

A typo-morphological analysis to trace the historical transformation of urban blocks around Ramna race course between 1947-2000

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Abstract

Due to negligence in planning and deficient urban governance, Dhaka city ranks very low in various liveability indexes and global surveys carried out annually. Unlike Chandigarh or Islamabad, the city was not developed with the guidance of renowned and established city planners. And yet, its physical characteristics have been gradually transforming over the past 400 years. This raises the question, how is that transformation happening over the course of time, and what are the causes? To understand this, this paper aims to look at the transformation of Ramna, one of the historically and politically significant neighbourhoods of Dhaka. The paper focuses on typo morphological analysis of urban blocks in and surrounding the area formerly known as Ramna Race Course, between the time period 1947 and 2000. Using typo morphological analysis, this study identified the main reasons for the transformation of some selected parts of the area in and surrounding the Ramna Race Course area. The results show that power play by political parties, development to support institutional needs of University of Dhaka and encroachment by newer buildings are the primary reasons for the transformation of the six selected study areas.

Keywords

planning diffusion, urban design, new towns, postmodernist urbanism, Jaime Lerner

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INTRODUCTION

Due to its complicated history, fluctuating geography and unstable political climate, Dhaka has undergone many changes in the past 400 hundred years. Citing these reasons, many may argue that any discourse about changing Dhaka is a matter of luxury. But the truth is regardless of all that the city is indeed changing. Those responsible for changes at the macro level are developers, landowners and policy makers, while small vendors, builders of unplanned dwellings and small business owners are changing the city at the micro level.¹

Unfortunately, Dhaka did not have the opportunity to develop its urban future with the guidance of renowned and established city planners. Some foreign visitors did play a role in its planning, including Patrick Geddes in 1917 and Minoprio, Macfarlane and Spencely in 1959. But the initiatives by local planners for developing the city have been lacking.² This negligence in planning, combined with deficient urban governance has resulted in the city ranking very low in various liveability indexes and global surveys carried out annually.³ The city has been the victim of wild urbanisation, as a result of which, its physical characteristics have been gradually transforming as well. This raises the question, what are the causes that are inflicting the transformation, and how is that transformation happening over the course of time?

To understand this, it is important to look at the transformation of urban elements of the city, especially the urban blocks. This paper thus aims to look into the social, political and environmental aspects which lead to the transformation of specific parts of Ramna area in Dhaka, between the time period of 1947 and 2000.

BACKGROUND

Dhaka is an old city whose growth and development has been influenced by various influences ranging from geographic to socio-cultural, and from technological to economical.⁴ The pacing of its growth goes against specific definition of its boundaries. It is said that Dhaka started its modern life in 1835, with the advent of English education, broadening of roads, and cleaning up of the dirt from the city. But the city experienced sudden changes when Bengal was divided in 1905, and Dhaka became the capital of East Bengal and Assam Province. The city became rejuvenated, and some impressive monuments gained prominence in the Ramna area. In 1912, two years after Dhaka lost its status as a capital, the then viceroy Lord Hardinge announced his plans for establishing University of Dhaka, which began its journey in 1921. The city then slowly progressed along this educational line.⁵

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dhaka's development can be divided into six morphologies, the interconnected components of the city created by the distinctive patterns of open spaces, built forms and social life. One of those

morphologies is the area around the Ramna Race Course, now known as Suhrawardy Uddyan. The area began as the place for new cultural, educational, governmental and residential buildings that were developed by the British in the early 20th century.⁶ However, the history of this area can be traced back to the Mughal era, in the early 1600s, when Emperor Jahangir was reigning. In 1608, Dhaka gained prominence when the Mughals established their provincial seat.⁷ This is when the Ramna area was developed as a place of recreation for the wealthy and elite class of people. The name Ramna was chosen by the Mughal as it means “lawn” in Persian, which referred to the lush green spaces of the neighbourhood.⁸ After the fall of the Mughals, the area remained deserted and mostly consisted of graves and jungle growth. The Ramna Race Course was built in 1852, and following the first partition of Bengal in 1905, the jungle growth that emerged after the fall of the Mughals was cleared. This is when the present Ramna was established⁹ and it became the central point for growth.¹⁰ Ramna Race Course has witnessed many remarkable moments of Dhaka's history. Following the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the first ever public meeting of Muhammad Ali Jinnah was held here in 1948. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's civic reception and historical 7th March speech were both held at Ramna Race Course in 1969 and 1971, respectively. The Race Course is also marked as the setting where the Pakistani Army surrendered, which brought an end to the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Because of all its layers of historical significance, Ramna Race Course and its surrounding areas are thus selected as the study area to investigate the historical transformation of urban blocks in Dhaka.

