

Has Dhaka become a status city?



THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

Recently, on a weekday, I went to an upscale cafe in the capital's Gulshan with a friend. It was late in the evening—almost midnight—but the place was filled with chattering people of all ages; some inside sipping expensive cafe lattes and others waiting to get their tables. Parked, rather chaotically, in front of the cafe were brand-name cars. The folks at the establishment appeared to be a happy bunch, both those watching others and those being watched. The overall spirit of the place had the social aroma of a riotous Gatsby party!

I kept wondering about the symbolic meaning of the cafe. What did it signify for the city of Dhaka and its social hierarchy? How did the cafe and its ilk articulate a metropolitan narrative of urban noir? Could the cafes of Dhaka be a measure of the country's economic and social prosperity? Flourishing cosmopolitanism? Swanky, middle-

journalist Will Storr calls the "status game"—a provocative argument concerning a fundamental human character to get ahead of others and climb the status ladder as a form of self-distinction. I wanted to explain how the status game gets played in Dhaka, in its everyday practices, its architecture and urbanity, its social mobility and consumptions, and in its capitalism. I have to say: the cafes of Dhaka offered me a compelling vantage point.

A good friend, Kishwar Imdad, introduced me to Storr's intriguing 2021 book *The Status Game*. He asked me if we could assess Dhaka's social spaces through the lens of the status game. I thought he posed a fascinating question.

But, first, what is the status game, as articulated by Storr? He argues that humans, since the subsistence economy of the hunter-gatherer times, have internalised the idea that

unmistakable part of our social DNA. Behind our pursuit of a good life, an attractive mate, elite education, money, prosperity, luxury, villas, and cars lies our desire to seek status.

To say this from the other end, status gives us those privileges and the ability to multiply them. Status empowers us to access the best schools, clubs, and markets. The status game

Let's bring the idea of the status game to understanding Dhaka as a metropolis. Has Dhaka become a status city that champions privilege-creation as a basis of urban growth?

Do the planning philosophies of the city view urban development around ivory towers, iconic infrastructures, high-end neighbourhoods, and 300-foot super-highways?

largeshopping mall with a gargantuan Ralph Lauren advertisement had the propensity of being an urban icon. There is a peculiar overlap between status-seeking and westernisation.

I am not saying that Dhaka has become a dehumanising status city. Despite its infernal streetscape and unsettling growth in cardinal directions, the city has an exuberant

most energy), they are fast becoming the city's favourite symbols given that they are status boosters. Like its Western counterparts in the mid-twentieth century, Dhaka keeps on building status-enhancing elevated expressways but not footpaths. Who uses the footpaths? The downtrodden. The vendors. The poor pedestrian commuters. Thus, footpaths are not status symbols or glamorous. In a rising culture of elitism and status-seeking, doing away with urban inequities has very little chance.

According to the latest Worldwide Cost of Living survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Dhaka's score is 56 (Delhi's 52, Chennai's 37, Ahmedabad's 34, and Karachi's score is 28), making it one of the most expensive cities in Asia.

The pursuit of status has become a booming business in the city. Look at the typical developers' advertisements for apartments. They all peddle exclusive luxury and individualism, not how to live with the community. The aspiring elites are buying expensive apartments built by prestigious developers and flocking to posh restaurants and cafes, while urban greenery and water bodies are diminishing in broad daylight. This does not have to be a binary condition. It should not be an either/or case. The magic lies in the balancing act and in identifying priorities which serve all.

There is no problem with people pursuing status and privilege. This is a foundational human trait. The trouble begins when status seeking becomes spatially inscribed in the city as domains of exclusionary utopias, while the city's everyday life of the majority becomes a low priority. The status city often serves the privileged, while the huddling masses eke out a minimal existence.

A prosperous Bangladesh needs not status cities but humane (and environmentally conscious) cities where all people have a fair shot at life's opportunities. Great cafes and metro rails are essential features of a thriving cosmopolis. So are urban forests, canals, footpaths, and birds that chirp next to your window. This may seem mundane, but the idea warrants a profound shift in the way we understand cities, progress, the market economy, and capitalism. It can be done. It requires leadership.



COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

If status feeds on consumption, glitter, and pleasure, the status city is bound to ignore and abandon those who don't have the means to pursue status. When status-seeking becomes a primary driver of metropolitan growth, social equity is sacrificed, and the disenfranchisement of the majority is barely noticed. The status city is hedonistic and paradoxical in the sense that it makes the rags-to-riches success story look so easy, while it is not.

class ethos? Do the cafes offer democratic access to elite practices and status to those who couldn't previously attain them?

I must confess that I went to the cafe in Gulshan that night with an anthropology project in mind—how to understand urban elitism in a metropolis of the Global South and, more particularly, what the British

the best way to survive, sustain, and dominate life is to acquire status—the quasi-evolutionary urge to belong to a special group of peers, one that demands the respect and adulation of the people in the lower rungs of the food chain. Life has always been, Storr argues, a game which we have been continuously playing to attain status. Status-seeking has become an

is hyper-competitive, and winning it requires constant play and flaunting. What symbolises and displays status? Wealth, social, and political positions, luxury apartments and SUVs, yachts, high end club memberships, degrees from Ivy League schools, artistic tastes, dining in pricey restaurants, Patek Philippe watches, ostentatious wedding ceremonies, and so on. In all these endeavours, there is a common thread of westernisation (and of being inspired by Bollywood).

The status game results in exclusionary conditions. The spatial dimension of the game entails a lot of walls, gates, separations, isolations, distinctions, and social distances. Status is a unique privilege that thrives on its fortification, restricting access for the masses. Status is about life on the pedestal. Everybody wants to get on that pedestal, but very few can. Thus, there are wars and skirmishes of all sorts.

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Dubai is a status city, defined by futuristic glass skyscrapers, air-conditioned shopping malls, and a culture of status-seeking, elitism, and privilege-peddling. Singapore is a supremely efficient city, but it at times feels Orwellian in its status-conscious social ethos. A few years ago, visiting Kuala Lumpur for a conference, I thought the city didn't know how not to fall into the trap of a status city. A

sense of humanity. From the roadside food vendors to the peculiar romance of its rickshaws, from the maddening congestion of Old Dhaka to the night bazaars of Mohammadpur, there is an urban grit and organic entrepreneurial culture of survival that give the capital city a cocktail sentiment of excitement, angst, euphoria, and pathos. This is humanity.

But Dhaka seems at a crossroads. An elite cafe with a pricey menu, situated in a public park, is a red flag. A barbecue pit in a public park is glorified, while learning the names of native trees doesn't appear to be a priority. Fencing off playfields in the name of preservation is more about urban status-building than providing the community with opportunities to access open spaces. Even though all-glass skyscrapers are enemies of the environment (because they emit the highest heat and consume the

My powerless poster walk



KNOT SO TRUE

Dr Rubana Huq is the vice-chancellor of Asian University for Women.

RUBANA HUQ

It was a random walk in the evening. The AQI score was up to 460 and something told me that it was okay to challenge my lungs, especially because some of us have signed up for the "Forever Bangladesh" project. The walls looked relieved, but half-washed, half-baked, half-cooked. The posters on these walls looked immature, premature, and reeked of an ugly redundancy all in the garb of an irrelevant sales pitch. They were all singing politicking praises of the heroes and aspirants, with pictures popping out of boxes, in careful dimensions, just about big enough not to offend the key leaders. In a few, I even spotted some where the heads of the actors had the central leaders' mugshots placed under them, almost in a postmodern style; almost defiant enough to make a point of lies being larger than lives.

Indeed, in spite of election season being over, and in spite of many posters being torn, I ended up counting 75 posters on a single wall in Banani last night. From *shommeloni*, *miladunnabi*, to let,



In spite of election season being over, I ended up counting 75 posters on a single wall in Banani last night.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

It's not unreasonable to assume that posters and microphones are two key objects to use to sway the public. Pitching to the public has always been the point. But an overkill during the campaigns through visual and auditory mediums also carries a bad taste of an apple gone bad.

sublet, *ghotkali*, physiotherapy, nursery admission, down to tutors, the posters all live together in perfect harmony in most neighbourhoods, barring the VVIP zones.

According to a recent study by the Environment and Social Development Organisation, in Dhaka city alone, the usage of posters rose by 51 percent in the last four years. There were 13,997

billboards in Dhaka in 2022, causing eye fatigue to 24.37 percent of people while 18.72 percent suffered from an overstimulated nervous system, 18.03 percent from insomnia, and 12.21 percent from headaches. Reportedly, 270,000 children suffer from eye fatigue annually.

