

Save the Buriganga

Prospects for a new Dhaka

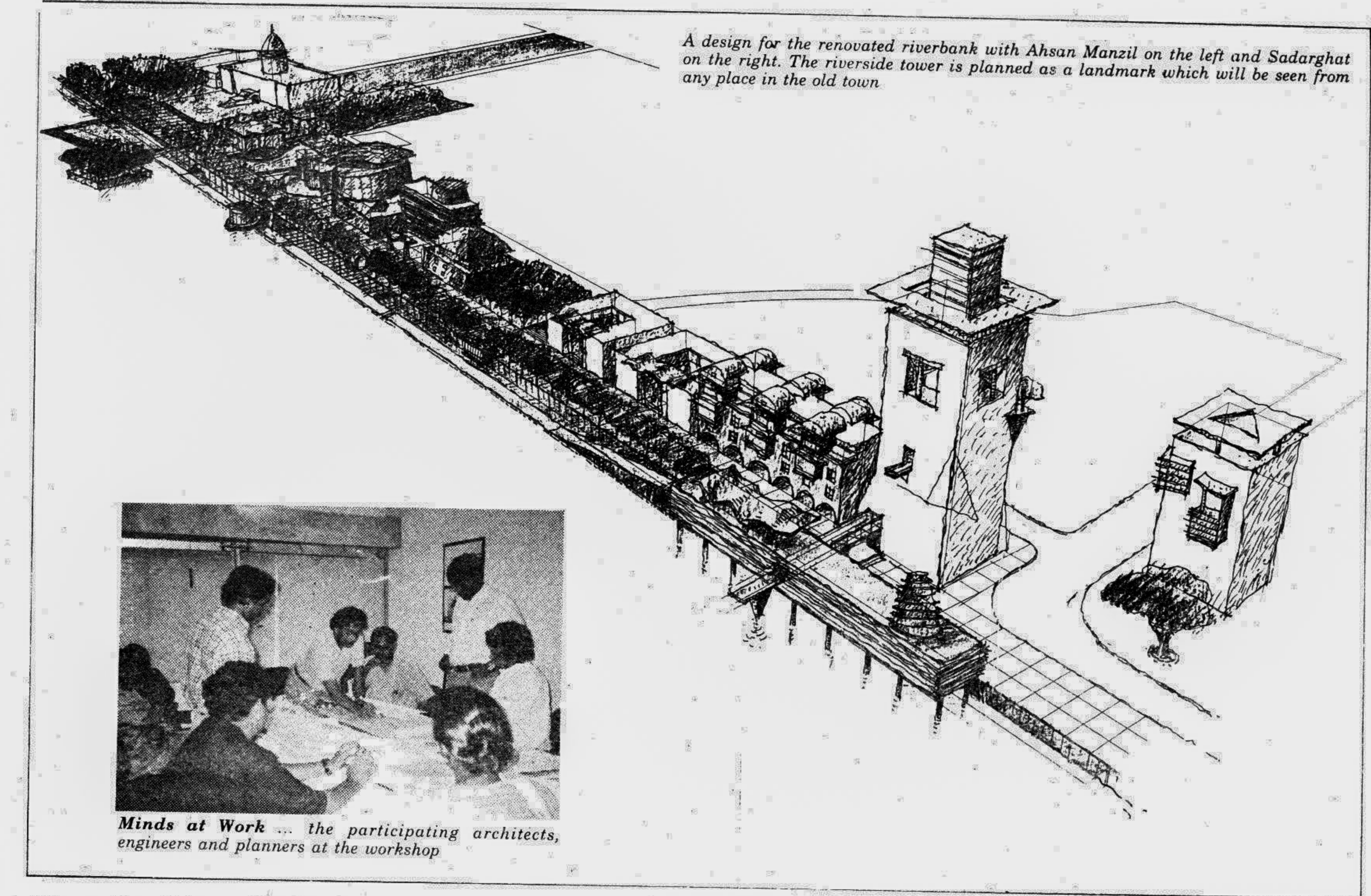
The Daily Star and Chetana Architecture Research Society jointly sponsored an urban design workshop to propose urban visions for the capital's Sadarghat area. A team of architects, urban planners, and engineers studied the area for a week, considered river-front developments in other cities and came up with visionary proposals. The ideas were later presented at an open forum at the British Council on August 10. **Kazi Khaleed Ashraf**, who co-ordinated the workshop partially supported by the British Council, sums up the participants' vision of a new Dhaka.

