

IN MEMORIAM

Adieu, Architect Bashirul Haq

ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

A Bangladeshi pioneer departed this world on Saturday, April 4, 2020. Architect Bashirul Haq was a poet who crafted his poems with the language of brick, green, light, air, and tactility. Some of his brick buildings are like inhabitable poetry, where one experiences space as one would read, say, Jibanananda. Architect Louis Kahn once famously asked, “What do you want, brick? And brick says to you, I like an arch.” If this was Kahn’s celebration of the brick’s quintessential material property (that brick can only be an arch but not a lintel), Bashirul Haq expanded that property into the realm of poetics, meditating with bricks and bringing them home, where they naturally belonged: the Bengal delta. In his architectural work, rural and urban were reimagined as an expression of organic cosmopolitanism.

Bashirul Haq’s design epitomised an entwined brand of indigenous and modernist impulses in Bangladeshi architecture since the independence. For the new nation of Bangladesh, the decade of the 1970s was a complex tapestry of optimism and pessimism. The euphoria of liberation soon dissipated within the maze of political unrest, assassinations, and military dictatorships. Reminiscent of many other post-independence countries in social turmoil, a contested search for a national identity ensued. Furthermore, the Cold War-era politics—particularly, the shifting fault lines along the relationships among the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and India—complicated the internal affairs of Bangladesh.

Amidst the social tension of the 1970s, a new generation of ambitious architects burst forth onto the architectural scene of Bangladesh. The outcomes of a few national architectural competitions revealed new visions of modernity, building technology, and architectural space. Institutional and commercial buildings were no longer bland boxes, comprising corridors and rooms. In 1977, Bashirul Haq won the national design

competition for the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) headquarters in downtown Dhaka’s Dilkusha Commercial Area. His entry showcased a new type of design energy that synthesised modernist aesthetics with a reasoned consideration for the local climate, a low budget, and a dense urban context.

Many of his subsequent brick buildings are considered architectural icons of the country, suggesting a sublime modern abstraction of Bengal’s geographic ambiance. Haq’s work is of utmost importance to explain how the notion of “critical regionalism” informed architectural modernism in Bangladesh since the early 1980s.

Born in 1942 in a village named Bhatshala, Brahmanbaria, a district in east-central Bangladesh and about 100 km from the capital Dhaka, Bashirul Haq developed a particular fondness for Bengal’s rural landscape. He received his Bachelor’s degree in architecture from the National College of Arts in Lahore, West Pakistan, in 1964. Lahore introduced him to the monumental architecture and gardens of the Mughals. Before he left for the United States in 1971 to pursue higher education in architecture, Haq worked in the office of Muzharul Islam, the first Bengali professional architect in East Pakistan. He was also affiliated with T. Abdul Hakim Thariani, designer of the country’s national mosque, Baitul Mukarram, in downtown Dhaka.

Haq’s journey to the United States played a formative role in his career development. He received his Master’s degree in architecture from the University of New Mexico in 1975. The south-western American state of New Mexico sensitised him to the transformative influence of landscape on aesthetic development. In this state, the famed American artist Georgia O’Keeffe was deeply inspired by the phenomenology of layered limestone cliffs, rugged mountains, rock formations, and the meditative dance of light across them. Haq, too, experienced firsthand



COURTESY: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/ROSS101

Bashirul Haq (June 24, 1942 – April 4, 2020).

in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and beyond the introspective power of a place and how its paradigmatic adobe architecture could embody the spirit of a unique terrain.

Bashirul Haq was fortunate to find a mentor in Fazlur Rahman Khan (popularly known as F.R. Khan), a fellow countryman, partner of the famed Chicago-based architectural/engineering firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), and structural designer of Chicago’s Sears Tower (now Willis Tower), the tallest building in the world from 1973 to 1997. The SOM stalwart took Haq under his wing and encouraged him to join his Chicago firm as an architect. However, as fate would have it, Bashirul Haq, already in his mid-30s, chose to return home, to Bangladesh. He was ready to embark on an architectural journey in the land he knew best.

There is a lot to learn from him. But how we learn from him is crucial. His work can be a great pivot to foster the production of “local” knowledge about the Bengal delta and its habitats. The lingering West-oriented

tendencies of architectural curriculum in Bangladesh could be best mitigated when native knowledge is produced within a global-historical milieu of the built environment. There is a serious scarcity of architectural literature in Bangladesh. The predominantly design studio-oriented undergraduate architectural curriculum in the country neither encourages nor trains architects to think analytically about the design culture. Furthermore, a general lack of research initiatives in the academia only exacerbates the problem.

