
RUPLAL HOUSE, DHAKA.

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The Workshop Brief

On the south side Ruplal House presents a river front of some 300 feet; on the north side it has three unequal projecting wings and a garden. The building is two storeys high overall and contains a large number of apartments of various size. At present it is heavily encroached by spice and vegetable vendors and by a colony of unauthorised squatters who have erected shanty hovels against the building. The east block, however, is owned by a private person.

The street which runs past the north side of the house (and the surrounding area generally) is characteristic of old Dhaka, with houses of varying height built right up to the street line.

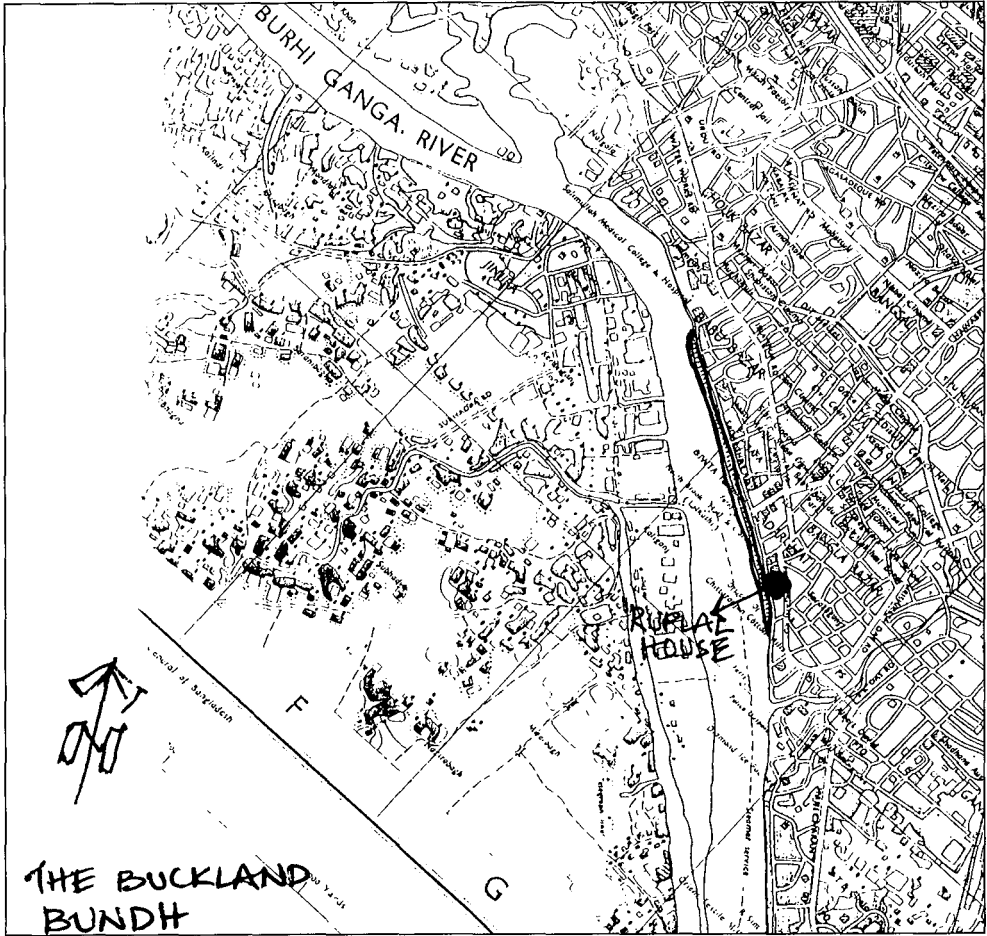
The Workshop team members are asked to carry out the following six tasks:

1. A survey of the Ruplal House and surrounding area.

You will need to take rough measurements so that you can draw up floor plans of the house to a scale of 1 in 200 and a plan of the whole area to a scale of 1 in 500.

You will also need to examine and consider the structure, finishes, decorative details and services of the house and the general condition of the garden.

Regarding the surrounding area, you are not expected to enter



Dhaka city plan showing location of Buckland Bund area and Ruplal House

into every house, but to make a rough and mainly external survey only, reporting on the general condition of the buildings and examining the spaces between the buildings.

2. A proposal for the restoration of the Ruplal House.

This task is to be seen as distinct from the conversion of the house to one or more new uses. It will include the removal of all accretions, making the building weather-tight, and the work necessary to restore the building both externally and internally to something like its former condition. In making this proposal you are asked particularly to highlight the general principles of restoration which you intend to follow.