Although we have the Graffiti Writing and Poster Sticking Control Act, 2012 to prevent visual pollution, nothing much has been done to implement it. Why, though?

It's not unreasonable to assume that posters and microphones are two key objects to use to sway the public. Pitching to the public has always been the point. But an overkill during the campaigns through visual and auditory mediums also carries a bad taste of an apple gone bad.

While I walked through my neighbourhood last night, and while I looked at hundreds of advertisements (in the form of posters, billboards, and neon signs), I really didn't "see" any and consciously registered none.

I must emphasise that there was literally zero communicative significance in any of them. The stimuli ended up bearing little or no significance as we never get to know any of our candidates through any of the campaigns. We get to know them from how our spaces look and feel, and by the range and level of corruption badges that they wear while strutting around us. Let's not forget that there's also an

leading them to disregard the message at least on the conscious level.

In Burundi, girls receive training to remain silent and be evasive. They are trained to listen to their families and then repeat verbatim to the males of the household.

Warhol's "Sleep," a six-hour-long film made in 1963, showed only one man sleeping. The screening allowed the audience to walk in, walk out, have a drink, chat over a burger and popcorn or even smoke a cigarette, only to go back to the screening room with an expectation of looking at a new shot of the sleeper's sleeping body.

Presidents and powerful people have also intelligently resorted to silence as a strategy.

President Reagan preferred helicopter press conferences, because neither could he hear the questions, nor could the reporters hear his answers, what with the helicopter's engines running, the blades rapidly spinning, and the tourists singing "God Bless America."

A classic example is Nixon's Cambodia Address delivered on April 30, 1970, wherein he presented three options: to "do nothing"; to "provide... military assistance to Cambodia," or "cleaning out." Instead of saying that he planned to invade Cambodia, Nixon took a longer route to condition US citizens and basically did what he wanted to do. Perhaps this way, power can also take a longer route.

In December 1981, Poland adopted martial law and imposed literal and metaphorical silence by stopping public communication. Television and radio channels were off air, newspapers and magazines weren't published, telephone lines were disconnected, and all mail was censored. Academic institutions and cinemas were closed. Public gatherings were banned, and many went to jail. None could travel.

Needless to say, the prism of silence benefitted none other than power.

The idea here should not be about a marketing gimmick of covering the walls with promotional pitches. The idea must be about creating a lasting impression of all the potential that comes with the face that wants to be elected to serve us, and not to be served. The walls should be able to breathe, the buses and gates can do with fresh coats of paints, the skies could be complimented by the uninterrupted gaze of those of us who live below. After all, it's our city, it's our space, and we have a right to at least clear vision, if not decent clean air anytime soon.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Flock leader
 - 7 Close
 - 11 Attraction
 - 12 El —, Texas
 - 13 Laughed loudly
 - 14 Peer group?
 - 15 Face parts
 - 16 Grazing groups
 - 17 Slugger Aaron
 - 18 Dress part
 - 19 Shucking units
 - 21 Pop
 - 22 "What's the point?"
 - 25 Dove sound
 - 26 Diamond corner
 - 27 Left over
 - 29 Overdue
 - 33 Right now
 - 34 Defamatory text
 - 35 Satanic
 - 36 Good name
 - 37 Posted
 - 38 "Be right with you"
 - 39 Baseball's Speaker
 - 40 Unassuming
 - 8 Harvest festival event
 - 9 Lemon, perhaps
 - 10 Flung
 - 16 Party VIPs
 - 18 Wide
 - 20 Monk's place
 - 22 Persuaded
 - 23 Escape expert
 - 24 Landing spot
 - 25 Most adorable
 - 28 Mariners
 - 30 Treat badly
 - 31 Heads of France
 - 32 Put in office
 - 34 TV's Jay Brink



MONDAY'S ANSWERS

L A P S E A L P H A
E R R O L B A R O N
A R O S E A M O N G
S I T A F T J O E
E V E N E E E R R
S E C T O R A C E S
S H I P A N T I C S
Q U O A R T O R C
U S N S I R N E O
A T I L T A P I A N
R O S I E P O S S E
E N T E R S I T E S

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