

The city is a beautiful thing when it’s for everyone



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A city is a web of facilities and opportunities in which different agencies and communities lay stakes, push boundaries, and make bullish claims of making things better. And yet, the discussion on appropriateness and effectiveness continues. Continuing the conversation, I cite five axioms in making a city beautiful, humane, and spirited.

Axiom 1: A beautiful city is made not by beautification, but by the careful process of design, planning, and assembling.

As an architect and urban designer, I have come to question the term “beautification,” although “City Beautiful” was a movement in the late-19th-century US to improve civic and social conditions through architecture. In Dhaka, beautification is mostly a beautiful deception, “a practice in which state money is mobilised for an unnecessary project that has little value in public benefit, and often carried out by bureaucratic decisions that lack knowledge of the actual requirements and consequences of what is going on. The work itself, usually not reviewed by any learned body, is carried out by dubious professionals and builders...

“No city planning culture in the world uses the term beautification in the design of their cities; planning proceeds through the methods and techniques of urban design, landscape design or civic design, any of which requires the involvement of trained and dedicated professionals. Only societies afflicted by the Potemkin syndrome put up hideous things – from billboards to bonsai trees – to hide an incompetence, which they then call “beautification.”

I wrote the above paragraphs six years ago in response to the strange bonsai planting scheme for Airport Road. The Potemkin phenomenon refers to propping up installations for a quick glory for the benefits of the select few. All that beautification enterprise along that road, dedicated solely for passing vehicles, paid no heed to the pedestrian. For a road with high-speed traffic, there should be barriers, typically with tree canopies and plants, as a buffer against the traffic. The plant landscaping on the far side is an arbitrary and useless spectacle. I describe that as the “fiction of beautification.”



PHOTO: KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

An ideal street view with proper placement of tree canopies and plants.

offer an equalitarian experience that any and all can participate in.

The ultimate measure of a good city, and consequently a beautiful city, are the qualities of public spaces. Such spaces signify “commons” or outdoor living rooms that stage the city’s life and energy, and make the city inviting for everyone. The global pandemic ushered a new urgency around public health and a strong necessity for such public spaces in the city, whether as plazas, *chottors*, promenades, fields, and tree-filled parks and gardens. If a plan for Dhaka aspires to be socially inclusive and humanistic, it should begin with a generous attention to creating public spaces at all scales, from the city to the neighbourhood and the corner of a street.

Axiom 3: Parks, playfields, and gardens are not the same thing.

in front of Dhaka Medical College. If one were to travel just outside Dhaka, one would notice that there is no square inch that is not green and vegetal in this fecund land. Yet, Dhaka is slowly and surely losing its green and tree coverage.

For a city like Dhaka, so intoxicated with economic returns from every square inch of land, greenery has become an adversary, only to be propped up as tokens in beautification schemes.

Axiom 4: A proper walkable condition is a civic right.

Most beautification efforts are targeted for people in a moving vehicle, in which the fate and state of the poor pedestrian are ignored. An evidence of that is the dedication and passion for constructing road medians. We have calculated that the median on Gulshan Avenue is constructed of so much reinforced concrete that one could build 100 one-storey houses out of them.

It would have been wiser to give more attention to the sidewalk, where people are. If open and public places define the civic realm of a city, sidewalks or footpaths are a necessary component of that network. The sidewalk is actually a linear public space that defines the humanity of any decent city; it belongs to the culture of walking, strolling and promenading, and getting around without hindrances. This is particularly critical for Dhaka where more than 50 percent of the people walk. Such urban pedestrian systems as boulevards, promenades, river walks, or simple sidewalks that are the hallmark of all liveable cities are, for most part, non-existent in Dhaka. And if they do exist, they are in bits and pieces and do not create a legible and defined network.

A proper walkable condition is a civic right.

Axiom 5: Trees are an existential necessity.

Walking brings us to trees. Since humans built the first cities after clearing trees, cities and trees have held a contentious and complicated relationship. From the predominant perspective of Dhaka, a city is most profitable when totally built sans trees, but to be a good city, an equation with trees is necessary.

The purpose of trees in a city is common knowledge: trees provide a green antidote to the stark built-ups both in visual, existential, and psychological terms. Trees absorb pollutants in the air, catch rainwater, and minimise heat. In urban parks and gardens, trees are an ancient foil for human existentiality. Trees on roadsides provide shade-giving canopies for the pedestrian. In the condition of climate change and heat gains, trees have acquired an ethical and existential urgency.

Trees may belong to the realm of the public, but they go missing in the brutal development climate. Ancient trees are uprooted without remorse. Trees are planted where there should have been plants, and vice versa. In most cases, trees and vegetation are planted in a helter-skelter manner without a knowledge of their species, behaviour and purpose. The term “green” is abused, even by professionals. Instead of grass in a field/park, they apply artificial turf and claim “greenness.”

