

# A quiet masterpiece that serves as Dhaka's gateway



ADNAN MORSHED

I didn't have a clue that Bob Boughey was alive and still working in Thailand. Every time I visit the Kamalapur Railway Station, I think of what he described to me a few years ago about the Dhaka of the 1960s. He was a gentleman, courteous, cautious, and sounded a tad melancholic about his memories of Dhaka.

Boughey was one of the two designers of the Kamalapur Railway Station (the other was Daniel Dunham). If you catch a train ride from this station or pass by it, you would notice that it is not one of those familiar colonial-era red-brick buildings that typically served as railway stations across South Asia. The station's parabolic umbrella roof over the terminal was unusual for its time. Along with Louis Kahn's Parliament building, Constantino Doxiadis' TSC, and Richard Vrooman's Architecture Building at BUET, among others, the pioneering structure of the railway station symbolised a "golden age" of architecture in Bangladesh during the 1960s.

These buildings also had a political history. They were the products of what the military regime of Muhammad Ayub Khan called the "Decade of Development" (1958-68), intertwined with West Pakistan's shrewd political strategy of placating East Pakistan's agitating Bengalis through architectural and infrastructure development.

To understand the significance of Kamalapur, one needs to understand the history of railway in this country.

The first railway line in East Bengal—connecting Kolkata with the western Bangladeshi town of Kushtia—was introduced in 1862. Called the Eastern Bengal Railway, this expansion of train service to East Bengal signalled a new phase in the growth of the region's colonial economy. However, the province east of the Padma River, including such urban centres as Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet, long remained deprived of the benefits of railway because the extensive river system of the deltaic country created geographic logistical issues.

Even by 1885, the only railway line on the eastern side of the Padma was the one connecting Dhaka and the northern town of Mymensingh. Still considered a provincial town at that time, Dhaka's railway infrastructure was nominal. The railway station constructed at Phulbaria, demarcating the northern extent of Dhaka, served only the people in and around the urban area. It was a rudimentary facility with one platform, a small yard, and a locomotive shed. The railway line leading to Phulbaria formed a semi-circular northern barrier of the city. However, the train track did not affect the flow of vehicular traffic to and from the area because, the city's total traffic volume was rather small.

During the early 20th century, Dhaka's urban status rose, and its economy grew, even more so after 1947, when it became the provincial capital of East Pakistan. The existing railway line bifurcated the capital into the old city and the new city, expanding northward. The north-south traffic flow was severely hampered because the existing train lines converging at the Phulbaria railway station cut roads at various points.

The most reasonable remedy was to shift the Phulbaria station and



A post-construction photo of Kamalapur Railway Station by one of its designers, Daniel Dunham.

divert the railway lines to a less populated and sparsely used area, thus easing the north-south vehicular movement without much hindrance. Furthermore, this move would help unify the old city and the new city. Accordingly, in 1948, experts suggested that the railway station be re-sited to its present location at Kamalapur.

However, the proposal came to fruition only a decade later, in 1958, when the provincial government was entrusted with executing the plan. The train line was diverted from Tejgaon to Khilgaon and then to Kamalapur, removing the previous east-west barrier that cut through the middle of the growing city.

The inauguration of the new railway station at Kamalapur on April 27, 1968, introduced a new chapter in the history of railway transportation in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Not only was it the

largest modern railway station in the country, but it also embodied the modernist spirit in architecture that defined the decade of the 1960s.

At Kamalapur, Dunham and Boughey's design challenge was to create a wide-span structure that would synthesise the language of modern architecture with the requirement of a tropical climate. The result is the unusual concrete roof structure of the train terminal, with a parabolic roof that shelters an interconnected series of low-rise structures. The profile of the terminal—a rhythmic pattern of gently-pointed and arched concrete shells—evokes a typical image of tropical conditions, in which an umbrella provides protection from the monsoon rains. The design creates a light-filled and cross-ventilated train terminal, reminiscent of Mughal pavilions, with deeply recessed spatial volumes.

