



AUSTRALIAN
HERITAGE
FESTIVAL

Present Practice of Heritage Conservation in old Dhaka

M. Mahmud Ali

PhD Candidate

Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET)

Email: ali2123m@yahoo.com

*The Article is sponsored by *Australian Heritage Festival*

Abstract:

Urbanization is not merely a modern phenomenon, but a rapid and historic transformation of human social roots on a global scale, whereby predominantly rural and traditional culture is being rapidly replaced by predominantly urban culture. If a skyscraper is blocking the view of a lake or a farmland you once had from your house window, urbanization is happening. But this has a negative impact on the preservation of our golden historical heritages. Due to rapid urbanization and unplanned urban development, Dhaka city is losing its heritage structure in a very fast mode. The present practice of Heritage Conservation in old Dhaka is top-down approach which is also known as formal approach. The idea of community/public participation is less recognized or practiced in Bangladesh which is also known as informal approach. Adaptive reuse may be considered as a means of heritage area preservation in a sustainable way. Adaptive reuse of some heritage structures of old Dhaka considering its heritage value for healthy living. Thus, the research will help to preserve its tradition and make urban lives more livable.

Key-words: Old Dhaka, Heritage Conservation, Adaptive reuse, Public participation

1.0 Introduction

Bangladesh was a part of ancient Bengal. It has a glorious and rich past historical, cultural heritage and diverse archeological treasure. Various religious and ethnic rulers ruled the country for centuries. Many illustrious dynasties of kings and sultans have ruled and disappeared and have left their marks in the shape of magnificent cities and monuments. And they have built the different types of establishment, the desolate ruins of which are still visible in many places throughout the country. The Mughal and the British rulers established Dhaka as their capital during different reigning periods. Dhaka became the central administration headquarter and therefore the city grew far earlier and more rapidly than other regions of Bangladesh. The older part of the city next to the bank of the river Buriganga is known to be the most affected part of the city in terms of heritage conservation. Due to economic innovation, heritage has become a secondary point of interest. The government often shows less attention on heritage protection related topics. The heritage edifices of the country are currently either in ruinous condition or already have faced an ultimate demolition. The heritage management topic is rather ignored in the events of the development matters.

The old Dhaka is losing its heritage buildings/structures and environmental harmony very rapidly not only because of poor maintenance facility but also ownership problem, lack of skilled manpower and experts, adequate planning and conservation policy guidelines/strategies, high maintenance costs and the lack of political will to preserve the past. In absence





of an appropriate special area plan, often the owners (landlords) of old Dhaka demolish the buildings and build a new one to accommodate more inhabitants or to take the benefit of high property prices. The lack of occupancy and the lack of maintenance are some of the reasons which often cause demolition of older buildings. In several cases the occupancy is also a reason for destruction which often cannot be assumed at the very beginning, and eventually the buildings disappear. Private owner cannot afford the costly preservation of a site/building. Even, they were unaware of facing any legal action for causing damage to the property. The authorities need to acquire private property to be able to carry out major restoration works. Acquiring private property was not necessary as the Antiquities Act grants the government guardianship rights and permits it to take action for preservation. Lots of acquisitions will also be costly, especially in cases where an entire neighborhood requires restoration. Consequently, we are losing our century old heritage buildings of old Dhaka.

2.0 History and Overview of old Dhaka

Many people believe that the name of the city was derived after the establishment of the Goddess Dhakeshwari's temple by Raja Ballal Sena in the 12th century CE. At that time, the Dhaka area used to be identified as Bengalla. In that era the town consisted of a few market centers; such as: Lakshmi Bazar, Shankhari Bazar, Tanti Bazar, and a few localities of other craftsmen and businessmen like Patuatuli and Kumartuli, Bania Nagar and Goal Nagar. After the dominions of Senas, Dhaka was respectively ruled by the Turkish and Afghan governors descending from the Delhi Sultanate before the arrival of the Mughals in 1608. The Afghan Fort in Dhaka was located at the area which was placed for the previous Central Jail (Dani, 1956).

