



Once Dhaka was a city of “mosques and bazaars,” now it is a city of walls and boundaries. PHOTO: SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

Metrophilia: How to Love Dhaka

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No wonder people walk on vehicular roads even at the risk of being run over. With the book “Designing Dhaka,” published in 2012, we may have been the first to raise concern about the poor and shabby sidewalks of Dhaka. We even joked: a footpath is exactly that—a foot wide path!

Despite heavy investments on the road, we have not been able to give a civic form and norm to it. Dhaka still has a rudimentary road and transportation system. Clogged, cluttered and chaotic, the roads of Dhaka are like scenes from a disaster movie. If after thousands of years of human civilisation, we crawl on our roads in our vehicles at 7 kms per hour—the average speed of a motorised vehicle on the roads of Dhaka—and some of us who are walking meet untimely deaths by being run over, there is something wrong with the image of development.

If we wish for this megacity of 20 million to be a shining capital of a developed nation, marching forward with its flag of ever higher GDP, we should start from city roads. Economic advancement should match the quality

of urban and physical spaces in cities.

I have emphasised elsewhere that the road in the city is really a *public landscape*, a space shared by both motor vehicles and humans, one is a mechanised contraption moving with a speed, and the other a vulnerable living breathing being. The road is not merely a conduit for movement of motorised vehicles; it includes passage, movement and crossing for pedestrians. In

Dhaka, we forget that the pedestrian is a vulnerable human being, whose five feet three inches stature provides the fundamental scale and reference for all spaces.

The real problem is Dhaka city—as is—resists walking, and hence our ambivalence about the city itself. The middle, upper middle and upper classes (MUMU) in Dhaka do not walk! Finding walking and thus becoming the public a discomfort, they are happily ensconced in their houses/apartments. Removed from the public domain, they move in their car capsules to go from one space capsule (apartment) to another (apartment or work). With the MUMU

class calling the shots on the lay of the city (they influence most policy decisions one way or another), and holding a disdain for the “public,” we will not expect any improvement of the public realm and public spaces any time soon.

One major public oriented enterprise that is late in coming but certainly crucial in improving the liveability of the city is the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT). We all look forward to that. With all the construction going on around MRT, we have not yet seen much thought on walkability as it is critically linked to the success of any rapid transit. All major cities with successful MRTs—Tokyo, Moscow, Manhattan, Hong Kong—are supremely walkable. What is needed along with the transit infrastructure plan is a “walkability plan” for Dhaka—the transit oriented metropolitan scale must match up with the walkable local scale.

In times of the Covid, the importance of open, public spaces and recognition of the local have become a dire public health necessity. Nearly all conscientious cities of the world focused their attention on the significance of public spaces, and the importance of walkable city hubs. Many cities in the US have adopted what is known as “open, slow or shared” streets in which the presence of the automobile has been curtailed or controlled to provide open-air mini public spaces. A new call for action for European cities is the “Fifteen Minutes City,” being popularised by the mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, in which most needs of the people will be catered to in a fifteen-minute walkable neighbourhood. In advancing the idea of the hyper-local, and allowing citizens to use the streets in their own way, Stockholm is testing the idea of a “one minute city.”

Dhaka is yet to present convincing initiatives for such public spaces. Urban or settlement design and landscape design—two critical areas for making our environments better—are sadly missing in the training of our environmental professionals, and starkly absent in the official discourse on urban planning. In the meantime, designers of apartment building and commercial structures, with quasi-artistic affects and gestures, are conducting urban planning with no grounding in the theory of cities or the methods of urban design.

I have also argued that in improving the public and civic life of a city, it is more important to think in terms of “urbanism,” that is, the dynamic and positive turns of a city with its multi-scalar realities, and not urbanisation which has come to mean only the dire and uncontrollable side. Urbanism can be approached only by urban design. In his new book, *The Largest Art: A Measured Manifesto for a Plural Urbanism*, Brent Ryan, a professor at MIT, describes urban design as the “largest art” in human culture that addresses the plurality and

multiple scalarity of our cities. Such approaches require a distinctive understanding and knowledge of cities, something that cannot be equated by the limiting methods of architectural design or the dry policy orientation of planning.

Despite being a city of disparities and chaos, and choked by urbanisation, Dhaka also functions. The city works because the formal and informal, and the structured and spontaneous coexist in a kind of quiet truce. That truce is maintained literally at the walls of plots and properties of Dhaka!

The public realm of Dhaka is a paradox in which the wall as a structural, spatial and signifying element remains decisive and divisive in basic social transactions. Once Dhaka was a city of “mosques and bazaars,” now it is a city of walls and boundaries. In 2016, Bengal Institute associates investigated a 410-acre planned residential area in Dhaka, and calculated that if all walls around the plots are lined up, it would be more than 300 miles long. From Dhaka, it would reach Chittagong. Bengal Institute also studied what would materialise if walls along institutional and commercial plots were dematerialised or reduced—it would bring about an amazing new quality to the public realm, and allow for a more inclusive experience of the collective.

The walls of Dhaka city constitute a “meta-site” against which the “unregistered” collectivity is practiced. A short walk through any of the streets of the city reveals the resiliency of its citizens—in how one meets ends and perhaps brings about meaningful and joyous elements.



PHOTO: ARIF HOSSAIN

A good city is above all a walkable city.

The walls provide a spatial reference and opportunity against which actual situationist and tactical operations are conducted. Such operations may be subversive to city ordinances, but for many tea-stands, shoe repair spots and nursery-wallas—I once saw a young woman with a sewing machine carrying on the trade of a tailor at a sidewalk intersection—are ways of inhabiting and negotiating life in the city at the smallest and invisible scale. These operations may be described as micro-urbanism.

While such tactics may mark a contestation between legal and illegal operations in the conventional terms, one also discovers conditions of ingenuity, craft (craftiness!), and skill that are conducted spatially as acts of design. Somewhere in the middle, between the invisible micro-urbanists and the loud planners and designers, there may be a fruitful transaction in making the spaces of the city more civic and accessible.



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.

PHOTO: AHNAF TAHSIN RAFI

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