

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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Future cities: A short guide to a Bengali urbanism



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When al-Mansur laid the foundation of Baghdad in 762 on the banks of the Tigris, he imagined an ideal city in the shape of a round plan. There has always been a symbolic import to the form and shape of the city in envisioning ideal cities. The city of Bhaktapur in Nepal is made of meandering streets and irregular forms, but once a year, citizens carry out ritual processions in which they enact a mental mandala form for the city. Renaissance Europe has ample examples of planning cities that fused perfect geometric plans with visions of ideal societies.

In the agricultural civilisation of Bengal, there is only a literary example of an ideal city—Kalaketu's imaginary Gujarat, described in the 16th century Candimangal of Mukundarama. Gujarat is imagined as a remarkably planned city in a grid layout, a carefully articulated sociological and architectural proposition, and an ideal civic place catering to the widest possible citizenry of that time. Kalaketu's urban creation was indeed an ideal city, an evidence of a higher Bengali urbanism representing cosmopolitan and secular values. It is unfortunate that lessons from Gujarat have not found a place in our current urban discourse.

The Daily Star asked me to write on

"ideal cities for a futuristic Bangladesh" at a time when the city is the biggest challenge in an otherwise economic ascendance of the nation. Economic growth is intimately linked with burgeoning cities and their health; the relationship should be symbiotic. Yet, our city plans are falling short of our economic aspirations, and that is the contemporary challenge. Considering that the future is not a distant phenomenon but something already embedded in what we can do now—or as an American columnist remarked, the future is not our fate but a choice—I take the view that cities can be made better no matter how complex they are and how daunting the scope. It's a question of making informed and directed choices.

Since envisioning the perfect city with pure geometry, things are now more complex. Catering to UN Habitat guidelines, we now imagine "ideal" cities through social equity and environmental sustainability. Building only grand structures and monuments is not sufficient aspiration for an ideal city. Cities now must be equitable, its spaces and resources available to all its citizens. Cities must be sustainable, so that its growth footprint does not ravage the delicate equilibrium of the environment. And, cities must be humane such that its spaces cater to the experience of the human figure and not to mechanistic and abstract configurations.

Despite the view that an ideal city is a mirage, humans do not give up on the prospect of creating cities following a plan. A plan is a latent utopia in which we reimagine the spaces we live in in the image of a better place. Is such imagination possible for cities in Bangladesh? It is not only possible; it is necessary. To overcome planning practices in Bangladesh, which are at best ad-hoc or technocratic, or just not ready



Riverbank as a lively public realm, Buriganga, Bengal Institute, 2015.

for the new brilliant Bangladesh, we have to enter a new imaginative realm.

Presented here in summary notes are 14 themes for a Bengali urbanism, or foundational thinking for cities of the near future.

URBANISM, NOT URBANISATION

We need to change the narrative on cities. First point: As a social fact, the city is the highest cultural and existential form. For too long, the discourse of cities has been ruled by economic, statistical or technocratic parameters through the term "urbanisation." Useful only in managing the techno-functional aspects, urbanisation is limiting in understanding the city in its fullest human, social,

aesthetical and ecological potential. In approaching the future city, we need to embrace a more pro-active and positive notion of the city represented by "urbanism." Reorienting ourselves from the entrenched sense of the city as an insurmountable chaos, we need to see the city as a most beautiful thing, an essential human innovation of how we should live together.

EVERY TOWN NEEDS A REGIONAL PLAN

No town is an island. Each city or town is integrally linked to a network of flows—of people, information, economy, and geographic conditions. No matter how devotedly a plan for a city is made,

it becomes limited without addressing a larger regional context. In 2012, I proposed for Dhaka (later developed at Bengal Institute in 2015) the idea of a regional plan in which a metropolitan core and diverse settlements—in a two-hour travel radius linked by an efficient transport network—create a planned polycentric constellation. It was assumed that the arrangement will be effective in de-centring the metropolitan core as well as re-clustering urban facilities and managing their population density.

MAKING FIVE-MILLION CITIES

A consolidated national plan is required to manage the wild urbanisation that

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