

In pursuit of a better Dhaka

Five years on the downward slide continues

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If you find yourself dwarfed by monolithic 10-, 12-storied concrete masses lined up arrogantly on both sides of narrow roads, nay paths; if you are robbed of air and light in areas packed like sardines with structures as low as even three to four stories; if you discover medical diagnostic equipment, fast food outlets, bedroom, kitchen and toilet in a basement; if you have to walk on the road to avoid the cars parked on a pedestrian way; if you see children kicking about on a field of masonry; if you bump into a clinic next to a busy market; if you find your bedroom windows facing a boundary wall six inches away brace yourself, you are at home, this is Dhaka!

The mega city's population has grown from 7 million in 1991 to 11 million today. Clearly the city is not prepared for this, compelling many (individuals and families) to live in the open, covered only by bamboo, sacking, polythene or cardboard.

Those better off among them populate the congested and unhygienic bastees, marked by ramshackle single-room houses of transient materials, narrow pathways, non-existent sanitation and the rule of ruthless landlords.

Cities such as these are manifest with out-of-school malnourished children, job-seeking educated youths, under-employed adults, abounding diseases, non-existent sanitation and drainage, contaminated drinking water sparking off cholera, typhoid, diarrhoea and dysentery, accumulating rubbish, shortage of doctors and hospitals, limited electricity. Crime, violence and unbridled terrorism have become a major problem of utmost concern.

Half of the world's population now lives in urban areas. This is double what it was 25 years ago and is expected to rise to two-thirds by 2025 when the world's population will rise to an estimated 8.3 billion. The urban population of the world is expected to reach over five billion people. Ninety percent of the growth in urban populations shall occur in developing countries of Asia and Africa (as well as Latin America) where urbanisation is taking place rapidly and involves far larger numbers of people than ever before.

Such unprecedented urban growth is placing a strain on municipal management and, as ever, the burden falls heaviest on the poor. Local governments especially are proving ill equipped to cope with the additional demands for land, housing, food, services and infrastructure, and have difficulty with the environmental and social costs of rapid urbanisation, whereas the key issue is to see that increasing urbanisation benefits the poor.

Urbanisation has been defined as an increase in the proportion of people living in an urban area, a town or a city.

The problem of urbanisation beset mainly the developing countries during the last century -- the 20th, accelerating to a point where many cities have been increasing in population by over 20% every

ten years.

In the case of Dhaka the picture is somewhat alarming. From 15% in 1961, the City has been urbanising @ almost 55% in 1991.

Even in relatively 'developed' Commonwealth countries of the North, such as Canada, the issue of urban poverty is becoming a greater problem at both local and national levels. Despite continuing economic growth in many developing countries of the Commonwealth, poverty reduction is likely to remain a formidable challenge.

Why do people move to towns and cities? There are two simultaneous factors working here, what we call the 'push' and the 'pull' factors. The motive behind migration from one place to another in this situation is to improve the quality of life.

'Push' factors (reasons why people leave the countryside/rural areas) include: pressure on the land, limited food production, farming is not invested in, many families do not own any land, natural disasters, extreme physical conditions, overpopulation, starvation, war, famine and intimidation, mechanisation causing a reduction in the number of jobs, farming is hard work with long hours and low pay, lack of services such as healthcare and education.

'Pull' factors (reasons why people move to the towns or cities) include: expectation to find "more reliable sources of food", access to more comfortable housing, opportunities better paid jobs, better access to services for schooling, medical treatment and entertainment, attraction to the 'bright lights' of opportunity, religious, political and cultural activities can be carried out more safely in cities, simply for a higher quality of life.

In reality they end up joining, often millions of others, with the most basic of housing with no services, no work, very little food, little or no opportunity to avail other facilities.

