

Central Shaheed Minar

The Commission and the Omission

In this document, which was found in the files of M. S. Jafar and Hamidur Rahman Collaboration, Architects and Engineers, the chief architect of the Shaheed Minar, Hamidur Rahman, recalls how the monument took shape over three decades. The document is reprinted verbatim.

CENTRAL SHAHEED MINAR

Place:

At the Dacca Medical College Students' Hostel Ground. Construction started in the year 1956-57.

Design and overall visualisation:

Hamidur Rahman.

Construction:

C&B City Division, Govt. of East Pakistan.

The complex story of the Central Shaheed Minar is spread over a period of long and difficult three decades.

It all started little after I returned home from England after completing my higher education in art. The Fall of 1956 turned out to be a very exciting year for me. Late Mr. Zainul Abedin requested me to see Mr. M. A. Jabbar (Chief Engineer, C & B) without any delay. It was a golden misty morning typical of Dacca's early winter—I walked to the chamber of Mr. Jabbar. I was informed about the prospect of building Central Shaheed Minar—in the memory of those who gave their lives during the Language Movement of 1952.

1957

According to the request of the Chief Engineer, I prepared a model and 52 paper works to support my concept of the structure. Other artists and architects were also requested to present their ideas and that was done. The Selection Committee was chaired by Doxiadis, the famous Greek Architect, along with Mr. Jabbar, Mr. Zainul Abedin and few other people from the government.

My design got the green

light—and from that stage on the painful process of completing the Minar started! My models and paper works were moved to the office of C & B City Division at that time. We all started working round the clock to give final shape of the structure.

C & B Department after a while offered me a helping hand of their Chief Architect Mr. Jean Delaurand (a visiting Danish architect).

I moved to the third floor of C & B Department with my plans and models. Jean was a big help to me. He produced a bulk of blue prints including several working models.

Late 1957 things started moving pretty fast for me

November '57, the foundation of Central Shaheed Minar was laid in the ground of Dacca Medical College Hostel. The entire construction was to be completed before the 21st Feb. of 1958.

Money matters and official papers

My demand was twenty five thousand rupees only for the royalty of my design.

Ten thousand rupees for Miss Novera Ahmed, the sculptress to execute three items of sculptures. So far as I remember, I was only paid five thousand rupees for my entire team. I have completed 1000 sq. ft. of mural in the basement of my Minar and Novera completed three sculptures which remained for good in the darkness of the studio of Shaheed Minar and in the long run. 21st Feb. was finally celebrated under the shadow of the columns of the incomplete structure. We went back to work after that date but we could not stay there to complete the project. I was thrown out of that place on the first day of Ayub Khan's Martial Law. We could not even get a chance to collect our art materials and personal belongings—a big lock was hanging on the studio door and an alert jawan by its side. I think a few documents relating to the project may still be with C & B City Division and the Deptt. of Architecture in the Eden Buildings.

Late 1958

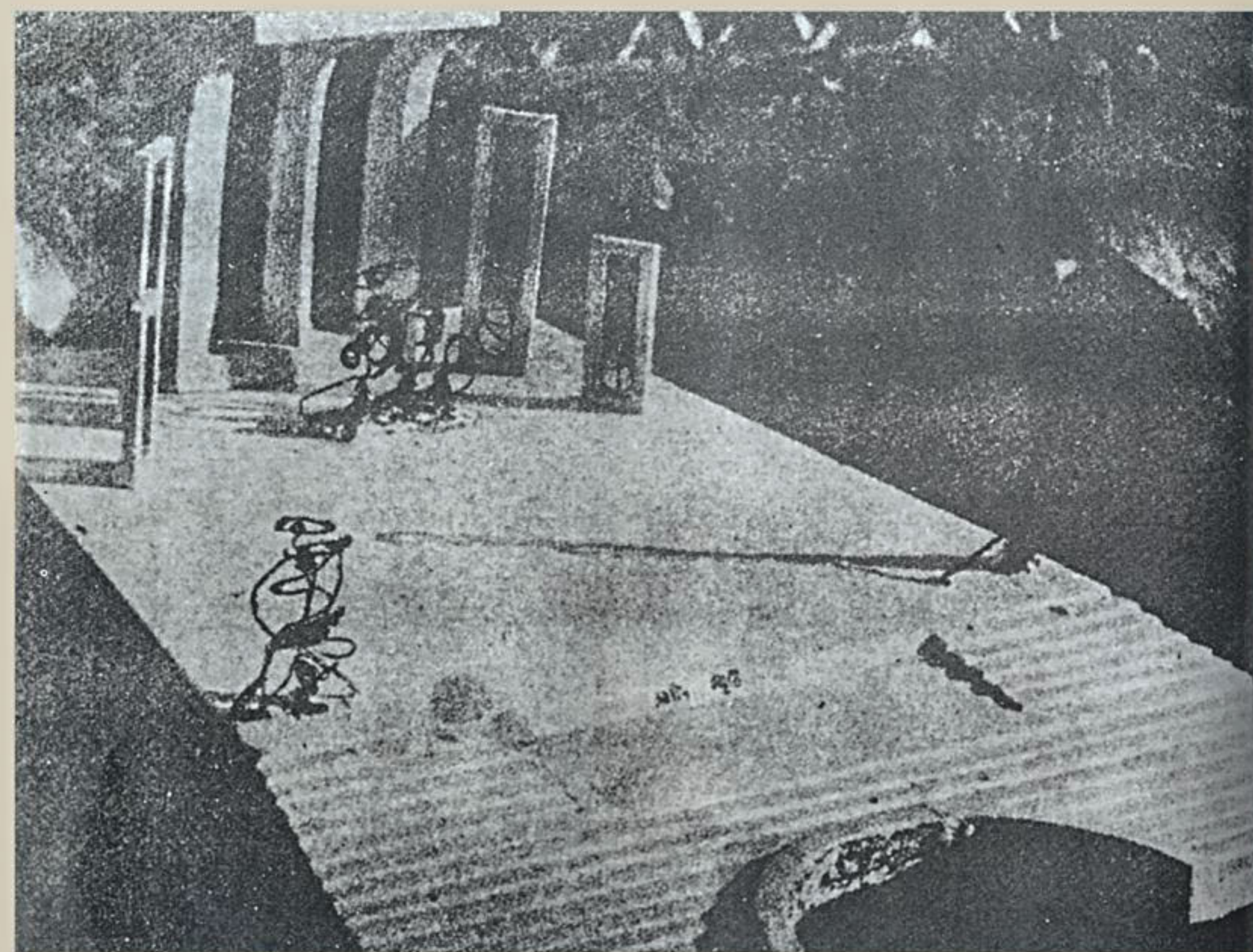
I moved to United States during October '58, under Leader Exchange Programme. I started working as a foreign scholar in Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. My mind was so much occupied with the thoughts of the left-behind incomplete Minar that I found that myself back home, after a while. But things did not change a bit for me. Martial Law was at its height of glory and no one had the guts to talk about the abandoned

Minar. That silence was finally broken, as late as in 1963-64.

East Pakistan Government that year formed a committee of experts to start the work of Minar again. Dr. Mahmood Hossain, Vice Chancellor of Dacca University at that time, Late Mr. Zainul Abedin, Principal, Art College and few other important people like Late Professor Munier Chowdhury of Dacca University formed the Team. I started hoping that I will be called by them very shortly, but before that could even happen the committee almost evaporated overnight. I was told by one of their committee members later on, that the committee was about to ask me to design Arabic "Togras" for each of the column.

House. The general reaction of the committee, press and public was in support of the design submitted by my team. Everybody wanted the old design of the Minar (which was my creation) with the addition of more fixtures added to it and that is what my team did.

A good hard work was done and everybody was highly satisfied with their performance and so everybody had a good reason to go back to the state of hibernation. The tick of the time did not stop, so very soon it was 21st February, 1972. Some invisible hands white washed my 1000 square feet mural from the existing walls of the Minar. I was really wild when I saw that, but no one could give me any clue—how



Original model of Shaheed Minar

PHOTO: COURTESY

There fell again a long shadow of silence over the Minar.

Early 1972

Government of Bangladesh took up the matter in their own hands. They wanted to complete the Minar for good. The government called for a completely new competition to get fresh design for the Shaheed Minar. The Government formed a very able committee of judges. This time all the important artists and architects of the country, in groups, presented their works to the committee. The competition got advance publicity in the local press: public opinion was recorded by the authority at the same time.

One fine morning all the presentations were displayed in the Central Hall of the Government

that thing happened, including C&B City Division, directly responsible for the protection of the structure.

I left home during late '72 for Europe to put up shows of my paintings in important centres. I have no idea what has happened to the Minar for then on till to-day, but I know one thing for certain, that no one has the right to adapt or enlarge it, without consulting me. I will be available to an individual or an organization whenever the request is made through proper channel.

Hamidur Rahman
Canada, May 10, 1974

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