

Spaces of ambivalence

The symbols of modernity that are a part of national identity

NUBRAS SAMAYEEN

“EACH monumental space becomes the metaphorical and quasi-metaphorical underpinning of a society, this by the virtue of a play of substitutions in which the religious and political realms symbolically (and ceremonially) exchange attributes—the attributes of power.” —Henri Lefebvre.

The term “modern” has multiple meanings “relating to the present and recent times, as opposed to the remote past; of, relating to, or originating in the current age or period”, which is contrary to being traditional and dependent on orthodox beliefs. Modernity refers to a specific historic time-period; it also refers to a state of being, an experience that is post-agrarian and characterised by capitalism, rationalism, and secularism. It goes hand in hand with secularism, which germinated and evolved through the three centuries of the Renaissance and its wake (14th to 17th century). Modernity evolved further with the paradigm of the Enlightenment (18th century) and accelerated with the Industrial Revolution (early to mid-19th century), and continues to this day. Anything modern becomes synonymous with industrialisation, urbanisation and consequently, progressiveness.

In 1947, there was the bloody birth of two interdependent countries—India and Pakistan—leaving millions homeless, orphaning thousands and putting all in a crisis of identity. Although the division was based on religious majority geographic areas, the hope was of a secular, modern and democratic nation, at least in India. The first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, insisted on modern mega-projects that were symbolic interventions in India’s then traditional landscape and created, or rather imposed, a new identity onto the people. Nehru invited and later hired two great modernist architects of the 20th century—the French architect Le Corbusier who designed the city of Chandigarh (1960), and the American architect Louis Kahn, who designed the Indian Institute of Management (IIM, 1962-1974) in Ahmedabad. The preference

for a foreign architect may seem contrary to the spirit of independence, but the Western style was regarded as the means to remove the national and racial stigma of being “of the East,” which at the time was more associated with tradition and suppression. Such modern architectures were supposed to be artifacts of forgetting the immediate past of colonial domination.

Nehru’s idea was to adopt modern aesthetics and build urban, industrial and progressive looking cities and campus towns such as IIM and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) to showcase a liberal India. His vision of new Indian cities echoed in his words, “Let this be a new town, symbolic of the freedom of India. Unfettered by the tradition of the past, an expression of the nation’s faith in the future.” The IITs, designed by various other modernist architects, were meant to become spaces of anti-memory, obliterating the past and becoming “temples of modernity.” The hope was that they would be healing agents. As foreseen, the IITs and IIM campuses have become symbols of modernity over the new Indian nationalist landscape.

Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) and West Pakistan were no further behind. In June 1959, with an approaching election, the central government of Pakistan under General Ayub Khan decided to create two new capitals, one in Dhaka, and the other in Islamabad. The South Asian nations were certainly in competition with each other, prompting Ayub Khan to rely on Bengali, modernist guru and pioneer architect Muzharul Islam’s decision to bring in a big name, equal in stature to Le Corbusier.

Designed by Louis Kahn, an icon in the modern architectural world, the National Assembly Complex in Dhaka (more commonly known as the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban)—the work on which was halted during the Liberation War—was later intended to stand as an emblem of Bangladesh’s democratic struggles and triumph. Kahn’s design bestowed us with a monument that holds a unique place in the country’s national imagination. The Sangsad Bhaban created a national identity for the

country, as is evident from the Bangladeshi currency notes, which hold its image along with that of other heritage sites.

To make these cities and their architecture look secular, both Corbusier and Kahn consciously adopted stylistic modern aesthetics: architecture without minarets, domes or other direct symbolic elements. In fact, Kahn faced friction with the Government of Pakistan for avoiding any forms that may seem Islamic. These designs, without objectifying any race, religion or creed, exemplified secular and neutral architectural aesthetics and were in the same vein with

can we truly call ourselves modern? Have the visions of Jawaharlal Nehru, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhashani, Mahatma Gandhi and many others—who expanded on the co-existence of religion and progression, modernism and traditionalism, the rational and the irrational, and the perceived ideas of the East and the West—failed?

