

Liveability in Old Dhaka: Evolving residential patterns in *Mohallas*

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Introduction

'Old City' conjures an image of dilapidated buildings, narrow twisting lanes and traffic congestions. To most people, it has long ceased to be a desirable place to live. Is this image representative of all areas of the old city? An outsider would mistake the bustling bazaars and chowks for the old city, and apply a uniform palette indiscriminately. He cannot be blamed for it, for his only interaction with the old city is because of the goods and services it offers. The residential *mohallas* on the other hand are hidden behind the bazaar facade and pass unnoticed. There is little point in measuring the bazaar in terms of 'liveability', whereas the *mohallas* — the residential enclaves, are the only indigenous urban model. If the old city is measured as 'a place to live' it should be done here and this paper concentrates on this area.

To term these *mohallas* static would be far from truth. Whilst a few socially destabilised *mohallas* such as Shankari Bazaar and Tanti Bazaar may fit this picture, they are the scars left behind by the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 and the exodus of national minorities. Most *mohallas* have participated in vigorous rebuilding. Early this century records show most houses were of mud, topped with thatch, which have long ago given way to brick and concrete. A walk through these *mohallas* will show brisk rebuilding activity.

True, even in these *mohallas* buildings have an unfinished, uncared for look, but the reasons are more earthly and universal. The municipal rates are fixed on the basis of an assumed yearly rental value, a difficult exercise in a non-rental, owner-occupant society. The rates had been fixed decades ago and passed on without adjustment and by today's standard are extremely

