

ADDRESSING HOUSING CRISIS IN BANGLADESH

Why we need new housing philosophies in Bangladesh

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The first Monday of October each year is celebrated as World Habitat Day. More than 30 years ago, the United Nations General Assembly conceived the day to build global awareness of a basic but overlooked human right; that is, everybody deserves a decent and affordable place to live. The day was first observed in 1986 with Nairobi as the focal city. The theme was “Shelter is my right.” In 2018, World Habitat Day was observed with the slogan, “Municipal Solid Waste Management,” within a broader focus on what was called Waste-Wise Cities.

World Habitat Day should be a time for introspection into our cities, into the state of our habitats. For instance, how are we addressing the urban housing challenge in Bangladesh? Are we approaching the issue with hackneyed and generic academic theories? Is it time to deal with the housing crisis with context-specific, creative solutions?

Three policy mind-set transformations are urgently needed. First, we must move away from the plot-based housing model, as it is not a practical solution for a land-scarce country like Bangladesh. Second, we must become accustomed to living in small places, since we have a very high land-population ratio. And, finally, we must abandon the oxymoronic idea of “slum-improvement,” because it ghettoises the urban poor and socially stigmatises them with the inhumanity of “informality.” I would like to discuss the first segment today, followed by the second and the third in forthcoming opinion pieces.

When it comes to housing a large urban population, we must question the idea of plot as a basic land module for housing solutions. We are an unapologetic plot nation. RAJUK develops and sells plots. The imageries of three-katha plots, five-katha plots, seven-katha plots are embedded in our urban DNA. City development agencies organise lotteries to distribute plots among successful participants. Private developers sell plots to aspiring homeowners. Newspaper advertisements relentlessly manufacture the mythology that the plot is the ultimate middle-class achievement. The government awards plots to national cricketers when they perform exceptionally well.

What all this means is that our society champions the plot as the most prestigious icon of middle-class social mobility and a fundamental urban-development unit, where stand-alone dream houses would be built. The social valorisation of the plot often takes place at the expense of the city and the community at large. I once saw a four-storey, very high-end house in Gulshan and an overflowing dumpster right outside its palatial gate. It seemed like good things could happen only inside the plot, while the city outside rots. The absurd juxtaposition of the two opposites ironically seemed culturally normative.

Significant problems emerge from the plot attitude. The first is obvious yet rarely discussed in the public forum. By holding onto the plot model as a way to urbanise, we behave as if we are Canada. The size of Canada's landmass is 3.855 million sq. miles, inhabited by merely 37 million people, whereas Bangladesh's land size is 57,000 sq. miles, with a population of 170 million. This means that Bangladesh needs to house a lot of people on a relatively tiny landmass. Plot-based urbanisation does not allow high-density urban growth. Thus, plots are not only a false luxury but also disastrous for a land-scarce country.

Consider Dhaka, an urban agglomeration growing at an unprecedented rate, with 600,000 people from rural hinterlands pouring into the city every year. The capital city needs about 120,000 new dwelling units every year. The government meets only 7 percent of this annual housing demand, whereas private sectors provide about 20 percent. Informal sectors account for approximately 55 percent of the private-sector housing delivery.

Low-density, plot-based urbanisation is a wrongheaded answer to Bangladesh's high land-population ratio. The township of Purbachal, a 6,150-acre site on the east-central side of Dhaka, provides 26,000 residential plots of various sizes. This would mean a low per-acre population density (165 persons per acre). Can we afford low-density housing in cities, where buildable land is quickly disappearing due to encroachment and land-grabbing?

Then there is another exacerbating problem. Imagine this: when fully developed, Purbachal is going to be a forest of cubical building masses with a “zillion” unusable narrow alleys or mandatory building setbacks in between buildings. If you live in an apartment block in Dhaka or Chittagong, you know how unhygienic the narrow spaces between buildings become due to lack of sunlight, air, and its secretly “convenient” use as a place for garbage-dumping from apartment windows above.

In a three-katha plot, typically the building setback is 8.3 feet from the front and back and 6.6 feet from the sides. Now imagine 20 plots in a 10x2 formation and how much unusably narrow in-between spaces these 20 plot-centric buildings would create. If each building has 5 floors with one unit per floor, then the total number of apartments in these 20 plots are 100. But if we combine the 20 plots to create one large housing complex or estate, we would be able to avoid useless in-between spaces, while accommodating more apartments with collective access to community green space. This is the healthier lifestyle that is being championed in liveable cities across the world.

It is entirely possible that Purbachal would fail to provide the kind of population density that a city like Dhaka needs due to the township's low-density and plot-centric urban vision. It would certainly create a lot of negative spaces due to the necessary setback of buildings within the plot.

Instead of plot-centric housing initiatives, we should follow, for instance, the Singapore model of housing estates to provide integrated housing units for a large urban population, disadvantaged by a broad lack of buildable land. More than 80 percent of Singaporeans live in the Housing and Development Board flats that create a vast network of housing estates across the tiny country. These housing estates are developed as independent neighbourhoods, served by schools, supermarkets, food courts, hospitals, diagnostic centres, recreational facilities, and parks. People really don't have to drive to take their children to school or go to the hospital. They can walk to their destinations.

One of the great examples of such a housing estate in Singapore is the [Pinnacle@Duxton](#), a 50-storey housing estate next to the business district. Winner of an international design competition and completed in 2009, it is a mammoth building complex, consisting of seven 48-storey tower blocks. The housing estate is laid out on a 2.5-ha site and connected at the ground level by green parks and public amenities. The whole complex is also woven together by two 1,600-ft-long “sky gardens” on the 26th floor and viewing galleries on the 50th floor. Such community-oriented features demonstrably inspire inhabitants to take ownership of their neighbourhood.

When thinking of a housing estate, we typically conjure up the mental image of monotonous concrete boxes, filled with pigeonhole apartments. Japan Garden City in Mohammadpur may be an example. The [Pinnacle@Duxton](#) is no such thing. It is described as “sky houses, flying green” and offers 35-unit variations, creating the vibrant experience of a mini-city within a city.

The tiny nation of Singapore was able to solve its housing crisis from the 1960s onward by creating housing estates, not plot-based, stand-alone housing blocks. It is high time we thought of alternative residential unit supply strategy to accommodate a rapidly growing urban population. We can't afford an unsustainable horizontal plot sprawl with low population density and unusable negative space. We simply do not have land to waste in Bangladesh.