



**POLITICS IN URBAN DESIGN
AND DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF
POST-COLONIAL DHAKA**

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Being the Institute of Architects Bangladesh- IAB's Best Award (Research & Publication Category) winning publication in 2020, this book was expected to be densely informative and the way authors describe politics in urban development with different stages of the historical evidence deserves appreciation for their keen observation. The book presents a new way of interpreting urban design and development. The book eradicates numerous previous misconceptions and opened new ideas of interpretation for future discourses on the issue. Congratulations to the principal author Prof. Dr. Qazi Azizul Mowla and co-author Sonya Afrin, for their seminal contribution on Dhaka's urban design and development.

First of all, authors identify changing political forces, both from social and economic perspectives, with historical chronology. Various previous scholarly reviews were discussed in this regard that have reexamined factors like socio-political logic of space; expressive architecture forms, social structure, dwellers' lifestyles and experiences, economic and cultural drive, and the forces behind city shaping processes. Phenomenological traces underlying connections between intangible human experiences with the built environment over a given topography are examined. Moreover, authors have tried to exert that cities are sustained in multifunctional settings, while politics itself is a socio-economic construct. They have attempted to identify, how politics plays a role in the morphological transformation of features like plazas, squares, streets, parks, landscape, landscape sculptures, monuments, and built form as a whole – which is the visible part of the city. They have endeavored to show how political ideology has an impact on urban morphology citing examples from cities around the world. For instance, democratic systems try to reflect public aspirations and ideally do not monopolize any extravagance, while autocratic government tries to display monumentality. Autocratic and Socialist governments prefer regimental Brutalism (Nazi Germany, Communist China, fortified Israel), whereas Capitalism displays gimmickry and vertical competitions of economic progress with power clashes. (i.e. Ground Zero project, New York). In their criticism, the authors discuss different cities, like Minsk (Belarus), Tirana (Albania), Ankara (Turkey) and Baghdad (Iraq); all these cases show how politics have themselves attempted to eradicate the past and present to establish their political statements.

In order to lay out the context, this book has set the historical chronology beginning in the Mughal period. According to the authors, the neighborhood pattern (Mahollah) was the core unit-form of Dhaka's urban fabric. In this transformation, local craftsmen and traders have also collaborated giving a pluralistic culture along with a new public open space concept (Chawk). Once stability was

achieved after the 1660's; the Mughal established roads, bridge networks, river-forts and likewise around Dhaka; while Ramna hosted gardens, garden-houses with burial places out of that busy kernel over an area named Maholla Chistia and Maholla Sujatpur. These were more secular in nature.

After the English East India Company took over in 1757, Dhaka lost its capital status. But the authors argue that, as a city, its glory or importance has never faded. Discrimination of eastern Bengal has been threefold: lack of education, religious segregation, and economic looting. After the Sepoy mutiny in 1858, the British consolidated their imperial rule where authors identified two most significant incidents: the first one is related to the economy (the establishing of the Dhaka Bank in 1864); the second one being relevant mainly in terms of transportation (Fulbaria railway station in 1885). The motto was something else: area demarcation of colonist and colonized. A civil servant township for middle class local clerks emerged, named Wari, near colonial civil lines. Two urban contexts of Dhaka are discussed: Johnson road as civic line, and Ramna area as civil station. At the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905, Ramna Bagh-e-Badshahi of Mughals was converted into a civil station. Consequently, Dhaka's cityscape received massive structures during this time, like Curzon hall (Community Centre), Old High Court Building (Viceroy's House) and Secretariat (DMCH) The annulment of the partition in 1911 eventually established Dhaka University as a compensation for the deprived people (mostly Muslims) of eastern Bengal. Partition of India in 1947 had an effect on the ethno-religious and demographic composition of the city. Dhaka's Mirpur and Mohammadpur areas rehabilitated the refugees from northern Indian states.

During Pakistan period, Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Banani areas were developed to host retiring neo- aristocrats. After the partition, Motijheel was developed as the CBD. Driven by religious dogma, Baitul Mukkarram mosque, New market, (Katra layout/Sok pattern) and New Supreme Court Building came into being. Such an eyewash development included Ayubnagar (today's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar) as the second capital.

