

Global media and Dhaka's urbanisation

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land-grabbing, frequently drowns out the cry for the preservation of the city's ecological DNA. One of the most remarkable episodes of the 1990s was when real-estate developers became crucial actors in the politics of the city's growth and future. In 1991, the Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB) was formed with 11 members to organise the real-estate sector. In 2015, nearly 1500 real-estate companies operated in Bangladesh. While they provided city dwellers with various housing options, the real-estate companies sometimes played a draconian role in transforming the capital into a cartography of lucrative housing business.

The governmental agencies responsible for the sustainable growth of the capital often either misunderstood or ignored the environmental cost of rampant urbanisation. Consider the case of Khilkhet, an area on the north-eastern edge of the capital, a site of intense ongoing housing development on reclaimed lands or low-lying agricultural fields. Khilkhet's crown jewel is the massive housing estate called Lake City Concord—a developing-world reincarnation of the iconic mid-20th-century public housing project called Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. Pruitt-Igoe was demolished in 1972 for its alleged dehumanising design and extreme frugality of space that, according to some observers, provoked antisocial behaviour and delinquency among the project's poor inhabitants. The housing project that architectural theorist Charles Jencks identified with the so-called failure of modern architecture to provide humane, site-specific buildings swells in Khilkhet, Mohammadpur, and other parts of Dhaka. Often presented to the public with exotic names, these projects invoke ecological utopias of lush green, blue water, and unlimited familial happiness, while the reality is often a stark opposite.



One of the central problems in improving the conditions of the city has been the continued reliance on an outdated western notion of master planning, often at the expense of problem-specific, tactical urban interventions. Heavily bureaucratized, a master plan tends to be top-down, leaving no room for public participation and the essential bottom-up feedback that enables the conditions of urban liveability. This legacy of master planning more or less defined Dhaka's urban development. Furthermore, the bureaucratisation and "ad hoc-ism" of the implementation process raised serious questions on the ethics of timely intervention in the affairs of the city. Flyovers, river protection schemes, waterfront developments, and playground improvement projects, among others, have been the result of rearguard action rather than proactive imagination of the city's future. The Mumbai planner Rahul Mehrotra identified similar problems in the case of Mumbai: "Over the last three decades in Mumbai, planning has been largely concerned with rearguard actions versus the avant-garde approaches that traditionally led planning. Thus, today most

infrastructure follows city growth rather than facilitating and opening up new growth centres within and outside the city's core." Mehrotra's lament of Mumbai's rearguard planning culture could also be viewed as an advocacy for opening up spaces for proactive policy interventions which then could be the basis of what is currently touted as "ecological urbanism."

Despite a growing culture of environmental activism in the country, Bangladeshi policy works continue to linearly focus on a much-mythologised narrative, "growth rate," all too often at the expense of rivers, wetlands, agricultural lands, forests, and air. The official attitude toward urbanisation remains entrenched in bureaucratic and technical solutions, divorced from nuanced understandings of the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on a land-scarce country like Bangladesh. For instance, the air-polluting brickfields that contribute to over 1 percent of Bangladesh's GDP are left to a laissez-faire policy gray zone because brickfields are viewed as a great protagonist in the vaunted growth-rate storyline. Besides, peddling political influence and resorting to hefty bribes,

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brickfield owners easily bypass environmental regulations. Brickfields that surround Dhaka today meet the building industry's incessant demand of bricks, but they also pollute the air of the metropolis and deplete the agricultural productivity of the land they occupy, legally or illegally. While this paradoxical effect of modernity will not go away, there will be choice available to the people. The choice, fortunately, does not have to be entrapped into an "either-or" situation. The choice could embrace an environmentally sensitive vision of urbanisation, while ensuring the economic progress of the populace with a least disruptive carbon footprint.

Let us return to the global media question regarding Dhaka that I posed at the outset. My own reaction to such labels as "one of the worst cities of the world" is one of both exasperation and introspection. I remain optimistic that it is possible to build on Dhaka's vibrant cultural footprint and enterprising human resources, while imagining a 21st-century ecologically-conscious response to the needs of a burgeoning metropolis. In the Travel section of the *New York Times* (The Bangladesh traffic jam that never ends, Sept 23, 2016),

Jody Rosen wrote: "Like other megacities of the developing world, Dhaka is both a boomtown and a necropolis, with a thriving real-estate market, a growing middle class and a lively cultural and intellectual life that is offset by rampant misery: poverty, pollution, disease, political corruption, extremist violence and terror attacks. But it is traffic that has sealed Dhaka's reputation among academics and development specialists as the great symbol of 21st-century urban dysfunction, the world's most broken city." The state of being both a boomtown and a necropolis, and in conclusion a broken city should not surprise or offend us. This is the nature of the contemporary metropolis in the developing world—a battlefield of contradictory forces. We just need to be proactive as to how to augment the positive forces. But the most important issue would be to take lessons from history and not repeat the same mistakes that western metropolises committed after World War II. Among these mistakes were building infrastructures that didn't serve the majority of the population, planning automobile-centric cities, focusing exclusively on economic growth at the expense of ecological balance, and segregating economic classes through zoning politics. Over the past four decades or so, many western metropolises have invested vast resources to undo these mistakes by embracing the ethos of ecological and people-centric urban planning. Can we learn from history?

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