Issues related to urbanisation of Dhaka City (not according to priority, nor exhaustive): (1) Legal: building rules violation, encroachment, change in land-use, (2) Housing, (3) Poverty alleviation through participation of people living in poverty, (4) Sound governance, (5) Gender equity: ensuring equal access to education, health, job opportunities, land, and credit for women, (6) Public health: improving health among the low-income people, (7) Food marketing, food security, peri-urban and rural food production development strategies, (8) Urban agriculture, (9) Water supply, (10) Electricity supply, (11) Waste management and cleanliness: (a) solid waste and surface water-- Dhaka City Corporation, (b) sewage and storm water DWASA, (12) Pollution by indiscriminate disposal of untreated industrial & municipal wastes, (13) Noise pollution, (14) Telecommunication, (15) Transportation: mode, footpath, over- and underpasses, travel time, traffic, (16) Education facilities, (17) Safety and security, (18) Fire prevention, precautions and control, (19) Entertainment, cultural activities, (20) Religious facilities, (21) Social issues, (22)



Business facilities, (23) Job opportunities, (24) Shopping facilities and (25) Water bodies.

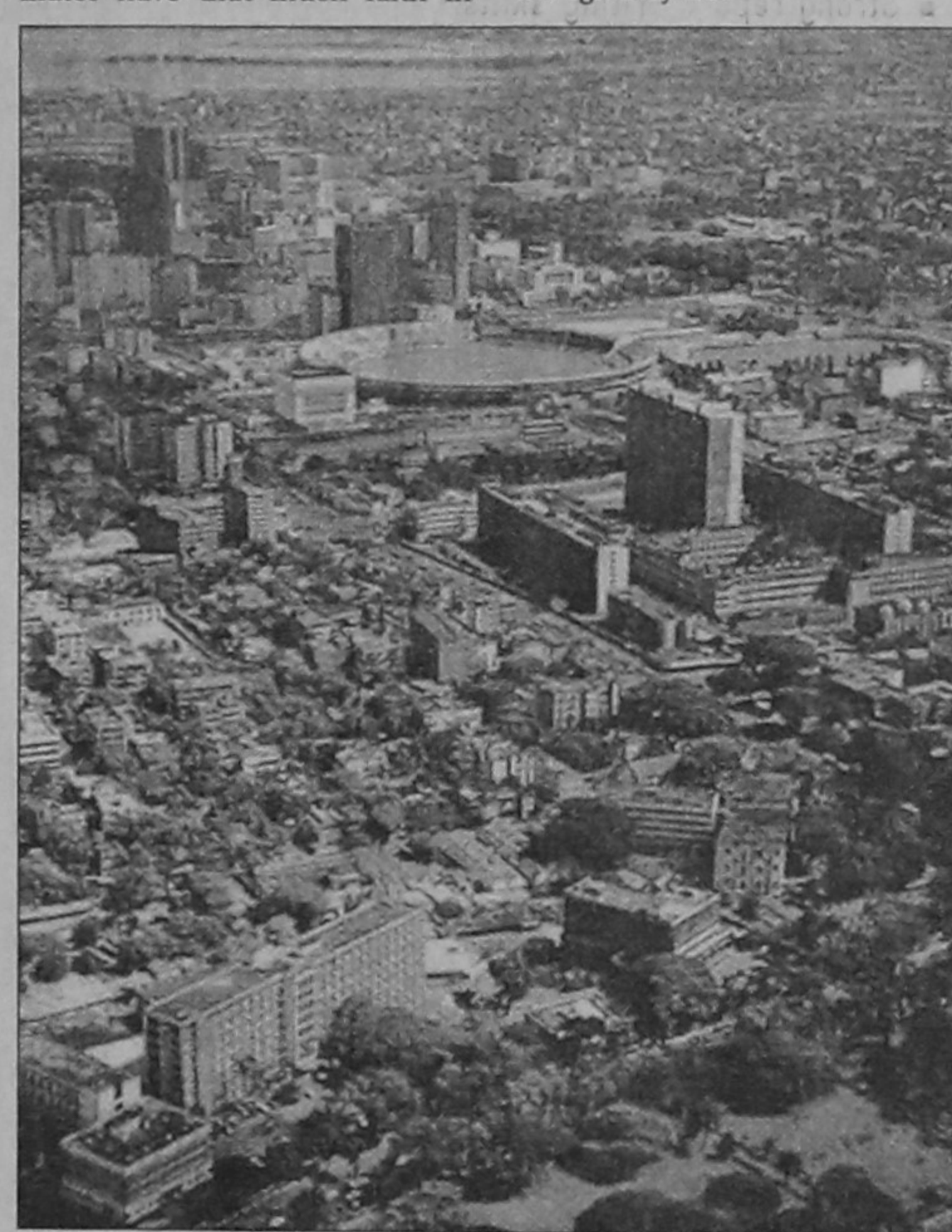
Each and every public service organisation will do well in the future if they plan their projects as part of a comprehensive, all-inclusive whole, by taking into consideration the opinions of all parties with a stake in the matter. People can very rarely be compelled; they have to find the situation encouraging and to their ultimate benefit if a decision is to last the test of time. And, in this day and time, only fools can afford to ignore expertise. Furthermore, mere provision of a singular item, and that too by poor design and high-handed attitude that whatever provided will work, is not the solution to any problem; often it can be the beginning of a chain of undesired events.

