

Architecture of the Essential

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In this Award Cycle, two of the winning projects are in Bangladesh – the Bait ur Rouf Mosque, Dhaka and the Friendship Centre, Gaibandha. While different in many ways, both projects reflect the humble means of the communities that they serve. In both, the budget has been the disciplining criterion, forcing the architects to define what is fundamental to their buildings and to make the design simple in every way. It is this limitation that has created an ‘Architecture of the Essential’.

Bait ur Rouf Mosque

The mosque is extremely elegant and has been exceptionally well executed on a modest budget. In approaching the design, the architect Marina Tabassum searched for the essence of a place of congregational prayer. For her, this is a space ‘devoid of ritualistic and symbolic attributes’, which is contemplative and ‘evenly lit to enhance the feeling of all as equals’, as a brotherhood praying towards the qibla. The mosque is inward-looking, as befits a place of meditation. In the large volume of the prayer hall, natural light pours down on the unplastered handmade brick walls, giving the interior a primordial character. Warm and rich in colour and texture, the light washes the space, which is the essence of sanctity.

This terracotta brick building is exquisitely scaled. Though small, it has an imposing presence and holds its corner in a fragmented, chaotic urban landscape. There are no views out from the prayer hall; all light enters from above. The construction and craftsmanship of the brick walls is exceptional. Taking every element of a mosque and giving it a modern voice, the building is a wonderfully contemporary expression of a timeless programme.

The Bait ur Rouf Mosque is exemplary as a small-scale participatory project for a community building, funded through charitable contributions. Yet what is even more admirable is the architectural expression. Here is the quintessential mosque, elegant yet elemental, with spaces that are direct, simple and robust, allowing the congregation to gather in prayer as equals.

Friendship Centre

The Friendship Centre, near the Brahma-Jamuna river, is a training facility for an NGO engaged in transformative work in northern Bangladesh, helping the rural communities who live on the floodplains and on sandbars that are destroyed every time this mighty river is in spate.

The conventional means of flood-proofing – which is to raise the building on 2.4 m of earth-fill and foundations – would have used up three-quarters

of the budget. So the architect, Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury, chose instead to set the building directly on the low-lying land and to protect the entire site with an embankment that could be built and maintained for much less.

The basic and the fundamental lie at the core of this design process, as they do at the centre of the lives of the people the building serves. Within extreme limitations of means, there is a search for what Chowdhury describes as the ‘luxury of light and shadows, of the economy and generosity of small spaces, and the joy of movement and discovery’.

The largest part of Bangladesh lies in the delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system. In this landscape, the relationship of land to water is continuously negotiated, both by nature and in man-made interventions. The people of this region exist with the knowledge that, with every monsoon, the ravages of the river could destroy their lives, yet they stay here because the alluvial soil is rich with fresh silt deposits; they have no alternative means of subsistence. They live on *chars* (sandbars or riverine islands), too poor to have access to a boat, and isolated from the world except when the river is shallow enough to wade across.

The NGO Friendship has worked with these communities since it was founded in 2002 by Runa Khan. Initially the focus was on providing health-care, with the help of a floating hospital. Over time, recognising that the broader goal of enabling these communities to gain control over their lives requires more than healthcare support alone, Friendship has progressively built its distinctive integrated development model, which includes health, nutrition; education; disaster management and infrastructure development; good governance; and sustainable economic development.¹

I visited two of their sites, one on a char, where all the facilities could be dismantled – the structures are traditionally made of bamboo and thatch, but now also incorporate corrugated GI sheets. Friendship has started a school, supplied the people with boats, and found funding to help them raise cattle and goats and grow corn in the fields. It has provided looms and taught women weaving skills. While I was there, a group of women sat in a circle outside the health centre (a small examination room), participating in a session on personal hygiene. The young woman leading the group was trained at the Friendship Centre. I later learned that this char will have to be evacuated before this year’s monsoon as it has shown signs of cracking and is certain to be destroyed by the river.

The second site was the floating hospital, a converted riverboat with operating theatres, an emergency room, etc. There were postoperative facilities on the riverbank, again built with materials that are easily dismantled. The hospital was staffed by local people, except for two doctors – a surgeon and an anaesthetist – and two nurses, who had come from France for two weeks. Every two weeks different doctors come in, and the boat moves downstream to provide healthcare to another group of villages.

Friendship realised that they needed a centre to train their staff, to include not only teaching spaces but also accommodation for trainees for the duration of the workshops. Architect Kashef Chowdhury says, ‘We wanted to take this idea further and truly create a centre around which the activities of this wonderful organisation would revolve, but that could also serve as a place which brings people together. In this way the architecture needed to be simple and bare: a response to the economy of the region, and with a quality of calmness and serenity that echoes the nature of its riverine landscape setting.’²

The site of the Friendship Centre was a paddy field set slightly lower than the road, and part of a landscape that extends in all directions – lush green, studded with small sheds and low-cost structures. The centre blends beautifully with the architecture in the vicinity – very simple, temporary shelters made of bamboo, thatch and GI sheets, as well as homes in brick masonry, plastered and limewashed, built on raised mounds of earth on the edges of the paddy fields. There are a few shops, some temporary, some permanent, at times lining both sides of the road. Chowdhury has also said that some of his inspiration came from the Buddhist monasteries in the area. The exposed brickwork, stark character and quadrilateral layout of the building all seem to speak of this influence.

After visiting these two buildings it was interesting to reflect on how strict economic constraints had been converted, in both projects, into strong aesthetic statements. Both works, the Bait ur Rouf Mosque and the Friendship Centre, are built in unplastered handmade brick – a rational decision, based on an economy of means, but also an aesthetic one. Terracotta is the most prominent building material in Bangladesh, in fact in all of Bengal. As there is very little stone available in the region, all construction of low-rise structures is in brick, usually loadbearing, or reinforced concrete frame with brick infill. There are thousands of brick kilns dotted across the country, as this is a large part of the informal economy. And while the majority of the brick structures are then rendered, buildings designed

by modern architects are often in exposed concrete or exposed brick, perhaps because of the legacy of the architects who built here in the 1960s – such as Louis Kahn (who designed the Capitol complex, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar), or Bangladesh’s own Muzharul Islam, who created the basis for a profession and an intellectual discipline.³ In both of these projects the modernist aesthetic, combined with the use of local handmade bricks, has created a strong tectonic language – a redefining of an ‘Architecture of the Essential’ for the region.

1 From Friendship’s mission statement, handout.

2 Interview in *UnCube*, ‘The Luxury of Light and Shadows’, 7 February 2013.

3 Kazi K Ashraf, ‘Muzharul Islam, Kahn and Architecture in Bangladesh’, in H-U Khan (ed), *Minmar 31: Architecture in Development* (Singapore: Concept Media, 1989).