

THE CHANGING NATURE OF URBAN PUBLIC PLACES IN DHAKA CITY

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Abstract. Throughout the history, public places have been asserted as one of the key components of urban life for their physical, social, political, symbolic and environmental roles. However, the nature and quality of public places in recent years have raised the question how far these places remain 'public' in true sense. The study systematically explores how the public places of Dhaka have transformed throughout the history in different time periods. It attempts to assess the 'publicness' of the existing public places focusing on the changing nature of these places and the tensions arise from different perspectives. The research is descriptive and employs a case study approach. Osmany Uddan, a park situated in the prime location in the city center and the Hatirjheel, a recently developed lakeside area, have been considered as two cases. The findings from the case studies reveal that although these places are public considering the ownership, their quality and characteristics as public place are diminishing day by day. Limited physical and social accessibility have narrowed the group of users who can use the public place for a variety of purposes. Another major phenomenon which can be attributed to the changing nature of public place is the growing private interest. In this backdrop, it needs planning and design considerations to make public place more inclusive to diverse groups of people as such these places can perform multiple functions in balance.

Key words: publicness, access, actor, interest.

1. Introduction

Public place and urban life - these two words are inextricably related with each other. The ancient Greek agora and classical Roman forum can be the examples how public places played the central role as the sites of cultural formation and popular political practice (Dhaliwal, 2012). These public spaces represented the civic center of the city and constituted the common and shared life of the citizens. Citizens could debate and formulate diverse opinions that ultimately form what could be called a public opinion. Aside from being the political spaces, these were also the places of commercial transactions, social exchange and entertainment. Thus, public spaces became symbols for the people and their society since these sites represented cultural, historical, religious or other social and political values for them (Grigorovschi, 2012).

As a historic city, in context of Dhaka, the traditional public places were the center of city image. These impulsive spaces played a significant role in the physical setting of the city as well as to form community culture and social value. The changes of Dhaka through different social and political period of times have resulted in a dynamic transformation of its public place and public life. Especially, in recent times, many of the public places are losing their inclusive characters. No more, these places remain as key attraction points for common people. Hence, from urban planning perspective regeneration of these places as an inevitable component of the city has become imperative to ensure an inclusive urban environment. But prior to that, exploration of the changing nature of public places and

identification the key issues have become important to bring desired improvement through proper planning, design and management.

2. Public places

In general, public space can be described as "open space", meaning the streets, parks, squares, recreation areas and other publicly owned and managed outdoor spaces, as opposed to the private domain (Table 1). But the word "public place" is importantly characterized by "public." Today, public space needs to be conceptualized as different from the domain of the state and its ownership. It should be considered more as a space that is accessible by everyone. Public spaces are spaces where public has unobstructed physical and social access (Lofland, 1998). Through human action, visual involvement and attachment to the values people are directly involved in public places. In fact, public places are participatory landscapes. Hence, public space is seen as a place where strangers meet, encounter with one another, and use this space as a stage to perform particular social interactions (Bărbuică, 2012; Sennette, 1974).

Madanipour (1996) developed two broad frameworks of 'place' and 'process' to analyze the quality of urban public place. He argued that public place should be *accessible place* developed through *inclusive processes*. According to him, accessibility is the key feature of public place. It distinguishes the public place from the private and determines the functions and activities to be allowed there. Madanipour also asserted that for an inclusive process of space design, an important consideration is how the

interests of different groups of people work for the place.

Table 1. The definition of “public space” with regard to the criteria of access, actor and interest

Criteria	Attributes
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Physically accessible to all – Socially accessible to all – Activities and use process should be accessible to all
Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A space which is controlled by public actors- agents or agencies which act on behalf of a community, city, commonwealth or state. – A space which is used by the public.
Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A space which serves the public interest- the benefit of which is controlled and received by all members of the society.

Source: Adapted from Benn and Gaus (1983)

The thoughts of Benn and Gaus were not much different from that of Madanipour. Benn and Gaus (1983) suggested a valuable empirical tool to systematically evaluate the quality of public place. They set three criteria for the assessment- ‘access’, ‘actors’ and ‘interest’. First, regarding the criterion of access, public space is a place which is physically reachable and open to all. However, the concept of accessibility is not confined only within its physical arena. Access also means social and symbolic access. The environment, security and activities may be perceived as threatening or comforting to the individuals and thus may affect the entry into the place. Secondly, public place is a place which is controlled by public actors. Here, the ownership and maintenance by the responsible agencies as well as the user groups who mainly use the place are the key considerations regarding the control of public place. Finally, public place is a place which serves the public interest, the interest of common. Especially, to what extent it favors the public interest against the

growing private interest is an important concern regarding the inclusiveness of public place.

