

# **ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION :**

## **A responsive approach to development**

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### **ABSTRACT :**

The significance of preserving architectural heritage for the benefit of posterity has led to an apparent and increasing restoration and architectural conservation activities all over the world. Bangladesh while heir to a rich architectural heritage, reminiscence of the great civilizations that flourished in this region for the past 2000 years and the magnificence of the building art of the indigenous craftsmen under the mighty rulers of the Hindus, the Muslims and the British Raj, is yet to define its stand and policy on the issues of conservation. It is unfortunate much of the country's building heritage is lost and the remaine face the same. Increment weather, serious resource constraints, absence of necessary policy and legislative apparatus, vandalism etc has been slowly crumbling the countrys culturally and historically important buildings over the years.

In the wake of energetic endeavours to discover, to define one's; past to construe one's future that characterises the present time this paper attempts to understand the nature, the scope and viability of architectural conservation in Bangladesh a country with extreme resource constraints striving to save the past and build for the future while struggling to meet to-day's need for basic shelter, food, health and education.

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## INTRODUCTION :

Buildings are representation of high points of human achievements and some buildings and environment cannot be destroyed without incalculable loss to all men both present and future, anymore than great paintings, or any great works of art can be effaced (1). Hence the bid to establish architectural continuum, which today is both a national and a global quest. The search for identity and permanence is said to be induced by the rapidity of change in present time that increases the psychological need for permanence. (2) It is also a reaction to the failure to respect the experience of human living in our present day environment which is not infrequently insensitive to a community's and thereby a country's historical, social, cultural and environmental need. In the developing world, particularly in the muslim countries, the desire for architectural continuum is partially an attempt to impress or reassert their national and cultural identity and or superiority. The concern for architectural conservation is also rooted in the contemporary trend that seriously threatens and are destroying historical sites and edifices in the name of progress, modernization and exploitation of rising land value particularly in the urban centres. The present economic crisis has also made it clear that we cannot afford to destroy old buildings that still have plenty of life in them.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

The concept of architectural conservation first crystallized during the early Romans who recognized the need to preserve Greek ruins as a cultural necessity. Fibonacci (of the Fibonacci series fame) established rules for conservation in Italy as early as 8C AD. The practice, however, was not effectively institutionalized by law in European countries until the middle of the 19c (3) which was linked with the transformation that followed the Industrial Revolution that resulted not only in the destruction of existing landscape and historical monuments on an unprecedented scale but with the discovery of steel framework changed the whole concept of design and material. The post-world war developments, focussing on economic standard solutions added a new dimension to this concept. The preservation of material cultural heritage or patrimony became a part of political ideology in the struggle to recapture the cultural identity lost as a result of industrialization and ravages of war.

In recent times the issue of architectural conservation has become truly an international concern impelled by the realization that natural and cultural resources, of which architecture represents an irreplaceable resource, are limited and are dwindling at an alarming rate. Today conservation is regarded as both a moral obligation and a matter of necessity. As a response the World Heritage Council has been formed and UNESCO has declared 1988-97 as the "World Decade for Cultural Development"

In the Indian subcontinent though conservation ethics is not entirely new the record of its practice is not so well documented as to allow a clear reading of its evolutionary process. There has been always isolated examples born out of individual penchant and vision since ancient times. For example, in the beginning of the christian era, Rudradaman had ordered the renovation of the historical dam that was falling to ruins and during the Sultanate period Feroze Shah Tughlaq had set highest priority to repair of ancient monuments. However by and large it is reasonable to infer that until the beginning of the colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century preservation of monuments was used as a means of legitimizing the existing ruling dynasty (4). The practice of conservation per se was introduced with the consolidation of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) by lord Curzon in 1902 with John Marshall as the director general. The conservation policy thus formulated was made statutory with the enactment of the Ancient Monument Preservation Act 1904 by John Marshall. The policies were given a mature form in a resolution in 1915 and the principles further elaborated and published in a book entitled 'Conservation Manual'. Marshall clearly stated in his book that the aim of conservation is not to reproduce what has been defaced or destroyed but to save what is left from further injury or decay and to preserve it as a national heirloom (5). Today, however, architectural conservation as an issue of wider public and professional concern is still nascent in the subcontinent particularly in Bangladesh. In India it is just beginning to be addressed as a real issue in the economic and social development and of urban and regional planning. At this point perhaps it could be of interest to glean the ideological transformation that has taken place in the conservation movement in the West as both values and practices here have been derived largely from western attitudes and experience (6).

