

## An architectural gem at the political heartland

Photo: Star

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We know the 1960s in the then East Pakistan as a decade of political agitation. Bangalis fought for self-rule. Streets were filled with activists demanding political emancipation.



The decade was also a “golden age” for architectural development in the country. One of the architectural gems defining the period was located at the heart of the political landscape. The

Greek architect, planner, and theoretician Constantinos Apostolos Doxiadis (1913-1975) designed the Teacher-Student Center (TSC) during the early 1960s.

Many architectural opportunities came forth in East Pakistan during the period of 1958-1968, the so-called “Decade of Development,” that benefitted from the United States' technical assistance to Pakistan. The United States allied with Pakistan as part of its Cold-War era foreign policy to create a geostrategic buffer against the socialist milieu of the Soviet Union-India axis in South Asia. Under the purview of a technical assistance programme, the United States Agency for International Development (the USAID was created in 1961 during the presidency of John F Kennedy) and the Ford Foundation provided support for building educational and civic institutions in East Pakistan.

Since there was a dearth of experienced architects in East Pakistan, the government sought the services of American and European architects for a host of buildings that were constructed during the 1960s. Among these architects were Louis Kahn, Doxiadis, Richard Vrooman, Daniel Dunham, Paul Rudolph, Stanley Tigerman, and Robert Bouighy.

Doxiadis designed multiple institutional complexes, sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Among them were the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development in Comilla, College of Home Economics in Dhaka, and the Institute of Education and Research, University of Dhaka. However, it was TSC that arguably captured the imagination of the people and, given its central location, became an emblem of Dhaka's architectural modernity.

Located at the historic heart of the University of Dhaka, TSC exemplifies a modernist architectural sensitivity toward spatial needs for tropical climatic conditions. It blends local parameters of space-making—particularly the indoor-outdoor continuum and generation of space around courtyards—with international-style visual expression of building forms.

A deeper understanding of TSC entails the development of the architect himself, and his design strategy prior to this project. Doxiadis was born in 1913 in Bulgaria to Greek parents. Early in his childhood, he was influenced by his father who was the Greek Minister of Refugees, Social Welfare, and Public Health. In 1951, he founded Doxiadis Associates, a private consulting firm of engineers, architects, and planners that grew rapidly as an international practice with offices in five continents and projects in 40 countries.

Doxiadis created the Athens Center of Ekistics in 1963, although he had introduced the concept of “ekistics” back in the 1930s. As he later explained in his book *Ekistics: An Introduction to the Science of Human Settlements* (1968), ekistics was conceived as an objective, comprehensive, and integrative approach to all principles and theories of human settlements. Criticising the top-down planning model of the first half of the twentieth century, Doxiadis employed the notion of ekistics to promote a multidisciplinary, inclusive, and bottom-up approach to architecture and city planning. He hoped that such an approach would create a synergy among the organic context of the locale, data-driven theorisation of planning, and universal values of harmonious living.

Doxiadis evidently tried out his “theories” of ekistics at TSC and other works in Bangladesh. Upon the approval of Doxiadis Associates' final design for the Teacher-Student Center by the Dhaka University authorities, the construction of the complex began in March 1962. The 3.7-acre site of TSC is located at the meeting of Bakshi Bazar Road and Mymensingh Road, with the Suhrawardi Udyan (park) on the east.

Access to the site is from the north, where three streets meet to form a major urban node and the geographic centre of the sprawling campus of the University of Dhaka. It is a historic gathering place of students and the public during national celebrations, such as: Liberation Day, Independence Day, the Language Movement Day, and Pohela Baishakh (the first day of the Bengali year). The horizontal building block to the north acts as a transition from the urban hustle and bustle to the verdant interior of the complex.

The buildings are aligned with the east-west axis to take advantage of the prevailing breeze from the south or north. The three-story Student Union Building is rectangular in plan, 158 by 37 feet, and composed of a reinforced concrete frame and non-load-bearing brick walls. It is a trendsetting building as it employs a double-roofed structure to minimise heat gain by allowing the cool breeze to pass through the two layers of the roof. Providing a protective canopy for the building shell, the upper roof has a wing-like formation with rainwater drainage in between.

The auditorium, rectangular in plan, is 170 by 85 feet and is covered by a reinforced concrete parabolic vault, a pioneering construction technique in the country. The auditorium has a level floor with removable seating, and a spacious stage with dressing rooms. The airy cafeteria features a high ceiling, and overlooks the sprawling courtyard in the north. It consists of two segments placed on either side of a linear green mall. The western wing of the cafeteria contains

a large games room, dressing rooms, showers, and toilets that serve the swimming pool. The eastern wing houses the main eating area and a kitchen with necessary auxiliary spaces.

Covered walkways, supported on steel columns, weave the major buildings and green spaces together. Functioning more like a continuous loop of linear pavilions rather than corridors, the walkways are the social spine of the entire complex. TSC is one of the first buildings in Bangladesh to employ a pavilion theme in non-residential architecture. Extensive use of brick *jalis* (or latticework) in the buildings ensures visual privacy, while providing natural ventilation. Considered a sensible response to the needs of tropical climate, Doxiadis assembled the buildings and courtyards in a lush tapestry of organic fluidity and special interconnectivity. The whole complex feels like a miniature city, perhaps, offering a spatial programme (although in a much smaller scale) antithetical to the recently completed projects of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh or Lucio Costa's Brasilia.

Over the years, TSC has become part of a national narrative in which many of the pivotal student movements took shape around this historic urban node. Furthermore, TSC is also celebrated as a verdant and breezy urban space, a rare liberating experience in this overcrowded city.