Dhaka not only expanded with regards to territory, but it also went through physical transformation at an internal level. Urbanisation is resulting in open spaces being transformed into built areas, while low lands and water bodies are being converted into built-up land.¹¹ Between the 1950s and 2010s, Dhaka's approximate area has grown by 8.33%.^{12,13,14, 15, 16} After the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the city became the capital for East Pakistan, and that is when it began attracting migrants from other districts. That was the time the city went through some drastic changes, which continued over the six decades following the partition. Hence this time period is the focus of this research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This paper will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How did the transformation of urban blocks in and surrounding Ramna Race Course take place between 1947 and 2000?
- What were the causes of this transformation?

METHODOLOGY

The area within the street patterns in an urban fabric that can be subdivided into plots for constructing built forms is known as an urban block. In simplest terms, a city's basic unit is an urban block.¹⁷ For the purpose of this research, each individual piece of land that is marked by a solid boundary line is considered as an urban block.

The typo-morphological analysis of urban blocks takes place in two stages:

- The typological analysis, where types of blocks are comparatively analysed.
- The morphological analysis, where selected urban block's characteristics will be supported by the evolution methods of reading. Transformation is one of the phases of this evolution process.
- In order to look at the transformation through a workable analysis, the study focused on four time periods: 1947, 1970, 1990 and 2000. These time periods were selected based on the availability of their historical maps.
- Using maps from aforementioned sources, this analysis is carried out. Six study areas were chosen to be analysed in detail, in order to find out the causes behind the historical transformation. Finally, all causes for each study area were tabulated.

FINDINGS

Six study areas are selected surrounding Ramna Race Course, whose transformations between 1947 and 2000 are investigated in detail. The areas are investigated over 4 time periods: 1947, 1970, 1990 and 2000.

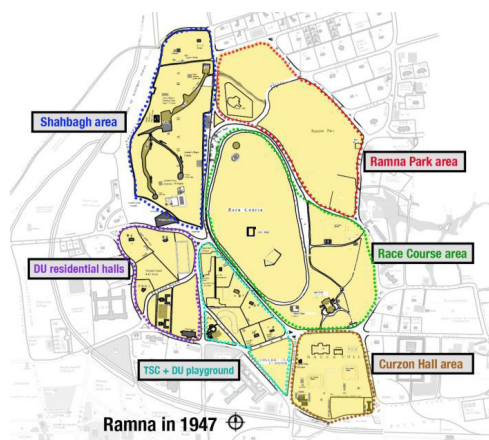


Fig. 1. Map of the selected site in Ramna, highlighting the six study areas

1. RAMNA RACE COURSE AREA

The Ramna Race Course served as the military club of British soldiers from the early British period. Charles Dawes, an English magistrate renovated the area previously known as Badshahi Bagh, and called the place 'Ramna Green' on which a race course was to be built in 1825.¹⁸ Except for the Ramna Kali Mandir¹⁹ and the old Shahbaz Khan mosque and tomb,²⁰ Dawes cleared up the area demolishing remaining monuments. As a result, an oval-shaped area remained and its perimeter was secured by a wooden fence for horse racing and other gaming purposes. And that is how the Badshahi Bagh was converted into a race

course which was used for other recreational purposes too.²¹ In 1972, the area was renamed Suhrawardy Uddyan, as a political decision by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founding father of Bangladesh. The 95 acres' area of the park has been significantly constricted, since various parts of the land have been leased out by the government to different organisations. Hence one of the causes of this transformation was political powerplay.

In 1979, 15 acres of land was allotted from Suhrawardy Uddyan to Parjatan Corporation through the Ministry of Works for constructing the Shishu Park.²² But in 2016, the government decided to remove the Shishu Park and build a Liberation War Memorial in its place.²³ According to Afrin (2016), this too is a display of political power between two rival political parties.

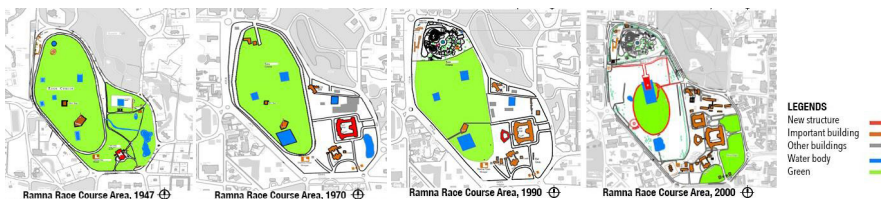


Fig. 2. Typo-morphological transformation of the Ramna Race Course Area between 1947 and 2000.

