

*Rafiq Azam Travel Bursary*

## **Spreading the world's architecture**

*Elita Karim*



**Rafiq Azam**

**Felix Saw**

**Patrick Bullen**

As photographs slide by, even the Bangladeshi viewers were awestruck by the majestic formations and architectures located in Dhaka.

Regal structures from the British period, white concretes from the pre-liberation era, brick walls dating back to the 80s and of course, the contemporary post-modern establishments -- the presentation by Felix and Patrick depicted their 15-day exploration programme through pictures and stories, thanks to the Rafiq Azam Travel Bursary (RATB), a widely recognised scholarship, amongst upcoming architects all over the world.

The two young Australian architects won the scholarship and visited Bangladesh for a 15-day long study of architecture in Bangladesh last month.

Felix Saw from the University of New South Wales in Sidney and Patrick Bullen from Monash University in Melbourne were selected from their respective universities after an inter-university competition was held between the architecture departments.

“Rafiq came and gave a presentation at Monash University of what he does in Dhaka, which I had attended,” says Bullen.

“Our university sent out an email, saying that Rafiq was offering the opportunity to young students to go to Bangladesh to study and explore the architecture there. So, I wrote an essay on the importance of architecture for the future of Bangladesh and how

architecture can serve in a positive way. My essay got selected and I won the scholarship.”

Felix Saw, on the other hand, was selected based on the project he has been working on for quite some time in Sidney.

His project idea is based on migration, cultural changes and how architecture is relevant to communities thriving and developing in new surroundings.

“I didn't get much of a culture shock when I first got down exploring the architecture of Dhaka,” smiles Saw.

“I am originally from Malaysia and many of the cultural traits here are similar to the ones in my home country.”

Muhammad Rafiq Azam is a well-known contemporary architect who specialises in modern aesthetics, inspired by the natural resources and the lush beauty of Bengal.

He and Shatotto, his firm, also promote the exploring and learning of ancient architectural heritage of the region. The Rafiq Azam Travel Bursary (RATB) was launched in the year 2008.

The idea of the scholarship had first shaped up at Jadavpur University.

“I was teaching at Jadavpur University in India, a very old establishment,” says Azam.

“The students there were very interested to come to Dhaka and explore our architecture. I offered them a chance to do so, and told them that I could support their stay. That's how the scholarship programme actually shaped up. Eventually, I spoke to other schools (universities) in Bangladesh. Brac University was the first one to agree. In fact I remember them saying -- grab this opportunity!”

The Department of Architecture at Brac has been running the scholarship programme for the last five years.

“Selected students go to other parts of the world,” he explains. “I believe, last year it was Turkey, previously the students had visited Malaysia, Bhutan, Nepal, India. This year, the selected students will visit Sri Lanka. I plan to start this scholarship in Pakistan very soon.”

The 15-day long scholarship programme required both Bullen and Saw to explore as much as they could of the structures in Dhaka, submit a thesis paper and give a presentation of what they had learnt.

According to Rafiq Azam, the scholarship was mainly launched to have a platform for sharing knowledge.

Sharing of ideas and spreading knowledge amongst small groups will eventually develop into something bigger, he says.

Only then can we make a better Bangladesh, a better world. “I don't believe in working alone,” says Rafiq Azam. “I believe in working with a team, always.”