The thin-shelled concrete canopy at Kamalapur reflects the prior experience of both architects. As a student at Harvard, Dunham designed structures with shell concrete. The government agency in charge of the terminal's construction was understandably anxious because of the unusual composition material of the proposed terminal. At Boughey's suggestion, a smaller version of the terminal was constructed to study the structural feasibility of the project. Berger's Stanley Jewkes, an experienced engineer who recently oversaw the construction of large-scale concrete structures in Malaysia, served as the project engineer.

The design of the Kamalapur Railway Station organises various functional spaces, such as ticket booths, administrative offices, passenger lounges, and waiting areas, under one unifying canopy roof.

The concrete roof structure provides a rhythmic visual effect, unifying the spaces below it. The parabolic roofline recalls other contemporary masterpieces, such as Danish architect Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House (1957-1973). Just as Utzon's Opera House shaped the skyline of the Sydney harbour, Kamalapur Railway Station's repetitive arches created a new skyline in this low-rise area of the city.

The completion of the Kamalapur Railway Station was hailed as a landmark government accomplishment. Pakistan's President Muhammad Ayub Khan attended the opening ceremony to show that he cared about East Pakistan's development! Commemorative stamps were even issued to celebrate the new terminal.

Today, the parabolic roof of the Kamalapur Railway Station continues to provide a unique skyline. It is a gateway that symbolises the architectural energy defining the urban persona of the city. The station also serves as a transition point through which impoverished rural migrants enter the city of "big dreams." As much as it is an icon of the city's modernist architectural heritage, ironically, it transforms into a night time refuge for the city's less fortunate inhabitants. More than any other building, this architectural masterpiece today presents many social commentaries on the city's grinding life.

This article is excerpted from the author's forthcoming book, *DAC/Dhaka in 25 Buildings*.

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## Of depravity and mimicry

What are our young people following?

W HY do our university students remain unperturbed when their double-decker buses move through the wrong side of the road? Why do they fail to perceive that showing such a reckless disregard for traffic rules has brought disgrace on them and their institutions? Recently a few students of one of the leading public universities of the country became so unruly as to assault a police sergeant when he tried to perform his duty by not letting the university bus pass through the wrong side. We sadly observed that some students studying in the university to be enlightened have not learnt to loathe vulgar displays of power. It is necessary to investigate the incident and take legal action against the students responsible for the misdeed. At the same time, we need to confront the question as to why such crass behaviour is instilled in many young people in our society. We cannot afford to remain oblivious to the underlying causes of indiscretion and mindlessness seen among the youth at this time.

Traffic congestion is one of the most appalling problems of Dhaka city at the moment. Recently a World Bank sponsored international conference informed us that 3.2 million working hours are wasted everyday in Dhaka city due to traffic jam. The economy suffers the loss of several billion

dollars per year because of this. When many people remain held up in heavy traffic in this city at different times of the day, it is often seen that certain vehicles presumably carrying VIPs, drive through the wrong side of the road. Policemen on traffic duty do not stop these cars even though these are committing a major traffic offence. Billboards are seen on Dhaka streets stating that violation of traffic rules is a punishable crime. But when certain influential individuals ignore this statement unashamedly, the general public who are stuck and suffering on the right side of the road become resentful. Surely, they do not expect such a blatant disrespect for the law by the privileged people in a democratic society.