This is incredibly historic that, today's Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is an ancient city of Bengal that had been founded during the Mughal period and experienced colonialism afterwards. The city of Dhaka was founded by Subedar Islam Khan as a Mughal Provincial capital of Bengal. Afterwards the capital was renamed as Jahangirnagar in 1608 AD by the Mughal emperor Jahangir during his ruling period. It is notable that, although Dhaka was existed as an urban area for several centuries earlier than the arrival of Mughals, the most significant heritage elements of the city date back to the Mughal period.

During the beginning of Mughal rule in the year 1608, the city was promulgated as the capital of Bengal and consequently the development of townships, public works and a significant growth in population took place. Mughal Subedar Islam Khan was the first Subedar of the capital city. The city was renowned as "Jahangir Nagar" (City of Jahangir) in honor of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. The greatest expansion of the city took place under Mughal general Shaista Khan (1662-1677 and 1679-1689). At that time, the city was stretched for 12 miles in length and 8 miles in breadth and is believed to have had a population of nearly a million people. The historical Chawk Mosque is located at the local market area of the old town of Dhaka, south of the current city centre. The mosque was originally built during the Mughals rule in the 17th century and it might be the earliest dated mosque which was built on a high vaulted foundation in Bengal. During the Mughal period, Dhaka became the chief commercial emporium. This encouraged a much greater concentration of commerce: maritime trade brought industry, Islamic education and increasing sophistication in art. The Mughals built mosques, palaces, caravanserais (accommodation for camel caravans), bazaars and gardens; all



these establishments enhanced Dhaka's prosperity significantly. This development began to attract European traders from southern India (Taifoor, 1956).

In 1666 the British East India Company established a trading post in Dhaka; however, Dhaka's decline as a maritime trade Centre had already begun. Dhaka remained the capital under the Mughals until they moved it to Murshidabad in 1704. The city was transited to the control of the British East India Company in 1765 AD. Then the city's population shrank dramatically in a short period of time. Although Dhaka was an important city in the Bengal province, it remained smaller than Kolkata, which served as the capital of British India for quite a long span of time. Under the British rule, many modern educational institutions, public works and townships were developed. A modern water supply system was introduced in 1874 AD and electricity supply in 1878 AD (Rabbani, 1997).

In 1905 Bengal was divided into east and west, the eastern section incorporating Assam (with Dhaka as its capital). From this certain point Dhaka again started to assume some measures of importance as an Administrative Centre. Government buildings, churches, residential enclaves and educational institutions made the transformation which led it into a city of great prosperity. During the existence of East Pakistan, Dhaka was classed as a subsidiary capital until the Liberation war following the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The country became independent and Dhaka once again achieved its former capital-city status (GOB, 1993).

3.0 Concept of Heritage Conservation:

Conservation is the process of maintaining and managing change to a heritage asset in a way that sustains and where appropriate enhances its significance. An American author Steve Berry said "A concerted effort to preserve our heritage is a vital link to our cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational, and economic legacies - all of the things that quite literally make us who we are." This statement accordingly holds a close relation to my Article's aim.

The term 'conservation' means "the act or process of preserving something in being, or keeping something alive. But, conservation is not only preservation of historic buildings, rather it is a multi-disciplinary and multi-stepped complex method which may include any number of the processes of renovation, restoration, regeneration, reconstruction, adaptive reuse, and routine maintenance without altering the original form.

Heritage management differs from heritage conservation (even though similar approaches and methods are used for both), as the process is continuous and an ongoing part of everyday socio-cultural activities of local communities. Heritage management involves active community participation in the identification, interpretation, assessment, decision making, maintenance and preservation.

