
A CRITIQUE OF THE WORKSHOP PROJECTS

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It is now time for us to review the results of this workshop and to look back over the last week of intense activity and ask ourselves what we have learned that we did not know before.

During this workshop we have discussed the meaning of conservation, the economics of conservation, and conservation in practice. All this information has been given to us by leading experts in these specific fields.

This workshop has certainly opened the eyes of the participants to their history and cultural assets. Many team members freely admitted that they were *seeing* their case study buildings for the very first time. The case studies were randomly selected, more to identify specific kinds of problems than because of their specific architectural or historic importance. We started with Khan Mohammad Mridha's Mosque which dates from about 1700 and which is representative of an historic, religious structure in a quasi-residential commercial area.

Next was Painam Village, an abandoned street of some architectural significance, strongly related to Old Sonargaon. This site was in a low density agrarian setting, perhaps the only one of this kind.

Another site, Ruplal House, is a large single house of the colonial period. A structure of considerable architectural significance, it is overrun and encroached upon by the wholesale and retail vegetable markets.

And finally came Ali Mian's Talab, a large tank located behind the Ahsan Manzil Complex. The team's brief asked them to consider also the adjoining rear portion of the Ahsan Manzil.

Having selected the sites, each team (composed of four students with a tutor) was given a brief with specific tasks: first, undertaking a general survey to actually assess the historical, architectural, and present condition of the building or sites. Second, to do a study on the possible restoration of the property. Then there was the question of rehabilitation: what to do with the building or the surroundings. This is something that is totally separate from the problems of architectural conservation. People often

muddle the meaning of these two words, and in many ways, and in many cases, the various teams did address the problem of conservation vs. restoration.

We then moved to the all-important surroundings or curtilage of the building to consider its landscaping. One of the points that perhaps didn't come through very clearly was the history of the landscape around many of these buildings. There was a tendency for many of the people to want to apply beautification rather than conservation or restoration of the landscape.

The next question was of incorporating a new structure within the complex: what is often called in-fill. It follows the major problems that architectural conservationists face, that of adding new buildings to an existing building or adding a new structure to an existing environment. It is perhaps one of the most tricky subjects to approach. It is important to actually look at the building, to question the value of any additions or accretions, and to ask one specific question — does it work? Do additions or alterations function correctly? (If not, then one can consider removing them.) In many cases, to make a building work in its present situation in the 20th Century, it is important to make additions so that it actually serves present-day functions. It can be done, and can be done very well. It can also be a total disaster, and it is usually those total disasters that we remember.

The final question that was posed was that of upgrading of the environment. We have varying circumstances among our case studies. The environment was fairly simple in Painam Village, where it is not overly crowded, where it has a wonderful agrarian setting, and where it has the mystique of a series of tumbled down but photogenic buildings. We then go to the other extreme at the Ruplal House, and there you fight your way through a dense crowd of people and vegetables and struggle through the spice market with a handkerchief over your nose. And you wonder how on earth can we upgrade this particular environment. Yet again, we had the question of Ali Mian's Talab. Some people, particularly the historians and the archeologists in our midst, questioned the value of looking after this *talab* (tank or pond). There were even proposals of draining it and turning it into a football field. What is the right answer? The great attraction in the *talab* proved to be the fact that it is a body of water, and as everyone agreed, it is such an important feeling to be near water, particularly in Bangladesh.

I'm first going to mention a word or two about the general methodology of the team approach to case studies.

One basic thing that we have all learned were the pitfalls and the

difficulties in making a good presentation. The use of videos was a specific tool utilized for two presentations; one was better than the other. The lesson we all learned was that the use of video can take you only so far, particularly for non-professionals. The art of making a documentary is that you must put over your point within fixed and unforgiving time limits.

A video is only one of the problems of condensing a large amount of material into a short period of time. The art of presentation, in fact, is in the distillation of material. A suggestion for all the teams was that they should tackle the presentation as though they were selling the project to a client.

There are, in fact, three types of client. For instance, an academic client, which could be the Aga Khan Foundation. The political client would be the government, and the third, more human level of client, would be the owner or occupier of the building. The outcome of the whole question of one's approach to a building is that you have to identify to whom you are actually trying to "sell" your project. You have to consider the time you have available for the presentation. You have to work out the attention span of the person to whom you are presenting, and if you see one part of your presentation missing the mark, have to stop that part and go on to something else.

The bottom line though is to avoid over-kill; just give your clients a sample of what you offer, of what they are after. Keep them looking for more.

Another form of media used in the presentations was the overhead projector. The presentations with good clear diagrams came over extremely well. When you are able to point at your proposal, i.e. this we're going to turn into a hotel, that we are going to use for landscaping, it is better remembered. The diagrams and pictures are far more valuable than a lot of verbiage.

At the feasibility stage, it is very important to present a series of options; you shouldn't thrust down your client's throat the "one and only" option, because he may not like it and then you have lost him. Throw out a series of possible options, and watch your client to see which one he likes and expand upon it.

Don't forget that to come up with a 15 or 20 minute presentation, it is still necessary to do those hours, weeks and months of research, and to have that information by your side in case you require it — just in case someone comes up with a difficult question.

Another point for a presentation is to respond to all tasks. You were all given the same tasks, five or six of them, and in actual fact, not many of you answered all of them. We appreciate you had very strict time

constraints, but nonetheless, if someone asks you a question, you should at least make an effort to answer it or acknowledge the fact that you haven't answered it for some reason or another.

I cannot hope, in the space available, to condense all the recommendations made by each of the teams, but I shall make comments on the content of the individual presentations.

