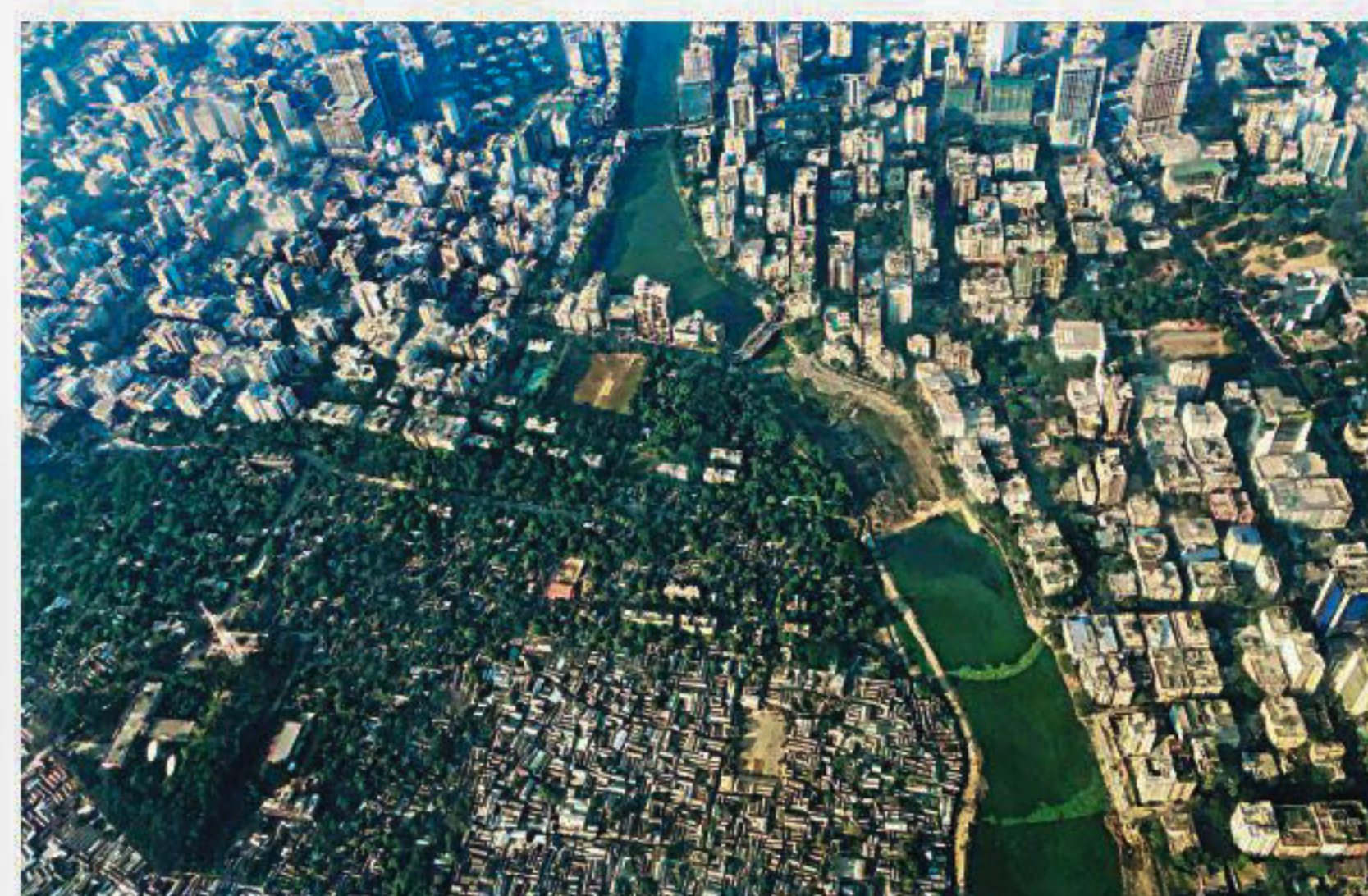


AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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IMAGES: BENGAL INSTITUTE, MOHAMMAD TAUHEED



Visualising housing in the coastal area (top). Visualising housing that maintains agricultural land (bottom left). Visualising cluster housing type (bottom centre). Housing the privileged and the less privileged in Dhaka city (bottom right).

The future of housing in Bangladesh

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government employees and a privileged section of the society are the only ones who have benefited from government action. A vast majority of the population have to depend on their own self-initiatives in accessing this basic necessity.

To make matters worse, the metropolitan hub Dhaka has no suitable large-scale models for housing that cater to the different economic groups that inhabit the city. The public sector housing, catering to government and corporation employees, still continues along the defunct line of erecting one building after another with no thought for in-between spaces. The middle-class is living by making do what it can in the brutal housing and rental market. The limited and lower income groups have been completely ignored in the housing equation. And when they mobilise on their own to create an active community against an unsupportive environment with their limited resources but infinite inventiveness and fortitude, they face eviction and alienation.

It is evident that in a country where rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer, there is a lack of affordable housing, especially for the people of low-income groups. According to the census on slum dwellers and floating population conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2014, 2.23 million people live in slums across the country. The increased population indicates the increased demand on housing. A report suggests, seven out of ten households in Bangladesh dwell in conditions that are not permanent (Saleh, 2017). Clearly, more housing is required for more diverse needs.

