

Revitalizing the Mughal Settlements in Old Dhaka

Mohammad Sazzad Hossain

Architect, 3/2, Block-F, Lalmatia, Dhaka-1207, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
Design_theme@yahoo.com

Abstract

The dynamics of rapid urbanization, shifting economic activities, rising cost of urban land are exerting serious pressure on the built heritage of Dhaka city which is more than 400 years old. The social Characteristics of the historic areas have undergone changes and patterns of invasion-succession of immigrant population have been superimposed onto the successive development. The historic buildings needed to be considered within the context of urban-settings in order to develop coherence among urban elements. This paper attempts to make some suggestions to protect the *Mughal* artifacts of *old Dhaka* from decay and damages, integrate them within the urban fabric as sustain in urban elements while ensuring social and economic viability. The objective of the paper is to regenerate the historic area for sustainable urban development. The paper will explore the existing crisis of the built heritage to manage the underlying issues and finally outline a comprehensive approach for conservation.

Key words

Mughal Settlements; Revitalization; Conservation; Adaptive reuse.

Preamble

The historic *Mughal* sector is currently the commercial nerve of Metropolitan *Dhaka* and known as *old City*. It is a dense settlement (strategic planning zone-3) that covers an area of 284.3 acres with 8, 87,000 population (DMDP 1995-2015). Once a vibrant settlement, most of it is now facing gradual physical deterioration. Scarcity of open spaces, coupled with high plot coverage limits the scope for recreation and cultural activities. Buildings of *Mughal* era were once the focus of settlement layout, which are now pushed into the backyard (Mowla, 2003). Important historic buildings have been subdivided for multiple families and densities have risen to inordinate level. Illegal settlements are growing without the consideration of basic urban services. To promote the urban quality, characterized by the strong sense of continuity, conservation of the *Mughal* settlement pattern in the area has now become an important urban issue. The objective of the paper is to prevent decay and manage transformation in the old fabric, to integrate the historic artifacts within the urban fabric and link up with traffic network, and to enable it to regenerate for sustainable urban development. (Appendix: Defining the terms)

The Urban Settings of Mughal Dhaka

Dani (1962) mentioned that Dhaka for the first time came into lime light under the *Mughals(1608-1764AD)* and became the center of political cultural and social life and it dictated the trends of events throughout Bengal. The *Mughal* sector was laid out around *Chauk* in old Dhaka and started to extend westward up to *Sarai-begampur* and northward to *Bagh-I-badshahi* (Mowla, 2003). During this time the greatest business center, the *Chauk*, near the *Bara-Katra* was developed. The *Chauk Bazar* remained as the main emporium in the city. *Chauk bazaar* was connected with the *Sadarghat* by a road running parallel to the river. The road is a continuation of old *Patuatoli* and the extension bears the name of *Islampur* and *Mughal tull* (Mowla, 2003). The *Mughal* structures may be grouped as (i) Mosque and religious buildings (ii) tombs (iii) *Katras* (iv) Forts (v) Bridges. (Fig, 1-5)

Conservation Positional:

The *Mughal* rulers established this magnificent city as the capital of Bengal to control the trade and commerce in the entire region and the city became the centre of political, cultural and social life. To manage the rapid transformation in urban structures it is important to consider the sig-

nificant *Mughal* artifacts for contextual conservation. To maintain the scale and proportion of the urban elements and the interrelation of the spaces within the urban fabric it is important to integrate the historic interventions. The old city, located at the bank of the river *Buriganga* is the focal point for city development and major roads radiated from the area during the expansion of the city. Conservation-measures at urban level may recover the harmonized form of urban elements of the *Mughal* city through integrating the artifacts within the existing urban landscape as unity in forms, texture and materials. The integration of the old settlements into the city is also important to maintain the continuity (Mowla, 1997b).

Social Settings: Traditional Civic Management: The traditional spatial divisions adopted indigenous mechanism for civic management that involves citizen's participation to manage urban services at neighborhood to city level (Mowla & Hossain 2006). The traditional civic institutions adopted public private partnership and community participation as basic components for sustainable urbanization. So it is important to synthesize the traditional with the contemporary approach to manage conservation (Mowla & Hussein, 2006). Traditional *panchayat* system which had substantial control over local society may be considered along with modern concepts of community management (Mowla, 1997a).

