

Muzharul Islam: Pioneer of Modern Architecture in Bangladesh

Kaanita Hasan, Wednesday 31 January 2007 - 18:00:00

(This essay was submitted by Architect **Kaanita Hasan** as a part of the course MA Architecture: Alternative Urbanism & History and Theory in the University of East London School of Architecture)

His pioneering works from the 1950s onward marked the beginning of modernism in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). He brought about a massive change in the contemporary scene of International Style Architecture of Bangladesh. He is none other than the most influential architects of Bangladesh, Architect Muzharul Islam. Being a teacher, architect, activist and politician he has set up the structure of architectural works in the country through his varied works. His commitment to societal changes and his ethics for practicing architectures is visible in his work. These thoughts are more like a means of progress towards transformation and changes rather than drawing a conclusion by themselves.

The existence of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, as a sustainable city is the most critical statement that confronts it today. It is not only difficult but would be quite inaccurate to judge this issue from its current architectural and planning scenario. Although there is a recent ever growing building activity going on in the city, it hardly compliments the surrounding environment it is being built on. These steel, concrete and brick structures of varied types and heights are growing rapidly, resulting a decrease of open space and water bodies. Roads bear more traffic and congestions and the air we breathe in is becoming more contaminated. Today Dhaka could be denoted as a nation which proves that sheer building activity is not satisfactory to make a decent and liveable city.

Dhaka is a city which carries the heritage of more than 400 years of her history. Looking back at its historical past helps to understand the different architectural phases it has experienced and also compliments some of the marked architectures of the country. The city gained eminence with the dawn of the Mughals in Bengal, but there are traces of architectural ruins which prove her existence prior the Mughals. Dhaka still embraces the reminiscence of mosques, tombs, forts, caravanserais and bridges from the 1610–1717 Mughal periods. Under the initiative of the colonial administrators of the British rule the Architectural scenario of Dhaka malformed again. It evoked new areas with new buildings and the city grew in importance as an administrative, educational and commercial center. The beginning of the twentieth century marks for the bulk of colonial architectures still existing in Dhaka city.

Yet another change was observed after the partition of India in 1947. The post-colonial period saw the coming of modernity in architecture and in 1955, Muzharul Islam, the doyen of Bangladeshi contemporary architecture, had the city's first two modern buildings constructed. The Public Library (now Dhaka University Library) and the Art College, both located on the Dhaka University campus, marked a distinct and definitive change in the architectural scene of

Dhaka. 1

Bangladesh saw the face of modernity in architecture through the unaided efforts of an extraordinary man. The confinement of Fine Arts Institute and Central Public Library during the fifties was Architect Muzharul Islam's two of the early projects contributed for the Modern Architectural scene of Bangladesh. The nice blend of universal modern techniques along with the nation's own personality made all learned eyes turn around and gawk at it for a long time. The confinement continued with the construction of Chittagong University campus building and Jahangirnagar University. A succession of intensely designed residences followed behind. His work portrays masses built in coherence with the nature. Each and every structure compliments the surrounding nature it is placed within. They merge with the context of Bangladeshi climate and life style in such a way that even a layman notices his respect and devotion towards the vernacular architecture of the nation.

It was during the fifties when the nation resisted against the domination and also dreamt of an unique nation of its own. Muzharul Islam believed architecture could be an important tool for the betterment of the Society. According to him Dhaka lacked examples of Modern Architecture at that time. He decided to bring about a change in this picture and thus started from scratch to contribute some samples of Modern Architecture for Bangladesh.

Architects and philosophers identify Modern Architecture or Modernism as a style which emphasis, primarily the simplification of form and the elimination of ornamentations. Modern architecture first came into view around the 1900's with the work of master architects like Louis I Kahn, Le Corbusier, Aldo Rossi, Frank Lloyd Wright, Carlo Scarpa, Kenzo Tange, Frank O Gehry, I. M. Pei, Richard Meier, Mario Botta and many more to mention. The style had been consolidated and identified as the International Style since 1940's and since then became a dominant architectural style all over the world.

Louis I. Kahn is one of the leading twentieth century architects, whose innovative theoretical and formal language has rejuvenated modern architecture in many significant ways. His best known works from the United States, India and Bangladesh reveals an integration of structure, a reverence for materials and light, a devotion to archetype geometry, and a profound concern for humanistic values.