HOUSING FORMS SETTLEMENTS

Typically, the term “housing” often conjures up an image of repetitive building blocks of residential units in an urban setting. It is however much more than that. Housing exists at different scales and in different hierarchy of settlements—from rural

landscapes to small towns, and from medium towns to large metropolitan areas. Housing can be a collection of houses within a *para* or neighbourhood in a village; a collection of houses within a *moholla* or neighbourhood within a town, be it small, medium or large; and blocks or neighbourhood in a metropolis. From the design point of view, each and every situation requires careful consideration and research, as densities and amenities vary for each scale.

We are observing a succession of construction works of industrial establishments all over the country but we do not see any matching effort in construction of housing for the workers of these establishments. Rather, it is left to the speculative behaviours of the land owners of the adjacent areas whose priority would be in maximising returns.

As housing is fundamentally a large-scale operation, it has a particular relationship with the larger context, be it an open landscape or a metropolitan environment. In most cases, housing is presented as an urban phenomenon; it is in fact the foundation of urbanism.

The issue of the house in rural areas

cannot be easily equated with the house in the city. In rural areas, people mostly build houses on their own using local resources and building technology. But there is certainly a change in the use of materials and use of spaces even in villages. The national housing policy suggests that the government will take necessary steps for appropriate rural housing to secure food security and environmental conservation. But people are prioritising concrete built forms now over traditional houses. As a result of this, traditional building types, which are more sensitive to the environment, are decreasing in number. High-rise buildings in small towns which are built with zero considerations to city planning are ripping apart the older urban fabric, both physically and socially. While this uncontrolled phenomenon continues, the experts are neither taking necessary steps to preserve the local architecture nor creating alternative housing opportunities.

Even in bigger cities, platoons of housing experts are still floundering with two dead-end models: the individual plot with the independent bungalow-style house, and the individual plot with a clunky apartment building. The two do not add up to a wholesome whole, neither do they create any fabric of a residential complex that is a cohesive community with an admirable quality of life. The dull strategy of making “new” housing areas by plotting and subdividing land—plotting and scheming—should be stopped immediately, and alternative imaginative models of mass housing should be explored. Let us not demean the nature of the free-standing house, but it should be erected where appropriate. Do we want these houses in the heart of the city? And if so, then within which urban fabric or system?

Large-scale examples in Dhaka, such as Bhashantek Rehabilitation Project and Japan Garden City, and others, are intrusions on the cultural landscape as well. They contribute little to a historic

continuity of our social living experiences or the pattern of buildings and spaces that make viable urbanism.

THE ECONOMIC FACTOR

With housing becoming primarily a profit-making enterprise, the true economic benefits of proper housing are also misunderstood. There is a misconception that housing has less contribution to economic growth compared to other sectors of investment as returns can be long-term resulting in less allocation of resources as well as attention in comparison to other sectors. However, the economic contribution of proper housing is manifold and the most important one is the impact on the health and productivity of the people.

We are observing a succession of construction works of industrial establishments all over the country but we do not see any matching effort in construction of housing for the workers of these establishments. Rather, it is left to the speculative behaviours of the land owners of the adjacent areas whose priority would be in maximising returns. The workers remain at the mercy of these landlords and the benefits of any increases in the workers' wages are mostly appropriated by them. The thrust of establishing economic zones is probably only on land development for industrial construction, and not including housing along with it. The concerned authorities must consider that improved living conditions will increase the productivity of workers by directly reducing their illnesses and health risks. Proper housing environment not only increases productivity but also reduces health care costs and this can increase the purchasing power of the workers.

Besides health, a vibrant housing sector attracts private savings in mobilising funds for investments in this sector. Increase in proper dwelling units will also increase the municipal tax base compared to substandard ones which are often out of any enumeration. In comparison to

haphazard and unplanned housing, properly designed and planned ones increase efficiency in land use, especially in a country like Bangladesh, where efficient use of land is of prime importance. Increased activity in the housing sector will contribute to the development of a dynamic construction industry, entrepreneurship, expansion of building materials manufacturing, furniture-making, transportation service, employment generation and most importantly development of infrastructure. Housing, therefore, is also an economic priority.

QUALITY HOUSING SHOULD BE A PRIORITY

It is the combination of economic and cultural strengths that makes housing a factor in sustaining societies. Hence it is very important to improve and maintain certain standards while planning housing. However, discussion on housing usually gets bogged down to numbers, that is, quantity not quality. Chasing numbers can only result in an environment that may fall short of a decent, liveable one.

Our rush to economic development has already given rise to many environmental issues requiring remediation. Qualitative aspects have been greatly neglected and the accelerated thrust in housing should not be devoid of this. Qualitative aspects of housing need to be clearly established and incorporated in rules and regulations so that they are not left out in the design, planning and delivery process. Of many aspects of quality we emphasise the following five as key ones: health and hygiene, durability, mix of communities, sustainability, and affordability.

The quality of a healthy environment through housing has major implications for people's life whether it is in rural or urban areas. Sunlight, natural ventilation, good water quality, proper sewage and waste disposal, available greenery and community spaces, all have health

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