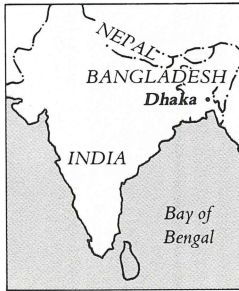


# Muzharul Islam, Kahn and Architecture in Bangladesh



*Kazi Ashraf, a young professional who trained in his own country, has used the opportunity for post-graduate study and work experience abroad to take a hard critical look at the contemporary situation, its roots and influences, in Bangladesh. He describes the seminal importance of one man, the architect Muzharul Islam, on his generation as well as famous expatriates like American Louis Kahn. Mr Ashraf's essay demonstrates an approach of critical self-appraisal from which young professionals in similar circumstances might benefit.*  
— Editors

**W**hile the role of British colonialism on the Indian sub-continent has already been widely debated, it is difficult to ignore this overwhelming specter even in contemporary times. Colonial rule constituted a great rupture in Indian societies, yet it is equally true that an exposure to European institutions also revealed some of the more repressive conditions existing in these same societies. It is this tension — created from drawing lessons from worldwide sources in order to transform what appeared to be obsolete systems, yet at the same time rediscovering the essence of ancient culture — which has charged the core of Bengali intellectuals, under foreign domination and since.

From the beginning of this century almost all aspects of societal existence in Bengal, particularly stimulated by movements in political and literary fields, have been informed by a duality of specifically Bengali cultural identity and of appropriating things from a global repository. There continues to reign a complex situation of *acceptance and resistance* — a resistance to both the traumatising aspects of colonialism and the repressive 'traditional' conditions, and an acceptance albeit critical of trans-cultural techniques and norms that promised new avenues for exploration. While Rabindranath Tagore the poet, through his varied intellectual pursuits, had been the most heroic figure in taming this duality, others were less successful in areas like painting and especially architecture, where a Eurocentric sensibility held sway. The problem was compounded because of the amnesia into which architectural culture had lapsed during the colonial period and the vacuum in thinking which prevailed in this realm of the arts.

In architecture there were no compa-

rable efforts to the Bengal School of Arts for example, which attempted to synthesize the imagery and symbolism of Bengali (Indian) culture with European representational methods. In fact, the Public Works Department, manned primarily by engineers and draftsmen, became the exclusive authority for construction — and devastatingly, synonymous with architecture.

Muzharul Islam, the leading figure in architecture of the region, began his lonely yet committed struggle under these conditions, by designing two buildings in Dhaka in 1955 which, it might be said, initiated a 'renaissance' in contemporary architecture for East Pakistan. Having trained first as an engineer, Muzharul Islam opted for further study in architecture and went to the University of Oregon in the United States and to Yale University where he received a Masters degree under the supervision of Paul Rudolph (see MIMAR 30). It was upon his return to East Pakistan, and as part of his responsibilities within the ubiquitous Public Works Department (as no private architectural firms existed at the time) that he designed two edifices which are landmark in terms of the recent history of the profession locally: Dhaka, Public Library (now Dhaka University Library) and the College of Arts and Crafts. The former was clearly organised in a Corbusian mode — a cubic volume on stilts, complete with ramps, sun-breakers and pristine white colour — but it indicated for Dhaka then fresh qualities of urbanism and environment. The western wing of the project, with its climate control devices such as shell roofs and brick louvres for the openings, was an original articulation by the architect. It was, however, the College for Arts and Crafts, which came closer to mediating with the conditions of the place and programme. Sprawling, low building volumes, the use of exposed fired brick which always has such a magical resonance with the "green" of Bengal, the natural 'garden' setting on an urban site, all went to form the atmosphere of a campus that was ideal for the contemplation and learning of the arts, and, more importantly, indicated a spatial environment evoking the architectural poetics of the land.

## The Eventful 1960s

In the political area the 1950s registered the first tremor of a rift between the two wings of Pakistan. The Language Movement of 1952, when lives were lost to

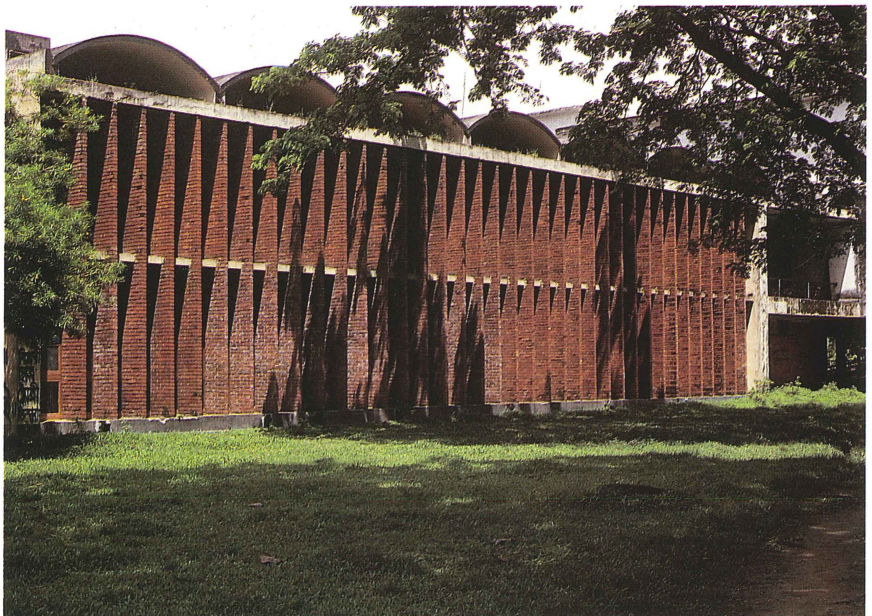
*Text and photographs by Kazi Khaleed Ashraf unless where otherwise indicated.*



establish Bengali as an official language, indicated the inability of the leaders of Pakistan then to comprehend the spiritual depth of cultures, and signalled the beginning of the struggle for Bengali self-identity which would explode into the War of 1971. The dominant political consciousness in East Pakistan, particularly in the 1960s, motivated by the issue of economic disparities between the two wings, and fuelled by the manipulative use of religion by the central government, would polarize most Bengali intellectual towards secular, socialist thinking.

Turbulent as this period was politically, the 1960s were significant too in the architectural realm. A development spree (often as part of "foreign aid package") saw a profusion of building activities. "... There was chaos in architecture, but there were achievements too. It was in this decade that formal architectural education was established. And it was in this decade that important foreign architects like Louis I. Kahn, Paul Rudolph, Constantin Doxiadis, Richard Neutra, Stanley Tigerman produced their works here. It was at Dhaka in 1968 that the most important conference of the Institute of Architects Pakistan was organised, proclaiming a new spirit of architecture. In the 60s, there were very few practising architects, there were gaps in architectural sensibility, and inadequately trained people with vested interests were operating within the profession, yet there was an agreement among the architects to offer their very best to society."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shamsul Wares, *Architecture in the 50s and 60s in Bangladesh*, *Architecture and Planning* 1982, *Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology*.

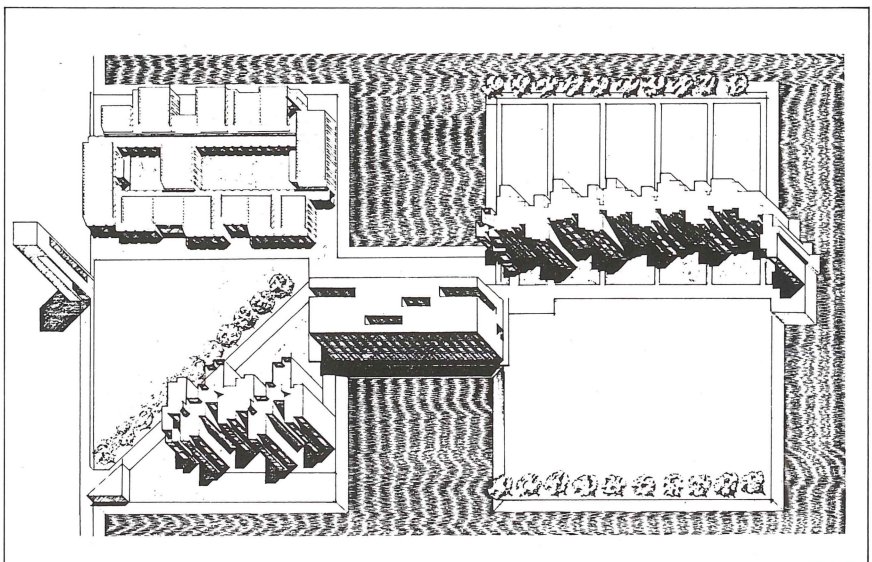


Right, top: Detail of the College of Arts and Crafts in Dhaka by Muzharul Islam, 1955. Photograph: Anwar Hossain.

