



Live and let live

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ONE of the popular topics occupying our living room conversations is how the ever-burgeoning Dhaka City is degrading by the year and becoming unsuitable for human habitation; thus conveying the connotation that the matter is no more taken seriously.

Over the years Dhakaites have resigned to corruption, nepotism, selfish unionism, imprudence, poor policies, inefficient governance as well as being guilty of lacking community and individual commitments. Repetitive frustration has cramped to within the four walls and among close friends what should have been a 'do or die' public debate.

Among quotable quotes is the adage: Dhaka will be unliveable in the next ten years. While the conversation has gone on for ages, Dhaka has survived, which we say with a note of caution, as sceptics will always point out, it may not in the next decade.

My classroom guru at BUET, Architect Khadem Ali expressed concern about the city's security, environment, housing and mobility in the keynote paper at the 30th Conference of the Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), held in Dhaka in November 2002.

Over three years ago his fears may have forecast further unliveability at the present time had the rot continued, yet we live on and only fear the future. Such is the tolerance of humankind; or is it only the survivors of Dhaka city?

The author emphasises on the rights of citizens, symbolised in pedestrian priority and supremacy, and concern for women. He advocates open spaces and greenery, increased security, a democratic housing system, and cost-effective transportation and metered parking, among some rather poignant observations. While pointing out the negligence of city inspectors for much of our sufferings, he promotes staff training and more professionals in city government.

Architect Khadem Ali believes that Dhaka can be made liveable in the true sense of the word. He believes knowledge, commitment and accountability can get us there and that too without hurting our city purse.

Let us not have to reprint these observations and recommendations three years from now. Let Dhaka live!

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Suffocating congested growth

Towards a liveable city

ARCHITECT KHADEM ALI

WHAT is a liveable city? It is one which shows concern for the wellbeing of the citizens and caters to their needs. It not only ensures provisions that the citizens require through appropriate planning and development, but also ensures equitable access to those by all. In other words, the liveable city incorporates the basic physical and social infrastructure on the one hand and access to these by all through good governance. A liveable city is a place of opportunities and living at ease.

Now, a city is a place for all. It is a place for the young and the old, for the strong and the infirm, for the working and non-working groups, for pre-school children, students, workers, retired people and dependants; for men and women, for rich and the poor. It is to be accommodating to inhabitants, commuters and visitors.

The needs of all these people vary. It includes housing, income opportunities, education, healthcare, leisure, transport and utility services in an environment of security and wellbeing. It is many things for many people. As cities around the world try to cope with these multi-sectored provisions in the face of ever growing population and technological transformations, capital resource and governance are becoming challenges to be faced. Each city faces these challenges differently. Some are more responsive and therefore successful, where people are better served than in others. Needless to say, most cities and urban centres in Bangladesh are either indifferent to the needs of great majority of its people or, at best, are focused to the demands of the rich and the powerful at the cost of the majority. Most of the common citizens lead an insecure life with inadequate basic facilities and suffer injustice on a daily basis. For them life is unliveable and without much hope for improvement.

Why is it so? Lack of capital resource often constrains development, but more often it happens because of failures in development planning and governance.

The four basic aspects of city which have become matters of acute concern to all are security, environment, housing and mobility. With no capital investment but with a fresh and sensible approach and appropriate planning and governance, many of the severe drawbacks can be removed to improve and transform our urban life to a more liveable level.

Reducing Insecurity

Lack of security has become a matter of acute concern to us all in both urban and rural areas, to rich and poor alike. It relates to threat to life, person and property. Crimes go without punishment, and according to peoples perception (over 95% of respondents in a recent survey) police are the most corrupt of all government organs and protect the criminals rather than the victims. By another survey, average income of the police force is 1000 times their legal income. It has been reported that a commotion occurred in the Bureau of Anti-corruption because the DG failed to deliver suitable postings to his deputies as prom-

ised in return for bribes. Crimes range from murder, mugging, snatching and extortion, gender based crime. Extortion has become a fact of life. Gender violence is so prevalent that a study reports one in 25 girls in garment industry are raped at workplace and one in 20 en route to work. This is not reported by them due to social stigma, not to speak of many lesser violations. Police is, as is well known, often a perpetrator.