3. Transformation of public places of Dhaka: Past to present

Along with the physical and morphological transformation of Dhaka City through different ages, characteristics and pattern of public places also have undergone major changes. These can be addressed mainly under three different periods of times- indigenous, colonial and post colonial times.

3.1. Indigenous Public Place

Old Dhaka from pre Mughal period of time had been developed through an instinctive manner. Traditionally the people of Dhaka inherited the habit of socialization in outdoor places. This led to the formation of traditional hierarchical places- gali (streets), morh (node), mahalla (neighborhood) and chowk (market square) (Mowla, 2003). Mahallas were linearly formed along the streets. The streets were the centers of Mahallas. The important characteristic of the indigenous pattern of urban fabric were winding, irregular and intricate street networks directed towards the market square with walls defining the physical boundary. Streets were not the mere sidewalks or just a place of pass through. Outdoor spaces, lanes, by-lanes, streets and roads were an extension of family activities. They were at a time path and places. To some extent their significance was more than as a civic space rather than as a path.

Chowk or the market places acted as the central knot and were the center of social gathering. Even the Chawk became the part and parcel of ritual,

ceremony and cultural occasion. The vibrant activities created a strong relationship between people and place. This gives the places a meaning and a strong socio-cultural identity. In fact, the spatial and articulated pattern of the public places suggested various ways how people can co-exist with the cities and to be integrated with the life style, culture and activities along with the public places. Perception of space was integrated with man, space, culture independent of any cast, religion.

3.2. Colonial Public Place

The colonial pattern of development was clearly different from indigenous pattern. Newly developed settlements were like bungalow pattern with individual private spaces. The streets, nodes and markets places in the newly formed city were limited to their functional uses only and did not serve as important civic spaces of social gathering. However, at that time crossing the limit of "Old Dhaka" the development was approaching towards "New Dhaka". As a way to establish the elite cultural value and to make the city aesthetically pleasant with ample greeneries apart from urban core, the spacious "Ramna Park" was introduced. It was landscaped with beautiful flowerbeds, rare trees and lakes. Other parks and open parks were developed in this period as the familiar elements of English design and the landscape park tradition.

During the 19th century and even during the beginning decades of the 20th century, Buckland Bund along the Buriganga River was an attractive public place for recreation and social gathering (Mamoon, 2000). People used to come here to enjoy the enchanting

view of the river and relaxed ambience of the place. It was the most favorite venue for hundreds of morning walkers where people can relax, slow down, unwind and come to close contact with the nature. Steel benches were placed at regular interval where one could sit and enjoy the cool breeze from the river. In fact, the riverfront as a quality public place with clean water enhanced the image of our past glorious city. The Nawab Bari (Ahsan Manjil), Ruplal House, red bricked Northbrook Hall - all these elegant structures added pride to the riverfront scenario.

3.3. Post Colonial Public Place

Post colonial period was characterized by the dominance of built up areas without the increase of attractive public places. Newly developed area became congested due to new housing, commercial development and mixed land use practices. Nevertheless, the colonial creation of spaces played the central role as symbolic places to show political spirit, movements and cultural assertion. Thus the values and meaning of public places were changed by modification and appropriation in response to changing cultural and political situation.

In the post independence period, life in Dhaka has become the subject of overcrowding, traffic congestion, excessive noise and dirt due to unprecedented urbanization, rural-urban migration combined with unplanned city development, lack of adequate roads for the increased traffic and congestion. But this great leap forward in the number of people is not matched by the simultaneous creation of public places. Land prices are sky rocketing and every vacant square feet becomes subject to speculation. The

once aesthetic sources of pleasure such as its surrounding rivers where the boats pleasantly sailed are too polluted compared to the sparkling clean waters of the same in the past. Dhaka City was once known for its serenity, beautiful parks, clean roads and lush greenery have now been converted into brick and concrete jungle. In the old part of city there is only 5% open space while in New Dhaka 12 % of land is green and open. The total amount of open spaces in greater Dhaka is about 17% to 18% and the total stock of public open spaces is hardly over 5000 acres (Mowla, 2011).

