WORLD CITIES DAY

We need to de-plot our urban imagination

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



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Early this year, I visited the Barbican Estate, a sprawling mixed-use housing complex in London's historic financial district. Developed on a site in Cripplegate devastated by German bombing during World War II, the Barbican emerged from a fundamental question facing the City of London Corporation as it contemplated rebuilding: What should be the basic unit of a city—buildings or people? More specifically, should the site be redeveloped for offices, or should it become a place where people could live as a community, with shared civic facilities and easy access to workplaces and public transportation?

The Barbican Estate became a landmark of post-war residential architecture in Britain, representing a modernist experiment in high-density community living. Rather than a collection of individual houses, it comprises approximately 2,000 residential units arranged in interconnected blocks, supported by an array of cultural, educational, religious, recreational and commercial facilities. Its crown jewel is a network of public spaces anchored by an urban lake, a cascading waterfall, and aquatic vegetation. Residents and visitors alike enjoy its tranquil beauty. The Barbican's vision is unmistakable: to create a thriving, compact, and relatively self-sufficient "city within a city" that remains integrated with the larger urban fabric.

As I strolled around the Barbican, I thought about Dhaka and other cities in Bangladesh. Why, in our small country of more than 18 crore people—with Greater Dhaka alone accommodating nearly four crore—don't we explore a similar model of urban development? Why don't we embrace large-scale, mixed-use, community-oriented housing estates as the basic units of residential development instead of clinging to the individualistic notion of the "plot"? The point, of course, is not to copy the Barbican but to adapt its underlying principles to our local sociocultural and economic context.

In our urban imagination, we suffer from a national obsession with the plot. We have calcified it into an icon of middle-class aspiration, an oasis in our dreamscape. We habitually plot the city with plots. We are an unapologetic plot nation. Our cities are a social cartography of plots. In the Dhaka region, Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) develops townships and allocates plots, while private developers market plots as prized assets. Three-katha, five-katha, seven-katha and ten-katha plots are embedded in our urban DNA as milestones of social mobility. Newspaper advertisements relentlessly manufacture the mythology that owning a plot—on which one's private Taj Mahal will rise—is the epitome of wealth creation.

It is time to reimagine our urban practices by moving away from plot-based housing, a model that is impractical, even disastrous, for a land-scarce country, fundamentally incompatible with its staggering population-to-land ratio. If we are to house a large urban population on limited land, we must question the assumption that the individual plot should remain the basic unit of urban development.

The theme of this year's World Cities Day, "Regenerating the City: Adequate Housing for All", should prompt us to reconsider our approach. Housing insecurity is closely connected to economic precarity, social inequality, generational tensions, and the growing perception that urban resources and opportunities are rigged in favour of the wealthy and powerful. Unless we learn quickly how to accommodate large numbers of people on limited land, we risk perpetuating social discontent.

Consider Dhaka. According to the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), the capital needs approximately 120,000 new housing units annually to accommodate its growing population. Yet the formal housing sector falls far short of this demand. A 2017 study by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development estimated that the private sector supplied approximately 25,000 units annually, while the public sector's contribution was minimal. The resulting shortfall forces many residents, particularly low- and middle-income households, to rely on informal settlements, shared accommodation, and other arrangements that often lack adequate services and secure tenure.



A view of Old Dhaka from Nagar Bhaban on July 16, 2026. FILE PHOTO: STAR

That low-density, plot-based urbanisation is a misguided response is perhaps best illustrated by Purbachal, the so-called East Dhaka. This 6,200-acre township was laid out across extensive agricultural lands and ecologically sensitive floodplains, yielding approximately 26,000 residential plots of various sizes. About three decades ago, Rajuk planned this satellite township, and around 2008, it began selling plots through a lottery to people from various professions. The expectation was that houses would spring up quickly, easing Dhaka's population pressure—a planned city to the east. But that never happened.

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But that never happened. Most buyers treated their plots as investment properties rather than places to live. They kept their primary residences in Dhaka proper, while their Purbachal plots served as financial assets. Consequently, they had little incentive to build. Leaving the land vacant posed no problem; its value would keep rising.

