

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Travel

PROVISIONS

yet always renewed. It is for that taste that they take off, as soon as possible, moonstruck. In one particularly frantic year I thus exported myself from Warsaw to Tokyo, Moscow to London via Rome and Toledo (Spain...). The reason of my travel was mere pretense. The only important thing was that sudden desire to pack-up and go.

The mystery of these happenstance peregrinations partly lies within this question: who am I when I am elsewhere? Am I the same or that facetious Golem, roaming Manhattan's back alleys looking for a bar or, in Madrid, for a bodega? In Rome, do as the Romans do... The same goes for Hong Kong, Vancouver or Sao Paulo. The moment you set foot on foreign soil, all it takes is to blend with it: my innerself then becomes that native, both alike and different, prey to a new fantasy. Observing him offers as many surprises as the cities within which he moves. The cities more than nature, because, more often than not, that is the residence of the loved woman, the master resuscitated from the past or the god one wishes to talk to on a friendlier basis and for whom one has left everything. Nature is truly too foreign: it eludes or overwhelms us: Africa's deserts, Brazilian forests, coral seas are for us the sources of such sure happiness that it must be postponed, saved for that age in our life when we will be able to abandon ourselves to its delights without any remorse. Ageless nature opens our eyes to our clumsy mediocrity, to our smallness. It is too difficult to tear oneself away from it again and the pain

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of not being forever part of her makes us flee her. Cities, on the other hand, are easy to leave after audacious and anonymous plunges to their depths. There is always something in them that does not hold us back, there, time flies at their own rhythm, they seduce and abandon us like capricious mistresses. Lost in the pursuit of a girl whose perfume has knocked him out, or the smile of a statue, or a rare liqueur, that traveler forever asking questions of himself is, in fact, chasing himself, in the hope that other architectures, other tastes, other faces will better reveal him to himself and soothe his hidden wounds, these dark waters rolling in his deepest self and that he would love to purify, while spring lasts. In vain. His own meanders, his ghost-filled labyrinths are with him, wherever he goes, and travel is merely a new way of getting lost in them, once again. The cities he thinks he is crossing are just splitting him apart a little more. One finally travels only to give a new name to one's Weltschmerz. To try and forget oneself a little, while one verifies that all the others are troubled by the same disorders as our own, busy, as we, and hidden behind similar masks, body and soul drifting in that strange motion that is called living. And since we are more lost than when we got there, it is not rare to finally call on the gods. It is they, at some sanctuary lost in a remote part of the city, who start imagining our travel's ultimate and unconscious goal: one asks of them to account for our despair, our condition or merely to feel their presence. Whatever the latitude, they shall never remain silent. Kyoto's Sanjusangen-do, with its thousand and one statues of Kannon, Kiev's Saint Sophia cathedral or Well's, a thousand other places, equally mysterious, are the foreign worlds where one best lives, naked and severe, like an antique warrior.

One thinks then that travel is merely the quest for the doors to the universe. A kind of costly ersatz for the motionless transports offered by the dreams and books of our own room. The temples man has erected to these Gods are the most secret of all doors and yet more accessible than those inflicted upon us by women or art. Between bars and sanctuaries one shall never know who one is when elsewhere, but he who temporarily lives there will give us the illusion: half way between drunkenness and ecstasy, there is always a spot where one can find, untouched, the solitude that one had thought of escaping.

