

# No river, no dream

A conversation between Kongjian Yu and Kazi Khaleed Ashraf on rivers and the future of our cities.



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ASHRAF

Prominent architectural and urban thinker and the editor of the book *The Great Padma: The Epic River that Made the Bengal Delta*.



KONGJIAN YU

One of the world's leading landscape architects and ecological thinkers, who developed the radical idea of a "sponge city." He died in a tragic plane accident in the Amazon last year.

**Kazi Khaleed Ashraf (KKA):** River-realm or river-sphere, or, in a technical sense, river ecology, has been a recurring topic in our many conversations. River ecology is the domain of professionals and planners, but when we say river-realm, it invokes the social life—the people's way of looking at rivers and experiencing them. There may be four ways in which rivers evoke our imagination. One, recreating the natural process with the river as the generator. By that, I mean the river has water, it has a flow, and an important thing—it has sediment.

Two, rivers are now technologically mediated. By that, I mean how human installations such as dams, dykes, embankments, and channelisations, constructed for one reason or the other, with good or bad consequences, define development.

Three, rivers are part of the public realm and shared imagination. People go from the interior of the land to the edge of the river and experience something phenomenal—you can't minimise that. In Bangladesh, there are so many poems on that experience; I am sure in China as well, about being present at the magical edge of the river.

And four, how rivers, from a natural system, become a part of a constructed system. I think conflicts arise there, in the kind of constructed landscape we are pursuing. In Bangladesh, the village is a constructed landscape in which rivers play a significant role. But the way rivers are in villages is quite different from the way rivers have become in cities. It seems that in cities we have lost the spirit of the river. What has happened from the villages to the cities? In cities, rivers have basically become drainage channels—an ecological disaster—polluted and abused, controlled by technocratic processes.

As an architect, I am interested in the ethos of rivers. Although I am trained in the techniques and technology of

making buildings, I have increasingly developed an interest in rivers. In Bangladesh—perhaps in China and Vietnam, in all the deltaic places—an architect should first be trained in understanding rivers before handling buildings. Because the river in deltaic places is the basis of the "ground" condition. And without understanding the ground condition, how can you proceed? In Bangladesh, sometimes there is no ground condition—the water comes in and the land vanishes, and when the water goes away, land is recreated in a different way. There is no site without water in Bangladesh—it's all about water.

**Kongjian Yu (KY):** Bangladesh and China, particularly East Asia, Malaysia, and Indonesia—what we call South to South-East Asia—have a monsoon climate. Most of the countries in the monsoon regions are underdeveloped or developing. Now the whole world is talking about climate change, but we are always in a climate change. Climate change is nothing new for China, for Bangladesh, for India, for Malaysia. For the past 100 years, these underdeveloped countries have been colonised by what we call industrial civilisations. Those



A proposed new urban form for Dhaka, by Bengal Institute.

civilisations developed in European countries where the climate is quite stable or mild, I would say. When you look at the rain pattern in Europe, it is very mild and evenly distributed. When we—I mean countries that are in a similar monsoon climate zone—try to adopt that industrial civilisation, we will fail. That's why all Chinese

cities in the monsoon region in coastal areas—in fact, two-thirds of Chinese cities—suffer from urban flooding. And certainly, most of the cities in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are suffering from issues like flooding because we simply don't have our own climate-adaptive infrastructure. We used to have it once, as you mentioned, in the villages. Unfortunately, we don't have an urban modernism adapted to the river and the monsoon climate.

In 4,000 years of agriculture in China, we learned to adapt to the monsoon and river system. We have hundreds of cities along the Yellow River basin that follow strong adaptive patterns. I wrote a paper in 2008 on this adaptive landscape. A typical Chinese city has two layers of walls surrounding it. There is an inner wall, which is a square wall to protect the city during war. Then there is a bigger circular wall, which is 2 metres or 1 metre high, that adapts to the river. In the villages, we build houses on higher ground. We build terraces and raise them to 2 metres or 3 metres high. That's enough to adapt to the river. The most important thing is that we never

fight the river. There are a thousand years of agricultural practices in which villages, by opting for minimum intervention, use adaptive landscapes and demonstrate adaptive skills that include cut and fill to create dykes and ponds, and high ground for settlement. So, we had villages that worked with the river, lived with the river, but now we have cities that change the river. But we will ultimately fail because of the power of the river. The river is a force of nature; it is the most forceful of natural entities because of the monsoon climate.

I think it is important to understand why rivers in this region are different from rivers in European countries, where they are often predictable, stable, and controllable. When you think of the Thames, the Rhine, or the Seine—those rivers were fine until European countries also began experiencing dramatic change due to climate change. Now, it is monsoon-like there. That's why European countries will come back to Asian civilisation to learn how we adapt to the monsoon type of climate.

Today, because we have powerful concrete and steel industries, as in China, all the rivers have been channelised, all the way from the Himalayas to the Yangtze River to the ocean. The whole river is being constructed because of the power of industrial civilisation. I believe this kind of civilisation will fail. That's why, in my letter to the mayors of China about the big river, I said we are going to have another civilisation. How to free the river. Instead of constructing rivers, we make our cities spongy, adapting them to rivers.

**KKA:** I am very glad you mentioned the monsoon sphere; that's what distinguishes this part of Asia from other parts. The region is a child of the monsoon. The monsoon is really a water phenomenon, and the river is a part of that.

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## KEY POINTS

1. Stop fighting rivers; plan cities that adapt to water, flow, and sediment.
2. Replace grey infrastructure with nature-based, sponge-city solutions.
3. Treat rivers as public, cultural, and ecological commons—not drains.
4. Learn from village-scale, monsoon-adaptive landscapes and practices.
5. Reform education and policy to prioritise river-centred urbanism.

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