



Cities to be tamed? Standards and alternatives
in the transformation of the urban South
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Context in Urbanism

Addressing the Intrinsic Aspirations for Strategic Urban Design in Small Cities in Bangladesh

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It is anticipated that 50% of world population will live in urban area by 2030. And it is also assumed that secondary cities will host most of this urban population. In Bangladesh there are 310 Municipalities some of which are upgrading rapidly to urbanized towns. Secondary and divisional cities are also facing the rapid emergence of urbanization. In such reality, question arises how the settlements which bear the legacy of being 'informal', 'spontaneous' and 'unconscious' in nature will keep up with the pace of urbanization. What shape these may take in future? A divisional city 'Rangpur' was studied as following a new approach to the study of Urbanism and Urban Design. The study investigates the intrinsic logic and dynamics of existing township of Rangpur to work on future urbanization in terms of social and spatial essence and reveals that the spatial form of small cities and secondary towns can be observed through the 'context' and 'aspirations'. This seems to be helpful to design strategies and projects for the shaping of the future city to reroute urban expansion towards a sustainable future instead of an uncontrolled sprawl. Thus the future 'hinterland' of the city can go beyond the geographic boundaries.

Keywords: Context, Urbanism, Aspirations, Small cities, Urbanization

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Introduction: small cities and future

Around half of the world population currently lives in cities. It is anticipated that around two billion people will increase in world population over next thirty years and most of these population increase will occur in the urban areas of developing countries. Not the limited 'larger cities', but the smaller cities and towns of developing countries will host most of this population (Cohen, 2006). Since small cities typically grow faster than larger cities as Cohen added, considering the role that will be played by small cities in accommodating future population, smaller cities deserve more attention in formulating the development agenda.

Bangladesh, holding the notion of a 'developing country', has ten City Corporations and more than three hundred Municipalities. Hierarchically there are metropolis, divisional/secondary towns, tertiary towns and urbanized municipalities. Many of these municipalities are upgrading rapidly towards urbanized towns. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh is a metropolis of sixteen million inhabitants. Concentration of urban-civic facilities and modern amenities in Dhaka establishes its primacy in the region. As Islam (2009) stated: "The primacy of Dhaka is stronger functionally than in terms of population. Administrative headquarters and civil employments, financial and banking services, international commerce and business except port functions, are all largely concentrated in Dhaka. Educational, cultural and consultancy and research activities are also concentrated in the capital area. A disproportionately large concentration of industrial and various public sector investments have been made in the area."

Due to the primacy of Dhaka, people from all over the country rush to the Capital, leaving their available resources and means unexplored. The unprecedented population growth beyond the capacity of unplanned Dhaka spreads enormous pressure on these amenities and puts the fate of the city into a gigantic question. Thus 'decentralization' of urbanization appears to be a demand of time, though politically it is being neglected till to date.

In spite of the negligence for decentralization of all prevailing political will, awareness has been rising among the common people towards the utilization and optimization of obtainable resources. A drift is noticeable now that, people are trying to reach out for the nearby cities/towns as a means of better modernized living and wellbeing instead of coming to the capital. It is a good sign that secondary and divisional cities have entered in the pace of emerging urbanization. It is apparent that decentralization of resources along with urbanization is indispensable to save Dhaka as well as to explore the immense possibilities offered by the other secondary cities and small towns in an ingenious way to face the challenges of contemporary time and the forthcoming future. The prospect, which has appeared in course of time, of spontaneous transformation of small cities, should not be missed. This transformation needs to be channelized and articulated meticulously so that this could appear as blessings rather as nuisance anymore.

If cities can be landscaped with its geo-logic, the exploration of its unexplored but available resources and nature i.e. the context, as well as the aspirations that is embedded within the pulse of the city's life, could be a new way to design the future of the city. Conventional practice of designing is a binary system of problem and solution. In this regard exploration of unexplored may way out new ideas independently beyond this binary system of designing and add new dimensions for the city.

To understand the urbanism and urban design in terms of context and aspirations, a series of study of secondary and small cities in Bangladesh has been initiated by the Department of Architecture at BRAC University. Rangpur, one of the seven divisional headquarters and a secondary level city in northwest of Bangladesh, was the first in the series.



The city is in a way to upgrade its status from 'Municipality' to 'City Corporation' and expanding its jurisdiction from fifty three square kilometres to two hundred three square kilometres. For the first time in Bangladesh, 'City Governance' is going to be introduced in Rangpur; the decision has been approved by the government which will add more significant lessons and experience towards urbanization of the cities in this land.