His notion of redefining architecture was prominent through the detail reassessment of Structure, Form, Space and Light. He described his quest for meaningful form as a search for "beginnings," a spiritual resource from which modern man could draw inspiration. His work yields out an honest combination of structures along side a notion to create a sense of place for the inhabitants of the space. It was more like a thesaurus of abstract forms rooted in Platonic geometry. He displayed his thoughts and his likings through masterpieces of brick and concrete, the most preferred materials of Louis I Kahn. The simplicity of Geometry, the importance of Axis, the connotation of Focal point, and the power of Solid mass, reflects his beaux-arts training and was ensue by modern architects after him.

Architect Muzharul Islam being the pioneer of Modern Architecture in Bangladesh resembled traces of Modern Architectural characteristics of International style. He completed his Bachelor of Architecture from Oregon University, USA in 1952 and Post Graduate Certificate from A.A. School of Architecture London, UK in 1957. It was in 1932, after the World War II, when most of the Architects from the Bauhaus fled to United States. Thus from 1932 till 1984 Modernism

became the pre-eminent and only acceptable design solution. Thus the typical characteristics influenced Muzharul Islam immensely. Even after being influenced he had a completely different approach and belief towards how he carried out his theories of Modernism in Bangladesh. His work shows relevance of his belief that every country should have its own architectural character. He also emphasizes that architecture of a nation depends on its geography, climate and the manifestations of its own culture. His architectural works are organized based on the warm humid monsoon climate and the locally available construction materials and techniques. He made the sun and the rain, the play of shade and shadow and ventilation the primary focus to work on. He was not biased by the tradition. Rather his approach shows a solution which allowed the modernist logic to work solely. Unlike all other architects of the twentieth century his work lacks ornamentation and decoration. The theme emphasized more the materials own characteristic, maintaining an honest identify of the material along with pure geometry and proportion. His masses portraits thoughtfulness towards orientation and purity of form. The buildings represent a harmonious tune with the contemporary aesthetic trends of the world at the same time respecting and being faithful to the country's culture and climate. The Fine Arts Institute and the Public Library are true representation of this thought process.

If the characteristics of Modern architecture are looked at then it shows a set of themes which were common among the works of all twentieth century architect's writing and buildings. They all had a strong rejection towards the historical styles of architecture. To be more specific they rejected the use of ornamentation, Doric and Corinthian columns and other decorative additions both on the exterior and interior of the building. This was also inter-related with the simplification of forms and the elimination of unnecessary details. Honesty towards material and structure was also visible among the early twentieth century projects. Expressing the original structural system of the building was also adopted during the twentieth century architecture practice. This also followed an adoption of the machine aesthetic. "Form follows function" first used by sculptor Horatio Greenough, more popularly used by Architect Louis Sullivan as well, was another major phase that was visible on all writing regarding Modern Architecture and was also visible on the architectures itself. Frank Lloyd Wright quoted that "Less is more only when more is too much." Overall a minimalism of unwanted details and modestly towards structural details were the key focus on the face of all Modern Architectures. Modernism also emphasized purity of geometry and functional needs of a space above all.

Muzharul Islam is denoted as an Architect with a Vision. This Visionary architect has always thought of the betterment of the nation through his contribution as an Architect. His intense creative genius and a foresight initiated Modern Architecture in Bangladesh and also inspired the contemporary Architects of the Nation. He questioned the identity of the nation. He states that first the Mughuls and then the British ruled the region for hundreds of years but now that the nation is independent why the legal systems, the laws, the rules and regulations are still the same. He quotes, why does the judges at the high court still wear a white wig and a black gown? He points out that unless the nation respects and identifies their true essence and be modest towards their culture development would be incomplete in a national level. His visions about the betterment of the nation were not only through a development in the architectural arena but also towards the infrastructure of the whole country. His visions also added that Architecture can instigate the whole society. Architecture is not only responsible for the shaping of the society but it can also bring out the positive aspects of a society. Architectural details are the foundation pillars of a society which points out the advantageous aspects to the general people. He says every architect should be committed to his work and be honest towards his profession.

His initial profession was as an engineer, which restricted proper utilization of his extraordinary drawing skills and also his creativity. His profound love for beauty and his own culture initiated his visions for an individual architectural solution for the nation. Thus he committed himself towards an enrichment of techniques to express and represent his thought process and his visions. Though he gained his knowledge about architectural details from America and later from United Kingdom, he was basically taught about the European Architectural strategies and techniques. Muzharul Islam realized that Bangladesh has a rich culture and heritage to be proud of. As nothing related to this heritage was taught he decided to be his own teacher and go deeper with his international knowledge and create individual architectural scenery for his own country.

