



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

YES, A BETTER DHAKA IS POSSIBLE!

By Kazi Khaleed Ashraf and Saif Ul Haque

Dhaka is neither dead nor dying. Despite a misplaced metaphor in which the city is seen as a diseased body – sounds more like a death threat – Dhaka is an immensely vibrant city. The traffic condition may be hellish, water may clog up road arteries, and walking is virtually impossible, but Dhaka is positioned to be one of the most economically dynamic cities in Asia. The UK Economic Outlook predicts that by the year 2025, Dhaka with an estimated GDP of USD 215 bn will be ranked 48 among 150 urban economies of the world, way above Brasilia, Rome, Karachi and Montreal.

HAD traffic been more disciplined, had housing been a serious enterprise, had civic and public spaces been nurtured, and had the landscape of water and green been sustained, Dhaka would also have been a magnificent, livable place. And that city is possible.

In the meantime, people want miracles for Dhaka. Consequently there is no shortage of rash declarations and proclamations. In one recent meeting of experts on Dhaka's transport, one person incredulously suggested getting rid of buses from city streets, while another

plan for calculated decentralisation and decongestion but not abandonment. In doing a Putrajaya on Dhaka, what happens to the existing city? Do we just leave it to the vultures? And what model to follow for that new shining city on the hill? How can we claim ownership for a new city when we don't have a good track record of managing existing ones?

Dhaka is not the only city on the planet that is going through a turbulence of change. To accept that this is how the city will be – dying and then dead – is not acceptable to those

short term and long term, and tactical and strategic. We have provided quite a few ideas for that in our 2012 book *Designing Dhaka: A Manifesto for a Better City*.

Facing the challenge of transforming Dhaka needs to begin with a clear understanding of the situation. There is an existing or present situation, and there is a future state.

It must first be accepted that the problems of Dhaka were not made in a day. They are an accumulation of negligence, inappropriate strategy, ad hoc decisions, short-sighted plans, and lack of creative imagination. No plan (DMDP structure plan, urban area plan, detail area plan, strategic transport plan, drainage plan, and building plan) so far has been able to redress the slide of the city into the least livable one on the planet. To expect solutions overnight is not only naive but misleading.

In order to head to a glorious future, there is a need to avoid a haphazard approach to design, planning and development. What should be the process of selecting solutions out of many being offered? How to arrive at a consensus among many stakeholders (landowners, speculators, builders, transport owners, hawkers, law enforcers and politicians)? How to provide a quality of life for millions in a privileged planning that only focuses on land development schemes and widening of roads?

Understanding the topography and hydrology should be the first item to any planning for Dhaka as it involves acknowledging the ecological footprint of the city. Water logging and flooding of present day are results of a deliberate negligence of the aquatic topography of the city. Incessant plundering of the delicate fabric of water through unlawful land filling has aggravated this crisis. Topographic and hydrologic sensitivity are linked to the larger governmental strategy on climate change.

Another important criterion is an understanding of demography, that is, present population and future population. What should be the relationship between the size of the

population and the area it will occupy? How to define districts or blocks of the city? How to ascertain the needs of the future so that the demands are always met? How best to distribute, group and locate the population? Demography is not only about numbers but about social and community distribution; it is about choreographing relationships between individual and the community, and the entire city. It is also about an effective and healthy relationship between spaces for living, work and leisure.

Understanding of the economy is certainly critical in contemporary market culture. Much of Dhaka's current problems arise from pressures exerted by profit opportunities that define Dhaka. Every square inch of land is considered a gold mine in the market economy to which we all have pledged unambiguous allegiance. All development centres on a singular plot without any consideration for the collective. Architects make stunning architecture, builders build buildings while the city goes to hell.

But the current economic ballgame targets the lowest common denominator; it does not take into account the quality of life for the collective, and does not consider an economic programme of a higher imaginative order that can yield better boons and profits for all, and make a more significant contribution to the projected GDP of 2025.

Understanding the vital role of mobility and transport in the life of a modern city is too obvious in this city of perpetual gridlock.

Gary Hack, an eminent urban designer and planner, was in Dhaka recently as a visiting faculty to the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements. Hack was dean of the design school at the University of Pennsylvania (where Louis Kahn taught), and head of the department of urban planning at MIT prior to that. Having been involved with the planning of over 30 cities, including Bangkok, Hack knows a thing or two about transforming cities. In the 1990s, he led the team, with transportation experts from MIT, that provided the planning guidelines for