Cultural and Economic Base: The old city is characterized

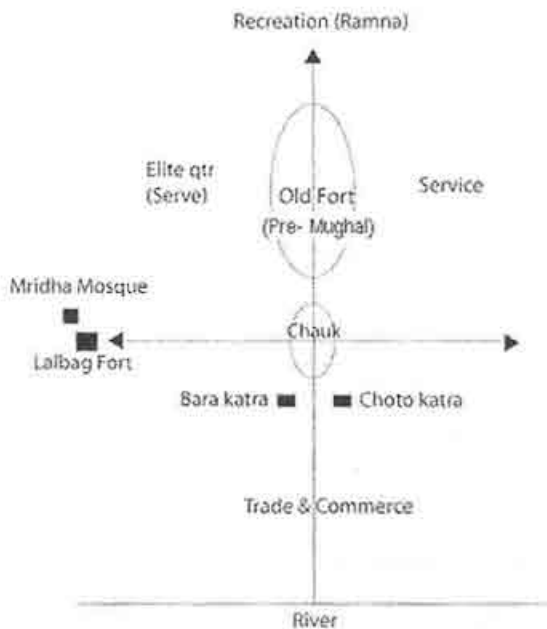


FIG 1 : Schematic layout of the Mughal Quarters in old Dhaka (based on Mowla, 1997b)

as major trade centre by the economic activities. There is a need to establish control over the economic driving forces to manage the rapid transformation in urban structures as the increasing activities for trade and commerce are exerting serious pressure on the traffic and utility network of the old fabric (Hossain, 2006b). Moreover the micro level enterprises needed to be properly organized for promotion of tourism in the area.

Landownership Pattern: One of the major constraints for conservation at the historic *Mughal* core is the complex landownership pattern that has developed there. Encroachment of the open spaces in and around the historic buildings and roads is a common practice in the area (DMDP, 1915-2015). Moreover the *Katras*¹ are in *dispersed form of submission*² that resulted in the lack of interest by each party to invest on proper maintenance. There is a need to unite the owners, users and actors on a common platform to generate collective action to protect the heritage properties.

Physical Settings: Conservation on urban level focuses on urban elements, of which individual buildings are by products (Cohen, 1999). It is necessary for urban conservation to identify the urban hierarchy of spaces to determine the elements for preservation.

Urban Pattern: The old city web is very difficult to maintain now as the dense settlements and organic growth has remained apparently unaffected by coerced geometry. However, it is important from the perspective of urban conservation as many design qualities are inherent in such town planning. The socio cultural dynamics resulted in the formation of spontaneous neighborhood, known as *para, mahalla* that act as the basic spatial unit to form the organic pattern in the urban web. Comprehensive strategy may be required to determine different level of interventions for different spatial divisions on the basis of their townscape value. The basic pattern evolved a hierarchy of spaces; *uthan, gullies, morh, Chauk and Bazars*³ that manifested the socio-cultural quality of urban life (Mowla, 1997a) that should be preserved. Formation of the major streets has got significant relation with the river. Historically important roads in the area are:-*Azimpur road, Waterworks road, Mitfordroad, Islampurroad, Patuatuli road, North brook road, Johnson road, North south road, Bangshal road, Nawabpur road ;Embankment road*(Hossain,2006b). The typical gullies(lanes and by lanes) of old Dhaka are extremely narrow with delicate curves that often create difficulties for the modern transport but offer changing views during usual movement. The streets are typically accompanied by urban services. The street front should be considered as principal part for

conservation as the continuous façade of old settlements and bazaars represent strong urban character. (Fig. 1) Observation point: Magnificent view of the old city was observed from the river as the river front was the most dominant part for the *Mughal* city that was considered to be approached through the river route. However, the riverbank has now moved away from the *Mughal* settlements and the newly built settlements and over height of the residential buildings around the artifacts creates obstacle for visual exposure from the river and different part of the old city. There is a need to identify different observation points from where the important urban elements can be viewed from long distance.

Mughal Monuments : Most of the monuments in the *Mughal* core are well documented but the *Katras* are not. *Katras* are therefore taken as a case, expecting the structures to follow the model.

Lalbag Fort and Mridha Mosque : An incomplete *Lalbagh* fort was commenced in A.D. 1678 by *Muhammad Azam* during his viceroyalty in *Bengal* (*Dani, A.H 1962*). The fort is situated at the bank of the river at ward no62, *Lalbag road*. The historic structure shows a long fortification wall with gateways. The fort consists a magnificent two-storied building which contains audience hall and *hammam* (bath

house). There is a three-domed-mosque, a few yards west of the tomb, known as *Bibi pari's tomb*. *Khan Mohammad Mridha's Mosque* is standing on a high platform and located close to the north-west corner of *Lalbag fort*, was constructed in 1706AD (*Dani, 1962*).