## ESSENCE AND ATTITUDES

The rationale and approaches to architectural conservation has undergone a great deal of ideological transformation both in technique and attitude since its inception. William Morris, the father of the conservation movement in England, considered any thing " which can be looked on as artistic, picturesque, historical, antique or substantial, any work in short, over which educated artistic people would think worthwhile to argue at all " worthy of protection and restoration. John Ruskin, another guru, held a diametrically opposite view to restoration. In his opinion a building or painting after restoration loses authenticity and it becomes a copy or counterfeit (7).

"It is ..... no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the building of past time or not. We have no right what ever to touch them. They are not ours they belong partly to those who built them and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us". "The seven lamps of Architecture", 1849 (8). Between the rationale for restoration and the extreme notion of non-interference or non-intervention also known as 'scrape' and anti-scrape' other attitudes emerged in Europe. The English attitude, however, always expressed a pre-occupation for authenticity. The 'Historic Monuments Protection Act' of 1882 institutionalizing conservation in England shows bias to Ruskin's philosophy that "when care will preserve it no longer, let it perish inch by inch rather than retouch it". This bias was consequently introduced by Lord Curzon in 1902 and absorbed as the philosophy of ASI. (9).

France on the other hand practised a more liberal policy in architectural conservation. It was argued that what could be skillfully substituted would in turn weather and become picturesque to later generations. An alternative preferable to the total obliteration of the form and design of the original (10). Viollet-le-Duc, George Gilbert Scott and a good majority of other 19 century restorers who advocated 'stylistic restoration' instead of 'scientific restoration' always strove to express the original intention of the builder of a historic monument in their work in terms of use form, material and construction techniques. Viollet-le-Duc for one always considered surviving details sufficient indication of the intent of the original builder to guide contemporary restoration.

The attitude of modern restorers towards conservation range over an entire spectrum. The ' archeological' attitude emphasizes scientific conservation in which everything new is set off as distinctly as possible from everything original. It is exemplified especially in the work of archeological restorers in Italy. The 'romantic sentimental' attitude frequently shows ignorance of traditional techniques and of the buildings original appearance. The 'practical architectural' approach stresses the practical knowledge of a modern architect, engineer or building technician and frequently suffers from the same kind of ignorance as the 'romantic' approach. The 'poetic' attitude values the patina of age, a quality difficult to preserve in many materials, especially if a building needs conservation to prevent serious deterioration or collapse. The 'cautious' undogmatic approach emphasizes humility to work of men of other ages, responsibility to the past and future and not just the present. To put more simply it takes the possible viewpoints into consideration and attempts to adopt the most logical of it all. (11)

Before deliberating further it is important to understand the contemporary philosophy of architectural conservation. Once preservation, restoration and architectural conservation, were synonymous its bias succinctly contained in the advice that " it is better to consolidate than to rebuild, better to rebuild than to embellish; in no case must anything be added, and above all nothing should be removed " The nature and intent of architectural conservation today shows a distinct departure from this philosophy. As practised to-day in restoration and preservation work the buildings are restored to their former glory and function, while adaptive re-use and historical preservation fall within the wider connotation of architectural conservation. The contemporary issue of architectural conservation is not the preservation of historical evidence per se but the intrinsic value of areas, environment, and edifices as representation of highpoints in human achievements with more concern for living buildings and living communities (12). It could be said to be the act or process of keeping something in being, of keeping something alive, a single building to a whole city quarter. In the effort to infuse new life it does not exclude demolition or new construction. Architectural conservation augments adaptive re-use i.e. finding new and contemporary use for old historical buildings retaining or preserving as much

as of its original character as possible. (13). It thus allows for slow change linking the past with present as distinct from restoration or preservation which merely preserves or restores a building as close to its original state as far as possible maintaining the same use or which in most cases turns the building at best into a museum. Over the years there has been also a variation in scale and dimension shifting concern from preservation of individual buildings to whole areas in cities, and from buildings to lesser elements of environment like the street furniture, and the surrounding landscape and environment in which the buildings exist.

