



A new look for SHAHEED MINAR?

TARUN SARKAR

After 38 years, the Central Shaheed Minar Complex is about to be restructured: the authorities concerned have taken an initiative to reshape the historic premise located inside the Dhaka University campus.

As per the recently formulated Dhaka University Master Plan, a large open terrace will be created in front of the Shaheed Minar's main plaza, while another semi-plaza will be set up at the north-western portion of the open terrace. Meanwhile, the eastern side is set to get a new pod.

In addition, a road will be constructed at the back of the Shaheed Minar Complex.

Planners of the project hope this will lead people to organise rallies and other social programmes at the semi-plaza instead of the main plaza.

The proposed new terrace will be created by demolishing the 2.17-acre residential area for Dhaka University (DU) teachers that lies at the north of the Shaheed Minar, along with the adjacent portion of Shibbari area and the road in front of the complex.

The original Shaheed Minar was built in February 23, 1952, in a spontaneous move by students in memory of the Language Movement martyrs who sacrificed their

lives two days earlier on February 21. The monument was set up where the massacre took place. But merely three days later, police demolished the structure.

Later, on February 20, 1953, students and people reconstructed the monument. But again, the police demolished it a day later.

Finally, in 1957, the government began constructing a permanent monument on the basis of the design formulated by architect Hamidur Rahman and sculptor Novera Ahmed. But after the military assumed power in 1958, the construction work had to be scrapped.

Later in 1962, the then government decided to restart the work, albeit after curtailing some major components of the main design. This version of the Minar

lives two days earlier on February 21. The monument was set up where the massacre took place. But merely three days later, police demolished the structure.

In 1983, the then government took steps to enlarge the Shaheed Minar complex on the basis of the main design. But the government's Public Works Department completed the project without working on its main structure. This phase of the reconstruction ended in 1984.

Currently, the complex covers around four acres of land. The minaret is located on the main plaza, covering around 1.5 acres of land.

The Shaheed Minar's foot, where people place floral tributes, is located on a 2,000 square feet area. There is a 64 feet road at the opposite side of the main plaza. Two separate 12-feet wide footpaths were constructed on both sides of the main plaza.

was inaugurated in 1963, according to researchers.

But as fate would have it, it was demolished again by the Pakistani military on the night of terror, March 25, 1971.

After the liberation war, the then government formed a committee in 1972. Headed by Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, it was tasked with reconstructing the Shaheed Minar.

The committee soon invited new designs and received 12 submissions. Of them, they ultimately accepted one by architects Hamidur Rahman and M. S. Jafar. However, the Shaheed Minar was later reconstructed in 1973 on the basis of a revision of the 1963 design. As a result, the original design of Hamidur Rahman and Novera Ahmed remained neglected, say historians and researchers.

Later in 1976, the then government took another initiative to reconstruct the Shaheed Minar. The Civil and Planning Faculty of BUET was assigned to formulate its design.

The faculty came up with three plans. Of them, the government accepted the design formulated by architect Dr MA Muktadir. The government even allocated Tk 47.5 lakhs in this regard, but even this project remained

Contacted, DU Vice-Chancellor Professor Md Akhtaruzzaman said, "There are some specific proposals in the masterplan to reshape the complex. Our next steps on the matter will be taken as per the Prime Minister's directives."

Convenor of the technical committee formed to formulate the master plan Prof VC (Academic) Prof ASM Maksud Kamal told The Daily Star, "The central Shaheed Minar is a nationally and internationally important establishment. But the space is small, which is why we took the decision to reshape the complex."

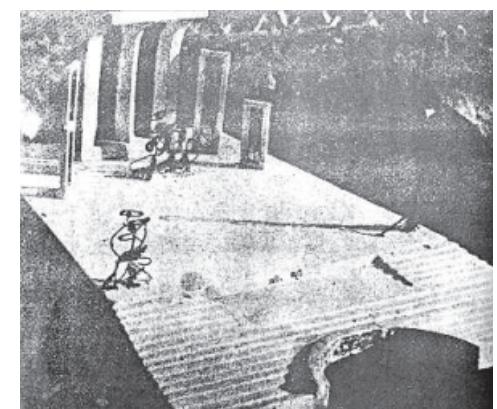
"Throughout the year, people organise rallies and demonstrations at the Minar's main plaza, often going against the premises' spirit. This is why another semi-plaza will be constructed here to facilitate such programmes," he informed.

As per the plan, separate entrance and exit corridors will be constructed at the west-southern and east-southern part correspondingly. However, these areas are owned by Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the Prof VC added. "We're carrying out discussions with DMCH authorities in this regard."