Right, above: Dhaka University Library by Muzharul Islam, 1952-55.

Right: Axonometric drawing of prototypical campus for polytechnic institutes in Bangladesh by Muzharul Islam and Stanley Tigerman, 1965-71.

Above: Teacher-Student's Centre at Dhaka University by Constantin Doxiadis, architect, 1963-64. Photograph: Zulfiqar Hyder.







*Left: Residential units for civil servants in the capital complex of Shere Bangla Nagar, Dhaka by Louis Kahn, 1962-82.*

*Left, below: Detail of secretaries' housing and Parliament, Shere Bangla Nagar.*

The involvement of the American trio — Kahn, Rudolph and Tigerman — was due, to a great degree, to Muzharul Islam who saw a need in the vacuous contemporary situation to provide visual and provocative paradigms in the Bengali landscape. The intention was not too dissimilar to the still-fresh, high adventure of Le Corbusier at Chandigarh — Nehru's "jolt" to Indians. Paul Rudolph was Muzharul Islam's teacher at Yale, and Stanley Tigerman was a close class-friend in the same institution. While students both Tigerman and Muzharul Islam had resolved to work together someday, and this was accomplished through the commission of five polytechnic institutes in Bangladesh. Paul Rudolph was invited in 1966 to prepare a Master Plan and to design important buildings of the Agricultural University at Mymensingh. In the overwhelming atmosphere of national development through primarily Western models then prevalent, the work of these otherwise deeply sensitive architects provides interesting insight into the encounter between architectural morphology basically developed in the West and conditions that are often totally different from their original milieu. The most perceptible zones of this encounter were the architectural and spatial solutions by which specific climatic conditions were tackled, the intelligent exploiting of available materials and technology, and the subsequent abstract sculptural rendering of the artifact in the brilliant, tropical light.

However, the most poignant event would be to invite Louis Kahn to design the capital complex at Shere Bangla Nagar in Dhaka. The decision to make Dhaka a 'second' capital, and to install the National Parliament there, was taken at the Governor's Conference in 1959 by President Ayub Khan, not out of an overwhelming reverence for democratic institutions but as a bid to placate the growing discontent among the Bengalis. Kahn worked on the project from 1965 to until his death in 1973. Construction continued slowly, with a number of interruptions, but was substantially finished by 1982. The Sangsad Bhaban (Assembly) has begun to be used for the parliamentary assemblies, although demo-





cracy hangs somewhere between a charade and a genuine national aspiration in the murky political circumstances of Bangladesh.

Kahn's involvement at Dhaka is of epic proportions in itself. The Shere Bangla Nagar project eludes categorical statements of economic and cultural impropriety often made by some critics; the project continues to provoke an inspirational dialogue on the very fundamental nature of architecture and of human institutions. The force of Kahn's ensemble is not merely formal, but emotional too; its genesis has become inextricably linked with the recent national struggle of the Bengalis. And this is what many people outside the Bengali domain would fail to comprehend. Of course, Kahn never intended this consciously, and whether the work of any other architect would have performed the same role is an open question (although a number of internationally reputed architects were operating in Pakistan then) yet it is possible that Kahn's special philosophical speculation about universal qualities in architecture — to mediate between global and specific culture, 'ancestral voice' and contemporaneity, found in the Dhaka project a coincidental significance.

Kahn's project has the capacity to engage a conversation with an emerging collective manifesto. The "ruinous" architecture, which transcends recognisable styles despite a Piranesian inspiration, coincided with the rise of Bengali identity, and the two formed an unforeseeable empathy with one another. Both contemplated the metaphorical glory of a lost time, and triggered what Charles Correa would call our latent, architectonic sense. Moreover, both reflect a new collective vision stratified by a complex layering of images and events. Although originally commissioned with a political motive by a basically exploitative government, the meaning of Kahn's ultimate imagery has never been perceived in Bangladesh as a haughty imposition comparable to Lutyen's government complex in New Delhi.

