

Commentary

Detailed area plan (DAP) 2022–2035 for Dhaka: The quest for identity

Hisham Uddin Chisty¹ and Mahfuja Aktar²

Context for plan making in Dhaka: “Oh! So, you are an ‘urban planner’!”

Being in the profession of urban planning is not an easy task in a city where apparently almost nothing seems to work, at least not ‘according to the plan’. We shall delve into finding out a little further down the line in our story whether this apparent impression about Dhaka is truly based on facts. But to begin with, let’s talk a little about how the concept, process, and practice of urban planning relates to the everyday reality and living experience of the residents of the capital city of Bangladesh.

The first formal ‘master plan’ for Dhaka of 1959 was essentially a physical, infrastructure-focused blueprint, complying with the norms of that era. Many proposals were materialized in the forms of large industrial and housing estates, straight, wide streets, and some form of basic land use zoning. After that, especially in the post-independence era of Bangladesh, one thing grew as fast as, or perhaps even faster than, the city’s size and population — the layers of complexity of urban life and the various issues in it. Urban planning is not so much, thus, about building new housing and industrial estates and constructing massive infrastructure anymore.

In this evolving and ever-transforming scenario of urban life and space, the need and justification of urban planning and its conventional output, urban plans, are therefore constantly being challenged, especially in cities like Dhaka. A well-made plan with bold and exciting new proposals is only one segment of the story. A small segment, to say the least. This is especially true for a city like Dhaka where residents can hardly perceive through their direct living experience the impacts and benefits of any mainstream, conventional planning decision and implications churned out by formal institutions like RAJUK, the capital planning and development authority.

The challenge of preparing a Detailed Area plan for a city where the planning professionals frequently face musings like the one stated in the title of this sub-section are therefore manifold. The prime one among these was preparing a plan that can be a relatable expression of the experiential reality for people who are outside the typical framework of relevant practitioners and academia; general residents, to be precise. Whether that end could be met can only be found out though through how the plan finds its expression in the experience of the city residents.

This In this article, we would therefore try to shed light on how this effort manifested in preparing a plan that was somewhat an expression of what the city embodied. In other words, although the procedure was more generic, an effort was made to assimilate a

¹ Urban Planner (Consultant), Detailed Area Plan Project, RAJUK, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

² Town Planner (Plan Preparation), RAJUK & Project Manager, Detailed Area Plan Project, RAJUK, Dhaka, Bangladesh,

philosophy and approach during the preparation of the detailed area plan (DAP) 2022–2035 that was specific to Dhaka and what life in it signified.

The baseline: “Really? There’s a plan for Dhaka? Where? How come?”

Usually, the first thing we hear from a person stuck in a typical traffic jam in Dhaka is, this city is destined to suffer like this as there is absolutely no planning effort for it, and everything happens here out of sheer chance and at the whim of a handful of people. The irony is that this very city has been under some sort of formal planning regime since the first master plan was prepared for it in 1959 (DIT, 1959), more than six decades ago. And the above common perception about the planning of the city not only surfaces during the extreme traffic congestion but also frequently due to the various other ailments the city suffers from.

There is a clear and wide gap, therefore, between how a plan is prepared and how it manifests itself in reality, and then how people living in the city experience it, if at all. The baseline for preparing the second detailed area plan for Dhaka, on the part of the professionals engaged, was first of all the realization of this ground-level perception.

An explicit display of how far away the formal plan-making process and institutions were from people’s daily reality was the responses from participants during the stakeholder engagement workshops and events during the early stages of the DAP preparation. The general people on most occasions were not aware of the existence of any formal planning regime and/or regulation for the city. Nor did they have a clear understanding of who had the responsibility to prepare and execute city plans in terms of institution (RAJUK, 2017).

On the other hand, apart from the common perception of the general city dwellers, there was also another side to the story of how Dhaka as a city functions. For a city of its geographic extent, Dhaka is beyond comparison with any other city in terms of population density. Due to the recent (2016) formal extension of city boundaries that incorporated massive tracts of very sparsely populated areas, the density of the city on average has fallen drastically on paper. If we take the last formally published disaggregated census data of 2011 (BBS, 2015) though, the city had a gross population density of approx. 52,000 persons/km², way beyond any city of its size and scale (Statista, 2022). If the population was distributed at this density, almost the entire global population could be accommodated within the territory of Bangladesh! The growth of the city in terms of population is also extremely high. To contextualize, Sydney Metro expects an average annual growth of approx. 56,000 persons/year in the period from 2006 to 2036 (DoP, 2010); while Dhaka metropolitan region as a whole estimate an average annual growth almost ten times of that of Sydney (RAJUK, 2016).

