

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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A vision of good development in satellite cities of Dhaka.

COURTESY: AUTHOR

Satellite towns and the need for a new mode of urban development



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In the Economic Intelligence Unit's list every year, Dhaka keeps showing up as one of the worst liveable cities in the world. For example, in 2015, it came second only to Damascus—a city devastated by war. Its issues primarily stem from its incredible density and growth—in both of which it ranks first. That means it is the most densely populated and the fastest growing megacity in the world.

Planning for this much growth

would be challenging anywhere in the world but it is being handled especially poorly in Dhaka. One of the most problematic aspects is the type of plot-based system being practised here which was never meant to handle this level of density.

In the late 19th century, the British started laying out the first roads and plots in a grid pattern in Dhaka, starting with Gandaria and Wari. Before that, roads grew organically, like the narrow winding roads that we still see in Old Dhaka. Planned residential areas

such as Dhanmondi, Banani, Baridhara, etc., are the successors of this type of planning. But when they were planned, multi-storied apartments weren't even a thing. These plots were designed for small houses with lawns—just like the American and the British suburbia it was trying to imitate. By the time six-storied residential buildings started being built, many large-scale model towns had already been planned this way such as Bashundhara and Uttara.

By then, this planning system had

become the established norm. Now we're building eight- to twenty-storied structures in neighbourhoods that were originally designed for small residences. The way we build has changed drastically, but the way we plan hasn't.

Multi-storied structures mean bigger building volume and more people, so they need more open spaces and amenities to be considered liveable. Currently, plots are placed back to back which creates a dark and damp space in between plots. Instead of placing plots this way, there should be a common

space in the middle for better lighting and ventilation. This could also free up the front road for pedestrians and for this area to be used as a back alley.

The existing road system is terrible for high-density living as well, filled with cars with no thought given to pedestrians. Back when the British started building roads, there weren't any cars—just carts and carriages. Even during the 90s, very few had one whereas now there's over a million vehicles on the streets.

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