Although the planning of Shere Bangla Nagar is informed by Beaux Arts sensibilities and much of the architectonic character by a Roman aura, it nonetheless creates a spiritual communion with certain aspects of Mughal planning and even

the architectural order in such monastic complexes as Nalanda (in Bihar, India) and Paharpur (in North Bangladesh). This gives meaning to a still open search for archetypal, timeless dimensions in human enterprises. In spite of the debatable issue of economy and those abrupt circular cut-outs, Kahn's work for a long time will stir and elucidate, as well as inspire generations of architects, in Bangladesh and India, to take up architecture as a serious, spiritual mission — unlike the short-lived visual titillation in which so many architects today are engrossed.

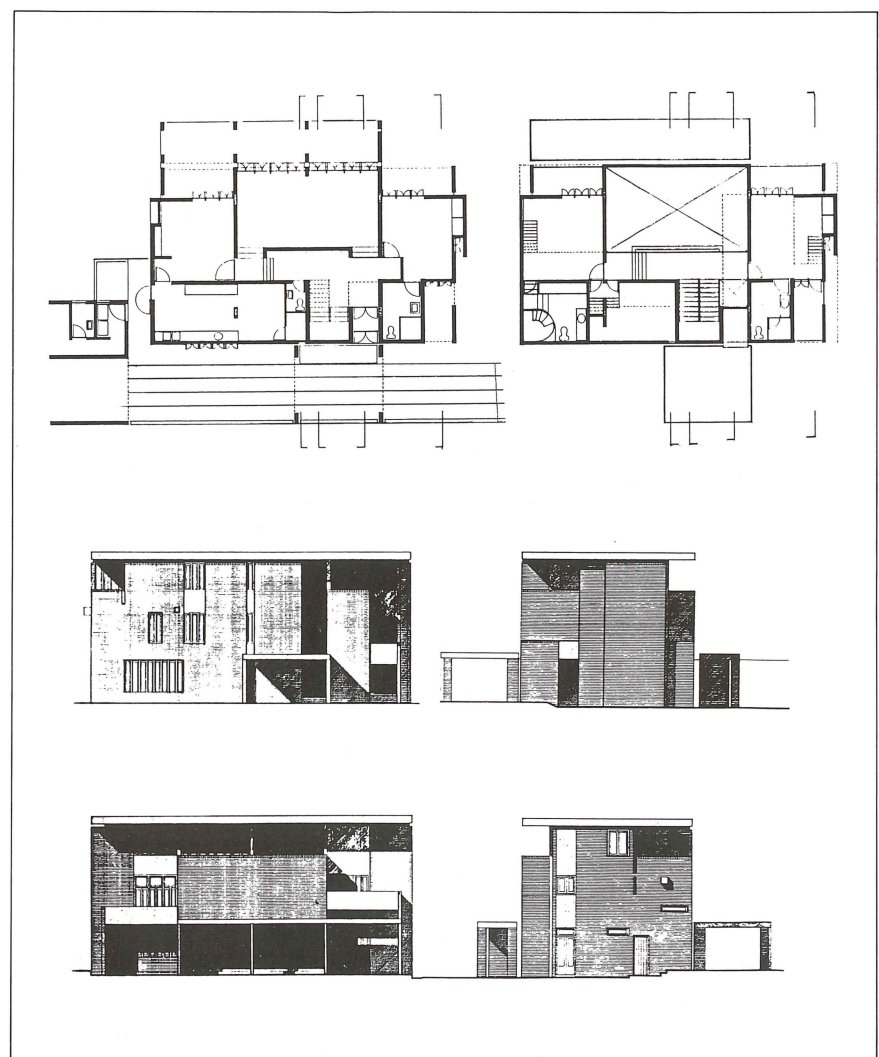
### Monumental Muzharul Islam

It is Muzharul Islam's work which, in addition to Kahn's capital buildings, has dominated the early architectural scene in Bangladesh. His practice has been discontinuous in time, with periods of greater or lesser intensity of production, but it has always been multisided from the late 1950s and onwards. Muzharul Islam created the nascent architectural culture of