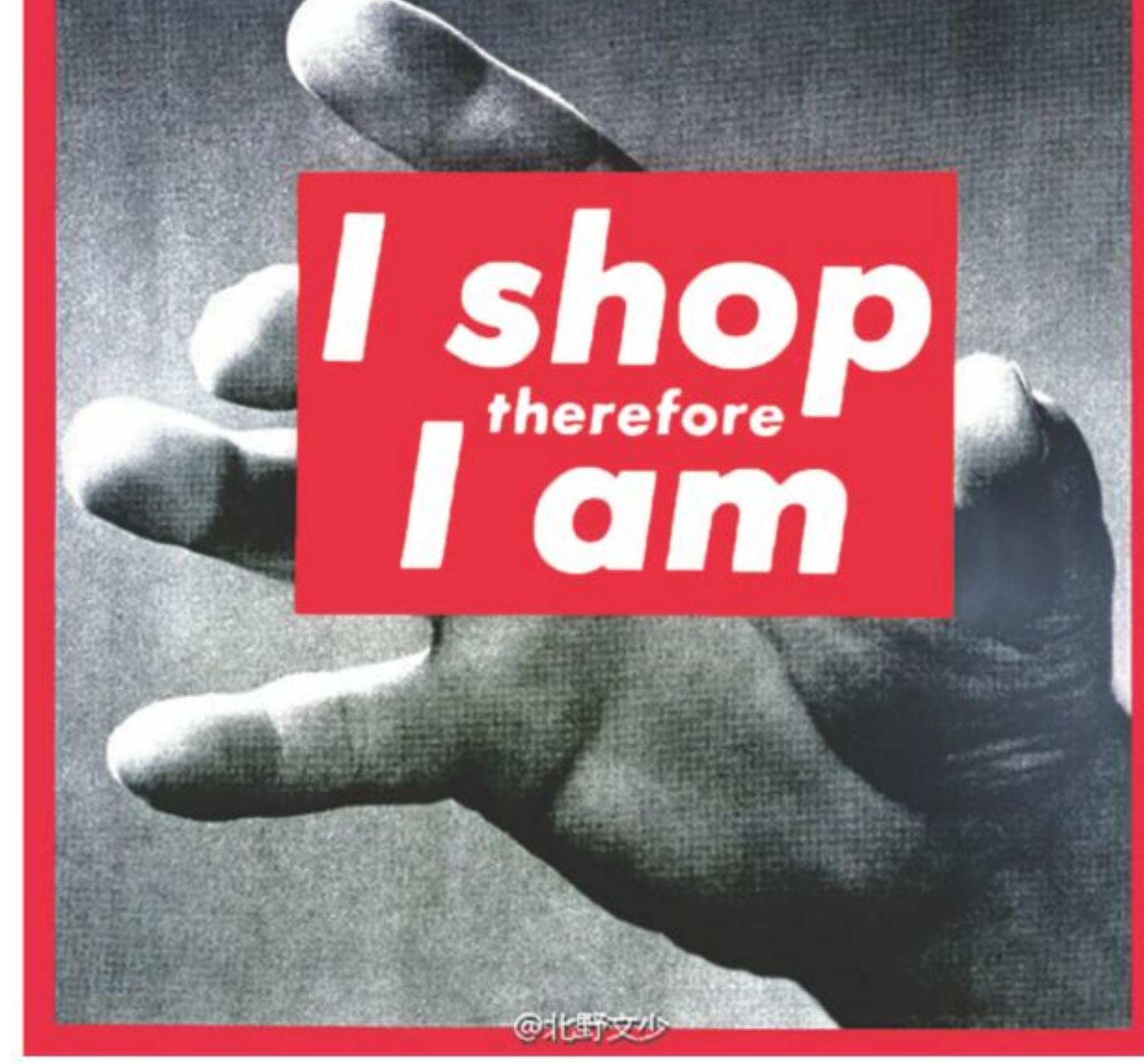
When politically and administratively powerful individuals set good examples to many others, it is certain that the general people start to emulate such good behaviour. Similarly, the arrogance and depravity of the privileged few serve to create social circumstances where the less advantaged people feel motivated to mimic morally corrupt acts. It is not difficult to impose penalties on a few young people, but will the

administration make sure that even the VIPs cannot act beyond the law in our society? Shall we see that the police are taking legal action against the powerful people guilty of breaking the traffic rules? If the common people are not given good examples to follow, can we expect that goodness and discipline will prevail in our society? A statement of Karl Marx is relevant in this regard: "it is not the

consciousness of men that determines

their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." Can we say that the social trends which are in vogue nowadays in our country make people, especially the young, recognise the value of the real components of the good life such as knowledge, wisdom and morality?

