

AN URBAN BREAKING point we can no longer ignore



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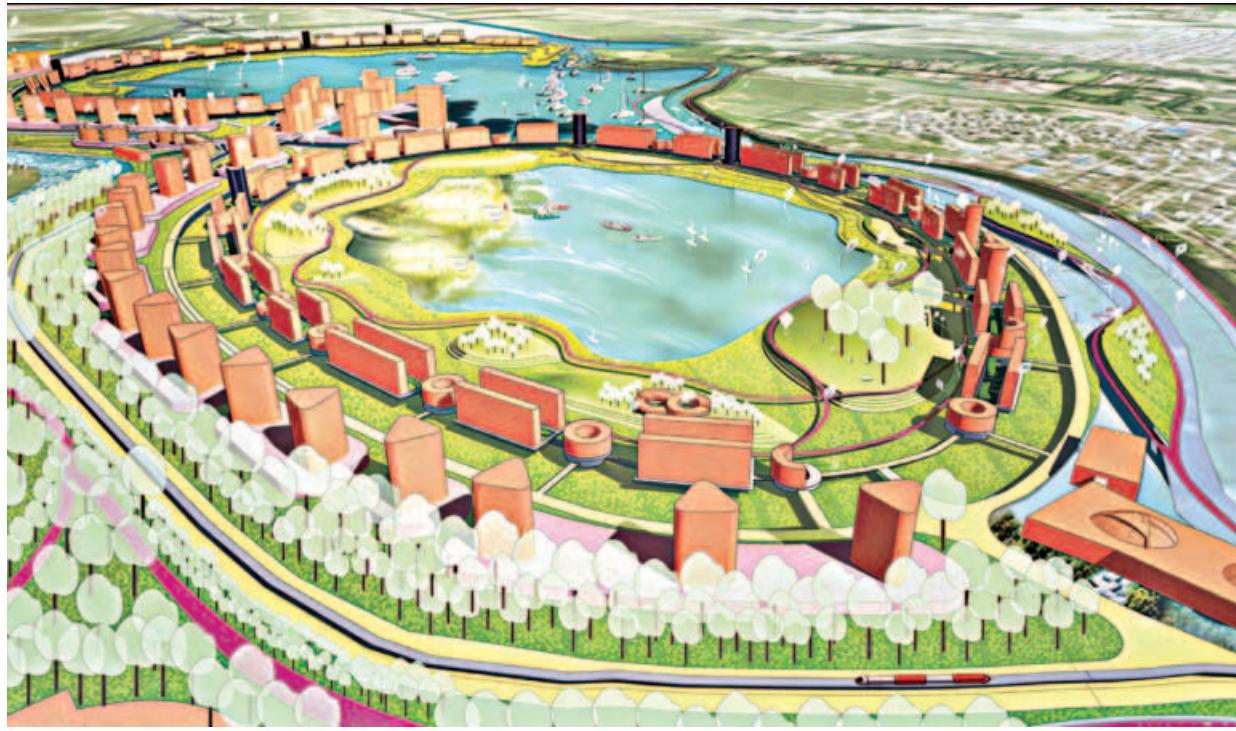
Bangladesh is currently grappling with the severe consequences of unplanned urbanisation. Key metropolitan hubs—including Dhaka, Chattogram, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Mymensingh, and Cumilla—have expanded in a manner that is increasingly unsustainable for both people and the environment. Consequently, Dhaka is now frequently ranked among the world's most unliveable and air-polluted cities. Fifty-five years after independence, and following decades of administrative inertia, a significant milestone has finally been reached: the approval of the National Urban Policy (NUP) 2025. This represents Bangladesh's first comprehensive framework designed to steer rapid urban growth towards a planned and sustainable future.

Despite the fact that nearly 40 percent of the population—nearly seven crore people—now live in urban centres, this critical policy was delayed for decades. With its implementation, the government now has a long-overdue mandate to rectify the structural failures of our cities and prioritise the well-being of its citizens over haphazard expansion. In



As cities continue to grow, market-driven housing alone cannot meet the needs of the majority.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN



A new urban form for Dhaka that works with canals and wetlands.

In many of these cities, unplanned housing and uncontrolled urbanisation are causing severe environmental degradation, requiring urgent and adequate preparedness.

Despite the existence of master plans and detailed area plans for major cities such as Dhaka and Chattogram, implementation rates remain extremely low. In many cities, the absence of master plans and the failure to enforce urban, building, construction, and environmental laws have resulted in serious soil, air, water, and noise pollution, placing urban liveability under grave threat. In this context, ensuring adequate and quality housing, services, and civic amenities for all has become a major challenge for urban authorities. As a result, many marginalised, low-income, and lower-middle-income residents are deprived of decent housing and urban services. At the same time, disparities in services and amenities between developed and underdeveloped urban areas are widening.

Spatial Planning of Bangladesh for Balanced and Sustainable Urbanisation

To ensure inclusive urban development, it is essential to prepare appropriate spatial plans, master plans, population density plans, and other planning instruments so that quality housing and civic services are available for all. Sustainable urbanisation and balanced development must be ensured through comprehensive planning frameworks. The Interim Government has recently formulated the National Spatial Planning Ordinance, 2025, which establishes a framework for comprehensive spatial planning, aiming for sustainable, balanced development through national, regional, and local spatial plans to guide land use,

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Bangladesh, about forty percent of people in cities live in slums or poor housing with inadequate infrastructure and services. This is especially true in large cities like Dhaka, where more than a third of the population lives in informal settlements that lack proper sanitation. This situation is the result of rapid, uncontrolled urban growth and a previous lack of urban planning.

Against this backdrop, another national parliamentary election is approaching, shaped by the July 2024 mass uprising that emerged from demands to eliminate discrimination across different strata of society. This context raises critical questions: what priorities should political parties place in their election manifestos,

what paradigm shifts should the upcoming government adopt to reverse current urbanisation trends towards sustainable and inclusive development, and how can the severe challenges faced by millions of urban residents living in slums or slum-like conditions be effectively addressed? These questions clearly warrant serious and focused attention from both the government and policymakers.

Dhaka is undeniably heading towards collapse, yet this reality is often overlooked as other urban areas across Bangladesh quietly follow the same path. Unplanned urban expansion, weak enforcement of planning laws, poor governance, and aggressive interventions by business

and corporate interests that distort urban laws and plans are the key drivers of unsustainable and destructive urban development in cities throughout the country.

Urbanisation, Liveability Challenges, and Planning Gaps

Due to the increasing rate of urbanisation and unplanned urban growth, liveability challenges in Bangladesh's cities are continuously intensifying. At the same time, urban areas make a highly significant contribution to the national economy. Bangladesh currently has around 530 urban centres, including city corporations, district towns, municipalities, and upazila towns.

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