3. A proposal for the conversion of the house to one or more new uses.

You will need to draw the floor plans of the house to show the new uses and the changes you propose to make. Drawings should be to a scale of 1 in 200.

4. A proposal for the restoration of the garden to fit in with the new use or uses you are proposing for the house. Drawings should be to a scale of 1 in 200.
5. A proposal for one or more new buildings in the street which runs past the north side of the house.

Land values are high in Old Dhaka and the restoration and rehabilitation of the Ruplal House has pushed these land values even higher. There is pressure to redevelop and several landowners in the street are considering taking advantage of the situation. In your design proposal you will need to consider height and bulk limitations and other design guide-lines to help achieve a sympathetic solution which will also give the landowners the returns which they are looking for. Floor plans should be drawn to a scale of 1 in 200, sections and elevations to a scale of 1 in 100.

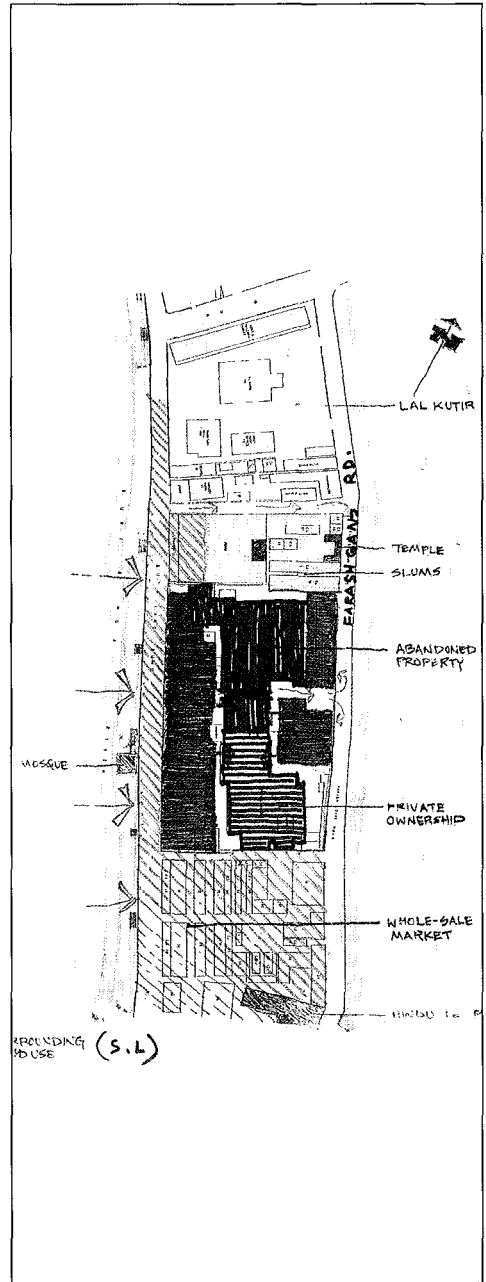
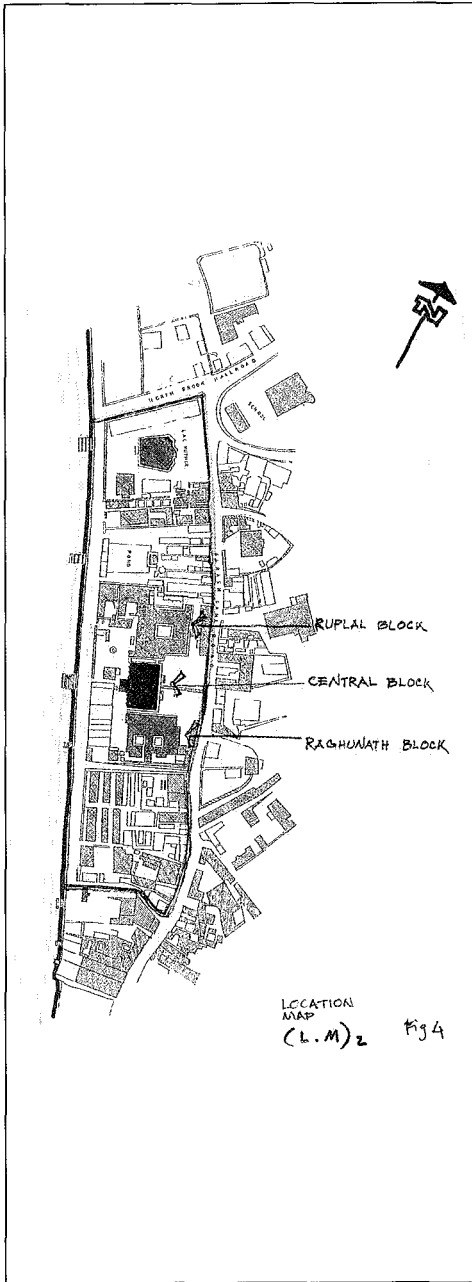
6. A proposal for the upgrading of the surrounding area and for the improvement of the spaces between buildings.

You will need to consider the quality of the services, the floor surface, the street furniture, the overhead wires, the lighting, etc.

Introduction

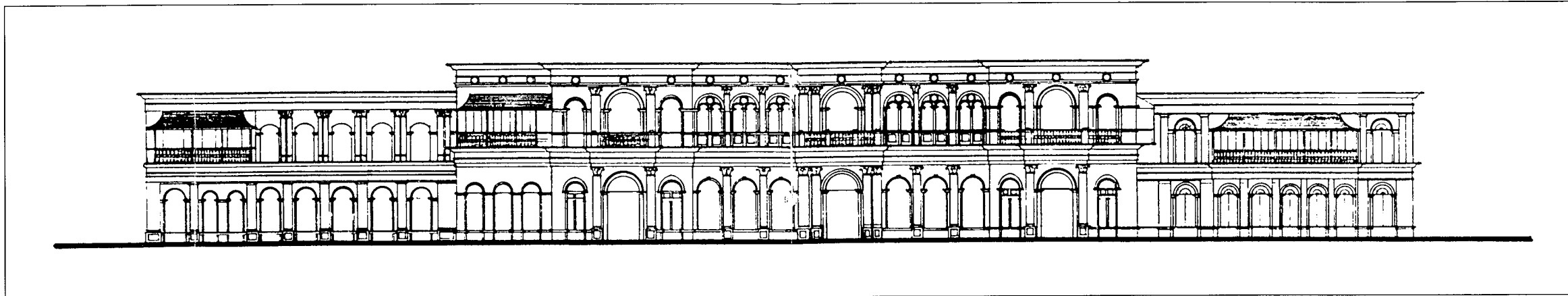
Ruplal House is a grand nineteenth century mansion situated on the northern bank of the River Buriganga in the southern part of Dhaka city. It is built on the Buckland Bund, an embankment built primarily to save the banks of the river from erosion. At the same time, the Bund provided the city with a river-side promenade. On the north of the site runs the Farashganj Road, one of the main links between the Eastern and Western parts of the Old City, presently extremely overcrowded.

Ruplal House is a very important example of a chain of river-side

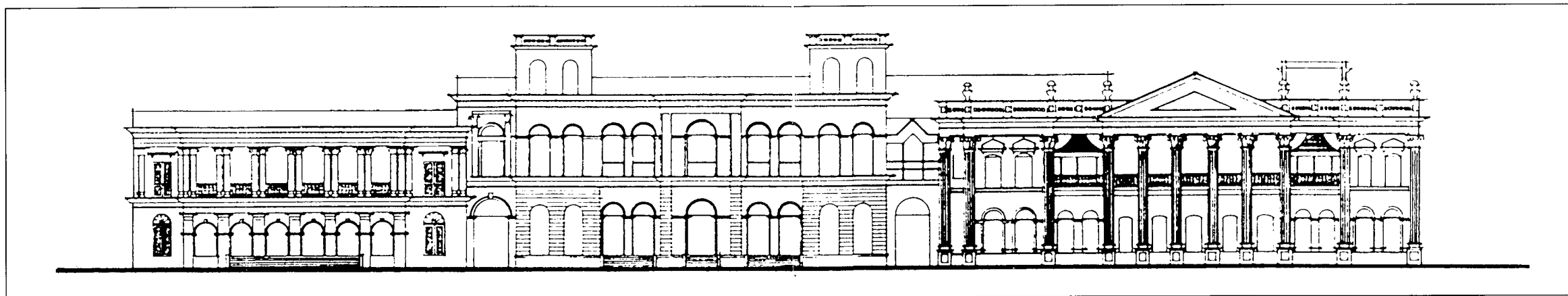


Location plan of buildings comprising Ruplal House

Land use and ownership diagram



Ruplal House, Dhaka, southern elevation from the riverside. Built by wealthy Hindu merchants, this late nineteenth century residence was designed by Martin & Company of Calcutta



Ruplal House, north elevation showing pediment marking main entrance on Ruplal's Block

mansions — among them Ahsan Manzil and Lal Kutir — constructed by eminent citizens of 19th century Dhaka. Proximity to water has always been appreciated by wealthy land owners, and we see its present counter-part in the artificial water bodies created for example in Dhanmondi, Gulshan and more recently Baridhara.

