

YEP TALK

A Concrete Jungle

Scrapping of two environment friendly laws prove too costly for the city

Mamnoon Murshed Chowdhury

"BUILT on maximum allowable area" the priority number one turns out to be the same each time, at the beginning of a design, an architect asks the client for his list of requirements. In fact, in most of the cases, this is followed by a bolder, no-nonsense pronouncement: "We will, of course, extend up to the boundary line from first floor onwards". Why? Well, why not? Everybody else has been doing it! "So why lose out?" The architect seldom has any answers to this. There is hardly any tool at his discretion, with the help of which he can restrict the proud plot-owner of late 20th century Dhaka. Soaring land prices and non-performance by a lackadaisical building authority have driven consciousness out of the mind of practically everyone in this suffocating city. These days, even individuals, planning to build homes on precious plots, are adamantly unwilling to leave one single square inch of open area more than any real estate developer would. Bad news for the city. Worse for its future citizens.

The Set Back Rules

Consider, for instance, the new developments in prime city areas such as Shiddheshori, Shegunbagicha, Dhanmondi, Gulshan or Baridhara. According to RAJUK's Building Construction Rules, one only has to leave a maximum four feet wide vacant space from each side of a building and equally sorry looking figures of five feet and six-and-a-half feet on front and backsides respectively. The resulting ground coverage is disastrous to say the least. Urban areas that once had healthy open to sky breathing spaces have now gradually turned into concrete jungles. In fact, to borrow from Prince Charles, "monstrous carbuncles" on the face of the city. With no density limits set by RAJUK as regards to the number of units that can be built within a single plot, apartments are being crammed in the so-called "luxury" complexes. These have all kinds of names starting from Serenity to Serenade and here, your spacious so-called master bedroom is only a nervous eight feet away from your neighbour's kitchen verandah. "It is impossible to design environmentally sound spaces", says one architect who works as a consultant for some leading real estate firms. "If you have to put in forty units within one high plot", the zero control on the density limits is also the main cause for breakdown in service infrastructures like water, gas and sewerage systems.

Only two years ago, RAJUK modified its Building Construction Rules for the worse. Gone was the law which stipulated that the maximum allowable built space in a plot shall not exceed 66% of its total area and the rest shall remain vacant, open to sky spaces. The unofficial practice of not permitting more than one unit per katha of land was also put into halt. By abolishing these two very important tools of environment control, the policy-makers virtually surrendered to the notion that if one has limited land at the city centre and a huge population to accommodate, one has to compromise on quality and/or remain insouciant about the far-reaching consequences of short term decisions. It was alleged then that RAJUK had succumbed to pressures exerted by the developers lobby, who lasciviously eyed the plots of Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Baridhara. Rumours were also rife that RAJUK would also permit eight-storey construction in those areas, prompting some developers to alter the foundation designs of projects about to be built. A study by the Institute of Architects Bangladesh shows that if all the plots in Dhanmondi have six storey buildings, the congestion on the internal streets will increase to such levels that it will take 22 minutes to reach the Shongshod Bhobon from mid-Dhanmondi areas. This time will increase to 45 to 90 minutes if all buildings are eight to ten stories high. The Institute also warned about total failure of sewerage and service infrastructures.

Social Responsibility? You must be kidding. . .

Gone are the days when an individual considered the impact his personal decisions would have on the neighbours, the neighbourhood and the city as a whole. The government, the architects and urban planners, the media and our whole system of education have failed miserably to create awareness among the city dwellers. But then, if the laws of the land continue to declare all the construction decisions that are harmful to the environment as perfectly legal, how can anyone, specially the professionals, convince an individual to refrain from taking such decisions?

Land prices and rental value have increased to such staggeringly high levels that all other considerations have become secondary. To give up almost a katha of land from a precious plot at mid-city Dhaka to save some thirty-year old trees, seems a ludicrous idea. "Arrey architect shahab, a katha of land in this area is worth twenty lakhs takal" says the client. And he is not exaggerating. Hundreds of trees are being felled each month to make room for giant, concrete oblongs. One direct impact of this "legal" act is the average temperature of urban Dhaka, which have been rising steadily for the last few years.

The most common argument in favour of all that has been going on, is that we are short of buildable land and the geographical characteristics of Dhaka restrict the growth of the city in east-west directions. But let's face it, if we have to grow in north and south, we just have to. Twenty years ago, making it to the Mottifield office from your Uttora residence seemed impossible. Now, with Premium and BRTC bus services, it has become a breeze. We can have new developments in areas as far-flung as Gazipur, provided we integrate the transportation systems in the physical development plans. Be it a private sector project or a RAJUK initiative. An evenly spread out settlement may lessen the pressure on the city centre and eventually stem the rise in land prices.

But, as an immediate step, RAJUK should revive the two laws it made redundant two years ago and reinforce them with supportive by-laws. May be RAJUK can make it mandatory to submit a landscape or plantation plan along with the approval drawings. It may also offer tax rebates to those who keep a certain portion of the plot vacant as green, open to sky space. Architects and urban planners can come up with hundreds of ideas, but without RAJUK backing them up, they can hardly make a difference. It's about time RAJUK takes clue from that Phillips slogan and vows to "make things better".

Arch. Chowdhury is a partner at Metaphor Architects.

Young Architects Speak Out

There is unanimity among all architects that the Building Construction Rules of RAJUK need to be strengthened in view of deteriorating urban environment. To find out areas that demand immediate action, we approached some Dhaka based young architects with the following question-

If you were given the freedom to make one addition or alternation to the existing Building Construction Rules, what would it be? Here are their replies

Rafiq Azam Shatotto



I would like to add a rule that restricts the maximum covered area within a plot to a certain limit. RAJUK previously had a rule, which specified that at least one-third area should be left vacant as open to sky spaces, but for reasons unknown this was abolished. For proper lighting, adequate ventilation and healthy environment, I do not think more than 60% covered area should be allowed under any circumstances. The distance between buildings in two adjacent plots and the distance between the road and a building need also to be increased than what they are in the present set back rules.

Asifur Rahman Bhuiyan

Dept. of Architecture, PWD



There is one law in the present set of rules, which stipulate that residential buildings up to four storey high may be designed by graduate civil engineers, diploma civil engineers or diploma architects. Since the majority of the urban residential buildings fall within that category, most of them are being built without the involvement of an architect. Hence, these buildings are hardly ever responsive to climatic and cultural contexts and as a result, a slum like environment has

evolved in Dhaka's residential districts. I fail to understand the differences in residential characteristics between four and five storey buildings. Why should we require an architect for a five-storey building, if we can do a four-storey without him?

I would like to amend this one particular rule and make mandatory the involvement of architects in all buildings, regardless of heights.

A.K.M. Abu Hasan In Grid Architects



The violation of RAJUK rules is the major problem in our urban areas. Let's make it clear at the very first place that the rules, as they are presently, are not adequate to foster an ideal urban environment. Still, the landowners have an intractable attitude to violate the RAJUK laws. To prevent violations, I want to propose a law, which will require that all new buildings, after completion of construction work, shall have to be inspected by its designer architects and engineers. Unless they certify that the building have been built as per their design and as per RAJUK rules, occupancy should not be allowed.

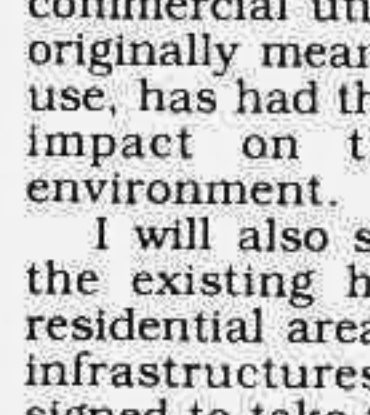
As regards to the buildings which have already been built violating the rules, prompt action should be taken for demolition of unauthorised portions of buildings. When this process becomes slow due to legal entanglements, I propose that RAJUK put black paint on a significant part of the front elevations of buildings, so that the violators of law. We might end up having 90% of all buildings in the city having black faces, but let's admit the fact that regardless of our social position, we have all made mockeries of the laws of the land.

I will suggest stricter zoning regulations within the city and severe penalty for any violation. There can be no doubt that commercial utilization of lands originally meant for residential use, has had the most negative impact on the quality of environment.

I will also suggest to lower the existing height limits in residential areas, since service infrastructures were not designed to take the load of such huge population. Again, we need to identify specific zones where high or low-rise structures will be located and design the services accordingly.

Tanya Karim

Tanya Karim, N.R. Khan & Associates



My top priority will be to restrict the number of units within a plot, with a strict density rule. Presently, with no limits on the total number of units, a landowner can have as many apartments as he desires. This has also given unlimited freedom to the real estate developers. The density regulation will specify the allowable number units for different plot sizes.

A separate law is also required which makes mandatory the provision of green, open to sky spaces within each plot or housing complex. It simply does not make sense to have a desert type city in a tropical country like Bangladesh.

Mahmudul Anwar Riyaad

Dept. of Architecture, BUET



The RAJUK rules regarding commercial buildings and shopping centres are vague and inadequate in many areas. Commercial plots as small as seven kathas in area have been leased out and on which fifteen-storey office buildings are being built. How does one make provision for adequate car parking in such a small area? As a result of this gross mistake, we now have parked vehicles occupying most of the roads at places like Pantho Poth and Kamal Ataturk Avenue. Given the powers, I will suggest that the sizes of new commercial plots are determined taking urban design and planning factors into consideration. New laws will have to be enacted accordingly.

I would also suggest giving sweeping powers to RAJUK to close down shopping centres that severely affect urban condition of the surrounding areas and in the process cripple the whole city. Laws that have allowed structures like Eastern Plaza and the like at Hatirpool-Sonargaon Road, need to be amended immediately.

Abdus Salam Liton

Profile Ltd.



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Selecting the Right Design : Let the Institute Help You

The Institute of Architects Bangladesh provides assistance in organizing design competitions. This also opens a window of opportunity for the young professionals.

By Khalid A Khan

YOUNG, talented architects are seldom given the chance to compete for major architectural commissions in this country. The pre-qualification systems, in almost all the cases, obstinately favour the aged and the experienced, slamming the door on the young. But the young professionals have all the potentials to come up with better design solutions. This has been proved repeatedly in design competitions held over the last few years.

It seems that there exist morbid fears among most clients that young people, due to their lack of experience, may make mistakes. But if the process of evaluation at the design selection phase is correct, there is hardly any scope of a 'faux' design being picked up. In the end, it is the client who benefits most. He has the exposure to a wide variety of design options from both young and the experienced and can choose the best among the lot. The architect of the competition winning entry may not be the most experienced of them all, but in such cases, the architect is required to form a team with another competent architect or firm of his/her choice but acceptable to the client. This ensures the skill and experience needed to implement the best design.

This requirement is only one from the complete set of competition rules that the Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB) has formulated to provide guidance to prospective clients. The Institute has an established policy of assisting government, individuals, private or public organizations in the selection of designs. The regulations ensure that the designs are selected on basis of their merit and that the clients requirements are satisfied. Properly disciplined and executed design competitions thus become most effective method of selecting the best design for a particular project.

Architectural design competitions are essential for civic projects of prestige and national importance. Last year, the Public Works Directorate of Government of Bangladesh, in association with IAB, organized

the design competition for Shadinota Sriti Stombox at the Suhrawardy Uddyan. Not surprisingly, from more than thirty designs submitted, the first three places went to young architects. The designers of the winning entry were architects Marina Tabassum, A.K.M. Sirajuddin and M.S. Chowdhury Kashef, who had graduated in 1995 from Department of Architecture, BUET. Once again, the design competition provided the opportunity for stimulating creative talents and had enabled young and talented professionals to gain recognition.

The Jatiyo Sriti Shoudho at Savar, designed by architect Syed Mainul Hossain, was also selected through a design competition.

Monuments apart, it is extremely important that significant buildings of the city attain a level of architectural excellence. Sadly, Dhaka can boast of only few buildings that have

reached such a level. It is a great pity that the best architects of the country are often not the designers of the most important buildings in Bangladesh. In cities around the world, from Berlin to Havana, it is the accepted practice to hold competitions for major architectural commissions. Take for instance, the addition to the Louvre in France. Chinese-American architect I.M. Pei's winning entry in the international design competition has, since then, become one of the major emblems of modern French nation.

But, here in Dhaka, let us start with national level competitions, both at public and private sectors. Lately, banks and insurance companies have started thinking about their own corporate office towers in Dhaka and Chittagong. The selection process, however, have remained the same. The resulting architecture in the major

commercial districts can, at best, be termed as mediocre, safe exercises. Pragmatism demands that we experiment, push the edges and break new grounds. One can never achieve that without giving the young a chance. That is why competitions are so important. If organizations lack enough manpower and technical ability to hold competitions, let them ask the Institute for help. IAB has the mechanism and experience of successfully organizing many such competitions and if any company wants to utilize that, it is always welcome.

As for the competition itself, any intending promoter should, as the first step, appoint a jury of assessors. The jury panel shall have at least three members, a majority of whom shall be architects. The selection of the assessors requires greatest care and the appointed persons are usually architects of acknowledged professional stand-

Apartments, Apartments!

An architect's checklist meant for intending buyers

You want to buy an apartment and all the real estate companies you have talked to promise you the moon. The time for a decision has come and you find yourself going through sleepless nights, actually looking at the moon. Here's what you can do to assess the choices-

1. Study the Plan. See if it meets your lifestyle or requirements.
2. Visit the project site and assess the location- what is now a sunny south, may be blocked by another building on adjacent plot a year hence.
3. Check whether a team of professionals has prepared the architectural and engineering designs. Are they following those designs during construction?
4. Ask for the RAJUK approval drawings. Check for any violation that may put you in trouble in future.
5. Check the approvals from other service agencies like DESA, WASA etc.
6. Ask for all the ownership documents of the land. Show them to a lawyer.
7. Check the transfer/registration system and the costs involved.
8. Ask for a project completion and hand-over date in writing. What if the company fails to deliver in time?
9. Clarify all features and finishing specifications in black and white. Let no gray areas remain.
10. Check whether laboratory tests are done at each stage of construction.
11. Check whether soil test has been done prior to construction.
12. Visit any completed project of the real estate company. Are the previous buyers satisfied?
13. The neighbours. Who else have booked units in the project?
14. The price. Compare with other offers. Why does the price vary?
15. Consult your spouse, parents or children. You may pay for it, but hey, they will have to live in it.

ing. The President of IAB is available to advise on such appointments and to make suggestions as to who should act as the chairman of the jury. In case of minor design competitions a jury panel may not be justified and a single assessor, who shall be an architect, may evaluate entries. The assessors, for their part, will undertake any investigation or research that may be necessary to produce the programme, setting out the client's requirements in the form of detailed instructions to the competitors. The promoter and the assessors work in close co-operation and the requirements of the promoter receive top priority. IAB maintains that any of its competition regulations may be waived or amended if the best interest of the client or the profession requires so.

Design competitions, thus, provide a win-win situation to all parties concerned. The client is guaranteed the best design in all respects, the city benefits from having an architectural masterpiece and the talented, young architects receive a badly needed exposure. Let us give the option a try and create great architecture in Bangladesh.

Mr Khan is a partner at Neo-formation Architects.

Meet the Young Architects

Khondker Neaz Rahman Talks to Yep Talk



Yep: You are an architect and also a planner. How do you identify yourself?

