

Metrophilia: How to Love Dhaka



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If you want to fall in love with the city—*walk*. This simple aphorism opens up a full discourse on how we can make our cities liveable and civic, and how we might live together as a collective. One needs to love a city to plan it—this perhaps could be a second aphorism. A better philosophy for urban development—what *The Daily Star* asked me to write on—should be based on an ambulatory life, in living and experiencing the city by walking. In walking, we are with others and we participate in what can be described as the public realm.

The city has become unbelievably complex and impenetrable, but it is also a beautiful thing, as the former mayor of the model Brazilian city Curitiba always reminds me. As the “most beautiful collective dream,” Lerner implores, the city is not a problem, but the solution to collective existence.

The French writer Charles Baudelaire



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PHOTO: NILOY BISWAS

celebrated the ritual of walking in the city in the form of the “flaneur.” A difficult word to translate from French, as it might mean a loafer as we say in Dhaka, but in Baudelaire’s sense a flaneur is “a connoisseur of the street,” an alert investigator who in wandering the streets takes in the sights, sounds and spirit of the place. Inspired by city life, Baudelaire’s flaneur can become a productive person. The architect Louis Kahn imagined the street as a place of infinite wonderment where a child while walking one day decides what she wants to do with her life.

In the 1960s, the Situationists, the avant-garde group based in Paris, proposed the practice of *dérive* that involved journeying the terrain of a city to randomly discover situations in which to enact unprecedented work of political art. Psychogeography, the practice of walking and mapping the city, developed from there. In a moving essay called the “Dictionary of Streets,” published in his book *Beginning with My Streets*, the Polish writer and Nobel winner Czeslaw Milosz intersects a psychological geography with the lay of the city streets in his hometown Wilno (Vilnius) so that the “aura of the place” may be recorded.

Writing in his book *The New York Nobody Knows*, sociology professor William Helmreich mentions walking almost every street in New York City which would be about 6,000 miles. “I love to read about the city, to live the city, to walk the city.” Helmreich confesses in a *New Yorker* article. “I did it in the morning. I did it in the evening. I did it on the weekends. I did it in the rain, in the snow, in the summer. It came to about thirty-five, forty miles a week, a hundred twenty a month, fifteen hundred a year.” I know the architect Salauddin Ahmed who takes off very early in the morning to walk the streets of Dhaka and document its life-world.

A good city is above all a walkable city—this is an axiomatic truth propagated by ardent lovers of the city,



▲ The street is a public landscape.

IMAGE:
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from Baudelaire to biologist-planner Patrick Geddes, and urban activist Jane Jacobs to sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Our most intimate engagement with the city is in walking. I describe this phenomenon as “metrophilia.” As a notion this is not found in the training of planners and architects in the country, and certainly not enshrined in the thick policy books produced for planning cities.

A walking environment should be the number one priority in any transport or urban planning. In our cultural schema, we prioritise the movement of motorised vehicles, and place the pedestrian at the lowest level of all policymaking and infrastructure planning. We overlook the fact that of the people on the move in the city, 40 percent of them walk. Where once the pedestrian ruled, and the city was a place for walking and meandering, and enjoying its sidewalks, riverbanks and public spaces, now the automobile

dictates the term of organising the city. We make roads for cars, and direct all major investments—elevated roads, flyovers, ever wider roads, and U-loops—to the promise of an uninterrupted vehicular movement, while we corner the pedestrian to the ever-shrinking edge of the road.

And that is why the footpaths of Dhaka remain the saddest configuration ever suggested for human adaptation. Primarily constructed as cover for drains, most footpaths are ironically unwalkable: they are broken into segments, they are obscenely high (sometimes requiring steps to get up!), and when they do exist are often taken over by electric transformers, bus ticket vendors and police boxes. There, the walkers topple over one another, and hop scotch and jump on a ragtag space not more than 4 feet wide.

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