



## A breath of fresh air

ARCHITECT DR. NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

**C**ELEBRATED Architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959) is often credited with pioneering the integration of the inside of a house with the outside, initiated in his prairie houses, the crucial swing from Greek antecedents to oriental precursors in India, Persia, Japan and China. No thanks to Western architecture historians, in their predisposed bid to place Wright on the right podium, centuries-old preceding Eastern models are unfortunately generally ignored in their accounts.

Our home-grown rural architecture is similarly gifted. But, so obsessed have we been for the past hundred or so years with imitating the alien that we have ignored the divine innate gift, that of taking into account the outdoors. For a very long time we have been guilty of being absorbed with the indoor while being a step-architect or step-user to the outdoor or landscaping.

There have been a few major sustained landscaping projects in the country. Those that come right away to mind are the Jatiya Smriti Soudha (National Martyrs Memorial) at Savar and the War Memorial at Comilla.

The road from Zia International Airport to the Banani rail crossing has for the past few months been the scene of one of the major works in landscape architecture in the country. Although it is somewhat of a cliché to claim every scheme in Bangladesh as a 'first', such public works of linear landscaping have only been undertaken in a limited way at some prestige institutions, industrial premises and cantonments. The proximity of the project to Dhaka Cantonment is to the project's advantage.

While not being a project that actually integrates the inside and the outside, the project enlarges our mind into demonstrating that the outside is equally important.

The hitherto chaotic and hazardous area is being modified by 'organising natural, cultivated, and constructed elements according to a comprehensive, aesthetic plan'.

There are several welcome signs in the project, undertaken at the behest of Prime Minister Begum Khaleida Zia, who it is assumed was prompted by the need to offer international visitors a positive impression and a befitting warm welcome on arrival.

The scheme is in line with many other international airports, particularly those of the emerging economies and in developing countries, where a nation tries to look its best at first impression. Against expected criticisms that while much of the City is belching under filth and reeling under traffic disorder, what good is a patch of sunshine, the argument, though not totally defensible, that in the urban house we usually optimise our living room and in the rural the *baithak khana* may hold.

The transition from disorder to order, from unsightly to pleasant, from apathy to belongingness is taking place. The differences between the opposites are gradually becoming clear.

Bus bays have been integrated into the linear composition to allow high-speed vehicles to move unhindered. Buses seemed to be encouraged to use the coves as stops, perhaps because of the informal order that has been established by the architects.

The architect, Khan Md. Mahfuzul Huq (Jaglu) and his team from Interdec Systems, have not disturbed the existing traffic pattern; rather several measures have been put in place to ease the movement of fast-moving vehicles.

Pedestrian ways have been fashioned to provide a sense of security to users. Already people have taken it up not only as a means to move from one place to another but some also as a treadmill to sweat it out.

Fresh greenery and flower beds, far end elevated to provide also the vehicular passengers a view, separates the vehicular path from the footpaths, much to the delight of the pedestrians. The linear tedium of the site has been broken up by delightfully shaped aluminium vases and ceramics, made in Bangladesh; the

plantation within sprouting with life. The hideous signboards have been done away with.

Undulations, fountains, flowerbeds, shrubbery, trees and grass, sculptural elements, vases, shades and shadows and walkways exist in a much-improved order, evoking a sense of pride among the Dhakaites.

Some trees had to be felled to implement the road network plan. If it can be said, in compensation about seventy thousand plants are to be planted along the project site before completion of works. Already many medium-sized trees and plants suitable for such developments have been placed in ground. All the trees and plants are indigenous or have acquired the status of 'native' due to their long habitation in the land; none have been imported for the project.

In establishing an overall plan, Landscape Architects have for long been taking into account proportion and scale, and advantage of natural land formations by using as much as possible the natural characteristics of the site. In the Airport road project, it is evident that these design principles have been attempted and the tools adopted, especially in employing 'contrasts in the size, colour, and texture of plant material'.