SADARGHAT is one of the most dynamic areas in Dhaka, but its fullest potential has not been realised as yet. Part of one of the historic centres of Dhaka where the city begins and a vital riverine node, the area has now become a symbol of sharp physical and environmental deterioration of the Buriganga and river-front. The Buriganga is not just a romantic presence in people's mind; it still is a major factor in the city's economic and ecological well-being. The current nature of activities along the river—chaotic and anarchic—does not make the optimum use of the river. Actually, continuation of such activities will result in the death of the river and an ecological disaster for the whole city.

The river can again become a major life-blood, and the river-front a much more organised

area providing renewed recreational, civic, economic, and transport facilities for the residents of the vicinity, in particular, and the city, in general. With thoughtful and imaginative planning, these areas could be transformed into something befitting the river-front of any civilised city. It could be an important step towards making Dhaka a decent and liveable place.

The first and foremost problem about the city that we live in is that it lacks an overall plan that will guide its development. It may be intensely urbanised but can hardly be called a city. In fact, it is only an agglomerate—a gigantic, bustling and bursting *chhapra* (shanty) without a sense of direction. Where it is heading for in the next twenty years, or even the next ten, nobody knows.



A design for the renovated riverbank with Ahsan Manzil on the left and Sadarghat on the right. The riverside tower is planned as a landmark which will be seen from any place in the old town.



Minds at Work... the participating architects, engineers and planners at the workshop

At the same time, Dhaka is fast losing whatever civility it once had: its public realm—the spaces where collective experiences take place—is being eroded, the results of which will be socially disastrous. Civic life is greatly affected by the nature