Bangladesh, carrying out a struggle against government bureaucracy, against political domination by engineers, and against academic sterility. He incarnated honourable practice in Bangladesh (and Pakistan before 1971) and 'progressively' enlightened architectural endeavour. Despite the arguable results since, the commissions for the American 'trio' in Bangladesh was initiated in sincere faith by Muzharul Islam, primarily in order to instill an *international* level of awareness and enquiry locally. Hardly involved himself with the school of architecture in Dhaka, his office *Vastukalabid* was more than once the springboard for passionate movements by committed young architects.

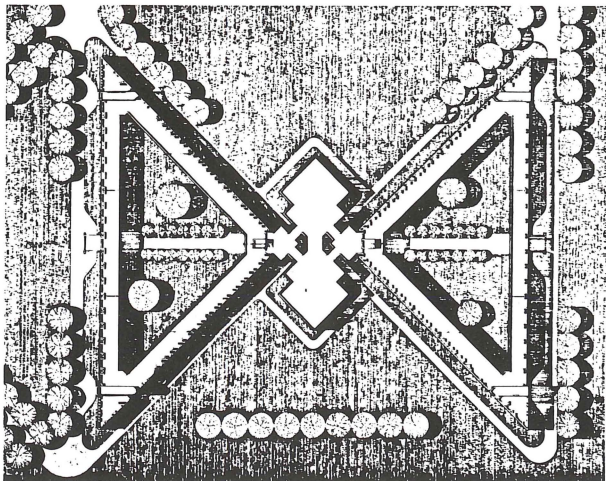
Although Muzharul Islam's notion of architecture, as "the creation and arrangement of physical objects in a total, natural and social design"<sup>2</sup>, aligned him with an

<sup>2</sup> Muzharul Islam, *Regional Planning in East Pakistan. Conference Institute of Architects Pakistan, 1968.*



*Architect's own residence in Dhaka. Elevations, ground floor and first floor plans. Muzharul Islam, 1969.*





*Above: Housing for the Joypurhat Limestone Factory, Muzharul Islam. Photograph: Rashidul Hasan.*

*Top: Exterior view of student dormitories at Jahangirnagar University, by Muzharul Islam, architect, 1968-69. Photograph: B.B. Taylor.*

*Left: Portion of the Master Plan for Jahangirnagar University by Muzharul Islam in 1968-69.*

‘untraditional’ and progressivist ideology in architecture, represented by certain attitudes of “modernism”, his crucial contribution was persistence in formulating a Bengali sense of identity that permeates more than just architecture. His essential point is that if the psyche has transcended the dilemmas and contradictions of identity, architecture will find its own natural expression. It was this con-



cern which, in the urgency of political and cultural consciousness of the 1960s, moved him gradually from a purely architectural performance to political activism as a more immediate role to confront social conditions. The Liberation War of 1971 created the first major discontinuity in his career, and which was to recur in the abnormal political and professional conditions of the post-independence years. In the near anarchic situation of the profession in the 1970s, the bulk of architects, lacking any legal or ethical basis for practice, submitted totally to mere profit-making and thus completely severed the building task from real social needs and cultural imperatives. Hence, Muzharul Islam was ironically edged into isolation. What started as a highly-charged beginning in his architecture could not, unfortunately, be carried to a more paradigmatic phase.

Despite the discontinuities in his practice, the work of Muzharul Islam does reveal a progression of research from a clear reference to the language of certain contemporary Western masters towards a more personal formulation. His early projects from the late 1950s to works like

