An Urbanism for Dhaka

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

A city is not mere buildings, streets and spaces; it is a theatre of social actions. And it is in that theatre, according to the American urbanist Lewis Mumford, that "man's more purposive activities…work out, through conflicting cooperative personalities, events, groups, into more significant culminations." I see the city as an existential theatre of our actions, practices, dreams and imaginations.

Cities are millions of stories. A city is neither hell nor heaven; we make cities in the shadows of our selves. *We are the city*.

In experiencing Dhaka as the toughest city in the world, the challenge is not one of solving its endless crises but in imagining and presenting the idea of how one should live in the theatre of the collective.

The narrative of Dhaka as a city continues to be framed by technical or economic notions around urbanisation. Urbanisation is a poor term to embrace the fullness of a city. Talks of urbanisation distract the discourse of cities with number games, not taking into account that a city is shaped, bit by bit, not only by policies and ordinances, but imaginations and practices. Statistics do not show how a city can be designed and lived in its fullest human, social, aesthetical and ecological potential. Such a dynamic is best approached by the term "urbanism." While the *city* is about material and spatial facts, *urbanism*, the French urban thinker Henri Lefebvre points out, is about social relations staged there. Our definition of the city has to be revised, and planners have to learn how to engage with the existential quotient of the city.

As the most ancient human artifact, the city now reverberates with a greater poignancy as a human collective. In much of Asia, there has been a quantum leap in the urban domain. Ushered by economic and climate migration, and administrative impetus, more people now live in cities. China is literally building 20 cities every year, and India proposes spending USD 20 billion in seven years for its National Urban Renewal Mission. Despite the fact that contemporary cities are responsible, according to architectural critic Warnock-Smith, for "history's greatest disparity between the wealthy and the poor," cities are the key catalyst for the future of the planet, its transformation, but most importantly, the destiny of subsequent generations.

Cities can still be the most beautiful collective dream, as the urban wizard from Brazil, Jaime Lerner, claims. Rejecting the notion that the city is a problem, Lerner insists that cities instead are solutions to the human nature of living in a socialised manner. In transforming the Brazilian city Curitiba as its mayor, the architect Lerner proved that the city is not defined by smog, crisis and deluge, but as an exemplar of how we should live as a decent society in which the fruits of urbanism are available to all citizens.

What about Dhaka then? Drawing people from different economic, ethnic, social and professional categories in one space, Dhaka first of all needs a civilised mode for addressing differences and diversities. Awash with many building enterprises in a booming economy, most buildings in Dhaka remain as enclaves unsure of how to form civic precincts or connect to the public fora. What should be celebrated are designs of spaces that engage the civic realm, from the larger and monumental scale to micro levels, and from the planned to the spontaneous.

At the same time, Bangladesh's urban future cannot be all about Dhaka even if it hogs up all our investments and imaginations. To think beyond Dhaka, to engage the multitude of small towns—the *mofussils*—is now critical. Unmapped and untheorised, small towns are developing on a faulty premise: adopting a spurious Dhaka as a role model while abandoning their own stories.

From the deluge of the late 1980s that drowned Dhaka to the unforgettable tragedy of the Rana Plaza factory, Dhaka can be easily written off as evidence of an apocalyptic city-site, a landscape of unruly industrial globalisation.

Death in the Plaza was also a consequence of Dhaka's irresponsible planning, a result of an abysmal failure by city leaders to establish what should be built where and how. This is the dark side of urban development, when economic growth and consumer capitalism connive to drive human desires. Along the way to Gazipur in the north of the city, on the riverbanks towards Narayanganj, and on the road past Savar, concrete and steel rods replace the vernacular of bamboo and thatch. Multi-storied buildings—six- to ten-story high—hum with the music of a far-off Gap or Walmart. Freshly laid sand-beds on wetland announce the arrival of an upcoming housing society.

The transformation of Dhaka and its regions, in the name of urbanisation, has been relentless and brutal. *Nalas*, *dobas* and *pukurs*—the lowlands—are filled to shore up tottering towers, without any basic recourse to safety and buildability, and petit goons with the blessings of bigger leaders become *crorepatis*, and enter the mystical chain of globalisation. By creating one landfill after another, emaciating rivers and canals, and decimating flood-plains and agriculture, Dhaka makes for a perfect candidate for an urbanisation without urbanism.

An urbanism for Dhaka, I have argued, has to be conceptualised from the hydrological property of the delta, the foundational basis of our existence. Surrounded and infiltrated by a labyrinthine and delicate network of rivers and canals, tissues of wetlands and floodplains, and organic formations of mounds and settlements, Dhaka needs a new approach to city-thinking.

Dhaka's primary urban challenge is one of imagination, of not being able to think of an appropriate form even when there are inspiring clues. Once Dhaka City hosted spacious green spaces, majestic trees, crisscrossing canals, civilised riverbanks, and boats in the heart of the city. Dhaka can actually be the garden city and a place by the water it always was.

The idea of the city as a garden is not a fantasy but an urban ideology that combines civic wellbeing and environmental sustainability. The master architect Muzharul Islam imagined "the whole country as a concentration of population in certain areas in a certain way, but even then within gardens." He perceived Dhaka not just having a collection of large gardens but the city itself as a garden. "If you can do this [tall buildings] utilising the highlands of Dhaka city," he suggested, "even now, you can place here a population three times its current number, and, at the same time, keep the lowlands as lowlands, keep the water bodies, and create gardens" (1992).

A big part of the challenge in re-imagining Dhaka lies in appreciating its landscape reality—the lowlands, the water bodies, in short, the powerful hydrology that surrounds and infiltrates it, and creates an "ecology of the edge."

The edge is made of a magnificent but precious terrain of land-water mass of wetlands, flood-plains, canals, and agricultural fields. The edge is where the dry meets the wet, the "developed" meets the "primitive," and infrastructure meets the structure-less. This is also where the urbanite meets the farmer, the land-grabber discovers his opportunity, and the uprooted often makes her habitation. Site/s of the biggest battle in the city, the terrain of the edge, is determined by the presence and flux of water. It is a battle because it is in that terrain the instruments of landfill and embankments are in play.

Most urban planners and policymakers focus on the core city. Even when they are dealing with the edge, they see it in the image of the core. Official planning is unable to conceptualise the special and unique condition of this edge. Without that realisation it is easy to participate in the destruction of the city's hydro-geographical landscape. An audacious vision for Dhaka has to begin from the edge so that the norm of planning, in which the core is privileged, is reversed.

The edge conditions of Dhaka present the possibility of re-negotiating the social and economic—as well as conceptual—separation between the city and its conventional anti-thesis, whether the village or agricultural plains. The edge is where new forms of space organisation will have to be reorganised in response to a fluctuating landscape, along with devising newer types of economic, civic and social opportunities. In the meeting of an older form of the city with agricultural and hydrological landscape, a new conception of a city will have to be developed that integrates urbanism, agriculture, infrastructure and flooding. Only then will a water ethos circulate in the veins of a city's imagination.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf is an architect and directs the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements.

A new urban form for Dhaka that works with canals and wetlands.

ILLUSTRATION: **AFREEN AHMED ROCHANA/ BENGAL INSTITUTE**

Welcome to the age of climate change

QUAMRUL HAIDER

OUR planet is under tremendous stress. During the last week of January, major cities in the US Midwest and Northeast were colder than some regions in Antarctica. Temperature in Minneapolis dipped as low as negative 32 degrees Celsius, with the wind chill reaching negative 47. Grand Forks in North Dakota has seen the lowest wind chill at negative 54 degrees. As many as 21 cold-related deaths have been reported so far.

Temperatures during the first week of February rose on average by a whopping 40-50 degrees. However, the reprieve is going to be short-lived as the frigid temperatures are expected to return later this month.

Although the scientifically challenged US president wants global warming to "come back fast", someone should whisper into his ears that extreme cold spells in the Northern Hemisphere are caused, at least in part, by global warming. Under normal circumstances, cold air mass sits above the poles in an area called the polar vortex. Emerging research suggests that a warming Arctic distorts the vortex in the North Pole, so that instead of staying where it belongs in winter, closer to the Arctic Circle, the air moves down south into continental United States. Hence, the brutal cold spells. With the rapid warming of the Arctic, the effects of the polar vortex could become more frequent and severe, bringing about more intense periods of cold snaps and storms.

While we are trying to stay warm, down under, Australians are getting baked by record-breaking heat. Over two days in November, temperatures exceeding 40 degrees in Australia's north wiped out almost one-third of the nation's fruit bats, also known as spectacled flying foxes. Scores of brumbies—Australian wild horses—in the Northern Territory have fallen victim to the January heatwave, which soared to a high of 47 degrees. They died from starvation and dehydration. More than a million fish have perished in a river in New South Wales as the water temperature surpassed their tolerance limit.

Last summer, many nuclear power plants in Europe halted operation because overheated river water could no longer cool down the reactors. And like many Asian megalopolises, Bangkok is choking on air pollution. Water cannons are used to alleviate the smog that has shrouded the city for weeks.

A series of droughts with little recovery time in the intervals has pushed millions to the edge of survival in the Horn of Africa. Bangladesh is staring at an unprecedented migration problem as hundreds of thousands face a stark choice between inundated coastal areas and urban slums.

California saw its most ruinous wildfires ever in 2018, claiming more than 100 lives and burning down nearly 1.6 million acres. There have even been freak blazes in Lapland and elsewhere in the Arctic Circle. There is ample data to suggest that climate change is the biggest driver of out-of-control wildfires. In colder regions, an unusually warmer climate leads to earlier snowmelt and, consequently, spring arrives earlier. An early spring causes soils to be drier for a longer period of time. Drier conditions and higher temperatures increase not only the likelihood of a wildfire to occur, but also affect its severity and duration.

Typhoon Mangkhut with maximum sustained winds of 120 miles per hour roared across the Philippines and China in September 2018, triggering landslides, extensive flooding and killing some 100 people. The ferocity of the typhoon matched that of Hurricane Florence on the other side of the globe that pummelled the Mid-Atlantic Coast of the United States just four days earlier. The wind speed was 130 miles per hour and the hurricane claimed 36 lives.

Up to a million fish have died along the Darling River in New South Wales, Australia due to soaring temperatures and low rainfall.

PHOTO: **DEBBIE NEWITT/FACEBOOK**

Cutting-edge research by climate scientists indicates that the intensity of hurricanes and typhoons is closely connected to global warming. Higher sea levels due to melting of glaciers and Greenland's ice sheets and warm water give coastal storm surges a higher starting point. Additionally, because hurricanes and tropical storms gain energy from water, their destructive power intensifies. Moreover, as the Earth has warmed, the probability of a storm with high precipitation levels is much higher than it was at the end of the twentieth century.

Besides raising the sea level, climate change is also modifying oceans in different ways. According to a study published in *Nature Communications* in January 2019, as climate change gradually heats oceans around the globe, it is also making the ocean waves stronger and more deadly.

Climate change is ravaging the natural laboratory in the Galápagos Islands, one of the most pristine and isolated places in the world, where Charles Darwin saw a blueprint for the origin and natural selection of every species, including humans. Today, because of the more frequent El Niño events that have come with warming of the seas, the inhabitants of the islands are trying to cope with the whims of natural selection.

Welcome to the age of climate change! These are just a few examples of multiple weather-related extremes occurring all over the world. They beg the question: Can human beings survive the climate crisis? The answer depends on what we do in the next 10-20 years. It will determine whether our planet will remain hospitable to human life or slide down an irreversible path towards becoming uninhabitable.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos last month, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said, "If what we agreed in Paris would be materialised, the temperature would rise more than three degrees." He is finally seeing eye-to-eye with the mainstream scientists and essentially declared the 2015 Paris Accord a dead deal.

If global temperature indeed increases by more than three degrees, summer heat would become unbearable. In particular, temperatures and humidity levels in cities that are already scorching hot would rise to levels that the human body simply cannot tolerate, researchers warn. More importantly, it would trigger a positive greenhouse effect feedback that would eventually push our planet, according to Guterres, "dramatically into a runaway climate change…." Once the runaway greenhouse effect starts, then Paris-like accords, conferences of parties, rulebooks for adaptation to climate change, or going cold turkey with fossil fuels won't be able to reverse the situation.

Runaway greenhouse effect is not a "Chinese hoax." Several billion years ago, Venus was cooler than what it is now and had an abundance of water in oceans overlain by an oxygen-rich atmosphere. The current hellish condition on Venus where the surface temperature is a blistering 460 degrees Celsius was caused by runaway greenhouse effect.

Thus, without a significant adjustment to how we conduct our lives, the possibility of Venus syndrome is quite high. In this scenario, our planet would still keep on spinning, but as the fourth dead ball of rock devoid of life.

Quamrul Haider is a Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.

A WORD A DAY

EPIGEAL
ADJECTIVE

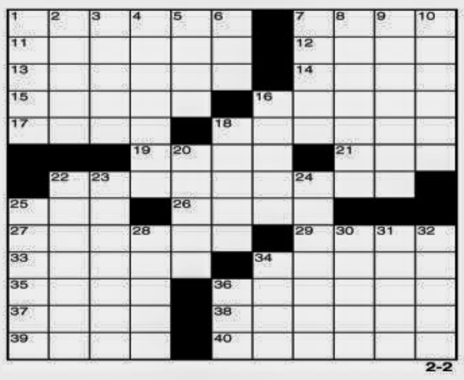
Growing on or close to the ground.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Followed the path of
7 Gets on
11 Atlas section
12 Spelunking site
13 Early primates
14 Large family
15 Zellweger of "Chicago"
16 Crossword diagrams
17 Some votes
18 Masked man
19 Vincent's brother
21 Close
22 February 2 VIP
25 Sailing site
26 Butte's kin
27 Lead-ins
29 Travel document
33 Lesson leader
34 Some surreal art
35 Rural sight
36 British party
37 Addition column
38 Power problem
39 Comfy place
40 Lion groups

DOWN
1 Visibly sad
2 Indian coin
3 Gladiator setting
4 Wakes up
5 Foil's kin
6 Comfy place
7 Ghana port
8 Pisa genius
9 Steering clear of
10 Felt
16 Merchandise
18 Trait carriers
20 Comic's forte
22 Bona fide
23 Disconcerts
24 Danish cheese
25 Squelches
28 Perch
30 Homer work
31 Long attack
32 Cart pullers
34 Sullen
36 Spinning toy

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.



2-2

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWER**

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

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott