

RIVER RHAPSODY

Urban spaces with an environmental commitment

From September 16 to 20, Alliance Française de Dhaka hosted an exhibition, titled River Rhapsody, which featured architectural designs for a museum of rivers and canals by architecture students of BRAC University. Adnan Morshed, Professor and Chairperson, Department of Architecture, Brac University talks to Moyukh Mahtab of The Daily Star about the idea behind the project, making university students learn from hands-on experience and the need for a developmental approach that is sensitive to the environment, while the designers highlight the core ideas they tried to portray through their designs.

Why a museum of rivers and canals—what is the idea behind this project?

Adnan Morshed: This is a third-year level design studio in which Brac Architecture students were expected to handle a complex design challenge. My co-instructor and I thought that instead of a standard classroom-based design exercise, we would rather challenge the students to consider a national priority: environmental protection. Bangladesh is a country of rivers and canals, the lifelines of the country's geography and economy.

We have some environmental laws to protect rivers and canals but our institutional capacity to implement them is dangerously weak. The culture of land-grabbing, political influence peddling, entitlement, and lack of public awareness of environmental wellbeing remain a collective threat to our survival. Besides, rapid urbanisation often prioritises development over ecological harmony. We are filling up rivers, canals, and floodplains in the name of progress. Waterlogging in urban areas even after moderate rain is the result of our mis-

room based. We come to the class, hear the lecture from our teacher, and prepare for the test. Our education system overemphasises test results, while learning from the "real" world suffers. Changing ground realities often complicate the standardised content of a course and remain neglected. This observation resonates particularly with disciplines like architecture and urban planning because the building industry, urban culture, and economy are not only intertwined but also constantly shifting. That is why

translate to their eventual transition to a career?

The students in this design exercise were asked to consider a museum that would be holistic, a centre of learning about rivers and canals and exhibits that showcase the environmental, economic, and cultural significance of these vital geographic lifelines. The exhibits would include not only multimedia presentations of the history of rivers and canals and their economic geographies, but also demonstrations, on the premise of the museum, of river-based economies such as fishing, boat repairing and building, net-making, etc.

Furthermore, the museum needed to be a vibrant public place that would attract visitors from across the city and beyond. This would be a tourist attraction. People from all walks of life would come here and enjoy a riverside space and get some new insights into how rivers make Bengal, Bengal. Thus, the museum includes a host of elements: libraries, archives, research facilities, exhibition spaces, conference rooms, auditorium, cafes, bookshop, outdoor exhibition areas, and riverside public plazas. When students are challenged to see building design as very much a part of society and economy they learn more effectively and usefully. A multidisciplinary design exercise is likely to make them critical thinkers and engaged practitioners of the future.

Most of the displayed projects tried to emphasize on a balance between development and the environment—the next generation of architects and urban planners more sensitive to this issue?

One of our avowed goals in this design exercise was not to disturb the river ecology by creating a large building footprint. Sometimes we overbuild and overdevelop, believing that that is progress. We are often driven by image-making and a false sense of gentrification. We crave for icons. But icons may not serve the people. Icons may irreparably hurt the environment, as well as local economies. Sometimes we need to challenge the conventional wisdom. Students were encouraged to think of a museum complex that would be an attractive and effective public place for experiencing the riverfront, while not alienating the people whose lives depend on rivers and canals. Through their research and design practice, the next generation of architects and planners must propagate the message that environmental stewardship should be a guiding policy framework for development in this deltaic country. Without a vigorous public awareness of the country's fragile land-water geography, development would be misguided. I am hopeful that the next generation of design practitioners would be much more sensitive about their responsibility toward the environment.



Water Sanctuary

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In many ways, they are the shapers of our national character and culture. Yet, in the name of development, rivers and canals have been encroached upon and filled up in the past two decades or so. This is an existential challenge. How do we make young students aware of this ecological disaster? Development has frequently overlooked this factor, leading to the issues we face today. Could you explain why awareness and preservation of the water bodies in our country is crucial now?

guided approach to urban planning. Without a robust social campaign about building public awareness of ecological balance we can't save our rivers and canals. And, that campaign has to begin with the young demography. The time is now.

Do you feel that such a hands-on approach to education is lacking in our education system?

