

A city booming with imported babies

DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

LARGE shopping centres, adorned with appellations such as plaza, square and tower, and sardonically bazaar, either singularly or embedded in mixed-use Goliaths, along with high-rise commercial buildings have been the most visible physical transformation in the cityscape over the last half a decade.

Faceless and placeless, primarily due to excessive reliance on imported cosmetics, most of these hybrid shopping arcades are devoid of any historical architectural reference and are often culpable of being cheap imitation of an alien Master Copy.

Not denying the fact that they have been able to draw a huge clientele, however select, more so because of the jazz combo of light, colour and even music, the shops within the concrete precinct are largely dealing in imported goods, a good enough reason for the swarming crowd. The appendage of an array of food outlets acts only as an appetiser for even the most reluctant of shoppers.

While they do provide to some extent the comfort of shopping around under one roof in controlled conditions, almost all of them have grossly, and with some disdain, violated building rules and code, particularly with regard to parking, setback and fire safety. No thanks to the decadent hand-in-glove understanding between the insatiable owner and some RAJUK officials, it may not be an exaggeration to pronounce most of these shopping centres unsafe for the thousands who linger there in complete innocence.

Not incorruptible though are the Architects, who under whatever

circumstances, have sadly given in to the whims of the owner and the developers; their ethics as well as knowledge, and vow to practise Architecture as a profession buried deep in the building's foundation.

Architecturally the less said about these alien monstrosity the better, because the buildings are reminiscent of the frontality of the 5000-year old Egyptian paintings with only the fascia lavishly overdone and the other three sides touched with chalk wash.

At best the buildings are a misfit at a time when globally the broad outlook is to make buildings secular, contextual and responsive to the socio-economic needs of a culture.

Architect Qazi Muhammad Arif and Architect-Planner Ishrat Islam delve into a very contemporary issue that unless addressed by all concerned may yet be another unpleasant node in a city that can ill afford any.

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Wide corridors and spacious walkways of Dhaka New Market.



Shopping facilities in Dhaka: Transformation of architecture

QAZI MUHAMMAD ARIF and ISHRAAT ISLAM

1. Evolution of Shopping Facilities

1.1 Trend During Pre-Mughal, Mughal and British Periods

In the pre-Mughal era (1299-1608 AD), Dhaka was a small Hindu trading centre and the main settlement was laid between the river Buriganga and Dholai Khal. The town had number of market centres like Lakkhi Bazar, Bangla Bazar, Sakhari Bazar for conch and shell, Taati Bazar for weavers, along with a few localities of craftsman and businessman, such as Patuattul, Kumartuli, etc. Market places in that period grew spontaneously along the streets in a linear pattern. It is evident from the names that some of these markets used to sell specialized goods. Traditionally the producers of the goods had their trading activities in the same areas where they resided.

Dhaka became the capital of Mughal Bengal in 1608. The Chawk (square) was the main market place of Mughal Dhaka, which was known as Badshahi Bazar (Royal Market).

The market received the major supply of goods from waterways as it was located close to the riverbank. It catered both poor and high-class residents and foreign traders.

After the battle of Plassey in 1757, when the capital of Bengal was removed to Calcutta, trading and commercial activities decreased significantly. Most of the cottage industries of 'Muslin' (woven fabric) were closed as it was adversely affected by the policies of British rulers to promote machine-made products.

New roads, administrative and residential enclaves were established in the city and the commercial activities extended towards the north where British bureaucrats lived. By the year 1930, Chawk, the retail centre of Mughals, was transformed to a wholesale centre and still today, it is one of the major wholesale areas of the city. Shopping facilities of Mughal and British period were mostly located at older part of the city. The primary characteristics of these shopping places were openness in design; they acted as a social core; people from all strata of society used to gather at these places.

1.2 Shopping Facilities in Pakistan

Period (1947-71)

After Dhaka became the provincial capital of East Pakistan in 1947, it expanded in size and developed in commerce, administration and industrial sectors. Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT), established in 1956, started planning for residential, industrial and commercial districts.

