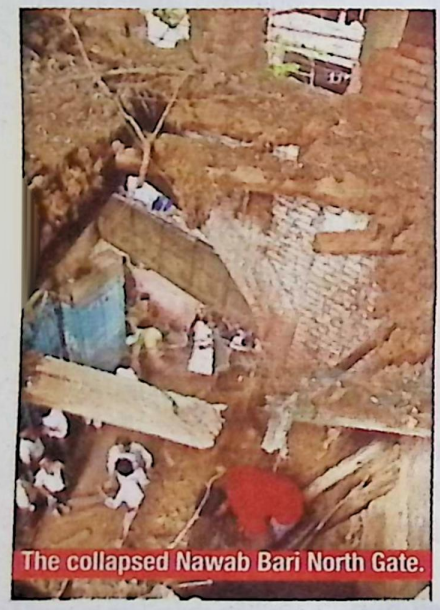
In 1970, the government wanted to use the Manjil as a Children Hospital, but found the dilapidated structure unfit. But its heritage value was evident and the committee recommended it for conservation. Recognising the landmark building's historical importance, the Public Works Secretary revived the proposal in 1975, by requesting the DIT to explore the possibilities of acquiring the complex and set up a museum after preservation. He formed a committee comprising the DIT Chairman, the Chief Architect, the Director of Urban Development and the Museum Curator, and sat with the Manager of the Nawab Court of Wards, the Director of Planning and the Parjatan Corporation to prepare a project proposal. The group opined that the "Ahsan Manjil should become a tourist attraction showcasing the history, culture and life of the peoples in Bangladesh".

Political changes got the project stalled for a decade until the President took a personal interest. The General who usurped to power had a romantic disposition. In November, 1985 acquisition of Ahsan Manjil and adjacent area was gazetted. The precinct had other properties, e.g. the Gol Talab (Louis's Nalla) an oval pond excavated by Ali Miah where members of the extended family lived, or the Andarmahal; yet the Rangmahal was restore first.

On March 16, 1986 the Government formed an Advisory Committee with the Education Secretary, Works Secretary, the National Museum Director, the Archaeology DG, the Chief Engineer and the Chief Architect; and engaged ASSO Consult to set up the exhibits following diorama, while the Department of Architecture carried out the conservation work; the site office was run by a principal architect. The premise had a number of private quarters for the ladies, later used as accommodations for less important nightly guests and essential staff. These and a stable were cleared out. The work was completed in July 1989 and the 23-gallery Museum was opened on September 20, 1992.

I first came to know about Ahsan Manjil possibly in the early 1970s when Bichitra did a story on it, urging for evicting the squatters and restoring the mansion. However, when it actually was happening in the late-1980s I was out of the country pursuing higher studies, and only returned to find a magnificent Pink Palace on the river. However, we architects soon got engaged in debates as to who should be credited with the Gold Medal that the Architects' Regional Council of Asia awarded the project in 1992, or whether pink was the right colour! The original lime-plaster finish of the building surface was replaced with sand-cement-lime plaster giving a reddish-pink lustre that monsoon rain washed away in a year; the weather beaten grey was ever present. Efforts were made more on giving the originally reddish-pink hue to the exterior, obtained by mixing the plaster with cement bound water based paint.

North South architecture students organised a workshop and month-long exhibition of measured drawings where the government Architecture Department presented their conservation efforts that renewed my interest on the building. I had long talks with the architects and consultants which were tapped by a colleague, and transcripts prepared by a student. Meanwhile at a party I met a Nawab family member who suggested I check a website on the Nawabs, full of rare photographs, history, biography and a fascinating family tree that connects thousands of people related to the family! My interest was heightened when the grandson of last Nawab Hasan Askari, studying at Berkeley College in Manhattan, defended a Jew from a



The collapsed Nawab Bari North Gate.



Slums in Ahsan Manjil in the 1970s.