

THE HERITAGE OF SHANKHARIBAZAR: PEOPLES PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSERVATION PROCESS TO PROMOTE CULTURAL TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Shankharibazar, the 300 years old urban settlement of Dhaka city was built during the Mughal period and the later part of the British rule. Most of the residents are specialist craftsmen who make 'Shankha' (a special kind of bangle for the Hindu married women made of seashells). The name of the area has evolved from the name of this craft. About 10,000 people live in about 4.6 acres of land. There are 157 houses on both side of the 600 feet long narrow alley. They share unique architectural styles. Over the years many unplanned modifications took place which is a serious threat for the houses with heritage value. With its linear built form, rich history and special craft, Shankharibazar has a unique aura and deserved special attention for conservation. There is a good scope of promoting cultural tourism here. Being a living heritage site, the existing population must participate in the conservation process. A "community-based" conservation process should be promoted to market the area as a tourist attraction. This paper suggests the process of integrated public involvement in the conservation management plan for Shankharibazar including steps, such as, understanding problems; generating and evaluating the options for response; and ultimately choosing a roadmap for conservation management for a successful spot for cultural tourism.

Key words: Conservation, Participatory approach, Cultural heritage, Management plan, Cultural tourism.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Shankharibazar and Shankha

Shankharibazar is located in old town. The 300 years old urban settlement is one of the high density areas of Dhaka city. Most of the residents are Hindu and they are specialist craftsmen who make 'shankha', a special kind of bangle for the Hindu married women made of seashells. Shankhari is a person who makes shankha, and thus the name of the area evolved from the name of this craft. In each building, both the indoor and outdoor living spaces are crammed and congested, and up to 15 families share a small residence. The narrow alleys are inadequate for pedestrians let alone vehicles. Some of the houses are two to three hundred years old and are in a very poor shape. These dwindling structures may collapse any time. Yet the residents are very worried about their future when the issue of demolishing these structures arises.

B. History and development of the area

During the Mughal rule, Dhaka was one of the provincial capitals. Shankharibazar was one of the

prosperous neighborhoods of Mughal Dhaka when the city was formed. During the middle part of the 19th century, the area reached the peak of its development. Legend says the Shankharis came to the East Bengal with the Hindu King Ballal Sen. In the 17th century the Mughal rulers promised the famous Shankharis of Vikrampur of better lands (in the current Shankharibazar area) and this area was formed.

C. The Heritage of Craft and culture

The craft of shankha making from conch shells, a large seashell with spiral design has been carried on through generations. The apprenticeship system is also continued through families. The residents are followers of Hindu gods Vishnu, Krishna and Ogosto muni. According to Hindu scriptures, Ogosto muni killed a demon named Osur with an arm which was similar to the saw used in the 'shankha' craft. Shankha is specially used by Hindu married women and sometimes others also wear it as ornament. The residents celebrate different important Hindu rituals like Dol, Holi, Durga and Laxmi puja. During the Durgapuja, the local areas

like Tantinagar, Goalnagar, Pannitala and Jhulonbari becomes celebration points around the 20 temples. The area is also an important venue for celebrating the Bangali New year.

II. BUILT ENVIRONMENT

A. Compact built form

About 10,000 people live in about 4.6 acres of land of Shankharibazar. Currently there are 157 houses on both side of the 600 feet long narrow alley [1]. The row houses share walls and the arrangement allows very poor lighting and ventilation. The houses are generally 3 to 4 storied and about 70 to 80 people share it. The dimension is 80 feet long and 6 feet wide in some cases. In the interiors, 6 to 15 persons share a single room in many of the residences. The rooms can accommodate a single bed at most and others must use the floor. The average ceiling height is lower than standards of RAJUK and vary from 7 to 8 feet. The narrow alleys are inadequate for pedestrians let alone

vehicles. Hardly two people can pass side by side through the narrow alleys. About 80 percent of the residents are Hindu and are generally poor.

B. The special spatial layout

Most of the houses of the area were built during the Mughal period and few were built during the later part of the British rule in the subcontinent. The linear configurations of the row houses are result of a special land distribution. As most of the residents are craftsman, they like to share their craft. Each original allottee may have received a plot with street frontage so that along with living they could sell their craft. However as business expanded, the narrow row houses could only expand backwards. Such expansions could only proceed up to 70 to 80 feet as similar backward growths from an opposite lane set limits. Other reasons for this special form may be to ensure security and subsequent divisions among successors each requiring a street frontage [1].