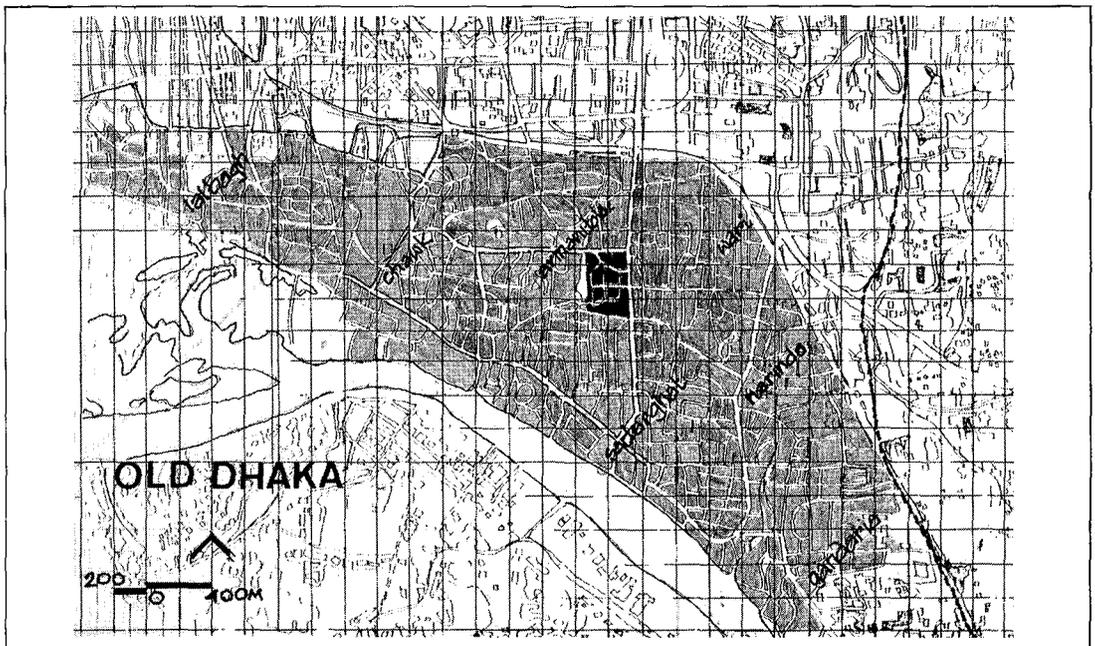


Fig 1 Old Dhaka showing the martola mohalla

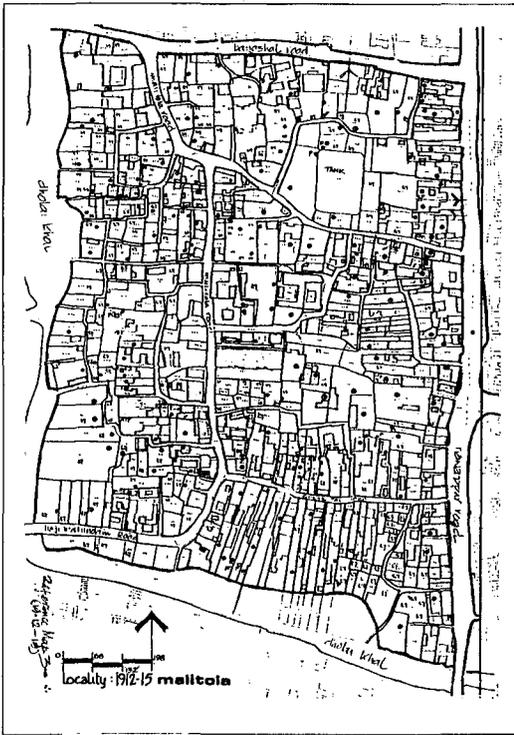


Fig. 2 Locality. Malitola ward-22 C S Map 1912-15.

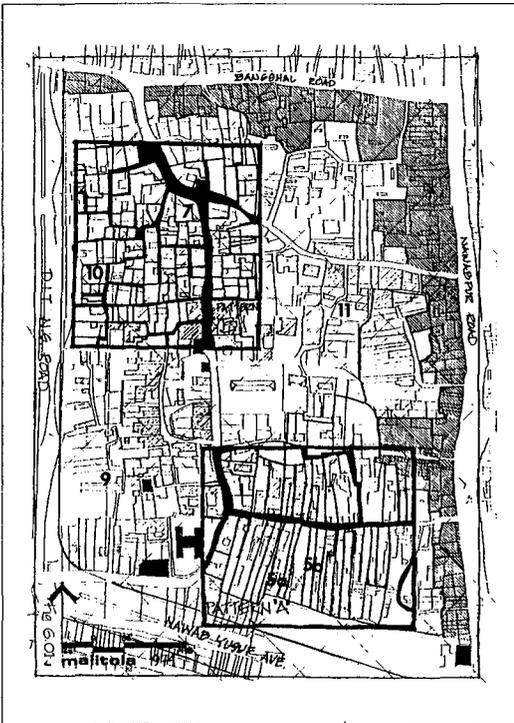


Fig. 3 Residential patterns also showing the case-study houses

meagre. Residents take undue care to keep the rates unchanged and depressed. Even when new additions are built efforts are made either to hide it or pass it off as old. Complete rebuilding would result in a drastic jump in rates and in such cases the building exterior is left unplastered allowing for negotiations on whether the building is under construction, completed or commissioned.

While the look, finish or care bestowed on physical built-up areas is important, it would perhaps be wise to skirt the issue by differentiating between 'beautiful' and 'good'. The values of 'good' have greater aesthetic content among architect and the value may not be equally shared by the residents of the *mohallas*. In this paper, house is measured on the level of form, i.e. lay-out, arrangement of rooms, open and covered spaces, privacy, and the pattern in the collective housing form, the arrangement of houses.

The misconception, of identifying old city with 'Old' may be simply a case of improper labelling. After all, what is 'old' in old city, is definitely not its buildings. To a large extent the population can be termed traditional and because of their longer urban history have distinct life-style, language and mannerism. All this gives a definite but undefinable 'milieu' peculiar to that area. What definitely is 'old' is the urban fabric, the pattern of streets, the arrangement of houses. If we replace 'Old' for 'native' we are on firmer conceptual ground and can view old city as a contemporary native city. (In colonial period it was called so, but 'native' then had a derogatory connotation and was later abandoned in favour of 'Old City'.)

Urban house in transition

The paper concentrates on a centrally located area (Ward-22) comprising of *mohallas* Malitola and Purana Mughaltuli and attempts to chart the development of urban house-form in different epochs. The field work (1980) is supplemented by the following documents.

- C.S. maps 1912-15 (80" to a mile)
- S.A. map 1958-63 (80" to a mile)
- Unpublished map 1974 (80" to a mile) (Directorate of Land Record and Survey)
- Aerial photo 1957-58 (1:10,000)
- Aerial photo 1974-75 (1:20,000) (Survey of Bangladesh)

The map of 1974 shows 2 distinct patterns. A third pattern is emerging, yet to make its mark on official maps. In the understanding and explanation of these 3 pattern it may be possible to decipher the essential cultural demands on house-form, the changing physical articulation and isolate future trends.