4.0 Importance of Heritage Edifice Conservation:

Heritage conservation has gained importance in contemporary society because of people's desire to find connection (tangible and intangible) to their historical roots and a 'sense of place', especially for those places that are slowly losing their identity and unique character by the onslaught of modern development. Most contemporary societies recognize the importance of conserving what remains of their past in the form of heritage. Conservation is a continuous process and responsibility of every generation; to save and pass on the elements of heritage



value to the succeeding generations unimpaired. By conserving heritage, a city can foster a strong local identity based upon a sound understanding of their area's unique history. The benefits of Heritage conservation are as follows:

- Historic places tend to bring together people of all ages;
- Historic places often become focal points for important community events and celebrations;
- Historic places and heritage planning provides opportunity for public service and volunteerism.
- Heritage resources embody the way of life of the people who created them;
- Protecting historic places promotes architectural diversity.

5.0 Present Practice of Heritage Conservation in old Dhaka

Conservation of invaluable heritage sites in the ancient city of Dhaka has always been ignored, leading to destruction of the sites. Destruction of heritage sites and historical monuments started during Pakistan period on a moderate scale but it gained momentum after independence. Since the country's independence, heritage conservation has always been at a lower level in the spectrum of the government's priorities on urban issues. Heritage properties suffered destruction in an appalling extent during military rule. According to conservationist architects, friezes and other ornamental features of the old buildings are replaced with dissimilar and odd-looking features. Details of the ornamental works, their sizes and proportions are lost in the intervention. The Department of Archaeology's approach was that of 'saving the more important' part of heritage within the limited resources available. As a result, the heritages that were considered of 'lesser' value, like several residential heritage buildings of Old Dhaka, seldom got the attention of the Department. Though the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC), the Metropolitan Building Rules of 2006 (revised in 2008) and the Antiquities Act of 1968 require the government to take measures and institute a standing committee to protect the heritage sites, the government has all along been idle on the issue. Even a structure may have important heritage value, Government authorities are not considered for conservation unless they are 'old enough (100 yrs)'

6.0 Limitations of Present Practice of Heritage Conservation in Dhaka:

The present approach (formal conservation) of heritage conservation has the following limitations:

- Lack of adequate technical resource & experts,
- Authenticity of material and construction methods used in restoration
- Lack of financial resources can cause the main obstacle to successful conservation, in others, having adequate fund may not be sufficient,
- Conservation is not properly done due to time limitation.
- Due to limited resource and time allotted, generally background/historical study which are most importantly required are not done before conservation.



7.0 Search for Better Options: Participatory Approach, Community/Public Participation

People in local communities are most knowledgeable about their heritage. Hence, People's active involvement adds some distinct elements in the heritage conservation process. The heritage management by the informal community bodies involves and engages the local community. It requires active involvement of all the relevant stakeholders in the community. This only happens in the traditional environments where the communities have survived and sustained through several generations and continue to inhabit them. These communities are equipped with greater social capital to manage the local heritage. They have the vernacular knowledge of material, crafts and construction methods to ensure the continuity of the heritage. Thus, the local informal effort in heritage management has proven successful for several generations while many of the formal interventions have failed and damaged the heritage.

8.0 Benefits of Participatory Approach (Community/Public Participation)

The local community of old Dhaka is involved in the informal heritage management of community and privately owned heritage buildings. Based on ownership, the involvement is direct and indirect in nature. The community heritage buildings are owned by the local community, unless the government intervenes to take over. Management of the community buildings is direct in nature, involving routine repair/restoration, managing funds and ensuring the continuity of the traditional craftsmen's guilds by engaging them. For privately owned buildings, the involvement is more indirect in nature; this happens by influencing, monitoring and assisting the private owners in the limited capacity of the community bodies. The conservation is better when the building is actively used by the community. Revival of traditional Panchayat system can be an effective tool to ensure public participation (Ahmed, 2012).