The study investigates to understand the intrinsic logic and dynamics of existing township of Rangpur to work on future urbanization in terms of social and spatial essence. It shows that, shaping the spatial form of the small cities and secondary towns due to rapid urbanization can be observed through the perception of 'context' and 'intrinsic aspirations'. This seems to be helpful to design strategic projects which lead the shaping of the city and reroute/direct urban expansion towards a sustainable future instead of an uncontrolled sprawl. This approach also found to consider that the future 'hinterland' of this city can go beyond the geographic/administrative boundaries.

Urbanization in process

Developing countries typically have distinct divisions between their rural and urban settlements, which are evident in Bangladesh as well. In a predominantly agrarian society and settlements which are mostly rural by character in Bangladesh, places start to be urbanized knowingly with the establishment of administrative civil authorities and associated physical and social infrastructure, where an informal urbanized centre was enduring. Along with the rise of local government (municipality), revenue collection, land settlement, judicial court, police station, secondary and higher schools, limited formal housing, and health facilities, people starts to reach these places and eventually it becomes more urbanized town. Through the course of time these invite other urban, civic events to take place and spread over the area. Markets, commercial venues, transportation hubs along with numerous other formal and informal economic activities initiate to play the role in that urbanized town. Rahman (2011) stated: "Today, Urban characteristics stretch right from the village all the way through rural market centres, rural towns, municipalities, district towns up to the metropolitan realities of upscale Dhaka. Urban aspirations are now defining even rural life-styles".

Centralized government puts very little attention on local government and urbanization does not get attention in a democratic way. As a result, the enormous process of urbanization all over the country falls in the face of uncontrolled/ unprecedented/ future. The spatial and visual logic of urban areas are being developed on the basis of the principle of 'momentary-benefit', instead of a sustainable manner. 'Nature' is an alienated element in development whereas the alienated engineered visions of solutions are becoming popular as a notion of progresses (Stokman, 2008). This shows total ignorance and disrespect of indigenous essence of living which are established as a source of knowledge of human effort to live with nature. The poorly constructed landscape and ecology appear as threat for the biodiversity of the urban settlements. Waterways and water bodies are often treated as part of the sewerage system, which turns water into a curse instead of blessings. In urban areas lack of drinkable water is a paradox in a land of plentiful water (Favaro, 2008).

In Bangladesh, larger cities are typically occupied with contestation, between formal homogenous and informal heterotopias settlements and another most visible phenomenon is appropriations of contested spaces. Very little formal measures have been taken for these cities in previous days. Yet again those measures are generic in character. Those formal measures in the form of 'master plans' but in ad-hoc basis did not address the native logic and dynamics rather were driven by the considerations of market and profit. Excuses are put forth of capitalism and globalization. Thus these cities are competing to be global.



Larger cities in Bangladesh are same as Korf (2004) mentioned about global cities that these cities are now connected with international network and characterized by confusion, because of their various realities which can no longer be integrated into a single system.

The new landscape reflects new land use pattern, which negotiates very little with the logic of the land, water, culture and livelihood, rather it imprints a top-down plan for further development. Within the pre-industrial phase of urbanization and land use intensification, 'engineered' and market driven 'political commerce' become major components of territorial planning and urbanization in those cities and towns.

Selfish political benefits and poorly realized globalization gained even more importance as structural and visual components of urban and regional form than the cultural landscapes dominated by agricultural land-use, states the similarities what Stokman (2008) observed in Changde, China. Investment is concentrated more in luxurious housing and dominating corporate commercial structures, resulting lack of public spaces and generation of slums. Attracted by job opportunities, people move from the under-serviced rural areas towards already congested under-equipped larger cities. As a result larger cities are the places of disparities between rich and poor. Resemblance can be established with other large cities of the developing world like, Rio-De-Janeiro in Brazil, Manila in Philippines or Mumbai in India.

On the contrary, smaller cities and towns are mostly urbanized rural areas having some traces yet of their identity and uniqueness and display the wisdom of their ancestors, the thoughtfulness and sensitivity towards land, water, climate and people. As stated by Korf (2004): "Of course not all of a city's people and communities are integrated in global networks. Social contexts with specific local histories, which differ from the realizations of global networks, are equally relevant", smaller cities still illustrate the promise to be an interrelating dot of local, national and global phenomena.