4. Case-study and major findings

In this study 'Osmani Uddyan' and 'Hatirjheel', these two places have been selected for the purpose of case-study. Among them, *Osmani Uddan* is a century old historical park and *Hatirjheel* is a recent development. The case-study attempts to examine the quality of public place under the main domains of 'publicness'- access, actors and interest, which have been mentioned earlier.

4.1. Osmani Uddan

Osmani Uddan (Fig. 1) is a century old historical park, which was established in colonial period. It is located in Gulistan area (city center) of Dhaka city opposite to the South Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) office (Fig. 2). The total area of the park is 23.14 acre. It includes two lakes comprising of total 5.34 acre area.

Access and Actors

The park is located in the city center well adjacent to the major public transport hub of the capital. So, the place is well reachable. The visitors have to face strict security system for the entrance of the

park. The park is heavily fenced by a high concrete wall having narrow entrance. In this inward oriented design with a little visual connection with its surrounding place, the park does not seem to offer a welcoming message to the people. In addition, several temporary and illegal retail shops and restaurants, established in recent years near the entrance of the park and the resulting unnecessary crowd make it difficult to approach and access.



Fig. 1. Osmani Uddan

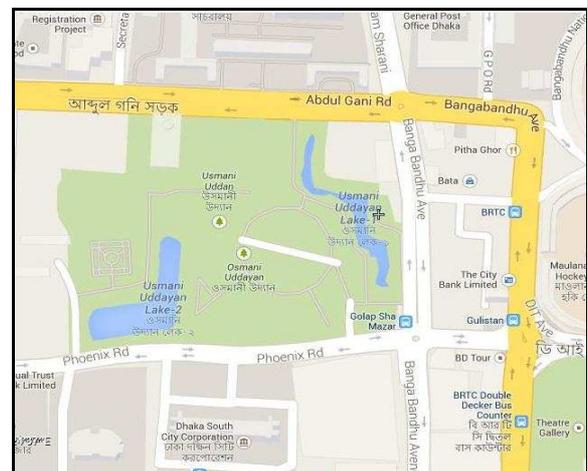


Fig. 2. Location map of Osmani Uddan

However, the more concerning fact is the social access of the park. The place is not fully congenial to the visitors. This has happened mostly in response to the growing presence of unwanted and undesirables (Figure 3). The floating people infiltrate into the park

and find safe shelter inside. Touts, muggers and drug peddlers thrive there in the park. For the place is becoming a more intimidating day by day, the access of desired activities of the intended users get restricted and people are not simply interested to visit the park.

However, being well connected with public transportation system, the place could be a wonderful place of relief for the people especially who work in the city center. A midst of crowd and chaos, it might provide a common ground to the people seeking a healthful relief from the pollution and noise. It could be made attractive with its soothing environment, trees and water bodies if properly designed and managed.



Fig. 3. Growing presence of undesirable and unwanted people. Source: Author

Interest

Since 1998, land of Osmani Uddyan has been under the attack of different public and private agencies. Three government agencies have encroached more than 1.5 acres of land from the original area of the park. Also, different religious institutions and private agencies have grabbed nearly 1 acre land. Thus, the park has lost nearly about 2.5 acre of land in different times by different agencies in

illegal ways (The Daily Bhorer Kagoj, 2005) – Fig. 4.



Fig. 4. Illegal use of park space and deteriorating environment. Source: Author

For its location in the city center, different interest groups had tried to monopolize the park for their own interest. From 2005 a bus operating company has been using a part of land as an unauthorized bus stand. Some human-haulers and rent a car companies park their vehicles inside the Osmani Uddyan. Some of the influential people also tried to establish some restaurants and makeshift shops inside the area of the park.

4.2. Hatirjheel

This public place was developed along the lake named 'Hatirjheel' (Figure 5). The primary objective was to preserve the lake and its surrounding areas as retention basin. Later, at-grade roadway and walkway along the periphery of the lake was constructed. The lake and its surrounding areas were planned for recreational purpose covering an area of 320 acre.

Access and Actors

The place is located in a prime location of Dhaka. It is well connected with the road network system. The place was well designed with walkways, viaducts,

bridges and delightfully landscaped with trees and shrubs. In the initial days after its inauguration many people came to visit the place purposefully from different parts of the city. However, in recent days the place cannot attract as many people as earlier. The underlying fact is mainly related to the accessibility. Unlike Osmani Uddyan, the place is not well accessible by public transport. It is a private car oriented development which majority of the people in Dhaka cannot afford. On the other hand, the transport routes of Hatirjheel are prohibited for use by Non Motorized Vehicles (NMV), where in Dhaka city; many people depend on NMVs as their major transportation option. Again, the place has become less hospitable for walking as there is little or no consideration for traffic management. Driving in wrong direction, reckless car driving, motorcycle stunts and consequently the increased number of road accidents in recent times are seriously affecting a pedestrian friendly walking environment.