Ruplal House is known to have hosted a lot of the cultural activity of the time. Gurus of Indian classical music like Ostad Alauddin Khan, Ostad Wali Ullah Khan and Lakshmi Devi used to hold regular *jalsas* or classical performances there.

Socio-Politico-Economic Environment

Since the shifting of the capital of Bengal in 1704 from Dhaka to

Murshidabad, Dhaka had gradually lost much of its political and economic importance, becoming a neglected outpost of the British Raj. A century later, squalor and unhygienic conditions were commonplace in Dhaka. As conditions reached notable extremes, the attention of the authorities was attracted and from 1825 onwards, the collectors of the District are said to have exerted efforts to improve the civic amenities of Dhaka. One result was the construction of the Buckland Bund; another was the series of riverside mansions built along this Bund. Dhaka after a long period of obscurity started to come into the limelight once again.

Ruplal House was built during a period in our history which witnessed the gradual rising of the merchant class in a society of landowners or *zamindars*. This merchant class understandably wanted to exhibit its newly acquired status by building prominent town palaces.



Buckland Bund Besides controlling river erosion, the Bund (embankment) served originally as a promenade for Dhaka's citizens. It is now dominated by wholesale vegetable and fruit dealers.

Ruplal Das and Raghunath Das, the two sons of a prominent merchant, Swarup Chandra Das, commissioned this graceful neo-Indo-Classical residential complex. They purchased the land from expatriate merchants along with an existing building on the site; they then commissioned the Calcutta-based architectural firm of Martin Company to build them this grand mansion, which would appropriately declare their status in the city.

Physical Aspects of the Project

The complex known as Ruplal House in reality consists of three distinct blocks of differing architectural styles. These blocks are completely separate in the ground floor, but are related to each other at the upper level by interconnections supported by archways spanning the ground level. For ease of identification, these three blocks are referred to as Ruplal's Block, the western wing; Raghunath's Block, the eastern wing, and a Central Block that linked them.

Of the three blocks, Ruplal's is the most imposing, built in the neo-classic style then prevailing in England. This grand wing has been finished with great attention to the minutest detail and can still convey, over a

century later, some of the astonishment and intense pleasure that it must have imparted in its prime. This wing is generously supplied with neo-corinthian capitals on fluted columns, several different types of window details, beautiful mosaic work and stained glass. The neo-corinthian portico at the northern side of this block lends it a very western flavour often observed in colonial buildings.

Very similar to Ruplal's Block is the central block. The two archways that connect this to the east and west block are treated differently. The western archway is topped by an essentially oriental gabled detail which seems to have been a later addition. The eastern archway, on the other hand, continues in the same style as the central block.

Raghunath's block which lies to the east of the complex is of a different architectural character from the rest. In the facade which faces the entrance court in the north, there is a distinct absence of arches. The capitals are no longer corinthian, but seem to be of a more Indianised origin. Workmanship on this block is apparently much inferior to that in Ruplal's Block.

However, there seems to have been an agreement in the construction of the river-side facades of the three blocks, all in the "Ruplal style", with a slight emphasis on the central block. The overhanging balconies of the three blocks also present a unified appearance.

Though at present there are no gardens or grounds serving this complex, it is clear that the north and south of the buildings consisted largely of formal gardens leading to the entrances.

The style and details of these blocks are as numerous as the constructional principles employed and any attempt at documentation must necessitate taking each block separately and discussing the treatment of the different elements there-in.

The walls are load-bearing constructions of 25 to 30-inch thick brick masonry work. On some interior surfaces there are alcoves or niches about 5 inches deep built into the walls.

Most of the columns in Ruplal's and the central block are fluted. The method employed in Ruplal's block to achieve fluting is moulding of lime plaster on the surface of circular brick columns. The main northern portico with its triangular pediment has columns of this sort. Raghunath's columns are mostly circular brick columns devoid of fluting and are topped by plain square capitals.