But this condition is under threat now. The corporate bodies are spreading their acquisitive tendency in those areas by building corporate infrastructures which seldom have connections with the legacy of indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Glazed and massive concrete structures of corporatist without any sensitivity to the climate, creates an alienated urban facade inviting unknown culture in city life. Large capital investment in roads is threatening the richness of water based urbanism of the region and migration from nearby rural areas is a phenomenon which is affecting the organization of the territory (Favaro, 2008).

Understanding context

How context has been understood? What is the antonym of context? Is it 'non contextual' or 'alien' or 'generic'? When Koolhaas (2011) was talking about the generic plug-in waterfronts like the Baltimore Inner Harbor, New York's East River Waterfront and Hafen City. He found that these are the products of a simple equation between developers and city governments.

This statement can be applied for other cities of the developing countries as well. May be the 'generic' cities are liberated from rules and celebrating the zeitgeist to be global, but at the same time missing the very context of its own history and culture. Consideration of contexts in urbanism thus could be an answer to the globalization or generic, but not an idea of globalization itself (Zivkovic, n.d.).

The working definition for the purpose of the study has been assumed as the city's history, legacies of tradition and culture, prevailing socio-economic, environmental and geological-landscape, solid-void relationship as well as the understanding of these features' further exploring attributes are the aspirations. The exploration of embryonic possibilities of these features that is aspirations will not always lead to solve the problem only, but also trigger to add something new which was not thought of before.



Thus the city may contain and display its own context. Context helps to visualize the hidden or underlying possibilities on the basis of legacy.

These become founding on the basis of findings. Analysis and synthesis of the existing layers of urbanism, which have come through the legacy of different dimensional aspects, make the 'thick complex layer', helps to unfold the 'hidden layers' of possibilities/opportunities/contingency to be explored. Thus it becomes 'contextual' not in terms of very literal but also in higher dimension.

The absence of contextual consideration in urban design can be examined in the case of Dhaka. Embankment that has been constructed on the south and west side of Dhaka to protect the city from monsoon flood of river Buriganga, results water clogging inside the city and motivated the land-grabbers to fill up the western wetlands for real-estate development. Consequently, river encroachments and pollution in the name of economic development of the city put urbanization in to question. Logic of climate and socio-cultural relationship has been neglected in the architecture of the present day real-estate and housing and other social infrastructure.

This results in an alienated street elevation of the city and invites energy crisis and crisis of other utilities in issues and increase disparities between rich and poor. Thus non contextual intervention in city's growth makes the experience quite alarming. Again reclaiming few water bodies and integrating those in city's life shape the city with the aspirations, show respect to the context which is acting for the resilience of the city. Here context does not stand for mere legacy of existing features, rather follows further exploration of new thoughts of transcendence of authenticity.

The Rangpur context

Rangpur is an intelligent landscape of the settlements. Ancestors, mostly coming from Assam and surrounding areas, had very clear understanding of the dynamics of the rivers and land of this delta. The shifting character of the braided stream Teesta pushed the territory of the settlement a bit further west, near to the Ghaghot, a tributary of 'Teesta'. Besides, seasonal variation of water levels and series of sharp bends of Ghaghot also did not allow growth of settlements along its bank. Thus a city was landscaped naturally on the highland in between Teesta and Ghaghot while keeping the adjacent lands as flood plains and also for agriculture. The *Shyama Shundori* canal by Raja Janakiballav Sen and later the KD canal played a significant role as sources of water along with some other *beels* and a number of ponds spread across the city. Absence of harbour generated road based growth and consequently the rail track connects it with the capital.

Lacking political importance for decades, Rangpur was striving to express its potentiality and prosperity. Fortunately over the period 1981-1991, some momentous of development took place and consequently Rangpur is bearing the legacy of that till today. Now city's territorial boundary has been revised from 50 square kilometres to 200 square kilometres as it earns the status of City Corporation from a municipality. Bearing the colonial heritage, it was tested as an educational harbour and yet keeps the potentiality to become an 'educational city'.