Courtesy: LABEL, France

by Jacques Baudouin

It starts with a new taste in the mouth, a tremor of the whole body, something like lust. At dawn, it becomes obvious, one must leave. It is urgent. Of all the travelers walking the planet, those afflicted with such symptoms are the hardest to grasp. Some are merely curious, seeking some unknown temptress, their soul nomadic, and those who travel out of sloth and laziness, those again who merely go. If possible on the spur of the moment. For those, a tribe I call 'my own', to travel is not so much to be on the move as to be somewhere else. Seized by some sudden frenzy, they would do anything to be leaving as soon as possible as if, all of a sudden, to live, love, sometimes lose oneself elsewhere had become their only reason for existing, for a single day or for part of a lifetime, responding to the call of a woman, a museum suddenly opening its doors or acute nostalgia. Blessed are these impulsive nomads! This century's machines have given them the possibility of meeting, be it for a night, in the heart of Tokyo, listening to the raucous call of seller of exorbitantly high-priced yams, or to hop on the 9 am Venice Accelerato. From that moment on, they are transformed by pleasure: they are elsewhere, where is of little importance and yet they continue to exist. The surprise is a total one and

Jade Island, a Jewel Again

The renovation of Qiong Dao marks a new step in the protection of China's cultural heritage. It has been rescued from the devastation of the Cultural Revolution

Gao Fengfeng writes from Beijing

It is just like returning to my childhood when Buddhist statues stood here solemnly, says Ma Xuchu, a noted architect and scholar of ancient structures, as he inspects newly restored Qiong Dao, or Jade Island, of Beihai Park.

The renovation of the centrepiece of this capital city's park has cost 7.2 million yuan (US\$1.25 million). But city residents, and the rest of China, consider it worthy, rejuvenating the park after years of turmoil and neglect.

Qiong Dao was built in 1179, the prime period of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) which occupied much of north China, including present Mongolia and part of Russia. Located at the centre of Beihai Park, the earliest imperial garden, the islet is actually an architectural ensemble consisting of dozens of imposing halls where the images of Buddhist deities and saints are enshrined. There are also some grottoes with fine frescoes featuring celestial figures.

In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), especially during the reign of Qianlong (1736-95), many more porches, pavilions and buildings imitating south China's architectural style were added, making Qiong Dao a royal Shangri-La.

The Tibetan-style White Pagoda, erected on top of the man-made hill on Qiong Dao in 1651 to placate the then separatists, is world famous and has become Beihai's symbol and a Beijing landmark. Besides its religious significance, the pagoda was militarily important. The Qing government positioned signal guns and royal guards there for the capital's security.

During its 800-year history, Qiong Dao has been shaken by several earthquakes and the 36-metre-high White Pagoda was rebuilt after one such disaster. However, the worst devastation was wrought by politics.

The year 1966 witnessed the beginning of the Cultural Revolution which culminated in the vandalism of many ancient relics in China. Qiong Dao was not spared.

At that time, all the Buddhist statues here were destroyed, architect Ma recalls. The pedestals lay empty, covered with dust. The halls on the island were deserted and unattended, a desolate scene.

Some halls, such as the Fa Lun Hall, were turned into shops selling cheap political souvenirs, or used for storage. No tourists visited Qiong Dao at that time. It gathered dust for years, according to an old staff member.

The great damage to Beihai Park resulted in the closure of the garden in 1970. Although the park reopened in 1978, Qiong Dao remained unattended for over a decade.

In order to draw visitors and make money, the former park authorities converted several major halls on Qiong Dao into curio shops, reducing the pearl of the royal garden to a marketplace. This saddened many old-timers like Mr Ma.

Now that high-rise buildings have mushroomed in the ancient capital, more and more citizens recall Beijing's peculiar grandeur and feel it imperative to preserve and restore the city's traditional features.

Motivated by this passion, a reconstruction scheme for Qiong Dao was initiated early in 1993. The project — a joint effort by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Gardening and the Administrative Office of Beihai Park — has revived some of Qiong Dao's former glory.

More than 40 Buddhist statues have been recast, including the Sakyamuni Buddha, eight great Bodhisattvas, eighteen Arhats, and four celestial kings. All were made in fibreglass by artists from Beijing Tiantu Engineering Company of Decorative Arts, who also repainted the dim, weather-beaten frescoes.

The visual records of the original statues and frescoes were too rare to serve as blueprints, says Wang Kai, head of the Tiantu Company.