All the external capitals are neo-corinthian in appearance and have square bases. The columns of the interior courtyard have Corinthian capitals on the upper ceiling level, but those of the lower ceiling level are slightly different and look like hybrid Indo-European styles.

Ownership Questions

The multi-ownership pattern at Ruplal House creates a complex situation from the legal standpoint. At present half of the house is occupied by legal owners; the other half was declared enemy property and hence is under possession by the government. The private owners have been in this site for about 35 years, when they bought it from one of the descendents of Ruplal's brother.

An informal talk with some of the present owners during the workshop period revealed that some of them would be willing to move to other areas and give the authorities the opportunity to conserve this building as long as proper compensation was handed out. The owners actually mentioned that it would be a relief to them to do this for two main reasons. Firstly it was becoming increasingly difficult to repair the building as definite ownership areas were not demarcated and secondly the wholesale market, especially the spice market, which surrounds the complex was making life very unpleasant.

The abandoned half of Ruplal's House is at present occupied by families of army staff. We feel that if properly appealed the Government would also voluntarily hand over this section for conservation purposes.

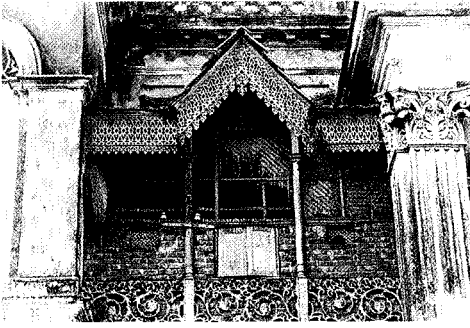
However, it is quite possible that legal intervention may be necessary to empty the building of its present varied occupancies and this has to be one of the first steps before the commencement of any actual physical conservation work in this project.

It is unclear at present whether there exists appropriate legislative support within the existing legal framework in this country. New supportive laws may have to be formulated by lawyers; this task is beyond the scope of architects, planners and engineers, who can merely outline the required end results.

Master Planning Control

The fact is that along with its other important associations, Ruplal House is undeniably part of an historical zone of the river-side palaces of Buckland Bund. Any plan to conserve Ruplal House, therefore, has to take into account a conservation plan for the embankment too, in order to restore the original setting.

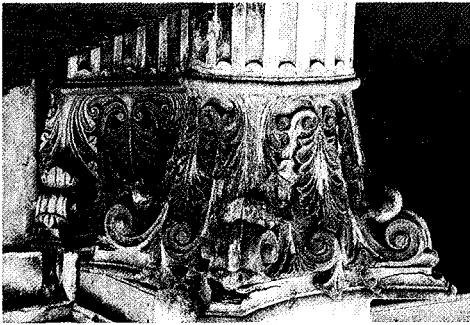
A government proposal to develop this embankment in 1963 (Buckland Bund Scheme) included the preservation of historical buildings along the Bund, notably Ahsan Manzil, Lal Kutir, BAFA, Ruplal House, etc.



The gabled connection between two of the blocks of Ruplal House, fairly intact but abused by careless modification



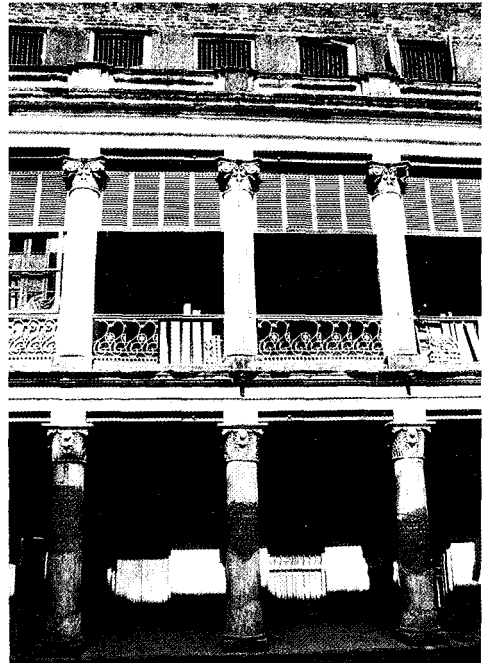
Balconies at Ruplal House, presently used as toilets.