Figure 1 and 2: Map and Aerial Photograph showing the linear layout of row houses of Shankharibazar. (not to scale)
Source: Fig 1 Urban Study Group and Fig 2 Google Earth

C. Architectural styles

The main entry gate on the linear façade is 6 feet high in general. Houses are divided into 3 segments: the commercial part facing the street, the residential part in the middle and the service (kitchen and toilets) in the open courts at the rear. A linear corridor (about 20 to 30 feet long) leads to the inner part of the houses. Corridors are divided by a party wall to provide access to rooms and to upper floors through stairways. Corridors ultimately terminate to service areas at rear (Figure 3). Upper floors are used for residential purposes. No separate cooking spaces are provided in

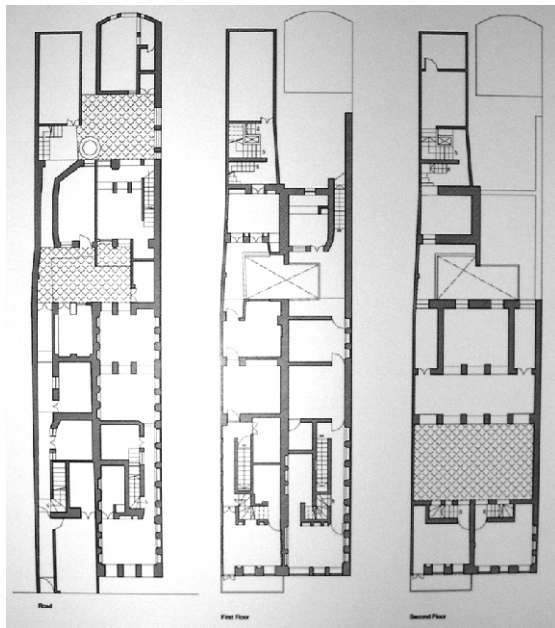


Figure 3: Typical plan of the row houses
Source: Urban Study Group

buildings; cooking is mostly done within family bedrooms. Many houses contain *mandirs* or small temples on the topmost floors. The stair leading to the upper floors is placed within an inner open to sky court approximately in the middle of the linear plan. In most of the houses, an open verandah encloses the court.

III. HERITAGE OF SHANKHARIBAZAR

A. The Built Heritage

During the formative years, forms and textures of different architectural styles with Mughal influences changed the urban fabric. Very few of the magnificent decorations of pillars, cornices and pedestals survived the decay and changes of time though there were some renovations done during the later half of 19th century. The row houses with their unique linear form (10 to 12 feet wide and 30 to 60 feet long) bear the rich architectural style of the Mughal and British period and share the rich history and culture of old Dhaka city and deserve to be conserved. The Architect community strongly recommends that the area should be declared a 'National Heritage Area'.

B. The Heritage of the 'Shankha'

As the name of the area suggests, the heritage of the area evolved around its main craft, the shankha making. The raw material of shankha is basically imported from Srilanka. The price of 100 shankha (from the sea) which previously cost 1,100 taka costs 40,000 taka now. The thicker and heavier shankha is sold at a higher price. The laborious manual process of shaping the shankha is replaced by more convenient machines. The designs can be customized and sometimes gold is added to it. The shell in its natural form is also used in different Hindu rituals for announcing different events.



Figure 4: The Street elevation of the linear row houses of Shankharibazar
Source: Architectural and Urban Conservation in the Islamic World



Figure 5: The poor condition of the heritage buildings
Photograph: Iftekhar Ahmed



Figure 6: A craftsman selling shankha
Photograph: Iftekhar Ahmed

But the pace of main craft is diminishing day by day. Gradually the craftsmen are shifting to gold and silver ornaments for survival. Only 12 shops import, manufacture and sell shankha. The other shops in the area sell cosmetics, local musical instruments and wedding accessories. There are about 80 shops who sell local handicrafts of bronze, jute, etc. Local craftsmen who make the Hindu deities in different Hindu Pujas are high in demand throughout the country.

C. The Living Heritage

Even though the business is getting tougher, many families are still carrying on this 300 year old craft. The younger generation has already learned the craft even though some of them are educated. A heritage component in a living environment implies dealing with their present context. Here the primary issues are concerned with protection and management of those significant components of heritage which still survive in the present (in totality or in parts). According to Rohit Jigyasu [2], the term 'Living' heritage has two fundamental dimensions. The first, dealing with those aspects of heritage, which are still living (in the case of Shankharibazar, the craft of making shankha and different surviving skills, crafts and lifestyle) and the second, dealing with heritage components, which exists in a living environment. The living aspects of heritage deals with skills and crafts (Figure 6), vernacular building systems, the way of life of local people (Figure 7), which have evolved over time and are still surviving in similar or modified form. 'Continuity' is the key word for this type of 'living' heritage.