9.0 Recommendations for sustainable conservation of heritage edifices in old Dhaka:

The preservation of heritage properties is an important undertaking. It is so important that even the United Nations has set up a subsidiary responsible for this purpose called the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. This organization declares cultural sites from around the world as being protected in order to preserve global heritage.

In a sustainable conservation practice, the heritage edifices should be restored and renovated maintaining the international guidelines. A comprehensive documentation of existing and previous condition, detail analysis of old Dhaka's building morphology and physical structures is needed for the renewal work. To reconstruct the missing parts, more land may be acquired. For preservation of heritage edifices, international chartered by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) may be followed. A committee of architects, archaeologists, planners, historians, representatives of the local community and government may work together in the renewal program (Mowla, 2013).

To make old Dhaka more vibrant with considering its heritage value, the following proposals may be adopted for renewal of old Dhaka:



a) Declare old Dhaka as Special Planning area:

The entire old Dhaka may be considered as a Special Planning area to protect the scale, visual exposure, skyline, and different qualities of the Mughal fabric. There should be restriction on height, scale and volume of surrounding structures so that the heritage building gets visual exposure and physical focus. An effective buffer zone should be introduced to protect the heritage structures from traffic vibration, noise pollution, air pollution, water pollution, and other threats.

b) Urban Planning/Architectural intervention for conservation of heritage edifices:

i) Adaptive Reuse of heritage edifices of old Dhaka:

Adaptive reuse is considered as a means of heritage edifices preservation in a sustainable way. Revitalization of economic structure is the prime concern for adaptive reuse. Entertainment, restaurant, hotel, souvenir shops, art galleries, libraries, craft shops and micro level enterprises that accompany tourism may be focused for economic transformation during the conservation planning or adaptive reuse. After restoration, the heritage buildings of old Dhaka can be used for sustainable purposes, such as serving as attractive heritage hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, art galleries, craft shops, libraries, and administrative buildings.

The **Bara Katra and Chota Katra** may be used as educational or recreational center for the local community so that, the community can take better care of these heritages. The adaptive reuse of Bara Katra and Chota Katra may have some tourist facilities too; like hotel, restaurant, souvenir shops, entertainment, and theater hall for a documentary film on old Dhaka history, etc,

Proposal for adaptive reuse of Ruplal house:

The Ruplal house is a huge structure. It consists of several blocks. The owners of Ruplal house can be offered compensation by negotiation or rehabilitated to other place of similar property value. Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) can be applied here.

- The Ruplal block may be used as accommodations and hotel service;
- The central block may be used as lobby, lounge, banquet hall, and restaurant;
- The Raghunath block will remain for hotel administration, maintenance office, library function, exhibition space and so on,
-

North brook hall can be converted into a permanent theater by incorporating some facilities like workshop, rehearsal and others,

Johnson hall can be again used as a Library by preserving the contemporary books and providing with new library facility for the people,

Develop/Establish a large central park and a museum on the premises of ex-Dhaka central jail. Craft shops, art galleries, restaurant, libraries and theater hall (for a documentary film on old Dhaka history), etc. should be installed on the vacant site of ex-Dhaka central jail.



ii) Creating view corridors

Identity providing edifices)such as Bara Katra, Chota Katra, Ruplal house, North brook hall/ Johnson hall etc.(should be opened up to the view or brought to the front by creating view corridors, featuring setbacks or controlling development around them. View corridors may also be created through the fabric to get a distant and an interesting view of the heritage edifices of old Dhaka,

All the approach and connecting road may be restructured to create view corridors so that heritage edifices can be integrated with the urban fabric and the river Buriganga, The access linkage between the heritage edifices and the Ghats (Landing Stations) should be improved to create an interesting approach from the river bank.

iii) Preserving the street elevation and the river front:

The facades of the heritage buildings should be preserved and restored to maintain the continuity of the river front and the street elevations of the old city.

The river side elevations of the Mughal and colonial buildings need to be recovered to reveal the identity and integrity of the heritage city.

