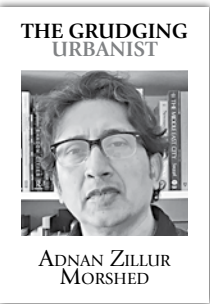


Is smart density the way forward for Bangladesh?



THE GRUDGING URBANIST

ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

GOING around in Dhaka could be overwhelming. The city seems overburdened with the impossible weight of people, buildings, vehicles, rickshaws, noise, carbon emission, and nonstop activities. The city's density (generally expressed as people per square mile or per acre) makes its inhabitants anxious about its future. I still remember an American colleague, who was visiting the city as part of a study tour I was leading, calling Dhaka "apocalyptic." While they enjoyed seeing some of Dhaka's finest modernist buildings—including the parliament building, TSC, and the Faculty of Fine Arts—most of the tour participants thought the city's extreme density of people and the built environment were scary. Many locals in Dhaka express similar views.

In fact, this fear has a long history. It has been a quintessential modern experience that originated in the 19th century. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, large Western metropolises like London and New York became overcrowded with factory workers, immigrants, and the urban poor. By the end of the 19th century, 40 percent of Britain's population lived in cities, compared to a mere four percent in Russia and seven percent in China. America's urban population jumped from seven percent in 1820 to 50 percent a hundred years later. Congested and disease-ridden slums, frequent cholera epidemics, abject poverty, and crimes in Victorian London led many to believe that the capital of the British Empire had become hell.

Offering an exposé of filthy living conditions in South London in 1883 with a shocking pamphlet titled "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London," a clergyman named Andrew Mearns demanded housing reform in the industrial city. Conditions in New York was the same. Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant who became a police reporter in New York, shook the conscience of New Yorkers with his

book *"How the Other Half Lives"* (1890) that portrayed the unconscionable conditions in the city's tenements.

At the centre of these horrified reactions was, justifiably, an anti-urban fear of overcrowding in the metropolis. As public health workers, social reformers, and design professionals sought answers to the pathologies of 19th-century industrial cities, the antipathy toward congestion and overpopulation became codified as a broader anti-density approach within emerging urban planning theories.

Overcrowding became synonymous with population density, poverty, disease, and depletion of resources. High density was typically seen as a threat to public health, the planet, and, in general, humanity. The anxiety over "population"—pollution resulting from population density—continued to influence planning philosophies throughout the 20th century. Earlier, in the late 18th century, Thomas Malthus, an English priest and economist, had already offered a theoretical framing for the anti-density approach by claiming that human population grows at a rate much faster than that of human food supply, until catastrophes reduce the population size.

The dread of population density and the menace of epidemics led to the creation of modern sewerage systems, public parks, and housing reforms in 19th-century Western metropolises. Planning professionals developed many density-control tools: for example, setback rules to allow light and air in between buildings, and floor-area ratio to control the size of a building's volume on a plot and thereby the total number of people on it. British social reformer Ebenezer Howard's Garden City movement proposed to solve the problems of urban congestion by dispersing people across satellite towns connected with each other and the mother city by public train. In postcolonial India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated: "Population control will not solve all of our problems, but it is certain that none can be solved without it."

As urbanisation accelerated in Bangladesh during the 1980s, we inherited an entrenched anti-density bias from Western planning models. In uncritically accepting a Western

fear of density while not taking into consideration the urban realities of South Asia, we failed at two levels. First, we failed to make a critical distinction between overcrowding and density. Overcrowding is a public health problem, but density is an opportunity to build a community-oriented lifestyle. Second, the appreciation of density as a pillar of sustainable living is yet to enter mainstream city planning policies in Bangladesh.

That population density could be an asset



Time has come to transform the fear of population density into an advantage to make our cities liveable and sustainable.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

is indeed counterintuitive. Today, density is no longer the old demon it used to be. In the era of climate change, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the moral quandary over abusing Mother Nature, Western nations are reassessing density as a core requirement for a healthy lifestyle based on mixed-use neighbourhoods and reduced carbon emission, energy consumption, environmental waste, and horizontal expansion. Research demonstrates that concentration of people and buildings foster social equity and inclusiveness, promote creative and non-conventional solutions, and make public transportation, walkability,

and biking not only efficient, but also economical and environment-friendly. Using public transportation means less reliance on environment-polluting, gas-guzzling personal automobiles. It is a win-win-win situation—for the people, for the environment, and for the economy.

The population density in the Manhattan borough of New York City is 70,000 people per sq-mi—highest in the US. Density is Manhattan's strength. It is one of the most liveable places in the world (like other places, it also has its share of social equity issues), thriving on a robust economic geography, an entrepreneurial culture, an efficient bus- and subway-based public transit, ethnic diversity, and check-and-balance urban governance. Manhattan is most walkable. Owning a car there is almost a nuisance. Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, and London are the same.