#### **THE BANGLADESH CONTEXT:**

If viewed from the wider context of architectural conservation that is adaptive re-use and historical preservation most of the conservation work in Bangladesh have been in fact historical restoration. Whatever little work at that has been done has been on the initiative of the Government. These has been either the undertakings of the Ministry of Culture, or the Department of Architecture under Ministry of Works. There have been isolated examples of conservation of ancient buildings by private firms e.g the conservation of 'Bardhawan House' 19 C for Bangla Academy by Shahidullah Associates, and conservation of "Ishaan school" 1910 in Faridpur. by Sthapati Sangsad for Medical Assistant Hostel etc. These do not in any way establish that conservation is a wider professional concern in the private sector.

In Bangladesh the responsibility of protection and preservation of listed monuments, excavation, survey, control of traffic in movable antiquities, regulating foreign excavation missions and establishing museums are entrusted by law to the Department of Archeology and Museums of the Government. The Department has to protect and preserve 229 protected monuments and old sites with a budget allocation of one million taka per annum. It has on its staff a regular engineering branch with engineers trained from the ICCROM Centre at Rome. (14). The monuments on the protection list of the Archeology Department are varied and many. However 90% of the protected monuments are of religious character-mosques, tombs, temples etc, most of which are live monuments daily in use. The Historic City of

Bagerhat and the ruins of Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur protected by the Department have been entered by Bangladesh to be listed on the World Heritage List. Constrained by extreme resource scarcity the Department of Archeology is making valiant effort, to protect the historically important edifices of Bangladesh. Some of the important monuments restored by the Archeology Department are Lalbagh Fort of Dhaka (1679) Kutia temples, Rajshahi (18C-19C); Bagha Mosque, Rajshahi (1523AD); Rajbibi Mosque, Gaur (15C); Goaldi Masjid, Sonargao (16C); Gorar Masjid, Baro Bazar, Jessore (16C), Shahjadpur Kacharibari Shirajganj (19C); Mainamati Buddha Vihar, Comilla; Idgah Mosque, Sat-Masjid Road, Dhaka (17C); Dhakcshwari Temple, Dhaka etc.

The architectural conservation activities of the Department of Architecture, Ministry of Works Bangladesh is more a denouement of individual initiative rather than effectuation of a policy frame-work. It reflects the enlightened view of an administrator rather than a general policy. The activities of the department although very recent, beginning only in the 80's are appreciable. It encompasses a wide variety of building types both religious and secular dating from the early Mughal to the British period. Some of the works are pure historic preservation while others are historic restoration and a degree of modification of the original structure to accommodate the need for expansion of the building's contemporary use as exemplified by the Collectorate Building in Jessore. The Jessore Collectorate Building marked the debut of the Department of Architecture's (Ministry of Works) architectural conservation pursuits in 1980. Since then a number of projects have been under taken by the Department of Architecture as follows (15).

- 1) The Jessore Collectorate Building (1880-1920) Jessore,
- 2) The Chummary House (1911). Dhaka
- 3) The Old High Court Building, (1905) Dhaka
- 4) The Mahanager Pathager, Dhaka (although built in 1952 it represents the vernacular Colonial style of the 1905-12 period)
- 5) Tara Masjid in Armanitola (early 18c) Dhaka.
- 6) Ahsan Manjil, (1872) the palace of the Nawab of Dhaka on the north bank of River Buriganga in old Dhaka.

In general as can be adduced from the previous discussion architectural conservation activities in Bangladesh have been focused upon monuments and group of monuments which have historical and cultural significance. For most part these are institution (religious and social) rarely the more utilitarian and less public and commercial structures. Today there are many recognised areas which warrant conservation efforts but are yet to be explored in Bangladesh. The traditional city quarters in the older parts of Dhaka, for example, representative of a distinct regional and cultural syntax are yet to receive the desired necessary attention and focus in conservation activities of the country. The older city quarters abandoned for the progress of the new city are often in a sad state of neglect. These areas have become the locus of inexpensive housing and with the resulting doubling and tripling of original population densities the physical fabric of these environments is continually deteriorating and some are on brink of total destruction. In other words area conservation is a dimension in architectural conservation that is yet to be explored in Bangladesh.

