

The transformation of the old houses of Dhaka

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ARCHITECTURE through the ages has been shaped by human need, matched by technological advances. Following an evolutionary course, from the past to the present, it encounters a number of sources, causes and phases of transformation; and continues to do so.

In the urban area, the house form depends largely on physical limitations of the land, boundary conditions, materials and technology, climate, economic factors, changing social and cultural values that often have pastoral roots, and none of the factors are stagnant either in time or space. Technological factors have tremendous impact on the culture, affecting the living pattern as well as the form of residential buildings.

Bangladesh as a region has experienced different political and religious forces, which eventually influenced its intellectual and cultural base. Attitude of the people changed with exposure to alien thoughts and ideas. Accordingly, the architecture of the region, accommodative throughout history to new isms, has gone through changes. However, certain ethnic habits and practice deep within the psyche of the people have remained, helping to form an association between the houses of different periods. This is well reflected in buildings through the ages and becomes the essence of architecture of the house in Dhaka.

Architecturally significant buildings that are fifty to hundred years old, representing their time, and located in the older part of the City, have now become obsolete primarily because of economics and increasing demand; requirements being fulfilled essentially by multi-storied buildings, built commercially, as much and as high as possible, often violating buildings regulations. Many owners thus have found it lucrative to sell off or build anew.

Some of the oldest houses that remain today, because of the durability of materials, were built in the late 19th and early-20th C by the affluent, who

Bagicha and Dhanmandi for example, some residential buildings seventy-five years old have survived the insatiability of the modern development. These give us an idea of the transformation of architectural characteristics from the lordly mansions of the early 19th C to today's residential accommodation.

Although houses as in the olden times are built no more because of changing lifestyle and attitude, family structure and expansion, multiple ownership among a family, independence of the self, spiralling cost of land, and other socio-economic causes, the yesteryear buildings represent the architectural characteristics of a particular time, that of a stepping stone of the lineage from the fading past to the present.

Today the old single-family houses are being replaced by multi-storied apartment buildings. Due to the dynamic changes in the urban lifestyle, the urban residence experienced a process of transformation in its planning, organisation of space and physical expression. Opposite pulls of tradition and Westernisation resulted in adaptation of a dual life style by the urban dweller, more so among the upper and middleclass people. The contemporary urban residences of Dhaka City are the outcome of a series of conversion and adaptation that are still continuous, as generated by various urban forces at different times and in phases in the growth of the city.

U Kullerman is of the view that in the context of the city, the urban house is the outcome of certain forces socio-cultural values, economics, politics, religious beliefs and historical influences, as well as the continuous pouring in of influences from other parts of the world. Throughout history, constituents of alien culture, imposed by foreign rulers, have been accommodated in the local social order. With time it became a part of the culture. The present pace of cultural import from the dominant cultures is rapid and society is hardly able to absorb them. The attempt at mimicry has made our architecture superficial and a mere product of commercial enterprise.



House of Anandamay

advancement. Plain rectangles sans ornamentation, and the inclination to express function through appropriate materials were the order of the day. Ornamentation, often out of context and limited to only the road-front façade, however has crept back in over the past few years.

Very gradually the rural epitome (huts around a courtyard) was converted to the urban model (rooms around a central area). The recent trend of air-conditioned homes with tinted glass is adding a new dimension to the urban house, although Man's ancient yearning for light is still alive.

The demarcation of the site is the first attempt to create an urban house. It introduces the boundary wall to demarcate the territory. The accessibility into urban site acts as a vital phenomenon in forming the urban house. The house form, as it is more compact due to the limitation of site, exhibits the privacy within the limited area. The old residential houses in Dhaka City were less affected by scarcity of urban land. At that time the rural archetype could have been transplanted into urban archetype. In later days, the regular plot demarcation, road layout and

woman is to a large extent equally exposed to the outside world. As a result the idea of strict segregation between the male and female in the house plan, a dominant aspect of space organisation in the traditional



House of Advocate Mosiur Rahman

house, has become slack.

Early urban houses are characterised by interconnected rooms, but the issue of privacy soon saw the introduction of an internal corridor that connected the separate rooms, providing each room with maximum privacy. The concept of corridor as a circulation space, linking different rooms has become almost redundant. The trend over the past decade or two has been to have a single uninterrupted space, usually the common dining space or the family room, which provides a circulation space for the other more private rooms under an arrangement where the original zones (front and back, public and private) can be identifiable. This development provides a wide and spacious feeling, as there always is the scope to add some other semi-public/semi-private rooms to the common space. This has obviously reduced the scope of providing privacy within a house.

A new dimension to lack of privacy has been added by adjacent buildings of the last two decades or so being located too close to each other and windows facing opposite, defying setback rules, if not on the planning papers approved by the development authority but on the more damaging stage of construction.