For Shankharibazar, these aspects are pivotal for maintaining the living heritage and making it an



Figure 7: Narrow street and active street life of Shankharibazar
Photograph: Iftekhar Ahmed

integral part of the place. The buildings along with the activity within them are vital in accentuating the value of the heritage. These will ensure active participation of the local community in the conservation process.

IV. THE DIMINISHING HERITAGE

A. Demolition of the heritage buildings

There are 157 houses in the area. Most of them are 200 to 300 years old. Most of the houses had to be built 2 to 3 storied (some 4 storied) to accommodate the rising population of the area. Many of the houses face serious threat of collapse due to their age and added load of new construction. As the houses share walls or too adjacent to each other, when a house is demolished or reconstructed, the foundation soil of the adjacent houses get unstable and becomes vulnerable. On 9th June 2004, a 5 storied house (house no. 81) collapsed (Figure 8) killing 19 people [3]. It caught the Government's attention. A decision was taken after preliminary survey to demolish the houses with high risk of collapse. 15 of these houses have already been demolished for different reasons and replaced by new houses.

The government became conscious after this incident and declared few of the houses as potentially dangerous. A technical committee (consisting representatives of Dhaka City Corporation, RAJUK and PWD) was formed to assess the overall condition of the houses. The committee declared 800 houses of old Dhaka to be potentially dangerous and 90 of them are of Shankharibazar area. On 19th April, 2006 the Dhaka City Corporation declared 99 of the houses of the area to be potentially dangerous and declared to demolish them [4]. But the decision was halted by the request of the local residents.

B. The demand of the local residents

The local residents demand that along with saving the built heritage, it is essential to take necessary steps to improve the living conditions. The craft that has given the area its name and binds the people together is in a dwindling state. To sustain the living heritage of the area, which includes the people and the century-old craft of 'shankha'; some initiatives are essential. They include (but not limited to) reduce tax on the craft, arrange for micro credits on easy terms and create atmosphere



Figure 8: The collapsed house of Shankharibazar
Source: The Bangladesh Observer

for investment (both public and private). To save the heritage buildings the residents require interest free loan for renovating the houses as well as government initiative to rehabilitate the residents during the renovation process.

C. Current state: Heritage Under threat

Lack of renovation, natural degradation, live load of overpopulation and dead load of the newly constructed upper floors and unplanned modifications are the major threats for these houses with heritage value. Though aluminum window replaced the wooden ones in many of the houses, the basic structure, layout and appearance of the houses remains intact till this day. Many of the owners are adding new front facades with newly constructed walls or plastering old walls to avoid demolition by the government authorities destroying the original façade. In other cases the original façade is maintained but the significant part of the inner areas is demolished and sold to the developers. The reason behind is the reluctance of the younger generation to live in this congested area.

Most of the local population lives under the poverty line and it is not possible for them to renovate their ancestral house. As a result the houses are losing their elegance day by day. Another threat is recently the developed multistoried buildings adjacent to the older houses. If this trend continues there is a great chance that the historic fabric will disappear in time.

Recently owners of the 14 houses marked 'highly dangerous' by the City corporation have started to renovate their houses. Though renovation work of 3 houses are nearing completion and others just started, house no 27, 33 and 48 [4] have already been demolished and construction of new houses has started. No architects, engineers or conservation experts have been consulted during this process, and the work has been executed by the owners with aid of local masons. In this way the area is gradually losing its architectural character and the unique urban form. The government should take immediate measures to save the heritage of Shankharibazar.

V. THE CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PROCESS

A. Conservation approaches for Shankharibazar

Successful urban conservation is more than merely preserving a few buildings. Conservation involves

making interventions at various scales and levels of intensity; and these are determined by the physical condition, causes of deterioration and the community involvement. The following approaches may be adapted in the conservation process of Shankharibazar:

Renewal: The process of Renewal targets redevelopment of existing communities based less on destruction and more on renovation and investment.

Redevelopment: Redevelopment targets old, dilapidated buildings with poor living conditions that may be re-planned and re-built. In Shankharibazar, some of the old buildings that are not structurally safe in the long run may be demolished and redeveloped using 'reduction method' (keeping the significant features intact and redevelop).

Preservation: Preservation aims to retain and enhance the unique character, culture and heritage of the area. It is found by the author that many rich details are still intact in the facades of some of the buildings. These details should be preserved.

