

'Business, not city service, is being prioritised'

In view of the rampant commercialisation of Dhanmondi Lake Park in Dhaka, architect and designer Iqbal Habib speaks to Afia Jahin of The Daily Star regarding the initial plan for the park versus what remains of it.



Architect and designer Iqbal Habib

PHOTO: STAR

What was your original vision regarding the Dhanmondi Lake Park?

The Dhanmondi Lake was the first of the interventional urban design projects surrounding lakes in Dhaka. We understood that the lake was a part of a network of canals, channels, and reservoirs that are spread throughout the city.

One of our main goals in this project was to rejuvenate the lake's waterflow. But we also discovered that people often take these reservoirs for granted. Also, this lake was a preferred zone of waste disposal for citizens, the city authorities, and surrounding businesses and establishments. Back then, given that this waste would eventually flow into the old Buriganga channel, the effects of such disposal were not too noticeable. But it still needed to be rectified, alongside improving accessibility by keeping the lake's waterflow intact, finding ways to oxygenate the water, and shutting down all pollution inlets into the lake. Of course, another aim was to make the Dhanmondi Lake an accessible, nature-based recreational space for citizens.

For this, certain facilities needed to be included so that visitors had all of the amenities they needed. There was also an effort to include areas around the lake for cultural activities in which the youth could participate. Another aspect, which, in hindsight, might have been more of an indulgence, was to put up a restaurant beside the lake. But the main idea was to design the surrounding area in such a way that all three aspects of the park's maintenance could be financed from it. These aspects were ensuring security, diligently taking care of the greenery, and general upkeep. In the beginning, the cost for the overall maintenance used to be around Tk 10-11 lakh monthly, financed from the Tk 12.5-14 lakh the park would earn.

Something that architect Muzharul Islam had pushed for was public engagement with our plans for the Dhanmondi Lake Park. Thus, we began going back and forth with a handful of citizen groups. Though they were largely against the plan at the beginning, these groups eventually came around and began cooperating with us. During the inauguration, they even said it was because they were consulted that the park had been constructed so beautifully.

Alas, the one aspect of our initial plan that we were unable to fulfil was restoring the flow in the connecting waterways. These areas were outside our jurisdiction. We had to witness as projects sprang up all around. If not for the (market), we would have ensured the waterflow of the lake till Azimpur graveyard. We also wanted to restore the waterway connection between the Dhanmondi Lake and the water body in Rayerbazar, which would have gone through Pilkhana. The establishment of the Panthapath area was the final nail in the coffin.

During all of this, we also discovered an element of protection for water bodies: walkways. The Dhanmondi Lake Park was the pioneer in this regard.

How lawful is it for the city authorities to commercialise various sectors of the park?

These sectors have existed since the original plan. This division was supposed to aid in easier management and maintenance of the park. In our spending-from-earnings model, we were careful not to spend on anything unnecessary, especially concretisation and anything that would harm the greenery. Back then, there was an advisory committee (under a ministerial secretary) and a management committee (led by the CEO of the mayor's office). So, any changes or commercialisation within the park would have to be approved by the advisory committee and, by extension, the ministry. Stakeholders such as local residents, government employees, and even the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum were involved. Having so many people involved acted as a barrier against vested groups trying to make unnecessary changes to the

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park. Even when the opposition came to power, they could only go so far as to neglect the park, but they could never take over.

The appointment of the current mayor changed things drastically. For one, he nullified the two-committee system altogether. This, to me, seemed impossible from a legal perspective, because nullifying the two-committee system is something that the ministry can do, not a mayor. We involved so many stakeholders in the project in order to prevent such moves. But no one challenged this move. I believe if this move is challenged in a court, and if that court is unbiased, the move would be deemed unlawful. I am not sure whether the ministry later approved the mayor's nullification of the model or not.

A mayor has the duty of protecting greenery, as this is something he or she commits to when taking on the post. I also believe that for the city corporation to commercialise the Dhanmondi Lake Park this way is a serious offence. A city corporation is not a business organisation; it is simply a provider of services.