The first pattern is perhaps the oldest (or earliest)

urban residential form and reached its present built-up area in pre-colonial period. The house/land is elongated and of extreme configurations such as 10 feet × 100 feet (3 metres × 30 metres) to 14 feet × 180 feet (4.5 metres × 60 metres). The built-up area is extreme, almost filling the land, 2 to 3 storey in height. The house-form is as enigmatic to us as it was to early European travellers². Under such land shape a house could only be a series of rooms connected by a narrow passage, with no openings on either side.

There are one or two small courts, for air and light but in general, the interiors are dark and stifling. Though the house has a unified look, on closer examination it can be seen that the built up area has been adhoc and cumulative.

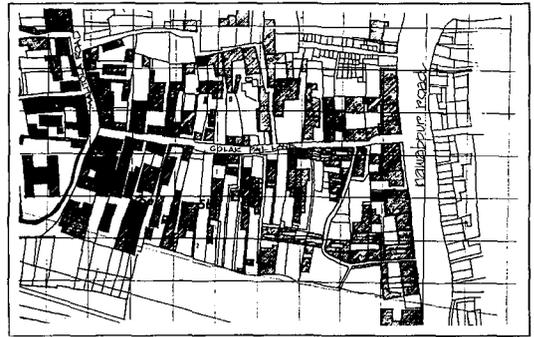


Fig. 4 The oldest pattern, Golakpal Lane

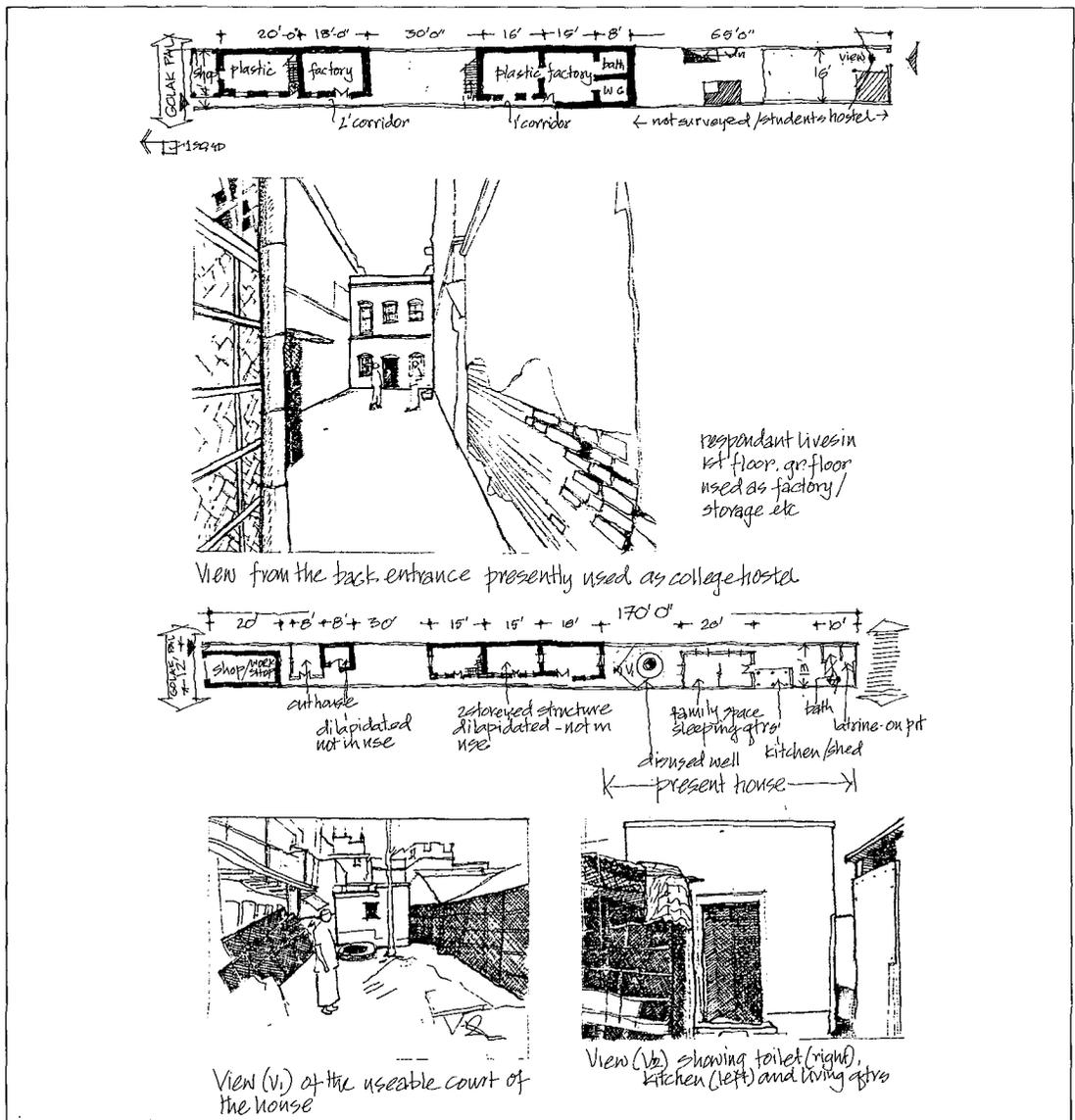


Fig 5 Houses in the oldest pattern, 34 and 38 Golakpal Lane

Two questions are posed; why such unliveable houses and secondly, why such extreme sub-division (and densification) in an otherwise declining town?

Native towns grew with total dependence on water bodies, — rivers, canals and ponds, and a complex network of water channels, natural and man-made. Urban form took advantage of the topography and was dependent on it for drinking water, waste disposal, transport and communication. In the Bengali house privacy dictated an autonomy, both in access and service. As such in the scheme of things, sub-division in that era had to take account of the street (front) and service (back) progressively creating the pattern. An initial stage of this sub-division (plots of 10 feet × 100 feet or 3 metres × 30 metres) did not create unliveable houses. The 'house' was a distribution of huts, only the 'out house' having a public appearance. The contract between the house and land was violated when greater build-up nullified these 'liveable' qualities

