

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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The future of housing in Bangladesh

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

While there are staggering numbers to be attained, we need to give greater attention to the quality of environment that encourages healthy, energetic and a fulfilling life.

In the context of India and Bangladesh, there is a critical turn in housing. While housing was a state affair under the socialist model in the 1950s and 60s, in which attention was given to various economic classes, now housing has been usurped by the forces of market economy.

Housing is no longer a question of dwelling but more a commercial capitalist enterprise in a neoliberal economy. Less seen as a building of social communities, the term "housing" is seen as land allocation and apportionment in a climate of real estate extremism, in which there is more subsidy for those who have, and none for those who have less. Housing is now understood more through banking language as loans, mortgage, equity, etc. Production of housing has changed from the independent "tower" as a model, but there is still not much provision for the high-density low-rise. The housing footprint and its ecological impact are calibrated from the accountant's desk, overruling the factors of ecology.

With a housing shortage of six million, the overall housing situation of the country is poor compared to the pace of development. BBS claims there was a housing shortfall of 4.6 million units for 43.43 million people in 2010. The shortage is projected to reach 8.5 million units for 60 million urban people by 2021. If the total urban population reaches 100 million by 2050, a minimum of 0.1 million housing units should be supplied in the market every year.

The bigger challenge is to provide housing or housing opportunities for the vast multitude of people living in vulnerable conditions. Creative

economic partnerships and incentives may go towards creating housing of diversity. Government land may be given to developers for dense development with the purpose of creating a community where a certain percentage in the area/volume in the development should be built for low-income/middle-income habitation. Needed are enlightened developers and engaged state to create both new models and opportunities.

WE NEED A VISION FOR HOUSING
We are basically suffering from a lack of vision of how we are going to live collectively. It is critical to explore new alternative and imaginative models of mass and group housing for every economic and social group with a process to deliver them. The intention should be to achieve greater density, better quality of life, and shared lifestyle. The current situation requires a clear-cut path to attaining the housing objectives as identified. We have identified the following three key initiatives.

Improving existing stock
Fulfilling the demands of the backlog as well as of new needs will surely require development of new housing but there is also the scope of upgrading the existing stock. This can be done by renewing and retrofitting the existing stock. Mindless demolition of the existing and replacing it with newer and taller buildings is not the answer for all of the existing housing. Each existing housing is linked with other amenities like schools, clinics, markets, playgrounds and increased density creates pressure on them and the services cannot cope with the demand.

Moreover, some of these existing areas provide a unique identity to the city and their replacement with the so-called modern ones alters the particular characteristics of the location that might have developed over the years. A policy of "careful urban renewal" is thus required. Each and every case should be evaluated prior to any demolition and

construction of the new.

For example, it appears that the architectural and engineering authorities of the state are working at full speed in taking down the old walk-up buildings in Azimpur Housing Estate in order to replace them with tall towers. As one of the earliest designed housing projects in Dhaka, Azimpur has been etched in the memory of the city, as well as in generations of government officials and their families who lived a precious part of their lives there. Considering the historical value of Azimpur as an urban fabric, and that it is a prime site of about 50 acres in a premier part of the city, we are looking forward to an exemplary solution to the challenge of renewal and renovation of a well-known neighbourhood of the city.

New housing
The demand for future housing and the backlog can only be fulfilled by new housing, and that too in the shortest possible time. Several generations since independence have passed their childhood and later periods of life in substandard living conditions. The process of adding new housing should be made as clear as possible with targets clearly identified.

First and foremost is the need to identify suitable locations including land requirement for future housing and it should be brought under development control. An example to follow would be the process the government has adopted for establishing the economic zones all over the country. In fact the development of the economic zones needs to be synchronised with housing development for the population to be employed in these zones. Establishing density requirements in relation to the scale of the development and location aspect with respect to the settlement hierarchy and amenity requirements are corresponding requirements with land and location identification. Density requirements also need to adhere to the

objectives of quality housing.

To meet the dire need of housing we must encourage group housing which allows high density. Group housing also suggests the experience of a community. This is critical in the context of Dhaka today as the older structure of communities, such as the *moholla*, is fast disappearing, and the current pattern of buildings hardly encourages community experience. Dhaka has become a city of fragments, with its social cohesiveness tattering away, broken down to the individual households living in their walled fortresses or sealed-off apartments. The general form of a city—its physical and spatial configuration—is capable of nurturing or disrupting the nature of communities.

Most urban planners and policy-makers focus on the core city for housing models. Even when they are dealing with the edge, they see it in the image of the core. Official planning is unable to conceptualise this edge, to recognise that the edge is its own ecology and a critical one. Without that realisation it is easy to participate in the destruction of the city's hydro-geographical landscape. The edge is where new forms of housing and other space organisation in response to a fluxed landscape will have to be reorganised, along with newer types of opportunities for social sustainability. Imaginative housing strategies can be seen as a way of managing the urban edge, whether in a metropolitan or small town context.

Many architects have shown us compelling examples with their housing projects. In the Indian context, Charles Correa and BV Doshi have designed projects like Belapur Housing and Aranya Housing consecutively which are a great example of low-rise community housing for low-income people. In response to the geographic question, projects like Silodam in Amsterdam (by MVRDV) and Xixi

Wetland estate in China (by David Chipperfield) are built in respect to the water bodies while providing density and quality housing.

Ensuring smooth and quality delivery
The government formulated the National Housing Policy in 1993, which was revised in 1999 and again in 2016. How much of this policy is being transferred into reality? How much have we achieved so far?

There should be coordination between DCC, RAJUK, concerned ministries and utility agencies in urban projects, while administrative procedures should be decentralised to ensure transparency in the implementation of housing projects. Private sector should be given responsibility to construct housing units for medium- or high-income households while low-income housing projects could be done by a specific entity, as RAJUK has failed to focus on the housing for the poor (Shams, 2014).

Housing, whether provided by the public, private or public-private partnership, needs to be a well-coordinated activity. This will require strengthening as well as making effective the existing institutions and creating new institutions. National Housing Authority has an immense role to play and the authority should be well represented by different stakeholders. Owners of future housing should be made part of the process. As already mentioned, design and planning play an important role in creating quality housing and efforts should be taken to involve the best minds to offer their services. Similarly, finance, construction, ownership and maintenance, all need to be clearly spelled out.

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