It is necessary to act upon this menace as an emergency. Security of life, person and property is fundamental to both survival and wellbeing. The state's constitutional responsibility of safety and security of citizens and their property is ignored. Sweeping measures for cleansing the political parties, the administration and the police administration is necessary. The widespread failure of law enforcement and interference with due process of law by the powerful, warrant making the failure of law enforcement and interference with its enforcement a punishable offence, to be monitored and pursued by an independent institution within the governance. Expansion of police force and strengthening it alone can only expand and strengthen the hands of injustice.

Lighting and Illumination: Our darkened and poorly lit streets harbour crime. The city collects an enormous amount on street lighting, without maintaining the facility properly. The lights go off a fortnight after replacement of bulbs. The question arises in this connection, why do the tube lights burn out so quickly, although the life of a tube is known to be 4-5 years at our homes.

Enhancement of security of life and property can reduce need for vehicular transport for many school going children and women, reducing traffic jams. More security can improve investment climate, encourage gainful work and improve productivity, bringing economic prosperity to citizens and income to the city, at no extra cost.

Improving Environment and Services

Environmental degradation has earned Dhaka the distinction of the most uninhabitable city on earth. Other urban centres fair better in respect of air pollution but otherwise deserve similar mention. Indiscriminate pollution of air, water bodies and land, parallel to steady depletion of natural regenerative agents like vegetation, forests and encroachment on lowlands, rivers and water channels is endangering life and the ecological balance. This is a governance problem relating to enforcement of law. Our record in the past one year has shown that it can be improved if we are serious. The law enforcement should be expanded to include encroachment on lowlands, river and water bodies, to industrial and clinical waste, and to air pollution by brick fields and industries.

Our urban centres do not appear to have concern for open spaces and city greenery. There is a need for Department of Open Spaces and City Greenery for development and preservation parks, open spaces, plazas, roundabouts and roadside greenery. The present policy of leasing out open spaces to business houses has led to replacement of greens with commercial structures

and bill boards, which are damaging the ecology, aesthetics and amenities of the city. This is not sanctioned in law and the officers responsible should be called to book.

Public Convenience: A city owes its citizens a minimum of public conveniences which include

a)Public toilets: This is a basic necessity which is lacking in most places, and those which are available are totally unsanitary. Without this facility people are forced to relieve themselves at roadsides, rendering these places unusable. Poor women, who work as day labourers and also pregnant women and others on visit, miss this service dearly and as a consequence refuse daily fluid intake for whole day, as they have no option like their male counterparts, and consequently develop serious health problems.

b)Night Shelters and Public Baths: Dhaka and most major cities have large number of floating population who have to spend the night in various public places, rendering them unusable. Their toilet and washing needs pollute the water bodies and secluded spaces. Women in need of wash expose themselves to male glare. They are exposed to sexual abuse at night. The city should build night shelters and public baths for the sake of minimum human dignity and clean environment. In fact as some studies show, such facilities are self sustainable economically.

c)Street furniture: A country with strong sun and long rainy season requires sufficient number of shaded benches on road sides and in open spaces for pedestrians to rest out. This is a considered a basic street furniture. Other missing services include public telephone booths, road maps displayed at prominent places and information

booths for visitors.

Drainage and open Gutters Among the infrastructure components, drainage is perhaps a glaring example of failure by our city fathers. It betrays a lack of competence in planning, refusal to learn from others and a greed for systems which offer scope for pilferage of public funds through high development and maintenance cost. A student of engineering and anyone who has seen such drains know that open rectangular gutters do not work. The appropriate drain for flow of liquid and liquid-borne waste is a pipe, in which the surface water penetrates at specified points through a grating. The pipe is concealed from view and is called a conduit drain, which is the normal solution all over the world. We also use it at homes for storm water and sewerage. It has many advantages, such as

- It works;
- It cannot be blocked by wayside garbage;
- It is self-cleaning with flow of water and needs no maintenance;
- It is concealed from view, not offensive, and does not permit breeding of mosquitoes and other vermin;
- It costs a fraction of the rectangular gutters.

Unfortunately, the corporation officials and the contractors seem to find this solution less lucrative.

Establishing supremacy of qualified professionals in the city government can greatly improve the condition of roads and drainage.

Solid Waste Collection and Disposal & Maintenance of Public Spaces: Our urban centres seem to have given up on solid waste handling which is the fault of both inhabitants and the city fathers. People of

Dhaka throw garbage anywhere, any time and in a manner which cannot be handled. They do not seem to care about their environment. This needs to be changed. City fathers also have not developed a workable solution.

In other places every city has a policy how garbage should be handled and requires the home owners to follow the rules. All cities prosecute offenders. Some cities require homeowners to separate organic waste from the rest and separate them in bags. Many require home owners to ensure a garbage storage space to city specification, without which building plans are not passed. Some require households to purchase bags from the city or containers of specific design without which garbage will not be carried away. We are in need of specific and binding rules for the city. The bottom line should be to require separation and storage of degradable and non-degradable types within the premises, allowing it to be efficiently handled.

Our city fathers do not know and

Equitable Access to Housing

Housing is a basic need. The city must offer adequate and appropriate housing opportunity to all sections of people. This means that the land use plan allocates adequate provisions for housing for all people in both owner and renter categories, and for all income groups. The land-use allocation will take into consideration the demand for various income groups and their location with respect to their vocation and place of work. Strict adherence to land use plan and building regulations need to be ensured by the concerned agencies. Planning and programs must ensure the physical and social infrastructure. This vital function, for which the RAJUK, the corporation and various service providing agencies are responsible, is neglected. The housing market has been taken over by the landlords, the speculators and real estate business, making appropriate housing beyond the reach of ordinary people. Due to failure of

garment girls and many others all day long. Our planning for mobility should take this into account and design of our roads in cities and communities geared to hierarchy of pedestrians over vehicular traffic. As a student some 40 years ago, I was told that 40-50% of road width should be allocated for sidewalks, trees and service lines. Minimum width of sidewalks is to be 10 feet, and much more in crowded areas with footpaths on both sides. In more user-friendly cities this is the case. Housing settlement projects on private initiatives are subject to these standards, and prior to approval they are required to give a financial bond equal to the cost of the outstanding infrastructure to ensure implementation of these.

Comfortable Sidewalks: Most of our foot paths are useless. Footpaths should be widened by reducing vehicular lanes if needed, ensuring their carrying capacity, with an absolute minimum width of 10 feet. The standard of pedestrian ways needs to be ensured. They should be kept free of all vendors, structures and lampposts and are to be lined with shade-giving trees and benches for occasional rest. Trees, lamppost, benches, stands for buses, and access to over- and underpasses must keep clear of the minimum right of way. Inspectors should prevent encroachment on sidewalks and should be made accountable to an internal job performance unit for failure.

Right to walk should be recognized as a priority over right of vehicles.

Public Transport: With ease of pedestrian movement and private transport made less convenient and sensible, demand for mass transit will increase. This will make possible efficient operation of better standard buses and taxis and three wheelers. Strict monitoring of their fare and service will ensure them to be an effective alternative, as has been proved in most urban areas in the world.

Efficiency of Roads : Our vehicular roads pose threat to life and vehicles. Road dividers are meant for safe and smooth movement of traffic without hazard. Steel joists planted alongside road dividers are threat to life. If the dividers are to be protected from the vehicles by life-threatening joists, the dividers have no business being in the middles of roads; so are the open gutters on the sides. The joists should be removed and the gutters should be replaced by conduit drains. The road dividers are not cluttered with bill boards or such greenery as obstruct the view. Profusion of bill boards is an eyesore in the road-scape. The road planners who do not know these basics do not know their job. Such planning is criminal and should be called to account.

Ill-maintained roads, open man-holes, jutting out joists, wayside gutters, view obstructed by bill boards and ill planned shrubs causes accidents and hamper smooth movement of traffic. These are pointers to negligence of inspectors and incompetence of road planners in the city administration. These personnel should be done away with and taxpayers' money saved.

Vehicle Stands and Roadside Parking: Halting and parking of buses and other vehicles at will on the traffic lane interfere with flowing

traffic and reduce road efficiency. Transport planning at a minimum shall make provision for them, keeping clear the traffic lanes.