Why such pressure on land in a dying town (the population had been diminishing and reached the lowest figures of 51,000 in 1838)? *Mohallas* were caste/craft enclaves, closed compartments with specific groups residing in specific sites. The social order allowed little physical mobility and one could find a loosely built, low-density neighbourhood next to a dense one with only a tract of water, a ditch or waste land separating them.

With the decline of native towns and the passing of the 'ancien regime' the canal based drainage system decayed. The picture drawn by a sanitary inspector can only be slightly exaggerated when he says, "since I have been a sanitary engineer I have seen a good deal of the filth of the big municipalities of Bengal, but never has it been my lot to have to inspect anything so revolting as I have seen in Dacca" (1899).

The municipality (1864) was created because of the threat to public health and organised service was slowly introduced during this period. Till recently human waste was collected from privies, hand carted to collection points and disposed to out-fall areas by underground sewer mains. Individual household connection to water and sewers are even more recent.

With organised service the house reverted to traditional form — the second pattern. This pattern is popular and persistent, the house is built around an *uthan* (court). In a few affluent *mohallas* it attained a *pucca* and multi-storeyed build-up.

Organised waste disposal was the enabling factor and sub-division created a complex network of front access lanes and back service lanes, absent in earlier patterns.

Euphemistically put, the much denigrated lanes and by-lanes were produced to create 'good' houses.

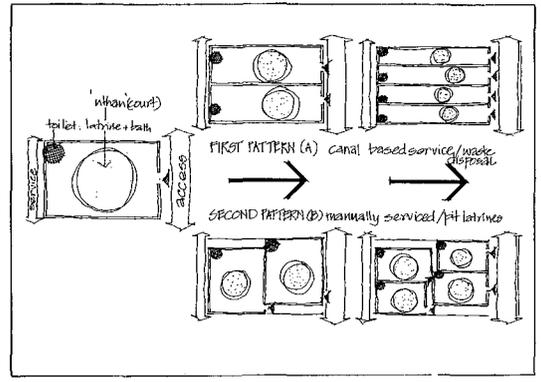


Fig 6 Land sub-division generating residential pattern.

