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# Colonial legacies and contemporary urban planning practices in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

Effective urban planning is said to be crucial for ensuring liveable, equitable and viable urban areas progress towards sustainability. This study combines a review of the relevant literature, key informant interviews and field observations to explore contemporary planning practices in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We problematize ineffective urban planning practice in Dhaka as a prime expression and reproduction of colonial planning, which manifests itself through institutional bureaucracy and centralization, technocracy, and ad hoc planning. We argue that these imprints have rendered planning institutions weak and fostered dependency on imported ideologies and practices. The situation, we further argue, not only stifles local planning creativity but also makes the planning profession unattractive. Apart from limited local innovations and political aspirations for meeting global development targets, urban planning and city management have followed a reductionist approach under neoliberalism. With little to no social resonance, attempts at creating ordered spaces are, instead, contributing to increased spatial fragmentation and segregation, informality, and widespread urban poverty. To promote urban sustainability, this paper urges the contextualization of colonial ideologies and practices against the social, political and economic realities of urban Bangladesh.

## KEYWORDS

Urbanization; planning; colonialism; Dhaka; segregation

## Introduction

Urban planning in the developing world is widely considered to be a failed enterprise. Consequently, urbanization continues to take a negative toll on cities, as many countries lack the appropriate and effective policies and planning frameworks to leverage the benefits.<sup>1</sup> Planning, at its best, has overly concentrated on the provision of physical infrastructure, including the construction of roads and drainage systems, as well as employing place promotion through beautification.<sup>2</sup> Urban planning practice in these economies has excessively focused on the production and editing of imported master plans and blueprint documents that often do not resonate with the social, economic and political contexts of the importing cities, explaining why unplanned settlements,

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

<sup>1</sup>World Bank, *Urban Development*, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Bolay, "Urban planning in Africa", 413–431.

slums and urban poverty have been on the ascendency.<sup>3</sup> According to the UN-Habitat<sup>4</sup> and the New Urban Agenda, effective management of urbanization through appropriate planning and urban policymaking is critical to attaining the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and addressing pressing global challenges, such as poverty, inequality and conflict in urban areas.<sup>5</sup>

Colonialism has had a significant influence on contemporary city planning, economic, political structures, and institutions in cities in many developing countries.<sup>6</sup> In addition to designing and regulating the urban morphology<sup>7</sup>, colonial administration focused on the provision of urban infrastructures and services, zoning and economic pursuits, with development largely concerned with European residential areas.<sup>8</sup> From the 2nd half of the twentieth Century, third-world cities began to diverge from Western colonist nations' political and economic control.<sup>9</sup> Colonial imprints are very much alive today<sup>10</sup> as contemporary planning systems in many African and Asian cities continue to draw inspiration from the colonial planning ideologies.<sup>11</sup> Home<sup>12</sup> notes:

'The legacy of colonialism is now etched on the landscape and in the societies of many, if not most, of the 'cities of the global south', and it still distinguishes them from those of the 'global north', even though they have grown in extent and population far beyond their colonial origins, and the former 'colonial masters' have largely departed'.

The questions, however, are: how do imperial ideas of town planning and city management find their expression in contemporary urban planning practices? what account do we have of how imperial ideas are reshaped in local contexts, or challenged and dissolved? and what are the dominating imperial legacies limiting urban sustainability? Most previous studies have analysed how colonialism has shaped the socioeconomic and political structures of town planning policies to find the historical roots of contemporary urban challenges.<sup>13</sup> Yet, it will be worth exploring the doctrine of colonial town planning and city management. This will help to explore how colonial planning has left its legacies in contemporary practices. Within this reality, the current paper attempts to answer these questions to trace out the extent to which colonial planning finds expression in contemporary urban planning of cities, using Dhaka, Bangladesh, as a case study.

Dhaka, one of the world's fastest-growing megacities, is selected because the city has been suffering from persistent acute urban challenges, which its planning practices cannot address. The city's colonial past still permeates contemporary planning practices. The city has about 100 years of history of urban planning, dating back to British colonial times, and it is on record that British town planners developed the city's first and second master plans (1917 and 1959).<sup>14</sup> Until today, the city continues to dwell on British planning ideologies in formulating its plans.<sup>15</sup> However, it is unclear

<sup>3</sup>Pieterse, *Urbanization imperatives*, 2010

<sup>4</sup>UN-Habitat. 2020

<sup>5</sup>Ibid

<sup>6</sup>Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, "Colonial Origins," 1369–1401; La Porta et al., "Consequences of legal origins," 285–332; La Porta et al., "Judicial checks," 445–470.

<sup>7</sup>Njoh, "Planning Power," 304–305.

<sup>8</sup>Oladiti and Idowu, "Interplay of Town Planning," 126–142.

<sup>9</sup>Robinson, "Global world cities," 542–543.

<sup>10</sup>Healey, "Circuits of Knowledge," 1512; Bissell, *Urban Design, Chaos, and Colonial Power in Zanzibar*, 2011.

<sup>11</sup>Njoh, Planning Power, 304–305; Khan and Swapan, "Traffic flow interruptions," 46–54; Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, "Colonial Origins," 1369–1401.

<sup>12</sup>Home, "Legal histories of planning and colonialism" 75–82.

<sup>13</sup>Home, "Town planning," 1910–1940; Yeoh, "Contested space"; Njoh, "Planning power"; Myers, "Designing Power," 193–204; Myers, *Verandahs of Power*, 2003; Khan and Swapan, "Traffic flow interruptions," 46–54; Oladiti and Idowu, "Interplay of Town Planning," 126–142; Tripathy, "Development as Urban Imaginary," 1–22; Bissell, *Urban Design, Chaos, and Colonial Power in Zanzibar*, 2011.

<sup>14</sup>Jahan, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh*; Mohaimen, *Dhaka Master Plan Report*, 1990.

<sup>15</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

how colonial legacies find expression in current practice, which is what this study will attempt to reveal. The study problematizes ineffective urban planning practice in Dhaka as a prime expression and reproduction of colonial planning, which reflects the inability of the state and planning authorities to break free from Western ideologies and practices. First, we present the theoretical perspective of colonial planning, where we conceptualize the key planning tenets. This is followed by the methodology used in the paper and a brief history of planning and urban development in Dhaka. The study then contextualizes the expressions of colonial planning. The last section concludes the study.

### **Conceptualizing colonialism and the doctrine of urban planning**

Colonialism is mostly viewed as the military occupation of territory by capitalist powers to influence the accumulation of capital with minimum effort.<sup>16</sup> The role of colonial cities has rested on the net expansion of colonial and world trade.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, in the early twentieth century, various military, political and technical principles were consciously applied to towns and cities.<sup>18</sup> With the political stability and infrastructure required for the rapid growth of trade, key cities were transformed into financial capital. The planning and construction of the capital city of India, New Delhi, for instance, was almost entirely devoted ‘to administrative, political and social functions’.<sup>19</sup> In principle, regarding the colonialists, cities with economic, political and administrative centrality formed the major places for planning and developmental attention.