2. RAMNA PARK AREA

Ramna Park was developed in 1908 as a recreational zone, with 68.5 acres of land surrounding the Ramna lake. With 71 species of plants, the park was officially inaugurated in 1949 with an area of 88.5 acres. In 1952, the landscape was designed by the Public Works Department of Bangladesh. After 1947, much of the area of the park was allotted to other buildings such as Radio Bangladesh in 1957, Hotel Sheraton in 1963 and the Tennis Federation in 1984. These establishments caused pollution in the Ramna lake and had adverse effects on the overall environment.²⁴ Thus, in this area, the cause of transformation was encroachment by other buildings.

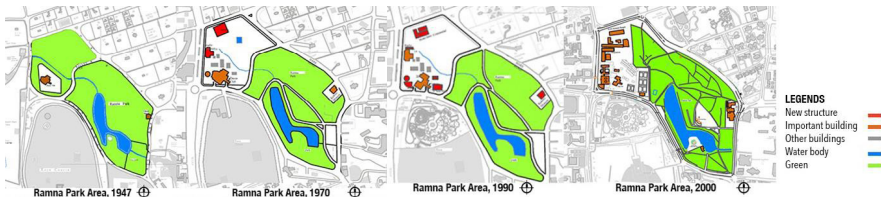


Fig. 3. Typo-morphological transformation of the Ramna Park area between 1947 and 2000.

3. CURZON HALL AREA

Following the first partition of Bengal in 1905, Curzon Hall became one of the first establishments to be built, which initiated the process of development of a new town in Ramna. The building was a prime location for the Bengali Language Movement between 1948 and 1956, as students of Dhaka University chose it as a venue to voice their opposition to Urdu being the state language. The site has a number of residential halls for Dhaka University, such as Dacca Hall, presently known as Shahidullah Hall, established in 1921, and Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall, established in 1940. After 1990, the botanical garden for Dhaka University was established in that area, and is used by students and faculties of the Department of Botany for scientific study of plants. Hence, it is evident that due to institutional development, this area has undergone various transformations over the decades.

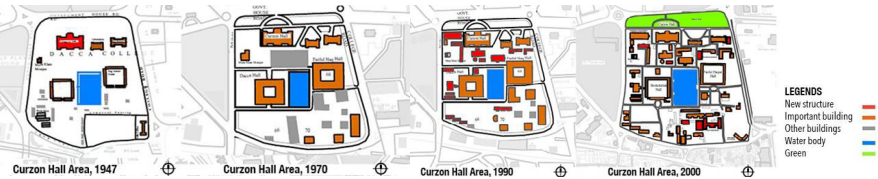


Fig. 4. Typo morphological transformation of the Curzon Hall Area

4. SHAHABAGH AREA

In 1947, Shahabagh was mostly devoid of large built forms, and contained a canal that ran across the block, and some small but notable structures such as Mohsin Ali Mazar and Civil Officer's Training Camp. In the 1960s, we saw some more developments in the area like Shahabagh Hotel, Fine Arts Institute and Public Library for University of Dhaka. After 1970, the block was divided into two parts, with the access road called 'Elephant road' running between them. After 1980, the Bangladesh National Museum was established in the area. The southern block expanded to include more plots from the western side of Ramna, including the Andre Malraux garden, Shurjo Sen Hall and Institute of Education and Research. All these spaces function as part of University of Dhaka, hence the transformation of this area can be alluded to institutional development. By the year 2000, the canal which was originally a part of the area had disappeared.

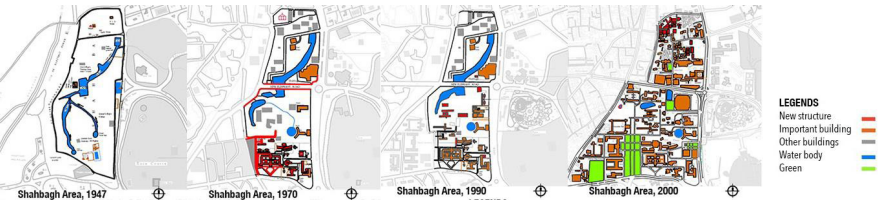


Fig. 5. Typo morphological transformation of the Shahabagh Area.