The Fine Arts Institute, Dhaka, Bangladesh represents the architect's thought process about two major issues related to the country and its context. Brick has been used as the main construction material for the whole complex. Dhaka was famous for its production of Brick. Brick was locally made and the construction related to this building material was also familiar to the local labors. He also incorporated the usefulness of technologies from Modern architectural point of view. The bricks were previously burnt with coal and wood, which resulted into more percentage of water absorbent in the final product. This attracted fungus and would wear off in a short time. The modernism movement all around the world brought about a gas burning technology for the formation of bricks which reduced the water absorption capacity up to 5% only and made bricks more durable and reliable as a building material for that region. The second major aspect of this significant architecture relates to a strong bond with the Landscape and the Building complex itself. Rather than being compact the whole complex is assembled of several scattered structures in line with the weather and the culture of Bangladesh. The building seems to open outwards to the Landscape. Rather than being introvert and enclosing the building links with the nature from every possible corner. He worked with the abstraction of Modernity, neither independent of the context nor referring to any particular time period. One of the major characteristics of Modernism is the Purity of Form. Once again this particular characteristic was very much visible in the Fine Arts Institute as he replaced many columns and pillars with walls. This emphasized the Purity of Form one step ahead. Walls are one of the most necessary building elements for a building. Even after the columns and the pillars every architect needs walls at one point. Thus if the pillars and the columns could be replaced by the use of walls then the overall mass becomes more Pure and true to its structural system.

The plan of Fine Arts Institute represents a well laid articulation of structures with the Nature and the Landscape around. The country's climate yields for a low height structure with lots of natural ventilation and light. This was visible through the orientation of the building and the openings and perforations at all levels of the complex. The indoor merges with the nature outdoor. The barriers between the outdoor and the indoor were narrowed down by the use of perforated brick screening. It ensured a link with the outdoor nature while being indoor, concurrently maintaining the privacy. His masses would intertwine with the air, light and water in the nature. Muzharul Islam never denoted architecture as pure modernity but also as a relationship with the context it was based upon. His vision always encompassed an architectural modernity which relates to the whole world in one hand and simultaneously relating with its own culture, environment and society.

When a man looks at Muzharul Islam's work, he notices sensitivity and power. His consciousness towards the context, the nature and the climate makes every learned eye aware of his power over Modern Architecture in Bangladesh. His work represents a desire to do something new and considerate. Every detail of his work represents his thought process. His awareness of the social, economical and environmental context of the country is visible through details in his work. Starting from the louvers on the windows till the overhang of the roof slabs proves deep calculation. Bangladesh has warm humid monsoon climate. Almost all well designed buildings have provisions for natural ventilation. Rain, Sun and Humidity are the key factors all architects need to consider to achieve comfort in that country. Muzharul Islam's building shows a true example of modern architecture with respect to the climatic condition of Bangladesh.

Jaipurhat Lime Stone Project was another of his outstanding creations. Standing side by side the buildings speak for themselves. They represent an aura of monumentality. The walls and the form together give a sculptural quality to the masses. Keeping the comfort of the user in mind he created an indoor environment which was both shaded and well ventilated. He created a double layer exterior to all the buildings to prevent the heat and radiation from entering the interior directly. The plan displays a perfect coherence between the landscape and the building masses. Once again the details portrait, his in-depth thoughts of the architectural concepts, in accordance with the climate, surrounding environment and the mentality of the users. He is a modernist who designs with minimal structures, minimal material and also economically viable aspects hence finding a true architectural expression. All his buildings represent the true nature of the occupier. His vision merges aesthetic details with purity of form resulting into a perfect architectural expression for Bangladesh.

Architects, who worked with International Style of Modernism, portrayed simple, unornamented buildings which were very different from the traditional architectural scene. The most commonly used material in the western world are glass for the various facades, steel for the exterior supports, and concrete for the floors and interior supports. They even have typical floor plans which are solved functionally and logically. This style was more evident on the design of skyscrapers. Some of the most famous manifestations include the United Nations Headquarters by Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, Sir Howard Robertson, then the Seagram Building by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and the Lever House by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, all in New York City. Villa Savoye is another example of Modernism by Le Corbusier which can be denoted as Pure Modern Architecture. The National Assembly Building, Dhaka, Bangladesh is considered to be one of Louis I Kahn's masterpieces and one of the great monuments of International Modernism.

