

Dhaka's urban politics, Haussmann, and related thoughts



THE GRUDGING URBANIST
ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

AFTER the tragic Chawkbazar inferno in Old Dhaka, I have been thinking about what it would take to bring some urban sanity to a complex megacity like Dhaka. I find myself constantly thinking of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, not because of his controversial “remaking” of 19th-century Paris, but because of how relevant the divisive debate that began in the wake of his remaking of the French capital could be for Dhaka’s current urban scenario. At the centre of the debate was whether Haussmann was a benevolent master planner or an imperialist megalomaniac in fixing Paris.

Who was Haussmann? In 1852, he was an ambitious civil servant who found a great opportunity to participate in the grand redevelopment plan that Emperor Napoleon III had envisioned for Paris. The new emperor hated Paris and its deplorable urban conditions. In 1846, the French capital had crossed the milestone of being a city with a million people. The city was a mess, overcrowded, congested, and polluted. The city’s narrow and winding streets were inaccessible and dingy, lacking sunlight and ventilation. Regular outbreak of cholera and typhoid took the lives of tens of thousands. The dismal environment in which the working class lived created conditions ripe for social anarchy and breakdown.

The emperor wondered what it would take to transform Paris into a liveable city, marked by urban parks, tree-lined avenues, and a modern sewage system. He needed somebody to execute his vision. In June 1853, at the recommendation of the then French interior minister, Haussmann was installed at the summit of the French prefectorial hierarchy to oversee Napoleon III’s ambitious plan for Paris.

What happened next was the most expensive and extensive public works ever carried out in a European city. For 17 years, the French capital was a massive building site. The cost of rebuilding was a staggering 75bn Euro by today’s estimate. Capitalising on his

intimate relationship with the emperor, Haussmann moved swiftly to carry out his plan. He cut boulevards through the congested centre of Paris, demolishing slums, knocking down about 27,500 buildings, and creating spaces for monuments, parks, and such landmarks as Palais Garnier and Les Halles marketplace. He oversaw the creation 71 miles of new roads and the city’s modern sewage network, among other infrastructures. He adorned city streets with lampposts, newspaper kiosks, benches, trees, and broad sidewalks. It was a new, rejuvenated Paris.

Many modern observers suggest that Haussmann had transformed Paris singlehandedly, laying the foundation for modern Paris, the City of Lights that cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin famously called “the capital of the nineteenth century”. Yet, many 19th-century Parisians also complained that Haussmann destroyed the historic core of Paris, with some portraying

him as an arrogant figure, who would do anything to get what he wanted. Some even suggested that the real reason for creating wide boulevards was to enable the army to mobilise swiftly and quell the revolt of the agitating working-class masses. Haussmann’s republican opponents thought he was merely facilitating the imperial control of the city, mired in political chaos. They also criticised his maniacal frenzy with which he executed his plan, suppressing all dissent.

Even Victor Hugo hated him. The author of *Les Misérables* (written in 1862, during Haussmann’s rebuilding of Paris), who bemoaned the wretched conditions of working-class Parisians, accused Haussmann rather for destroying the medieval charm of 19th-century Paris! The political backlash against Haussmann was damning. Eventually, he was ousted from his position and became a *persona non grata* in the city he sought to rebuild.

The irony of the story is that in many ways

the Paris that we all romanticise became Paris as a result of Haussmann’s demolishing and rebuilding. Was Haussmann autocratic? Did he embody the ethos of repressive top-down planning? Was he a necessary messiah to reclaim a city where frequent cholera epidemics killed scores of people? What was more important: his method of getting it done or the end product of his intervention? Many people, including Queen Victoria, visiting Paris following Haussmann’s rebuilding, thought he was a master planner of pure genius.

Haussmann’s story raises relevant questions for the urban governance of megapolises like Dhaka. Let me pose the question again: what would it take to make Dhaka a liveable, safe city, where fire, out of the blue, wouldn’t kill hundreds of people. In the wake of the Chawkbazar fire, urban planners predictably suggested doing land-use planning, as if some drawings on the table would compel small business-owners to give up their clandestine ways of storing flammable chemicals in residential areas. Unfortunately, accidents will happen, but the challenge is to plan land-use and be fully prepared to minimise damage when accidents strike.

Planning plays a very important role in developing resilient cities. But who plans? How does he/she plan? What is the methodology? How do city administrators execute an urban plan for a city? In recent times we have become accustomed to hearing about “participatory” planning, a democratic way of engaging all stakeholders, so that the final product would be acceptable to all.