Now, even a greening, hydro-ecological, biodiversity project like the Dhanmondi Lake Park has been handed over to business organisations. On top of that, the park

is not being maintained properly either. It has become something of a zone for questionable and criminal activities. The original concept behind the project is now lost.

I want to say clearly that the Dhanmondi Lake Park project is one that was very close to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's heart. Not only her own house, but her father's house is also situated by the lake. One after another, actions are taking place to strip the Dhanmondi Lake of its intended character. Crores of taka were spent to divert the drainage routes of the area away from the lake. Now, all the waste from these commercial establishments is being dumped into the lake. This is unacceptable.

If the Dhanmondi Lake Park could be restructured, what would be the way to go about doing so?

The foremost task would be to eliminate all elements of commercialisation from the park. If needed, even the commercial structures in the original plan (besides a couple eateries and the public toilets) should be removed in order to revive the area's biodiversity. In my estimates, only Tk 15-16 lakh would be needed monthly for the park's maintenance, and this should be allocated from the city corporation. If needed, each visitor can be charged Tk 1 of entry fee. But the current concept of having businesses take over the park cannot be accepted.

Only by returning to the original spending-from-earnings model and by engaging the community in the management of the area can the Dhanmondi Lake Park be properly refurbished. Greening of the park and oxygenation of the lake water through boating activities should also be brought back.

Parks under the DNCC seem to be more people-oriented in comparison to those under the DSCC. Why do you think this is?

The answer in one line would be: Viewing public property through a business lens. If you look at the projects we have done under the Jol-Sobuje Dhaka campaign, you will see that no more than five percent of any of these spaces is occupied by structures, and that, too, by fitness centres or libraries. Then why are these changes being brought about now? Previously, the Golapbagh field was taken over by markets too. These were relocated, outside the field and concealed behind a gallery. The field was thus freed of commercial activities.

I urge the current authorities to resume the public space de-commercialisation initiatives of the previous mayors.

The present way of building commercial structures in parks itself is very wrong. Business, not city service, is being prioritised. And this is not part of the job description of the mayor, the mayor's office, or the councillor.

What has happened with the Dhanmondi Lake Park causes me pain. If you look at the original masterplan, you will see that nothing outside of what people and nature would require was included. What kind of perspective is this, where one only thinks of commercialising everything? At a minimum, shouldn't our children be able to see greenery? Now, there is only uncontrolled concretisation.



The international community must ensure that any repatriation efforts are accompanied by guarantees of the Rohingya refugees' rights, security, and justice.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

ROHINGYA REPATRIATION

Prioritise the Rohingya's safety and well-being

San Thai Shin is a Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh who is a community-based researcher and freelance journalist.

SAN THAI SHIN

The Rohingya crisis continues to leave a tragic trail of immense suffering and injustice. As a persecuted minority group, the Rohingya people have endured decades of oppression, displacement, and violence, which have left an indelible scar on humanity. Their struggle for justice and repatriation has been marred by obstacles, false promises, and political manoeuvring, prolonging their agony and preventing a resolution to this humanitarian crisis.

The Rohingya people, who have faced systemic discrimination and persecution in Myanmar for decades, have been denied basic human rights and subjected to propagandistic campaigns that label them as foreigners and potential threats to the country's stability. The 1982 constitution stripped them of their citizenship and rendered them stateless, effectively erasing their identity and denying them access to education, employment, and freedom of movement.

Despite international calls for their repatriation and restoration of their rights, the Myanmar government has shown little genuine commitment to resolving the crisis. Instead, they have engaged in a deceptive repatriation process aimed at evading international scrutiny and appeasing the International Criminal Court (ICC). The construction of government buildings and settlements on Rohingya land, as well as the destruction of their villages, further reveal the government's ulterior motives and lack of sincerity.

The Myanmar military junta has played a central role in perpetuating the suffering of the Rohingya people. Their brutal campaign of violence in 2017, characterised by mass killings, rape and arson, resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who fled to neighbouring Bangladesh. The military's continued presence in the Rakhine state and their refusal to create a safe environment for the Rohingya undermine any prospects of a meaningful repatriation process.