Fig. 5. Hatirjheel and its surrounding areas

In recent times, a growing concern of Hatirjheel is security and safety like the previous case of Osmani Uddyan. The issue is strongly related with social access. Frequent criminal activities like open drug dealing, extortion, mugging, stalking and floating immoral acts

especially after sundown have greatly increased in recent times. Moreover, dumping of wastes and the waste water released from adjoining areas into the lake are polluting its environment as well as belching a stench (Fig. 6, 7). All these facts restrict the desired user group visiting the place.

Officially, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is responsible for the public place now. After implementation of the project, it was proposed to organize a management team, who will be responsible for the maintenance of the public place. Yet, such team has not been formed. As a result, undesirable people pollute the environment and hamper the security of other people. Thus, lack of proper actor and action is reducing the publicness of the place.



Fig. 6. Scenario of waste dumping. Source: The Daily Sun



Fig. 7. Pollution of lake water. Source: Onlinekhorbor

Table 2. Comparison of the case studies

Domains of public place	Osmani Uddyan	Hatir Jheel
Access	<p>Physical Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Well accessible by public transportation – Less visual connectivity with the surrounding environment – Several footpath restaurant, makeshift shops and the resulting unnecessary crowd create problem in accessibility <p>Social Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Degradation of social environment as a result of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • living of floating people, • criminal and unsocial activities • lack of security 	<p>Physical Access</p> <p>Less public because of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Car oriented development; lack of public transportation facility. – Exclusion of NMVs – Less pedestrian friendly environment; lack of traffic management <p>Social Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Degradation of social environment as a result of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • living of floating people, • criminal and unsocial activities • lack of security
Actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Agencies in control: Officially DCC (Dhaka City Corporation) <p>User:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – People working in the city center. – Floating people, drug peddler touts and muggers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Agencies in control: DCC officially <p>User:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – People living in the surrounding areas and mainly the car users – Floating people, drug peddler touts and muggers.
Interest	<p>Undermines the public interest due to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Encroachment of land of park by different stakeholders (Titas Gas, Police department, Mukti Jodhya Sangsad, Golap Shah Library, Baitullah Jame Mosque). – Benefited by using the park area as parking space <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private bus operators • Humal haulers • Rent-a-car Companies – living of floating people – criminal and unsocial activities – lack of security 	<p>Undermines the public interest due to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of public transport; private car riders benefiting from the transportation route – traffic congestion – conflict between pedestrian and vehicular traffic – Illegal establishments- – The building of BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association) – chaotic and unorganized public space – disturbance of undesirable persons

Interest

The private car users get full benefit from the transportation route of Hatirjheel. On the other hand, NMV users are excluded. Thus, private interests get importance here. Another concern is the illegal establishment. The Hatirjheel canal could not be completely freed from illegal establishments as the BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment

Manufacturers and Exporters Association) headquarters, two makeshift mosques and a madrasa still exist in the middle of the canal. The placements of the structures undermine the beauty of the water body and create obstacles to water discharge. The authority has failed to get rid of the 15-storey building of BGMEA because of legal complexities.

From the above case-study it is quite prominent that although, for the first case, the public place is well accessible being located in the city center, in case of second one lack of public transport facilities has become the key issue for the limited accessibility. For both of the public places, social accessibility has become a serious concern (Table 2). Most importantly, presence of unwanted and undesirable actors and the criminal activities are responsible for this creating fear and insecurity. In addition, encroachment and pollution are the main factors which undermine the public interest for the favor of vested interest of some private actors (Chronopoulou-Sereli et al., 1999; Sun et al., 2010). As a result, now-a-days the publicness of these places is diminishing to a great extent and thereby losing their inclusive characters.

5. The way forward

5.1. Reclaiming the Existing Open space

Considering the pressure of urbanization and existing pace of development, it has been almost impossible to create the standard required amount of public places in Dhaka City. Even the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) has failed to set aside the adequate amount of space. However, in spite of growing densification of built-up areas in newer parts of Dhaka, a number of medium and large scale open spaces are scattered in the city (Nilufar, 2009). Identification and utilization of these open spaces will have an enormous impact on the public life of Dhaka City. The existing open spaces must be protected by the enforcement of Environmental Laws. In order to make the open spaces suitable and responsive to the urban needs, such spaces need to

be well equipped. Besides, regular maintenance and control of these areas is essential to avoid the anti-social occurrences and put them in successful use.