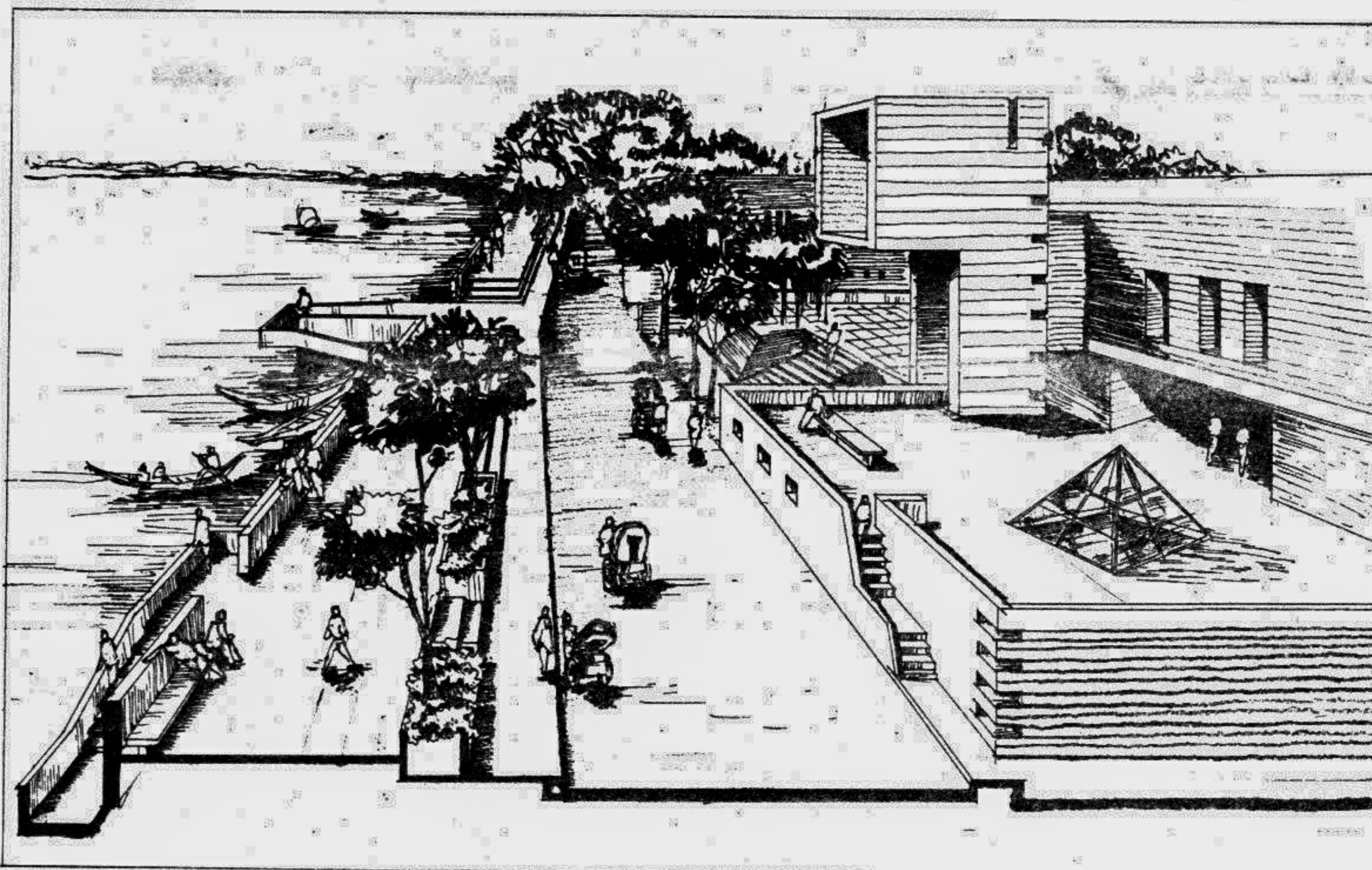
of the urban fabric and Dhaka lacks convincing models of urban fabric that will enhance the civic realm. A building or two does not make a city; a city is made from a vision — of a fabric of spaces and buildings within which a civic life is enacted.

Plans are useless unless there is a vision. Any action entails a vision. Even if it is fuzzy and hazy, it creates the compulsion to take up strategies and plans, a much more technocratic and bureaucratic stage.

Sadarghat can be the starting point of a vision of a larger than life act to eventually transform our lives. Sadarghat is where the city began, and where possibly we can start all over again. It could be a gift, a permanent offering of our city fathers to the city of Dhaka.

What the workshop has proposed are some reasonable ideas for transformation of Sadarghat, images of a decent and liveable city and ways to recover from a condition of deterioration.

The workshop was attended by Nahas Ahmed Khalil, Zarin Hossain, Maniruzzaman, Jalal Ahmed, Rafiq Azam, A B M Badruzzaman, Afroza Ahmed, Ehsan Khan, Khandaker Shabbir Ahmed, Khondoker Neaz Rahman, M S Kashef and Marina Tabassum.



Why renovation of the river-front?

