

# The high stakes of high-rise buildings



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The Detailed Area Plan (DAP) for Dhaka city, which will guide planning and development for our capital in the coming years, has many proposals for making Dhaka more liveable and also includes loopholes that should be discussed in the public interest. However, ironically, one of the debates – revolving around the size of residential buildings – is mainly being raised by building developers who have direct business stakes in it.

The issue centres on the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) values allocated for different urban areas. Generally, FAR is a value that determines the gross floor area that can be built for a land area within different storeys of a building. According to planning considerations, building size, volume and height in a residential neighbourhood are determined based on factors like the level of urbanisation in the area, facilities and amenities of the neighbourhood and its built environment, width of the access road, playground, parks, open spaces and waterbody facilities, social infrastructure, etc.

According to the Building Construction Rules, 1996 – which are still implemented in the country’s urban areas, except in Dhaka and Chattogram – building height is generally determined by doubling the width of the access road plus setback distance adjacent to the plot. The Imarat Nirman Bidhimala 2008, in use in Dhaka and Chattogram, has proposed an FAR value ranging from 3.15 to 6.5, which is staggeringly high in terms of global planning practices for individual plot-based development. This model of housing development makes housing more unaffordable for lower income people. This is becoming increasingly clear in various cities across the world, including in India, where high-rise buildings do not cater to lower and lower middle-income groups, since they are costly to build and maintenance charges are higher.

In urban planning practices, plot-based housing usually gets relatively small FAR values, generally ranging between 1 and 2, in order to control density and overall population. That’s why even for individual plot

development in a city like Singapore, the FAR value is around 1 to 1.5, which allows maximum two-storey buildings. In liveable cities across the world, if any landowner or developer wants to build a high-rise building, they should have adequate land, like one bigha or minimum one acre, to justify a relatively higher FAR for block development.

It is regrettable that it has taken so many years to formulate the different FAR values for Dhaka’s different urban areas, which have finally been outlined for implementation in the DAP. Planned and developed areas have been recommended for relatively higher FARs, and unplanned and organic areas have been provided with lower FARs in the DAP.

We must now keep in mind that higher FAR values, to whatever extent, exacerbate the prevailing disparity between landowners and landless urbanites. Exceeding an FAR value of 1 to 1.5 can only pave the way for landowners to invest in the business of housing, which we have already witnessed in Dhaka.

One major national daily organised a poll last year regarding the Draft DAP’s proposals on building heights. Roughly 70 percent responded positively, and 30 percent had other ideas. This is perhaps the true reflection of public opinion regarding the building height debate. Because ordinary people who do not have any land titles are the urban majority, they would much rather opt for affordable housing and a liveable city.

FAR incentives for low income units in a residential building is an excellent proposal that could go a long way in meeting the demands of the low-income urban population for formal housing. In addition, planning strategies like dwelling unit per katha, and flat-based and block-based development instead of plot-based development in urban areas, can have enormous impacts on controlling population density and preserving agricultural land and waterbodies, leading to more planned development.

So what about the claims from certain quarters that the proposed FAR values have created disparities between different types of urban areas

in the city? According to planning standards, it is quite obvious that planned areas will get higher FAR to build taller buildings. However, plot-based development in planned areas usually have lower base FAR for individual plot housing development, and FAR incentives or bonuses can be provided for developed areas with adequate facilities and amenities through the purchase of Transfer of Development Rights (TDR), which is a strategy proposed in the DAP. So, FAR values for planned areas of the DAP should not exceed 3 and additional FAR values should be purchased from TDR, which will ensure some sort of parity among different urban areas.

Another important point we are perhaps missing is that the debate surrounding FAR value and heights of residential buildings is only focusing on the issue of density of the city. However, modern urban planning has moved far away from the concept of density alone, and takes in other considerations, such as the “development intensity” of an area – which measures volume of development alongside population density – public health, environmental sustainability, and affordability. Public health considerations include sunlight, air ventilation and indoor air quality, whereas sustainability considers volume of construction impacting urban heat islands, electricity consumption through air conditioners, generators and other appliances that significantly contribute to climate change, groundwater recharge issues, etc.

The high-rise model of development is not sustainable if we consider these elements. And it is significant that the new DAP used the term “development intensity” instead of “density planning”. We should, therefore, construct our arguments on the broad spectrum of development intensity, city liveability and sustainability, rather than just debating how much floor space do landowners need when building on their land.

We certainly believe that city authorities should welcome any suggestions for making the city liveable and sustainable, and promote collective welfare. However, the state and government should also have clear ideas about the business interests of different stakeholders that will impede the liveability and sustainability of the city.

A city is a living entity, and planning is a serious game. But in the end, it is the state that has the responsibility to uphold public interest, and ensure the collective wellbeing of its people, land and environment.



VISUAL: AFIA JAHIN

## Tagore, the climate crisis, and compassionate development



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When I am in Dhaka, the likelihood of climate action feels quite distant. The degradation and punishment of green or undeveloped space is visible everywhere. There’s been a boom in single-use items and disposable-useless things available in shops and stalls. And it seems like the surge in consumption is outdoing concerns about the environment. In the West, people are starting to alter their habits, and the ideas of climate change sensitivity and reducing consumption are in fashion; Gen Z are all signing up – whether it is out of principle or social pressure, that is hard to know (and perhaps not important).

I understand that people in the UK have larger average carbon footprints than people in Bangladesh, and that the UK still produces copious amounts of waste that is hefted onto boats and booted in the direction of South and Southeast Asia. But that doesn’t justify emerging economies doing the same. Just because the West has had its chance to destroy the human race, does that mean that the rest of the world should do so too?

Rabindranath Tagore saw World War I as the West literally turning its guns on itself, using its very worst traits to cannibalise itself. All the greed and commercialisation, the efficiency ethic were being turned inwards in fratricidal and brutal mechanised warfare. Tagore argued that the East should never simply ape the West. While this might bring development, it would also bring with it all the ugly, inhumane and destructive forces of modern,

atheistic capitalism.

Does the same argument not apply with the climate crisis? If the UK or the US has proven how not to do things, then is it still okay for Bangladesh to do it anyway, arguing that it is only fair for it to follow the same development path as the West did before?

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To me, this seems a broken moral logic. This is equivalent to an eye for an eye; since you have committed an evil, so can I. I think that loss and damage payments are necessary and should be used to fund different development pathways

for developing markets, but I don’t think the argument that Bangladesh should be allowed to consume coal since the UK did so before is any kind of a morally acceptable approach.

In Bangladesh today, I think that something has to happen urgently to prevent the irrepressible, bloodied and gnashing teeth of the market from turning the country into a large, barren, concrete housing complex.

I think that, just as Tagore said a hundred years ago, this could be achieved not by copying the West, but rather by finding a new, moral and distinct approach to national development, where the market is not supreme. This may sound like the silly and idle chatter of someone who already benefits from the material trappings of modern Western leisure, healthcare and services. But this is precisely the problem: the focus on the immediate and the material as the primary indicators of development – bigger markets, more wealth, more things.

Of course, there are great benefits to Western development, but simply repeating what went before will store up even bigger climate problems in the future. And in doing so, we will fail, as humanity, to engage with the complex moral questions raised by the most recent age of Western ascendancy. Is freedom and individual independence just an enormous, vaunted selfishness? Should we accept the total power of the market, the primacy of efficiency and profit? Are we suffering from the death of strong, communal spiritual movements?

Perhaps the crises we face can inspire us to pursue a more humane and compassionate development. The opportunity is, as Tagore wrote, to “change the aspects of modern civilisation, infusing life in it where it is a machine, substituting the human heart for cold expediency, not caring so much for power and success as for harmonious and living growth, for truth and beauty” (Tagore, 1916).



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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Good pair

5 Surgery souvenirs

10 “The Fifer” artist

12 Gauge setting

13 Trig topic

14 City on the Mohawk

15 Biol. Or chem.

16 Went first

18 “Oh, wow!”

19 Casual shoe

21 Fountain order

22 Axon setting

24 Fairway chunk

25 Fill the bill

29 Robust

30 M and N, in pronunciation

32 In the style of

33 Latvia once: Abbr.

34 Scoundrel

35 Watch a season in a day

37 Church doctrine

39 Almanac section

40 Furtive fellow

41 Peevish

42 Gaelic language

DOWN

1 Accumulate

2 Moulin Rouge dance

3 Car part

4 Salt, to Simone

5 Tater

6 Mans, e.g.

7 Zoo resident

8 Think back about

9 Bias

11 Israeli city

17 Craps naturals

20 Eminem collaborator

21 Doles

23 Yellow fellows

25 Like tears

26 African grazers

27 Not so small

28 Andean animals

29 Custom

31 Tent anchor

33 Hot

36 Acquire

38 Binary digit

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