Early urban houses had thick brick walls (25-30 inches) to meet structural requirements. Optimum window openings in the wall for light, ventilation and view were a traditional criterion. Thick walls, openings and high ceilings (up to 15 feet) were favourable responses to the hot-humid climate. In later houses, structural brickwork was reduced to ten inches but with the introduction of reinforced cement concrete frame structure, the curtain walls became thinner (5-10 inches). The ceiling today has come down to plus-minus ten feet.

Extension of the roof as well as shading devices provided protection to the walls, openings and verandas in rural houses, features (cornice, sunshade) that are seen also in the urban counterpart, albeit in different and varying forms. The protective high parapet on the roof was an urban innovation. The early urban windows were shaded by slanting windows, emulating the form of the rural predecessor.

The urban houses located in the

Old City have clearly defined outer and inner, that is public and private, zones. The residences of the late 19th C are organised around interconnected multiple courts of varying sizes and shapes, depending on the functions located around them and formed by inward facing living spaces. Reminiscent of their rural precedent, services and support facilities of the residences were almost always set to the back of the house with reception area and the more important living rooms circumscribing the major court, such as those existing at Armanitola, Tipu Sultan Road, and Farashganj.

Visible outstanding features of these impressive buildings were application of floral ornamentation in plaster, column and surface treatment by shaped bricks and employment of imported classical orders in the form of freestanding decorative columns, but in the organisation of space there was an uncanny reflection of rural images and values, as exemplified by the location of long and wide verandas on both sides of the living spaces. These common verandas did not provide privacy to the occupants of the different

decorative circular columns with decorative capital are an important architectural feature. The inner courtyard is encircled by cast iron columns. The upper floor veranda is shaded by a louvered wooden drop-wall with lattice-work. The wall is of brick and lime surki mortar. The roof is of brick tiles supported by wooden rafters and purlins. Perhaps the most prominent external feature in the mansion is the convex-shaped plinth projecting out from the building facade acting as an entrance lobby. Windows are seven feet high starting from the floor to the lintel level. Wooden shutter is used in the window and doors. The skirting of the inner court is of decorative tiles 2'6" high. The railing of the upper floor veranda was designed at a later phase. Some rooms were added to the building to suit the need of the user. Presently this building is being used as a hostel.

The House of Radha Sham Saha Banik at Tipu Sultan Road is the smallest among the studied buildings of the period. The two-storied building once extensively decorated now has the colonnaded entry facade on ground floor walled up. The most important feature of this building is the open roof terrace. The shading device in the exterior windows is a wooden shutter having two parts.

The House of Madhu Shaha has two courtyards. Around the formal courtyard all the habitable rooms are arranged. Later additions have been toilet facilities in the rear court, which contain the service zone. The most important feature of this building is the double circular columns around the formal courtyard. Multi-foil arched over upper floor windows and semi-circular arches in the ground floor are its distinguishing features, as is the entry door. Presently the colonnaded windows are filled with brick-wall.

In the House of Lal Mohan (Thakur Bari), there is one large courtyard having colonnaded veranda around which all the rooms are arranged. The



Lal Mohan Thakur Bari

extended veranda with cast iron column posts and railing run around the upper level of the front court. All the liveable rooms are arranged on the two sides of a wide corridor. The building has two staircases, one at the front and the other at the rear. In the exterior façade rectangular columns are striking features. The side elevation is decorated with trefoil arch and the front elevation with semicircular arches on the ground level.

The buildings of early 20th C located at Wari and Segun Bagicha have a different layout. These buildings are freestanding compact houses without any courtyards, but having front and rear yards. Examples are Delowar Cottage, House of Azadur Rahman, House of Advocate Mosiur Rahman and House of Dhalur Zamindar.

The House of Advocate Mosiur Rahman at Wari is placed in the middle of the plot forming an entrance green lawn. A colonnaded veranda having elevated plinth and approached by steps serves as the entrance lobby.

the later phase for commercial purpose.

In the house of Ismail Hossain at Segun Bagicha also, an octagonal form serves as an entrance lobby. At present the high boundary wall hides the exterior façade of the ground floor. The special feature of this building is the kiosk type extended veranda on the upper level of the exterior façade. Decorative cornice and parapet are important features as are windows with shading device.

The House of Dhalur Zamindar is an exceptional example of early 20th C in which exposed red brick is used on the exterior facade. The building is rectangular. Pointed arch is used on the ground floor and multi-foil arches on the upper floor. The staircase of the building is made of wood and is visible from the front. There are kiosks at the parapet level designed in jali pattern. The railing of the veranda is designed in brick. Red brick is used in the cornice, to decorate the rectangular columns and in the rear to decorate the arch.

