

An unequal city



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The uprising was quick. Starting from a rather simple demand by students, it turned to a larger movement in which people beyond universities, including workers and common people, joined the fray. In a month, it acquired a political and social cry about justice and fairness, and an opposition to the authoritarian establishment. In ensuing riots, students and the police faced off each other in violent confrontations on the streets of the city. One particularly violent night, 600 people were wounded and 422 detained. Tainted by accusations of heavy-handed treatment of the protests, the head of the government left the country.

The above scenario—perhaps too near and familiar at this time—describes the famous May uprising of Paris in 1968. *The New York Times*, in a 2018 feature on the Paris events, described it as a month of revolution that propelled students to confront capitalism, war and authority. It also pushed France into the modern world. Soon, France returned to being normal, and the indomitable leader who had left, Charles de Gaulle, was removed in a year. “Today it is hard to imagine,” the *Times* writes, “a Western country completely engulfed by a social upheaval, but that is what happened in May 1968 in France.” The youth rage that roiled Paris in 1968 was worldwide, from anti-Vietnam war protests in the US to the anti-dictator movement in then Pakistan (that eventually ousted Ayub Khan).

Revolutions have evolutions. While the confrontational part dwindled, the Paris uprising engaged major French thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel de Certeau,

spectacularity, in which the lived life (the “real” life), he argued, has become a prisoner of representations and images. Student protesters used extracts from Debord’s writings as slogans and inspiration during the movement. Perhaps the most powerful thinking emerged from the sociologist Henre Lefebvre, whose tracts, translated as “Right to the City” and “Urban Revolution,” had a huge impact on thinking about spatial occupation in the city.

Revolutions have evolutions. The movement that ousted the Sheikh Hasina government found its clarity, not before or during, but in the aftermath: what began as a demand for equity in government job quotas has now become generally accepted as a call for social and institutional reforms. It is, and will remain, a work in progress.

At this juncture, some friends and colleagues have asked me to write on the state of architecture and the city. I was not convinced that this is a proper time to write about such a topic when the new government is busy tackling more critical issues around beleaguered normalcy, security and economy. And yet, I thought, if an outrage over disparity is the key theme of the movement, it’s not far-fetched to see it in a glaring display in the spaces of the city.

In Lefebvre’s rethinking of the city, it is a site for social justice, or lack of it. In his now famous tract “Right to the City,” Lefebvre describes how the threads of the neoliberal-commercial state set-up dictates and controls the uses and values of the spaces of the city. The end result is an increasing disenfranchisement



SOURCE: COURTESY
The streetscape of Dhaka as an installation at the 2019 Seoul Biennale. Conceived by Salahuddin Ahmed, organised by Bengal Institute.

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Guy Debord, Henre Lefebvre, and many others. Their work, then and after, became an intellectual guide for rethinking critical aspects of society in which the city was a key theme. De Certeau famously wrote about the “everyday” which was, until then, hardly the focus of an intellectual inquiry. Going beyond spectacles of popular culture or hegemonic constructs by political regimes, he brought focus to how individuals navigate the everyday, from life in the street to life mediated by the state.

Debord’s book *Society of the Spectacle*, published a year before the rebellion, was a damning critique of consumerist capitalism and mass production, and its techniques of

of the citizens. In the context of Dhaka, such a condition would mean how the spaces of the city, most particularly public and semi-public spaces, have been co-opted into commercial, exclusive or privatised enterprises. The outcome is the shrinkage of the public realm and alienation of citizens from their own spaces, an increasing marginalisation of the marginals, and the surrender of the state to a unilateral monetisation of land.

A counter-trope to that unilateralism, Lefebvre’s Right to the City included the right to inhabit the city, and the right to participate in the making of the city. American sociologist Edward Soja’s notion of “spatial justice” is appropriate here, which is “the fair and

flagrantly missing is housing, that is, shelter for people. It is very clear that we have done poorly in providing basic shelter to a large swath of people who actually need it. It is shocking that in a megapolis like Dhaka, there is no example of public, social or affordable housing whether through state or private initiatives.

Housing is poorly defined in our conversations. There is little discourse on the idea that housing is a social enterprise that works beyond provision of shelters. The goal of housing—creating social relations and a quality of life—works across all economic classes, and that the city and the state have an obligation to pursue that. It is no wonder that a vast population of Dhaka are generally disgruntled with where they are.

Oftentimes, what is touted as housing in Dhaka are apartment buildings on individual plots for the middle and upper middle classes—primarily ventures in real-estate speculation and profit-making. While such enterprises have been broadly sponsored by the state, through land preparedness, constructing infrastructure and utilities, and providing banking support, the lower- and limited-income groups have been completely ignored.

resources, while mass transit systems lagged behind. When it came, it was late. There should be more and vigorous resources for MRTs and other mass transit systems, such as BRTs, light rail, etc, over road infrastructure.

A city like Dhaka cannot remain hostage to a primitive bus system managed in a helter-skelter manner. Dhaka needs a master plan for bus routes with quality vehicles. There should be other smaller modules of mass transit, such as organised smaller vehicles serving secondary or neighbourhood roads and connecting to MRT/BRT stations. With Dhaka’s natural waterways, as we have decried for a long time, why can we not have a robust water-based transportation?

