

Fifty-two bazaars, fifty-three alleys, but where is the civic realm?



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DHAKA is the only fastest growing city on the planet that is growing without a vision or plan. I am ready to be challenged on this by any aggrieved party. A gushing fountain in the middle of a traffic circle, a beautified road from the mouth of the airport to a building, a single flyover hovering like an over-scaled memorial, is not a plan but a ploy. A ploy to make a visual spectacle but to solve nothing. And Dhaka is but a microcosm of how things are running nationally.

Among the various titles that have stuck to Dhaka, one is the city of fifty-two bazaars and fifty-three alleys ('ba-anno bazaar, tep-panno goli'). Who gave that tag? What does it mean? Why 52 and not 50? Is this some kind of magic number? Did Dhaka really have 52 bazaars?

What's so thrilling about glorifying 52 bazaars anyway? For every bazaar now, there are five 'plazas,' 10 half-pucca markets, and not to mention the endless line of vendors and sellers occupying every inch of Dhaka's footpath. The transformation of Dhaka city is almost complete: The whole city is close to becoming nothing but an immense bazaar where all roads are lined with shops, markets and 'plazas.' If there is one thing every successive authority has contributed to is the wanton bazaarification of the city. Even such areas as Gulshan, once touted as a planned residential area, are becoming commercial strips of shops, restaurants, offices, and banks. (I wonder why maintain the walls

between the plots that were once exclusive houses? If Gulshan is going to be commercialised, why not go full speed in the positive way? Why not take down the walls, and have a continuous open-air, tree-lined pedestrian mall running all the way through the plots parallel to the street? Well, shops by themselves are not the biggest issue for every city thrives on that; the problems are in the consequences, things like traffic congestion, parking, pollution, uncollected filth, and lack of open-air urban space. In the atmosphere of the commercial monopolisation of urban life in Dhaka, compounded by a lack of coherent plan for the city, the biggest casualty is civic life.

The new phenomenon of Dhaka is the boom of air-conditioned plazas, arcades, mini-malls, etc., and other exclusive enclaves. Such glitzy commercial centres in the model of American shopping malls is popping

up with relentless fervour in every South Asian city, changing not only the urban landscape but also the nature of human transaction. These places are not only spatial islands but social enclaves in the body of the city. Exclusivity is now becoming more and more the norm. With having failed to turn the city into a coherent, organised and equitable space for all citizens, the middle and the upper middle-class are fleeing to the consolation of these exclusive enclaves.

I wrote in an earlier piece that shopping is now everything; it is appearing to be the only viable form of culture. I did not say that to extol the virtues of shopping but to point out that the culture of shopping is rising to a height unforeseen in human history. This is now happening everywhere because of a complex crisscrossing of globalisation, mediatisation, transnational transaction, and middle class consumerism. Rem Koolhaas,

festivities that have a close tie with the streets and the city, in short, spaces that define and celebrate the civic realm. The only space worth the name of a plaza in the city is the South Plaza of Sangsad Bhaban, but ironically people are now barred from enjoying the space as envisioned originally because some over-zealous, anti-civic bureaucrat must have cooked up an argument

around security. South Plaza, an offering to the city, now remains empty as an abandoned dream. Why not then rename South Plaza as South Bastion? Besides the pseudo-plazas, Dhaka has a few other commercial models. There is, of course, Gausia, and many others like that, unplanned but put together in an incremental way, a place teeming with incomprehensible

clutter, energy, and humidity where one's physiological endurance can only be superseded by mysterious longings for saris and lehengas. And there is New Market, which is not that new anymore but still is a successful idea for a planned market in the tropical environment of Dhaka. And most of all, it is not dedicated purely to commerce; it has some civic quality about it. Has or Had, I am not sure now.

New Market is a destination, a truly working civic space in the context of Dhaka. There is a grand sense of entry, although it looks bland and blank from the roads, but inside rows of shops open into covered colonnades framing an open-air pedestrian street, making a pleasurable relationship between the shop and the street, of inside and outside, and enclosure and openness. Never mind the male university

students hanging around in strategic corners but the open-air street is the closest to the idea of a real plaza. The little park in the middle, if it were kept well, could have been an ideal urban garden as well as a space for festivities and cultural programmes. I remember the time I was a university student, I especially loved going to the stationery stores. Among the stores selling pens, compasses, new notebooks, inks, paints, amidst the smell of fresh paper and pencils, there was an air of possibilities.

But as with everything else, New Market is also tampered with, and rest assured, thoughtlessly, with only a myopic view of what life and living in this city can be.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, an architect and writer, currently teaches at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu.



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the famous Dutch architect who recently designed the \$40 million Prada store in Manhattan that raised quite a few eyebrows because of the obscene price-tag, says it unflinchingly: "Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity. Through a battery of increasingly predatory forms, shopping has infiltrated, colonised, and even replaced, almost every aspect of urban life."

What does this ubiquity of shopping mean? In the western context, but even as it is reproduced elsewhere in a global chain of late capitalism, no matter where you go, the malls, the airport terminal, the television, your favourite web page, it's shop till you drop. At Dubai Airport, they even organise what they call a shopping festival! Is shopping the death of civic space, or its extreme reformation, its final capitulation in the bowels of business?

Well, Manhattan is one thing, Dhaka is another. Manhattanites certainly can, and they do with great passion, take care of their civic needs (just listen to the public debates around the rebuilding of World Trade Centre). We should be concerned about what we can do in our city where commercialisation is running amok. To return to the mall and the plaza: As far as I can say, the model for the mall was set in Dhaka by Eastern Plaza. It was fanciful then but it was an inward looking, air-conditioned, street choking, car-park madness creating behemoth of a shopping centre. And now malls and plazas are popping up everywhere, of all sorts, shapes, and sizes. The recent opening of one -- claimed as the biggest, chunkiest and supersized mall in all of Asia -- leads to the thronging of people like bees at a honey festival. An architect friend raises a simple but poignant point: But why are they called plazas? In Italian, a plaza is an open air place for social assembly, gathering, dining, recreation, and for both designated and informal urban

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