At important nodes, for instance the entry into a city road from ZIA Domestic and International Terminals, and from the VIP Terminal, and at the bend at the Zia Colony entry, larger scaled sculptural elements, complete with flora and water components, in tune with the theme have been placed, providing a somewhat refreshing change to the linear repetitiveness.

Despite such interventions, all along there is an indication of not trying to overdo.

Although the designers have tried to make use of variation in the project, there are visible degrees of monotony at places, particularly if you are walking or on a slow-moving vehicle. Perhaps the viewing speed was considered from the point of only a vehicular traveller.

It is now most important in Bangladesh to set the right standards in all spheres. In our rush to build, to cope with the rising demand for liveable space, in unwittingly transforming architecture into a commercial enterprise, as a profitable undertaking by non-architects, rather than as a means to provide a better living environment, we have ended up with setting the wrong standards; and that too in violation of existing construction rules, minimal and meagre though they are.

There is perhaps nothing wrong with such business-related pursuits, except that hunger for as much profit as possible has negated the exterior. A series of houses now means interior spaces separated by property walls. The garden-building relationship, Man's bond with nature, the perfect ground for children to make the most of their childhood, has been buried.

Let the project be a model, if not so much in landscape architecture, but at any rate in transforming the attitude of the government, the public, and most importantly the professionals. The project may go some way in paving our way towards setting the right standards.

The rest is for your eyes to behold.

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Container plantation in road median



Container plantation



Composite plants pattern



VIP fountain

## Landscape architecture through the ages

**A**S early as the 3rd millennium BC, the Egyptians planted gardens within the walled enclosures surrounding their homes. In time these gardens came to be formally laid out around a rectangular fish pond flanked by orderly rows of fruit trees and ornamental plants, as seen in tomb paintings.

In Mesopotamia, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the Seven Wonders of the World. They included full-size trees planted on earth-covered terraces raised on stone vaults in a corner of the palace complex of Nebuchadnezzar II. In the highlands to the north, the Assyrians and Persians developed great tree-filled parks for hunting on horseback. They also planned rectangular walled formal gardens, irrigated by pools and canals and shaded by trees, usually set in vast barren plains. These gardens symbolized paradise and inspired Persian carpet designs.

In ancient Greece, sacred groves were preserved as the habitats of divinities. Greek houses included a walled court or garden usually surrounded by a colonnade. In 5th C. BC Athens, public gardens and colonnaded walks attached to the Academy (school) and the Lyceum (gymnasium) were much frequented by philosophers and their disciples.

Roman houses, similar to Greek houses, included a colonnaded garden, as depicted in wall paintings at Pompeii. Villas on the hilly terrain near Rome were designed with terraced gardens. Rich Romans, such as Lucullus, Maecenas, and Sallust, laid out lavish pleasure grounds including porticoes, banqueting halls, and sculpture. The vast grounds of the Emperor Hadrian's villa near Tivoli (2nd C. AD) were magnificently landscaped. The Roman populace enjoyed gardens attached to the public baths.

The Muslims, living where the climate is generally hot and dry, were inspired by the desert oasis and the ancient Persian paradise garden centred on water. Muslim gardens were usually one or more enclosed courts surrounded by cool arcades and planted with trees and shrubs. They were enlivened with coloured tile-work, fountains and pools, and the interplay of light and shade. Before the 15th century, the Moors in Spain built such gardens at Cordoba, Toledo, and especially at the Alhambra in Granada. Similar gardens, in which flowers, fruit trees, water, and shade were arranged in a unified composition, were built by the Mughals in 17-18th C. India. The most notable examples are the Taj Mahal gardens in Agra and the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore.

In China, palaces, temples, and houses were built around a series of courtyards, which might include trees and plants often in pots that could be changed with the seasons, and pools. The Imperial City in Beijing contained elaborate pleasure gardens with trees, artificial lakes and hillocks, bridges, and pavilions.