All these approaches should be adapted in Shankharibazar and can be materialized through a Conservation Management Plan.

B. The Conservation Management Plan or CMP

The CMP can identify, retain, conserve and enhance socio-economic as well as the physical character of Shankharibazar. For this the decision makers (Government, local residents, Conservation board) need to identify key issues and stakeholders involved. Later they should ascertain possible consensus on the themes, issues and the general approach to the implementation of renewal, redevelopment, rehabilitation, and preservation appropriate for Shankharibazar.

Generally a Conservation Management Plan is a document which explains why a site is significant, and how that significance will be retained in the future. James Kerr describes [5] a CMP as "...a document which sets out what is significant in a place and, consequently, what policies are appropriate to enable that significance to be retained in its future use and development. For most places it deals with the management of change".

The Conservation Management Plan provides guidelines that aim to conserve important elements in the area without jeopardizing opportunities for

change and growth, as change is inevitable. The existing crafts and living pattern of the local residents are also considered in the process. The process may involve urban planning/design/conservation. The management plan involves community-planning process, whereby different stakeholders such as the local community, the academics, and the professionals are involved both in the early planning and implementation stage.

The management plan suggests the systems of integrated public involvement and conservation. The idea of conserving an area with people living in it includes a range of steps, such as, understanding problems; generating options for response; evaluating the options; and ultimately choosing a roadmap for action. The process includes preparing “participants” to participate in a meaningful way. For Shankharibazar, the several phases of work may include the following steps:

Background research: This includes analyzing historic maps, documents and photographs, which generate basis for assessment process of the physical history and how it has developed into the place that we see today. Detailed survey of the area need to be done for clear understanding of the planning and design of the built forms and open spaces.

Assessing the significance of the site: The second phase requires assessing the significance of the site which involves identifying the factors that makes it such a special place; its historical and archaeological importance.

Identifying issues for management: In the third phase, the CMP needs to consider a number of issues such as:

- For tourism,
- The condition of the buildings;
 - The views to and from the surrounding areas;
 - Access and basic visitor facilities e.g. toilets;
 - Site information about the history and built form;

Management framework and options: Based on the analysis of the significance and issues, a series of principles to guide the future management can be formulated. These will be supported by a management framework for the day to day management of the site and a series of options for conservation works, with active participation of the members of the community.

VI. The PEOPLES PARTICIPATION

The protection, conservation, interpretation and presentation of the heritage and cultural diversity

of any particular place are important challenges for people everywhere. However, management of that heritage is usually the responsibility of the particular community or custodian group comprised of representatives from government authority, local community and conservation board.

A. Working with the community

A “community-based” conservation process needs to engage residents and others stakeholders in developing a broad plan for its pragmatic application. The best possible solution would be to conserve the site by developing the conservation management plan with people using an active participatory approach [6].

Benefits of participatory approach: When designed and managed well, participatory approach can produce better substantive ideas, useful relationships and social support (from the community involved) which is so vital for the conservation process. Participatory approach can serve a variety of overall purposes, such as a) creating a wider democratic way to conserve, b) better substantive ideas to drive action, c) feeling of psychological “ownership” and investment in collective work [6]. As there is a sense of 'our place' exists in Shankharibazar, the participatory approach could be made successful here.

The advantages of working with local people in the conservation process are demonstrated in the following table:

Table 1: Promoting Deliberation:

Conventional approach	Participatory approach
The fastest thinkers and most articulate speakers get more “air time.”	Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.
Differences of opinion are treated as conflict that must either be stifled or “solved”	Opposing viewpoints are allowed to co-exist.
People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.	Even in the face of opposition from the person in charge, people are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs.

Source: Xavier de Souza Briggs. (2003), p 22 [6]

B. The steps of participatory approach

The 'facilitators' in the participatory approach, government or private, should work to encourage the participatory process of conservation in Shankharibazar. They will organize different stakeholders including concerned officials, professionals, different stakeholders especially the local residents to disseminate information, promote learning, and generate consensus and more. The public participation will include the following five steps [6]:

Organizing issues and participants: Help the local residents define their interests in key issue in the conservation process, facilitate public participation to give the local residents a clear understanding of the heritage and build 'local leadership'. Public should be notified of the intention to develop a conservation management plan.

Building a common knowledge base and analyzing opportunities and problems: Engage the public (especially the local residents) in education and cultural understanding. Identify information requirements, resources available; identify 'community assets', needs and deficiencies to come up with more viable action ideas. Educational institutes to initiate research and documentation and help in building the knowledge base and the analyzing process.