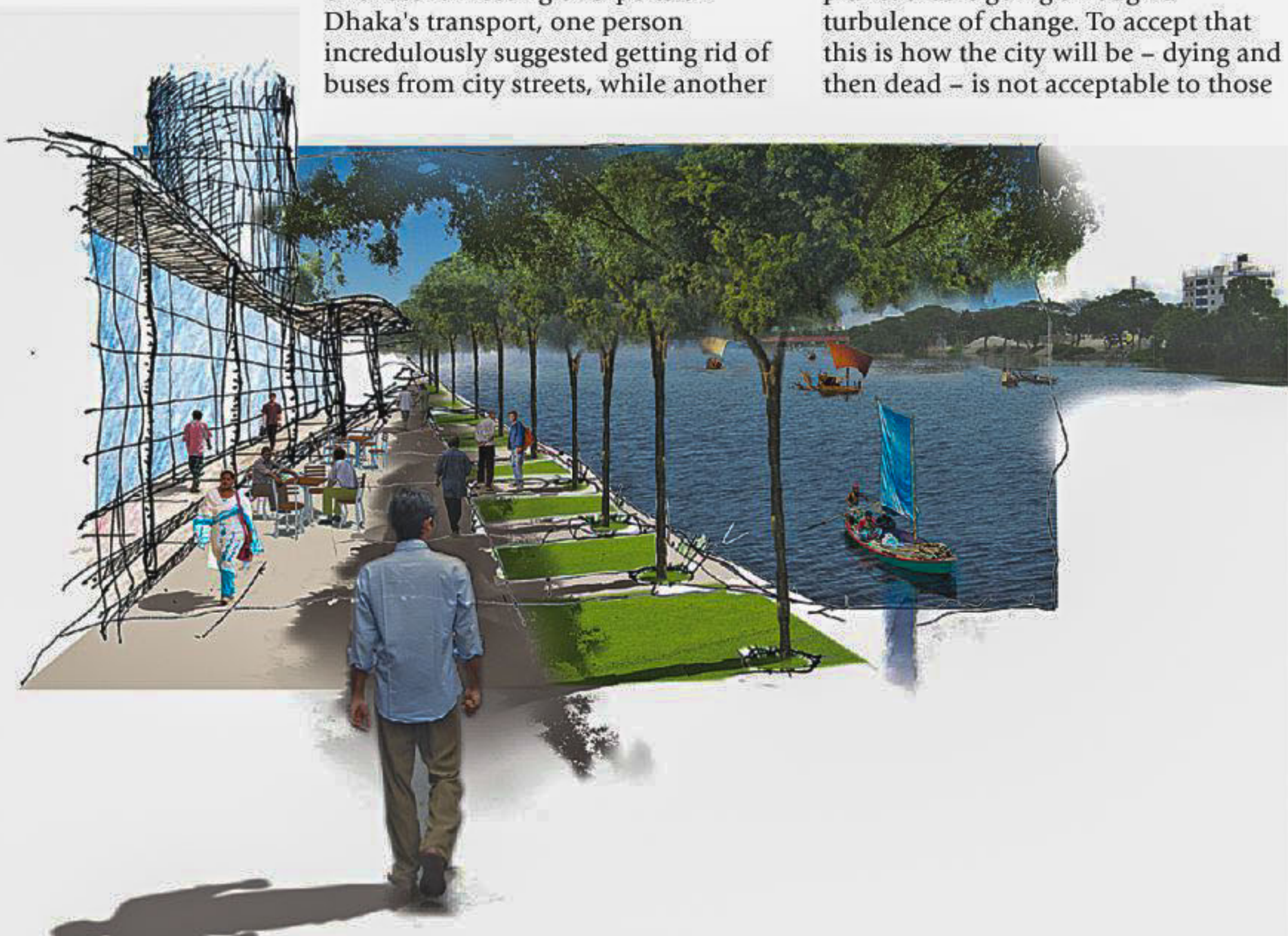
transforming Bangkok to what it is now – from a Dhaka-like "dead" city to a disciplined and thriving metropolis.

Based on his Bangkok experience, Gary Hack had few suggestions – small to big, and immediate to long-term approaches – to address the traffic situation of Dhaka.

Dhaka is in dire need of road management, something that does not require major infrastructural or financial investment but does need sorting out of existing roadways and installing a vigorous management system. Hack notes that the roads of Dhaka are sufficiently wide but unruly behaviour by all kinds of vehicles reduces road functionality. Heavy duty industrial traffic needs to stay out of the centre of the city. On the other hand, Dhaka urgently needs vehicles of higher capacity and faster movement, whether as MRT, express bus or RRT (river route transport). Even when mass transit rail arrives, it can only be effective with a network of walking. Current arrangement for walking in Dhaka is at best shoddy. In the long run, the land-use pattern of the city will have to be carefully rearranged so that there is a better relationship between home and workplace. A network of mobility however is not only about going from one point to another, it is more critically related to land use distribution and formation of city clusters.

Finally, seeing Dhaka as the only urban trope of the country needs to be revised. Every town and *mofussil* seems to want to be like Dhaka. If Dhaka is a dying or dead body, it is quite ironic that every small town wants to mimic such a pathological organism. A national urban and regional development strategy needs to be developed that provides equal emphasis on the future of smaller towns and settlements, as well as on an integrated matrix of agricultural lands, floodplains and wetlands.

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A riverfront walk.

COURTESY:
 KHALEED ASHRAF AND
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declared getting rid of rickshaws, and yet another, private cars. Hasty and ad hoc proposals emerge because there are really very few amongst us who possess a deep understanding of cities (especially one as complex as Dhaka), on how they work and how they can be transformed.

Another idea is touted: that we should abandon Dhaka and build a totally new city. This can be described as the "Putrajaya syndrome," kind of a megalomaniac delusion that once the city moves to a new site, all problems will be solved. Dhaka certainly needs a

who follow the trajectory of cities. In the 1990s, when Dhaka was still a decent city, Bangkok was what Dhaka is now: exasperating and impossible. Instead of preparing a post-mortem for Dhaka, we need to find out how Bangkok, and other cities in the neighbourhood, has turned around and simply gotten better.

We still think a new and better Dhaka is possible, and not by abandoning the existing city, and not by niggling proposals, but through careful and calibrated, but definitive interventions. They should be both