Colonialism introduced new and expanding professions to the colonized cities, including urban planning, law, surveying, administration, and public health.<sup>20</sup> Even before the emergence of a recognizable planning profession, military engineers were responsible in the nineteenth century for laying out the new colonial ports and towns.<sup>21</sup> In principle, colonial governors and ruling elites had the political authority to determine the physical form of these ports and towns and to redefine their physical space.<sup>22</sup> However, native views were hardly accounted for in the determination of planning policy in most of the colonies, particularly those of the British.<sup>23</sup>

Town planning in the colonies reflected the planning ideologies and practices of the Western settler states. The City Beautiful movement, although concerned with the American and European ideological, socioeconomic and urban context, was viewed as the modern approach to address urban challenges in many colonies.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, when it was realized that the 1932 English Town and Country Planning Act could offer comprehensive physical planning, it was transplanted and adapted for many colonies across the globe.<sup>25</sup> The lives of the colonized indigenous population and their environment received little attention in the urban schemes.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the central functions were aimed to serve colonial administrative and economic interests.<sup>27</sup> For example,

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<sup>16</sup>Davis et al., *Mammon and the pursuit of Empire*, 32; Johnson, *British Imperialism*, 2.

<sup>17</sup>Dumett, *Gentlemanly Capitalism*, 53.

<sup>18</sup>White et al., 1948 in King, “Exporting Planning,” 53.

<sup>19</sup>King, “Exporting Planning,” 18–20.

<sup>20</sup>Lambert and Lester, *Across the British Empire*, 113; Home, “*Planting and planning*,” 38–62, and Ballantyne, “*Empire, knowledge and culture*,” 115–140.

<sup>21</sup>King, “Exporting Planning,” 18–19.

<sup>22</sup>Home, *Planting and planning*, 3.

<sup>23</sup>Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence*, 153.

<sup>24</sup>Home, *Colonial urban planning in Anglophone*, 75–88.

<sup>25</sup>Home, “*Legal histories of planning and colonialism*” 75–82.

<sup>26</sup>Olujimi and Enisan, *Colonial Planning Education*.

<sup>27</sup>De Bruijne, “*Colonial City*,” 231–232.

from the early twentieth century, when the City Beautiful approach was imprinted in the planning practice of Delhi, slum clearance became common and was justified as it kept the city clean. Later, the British, who happened to be the largest coloniser<sup>28</sup>, vigorously promoted master planning during the mid-twentieth century, which had, by then, become a major planning instrument in Europe and Asia. The master planning wave was manifested as a form of 'rational' behaviour towards urban development in the colonial cities.<sup>29</sup> For reasons of supposed urban efficiency, the modernization agenda of the colonial authorities also took the forms of regulation, control, growth management and bringing order into urban spaces.<sup>30</sup> Sadly, the grand designs and master plans that were adopted in Asia and Africa failed to value the socioeconomic and environmental needs of the local population and the importing contexts.<sup>31</sup>

Municipal governance in colonial cities in the nineteenth century also went through a progressive conversion through the incorporation of new local government legal frameworks.<sup>32</sup> The rules and practices of colonial urban management were blamed for creating residential racial and class segregation, and the displacement of the poor to the city's peripheries<sup>33</sup> as the health and sanitation of the colonial British and their security and housing needs were the prime concern of urban governance in the metropolis.<sup>34</sup> For instance, there were distinct British and Indian quarters in Bombay, just as in other colonial towns.<sup>35</sup> The imposition of movement restrictions, often without the consent of the natives, required the local people to carry on with them, for instance, personal registration documents, as was the case in the cantonments of India, pass laws of South Africa and Kipande Laws of Kenya.<sup>36</sup> Legal frameworks meant that municipalities had the authority to reserve land for separate residential areas for Europeans, the Asian working class and the natives, as well as commercial areas for the Europeans and Asians, but not for the natives.<sup>37</sup> In colonial Africa, the Township Rules in the 1920s formally imposed social class and race-based residential rules and commercial use zoning.<sup>38</sup> Colonial authorities restricted the access of native labourers to the major towns (e.g. in South Africa), and the peri-urban settlements of the largely migrant population remained unloved and unplanned. The rapid emergence of unplanned and informal settlements in the urban periphery because of the colonial laws, prompted tenure insecurity among the natives resulting in what we call slums today.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, spacious detached housing within fenced compounds was reserved for the higher income groups in the cities.<sup>40</sup> Policies and practices that promoted racial segregation within and beyond cities were meant to convey and strengthen the power and social control of the colonialists over the indigenous population<sup>41</sup> and were legitimised on the grounds of abatement of health danger and by the explicit pursuit of class and racial interests.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Wekwete, *Planning law in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 13–28.

<sup>29</sup>Paris, *Critical Readings*, 7.

<sup>30</sup>Njoh, "Planning Power," 305–312.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid

<sup>32</sup>Home, *Colonial Urban Planning in Anglophone*, 75–88; Johnson, *British imperialism*.

<sup>33</sup>King, *Urbanism, Colonialism*.

<sup>34</sup>Home, *Colonial Urban Planning in Anglophone*, 75–88.

<sup>35</sup>Dossal, "Limits of Colonial Urban Planning", 19–31.

<sup>36</sup>Clayton and Savage, "Government and Labour in Kenya 1895–1963", 1974, and Hindson, "Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat", 1987.

<sup>37</sup>Home, *Colonial Urban Planning in Anglophone*, 75–88.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid

<sup>39</sup>Home, "Legal histories of planning and colonialism" 75–82.

<sup>40</sup>Home, *Colonial Urban Planning in Anglophone*, 75–88.

<sup>41</sup>Njoh, "Planning as a tool of power," 301–317.

<sup>42</sup>King, "Exporting 'Planning,'".

## Analytical framework

As the European colonizers entered the interiors of Asia and Africa, new challenges and opportunities prompted new strategies for urban management.<sup>43</sup> Colonial town planning and urban management revolve around three main strategies: the diffusion of a planning ethos and approaches from the colonialists; the transfer of planning expertise to the colonies for the preparation of policy documents and designing schemes; and the implementation of planning laws and decisions.<sup>44</sup> Colonial planning advocates believed that the strategies offered the best modern approach to urban management in the colonies. Therefore, to practicalize the strategies, various planning acts of English descent were imposed to manage urban growth and intercommunal tensions brought about by racial segregation.<sup>45</sup> The dual mandate system (a system where traditional political institutions were maintained and incorporated into the colonial administrative system for governance purposes) became the dominant ideology of British colonial management<sup>46</sup> that is believed to have created systemic urban racial segregation with its concomitant fragmented spatial development, particularly in Asia and African colonies.<sup>47</sup> Present-day planning practice in many developing countries still follows a similar pattern, where, mainly, the ideas of rational planning and incremental planning are imported, and non-native experts and technocrats are hired as consultants to assist with the preparation of master plans and strategic plans. These experts and technocrats mostly follow a top-down approach to interpreting local challenges, thereby undermining the need for local participation in the decision-making process. This practice led to centralized planning activities. Meanwhile, most of the plans (largely in master plan format) were formulated to redress sector-specific urban challenges. Due to limited resources and implementation failure, many countries had to move to and heavily rely on an incremental planning approach, where planning responses tended to be ad hoc in nature.<sup>48</sup> Bissell notes:

‘On paper, colonial urban plans often appear fully formed, the ultimate realization of promises to modernize the city, but in practice they were marked again and again by incoherence, incapacity, and incompleteness.’<sup>49</sup>

Many developing countries continue to depend on international donors for both financial and technical support, giving them the opportunity to capitalize on such aids to influence urban planning policies and plans to suit their interests.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the socioeconomic needs of local people remain poorly addressed.