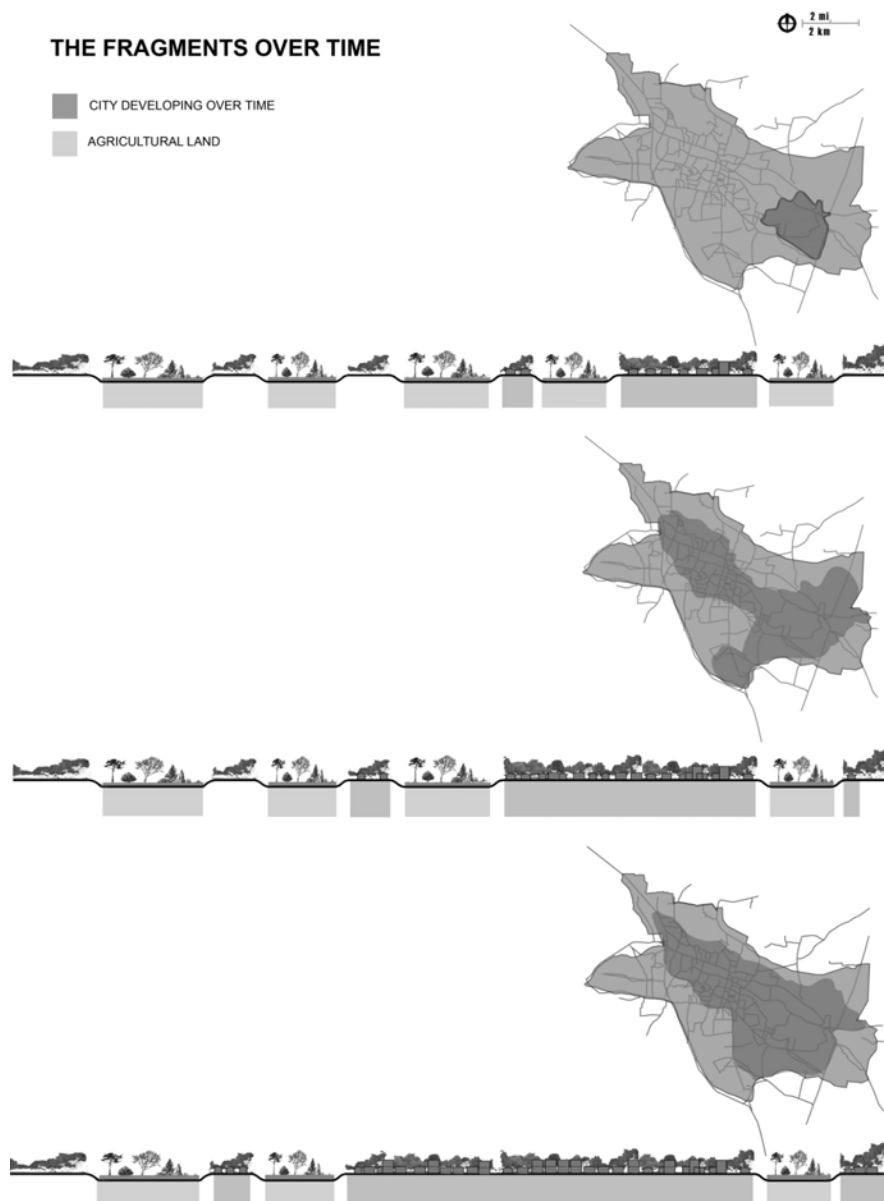
The agro-based city is experiencing the emergence of modernistic mode of growth. Emergence/invasion of corporate economy, globalization, open market policy and new commercial enterprises already put this agro based naturally landscaped city under challenges. The patches of agricultural lands within the hard tissue of the city and peripheral cultivations yet uphold the 'nature' within and around the city. Settlements clustered as '*paras*' reveal the originality and culture of clusters in weaving the city's spatial distribution. Closely located '*paras*' contest in terms of 'unity-diversity', as these dot the city with many internal small neighbourhood spaces, while the city lacks in larger open public spaces.



Clear potentiality is there of these small neighbourhood spaces to grow in hierarchical public open spaces for further integration of the city to get more socially equitable and sustainable city spaces for coming future. The interplay of the city and the inhabitants can be strengthened further.

The study aims at understanding the dynamics and consequent design of the city in a holistic way by looking to it in 'macro' as well as 'micro' scale. The architecture of the city in terms of morphology and physical shape i.e. the landscaping of the territory is an issue, has been considered too.

Rangpur is one of the major cities in Bangladesh. It has recently become the divisional capital of the Rangpur division in 2010. It is considered the north-western centre of the country, originating as a district headquarter in 1769. Through time it has come a long way and will be having its own city corporation in the very near future.



The existing municipality of Rangpur consists of a population of 3,20,000 spread across an area of 50.66 square kilometres. With a rich history, culture and heritage, along with its strategic location, Rangpur preserves the potential of a metropolis in the region. The new city corporation will soon be extended to a total of 203.6 square kilometres with a population of 12, 00,000. The city accommodates important institutions such as Rangpur Medical College, Rangpur Cadet College, Begum Rokeya University, which make Rangpur a regional centre for education.

