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# **ALI MIAN'S GOAL TALAB AND ITS SURROUNDINGS, DHAKA.**

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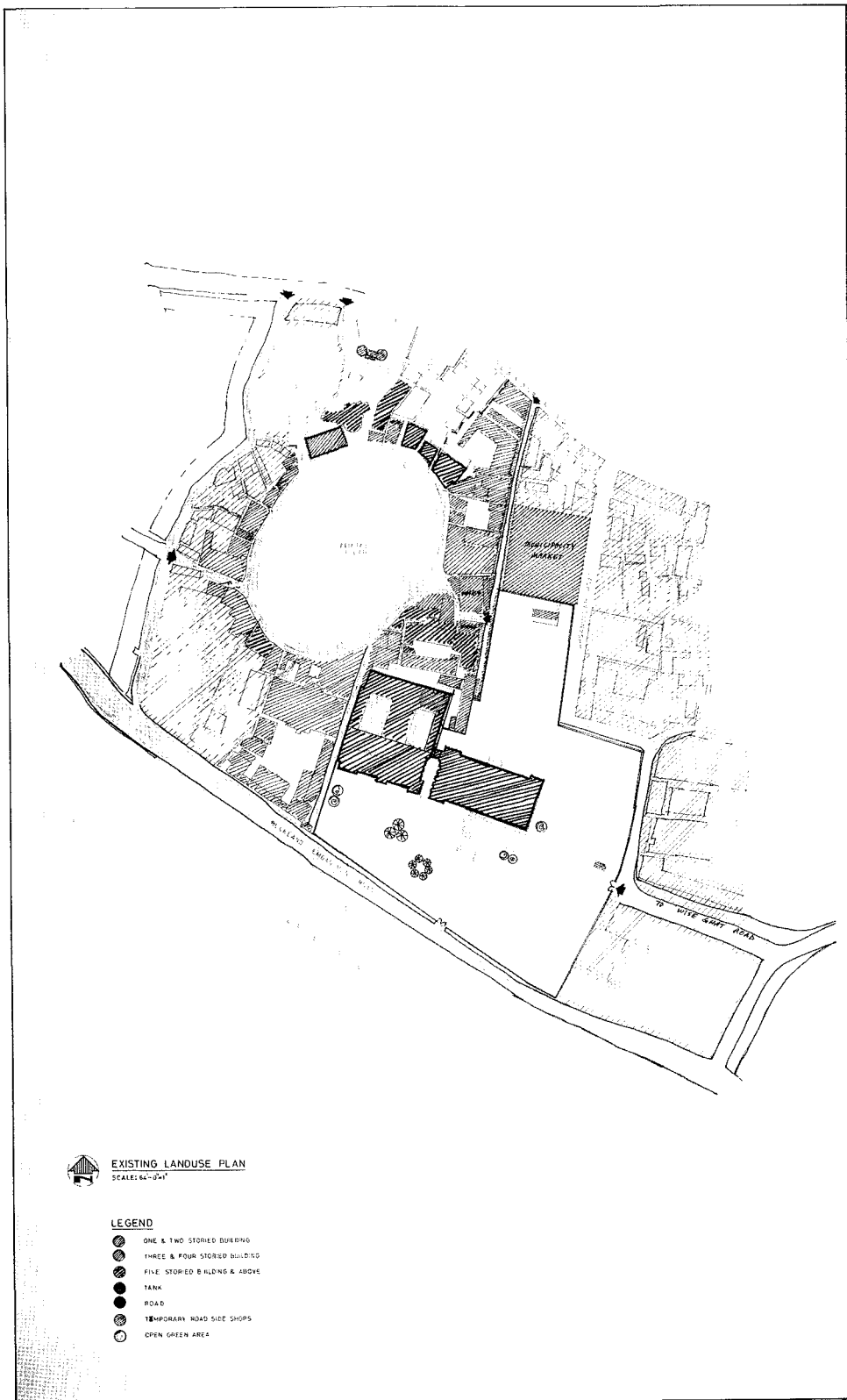
## The Workshop Brief

Ali Mian's Talab is an oval-shaped water tank immediately to the north-west of the Ahsan Manzil, the 19th century Nawab's Palace which stands in a large garden near Wiseghat on the river and which has been restored and converted into a museum by the Public Works Department. The tank is surrounded by buildings, some of which are recent and rise to a height of five storeys. An area on the south-east side is used for popular shows like bear dancing. The Andar Mahal, the rear portion of Ahsan Manzil, is a building which stands to the west of the palace proper. It can be seen above the low buildings which still survive on the southern side of the talab. The rear portion of Andar Mahal, which is planned around two courtyards, is not part of the PWD's restoration programme, and is occupied by numerous families.

