

Walking to the future (and liveable cities)



THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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I have long wondered why cities in Bangladesh cannot develop a “culture” of walking as a mode of transportation, even though city streets and footpaths are always crowded. It is a paradox. There is no shortage of commuters, vendors, food kiosks, and everyday happenings of urban life on Dhaka’s footpaths. But do congested footpaths necessarily indicate a pedestrian culture?

Culture is, of course, a complicated word with a zigzagging history of numerous meanings, as the Welsh thinker Raymond Williams would say.

It is hard to pinpoint what culture is. At its most safe and cautious stance, it may mean a people’s widely shared ways of thinking about themselves, their way of life, language, food, music, money, art, and their sense of right or wrong, among many other

things. Culture presumably shapes a group’s identity by fostering certain social patterns unique to that group, even though both identity and social patterns could very well be complicit with the political machinations of the dominant class.

Is walking as an everyday urban practice to go to work, the market, or to school – or, walkability – an element of Bangalee culture? I am talking about walking as a primary means of going around, as an urban lifestyle, not merely as a “health practice” in parks and on lakefronts. Walking, sadly, is not part of our shared value system, and there are many reasons behind this.

First, the most obvious: our cities hardly value walkable footpaths as part of an urban ecosystem. Merely having footpaths does not mean people will start walking on them. Other related factors inspire people to view the footpath as an inviting, pedestrian- and gender-friendly, functional, and safe place. I was reading urban planner Jeff Speck’s *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time* (2012) and in it, Speck offers a “General Theory of Walkability,” which explains how a walk must meet four essential goals: “usefulness,” “safety,” “comfort,” and be “interesting.” When a walk satisfies these conditions, a pedestrian can rate a city’s walkability score highly.

Usefulness implies a kind of urban organisation in which a walker can reach his or her daily destinations by walking. Safety suggests that a pedestrian can walk without being hit by a car or obstructed by a makeshift *chayer dokan* or *tong* (tea stall). Comfort means that the organisation of footpaths and adjacent buildings should be undertaken at a scale and distance that pedestrians find welcoming. And, interesting is when the pedestrian finds the footpath not only walkable, but also full of exciting experiences, including views of unique buildings, sites, trees, water bodies and, in general, humanity.

The second reason for the low score of walkability in Bangladeshi

cities is related to the ways in which we conceptualise the idea of social status. Our self-righteous notion of *ijjat* (honour) frames walking on the street with a tinge of both denigration and indignation. From the bourgeois middle-class perspective, the street is a place for the struggling masses, the downtrodden, *khete khava manush* (the working class).

This view is enshrined, for instance, in Abdullah Al Mamun’s acclaimed film *Ekhoni Shomoy* (*The Moment*, 1980), where the protagonist walks the streets of Dhaka in despair and observes the cruelties of life, while Sabina Yasmin’s classic song, “*Jibon mane jontrona, noy phooler bichhana* (Life is pain, not a bed of flowers)” – makes it all painfully vivid.

So, the thought process goes like this: If you are walking to your office

“A motorcar/Fills the mind with misgivings/A motorcar is always a thing of darkness/Though its name is the first/Among the children of light... This motorcar is a trailblazer/It’s rushing in the direction/Where everyone is supposed to be going...” (translation by Rakibul Hasan Khan). “The children of light” learn their first lesson: they must ride a car one day in order to be seen as successful. This type of lesson continues to fuel our middle class aspirations, national priorities, planning policies, and visions of progress.

Bangladesh needs a national footpath policy. The foundation of this policy could be as simple as this: if there is a road, there must be a functional footpath alongside it. All kinds of urban planning – from the metropolis to small towns – should vigorously focus on footpath design. This must be an urban requirement by law.

Today, around the world, footpaths/sidewalks are enjoying an urban renaissance as the foundation of walkable urbanism. “Walkability studies” is a growing sub-field in urban planning.

This is not to say that footpaths are only about safety and aesthetic



In Bangladesh, we hardly value walkable footpaths as part of our urban ecosystem.

FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

pleasure. It is also about business-friendliness and environmental well-being. Speck writes, “We must understand that the walkable city is not just a nice, idealistic notion. Rather, it is a simple, practical-minded solution to a host of complex problems that we face as a society, problems that daily undermine our nation’s economic competitiveness, public welfare, and environmental sustainability.”

Why are footpaths neglected in our urban vision? According to the Danish architect and urban planner Jan Gehl (who visited Bangladesh with much interest), it is a problem of the level from which city administrators and planners look down on the city. Gehl argues that they only see the “big story” – the mega-scale of the city viewable only from above – and then the “medium story” of land-use plans, the Detailed Area Plan (DAP), and infrastructures.

But city administrators often fail or are reluctant to see the “little story,” experienced only at the ground level or at a human scale. Yet, most people live their lives at the level of little stories. This is where their houses, neighbourhood parks and markets, and footpaths are. These are the places where the community flourishes and thrives.

The problem is that our political and urban leadership looks at the city and its problems from godlike heights. From the sky, it’s hard to see the humble necessity of footpaths. From the political perch high up, one can only see massive infrastructures like expressways, bridges, intercity highways, and other megaprojects – but not footpaths, the neglected and negligible domain of *aamjonota*.

To create liveable cities, it is very important to come down from the sky and wade into the mud of our grinding reality on the ground. Ministers, city mayors, MPs, bureaucrats, city administrators, transportation engineers, and planning professionals should start walking on the footpaths – at least a kilometre of it – to reach their office every day. Change comes when one experiences its possibilities.

trajectory. And walking is a necessity for people on the lowest rung of the social ladder.

We grew up hearing “*Lekha pora kore je, gari-ghora chore shey* (S/he who studies, rides a car or a horse),” believing firmly in the capitalist mantra of wealth accumulation as an unquestionable life pursuit. Poet Jibanananda Das’ anti-materialist reading of the automobile in his 1934 poem “*Unishsh Choutrish*” portrays the middle class valorisation of the car, as well as his own anxiety over this misguided dream that he thinks blunts our inner sensibilities:

The thought process goes like this: If you are walking to your office a few kilometres away, there must be something wrong. If your children are walking to school, it socially means that you failed to afford a middle-class lifestyle. These mythologies need to be challenged.



Morocco’s success in the football World Cup was not a fluke.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Morocco’s World Cup success and the ‘global’ sport



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AZMIN AZRAN

Football’s claim to being the global sport has strong merits. FIFA is an international organisation with more members than the United Nations, and the football World Cup is one of the top two most watched sports events in the world. Even the national leagues in England, Spain, Germany, and Italy are enormously popular outside their borders. The chequered football made of sewn black and white pentagons, despite its relatively late adoption in 1970, is recognisable to any child anywhere in the world who has a notion of what sports is.

But when you realise that it took 92 years and 22 tries for the first African nation to reach the semi-finals of a FIFA World Cup, it makes you want to examine just how “global” this sport is.

Morocco may as well have been the first non-European and non-South American country in World Cup semi-finals, but that credit goes to a distinct anomaly. The US finished third in 1930, in the first ever football World Cup. In more modern days, it was last done by South Korea in 2002, in their own backyard. Success in the global sport seems to be universal in two continents out of six, leaving others in relative irrelevance. Why is that?

Well, of course, it has everything to do with who came up with the sport and who ran it.

Professional football developed in Europe and exploded in South America. FIFA has only ever had European men as presidents, other than the one Brazilian (also a man) who ran it for 24 years. That is concerning, given FIFA’s (admirable, on the face of it) policy of allowing every member to have one vote in elections, regardless of footballing prowess or tradition. The Netflix documentary *FIFA Uncovered* explains how this international governing body for the sport exploited this situation, morphing into a cartel of sorts where power is held onto as long as possible, where

votes are bought and sold with money.

This money is most often disbursed to lower ranked teams from poor countries as “development funds.” But money ill-begotten is often ill-spent, and seldom do these funds make their way to the grassroots. This process powers a toxic cycle, where poor nations with lower FIFA rankings tend to stay there, while the people representing these nations line their pockets, and FIFA keeps on being corrupt. The European and South American nations with rich

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footballing traditions generate their own revenue to keep the sport alive and well in their own countries, and it’s nigh impossible for anyone else to emerge.