After 1930, the overall planning of the building changed much due to the technological advancement. The compact extrovert type developed as a more appropriate urban house form. This represents the flat typology in which the living and service part of the house are grouped into a single mass. Examples exist in some houses at Eskaton and Dhanmandi. Beam-column structural system was introduced. Brick continued to be used as the main material but the wall thickness was reduced to 5-10". Windows had the sill level at 2'6" to 3'. Various shading device were introduced to protect the building from the sun and rain.

The older buildings, few examples that exist in Dhaka, besides being dilapidated due to age and lack of maintenance, are now being threatened by a surge of multi-storied development that has overtaken the City over the past decade or so in view of rising population and high price of land. Several old buildings have already changed ownership and/or the owner has contracted developers to demolish the existing building, an icon of antiquity, and make room for a towering block of apartments or office rental space.

In order to conserve at least a few of these old buildings as a reminder into the future of what was the past, it is necessary to garner sufficient public support by publicising the importance of the buildings in the City's history such as to make preservation economically feasible through government backup, the initiation of which may be marked by declaring a few of the old buildings as heritage sites. Fund may also be arranged by seeking the assistance of international agencies which support similar heritage projects across the world.

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House of Asaduzzaman

could afford big plots of land and large intricately-decorated palatial houses, relatively speaking. A. Karim recorded in 1964 that having always been a densely populated City, Dhaka was also home to another set of houses that had narrow frontals, were deep side-long and high, and built in high-density area. These buildings took to a variety of elements and taste acquired often from the more prosperous parts of India and from as far as Europe, primarily Britain. Despite the variation in house form, the denotation, classification, arrangement and hierarchy of space within were basically conventional and largely traditional.

Although the mansions of the period can hardly be compared in enormity, height, splendour of materials, spaciousness of setting or grandeur of scale with contemporary examples of the building type elsewhere, in contrast to the humble urban descendant of the Bengali rural house, they were monumental; inspired perhaps by alien royalty with perceivable outward appearance, high ceilings and large floor spaces that were adorned by magnificent plasterwork reminiscent of and as a matter of continuity with antecedence. Indeed the British, the longest enduring colonialists and logically the main builders, were largely responsible for introducing a European style, fundamentals, elements and technology included, that responded to local climate to emerge as a hybrid.

In the changing urban environment due to commercialisation, densification and occupation, the domestic space has been subjected to change. A D King noted that the introduction of new occupation during the colonial period influenced the urbanites to lead a dual life -- the outer, and thereby public, zone incorporating the Western system of formal living while the private zone within a house was reserved for the deep-rooted practice of local lifestyle.

In the newer parts of the City, Segun



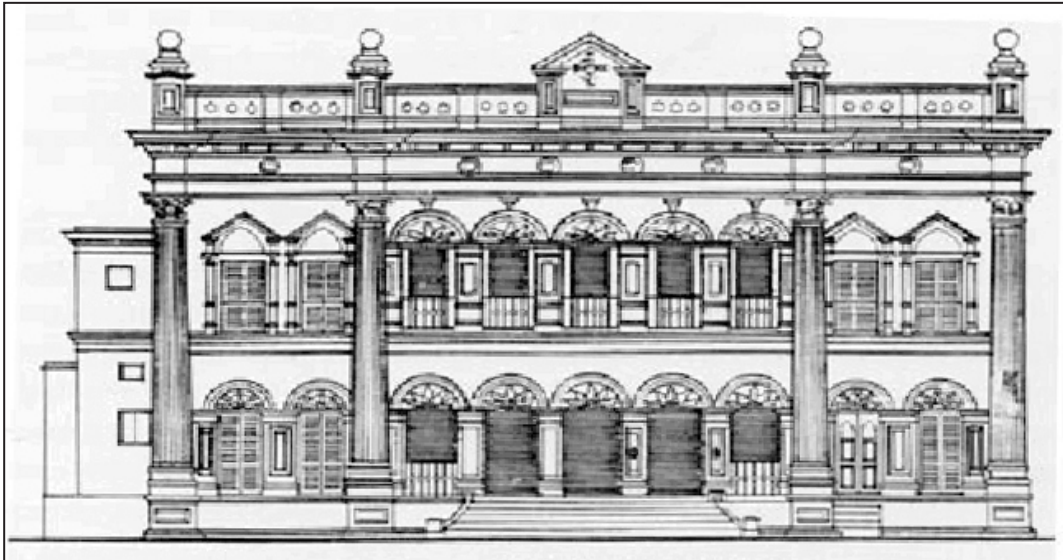
Courtyard of Ruplal House

The urban house form in Dhaka today is vastly different from that of the houses of the late 19th and early-20th C. The courtyard, traditionally central to social and cultural activities, often employed to provide climatic solutions, has long vanished. From an uncovered central light-well (larger houses had more than one), around which rooms were grouped, a direct transformation of the courtyard of the rural archetype, there was a transition period during which urban houses had a corridor, first external and then internal, abutted by rooms on the sides. The internal corridor later evolved into the indoor family living and/or dining room, which is the centre of most activities of the modern house. The corridor, dark and unventilated as they were, and considered a waste of space, was done away with. Instead, spatial relationships between the spaces were considered more functional, and the new style was in keeping with Cubism and the ensuing Modern Movement of the West, well-timed with its technological