According to sources in DU, the university syndicate approved the masterplan (2021-2050) on September 17, 2020. Later on October 3, the university authority placed the masterplan before the Prime Minister.

After scrutinising the plan, the PM directed all concerned to take steps to implement the Shaheed Minar project through coordination and discussion between DU and the medical college authorities, said sources.

However, renowned artist Mustafa Monwar expressed his reservations about the project, saying, "People come to the Shaheed Minar from a place of sentiment. The works need to keep this in consideration. There's a noticeable tendency to build multiple buildings in government projects. If the Shaheed Minar premises feature museums and libraries, the emotions it evokes may get compromised. I think the project should be limited to building an open square at the premises."



Original model of Shaheed Minar.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

In this document, which was found in the files of M. S. Jafar and Hamidur Rahman Collaboration, Architects and Engineers, the chief architect of the Shaheed Minar, Hamidur Rahman, recalls how the monument took shape over three decades – and the omissions from his original commission.

The complex story of the Central Shaheed Minar is spread over a period of long and difficult three decades.

The fall of 1956 turned out to be a very exciting year for me. Late Mr. Zainul Abedin requested me to see Mr. M. A. Jabbar (Chief Engineer, C & B) without any delay. It was a golden misty morning typical of Dacca's early winter – I walked to the chamber of Mr. Jabbar and was informed about the prospect of building Central Shaheed Minar, in memory of those who gave their lives during the Language Movement of 1952.

According to the request of the Chief Engineer, I prepared a model and 52 paper works to support my concept of the structure. Other artists and architects were also requested to present their ideas. The Selection Committee was chaired by Doxiadis, the famous Greek Architect, along with Mr. Jabbar, Mr. Zainul Abedin and a few other people from the government.

My design got the green light – and from that stage on, the painful process of completing the Minar started! My models and paper works were moved to the office of C & B City Division at that time. We all started working round the clock to give final shape to the structure.

In November '57, the foundation of Central Shaheed Minar was laid on the ground of Dacca Medical College Hostel. The entire construction was to be completed before Feb 21, 1958.

Money matters and official papers
My demand was 25,000 rupees only for the royalty of my design.

Ten thousand rupees for Miss Novera Ahmed, the sculptress to execute three sculptures. As far as I remember, I was only paid 5,000 rupees for my entire team. I completed 1000 sq. ft. of mural in the basement of my Minar and Novera completed three sculptures which remained for good in the darkness of the studio of Shaheed

Minar and in the long run, *Ekushey February* was finally celebrated under the shadow of the columns of the incomplete structure. We went back to work after that date but we could not stay there to complete the project. I was thrown out of that place on the first day of Ayub Khan's Martial Law. We could not even get a chance to collect our art materials and personal belongings – a big lock was hanging on the studio door, with an alert *jawan* by its side.

Late 1958

I moved to the United States during October '58. My mind was so occupied with the incomplete Minar I had left behind that I found that myself back home after a while. But Martial Law was at its height of glory and no one had the guts to talk about the abandoned Minar. That silence was finally broken, as late as in 1963 '64.

East Pakistan Government that year formed a committee of experts to start the work of the Minar again. I started hoping that I would be called by them very shortly, but before that could even happen the committee almost evaporated overnight. I was told by one of their committee members later on that they were about to ask me to design Arabic "Togras" for each of the column. There fell again a long shadow of silence over the Minar.

Early 1972

Government of Bangladesh took the matter into their own hands. They wanted to complete the Minar for good. They called for a completely new competition to get fresh design for the Shaheed Minar. This time all the important artists and architects of the country, in groups, presented their works to the committee.

One fine morning all the presentations were displayed in the Central Hall of the Government House. The general reaction of the committee, press and public was in support of the design submitted by my team. Everybody wanted the old design of the Minar with the addition of more fixtures.

The tick of the time did not stop, so very soon it was February 21, 1972. Some invisible hands whitewashed my 1000 square feet mural from the existing walls of the Minar. I was really wild when I saw that, but no one could give me any clue as to how that thing happened, including C&B City Division, directly responsible for the protection of the structure.

I left home during late '72 for Europe. I have no idea what has happened to the Minar from then on, but I know one thing for certain, that no one has the right to adapt or enlarge it, without consulting me. I will be available to an individual or an organisation whenever the request is made through proper channel.

Hamidur Rahman
Canada, May 10, 1974

This document was published in Hamidur Rahman, ed. Sayeed Ahmed, published by Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. This is an abridged version of the piece, edited for clarity.