Free roadside parking reduces road efficiency. Parking should be permitted only at designated locations and at a price. All parking should be metered and charged for duration. This would discourage unnecessary use of vehicles. Leasing parking lots to private parties is not sufficient deterrent to unnecessary use of vehicles, and undermine a potential source of income for the city.

Traffic Rules: Traffic rules are hardly enforced. Police ought to have driving lessons and be trained on law enforcement. Police should be committed to enforce rules without discretion. Violation should entail stiff penalty. The measures proposed above would bring several advantages, namely

- It will respond to the needs of large section of population, who cannot afford cost of transport or prefer walking;
 - It will automatically phase out the slow moving and other less efficient vehicles due to lack of demand;
 - It will greatly reduce the perennial traffic jam on streets;
 - It will reduce energy consumption by transport;
 - It will reduce air pollution and noise pollution.
- The transition to pedestrian supremacy will entail little expenditure. Initially the sidewalks have to be widened by reducing traffic lanes. The cost will soon be more than compensated by savings in yearly maintenance cost of road surface due to fewer lanes and less wear and tear due to reduced traffic. It only calls for strict law enforcement by public servants already in the payroll.

Conclusion

Improvement of Security, environment and services, housing opportunity and mobility options are the cornerstones for improving liveability of urban centres. Their improvement can favourably impact on quality of life and economic opportunities in cities.

1)Improving security is essential for improving basic and essential conditions for a normal life, increase housing and mobility options, and improve investment climate in cities and productivity of people.

2)Improvement of environment and services will lead to improvement of the quality of life and facilitate productivity.

3)Improvement of housing opportunity will fulfil a basic need, make it more affordable to all and reduce distance between home and workplace.

4)Improvement of mobility options through a shift to pedestrian supremacy on roads and better planned roads will reduce vehicular traffic and traffic jams, make movement affordable for all, reduce pollution and save energy.

Improvement of security, environment and housing opportunity do not require capital expenditure, but knowledge, commitment, a new strategy and accountability, and simply better management.

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Chronic traffic jam



Unsecured roads

care to know how to handle solid waste. They are in need of know-how, a policy and rules, to be enforced for domestic industrial and clinical wastes. Their staffs need field training on handling and work ethics. There should be inspectors to detect negligence on the part of the corporation staff or by general public, with power to penalize its breach on the spot.

In view of the persisting deficiency in the service, several community and private initiatives have developed workable strategy for collection, disposal or for both. The city has much to learn from them.

Cleaning and maintenance operation of public spaces is in great neglect due to lack of monitoring. City can gear up this activity through appropriate accountability.

Utility Services: Water, Electricity, Gas, Telephone: Basic utility services like water and gas are essential for normal life. Inadequate supply of water make life impossible in many areas, forcing inhabitants to spend many hours fetching water and supplementing it from polluted sources, causing suffering and health hazard. Lack of electricity hampers normal life and productivity. Meagre supply of water and electricity is a roadblock to economic growth of settlements. Inadequate drainage and sewerage lead to unsanitary environment. Lack of access to gas and telephone is a serious inconvenience. Delivery of these services needs to be boosted on urgent footing to improve liveability.

access to affordable housing, there has been a growth of slums and squatter settlements all over the city which provide a lucrative income to slum lords, and political & administrative thugs, encouraging growth in criminality.

A supportive framework for growth of adequate, appropriate and affordable housing for the citizens and the large number of immigrants, can be a major step towards liveability of our big cities.

It is imperative that the structural plans for the cities incorporate land allocation for all income groups, at appropriate locations, with incentive for development of mass housing for low-income groups. A further need is to move away from the concept of single family units or town houses towards multi-unit blocks and mass housing in the new housing and settlement projects of the various city improvement authorities through private initiatives.

Mobility: Transition from a Vehicular Priority mode to a Pedestrian Priority mode

Bangladesh is a poor country in which the majority cannot afford a transport on a daily basis. Generally, we prefer to walk over short distances; if walking were pleasant and without hazard, many among us would prefer walking longer distances. Many would like to walk any distance since they cannot afford transport, as do 1.5 million