Now if we take liveability and functionality issues, we are typically very quick to make judgments about both these aspects regarding Dhaka. We come to the convenient conclusion that Dhaka is an unliveable place while all the possible systems of the city are failing miserably and are beyond repair. The silent question that lurks in the air is what Sydney would do if its projected growth were magnified by ten times. Or how any city in the world, even the highest ranked ones, would manage itself if it were packed with people at the density that Dhaka holds. Of course, these questions cannot be answered

directly. Nor that they need to be. The intention here is to make explicit the very context under which the city of Dhaka operates, and more significantly, accommodates and serves nearly 18 million people. Moreover, it also produces more than one-third of the total economic output of the country in terms of GDP (GED, 2020) on only 1% of its geographic area.

If a plan that had to be produced for this city that would have some tangible connection with the living reality, both the aspects discussed above had to be considered with utmost importance.

This city and life in it are older than its 'plans'! Philosophy for plan-making for Dhaka

Dhaka has been a capital for 400 years but a human settlement even longer than that. If we look back to the past days of Dhaka, we will see a city rising from the surface of water (Taylor, 1840, cited in Iqbal, 2013). The known history of the city with the status of capital dates back to 400 years ago whereas the history of urban settlement is found from the 12th century (Ahmed, 1986, cited in Ahmed, 2016) though the earliest settlement was discovered from the 6th century AD (Ahmed, 2016).

The very first plan was attempted by Sir Petrik Geddes in 1917 (Geddes, 1917) with a 'conservative diagnosis' but the first formal master plan was prepared in 1959 by the then Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT). The master plan emphasizing physical development proposed northward expansion of the city. The second attempt, Dacca metropolitan area integrated urban development plan (GoB, 1981), was never approved by the government and was actually the first strategic plan for Dhaka city connecting economic and physical aspects. This plan also proposed northward expansion with a land reclamation proposal. On the other hand, Dhaka metropolitan development plan (RAJUK, 1997) proposed comprehensive flood protection with compact development. The organic growth of the city actually followed none proving the confusion regarding growth direction in different plans. The settlement concentration followed the usual flood-free high lands for development.

The general notion about the city pattern is 'spontaneous' apart from some gridiron pattern housing, commercial, and industrial estates. Now we are suggesting almost the whole city is 'unplanned'. The 'planned' development of the city was hailed by all quarters from professionals to politicians. But the city dwellers found their own way of development in an organic way adjusting themselves with the flood.

But is what is organic or spontaneous really a curse? Conventional city planning has viewed them as a problem: accommodation of urban poor and creating a hazardous, degraded environment and ecosystem (Wekesa et. al., 2011). But there are other views also. "The problem is an obsession with the physical appearance of cities rather than valuing and building on the social capital that is frequently created in poor or low-income communities" (UN-Habitat, 2009). Urhahn (2010) has depicted this as "local resourcefulness, flexibility, and openness". According to Dovey (2015), informality eases information and goods flow to generate sustainable income. Previous research on Dhaka also supports this as it was mentioned that integration, connectivity, and intelligibility are high in the organic settlements of Dhaka than in formal or mixed-type development areas (Ahmed et. al., 2014).

In DAP 2022, this was one of the main discourses. There were plans at regular intervals for Dhaka city, most of which were formulated by foreign consultants that wished to dictate the city in the conventional way of master planning or mere zoning. Almost all of them faced the fate of remaining on the shelves forever. What are we trying to do with the plans then? Are we trying to purify the city from its 'past sins' by tearing up the social-spatial fibre of organically developed communities and replacing them with 'well planned and designed neighbourhoods'? By imposing our city plans upon people's lives totally overlooking the endemic development pattern or way of life? The following sections goes deeper into the question.

Could a plan really change how the city works? Approach for plan making

Will the plan dictate the city? Or will the city dictate the plan? In other words, will urban planning see itself as a 'Godly', fate-making activity? Or will it consider itself as only one small aspect/effort that intends to bring as much harmony in a system that is much wider and larger than itself? Will urban plans strive to harness the inherent power/traits of the city? Or will it submit to the manipulative power of the market forces? The approach for DAP preparation revolved around these fundamental questions.

The underlying philosophy of DAP 2022 wants to bring a more humane character to the city instead of an emphasis on its economic aspect. It emphasizes improving the quality of life of the city dwellers considering the city as a human habitat. The success of reaching the goal is yet to be tested. But, at least, this plan acknowledges the growing division in society and loss of connection between humans and nature, as a result of which the city contributes significantly to the national GDP but fails to distribute the benefit to the majority of the people. An attempt is made in the plan to bring about a change in priority.

