

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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Humanising Dhaka with civic spaces



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Imagine yourself as an international tourist who just arrived in Dhaka to explore a quintessential city of the Global South. You checked into your hotel somewhere in Banani. You have only three days in the country, so you head out right away to visit a few basic destinations in Dhaka. Where would you go first? Which site or place would begin to tell you the urban evolution of Dhaka? Where is Dhaka's magic? Old Dhaka? Dhaka University? Manik Mia Avenue? Gulshan 2? New Market? Motijheel? I am not quite sure.

Where do you begin to explore a city? This is a classic question that a tourist often faces when visiting a city. To ask the question a bit differently, should there be a *ground zero* for a city's story to be told?

Let me address these questions by explaining my own experience of visiting different cities around the world and why I found some of them so extraordinary that I wanted to return. After discussing my travel experience I will turn to Dhaka again.

A few years ago, I visited Marrakech, a historic Moroccan city on the western edge of the Sahara Desert. I checked into my hotel, or Riad (although the word means "enclosed garden," it is generally used in Marrakech to imply a traditional courtyard house that has



Djemaa el-Fna, a square and marketplace in Marrakech's medina quarter.

been converted into a boutique hotel), located in the old town, or medina. After settling down, I knew where I needed to go: Djemaa el-Fna, the cultural and social epicentre of this centuries-old trading hub in western Africa. This is basically a large, irregularly shaped open plaza where the whole world has converged! From snake-charmers to Gnawa musicians (ancient African Islamic spiritual

songs), from acrobats and fortune-tellers, from hundreds of barbeques to tourists from all corners of the world, Djemaa el-Fna seems like a magical place of "everything possible." Marrakech revolves around this place of extraordinary camaraderie and Moroccan vitality. If you are here, you are most likely to grasp what Marrakech means culturally and socially.

If you find yourself in Barcelona, the

capital of Catalonia, the first thing you would check out is its historic avenue called Las Ramblas (from the Arabic word *ramla*, the dried-up bed of a seasonal river), a long tree-lined street that pulsates with a flamboyant Mediterranean energy. Caged birds, newsstands, musicians, mime artists, flower shops, sketch artists, painters, and tourists transform this street into a cultural microcosm of this Spanish city. I consider Barcelona one of my favourite cities because of Las Ramblas.

One can continue this ritual of finding the cultural heart of a city in so many European cities, such as Florence, Venice, Prague, Krakow, Vienna, Athens, and Lisbon. How can one not experience the collective romance of Venice in Piazza San Marco? Krakow's captivating Rynek Glowny (main square) is a monument to Polish history, even if this monument is an open plaza. Rome, London, Paris, and Istanbul, among other cities, have multiple centres; in Rome, the centre could be Piazza Navona or the Capitoline Hill; in Paris, it may be Place de la Concorde; in Istanbul, Sultanahmet Square. A tourist in these great cities would spontaneously know where to go to feel their cultural pulse.