'We only got access to some written materials or used other ancient structures, such as Yong He Temple and Fa Hai Temple as models. The restorations, strictly speaking, are not replicas of the originals, but we've done our best.'

Scholars of history, architecture, archaeology and religion supervised the work to

make sure the statues were historically faithful.

'We were very conscientious. Our principle was to do credit to our ancestors and Buddhist art,' says Mr Wang. One architect even made it a point to take a bath every morning before work, a ritual to show his respect and piety.

More than one-third of the 7.2 million yuan cost was lent by the staff of Beihai Park. The 3 million yuan necessary to start work was collected within one week.

Su Baoguo has been a security officer at Beihai Park for 25 years. 'As a veteran, I thought I should do my share for the restoration of Qiong Dao. I must say I'm not well-off, but I gave my portion because it has to do with the preservation of cultural relics.'

'All the staff are very enthusiastic about this undertaking. They know it will benefit future generations immensely,' says Li Zhenxi, the new director of Beihai Park who initiated the renovation project.

Mr Li says the repayment of the loans will come from ticket sales. Admission to the restored Qiong Dao costs 10 yuan (US\$1.70), and on an average day it receives about 5,000 visitors.

The renovation of Qiong Dao marks a new step in the protection of China's cultural heritage and rescues ancient artifacts from possible oblivion.

'It would have been inconceivable to place this project on the agenda a few years ago. Nowadays, people have changed a lot when it comes to religion and tourism,' says Mr Wang.

Qiong Dao, the Jade Island, is a jewel again.

—Depthnews Asia

Architecture of the Last 100 Years

by Rabiul Husain

URBANIZATION is called the second revolution of human civilization, first being the agriculture. In Bengal the first urbanization began in the third century BC. This piece of information came to light for the first time when the 85-lettered 6-line Mahasthan stone inscription was discovered suddenly by Baru Fokir. Huen Tsang came to visit Mahasthan, the then ancient capital city of Bengal, now at Bogra. At that time it was known as Pundranagar or Pundrabardhan. The name came from 'pundra' meaning sugarcane which was then produced abundantly. He described that the pinnacle of the temple of that city was visible afar and the height was about 150 ft.

Architecture has got the close affinity with the process of urbanization. It was derived from the necessity of developing and functioning of the state, commerce and culture by man. It is necessary to have a central locality where all facilities are established thoughtfully for the use of all. This kind of locality is called a city in general. To run and function this city efficiently, there is a need to have permanent office space, space for the housing, entertainment, communication system etc and the art by which the whole process is being realistically built is the art of architecture that has to be functionally efficient, aesthetically attractive and above all has to have the quality to sustain against the cruel time. This is why the subject of

architecture automatically appears when we talk about urbanization.

After Mahasthan, the third century BC, though Mainamati-Paharpur do not give the full identity of urbanization, yet it upholds the high quality of architecture through its various Buddhist shrines and temples. In the ancient time the seat and dwelling places of kings were automatically turned into an urban area. Generally the cities were built with moat or wall all around for defence and to protect against enemies from outside. These kinds of fort-cities were built at Dinajpur and Rangpur areas in ancient time in a great number the ruins of which are still to be found. Besides fort-city, there were cities built also without walls specially at lower areas of red soil and hills. But those were ruined forever by the gradual lapse of time. These structures could not be sustained due to three main causes: a) The alluvial soil on which the structures were built could not last long. b) This land of monsoon is full of rains and humidity so nothing is permanent here and c) Being the land of alluvial soil, the permanent building materials like stones are not available here. Due to these causes, instead of having built great monuments and buildings in ancient times very few are visible at present. So, we become frightened sometimes as if we have no tradition. Which is not

true at all. And this is why this country can be called as a vast and large village and also the centre of the rural culture and civilization. Though this definition is not that appropriate, but it helps to understand the overall history and situation in the context of ancient period. But now that has been changed specially for the last one hundred years.