Within the imperial political and economic reality, colonial rule has explicitly exhibited a certain doctrine of town planning and city management. This study uses the colonialism lens to unpack the current practice in Dhaka. The paper conceptualizes colonial planning expression based on four major tenets: Western dependency, technocracy and institutional weaknesses, centralization, and ad hoc planning (see [Figure 1](#)). The inability of city and planning authorities to break away from colonial planning ideologies, we argue, have rendered the planning enterprise a top-down exercise, and this has contributed to poor urban management practices and systems in developing

<sup>43</sup>Home, “Legal histories of planning and colonialism” 75–82.

<sup>44</sup>Beeckmans, “Editing the African city”, 615–627.

<sup>45</sup>Home, “Legal histories of planning and colonialism” 75–82.

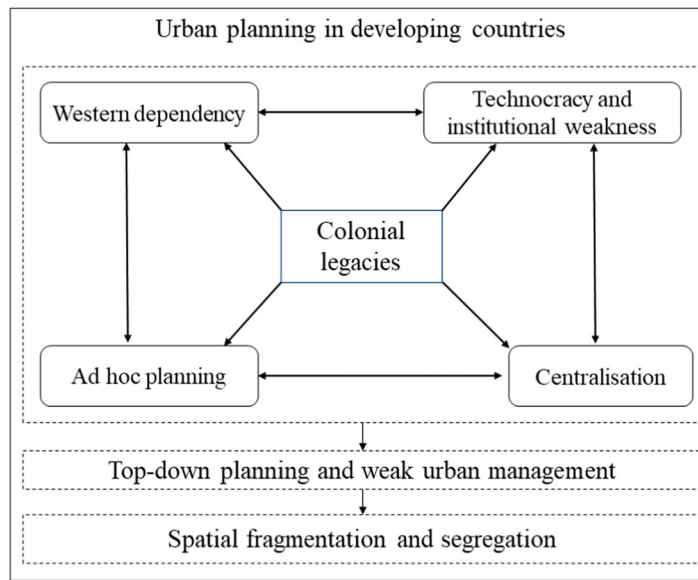
<sup>46</sup>Dubow, “Racial segregation” 1989; Maylam, “Explaining the Apartheid city”, 1995”, and Maharaj, “Apartheid, urban segregation and local state” 1997.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid

<sup>48</sup>Olujimi and Enisan, *Colonial Planning Education*.

<sup>49</sup>Bissell, *Urban Design, Chaos, and Colonial Power in Zanzibar*, 2011.

<sup>50</sup>Khan and Swapan, “From Master plans to democratic planning,” 183–191.



**Figure 1.** A framework of colonial legacies in contemporary planning practices. Source: authors construct based on literature.

countries. As a result, spatial fragmentation, informality, and poverty, remain the common urban features of the developing world. This paper explores how colonial planning ideologies have found expression in the contemporary planning practices in Dhaka and the implications for the city.

### **Approach and data sources**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to understanding the colonial imprints of planning in Dhaka. The qualitative approach was deemed suitable for the study, given the subjective nature of the issue under investigation.<sup>51</sup>

The study draws on a review of scientific literature and national planning documents, field observations, and eighteen semi-structured interviews with key informants (five policymakers, five planners and one development worker, four architects, and three academics and professionals). Knowledge and understanding concerning planning practices in Bangladesh, which the second author accumulated through 15 years of practice in the field, have also informed the findings in this paper.

The primary data used for this paper are extracted from the data collected as a part of a four- and half-year-long large-scale international research project. As the country lead of this project, the second author of this paper led and coordinated this data collection between 2018 and 2019 and conducted the interviews.

The key informants were recruited based on their knowledge and practical experience. A purposive sampling technique (a researcher-based judgement in selecting a representative sample for a study) was adopted in recruiting the participants. The extracted interview data focused on: (1) understanding the history of city planning in Dhaka, (2) contemporary planning practices and associated issues, and (3) the urban and planning challenges of the city.

<sup>51</sup>Creswell, *Research Design*, 203–225; Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 2017.

A research team of 38 members were engaged in field observation of 863 residential neighbourhoods in Dhaka and its pre-urban areas. Data from field observations informed the challenges that the city and its peri-urban areas face related to urban growth, structure and differentiation of neighbourhoods and neighbourhood sustainability. Evidence on associated concerns of planning practices is also gathered from field observation. Pictures, video footage and field notes were taken to provide contextual information.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Colonial roots of planning practice in Dhaka***

Dhaka has an urban history of over 400 years. When this former capital of Bengal (from 1608 to 1707) became a municipality in 1864, the British rulers concentrated on investing in urban services and building an administrative infrastructure.<sup>53</sup> With rising urban growth, an effort to organize spatial planning for the city began when the British town planner Sir Patrick Geddes was commissioned to prepare the first physical plan for Dhaka in 1917.<sup>54</sup> Although the *Dacca Town Planning Report* was a concept paper for the future master plan, it never received formal recognition and, until 1947, the city developed almost spontaneously.

After the partition of British India in 1947, Dhaka became the provincial capital of East Pakistan (known as East Bengal until 1955). For the purposes of detailed planning and to facilitate plan implementation, the early Pakistan rule initiated a new institutional framework for urban planning by establishing relevant institutions, legislation and statutory master plans for the growing cities.<sup>55</sup> After the establishment of the Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) in 1956 (now Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK)), under the supervision of a planning committee, a British planning team with the help of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, prepared a master plan in 1959 for the following 20 years.<sup>56</sup> The plan was supposed to be the framework for the growth of Dhaka, where the major roads, railway lines and land-use zones were marked to create the basic spatial structure of the city. Under the leadership of the planning cell in the Ministry of Public Works, Dhaka had few planned residential areas, commercial and industrial areas or diplomatic zones. Interestingly, in a few areas, local communities were encouraged to design local street patterns, and identify locations for shops, schools and mosques. Such was the case in areas such as Segunbagicha, Kalabagan Lake Circus and the Natun Paltan Line, where local people played a significant role in planning their neighbourhood.<sup>57</sup>

After becoming the national capital of the new country of Bangladesh in 1971, the rigid land use-based plan of 1959, which was based on a target population of 4,500,000, appeared ineffective against rapid population growth and associated complex spatial configurations.<sup>58</sup> The proposal of continuous review of the 1959 plan that could accommodate the changing needs remained unimplemented in the war-affected<sup>59</sup> new economy.<sup>60</sup> Although the plan period ended in 1980, the country could not afford a new plan for the city.<sup>61</sup> Importantly, in the late 1970s, the Planning Commission of Bangladesh contracted Shankland Cox, another British town planning

<sup>52</sup>Baffoe et al. "Understanding the concept of neighborhood in Kigali City," 2020.

