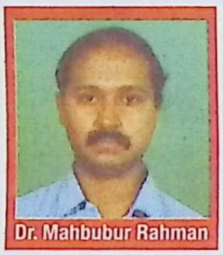
An Architect's Dhaka

Part Eleven

PRESERVATION of cultural artefacts is part of a process to retain local heritage on the face of modernisation often perceived to denude cultural identity. This often manifests in vernacular revivalism as a style or in the efforts towards architectural conservation as a cultural agenda that invigorates collective memory of cultural history. What often erodes the historic and traditional character of any city is modern methods and approaches to architecture and building design. It has been made necessary to preserve historic buildings and neighbourhoods as relics of the cultural past on the face of the fact that modernisation, as well as time borne natural decay, tends to wipe them off the face of the city's cultural landscape.

The aims of modernisation and architectural conservation are thus seen to conflict, the causes of which are deeply embedded within the socio-political institutions. City authorities are deterred from cultural preservation and adaptive reuse of old buildings or areas because the patterns of land ownership, re-housing, fixed rents and political ramifications among the people are often daunting. Building professionals on the other hand do not help with the process as because they are not trained to improve upon older built environments, but only to build on pristine sites. The society too is predominantly against conservation because affluence or real estate investment drives the owners of old buildings not only to remodel or transform the original settings to suit modern day aesthetic(?) and commercial preferences but sometimes there is impetus to demolish old neighbourhoods to pave the way for modern construction.

Against such odds, it is necessary for the major initiatives towards architectural heritage conservation to be undertaken as organisational activities. In Bangladesh the Archaeology Department under the Cultural Ministry is the official custodian of building heritage. The government has enacted laws to protect older buildings and entrusted institution(s) with the task of protecting and conserving heritage buildings. The municipalities have also been mandated by Pourashava Ordinance 1977 to undertake conservation activities. Besides, the Department of Architecture and Rajdhani Unnayan Kattripakkhya (RajUK), both under the Public Works Ministry have in the past undertaken conservation work. In fact the Public Works Department (PWD) and such other government organisations in smaller scale have undertaken routine repair, renovation, and remodelling work. The Railway Department allowed Grameen Phone's initiative to refurbish/renovate the Chittagong Railway Station. Many of the nationalised bank's branches, specially of the Sonali Bank, are accommodated in many ornate colonial period large mansions, like in Mymensingh, Rangpur, etc. Many government colleges or other institutions are too occupying many of the zamindaarbaris, for example in Muktagacha, Puthia, Saturia and Muraripara.



Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

International events and organisations such as the 1957 Hague Conference, the 1972 UNESCO convention in passing resolution for the protection of world patrimony, the endorsement of tourism by the UN General Assembly proposing preservation of historic sites and monuments as tools and subsequently the indirect influence of various UN bodies such as the UNDP, FAO and international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Council for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Centre for Restoration and Conservation of Monuments (ICCROM), the Aga Khan Award for Architecture introduced in 1976 and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in 1988, the Ford Foundation, and the Getty Trust, all have considerably helped to grow awareness and the emergence of conservation activities in Bangladesh.

Awareness towards conservation or value of architectural heritage is not very old among the architects in Bangladesh. In early 1980s when we were in our final year(s) of education at BUET which for another decade was the only school of architecture in Bangladesh, few were looking to develop a better understanding of cultural heritage and architecture both in the West and in the region, which I have written about earlier, including about the study circle that they formed which brought together not only young architects and students but gradually artists, sculptors, historians, literary personalities, journalists and even few engineers. They propagated the idea that we have to look into vernacular, culture, climate and materials in order to generate form and space that is Bengali.

It was a time when an unpopular government, and the nouveau riche elite who were in fact the product of the system, formed the main clientele. They touted cheap Islamic clichés and a distorted view of both modem and traditional architecture in order to identify with the Islamic sentiments, profiteer from it, gain foreign support and consolidate their hold.