The task for involves: (a) professionals such as architects, urban planners, engineers, sociologists, (b) government agencies, (c) elected bodies, (d) financial institutions and (e) the public.

It is now accepted by most international agencies and professionals that urbanisation is inevitable, and a precondition to economic and social development. Urban life offers increased access to diverse forms of employment and services due to the economies of scale. It is also now acknowledged that for all their problems, urban areas are the primary engines of economic growth, as well as social and technical innovation. The evidence shows that cities generate a disproportionately higher ratio of central government revenues and economic activity relative to their population levels. The challenge is therefore to evolve appropriate and sustainable ways of managing the urbanisation process, rather than seeking to prevent it.

In any neighbourhood existing surrounding buildings are already an impediment, particularly in regions with reputation of poorly implemented zoning regulations. Often the new kid on the block joins the parade and becomes

another blot on the landscape. The architect is expected to wave his magic wand on site limitations and detrimental proximate conditions. These include approach, narrow frontage, shape and orientation. The latter has evoked architects to produce facades sealed with glass facing the West; an architectural absurdity, but some clients in some sub-tropical climates have that much faith in



their architects.

Scarcity of funds is perennial. Long before the sculptural Opera House descended at Bennelong Point on Sydney Harbour to spell the demise of Western Classical Architecture as the lone language for public buildings, it was well accepted that initial estimates would be overrun. Prize-winning Danish architect Jørn Utzon's opening estimate of US\$7 million in 1957 ballooned to a completion expenditure of US\$102 million when finally the building was completed in 1973.

Closer at home, Master Architect Louis Kahn's monumental extravaganza in concrete and brick, don't forget the traces of white marble, the Sangsad Bhaban at Dhaka began in 1965 with an estimate of Taka 4 crore 86 lakh (Tk 4,86,00,000). By the time Kahn's coup de maître was inaugurated in 1982, the expenditure incurred had come to rest at Taka 128 crore 95 lakh (Tk 128,95,00,000).

There is increasing need for safety and security. Over the years buildings have become insecure, both from accidents and man-made assaults. Repulsive metal fences have gone up through which once the outside flowed to the inside, a treasured architectural attitude since Frank of Wright fame defined Usonian architecture.

In our rush to build, to cope

with the rising demand for livable 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.

country, a school meant also a playground, today it is no different from an office building. Office buildings have been converted into garment factories. Residential buildings do just as well as clinics. Garages can become a boutique. Indeed edifices are the mileposts of an era, the sculpted tale of a civilisation. If architecture represents the time and the society we live in, then our tightly packed buildings, egocentric, each different from the other, entirely apathetic, each a different entity, lacking harmony, decked in imported embellishments, paints a gloomy picture about our social order. We owe an explanation to our future.

Machine has been a blessing and then a nuisance. With water, electricity, telephone, gas, air-conditioning and television network came miles of conduits, wiring and ducting. Architects have almost always had the tendency to hide the service channels to give a spick and span look on the outside. There have been attempts to the contrary, but not too many were inclined to follow the inside-outside philosophy of Richard Rogers as he exposed the anatomy of the Lloyd's Bank in London.

