

A historical legacy at risk

Save Muzharul Islam's buildings at Azimpur Govt Quarters

FATIHA POLIN and DHRUBO ALAM

If you commute regularly along the Azimpur Road, perhaps you have noticed the ongoing construction of multi-storeyed apartment buildings for government officials by the Public Works Department (PWD); there are good chances you have also noticed the knocking down of a few old four-storyed blocks. Or, you may not have noticed it at all—after all, it's just another demolition work, the kind of which is taking place around every corner of this rapidly changing city. But as conscious citizens, we should know that the Azimpur Government Quarters is one of the earliest examples of public housing schemes in Bangladesh containing two notable specimens of residential quarters designed by the first Bengali modernist architect, the maestro Muzharul Islam. It's such a tragedy that we are demolishing these extraordinary buildings without paying due respect to the architect or his creation, without proper acknowledgement or recognition.

Some may ask, why should we remember him or even keep his works intact? Well, he was the only trained professional in the field of architecture in East Bengal back in the 1950s. Though he started his career as a civil engineer after obtaining his degree from Shibpur Engineering College, his longing for aesthetics and creativity led him towards architecture. But he also wanted to excel in that field. That is why he went abroad three times and finished every segment of his higher education in record time. Islam was taught at the University of Oregon (1952) through a Post-War Development Scholarship and later at Yale University (1961) under leading modernist architect Paul Rudolph through self-funding. He was also awarded the British Council Scholarship in 1956 for pursuing a post-graduate course in Tropical Architecture at the Architectural Association of London. Before starting his own practice in Dhaka, he worked as the Senior Architect of the Government of East Pakistan (1948-64) for 12 years intermittently in the Communication and Building Directorate (C&B). He was the founder president of not only the Institute of Architects Bangladesh but also the Institute of Architects Pakistan.

Although he is best known for his legendary works like the buildings of the Faculty of Fine Arts, the Central Library and the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) of Dhaka University, Chattogram University and Jahangirnagar University, there is a dearth of information on his hundreds of other projects including, but not limited to, residential buildings and other housing schemes. As very few of those structures have been explored or documented properly, many have faced the same fate like the Building Number 74 in the photo.

The four-storyed building, which was originally designed as a three-storyed structure, is situated on the southern block of the Azimpur Government Quarters, right beside the Azimpur Bus Stand Mosque and on the south-west corner of Azimpur intersection, where Dhaka has just started formulating a new urban fabric, emerging from the indigenous organic growth of Old Town. It is said that Azimpur was the residential area for the employees working under Subadar Azam Khan, the son of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, during the

construction of Lalbagh Fort in 1678. The area became an outskirt of Dhaka during the British period, as illustrated in the map of 1859. There is no doubt that Azimpur was established as a residential area as early as 17th century and it got much prominence when Dhaka was declared as the capital of East Pakistan after the partition in 1947.

The construction work undertaken by the authorities included several commercial, institutional and residential area developments like Azimpur (1950s), Dhanmondi (1950s) and Wahab Colony (1956). Azimpur was the residential area for government officers. There were civil surgeons, engineers, administrative officers all sharing the same facilities like Azimpur Ladies Club, Azimpur Mosque and the Azimpur Maternity. Their children went to the same school and thus they became a part of the same neighbourhood like the *mahalla* in their childhood.

The whole Azimpur Residential Complex (with a few other four-storyed buildings in the vicinity) was secured by a boundary wall before the demolition started. Every building had a number of single-bed

apartments with a spacious living room, a small dining area, a moderate kitchen and lavatory with ample light and ventilation. The full-height window of the living room facing south allowed the breeze to come in through the built-in ventilators between the living and the dining space, which also ensured privacy. The pre-fabricated *jali* or *brise soleil* (patterned concrete wall as sun-shading structure) on the balcony, a signature of the architect, plays with light and shade all day. They also hide the plumbing pipes and the clumsy kitchen accessories. The windows are well-protected by an alcove made of long extended roof and side walls; no added sun shades were attached—together, they act as a complete facade. There are adequate in-built shelves in cooking and sleeping spaces. The perfect arrangement for a bachelor government officer can also be a modest home for a single family.

Half of one of the two buildings is gone already. Three out of six apartments on each floor still remain, though the residents have been changing the original design for the last few decades. They are now being used as the temporary accommodation for the construction workers. Two out of three staircases are in usable condition. It's not too late to rebuild the whole structure or restore the existing portion to its original glory. It can stand there simply as an example of that period or of Muzharul Islam's design process for a comparative analysis.

