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# PLANNING TOOLS FOR ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION

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Conservation is still a relatively new concept in Bangladesh, often taken to mean only the preservation of historic buildings and structures, usually under the aegis of the Department of Archeology. But conservation cannot be confined to such narrow limits. We cannot be content at conserving a few old buildings or structures of cultural and historic interest. This reduces conservation into a specialized activity outside the development stream. But conservation involves

“maintaining the presence of the past in the present. That involves preserving, restoring and/or adapting old buildings; designing new ones that respect their neighbours and the continuity of history; weaving old and new together in an urban fabric of variety and richness”.<sup>1</sup>

This concept can be extended from buildings to areas, cultures and even lifestyles.

The older areas of our cities are in some ways the best examples of what is loosely termed as culture — the customs and mannerisms; the way one decorates one’s doorway, the street vendors in the narrow lanes, childrens’ play areas, the carving on the posts and above all the physical character of the spaces. It is not built-form alone, but also the left-out spaces, the randomly built-in chaos, the gaiety and colour of human activities which confer specific characters to specific areas.

These inner city areas, mostly inhabited by the poor, are as much a part of our heritage as monuments and palaces. We owe it to the present and the future to maintain a continuity with this part and build into the future without disrupting the community or destroying its character.

But how do we conserve and revitalize an area and control it sufficiently without destroying the character and the community such intervention seeks to conserve? This is the basic theme of this paper.

## Problems of Conservation

Old parts of cities and towns in Bangladesh and much of the region are marked by small irregular parcels, traffic congestion, structural and functional obsolescence, congestion of occupancy in all types of premises and inadequate services. But despite the poverty of the people living in these areas and physical decay all around, old parts of cities in Bangladesh serve vital economic and social functions. Most of the places of historic interest are located in the old parts of the cities and towns. They have a physical and social character that singles them out from the rest of the city.

But such areas are in a continual flux of change, readjusting to the changing demands of economy and related activities. With or without government intervention changes in uses, rebuilding and renovation are taking place. This is both encouraging and unfortunate. It is encouraging because private initiative and capital are being used in physical transformation, and unfortunate because the changes are often for the worse. The rebuilding or development taking place has no reference to any plan or context. These developments are changing the basic character of historical areas. Buildings of significant cultural import are being destroyed and communities and activities that lend character to the areas are being disrupted. (For instance, the former State Bank Building, perhaps the oldest of British buildings in Dhaka, was vandalised and then auctioned for demolition.)

We have old parts of cities/towns that are:

1. inhabited by the poor, but nevertheless economically vital to the city.
2. experiencing continual changes both due to economic forces and rebuilding activities.
3. plagued by a deteriorating environment and inadequate services.
4. replete with buildings of exquisite craftsmanship, style and character.

As for monuments, common problems arise:

1. when the old monuments lose their original use.
2. when people in the course of development destroy the immediate surroundings to monuments.

Monuments which lose their original function are often considered useless and unnecessary. They become derelict, misused or even left to the mercy of the general public. Monuments in remote areas are usually not

taken care of. Encroachment on the sites of monuments is a common practice, as is the use of building materials from a monument site by local people.

## Motivation and Legislation

That man's cultural heritage should be conserved is *not* a thought shared by all. There is a need for motivation and raising the general awareness towards conserving old buildings, monuments and historical districts, but the philosophy of conservation has to be politically and socially acceptable. Conservation is a *process of development* rather than a step backward. Like land-use conservation, it has political connotations as it carries with it the improvement of the living conditions of ordinary people. Conservation, like planning, cannot be effective unless tied to political power and legislative support.

Orderly planning and conservation of buildings and areas are difficult where the directions of development depend on decisions taken by numerous individuals separately, on the basis of immediate needs, without reference to a plan, policy or what others are doing. The urban form that evolves in the absence of regulations or controls does not respect culture, environment, public health or safety. Without adequate legislation, the deterioration of historic areas will continue unabated and it will be difficult to stem the tide of what is conceived of as 'progress and internationalism'.

Legislation relating to building and land-use controls in Bangladesh exists in the form of East-Bengal Building Construction Act (EBBC) of 1952, the Pourashava Act of 1977 and the Building Construction Regulation of 1984. In cities having Development Authorities such as Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi, the Town Improvement Act (TIA) of 1953 prevails in addition to the EBBC Act. In all this legislation there is not even a passing reference to conservation.

'Preservation' is dealt within some detail in Clauses 5, 10, and 12 of the Antiquities Ordinance of 1976. The regulatory framework leaves much to be desired. There is a need to expand building regulations and land use controls both in scope and intent to include conservation of not only buildings, but also areas of historical and cultural significance.

But it is not axiomatic that enforcement of laws will follow enactment. Even the existing elementary rules and regulations on buildings and land use controls have seldom been used by municipalities other than Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi. This is partly because of lack of trained personnel and partly because municipalities are presently ill-equipped to enforce these rules.

## Recommendations

Recommendations, whether legislative or otherwise, have to be seen against the backdrop of socio-economic conditions. There will be a continuing need to balance scarce resources between development and maintenance of existing rural and urban areas. Financial resources for conservation will remain severely limited; maximum use must therefore be made of existing levels of commitment, and we must devise tools that are economical in the use of resources but nevertheless create the necessary impact. In this spirit the following general recommendations are offered.

1. Formulate criteria for designation of preservation areas after careful study of representative areas in different towns. Create zoning laws to ensure their survival.
2. Write rules and regulations pertaining to preservation of facades and building envelopes, in order that new buildings in historic districts may be in sympathy in scale, architectural character, detail and colour.
3. Spell out clearly the procedure for listing historic buildings or structures of cultural/social significance. A building to be worthy of preservation need not be very old. The criteria for inclusion should be historic or cultural importance. Such a listing should exclude financial compensation to the owner for being placed on the list.
4. Enact protective legislation at the national level to prevent local powerful elites from changing regulations to suit their interests.
5. Establish the legal basis to invite interested private and public bodies to share some responsibilities in the protection of monuments and antiquities, especially the 229 Government-listed antiquities.
6. Support conservation legislation by careful planning policies. Uses in historic buildings require restriction of those uses in new buildings. For instance, laws to convert historic palaces to museums should restrict the setting up of museums in new buildings.
7. Provide for re-housing any original occupants forced out by conservation. In a developing country dislocation of people is a serious problem.
8. Encourage citizen participation as a step to the revitalization of the

community, another goal of conservation. This will inculcate a sense of belonging to the conserved area.

9. Create incentives rather than proscriptive regulations, which tend to stifle creativity and result in banal, lifeless communities. Performance bonuses may also prove to be an important tool.

10. Improve infrastructure and social services in old areas. Attention to small things coupled with imagination can help enhance the viability of old areas and structures without necessitating huge capital outlays. Low-cost measures cannot of course take the place of needed infrastructure, but high investment alone cannot ensure the quality of life. A series of low-cost improvements may bring greater benefit to the people in terms of increased well-being than a few projects of spectacularly high investment.

11. Promulgate national standards on conservation with regards to materials, use, craftsmanship, colour and form.

The importance of conservation “... is not limited to maintaining the forms of historical buildings for posterity; conservation is also the mechanism for the carry over of the old traditions, from the conceptual as well as the functional view points”.<sup>2</sup>

The scarcity of the financial and human resources, the lack of awareness of the need of conservation, and the absence of political commitment make conservation a difficult proposition both socially and politically. We have many constraints, but the irreversible damage to our historical environment and buildings cannot be condoned. Conservation cannot wait till a point in time when resources may be available or the political climate may change. The recommendations outlined do not make large demands on capital, but nevertheless will serve the cause of conservation.

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*Footnotes*

1) *Architecture*, Nov 1986, p 37

2) An intervention by Hassan Fathy in a seminar published as *Conservation as Cultural Survival*; The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Sept 1978, p 103