

Leather and footwear The next big export frontier for Bangladesh

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The export basket is still too heavy on raw hides and semi-processed products that earn little compared to finished shoes and bags. Countries like China, Vietnam and India capture the markets Bangladesh aims for because they mastered finishing, branding and consistency long ago.

Skill shortages remain a major bottleneck. The number of actual designers is low. Many who claim the title are technicians or hobbyists.

“When I am hiring someone whom I call a designer, he is not actually a designer,” Hossain said. “He is basically a technician or maybe a student out of passion.”

Financing is another hurdle. Entrepreneurs struggle with collateral demands, high interest rates, and banks that treat the sector as high risk. Foreign investment remains far below potential. Buyers abroad still associate Bangladesh with raw leather, not luxury finishing, which creates a credibility gap.

Even when manufacturers want to scale, the supply chain slows them down. Without proper backend finishing capabilities, much of the leather has to be sent to China for processing and then bought back at a higher price. That adds delays and uncertainty.

Local inspection is often impossible when shipments come from abroad, leaving room for inconsistency. “I have to buy my own leather at a higher price after it goes to China and comes back,” Hossain said.

Despite this, people like Sara Hossain

remain in the trade. Their factories employ hundreds. Her reflections on Bangladesh’s chaos are painfully relatable. She does not thrive in it. She developed routines to survive it.

Good shoes, she says, are defined by comfort, quality and proportion. If you forget you are wearing them after a day at the office, then they have done their job. The process is long and meticulous. A single pair takes around two to three hours.

Some things remain proudly manual, such as finishing touches, hand painted areas, and details that machines cannot replicate. Even with machinery, the final eye must be human. In her factory, it is still about 60 per cent manual and 40 per cent automated. “Handmade things have their own finishing, and that’s the uniqueness,” she said.

Hossain believes Bangladesh has not yet formed its own design language but is slowly getting there. She builds collections with trends in mind but adjusts for weather, local habits, and the demographic she is serving. Comfort testing happens in multiple rounds, and she relies on real users to point out issues.

Sourcing remains largely local at around ninety per cent, but limitations in processing force her to rely on other countries for the rest. Exporting is difficult because buyers want premium finishing but do not want to pay a premium price. Logistics issues and port delays add another layer of frustration.



Her vision for the future is simple but ambitious. Sara Hossain wants people to pick up local products and recognise the value without comparing them to foreign brands first. She wants longevity and sustainability to matter.

Under the right conditions with investment, policy support and infrastructure, Bangladesh’s leather and footwear sector can become a major growth driver. It already has the labour, the demand, the raw materials and the ambition. What it needs now is a cleaner system, better financing, improved compliance and a national commitment to value-added production. The foundation is here. The momentum is real. The question now is whether Bangladesh is willing to step fully into a future it has already begun building.

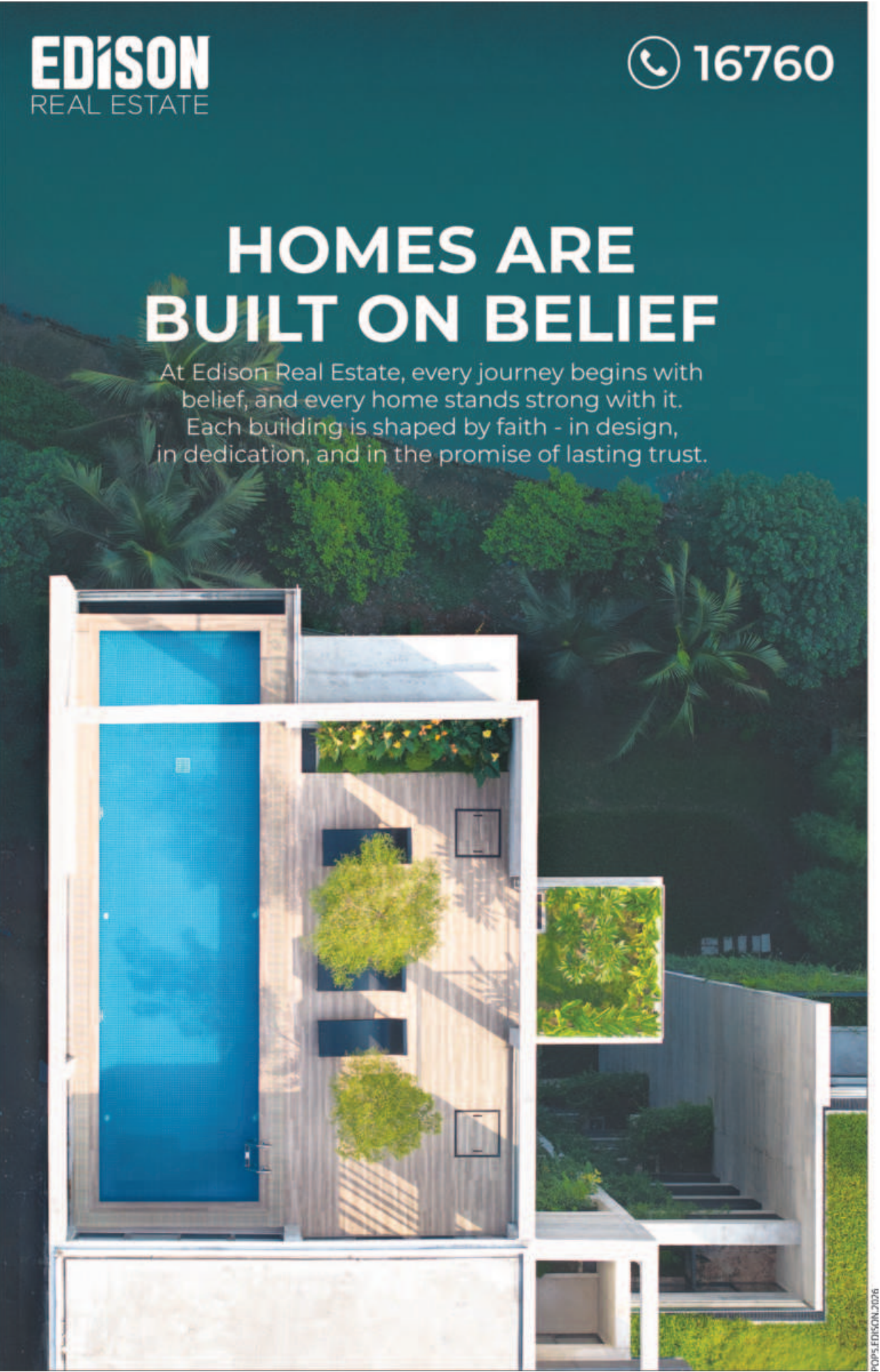
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