Dhaka New Market can be identified as the first planned shopping centre for the City, a turning point of transformation of the traditional market place. It was constructed by the government in 1953 in accordance with the 1950's master plan for Dhaka.

This one-story shopping complex has a simple triangular layout. Major characteristic of this complex is its openness of design. Shops of inner and outer layer are aligned along a wide covered corridor. There are wide open-to-sky walkways in between layers. These walkways are wide enough to accommodate both temporary vendors and shoppers.

This complex has always been a popular gathering place for the nearby college and university students. More than half of the complex is used for circulation. Even today it is comfortably accommodating the shoppers even in peak season. The original central open court was given up for development in 1990 to house more shops on the ground floor and a mosque above.

DIT developed several high-class residential areas in Gulshan (1964), Banani (1964) and Uttara (1965). New shopping complexes were built as part of the plan to serve the newly developed residential enclaves. Gulshan Market 1 and 2 are such examples. They were built on a comparatively smaller lot. Both these two-storey shopping complexes were also naturally ventilated and had a variety of stores.

During the same period, several shopping complexes with similar characteristics were built by private entrepreneurs at different locations of the city. The central location and popularity of New Market complex encouraged the growth of retail business centres in adjacent areas, such as Nur Mansion (1966-67). This shopping centre was initially built with a courtyard but after a few years it accommodated more shops. Several other shopping complexes were built in the same location under both government and private initiatives. Due to expansions in later period, many of

these shopping complexes became congested and dependent on artificial ventilation and lighting system. In addition to planned shopping centres, Dhanmondi Hawkers Market in close proximity to New Market complex emerged in 1965 and gradually expanded in size. A new trend of "ribbon development" of shops along Elephant Road started in the late 60s, and later flourished as a vibrant shopping street.

1.3 Shopping Facilities after Independence (1971-late 80s)

Dhaka became the capital of independent Bangladesh in 1971. The population grew at a fast pace. To cater to the growing population, a number of market places developed spontaneously in the city without proper planning and design. Even the government-initiated projects also failed to provide required shopping environment in terms of space and services.

About 80% of the road frontage of New Elephant Road is shopping. These roadside developments were unplanned. Shops were lined along both sides of the major city roads. Shopping centres along these roads developed in a grid system and had direct access from the street. This trend continued till the mid-90s. Lack of parking facilities is the major drawback of these shopping areas.

Similar kinds of development of shopping facilities are found in Gulistan area where planned shopping centres were followed by ribbon development along the adjacent streets and it became another retail core of the city.

2. Features of Shopping Facilities Until Late 80s

2.1 Characteristics of Planned Shopping Facilities

- The earlier examples are spacious.
- One- or two-story walk-up structure.
- Generally naturally ventilated but artificial lighting used inside stores.
- Indigenous building materials are used.
- Drop-off and surface parking spaces were provided.

2.2 Spontaneously Developed Shopping Areas

- Direct access and on-street parking cause traffic congestion.
- Ribbon development along major roads has display windows to attract people.

c. Hawkers' markets, crowded as they are, are extreme examples of unplanned layout.

d. Small shops along narrow aisles, lacking proper ventilation, makes interior suffocating and stuffy.

e. Price of commodities is less, compared to planned shopping areas and primarily caters to low- and middle-income population.

There is a trend of addition of newer shopping facilities close to the existing popular shopping areas.

introduced in Dhaka city by an eminent private developer. This complex is called 'Eastern Plaza' and is located at a central location.

This complex is a multi-storied building with basement car parking. The first three floors are designed for shopping and are totally dependent on artificial means for ventilation and lighting. The upper floors are commercial and residential. Modern facilities like central air condition, elevators and escalators

for residential purpose.