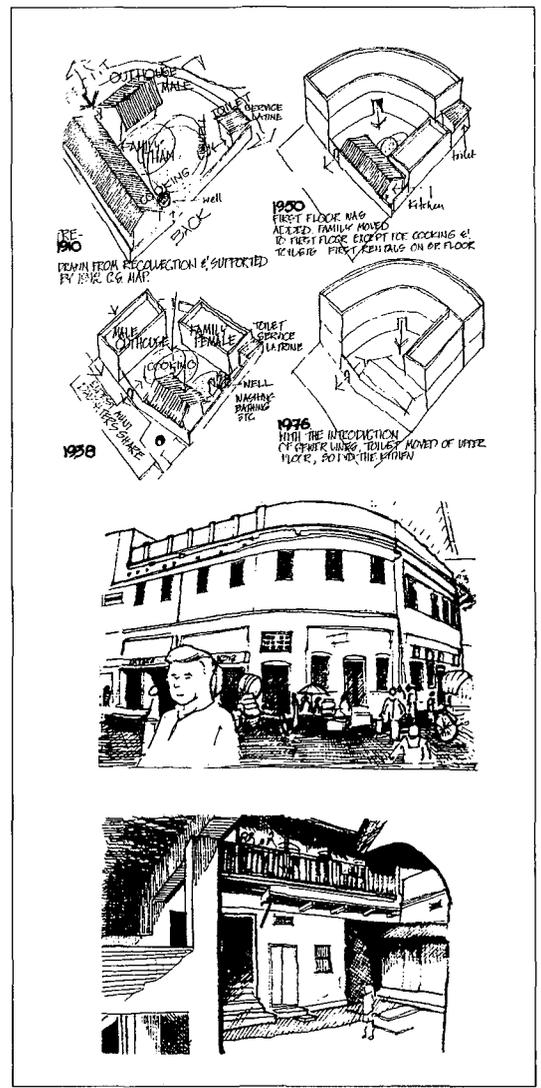


Fig 7 Vernacular urban house House-form generated by uthan (court)

Greater pressure or demand on land meant greater built-up area or more crowding. The *uthan* adds a cultural dimension, by defining a minimum buildable land, by offering a logical house lay-out and finally vouching for its quality. Put more simply house qualities were pegged on the *uthan* and made apparent the close ties between land and house.

The field work shows the pattern of today, the third pattern. Sub-divisions now are in lots of 20 feet \times 30 feet (6 metres \times 10 metres) or less. Is it merely due to the pressure on land or a belief that any land, even this small, offers a house. The flats, patronised in New City (mostly as accommodation of Government employees) may have inspired the pattern. The downward definition of house as vertical multiplication of ground lot has made all land buildable. Individual access to piped services may have helped in bringing a discrete and loose Bengali house-form under a single roof but it has released all constraints on land sub-division.

Flats have been projected as a panacea, most people believe it to be so, but the question here is not the qualities or advantages of flats but its appropriateness and place in the historic fabric of the native city.

Flat is another colonial legacy, to it we owe the bungalows, the civil lines and the cantonments. They appeared in the post-colonial period, locally termed as Colonies*. Flats, as units of urban-form, need large chunks of land, large set-backs, a centralised sponsorship and lastly a more complex design skill, all of which are absent in *mohallas*. Where such a pattern exists can this new house-form be accommodated? Further sub-division is going on however and the process is irreversible.

The new flats that are built, show a very inefficient lay-out while the house proclaims an illusive standard of 'liveability'. If such rebuilding becomes widespread it

* Interestingly, the cheap rental tenements, (usually of bamboo and cast iron sheet roofing) present throughout the old city *mohallas* are also locally termed 'colony'.

will nullify whatever benefits it lays claim to.

An historic parallel can be drawn, between the first and last pattern. Both were induced by an unknown house-form, a house not conceived around the *uthan*. Without the safe hand of tradition, house-building goes out of popular competence and the resultant residential form is oppressive and redundant. Field study shows that a large land parcel does not necessarily result in a 'good' house. 'Bad' houses were built even in larger plots in earlier eras only when the lay-out grew without the reference of a court.

Conclusion

In this paper house and land has been used synonymously, not inadvertently but to highlight the close connection between them. Culture dictates such close intimacy and interdependence. Bengali house is conceived on land a structured arrangement of open and covered spaces, 'good' land yielding 'good' houses. Here 'good' has cultural dimensions, the only worthwhile measure in housing. Sub-division imbues these values and only results in smaller such houses, setting its own limit.

Against this, the present-day sub-division has delinked the close ties. The new house-form (flat-typology) has meant the effective demise of the *uthan*. In larger houses for the affluent, westernised population group this may create little problem but in minimal houses it is of far greater importance. The *uthan* makes up for many of the inadequacies of the covered spaces.

In sociological terms, the *uthan* is the only open space at domestic level a domain created primarily for females and children. There is no equivalent or substitute for this space in the old city *mohallas*.

Finally, this pattern if it ever reaches maturity by gradual build-up will ultimately create the much dreaded 'permanent slum', and unlike the past build-up, it will not be restricted to a few old *mohallas* but representative of the whole of the 'Old City'.