5. THE UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA (DU) TEACHER STUDENT CENTRE (TSC) AND PLAYGROUND AREA.

This part of Ramna was mostly vacant in 1947, and the south-east part contained a triangular piece of green space which served as college playground for University of Dhaka. One notable building that existed at that point of time was Bardhaman House, which was the official residence of then Prime Minister of East Pakistan, Nurul Amin. Following the 1960s, the Teacher-Student Centre and the Atomic Energy Commission were established in the area. After the 1990s, some more establishments were developed, which all served various faculties of the University of Dhaka. In the triangular piece of green space, the gymnasium for the University of Dhaka was built. So, this part of Ramna transformed due to institutional developments that were necessary for the University of Dhaka.

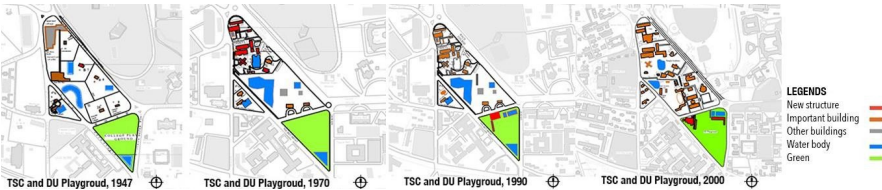


Fig. 6. Typo morphological transformation of the University of Dhaka's Teacher Student Centre and Playground Area.

6. UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA (DU) RESIDENTIAL HALL AREA

After 1947, the area developed into a significant location for learning purposes (Haque, 2013). In block 7, a new building can be seen, which is the Institute of Engineers Bangladesh, established in 1948.²⁵ Based on these observations, it is evident that the cause of transformation of urban blocks in this area is new planning developments. Based on all the findings mentioned above, the following causes have been identified for the six study areas in and surrounding Ramna Race Course between 1947 and 2000:

Urban blocks	Causes of transformation in Ramna between 1947- 2000
Ramna Race Course	Display of power by political groups
Ramna Park Area	Encroachment by other buildings
Curzon Hall Area	Institutional development
TSC and Playground at DU	Institutional development
DU Residential Hall Area	New planning developments
Shahbagh Area	Institutional development

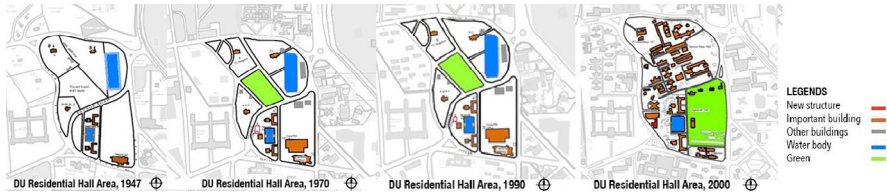


Fig. 7. Dhaka University Residential Hall Area.

CONCLUSION

The idea for conducting this study originally stemmed from the researcher's desire to find out the connections between Dhaka's social, political and environmental factors and the morphology of the city. Ramna being a significant part of the city that had witnessed much of Dhaka's transformation over the past few centuries was thus chosen as the study area. Using typo morphological analysis, this study aimed to identify the main reasons for the transformation of some selected parts of the area in and surrounding the Ramna Race Course area. The results show that power play by political parties, development to support institutional needs of University of Dhaka and encroachment by newer buildings are the primary reasons for the transformation of the six selected study areas.

Much of the study was conducted with some limitations. The information for the analysis was collected from secondary sources, from a postgraduate thesis of a student from BUET. Maps were collected from there, and the entire analysis was based on those maps. Any inaccuracy and discrepancy in those maps will be reflected in this study's findings and analysis. A city is like a living organism, with multiple functions and forces that operate in tandem to transform its morphology. But in the case of most studies concerning urban form of cities, urban fabric or architectural typologies have remained the main point of focus. Few studies, especially for Dhaka, have been undertaken which considered the contexts and intangible factors which are responsible for the city's morphology. Studies like this one can perhaps be conducted for other parts of the city, as well as for other cities in Bangladesh to investigate how social, political and environmental factors play a role in the transformation of a city.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Farhat Afzal is an architect and writer, currently enrolled as a doctoral student in architecture at the College of DAAP, at the University of Cincinnati. She has over six years of experience in academic research, publications, and large-scale international exhibitions. She was involved in various capacities in architecture education, historical research, and exhibition planning at both local and international levels. Her research interests are in the history of Indian art and architecture, 19th century architectural historiography, modernism in South Asia, and the colonial legacies of western ethnological museums. In her spare time, Farhat enjoys photographing old buildings, documenting her reading habits on Instagram, and maintaining her blog at <http://farhatafzal.com>.

IMAGE SOURCES

All images are from Sonya Afrin, "Politics as Manifested Spatially in the Morphology of Post-Colonial Dhaka with a Focus on Ramna Area." Master's thesis, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, 2016.

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