There is, as far as we know, no policy, guideline or charter for trees, for their planting, cutting and replanting. Consequently, there is an ad hoc and unilateral manner in doing business in which qualified people are hardly involved and informed decision-making is rarely engaged. If the tree is life, this is serious business.



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

The sun also rises



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The message is loud and clear: St Martin’s Island is not for sale. When was it up for sale anyway? We, the public, scratch our heads. The presumed buyer shies away from shrugging shoulders: hey, don’t blame me! Who said I wanted to buy it anyway? I just needed a place to rest and see the sea where nuclear whales of different colours swim. You never know when you might need a friendly referee. Besides, if there is any rerun of the movie *Chandni Chowk to China*, you might want me on the couch with a bag of popcorn. And don’t you forget that rogue neighbour of yours who is good at pushing back humans while supplying radioactive minerals to the wrong hands.

Trouble is brewing in Pakistan, too. The news is fresh, but unclear. The country is reportedly leasing its largest port in Karachi to the UAE to keep things afloat. Sri Lanka did the same with one of its ports, handing it over to China. We have read stories of the travelling usurer *kabuliwala* even before mobile banking or microfinance was made popular. We have heard about our parents going to pawn shops when recessions hit hard or when depressions hit home following stock shocks, Ponzi schemes or share scams. Now countries are looking for bailouts. If you can’t pay, they will take your jewels away. The audit teams of IMF are sure to have their way. No wonder, the jewel hoarders are scared. They are withdrawing their treasures from the Swiss Alps and hiding them away in offshore islands. Guess the state of an individual is no different from the State that gives the aura of being so strong and powerful. The soft underbellies are exposed. The world is in a mess. Inflation. Food shortage. Climate change? Oh, that too!

Those of us who thought the sickness trail of the pandemic was over have a rude awakening. The world is getting sicker by the day. It’s sicker than the woke vandals who tarnished museums would like you to believe. Yes, the glacier cap is melting. You need to find alternatives to fossil fuels. What do you do? Harness natural energy. Solar power and battery-driven cars seem to be the answer. You need a lot of lithium and cobalt to make electric vehicles and solar panels. Africa has them in abundance. Who is there first? China. The seven European powers who “Scrambled for Africa” between 1834 and 1914 meekly tried to make their way back into the

heart of darkness. The responses of the African leaders are not only nationalistic, but also defiant. Much to the dismay of Western officials, many African leaders and governments have either supported Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine or refused to condemn it. They hailed China as their development partner. The West was told that the Rest of the World was tired of being lectured.

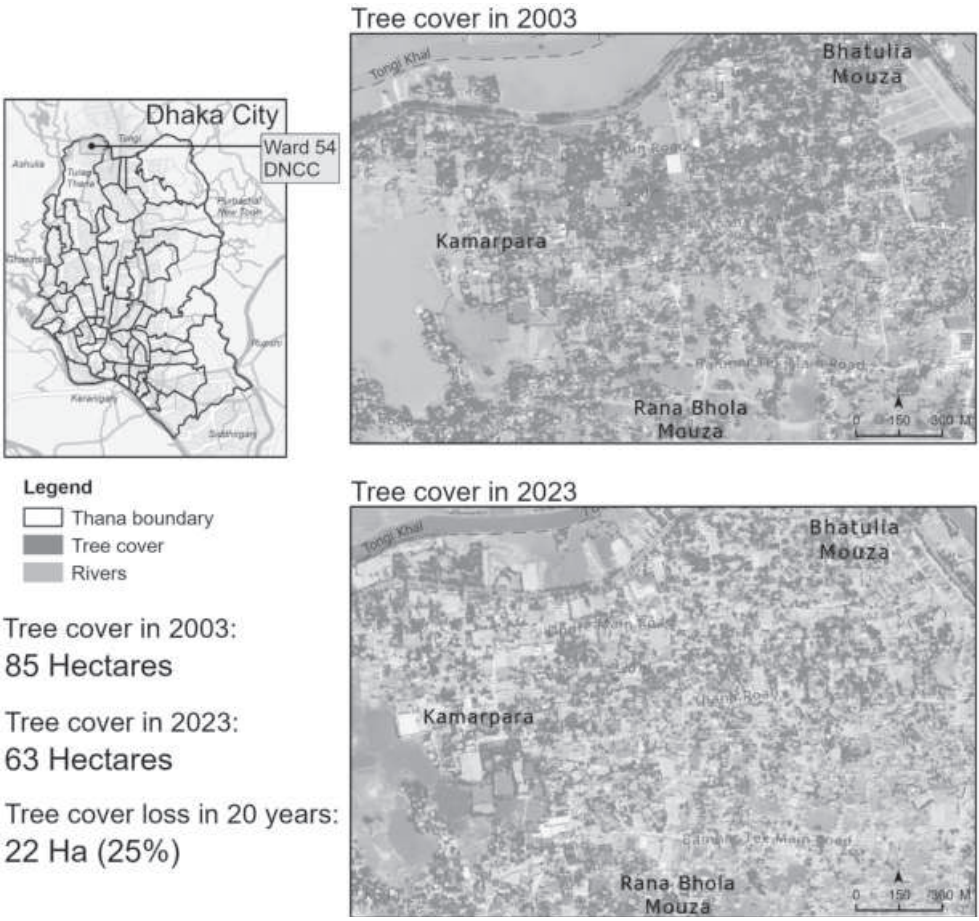
Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa, for instance, has described both Russia and China as “dependable pillars for many years” which “assisted us in our fight for independence, but equally ... to defend our sovereignty against the sustained onslaught by our detractors.” By “onslaught of the detractors,” Mnangagwa is probably referring to various Western sanctions on his country for human rights abuses.