China's involvement in the repatriation process has raised suspicions and concerns among the Rohingya population. China, known for its controversial policies towards its own Muslim minority, the Uyghurs, has consistently used its veto power to prevent international resolutions on the Rohingya refugee crisis. This has fuelled speculations that China's engagement in the repatriation process is driven by political motivations, rather than a genuine concern for the welfare of the Rohingya people.

The lack of trust and safety in the Arakan region, where the Rohingya would potentially be repatriated, adds another layer of complexity to the crisis. The region is currently under the control of the Arakan Army (AA), an armed group seeking to establish a Rakhine nation. The AA's opposition to recognising the Rohingya as an ethnic group and their mistreatment of the Rohingya population have created an environment of fear and uncertainty. The Rohingya people find themselves caught between the oppressive policies of both the AA and the Myanmar military junta, facing restrictions on their freedom of movement, livelihoods, and even their identity.

The AA's involvement in drug trafficking exacerbates the plight of the Rohingya community. Forced to serve as porters and subjected to punishment if they fail to

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comply, the Rohingya are trapped in a cycle of exploitation and abuse. The AA's oppressive tax system further burdens the already impoverished Rohingya population, making their daily lives even more challenging.

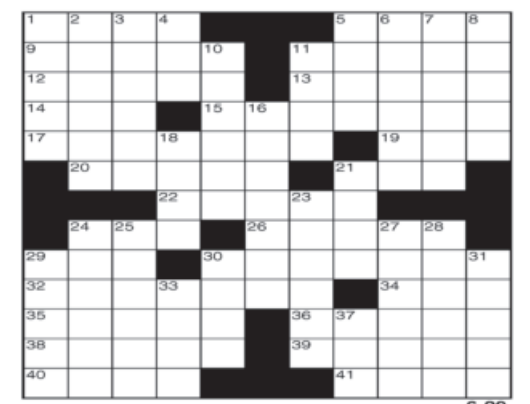
While some individuals hope that compliance with the AA's rules may lead to a more inclusive and tolerant Arakan, the overall sentiment remains one of fear and scepticism. The AA's disregard for the Rohingya's ethnic identity and their mistreatment of the population undermine any prospects for peaceful coexistence.

In light of these challenges, it is evident that the repatriation process is fraught with obstacles and uncertainties. The Rohingya people, already traumatised by decades of persecution, fear that returning to Myanmar under the current circumstances would subject them to further violence and oppression. The international community must prioritise the safety and well-being of the Rohingya people, ensuring that any repatriation efforts are accompanied by guarantees of their rights, security, and justice.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Neighbor
5 Gush forth
9 Camp craft
11 Push rudely
12 Inclines
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14 Numerical prefix
15 Cameraman's activity
17 Authoring
19 Kicker's aid
20 Trap-shooting sport
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24 Back muscle, for short
26 Tennis star
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- 29 Shop tool
30 Wrestler's goal
32 Ogden Nash specialty
34 West of films
35 Blockhead
36 Wed in secret
38 Euro divisions
39 Derby prize
40 Border
41 Airport area
- DOWN**
1 Carry on
2 Johnson's middle name
3 Disconnect
4 Young one
5 Tibia's place
6 Civil
7 Made flat
- 8 Doorstop shape
10 Spotted
11 Warbled
16 Justice Scalia
18 Orderly
21 Writer Uris
23 Texas baseballer
24 Praised
25 Store-front sight
27 Champagne drink
28 Sulking
29 Cumin or coriander
30 Peach parts
31 Skein members
33 Staff symbol
37 Fireplace fuel



SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

S A M O A N S A G E
E M E R G E P H I L
W I N D O W G L A S S
E N S U E
J U R Y M E A N
T O N S F U N N E L
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S E E N B O L L
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M E A D O W G R A S S
E X P O L O O K U P
T E E N S T E A M Y

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsoption@gmail.com.