The Workshop team members are asked to carry out the following six tasks:

1. A survey of Andar Mahal, of the area surrounding Ali Mian's Talab and of the street linking the talab with the Ahsan Manzil (also called "Nawab Bari").

You will need to take rough measurements so that you can draw up floor plans of the rear portion of the residence to a scale of 1 in 200 and a plan of the whole area to a scale of 1 in 500. You will also need to examine and consider the structure,



Ali Mian's Talab, site plan This tank (artificial pond) built in 1838 and now completely ringed by buildings provides much needed open space in a crowded neighbourhood

finishes, decorative details and services of the residence.

Regarding the area surrounding the talab and the street linking the talab with the Ahsan Manzil, you are not expected to enter into every building, but to make a rough and mainly external survey only, reporting on the general condition of the buildings, and examining the spaces between the buildings, the talab itself and the area around it.

2. A proposal for the restoration of Andar Mahal, the rear portion of the residence of Ahsan Manzil.

This task is to be seen as distinct from the conversion of the rear portion of the residence to new uses. The rear portion is an integral part of an important building which combines a European facade with the traditional local courtyard plan. Your task will include the removal of all accretions, making the building weather-tight, and the work necessary to restore the building both externally and internally to something like its former condition.

In making this proposal you are asked particularly to highlight the general principles of restoration which you intend to follow.

3. A proposal for the conversion of Andar Mahal to one or more new uses.

You will need to draw the floor plans of the house to show the new uses and the changes you propose to make. Drawings should be to a scale of 1 in 200.

4. A proposal for the landscaping and planting of the Ahsan Manzil's garden.

The garden at present is a desert and you should consider the value of trees as shade-giving to the ground under them, as shade-giving to buildings, as a screen to an exclusive environment, and as a natural and soft element in an artificial and hard urban situation. You should also consider the garden as a work of art, both to "be in" and "to look at".

5. A proposal for one or more new buildings in the area around the talab.

Land values are high in old Dhaka and the restoration and conversion to a museum of the Ahsan Manzil has pushed these land values even higher. There is pressure to redevelop and several landowners in the area around the talab are considering taking advantage of the situation.

In your design proposal you will need to consider height and bulk limitations and other design guide-lines to help achieve a sympathetic solution which will also give the landowners the returns which they are looking for.

Floor plans should be drawn to a scale of 1 in 200, sections and elevations to a scale of 1 in 100.

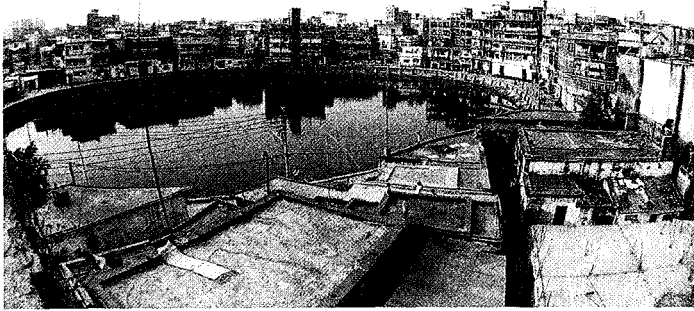
6. A proposal for the upgrading of the area surrounding the talab and the street linking the talab with the Ahsan Manzil, and for the improvement of the spaces between buildings and of the talab itself.

You will need to consider the quality of the services, the floor surfaces, the street furniture, the overhead wires, the lighting, etc. You will also need to consider the wall containing the water tank and the relationship between the water and the public area around it; the requirements of the public area where performances are enacted; and the relationship and approach to the north side of the Ahsan Manzil and its garden.

## Introduction

Ali Mian's *Goal Talab* is an oval-shaped pond or 'tank' which is a part of a palace complex known as the Dhaka Nawab Bari, on a built-up embankment of the river Buriganga called Buckland Bund. Originally the palace was a factory built by French traders, bought by the Nawabs and converted into their family residence. They made certain modifications to the building and subsequently added a rear portion with two internal courtyards. In 1838, Khaja Alimullah excavated the *talab* or tank north-west of the palace, used as a private area by the nawab's family. A magnificent guest house was built in 1872 by Nawab Abdul Gani who named it "Ahsan Manzil" after his son Ahsanullah. The two houses were connected by an intricately detailed wooden bridge at the upper level.

At first, the rear portion of the Nawab Bari, or "Andar Mahal", was the only building around the tank, so the courtyards and the banks of the tank were for the exclusive use of the women of the Nawab Bari. As the Nawab's



*General view of the Talab*



*View of the Talab showing the height differences of the structures with the taller five-storey structure, to the north-east (left of photograph)*



*The taller buildings exhibit commercial and residential mixed uses.*

family grew, they gradually built their houses all around the tank. The tank soon became a common area for the Nawab's relatives and thus the private area changed into a public area where fairs, festivals and games were organised.

The area now occupied by the tank was originally a French *jalla* or an undefined low land for garbage disposal. In 1838, the tank was excavated. In 1948, the area around the tank was raised, hard-surfaced and a road constructed all around the tank. The area presents an introverted character because all the buildings face the tank. There were six pedestrian accesses to the tank but vehicles could come in through only one passageway. Therefore this area remained tranquil even amidst the bustle of the surrounding areas. The tank is very important to the locality. While the Nawab's estate has been subdivided among the heirs, the tank remains an undivided property enjoyed by everybody. There is a *talab* committee which looks after the yearly cleaning of the water and arranges angling competitions.

## Site Survey

The government has undertaken the restoration of the Ahsan Manzil palace and the front portion of the Nawab Bari, (Andar Mahal) now in its final phase of completion. The rear part, however, remains in a derelict condition, occupied by distant relatives of the Nawab who cannot afford to move elsewhere. A detailed reconnaissance survey of the building was undertaken which revealed the following.

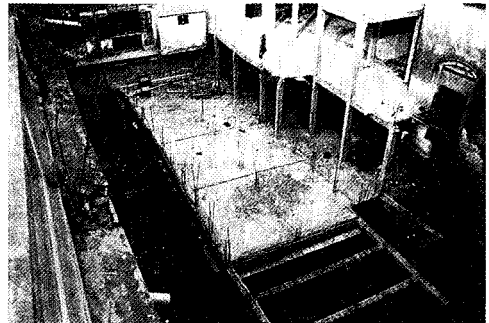
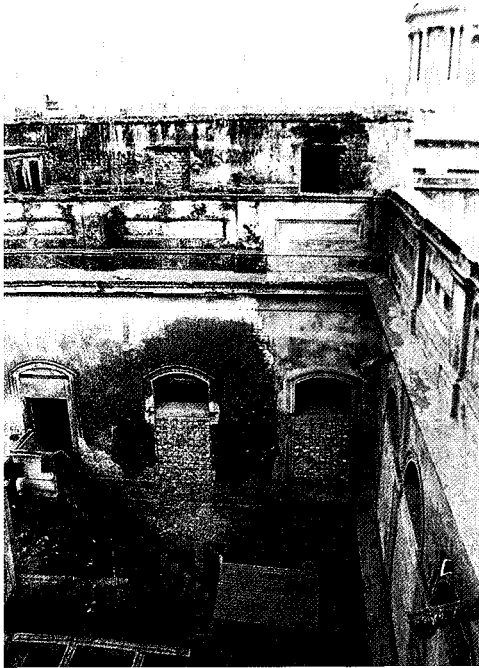
### *Andar Mahal*

The building is a brick masonry structure with a rafter-purlin roof system. It is not of any architectural or historical significance but was found to be structurally sound, albeit with some cracks in the upper storeys and rising dampness in the ground floor. Critical investigation established that the cracks were not due to settlement, but happened during a severe earthquake in the early part of this century. The dampness was also found to be caused by stagnant water and clogged drainage lines. Thus these faults could be easily rectified.

The number of inhabitants has increased over the years to 28 families now living in the building, and all of them legal heirs of the Nawab. Pressure on living areas has forced the inhabitants to occupy verandahs and encroach on the courtyard. Additions were also seen in some parts of the



*North elevation and section of Nawab Bari or Andar Mahal.*



*The market has encroached inside the Andar Mahal destroying its character*

*Andar Mahal in 1989 shows itself to be in a dilapidated condition with unsympathetic and thoughtless modifications to the structure*

roof. Conditions are slum-like. Service conditions are very poor. Only four of the 28 households have a piped water supply.