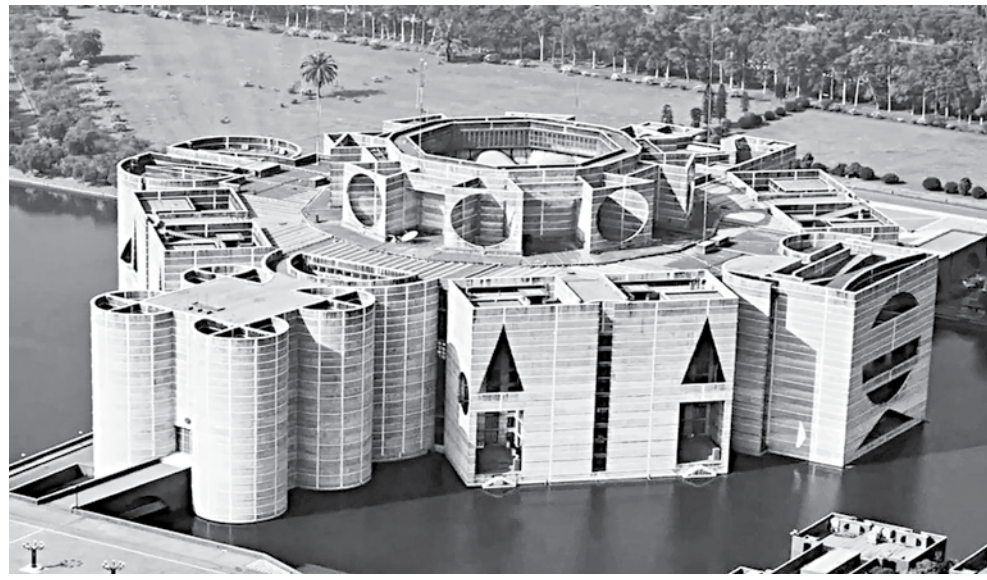
The freedom we achieved in 1947 was neither the resolution of a problem, nor the beginning of the South Asian liberal society. Rather, it was the beginning of an ambiguous identity. Riots, clashes over inequalities and

historical and social ruptures. While they signify modernity, we still suffer from the deep-rooted ideological backwardness that continues from the region’s pre-modern and pre-independence paradigm. Hence, it is a visible, as well as an invisible, rift between people and the designed spaces. This separation is not solely mental; with more recently implemented barriers, walls and heightened security, these places of modernist hopes have instead become physical isolated from the public. Yet these modernist enclaves are now a quintessential part of the everyday nationalistic landscape that represent South Asia’s modernity, from which we cannot divorce ourselves.

We cannot claim this to be the failure of the architecture per se; after all, spatial meaning relies on the people’s use and imagination, as well as both personal and collective memories. While Kahn and Corbusier have perished, their designed places have become a simultaneity of past, present and future; of the past that is an attempt at erasure, the present that is the failure and the future, which is our hope. We can also see these spaces as a representation of progress towards democracy.

With concrete and bricks, these are the sites of permanence in conjunction with the temporality of history, society and memory. According to urban and postmodern political geographer, Edward J Soja, they are the “third space”, with the combination and simultaneities of “the real and the imagined.” Perhaps we could also add “permanence and temporary” in the paradigm of South Asian modernity, representing a society that is in constant flux and where modern ideals can still be elusive. Therefore, the façades of these edifices and the society of real citizens are two worlds that are constantly asserting their claims (or images). Can these spaces become the antidote to alleviate modernity’s discontent in South Asia? Can we ever evolve into becoming modern and reclaim these spaces as our own?

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The National Parliament House of Bangladesh

PHOTO: COLLECTED

other world architecture of that period.

However, after almost three-quarter of a century of partition, South Asia still suffers from an acute schizophrenia. It has a modern, nationalist landscape, yet our socio-cultural structures are yet to be modern. Informality—unlike the formalism of modernity—is its vein, and our societies seem unable to accept modern value systems. With social backwardness, rising religious orthodoxy and an ongoing practice of volatile, religion-centered politics in the South Asian countries,

rising tensions, not only among different religious groups but also between unequal social classes, define a discontent modern South Asia. Therefore, with persisting dichotomies amid the strong pluralistic culture of the subcontinent, Kahn’s and Corbusier’s modern capitals and institutions remain as “spaces of ambivalence” and not of the modernity they once aspired to.

