

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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

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Dhaka's good old days have been much talked about, with its quiet charming streets and green spaces. But back in the 60s, Dhaka had less than a million people. In the last 50 years, there has been a roughly twenty-fold increase in population. None of Dhaka's

masterplans had anticipated such rapid growth.

But now that we know all this, why do we keep doing things the same way? New satellite cities in Uttara, Purbachal, etc., have the same pattern of planning, but with even smaller plots, narrower roads, and even less amenities. It's partly due to ignorance, partly greed.

Developers and even the RAJUK (Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha) keep designing small plots, just because it's easier to sell them. In fact, the average size of plot keeps getting smaller and smaller. In the 90s, the size of most plots in planned model towns (such as Uttara and Bashundhara) used to be about five *katha*. Now the median plot size is just three *katha*. The most common customers buying this kind of plots are middle-class salaried people. Buying small plots with installments feels like a good deal even though most can't afford to construct the building themselves. For the fortunate few who are actually handed over the plot, most end up giving it to a developer.

Buildings in small plots have smaller setbacks. Placed side by side and back to back, any façade in such construction except the roadside gets dark and stuffy. This leads to an increased dependency on artificial lighting and air conditioning, but our national grid can't keep up with the ever-increasing energy demands. Dhaka already uses up more than half of the entire country's electricity, and this is just making things worse. Meanwhile, the lack of green spaces combined with global warming is heating up our homes and our streets. And it's not just getting hotter, but also healthier; since the still air carries more pollutants. Dhaka's air quality already ranks among the worst in the world so many opt to keep the windows shut. We need trees, a lot more of it, to filter out the pollutants, and more open spaces to promote healthy ventilation.

The people living in these satellite cities also need amenities. That means community spaces, shops, pharmacies, daycares, gyms, etc. There are currently small designated areas for markets and hospitals in the masterplans of most satellite cities. But they are simply not

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enough compared to the number of people that'll live there. In the older neighbourhoods, such as Dhanmondi, we have dealt with this problem by essentially turning residential areas into mixed use and putting up things like shops, schools and clinics in apartment buildings. Due to being unplanned, this gives way to its own issues, such as creating more traffic and noise but it serves a purpose. On the other hand, in the new towns, there's no room for such amenities in these tiny buildings. If the plots were bigger, amenities and mixed-use development could've been placed strategically for convenience while also minimising traffic.

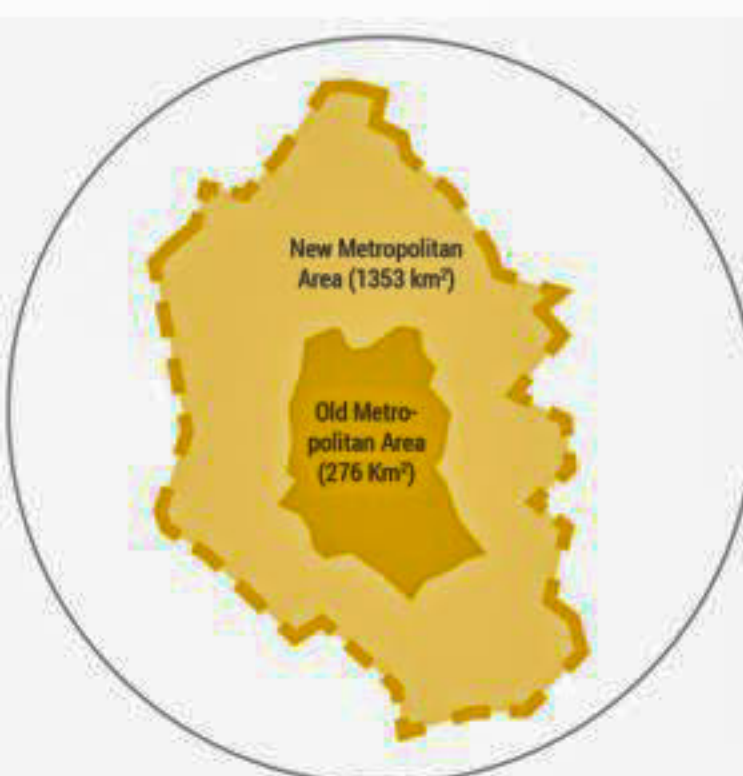
Many have suggested getting rid of this plot-based system entirely, naming examples of cities such as Singapore, to opt for a block-based system. The idea is that large mixed-use developments can be built in an area the size of a city block (a block is the smallest area surrounded by streets) that would have large open spaces, amenities and commercial spaces

all within its walls. Even in the new Draft Structure Plan of Dhaka, this kind of large-scale development has been recommended as a replacement to the existing planning system in a regulatory level. This basically means that even the government thinks letting the current planning system continue is a bad idea, although they haven't really done anything about it yet.

But although replacing tiny plots with massive beautiful condominiums seems like a good idea, Dhaka's local economy gets in the way. Big projects demand big money, and very few developers here can afford to build them. Those who can usually target the upper class. People are also less trusting to commit to a cooperating housing scheme here, where many land owners form a partnership to build a development. Considering the level of crime and corruption here, this lack of trust seems downright rational. Dhaka's current predicament is unique and needs a system that works specifically for it.

