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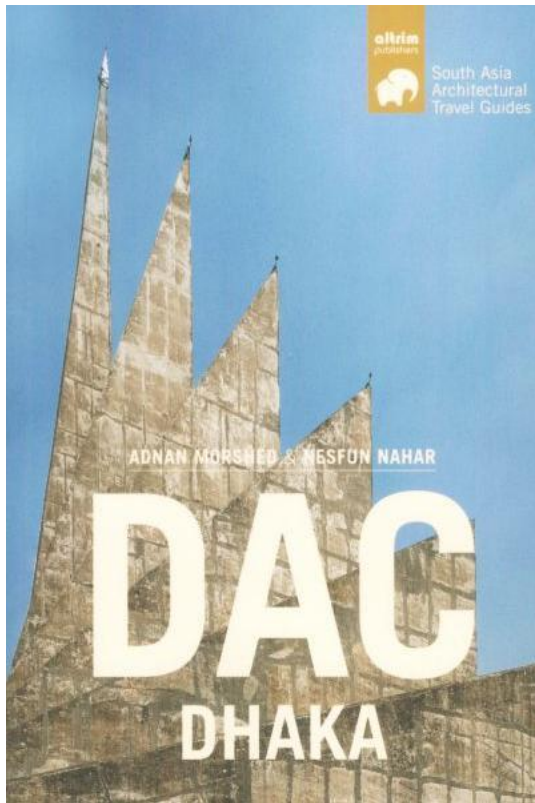
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The story of Dhaka, as told through 25 buildings

A review of Adnan Morshed and Nefsun Nahar's DAC: Dhaka (Altrim Publishers, Barcelona, 2017)



The Swadhinata Stambha (Independence Monument), designed by Marina Tabassum and Kasheb Mahboob Chowdhury alongside the Museum of Independence, was the winning entry of a national architectural competition held in 1997. Photo: Prabir Das



DAC: Dhaka is a story of Dhaka told through 25 buildings—from the Lalbagh Fort of 500 years ago to buildings barely 10 years old. Put together by architects Adnan Morshed and Nesfun Nahar, this is a fascinating account of how architecture has evolved in a city often described as a concrete jungle, perhaps even as an environmental disaster in the making.

Perhaps a more apt description of this fast-growing city of 18 million is the one provided in the book's introduction—“a quintessentially 21st century urban narrative of whirlwind modernity.” As these whirlwinds often threaten to engulf us, architects strive to build an oasis, where the insatiable demands of impatient growth can be harmonised with the environment, the finer aspects of our sensibilities and our rich heritage.

As we struggle to move around Dhaka amidst the traffic and the pollution, numbed by the noise and heat, our visions blurred by graffiti, we pass by buildings whose beauty and significance we fail to appreciate. There are buildings we do not even know existed—tucked away in some corner of the city that we would hardly visit, on a lane we would hardly notice—that are symbols of the city's architectural heritage or

harbingers of what lies ahead. The book reveals Dhaka in a way that is new to even those who have lived long in the city.

Consider, for example, the Bait ur Rouf mosque in a part of Uttara called Faidabad. An agrarian land not long ago, sucked up by the ever-growing Dhaka, Faidabad is where Sufia Khatun, widowed in 1971, had a small plot of land. In 2005, she decided to grant the land to build a mosque for the community. She died soon after but her grandchild, an architect, took on the task. This could have been just another mosque in the city of mosques. But Marina Tabassum, one of our most creative architects, had other ideas. As the book tells us, “the monastic geometry of the mosque, its brick choreography and chiaroscuro play of interior light, and its siting in the midst of frenzied urban growth—all suggest how the architect negotiated both the region's rich legacy of mosque architecture and the poetics of minimalist modernism.” The mosque is nested within an all-familiar Dhaka setting of “congested neighborhoods with narrow alleys and inadequate community facilities”. But within that bland space, the architect has created a spiritual oasis in urban Dhaka that received the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2016. A labour of love of an architect to fulfil the wish of her grandmother.



Prayer hall of Bait Ur Rouf Mosque, Faidabad, Uttara. Designed by architect Marina Tabassum, Bait Ur Rouf received the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2016. Photo: AKTC / Hassan Saifuddin Chandan

The book has an intriguing title. DAC is the airport code for the city, derived from Dacca, the old spelling for Dhaka. This highly symbolic short title thus represents a blend of the old and the new, one of the many blends that the book talks about. This, I believe, is one of the guiding principles and major challenges of an architect's work, i.e., the blending of things, of the old and the new, the concrete and the abstract, the horizontal and the vertical, the functionality and the aesthetics, and the art and the

politics. DAC: Dhaka is a story of how architects of several generations, some coming from abroad but most being of the soil, have imagined such blends as they tried to create harmony amongst discord, in this “city with a history”, amidst “the whirlwinds of modernity”.

To follow that story let us take a trip to one of the well-known parts of Dhaka, the area in and around Dhaka University, which came to life largely in the first six decades of the last century. Our first stop is the Curzon Hall which hosts the Science Faculty of the university. The building, where students are taught to navigate the future, also takes us to the past. It was built in 1905, in the context of the short-lived partition of Bengal of which Dhaka was designated as a capital, and at a time of rising nationalism. The authors write, “synthesizing imperial grandiosity with sporadic Mughal motifs, the imposing building symbolizes how the colonial administration sought to include elements of 'local' architecture as a way to show its sensitivity to native culture, which they hoped would counter growing nationalist sentiments among the natives”. Blending art with politics.



The Curzon Hall located in the University of Dhaka campus area, was named after the incumbent Viceroy Lord Curzon, who laid the foundation of the building on February 14, 1904. The two-story building represents a hybrid of European and Indian architectural styles. Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

Staying in that neighbourhood, lets pay a visit to the Faculty of Arts, more commonly known as the Art College. The building, where aspiring artists get their training year after year, is itself a work of art. It is one of the earliest creations of Muzharul Islam,

the doyen of Bangladeshi architects and harbinger of the modernist trend in our architecture. We learn from the book how Islam “informs modern architectural language with self-conscious considerations of climatic needs and local building materials.” Blending modernity with local heritage.

As we travel further north, we enter the parts of the city which grew rapidly after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Sixteen of the 25 buildings covered by this book belong to this era. Some are private residences, in Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Bashundhara. As economic growth from the 1980s onwards brought wealth to many, some could afford to maintain the luxury of living in independent houses. The more aesthetically-minded of these commissioned imaginative architects to design something that was more than an abode for them. Nostalgia played a part. The authors talk about one such owner, an urban entrepreneur who “knew he could not never return permanently to his ancestral village” but yet “yearned to make tangible part of his childhood memory in the midst of a frenzied city of 18 million”. The result, in the middle of upscale Gulshan, is “an almost Kafkaesque return to the Bengali wilderness, including such spaces as 'crop field,' 'rain room', and 'bamboo bush.’” “Luxury at its absurd heights” as the authors call it, but with an architect's expression which has “dignified, restrained and introspective felicity.” Blending materialism with nature.

The book also takes us inside some office buildings. A striking one is the Grameenphone building in Bashundhara. Completed in 2009, the building is full of blends, harmonies and ironies. We learn about two murals that adorn the interior. One is a vast collection of hand gestures. The authors note the irony in this depiction of non-verbal communication in the headquarters of a company spreading modern technology for verbal communication. Another mural comprises the names of Bangladeshi villages. The authors see in this a “dynamic tension between the globalization of telecommunications and the phenomenology of local geography.” Notwithstanding these ironies and tensions, the building is indeed a paradigm setter for corporate Bangladesh. We may hope to see more such buildings where functionality is combined with modern aesthetics, and where respect for local culture

and sensitivity to the environment goes beyond the traditional practice of corporate social responsibility. Blending commerce with social responsibility.

Let us come back to where we started, the area around the Dhaka University, and join the authors as they take us to the Museum of Independence and the Independence Monument. Devoted to the finest moments of our own history, the complex also reflects the cross-cutting of architectural heritages. While we realise how the architects have captured the “land-water mysticism of deltaic Bengal” we are also reminded of the “evocative expansiveness of a Roman forum or the geographical assemblage of an Egyptian *mastaba* sanctuary”. Blending the local with the global.



The Kamalapur Railway Station, designed Daniel C Dunham and Robert G Boughey, creates a light-filled and cross-ventilated train terminal, reminiscent of Mughal pavilions, with deep recessed spatial volumes. Photo: Mary Frances Dunham

The core feature of this eminently readable book consists of short descriptions of the 25 buildings. These descriptions, full of memorable phrases as the ones I have quoted, cover rich architectural details of the buildings but also the historical, political, economic and policy context in which these buildings were conceived and designed.

Detailed architectural maps are provided for each building. Sharp photographs, taken from different angles, convey the exquisite beauty and varied architectural features of the buildings. Taken together, in their chronological arrangement, these vignettes tell a rich story of evolution, of how the thinking and creativity of our architects evolved, as they responded to changing times and new demands that came with change.

For me, the vignette on the Teacher-Student Centre (TSC) was a personal eye-opener. I frequented this place during my days at the Dhaka University. The cafeteria, the lawn in front of the auditorium and the verandas were the locations for endless addas with friends. The auditorium was where we would go for cultural functions and conferences. When I was first glancing through book, I was struck by the photo of a hall, the tables and chairs in which suggested an eating place. With my eyes fixated on the continuous band of clerestory around the perimeter of the room, I wondered what this very modern-looking place was. Much to my surprise, I realised that it was a picture of the TSC cafeteria, our favourite place for hanging out! As I read the description of the TSC, I came to know facts that I was unaware of, or architectural details that my friends and I had never noticed as we idled in the cafeteria or rushed through the corridors. I now know that the TSC was the creation of a famous Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis, who was trying out his theories of ekistics, an integrated approach to principles of human settlements. I began to comprehend how Doxiadis designed the layout of the complex in a way that it conformed to the realities of a tropical climate, the same sensitivity that guided Muzharul Islam a decade ago when he designed the nearby Arts Faculty building. Somehow, things started to come together for me. There is now a yearning in me to revisit the TSC, four decades later, but with eyes more open.



The Faculty of Fine Arts building, designed by Muzharul Islam, signalled the beginning of Bengali modernism in the architecture of the then East Pakistan. Photo: Mary Frances Dunham

This is what the book does. It opens our eyes, makes us see our familiar buildings in a different way and introduces us to buildings we have not seen or even knew existed in Dhaka. But this is not just a book on buildings and architecture. It is an account of the evolution of a city and its residents who, caught in the whirlwinds of modernity, of tumultuous political and economic change, of a senseless construction mania,

nonetheless endeavour to strike a balance, to maintain harmony, and to never lose the dream of making Dhaka a truly liveable city.

The book is introduced as a traveller's resource, a guidebook for those who would visit the city. But it could equally be an inspiration, and an invitation, for long-term residents of the city to rediscover their home town, perhaps even to discover it for the first time! This is the precious gift that Adnan Morshed and Nesfun Nahar have given us.

DAC: Dhaka is available at the Department of Architecture, BRAC University, Mohakhali, Dhaka

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