Today, Purbachal remains largely barren. Beyond its predatory land acquisition practices and staggering ecological insensitivity, the project suffered from two fundamental planning failures. First, access to plot ownership—although I question plot-based planning itself—should have been restricted to first-time homebuilders committed to constructing their homes promptly to meet an immediate housing need. Second, rather than subdividing land into individual plots, the government should have pursued large-scale, community-based and cooperative housing through public-private partnerships.

Under such a model, the public sector would provide utilities and urban services and select private-sector partners to develop housing estates offering a range of options, from affordable to luxury. Financing and profits would be shared through a carefully designed arrangement. An effective public oversight regime would ensure that the project did more than maximise private returns: it would become a community-oriented venture that benefited all stakeholders. This is one approach through which countries facing severe land constraints can address their housing challenges.

But Purbachal presents another, equally troubling problem. Imagine "East Dhaka" when fully developed: a forest of cubical buildings separated by mandatory setbacks, creating countless narrow, dark, poorly ventilated, and unusable spaces that compromise residents' privacy. Anyone who has lived in a Dhaka apartment building knows how unhygienic and dingy these spaces can become. Deprived of adequate sunlight and ventilation, they can become breeding grounds for disease and convenient dumping grounds for rubbish thrown from apartment windows above.

By consolidating, say, 200 five-katha plots, we could eliminate much of the redundant space between individual buildings while accommodating more apartments and providing residents with shared green spaces and community facilities. This would offer a healthier, more community-oriented approach to urban living—one increasingly embraced by cities around the world.

Instead of plot-centric housing initiatives, Bangladesh should look to alternatives such as Singapore's housing-estate model. In a country with limited land, Singapore has developed integrated residential environments capable of accommodating a large urban population. More than 80 percent of Singapore's resident population lives in flats built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which has developed an extensive network of housing estates since the 1960s. These estates function as integrated neighbourhoods, with schools, supermarkets, food courts, healthcare facilities, recreational amenities, and parks. Residents can walk to many everyday destinations rather than drive their children to school or travel long distances to access healthcare.

Bangladesh's experience over the past three decades, during which its urban population has grown dramatically, offers several lessons. Housing must be treated as a national system, informed by the country's daunting population-to-land ratio and fragile ecological conditions. Public-private partnerships can help foster a transparent, accountable framework for developing context-specific housing solutions. The government must ensure fairness in land acquisition and allocation, infrastructure provision, housing finance, and long-term management, while the public sector provides design excellence. Housing policy must not be reduced to the subdivision and sale of residential plots.

In The Right to the City (1968), French sociologist Henri Lefebvre wrote, "Housing does not necessarily become a public service. It surfaces into social consciousness as a right." If housing is an inalienable right, what kind of housing would be worthy of that right? The word "adequate" in this year's World Cities Day theme raises a broader question about what adequacy means. The plot as a unit of residential development is incompatible with the goal of adequate housing for all. We need to de-plot our imagination of future growth.

The secretariat relocation plan should open up Dhaka

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND



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When we pass through Farmgate, one of the busiest junctions in Dhaka, the thought of farming rarely crosses our minds. As commuters, we think of schools, colleges, cinema halls, shopping hubs, buses or newspaper offices. The recent debate over Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University (SAU) has suddenly evoked memories of a vanished landscape that used to have agricultural facilities in its once urban fringe. In 1906, the British-Indian provincial government of Bengal established an agriculture department. Roughly 1,000 acres of farmland was allocated in what is now Manipuri Para. The entrance to the agricultural research laboratory—Khamarbari—established in 1909 was named Farmgate. The Bengal Agricultural Institute was established nearby in 1938, which was later christened as SAU in 2001. The farmland acquired new neighbours in the course of time as Dhaka, the living organism that grew out of the Buriganga River, extended its tentacles to hold onto as much as possible to support its burgeoning populace.

Dhaka kept on growing, repeatedly turning yesterday's outskirts into today's centre. The flood-prone wetlands in the east and the west caused Dhaka to claim the relatively higher land of the north. Today, agricultural land, administrative precincts, residential zones, and military installations share a metropolitan space, exceeding the purposes for which those estates were originally assembled.