<sup>53</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>54</sup>Jahan, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh, 1990*; Mohaiman, *Dhaka Master Plan Report*.

<sup>55</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>56</sup>Ahmed, *When will urban planning get its due importance?* 2018.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid

<sup>58</sup>Islam, *Dhaka Now*, 34.

<sup>59</sup>Bangladesh, as a democratic republic, won independence in 1971, after a nine-month long war with the then East Pakistan.

<sup>60</sup>Shafi, *Dhaka city Master Plan*, 2010.

<sup>61</sup>Islam, *Dhaka Now*, 34.



organization, to prepare a long-term strategic plan for the Dhaka Metropolitan area.<sup>62</sup> However, the plan was abandoned during the approval process, and Dhaka was left with no plan at all for the next 15 years.<sup>63</sup>

A major turning point was in the 1990s. This was the period when decades of failure to initiate a workable plan were reversed. Significant changes pertaining to planning philosophy and methodology were made during this time. The statutory master planning approach was replaced with a strategic planning approach.<sup>64</sup> As a shift away from the sole dependence on rigid land use-based master plans, the British hierarchical planning system was adopted to offer broader scope for guiding development and flexibility through a strategic plan, with detailed area plans for more rigid area-specific development plans. A core feature of the planning process was the direct or indirect involvement of the relevant stakeholders, including the local population. Professional planners were responsible for shaping the plans based on the local needs of the people in the plan.<sup>65</sup> Given this planning orientation, the Structure Plan and Urban Area Plan, two tiers of a three-tier plan for the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Planning region, were enacted in 1997.<sup>66</sup> However, due to the failure of RAJUK, the Detailed Area Plan (DAP), which was the third tier of the plan package, was contracted out, with the completed plan receiving official approval in 2010. The DAP of 2010 and DMDP 1995–2015 were both meant to be completed within the plan period of 2015. Five years on, the Dhaka Structure Plan (2016–2035) and DAP (2016–2035) are still at the draft stage. The DAP 2016–2035 has offered, possibly, greater room for public engagement than any other previous plan. However, after all the planning initiatives, little has been achieved, and Dhaka continues to grapple with the challenges of urbanization.

The partition wars, centralized administration and weak political settlement systems have all contributed to undermining planning in Dhaka. It is worthy of knowing that Bangladesh emerged because of two violent partitions, with the first taking place in 1947.<sup>67</sup> Here, Bengal was partitioned into a predominantly Muslim east and later became East Pakistan. The Hindus primarily occupied the partitioned west which became the state of West Bengal in India. The failure of the Pakistan state to meet the needs of the East Pakistani elites culminated in a second violent partition in 1971, which led to the secession of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.<sup>68</sup> Underlying these violent partitions was the conflict between established elites and upward moving elites, who were keen on addressing internal distributive conflicts through patron-client mobilization.<sup>69</sup> The desire for the two groups to usurp power and privilege caused severe harm to all areas of development in Bangladesh. Khan masterfully summarizes the political terrain as:

‘The emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 did not achieve internal peace. Instead, there was more violence, an attempted imposition of a one-party state, the assassinations of two heads of state, long periods of military rule and finally in 2000, the emergence of a vulnerable democracy. Even by the standards of developing countries, its emerging democracy was characterised by high levels of political corruption and insufficient attention to institution-building or developmental policy’.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Nazem, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh*, 2.

<sup>63</sup>Kabir and Parolin, *Dhaka—a story of 400 years*, 1–20.

<sup>64</sup>Nazem, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh*, 2.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid

<sup>66</sup>Ibid

<sup>67</sup>Khan, *Bangladesh: Partitions, Nationalisms and Legacies*, 2010.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid

<sup>69</sup>Ibid

<sup>70</sup>Ibid

The weak political system punctuated by unceasing conflicts between Muslims and Hindus undermined political settlement, which explains the interplay between economics and power relations and institutions.<sup>71</sup> According to Khan<sup>72</sup>, the partitions and subsequent attempts to create a political settlement, to a larger extent, destroyed the needed atmosphere to create effective patron-client politics. In all these, however, democracy and planning suffered the most. The critical disruptions of a nation-state in a fashion of what Bangladesh experienced is what Sorensen<sup>73</sup> refers to as ‘critical junctures’. Critical junctures are those moments when existing political and institutional apparatus fail to offer solutions to pressing issues, undermining the government legitimacy and deterministic ability in the process.<sup>74</sup>

Planning as an institution in Bangladesh, is hugely challenged by administrative discrepancies and bureaucracy. This is partly because of dysfunctional institutional structure. The first civic committee established to address urban challenges in Dhaka was the Committee of Improvement in 1823, which was rebranded as the Dhaka Municipal Committee in 1864. The municipality attained a corporation status in 1978, and was reshaped as Dhaka City Corporation in 1990.<sup>75</sup> DIT was manned by 16-member Board of Trustees until 1987, when structural changes were introduced in the Town Act and in the leadership, with Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK) as the new name.<sup>76</sup> Importantly, Section 73 (1) of the Town Act empowered RAJUK as the central planning authority for areas under its jurisdiction. The need to address diverse urban issues warranted the establishment of other bodies aside RAJUK, including Public Works Department (PWD), Urban Development Directorate (UDD), Housing and Settlement Directorate (HSD). Next, we deconstruct the current urban development challenges as a symptom of ineffective planning practice.

### **Urban issues at the limit of ineffective planning efforts in Dhaka**

Urbanization and migration remain major developmental challenges in Dhaka. The city has emerged as one of the fastest-growing megacities in the world.<sup>77</sup> Though economic activities in the Dhaka Metropolitan area generate over 36% of the country’s GDP<sup>78</sup>, the socioeconomic and environmental ramifications of the unplanned and spontaneous urbanization of the city have been far-reaching. The soaring population has already exhausted the housing and urban services and facilities and contested for the quality of life opportunities.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, Dhaka is suffering from critical urban challenges, including extremely high urban congestion, high living density, severe air pollution, flooding, a lack of green spaces, and unhygienic living conditions (see [Figure 2 and 3](#)).<sup>80</sup>

With rapid urban transformation, socio-spatial divisions and urban poverty have become widespread. Although the city region is contributing almost a third (31.8%) of the total national employment<sup>81</sup>, urban wealth, thus far, has been highly skewed, favouring a few political elites and businesspeople. Under the hegemony of neoliberalism, Dhaka’s urban landscape is increasingly dominated by new real estate developments, targeting high-income earners; although, there are

<sup>71</sup>Ibid; Goodfellow, “Seeing political settlement through the city”, 199–222.

