

Bustees to Blots

The Bangladeshi Pursuit of Community

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ABSTRACT

From bustees to blots, this essay traces the migration of disenfranchised Bangladeshi families from Dhaka to Queens, and finally to Banglatown, Detroit, which is home to one of the largest Bangladeshi populations outside of Dhaka. Regardless of urban context, residents face forces such as governmental neglect, rising rents, and racial scrutiny that prevent them from achieving socio-economic stability. The persistence of residents to overcome these challenges undoubtedly leaves a mark on the urban environment, where the informal appropriation of space to suit individual needs can be found across densities, architectural typologies, and geographic contexts. This informality can be more easily understood through the bustees settlements in Dhaka, although the occupation of illegally converted housing units in Queens and property expansion into vacant parcels in Detroit have provided opportunities for communities to acquire a sense of agency over their neighborhoods. The transition from Dhaka to Banglatown illustrates the need to acquire some sense of tenure and community; through this aspiration, the appropriation of habitat persists as a layered emancipatory process of adaptation where static and kinetic can coexist.

Debates about immigration are currently at the heart of the global political climate. Right-wing politicians in the United States have built their agenda around a narrative of exclusionary wall building – literally and figuratively – ignoring the fact that this nation was built upon immigrants. While the history of the Pilgrims’ arrival at Plymouth Rock in pursuit of religious freedom is a staple of elementary school curricula, the stories of immigrants from other countries like China, India, and Spain have hardly permeated our consciousness. The allure of prosperity and freedom has been the impetus for many wishing to pursue their own version of the American dream, and this opportunistic desire persists to this day.

The transition migrants undergo from their home country to so-called ‘developed cities’ varies wildly, from fleeing conflict and violence to seeking respite from environmental disasters. Regardless of circumstance, the innate desire to survive and improve their socioeconomic status has left its mark on the urban environment. From bustees to blots, this essay traces the migration of Bangladeshi families from Dhaka to Queens, and finally to Banglatown, Detroit, which is home to one of the largest Bangladeshi populations outside of Dhaka. The urban conditions of these cities are vastly different, yet it seems that some sense of informality exists between geographic regions and cultural contexts. In these instances, informality exists not as a characteristic distinct from formality, but as a means of appropriating space for inhabitation.

The notion of formal and informal as it relates to urban settlement has been described as “static and kinetic states.”¹ Static formations of development are characterized by permanent materials, like concrete, steel, and brick, whereas kinetic settlements consist of temporary materials, like scrap metal, plastic sheets, and waste wood.² While these terms reference the temporal articulation and occupation of

physical space, what I am interested in is the transition between these states and the innate desire for some material sense of stability. ‘Static’ and ‘kinetic’ are also terms that imply states of friction, which can be defined as the force resisting the relative motion between entities. In this essay, I would like to consider the forces of resistance – the friction points that hinder the potential of populations from achieving a life of freedom and opportunity – and how residents overcome these challenges to make their own imprint on the surrounding urban morphology. Exploring the appropriation of space from Dhaka to Banglatown reveals the necessity of describing the formal and informal, the static and kinetic, as less of a binary spectrum and more of an urban palimpsest, where a layered construction of formal diversities is exhibited in the residential fabric.³

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

To begin, we must understand the morphology of the bustees, or informal settlements, in Dhaka. The key word in understanding this urban condition is ‘informality,’ where the kineticism is characterized by incremental development. These settlements are often constructed by means of quotidian building materials and assembled and reassembled to best serve the immediate needs of their inhabitants.⁴ In developing countries where rural-to-urban migration is the primary source of population growth, it is common for migrants to seek a better life with opportunities to make a decent living. Unfortunately, there is a severe lack of housing and job opportunities in Dhaka, which forces migrants to acquire vital resources on their own. Formal institutions fail to provide solutions to these problems, leaving migrants to fend for themselves. This creates a condition where inhabitants of these informal settlements rely on their network of family and community members to assemble their own shelters and urban

environments, which leads to shoddy construction techniques and haphazard safety considerations.⁵

The appearance of these 'kinetic cities' varies from country to country, but they emerge under similar conditions. These are the spaces of the 'everyday,' a common ground where cultural and economic struggles are articulated. In the case of Dhaka, low income groups comprise a striking 70 percent of the population, but only have access to 20 percent of the city's residential land, creating conditions of hyperdensity.⁶ Bustees are typically constructed on unauthorized government land or privately owned land, which has become very popular over the last two decades. These landowners are looking to capitalize on the tremendous demand for space, and have in some cases leveraged illegal tax collection through Mafia-like intimidation or, in the case of bustees, *Mastan* (muscle men) who take regular 'taxes' of protection money from such settlers. This is a major friction point and an impediment to the freedoms of the bustees' inhabitants.⁷

The impacts of bustees can be felt and seen throughout the city. Home to almost 15 million inhabitants, Dhaka is poised to become one of the largest megacities in the world. Following the partition of British India, this economic and administrative capital of the nation saw phenomenal population growth primarily due to rural-to-urban migration.⁸ Lack of economic opportunity and poor protection from natural disaster have greatly contributed to this phenomenon. The population, with a Muslim majority constituting 90 percent of the total population,⁹ is projected to increase to 23 million by 2025.¹⁰ High rates of urbanization are primarily taking place within bustees, which currently house over 50 percent of the territory's population.¹¹

Access to water, transport, energy, and housing present a whole host of challenges and have been widely explored issues in

the realm of planning and urban policy. The massive influx of population puts unimaginable stress on the municipality's ability to address these issues, leaving much of the city's infrastructure in a state of disrepair. Programs like Ghore Fera (or the "Back to Home" program) have been created to alleviate urban poverty, reduce rural-to-urban migration, and improve the city's environment. The government encourages migrants to return to their villages by offering them loans to start businesses, stipends for transportation, and an allowance to settle back into their home communities.¹² Although strongly supported by the Bangladeshi government, community leaders have criticized the program's selection criteria and lack of transparency. The program has been perceived to be a massive waste of resources, with a majority of the recipients of the loan returning to the slums within several months.¹³

In addition to the inadequacy of government programs, mass evictions have been a major source of discontentment over the last several decades. For example, in 1990 the government cleared over 20,000 homes via police brutality and bulldozers with only a day's notice; these evictions were usually dictated over a loud speaker the night before.¹⁴ The government has claimed that the clearing out of informal settlements was a preventative measure to rid the city of terrorists, although there has been no proof that bustees ever harbored extremists in the first place. While the government lacks the resources to provide housing to all those in need, it could still ensure rehabilitation and compensation for the poor and vulnerable to establish some sense of tenure and community.¹⁵ Given the personal resources invested, where bustees inhabitants on average spend between 5,000 to 10,000 Takas on their homes (about 100-200 USD; per capita income is 350 USD), there should be a more humane protocol before destroying years of accumulated equity.¹⁶ The Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction and the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (COHRE

& ACHR) explains the communitarian aspects contained within these bustees and how forced evictions destroy these crucial networks.

It could be fetching water, taking care of children or an elderly person while the woman shops, taking a sick child to the doctor or going to earn a living or any number of good neighborly actions. These networks are relationships with families around one's dwelling place and are cultivated over time. These relationships are carefully interwoven into the fabric of the life of squatters and assist greatly in their survival and development. They are non-quantifiable but so important to poor people's economic survival and development.¹⁷

This personal account of these evictions is particularly harrowing.

"We have to start from scratch:" The Story of Ayesha

I was born over thirty years ago in Karwan Basti (Bustee). So, my parents were also living in this settlement. We got a notice in the evening and the next day police and bulldozers came. We did not know what was happening. We went to the police to plead with them to allow us to stay, but all they said was that they had their orders to evict us. We asked them what was the reason, and they said we were living there illegally. We have lived here for over thirty years and now we are illegal. We couldn't understand this. We told them we had nowhere to go. But they said they had their orders to clear the land and if we did not get our belongings out, the bulldozer would destroy it. While we were still discussing this, someone threw stones at the police. The next thing I knew was the police beating me with sticks, tear gas shells were thrown. I fell unconscious. My friends carried me to one side and when they revived me I saw the bulldozer

destroyed our whole settlement. I was so shocked and felt like dying. I then remembered my children and somebody told me they were safe. I was so worried about my little baby who was only one andahalf years old. We had taken years to build our house. Our belongings were all destroyed – the beds – utensils, everything. All the women were crying even some of the men. We felt so devastated. We are living with our relatives. We have to start from scratch. We have no hope in the Government.¹⁸

QUEENS, NY TO BANGLATOWN, DETROIT

Some of Dhaka's evictees, among others seeking a new life, have made their way to the United States, where the population of Bangladeshi immigrants increased from 57,000 in 1990 to 188,000 in 2015.¹⁹ Not all of the immigrants coming from Bangladesh can be traced back to bustees, but given the prevalence of informality as the prevailing mode of development, one could assume that it is deeply embedded within the Bangladeshi culture. The unfortunate irony in this pursuit is the transition from one form of oppression to another; many Americans are suspicious of Muslims as a result of major global political events. Most notable are the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York City, carried out by Islamic extremists in 2001, which heightened tensions toward Muslim groups. The July 7th, 2005 London bombings, also committed by Muslim men, further compounded this state of anxiety.

Attitudes towards Muslims have resulted in hostile stigmatization and even violence. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in early 2017, the recent rise of hate crimes has resulted in most Muslims saying their community faces discrimination. Three-quarters of Muslim American adults (75 percent) say there is "a lot" of

discrimination against Muslims in the U.S., a view shared by nearly seven in ten adults in the general public (69 percent).²⁰ A stronger sense of collective identity has emerged as a reaction to the increased negative scrutiny, with the youth population revealing an even stronger sense of religious identification than ever before.²¹ This phenomenon can be observed in Queens, home to the most populous Bangladeshi diaspora in New York. There are many Bangladeshi immigrant communities in Astoria and an area dubbed "Little Bangladesh" in the neighborhood of Jamaica, which is home to a large portion of the 74,000 Bangladeshi inhabitants in New York.²²

However, life in New York can be challenging, where housing prices far exceed the capacity of the Bangladeshi working class salary, and many occupy low-paying jobs in the restaurant and taxi industries. Families have had to cram into small one-bedroom apartments in order to make ends meet.²³ Culturally, the most common family unit in Bangladesh is called the 'barhi,' which consists of a husband and wife, their unmarried children, and their adult sons with their wives and children.²⁴ Shared family homes have been identified as contributing to the illegal conversion of units in Queens. According to the Pratt Center, illegally converted units are found in "stable working- and middle-class neighborhoods that are home to numerous immigrant groups... that have, on average, larger family sizes." The study identified 48,000 informal units in Queens created without permits from the City.²⁵ These challenges have encouraged another transition: rising rents and racial scrutiny have sparked an exodus from Queens to a particular neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan.²⁶

Many of the Bangladeshi migrants from Queens have settled into an area called Banglatown, just north of Hamtramck and bounded by the Davison Freeway, I-280, and Mound Road. The Bangladeshi population in Detroit and Hamtramck is

rapidly increasing. From the mosques and restaurants to the grocery stores, which import many Bangladeshi products from New York and Bangladesh, the presence of the Bangladeshi community is palpable. It is difficult to precisely measure the number of Bangladeshis who have left Queens for Detroit, as the census does not currently ask residents about their legal status, but sources say that the Bangladeshi population rose from a few thousand in the mid-1990s to around 20,000 by the early 2000s.²⁷

What is it about Banglatown, Detroit that has transformed it into a population siphon from Dhaka and Queens? Perhaps it's the abundance of available jobs in Detroit – a result of white flight over the last several decades wherever one million people have left the city since the 1950s.²⁸ Factories that produce automobile parts and electronics have been clamoring for new employees to enter the desolate workforce, a huge opportunity for the Bangladeshis. A *New York Times* piece explored this population influx in 2001, featuring interviews with recent immigrants and Detroit residents who have noted the rapid growth of the Bangladeshi population. "Now every week, every week, they are moving from New York," said Shah Abdul Khalish, a school teacher who moved to Detroit from Bangladesh in 1982. He mentions that when he was a child, his family had to cross the border into Canada in order to acquire imported spices from Bangladesh.²⁹ Now, there are six Bangladeshi groceries in the area. The abundance of cheap housing also likely encourages this migration to Detroit. According to a study by Quicken Loans, Detroit has the second-most affordable housing in the United States.³⁰ Mashud Ahmed Chowdhury lived in the same one-bedroom apartment in Queens for 11 years with his wife and two young sons; Chowdhury was able to find a home in Banglatown for nearly half the price.³¹