Ever since the early 18th C, the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, marked by important innovations and inventions, and followed with the commercial availability of electricity in the 1880s, Man had been overtaken by machines. Annoying sound has been one of the major contributions of electromechanical technology. While in the factories it was somehow accepted as normal and we endure the legacy, in the home and the office there is growing concern about high level noise. In the auditoriums, performers and users are increasingly becoming aware of the need for good acoustics. Although motor car manufacturers will advertise models that will not bother a sleeping

We have come to accept wrong standards in terms of density, width of roads, depth of veranda, percentage of circulation against useable area, ratio between built-up and open areas, encroachment of public space, form and size of shops, number of users designated for a toilet, sanitation, safety measures ... the list could go on. These discrepancies need to be overcome if we expect to achieve an environment fit for human habitation. For that we need to think like human beings.

Commercial buildings, shopping centres, bus terminals, clinics, mosques have all set their own standards, where the criteria it seems is to cover the entire land with building, wall up even the veranda for that extra room and provide almost nothing in terms of open, neutral space for the users and the passers-by, physically or visually. Consequently most buildings will consider the adjacent road as legitimate parking.

Whereas in the past even in this

baby, architects need to work on providing a congenial acoustic environment for the children outside the car.

The possibility of a fire in a building has been increased due to the influence of machine. The possibility of fire starting has increased because we have made our buildings airtight for air-conditioning. Escape from fire has been made more difficult because we are not only going higher, but having to enclose our buildings to also prevent theft and vandalism, and in our eternal yearning for privacy. In our fanaticism to make our buildings more secure, we have made them more unsafe.

We are failing to respond to context social, cultural, physical, demographic. A different site, a different weather, different materials, different technology, different cultures, different economics, different societies; how can then buildings for different people in different areas look the same or attempt to be so? Take a look at the parliament house in Brasilia. Does it look like a familiar airport?

Despite the call for globalisation, we guard our cultures as never before. It may be argued now that the cyber tics and airlines have brought the world closer, and therefore there could be a case for One Architecture. But the world is as different as it ever was. We may have reached common ground in terms of communicating with each other, in understanding the other side of the fence, but are we not busy telling the 'other' about us, about how we live, or how we want to live? More than ever before we are now conversing about our individual distinctiveness and quality of life.

There is character and exclusivity in every aspect of Art, if that be the forte of architecture. Across the globe music is different, lyrics are 'untranslatable delicacies of colour', poetry is unique, paintings have their distinctive messages, theatre continues to narrate the joys and sorrows of a people the playwright wants to portray, and life itself has as many shades as nature's palette. So why is it in architecture that we have to humiliate ourselves by patronising plagiarism?

Constraints are ever present and perhaps more so in a developing country. Each society, every culture and each political identity will indeed continue to have its own set of constraints, in addition to those common. If one compromises with constraints, then buildings are apt to be faceless and meaningless, and therefore unqualified to represent time, space, society, culture and humanity.

The architect's artefact the building, his creation in the words of the more romantic, has been the outcome of his successful struggle with such constraints, added to which is Man's changing way of life to keep up to the demands of the times transforming.

As opposed to the freedom of a painter who can fill his studio with works that perhaps he never intends to sell, or the sculptor who can chisel through a block of stone and end up with nothing but thin air, a dramatist who can travel in his Time Machine and meet Adam

and Eve, the flutist plays simply because he loves doing it, the architect's effort like that of the investigating scientist must always touch the earth and contend with reality.

Does not the Architect enjoy any freedom? Of course, he does to play as he wills, to soar like a bird and deep-sea hunt like the blue whale, but he must work within those constraints and many more. Those are the tensions that form a meaningful boundary to his wildest emotions and creative infinity.

Note: The article is based on a Lecture "Urbanisation and the Architect: Problems and Prospects" delivered at the Defence Services Command and Staff College, Mirpur Cantonment, Dhaka, 2004, and the keynote paper "Question of Architecture" for the seminar Architecture: Overcoming Constraints organized by the Dept of Architecture, BUET, 2003

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