



Present Gulshan Park may be converted into an Art Park with an Art Pavilion building housing galleries, cafes and bookstores, as a new destination for the neighbourhood. All car parking will be underground. Proper sidewalk for pedestrians and proposed light rail pictured on the left.

## DHAKA NEXT

# New visions for the city

Described as “the toughest city in the world,” and consistently ranked as unlivable, Dhaka demands new architectural and urban imagination if it were to escape from those tags. Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements presents here visions for an alternative destiny for Dhaka that can be actualised. Bengal Institute is dedicated to reimagining Bangladesh's urban future in which dire Dhaka and its regions can be transformed into a condition of civic, social and ecological wellbeing. The research and design team was led by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, Director General, with Saif Ul Haque, Director, Research Program, and Md. Masudul Islam, Research Program Coordinator of Bengal Institute.

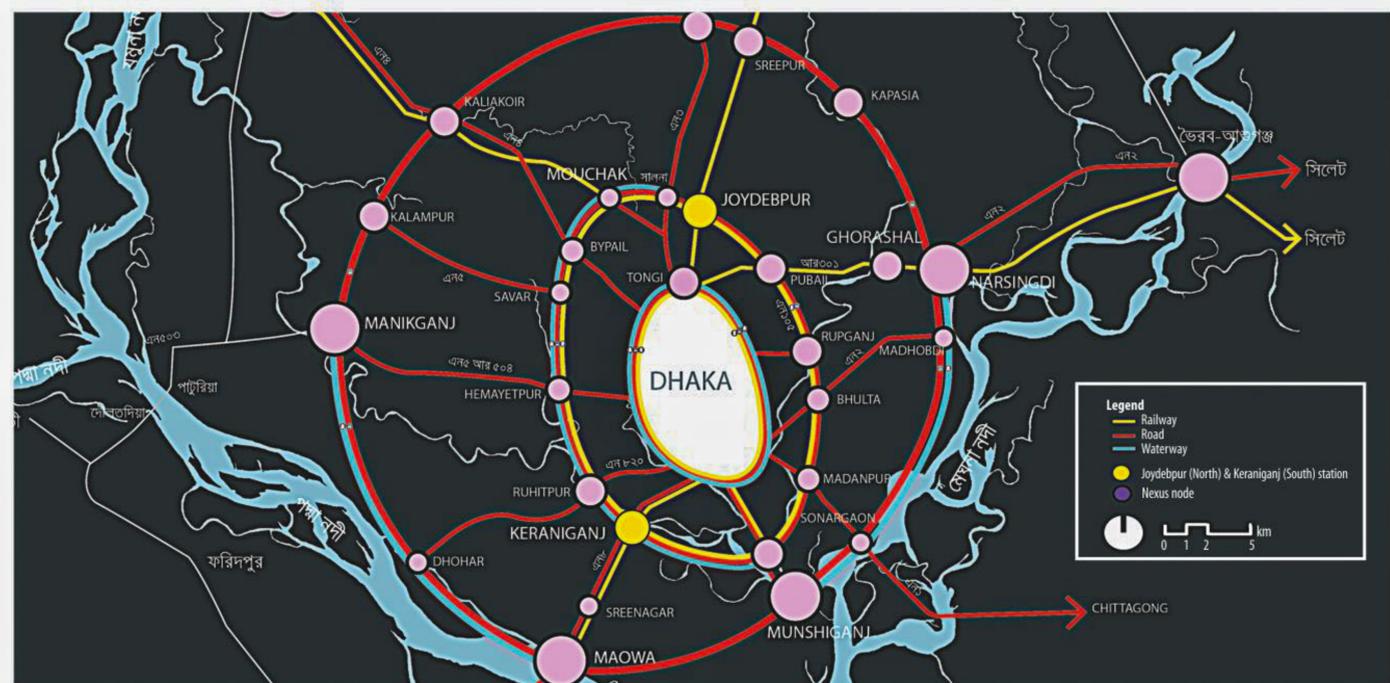
Dhaka is now poised for a new era. Positioned to be one of the most economically dynamic cities in Asia, Dhaka is predicted to be ranked at 48 by the year 2025 with an estimated GDP of USD 215 billion, way above Rome, Karachi, Hanoi and Montreal (UK Economic Outlook, 2009). Now ranked 31st among the world's largest economies, Bangladesh is predicted to take 28th place by 2030, and will be ahead of Malaysia by 2050 (in GDP figure by purchasing power parity according to PricewaterhouseCoopers).

