

# RETHINKING URBAN SPACES DHAKA AND BEYOND



DHAKA THURSDAY  
FEBRUARY 22, 2018  
FALGUN 10, 1424 BS

10

## Does architecture define a "new" Bangladesh?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

East Pakistan. 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. No building symbolises the advent of professional architectural education in Bangladesh during the 1960s more appropriately than Richard "Dik" Vrooman's Department of Architecture building at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology.

It was intriguing that an architectural narrative paralleled East Pakistan's political pursuit of self-rule. When it was finally completed in 1983—more than a decade after East Pakistan emerged as the new nation-state of Bangladesh and nine years after Kahn's unexpected death in New York City—the Parliament complex emblematised the political odyssey of a people to statehood.

Bangladesh's independence after a nine-month liberation war in 1971 was followed by a collective yearning to memorialise the heroism and sacrifice of the freedom fighters. When the moment of independence had finally arrived, the need for a powerful symbol to portray its meaning was urgently felt. On December 16, 1982, 11 years after Bangladesh became an independent country, the National Martyrs Monument was inaugurated. It now stands as a universally-admired iconic structure, encapsulating the nation's gratitude toward the men and women who sacrificed their lives for the Bengalis' right to self-rule.

For the new nation, the decade of the 1970s was a complex tapestry of optimism and pessimism. The uncertain period following the tragic assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family stunted the growth of a self-confident building culture. However, amidst the social tension of the 1970s, a new generation of ambitious architects burst forth onto the architectural scene of Bangladesh. The outcomes of a few national architectural competitions revealed new visions of modernity, building technology, and architectural space.

Bashirul Haq is a pioneering architect, who, in many ways epitomised the modernist impulses in Bangladeshi architecture during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977, he won the national competition for the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) headquarters in



PHOTO: AKTC/ANUP BASAK

Located in rural Gaibandha where agriculture is predominant, the project's roofscape merges with its environment. Friendship Centre, Gaibandha, Bangladesh, designed by Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury.

downtown Dhaka's Dilkusha Commercial Area. His entry showcased a new type of design energy that synthesised modernist aesthetics with a reasoned consideration for the local climate, a low budget, and an urban context.

Architecturally, the 1980s was an interesting time, as divergent ideas began to permeate architectural thinking in the country. Three stories should be mentioned. An "avant-garde" architectural study group named *Chetona* (meaning awareness) sought to introduce critical thinking as an essential part of architectural practice. Many architects, senior and junior—disillusioned with the prevalent role of architecture as primarily a professional practice without broader social visions and engagement with history and culture—gravitated toward *Chetona*, meeting at Muzharul Islam's architectural office, Bastukalabid, at Poribagh. The iconoclasm of the study group revolved around reading critical writings in architecture, criticism of current methods of architectural pedagogy, and reasoned questioning of architecture as a technical discipline. The group's reading list ranged from Rabindranath Tagore to the Franco-

Swiss architect Le Corbusier to the Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz.

The influence of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA), an architectural prize established by Aga Khan IV in 1977, was also felt strongly during the 1980s. The award sought to champion regional, place-based and culture-sensitive architectural impetuses in Islamic societies. Awardees included projects in contemporary design, social housing, community development, restoration, adaptive reuse, and landscape design. Architects were inspired to look for a "spirit of place." Regionalism was in vogue.

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture's flagship magazine, *Mimar: Architecture in Development*, first published in 1981 with a print run of 43 issues, influenced many Bangladeshi architects and architecture students in thinking beyond western modernism and the aesthetic conventions it allegedly created. At its inception, *Mimar* was the sole international architecture magazine focusing on architecture in the developing world. In many ways, the magazine's celebration of "local" expanded the scope of architectural practice in the country and

gave rise to new aspirations among architects, who were willing to search for organic roots in architecture.

The new architectural aspirations coincided with the rapid urbanisation of Bangladesh and the rise of an urban middle class that spawned a flourishing culture of architectural patronage. A historically agrarian country, Bangladesh began to urbanise rapidly from the late 1980s. The country's total urban population rose from a modest 7.7 percent in 1970 to 31.1 percent in 2010. Impoverished rural migrants began to flock to major cities, particularly the capital, Dhaka, in search of employment and better lives. Its population skyrocketed from 1.8 million in 1974 to more than 6 million in 1991 and to nearly 18 million today. The capital city's massive population boom created an unsustainable demand on urban land, and in return, land values increased.

During this transitional period, real estate developers emerged as powerful economic actors in Dhaka and beyond, playing a key role in replacing traditional single-family houses with multi-story apartment complexes. Meanwhile, public-sector housing failed to meet the demand, and in this

vacuum, private real estate companies flourished rapidly. As private developers became key actors in the city's housing market, a trade association was needed to regulate the real estate sector and to ensure fair competition among its members. The Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB) was formed in 1991 with 11 members. By 2017, the REHAB membership has surpassed 1500. The stratospheric rise of private real-estate developers suggested that there was a robust market for high-density, multifamily apartments, even though affordability remained a major hurdle. Many architects experimented with material, form, spatial organisation, construction, aesthetic expression, and the individual plot's urban relationship to the neighbourhood.

A burgeoning class of urban entrepreneurs—who made their fortunes in the country's export-oriented ready-made garments industry, manufacturing and transportation sectors, construction industry, and consumer market—emerged as a new generation of architectural patrons, investing hefty amounts of money to build their signature single-family houses and other projects, including apartment complexes, hospitals, shopping malls, private schools and universities, factories, spaces of worship, etc.

And, happily, architects began to find work abundantly from the mid-1990s. Design consultancy until the early 1990s was limited to a handful of architectural firms. But soon thereafter new, smaller firms, run by younger architects, began to reshape the traditional methods of architectural design practice in the country.

The liberalisation of the market, the emergence of a strong private sector, and rapid urbanisation resulted in the need for a range of building typologies and related architectural design services. In the public sector, government organisations began to evaluate the social and commercial value of aesthetic expression and hired architectural firms to compete in the building market. All of these developments ushered in a vibrant and dynamic opportunity for architectural experiments.

The last two decades in Bangladesh witnessed an intense battle of architectural ideas. The earlier attitudes to orthodox modernism or regionalism

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12



In addition to four light courts, random circular roof openings allow daylight into the prayer hall creating an ornate pattern on the floor enhancing spirituality through light. Baifur Mosque, Dhaka, Bangladesh, designed by Marina Tabassum.

PHOTO: AKTC/HASSAN SAIFUDDIN CHANDA