

## Humanising Dhaka with civic spaces

12:00 AM, February 19, 2019 / LAST MODIFIED: 12:00 AM, February 19, 2019

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Imagine yourself as an international tourist who just arrived in Dhaka to explore a quintessential city of the Global South. You checked into your hotel somewhere in Banani. You have only three days in the country, so you head out right away to visit a few basic destinations in Dhaka. Where would you go first? Which site or place would begin to tell you the urban evolution of Dhaka? Where is Dhaka's magic? Old Dhaka? Dhaka University? Manik Mia Avenue? Gulshan 2? New Market? Motijheel? I am not quite sure.

Where do you begin to explore a city? This is a classic question that a tourist often faces when visiting a city. To ask the question a bit differently, should there be a *ground zero* for a city's story to be told?

Let me address these questions by explaining my own experience of visiting different cities around the world and why I found some of them so extraordinary that I wanted to return. After discussing my travel experience I will turn to Dhaka again.

A few years ago, I visited Marrakech, a historic Moroccan city on the western edge of the Sahara Desert. I checked into my hotel, or Riad (although the word means “enclosed garden,” it is generally used in Marrakech to imply a traditional courtyard house that has been converted into a boutique hotel), located in the old town, or medina. After settling down, I knew where I needed to go: Djemma el-Fna, the cultural and social epicentre of this centuries-old trading hub in western Africa. This is basically a large, irregularly shaped open plaza where the whole world has converged! From snake-charmers to Gnawa musicians (ancient African Islamic spiritual songs), from acrobats and fortune-tellers, from hundreds of barbeques to tourists from all corners

of the world, Djemma el-Fna seems like a magical place of “everything possible.” Marrakech revolves around this place of extraordinary camaraderie and Moroccan vitality. If you are here, you are most likely to grasp what Marrakech means culturally and socially.

If you find yourself in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, the first thing you would check out is its historic avenue called Las Ramblas (from the Arabic word *ramla*, the dried-up bed of a seasonal river), a long tree-lined street that pulsates with a flamboyant Mediterranean energy. Caged birds, newsstands, musicians, mime artists, flower shops, sketch artists, painters, and tourists transform this street into a cultural microcosm of this Spanish city. I consider Barcelona one of my favourite cities because of Las Ramblas.

One can continue this ritual of finding the cultural heart of a city in so many European cities, such as Florence, Venice, Prague, Krakow, Vienna, Athens, and Lisbon. How can one not experience the collective romance of Venice in Piazza San Marco? Krakow's captivating Rynek Glowny (main square) is a monument to Polish history, even if this monument is an open plaza. Rome, London, Paris, and Istanbul, among other cities, have multiple centres; in Rome, the centre could be Piazza Navona or the Capitoline Hill; in Paris, it may be Place de la Concorde; in Istanbul, Sultanahmet Square. A tourist in these great cities would spontaneously know where to go to feel their cultural pulse.

There are cities in other continents as well. Washington, DC, is built around the National Mall, a landscaped park that serves as the site of national events, book fairs, political protests, summer festivals, concerts, and general public assembly. This is where Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his iconic “I have a dream” speech to a crowd of nearly 250,000 people in 1963. In Mexico City one must first go to Zócalo (meaning plinth or base). Located at the centre of the city since Aztec times, this large plaza, also known as Plaza de la Constitución, has been serving as the city's main square for public gathering, national events, concerts, and festivals. It is the Zócalo where Colombian rock star Shakira reportedly attracted more than 200,000 people to her concert in 2007!

Then there is Tian'an Men Square, an expansive concrete plaza at the heart of modern Beijing. Although associated with the complicated history of the 1989 student protests, this main square has served as the national stage for festivities and ceremonies.

From Lima (Plaza Mayor) to Cairo (Tahrir Square), from Manhattan (Times Square) to Moscow (Red Square), there are many cities that feature a cultural nerve centre. The centre not only

serves as the city's cultural heart, but also helps city-dwellers and visitors orient themselves within its maze of buildings, activities, and anxieties.

Even if some of these centres or squares are affiliated with uncomfortable histories of political repression or other tragedies, they eventually shape the identity of a city and help nurture the democratic values of its citizens. Cities reinforce humanity when they have a public square or squares, filled with history, culture, and human aspirations. That brings us back to Dhaka. Where would a tourist first go in this city? Where do Dhakaites gather to celebrate the Victory Day? If Bangladesh reaches the World Cup Cricket final in the near future, where would 300,000 or more people watch it together in one place and rejoice?

In Dhaka, we have action-filled streets and road intersections, full of people, urban activities, vehicles, vendors, and noise, but hardly any public places (we can debate whether a roadside tea stall on a typical Dhaka street or in TSC (Dhaka University) represents the spirit of a public place). Political theorist Hannah Arendt and sociologist Richard Sennett have studied this classic urban paradox: the peculiar failure of public life in modern societies that often tend to reinforce the interiority of the individual. They argued, in their disparate ways, that publicness of modern life can bloom when there are moments, opportunities, and spaces for free interactions among strangers in the city, when multiple perspectives can coexist as a result of unrestricted exchanges.

In Dhaka, we can ask: Is there a civic place where people of all economic strata can gather freely without social tension, while experiencing the publicness of urban life?

It is with this dilemma that I directed a project at the Department of Architecture at BRAC University about seven years ago. An advanced group of undergraduate students was given the challenge of identifying a central and accessible location in the city and developing it as a place for the public to enjoy civic life, experience culture, watch nature and wildlife, be near water, walk, bike, see the sky, hear the songs of aspiring musicians, be entertained by sketch artists, eat traditional food, buy artwork, and, most of all, begin to love their city for its humanity.

We imagined this place as Dhaka's premier venue for the city dwellers to become public and co-producers of civility. We believed that a democratically inspired civic place would bring all economic classes together, removing the invisible but entrenched barriers of economic divisions

that exist in the city. We studied the history of the significance of public places in the development of liveable, humane cities.

Although the location we chose was controversial, we were led by idealism. We innocently thought that the government and the Bangladesh Air Force would empathise with our point about the greater public good, about the future of Dhaka. We were convinced that the central location, size, and relatively modest use of the old airport at Tejgaon would justify its transformation into Dhaka's urban maidan or civic centre. We argued that this place of public gathering would humanise Dhaka as a people-centric city. The Air Force would continue to manage the site. The old airport's aviation-related use, if any, could move to Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, as the forthcoming Bangabandhu International Airport on the bank of the Padma River would reduce its air traffic. The project would be an excellent public relations effort by the Air Force.

The proposed place of public assembly would feature urban parks filled with native trees, wildlife sanctuaries, walking and biking trails, water bodies, bookshops, art galleries, museums, outdoor exhibition spaces, outdoor theatres, playing fields, boutique restaurants, WiFi cafes, specialty markets for local products, flea markets, space for creative businesses, and plenty of open spaces. The centre would obviously not solve all of Dhaka's urban problems but it would surely create a space where people would begin to appreciate their city and its culture, learn better urban etiquette, become responsible citizens, develop empathy for others, and help flourish democratic norms in urban life. Flyovers are necessary but a good society is often built on humane measures.

If materialised, this public place would be one of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's greatest contributions to Bangladesh and its future. In the next decades, most developing countries will be building flyovers, tunnels, and intercity highways as part of their urbanisation agenda, but very few will have the vision to transform their old airfields or riverfronts into civic squares to celebrate the ideals of democracy. The significance of such undertaking will be both international and historic. Often the middle-income aspirations of a developing country could be best measured by its ability to transcend the formulaic.