Detail of the corinthian capitals in Ruplal's Block of the mansion



The north pediment, Ruplal's Block (western wing). The only such pediment in the structure, it highlights the most imposing of the three blocks built in the neo-classical style



Rising damp on the ground floor has disintegrated the plaster finish of the brick columns

Secondly, it mandated the development of the embankment extending from Babu Bazar in the north-west to Mill Barracks in the south-east.

From the planning point of view two factors are of special importance, the traffic pattern and the land use pattern. The streets here are narrow, the volume of traffic is enormous and on the increase all the time, which contributes to heavy traffic jams, a regular feature in the daily life of old Dhaka. To overcome this, alternative routes have to be suggested. One possible solution is river access.

A river connection between easily accessible points in Newer Dhaka, like the Sat Masjid area to the Buckland Bund, may be worth serious consideration to solve the traffic problems.

Land Use Pattern

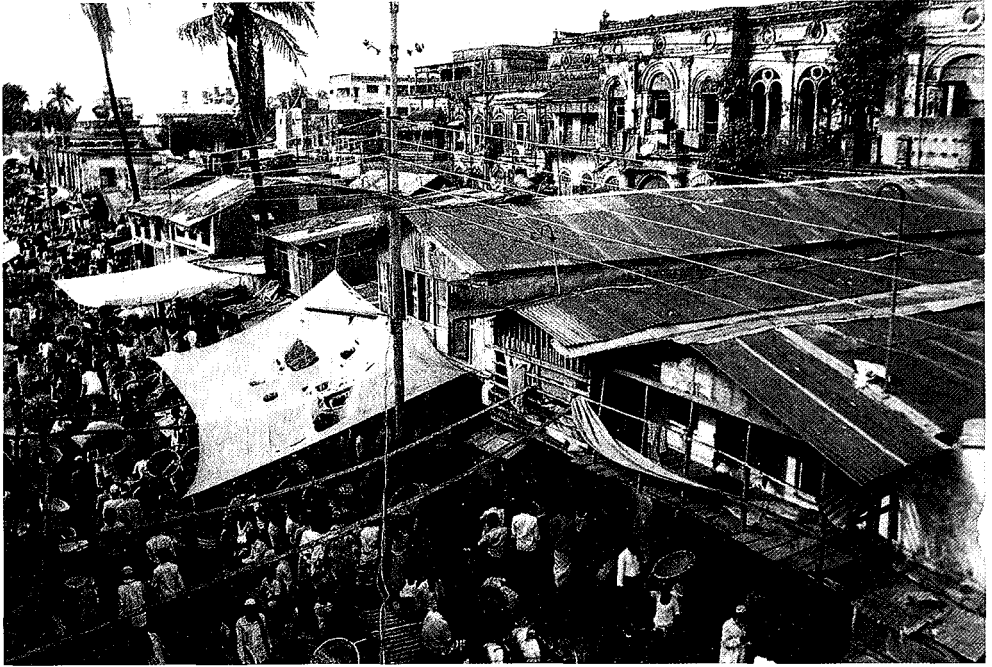
The commercial activity in this area has been on the increase for quite some time.

One of the wholesale centres of old Dhaka was the neighbouring Shyambazar. From here the wholesale market started to overflow into the Buckland Bund and Farashganj Road. At present the embankment is absolutely crowded with wholesalers primarily of vegetables and fruits. The Farashganj side and the premises of Ruplal House are occupied by spice wholesalers. The goods are delivered from the river which makes possible this encroachment on the banks, almost totally illegal.

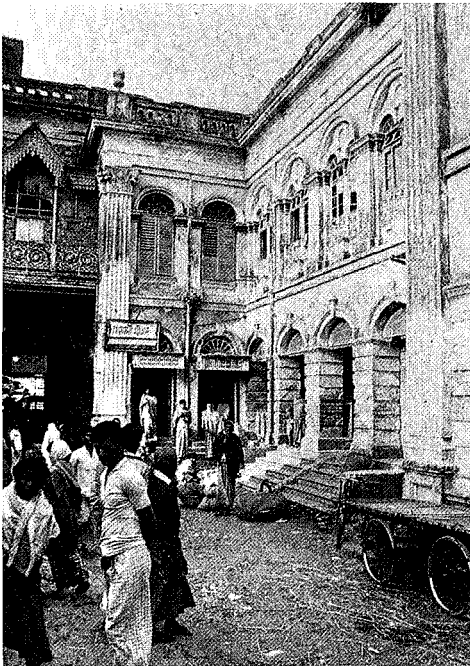
In the beginning of this decade the Town Planner of Rajuk conducted a study on this market. His findings showed that there has been a spontaneous shifting of this market to new centres like Kawran Bazar, Gabtali and Saidabad. This was a direct result of a government restriction on the movement of heavy vehicles in old Dhaka.