<sup>72</sup>Khan, *Bangladesh: Partitions, Nationalisms and Legacies*, 2010.

<sup>73</sup>Sorensen, “Taking path dependence seriously”, 17–30.

<sup>74</sup>Katznelson, “Periodization and Preferences.”

<sup>75</sup>Hossain, “Urban growth and poverty in Dhaka”, 1–24.

<sup>76</sup>Rahman, “Coordination of urban planning”, 330–340.

<sup>77</sup>Hossain, “*Urban development in Bangladesh*,” 2016.

<sup>78</sup>RAJUK, *Dhaka Structure Plan*.

<sup>79</sup>Includes urban services and facilities and healthy living environment, see Roy, Sowgat and Mondal, “City profile: Dhaka,” 6–8.

<sup>80</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>81</sup>RAJUK, *Dhaka Structure Plan*.



**Figure 2.** High density urban living in Dhaka. Credit: Shilpi Roy, 2019.



**Figure 3.** Unhygienic living conditions in an organically developed neighbourhood. Credit: Shilpi Roy, 2019.

a few public housing projects for middle-income households, access to which is largely determined by political affiliation and connections.<sup>82</sup> In the absence of affordable housing, poor migrants have no choice other than to move into established slums and squatters and create their own informal units.<sup>83</sup> According to the Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population 2014<sup>84</sup>, the slum population in the city has been estimated to be around 0.6 million, living in 3,394 slum areas. The

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<sup>82</sup>Roy, "Business district regeneration," 2014; Hossain, "Urban development in Bangladesh,".

<sup>83</sup>Sowgat and Roy, "Pro-poor Development," 43–61.

<sup>84</sup>Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Slum Areas*, 2015.

residents in the slums are highly exposed to the risk of eviction and fire hazards. The inability of the formal labour sector to absorb the increasing urbanites, coupled with an increasingly restricted informal economy, explains why unemployment is rife in the city. People who depend on the informal sector for their livelihood continue to live in degraded conditions with high levels of poverty.<sup>85</sup> A high dependency on the informal sector offers only low-income prospects<sup>86</sup>, and results in the widening income inequality between the rich and the poor, as well as class divisions in the city.

A deficiency in access to basic services suggests the inability of city authorities to meet the needs of the increasing urban population. Thirty-eight percent of solid waste in Dhaka is left uncollected and is dumped indiscriminately in drains, roads and ditches.<sup>87</sup> Currently, about 84% of the total population have access to a water supply<sup>88</sup>, but more than 41% do not have access to improved sanitation.<sup>89</sup> In the informal settlements, only 10% have access to a proper drainage network, while 38% have poor drainage systems.<sup>90</sup> Our study suggests the lack of urban services has led to the privatization of most services, with education and health largely provided by private individuals and non-state agencies.<sup>91</sup> The implication here is that many urban residents, especially the low-income residents, are deprived of basic services because the privatized services are overpriced and beyond their means – only those with a high income can easily afford them.<sup>92</sup> According to the World Bank<sup>93</sup>, Dhaka is underperforming in terms of liveability. Next, we contextualize the expressions of imperial legacies in the contemporary planning, policies and strategies in Dhaka to tease out the reasons behind the planning failure.

## **Contextualizing colonial legacies in the urban planning of Dhaka**

### **Western dependency**

Since the inception of organized planning, almost all the approaches for plan-making, the planning tools and planning functions in Dhaka have drawn impetus from the dominant Western planning paradigms.<sup>94</sup> Ironically, Patrick Geddes was, perhaps, the least colonial of colonial planners as he was against demolition and clearances and he promoted a balance between people and the environment. When he prepared the Dacca Town Planning Report in 1917, the landforms, water features and green areas in the city were valued; yet, his vision was considered to be ‘rhetorical and utopian’, mostly following a Western orientation.<sup>95</sup> The Geddes report was essentially a British strategic device meant to guide a future Dhaka through planning principles.

Western ideology continued unabated during the Pakistani regimes. In 1959, a British planning group, Minoprio, Spencely and MacFarlane, was contracted to develop the first master plan for Dhaka.<sup>96</sup> The rational-comprehensive planning approach of the West, which emerged in the 1940s, was imported to inform the master plan. Likewise, under the auspices of the Bangladesh Planning Commission, another British planning team - Shankland Cox – produced the Dhaka

<sup>85</sup>Hossain, “Urban development in Bangladesh,” 2016.

<sup>86</sup>Hussain, *Alternative to Urbanisation*, 2020.

<sup>87</sup>Planning Commission, *Seventh Five-Year Plan*, 2015.

<sup>88</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid

<sup>90</sup>Sowgat, Wang and McWilliams, “Pro-poorness of planning policies,” 145–160.

<sup>91</sup>Roy and Sowgat, *Dhaka: diverse, dense and damaged neighbourhoods*, 2020.

<sup>92</sup>Hossain, “Urban development in Bangladesh,”.

<sup>93</sup>World Bank, *Bangladesh City Planning*.

<sup>94</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>95</sup>Choudhury and Armstrong, “Failure of the 1917 Geddes master plan,” 449–460.

<sup>96</sup>Choudhury and Bell, “Engagement of Kahn and Khan,” 104–111; Mascarenhas, “The Rape of Bangladesh,” 182–183.

Metropolitan Integrated Plan in 1982.<sup>97</sup> Even when there was no new plan for the city during the 80s and 90s, small-scale project-based planning and developments followed the British incremental planning approach. Surprisingly, little has changed in recent times. The Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP) 1995–2015 was developed in alignment with the British development planning concept, which involves strategic planning.<sup>98</sup> Importantly, local consultants have attempted to accommodate the legacies of Western normative planning while making the recent DAP (2016–2035); norms and values adaptive to local needs have informed the planning process and substance of the draft plan.

Unfortunately, until 1980, in all the cases, it was the foreign experts' constructs that constituted the socioeconomic contexts of Dhaka. For instance, Geddes's report of 1917 was based on a 'diagnostic survey' that left no room for local engagement. Commenting on the Pakistani approach towards planning in the post-colonial era, Gable<sup>99</sup> highlights that 'with the departure of the British, those trained by the British constituted the group with the continuity to project British values – an elite within an elite'. From the bureaucratic perspective, planning and policies in the 1959 master plan were introduced mainly to govern the interests of the colonialists.<sup>100</sup> Foreign experts contemplated urban functions in a simple fashion and alienated people from the planning process. Decisions relied on quantitative data and the use of projection. Therefore, the rigid land-use zoning was violated in the best possible way due to the inability to accommodate the changing situation after 1971. The planning of 1995 and DAP of 2010 created room for the engagement of the stakeholders in the planning process. In almost all the cases, decisions were heavily reliant on the philosophy of rationalism, where the need for deliberation with the local people was undermined. The various plans failed to redress existing challenges; hence, they had little impact on the ground. Poverty, therefore, became an emerging urban issue.