Presenting and giving feedback to the residents: Communicate ideas with words, pictures, numbers, etc from all stakeholders involved. Involve the local community (by incorporating their lifestyle and local craft) in formulating the conservation management plan with their feedback. The modes can be public meetings, community surveys, design competitions, workshops, etc. Public should be notified of draft conservation management plan. Submissions for CMP should be open to public in written and oral form.

Discussion and deliberation: Encourage dialogue (not just debate) for positive learning to work towards community based conservation proposals for Shankharibazar. The discussion will make the decision making process more efficient, democratic and accountable. Written and verbal comments should be summarized and the conservation management plan should be revised in light of submissions.

Decision-making: The decision making process should be creative. Weigh the pros and cons while deciding. Priority should be given to valid

conservation ideas of the local participants. While for simpler issues voting may be used, other more critical issues may need more creative group processes and more time. The documents should be considered and finally approved by conservation board of the government/country (including local representatives).

VII. PROMOTING CULTURAL TOURISM

A. Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is concerned with a country or region's culture, especially its art and architecture. It generally focuses on traditional communities who have diverse customs, unique form of art and distinct social practices, which basically distinguishes it from other types/forms of culture [7]. Cultural tourism includes tourism in urban areas, particularly historic or large cities. It can also include tourism in cultural communities (i.e. festivals, rituals), and their values and lifestyle. It is generally agreed that cultural tourists spend substantially more than standard tourists do. As Shankharibazar has many of the qualities described here, there is good scope of promoting it as a spot for cultural tourism.

B. The Dynamic Interaction between Tourism and Cultural Heritage

In Shankharibazar it is essential to save the cultural heritage along with saving the built heritage. According to ICOMOS [8], domestic and international tourism continues to be among the foremost vehicles for cultural exchange, providing a personal experience, not only of that which has survived from the past, but of the contemporary life. It is increasingly appreciated as a positive force for cultural conservation. Tourism can capture the economic characteristics of the heritage and harness these for conservation by generating funding, educating the community and influencing policy. It is an essential part of many national and regional economies and can be an important factor in development, when managed successfully. Conservation and tourism boards of the country/government need to work together in this respect.

C. Recommendations

With its linear built form, rich history and special craft, Shankharibazar has a unique heritage and deserves special attention for conservation.

1. Most of the old buildings should be conserved except the few that are potentially hazardous.

Those houses should be redeveloped keeping their footprint and possible facades. The others can be renewed and revitalized.

2. The area should be promoted as a spot for cultural tourism (for local and international tourists) focusing on the special craft of shankha. Improved infrastructure with the preserved buildings will add new life to the locality.
3. The area should not be turned into a 'Museum' after declaring it a 'Heritage area'. It is the people and their craft along with the special arrangement of row houses that form the image of the place. The participatory conservation approach should be sensitive to the needs of the local residents to avoid possible 'gentrification' common in similar renewal projects.
4. The tourism industry should promote and manage tourism in ways that respect and enhance the heritage and living cultures of Shankharibazar. Tourism promotion programmes should protect and enhance cultural heritage characteristics. A significant proportion of the revenue derived from tourism programmes should be allotted to the protection, conservation and presentation of Shankharibazar. Visitors should be advised of this revenue allocation. Collaboration between heritage/conservation board and tourism industry is a must for success.
5. Tourism activities and developments should minimize adverse impacts on the heritage and lifestyle of Shankharibazar community, while responding to the needs of the visitors. The promotion, distribution and sale of local crafts and other products should provide a reasonable return to Shankharibazar community, while ensuring that their cultural integrity is not degraded.
6. The participatory conservation should provide opportunities for members of the host community and visitors to experience and understand that community's heritage and culture at first hand.
7. To sustain the living heritage of the area and the old craft of 'shankha'; government should reduce tax on the craft, arrange for micro credits on easy terms and create atmosphere for investment (both public and private).

8. To save the heritage buildings the residents require interest free loan for renovating the houses as well as government initiative to rehabilitate the residents during the renovation process.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The craft that has given Shankharibazar its name and binds the people together is in a dwindling state. To sustain the living heritage of the area, which includes the people and the centuries old craft of 'shankha'; some initiatives are essential. The people, their craft and living are an integral part of its heritage. The conservation process can only be successful when the people actively participate in the process. Shankharibazar can be saved by adopting a comprehensive approach combining participatory conservation process and cultural tourism. Through conservation of the built forms of historical and cultural significance; and conservation of the craft, a sense of pride and a common purpose in the community can be established in Shankharibazar.

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