



"Nogornama- The Future of Our Habitats".



"Bengal Stream" at German Architecture Museum (DAM) in Frankfurt.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD TAUHEED

Exhibiting the New Spirit in Bangladeshi Architecture

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Four exhibitions in four different locations of the world, with one in Bangladesh, demonstrate the new vibrancy propelling architectural production and thinking in Bangladesh. Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements, involved in the advancement of a new urbanism in Bangladesh, is associated in one way or another with all the exhibitions.

The new vibrancy comes at an exciting time in the economic and social life of Bangladesh. The country's GDP has been steadily rising, the literacy rate is going up, and public health and living standards are improving. With Dhaka as the dominant urban centre, the big frontier of this development are cities and towns. This unruly urbanisation has also led to some dire environmental conditions.

According to a World Bank report, between 2000 and 2010, Bangladesh has experienced faster urbanisation than South Asia as a whole. The dramatic rise in urban population has led to crises in transportation, public spaces and housing. The critical challenge in the conflict between economy and ecology is how the rush for economic growth has led to a wanton filling up of wetlands and radical change to agricultural and flood lands.

innovative designs. A major credit is due to the late master architect, Muzharul Islam, who first redefined the identity and scope of the architecture of the new nation. Many of today's leading architects have been Muzharul Islam's students, assistants or companions who have now established an architectural language of the present time based on the broader concerns set up by him.

In December 2017, for the first time ever, an exhibition on Bangladeshi architecture was displayed for the European audience at the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel, Switzerland. Organised and curated by the Swiss Architecture Museum in association with Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements, the exhibition, titled "Bengal Stream: The Vibrant Architecture Scene of Bangladesh" consisted of over 60 selected and exemplary works by Bangladeshi architects. Running for six months from December 2017 to May 2018, the exhibition highlighted the diverse works of Bangladeshi architects, working in dense conditions such as urban context as well as rural communities and fragile landscapes. Works by Muzharul Islam, Louis Kahn and Paul Rudolph, as well as thirty other renowned contemporary architects in Bangladesh were also on display at the exhibition.

The exhibition was on display from November 2018 to March 2019. From June to October 2019, *Bengal Stream* was on display at the renowned German Architecture Museum (DAM) in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The exhibition received tremendous responses at all three venues in Europe with high attendance and media coverage. The plan now is to take the exhibition to the United States.

professionals can develop their interests and imaginations, as well as fulfill their obligations to the new environmental responsibilities.

The exhibition presents the four-fold activities of Bengal Institute: (1) to bring about a comprehensive knowledge of the past and future of our environment; (2) to conduct deep research and analytical investigation in an integrated way; (3) to generate new

etc., among others. Videos of talks from the Institute's academic sessions are played in multiple screens as well. Publications of Bengal Institute are also available to read and purchase at the exhibition. These activities made *Nogornama* a participative experience with an enormous amount of content to explore.

During weekends, various activities with people visiting the exhibition are being organised. The first one was a workshop with young children who were asked about their visions of the future, which they represented through brilliant drawings. The second activity was a guided tour for the people who were instrumental behind the scenes in setting up and constructing the exhibition. They voiced their own opinions about the cities, villages or towns they belong to, as well as the overall exhibition.

Marina Tabassum, Principal of Marina Tabassum Architects and Director of Academic Program at Bengal Institute, currently has her works displayed at the first ever Sharjah Architecture Triennale, where it will remain until February 2020. One of the commissioned research initiatives of the Triennale, Tabassum's installation, titled "Inheriting Wetness", is focused on the Padma- Meghna riverbank where the delta is susceptible to shifts and changes. The installation is a part of a research that shows three fabricated structures highlighting the extreme conditions of the families who are forced to relocate their houses due to the routine changes in water level. The lives of the inhabitants are shown in a series of films which are played in one of the fabricated structures. Curated by Adrian Lahoud, Dean of the School of Architecture at the Royal College of Art in London, the triennale's main location is an abandoned two-storey school in Sharjah where the classrooms and courtyards have been transformed into gallery spaces. As a response to the triennale's theme 'Rights of Future Generations', Tabassum's installation explores the connection between architecture and context as well as the concept of inheritance in a fluid landscape.