The internet is rife with terms such as de-dollarisation, BRICS, electoral dictatorship, and liberal world. It is tough for my old brain to navigate through the explainers by media pundits about the changing world order as well as the reels made by the TikTok generations.

The international order is changing what can only be described as what CNN’s Fareed Zakaria calls “the rise of the rest.” Isn’t it the Bible that says, “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose” (Ecclesiastes)? Ernest Hemingway used this idea for the title of his novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, to respond to his literary colleague of the Parisian circuit Gertrude Stein. It was Hemingway’s way of refuting Stein’s characterisation of the modernist writers as “the Lost Generation.”

On a Saturday, named after Saturn in Latin, I muse over the calamities that we are facing. In Vedic astrology, the placement of celestial objects can impact our lives. An ill placement or retrograde of Saturn is known for causing harm and hindrances. Then again, in Old Norse, Saturday is known as *laugardagur* – “the day of the hot water” or “bathing day.” It is the day of cleansing. In some parts of Germany, the day is *Sunnunött* – the night before Sunday.

Optimistic that I am, I would like to believe that this, too, shall pass, and the sun also shall rise.



VISUAL: SANJOY ROY, BANDHAN DHAR & ORNA RAHMAN/BENGAL INSTITUTE

Comparative study of tree cover in a ward in Dhaka.

Axiom 2: A good city is better than a beautiful city.

A good city is hard to define, and yet being liveable, healthy and equitable are some defining parameters.

Dhaka remains far from the destination of a “good” city. Dhaka is a city of brazen buildings, of opulent and dazzling structures showcasing the new economic clout, and of relentless build-up marking the intense density of the city. Yet, buildings and structures alone do not make a city, far less a good city. Cities need – and Dhaka needs that dearly – various forms of public and civic places that will provide the essential experiential spaces where citizens can arrive and thrive, unfettered, in an urban milieu. Unlike individual buildings which are mostly privatised and secured, public spaces

Dhaka has received quite a few designed parks in recent times which, at one level, are a gift to the citizens. Such parks are, at best, rudiments of public spaces in the city in which people can gather for recreation. Yet, there is a lack of landscape intelligence in the making of those parks as they perform mostly as plazas, entertain commercial hubs, and really are playfields. There is hardly a park with a conscious planting of trees and greeneries amid which a visitor may find a respite from his or her life of urban stress.

It appears that people entrusted with the making and administering of parks have not quite clarified a distinction among parks, playfields, and gardens. For a true garden, one should look at Balda Garden. Armanitola School field and Abahani ground are examples

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Like corduroy

7 2006 Pixar film

11 Smitten

12 Opposite of “sans”

13 Pale yellow

14 Loaded

15 Burdened down

16 Out-pouring

17 Looked over

18 Usual practice

19 Guernsey, for one

21 Mine find

22 Fine

25 Gents

26 Think tank product

27 Mysterious

29 Make bootees

33 Hotel units

34 Unemotional

35 Old Italian currency

36 Exercise lead-in

37 Print supplies

38 Relaxed

39 Mysterious loch

40 Not optional

DOWN

1 Biathlon need

2 Parquet feature

3 Ice skate part

4 Trapped

5 Smooth

6 Cub’s home

7 Complains

8 Ace, e.g.

9 Parish residence

10 Plot

16 Shoe material

18 Bonnie’s partner

20 Onion layers

22 Sheena or Xena

23 Pops open

24 Symbol of solidity

25 Game fish

28 Stockpile

30 Wanderer

31 Occupied

32 Used a keyboard

34 Fill completely

36 Pallid

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

7-16

WEDNESDAY’S ANSWERS

S	T	A	T	E		D	E	B	I	T	
C	O	L	O	N		E	L	E	N	A	
A	D	A	P	T		W	I	L	T	S	
L	A	B			W	O	E		M	E	T
E	T	A			I	V			O	R	E
D	E	M	I	S	E		I	N	N	S	
	A	T	T	R	A	C	T	S			
L	E	S	S		T	R					S
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S	P	A		S	P				A	L	A
S	A	K	E	S					M	A	K
I	N	E	R	T					E	V	E
E	A	S	E	S					N	E	S