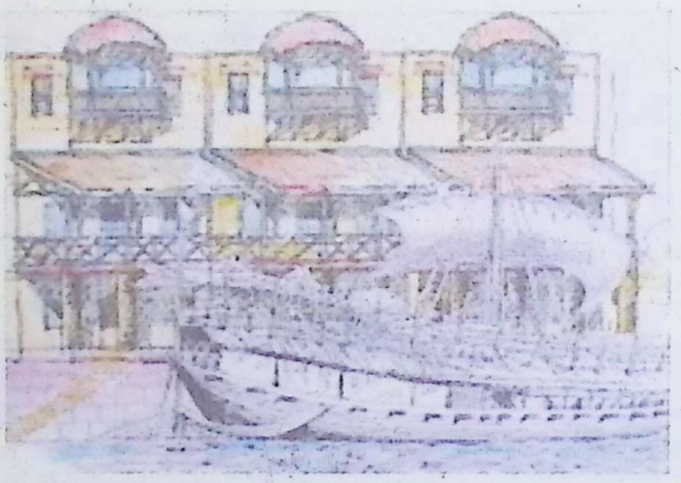
morphologies that define its urban fabric: the settlement along the Buriganga; the colonial spread of the city carving out a 'new Dhaka,' the post-1947 development of the city including its planned residential areas, the chaotic and unplanned growth of a jumble of infrastructure that stifled the planned city and the ubiquitous squatter colonies and slums define the city and give it its uniqueness. He picks up the essential properties of each morphology—which he sees as both a reality as well as a promise-- and collates them for an understanding of their essential character. What they have in common is a socio-spatial dialectic – more than physical structures – that should not be lost sight of in planning for cohesion and transcendence. 'A new Dhaka is possible,' he writes; 'It can truly be a modern city that is socially, economically and ecologically sustainable.' And then explains his grounds of optimism. 'Working with its geography and hydrology, and its growing urban needs,' he maintains, 'Dhaka can still be a very unique, green and highly livable city.'



Canal front Image by Ashraf.

Such an assumption rests on unsure grounds if it is not supported by two essential qualities of a city designer – 'daring' and 'vision.' Ashraf has both. In the subsequent pages of the book he explains what 'daring' implies and what design can do if it assumes a visionary dimension.

Designing Dhaka has a theory part and an action part. The theory part deals with an understanding of spatial ontology, the heterogeneous spaces and their relations, and explains the reasons behind Dhaka's cataclysmic urban growth. It also defines the city in civilizational terms, explaining how Dhaka, like all comparable cities, has become over the centuries 'an instrument of destiny.' Ashraf maintains that a city like Dhaka is an 'aggregate of economic and technical vectors' that policy makers and planners should take into account, but it is 'lived experience' that should take precedence. He indeed builds on the lived experience to formulate his vision. This is one reason why history is so important to him. In course of his journey through the history of the city he discovers when and where the feeling of place and civitas – civic enterprise – was lost and can be regained.

Another strong point Ashraf makes is that any design for Dhaka has to base itself on 'a liquid landscape' and how the plan has to be around land and water, without putting them in an antagonistic position.

The theory part of *Designing Dhaka* lays the ground of what cultural geographers describe as a 'critical-mass potential for innovation' and looks at space as culturally constructed instead of being a given. For a space-starved city like Dhaka, space has to be both material and representational. It has to be a triad of historicality, sociality and spatiality that constitutes human being. The theory part also alerts us to the need of emphasizing more on practices, strategies and interactions rather than on systems and structures.

The action part of *Designing Dhaka* begins with a 15 point manifesto for making a new Dhaka possible. Briefly stated, these are: urbanism, hydrology, peripheries, the city as an island, containing the city, mobility, housing, open spaces, pedestrian friendly streets, city governance, urban assets, new economy, energy and ecology, catalytic architecture and city of play. Each point is explained and supported by a wealth of information and a doable agenda. In planning the city, Ashraf maintains, urbanism, rather than urbanisation should be the focus, since 'urbanism is a visualisation of the soul of the city.' What he emphasizes is an evolutionary philosophy, a 'meditation on totality' which would take into account the past, the present and the future. If such a holistic approach is taken and sustained, it would be possible for designers to understand the essential chemistry of land and water and combine them to create a fluid city. A holistic approach should also take the designers from the core of the city to the edge in order to make a polycentric Dhaka and enclose the river within its living parameters.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf's manifesto looks at Dhaka as a site where an urban revolution is possible. As architect Saif Ul Haque, another crusader for a new and better Dhaka, remarks in his prologue, 'All the tasks listed above are not of very complex nature, neither are they very difficult to implement but the question is how much are we willing to do it?' He then asks, 'And when do we begin?'

The right answer is: 'Yesterday'. ■