From this point of view, inclusiveness and the creation of man-nature relationship are the two commitments declared by DAP 2022. It also suggests ways to achieve these that are different from the planning of the colonial regime. We find this in suggestions for guided mixed-use development in major parts of Dhaka city which actually followed our traditional shophouse culture of old Dhaka. In the drawings of pedestrian-friendly streets, the policies of guided street vendor management support 'inclusiveness'. On the other hand, Nature Based Solutions (NBS) like 'urban lifeline' and 590 km² waterways proposals are wishful measures of setting the relationship between man and nature. This is also a firm vision to get back to the way of life of Dhaka that was based mainly on water.

How far would we go in trying to change things? Scope and priority

As already mentioned, Dhaka is one of the fastest-growing megacities in the world (World Bank, 2010). More than 5,00,000 people are added to its population (RAJUK 2016) while more than 90,000 building structures are built here each year (RAJUK 2022). Considering Dhaka's almost unparalleled growth, change, and dynamic nature, DAP strongly considered the concept of strategic prioritization regarding the selection of critical planning issues, during the plan preparation process, as well as for overall and long-term management of the city.

The concept and model of ‘leverage points’ by Meadows (1999) were used regarding the selection of priority issues for the city. A gradual step-by-step process was followed for this selection (RAJUK, 2018). The fundamental approach was based on the realization that widening the range of the plan to ‘cover everything’ would dilute the focus and create an apparent sense of control, which in fact, was not there. Instead, focusing on things that had long-term transformative impacts on the city could establish a strong connection between plans and the living reality of the residents, as discussed in the beginning, through providing tangible, real life impacts. As the DAP document emphasized (RAJUK, 2022):

“Dhaka is not a static or inanimate reality, but the city itself, like its approx. two crore people, is a living, ever-changing and ever-growing entity. Therefore, in a city like Dhaka, trying to bring all issues, all sectors under control and strict management is not only difficult, it is almost impossible. At the same time, it is also ineffective.”

Leverage points

‘Leverage points’ refer to certain aspects of the city where even a small change can initiate a series of continuous and far-reaching changes. If even such an issue can be changed positively, it will have a profound effect on many areas, peoples, sectors or issues around it. If you want to transform Dhaka in a positive way, one or two or five things can be done which will give the fastest and most effective result. Based on this concept, policy guidelines, provisions and other decisions of detailed zoning have been taken. In order to achieve the goals of the plan, such effective and influential issues are first identified and then their ancillary plans, designs, maps and policy guidelines are made.

The priority leverage points identified in DAP (2022-2035) are as follows:

- More effective and practical land use guidelines
- Founding of the concept of Urban Lifeline
- Education and primary health care for the common people
- Priority for non-motorized transport and pedestrian movement
- Affordable housing for lower and lower-middle-income people
- Endemic Livelihood based gradual urbanization and development
- Decentralized and community-based Solid and Liquid Waste Management and Recycling
- Appropriate development strategy for Environmentally Sensitive Area
- Hydrologically sensitive and sustainable Integrated Land Development Strategy” (RAJUK, 2022)

Imposing change, resisting change, and making change just: Plan, implication, and implementation

If the city or metropolis is a living, dynamic entity, what would be the prime indicator of its aliveness? ‘Change’ would be the answer, if we had to be very direct and concise. That ‘change’ would surely manifest in many ways—a ‘change’ of land use especially in the

outer and fringe areas, a 'change' in the built form in certain parts of the city, 'change' in use and proportion of road space, and many more.

Now, like any other such aspect, there are two extreme ends of dealing with change, and of course, there is the 'third way'. At one extreme, we typically see the exploitation of this transforming and evolving nature of the city in imposing change that oftentimes disrupts local lives and livelihoods. This tendency expresses itself in massive new housing areas, large industrial estates, invasive mega infrastructure projects etc. These typically are capital-intensive, heavily structurally oriented, and involves drastic initiatives that have very little to do with the locality and its people where they are situated. By nature, these projects usually bring abrupt and radical changes to the endemic social, cultural, economic, and environmental landscape, and therefore, a consequential disruption in the indigenous way of life.

At the other extreme, often arising out of a reaction to the first scenario, is a stern stand of resisting almost any change in all possible ways. This trend often manifests itself in opposing any development projects and initiatives that are supposed to bring impacts in the local socio-economic and environmental conditions. Conservation and caring for communities, in this standpoint, thus often turns into blind antagonism to change.

