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THE ANCESTRAL VOICE: Kahn in Dhaka
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The monument Architecture of Louis Kahn in Dhaka is deeply imbued with elements of Archaic civilisations, more than just the product of climate, programme or the tradition of the land receiving it. It shows the lost tremendousness of Architecture, of its etymon, and its mythopoeic source. This work is to be regarded as the value statement of great civilisation lost to time.

The new work in Dhaka is seen to displace the present. Set on the Gangetic delta where great Architectural epochs of Bengal were played out, its attitude and forms release the romantic power of restoration. The new forms are subtly imported as engrams from the ancestral minds of man from Rome, Mycenae, Mesopotamia and the Indus. They are examples of their creator's belief that there is no such thing as primitive man, only primitive resources, because the "idea" is constant

In Kahn's Bangladeshi work one is constantly reminded of primitivist values. The work cuts through a deep strata of centralised tradition of the ancients. Kahn turns to the Mughals in India for his often repeated geometry of arches and cylinders. The "octagon" of the national assembly is richly associative. Kahn has also drawn from his Islamic religious tradition of "Madrasa". Madrasa is intensely social in spatial disposition because man's disparate institutions are gathered around a common focus. Typologically akin to Madrasa is the composition of the national assembly Building.

In a surrealistic sunset, in the days' dying dim light on unpeopled plaza near the assembly building our mind may hallucinate to the Mughal space and time that are no more. The monumentality of Kahn's project decibels the reminiscent air with the prodigious dimensions of mosques, empires and regal horses without pageantry. The horses are lost because the empire is gone. Only the kites and eagles flying overhead remember.

The brick architecture is recalled by Kahn in the surrounding building of the citadel. Arches are reinstated because the idea and the construction of the arch happened first near Baghdad, not in Rome. An arch is an Arab invention. Brick aesthetics originated in the Indus Valley civilisation, in the Mohenjodaro and in Harappa. Brick was also used in Vedic alters. Alexander the Great and Plotinus have paid respect to the Indian subcontinent. It is also on a brick pedestal that the Bengali barber continues to perfect his craft with the customer. Brick in Bengal is connotative and pervasive. The terra-cotta Harappan dancing figure and the wings of kites remember this pervasive brick culture of Bengal.

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VOLUME

02

ISSUE 01

CONTENTS

- 01 THE ANCESTRAL VOICE
- 03 IN SEARCH OF HUMAN HABITAT
- 04 ARCHITECTURE & SOCIETY
- 06 ARCHITECTURE & SOCIETY
- 08 ESSENCE OF INDIAN ARCHITECTURE
- 12 REGIONALISM Vs. COSMOPOLITANISM
- 16 ARCHITECTURE IN BANGLADESH & THE STATE
- 19 ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY
- 20 BANGLADESHI URBAN IMAGE
- 22 BROADENING THE PARADIGM
- 24 SOCIETY AND SYNCRETISM
- 27 KHANAR BACHAN

- 2 EARTH *Communique* ■ 2 EARTH *Editorial*
- 3 EARTH *Energy* ■ 5 EARTH *Construction*
- 7 EARTH *Environment* ■ 10 EARTH *Workshop*
- 11 EARTH *Book Review* ■ 13 EARTH *Environment*
- 14 EARTH *Colloquy* ■ 14 EARTH *Profile*
- 17 EARTH *Courses* ■ 18 EARTH *Project Review*
- 18 EARTH *Research* ■ 21 EARTH *Heritage*
- 28 EARTH *Calendar*

Conception of Making

Saif-ul- Haq

The relationship of urban house form to culture in Bangladesh is peculiar. While houses relate to the morphology imposed by British, they do not satisfy cultural values. Yet these forms, popularly known as 'flats' are cropping up in exuberant numbers and is now the major form of urban housing. In fact, today, 'flats' may well be equated with the popular image of an urban structure. Bangladesh having a predominantly Muslim population does not have pronounced social or religious class distinction. Instead, it has an apparent economic stratification. Before colonisation by the British (mid 18c to mid 20c) there were essentially two economic classes and two house types. Those which belonged to the rich and those which belong to the working class.

The houses belonging to the affluent section was in essence, a one or two storied courtyard type dwelling set in a very large compound with rooms opening inwards into the courtyards. The number of courtyards, the richness of materials, and the exquisiteness of detailing were the index of the owner's wealth. On the other hand, the working class of craftsman and artisans built a mixed-use type of structure. This had shop/workshop in the front and living quarters behind. Naturally they preferred the street and built their structures opening right into it. This phenomenon gave rise to a 'row' type of settlement with houses all squeezed together and elongated in one direction. These shared common side walls and everyone had a street frontage, therefore the subdivisions were done along the side perpendicular to the road resulting in very thin and long houses. These may be seen even today in some old parts of Dhaka city.

Macaulay's minute of 1835 which launched English education and knowledge in India opened the way for the growth of the westernised Indian middle class. Its object was imparting 'knowledge to the native population'—so that it was—"to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons. Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, in morals and intellects' who will help govern in the interest of the British. They would be engaged in Government offices and commerce, and would help Europeans in the development of India's resources (for their benefit) and increase the demand by the Indians for the consumption of British goods.

This middle class, which was a totally new concept in the Indian society, rapidly developed into a hybrid class which tried to imitate all that was British but at the same time could not shake off their instinctive indigenous characteristics. They differed from the English middle class in the sense that while the British were engaged in trade and industry, the Indian middle class belonged to the learned society. The British policy

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of accepting these people to higher echelons depended on the extent of their attaining British characteristics. This intentional attitude changed the concept of modernisation which became confused with westernization. Therefore, people equated rise in the standard of living with increasing acquisition of British attitudes which understandably gave to an urban preference.

The daughter of a 'foreign-returned' middle-class FRCS doctor, Begum Shaista Ikramullah's description of their living style in Lilloah, Calcutta in 1915 explains the attitude of these people. "We had a very nice house and a really lovely garden,..... Our house,.... was furnished to look exactly like an English house. In the drawing room there were heavy sofas.... lace curtains, gleaming brass and silver and knickknacks displayed in cabinets, the dining room had a fairly massive side-board.... displaying a love of heavy silver. The hall and the study were furnished in the typical English style of the time...., We had afternoon tea with hot buttered toast and even at other meals we ate what was called 'English food'"

The most significant change in house-form from the existing local house type was the shift to the 'extrovert' type of house which was a courtyard-less, outward facing one or two storied 'bungalow'. This was a single family residential quarter of a mixed Indo-European style. Bungalow usually implies a free-standing one or two storied dwelling placed in the centre of a very large compound with a formal entry in the centre, usually through a porch. There was a big garden in the front, very formally maintained by local (native?) gardeners and quite a number of servants' quarters at the back. The kitchen was a detached structure at the back connected to the main house by a covered passageway.

This change in house-form also involved a change in location. The residential areas moved from the traditional city into the suburbs to what became known as the 'civil lines'. This was initially a totally British area, but gradually the local people, specially those who associated with the foreign rulers moved out their traditional areas to similar civil lines, or 'model towns' as they were subsequently called. This is an understandable feature in the 'dominance-dependence' relationship. The segregation of the city minimised contact between the people and car was taken to project the image of a 'civilised' way of life versus the 'uncivilised' local customs.

Towards the end of the British rule, one generation of the 'custom-made' middle class were already in their retirement age. The colonial powers never followed any policy of relocating these people in their former areas of residence and they too could not go back to the society which contradicted with their acquired 'hybrid' attitudes. Therefore,



a housing for them had to be created and so the concept of 'model towns' came into being. This was a geometrical subdivision of big tract of land into roads and plots. The retired people settled there and built their houses predictably in the bungalow pattern. Thus the concept of house being culture-specific became non-existent in the urban areas.

In this manner, urban residential areas were mainly built by the retired government officials who were given a plot of land and opportunity of availing loan facilities for constructing houses. Besides that, government also built 'quarters' to house its employees. Thus the people who were coming from indigenous environment were exposed to the house types preferred by their colonisers. When they were given the opportunity to build for themselves, they followed the alien pattern which they had been trained to regard as 'superior'. They started building houses based on the bungalow form and layout (even when it was their wives and not the head-cook who were in their far away kitchen). The house was placed squarely in the centre of the plot, formal lawn in the front, service in the back. Sometimes a Bern was also included to facilitate chicken or cow rearing. Thus the traditional image of the house was totally replaced with a different form.

Post-war housing situations in the western world coincided with the post-colonial requirements of making accommodation for scores of people who were turning up in the cities for government employment. Thus developed the concept of a 'Housing Estate' with linear blocks of multi-storied walk-up houses popularly known as flats. These were four or five storied walk-up apartment buildings having central staircases with apartments leading off to the two sides. Each apartment is a self-contained unit which corresponds to the 'extrovert' character of the bungalow. Services like kitchens, servant's rooms etc. are all built within the apartment area. The first generation of flats were designed by two British architects, E.C. Hicks and R. McConnel. The site of their housing scheme was in the area called Azimpur in Dhaka.

When compared with traditional house, flats are found to have many differences, the more significant of them are :

a) Loss of privacy. It is a problem specially for conservative Muslim families, more pronounced due to common entries and higher densities;

- b) Small floor areas;
- c) Lack of outdoor space. This was hardly compensated by tiny balconies;
- d) No one takes care of the common areas like the stairways, lobbies, driveways etc. which become derelict;
- e) It is difficult for older people and children to climb stairs.

On the other hand, flats had the same connotations of urbanisation/westernised as had the bungalow. In a metaphorical sense, it was the 'bungalow' of the financially deficient person. It is hardly surprising to note that despite its obvious disadvantages, flats were slowly becoming the image of the urban residential buildings.

Gradually inflation increased and many people could no longer afford to build individual houses in their plots as it usually required most of his savings. Thus developed the trend of making two houses, one top of the other (flat?)- one for living in and another for renting out. The growing urban population and the acute shortage of housing gradually made it into a very promising idea. Independence in 1971 brought fort an unprecedented growth of urban population because of a rapid rise of commercial enterprise, administrative activities and fresh opportunity. Pressure on urban land and services demanded a fresh approach to the problem. Unfortunately, age-old ideas were carried forth to the new country and some development strategies were undertaken.

Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripaksha did nothing more than what it had been doing as Dhaka Improvement Trust. For developing housing, it acquired vast tracts of land and divided it into roads and rectangular plots and called them model towns like the British did. The only difference was that the plot sizes were smaller- their most *significant* contribution in combating the population pressure. Meanwhile, requirements drastically changed. The people could no longer consider single or two storied houses. Loan from the House Building Finance Corporation, which gave loans only to the people who had land, helped but was not enough for the purpose. Therefore, people tried other means- they either took additional loans from commercial banks or took 'advance' from the rent of 'would-be' tenants. The housing shortfall ensured the abundance of people willing to pay down payment, so that they could rent the apartment when it was finished. This encouraged land owners or rather 'plot owners' to build as many flats as they could in their hand. Since the land distribution is to individuals in urban areas, and since these individuals are more prone to build tenement houses, it follows that they built in the only model they know- the flat. The prevailing building code specifies only the setback criteria and a certain height about four or five stories high. Therefore, the people were free to build at least five to ten flats in their plots. The houses fill the plots and leave only about four feet of unusable land at the two sides which made a monotonous street facade.

Some developers, taking the advantage of the acute urban housing shortage and realising the

fact that the wage earners from the Middle East and the Gulf countries with their confused idea of modernisation (westernization) would be looking for urban houses, quickly built houses for sale. Although these developers, in most cases, were not constrained by small plot sizes, yet they never undertook any study or research in any other house type. There could be various reasons for this.

- a. They were in too much hurry to build and sell and so did not have any time to experiment.
- b. They never cared about developing a new morphology.
- c. Their consultants did not feel the urge to develop and test new ideas and theories.
- d. They were quick and perhaps correct in realising that the people who bought their houses cared more about their identity as an urban dweller. Since flats have now become the symbol of urban life, they would be reluctant to accept anything different, least they fail to become urban.

The present day image of the Middle class housing is very much the same all over the country. Four to five storied houses set in a plot with only about a few feet of space left in-between. Nearly all the houses look unfinished with reinforcing bars sticking out vertically from the top. The owners have the intentions of building up to at least five stories but do not have the funds to do so. Therefore he builds as much as he possibly can with all his resources, but still builds a foundation for five stories and leaves the sticking reinforcements as a legacy to his children.

Government housing, company housing, developer housing etc. are numerous housing projects found nowadays besides private developments. Remarkably, they all embody the same morphology. It can therefore be assumed that the people have a general tendency to follow established or built themes. The majority still perceives the indigenous as backward and undesirable and hindrance to his attempts of achieving modernity. Many architects have argued for the development of courtyard houses which can attain densities similar to the existing ones. In spite of these, architects of Bangladesh have failed to come up with different and perhaps better models. Even if they have had, they were too weak to exert any influence on its acceptance by the society. Market forces today have also brought the tall apartment buildings in the scene, but these feature is too recent to have any impact.

As the flat typology developed from the image consciousness of the people in trying desperately to be urban, perhaps different and better alternatives need to be proposed and made acceptable by appealing to that very same consciousness. In instances where affordability is not in question, it can be observed that people try to import images from abroad. This by itself speaks of the lack of urban architectural models from which they may draw from and this is a significant gap. Architects, academics, legislators, administrators and other related professionals must accept and understand this void and make deliberate attempts to fill it. However, the main responsibility lies with the architects. **[3]**

EARTH *Heritage*

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has prepared a Conservation Plan for Zanzibar Stone Town. The plan, on approval of the government and enactment of Act, is deemed to become a coherent alternative to the indiscriminate construction destroying the historically rich urban fabric. It proposes a general planning framework along with detailed design guidelines for specific action areas. It manifests the comprehensiveness of the initiative taken by the AK Development Institute to catalyse a development process capable of preserving Zanzibar's unique heritage and revitalising it.

A confluence of different cultures by virtue of being the gateway to India and later a focal point for the West gave the Swahili coast town a rich cultural diversity. After a brief period of protracted growth since Independence, a frenetic construction boom has been damaging the city's fabric with the deregulation of economy. At this stage, AKTC stepped in with the restoration and adaptive reuse of the *Old Dispensary*, a historic structure built by an Indian trader on the sea coast which embodies the different influences, Omani rule, colonial rule and trade links with India, on the Swahili architecture. Arabian courtyards, Swahili wikios, ornate balconies of Indian shop fronts and Neo-classical European plaster mouldings are all incorporated in this palatial structure. AK took a long term lease of the building to reuse it as a Local Cultural Centre. It was an exemplary work for agencies working with rehabilitation. AK is involved with the remodelling of another historic structure into a hotel to be financed jointly by them, IFC, CDC and the Government.

Eventually, AKTC got involved with the project as a whole. The 1993 base map, compared with 1982 UNCHS Survey, showed the huge construction that was taking place, the deterioration of historic building stock, and the gradual depletion of the infrastructure and traffic system. Another alarming finding was the increasing pressure on the residential space since most of these were public-owned with no maintenance. Despite the redevelopment with privatisation, compatibility with historical characters and well-being of the users has been questioned. It is apprehended that the government has the potential to lead in the Stone Town development.

Scope and function of the Stone Town Conservation and Development Authority was redefined to include co-ordination of all development and conservation projects, provide technical and advisory services, maintenance of public areas and management of the community and business development programmes. The Plan divides the town into 8 zones according to land-use with 4 zones as action areas: architecturally significant buildings and street-scapes, trees and public open spaces shall remain under the preview of conservation. The areas were chosen for their potential for development and the density of the fabric; the schemes each with its own problems and prospects provide models for the future development. *Taimur Islam*