With the MRT’s arrival, there should be a walkability master plan for the city. How else will people avail the transit system? Consider the pedestrian aspect of the footpath: the domain of poor pedestrians, who constitute more than 40 percent of the people on the move in the city. In that case, we should have proper, wider and more decent footpaths, but no! Footpaths are chipped off to make wider roads, and whatever remains as a footpath is often a farce in walkability. No wonder people

the third issue of spatial justice in Dhaka.

In a city of around 22 million, there are few designated public spaces; there are no charters for safeguarding them as we have for a forest preserve, for example. Ambiguity prevails in giving definitions to public spaces: we know that Shahbag Chattar is not a *chattar* at all—it is a road intersection. Construction of new parks all over Dhaka has only yielded fenced-off areas. Parks, fields, lakesides, and canals have been appropriated and privatised. Riverbanks, which are natural ecological assets as well as a natural public realm, have been increasingly occupied by a state-private nexus.

Spatial equity, in this context, would mean the reclamation of riverbanks and all such public spaces, and their release to an occupation by the people. It would also mean a cataloguing of all public spaces in the city—fields, sidewalks, grounds, greens, ponds, leftover spaces, under-the-highway spaces—and creating a strict protocol for their preservation, and at the same time discovering new spaces and applying appropriate design to uplift them for access and use by all.

Revolutions have evolutions. Let us hope that they are for a public good.

The key changes needed in the education sector



EDUCATING EDUCATION
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We are living in a new Bangladesh where ideas really are bulletproof, thanks to the sacrifices—of lives, of sight, of comfort—made by countless students and general people in the July uprising, and to the sacrifices by the likes of Abrar Fahad and many others before that were made dreaming of such a revolution. In respect of their bravery and sacrifice, the rest of us must become louder in voicing ideas important for a discrimination-free, fair and passionate Bangladesh. In tribute to them, I will do what I have been trained to do, and outline what I think are the top priorities for our education sector in this rejuvenated and reform-promised Bangladesh.

Equity in primary education

If we imagine our education system as a pyramid, the wide base at the bottom would be the primary education level. The base needs to be strong, meaning that primary education should yield the required level of learning outcomes at each grade. Keeping in mind that different children face different realities and that privilege plays a strong role, the focus should be on providing quality primary education all across schools, madrasas, villages, and cities.

Equitable quality primary education would mean enabling students to read and write at the right level, regardless of their socioeconomic background. A decentralised



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

equitable widespread distribution of resources is key in this case. Also, we must invest in research on primary education to find out what works in improving learning outcomes at the primary level. Raising the bar of primary education will, in turn, pull up the quality of secondary education as well.

Investment in educational research

If we want a reliable education system, there is no alternative to research-driven and

they believe in—the lack of a system and the absence of institutionalisation allows room for this person-focused autonomy. No matter how knowledgeable a person may be, no national-level reform should be without a process.

Streamlined purpose of a university education

Contingent on being able to achieve equity in the primary-level learning outcomes, we may

consider encouraging students to choose either the academic route or the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)/diploma route from the college level. The choice of a route may depend on the students’ academic performance, personal ambition, or a combination of both. For this system to be implementable, we need to first strengthen primary education so that academic performance or ambition is not biased by privilege. Otherwise, we will end up with a faulty system where an underprivileged child, despite being academically talented, is forced to pursue the TVET or diploma route.

This is linked to a similar choice being offered at the university level. Those seeking a career in academia may choose the degree path, while others seeking different careers than academia, e.g., a civil service job, would pursue the diploma route.

Michael Spence’s job market signalling model tells a story of how degrees have become signals for employers, so much so that large numbers of students enrol in universities for merely that: the degree. Consequently, students pursue a university degree to find jobs when in reality, perhaps a college graduate degree could have been adequate for most jobs.

Ideally, university—the academic route—shouldn’t be for the masses. If we consider the purpose of the degree route to be the creation of a body of academics who will produce and reproduce knowledge, mass participation in university education defeats this purpose. Consider then, for example, that someone doesn’t want to go into academia, but just wants to acquire the skills needed for a job with a decent salary. This is where we need the industry and job market to realign their intake criteria. It is time for them, across the board, to re-evaluate what they want in their workers.

Ideas inspired by collective experiences

Steps should be taken to include social and charity work into the curriculum. For example, a requirement of passing a grade could be that a student has to serve their community—plant trees, serve at an orphanage, control traffic, clean public places, etc. Additionally, a restructuring of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment process should be implemented to rethink how we measure merit in this country. Committees involved in scholarship (Commonwealth, for example) granting processes controlled by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and other such bodies should be rebuilt because there are strong grounds for questioning the presence of some of the members who have sat on these selection boards for years.

Finally, creating political awareness should be prioritised through education among eligible and future voters across rural and urban Bangladesh through extensive campaigning. This political awareness is crucial if we are to change the norms and narratives around whom we elect as our leaders, which is an important responsibility and can no longer be hereditary or bought with promises, favours or gifts. We need to actively nudge voting behaviour towards realistic manifestos, candidates’ potential to implement plans, and their dedication and passion towards reforms in health, quality of life, and education. The new norm should be people before profit, not the other way around.

But all these ideas first need to be vetted through rigorous research and contextualised, decolonised analysis. The very first thing needed is to bring together a team of educational researchers—those with a track record of extensive research and training in the field—to brainstorm the future of education in Bangladesh.