The question arises, why should we preserve them? After all, it's just a block in that area! Well, we should remember that it was the beginning of planned housing projects in Bangladesh. The arrangement of rectangular buildings like in other government housing projects may seem rudimentary at present but it is a significant part of our architectural history in the context of Dhaka as well as the history of East Bengal. Only a few buildings of that time-span in the neighbouring countries resemble such examples.

It was such an innovative creation at that time that one of the buildings, Building Number 75, was known as *Ajob Bari* (the Strange Building) and people used to come to see it out of curiosity! Anonymously, a senior dweller of that building shared her personal experience, mentioning that it was

designed basically for a bachelor officer. But she started living there as a newly married woman and stayed there longer than expected as her son became a government employee. Now she has two grandchildren, and all of them are staying in the same house without much hurdle. She agreed that it was much more comfortable when they were just two, but even now it is still liveable.

Muzharul Islam split the space of each unit into sections which helped to fulfil the functional requirements of the residents. Instead of arranging the sleeping, living-cum-dining spaces, kitchen and toilet horizontally in a similar pattern in all the modules, he grouped them vertically and created a duplex in a single building block. His organisation of volume here had been deeply influenced by the concepts of esteemed architect Le Corbusier. The structure contains 20 interlocking duplex units; 10 of them can be accessed from the ground level and the rest from the upper floor. There are two wide staircases connected by a corridor for circulation and which also serve as a community space. Neighbours shared their stories and created collective memories on the corridor. Muzharul Islam realised that as a common Bengali practice, most of the doors of the dwellings would be kept open, so the corridors worked as an extended living space for the dwellers. They may have felt like an extended family living in their ancestral home with a courtyard.

Therefore, the two buildings are rare examples of solving the complexity of public housing in two different manners. They can feed the inquisitive mind of the future generation, ranging from architects to designers to planners to researchers. Also for unfolding the history of the transformation and architecture of Dhaka, these must be preserved as key representatives of modernist buildings in the city from that period of time. Thus, the half-demolished Building Number 74 should be restored and kept intact with proper conservation, and Building Number 75 should be

Fatiha Polin is Senior Research Associate, Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements. Dhrubo Alam is a technical consultant (transport) at the Dhaka Metro Preparatory Technical Assistance Project, Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA).



View from the south-east corner, Building 74, Azimpur (March 2019).

PHOTO:FATIHA POLIN

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Accidental Atlanticist

TWO Americas were represented by two different vice presidents at the Munich Security Conference this year. Between them, former Vice President Joseph Biden certainly received the warmer

reception, but Vice President Mike Pence may have unwittingly emerged as the saviour of transatlantic relations.

In his address, Pence duly championed his boss, US President Donald Trump, as the "leader of the free world." But the "free world" he described was scarcely recognisable to the Munich audience. In the world Trump wants to lead, America is not the exceptional power, but merely a normal country putting its own interests first. By that logic, it is only reasonable to break from multilateral institutions that allow weaker countries to free-ride on American largesse.

In keeping with this vision, Pence used his speech to demand that Europeans spend more on defence, and to extol the virtues of the Trump administration's trade war against China. But the climax came when he enjoined Europe to get in line with the US in suspending the 2015 nuclear deal with

Iran—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—and restoring sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

According to Pence, Iran is plotting another Holocaust, for which Europeans will bear partial responsibility unless they stop undermining US sanctions. This warning came on the tail of a US-hosted conference in Warsaw, which was designed to drive a wedge between European Union countries and derail the bloc's efforts to salvage the JCPOA.

Pence spoke for the America that works to divide and weaken Europe. The other America, represented in Munich by Biden, views the Trump administration's actions as an "embarrassment." In his speech, Biden described an America that does not want to turn its back on allies and that values democracy, the rule of law, freedom of the press, and a close partnership with Europe based on shared "human decency."

Biden ended his remarks to great applause, declaring, "We will be back." Was he referring to an outward-looking America, or to a future Biden presidency? Many of those present hoped for both.

The rapturous applause following Biden's appearance was markedly at odds with the awkward, stony silence that followed Pence's address. The contrast was reminiscent of the early 2000s, when disillusioned transatlanticists took refuge in "The West

Wing", wherein the cerebral character of President Josiah Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) stood in stark contrast to George W Bush and his administration's disingenuous brutality.

But such escapism yields only false hope. Rather than being lulled into complacency by Biden's reassuring words, Europeans would be better off heeding Pence. Only by growing up, paying its way, and clarifying its goals can Europe repair the transatlantic relationship and ensure a healthy and durable partnership.

