Identifying landscape features for the deltaic Dhaka

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Dhaka, home of 15 million people, is a city of rivers that is a part of the bigger hydrological system of Bengal delta. Being a part of Bengal delta, this has a unique regional landscape characterized by water and green. The distinct landscape identity is guided by three significant factors: Geography, physiography, and cultural practice. Early traces of human settlements in Bengal delta found to be settling with the context in a harmonic way that gave rise to cultural landscape. The cultural way of settling with water and land is very local and distinctive which is now absent in the present-day Dhaka city.

The deltaic Dhaka now faces constant destruction of water bodies, public space, and green areas due to uncontrolled development and wild urbanization resulting in
environmental, ecological, and social disparity. Present Dhaka is becoming less resilient. Moreover, the reduction of water-permeable open spaces results in decrease of the percolation areas causing the water level depletion of the Madhupur aquifer on which Dhaka city stands. Therefore, Dhaka needs immediate attention in rethinking the possibility and role of water and green. Dhaka can be a distinctive 'Bengali City' instead of being fated as a problematic city. To envision a modern Bengali city Dhaka needs a context-based strategy, culture-based design, and climate-responsive resolution to the water. This paper explores the constantly shifting landscape trajectory of Dhaka. The research investigates the precedence of settlement, Dhaka’s development trajectory and a taxonomy of public open space. Based on the precedence, the study attempts to trace back the archetype of land-water interfaces of Bengal across different scale. This research is an effort to understand the archetypes and subsequently the metamorphosis of this type to consider their future adaptation considering pressing urbanization, climate change, etc.

Keywords: Bengal, Water, landscape, Culture, Context, and public open space.

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Salma Begum is an independently practicing Bangladeshi Architect and a faculty at Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She has been a prominent student throughout her academic career – from being the recipient of Vice Chancellor’s Gold Medal in Bachelor of Architecture to double masters from BUET, Bangladesh, and KU Leuven, Belgium with distinction. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD at OSA Architecture and Urbanism research group in KU Leuven funded by Prime minister fellowship of Bangladesh Government.

Professionally, she had been a recipient of many award-winning competitions as part of many design teams noticeably with TKNRK and Associates in Bangladesh. Recently one of her projects was shortlisted in ‘Building 4Humanity’ Design Competition and exhibited in Portugal in an event of 8th international Conference on Building Resilience in 2018.

Her field of interest is Architecture, Urbanism, Sustainable development, and Landscape. She frequently contributes to international architectural publications and been involved in many workshops relating to low-cost construction systems, landscape design, and urban design solutions. One of her International conference papers from PhD research got awarded the best paper award in 2020.

She is also a Jury member of the largest International student competition - ‘Inspireli Award’. Outside the architecture world, she is an avid traveler and a photographer.
Bruno De Meulder is a professor of Urbanism currently teaching at KU Leuven, Belgium. He is the Programme Coordinator of MaHS and MaULP and the Vice-Chair of the Department of Architecture.

He has formed the OSA Research Group on Architecture and Urbanism along with Kelly Shannon and Viviana d’Auria. He completed his PhD from KU Leuven. He was a visiting professor at TU Delft and AHO (Oslo) and held the Chair of Urban Design at Eindhoven University of Technology from 2001 to 2012. He was a partner of WIT Architecten (1994-2005). His doctoral research dealt with the history of Belgian colonial Urbanism in Congo (1880-1960) and laid the basis for a widening interest in colonial and postcolonial Urbanism. His urban design experience intertwines urban analysis and projection and engages with the social and ecological challenges that characterize our times.