What I am talking about is smart density, a type of development model that allows you to live close to your work, your children's school, your healthcare centre and market, and your park, so that you don't have to rely exclusively on cars for your mobility. In a smart density situation, you can perform your

daily activities by walking or taking the public bus or metro. This way, not only do you save money, but you also live a healthier and economically dynamic life.

Developing a smart density way of life would require overcoming many mental and cultural barriers, and a new generation of bold urban policy initiatives. Owning an expensive car to flaunt wealth and personal prosperity needs to be de-glamourised. Building a personal Taj Mahal in one's own plot while not caring about the city's garbage collection system must be pointed out for what it is: selfishness.

How do we incentivise the public to embrace a smart density lifestyle? Walking every day to work or other destinations reduces health challenges. To encourage people to walk, cities must build safe, comfortable, and attractive footpaths. I have already argued for a national footpath policy in a previous column in this daily. Because people in compact areas are more likely to use public transportation, there will be much less use of private cars, and therefore less consumption of fossil fuel and reduced monthly household expenses. With sensible planning, dense settlements can ensure higher economic productivity, create a vibrant labour market, foster community building, and develop high-quality human capital because, as research shows, proximity fuels competitive entrepreneurship and idea cross-pollination.

Dhaka and other cities in Bangladesh have density. But it remains a "raw material" that needs to be processed for great societal, environmental, and economic benefits. Instead of seeing it as a misery and burden, policymakers, urban administrators, and planning communities could form strategic partnership to transform Dhaka's hyper-density (114,000 people per sq-mi) into a robust environmental, economic, and social advantage. Jan Eliasson, former UN deputy secretary-general, once stated: "The battle for sustainable development will be won or lost in cities." Agreed, but the statement needs elaboration. Winning would depend on how cities deal with their densities.

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16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

How long will patriarchal mindsets impede gender justice?



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

A couple of weeks ago, I spent the night in a district town's Parjatan hotel. The area was not too isolated, but these hotels tend to be on quite large grounds, and it felt secluded and somewhat eerie. The rooms all faced an overgrown garden, and I remember thinking to myself: if I believed in ghosts, this would be the place where I encountered one.

After dinner, I walked up the stairs and down the dimly lit corridor that led to my room. As I was about to unlock the door, I heard two voices—definitely male—coming up very close behind me. I didn't really even think about it. I froze. Once they passed me by, I quickly unlocked the door, went inside, and bolted it. It was only after I went indoors that I realised my heart was racing, and I had been holding my breath.

I narrate this story because I think many women would be able to relate—whether it is in dark corridors, unfamiliar streets, public transport or empty classrooms. Most of us are far more afraid of men than of any other threats, real or imaginary, when we are alone.

Not all men, of course, as many would point out. But as many more would say, we really don't know which ones. And without a shred of doubt, I can tell you that all women have internalised this defence mechanism that raises red flags and has you expecting the worst, even in the most ordinary/commonplace situations.

However, while the extreme violence faced by women and children is ample reason for us to be fearful—according to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), 1,178 women were raped in Bangladesh in the past 10 months, of which at least 220 were gang rapes—this tends to translate mainly into a fear of "stranger danger." Despite all reports and research pointing towards a greater likelihood of being abused by someone in a position of trust, we cling to the idea that the threat of sexual violence is most likely to come from a nameless, faceless stranger—an "animal" who deserves the worst form of punishment, rather than a neighbour, teacher, friend or family member, including and especially an intimate partner.

The fact that children are particularly at risk of sexual violence points towards how exposed the most vulnerable are to being abused by a trusted individual. Although specific data could not be gathered for around 30 percent of the 1,178 rape cases recorded by ASK, they still found that 129 were teenagers (13-18 years old), 110 were 7-12 years old, and at least 74 of this year's rape victims were under six years old.

Last week, there were two such reports of child rape. On November 22, a madrasa teacher named Abdul Malek was arrested for raping a nine-year-old student; she had gone to him to learn Arabic, and after class, he asked her to stay back and raped the child. The day before that, another man named Nazmul Haque was arrested for raping and killing a six-year-old who lived next door to him; her body was discovered in a sack under his bed. Did these children's parents ever imagine that they would suffer such cruelty at the hands of an educator and a neighbour?

The problem with an over-representation of stranger danger is not just that we tend to rule out the danger posed by people in positions of trust—it almost always comes with the

patriarchal implication that, since public spaces are so unsafe, women are "better off at home." This fear is possibly one of the primary reasons behind the shockingly high levels of child marriage in Bangladesh. Although poverty is definitely a driver, there is also the idea that once a girl reaches "womanhood," it is better to get her married, rather than risk her chastity at the hands of a strange man—i.e. a man she is not married to.

Which brings us to the topic of intimate partner violence and marital rape. ASK's report also revealed that, in the last 10 months, 197 women have been killed by their husbands, and 128 women committed suicide after facing domestic violence. In the 2015 Report on Violence Against Women survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (its most recent one), it was found that 25.2 percent of Bangladeshi women experienced sexual violence at the hands of their partners.