### *Tank and Surrounding Area*

The entire area of Islampur is experiencing rapid commercialisation. Since Islampur is on the north and north-east of the tank, the structures on this side are most exposed to commercial influences. This is apparent by the height of the buildings, five storeys on the north gradually reduced to single or double storeys on the opposite side. The northern and north-eastern buildings have commercial activities on the lower floors with residential activities on top. The commercial traffic is from the Islampur Road while residential entrances are from the tank. This has helped to retain the residential character of the *talab* area. The edges of the tank have been lined with a masonry retaining wall and a metalled road has been built all around the tank. Traffic is light on this road which acts as the residential approach. Children play in the road; people swim, bathe or just idle in the tank. The *talab* area is a source of great relief in an otherwise congested area. However, certain problems were identified in the area. They are:

- i Lack of services like water supply, electricity and sewerage. Sanitary conditions for most buildings are very poor.
- ii Lack of openness due to incremental growth of built-up areas.
- iii Complete absence of any vegetation. The large water body does soften the harshness of the brick buildings and pavements somewhat but even then, the lack of plantation is badly felt.
- iv Absence of community facilities like playgrounds, clubs, health clinics, etc.

The area just outside is in sharp contrast to the tranquility of the *talab*. Here a four-storeyed municipal market has been developed and hawkers spread all over the road. The hustle and bustle of cloth trading has made it a very busy and noisy area.

Commercial forces are so powerful here that they invaded the only primary school of the area and turned it into a warehouse.



### *The Garden Area of the Ahsan Manzil*

The whole palace compound is barren except for a few palms and minor trees. However, this area has been acquired by the Public Works Department which has drawn up plans for open landscaping in the entire area according to an overall design scheme.

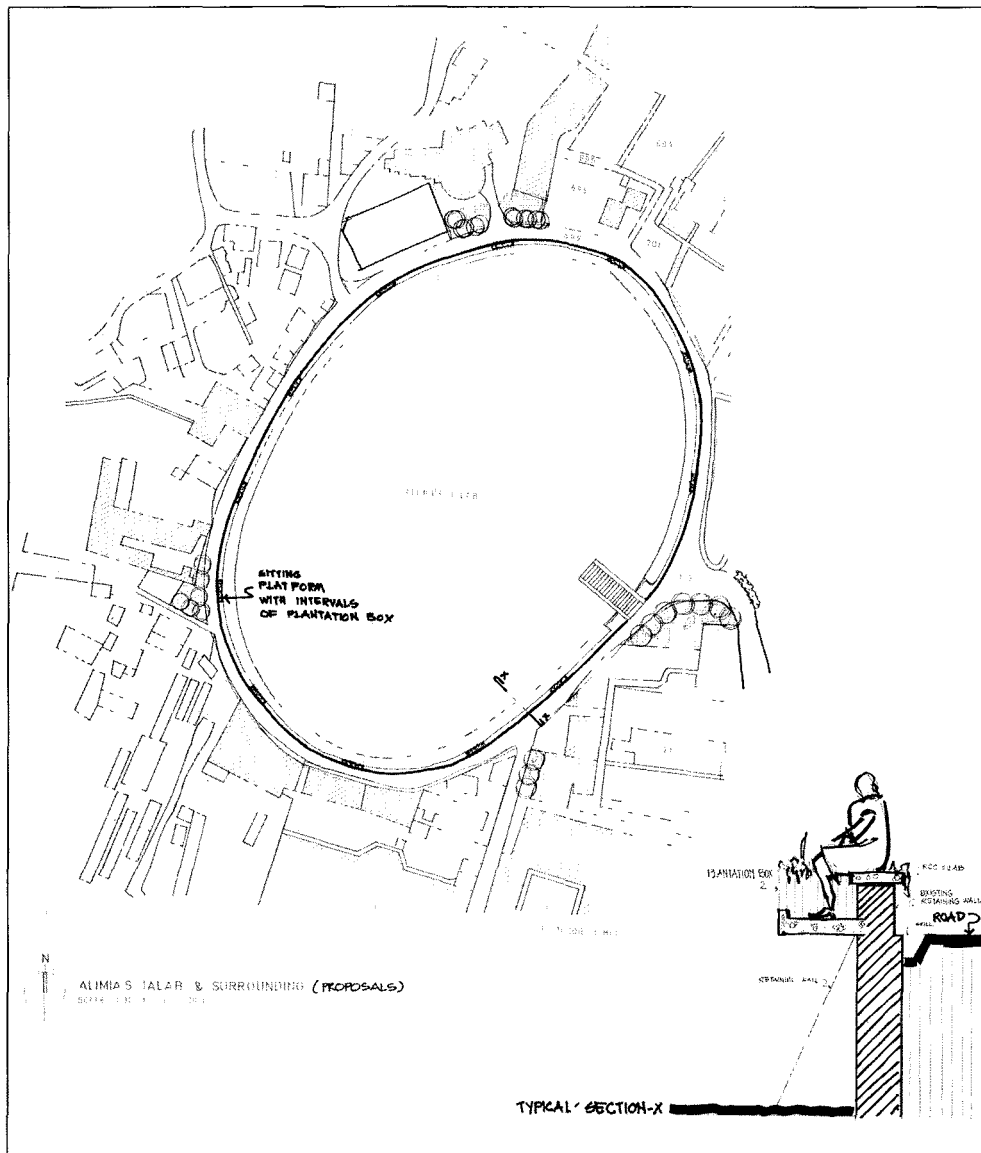
During the process of restoration of the Ahsan Manzil complex, the foundation of a fountain was excavated. The builders had abandoned the work after completing the sub-soil portion.