Despite some progress in recent times, our education system has predominantly been class-

we took our students to Chittagong, thoroughly surveyed and researched the proposed site for the museum along the River Karnaphuli in old town Chittagong, interviewed the local people about their views and aspirations, and, at dawn, meditated on the site to feel its ecological pulse or what is known as genius loci, the spirit of place.

Could you give us some examples of the type of ideas that came up from your students from this project and how do these

The Designs

Nir Dhoroni

"Our design was shaped by three determinants: to create a platform that enhances the pleasure of walking by the river; to create a transition from the city to the river, ensuring the unique horizontal variation that Chittagong offers; and, to create a public place that not only houses the history of rivers and canals of Bangladesh but also lets people experience riverfront culture. Each element reflects these—for example, the floating bazaar is based on the practice of building houses on wooden poles. This museum acts as a public space and an educational platform to make people more aware about extinction of rivers and canals."

Itminan Tasneea, Zareen Tasnim and Kazi Abrarul

Joltorongo

"The goal of the project is to highlight the importance of rivers and khals, and how they serve the multiethnic community of this port city. Walking along the river bank adjacent to our site, we observed various physical elements such as bamboo bridges, use of local materials like bamboo and timber, and activities such as net weaving, boat making and repairing. These elements and activities inspired us to focus on how to connect the city with the river.

The project celebrates the culture and heritage of the place, while emphasising its



Nodir Golpo

land-water harmony. Our design offers multiple galleries, a library, a multipurpose hall, cafeteria and other required services."

Labiba Nazeen, Fairuz Raisa and Fariha Hossain

Water Sanctuary

"The design seeks to capture a sense of tranquillity, experienced when taking a walk through the museum. It is an urban gateway to the river Karnaphuli, both literally and metaphorically.

Design considerations were taken based on three aspects: lifestyle, ecology, and boats. Flora was incorporated within the structure, and along the way, visitors can view different types of boats, river-based activities, and basics of fishing. The journey ends at the

ghat where the essence of the river is experienced with maximum proximity. The simplicity of the design lies in the landscape where a modest footprint for sitting (kiosks) and walking has been created."

Tahreem Shah, Mobasheer Meead and Kalpopriya

Jol Nogar

"Emerging from water and land, showcasing a diverse culture and water trade, Jol Nogar, meaning 'the city of water', explores a multi-layered Chittagong. Sitting on the bank of Karnaphuli, in a manmade landfill, Jol Nogar gives a 360-degree seamless view of the offing. With functions to serve both the city and the fishing community, the design guides visi-



Nir Dhoroni

to various outdoor activities. Jol Nogar is a bridge between the fishing community and the urbanites. The bazaar, integrated courtyards, ghat and watchtower act as unique connections for them to interact."

Tanima Uddin, Sindis Hassan, Mashiat Iqbal and Sadat

Sholil Digonto

"Sholil Digonto, meaning 'water horizon', showcases how the horizontality of the site merges with the river, and this design enhances this special character.

As an integrated part of riverine lifestyle and landscape, this museum celebrates pedestrian walkways as much as possible to welcome people of all classes. The functions were organised in a way that would

create a loop of the exhibition spaces which open up to river-facing terraces. The terraces and the roof invite people to not only experience the museum but also the river itself. Rather than keeping the scattered arrangement of activities within the site, the museum arranges them sequentially with the use of landscape in order to make them more accessible to the public. These activities, as well as the lifestyle of the people, become exhibits themselves."

Umme Nabila, Fateen Faiyaz and Parisha Shamim

Nodir Golpo

"A museum is generally conceived to reflect the background, history, culture, and heritage of a city or a nation. Therefore, reflecting the everyday lifestyle and relationship between people living with the river and canals was essential. The core idea behind our design is to portray the existing activities and elements that are dependent on the Karnaphuli River and the Chaktai and Rajakhali canals.

The existing site of Mariners Drive Park of Firingibazar is a trade and commercial hub, therefore the built form aims to make people experience the river-based lifestyle and the economic activities associated with the river."

Pronnoy Das, Arik Islam and Sadia Tarannum

See our online version at thedailystar.net/infocus for pictures of all the designs.