4.2 Architectural Features

Among the components of planning and designing, major emphasis is given to the exterior look, intended to be 'modern' and 'contemporary'. Thanks to satellite TV and the Internet people are more exposed to international expression of architecture, business and global lifestyle, newer material and technology. Availability of new building materials in the local market (curtain wall, marble, granite, reflective glass, glass blocks, stainless steel, etc.) have been instrumental in getting a more global look, both in exterior treatment and in interior space layout.

Very little thought and effort is given for true search of aesthetics, rather more emphasis is given to imported materials and technology. Indigenous building materials have almost disappeared from the exterior facade of buildings. Use of escalator, capsule lift and large glazing has become a common trend.

organisational set up. The Building Code and land use policy must also be revised according to the changing context.

Architects involved in designing such shopping centres expressed their awareness regarding the inappropriateness of the building in relation to climate, environment and socio-economics. They tried to swing the responsibility on to the 'overpowering' client group. It could have been much easier on their part to guide and satisfy the client if there was adequate building law to regulate the development. Professional and educational institutes should come forward with a manifesto towards a better living environment. Programs are required to be undertaken to educate, guide and enlighten the investors, developers and general mass about the impact and consequences of the contemporary building trend.

4.3 Impact on Environment

Apparently these shopping areas are providing pleasant shopping

merchandise. Moreover the justification of import of building material and other luxury goods are also questionable in the context of local economy where 50% of total population live under poverty level.

4.5 Social Issues

Mega city Dhaka is one of the most populous cities of the world. Efficient use of land and other resources is the prerequisite of development. Except the employment generation during the construction period, these newly emerging shopping facilities offer small job opportunities for city dwellers.

In addition to trading, traditional shopping areas of Dhaka also act as social gathering spaces. But recently developed shopping areas are specially protected in the name of ensuring 'security' to the shoppers. As a result, majority of the urban dwellers are restricted. The social impact of such exclusion would certainly have long-term political and social implications.

Three-quarters of rural households and about 15% of urban households are deprived of electricity. The supply of electricity is far below the demand of the country. Efficient and equitable distribution of energy resource should be given immense importance in national policy level.

It is again questionable to what extent a less developed country would continue to support such development. If we look back to the history of civilisation, evidences are there that luxurious, extravagant lifestyle of a small affluent class of the society was primarily responsible for revolts, unrest, disintegration of the socio-political systems and institutions.

5. Conclusion

Establishment of contemporary shopping facilities is an emphatic, significant and coherent component of the physical development of the city and the society. Planning and architecture for a society must ensure, according to Cambell, 'Promotion of economy, protection of environment and assurance of equity and justice'. The entire process is a collective endeavour of professionals, academicians, investors, developers and policy makers. The proficiency, knowledge and consciousness of all parties involved, along with sensitivity to and respect for the place and people can guide and control the course of development. The morphology of a city, its streetscape, land-use, and lifestyle, social and cultural attitudes, people can be influenced by the responsive thoughts and works of Architects.