Originally, the city developed because of its location which served as a driving force behind the regional trade and administrative control of Bengal in British India. As the centre of development shifted elsewhere in Bangladesh, the importance of the city significantly declined through time. But with rapid population growth, rural to urban migration and increasing demand, Rangpur is expanding in every direction. Now the time has come when this urban expansion needs to be routed towards a sustainable future instead of an uncontrolled sprawl. Some of these initiatives have already come to scene through the introduction of city governance in Rangpur which will be happening for the first time in Bangladesh. This will bring different government bodies of civic utilities and services under one umbrella and take integrated decisions for the development of the city's infrastructure. The vision for the future of Rangpur needs ensuring health and wellbeing of its population, directing the development towards a focused goal and appropriate incorporation of the urban settlements.

Contexts-aspirations-strategies

A matrix of physical elements (land, water, green, built and open) in fusion with socio-cultural elements (culture, economy/livelihood, history) was used for the study. Each element was mapped to understand the blended thick layers of complexities of the city. On the basis of analysis and synthesis of layers of contexts, five specific strategic aspirations were figured out.

The *pulsating voids* of the city spread over the landscape holds the potential of the greenery, waterscape and road networks to be interwoven. In Rangpur region agriculture is more than an occupation; it is rather a lifestyle. The aspiration of farmers can be best reflected in an *agriculture-friendly* city that keeps the provision of spaces and infrastructure for farmers' network in local, regional and beyond. The history of education is as old as the history of human settlements in the region. The pioneer of female *education* in the Subcontinent, Begum Rokeya, hails from Rangpur. Since then, significant educational institutes have been playing roles in sustaining culture in society, acting as a *spine*. The constructed *water channel* (*Shyama Shundori Canal*) brings the river Teesta home that brings life in the city is considered as another spine. Aridness is now engulfing Rangpur, though it had a rich system of hydrology consisting rivers, canals and ponds in regional, city and domestic scale respectively. The desire of restoring the hydrology is reflected through the *urban blue*. Gentrification is a perceptible phenomenon in mono-centric Rangpur city. Whatever the magnitude of this gentrification is, it is pushing the original inhabitants of the city to the periphery of the urban settlements. This clearly indicates to have a *polycentric* exploration of the city instead of a mono-centric one to keep room for the natives.

City of Pulsating voids

To revive the city of Rangpur at its infancy, the chaos of urban city has to be refurbished and re-fabricated along with the restoration of existing open spaces. Ample open spaces deserve to be weaved with the greenery, waterscape and road networks for Rangpur to continue its unique organic growth.





The strategy involves reclaiming the open spaces, along with fabricating the road network with pedestrian and bicycle routes, transforming the public transport system by reducing carbon emitting vehicles, and introducing tram network and parking services. Agriculture and open fields are reinstated and reformed with eco parks and public recreational areas. The existing waterscape and canals are rejuvenated with water treatment facilities and proper drainage system, along with generation of number of links throughout the city; interlacing the water transport system with trade and commerce and urban landscape. The strategies ensure vessels to pulsate the void spaces of Rangpur, and introducing open space with the greenery entangled with the water canals. The gradual growth of Rangpur will flourish with the network of green, blue and grey.