services, as well as densification, forced the house form to adjust itself also with climatic and functional consideration. According to Architect I. M. Khan, the concept of front (formal receiving of guests) and back (family and service) in rural archetype house form was thus reshaped to form an urban archetype.

Architect Imamuddin defined the tripartite relationship in the spaces of urban house between formal, family and service zones, each having its clear physical distinctions. These zones are created in consideration to privacy and to the nature of the use of the spaces. 'The formal and family areas resemble the inner and outer domains in the house which are formed on the basis of their functional and symbolic meanings. Traditional taste and preferences find expression in the inner house while the acquired Western taste and attitude find priority in the outer house'.

Privacy is in a dilemma in present residences. Nowadays the urban



House of Jatindra Kumar Saha: Front elevation

rooms. Typical examples are Ruplal House and House of Jatindra Kumar Saha. Perhaps the most prominent external feature in the House of Jatindra Kumar Saha is curved plinth protruding out from the building and conveniently serving as a foyer.

Load-bearing walls and columns were constructed of clay bricks bonded and plastered with lime surki. Walls were much thicker compared to present day and ranged usually between 15 to 24 inches. The thickness served to position windows deep into the wall such as to provide with some protection against the elements of nature, excessive sunlight and typical Bengal rain, albeit with the generous veranda and cornice. Windows were often embellished with multiple arches and did not have glass, but were of horizontal wooden planks, designed to open or shut by a lever mechanism according to the need.

In the 1920s concurrent to plastered houses, buildings were being rendered with exposed red brickwork as in the House of Dhalur Zamindar at Wari.

The buildings of the early 20th C almost did away with the traditional courtyard and excessive decoration,



House of Azadur Rahman

displaying rather greater influence of the ruling British. These complexes, set in a plot of land well-demarcated by a boundary wall, as existing at Wari and Segun Bagicha, are composed of a one- to two-storied principal building that houses all the major functions with verandas on both sides of the longer axis and a detached one-storied smaller service building containing the kitchen, store and servants area. The major building would be set back sufficiently to allow for a front garden. The two buildings would be standing apart well enough to form an inner courtyard as in Delowar Cottage and House of Azadur Rahman. The House of Advocate Mosiur Rahman is also demonstrative of the period.

Characteristic features

Most of the residences of the late 19th C are of the enclosed introvert type. Externally these buildings used extensive ornamentation and classical orders but in planning and organisation they demonstrated traditional values and discrimination.

The House of Jatindra Kumar Saha is organised with three courtyards of different sizes, around which the public, private and service zone are arranged. All the courtyards have an inner veranda running all around. The courts are connected with each other through corridors. Freestanding fluted



Delowar Cottage

exterior façade is highly decorated with different type of elements. The entry of the building features two freestanding circular columns having decorative base and capital. The colonnaded veranda has multi-foil arch supported by thin circular column posts. In the upper level exterior façade an extended veranda is supported by brackets has cast iron double post

Windows are seven feet high starting from the floor to the lintel level. Two-part wooden shutter is used. The exterior façade on the ground level has rectangular columns with decorative capital. But on the upper level the rectangular columns are highlighted with circular double columns with decorative base and capital. The cornice in this building is decorative. In the rear part of the building some additions have been made in the later phase to meet the user's requirement.

In the House of Azadur Rahman at Wari, cantilevered pitch roof emphasizes the front façade with a colonnaded veranda going around the building. The parapet of the building is also highly decorated.

In Delowar Cottage at Wari, an octagonal form has been added as a building element. The building is approached by a front garden. A simple colonnaded veranda serves as an entrance lobby on the ground floor. But on the upper floor veranda colonnade is not used, rather a triangular form is added above the middle column. The present owners renovated the building extensively in 1974. They used mosaic work in the front façade to clad the wall and columns. It is assumed that extended shading device has been added in the later phase.

In the house of Asaduzzaman at Armanitola, the entrance lobby is octagonal. Rectangular columns and semicircular arches decorate the exterior facade. Decorative cornice is used around the building. In the front of the building some structure is added in



House of Radha Sham Saha Banik

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