But are our cities and towns ready for this forthcoming future? Is Dhaka prepared?

The future landscape of the country depends on what we make of Dhaka city. Any national plan will have to consider the urban scenario of the whole country, from the primary cities to the small towns, but particularly Dhaka city as it will continue to play a vital role in impacting places throughout the country. In the absence of a solid tradition of civic urban culture or infrastructural system, Dhaka city remains the sole model of urbanism in the country. It is ironic that every nook and corner in the mofussil (parts of a country outside an urban centre/rural areas) wishes to mimic the characteristics of a dysfunctional Dhaka.

New visions will have to consider the emerging urban landscape not as a knotty problem but as vast opportunities. Cities are not merely dire sites of institutional and social calamities that need constant remedies; if properly oriented and organised, they can be economic, social, and cultural engines. Bangladesh's potential for utilising its human resources in the new era of global economy remains largely untapped, and yet there are new ways by which Dhaka (and other towns) can be positioned towards a unique and desirable future.

Urbanisation has one meaning, and urbanism another. We urge the consideration of cities and settlements from the perspective of urbanism. Increasing population and physical growth, and their fallouts, mainly serve as the mea-



Dhaka Nexus area with network of nodes and connections.

sure of urbanisation, but they do not necessarily make for a civic organism; they do not show how a city can be lived in its fullest human, social, aesthetic and ecological potential. From what was truly a garden city, Dhaka continues its predictable civic and environmental degradation. Even until the 1950s, with its spacious green spaces, majestic trees, crisscrossing canals, and civilised riverbanks, Dhaka presented itself as a garden city and a place by the water. With a new urban vision and political will and action, Dhaka can still be a unique, green and highly livable city that is also responsive economically and ecologically.

We have written about the prospects of Dhaka since 1996, in which we have constantly listed the following as parameters for a desirable future for

Dhaka:

- (1) A “good” city does not happen on its own; it is envisioned, planned in a professional manner, and then implemented with meticulous dedication.
- (2) Dhaka is an aquatic city and we tend to forget that. A recognition of rivers along with its banks and canals, and the various wetlands surrounding the city, instead of filling them up mercilessly, is crucial for an economic, ecological and cultural revitalisation of Dhaka.
- (3) Dhaka requires a radical restructuring of its transportation network in alignment with its dynamic physical and social transformation.
- (4) Buildings alone do not make a city, but buildings and spaces in a well-knit fabric. Urban spaces, such as parks, gardens, riverfronts, are precious ingredients of a city.
- (5) Housing is the

material and social fabric of the city, and yet Dhaka has not been able to create suitable residential models for the many different communities that inhabit it. Alternative imaginative models of mass housing with greater density and higher quality of urbanity should be explored instead of promoting houses on individual lots and plots.

We present here few ideas at different scales and scopes that demonstrate how Dhaka can be transformed into a desirable city.

### Dhaka's destiny lies in a regional plan

Dhaka is “growing” in its own happy rhythm, spurred on every now and then by fragmentary planning initiatives. This “growth” is neither relieving pressures at the centres nor creating a decent urban development anywhere

for the city and its regions. Massive areas of precious wetlands and agricultural lands are being filled up to manufacture “urban land.” It appears that the problems of Dhaka cannot be solved by looking only at Dhaka city.

We propose a “Dhaka Nexus” in which the city and its greater neighbourhoods – the region – may be brought under a coordinated planning net. In the nexus area, selected existing nodes (settlements) may be revitalised by instituting and distributing commerce, institutions, and government offices in a uniform way. All nodes and hubs, old and new, may be connected by a coordinated transportation network. The nexus system can support the creation of multiple and diverse kinds of settlements, catering to different