The lacuna of local knowledge production creates multifaceted problems. One of them is academia’s continued reliance on imported West-centric books—often based on a false distinction between East and West—buttressing an uncritical belief in the perceived superiority of the West. Another related problem is that the absence of discursive conversation on local architects and their innovative work perpetuates a peculiar cultural self-pity that warrants western recognition as a validation of local designs.

Yet, to frame Bashirul Haq’s work with the trite argument that he searched for *local* inspiration in his design and then sought to synthesise indigenous spatial qualities with modernity is to do disservice to his oeuvre that is complex, nuanced, and multi-layered. It would be unfair to see his architecture ricocheting between the false binary of local and modern. His work is much more. His sensitive and restrained use of brick as a building material tells richly complex architectural stories that elude simple classifications.

Bashirul Haq creates a cosmopolitan architecture, one in which the very premise of the local/modernity dichotomy is robustly resisted. Rather, he seeks to conflate an architectural archetype with a perceptive understanding of temporality and the spatial sensibilities of Bengal, but ultimately transcending the exigencies of the local. Experiencing his architecture, particularly

his red-brick buildings, reminds one that searching for local inspiration does not have to be an inflexible moral burden, in the same way one feels that Alvar Aalto’s Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949) seems to remain embedded in some kind of Finnish *genius loci*, while ultimately suspending the very need to be Finnish as an expression of aesthetic authenticity. In many ways, the exquisitely delicate use of brick in Haq’s work, for example the architect’s own residence on Indira Road in Dhaka, performs Bengali folk dance and western ballet at the same time.

To understand how Bashirul Haq resisted the temptation of compartmentalised historiographies of local and global (or East and West), one needs to appreciate the ways he values his cross-cultural architectural education. Like architect Muzharul Islam, Haq grasped the power of diverse geographies and how their cultures could blend together to produce all kinds of aesthetic chemical reactions.

Today Bangladesh thrives on design innovation and entrepreneurship, aesthetic experiments in materiality, and bottom-up community-driven buildings. The traveling exhibition *Bengal Stream: The Vibrant Architecture Scene of Bangladesh* (2017-2018), first held in Basel and then other European cities, my own cover article on Muzharul Islam in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (December 2017) and my travel companion *DAC/Dhaka in 25 Buildings* (2017), and three Aga Khan Awards for Architecture in the last few years showcase a growing global interest in the architectural developments of Bangladesh. Innovative research and analytical writing on the work of Bashirul Haq will broaden and validate this interest.

Adieu architect! You will be missed.

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

Changing teaching modality during the Covid-19 pandemic

QUAMRUL HAIDER

IN a book on influenza published last year, Robert G. Webster, a virologist at Otago University in New Zealand, had a terrifyingly prescient chapter about pandemics. He warned that “Nature will eventually again challenge mankind with an equivalent of the 1918 influenza virus.” He was referring to the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic that infected about 500 million people around the world, killing nearly three percent (50 million) of the world’s population at the time.

Indeed, at the end of December 2019, Chinese authorities alerted the World Health Organization to pneumonia cases, which was later dubbed as Coronavirus (Covid-19), in Wuhan City in Hubei province. Since then, the virus has led to a global public health crisis, a pandemic infecting over a million people worldwide and claiming in excess of 60,000 lives.

In the United States, the response to Covid-19 is heavily overlaid with political calculations by Donald Trump. As noted by the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the president “fiddles [while] people are dying.” Consequently, because of his ignorance, initial denial and lack of proactive action, the virus has swept through the country like a wildfire. As of now, there are over 300,000 cases with more than 8,400 deaths. These numbers change by the hour.

According to latest models, we are staring at 100,000-250,000 deaths, with New York City being the epicentre, where there have been at least 113,704 confirmed cases and 3,565 deaths since the first case was reported during the first week of March 2020. Scientists and epidemiologists believe that this may be only the beginning of what is yet to come before the virus disappears into the thin air.

For American colleges and universities,



The ineffable, intellectual vibe that a great classroom discussion generates cannot be found in virtual online teaching.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MICHAELA REHLE

Covid-19 upended many of the hallmarks of the campus experience, as the virus coincided with the start of the spring semester. Universities are especially vulnerable to the spread of the disease because of the close proximity of those who live and work on campus.

In a matter of weeks, classroom lecture as we know it was completely disrupted. In an effort to slow down transmission of the highly contagious Covid-19, Fordham University, where I have been teaching since 1988, ordered all but its most essential employees to stay at home. On March 9, 2020, the university suspended face-to-

face instruction on its four New York area campuses for the remainder of the semester. Henceforth, the faculty were instructed to teach their classes online. Other universities in the tri-state area—NYU, CUNY, Columbia, Yale and Princeton, among others—took similar action.