Bara Katra and Chota Katra : The artifacts are the two historically important *Mughal Caravan Sarais* standing at *Chauk bazaar*. The *Mughal* prince *Shah Suja* appointed his chief architect *Abul Qasim* to build *Bara Katra* and its foundation was laid in 1644A.D (*Dani, 1962*). Except the southern wing all other part of *Bara Katra* has almost disappeared. There are traces of walls and foundations of east and west wings standing with the newly built residences on east and *madrasa* on the west side. *Chota Katra* is situated about 200 yard's east of the *Bara Katra* on the bank of the river *Buriganga*. It was built by *Naiwab Shaista Khan* in 1663 AD (*Dani, 1962*). This *Katra* is of similar plan and structure as the *Bara Katra*, but smaller in size. The entire premises are now heavily encroached by settlements, defacing the historic artifacts. The enclosed quadrangular courtyards are now overcrowded with newly built settlements like shops, ware houses, and workshops. The artifacts are in deplorable condition and gradually deteriorating due to the lack of maintenance.

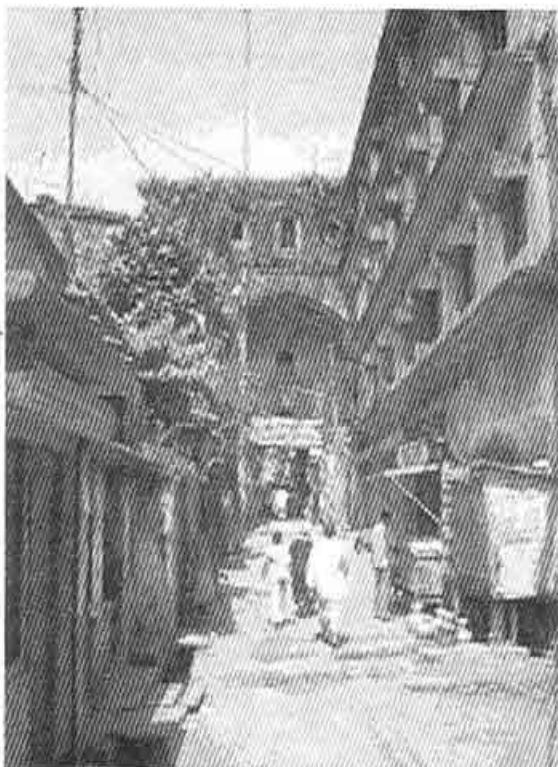


FIG 2 : Bara Katra

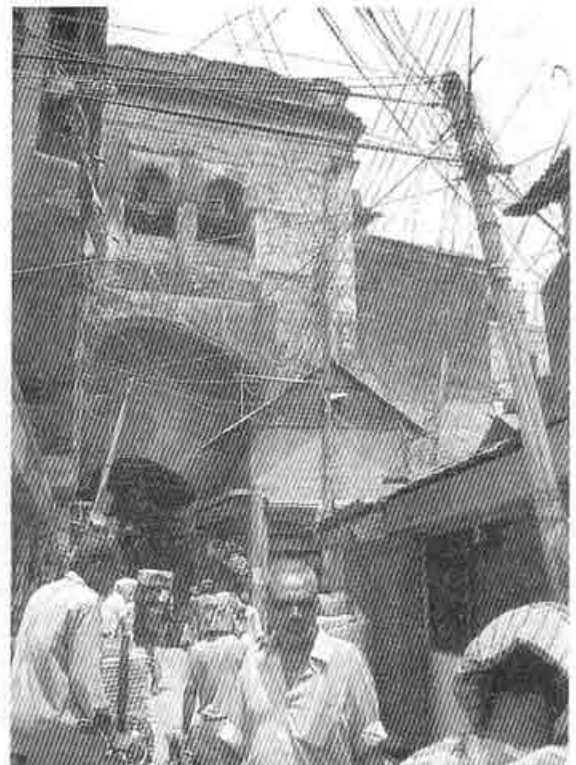


FIG 3 : Chota Katra

The narrow and poor road network doesn't permit easy access as the historic structures are hidden within dense settlements that have resulted in visual obstacle also. This isolation and inaccessibility cause deterioration of the structures. The artifacts are declared as protected-monument by the Department of archaeology, Bangladesh but only the fort and *Mridha* mosque are conserved. Architectural conservation is necessary to protect the *Katra* buildings from decay and damages with special emphasis on its townscape value. Supporting services are not adequately provided in these areas for tourism. The historic buildings needed to be considered within the context of urban-settings rather than as an isolated example of architecture in order to develop coherence among urban elements during urban conservation.

Damage Survey:

Though the Fort and *Mridha* mosque are well maintained by the department of Archaeology but the *Katra* buildings are in deplorable condition and gradually deteriorating due to the lack of maintenance. As an example of *Mughal* buildings, extensive inspection is required for these buildings to record the level of damage and decay prior to any interventions. There is a need to identify major structural damages especially at foundation level. Dampness, Efflorescence and vegetation is a common problem and in some cases walls have deteriorated to a extent that the bricks are coming out and cracks are found on the load bearing walls. Seasonal temperature variation, humidity, and precipitation of rain, ground water moisture in soil dust, particulates, and dust and sand particles in air, Vegetations, Termites, Earthquake, Flood, Lack of maintenance, Purposeful alternation, Traffic vibration, Vandalism and arson, Encroachment are some common reasons for decay of these historic buildings (Hossain,2006b).

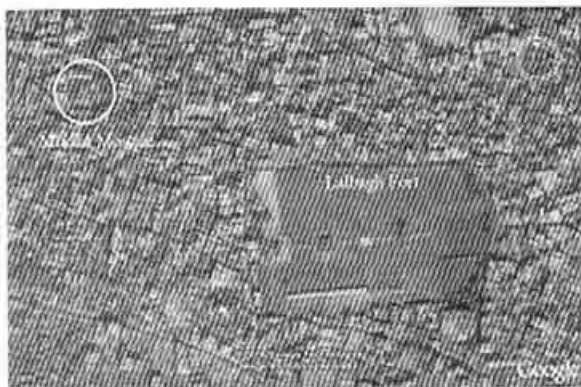


FIG 4 : Lalbag Fort and Mridha mosque in the old fabric

Planning Conservation

Urban conservation is more than merely preserving few historic buildings and requires comprehensive approach to integrate focal urban elements of the past within the existing urban tissues and open them up to the city dwellers(Mowla,2003)). The dynamics of rapid urbanization, shifting economic activities, rising cost of urban land, changes in land use-pattern and zoning, growing population density, modernization transportation are bringing transformation in the city structure that has to be managed though integrating the urban elements within the fabric and keep the city's identity intact(Hossain,2006b). Shifting focus from individual buildings to urban context during conservation may reinforce the urban pattern to incorporate the new structures into the old fabric. Conservation therefore may be judged as a planning concept and tool to justify the urban form to incorporate the new and the old to maintain the urban continuity and identity. *Urban conservation can be correctly conceived within the frame of a general approach to urban problem (Geddes, 1917). Basic methodology of urban conservation can be compared with classical town planning that considers the past along with future as fundamental element of planning (Lemaire, 1996).* To a large degree historic city manifest characteristics of self preservation. Considering the townscape value for the heritage buildings the concept of *integrated urban conservation* was promoted by the ICOMOS, 'Charter for the conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas', in 1991. It is important to establish guidelines as to the nature of intervention to meet the standards of historic value and adopt those in response to the economic and social realities in which the building is to be used. It requires multi-disciplinary approach involving different professionals to develop comprehensive plan for urban conservation. Planning interventions to revitalize the *Mughal* settlements in old Dhaka may be taken at two levels as follows:

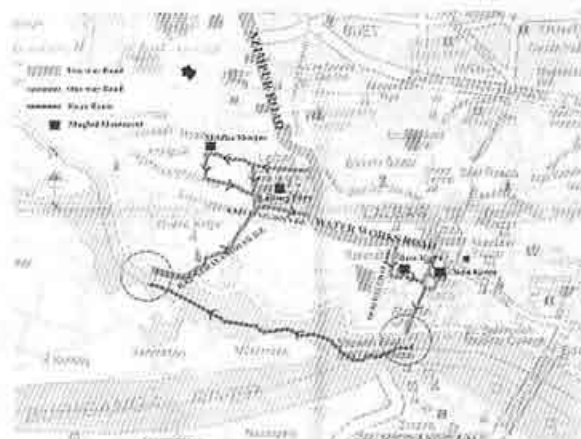


FIG 5 : The Traffic rout (Hossain, 2006b)