Yes, participatory planning is the right way and we need to believe in its power to create people-centric cities. But we should also not shy away from asking context-specific, and at times inconvenient, questions about its ability to work when the idea of *greater good* is not a widely shared and understood societal goal. The Greeks called it *eunomia* or good order—a basic social contract that all citizens believed in for society to function, despite the messiness of democracy’s dissenting voices.

Would business owners in Old Dhaka heed any moralist appeal to relocate their dangerous but profit-making chemicals to designated, safe storage places? Could environmental laws and their strict implementation solve the problem of fire hazards in dangerously populated areas?

How about social campaigns to inspire the public to be conscious of the greater good? Would democratic governance work when the public trust in the greater good is weak? These questions should be solemn reminders of how urban planning is intertwined with a complex web of anthropological and political challenges.

This discussion should also raise an uncomfortable question about democracy for democracy’s sake. While we can’t underestimate the significance of democratic values and norms, we should also be mindful that democracy is not an end in itself. Democracy is for the people or *demos*, not the other way around. Democracy can’t exist for itself. While they are not mutually exclusive, democracy is only a means to human wellbeing.

Francis Fukuyama’s 1992 prophecy that western liberal democracy was the apex of humanity’s socio-cultural evolution—the “end of history” hypothesis—proved to be premature. Democracy has its discontents. We should not be afraid to acknowledge that sometimes the greater good could be too elusive or not readily understood by us within the framework of conventional democratic practices. Sometimes we could be too concerned with the immediate problems in our daily lives, while unwittingly remaining unaware of the possibility of the greater good in the long run. But whose idea of the greater good should we, the people, subscribe to?

Haussmann’s “creation” of modern Paris doesn’t answer this question. Yet, it offers us a fertile field to debate how we can move forward to create liveable, safe, and resilient cities. In such cities, business-owners won’t store flammable chemicals in packed residential buildings because there are no secret spaces available to them anymore to hide their hazardous stuff after the strict enforcement of urban land-use reforms. More important, they will not do so because it is not the right thing to do. The achievement of the greater good is a battle on many fronts.

Adnan Zillur Morshed, PhD, is an architect, architectural historian, urbanist, and columnist. He teaches at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and serves as Executive Director of the Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism at BRAC University. He can be reached at amorshed@bracu.ac.bd.



Napoleon III instructed Haussmann to bring air and light to the centre of the city, to unify the different neighbourhoods with boulevards, and to make the city more beautiful. The avenue de l’Opéra, created by Haussmann, painted by Camille Pissarro (1898).

How do we improve maternal health of garment workers?



HASANAT ALAMGIR

THE influx of millions of female workers to work at the garment factories has created unique health challenges, issues and needs that have mostly remained unstudied and unaddressed. This industry now employs over four million workers, of whom around 70 percent are thought to be women, mostly young. Being a fairly new sector that burgeoned over the last three decades, many of the factory settings and management are not yet well-prepared to accommodate the health needs of these young female workers particularly with regard to their reproductive and maternal health issues as well as the growth and wellbeing needs of their newborns and children.

Questions that we may ask about these women of reproductive age include: a) are they receiving pre-natal care? b) how are they breastfeeding their infants? c) are there nursing rooms or breaks in the factories? d) are they receiving education on reproductive health? e) is there workplace modification or accommodation for pregnant workers? f) is there paid maternity leave? g) are there childcare facilities in or around the factories?

We know very little about the status, needs,

access, and barriers of these women in terms of their reproductive and maternal health. For example, exclusive breastfeeding and access to paid maternity leave have been advocated by all international health organisations and national governments, particularly in the developing countries where infant mortality rate is still high. One of the key goals of World Health Organization (WHO) is to improve maternal and child health by increasing breastfeeding habit and practice among women in developing countries. Exclusive breastfeeding, with no supplementation such as formula or other foods, for the first six months of life has been shown to be the most effective strategy for saving lives among children from low income groups.

Bangladesh still has one of the highest infant mortality rates. According to World Bank, there were 26.90 infant deaths per 1000 live births in 2017. The country is currently ranked 7th with the greatest number of preterm births (424,100). Bangladesh also faces a big burden of malnutrition—more than 54 percent of preschool-age children, equivalent to more than 9.5 million children, are stunted, 56 percent are underweight, and more than 17 percent are wasted. This is concerning because malnutrition is associated with immune and learning deficiencies.