Japan has a long tradition of gardens inspired by Chinese and Korean models. In former times, palaces, temples, teahouses, and private houses all had garden settings that were closely integrated with the buildings. Kyoto was especially famous for its gardens. The gardens included pools and waterfalls; rocks, stone, and sand; and evergreens. They might also contain stone lanterns and sculptures and wooden bridges, gates, and pavilions.

In medieval Europe, ravaged by invasions and incessant wars, gardens were generally small and enclosed for protection within the fortified walls of monasteries and castles.

During the Renaissance in Italy when conditions became more stable, castles gave way to palaces and villas with extensive grounds landscaped in the Roman tradition.

Italian gardens of the 17th C. became even more complex in the dramatic Baroque style. They were distinguished by lavish use of serpentine lines, groups of sculptured allegorical figures in violent movement, and a multiplicity of spouting fountains and waterfalls. Modified versions of Italian Renaissance and Baroque gardens appeared throughout Europe.

In the 17th C., France replaced Italy as the primary inspiration of architectural and landscape design.

Andre Le Notre created at Versailles a series of great, open parterres that formed geometric patterns when seen from above. Beyond them stretched lawns and shrubbery merging into woodland.

Le Notre also designed the gardens at Chantilly, St. Cloud, and Fontainebleau in France; Kensington Gardens and St. James's Park in London.

In the late 18th C. the rise of Romanticism, with its emphasis on untamed nature, the picturesque, the past, and the exotic, led to important changes in landscape

architecture as well as in other arts. The shift began in England. In place of the patterned formality of Le Notre's designs, architects such as Capability Brown preferred a new, softer romantic style that imitated rather than disciplined nature. At such great houses as Blenheim Palace and Chatsworth, Brown replaced the parterres of symmetrically arranged flower beds and straight walks with sweeping lawns, sloping hills with curving paths, and rivers and ponds punctuated by informally planted groups of trees and shrubbery, to achieve the effect of a wilderness.

These so-called English gardens often incorporated 'follies', fake medieval ruins and Roman temples, inspired by the 17th C. paintings of the Roman countryside by Claude Lorrain and his followers. (*Source: Encarta*)

The Romantic English garden is emulated at the (World) War Memorial in Comilla.

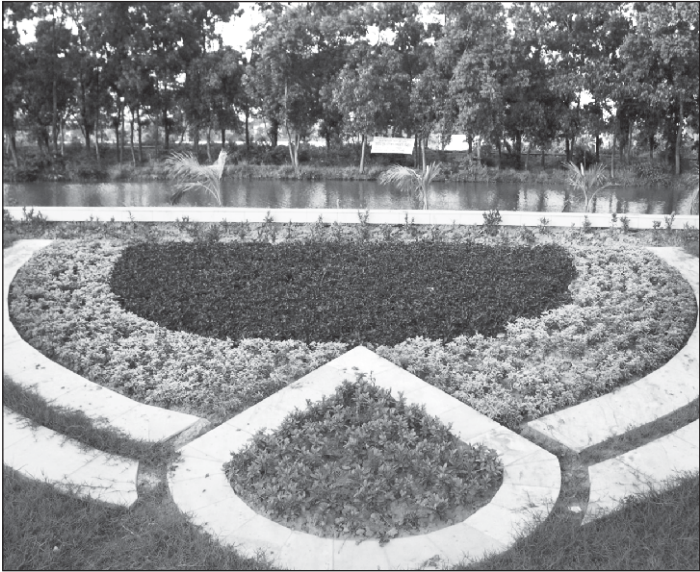
The landscaping of the premises of the *Jatiya Smriti Soudha* (National Martyrs Memorial) in Savar, Dhaka by Architect Md. Abdur Rashid and his team at the Government Dept of Architecture accommodates large volumes of people on 26 March and 16 December.



Road perspective



Design pedestrian



Landscape alpona



Road island design