Interventions at Macro Level:

- View corridors may be created from main circulation spine to the historical artifacts and to the river to properly hook them up with the city fabric.
- Conservation at urban level should consider minimum buffer space and height restriction zone, circling the area occupied by the artifacts, to protect scale, visual exposure and the quality of the old urban fabric. Removals of illegal settlements, standing close to the historic monuments will ensure proper access and setback.
- Narrow Street, curves, irregular crossing, and shortage of parking possibilities, of the old city are not suitable for modern mechanical traffic system as the old pattern was developed to provide efficient living condition, based on pedestrian circulation or slow moving vehicles. Moreover unrestricted access of slow and fast moving vehicles results in protracted congestion. Combination of different form of transport may be adopted to serve the old city. Parking may be considered on the perimeter outside a ring road with loops into the center. These loops may be served by slow moving vehicles like *riksha*. To reduce traffic load due to commercial activity transportation route should be developed to establish link between the periphery and the new city. The proposed traffic route over the existing layout starts as a continuation of *Azimpur* road and approached to *Lalbag* to establish a link between the city centre and the *Lalbag* group of monuments. The route continues towards *Chauk* through *Waterworks* roads to establish link with *Katra* buildings. The later phase of the route permits the choice of river trip, launched from *Swarighat*. A one way access loop for vehicular movement can be introduced around the artifacts to reduce the regular traffic congestions on the roads. *Chompatuli Lane* may be expanded in width to establish proper linkage between *BaraKatra Lane* and *Chota Katra Ghat Road* through *Swoarighatroad* and *Chompatuli Lane*. The narrow part of, *Chota Katra ghat road*, *DebidasGhat road*, should be expanded to ensure easy traffic movement.(Hossain,2006b).As far as possible some space may be cleared around the artifacts to increase accessibility and visibility.
- Atmospheric and ground pollution are threats to the old city. Poor access to municipal services augmented the pollution level at the area. FAP-8B and *Dhulai khal* improvement project may reduce the drainage problem. Moreover the *Islambag* environmental project is an important opportunity to improve sanitation in the area (DMDP 1995-2015).
- Coexistence of the inhabitant of different religions opened up vast field for cultural diversity and religious and non religious practices have become integral part of urban culture that has to be properly explored to evolve coherent urban culture.

Interventions at Micro Level:

- Relocation of Central Jail and *BDR* head quarters will open up huge possibilities for the area for comprehensive redevelopment programme to reduce pressure on the old fabric and to reestablish linkage with rest of the city. Completion of the western flood protection embankment and improvement of *Buckland* embankment offers an opportunity to provide additional access into the zone by widening the embankment as access road. (DMDP 1995-2015)
- Hotel, entertainment, restaurant, shops, art galleries, craft shops and micro level enterprises that accompany tourism should be focused for economic rejuvenation during adaptive reuse.
- To reduce densities relocation of shelters and commercial activities at the urban fringe may be considered. Parts of the *Katra* buildings are presently occupied by ware houses that should be relocated at the adjacent fringe areas.
- Most retention and least intervention should be done to preserve the aesthetic, cultural quality and patina of age.
- Necessary steps should be taken for emergency maintenance, Routine house keeping and periodic maintenance.
- To revive the damaged parts restoration can be done on the basis of authentic documents, drawings and archaeological evidences.
- Physical up gradation of the existing built-environment should be accompanied by better services and special consolidation is required for the coverage of municipal services in the old fabric.
- As different efforts have failed in past to evict the existing users, contemporary use should be considered along with tourism for *adaptive reuse*. Moreover phase wise development may be considered as mode of operation at implementation level (Hossain, 2006a). So small schemes may be encouraged for rehabilitation rather than large.
- Some consolidation may also be carried out for repairing the damages at foundation level and on structural elements that are partly damaged. Application of the supportive or adhesive material like grouting should be considered in fabricates for continued durability and structural integrity.
- Finishing work on the floor should be based on special technical method followed in *Mughal* period. During restoration of door and windows recent addition and changes should be substituted by original typology.

