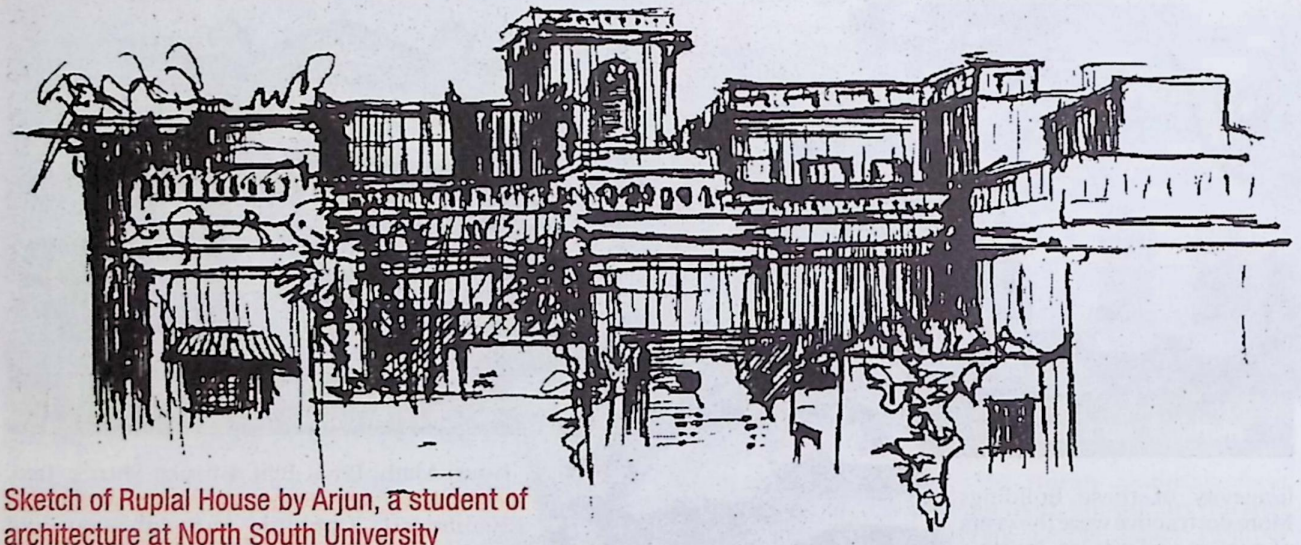
This is neither a full list, nor all the above structures made up the illusive 'List' of heritage buildings. An attempt made by the Urban Development Committee is still not complete.

Extensive encroachments plague almost all magnificent 19-20C palatial mansions in Dhaka. The Bundh area with a few excellent colonial period buildings is a historic zone; so are Sankharibazaar, Tantibazaar and Goalnagar. The areas are choked with people, vehicle, goods due to the narrow roads and incompatible functions. The Ruplal House, which not many buildings can parallel in grandeur and importance, houses the largest wholesale vegetable and spice market in the country, in addition to housing some defense staff. About 50 families of the Fire Department staff and Sublette now occupy the Reboti Mohon Saha's house on Dholai Khal. Other mansions like Sadhana Oushudhalay or Jatindranath's house are subject to abuse and misuse by commercial interests like boarding, hostel, warehouse, cottage industry and printing press.

The Adi Basanta Babur Bari and the Goala Bari are just two examples of past magnificence and grandeur swept away by ominous market forces; developers demolished these two beautiful buildings in 2005 to build shopping malls and multi-storey apartments. Yet another example of insensitivity towards and ignorance of heritage by the 'enlightened' society is the destruction of the 160 years old Jagannath University Library Building in November 2006. Originally a Zamindaar Bari overlooking the oval greens of the Bahadur Shah Park and an arboretum of precious plants on the south, housed the first modern bank of the country. The two storied building gave in to a 20-storied academic cum commercial block despite series of protests and unsuccessful legal steps by activists and the media. The phenomenon of 'demolish-and-replace' is ubiquitous in the old and even in the not-so-old parts of the city. Multi-storied residential and commercial buildings are continually and rapidly replacing the historic urban fabric. The Ramna, Segunbagicha, Paltan, Topkhana and Bijoynagar to the north of the Secretariat in new Dhaka are witnessing demolition of many early-20C bungalows.

Vibrant Old Dhaka is pulsating with activity and people, which can be the basis for an area conservation plan. To establish controls and limits, society must accept the historical references and the government should patronise and support conservation. This will ensure survival of the heritage and success of conservation programs with the stakeholders' involvement. The restoration of Northbrook Hall and the Ahsan Manjil has assured their continuity, but the surrounding inhospitable conditions grossly undermine the value and benefit of conservation to the society. It demands that the area be cleared of incompatible uses, made more accessible and the context revived by restoring other historical buildings too. There is a need to carry architectural documentation, and conservation carried out to protect them from decay and damages, with special consideration on the townscape value.



Sketch of Ruplal House by Arjun, a student of architecture at North South University

This final note is on possibly the most viewed of those magnificent villas, thanks to the entertaining media. Zamindaar Hrishikesh Das built Rose Villa on KM Das Lane in Tikatuly amidst a garden of rare roses, some of foreign origin, on 22 bigha of land with ponds, fountain, marble statues and an orchard. It took him six years to finish this mansion of timeless elegance and stupefying luxury. Hrishikesh built this and started organising jalsas to rival Baldah Garden where he was refused entry despite his wealth due to his low caste.