As Bangladesh undergoes more changes in its goal to develop economically, as the economy is contrasted with ecology, as high capitalism defines development spree, and as social inequality and environmental imbalance grow, an increasing number of design professionals are creating architecture and urban responses that look both inwards and outwards. While some architects still view architecture as the practice of creating spectacular buildings, many work with contextual, ecological and cultural considerations, sometimes with direct participation of the users. The arising and upcoming architecture as embodied in the four exhibitions truly align with the independent spirit that represents the country.

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"Constructing Wetness," Marina Tabassum's prefabricated structures at Sharjah Architecture Triennale.

PHOTO: TOM RAVENSCROFT

In September 2019, Bengal Institute participated in the thematic exhibition "Collective City" at the 2019 Seoul Biennale for Architecture and Urbanism. An installation "Dhaka: A Million Stories" was set up that celebrated the lives of millions of "micro-urbanists" who, with their innovative presence in the streets and sidewalks, bring vibrancy and colour to Dhaka city. The installation was a collaboration among Salauddin Ahmed, Marina Tabassum, and Bengal Institute, with Salauddin Ahmed curating the installation.

Starting in 2017, the Seoul Biennale for Architecture and Urbanism can be credited for incorporating critical themes into today's architecture and urbanism agenda, impacting the global architecture scene. The year's biennale, directed by Jaeyong Lim and Francisco Sanin, under the main theme "Collective City," presented the state of cities around the world through research and installations.

Bengal Institute celebrated four years of its initiation in November 2019, with a major exhibition titled "Nogornama - The Future of Our Habitats," curated by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, Nusrat Sumaiya and Muhammad Tauheed. The Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements was established in 2015 to present ideas for a new urbanism based on an ecological and humane approach, one which superseded the conflict between nature and progress. As a place for advancing the understanding of the lived environment, Bengal Institute presents ideas and programmes to improve the qualities of architecture, landscapes and settlements. It is a unique platform in which both young and experienced

visions for the future of our habitats; and, (4) to present the findings and propositions to a bigger audience.

The month-long exhibition opened to a lot of acclaim from both professionals as well as common citizens with no design background. The Institute's works and activities from the past four years are displayed, with emphasis on visualisations of what future cities, towns, urban centres and housings may look like if designed and planned. In attempting to overcome the conflict between economy and ecology, Bengal Institute's research and design team has been working on ideas to create a balance between progress, nature and climate change. By integrating architectural and design research, and landscape and urban thinking, Bengal Institute aims to investigate the prospect of cities and settlements in the new economic turn of the country.

The exhibition displays works around five themes: the regional future of metropolitan Dhaka, the new possibilities for small towns, public spaces as the spirit of cities, the vibrancy of urban riverbanks, and housing as the patterns for cities. The overall activities of the Institute's multifarious programmes were also displayed which included seminars, workshops and public lectures by renowned academics, scholars and experts from various disciplines both from home and abroad, bringing an international discourse to Bangladesh.

Beyond the designs and drawings, the exhibition also features interactive data visualisation on a large digital screen where one can operate dozens of different layers showing visual data on floods, earthquake prone zones,



"Dhaka- A Million Stories," Seoul Biennale for Architecture and Urbanism 2019.

PHOTO: SALAUDDIN AHMED

These four exhibitions show how innovative thinking in architecture is facing up to these new environmental and urban challenges. Since its inception in 2015, Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements has taken up some of these challenges and conducted innovative research and design in response.

Over the past several decades, the architecture of Bangladesh has been gradually gaining momentum, and receiving recognition both at home and abroad for culturally and climatically

Principally curated by Niklaus Graber after a year-long research, with Andreas Ruby and Viviane Ehrensberger, *Bengal Stream* represents the new architectural spirit of Bangladesh emerging from its dynamic geography and landscape. Along with the exhibition, a book of the same title was also released, with photographs by one of the most prominent architecture photographers of today, Iwan Baan.

Following Basel, *Bengal Stream* traveled to Bordeaux, France at Arc en Réve, Centre d'architecture, where