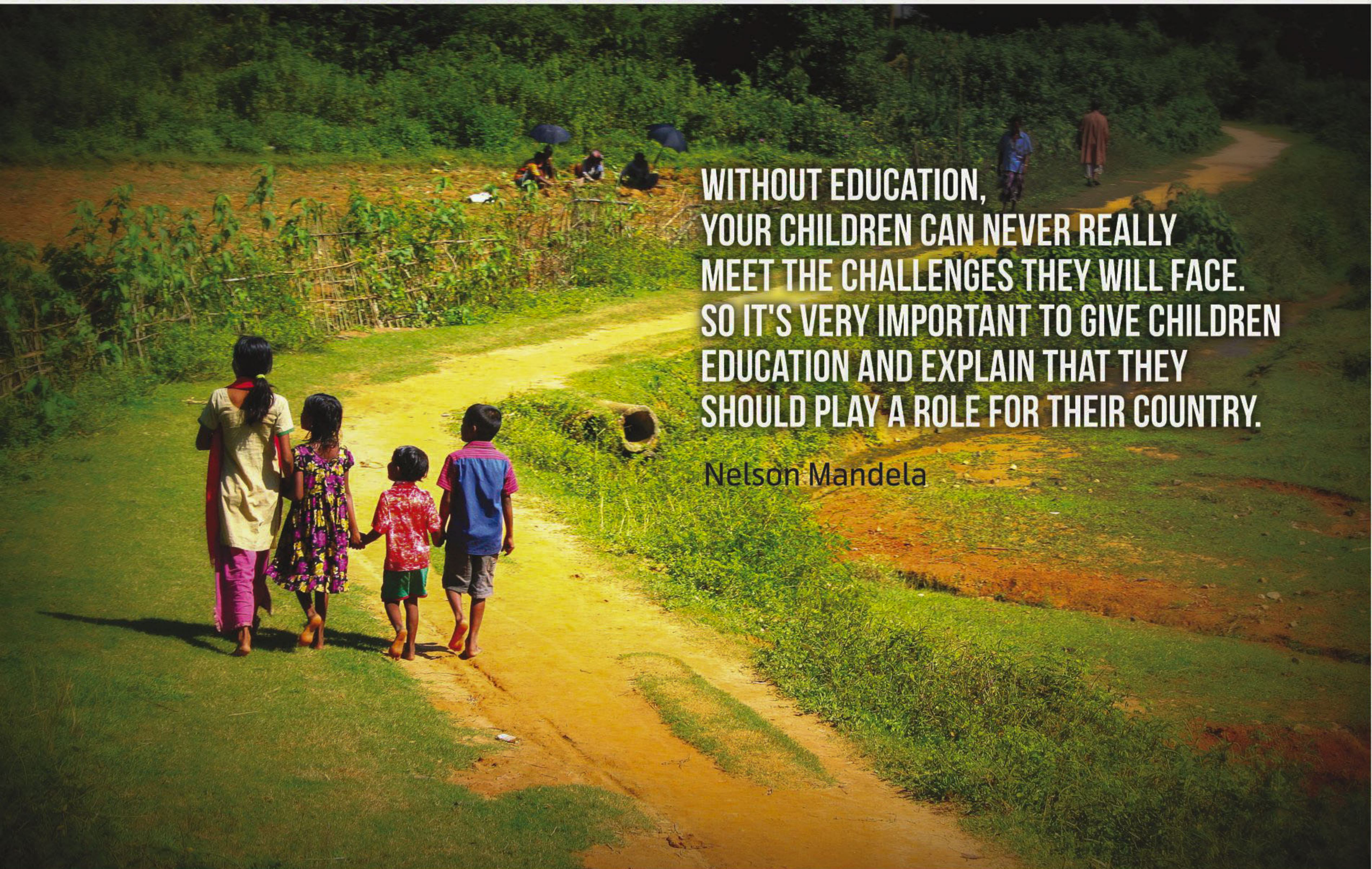
There are cities in other continents as well. Washington, DC, is built around the National Mall, a landscaped park that serves as the site of national events,

book fairs, political protests, summer festivals, concerts, and general public assembly. This is where Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his iconic "I have a dream" speech to a crowd of nearly 250,000 people in 1963. In Mexico City one must first go to Zócalo (meaning plinth or base). Located at the centre of the city since Aztec times, this large plaza, also known as Plaza de la Constitución, has been serving as the city's main square for public gathering, national events, concerts, and festivals. It is the Zócalo where Colombian rock star Shakira reportedly attracted more than 200,000 people to her concert in 2007!

Then there is Tian'an Men Square, an expansive concrete plaza at the heart of modern Beijing. Although associated with the complicated history of the 1989 student protests, this main square has served as the national stage for festivities and ceremonies.

From Lima (Plaza Mayor) to Cairo (Tahrir Square), from Manhattan (Times Square) to Moscow (Red Square), there are many cities that feature a cultural nerve centre. The centre not only serves as the city's cultural heart, but also helps city-dwellers and visitors orient themselves within its maze of buildings, activities, and anxieties.

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**WITHOUT EDUCATION,
YOUR CHILDREN CAN NEVER REALLY
MEET THE CHALLENGES THEY WILL FACE.
SO IT'S VERY IMPORTANT TO GIVE CHILDREN
EDUCATION AND EXPLAIN THAT THEY
SHOULD PLAY A ROLE FOR THEIR COUNTRY.**

Nelson Mandela