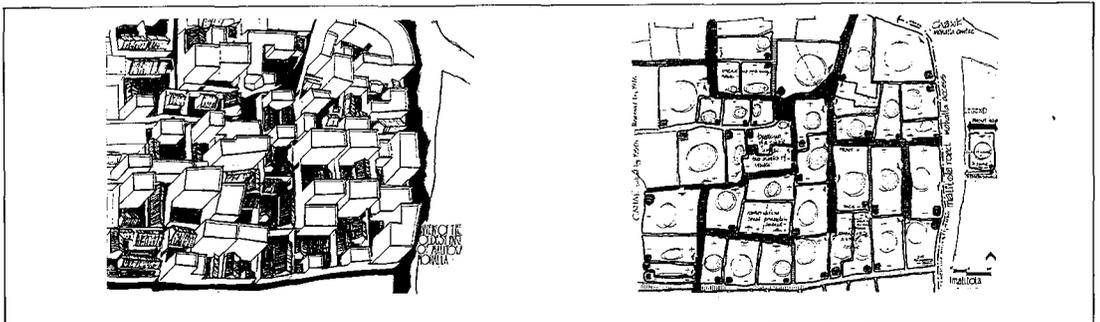


Fig 8 Organisation in the mohalla — second pattern houses supported by front/access and back/service network.