Muzharul Islam's work based at the same time of Modern architecture displays a completely different looking Architecture. Like all other master architects he emphasized on the context of the place, society and environment. His mark of honesty, sincerity and commitment towards his profession was once again observed when he brought in Architect Louis I Kahn to do the National Parliament Building for the country. He was initially offered the project but he refused the opportunity saying that it requires a master Architect to design such an important structure of the Nation. Louis I Kahn's son Nathaniel Kahn says, "You cannot have a building without a

client. Sometimes you need to have someone looking out for you so that you actually get the job. And for Louis I Kahn that person was Muzharul Islam.

The philosophy that gave birth to National Assembly building in Dhaka, Bangladesh was the optimum use of space but a very clear representation of Bangladeshi culture and heritage through the architecture. The architecture evolved from the basic human requirement of protection from the glare and fury of nature. In order to accomplish this theme, an organization of the enclave into different groups of building was introduced. Porticoes with huge openings of regular geometric shapes were recessed on the exterior walls. This created an outer visual impact for the buildings along side was also a replacement for the tradition protection for external windows depending on the climatic condition of Bangladesh. This also added a compositional effect to the huge openings which benefits buildings of huge scale. It was not only the Assembly building that he designed but it was a complex which had lawns, lakes and residences for the Members of the Parliament as well. The water body that embraces the main Bhaban (Assembly building) stretches up to the Member s Hostel, adds aesthetics beauty and expresses the riverine beauty of Bangladesh concomitantly.

The wonderful work done by Louis I Kahn emphasized the concepts on which the Modern Architecture of Bangladesh relies. Relevance of the same concepts is also visible in Muzharul Islam s Chittagong University Campus, Polytechnic Institute, Bogra and Jahangir Nagar University at Savar, Bangladesh. He has always intended to create an architecture which would be Purely for Bangladesh. His struggle to establish his visions and to make it acceptable among the common people of the country was inevitable. He has bequeathed the architectural society of Bangladesh with a fatless Modern architecture which was free of unnecessary decoration and ornamentation. His architecture is all about a creation of spaces with necessary enclosures and elements only.

His Chittagong University and Jahangir Nagar University portrays an architectural solution with Planes, Lines and Spaces. This gave birth to a completely new Architecture which was only viable for Bangladesh. It was a novel concept that reflected the local architecture. He worked with forms and masses. For example in Chittagong University he worked with such a form which was repeated in a staggered progression to echo the mountains and the contour the site was on. Every floor had an open terrace on one side and the mountains on the other. The buildings were gradually sliding on columns towards the mountain creating a beautiful graphic and a visual system. Hence it displayed a skillful juxtaposition of the aesthetic and perception of the structure in consistency with the environment. His private indoor spaces always linked with the outdoor landscape through a secondary space in between them. This semi enclosed space was not only necessary for linking the outdoor with the indoor but was also an ideal solution for the protection from sun and rain that a warm humid monsoon climate plead for.

Muzharul Islam had a vision and belief of his own for the architecture of Bangladesh. He refused any such work where he saw a lack of potential to practice his belief or vision. This displays his commitment towards his work and also his sincerity towards Architecture. None of his work portrays negligence. He works represent Bengali vernacular Architecture and culture but not in a traditional mannerism but instead through a modernist approach towards it. Since the time when he had the vision within him for doing something new and progressive for the society, there was a

utopia going on among the whole nation for the achievement of a better nation. He followed the proper techniques that every master architect does prior designing a building. Doing a details study of the site, its topography, its surrounding conditions, explore the nature of users and the approach of establishing a relationship with the surrounding. He never ran out of ideas to use his intelligence and creativity in taking the proper decision. Alongside negligence and professionalism was always absent while he worked.

According to many critics, we can criticize his work, but cannot question his intentions (attempt of a free mind). In Jahangir Nagar University he worked with pure platonic forms. He worked with geometric shapes like two similar triangles. He manipulated the forms in such a manner that it produces resemblance among all the four facades. He worked with the orientation of the building with respect to the position of the sun, in order to yield such a form which would have openings all around but no direct entry of sunlight into the interior. He urbanized this successfully with his knowledge of science and graphics in places. He incorporated the existing lakes and water bodies within the buildings to add to the serenity of the environment. The topography and natural advantages of the site was beautifully mingled with the geometric and free forms in his design.

