

## The calculus of heritage preservation



Ruins of Jahaj Bari, which was torn down violating a High Court order and without permission from the Waqf Estate that the land belongs to. Photo: Collected

**Adnan Zillur Morshed**

The clandestine demolition of Jahaj Bari in Old Dhaka on the night of Eid-ul-Fitr reveals the precarious state of historic preservation in Bangladesh. Such a senseless act of destruction—a kind of cultural violence—was possible because of a host of interrelated reasons. Among them are: a lack of clear policy guidelines for the preservation of “historic” buildings in private hands or *waqf* custodianship; a policy marginality of the very idea of historic preservation within government bureaucracies; pervasive lack of knowledge of heritage buildings (a newspaper journalist called Jahaj Bari an “ancient” building; there is no consensus as to when exactly the building was built); absence of broad public heritage awareness, further weakened by a

disjointed culture of sentimental attitude toward preservation, often falsely isolated from the economics of preservation.

The knocking down of Jahaj Bari received some news media coverage. Yet, the overall feeling was that this was merely a minor headache of the preservation specialist! There was no statement about it on the website of the Department of Archaeology, the government agency in charge of the country's cultural patrimony. This agency recognises only 32 buildings in Old Dhaka as archaeologically significant. Jahaj Bari is not one of them. According to the Urban Study Group, a team of activists committed to the conservation of historic buildings, there are 2,200 "heritage" buildings in Old Dhaka.

## **There has been very little attempt to see historic preservation as a complex restorative process that has no universal formula. For instance, what stage in the life of the building would you restore?**

The absence of a comprehensive national preservation plan in Bangladesh to safeguard cultural patrimony has long been identified as the main cause for the fast disappearance of heritage sites. But part of the problem also has emerged from the ways in which preservation activists frame the issue. Their suggestions have mostly oscillated between a lament for lost glory and the elitist foibles of a fairy-tale preservation strategy, as if nobody lives in historic buildings and the buildings exist outside of any kind of economic and political conditions.

Furthermore, there has been very little attempt to see historic preservation as a complex restorative process that has no universal formula. For instance, what stage in the life of the building would you restore? The original state when the building was built, or the "decayed" state in which the building was given to the curatorial agency? Should there be any modern technological adaptation so that the restored building would be sustainable for the modern age? But would this technological retrofitting compromise the heritage building's originality? These are some of the questions that complicate the forthcoming restoration of Paris's Notre-Dame Cathedral, recently damaged due to fire.

In Bangladesh, neither the government agencies see any real political leverage in heritage preservation (which requires long-time commitments) nor do the owners of historic buildings understand the economic possibilities in saving their buildings from the crushing modernity of high-rise apartment blocks or shopping centres.

A dynamic and practicable action plan for heritage preservation warrants the real engagement of specialists, architects, historians, urban planners, engineers, the community, the municipality, the government, private-sector investors, and the owners. Legislative measures alone would not be enough to stop demolitions because economic incentives to tear down a building often outweigh the “manageable” penalty for breaking the law.

The idea that a historic building could be preserved to tell the story of a city’s cultural evolution or that preservation could actually be profitable business simply does not resonate with a lot of people, as they are not guided to see the project of preservation within a larger economic and political context. The romantic plea for preservation has often remained entrenched in elitism and the technicality of physical restoration itself. Where is the owner in the equation? Demonising the owner as an uncultured demolisher of history is to misunderstand the inevitable conflict between tradition and modernity.

The question of heritage preservation has long been a serious debate at the very heart of modernity: how does a civilised nation retain the vestiges of its history while incorporating the infrastructures of modern life so that preservation and economic growth can move forward in concert?

From the United States to Italy to England, from France to Turkey to Vietnam, many countries around the world have been debating this issue as a national priority and have come up with various ingenious solutions. There is a lot to learn from the experiences of these countries. A balanced mix of government regulations (without being overly authoritarian) and market-based incentives provides a defensible reason for the public to preserve, care for, and invest in historic buildings. Economic incentives for historic preservation may include: income tax deductions and low-interest loans for historic property owners, tax exemptions for heritage organisations and investors, government grants for heritage protection projects, property tax abatements, sales tax rebates for historic property maintenance, and free consultation for developing business models for historic properties.

Another approach toward preservation would be to convert historic buildings to economically viable “adaptive reuse”—the process of commissioning old structures for new beneficial and compatible functions (one of Jahaj Bari’s tenants was Hanif Biryani; a restaurant with its fire hazard can’t be adaptive reuse!). Instead of falsely mummifying a historic building by keeping it outside public usage and demanding its continued (dilapidated) existence, it could be given new

life that enables reinvigorated civic participation in the building's legacy rather than simply inspiring distant admiration.

I have had the experience of visiting many adaptive-reuse buildings around the world. Here are three examples. A magnificent old oil-fired power station on the banks of the River Thames in London was transformed into Tate Modern, one of the most visited museums of modern art in the world. Since its opening in 2000, the restored building has attracted over 30 million visitors. In the medina of Marrakesh, Morocco, old residential buildings have been converted into exquisite Riad boutique hotels, an essential experience recommended for tourists visiting this fascinating North African city. New York's High Line, an abandoned early 20th-century elevated freight train track restored as a linear urban park in Manhattan's West Side, has become a major tourist attraction and spawned a new generation of preservation movements across the world. Often times community activism makes the adaptive transformation of historic buildings or sites possible.

If a historically conscious investor comes forward with a creative financial plan, Ruplal House in Farashganj could be a fabulous venue for a Dhaka City museum where the public can witness the city's history after paying an entrance fee. After successfully relocating the current occupants (legal or illegal), the museum could reserve thirty percent of the museum jobs for them. This is a win-win situation for all stakeholders.

If the maddening traffic congestion is controlled, Old Dhaka appears ripe for an intervention of heritage tourism. By converting its historic buildings into museums, boutique hotels, libraries, art galleries, and gift shops, the economic health of Old Dhaka could be lifted to new heights, while maintaining current residential and commercial use. The financial benefits of architectural tourism should be robustly explored in Bangladesh.

While integrating a sound economic plan with heritage preservation practices constitutes a feasible approach, the main goal is, and should be, loftier than mere financial gains. Should it not be a moral imperative of a country to preserve those physical traces that both reveal and strengthen its complex cultural identity?

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