This small country of only 56 thousand square miles in area was ruled by many kings and rulers from outside since its existence. In Ottereya Aranyak the ancient Hindu religious book, the ward Banga was found for the first time. Then the rough and tough people of this country did not allow the great Mahabir to preach the Jain religion in 6th century BC. So, the name of this country became rough or Rurah area. The name of Bangladesh is found in the book of Mahabharat, Ramayan, Puran and ancient Greek and Latin history. The son of Ugra Sen was the great ruler of Gangaridhi the ancient Bangladesh where Alexander the Great could not dare to appear due to her defence and military outfits and rivers and marshy lands in 327 BC. Then this land was successively ruled by Emperor Ashok in 3rd century BC, the Murya and the Gupta in 4th century AD, the Gopchandra in 6th century AD, Shashanka and Harshabardhan in 7th century. After the death of Emperor Harshabardhan in 647 AD

Bangladesh political chaos and internecine feuds reigned in for long 100 years and this period is called Matsanaya but only in north without its influence in southern and eastern areas. This part was ruled by Bhadra, Kharag, Rat, Loknath, Dev and Chandra dynasties successively which ranged from 7th to 11th century AD. The north part was begun to be ruled by Gopal, son of Batyap from whom the Pal dynasty followed after the Matsanaya in the middle of 8th century AD and continued for long 400 years. The Bangalee national feelings, nourished by them, flourished for the first time in the history. The art of architecture, sculpture, paintings were created in all ways by the all-time genius and great architects-artists-sculptors like Dhiman and Bitopal and Bangladesh feels proud to inherit their glorious creativity even at this time. Truly, the seed of the Bangalee culture and tradition had been sowed at that time which is now called as the missing link of our glorious past. After the Pal dynasty, the Hindu rulers of Sen dynasty appeared from Karnataka to rule this whole land in 12th century AD. They at that time, began the communal violence in this area for the first time in the name of Hindu revivalism and which extended so severely that many Buddhist Bangalees were compelled to leave this land by groups for good to save their dear lives and went to other nearby countries and this tragic event is known as the



Ashutosh Majhi, Dhaka

Courtesy: Mohammad Iqbal/AB Bank



Curzon Hall, Dhaka

Great Exodus in the history of Bangladesh. In this way, it is considered that many of our talented Buddhist artists, artisans, intellectuals, teachers left this country and thus occurred the event of transfer of skill or brain-drain for the first time, thanks to inhuman religious and political causes. After the Sen dynasty the Muslims came to rule this country in the first part of the 13th century AD i.e. in 1206 AD with Turkish soldier Bakhtiar Khilji taking the lead.

The southern part of Bangladesh did not fall under the Muslim rule till then. The Sultan of Sonargaon, Fakhruddin denied the rule of Delhi and occupied the whole of Bangladesh in 1338 AD and his Sultanate dynasty ruled this land independently till 1538 AD i.e. for long 200 years. This Sultanate period was again very successful to uphold and cherish the Bangalee sensibility and consciousness as a nation politically, culturally and linguistically by the liberal and generous patronage of Sultans with the initiative, help and cooperation of Hindu ministers and advisers particularly in Bangla language which did not happen even at the time of Hindu rulers. It occurred not only in mother language Bangla but in other subjects specially in architecture where a conscious motivation of creating Bangla architecture was thoughtfully taken into consideration with local materials like brick, wood, considering local climate, way of life, available skill and work force. A true reflection of this could be found in the various mosques and mausoleums of Bagerhat and those are considered to be an extension

of the heritage of the Pal rule. After this period came the brief rule of Shershah. Afgan Sultan Karrani also ruled this land even in the era of Akbar the great. The independent twelve Bhuiyans under the leadership of Isha Khan fought against the Mughal. After that the capital of Bangladesh was established in Dhaka in the era of Emperor Jahangir in 1608 AD and thus the city of Dhaka was born. The Mughals ruled for 132 years from 1608 to 1740, the Nawabs for 17 years from 1740 to 1757, the British for 190 years from 1757 to 1947 and the pre-independence era was for 24 years i.e. from 1947 to 1971 and then the nation of Bangladesh came into being under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In short this is the political and chronological history of Bangladesh.

