

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 19, 2019, FALGUN 7, 1425 BS 11

Humanising Dhaka with civic spaces

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Even if some of these centres or squares are affiliated with uncomfortable histories of political repression or other tragedies, they eventually shape the identity of a city and help nurture the democratic values of its citizens. Cities reinforce humanity when they have a public square or squares, filled with history, culture, and human aspirations. That brings us back to Dhaka. Where would a tourist first go in this city? Where do Dhakaites gather to celebrate the Victory Day? If Bangladesh reaches the World Cup Cricket final in the near future, where would 300,000 or more people watch it together in one place and rejoice?

In Dhaka, we have action-filled streets and road intersections, full of people, urban activities, vehicles, vendors, and noise, but hardly any public places (we can debate whether a roadside tea stall on a typical Dhaka street or in TSC (Dhaka University) represents the spirit of a public place). Political theorist Hannah Arendt and sociologist Richard Sennett have studied this classic urban paradox: the peculiar failure of public life in modern societies that often tend to reinforce the interiority of the individual. They argued, in their disparate ways, that publicness of modern life can bloom when there are moments, opportunities, and spaces for free interactions among strangers in the city, when multiple perspectives can coexist as a result of unrestricted exchanges.

In Dhaka, we can ask: Is there a civic place where people of all economic strata can gather freely without social tension, while experiencing the publicness of urban life?

It is with this dilemma that I directed a project at the Department of Architecture at BRAC University about seven years ago. An advanced group of undergraduate students was given the challenge of identifying a central and



Las Ramblas, Barcelona.

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accessible location in the city and developing it as a place for the public to enjoy civic life, experience culture, watch nature and wildlife, be near water, walk, bike, see the sky, hear the songs of aspiring musicians, be entertained by sketch artists, eat traditional food, buy artwork, and, most of all, begin to love their city for its humanity.

We imagined this place as Dhaka's premier venue for the city dwellers to become public and co-producers of civility. We believed that a democratically inspired civic place

would bring all economic classes together, removing the invisible but entrenched barriers of economic divisions that exist in the city. We studied the history of the significance of public places in the development of liveable, humane cities.

Although the location we chose was controversial, we were led by idealism. We innocently thought that the government and the Bangladesh Air Force would empathise with our point about the greater public good, about the future of Dhaka. We were convinced that the central location,

size, and relatively modest use of the old airport at Tejgaon would justify its transformation into Dhaka's urban *maidan* or civic centre. We argued that this place of public gathering would humanise Dhaka as a people-centric city. The Air Force would continue to manage the site. The old airport's aviation-related use, if any, could move to Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, as the forthcoming Bangabandhu International Airport on the bank of the Padma River would reduce its air traffic. The project would be an excellent public relations effort

by the Air Force.

The proposed place of public assembly would feature urban parks filled with native trees, wildlife sanctuaries, walking and biking trails, water bodies, bookshops, art galleries, museums, outdoor exhibition spaces, outdoor theatres, playing fields, boutique restaurants, WiFi cafes, specialty markets for local products, flea markets, space for creative businesses, and plenty of open spaces. The centre would obviously not solve all of Dhaka's urban problems but it would surely create a space where people would begin to appreciate their city and its culture, learn better urban etiquette, become responsible citizens, develop empathy for others, and help flourish democratic norms in urban life. Flyovers are necessary but a good society is often built on humane measures.

If materialised, this public place would be one of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's greatest contributions to Bangladesh and its future. In the next decades, most developing countries will be building flyovers, tunnels, and intercity highways as part of their urbanisation agenda, but very few will have the vision to transform their old airfields or riverfronts into civic squares to celebrate the ideals of democracy. The significance of such undertaking will be both international and historic. Often the middle-income aspirations of a developing country could be best measured by its ability to transcend the formulaic.

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কি করি। এখনই টাকা পাঠাতে হবে..

হায় হায়! এতো রাতে বিকাশ অ্যাকাউন্টে ক্যাশ ইন করি কিভাবে?

সর্বনাশ! ব্যালাগ শেষ

ধুর। বিকাশের ইন্সট্যান্ট ক্যাশ ব্যাক মিস্ হয়ে গেলো

টাকা পাঠাই দেশের যে কোন প্রান্তে বিকাশ অ্যাকাউন্টে

এজেন্ট

কি মুশকিল! ছুটির দিনে দোকান তো বন্ধ!

ব্যাংক থেকে বিকাশে >>
>> টাকা পাঠাই আয়েশে

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