A recent survey conducted by a team of University of Texas medical and public health

students, in collaboration with Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP) and led by this author, attempted to generate preliminary data on some of these vital issues among garment workers. They reported that 90 percent of the garment workers are married and 84 percent of them are sexually active. However, only 62 percent reported to be using some sort of birth control methods. More than 90 percent of workers reported to have been pregnant at least once, and 80 percent of babies were born at home. Garment workers reported on average 3-4 pregnancies. Only 37.5 percent of these workers reported to have exclusively breastfed. Even less are the numbers of women who reported exclusive breastfeeding for at least 6 months, the recommended time by WHO for breastfeeding. Additionally, it was found that only 50 percent of garment workers reported to have access to paid maternity leave. The full-length report of this research study is to be published soon in a scientific journal.

These findings show the immense need related to reproductive and maternal health among millions of working women in this sector. There is plenty of room to increase the use and uptake of birth control methods in this population. Factory-based education programmes and supply of subsidised effective birth control measures may be undertaken by factory management. Also, the

very high rates of pregnancy among this population should encourage the factory owners to formulate more policies and programmes to accommodate expecting mothers and create provisions of light duty or modified work. Human resource policies must include provisions of offering paid maternity leave.

Breastfeeding in the workplace helps save money for companies in several ways. Studies have shown that mothers who can nurse their babies at the workplace are less absent from work, thus decreasing cost due to absenteeism. Furthermore, employers who allow breastfeeding in the workplace can retain trained and essential workers, thus having a smaller turnover, and their workers have a higher sense of ownership and loyalty to the company for which they work. Breastfeeding is beneficial to both maternal and infant health as well as for the company.

Many women will avoid receiving prenatal care in factory-run clinics due to the fear of being encouraged to leave the job due to decreased productivity. Many of these women live in constant fear that they will lose their jobs, and many are encouraged to quit and reapply for their job after pregnancy as there is inadequate maternity leave regulation and application. The length of maternity leave has been reported to be associated with improvements in mental health and duration of breastfeeding in industrialised countries.

The factory work environment must be made mother-friendly by taking simple measures such as creating child care sites close to the factory and giving more breaks to nursing mothers. Assigned nursing rooms and milk bank have been tried in some countries on a similar population. The option of paid maternity leave should not be considered a luxury for an industry that is this country’s main foreign exchange earner. However, if a three-month full-paid leave is not yet a practical possibility, partial pay option with gradual re-entry to work can be an alternative. A gradual-return-to-work programme with reduced pay for mothers, who can keep on working while raising children, can be organised. Similarly, light-duty work arrangement can help expecting mothers to remain employed without losing their much-needed wages for the whole term of pregnancy.

Garment factories are part of a global market and Western companies should participate in creating safe and socially responsible factories in Bangladesh. The health and future of millions of unborn babies and infants may be at stake if their mothers in these garment factories are not well taken care of.

Dr Hasanat Alamgir directs the Doctoral Program in Health Policy and Management at New York Medical College, New York. He has led and published several research studies on Bangladeshi garment workers, and also evaluated the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety’s fire safety training programmes.

ALFRED TENNYSON
(1809-1892)
British poet

*Words, like nature,
half reveal and half
conceal the soul
within.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	28 Arab leader	bestower
1 Secure, as a climbing rope	30 Director Preminger	4 Director Lee
6 Building directory site	33 Deplore	5 Give up
11 Muscat native	34 Acquire	6 Fastened, in a way
12 Concur	36 Possessed	7 Shrek, for one
13 Pigeon's perch	37 Blow up	8 Venice nickname
14 Court event	39 Ivy League student	9 Model's asset
15 Take a stab at	40 Wise words	10 Puppy sounds
16 Like corsets	41 Alleviates	17 Vid. counterpart
18 Freud topic	43 Patisserie array	22 Low digit
19 "Well, that's obvious!"	44 Politician Lott	24 Corp. VIP
20 UFO pilots	45 Listens to	26 Striped female
21 Skilled	46 Track trials	28 Gooley treat
23 Fake duck		29 Beer bash need
25 Young one	DOWN	31 Natural gift
27 Excellent, in slang	1 Ran off	32 Lyric poets
	2 Come into view	33 Attain
	3 Excalibur's	35 Comb components
		38 Like some wines
		42 "Right you --!"

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

V	E	T	O		C	A	N	I	T
E	R	I	N		C	O	R	O	N
R	I	P	E		H	A	I	R	D
B	E	S	T		C	A	S	E	
				W	E	S	T	S	I
				T	H	R	O	N	E
				R	O	A	S	T	
				O	P	T		D	E
				T	E	S	T	T	U
						R	E	S	T
				A	S	S	E	R	T
				P	A	P	E	R	S
				T	O	A	D	Y	
						R	A	T	A

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott