

ARCHITECTURE

# THE MODERNIST OF DHAKA

*The evolution of modernist architecture in Bangladesh is a journey marked by 60 years and a series of revolutionary architects, including its most recent proponent: Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury*

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PHOTO: KASHEF CHOWDHURY

(From this picture)

**DECADENCE IN DHAKA**

The pool atop the EHL Premium Condominium, the “most expensive apartment building in Dhaka”, looks out over the Bangladeshi capital. Architect Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury, who designed the luxurious building.



PHOTO: SHUMON AHMED

From the flat, straight country road that heads from the northern Bangladeshi town of Gaibandha to the banks of the Jamuna river, the Friendship Centre looks like little more than a mound of grass and a volume of red brick looking over the low-lying rice paddies across the way. Standing atop that mound (really a 10-foot-tall embankment), you’ll have an entirely different view: a series of red brick pavilions and courtyards capped with flat, grassy rooftops that, from here, look subterranean, literally unearthed.

“Buddhist monasteries are all around this place from the seventh, eighth, ninth centuries—all in brick, all in ruins,” says Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury, the Dhaka-based architect whose firm, Urbana, designed and built the two-acre project for a miniscule budget of just Tk4 crore. Those monasteries are a clear point of reference for the Centre, built in 2010 as a training facility for an NGO called Friendship, but the impulse to dig, to excavate a contemporary architecture from the earth, is as essential to Bangladesh’s rich modernist history as the establishment of Chandigarh—and its planned development—has been to India’s.

First articulated in 1955 with the completion of Bangladeshi architect Muzharul Islam’s Art Institute in Dhaka, and later distilled in Louis Kahn’s iconic Sangshad Bhaban (the parliament building, a commission orchestrated by Islam), Bangladeshi modernism always stood in contrast to its Indian counterpart. Beginning in the 1950s, and inspired by the Bauhaus movement and Le Corbusier, India’s modernism deliberately broke with the past; in a nation with no unified cultural reference point, modernism created a shared aesthetic language very much in line with the Nehruvian ideal of an India living in the future tense. In Bangladesh, >

< a nation founded because of its shared heritage, a native modernism could only be built from the ground up.

Continuing today through architects like Chowdhury (and his predecessors, architects like Bashirul Haq and Saif ul Haque), Bangladeshi modernism has both grown with and shaped Bangladesh's history as an independent nation. It's no mistake that Kahn's parliament building, one of the world's greatest modernist buildings, has become Bangladesh's most iconic structure and, in many ways, its national emblem. Despite its own rich modernist history, India still sees itself most fully in the architecture of the past; Bangladesh has realized itself in modernism.

## WHAT LIES BENEATH

The first major project awarded to Chowdhury's firm, then run in conjunction with former partner Marina Tabassum, was the Liberation War Museum and Independence Monument in Dhaka. In 1997, when the national government launched the design competition for the project, Urbana was barely a year old, the youngest firm to enter. Chowdhury's firm won with a design that buried a voluminous concrete gallery space, all sweeping lines and spare Kahn-style geometries, beneath a sprawling ground-level plaza. The Monument, built at ground level directly over the museum, is a soaring 150-foot-tall tower built of stacked panes of glass. It looks like a translucent core sample, each striation a layer of a new nation's ancient history.

There's a hint of the archaeological in all Chowdhury's work. The celestial Chandgaon Mosque in Chittagong, the project that earned Chowdhury an Aga Khan Award nomination in 2010, features a broad oculus in its entry court, the roof opened from above as though by divine intervention. The dome surmounting its prayer hall is split open toward the sky. The bricks lining the walls of his apartment in Dhaka were all salvaged from demolished buildings in Old Dhaka, and the process of designing the Friendship Centre was, in itself, a kind of excavation.

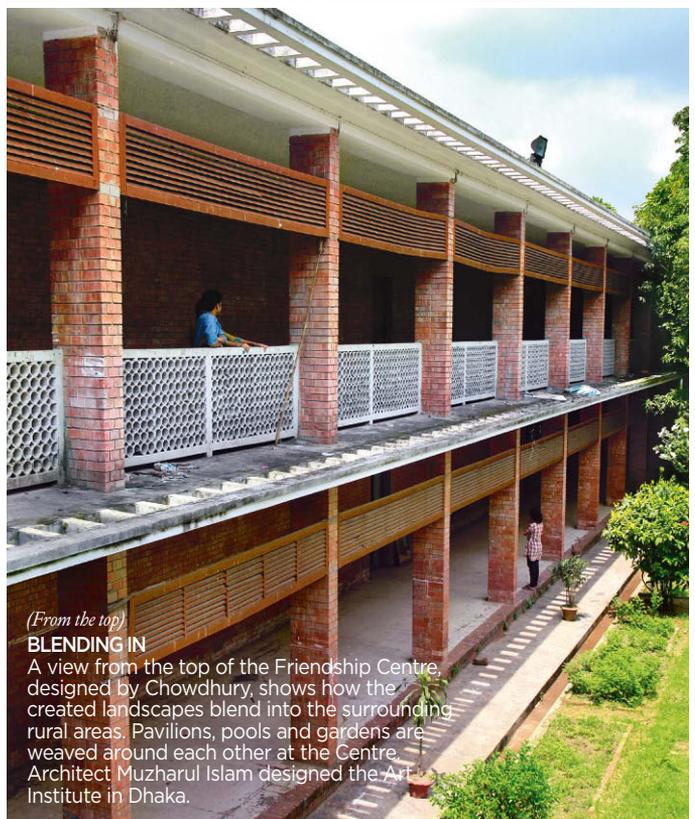
Built on land that would lie eight feet below water level if the embankments on the nearby Jamuna collapsed, the Centre was initially conceived as a complex of buildings built on an eight-foot-high landfill. When the budget came in at twice the amount allotted, Chowdhury returned to his plans. "They showed the building, but below the building there were these columns and foundations and I looked at those eight feet and realized, 'My God, there's an entire storey there that we're just filling with earth.'" Chowdhury dug out that buried floor, reorganized it, and surrounded it with a 10-foot-tall embankment of his own.

Even the terms Chowdhury uses to describe his process are archaeological: "For aesthetics to have an original expression... that's a painful process. It requires going deep into oneself."

In their 1997 essay *Building a Nation*, penned for the India International Centre Quarterly, critics Kazi Khaleed Ashraf and James Belluardo described Islam's modernism in much the same terms. It was, they claimed, "an inward journey, a conscious 'archaeological' excavation of one's own taken-for-granted cultural strata."

## LED BY EXAMPLE

Over the last 40 years, a series of architects based in Dhaka >



(From the top)  
**BLENDING IN**

A view from the top of the Friendship Centre, designed by Chowdhury, shows how the created landscapes blend into the surrounding rural areas. Pavilions, pools and gardens are weaved around each other at the Centre. Architect Muzharul Islam designed the Art Institute in Dhaka.

PHOTOS: HÉLÈNE BINET MANOLO YLLERA

PHOTO: SHUMON AHMED



< have continued to unearth those many layers of cultural history, refining and focusing the style pioneered by Islam to create an unmistakably local contemporary vernacular. Since founding his firm in 1977, Bashirul Haq has worked almost exclusively with brick, exploring the possibilities of what he describes as “the only permanent material available” in the indigenous lexicon. Saif ul Haque, whose firm Diagram Architects falls between Haq and Chowdhury in the lineage of Dhaka modernism, describes the work of local architects as “a part of the culture of the country.”

Though the world at large knows Dhaka more for architectural disaster than innovation, there is perhaps no city on the Indian subcontinent more thoroughly and indelibly marked with modernism. Make no mistake; Dhaka is, by any standard, an ugly city: a mess of concrete and brick, much of it shoddily made and thrown up into buildings that are shoddier still. The traffic makes Mumbai look like Paris; the fume-dense air and characterless sprawl give Delhi a run for its money. As Chowdhury likes to say, “Dhaka is an orphan. Who’s looking after it?” Yet for all that, the new constructions that I saw in Dhaka’s upmarket residential districts far outstrip anything I’ve seen coming up in Indian cities in terms of design.

What you see in these areas is the mass propagation of the vernacular pioneered by Islam: red brick and concrete, strong

geometries, minimal or nonexistent ornamentation. Surely, many of these structures, built by developers no less rapacious than their counterparts in India, merely imitate the serious intent of the Dhaka modernists, yet that imitation is itself proof of the power their singular vision wields here in one of the world’s fastest growing metropolises. While large-scale architecture in Indian cities remains a mix of glass curtain walls, nouveau jaali screens and Greco-Roman colonnades, Dhaka has developed a distinctive architectural language grounded in the era of its independence.

And Chowdhury speaks that language more eloquently than any other architect of his generation. It’s appropriate that he keeps his studio—an intimate, light-flooded set of rooms near Dhanmondi lake, the most vibrant cultural district in Dhaka—on the ground floor of a house designed by Islam himself.

“If I were in Scandinavia, with very few people and a lot of money, then probably my architecture would be different,” Chowdhury says, “but [the Indian Subcontinent] is where I come from. No matter what the available resources are, there’s always a need to optimize them—to optimize resources, to respond to the context, natural and man-made. If you do that, it automatically becomes an architecture of responsibility.”

#### LOOKING FORWARD

This interest in “an architecture of responsibility” does not mean that Chowdhury has restricted himself to projects with a clear social valence. For one recent project, commissioned by a Dhaka developer looking to enter the luxury market, the brief was simply to build “the most expensive apartment building in Dhaka,” which he accomplished by focusing on “the luxury of materials, the luxury of space”—no small luxuries in such a tremendously congested city.

Among the 20-odd projects currently underway at Chowdhury’s studio are a 16-storey tower for a media company, the first that Chowdhury has designed using a glass facade (he’s used multiple layers of shading and ventilation to keep the building from overheating); a riverside boutique hotel for a private client; and a small boat museum, designed to resemble a traditional Bengali fisherman’s launch.

The project that seems to occupy his mind more than any other, though, is a low-cost, easily replicable cyclone shelter inspired by a spontaneous trip along the path of cyclone Sidr, the immense storm that ravaged the Bangladeshi coastline back in 2007 (a fundraiser launched in Luxembourg in May has gone some way to raising funds for the first prototype). “Coming back,” he said, “we realized the only way we could do something was through design.”

This thought is itself essentially Bangladeshi, a belief in architecture’s ability first to express a national identity, then to unify it and, in this latest stage, to address its fragile future. If India’s strategy is to build its future from scratch—exemplified in recent promises for a hundred “smart cities” built from practically nothing, the inheritance of Chandigarh—then Chowdhury’s, the inheritance of Islam, is to unearth a future right below his feet.

To use Chowdhury’s own words, the goal is to “look at Bangladesh first, and then get to architecture. Look at society, at people, their culture first—and then get to architecture.” ♦