This is justified by the fact that planning activities relied largely on foreign expertise, with little local input. The Geddes report is believed to have been diagnostic, with few contextual detail directions to form a planning framework.<sup>101</sup> The Western orientation of planning could hardly offer a pragmatic approach for decision-making that could better understand the urban problems and feasible policies and programmes in a resource-scarce nation. The influence of the political process and socioeconomic forces on the ground received little attention. As such, Dhaka was unable to afford any new or updated plan for a considerable period. Also, only a small share of proposals was implemented, with development control measures largely considered a failure. The Western superiority thinking particularly limits the prioritization and contextualization of local peculiarities, often resulting in unaligned and polarized plans with little potential to control spatial development, while stimulating economic development. Now, we explain how bureaucracy and technocracy have also contributed to making planning ineffective in Dhaka.

### ***Bureaucracy, institutional weakness, and technocracy***

Bureaucracy engulfs planning practices in Bangladesh. Technical shortcomings, financial constraints, a lack of automation and unexpected political interference have crippled planning administration and practice.<sup>102</sup> These challenges have constrained the system, leading to delays in

<sup>97</sup>Nazem, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh*, 2; Kabir and Parolin, "Planning and Development," 16.

<sup>98</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>99</sup>Gable, "Bureaucratic Transition," 474–482.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid

<sup>101</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>102</sup>Swapan et al., "Transforming urban dichotomies," 7.

processing simple planning tasks and the preparation of plans. Because of these systemic loopholes, RAJUK has failed to revise the DMDP (1995-2015) on time and is yet to finalise the Dhaka Structure Plan 2016–2035 and the DAP for 2016-2035.<sup>103</sup> The delay hinders the possibility of plans to accommodate the rapidly changing socioeconomic needs and to guide the spatial transformation of Dhaka. This is because the lengthy planning process makes proposals outdated before they can be endorsed. An equally worrying practice is the partial implementation and failure of many plans.<sup>104</sup> Out of 31 major proposals of the DMDP Structure Plan 1995-2015, only eight were fully implemented, 11 were partially implemented and 12 remain unimplemented.<sup>105</sup> A planner resonates with this implementation failure, noting:

‘A handsome number of plans/regulations is there, but the main issue is there is no implementation of those regulations. The professionals of the development authorities are either overloaded with work, corrupt or don’t get the support for implementation ... mega projects are mostly prioritised.’<sup>106</sup>

Plans, on many occasions, are blamed for their inability to reflect the proposals of the line agencies and economic and political elites; too often, with this excuse, the elites overturn and ignore policy proposals and development control regulations.<sup>107</sup> In the case of DAP 2010, under the influence of powerful elites, a committee with cabinet ministers altered the designated land-use classes for waterbodies, farming lands and open spaces to more convenient classes of their choice. Nazem<sup>108</sup> argued that the lack of legitimate and robust policy guidelines for implementation and the overlap of responsibilities have together rendered poor coordination among the implementation authorities. The clash of authority hampers the effective implementation of policies and the maintenance of development projects.<sup>109</sup> An architect remarked:

‘Service provision of Dhaka is handled by seven ministries, including 54 organisations under those ministries. The same service is controlled by different organisations. This situation creates conflict in service delivery ... Corrupt service providers have restricted the implementation of plans.’<sup>110</sup>

The existing institutional setup and fundamental legislation governing urban planning carry the colonial tradition, with little advancement since their emergence in the 1950s and 1960s. Linked to the issue of bureaucracy is the weak planning institutional setup. The urban planning profession is still evolving in Bangladesh, with few institutions known to offer planning qualifications.<sup>111</sup> The number of qualified planners remains woefully inadequate for a country with a population of more than 161 million. The situation partly explains why the country keeps relying on Western experts and hired technocrats to develop its strategic plans. The colonial mentality of using foreign technocrats without recourse to the appropriate training of indigenes continue to plague planning and development practices in Dhaka. According to Nazem<sup>112</sup>, none of the planning institutions has a proper institutional setup. A dependency mindset among senior politicians and policymakers stems from pre-1948.<sup>113</sup> Consequently, there are few planners in either the city corporations or

<sup>103</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>104</sup>Swapan et al., “Transforming urban dichotomies,” 7.

<sup>105</sup>Planning Commission, *Seventh Five-Year Plan*.

<sup>106</sup>Interview with an academic-cum-planner A, December, 2018.

<sup>107</sup>Ahmed, Bramley and Dewan, “Exploratory Growth Analysis,”

<sup>108</sup>Nazem, “Land Use Planning,” in Baki and Islam, *Bangladesh in Urbanisation*.

<sup>109</sup>Swapan, “Who participates and who doesn’t?” 70–77.

<sup>110</sup>Interview with an architect B, December, 2018.

<sup>111</sup>Nazem, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh*, 3.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid

<sup>113</sup>Interview with B, December, 2018.

RAJUK. Meanwhile, civil engineers and architects are in planning leadership. These institutions are unable to develop effective long-term plans because they lack the proper guidance and motivations and resources for the work they do. A senior official in a city corporation rightly argued that:

'I am a civil engineer. I should not be in this post (planner). Existing planners are not enthusiastic about their jobs. I have so much to do ... we have only a few planners here.'<sup>114</sup>

There is apathy concerning the planning profession and associated institutions, a situation that has caused major planning decisions to be undertaken by politicians and technocrats with no planning background. In the next section, we present how the current situation has rendered planning a centralized activity in Dhaka.

### **Centralization**

Dhaka has evolved as a centre of political and economic power through the systematic and constant centralization of administrative and economic activities and services. The effort began after 1864 when the British rulers concentrated their investment on building administrative infrastructure, roads, railways and urban services. The centralization of administrative power intensified even after British rule as all the ministries and government headquarters were set up in Dhaka. Economic policies and investments in the newly liberated country also encouraged establishing most industries within and around Dhaka. Public investment and infrastructural development have all been set up for an organization that can aid production, reproduction and the expansion of capital, and benefit the accumulation of political power in the country's capital. The realm of political and economic power has inevitably transformed Dhaka into a powerful city that can aggressively control all spheres of public policies and investment. The present situation speaks to the colonial era practice where planning activities and critical infrastructure were centred in major cities. An academic-cum-planner resonates this when he says:

'Dhaka is in the middle of the country. This is kind of a monocentric city. Ever since its birth, Dhaka has been prioritised for political centralisation, functional centralisation and policy centralisation.'<sup>115</sup>

The centralization of administration and economic power has rendered urban planning ineffective in tackling the uneven urbanization in Bangladesh, from which Dhaka suffers the most, while the rest of the country suffers from underdevelopment. The institutional setup of planning has created a vacuum in paurashavas (municipalities) where, out of 329, only 27 have any graduate planners. The planning division is absent in any of these municipalities, leading to their spontaneous transformation, with limited economic and life opportunities. In contrast, both city-level planning and national-level development decisions have been pro-growth, and Dhaka receives disproportionately higher national investment than any other urban area in Bangladesh. Ultimately, the city has been the hardest hit by massive migration that has profoundly affected the urban services and opportunities. Policies are unable to tackle the implications of unprecedented growth, which is known to impact liveability and the natural environment negatively (see [Figure 4](#)). An enormous share of urban land is in the possession of the Bangladesh armed forces, the Ministry of Shipping, the Bangladesh coast guard headquarters, the Ministry of Railways and the border guard headquarters (see [Figure 5](#)). These urban lands are restricted for private use. As such, land remains an

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<sup>114</sup>Interview with a senior official in a city corporation C, December, 2018.