It has been a jarring, surreal and draining experience for most of the faculty members to adapt to a completely new way of working, with everyone forced to interact with students on screens. However, the Information Technology (IT) division of Fordham made life bearable for us by creating a Course Continuity Site as an immediate resource

to prepare us to teach online. Therein, we can find teaching strategies, get quick overview of internet technologies, such as Zoom, Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Collaborate. We can also find various synchronous and asynchronous tools to fit our teaching style. Those of us who needed a laptop or webcam were given one by the university’s Media Services. Moreover, if a student did not have access to a sufficiently equipped computer, IT Customer Care gave him/her a laptop at no charge.

As we proceed in this new learning modality, we have to be ever-mindful of how our students’ access to technology can introduce new challenges to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion. We have to be aware that some of our students may be living in a completely different time zone, making it difficult for them to participate fully at the pre-assigned class time. Others may require special accommodations as outlined by the Office of Disability Services.

In light of the shift from face-to-face to online instruction, Fordham Libraries and its services are still available to us and our students. They are offering many of the reference and instructional services we relied on in the past via online meeting platforms—Blackboard Collaborate, WebEx and Google Meet.

Our bookstore, operated by Barnes and Noble, joined Vital Source Bookshelf and leading publishers to make e-textbooks available free to students impacted by campus closures. Vital Source Bookshelf is an easy-to-use, intuitive app built to help enhance one’s reading, studying and learning experience. Besides, it offers handy tools to help one learn more efficiently.

The American Institute of Physics has compiled a list of resources for physics educators to support their move to online teaching for the rest of the semester. These

resources highlight the use of cell phones for lab experiments, as well as other activities that can be adapted for use by students at home.

As we are forced to work from home, some tenure-track professors are worried about how the disruption will affect their tenure bids. In response, many universities have announced a one-year tenure-clock extension for junior faculty members.

I have to say that what I miss most right now is being able to see my colleagues and students walking across the campus, hanging out with them in Freeman Hall which houses the physics department, getting coffee at Starbucks, and so on. I also miss standing in front of a chalkboard lecturing, as well as mingling, talking and brainstorming physics problems with my students.

What happens next? One clue might lie in the early nineteenth-century Britain when the intrusion of mechanised technology into the textile production process ignited the Luddite rebellion, named after Ned Ludd, a mythical weaver who lived in Sherwood Forest. The textile workers who were so paranoid that machinery would replace their jobs took to the task of physically destroying machines they used.

Having said that, is Coronavirus making us face our own obsolescence just like the Luddites? I hope not. Nevertheless, under the present circumstances, I am not sure when campus life will return to normal. Let’s not forget, education happens in the lecture hall and an ineffable, intellectual vibe that a great class discussion generates cannot be found in virtual online teaching. In the meantime, let us allow ourselves to be imperfect together in the service of our students and their deepest needs for learning, and meaning of humanity and compassion.

Quamrul Haider is a professor of physics at Fordham University, New York.

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

OLYMPICS REVIVED
April 6, 1896

Pierre, baron de Coubertin, a founder of the International Olympic Committee and its president from 1896 to 1925, realised his goal of reviving the Olympics when the first modern Games opened in Athens this day in 1896.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Adore

5 Village residents

11 Valhalla VIP

12 Sulky

13 Splinter group

14 Cure

15 Rough guess

17 Lode material

18 Windshield clearer

22 Insertion sign

24 Kept in reserve

25 Clay, later

26 Greek X

27 Flies like an eagle

30 Relay stick

32 Doctrine

33 Swearing-in

vow

34 “Time to split!”

38 Glib

41 Heap

42 Makes amends

43 Earth tones

44 Lease signer

45 Blinds piece

DOWN

1 Finish last

2 Lyric poems

3 Prudish

4 Whole

5 Old Italian coin

6 Boxing combo

7 Entered

8 Gorilla or gibbon

9 Went ahead

10 Porker place

16 Got together

19 Illustrated

20 Cave sound

21 Horse halter

22 Group of actors

23 Balm

28 Ingredient

28 Saskatchewan’s capital

29 Hot

30 Drill part

31 Conforms

35 Final, for one

36 Radius partner

37 High home

38 Diet no-no

39 Had supper

40 Swindle

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4-2

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

D	A	F	T		H	E	R	B	A	L
O	B	O	E		E	Q	U	A	T	E
N	E	O	N		L	U	N	G	E	D
E	L	L		F	L	I	T			
V	I	G	O	R		S	L	O	O	P
O	D	O	R		S	T	O	O	D	
W	E	L	D	S		S	O	L	O	S
S	A	D		L	E	A	K	S		
I	M	P	A	C	T		F	A	R	E
R	A	I	D	E	R		I	T	E	M
S	P	E	E	D	Y		R	E	A	P

BEEBLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT