

YEP TALK

A Concrete Jungle

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

Mamnoon Murshed Chowdhury

"BUILD 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 Shiddheshwar, Shegunbagicha, Dhamondi, 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, littered with, 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 neighbours 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 bigha 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 Dhamondi, Gulshan and Baridhara. Rumours were also ripe 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 Dhamondi have six storey buildings, the congestion on the internal streets will increase to such levels that it will take 22 minutes to reach the Shongshodh Bhabon from mid-Dhamondi 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 has 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 Motijheel office from our Uttara residence seemed impossible. Now, with Premium and BRTC bus services, it has become a reality. 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 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 alteration to the existing Building Construction Rules, what would it be?

Here are their replies

**Rafiq Azam
Shatto**



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 unauthorized portions of buildings. When this process becomes slow due to legal entanglements, I propose that RAJUK put black paint on a sign-

ificant part of the front elevations of buildings, so that the builders are clearly branded as 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.

**Tanya Karim
Tanya Karim, N.R. Khan & Associates**

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.

**Abdus Salam Liton
Profile Ltd.**



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 of 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
Riyad**

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 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.

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.

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 'faulty' 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 en-

sure that designs are selected on

basis of their merit and that the

client's requirements are satis-

fied. Properly disciplined and

executed design competitions

thus become most effective

method of selecting the best de-

sign for a particular project.

Architectural design competi-

tions are essential for civic

projects of prestige and na-

tional importance. Last year,

the Public Works Directorate of

Government of Bangladesh, in

association with IAB, organized

the design competition for

Shadhinota Sriti Stombo at

the Subhrawardi 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. Siraj-

uddin and M.S. Chowdhury

Kashef, who had graduated in

1995 from Department of Ar-

chitecture, BUET. Once again,

the design competition provided

the opportunity for stimulating

creative talents and had en-

abled young and talented pro-

fessionals to gain recognition.

The Jatiyo Sriti Shoudho at

Savar, designed by architect

Syed Mainul Hossain, was also

selected through a design com-

petition.

Monuments apart, it is ex-

tremely important that signifi-

cant buildings of the city attain

a level of architectural excel-

lence. 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