In 1989, journalist Shahrir Kabir visited Albania. On his return he had published a travelogue. The book informs that the entire population of Albania at that time was only 32 lakhs but the country had 1700 public libraries apart from national archives and libraries of academic institutions. There was no area in the capital Tirana without a book shop or a library. In contrast, only a few book stores and libraries are seen in a handful of areas in Dhaka city where the population now stands at 1.8 crores. Although book stores are not commonplace in Dhaka, we are witnessing in various areas of the city the rapid growth of fast food restaurants and shops selling mobile phones, fashionable clothes and cosmetic products. Alluring commercials serve to fix the subliminal message deeply in young people's minds that consuming such commodities is far more important than reading books in order to become happy and smart. The majority of television dramas and films produced in our country nowadays tend to prioritise puerile humour and shoddy entertainment in order to attract the lowest common denominator audience. For Media Studies scholar Marshall McLuhan, commercial media resembles ad agencies "in constantly striving to



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enter and control the unconscious minds of a vast public, not in order to understand it or to present these minds, as the serious novelist does, but in order to exploit them for profit."

By placing an emphasis on the values of a consumer society, such films and advertisements entice people to put in efforts to indulge and satisfy their materialistic impulses. They divert people's attention away from burning and deep-seated social problems because their main aim is to

maintain the status quo. Thus, through the dissemination of standardised and superficial cultural products, the society starts to breed a kind of people who are not trained to think critically. Their constant exposure to distracting and frivolous media elements hardly helps them develop intellectual complexity. Thus, they are unable to distinguish between right and wrong. Novelist Nabaran Bhattachariya from West Bengal once said we should not be surprised seeing the increase in the number of

reported rapes in our society when commercials, television dramas and films constantly titillate the imagination of the people. Mass media play the most crucial role in shaping the attitudes of young people in contemporary society. The internet is now widely available, but has the society made the youngsters perceive the necessity of exploring thought-provoking cultural ingredients? Without an understanding of the importance of intellectual depth and refined taste the information galore would not be of any help. We may think of the words of an English poet: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? And where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

If attempts to emphasise consumerist culture continue to get priority, we are bound to witness a dearth of thinking individuals. If young people do not learn how to think deeply and critically it is obvious that they will fail to question and reject immoral behaviour. Their inability to understand the essential nature of moral duty may cause them to imitate the debased attitudes seen in the society. It is certain that the failure to develop a critical consciousness among citizens will result in growing shallowness and social degradation. Unless the social and cultural milieu inspires people to adhere to idealistic principles, we cannot expect that self-seeking and depraved motivations will cease to exist.

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## A WORD A DAY



**BRONTIDE**  
noun

A low muffled sound like distant thunder

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 32 Floor protectors, of a sort
- 11 Antlered animals
- 15 Rancor
- 36 "Enough!"
- 17 Tacks on
- 39 Heaps
- 18 Mosaic piece
- 40 Lunk-heads
- 19 Declares
- 41 Bendy practice
- 20 Open-handed
- 42 Range features
- 21 -- Alto
- 43 Scorch
- 25 Solemn promise
- 26 Horribles
- 38 Billing info
- 30 Downloadable
- 1 Not barefoot
- 31 Shoppers' aids
- 2 Pueblo people
- 33 Balm ingredient
- 3 Flock reply
- 34 Forum garb
- 4 Infamous Khan
- 35 Celeb
- 5 Material
- 36 Wee bite
- 6 Grating
- 37 Keats work
- 7 Had something
- 38 Hamm of soccer
- 8 Body of eau
- 9 Debate side

## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

T	A	R	D	R	I	P
A	L	E	C	S	P	E
G	O	T	T	O	L	D
U	T	E	W	A	R	L
P	O	L	L	O	N	Y
F	L	O	R	P	E	P
S	T	Y	L	I	T	S
F	A	T	L	I	L	T
H	E	M	H	L	L	O
A	D	I	O	S	I	N
N	E	R	V	E	M	O
T	R	E	E	T	O	S

## BEETLE BAILEY



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## BABY BLUES



## BY MORT WALKER



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## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