In this regard, two especially horrific images are seared into my mind. The first is of 14-year-

About a year ago, she was forced into marriage and almost immediately became pregnant. On October 9, 2021, Labonno poured kerosene over her body and set herself on fire. Five days later, she delivered her child—stillborn—before succumbing to her wounds. Her family alleges that she was consistently abused because of dowry demands, but we will never know what truly happened for this teenager to be so devoid of hope to take the steps that she did.

Both of these children were abused by an intimate partner, yet they were not able to reach out to anyone for help—not the local authorities, not any law enforcement agency, no friends, no teachers, and definitely not their families. And they were only children. When an adult woman tries to tell people that her husband has been forcing himself on her, day in and day out, without her consent, and that this constitutes as sexual violence, she is likely to be met with nothing but ridicule and scorn.

And this, perhaps, leads to the heart of the issue of gender-based violence in Bangladesh:

way is really quite incredible, but sadly, not surprising. Such toxic, patriarchal mindsets from people in positions of power (both men and women) are one of the biggest stumbling blocks to gender justice in our country. As academic Paulomi Chakraborty puts it: "The state... duplicates the violence of fixing the value of a woman in terms of her sexuality," treating her "merely as currency in an honour economy."

As long as these mindsets don't change, we will always be looking over our

shoulders, because we cannot put our faith in a system that sees us as nothing more than vessels of chastity and morality. As the firebrand Indian feminist Kamla Bhasin once famously said: "Why did you place your community's honour in a woman's vagina?" And how much longer will we continue to suffer the indignity of being dehumanised in this way?

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The fact that women are still looked at as objects, and not human beings, is perhaps why gender-based violence is so rampant in Bangladesh.

ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

old Nurnahar, decked in full bridal wear and weighed down by gold, standing next to her husband (read: abuser) 35-year-old migrant worker Rajib Khan—a look on her face that can only be described as terror. She started bleeding on September 20 last year, the night of her marriage. By October 25, she was gone. The cause of death was excessive genital bleeding.

Nurnahar's abuser went scot-free, because not only does Bangladeshi law not criminalise marital rape (even if the parties are separated), it permits the marital rape of children over the age of 13. According to an Equality Now report, there is a mismatched punishment clause which only provides for punishment of two years' imprisonment in cases of marital rape of a child under 12 years of age, with no punishment designated for marital rape of children over the age of 12.

The second image is the plump, smiling face of Suraiya Newaz Labonno—a seemingly happy 17-year-old with yellow ribbons in her hair, shared by *The Daily Star* only last month.

the fact that, regardless of the laws that protect them, women are still simply viewed as objects deserving of masculine protection or subjects of terrible violation, and the responsibility of preventing the latter rests on the guardians who have "ownership" over a woman, and thus has sanction to police her behaviour.

As the crass and insensitive comments of Judge Kamrunnahar, who presided over the Raintree rape trial, demonstrates, this does not just affect society's treatment of women—it impacts how they are viewed by the state and the institutions that are meant to protect them. The judge did not only suggest the 72-hour time limit for rape victims to come forward—an idea that was later trashed by experts, including the law minister. According to media reports, she argued that the victims "were partner to the sexual intercourse wilfully because they willingly went to the party, danced, drank alcohol and they swam in the pool."

The fact that a member of the judiciary could trivialise the trauma of a rape survivor in this

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Date: 29.11.2021

e-Tender Notice

e-Tenders are invited in National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) by Executive Engineer, RHD, Road Division, Noakhali for the Procurement of following works:

Sl No.	Tender ID No.	Package No.	Description of works	Tender last selling (date & time)	Tender closing (date & time)	Tender opening (date & time)
01	632254	NRD/e-GP/ 12/2021- 2022	Repair of Damaged Pavement by Carpeting & Seal Coat work at 1st(P), 2nd(P), 4th(P), 5th(P), 7th(P), 9th(P), 21st(P), 23rd(P) & 24th(P) Km of Sonapur-Kabirhat-Companigonj (Bashurhat)-Dagonbhuiyan Road (R-148) under Noakhali Road Division during the year 2021-2022.	19/12/2021 up to 4:00pm	20/12/2021 12:15pm	20/12/2021 12:15pm
02	632255	NRD/e-GP/ 13/2021- 2022	Repair of Damaged Pavement by Carpeting & Seal Coat work at 20th(P), 21st(P), 22nd(P), 23rd(P), 24th(P), 25th(P) & 26th(P) Km of Dinomonibazar-Moulvibazar-Companirhat-Little Feni River Road (Z-1508) under Noakhali Road Division during the year 2021-2022.	19/12/2021 up to 4:00pm	20/12/2021 12:30pm	20/12/2021 12:30pm

This is an online tender, where only e-Tenders will be accepted in National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, please register on e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>). Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP helpdesk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any member of scheduled banks branches up to 4:00pm on 19-12-2021.

Dr. Mohammad Ahad Ullah

ID No. 602136

Executive Engineer, RHD

Road Division, Noakhali

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