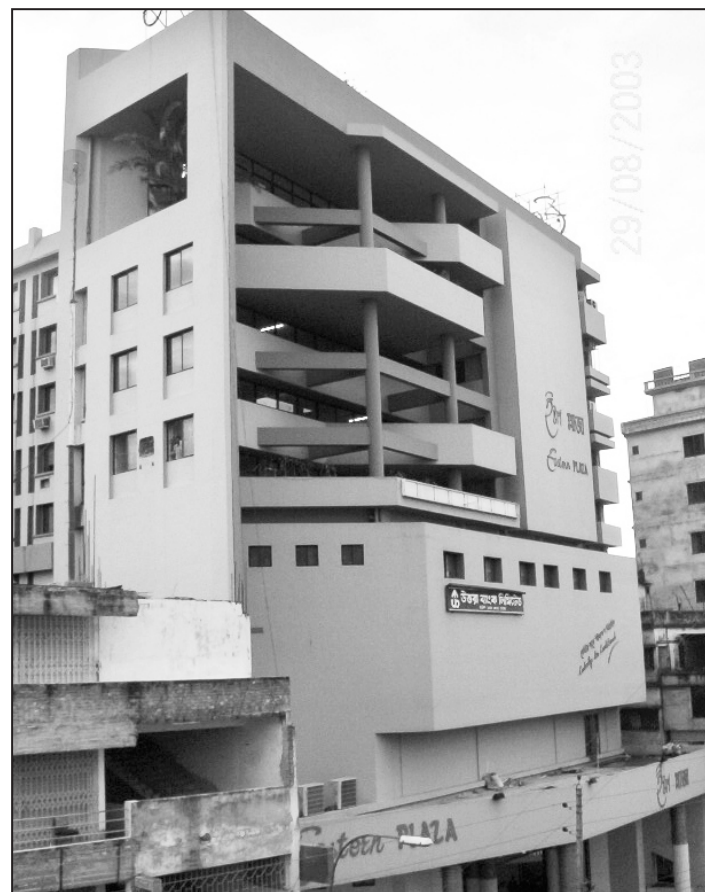
Our buildings are the spiritual and visual documentation of our time. They are supposed to speak the language of people, culture, tradition and lifestyle, and to recite the poems of seasons of nature and sketch the way towards the eternal essence of life.

The trend of development of shopping facilities in Dhaka seems to be driven away from the ethical and physical objectives, and the issue utterly needs immediate attention in order to ensure a sustainable habitat for the future.

Sources: R. M. Ahsan, N. Hossain, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, BUET, M. Savage, A. Warde, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, S. Cambell, Eastern Housing Ltd., Architect Md. Rafiq Azam and Architect Ferdous Ahmed

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Eastern Plaza: Milestone of modern shopping facilities of Dhaka.

New Market and its vicinity gradually became the retail hub of the city. As a result, overall environment and traffic circulation in and around this area deteriorated significantly.

3. Trend of Shopping Facilities Since Late 80s

By the late 70s and early 80s, private developers started to enter the land market of Dhaka city. In 1989, a new typology of shopping complex was

gave the glamorous shops of this shopping complex immediate popularity. Private developers thus were encouraged to invest in mixed-use buildings with shopping on the lower floors.

Since the late 80s, the skyline of Dhaka city has been changing. Construction of apartments, shopping complexes and office buildings became a lucrative field of investment for private developers. A growing demand for modern apartments and shopping complexes were also evident in the city.

4. Contemporary Trend of Shopping Facilities

4.1 Location

During the 70s and 80s, new shopping facilities developed mostly within or adjacent to the prevailing retail core of the city or along major roads. Accumulation of shopping facilities in a few locations had adverse impact on the traffic system. Convenient stores, boutique shops, departmental stores started to grow along the major roads of the outer periphery of some residential enclaves. By the mid 90s, zoning law for Dhaka was revised and land use types along some major roads were changed from previous residential to commercial use. In the same period, private developers found it profitable to construct modern shopping centres in different locations of the city close to residential areas.

Shopping facilities in close proximity to residential areas become popular because people want to avoid traffic congestion on their way to the prevailing shopping hubs of the city. The interest of the private developers encouraged landowners to offer their residential lots for commercial development for higher profit. As a result, land use characteristics are changing from a single use to mixed use -- the lower two stories for shopping, middle floors for offices and upper floors



Reflective curtain wall extravaganza of Metro Shopping Mall.

Extensive use of glazing on the exterior facades, including the West, adds to the heat gain. It indicates lack of sensitivity to environmental requirements of the architect, the owner and the developer in such a warm humid tropical climatic condition.

In contrast, these facilities fail to offer functional services required in compliance with international standard. None of these shopping complexes are accessible to the disabled. Most of them fail to provide required number of toilet facilities and fire escape. These buildings are mostly dependent on artificial lighting and ventilation system.

