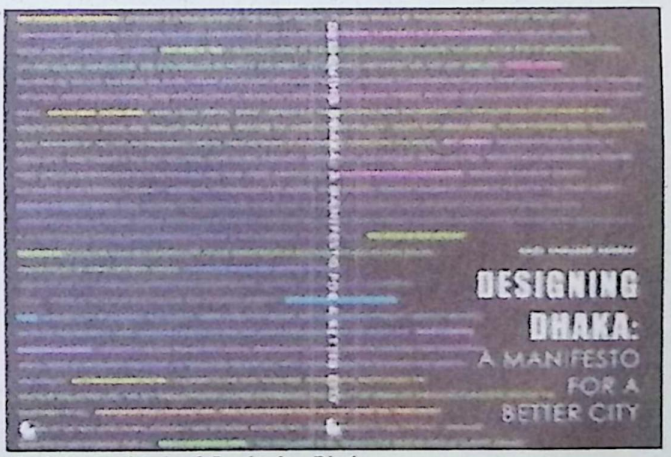
Re-visioning Dhaka

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf's imagined city

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Can Dhaka be saved? Can it be made livable again, and turned into the green and friendly city it once was? Can its crazy landscape of high-rise ghettos, random shopping centres, festering slums and residential neighbourhoods that have also morphed as business districts and commercial hubs be ever redrawn to reflect a proper urban environment? Or, for that matter, can its decaying public places and decrepit parks overrun by squatters, drug dealers and vendors of various dispositions be ever reclaimed and restored to their primary functions? Or its dysfunctional traffic system given a shot in the arm and made to run the way it runs in cities of comparable size, population or importance?

No one should be surprised if the answer to the above questions is a resounding 'no' – such is the pessimism that Dhaka's urban reality breeds, which even grips city planners and administrators. To be fair to them, they have done their part: their have been many projects and plans to revive the city and give it some semblance of order and coherent environment, but none of these plans even reached the stage of implementation.



Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, Designing Dhaka: A Manifesto for a Better City
Dhaka: Loka, 2012

Dhaka has long reached the limits of ecology and morphology; it has missed all the buses to modernisation. It is a city in perpetual crisis – it has no zoning law, no public transport system, no solid waste management or pollution control strategies, no density distribution, no properly functioning public utility system, , no neighbourhood parks or playing fields or empty spaces, not much of social security and hardly any provision for open air cultural activities. It is plagued by overcrowding which has been triggered by Dhaka's pre-eminent omniscientrality as successive governments and the corporate sector have placed all their head offices in Dhaka. Dhaka has little respect for its archives. Except for the street lines, most of Dhaka is in a state of flux. It doesn't allow its citizens to nurture memories. It is a city that takes pride in concentration and city centre living; it is paranoid about connecting with peripheries

Dhaka's social ecology is a mess; it hardly inspires a concept of place.

Dhaka has never been able to optimize its size or its population; or zone out its schoolsand other non-residential elements.

Dhaka, a riverfront city, has no connection with water. Reclaimed waterbodies fall victim to encroachment and earth filling and eventually disappear.

In a recent survey conducted by the London-based Economist Intelligent unit Dhaka scored poorly in almost all the vital indices that define a livable city. It has a public transport system which is hugely dysfunctional as it solely depends on roads. Its infrastructure facilities are poor; its supply of utilities inadequate and its crime rate alarming. Nothing short of a revolution can save the city and effectively put an end to the contradictions and ambiguities that beset it now. That revolution has to draw a new cognitive map of the city, a visionary design that will inspire policy planners, government functionaries, politicians, activists and private entrepreneurs to put their resources together to halt Dhaka's slide to disaster.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf's *Designing Dhaka: A Manifesto for a Better City* which came out in 2012 offers such a stimulating and challenging design for Dhaka. It proposes a manifesto to bring healing to Dhaka, and solve its problems from the bottom up. He calls Dhaka 'a stubborn city,' 'a city of brutal facts' balancing itself unsteadily on six different