Conceivably, these edifices and cities were prematurely envisioned and consequently produced along the lines of deliberate

Our negligence of the ever-growing gaming industry

AHMED MADHURJA and SOUMIK SIDDIQUE

IN the early 1990s, playing arcade games like *Mustapha* opened a whole new world for Bangladeshi children. Fast-forward to the modern day, and technology has accelerated the growth of a new generation of gamers in our country. Yet, 20-25 years later, our country is yet to grasp the huge reach and prospects of the global gaming industry—let alone accept the idea of providing training and building careers in gaming—which, at present, is worth almost USD 152 billion worldwide. To put this in perspective, gaming is worth more than both the movie and the music industry combined!

There are many ways game developers generate revenue—such as through the traditional sale of hard copies of video games, online distribution of video games through third-party clients like Steam, Epic Store, etc., and in-game micro-transactions with things like loot-boxes and sales of customised features (which allows free-to-play (F2P) games like *Fortnite* and other *Battle Royale* games to thrive).

In 2018 alone, the gaming industry generated almost USD 135 billion worldwide. It has marked a steady 10 percent growth for two years and is expected to reach USD 180.1 billion by 2021. However, Bangladesh’s video game market is worth only USD 63 million, less than a mere 0.05 percent of the global market value. This is mostly because of negligence and the improper treatment of enthusiastic people who wish to delve into video game development. We are losing crucial animators, developers and coders to the outside market. However, there are a small number of Bangladeshi companies who are trying to change this trend.

Gaming enthusiasts and developers of Bangladesh started developing personal computer (PC) games in the early 2000s, starting with a racing game named *Dhaka Racing* set in the streets of Dhaka. It was the first 3D game developed by Bangladeshis. Then in 2004, a first-person shooter (FPS) game called *Arunodoyer Agnishikha* was developed by Trimatrik Interactive. Unfortunately, game development in Bangladesh was halted for the following eight years, until in 2012, Team 71 delivered *Liberation 71*.

Recently, the hype for local games reached a peak in gaming communities, as some big titles were announced for release, such as *Agontuk* and *Annihilation*. Developed by M7 Productions and Attrito, *Agontuk* will have an open-world setting, and *Annihilation* will be the first-ever FPS online competitive game developed by Dhaka-based Crisis Entertainment. While PC game developers are facing some negligence in Bangladesh, our mobile gaming industry is showing steady growth over the years, and some developers are even providing world-class games and applications. The Mascoteers have already established a dominance in the smart-phone gaming sector, as well as in television games, Gear VR (a virtual reality headset) games, and on many other platforms in Bangladesh. Now, they have over 25 games in the Google Play Store, which is no small feat for a local game development company. *Tap-Tap Ants*, downloaded 15 million times, is also one of the most popular games developed by the Bangladeshi company Rise Up Labs.

However, despite slow but somewhat steady progress, we are still far behind in the gaming industry. In contrast, our counterparts in India are flourishing; they are focusing

more and more on their gaming sector and reaping the rewards, which is contributing to their economy as well. Currently valued at USD 890 million, the Indian gaming industry is expected to grow at an annual growth rate of 14.3 percent, with mobile gaming taking the lead with a share of 71 percent of growth. Today, the number of game-developing companies in India stands at over 100 and is growing exponentially, although in 2010, this number was only a mere 25.

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Although Bangladesh still lags in the game development industry, there is a huge number of gaming enthusiasts in the country who consistently participate in various gaming events and even compete nationally. While the most likely career path in the gaming industry is as a developer, coder or animator, very few people are aware that there is also the possibility of becoming a professional gamer. However, there is still a lack of global exposure. In 2018, some of the Indian companies invested in e-sports, with prize pools of over INR 10 million. Comparatively,

the Bangladeshi gaming competitions operate on a much smaller scale. AIUB Cyber Gaming Fest, AMD Gamers Fest Dhaka, Axiata Game hero, etc. are some of the gaming tournaments and e-sports events that are being held in Bangladesh.