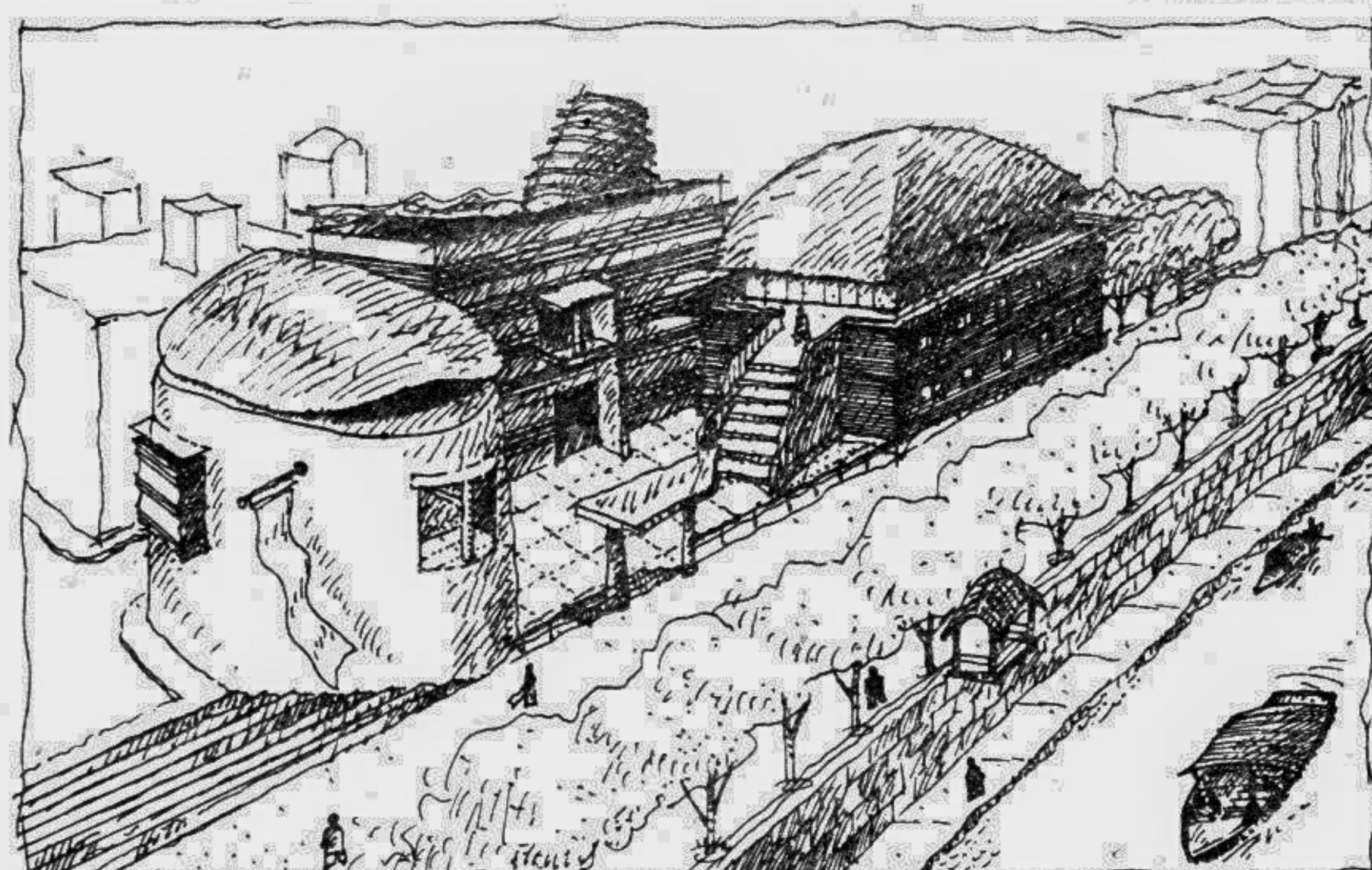
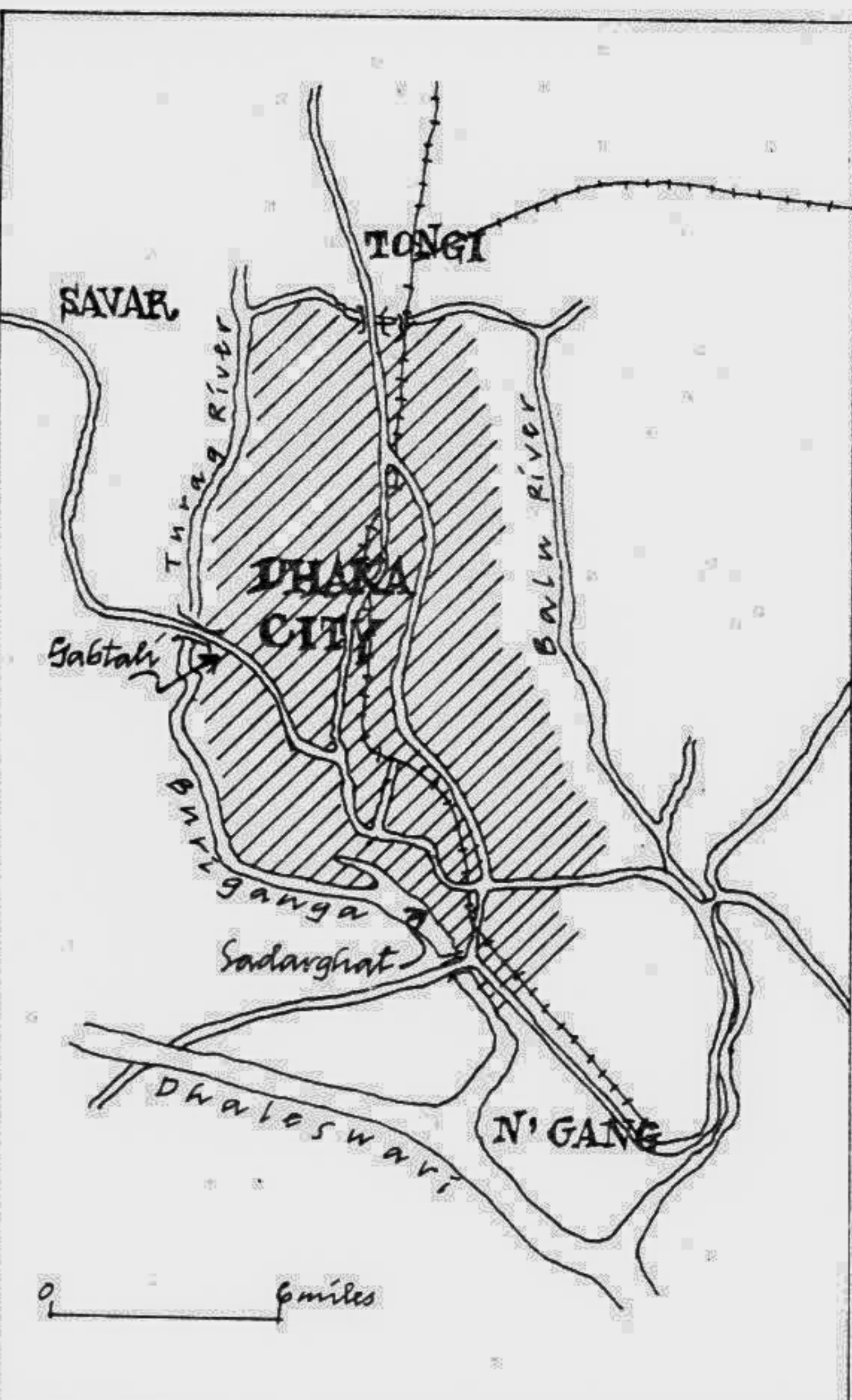
- Following broad premises and themes affecting Buriganga and the river-front were recognised at the workshop:
1. The full length of the Buriganga must be given serious consideration immediately, otherwise we are going to encounter an ecological and environmental calamity. The situation is already grave with rampant dumping of waste and toxic materials, and uncontrolled encroachment on the river. A monitored development along the edge could be a way to control these disastrous irregularities.
 2. Major rethinking of transport network along the edge could be a way to control these disastrous irregularities. The river/canal network for city-wide transportation remains very much under-utilised, although there is an intense inter-district movement. The idea of water-buses and water-taxis encircling Dhaka city (through Balu, Turag and Buriganga, as cited in a number of transport studies) can be pursued for the much-needed alternative routes within the city.
 3. The current IWTA terminal at Sadarghat needs thorough modification. Much of the environmental deterioration in the area can be traced to activities in and around the terminal. The pressure of the terminal (passengers and goods handling) has simply violated the area, turning it more and more into a mushrooming *chhapra*, and adding to large-scale chaos and pollution. Dhaka has expanded so much that a single terminal, or the current location of the terminal, is not viable to serve the whole city. It can be shifted to a more proper and planned location (e.g. near Gabtoli where it can also be linked to a major road network), or it can be split into two, keeping some part in the Sadarghat area to retain accessibility for old Dhaka.
 4. A new riverbank authority, with a clear and strong capacity to act, is required to control development along the riverbank (the other option being a central body like the City Corporation giving special attention). As an immediate action, a controlling body can be set up to cover the riverbank from the Friendship Bridge to the bridge under construction at Babubazar. Creation of a controlling body needs to be matched with a genuine political will and a direct participation of concerned citizens.
 5. The riverbank is the most natural open space in the city. Open spaces are vital to the pragmatic, psychological and mystical functioning of any city. In the case of a madly-congested city like Dhaka, open spaces are as critical to the city as lungs are to human. The riverbank should be made accessible, enjoyable and functional.
 6. Civic life—improving the public realm—requires urgent attention. Each one of us has a claim to a decent city—not the garbage city, the pollution city and the *chhapra* city that we live in. A spectacle of individualism runs riot in the city; except for few places like the Sangsad Bhaban area, there are no successful public places. Architecture could be an effective tool to improve the public realm, by creating places and spaces that could be experienced and enjoyed collectively.

Visions of a new Dhaka

- The workshop agreed that through a set of urban design and architectural strategies, the Sadarghat area could be revitalised to create a generous public realm (a place of well-being), and generate a greater social and economic benefit (than the current lowest common commercial profits). Certain common recommendations were proposed:
1. A clean river and a decent river-front, enjoyable and accessible to everyone. At the moment, even the immediate residents of old Dhaka are exiled from the banks of the river. The river needs to be restored to the city.
 2. The vitality of the river should be maintained, but with modification of the adverse features. Different dynamic activities on and along the river should be systematically promoted (including boat racing, water pageants and certain tourism related enterprises).
 3. A riverside tree-lined promenade as a largely pedestrian public space that is linked to other open and green spaces, historic sites, residential and commercial zones.
 4. Segregation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic along the river, by either keeping them separate horizontally, or taking the pedestrian above the vehicular route. The current flood protection wall built seven feet above the existing street level (further separating the river from the city) gives a cue to build a walkway above the wall; the lower level could be used as vehicular road, car park, or some building functions.
 5. Maintaining the Ahsan Manzil area as a civic place, with the current museum as the focal point.
 6. A set of "selective surgery" whereby certain buildings are retained, and certain others are removed or transformed.
 7. Revitalisation of economic life through new commercial generators, such as well-planned shops and markets, hotels, restaurants, and other enterprises.
 8. Heightening the potential of existing cultural nodes, such as Bulbul Academy, and to infuse new cultural dynamics to the area.
 9. Transformation of the terminal building and its activities, along with efficient system of accessing and moving around the area.
 10. Creating a tourist potential that could generate new economic benefit with impact on different parts of Dhaka.

An image of the riverbank with a pedestrian pathway on the left, a new low-volume traffic road and a library building on the right. — Conceived by Marina Tabassum, M S Kashef and Shabbir Ahmed.

Map of Dhaka showing the city as an island framed by the Buriganga, Balu and Turag rivers (left).



Aerial view of a cultural centre complex along the promenade. The building on the left in the complex is an auditorium, the building on the right is a multi-purpose hall (for town meetings, wedding receptions, etc.), and the building in the middle are for offices, rehearsals and some accommodations. The old town is in the back on the left (above). View through tree-lined promenade with Buriganga on the left and new hotel and shopping buildings on the right (right)



—by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, Rafiq Azam, and Jalal Ahmed