Starting in order with the Khan Mohammad Mridha's Mosque, we all agreed that while the team made a very brave attempt at solving some particularly difficult problems, it should try to make a bolder statement. I feel that your answer was a little bit standard; it would have been worthwhile to try to think beyond the standard answer in what is, after all, an exercise. You made a very bold recommendation, for example, that you should pull down the six-storey building, but you avoided the question of what to do with the empty space beneath the building. You showed us the very interesting photograph of 1960, when the building was a partial ruin, but I don't think you researched sufficiently as to exactly what the levels were. You should have stipulated that further investigations were necessary to see where the original floor was. It was interesting how much historical evidence came out, such as the fascinating series of photographs and old drawings.

One of the lessons, certainly, that you learned from this particular project, was the need for legislation. It is all very well to say that we should pull a building down, but you have got to find strong reasons behind it. Nonetheless, you did make a very good presentation and you unearthed several important questions that still remained unanswered, and it would be well worthwhile to take it a step further and make a few brave statements.

We then move to the Painam Village. The lesson to be learned here is *distillation*, to reduce your information down to what is actually necessary. You had perhaps the most difficult job, because you have two-thirds of a mile of road with buildings and dense construction on either side. Of any team, you probably had more right to dodge a few questions, because of the amount you were asked for. However, you shouldn't get into too much detail; it should have been more of an overview, of putting up ideas as to the use of the various buildings. You identified those that should be removed. You rather overlooked the *macro* view, for the benefit of archeologists and historians. You didn't actually succeed in putting Painam into its historical context. None of us could be presumed to know where the real Sonargaon is, that is, on the other side of the Chittagong road. Nonetheless, it is important to establish the historical link, tenuous though it may be with the whole environment. It is a responsibility that you owe to history to recognize the importance of Sonargaon or Painam in the total

context of Sonargaon, which after all was the most important city in Bengal at that particular time.

One thing which I hope that the workshop will endorse is your recommendation that Painam should be incorporated in the overall development plan for the folk art museum and the recreation center. If nothing else, the information and the interest generated from your presentation has brought to light that very close to the folk art museum you have the opportunity of incorporating an important part of Bengali history.

Next is the Ruplal House. This team was faced with several serious initial problems, including the physical one of actually getting into the building under appalling working conditions. So very wisely, and with the support of their tutors, they decided to make the assumptions that the encroachment from the wholesale vegetable market and the spice market was going to be resolved. They could have spent two hours explaining how they were going to do it; instead, they made a few assumptions, such as that the new Chinese bridge would take the market to the other side of the river, therefore freeing up the curtilage and environs of the house. One has to accept these sort of assumptions to open up the possibilities of an interesting analysis of the property.

They were faced with an important task, that of identifying the future use of the building. It is very important to consider this at a very, very early stage. One of the good things about their presentation was that they came up with several different alternatives for usage. It provoked discussion, which is just what you try to do when you are presenting a program, and I think it underlines the fact that by putting up several options at the feasibility stage, you will get a lot of feedback. Their presentation approach was different from the others. They prepared a very concise statement which they handed out, and then they read it. They knew exactly how long it was going to take, and they put out far more information in a very short time than anyone else did. The fact that they finished 15 or 20 minutes before their time due was a credit to them, because we still had their ideas very fresh in our minds.

And finally, we move to Ali Mian's Talab; this case raised several problems, even the central one of "what is there actually to conserve"? The analysis of the Talab was carried out extremely well, and even those who wondered why the tank was being considered were convinced, after their presentation, of the importance of it. Taking into consideration the extra building in the back of the Ahsan Manzil Complex that was not quite adjacent to the Talab itself opened a series of interesting possibilities. The team dutifully considered this rather dilapidated building with a view to its repair and conservation. As a devil's advocate, I suggested that there was

no point in saving this building; it should be torn down and replaced. At this suggestion they made valiant proposals to incorporate suitable services and facilities for the people who lived in the building; they should be commended for considering the residents. It is too easy to pull a building down and build something better, but what are you going to do with the poor people living in it while you are going through this process?

My personal view was that they should have recommended the incorporation of that building as well as perhaps a larger section of the land almost adjacent to the Talab into a very careful redevelopment of that whole area. History states that there was a strong relationship between the historic buildings and the Talab itself, and the location of the building seemed to be the obvious link. It is therefore important that this be given due consideration. However, you have to go through the process of studying the building before decisions are made, and it is only after doing this that you can truly assess the merits of the existing structure against that of a new one. Normally the guiding factor at the end of it all is cost.

To summarize some of our experiences, we have learned the importance of communication, but even more importantly, the value of *collaboration*. An architect restorer is often named as being a jack of all trades and master of none, not an enviable position to be in. But if you have to know a little bit about everything, the most important thing to know is whom to contact when you have to know more. The architect, the engineer, the planner, the archeologist, and the historian make up a working team. The architect's fate is often to act as the mediator in this team approach. One of the developments that I was sorry did not take place in this workshop was a greater collaboration between the architects, the historians, and the archeologists.

One has also to realize one's limitations, and to remember that one ten-day workshop does not make an expert. You have just started a fascinating journey, and it is now through experience and exposure that you will learn.

Proposals for the Government of Bangladesh

In recognition of this workshop and the extensive research that has gone into its preparation, and the information derived from the four selected projects, it is appropriate to make a few recommendations to our host government in recognition of the impressive cultural heritage that belongs to Bangladesh. We all appreciate the efforts and commitment of the Bangladesh government to conserving and preserving the internationally-acclaimed World Heritage sites of Paharpur and Bagerhat, which is being

carried out in collaboration with UNESCO/UNDP. It is important to endorse the findings of this workshop to show our commitment. While the proposals will be found in a separate section, it is important to emphasize that they are the product of *all* the workshop participants.