While affordable housing and an abundance of jobs are vital, I believe the biggest draw

for Bangladeshi immigrants has to do with the sense of community. Having a place to live without the potential for the government to destroy your home along with all of your accumulated belongings creates a sense of permanent and static occupancy. Additionally, the aggregation of the Bangladeshi immigrants in Banglatown has led to an increase in mosques, grocery stores, and community groups. Perhaps this is what Banglatown offers: a sense of stability, safety, and ultimately a sense of belonging, something the Bangladeshi community has longed for ever since they left Dhaka. But what does this new static occupation look like in comparison to the informal and kinetic morphology of the bustees? Is there some aspect of kineticism present in Banglatown?

A NEW MORPHOLOGY: BUSTEES TO BLOTS

In many cases, the condition in Banglatown is the exact opposite of the conditions in Dhaka. The population density in Detroit is about 5,000 people per square mile, whereas Dhaka features a staggering 60,000 people per square mile – 12 times the density in Detroit.³² While Dhaka is in a state of rapid growth, Detroit has faced immense population decline, and nearly a third of its 139 square miles have become vacant.³³ This phenomenon can be seen throughout the residential fabric of the city, with many homes sitting in isolation among unkempt lots and emerging ecologies reclaiming the vacant landscapes. These vacant parcels are considered to foster crime and illegal dumping, putting a strain on the city's limited police and fire resources.³⁴

Increasingly, homeowners are capitalizing on the availability of adjacent land by borrowing or occupying abandoned lots and appropriating them for their own individual needs. Gradually, these lots are transformed into patios, garages, play equipment,

and swimming pools, among many other potential uses. This process of property expansion into block-lots or “blots” is called “blotting” – the term was coined by the Brooklyn-based urban design firm Interboro Partners.³⁵ According to *CityLab*, blotting is a process that has become more prevalent among cities dealing with urban decline. For example, Chicago launched its sideyard expansion program in 1981, shortly followed by Cleveland, which developed a similar program as a way to reclaim large tracts of vacant land.³⁶

The concept, part of a movement called “new-suburbanism,” is a form of smart de-urbanization where cities become “more green and less dense.”³⁷ These neo-suburbs encourage existing residents to become stewards of available tracts of land in order to reduce the negative impacts of a neglected urban landscape. This type of urban morphology lends itself to characteristics of informality, which is interesting given the transition from the informal landscape of the bustees in Dhaka. Communities are also leveraging their existing networks in Banglatown to provide much-needed forms of production and amenities. For example, Interboro documents a case of blotting where two sisters occupied homes separated by several lots, which over time became abandoned. In a joint effort, these two sisters eventually acquired these lots to merge their properties and now operate a shared urban garden.³⁸

These neo-suburbs have provided a template for Bangladeshi immigrants, along with many other diverse constituents of Banglatown, to establish themselves in a way that would never be possible in the dense megacity of Dhaka or Queens. Free from the potential evictions and threats of illegal taxation from Mastan, Bangladeshi families can now develop the sense of community and belonging that they have yearned for since making the transition to the United States in search of a better life. Perhaps neo-suburban smart models for de-urbanization can

give residents control of their future while breathing new life into the declining urban landscape.

The notions of static and kinetic are frequently found in tandem, where the often binary representation of this concept manifests itself in a more palimpsestic form of development. It can be argued that informality is a persistent element that can be found across classes, architectural typologies, and geographic contexts. The

informal appropriation of space to suit individual needs can be seen as a way to overcome the points of friction that infringe upon one's ability to subsist in this world. While the transition from Dhaka to Banglatown illustrates the need to acquire some sense of material stability in the static, the appropriation of habitat persists as a layered emancipatory process of adaptation, where static and kinetic can exist in the same space, always evolving, and always in motion. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prior to enrolling in the Master of Urban Design program, Salvador Lindquist graduated from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln with a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture. As a licensed landscape architect, Lindquist practiced for several years in Ann Arbor on place-making projects ranging in scale from urban design to site-specific design. He is interested in understanding how urban interventions can be better situated within the larger systematic context of our cities and regions and how research and speculation can frame compelling narratives surrounding urban renewal through equitable and resilient perspectives.

ENDNOTES

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