With the construction of the new China-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge which gives easy access to the northern bank of the river Buriganga, it is hoped that the shifting trend will further accelerate, as this new bridge provides relatively easy transportation to and from the other bank. We know that there is a proposal to form a new wholesale centre across the river which would encourage the shift of the Bund wholesalers. A removal of the market from the Ruplal area would free the locality of its encroachment and also reduce the traffic load to a marked extent.

Thus Master Planning control has to be implemented as a prerequisite to any conservation work on Ruplal House.



Buckland Bund, Dhaka, with Ruplal House in the background. The present market activities are illegal. Proposals to ameliorate the situation include a new wholesale centre across the river. Government restrictions on heavy vehicle movement in old Dhaka may also encourage a shift of the market to new centres.



Ruplal House, showing the encroachment of the wholesale market.

Physical Intervention

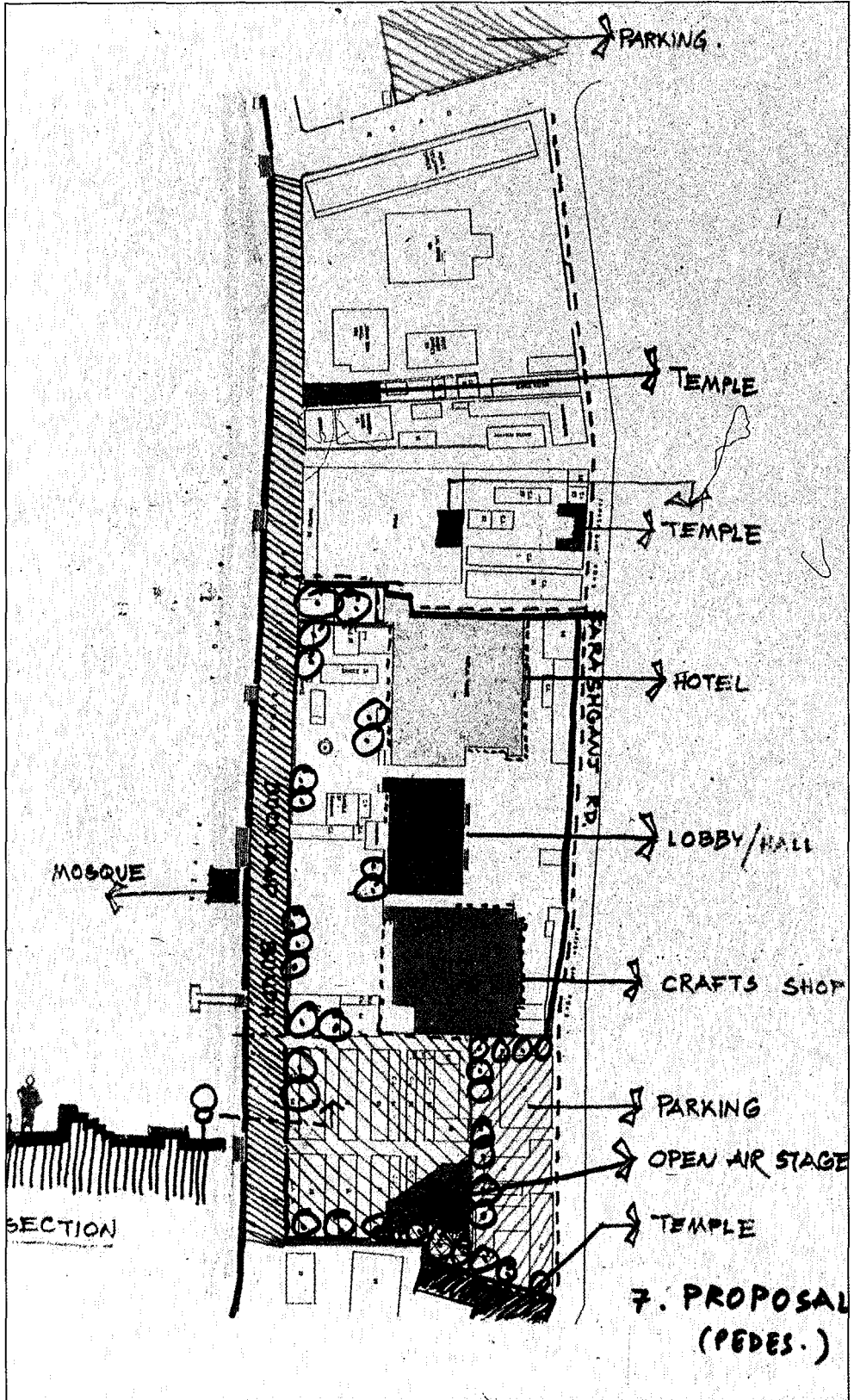
In the course of the workshop, this group tried to ascertain the degree of physical intervention necessary to realise the conservation of Ruplal House. The technical feasibility study at this stage consisted of locating damage to the various parts of the structure and subsequently listing them according to priorities. The following is a summary of the findings.