But this doesn’t change the fact that football really is the global sport, because it’s loved globally. Every country has football fans, if not a proper football league or a national team, and each and every one of those fans dreams of seeing their nation represented on the global

stage. Most live and die without ever seeing that dream realised.

But Morocco did it; they found a way, and the way they did it may just be an inspiration, if not a template, for other teams outside of Europe and South America. Morocco’s 26-man squad has 14 players born in foreign countries, including some of their best players. Hakim Ziyech and Sofyan Amrabat were born in the Netherlands, Achraf Hakimi in Spain. Defender Roman Saiss and even the coach, Walid Regragui, were born in France. They all have ancestors who were from Morocco, and they chose to play for the North African country. Clearly, they chose well. The Dutch crashed out of the World Cup in the quarter-finals, Morocco knocked out Spain themselves, and faced France in the semi-final, where, sadly, their World Cup campaign came to an end.

The brand of football Morocco played to get here has had European flavours as well. They have been tactical, nullifying opposition threats, and taking their own chances to score, as opposed to previous African teams who would play exciting football to go out in a blaze of glory. Contrary to Spanish midfielder Rodri’s claim that “Morocco offered absolutely nothing,” Morocco have actually offered a lot. The tactical know-how of beating technically superior teams is an invention of the Italians of the distant past, or the Portuguese Jose Mourinho in modern times. Morocco applied their own spin on it, based on the players they had and the challenges in front of them, and look at them now!

If you look at FIFA and the football administrators at the top, I think their interpretation of why football is the global sport would be that it makes money globally. But if you asked players and fans, I think they would say that it’s global because it’s played globally, because the truth of football being accessible to anyone with a round thing to kick and a stretch of land to run on applies to all nations across the world.

If that is the case, why should the story of non-European and non-South American success in the World Cup be so limited? It’s clear that Morocco have found their method, their way forward, and football’s universality and global appeal – as a sport and not a business – ensures that other nations will, too.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

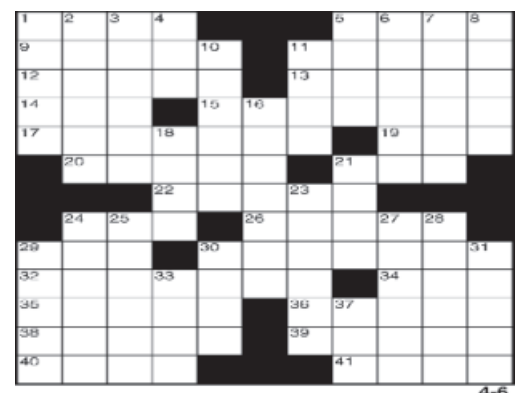
- 1 Glided
- 5 Gush forth
- 9 Game official
- 11 Martin or Carell
- 12 “Seascape” playwright
- 13 Carried
- 14 Tell tales
- 15 Jete action
- 17 Car option
- 19 Casual shirt
- 20 Girder material
- 21 Stop signal
- 22 Blazing
- 24 Light touch
- 26 Blood lines
- 29 Fragrant tree
- 30 Tendency
- 32 Out in front

- 34 Dove call
- 35 Noble gas
- 36 Love affair
- 38 Witch
- 39 Nick of “Affliction”
- 40 Lane’s co-worker
- 41 Clutter

DOWN

- 1 Barn section
- 2 Easter symbols
- 3 Pooped pronouncement
- 4 Ruby of films
- 5 Cut off
- 6 Small
- 7 Made level
- 8 Doorstop shape
- 10 Charitable aid

- 11 Antlered animal
- 16 Pep up
- 18 Pants part
- 21 Rider’s strap
- 23 Carter’s successor
- 24 South Dakota capital
- 25 Region of Spain
- 27 Kidman of “The Others”
- 28 Pig parts
- 29 Singer Roberta
- 30 Script unit
- 31 Skirt inserts
- 33 Parent’s warning
- 37 May honoree



DECEMBER 1 ANSWERS

W	E	B	C	A	M	S	E	E	P						
A	R	O	U	S	E	A	R	E	A						
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