### Proposals

The overall condition of the area is congested, dilapidated and chaotic, where the tank or *Talab* is the only element of relief. Therefore planning proposals were determined with a view of conserving the urban character of the area, enhancing its quality but also returning some breathing space to the tank area. The recommendations are as follows :

#### *Area around the Talab*

- i Declare Ali Mian's *Goal Talab* as a conservation area.
- ii Develop planning controls to restrict construction of buildings above five storeys. This will allow adequate sun and air in the tank and bring forth an acceptable skyline. It will also control the density of the area, while keeping the "openness" of the tank intact. Some suggested controls are: height and bulk control, elevation control, land readjustment, land use control.
- iii Upgrading of the services of all the buildings to an acceptable standard. This will involve the improvement of drainage, sewerage, water supply, gas, electricity and street lighting.
- iv Arrange cleaning of the tank itself and purification of the water from time to time.
- v Develop the bank of the tank as a community area. This could be done by restricting vehicular traffic, providing seating benches and necessary landscaping.



The workshop proposal plan for the Talab includes additional seating areas and plantation enhancing its social public use functions

- vi Reopen and upgrade the primary school which was taken over and closed down by antisocial elements.
- vii Create a neighbourhood open area and a children's play area. For this purpose, the land at the rear portion of the Ahsan Manzil is suggested. However, care should be taken so that the openness of the Ahsan Manzil is not diminished. It must be remembered that restoration of a building is incomplete without restoration of its surroundings. Therefore, even if the area is put to a new use the setback of the Manzil should be retained.
- viii Relocate the hawkers from the roadside to the newly-constructed market place.
- ix Identify and list for restoration nearby buildings of high architectural merit (but in the process of decay) noticed in the process of the workshop.

