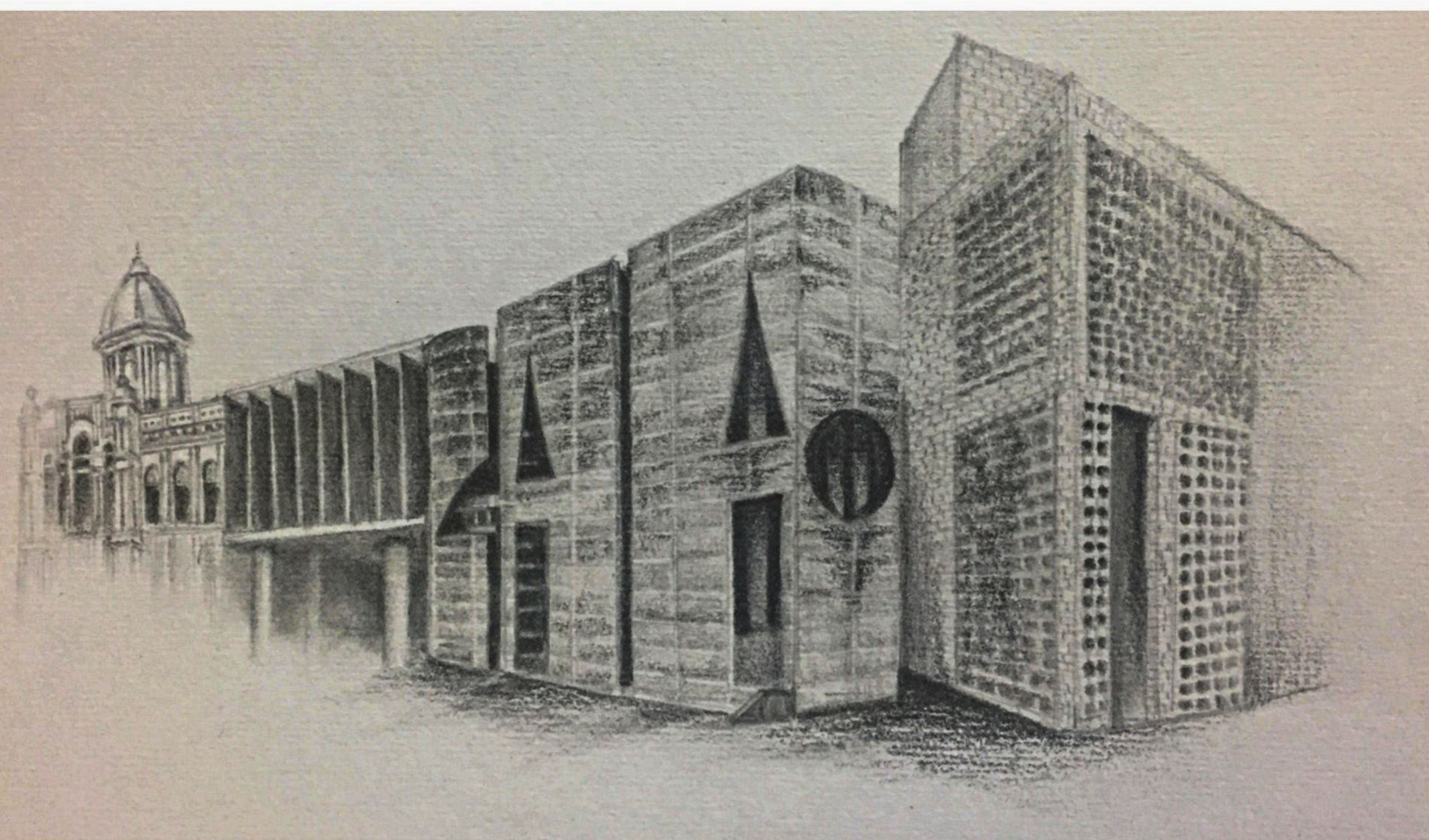


RETHINKING URBAN SPACES DHAKA AND BEYOND



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From left to right: Ahsan Manzil, Institute of Fine Arts (DU), Jatiyo Shangshad Bhaban, and Bait Ur Rauf Jame Masjid.

