

ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN RIVERS AND MOUNTAINS

A fruitful exchange across continents

Modern architecture may not be the very first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bangladesh that is blessed with its endless green of a scenic fluvial landscape. But there is no doubt that an unmistakable contemporary architectural scene has developed in the Bengal Delta over the past decades, which attracts more and more international attention with its stupendous buildings. Since Switzerland also attaches great importance to building culture, it is obvious that a transnational dialogue can generate extra value in this field.

At first glance, it may seem that Bangladesh and Switzerland are quite different geographically, climatically or socially. But there are as well similarities, such as the very specific respective landscape character that have shaped settlement patterns. Here the endless flatland of the delta, there the steep flanks of the mountains. Out of such somehow exceptional contexts comes the awareness to treat the rare soil of a small territory with care.

In the wake of issues such as the climate crisis, architecture currently is globally undergoing a change of paradigms towards more sustainability and inclusiveness. More than in other parts of the world, architects in Bangladesh have already been dealing with climatic, environmental and societal topics for quite some time, which recently have gained relevance in other hemispheres, too. The cross-national discussion on architecture or urban development offers all participants the opportunity to learn from each other on how to create future-oriented habitats.

The exhibition 'Bengal Stream - The Vibrant Architecture Scene of Bangladesh', organised by the Swiss Architecture Museum SAM

in Basel in collaboration with the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlement in 2017, was the first of its kind in the world and has accelerated a cross-continental dialogue on today's burning issues while it toured Europe and eventually concluded in Dhaka in 2023. 'Porosity - Enabling Structures', a site-specific exhibition installation that took place this year in and around the Kalakendra Art Space Dhaka, is another example of how Bangladeshi and Swiss architects exchange ideas about circular architectural concept in a vivid way. In this context, projects by Swiss Architecture Students, which



Bengal Stream exhibition in Dhaka;

PHOTO: ASIF SALMAN

in a semester long design course dealt with transport infrastructures in Dhaka, were also discussed.

That architecture in Bangladesh is in the focus of Swiss professionals, among others, is evident in the high interest in architecture group travels organised by the Bangla-Swiss joint venture 'ARCHITECTourBGD' or in the fact that Swiss publishers are launching more and more books on

the subject. Last but not least, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation recently supported a research to build small modular homes in rural Bangladesh.

However, an exchange about architecture does not necessarily have to be directly expressed in built form or real estate development. First and foremost, it is about the inspiring fertilisation of the discussion culture. An animating overlap of ideas from East and West on the sustainable design of living spaces will contribute to a relevant building culture for future generations here and there. Architecture is a cultural process that affects all levels of a society and,

therefore, can play a key role in global coexistence. And culture is and will remain the key and the basis for any kind of fruitful bilateral cooperation.

This article is written by Niklaus Graber, an architect based in Lucerne, Switzerland and the lead curator of the exhibition "Bengal Stream - The Vibrant Architecture Scene of Bangladesh."



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