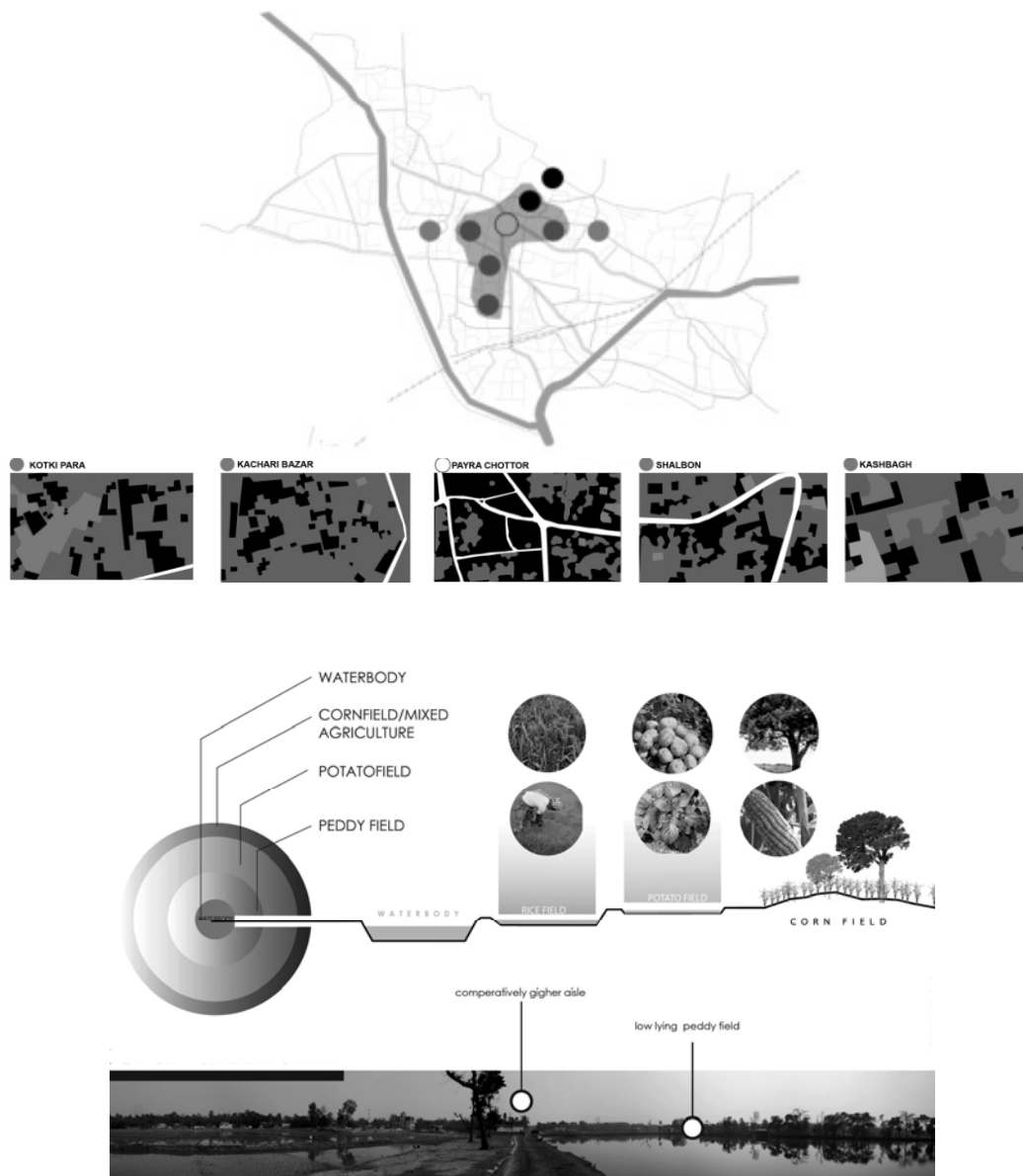
The strategic location of ‘Chiklir Beel’ (large artificial lake) offers the city to be an open public space. This huge void in the city consists of land, water and green could house eco-park, edutainment and recreational trail, games field, museums, stadium, water reservoir and aqua culture point. The real state value will be increased and density can be achieved by series of high-rise apartments along the edge of this urban park and aqualung.

City offering Agriculture as a life style

The soil composition is mainly alluvial (80%) of the Teesta River basin, and the remaining is Barind. In the British period 25% of the total rice of the then Bengal region was produced in Rangpur. Jute and jute products were other significant agricultural goods of the then time. Tobacco and tea, along with other food grain are being cultivated around and within the city. Flower plant has taken place to be a potential economical agro product of which lands are engaged around and within the city. Associated processing mills and factories added new item within the city fabric and grains in the tissue.

One of the sophisticated agro-research centre along with the newly established university create an enormous potentiality to consider the future of this city as a major agricultural hub for not only in the country but also in the region of south east Asia. Presence of Teesta barrage puts a significant impact on the irrigation and also contains the aquaculture possibility.

City's future expansion is curved not along the line of present linear shape, rather in a circular manner around the main axis of the city. Without any previous reference this shape and jurisdiction of the city has been decided. This idea indicates that, all the surrounding agricultural fields are supposed to be transformed into hard urban lands. Present city is linear in shape, allows the agriculture to weave in the tissue of the city transversely. The highway bypass on the north, allows the farmers around the city to congregate in few centres along the present periphery. New connectivity may be routed from these centres.



Palate of the green mosaic shows the patches of agriculture within the city

Strategies include the densification of the centre along the existing main spine that can complement the surrounding land for agriculture. Transverse extension of infrastructure connecting the centre should be concentrated according to the logic of agriculture and aquaculture.