Architectural Conservation problems in Bangladesh are multi-dimensional. The very object of conservation i.e. the buildings and edifices to be conserved present a unique problem on account of the fragile nature of the building materials used. The pre-mughal buildings were generally made of indigenous perishable materials like mud, bamboo, reed and wood which on exposure to extreme heat, high humidity and torrential monsoon rainfall experienced in these parts easily perished and are nonexistent today. The more permanent structure of the later periods were invariably burnt brick constructions laid in mud-mortar. Brick, which has remained the chief building material in Bangladesh even today, is susceptible to sulphate attack, dampness and rank vegetable growth in the subtropical humid climate of the region. The flat topography with high water-table compounded by water logging from seasonal inundation causes general dampness and severe dampness to the brick foundations. The rising damp and the resultant heavy sulphate attack, pernicious lichens, moss and banayan growth disfigures and disintegrates the masonry work of unattended ancient buildings with surprising speed. Other dimensions of problem in architectural conservation in Bangladesh are legislation, public awareness and financial inducement, above all the absence

of healthy professionalism i.e conservation not being a wider professional concern.

Presently legislations relating to building and use controls in Bangladesh exist in the form of East Bengal Building Construction Act (EBBC) 1952, the Pourashava Act 1977, the Building Construction Regulation 1984, and Town Improvement Act (TIA) 1953 for different cities and towns as for Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi etc. These legislations have no reference what so ever to the problem of architectural conservation. There are also a number of legal provisions and codes for archeological preservation like the Antiquities Act of 1964, the Manuals of Conservation of 1922 etc. (16). These acts are more or less in the pattern of what is followed in India, Pakistan and Srilanka introduced by the British about a hundred years ago.

None of the legislations mentioned effectively deal or serve the present need and cause of conservation. For example, the most recent legislation enacted is the Antiquities Ordinance 1976 (17) which is merely an amendment of the Antiquities Act, 1964 of the then Pakistan period. The ordinance was primarily introduced with the objective to make,

(I) Terminological changes deemed necessary with the change in the political status of the country i.e. the emergence of the sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971.

(II) Correction of typing/printing errors in the 1964 Act.

(III) Minor omissions, inclusion, or elaboration of the clauses in the 1964 Act.

The Antiquities Act 1964 is an act to consolidate and amend the law relating to the preservation and protection of Antiquities. Antiquities as defined by the law means "(i) any product of human activity \_\_\_\_\_ reflective of any aspect of civilization; (ii) any ancient object or site of historic, ethnographic, anthropological, military or scientific interest; (iii) any other ancient object \_\_\_\_\_ declared \_\_\_\_\_ by notification \_\_\_\_\_ to be an antiquity, where ancient means, "belonging or relating to any period prior to May 1857" The period was later redefined in the 1976 ordinance as ~The Preceding hundred years.

"The 1964 Act merely empowers the Archeology Department, Ministry of Culture to declare any building or site as an ancient monument to be preserved by law if more than hundred years old, and the right to acquire the property under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (I of 1894) as for a public purpose. (18). The 1964 Act to be precise merely defines what is to be protected, who has to protect but the hows are not well stipulated so far as buildings and monuments are concerned, nor is there any reference to the issues of architectural conservation. For instance, there is no clause or sub-clause in the Act to control the land-use and physical development in the area around historical sites and buildings which is a matter of necessity for their conservation. The ineffective existing legislation is primarily a consequent of inadequate knowledge and expertise in the concerned bodies compounded by the absence of an appropriate administrative apparatus. (19).

Never the less legislation alone cannot preserve or conserve a heritage. It needs the support of an enlightened public and financial assistance for restoration work. (20). Vandalism has been a serious threat to preservation of historic monuments. Rising building costs has led to dismantling of many ancient edifices to provide building material, particularly brick, for new construction. In the rural scene the constant pressure for arable land has claimed and destroyed many historical sites. The misguided zeal of ignorant public has been a considerable threat in the recent past (21). In attempts to restore and renovate ugly old buildings they have been given a face - lift with the so called modern look and thus permanently destroyed of their historical value.