When Dhaka became the second capital, the administrative complex was commissioned in 1959 to house the provincial assembly. Architect Muzharul Islam invited Louis I Kahn, his professor from Yale University, to design the newly commissioned administrative complex. The Ayub Khan government acquired land for Kahn's design in 1961. The first phase focused on the assembly hall, the adjacent plazas, an artificial lake, and the MP hostels. In 1963, the plan for the secretariat was proposed and later incorporated into the 1973 plan. The parliamentary complex was finished in 1982, but the secretariat remained incomplete.

Successive governments have talked about relocating the secretariat from its current location to the land adjacent to the parliamentary complex. The empty field, meanwhile, became popular for seasonal fairs. The installation of the convention hall transformed the area into a car park. On paper, this land belonged to the agricultural university. SAU requested the return of the land for research purposes after the trade fair ground was relocated to Purbachal. The field fields competing purposes into confrontation. Students protested the government's decision to consolidate its administrative units. Both groups are claiming to represent the public interest. Meanwhile, as citizens trying to cross the city, we have an interest that extends beyond either boundary.

Transplanting the administrative heart to the parliamentary zone can understandably cause panic because of the potential heavy inflow of traffic in an already congested locality. While the government and the SAU authorities battle over the land ownership, citizen concerns remain present. From an administrative perspective, ministries spread across different premises are currently facing coordination difficulties. Bringing offices together may improve working relationships, accommodation and access to shared facilities. Proximity to parliament will make sure that the policymakers and the bureaucratic enablers work in tandem.



Students of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University (SAU), in protest of the government's plan to relocate the secretariat to the old trade fair ground in Dhaka's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area, vandalised structures being built for two separate fairs, on October 28, 2026. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Conversely, SAU's objection merits attention. Agricultural education requires field study, and experiments may depend on soil conditions, irrigation, seasonal continuity and regular supervision. But the university must also be willing to ask whether agricultural education requires every activity to remain in central Dhaka. The answer can be found in the way the research components of Khamarbari were moved to Joydebpur (Gazipur) in 1966, leading to the birth of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) in 1976. The broader agricultural estate associated with Farmgate and Sher-e-Bangla Nagar could be considered through the same functional approach. While land-intensive research, training and demonstration activities could move to suitable locations outside the congested core, agricultural policy and appropriate departmental headquarters could be brought together with the agriculture ministry within the proposed secretariat complex.

The current ownership dispute should not have placed the students in the spotlight. The university authorities must resolve the issue through published records and legal process. The raw sentiment of students deserves patient hearing. The government should provide a credible process before confrontation becomes the principal language of negotiation.

The scrutiny applied to the university location must extend to the nearby old airport in Tejgaon. The military repurposed the site after civilian airport operations relocated to Kurmitola. Questions already arise regarding the functions that necessitate this central location, the amount of land required, and the feasibility of accommodating civilian connectivity alongside them. The eastern and western corridors of the city are virtually disconnected. A new secretariat would make access to Sher-e-Bangla Nagar an even more consequential metropolitan question. The old airport can provide a major link.

The idea was explored by the Bangladesh Bridge Authority, who considered the construction of a tunnel beneath the old airport between the Jahangir Gate side and Rokeya Sarani at Agargaon. The report appeared less favourable because of financial assumptions and perceptions of tolls. But with the renewed interest in the administrative complex, the tunnel project could be revisited. The objective of the underpass, tunnel, overpass or improved perimeter should focus on people's commute. MRT access, feeder buses, staff transport and shaded, accessible walking routes must be integral to the plan. The proposed provision for 3,800 parked vehicles for the secretariat makes it particularly important to ask how employees and visitors who don't travel by private car will reach the complex.

The university's relocation should add any released land to the nearby greenspace of Chandrima Udyan. Dhaka needs connected green space and safe pedestrian routes and places where people can gather. The newly planned ministry buildings should employ landscaped space to add to the much-needed greenery.

We should take advantage of the secretariat relocation proposal to intelligently reorganise this part of Dhaka. Planned growth can ensure that agriculture has the opportunity to expand beyond the congested core. It can allow administration to be streamlined and better coordinated. And the redesign of public space could allow citizens to gain greater connections and better access to it. Achieving that outcome requires each institution to accept change and the government to make its promises concrete before asking others to move.

Farmgate's name can preserve the memory of a farm even as agriculture finds a more expansive future elsewhere. The move will require a lot of spatial and conceptual adjustments. An institution must accommodate Dhaka, and Dhaka must accommodate its people.