1. The roof was found to be leaking in many parts. The timber beams are slowly decaying and are termite-ridden. One section of the roof has caved in. Roof repair is obviously the first line of action.
2. There appeared to be fractures in the fabric of the building at certain points, either caused by earthquake or by differential settlement. If on further examination this is found to be severe, under-pinning of the foundation may have to be undertaken.
3. There appeared to be definite evidences of rising damp up to about 10 feet above ground level. This is probably the effect of a very high water table and may require site-draining. A detailed survey by experts is necessary.
4. Damage done to the building by encroachers is quite high. Heavy jute gunny bags of whole spices are stocked against the walls with little thought given to the structure. The open drains are used as latrines. This adds to the already acute drainage problem in the area.
5. Make-shift toilets have been added at random around the building and leaking pipes from them are producing damage to walls.

Rehabilitation of the Structure

Any conservation project has to be made economically and socially viable before work on it can be approved. Possible uses for the building discussed in this workshop were:

1. The mayor's formal office, with formal gardens where he could entertain and conduct ceremonies of special importance.
2. A house for cultural activities, dance, dramas, etc. The demand for this is quite high at the moment in this area.



Planning proposal of the redevelopment of Ruplal House as a hotel and tourist center.

3. A city museum. There may well be further possibilities for new uses for this beautiful building.

4. The use for Ruplal House that the Team supports finds its origin in the original setting, i.e. the Embankment. We propose that Parjatan Corporation, the tourist organization of Bangladesh, take over the property and convert it into a tourist centre with hotel accommodations. This would include a grand dining hall and a multi-purpose hall, both of which could be housed in the beautiful but forgotten ballrooms of this building.

The complex would include a local tourist centre and specialised shops for crafts, jewellery and books. There could be provision for viewing the craftsmen at work, who would have their sales sections attached, e.g. such crafts as *Nokshi Katha*, jewellers, wooden and bamboo carving, and weaving.

However, the rehabilitation cannot stop at the building itself. Any proposal for its conservation must include the following points:

1. Treatment of the Buckland Bund stretch from Shyambazar to Babu Bazar as an historical zone.
2. Complete pedestrianization of this embankment. If this is not possible, pedestrianize at least the stretch from Shyambazar to Lal Kutir.
3. Installation of green areas, benches, gas lamps, selected vendors, horse carts, etc., anything to give the place a feeling of history.
4. Restoration not only of Ruplal House but of other buildings of particular beauty along this stretch. Ahsan Manzil and Lal Kutir have already been done. We hope that adding Ruplal House to this list will enrich this zone further and more proposals for restoration will follow.
5. Establishment of alternative boat routes to and from new Dhaka to ease congestion.
6. Proper planning for shifting the wholesale market to a more suitable area.
7. Installation of adequate sewerage and drainage to prevent the water table from rising further and creating more structural damage.

Conclusions

It has been obvious from the start of the workshop that Ruplal House cannot be treated as an isolated building in the middle of a crowded spice market and that conservation of the actual building will automatically demand the conservation of the bordering river-side belt. This would not only revitalise the area, but would also provide a much needed breathing space for the city dwellers.

A zone such as has been suggested would encourage the population of New Dhaka to re-establish its link with old Dhaka and thus with their roots. There is a dearth of open civic amenities in the city as a whole, which is why the newly opened China-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge is so crowded in the evenings. People are forever seeking open spaces. The historic zone proposed with its river-side mansions will provide an excellent opportunity for such a promenade. From this presentation, we hope we have been able to convey to our readers the need to conserve Ruplal House in its original setting. We have to give back Dhaka its water front and with it, its heritage.