The National Achieves, Dhaka, Bangladesh is another wonderful work Dhaka received from Architect Muzharul Islam. The plan and the total three-dimensional organizations of the Archive building were very strong. It shows uniformity among the plans, elevations and spatial formation that was developed coherently. It did not have any manipulation rather gave an honest expression. There were some traces of influences from Louis I Kahn visible on this project and later as well.

Muzharul Islam's vision about the society questions the poverty of the Nation. He claims that equity should be promoted at every level of the society. Though people say that these are political conscience and it had nothing to do with the architectural scene of a nation Islam looks at it from a different angle. He tried to bring about the equity in his work by using the same material, floor finish, railings, the bricks, the grills, wooden frames etc. for both the Vice Chancellor's house and the employees quarter in Chittagong University Campus. Architect B.V. Doshi says, "How much we spoke about the architecture, the poetry, literature, art, culture, and we talked at length about how Bangladesh can come back to its old glory rather than succumbing only to western influences but to really create architecture which is much more useful related, contextual and aspiring like what Bangladesh should be originally."

Muzharul Islam said that long term comprehensive planning is needed to build a nation in a systematic manner. His thoughts justified the facts that to improve living standard of the in general population of a nation along with the maintenance of an environmental balance, the master plan should involve cities, villages, ports, roads and highways, rivers and water-bodies, forests and lakes, mountains and hills, agricultural lands, flood and storms and features of the biosphere. Piecemeal solutions can bring temporary results but in the long run it results into chaos, were the exact words of Architect Muzharul Islam. He says it is a question of vision, honesty and patriotism of an individual that allows him to sacrifice his personal interest and take a brave people oriented stance.

Muzharul Islam had great visions and dreams about the Architectural scenario of Bangladesh. He

had a dream to organize the country and to make it beautiful using the various tools of architecture like city planning, regional planning, and architecture itself. This was his great ambition. Given the proper scoop, he would have achieved it. His plans considered political, social and economical context where the ownership was to be through the co-operatives. Unfortunately Architect Muzharul Islam being the sole Pioneer of Modern Architecture in Bangladesh became a tragic figure. His visions, his ideas remained incomplete due to political reasons. It is considered as the Bengalis ill fate that they could not put in action Architect Muzharul Islam's ideas and visions. He never endorsed the commercial ways to procure work. Architect Suha Oz Kahn says, He is a man of vision. He has many responsibilities not as a designing architect but also he has been instrumental in underwriting the quality of architecture of the subcontinent and primarily in Bangladesh.

Architect Stanley Tigerman and Architect Louis I Kahn always spoke highly of Muzharul Islam and his visions for a better Bangladesh. Muzharul Islam has given a very strong foundation and ideology to the Nation to build upon it. It is absolutely unavoidable and would be very naïve to ignore such a prominent figure like him. Bangladeshi Architects claims it as a tremendous loss that he has been absent from the professional and educational scene of architecture in the last thirty years. It was very instrumental of him to bring in Louis I Kahn, Stanley Tigerman, Paul Rudolph and many other famous Architects to practice and share their talents with the Bangladeshi people on various architectural problems. He tried to improve the surrounding with the best available knowledge of an architect. Dhaka has very few architects today who r concerned about the inter depth of architecture and to top it all a vision for the society does not co-exist with the professionalism today. Muzharul Islam was and is the one and only Visionary Architect in Bangladesh.

The practical aspects of architecture are measurable such as, the practical requirements, climatic judgments, the advantages and limitations of the site etc. but the humanistic aspects are not measurable. The loves of ones own land is the eternal source of creative power, which in turn, makes a proper architect. Architect Muzharul Islam.

Photography: Architect Nurur Rahman Khan

Information courtesy:

[Views from Dhaka:](#)

Muzharul Islam Archive - <http://www.muzharulislam.com>

Architect Biography: Louis Isadore Kahn

<http://architect.architecture.sk/louis-isadore-kahn-architect/louis-isadore-kahn-architect.php>

Wikipedia: Modernism in Architecture

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_architecture#Modernism_as_dominant_style

Documentary Film: The Architect Muzharul Islam, Directed by: Architect Enamul Karim

Nirjhar,
Institute of Architects Bangladesh.