Cities, especially ones like Dhaka, are at the forefront of experiencing and managing these two strong, diametrically opposite ways of handling change and transformation. The DAP 2022 tried to realize the dynamics and interplay of these opposing forces and intended to bring about a 'third alternative'. The fundamental approach, therefore, was to create a gradual continuum of change with a certain scope of flexibility. At one end of this continuum was a need for strict conservation and very little change was allowed here. Whereas at the other end were areas and aspects where there was very little restriction of what could be done and to what extent. Usually, this gradual hierarchy was operationalized through 'development conditionality' (RAJUK, 2018). For example, there are vast tracts of hydrologically sensitive flood plains and also ecologically sensitive reserve forests within the planning territory. Extremely limited number of development activities are permitted in these types of areas to preserve resources that are critical to the environmental and also socio-economic balance and integrity. Typically, only the types of activities/development allowed here are mentioned in the zoning regulations. Whereas, for the bustling inner core of the city, only a limited number of development activities are restricted, while generally the others are permitted. Usually, these restricted activities are the extreme cases of very polluting industries and the like. Between these two extreme scenarios lies the majority of the areas where generally a limited number of activities are either unconditionally permitted or unconditionally restricted, while the most others are permitted based on the fulfilment of certain conditionality.

This approach of 'gradual continuum' of planning, regulation and management of the city adopted by the DAP 2022 is evident in aspects ranging from land use zoning regulations, water and flood management, road hierarchy and management etc. The basic underlying philosophy here is the embracing of a transformation that is gradual, non-invasive, and sensitive to local lives, livelihoods and ways of living. It refuses to accept the change that is abrupt, forceful and manipulative. But it also recognizes that change is inevitable for a living city like Dhaka, and outright resisting it may be as detrimental to its spontaneous growth and evolution in the long run.

References

- Ahmed, B., Hasan, R., & Maniruzzaman, K. M. (2014). Urban morphological change analysis of Dhaka City, Bangladesh, using space syntax. *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information* 3(4), 1412–1444. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijgi3041412>.
- Ahmed, I. (2016). Dhaka: Stressed but alive! In F. Mancini & A. Ó. Súilleabháin (Eds.), *Building resilience in cities under stress* (pp. 13–23) International Peace Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09526.6>.
- Ahmed, S. U. (1986). *Dacca: A study in urban history and development*. Curzon Press.
- BBS. (2015). *Population and housing census 2011: Analytical report*. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- DIT. (1959). *Dacca master plan*. Dhaka Improvement Trust
- DoP. (2010). *Metropolitan plan for Sydney 2036*. NSW Department of Planning, New South Wales Government.
- Dovey, K. (2015). Sustainable informal settlements? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 179(2015), 5–13.
- GED. (2020). *8th five year plan*. General Economic Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission. Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Geddes, P. (1917). *Report on town planning, Dacca*. Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. https://shekhar.cc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/dacca_1917.pdf
- GoB. (1981). *Dhaka metropolitan area integrated urban development project. Final report* (Vol. 1). Government of Bangladesh.
- Iqbal, I. (2013). First master plan for Dhaka city: An environmental exploration. *Sudasien-Chronik–South Asia Chronicle*, 3, 42–61.
- Meadows, D. H. (1999). *Leverage points: Places to intervene in a system*. The Sustainability Institute.
- RAJUK. (1997). *Dhaka structure plan* (Vol. 1). Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.
- RAJUK. (2016). *Dhaka structure plan 2016-2035*. Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.
- RAJUK. (2017). *Survey report, part A: Preparation of Detailed Area Plan*. Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.
- RAJUK. (2018). *Interim report: Preparation of detailed area plan*. Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.
- RAJUK. (2022). *Detailed area plan for Dhaka Metropolitan Region*. Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.
- Statista. (2022). Cities with highest population densities worldwide in 2022. www.statista.com/statistics/1237290/cities-highest-population-density/
- Taylor, J. (1840). *A sketch of the topography and statistics of Dacca*. Military Orphan Press.
- UN-Habitat (2009). *Planning sustainable cities: Global report on human settlements 2009*. Earthscan.
- Urhahn, G. (2010). *Spontaneous city*. BIS Publishers.
- Wekesa, B. W., Steyn, G. S., & Otieno, F. E. O. (2011). A review of physical and socio-economic characteristics and intervention approaches of informal settlements. *Habitat International*, 35(2), 238–245.
- World Bank. (2010). *Leveraging urbanization in South Asia*. Bangladesh development series, paper no. 18. World Bank.