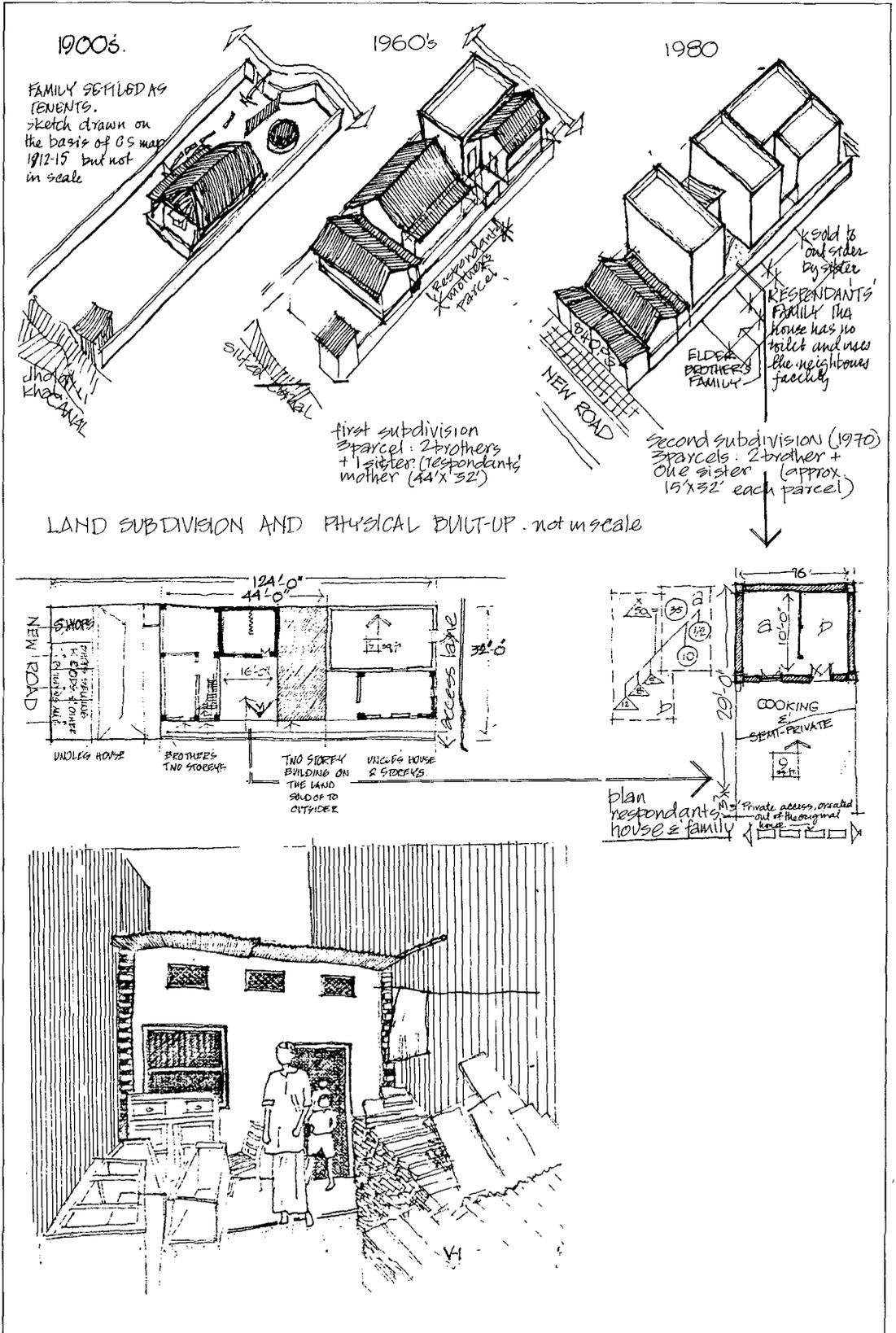


Fig 9 Present-day sub-division for minimal houses The lot (parcel) measures 16' x 30'

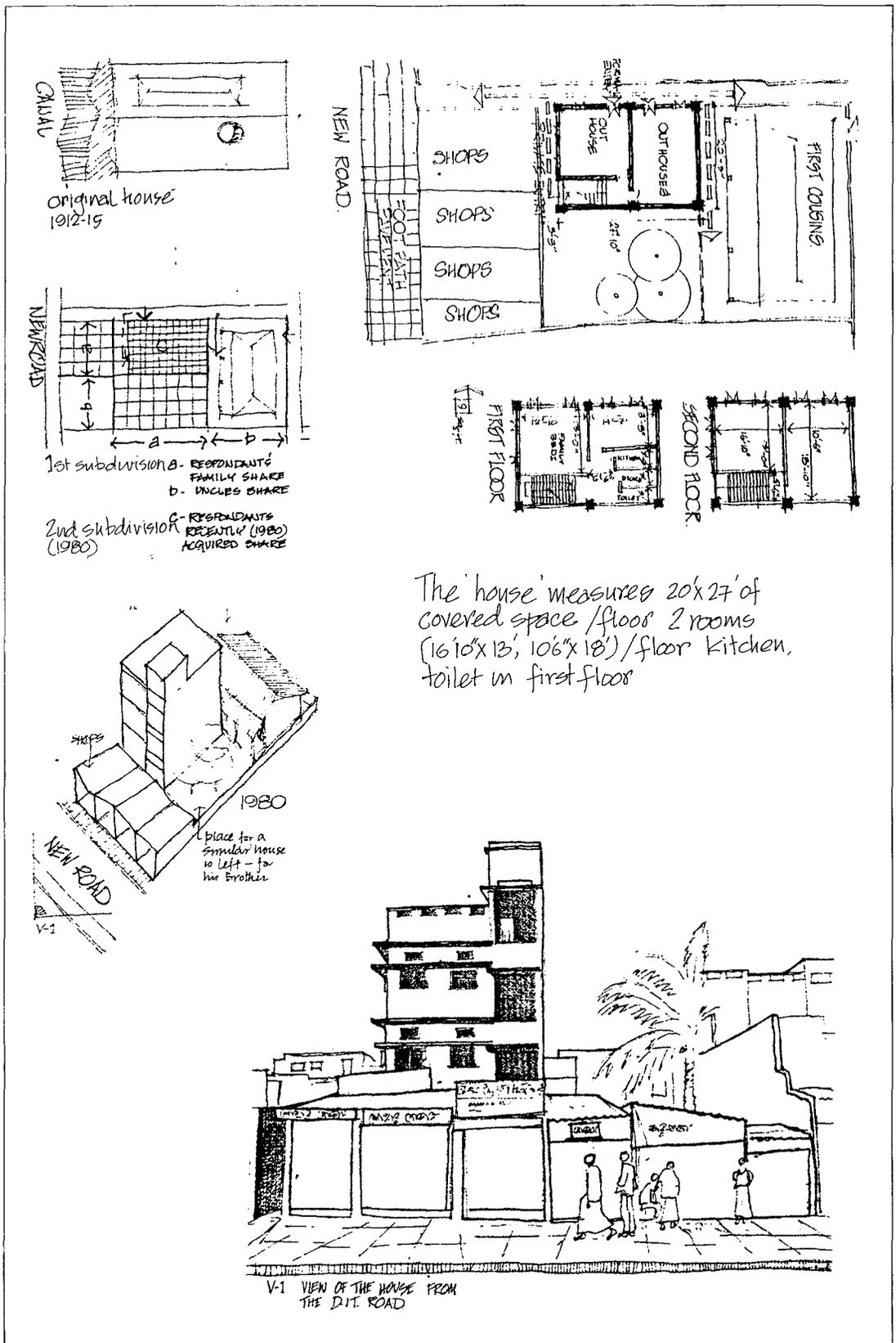


Fig 10 Sub-division for minimal houses, 'flats' in mohallas, 25 Malitola Lane.