<sup>115</sup>Interview with an academic-cum-planner A, December, 2018.



**Figure 4.** Aftabnagar, a residential neighbourhood fully built on wetlands. Credit: Shilpi Roy, 2019.

extremely scarce resource for fulfilling housing needs and offering urban opportunities. Meanwhile, the structure of regulations has limited the scope of planning to be able to reverse any development within the land owned by government ministries. Thus, the concentrated power of politics and capital has become so strong that the proposals on decentralization, to shift several head offices of some of the ministries to other secondary cities, have become impossible to materialize by any democratic government.

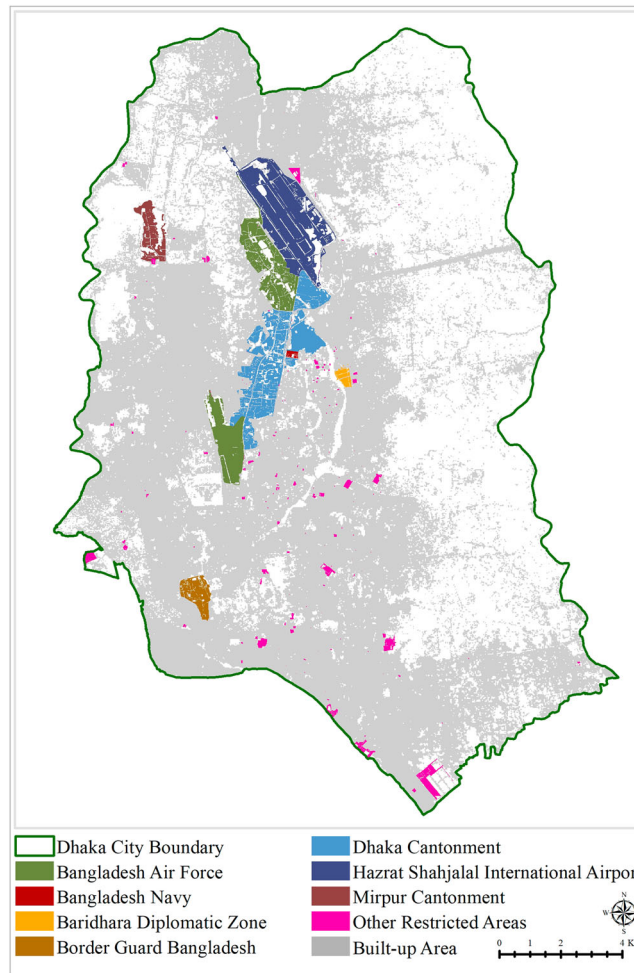
Planning is not decentralized within Dhaka, and this has hampered people-centric development. Apart from a few recent practices, local participation is mostly excluded in the decision-making processes. A senior town planner of the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) refers to the recent practice of participatory development as:

‘The government of Bangladesh funded a project on the upgrade, regeneration and greening of urban spaces in the DNCC area. We are developing parks and playgrounds ... we’ve ensured the public participation of all age groups and income classes, as well as disabled people, in the planning procedure. We’ll ensure the involvement of both community and city corporations for the operation and maintenance of those projects.’

The fact that most plans are centrally produced without recourse to effective stakeholder participation and local needs assessment means that most plans end up being non-starters or counterproductive. The lack of guidelines on how to include citizens in the planning process, weak technical competencies and limited human resources have made the participatory planning exercises less transparent and have created scope for the unexpected domination by the political elites. The situation speaks to the colonial era practice where Western technocrats were stationed in the capital to plan residential areas for the colonialists. Again, poor implementation of policy proposals has been plausible because local government bodies lack the expertise and the ownership power to implement centrally developed plans. An internationally acclaimed economist added:

‘If you concentrate, you will see that there are local governments, but they play only a minor role. The power is held by the ministry or central government. The rightful opportunity for development by the





**Figure 5.** Share of urban land restricted for private use and under ownership and control of public ministries. Source: authors based on the DAP 2016–2035 data by RAJUK.

local government is not given indeed ... there are some small-scale innovations too. These innovations mainly emerge in a public-private partnership method. Besides being unplanned growth, these innovations are also being unutilised. Political economy is a nexus between different interest groups who do not bother about the loss of others or the cities. Public policymakers are actually concerned about their personal interest.<sup>116</sup>

Issues of centralized power are also evident from the comment of an architect, where he points out:

‘Before setting up any vision, city corporations need to be provided with power. Local government holds all the power. A mayor, who is the only representative of citizens, serves the area of 16–20 MPs. But he could be knocked back by a deputy secretary at any time. He does not hold the authority for development activity. He holds even less power than a municipality chairman. After this, how can we expect development?’<sup>117</sup>

<sup>116</sup>Interview with a senior town planner C, December, 2018.

<sup>117</sup>Interview with a senior town planner D, December, 2018.

Weak coordination between implementation agencies, a top-down political approach, and weak city governance, coupled with a lack of technical competency to plan and implement policies by the implementing authorities, continue to stifle effective planning.<sup>118</sup> Next, we present how the above have rendered planning an ad hoc exercise in Dhaka.

### ***Ad hoc planning***

Urban planning in Dhaka has been mostly reactive rather than proactive. The city's inability to afford any update of long-term plans for a considerable period coupled with the failure to materialize a significant share of planned proposals has promoted the adoption of an incremental planning approach. When outdated policies become unable to accommodate the changing needs of the population and the market demand, project-based planning appears a feasible option for planners.<sup>119</sup> Mostly, infrastructural development has been carried out on a piecemeal basis to address the issues that need immediate action.<sup>120</sup> This ad hoc approach is usually made without a long-term strategic plan, and this has made it challenging to direct the organized spatial development of the city. This practice means that little attention is paid to the study and understanding of the broader socioeconomic and political realities on the ground, which can inform pragmatic long-term solutions. For instance, both the 1917 and 1959 plans, from which the current plans draw inspiration, were borne out of the social and political needs in Dhaka. In both instances, due diligence was an expensive commodity to buy into as planners worked in the silo, failing to understand the then prevailing cultural issues in Dhaka.