The street front should be considered as an important part of integration because the continuous façade of old settlements, such as Shankhari Bazaar and Tanti Bazaar, represent a strong urban character.

iv) Developing heritage trail/walking route:

To promote cultural tourism, a heritage trail (route for heritage walk) may be developed in old Dhaka within the present fabric. The route will be used as a heritage walk with a focus on the Mughal and Colonial structures (such as Lalbag fort, Chawkbazar Shahi Masjid, Bara Katra, Chota Katra, Ahsan Manjil, North brook hall, Ruplal house) along the Buriganga river bank.

c) Developing Tourism facilities:

i) To attract tourists, some river based recreational activities such as boating club, amphitheater, cruising, fishing and other public recreational facilities may be developed on the river Buriganga based on Buckland embankment cum road.

ii) To enhance with a feeling of history, develop green areas and install benches, lamps, and light and sound system etc. in the old fort area, Bara Katra and along the river Buriganga.

d) Ensuring Public participation and revival of Panchayat system

To conserve the heritage edifices and solve the problems of old Dhaka, the spontaneous public participation is necessary. But it is a matter of question about how the participation will be ensured. Political government has less concentration in this regard. So, revival of traditional Panchayat system can be an effective tool to ensure public participation, as it develops from the root of the community.



10.0 Conclusion:

In this relatively small city especially in old Dhaka part everywhere bears the marks of our predecessors' efforts to sustain life and satisfy their needs. Some parts of the historic environment are important to society as a whole or within it and merit some level of protection or consideration. These are our heritage assets and they are the elements of the historic environment that we value for more than their money's worth. The generations that follow us are most likely to value them too, for the same or similar reasons. It has therefore long been accepted that we have a responsibility to look after them.

In the case of old Dhaka, the practice of heritage conservation required to be integrated and strategic that aims to preserve identity and heritages, regenerate local economy, maintain sense of community and place and improve quality of life of local people should be formulated and implemented. Heritage conservation practice should not be the end process rather it should be continuous process that would preserve heritage resources and provide quality environment for present and future generations of old Dhaka. Built heritages such as monuments, mosques, temples, residential buildings, and intangibles such as arts and crafts, pottery, feasts and festivals and cultural programmes of old Dhaka should be strongly integrated within the broader framework of comprehensive renewal and development plan. The genuine significance of cultural heritage of old Dhaka has to be retained and historic identity should be maintained. The responsible institutions should therefore be effective and efficient in technical, financial and legal aspects, and adopt integrated renewal plan through broader public participation. Heritage Conservation should not be taken only for the sake of preserving buildings, but it should provide quality environment to the neighborhoods. Above all, we can remember the words once Abraham Lincoln said and realize the urge to conserve our heritages.

“Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as a heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors.” And the ‘spirit’ is what we inherit from our past generations in the form of heritage.

References:

1. Ahmed, Iftekhhar. (2012). A Study of Architectural Heritage Management by the Informal Community Bodies in Traditional Neighborhoods of old Dhaka, Doctoral Thesis, National University of Singapore.
2. Dani, Ahmad Hasan. (1956). Dacca- A Record of Its Changing Fortunes, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca.
3. GOB, (1993). Bangladesh District Gazetteers Greater Dhaka.
4. Hossain, Mohammad Sazzad. (2013). Strategies to integrate the Mughal settlements in Old Dhaka,
5. Mowla, Q.A. (2013). Integration Proposal for Historic Katras into Dhaka's Urban Fabric, Pratnatattva, Journal of the Dept. of Archaeology, Vol.19.



6. Rabbani, Golam. (1997). DHAKA - From Mughal Outpost to Metropolis, University Press Limited (UPL), Dhaka.

7. Taifoor, S.M. (1956). Glimpses of Old Dhaka, Pioneer Printing Press, Dhaka.



NATIONAL TRUST
**AUSTRALIAN
HERITAGE
FESTIVAL**