5.2. Improvement of Parks

Parks are probably the most used and best-known open spaces in the urban environment (Mitchell, 1995). It has been found that this middle income people, coming from distant places bearing the communication cost only to get relief from the exhaustion of busy urban life (Afroz, 2009). Parks should be provided both community level and urban level. According to the planning standard, Community Parks should be provided within 1 mile of all homes. Moreover, the existing parks are in need of maintenance and control. There is dirt and garbage everywhere in the large parks and no proper system or infrastructure in place. So, a system of proper maintenance is necessary to make sure that these open public spaces are kept clean, hygienic and environment-friendly.

5.3. Making the Streets as Civic Spaces

Streets can be the place of civic activities. Unscripted life of the streets offers a continually diverse and changing scene to the eye and stimulation for the other senses. One person's activity becomes another's visual entertainment. Jacobs (1992) noted "If city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull." It has already mentioned that in indigenous way of life streets were not only a place of moving through but also the places of public gathering and social activities. This traditional indigenous pattern should be the way how the roads and streets have to be developed in the

future as attractive civic spaces. Streets and tracks are to be well connected by trails. A pedestrian friendly environment should be created and all the neighborhoods should be walkable (Sepe, 2007). The nodes and intersection of the streets have to be considered as places of larger public domain. These can be the places for community gathering (Giddings et al., 2011), chatting, shopping and space for the hawker following the traditional chowks (market-square).

5.4. Regeneration of Waterfronts

The historic core of Dhaka is inextricably related with rivers. The city is virtually like an island bounded by the Balu River on the east, Turag River on the west, the Buriganga River on the west and south and the Tongi Khal on the north. Inside the city, there is a system of canals, ponds, lakes, swamps, reservoirs and low lying marshy lands. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Dhaka is located amidst of the most dynamic hydrological system of the world.

Rivers span around 110 km of our capital city. But most the places are presently inaccessible. Riverfront should be physically, visually, conceptually made accessible (Buhociu et al., 2013). One of the ways of creating public spaces along the river and reconnecting the place to its historic roots is to integrate the river with the traditional urban settings (Godfrey and Arguinzoni, 2012). One has to understand how the river was or has been connected to the City historically, culturally and physically. There are still some dominant historic buildings along the riverfront of the Buriganga. Most of them are dilapidated and in poor physical state. But not gone forever. Still

today, these edifices bear the sign of the identity and heritage of our city. Conservation of these buildings can be a way how we can create both attractive and historic public spaces (Escorteganha et al., 2013) along the riverfront with a 'sense of place'. Most importantly, the quality of the rivers should be improved free from all sorts pollution and encroachments. Besides the Buriganga one can find the riverfront of Turag as a place of delightful festivity during the rainy season especially in Ashulia and its adjacent areas. The whole length of the riverbank along the city should be developed as a tree-lined promenade, largely pedestrian public spaces, and linear parks those are to be linked to other open and green spaces, historic and important sites of the city.

Other types of water bodies- canals, ponds, lakes, swamps, reservoirs and low lying marshy lands can also be developed as recreational public places (Brand, 2007). According to Water and Sewerage Authority of Dhaka (DWASA), there were once 43 canals in Dhaka. In the Town Planning Report Dacca of the famous British town planner Patrick Geddes, khals were important open spaces (Geddes, 1917). Appropriate initiatives can revitalize these canals. Moreover, Detailed Area Plan (DAP) has proposed numbers of water retention areas especially in the Eastern fringe where traditional development is restricted. These areas can be developed as recreational places especially as aquatic recreation sites and water parks according to permitted land use.

6. Conclusions

The notion of public space empowers people to define and

construct public attitude through their actions, reactions and interactions. A good sense of public place suggests the way how community people can relate themselves with the place and culture. The traditional pattern suggests us the way how places can be intuitively related to the culture, values and activities. Even today, under enormous pressure of urbanization, public places can be an integral part of the built urban environment can enhance the quality of life and contribute to the sustainability and formulation of civic identity. Therefore, for the livability of Dhaka City it has become imperative to develop adequate amount of quality public places especially at the time when public realm is under challenge.

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