Perhaps the most feasible course of action is a reformation of the current planning standards and practices, with tighter regulations enforcing larger plots, more open spaces and amenities and encouraging mixed-use development. There are more technical issues that need to be addressed as well, such as regulating building forms and setbacks, plot sizes and orientation, etc., to ensure good natural lighting and ventilation not just in a building scale but in a city scale. We also need to prioritise pedestrians and public transportation over private cars—the opposite of what is being done right now. Currently, there are over 20 satellite cities in various stages of development in Dhaka, which will eventually house millions.

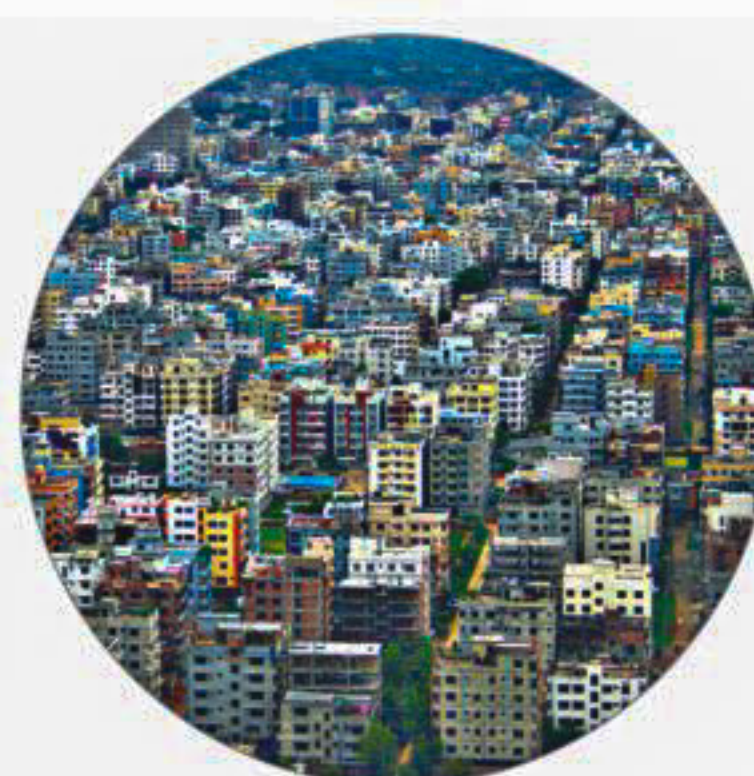
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Dhaka's new metropolitan area is 5 times bigger than it was, with new development currently concentrated in the north, such as Uttara and Purbachal



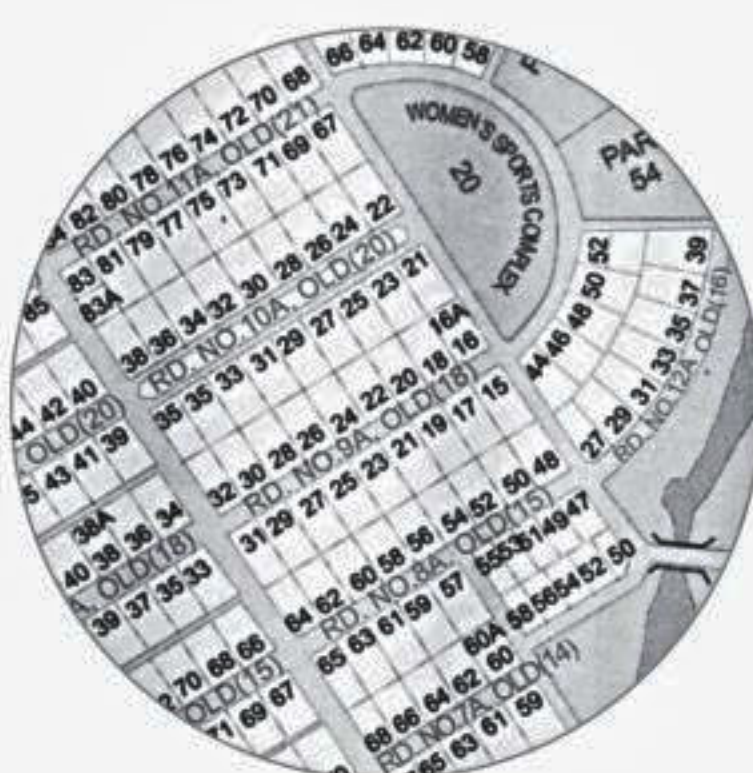
The root of the issues is how roads are laid and plots are divided in these developments. There's also very little control on what the built city is going to look like



Buildings in these developments look pretty much the same, with narrow spaces in between buildings and lacking natural light and airflow



When the British first started laying out roads, they were designed for carts and carriages and 1-2 storied buildings (Chawk Bazar, 1904)



Over the years this model hasn't changed significantly. Although it was fine for low-rise development, it's terrible for the current practice of multi-storied buildings



Multi-storied structures mean bigger building volume and more people, so it needs more open spaces and amenities to be livable

Issues with current development practices.

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