E-sports is another factor that is contributing to the rapid growth of the video game industry and silently taking over the entertainment world. The opportunities and the scope for growth in this sector are immense, given that there are 2.6 billion video gaming enthusiasts around the world, and the numbers only keep skyrocketing. Today, a professional gaming career is a lucrative one, since numerous competitions are organised around the globe and tens of thousands to millions of dollars are given away as prize money. A few of the highest-paid and the most prestigious e-sports competitions today are *Fortnite World Cup*, *DOTA 2 Championship*, *Call of Duty World League (CWL)* and *League of Legends World Championship*.

In the global arena, the salaries of game developers can range anywhere from USD 50,000 to USD 120,000, depending on seniority and experience, which can often take between one to three years of development. In 2014, the Bangladeshi MassiveStar studio began a project to train 80,000 students as video game developers. Observing the potential of this industry, Mustafa Jabbar, the Minister of Post and Telecommunication, expressed his worry over the local gaming market being occupied by international companies. He is right to show concern; the proliferating gaming market is increasingly generating revenue as the number of gamers rise every day, and local developers need to be quick and grab this opportunity as soon


as possible. In an unprecedented move, the government of Bangladesh actually did undertake the “Skills Development for Mobile Game and Application Project”, worth BDT 2.82 billion. However, this project focuses primarily on mobile applications and games, and fails to explain the diverse ways in which the gaming industry can boost our economy.

Gone are the days when gaming was only considered to be an undesirable hobby for bored teenagers, and describing it as a “niche market” is a massive understatement. It is a booming industry where continuous innovation and the launching of more and more games is generating more revenue than ever thought of before, and where there is no possibility of a drop in demand anytime soon. Bangladesh needs to immediately get on the gaming bandwagon and invest in technologies and training that will allow people to pursue lucrative careers in this industry. We also need to get rid of a distrust of games and gaming as a “waste of time” and embrace careers that belong in the 21st century and can ride the waves of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

For now, we can only hope that one day, our local developers will develop AAA games (informal classification for games produced and distributed by mid-sized or major publishers with high development and marketing budgets), or that we will have an *Assassin’s Creed* title that is set during our Liberation War and is designed and written by our local developers. With the right training and investment, there is no reason for us to be unable to reach this level, but we need to act now, before it is too late.

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QUOTABLE Quote



WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM
(1874-1965)
English playwright and novelist

We are not the same persons this year as last; nor are those we love. It is a happy chance if we, changing, continue to love a changed person.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Make sense
- 6 Parking pro
- 11 Silly one
- 12 Cartoon genre
- 13 Had title to
- 14 Excessive
- 15 Item of little value
- 17 Avril follower
- 19 Manx, for one
- 20 Block up
- 23 Stamping need
- 25 Bullfight beast
- 26 “Unlikely!”
- 28 Altar exchange
- 29 Sofa’s cousin
- 30 Attach a patch
- 31 Storage site
- 32 Completely
- 33 Get crazy

DOWN

- 1 Previously
- 2 Market indicator
- 3 “You said it!”
- 4 Manual reader
- 5 Rickshaw’s kin
- 6 Bank fixture
- 7 Last Stuart ruler
- 8 Top
- 9 Outback bird
- 10 Course need
- 16 Gradually appears, as a film

35 Viking of the comics

38 Did some yard work

41 Knock for a loop

42 Bugs bugs him

43 Used a Keyboard

17 Some skirts

18 Battery end

20 “I have no idea!”

21 Shakespearean spirit

22 Tourist stop

24 Scoreboard abbr.

25 Young one

27 Lengths of service

31 Yawning, perhaps

33 Intent look

34 Yarn

35 Bowler, e.g.

36 Writer Tan

37 Opening

39 Mouse-spotting cry


40 Hosp. staffers

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

C	R	A	V	E	L	I	M	B
H	E	L	E	N	P	E	N	A
A	T	L	A	S	R	A	N	G
N	O	E	L	C	I	N	E	M
T	U	G	S	U	M	R	A	T
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H	O	B	O	V	I	A	L	
C	A	B	L	I	L	R	O	E
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L	O	S	E	S	T	A	C	I
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B	A	S	S		M	E	T	E

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