Connectivity with nearby towns and growth points will accelerate to establish farmers centres (*Bondhonshala*). Strategic placements of *Bondhonshala* on peripheral highways and crossroads of bus, tram, train and waterways will ensure the growth of farmers' mega centres/hubs, containing the research centre, inter-districts farmers markets, banks, high-tech information centres, convention centres, expo, airports and tourist centres.

Proposed centres (*Bondhonshala*) are the 'farmers' centres' where people will gather and exchange, not just their surplus productions of agriculture, but also share their own stories. These centres in the form of farmers' markets, super markets, agricultural trails, parks, plaza and squares, convection centres for national and international convention of farmers', tourist accommodation, floating markets' etc will be the pulse of the city.

Dual Spine

Rangpur city grew from *Mahiganj* and then developed along the *Shyama Shundori* and KD canals. The first master plan of this city was this canal. *Shyama Shundori* canal connects the river Teesta on the up and flows down through the city. The canals played a major role as a spine for Rangpur. The culture and history of the city evolved around the educational institutions and canals. These two infrastructures, the canal (Physical infrastructure) and education (social infrastructure) are considered as the *Dual Spine*.

By reclaiming the aspirations of the canals and their strategic integration with the educational infrastructure will play a vital role symbiotically for the growth of the city. Educational institutes will grow in strategic locations along the canals bringing along social infrastructures like public realm. These spaces have high potential to transform into major urban activities in future.



Road network as a catalyst



Junction of physical and social infrastructure
(water and education)



Strategic node for future development,
e.g. Mahiganj and Medical more, RK road.
Shahebganj

New housing typology for the student population, book markets, students' leisure centres are the essentials to be accommodated in near future. Several public activities will also be generated as the canal will be used for water transportation connecting the whole city. Bicycle routes, pedestrian routes along the canal can be a strategy to increase public interactions along the canal.

In the macro level, mass transportation system like tram, metro rail will connect the surrounding districts, making Rangpur a significant transportation hub. Accordingly a multi-modal transportation hub at the point of origin (Mahiganj) will act a major catalyst by providing organic permeability and humble invitation to urban economic growth.

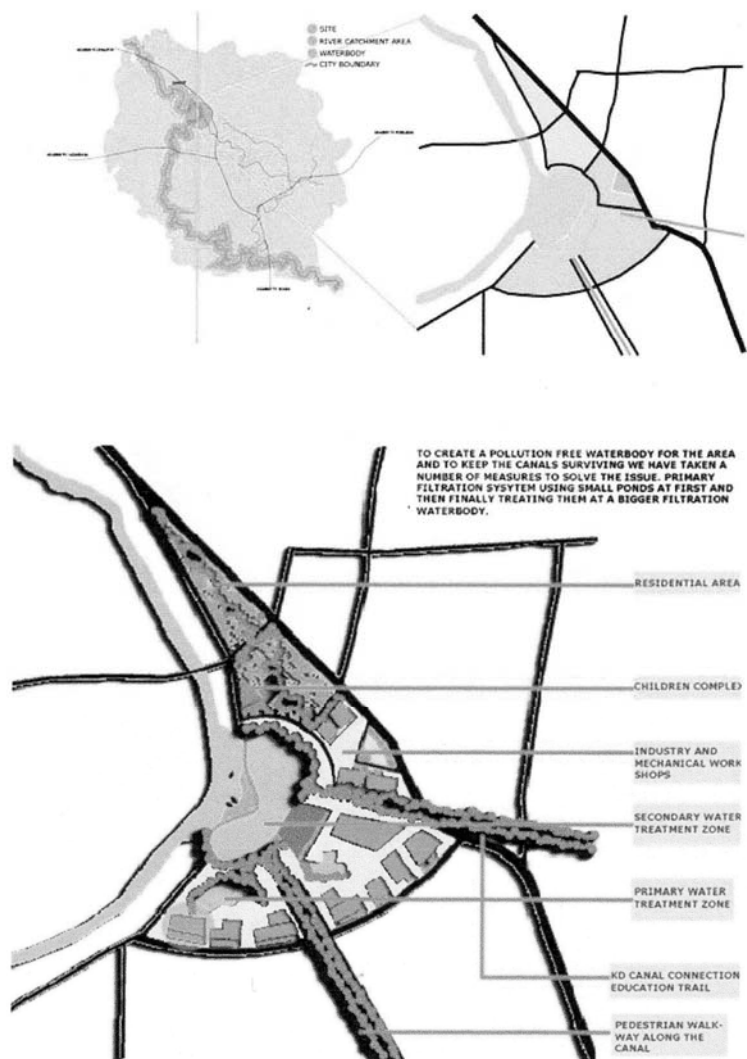


The revival of the canals will be achieved by establishing water treatment mythologies through strategic timeline. A better transport will bring people from other cities, other divisions and also from other countries to Rangpur as a city like Cambridge and Oxford.