Epilogue

The Mughal city layout as shown in fig 1 may be revived as discussed. The city must continue to renew itself .So it is not necessary to enact special legislation to preserve the original urban plan of *Mughal Dhaka* or to restrict the

Revitalizing the Mughal Settlements in Old Dhaka

urban continuity in a static frame of any specific period. Physical and visual accessibility to man made (historic) and natural elements need to be created to integrate them into the urban fabric. Preventive maintenance strategy should be effective as an intermediate guideline and to avoid rigidity in architectural conservation different degree of interventions may be synthesized for different *Mughal* monuments. So it is not necessary to conserve the historic artifacts in the conventional manner. Moreover integration of historic monuments within the present urban fabric through development of contextual circulation pattern can promote interrelation among the monuments. During urban conservation it is important to manage the urban dynamics to control increasing pressure that causes rapid transformation. So policy and plans should be formulated to focus on adaptive reuse for the *Mughal* monuments to safeguard the historical patrimony to regenerate the potential cultural market of *old Dhaka* for sustainable development. In short some strategic actions were proposed in the paper to revitalize the Mughal settlements in old Dhaka.

Appendix: Defining the terms.

Prevention of Deterioration: Prevention entails protecting cultural property by controlling its environment, thus preventing agents of decay and damage from becoming active. (Feilden, 2003)

Preservation: Preservation deals directly with cultural property. Its objective is to keep it in its existing state. Repairs must be carried out when necessary to prevent further decay (Feilden, 2003).

Consolidation: With historic buildings, when the strength of structural elements has been so reduced that it is no longer sufficient to meet further hazards, consolidation of the existing material may have to be carried out. However the integrity of the structural system must be respected and its form preserved (Feilden, 2003).

Restoration: The object of restoration is to revive the original concept or legibility of the object. Replacement of missing or decayed parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, must be distinguishable on close inspection from the original so that the restoration doesn't falsify archaeological or historical evidence. (Feilden, 2003).

Revitalization: To bring vigor back to an area or object after decline. This includes redevelopment along with conservation and restoration. (Mowla, 2006)

Adaptive Reuse: Adaptive Reuse, a particular type of approach, combining area conservation with the preservation of individual monuments with upgrading, and some renewal is more nuanced and flexible approach. Adaptive

reuse should be accompanied by area conservation, which focuses on the conservation of urban character as well as some monuments. Legislatively this means the control of new and offensive construction and the restoration and reuse of key buildings as appropriate (Serageldin, 1996).

Reference

Akbar, J. (1988). Crisis in the Built Environment-A Case Study of Muslim Cities, Concept Media Pte Ltd, Singapore.

Cohen, Nohoum (1999). Urban Conservation, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Dani, A.H (1962). Dacca-A Record of Its Changing Fortune, Asiatic Society, Dhaka

DMDP- Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan, 1995-2015, Volume I and II.

Fielden, Bernard.M (2003). Conservation of Historic Buildings, Architectural Press, UK

Geddes, P (1917) Report on Town Planning, Dacca, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta.

Hossain, M.S (2006a). Conservation and management a concept paper for Bara Katra. Unpublished PGT report Submitted at Lund University, Lund, Sweden.

Hossain, M, S (2006b). Lalbag to Chota Katra-A Route to Revitalize the Mughal Heritage of Dhaka City, paper presented at the 19th European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands, June 2006.

Lemaire, Raymond (1996): Why do we preserve historic towns? – presented in the International Workshop on Architecture and Urban Conservation (December 1994) & published in 1996, Centre for Built Environment, Calcutta.

Mowla, Q.A (1997a): Settlement texture: Study of Mahalla in Dhaka, Journal of Urban Design Vol-2(3), U.K. pp 259-275.

Mowla, Q.A (1997b): Morphological evolution of Urban Dhaka, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Liverpool, UK.

Mowla, Q.A (2003): Urbanization and Morphology of Dhaka, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh Vol-48(1) Dhaka, pp 145-170.

Mowla, Q.A (2006): Genesis of South Asian urban Design – Fatehpur Sikri Synthesized, in Jahangir Nagar Planning review-vol-4, pp 53-62.

Mowla, Q.A and Hossain, M.S (2006). Traditional Wisdom in Managing the Dhaka Metropolis, paper presented at the 19th European Conference of Modern South Asian Studies, Leiden University, Netherlands, June 2006.

Serageldin, Ismail (1996): Revitalizing Historic Cities, - presented in the International Workshop on Architecture and Urban Conservation (December 1994) & published in 1996, Centre for Built Environment, Calcutta.