In most major Bangladeshi cities, planning decisions are informed by service shortages and calculated using present and future population projections, with the underlying motive being to identify gaps in service provision.<sup>121</sup> However, for a city that is transforming so dynamically, it has not always been easy to foresee all the forces that may impact its urban growth when many new development decisions are made independently of the plan due to political decisions and the availability of foreign funds. For example, the government has considered several mega projects violating the Strategic Transport Plan 2004-2024 and the Revised Strategic Transport Plan 2015-2035. All these projects have had far-reaching consequences on urban development in Dhaka. Sadly, these schemes have been characterized by deviations from the proposed land-use zones, a situation that has made the maintenance of urban growth challenging. The current ad hoc nature of planning practices reflects the colonial era when planning was used to address urban challenges rather than to guide organized city development. The next section explains how ad hoc planning has contributed to spatial fragmentation and segregation in Dhaka.

### ***Deliberate social and spatial segregation***

The development of gated communities and other luxurious neighbourhoods in Dhaka perpetuates the colonial culture of spatial segregation. The current pattern of spatial development has intensified the colonial strategy of spatial segregation, where space was differentiated by economic and social status and race. The site and service schemes demonstrate the Western idea of creating ordered urban space. These areas are closed in nature and mostly restrict transformation; conversely, organically developed areas are open for the accommodation of the poor (see [Figure 6](#)). An architect offers his insight into spatial inequality:

<sup>118</sup>BanDuDeltAS, *Growth of population*, 2015.

<sup>119</sup>Roy et al. *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2018.

<sup>120</sup>Swapan et al., "Transforming urban dichotomies," 15.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid



**Figure 6.** Organically developed area. Such areas are open for accommodating the poor but are left with limited attention. Credit: Shilpi Roy, 2019.

‘Selfishness, the tendency of accumulating wealth, bringing foreign ideas into our circumstances, all are resulting in the increase of deprivation and inequality.’<sup>122</sup>

New buildings, sites and service schemes and urban development projects are all created to target the rich at the expense of the poor. The mass accumulation of land for servicing and resale means that many people, particularly the urban poor, are displaced with or without compensation, a situation that continues to disrupt livelihoods, incomes and social networks. As the poor population often does not have land ownership, they get displaced without, or with a negligible amount of, compensation, such as in the case of the Hatirjhil Lake beautification project. The largest slum of the city, the Korail slum, will also be cleared away as part of the Gulshan Lake improvement, and each household will receive only £40 as compensation.

In Dhaka, socio-spatial segregation has been blamed for several urban woes, including increased poverty and slum proliferation (see Figure 7). The social fabric of the city is characterized by extreme inequality.<sup>123</sup> The poor have a right to the city, but relocation schemes are planned outside the city to sweep urban issues away. A senior academic points out:

‘the business persons, entrepreneurs, investors and owners of industries who could foresee the city as a business centre are the most benefited ... the local lower income group people are the least benefited. They are always displaced for any development project.’<sup>124</sup>

Social exclusion and widespread informality have, therefore, become rampant, with many of the poor engaged in menial jobs (e.g. rickshaw driving, street vending, etc.) for survival.

Contemporary planning in Dhaka has failed to keep up with increased housing demands, particularly among the poor. It is estimated that 100,000 new housing units are required every year to meet the housing needs.<sup>125</sup> Unfortunately, most (around 90%) of the housing supply is provided by

<sup>122</sup>Interview with an architect E, December, 2018.

<sup>123</sup>Siddiqui et al., *Social Formation in Dhaka*, 2010.

<sup>124</sup>Interview with an academic-cum-planner A, December, 2018.

<sup>125</sup>RAJUK, *Dhaka Structure Plan*, 2015.



**Figure 7.** Korail slum lacks access to essential services. Credit: Shilpi Roy, 2019.

the private sector, whose products are beyond the means of the poor.<sup>126</sup> A substantial 78% of the lower-middle-income class and 71% of the middle-income class are unable to afford to buy property in Dhaka<sup>127</sup>, a reason why unplanned settlements have been in the ascendency.

The concerns of the poor, particularly in the slums, rarely receive attention in planning policies and interventions as decisions are made following a rationalist approach. Due to the absence of legal entitlement, city corporations feel they are not responsible for offering urban poor the services they need. The draft DAP 2015–2035 incorporated some of the fundamental principles of the just city approach. However, the draft proposals that allowed low-income people to have housing ownership have been highly criticized by the built environment experts. The fear is that allowing the building of houses in small land parcels along narrow roads, where low-income people usually can afford to live, will create a poor-quality built environment. Urban planning, therefore, is yet to become pro-poor in Bangladesh<sup>128</sup>, as it exacerbates poverty and spatial fragmentation.

## Conclusion

This study has explored how colonial planning finds expression in contemporary urban planning practices in Dhaka. The case of Dhaka shows that the colonial tradition is still alive, with imprints expressed through continuous dependence on imported Western ideologies and practices, ad hoc planning and incremental development, bureaucratic administration, technocratic practices and the centralization of planning decisions. The inability of city and planning authorities to break free from Western ideologies and practices has hindered local planning ingenuity, rendering the

<sup>126</sup>Seraj and Islam, "Detailed Area Plan," 2013.

<sup>127</sup>RAJUK, *Dhaka Structure Plan*, 2015.

<sup>128</sup>Sowgat, Wang and McWilliams, "Pro-poorness of planning policies," 145–16.

entire body of planning institutions weak, with urban planning and city management following a top-down approach. The colonial segregation approach and the associated ethos, we argue, are still followed in strategies and schemes. With little to no social resonance, attempts at creating ordered spaces are resulting in increased spatial segregation, widespread inequality, informality and poverty. The current urban woes (e.g. widespread poverty, informality, the proliferation of slums and traffic congestion) evidently show that the planning policies and activities in Dhaka have been ineffective in redressing the challenges of urbanization.

For urban sustainability, Dhaka will need to acknowledge the realities of ineffective planning and adopt planning approaches that suit the social, political, and economic realities of urban Bangladesh. To coordinate urban planning activities, there is a need for an operational institutional framework which will strengthen the planning authorities at all levels, and will work in a collaborative and coordinated manner, thereby curtailing the inefficiencies brought about by centralization and bureaucracy. A well-coordinated planning system will help to streamline all planning activities effectively, which will be critical in addressing institutional fragmentation and unnecessary conflicts that characterize existing institutions. Planning also needs to be more participatory as this can lead to context-specific plans that are faithful to the needs of the people they are intended to serve. Community members and other relevant stakeholders, such as NGOs and civil society organizations must be given the opportunity to fully participate in the development, implementation, and evaluation of planning activities. It is also important to empower local planning professionals to exercise their professional knowledge devoid of political influence and economic interests. Universities and related institutions must be resourced to train more qualified planners who are ardent to the existing local challenges. Notably, a conscious effort is needed to decolonize the planning curriculum to remove the western elements, which occupy the central position of planning education in Bangladesh. More so, planning policies and activities need to be pro-poor and have local resonance. A people-centred approach to planning is necessary to prioritize local needs and challenges. A more inclusive planning approach is needed to bridge the spatial divisions and inequalities in Dhaka. This will help to bridge the spatial fragmentation, inequality and poverty gaps that exist between the rich and the poor.

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