Resource constraints of Bangladesh need no elaboration. The funds available for architectural conservation is grossly inadequate. The Department of Archeology is allocated one million taka (US \$ 30,000 approx) annually to protect 229 monuments all over the country which in Expert's opinion is extremely low. The Department of Architecture under Ministry of Works, the other organization concerned with architectural conservation, has no budget allocation for conservation work. Funds are made available on project basis by different sponsoring agencies who in most part are also the prospective client and user of the building to be conserved. This indeed poses an insurmountable obstacle as no clear and effective policy can be formulated. In

expert's opinion at present more funds for architectural conservation are not likely to be available nor can be justified given the enormous, competing demands of broader context of national economic and social development needs for basic shelter, food, health and education that are now faced in Bangladesh. (22).

Recognising that the responsibility of preserving and conserving our heritage cannot be borne by the Public Authority alone a workshop on 'Architectural Conservation' the first of its kind in the country was held in Dhaka recently to deliberate and to acquaint the professional and non-professional communities to the scope of architectural conservation in Bangladesh. The workshop undoubtedly was instrumental in defining to an extent the theoretical, technical and practical aspect of architectural conservation in Bangladesh.

### CONCLUSION

A coherent policy of architectural conservation is a sine qua non if substance is to be given to our built environment, of present and of future, and to the intangible ethos of our cultural identity. The questions to be addressed are how in Bangladesh the concern for architectural conservation can be developed and what should be the matrix of decision making and what line of action could be pursued.

Contextual research is perhaps the first necessary precondition to build any effective programme of conservation in Bangladesh. Since to preserve everything of value however desirable is not possible one would have to be selective. The selection process necessarily pre-supposes the definition of what is important and also classification of buildings and areas deserving conservation efforts. The objective is to ensure that what is most valuable historically and is culturally significant and truly representative may receive the priority they deserve. To accomplish this task professionals need to be trained to be sufficiently knowledgeable and skillful to make the critical judgement and act on the critical issues.

Conservation involves legislation, public education and money. Without all three a successful programme cannot exist. Legislation alone cannot preserve or conserve a heritage, nor can ample funds without the public's belief in the need to preserve and conserve. Similarly an enlightened public unsupported by effective legislation will fail and without adequate funds no work is possible. Therefore all three elements must have a pragmatic basis to make any conservation policy a reality in Bangladesh.

In this country arousing public awareness and interest is necessary not only to prevent present vandalism and misguided efforts but because it is necessary to initiate and mobilize private finance to the cause of conservation. It is recognised that the shoe-string public budget can only protect a very limited number of historic monuments effectively. It may be mentioned further that significant public sector budget are not likely to be available or even to be expected in Bangladesh for conservation works. Other sources of finance must be sought. Foundations, major private sector enterprises etc need to be explored as possible sponsors of specific projects. It is also not considered to be ideal to have the government in the role of the sole custodian of a nation's heritage, a task for the community at large. (23). Therefore a 'heritage council' is needed through which the community can participate in decision making.

There is also a great need to develop an awareness among all development institutions on the issues of conservation for often irreparable damages are made in the name of progress. To achieve this it is needed to ensure that the scope of work for the major development projects, both sectoral and spatial, include a specific task to assess the architectural conservation need of the particular area.

Ironic as it may be the very fact that Bangladesh is yet to address the problem of conservation could be a blessing in disguise. What has emerged in this vacuum is the option to reassess our development ideology and to deliberate and define the role of architectural conservation in our development and planning, whether it should be a marginal technical activity

central to our material reality and key to the definition of identity. It further offers Bangladesh the opportunity to profitably glean experience from others in comparable situation and seek appropriate solutions in the local context.

In the deranged order of happenings in the country there is an inherent danger of trying to telescope overnight the process that took generations else-where to evolve and inviting the obvious pitfalls. However in the face of the alternative of losing our historic built environment and associated cultural heritage by default makes it a lesser evil. Whatever be the action matrix it calls for the initiative and commitment of architects and other professionals in the field to formulate it and make it a practical reality.

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