrupt to ask whether the DCC had ever taken any legal steps against such 'ignorant' owners? If so, what has been the outcome?

Chief Executive Engineer of Dhaka City Corporation: We are saying that we are powerful as we are the government, we can make rules. At the same time our hands are weak too because we are also breaking the law. We are limited in many ways. For example, what the civil society did with their trust to save the Osmany Uddyan, we could not have done...

Dr Nizam: I get your mind, we need awareness and at the same time an effective operational management because in the Building Construction Rules 1996, it is clearly stated that the Authorised Officer who gives the approval for construction can actually stop any work anytime. You cannot go to court against his action as he is indemnified. To my knowledge, there has not been a single occasion where the Authorised Officer had exercised his power. That is our weakness.

ASM Feroze: I find the tendency of the Chief Executive Engineer is typical of the government's defensive position in such open meetings. The truth is that it is possible for citizens to become

There are several kinds of open space like park open space, greenway open space, national park open space, etc. So how are we going to define the space beside the lake in Dhanmondi?

You have a narrow lake and narrow space on both sides of it. You have a residential community. So do you call it Neighbourhood Park? No, because if you do, then you have to preserve it. A park is for protection. The other uses come much later.

So we can call it a greenway. That means it is for movement. If it is for movement, then you have to attract some other activities here.

Now you have to decide in what way you want it. I totally agree with the values Prof. Sirajul Islam spoke about. There were cultural activities, fairs here once. You have to decide whether you want those things revived because if you do then you are bound to attract people from the outside to the lake and you can't keep it as a 'Dhanmondi residents only' area. What are you going to do in that situation as you have already said that you don't want outsiders in?

So you need to have a clear definition. Before that, you should form a forum that will re-define the characteristics of Dhanmondi. You can move on from there.

Development of the lake is not a problem. But you have to reach a common ground first. You can't say that Dhanmondi residents will use this lake only...you don't have that right. It's the democratic right of the people to use it. If you can't agree on this then the problem is not solvable.

There is nothing free. If you provide free service, a lot many liabilities come along with it. If you want to create a free enterprise, I'm afraid you can't manage it. You have to associate certain costs with it. My suggestion is that if you can define the characteristics and if you have a prior idea about the things you are going to set here that will show you the way.

I think the toll collection, extra tax, etc. are a long way off but you can earn through setting up attractions like rowing club, jogging club, water sports...

Iqbal Habib: I just want to bring to your knowledge the question of public participation in the lake development project. When the designs were being made, we requested the government repeated times on behalf of the consultants there are at least seven Minutes on it that there should be a participation of the stakeholders living around the lake. A lake stewardship should be developed and those who live around

the lake should be involved in it.

Although the government never took any initiative to launch this process or do not intend to in future, we did manage to reach the fourth stage of the citizen's participation ladder, which was consultations with people living around.

When we tried to define representation of Dhanmondi area, the City Corporation wanted only elected Ward Commissioners there. We however ensured that those who used the lake like Lake Walkers Association, Rate Payers Association and Dhanmondi Residential Area Welfare Association had their representation. We managed to force the government to recognise them.

Saiful Islam, Gulshan Society: If public participation was ensured then I would not dispute that but when we had a similar project at the Gulshan Lake, RAJUK told us that their consultant would sit with us, the Gulshan Society. But that never transpired. So my suggestion is that you should try to have a legislative process so that for example, for any municipal license, the NOC has to be taken from the Dhanmondi Society or any plan in the area has to be endorsed by the society. If you can form a unified society with the legislative power provided by the RAJUK, then I believe you can work smoothly.

(The workshop then divided into four groups by choice. Recommendations of each group have been published in The Daily Star on Friday 21 March 2003)

Dr Nizam: Based on the discussion and your recommendations, I have underlined seven points:

1. Dhanmondi residents have voiced that commercial growth is not acceptable. The minister has said it but we don't want it.
2. There has to be a coordinated body formed. It should work as a neighbourhood advisory council in close contact with the local government administration.
3. Increased awareness among the residents of Dhanmondi about the detrimental effects of commercialisation.
4. Transform Dhanmondi into a garden-like setting.
5. Ban large structures from public use and such structures should be constructed no more.
6. Bring back the natural characteristics and ensure a neighbourhood feeling in the lake.
7. If there is commercial use, then it should be sympathetic commercial use.