Neaz: Training imparted to me by BUET and also the leading I got from my fellow student leaders and activists about my society created the base of my identification. To me I am an architect-planner. More precisely, I am trying to build up myself as a Social Activist, or technically you can say a Community Planner. A Planner, who does not prepare plans by himself, neither he thinks that he is the judge to determine what is right or wrong for his society. Rather who will work inside the society to organize the community to prepare their own plan for their development and prosperity. Technically it can be called 'Participatory Planning'.

Yep: How long are you working?

Neaz: I am working as an architect since 1987 and as a planner since 1991.

Yep: You had worked for the government for six years and now you are working as a private consultant. What are the merits and demerits of these two fields?

Neaz: The advantage in working as a government staff is you can get opportunity to work in big projects. If you are committed you can exercise power for the benefit of your countrymen. The negative side is they lack rational decision making process. On the other hand as a private consultant it is difficult for young professionals to get challenging jobs. Bureaucratic hurdles are difficult to cross. But the good side is you have more freedom to work and talk. Absence of national leader with vision is acutely felt by young professionals. Let me give some example. After

independence the then Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman appointed Dr. Kamal Hossain to prepare our constitution and Mr. Rehman Sobhan to form the planning commission. These young professionals showed their excellence and these works are possessed as our national pride. Does our present leaders have that vision or courage to appoint young professionals for such important national assignment?

Yep: What are the main problems of Dhaka City? Why it did not grow in proper way?

Neaz: My observation does not go beyond 1971. Last twenty-seven years it seems to me that there are five main reasons for this unplanned growth of Dhaka. (1) Lack of resources (2) Corruption (3) Lack of co-ordination among government agency (4) Lack of rational decision making process and (5) Presence of procedural accountability instead of Goal Achievement accountability.

Only government fund is not sufficient to implement development projects for the city. In Chittagong Metropolitan Master Plan it is suggested that the Authority should have the power to form joint-venture companies with private investors to tap required resources. This can be also done for Dhaka.

By corruption I mean that the plans which are prepared with investing huge resource are regularly averted by a small committee in RAJUK for the interest of vested group, in the name of plan updating. Introduction of Community Participation in plan preparation, approval and implementation can effectively stop this malpractice. It can

ensure peoples interest instead of preserving the interest of the powerful groups.

Lack of co-ordination is highly visible in Dhaka. It is very common that after DCC repairs a road, T&T or WASA start their digging. Apparently it demonstrates the lack of responsibility of our government office. But if an in-depth analysis is done it will reveal a different reason. We don't have a formal co-ordination body and more important the absence of well developed rational decision making process. City like Dhaka needs a well-prepared Multi-Sectoral Investment Program, with regular updating.

The most important thing is we must have an efficient government office. For that, we need to introduce Goal Achievement Accountability instead of Procedural Accountability. Secondly reward and punishment must be introduced. And third one is putting more weighted value on academic and professional quality during promotion and hiring.

Yep: Why did Dhaka City don't have a character? Neaz: Mega-cities usually losses its past character in the sense of intimate scale and detail design of its structure. But obviously it develops a new character, which express the process of its development and economic phenomenon it houses. Most important is that, a city expresses the vision the nation holds during its development.

Now let us see how Dhaka looks. Clearly it express chaos with less attempt of rationality. It is an expression of lack of clear vision: a nation lost its direction. Few rational

developments show that some desperate individual had tried to think and act rationally. Our urban fabric will change positively only if we and our leaders act positively.

Yep: Tell me something about your dream.

Neaz: As a professional I have some dream. The main point is to develop an effective mechanism for community participation in planning and development process. To me planning is a process through which resources are distributed among different conflicting group of the society. If we observe we can see that social injustice is the root cause of environmental deterioration, whether it is social or physical environment. In this connection I have a plan to setup a Nature Observation Laboratory. The function will be to provide services to school going student to observe and study nature; flora, fauna and human settlement. The second issue is to materialize the sovereignty of people's power on the state machine. To do so, Community Participatory Planning is probably the most effective path. We must succeed to implement people's right to control the planning and development process. This will help to reduce social injustice in resource distribution and also bring the people in the steering role of the country's development process.

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Interviewed by Rafi Hossain