The fact is that Europeans and Americans have long lied to themselves and each other about the extent of their common interests and values. European and US strategic interests have been diverging at least since the end of the Cold War. America rescued a hapless Europe in the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. But by the time of the Kosovo War at the end of that decade, Europeans had begun to wake up to their responsibilities. In the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, and in the conflict in Ukraine since 2014, it was Europeans—not Americans—who led the diplomatic response and imposed the strongest sanctions on Russia.

Moreover, Europe is the only party ever to have mobilised in the name of collective defence under Article 5 of the NATO treaty. Following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, Europeans sent forces to distant wars in

the Middle East, over which they had little control.

In hindsight, it is clear that those wars destabilised Europe's neighbourhood and, eventually, Europe itself. America's exclusive focus on counterterrorism left war-torn Middle Eastern countries with fragile governments, or none at all. And in recent years, Europeans have increasingly borne the costs in the form of terrorism and influxes of refugees.

As for the US, many of its 320 million citizens no longer understand why they should have to protect 500 million Europeans, who live, after all, on a relatively peaceful and prosperous continent. They know that their country is in an escalating competition with China in the Indo-Pacific, and are thus shocked that Europeans would join the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Ultimately, Europeans are left between a rock and a hard place. They, too, want to push China harder on trade and investment issues. But the best way to do that is through the World Trade Organization, which the Trump administration is actively undermining.

The divergence in values is no less pronounced. For their part, Europeans support international institutions, rules-based arrangements, and multilateralism generally. But America has always been ambivalent about treaties and institutions that might

constrain its sovereignty or defy its objectives.

While Trump and Pence crudely state what today's America wants, Biden is selling a vision of America that it no longer obtains. The US government does not have the American people's consent to act on the world stage as it once did. While Americans still recognise the importance of sustaining US economic and military primacy *vis-à-vis* China, they appear to have rejected the elite consensus on trade, defence spending, and diplomacy.

The transatlantic partnership will always be Europe's most important relationship. But it can last only if both sides take responsibility for their own affairs. The alliance would be immeasurably stronger if it were based on an honest assessment of each side's interests and values, rather than on quaint illusions of fellow feeling.

Pence's blunt speech in Munich may have been painful to hear, but one hopes that it will bring an end to European complacency and point the way to a renewal of transatlantic relations on realistic terms. If that turns out to be the case, Pence will have won the title of transatlantic hero—whether he wants it or not.

Mark Leonard is Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sweet liqueur
- 34 "Right away, boss!"
- 8 Sleep sound
- 6 Kitty
- 36 Floor model
- 10 Flatten
- 37 November
- 11 Summer of song
- 12 Wrong
- 13 Figure of speech
- 14 Reactor parts
- 15 Big name in Havana
- 16 Serpent's victim
- 17 Marsh
- 18 Mariner's place
- 19 Causes of stress
- 22 RBI or ERA
- 23 Gumbo veggie
- 26 Funds for retirees
- 29 Touch lightly
- 32 Haul into court
- 33 Deep hole
- 34 "Right away, boss!"
- 35 Fancy flapjack
- 39 Fancy
- 40 Select group
- 41 Towel word
- 42 Sheet material
- 27 Bolt partner
- 28 Hot
- 29 Sales spiel
- 30 Love, in Lombardy
- 31 Heavy drinker
- 35 Snoozes
- 36 Sub spot
- 39 Crooner Torre

DOWN

- 1 Red wine
- 2 Takes out
- 3 Plain to see
- 4 Base meal
- 5 Golfer Ernie
- 6 Seed holders
- 7 Pounds and parsecs
- 8 Sleep sound
- 9 Pacific island
- 10 Flatten
- 11 Do a doctor's job
- 12 Group
- 13 Birthstone
- 14 Military award
- 15 Pigeon sound
- 16 Easy to eat
- 17 Tree flow
- 18 Enjoy Aspen
- 19 Towel word
- 20 Inveigled
- 21 Bring to life
- 22 Bolt partner
- 23 Toned
- 24 Inveigled
- 25 Bring to life
- 26 Sales spiel
- 27 Bolt partner
- 28 Hot
- 29 Sales spiel
- 30 Love, in Lombardy
- 31 Heavy drinker
- 32 Haul into court
- 33 Deep hole
- 34 "Right away, boss!"
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- 37 Fancy
- 38 Military award
- 39 Fancy
- 40 Select group
- 41 Towel word
- 42 Sheet material

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