ILLUSTRATION: NUZHAT SHAMA

Does architecture define a "new" Bangladesh?



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The architectural scene in Bangladesh has been thriving with a "new" energy over the past two decades or so. Bangladeshi architects have been experimenting with form, material, aesthetics, and, most importantly, the idea of how architecture relates to history, society, and the land. Their various experiments bring to the fore a collective feeling that something has been going on in this crowded South Asian country. One is not quite sure about what drives this restless energy! Is it the growing economy? The rise of a new middle class with deeper pockets? Is it an aesthetic expression of a society in transition? Is it aesthetics meeting the politics of development?

Whatever it is, an engaged observer may call this an open-ended search for some kind of "local" modernity. Two recent projects—Bait Ur Rouf Mosque on the outskirts of Dhaka and the Friendship Center in the northern city of Gaibandha—have won one of global architecture's most coveted design awards, the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, in the 2014–16 award cycle. Bangladeshi architects have been winning architectural accolades from around the world for a variety of architectural projects. High-profile national architectural competitions have created a new type of design entrepreneurship, yielding intriguing

edifices. Architects have also been expanding the notion of architectural practice by engaging with low-income communities and producing cost-effective shelters for the disenfranchised. Traditionally trained to design stand-alone buildings, architects seem increasingly concerned with the challenges of creating liveable cities.

No doubt it is an exciting time in Bangladesh, architecturally speaking, even if the roads in the country's big cities are paralysed by traffic congestion and a pervasive atmosphere of urban chaos. In the midst of infernal urbanisation across the country, an

architectural culture has been taking roots with both promises and perils, introducing contentious debates about its origin, nature, and future.

It is useful to look back at some of the earlier architectural energies that may shed some light on the current architectural scene in Bangladesh. The country's architectural modernism could be traced back to the 1950s, a post-Partition period of political agitation in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The country's first professionally trained architect Muzharul Islam (1923–2012) returned to Dhaka after completing his Bachelor of Architecture degree at the University

of Oregon in 1952. Pakistan was already in trouble soon after the 1947 Partition. The newly minted country's two regions—East and West Pakistan, separated by 1,000 miles of Indian territory—clashed over their asymmetric power relationship. In this political climate, many secular-minded Bengali leaders, intellectuals, and professionals—drawn more to a mediating relationship between humanist Bengali traditions than to greater Pakistan's Islamic nationalism—searched for ways to showcase their Bengali heritage.

Considered the first modernist building in East Pakistan, Muzharul

Islam's Faculty of Fine Arts (1953–56), at Shahbagh, is a telling example of how politics and aesthetics intersected. At first encounter, this iconoclastic building presents the image of another international-style building. But as one experiences its layered tropical spaces, it slowly reveals how the architect cross-pollinates a humanising, modernist architectural language with conscious considerations of climatic needs and local building materials. Deeply committed to a vision of architecture as a powerful tool for social reform, Muzharul Islam went on to design many other iconic buildings across Bangladesh and laid the foundation for a Bengali architectural modernism during the politically turbulent times of the 1960s.

One of Muzharul Islam's greatest architectural contributions to the country was to facilitate the arrival of a number of internationally known architects to build in East Pakistan during what was called the "Decade of Development," a propagandistic slogan of Pakistan's ruling military regime. Among other architects that he helped bring were two great American masters: Louis I Kahn and Paul Rudolph. Kahn designed East Pakistan's "second capital," which became the Parliament complex of the new nation of Bangladesh after its independence in 1971 and, Rudolph, the Agricultural University in Mymensingh.

There were other foreign architects, who also made contributions to what was, according to many, a "golden age" of architectural modernism in East Pakistan during the 1960s. The Greek architect, planner, and theoretician Constantinos Doxiadis designed the University of Dhaka's Teacher-Student Center (TSC). Designed by American architect Robert G Boughey, the new railway station at Kamalapur introduced a new chapter in the history of railway transportation in



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