Mahiganj is a strategically an ideal location where road, rail and water transports come together. Reclaiming Mahiganj as a multimodal transport hub will ensure city's connectivity with the region and can arrange an array of public amenities around it. This reclaimed public centre will complement the easy accessibility to education for the learners of this region and other civic services as well.

The Urban Blue

The blessings of nature are evident in Rangpur. The city possesses a rich water network with Teesta on the far East and the river Ghaghot flowing through the heart of the city. These rivers are the sources of water for agriculture, a native occupation for maximum population. The main drainage system consists of the two canals: *Shyama Shundori* and KD. Dense housing along the canals has been worsening the conditions of the canal making it extremely polluted, stagnant and narrowing it down over time. Ponds keep a lower value in recent times and without proper maintenance they too are becoming polluted and unsuitable for any purposes. The proposed extended city will now require uninterrupted water supply for survival of its agriculture and also for the increasing development.



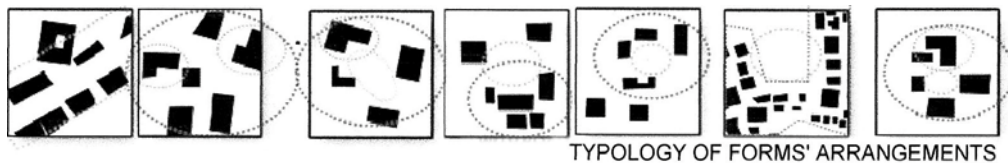
Strategies include revitalization of the water bodies (canals, *beels* and ponds) and enhance water supply through new connections and building reservoirs of water for the city. A new connection from the river Teesta to the river Ghagot could increase the flow of the latter. At domestic level the ponds can act as reservoirs for the rainwater. They will serve the households and may also be used for aquaculture. As the city develops, new canals would be introduced along the periphery of the city starting and connecting Ghagot. New *beels* can be added to make the city a network of blue.

The objective is to revitalize the urban blue in every possible ways, make the water bodies the vital veins for transportation, reviving the age old tradition of boat travelling and use the pockets of blue as throbbing hearts to get water for the city. Revitalizing urban blue would enliven the city and once again the city would be at its harmony with the rushing blue blood, the water, amidst the grey concrete structures and green agricultural land.

Polycentrism (Dispersal from the centralized)

Rangpur is a mono-centric city of informal and formal commerce, small trade and industries and agriculture. Commercialization is taking place along the main spinal nodes of the roads. As the city urbanizes the agricultural use of lands faces threat by wealthier migrants and land developers. As a result, the native people seem to become marginalized economically making Rangpur vulnerable to phenomena like rapid unplanned urbanization, gentrification and development of urban sprawl on agricultural land.

Polycentricism in the city may help to strengthen the economy by eliminating middlemen in the production and trading. Development of poly-centres with the help of transportation network will strengthen the native producers and traders to raise their stake in the market. They may not be pushed further from their native land; rather the sense of belongingness to their land and assets will be enhanced.



Strategic locations of centres to create a web of small centres equipped with social infrastructure, new type of land use fusing agriculture and trade, new typology of housing, transport and communication hub will make inter-dependent multiple centres in and around the city which will complement the main city centre.

Conclusion

Prevailing urbanization in Bangladesh appears as an alienated transformation of urban areas, which denies the indigenous understanding and intrinsic context and often contradictory to the core idea of progress. Whatever formal and informal measures have been taken in last few decades in the process of urbanization resulted up with severe environmental degradation, increased poverty and proneness to natural and human induced hazards and risks.



Social disparities and injustice are tagged with the notion of urbanization. It seems that the practice of urbanism in larger cities might not fit the smaller ones. In Bangladesh where urban areas are mostly informal and spontaneous in disposition, conventional approaches (economic zoning based master plan) for urbanization have very little considerations of the natural, geographical and social attributes. Hence, the formal ways of designing the cities do not conform the very nature of such settlements. Deep understanding of the logic and dynamics of the regions physical, social and spiritual basics that is the intrinsic context and aspirations, fused with the spirit of time may appear to be a way out of this dilemma.

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