

Crossing thresholds in Bangladesh

In een context van beperkte financiële middelen, verkeerd beheer, afnemende politieke wil, nagenoeg afwezigheid van land controle en dringende urbane kwesties, zijn de uitdagingen en strategische belangrijkheid van het realiseren van urbane ontwerpen ontelbaar. Kolonisatie en bewoning van het ongestuurde territorium openbaart een hybridisch urbane/rurale vorm van extreme dispersie. Deze grensgebieden van moderne/traditionele, formele/informele en parochiale/globale zones bestaan gelijktijdig in Bangladesh in een ongemakkelijke toestand.

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Dichotomies easily identifiable in Western contexts are blurred beyond recognition in the wild juxtapositions of eras, cultures and urbanisms of Bangladesh. The Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta hosts one of the densest territories in the world and the nation's population of 153 million promises to increase with its over 2% annual population growth rate [CIA 2008]. As a land fundamentally unfit for habitation, Bangladesh is near-universally regarded as one of the most stressed environments in the world – frequented by vicious tropical cyclones, tornados, tidal bores and life-threatening monsoon floods. Yet there is an urban upsurge and dynamic growth. In the midst of profound political instability (exacerbated by emergency rule since January 2007), the retreat of the state as public builder and the withdrawal of private capital into its protected and walled enclaves, the gap between the have and have-nots, rich and poor, powerful and powerless is exponentially growing.

Across the country, formal planning and city building occurs along side an expansive world of spontaneous informal urbanization. In stark contrast to the imaginary cities that planners are concocting in their master-plans, informal urbanization follows a proto-rational logic – a rationality hidden in reality. The apparent chaos of the fragmented, yet

bustling, cities and their peripheries does have an underlying order. Although urbanization appears to have occurred in leaps and bounds – resulting in a rich fabric of over-lapping land use patterns – there is a clearly discernible spatial pattern. Primitive logics of development following infrastructure, resources and labor markets have risen to the fore and strings of linear, ribbon development are found throughout the country. Nearly every piece of vacant land is intensively cultivated and businesses of every sort spring up like mushrooms. In fact, in terms of land use, the two (agriculture and commerce) simultaneously compete and co-exist. Similarly, the economic culture of Bangladesh remains based upon two parallel – and seemingly contradictory – systems: one modern, firm-based and the other pre-industrial, rooted in extended systems of kinship. Cottage industries appear alongside high-tech corporate enterprises; agriculture (and increasing, aquaculture) fields edge industrial complexes; hawkers affront entrances to new corporate headquarters.

Appropriated Infrastructure

In a cash-strapped in inefficiently governed nation such as Bangladesh, the largest building activity of the State is infrastructure – often only possible with external borrowing through excessive loans from the Asian Development

Bridge Underworld. Storage under flyover near Buriganga River in Dhaka. (Picture: W. Wambecq)



Bank and/or World Bank. Massive expenditure for physical infrastructure is justified in the name of strengthening the foundations of promoting overall growth, development and poverty reduction. In reality however, the large-scale, capital-intensive infrastructure projects of flyovers, bypasses and highways completely transforms urban and rural territories alike. Urban conurbations and settlements are repositioned in terms of new economies, proximities and hierarchies, while landscapes and ecologies are radically altered.

In Bangladesh, the street is a primary and vibrant focus of public life. Streets are not merely for the movement of traffic but host a large array of activities – encroachment by commerce, begging by street urchins, garbage disposal and cottage industries is commonplace. In larger cities, sidewalks are taken over by individual households or businesses; informal cafes, hawkers and make-shift housing of uprooted rural refugees extend from building lot lines to curbs, often forcing pedestrians to walk in the congested streets. Housekeeping, economic and free time activities literally span an ambiguous threshold between private and collective, imbuing streets as an unmatched public realm. Frequent festivals, religious processions and political rallies also occur in the streets – stopping traffic for hours on end.

Worldwide, infrastructure embodies the functions of transport, communication, flow, power, movement, structure and framework. Infrastructure in Bangladesh is much more than a rational and utilitarian engineering feat – but it is a structure appropriated and part of a dynamic civic realm. When infrastructure is projected as a technical amenity, it creates leftovers on its fringes: neglected taluses, derelict bits and pieces, abandoned in-betweens. It accommodates existing conditions and local contingency while maintaining overall functional continuity; it is accessible to almost everyone and it marks a

common itinerary or a collective place. Infrastructural investments thus allow for a form of public management or co-partnership of a more complex urban transformation. In Dhaka, flyovers and bridges operate as more-or-less efficient conduits for the increasing car-based middle-class and simultaneously host an informal underworld of trade and wholesale/industrial storage. The spatial juxtaposition of a world above and world below is mirrored with respect to programs and social differences. Nonetheless, in Khulna, the underbelly of the recently-constructed Rupsa Bridge serves as one of the most vibrant and well-kept urban open spaces – concurrently establishing networks for movement, communication and exchange for all of the city's inhabitants.

Also in Khulna is a vast area of State infrastructure land that has been informally appropriated. The industrial legacy of Khulna (via its jute mills) carried with it an extensive railway network linked to the Rupsa- Bhairab Riverfront. Following Bangladeshi independence, the mills became state enterprises and slid into a vicious cycle of under-investment; the city lost its economic driver. Today, the large, centrally-located property owned by the Bangladesh Railway is largely non-operational and under-exploited. It has become an area of encroachment with the proliferation of unhygienic slums, informal industries and cultivated land. It is a contested territory – desired by the Khulna Development Authority and private investors alike. The State has a strategic site in its hands – in addition to an infrastructure system that could one day be revived – which will hopefully not be inappropriately squandered.

Indigenous Urban Elements

Whereas infrastructure is simply informally appropriated, in South Asia, in general, and Bangladesh, in particular, there are a number of indigenous urban elements which define particular spatial practices and explicitly encourage



Infrastructural Civic Space. Formal and informal public space afoot of the Rupsa Bridge in Khulna.
(Picture: K. Shannon)

appropriation. On the one hand, there are visible and invisible thresholds and, on the other hand, there is an uncanny polyvalence to spaces that in the Western context are clearly demarcated. Cultural practices and entrenched social hierarchies resolutely determine the use and users of certain spaces while in others public/private thresholds are irrevocably blurred. Public domains are habitually privatized.

Perhaps Bangladesh's (and the larger South Asian region's) most ambiguous indigenous urban spaces are the maidans. The 'maidan' is a particular term (coming from Persia) for a large plain that is neither a cultivated park, nor a neglected wasteland [Mathur 1999]. Maidans are evocative spaces – formally unprogrammed yet seemingly subjected to unwritten codes of behavior and use. The Mughals established maidans as early as the 15th century and the British adopted the morphology as free field of fire between the controlled space of the



Informal Affronts Formal. After-hours appropriation of shopfronts in Khulna.
(Picture: K. Shannon)

colonizers and the 'native town.' In Dhaka, the famous Paltan Maidan is strategically located between Old Dhaka and New Dhaka. This maidan, like others, was the site of countless social and political rallies throughout the country's history. The maidans are the large grassy fields that host cricket and football matches amongst a large array of spontaneous occupation for leisure and informal activities. Free land with indeterminate use marks the maidans as vital open spaces in cities where open space is a shrinking resource.

At a completely different scale, an 'otla' is a transitional, threshold element common in South Asian urbanism. The otl straddles the enclosed private realm of the house/shop and the open public

space of the street; it is located where one expects a sidewalk in the Western city. Otlas are plinths, elevated from the street and accommodates extended activities of the built form – it is a place for socializing, selling wares, drying agricultural products, etc. It also holds ritual significance and many religious rites are performed on the otl. In Old Dhaka, otlas are visible remnants of a traditional urbanism; in Khulna, a carpet on the ground and taking over of sidewalks demarcates a temporary otl.

A 'ghat' refers to a series of steps leading down to a body of water and is used as a term in many South-Asian countries. For the Bengali, the ghat establishes contact between land and water, varying from a small pond to a

major river and everything in between. Along Dhaka's Buriganga River, ghats are an economic resource, interspersed along concrete embankments, bustling with activity and serve as hubs for transport and commerce. Gently sloping surfaces and steps operate as landing places for different size boats, platforms for drying laundry and recyclable plastic bags, curing bamboo, places for washing and other domestic activities and areas for sitting, fishing and selling wares. In Khulna, the ghats at regular rhythms are primarily exploited as congested passenger and goods ferry terminals on the Rupsa- Bhairab River and the larger public ghats are mirrored by packed land-side rickshaw and bus depots.

Informal vendors align accessways and create an animated bridge between water and land. In Khulna's central Bara Bazar, the river – once the city's *raison d'être* – has effectively become a backside and simply fulfills a utilitarian role for goods loading. There are few qualitative points of interaction with the river.

Water, nevertheless, remains omnipresent in Bangladesh's urbanism and networks of man-made khals (channels controlled by sluices), ponds and lakes structure not only the hydrological system, but also as vegetated areas of social life in villages and cities. The careful attention to slight nuances in topographical heights and the articulation of high lands for living and low lands for agricultural (aquacultural)

Land/Water Ghat. Landing place along the Buriganga River in Dhaka.
(Picture: K. Shannon)



River Market. Wholesale vegetable market along Dhaka's Buriganga River.
(Picture: K. Shannon)



Thickened Land/Water Edge. The bustling Bara Bazar in Khulna.
(Picture: K. Shannon)



production seems to be mere common sense. Unfortunately, this inherent logic is being lost. Traditionally, the lakes and ponds resulted from a process of cutting and filling – utilized in order to create, higher safe ground for inhabitation. The artificial water bodies operate as retention basins for drinking, bathing and washing; they also sources used for irrigation and fishing. Dhaka has a series of lakes and Khulna has an incredibly dense structure of ponds. In Khulna ponds of various sizes spatially structure family compounds, neighborhoods and villages. Pump wells are often located on their perimeter and the ponds become centers of social gathering. However, urban water bodies are under threat of extinction due to excessive development pressures which is reclaiming them at an alarming rate.

Fragile Ecologies Encroached

Bangladesh is a landscape of vegetal and hydrological intensity. Settlement in Bangladesh is dependent upon and inseparable from water – urban and rural agglomerations appear to rise from the surface of the water. The nation's profits and perils are linked to what once was an extensive system of rivers, canals, lakes, ponds and low-land marshy areas. Water resource management should arguably be at the core of the city's planning and development – but everyday realities and the ineffectiveness of development controls has resulted in the wide-spread illegal encroachment, land filling and severe environmental degradation of water bodies.

Across the country, leapfrog development is not only deflowering agricultural territory, but also disrupting an essential ecological balance of the territory; productive land is being inefficiently consumed by sprawl and the balance of permeable/impermeable surfaces has been severely compromised. The dross of rapid modernization, the suburbanization is a hybrid of urban and rural, consumptive and productive landscapes.

The resultant rural metropolis and urban countryside, simultaneously influenced by rural and urban forces. At the same time, urban transformations are following the unregulated (and often severely corrupt) practices of footloose market capitalism and the mushrooming of vulnerable slum communities in fragile landscapes. The formal sector simply cannot provide the necessary housing

and infrastructure – spurring unprecedented growth of the informal sector which in a context of high land prices can only claim the marginal (yet environmentally vital) lowlands, riverbanks and water-bodies.

Expansion of Dhaka is extremely difficult and the hazards of flooding and inundation haunt city dwellers. From the

Inoperative State Property. Railroad land as post-industrial void in Khulna.
(Picture: K. Shannon)



Squatting of Fragile Ecologies. Informal settlements in Khulna's lowlands.
(Picture: K. Shannon)



contentious misuse of the Buriganga River (for untreated sewage and chemical waste discharges from a number of industries, including tanneries) in the west to the land-grabbing and indiscriminate filling of the absorptive low-lands of the eastern periphery, water problems are guaranteed to exponentially increase. Illegal appropriation of waterways and the subsequent water course loss exacerbates flooding. In an effort to reduce flooding, the rivers are often dredged. Ironically, this results in the branching rivers and canals drying up, which are subjected to further land-grabbing. The ultimate result is that Dhaka's water bodies are under threat of extinction.

Bangladesh cannot escape the inevitable. Responsible water management is necessary for mere survival. Tactics and everyday practices must be significantly overhauled before it is simply too late. Presently, industrial, domestic and commercial wastes pollute surface water and groundwater, resulting in both organic and inorganic contamination. Laws to prevent environmental pollution are rarely enforced. Groundwater

aquifers are being depleted through over-exploitation and arsenic-poisoning effects a great number of wells.

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In a context of restricted financial means, mismanagement and diminishing political will, near absence of land control and pressing other urban issues (such as slum redevelopment, basic infrastructure provision, etc.), the challenges and strategic importance of realizing urban design are innumerable. Yet, within the context there are inherent logics of the territory and acquired practices of urbanism which hold invaluable lessons for future projections. Indigenous urban elements challenge Western dichotomies of public/private and inside/outside. Colonization and habitation of the inhospitable territory itself reveals a hybrid urban/rural form of extreme dispersion. And, finally the modern/traditional, formal/informal and parochial/global coexist in an uneasy distance. Thresholds have been – and will continue to be – crossed in Bangladesh's urbanism.

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Street/sidewalk Appropriation. Commerce space pervades in Dhaka.
(Picture: S. Favaro)