The authors admit that Mughal, British and Pakistani rulers had their own agenda and visions including political interests to establish their wills over the city fabric. But Dhaka's point of frustration is the way post-independence scenario deteriorated due to malpractice and corruption. Ramna Green, founded in Mughal era, having undergone English rule and remained focal point during the Pakistan period, represented a perfect battlefield for power politics. Historically, it was a great point of interest and

subject to suppression from every direction; both by government and non-government authorities. Hotel Intercontinental, BIRDEM, BAR Council, Shishu Academy, and IEB were able to take their shares, while Shishu Park and RHD were not lucky enough and had to move elsewhere, a decision driven by power-oriented politics. The most influential organization was PWD, which allocated lands to the National Tennis Federation, Children's (Shishu) Park by Porjaton Corporation (Tourism Board), Radio Bangladesh, and Hotel Intercontinental, by encroaching Ramna with political patronizing. For example, JATIC grabbed nearly 0.90 acres of land from DU. Religious intuitions like Kakrail mosque, Ramna Kali temple, Sikh temple and Greek tombs are remaining in the area despite having no dedicated communities to serve. Also, the spot where the Pakistani army surrendered has faded. In contrast, Independence Tower (Shwadhinota Stambha) is supposed to revive the spirit, but it eventually seems an abrupt element for the overall context. Its hard concrete surface seems unnecessary from the authors' opinion, a scar on the lungs of the city. Chummery house leased to an International NGO while Jamuna and Shugandha, the former colonial bungalows, underwent changes that hampered the authenticity and integrity of their context.

The latter situation was not confined to the Ramna area. Rather, it has spread all over the Government's properties in the city. President Zia's tomb is a light intervention but brought to limelight for political debate. But NAM flats or the China-Bangladesh friendship International Convention Center (place for secretariat in approved design phase), or the boundary wall of Parliament (Shangshad) destroying the concept of 'peoples place' by master architect Louis Kahn, have not been debated. Initially, the southern Plaza in this complex was supposed to be a breathing space for city dwellers, but the reality is quite the opposite: restricted access and engulfed by fences. The Defense Ministry occupies Tejgaon Old Airport and Peelkhana HQ, which also could serve as an accessible space for the general public in a congested city like Dhaka. On contrary, Dhaka City Corporation's 8 parks and 6 playgrounds have encroached illegally, and the authorities have remained silent. After 1975, the cold war effect shifted Bangladesh towards the American pole and, after the fall of Soviet era, Dhaka bloomed with the capitalist blessings towards its north, but taking a high toll: ruining its ecosystem and increasing global warming due to haphazard, unplanned growth, vicious impact of Globalization. Urban planning has acted as a 'top-down' process for Dhaka, was never implemented properly, and was deliberately modified to facilitate the 'powerful' people who control land acquisition decisions. Custodians, concerned authorities, and entities eased their way for such mischief. Apparently, there seems to be some shortcomings in

its inbuilt safety mechanisms, underpinning Dhaka's inability to resist unplanned interventions.

To understand the context properly; authors have selected 37 buildings to analyze morphological transformation and reveal political influence/intervention behind each built form. They segregated Ramna area into 3 zones: core (20 buildings), buffer (10 buildings) and periphery (remaining 7 buildings). Three political factors have decided the fate of Ramna: leaders' decisions, demand of the elite groups, and powerful professionals' (engineers and builders) corruptions. The authors meticulously identified 9 historical stages in the greater Ramna area dating from the late 18th century, and their examples included 10 distinct architectural styles, which enriched the contents of the book.

This book's concern was not to seek for 'weal and woe', rather to induce inquiries regarding the facts and evidence from a neutral point of view. Such sort of thought-provoking writing has rarely been introduced in the pedagogy before. I recommend that it could be included in the academic curriculum for urban design study. The principal author, Prof. Mowla, is a referent for establishing architecture schools and developing their curricula throughout Bangladesh, with vast experience in teaching and research; thus his contribution in such 'good read' really did not surprise me at all, as it was expected. Prof. Mowla, being a veteran academician and experienced urban design professional, could have dealt in this book a bit more with urban planning issues. From my observation, one thing is still missing i. e. the contribution of Patrick Geddes and his 'conservative surgery', the concept which could be discussed in a nutshell to correlate the main perception of the book. Otherwise, it is a must-read book, and I am expecting such qualified books in upcoming days from the authors.