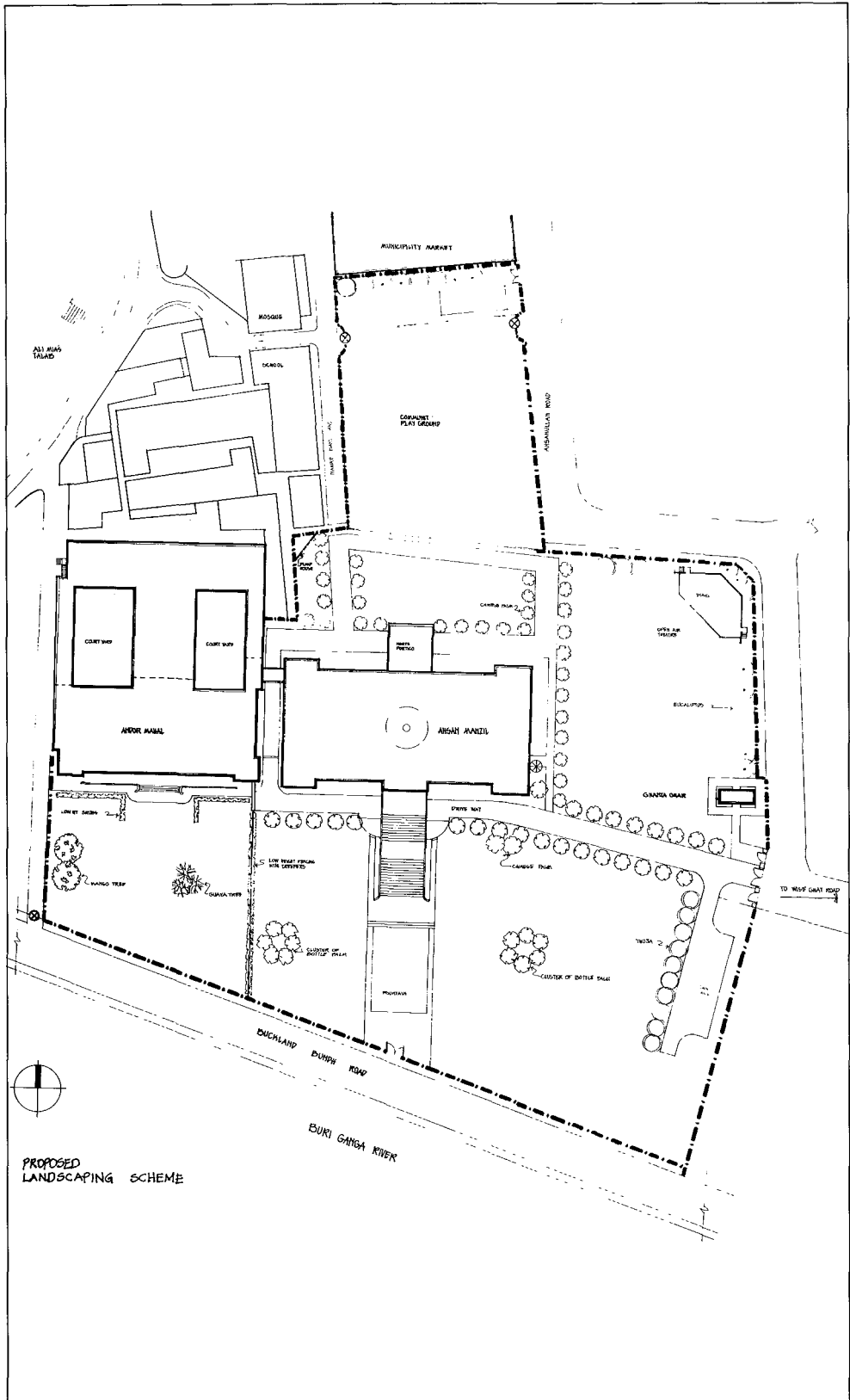
#### *Rear Portion of the Andar Mahal*

Since the survey shows that the building is structurally sound, it would be worthwhile to restore and renovate it. Although it is not rich in architectural merit, yet it has considerable use value as it houses a lot of families. Detailed design analysis were undertaken and it has been found that given the proper services all the twenty-eight families could be accommodated in this large building.

It is proposed that this be done, but only after necessary repairs to make good the cracks in walls, the broken roof tiles, the decaying parapets and the rising dampness. Rearranging the internal space will be necessary for the purpose, as will demolition of added constructions particularly those in the courtyard. A possible approach for rearrangement for housing the families is shown.

#### *Landscaping of the Open Area of Ahsan Manzil*

- i Convert the whole area into a formal garden befitting the architectural character of the Ahsan Manzil. The proposal would essentially recreate the original landscaping. Palm trees should be planted in rows on both sides of the walkway. Such vertical trees will enhance the formal character and monumentality of the building and at the same time permit clear views both from the building and the river.



Proposed landscaping scheme around Absan Manzil

- ii It is proposed that a fountain be built in the area where the remains of the foundation of an earlier fountain had been found. The fountain should be as far as possible close to the original design.
- iii The open area of the north-east corner is proposed for holding outdoor museum-related activities. This shall be in harmony with the proposed use of the restored Ahsan Manzil as a museum.
- iv The area at the rear of the Manzil should be opened up for use as a community play field. This might be against restoration concepts for Ahsan Manzil, but considering the requirements of the larger neighbourhood, it is an acceptable choice.

In conclusion, this project is not one of mere restoration, but deals with the aspects of urban area conservation. Therefore it is essential to consider this area both in the wider context of the old city and as an aspect of river front development.

All issues of social, cultural, religious and economic importance have to be considered in this task of preserving a unique urban heritage. Supportive laws must be developed so that the people around the tank are not subject to unfair restrictions. The river front of Dhaka had always been an important part of city. Conservation efforts to recreate that lost quality can go a long way towards guiding the future development of Dhaka.