Looking through this history it is found that at different times the process of urbanization occurred in this part of land very haphazardly. To the 64 districts and 460 thana towns which we have got, the urbanization came to grow in British time at first and then in modern times. Only the growth of Dhaka city of 386 years old was more or less steady throughout the time. Yet it was not so smooth. The capital of this land was changed again and again from Sonargaon, Gaur, Tanda or Tara, Rajmahal, Dhaka, Murshidabad and lastly to Dhaka. When the capital of Bangladesh had been changed from Dhaka to Murshidabad in 1704, Dhaka almost became abandoned totally and turned to a ghost city. Dhaka again used to get importance as the

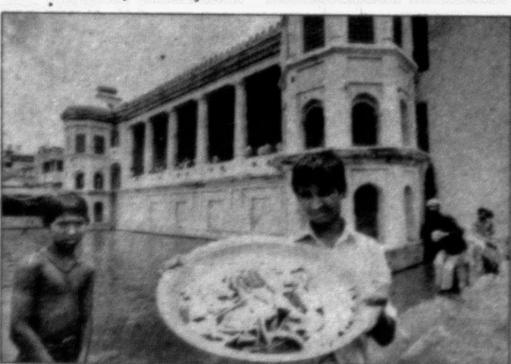
capital of East Bengal in the British period specially after the partition movement of Bengal in 1905 and the planning and development works began under the patronage of British government officially after the long gap since the construction of Lalbag Fort of Mughal time. But it lasted only for six years i.e. in 1911 the development works stopped to stay after the withdrawal of the partition order of Bengal in 1911. Yet the British gave importance to Dhaka as a regional city where Dhaka University, hospitals, schools, residential areas grew and also it is true that the Nawabs of Dhaka also helped for the development of this great city specially for various building constructions, electricity, sewerage, roads and communication, law and order situation etc.

Now this is the happy beginning of the Bangla 15th century. We can look into the development of the art of architecture critically as to what happened here since the last one hundred years i.e. 1894. At the time of British rule the European architecture came to flourish in Dhaka for the first time. The mixed type of architecture developed. It mixed with Mughal and other types like Greek, Roman, Victorian. The Curzon Hall, Sallimullah Hall of Nawabs, Secretariat bldg now Medical College Hospital, High Court, a few residential areas and above all the planning of Dhaka city in the context of roads and communication net works, place of entertainment specially Ramna Park area — all were initiated and established by Mr Woodcock, a great Botanist of his time. This mixed type of architecture also grew in

other places specially in Railway stations, Court Buildings, Circuit Houses, Govt office and residential buildings etc. It is also noteworthy that the laws of permanent settlement were introduced by the British in 1793 and as a result a group neo-rich class of Zamindars came into existence with elite urban culture. With their patronage the development works flourished not in cities like Calcutta but also in remotest village areas where palaces, temples, dance halls, schools, office buildings etc were constructed following that mixed Victorian or Indo-Saracenic style and those are the part of our architectural heritage. During the pre-independence time of 24 years, modern architecture found its way for the first time in to Dhaka and it was through two buildings namely, the Arts Institution and the Dhaka University Library designed by the first modern architect of the country Architect Muzharul Islam. At that time their were no qualified architect and so a number of buildings were designed by foreign architects as we found in Dhaka city, for example the buildings of Kamalapur Railway Station, the students' hostel of Engineering University, Teachers Students Centre, Home Economics College, and outside Dhaka we found the Rural Development Academy in Comilla and various buildings of Rajshahi and Mymensingh universities.

After this, an extraordinary development took place in the art of architecture throughout the 47 years of time. Almost all the works of architecture evolved around

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Hussaini Dargah, Dhaka



A mosque in old Dhaka

Photo: Courtesy — Anwar Hussain