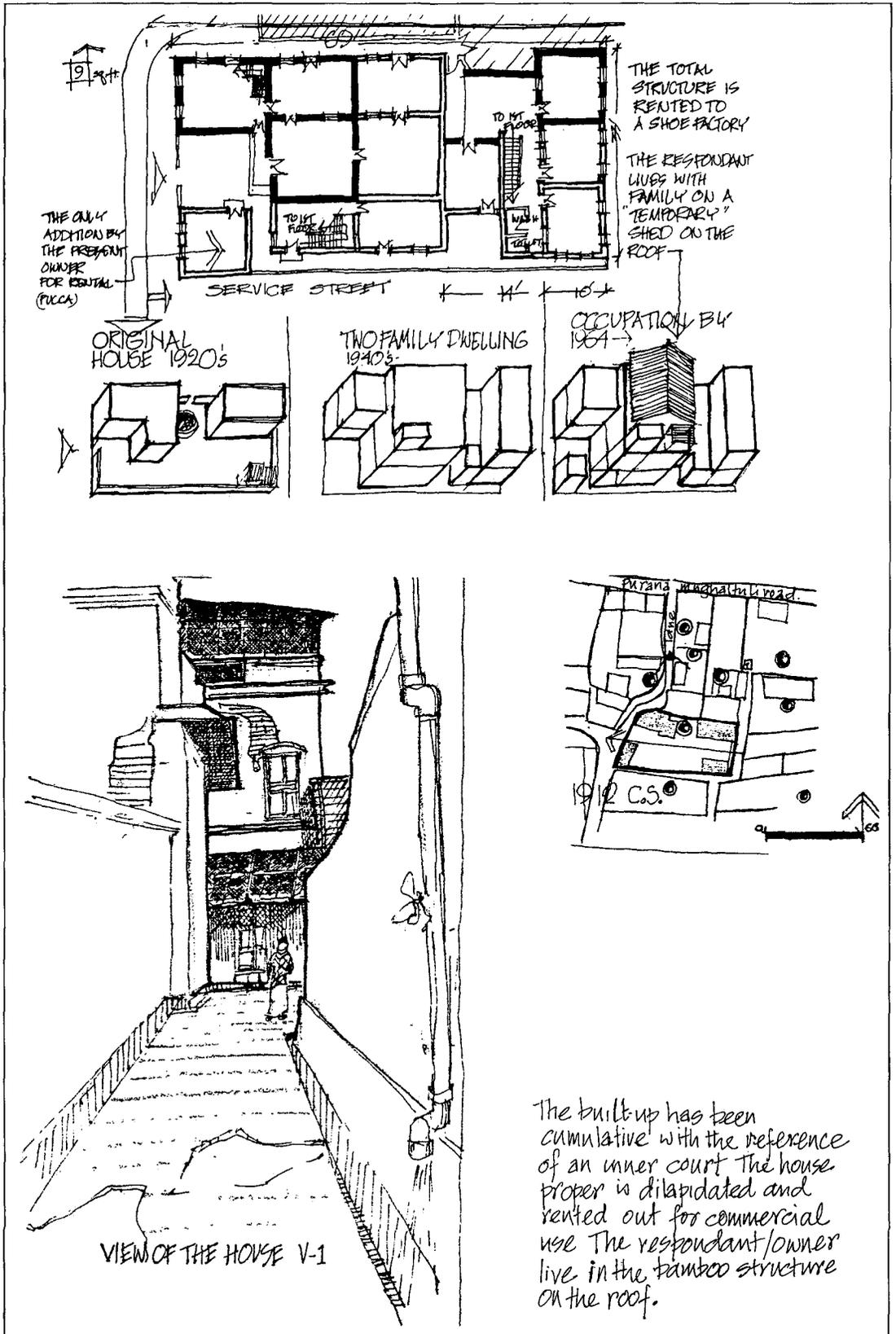


Fig. 11 Houses without uthan, 7/8 Purana Mughaltuli Lane