Attempts have been made to communicate with a number of architects to collect their views on this specific trend of development. Architects who are practising commendably but not yet involved in designing shopping complexes criticise the role of Architects involved in the shopping complexes. In their opinion, the Architect should consider the local climate, environment, history and culture of a place and propose the most appropriate design to serve a purpose.

The tripartite relationship between Architect, developer and the building regulatory agencies is complex. All the parties can be held responsible for such ruthless development. Firstly, the practising Architects are overwhelmed by the desires of the client and fail to uphold the professional integrity, ethics and the commitment towards the society. Secondly, the developers are mostly interested on immediate financial gain and do not hesitate to violate prevailing building law and code. Thirdly, the regulatory bodies are found to be extremely incapable of enforcing the building regulations due to corruption and lack of adequate

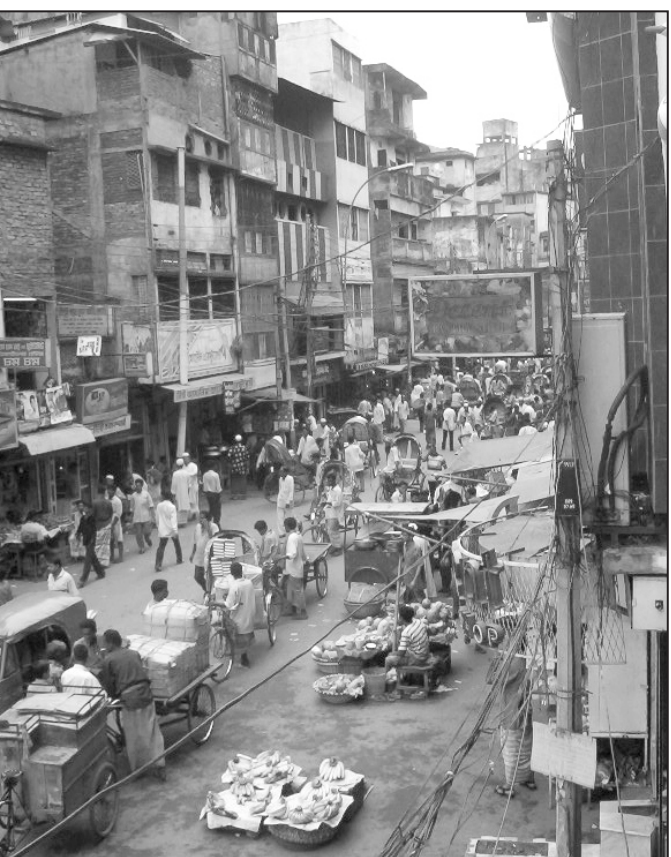
environment, but more and more consumption of electricity and emission from air-conditioning system is adding to the already polluted air of Dhaka. The extensive use of exposed curtain glass on exterior facade enhances the interior heat gain and minimum attempt is applied to reduce heat gain.

Absence of adequate parking and drop-off facilities and direct access from the major roads are responsible for traffic congestion, which in turn increase the air pollution. Study on 14 shopping centres on Mirpur road reveals that only two of them satisfy the building code regarding parking demand, whereas 57% of these shopping centres provide none or less than 20% of the specified parking space. Most of these shopping complexes violate the building code and setback rules. As a result, the streetscape is becoming lifeless with concrete buildings and reflective glass facades. Ecological footprints of these buildings are by far more elaborate than its tangible environmental impacts.

4.4 Economic Factor

Participation of private developers, availability of financial support from private and public banks for building and construction, demand from a certain section of the society stimulates the investment in shopping centres. Justification of this kind of investment against the impact on overall economy of the country needs to be addressed.

Survey findings show that 56.25% shops of the shopping centres sell foreign goods, and the rest sell products from both home and abroad. These shopping centres are popular among affluent class because of the availability of foreign goods and comfortable interior environment. Development of these shopping centres has little impact on production of local



Chawk Bazar in crowded old part of the city.



Ribbon development along New Elephant Road causes severe traffic congestion.