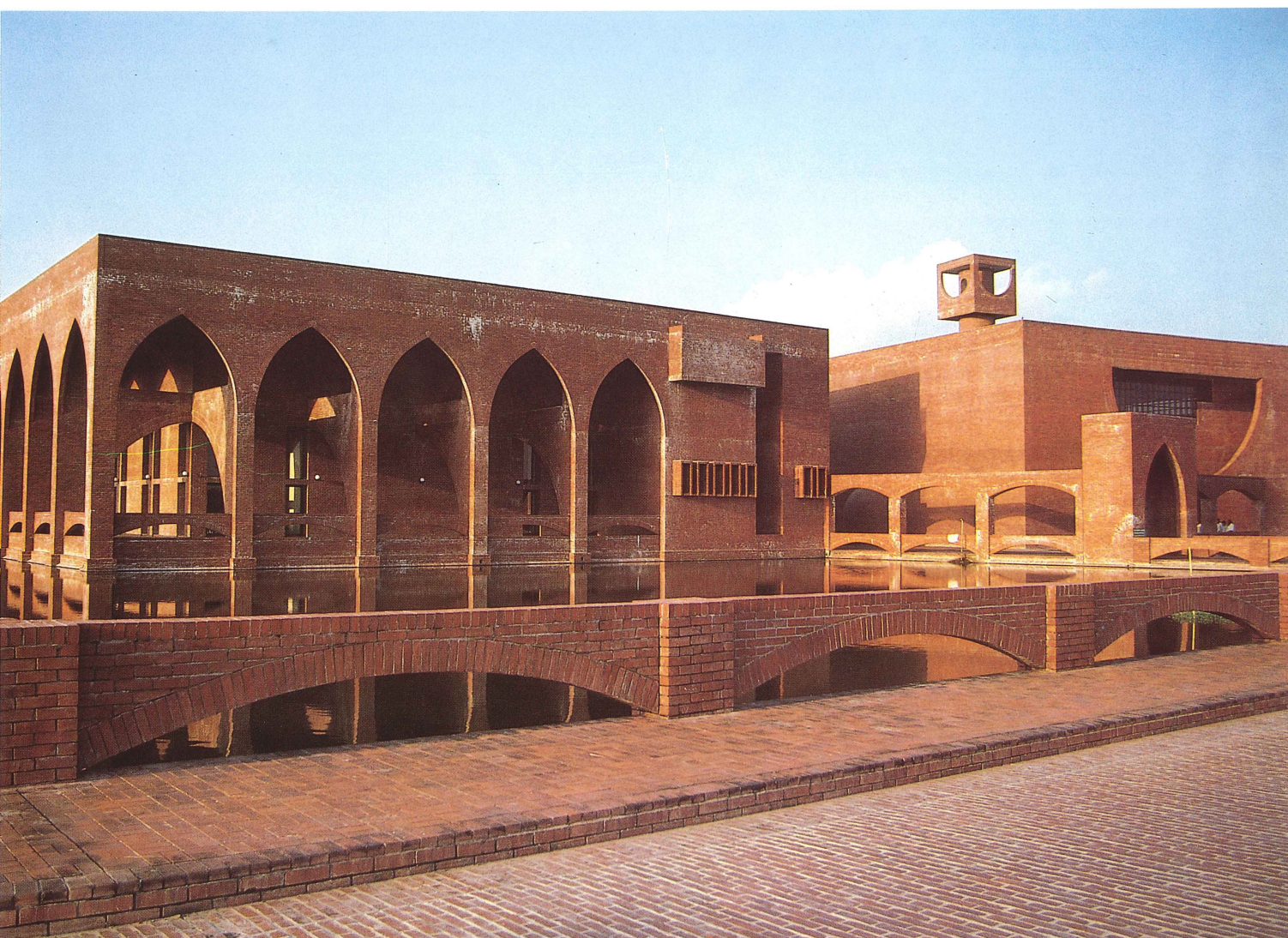
*Right, above: National Library in Dhaka by Muzharul Islam, 1985.*

*Right: Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) in Dhaka, by Rabiul Husain, Shaheedullah and Associates, 1982. Photograph: Zulfiqar Hyder.*

*Below: Interior of the architect's own residence in Dhaka by Bashirul Haq, 1983.*







*Above: Islamic Centre for Vocational Training and Research in Tongi by Doruk Pamir, 1986. Photograph: Zulfiqar Hyder.*

*Left: View of the Hermann Gmeiner Social Centre in Kulna by Uttam Kumar Saha, Consociates Ltd. 1986-87. Photograph: Uttam Kumar Saha.*

N.I.P.A. and his own house constitute a first phase where, within his own experimentation, there is an unmistakable continuation of certain Corbusian-Rudolphian devices. They are evident in the innovation of climate control (the umbrella roof of his own house recalling Shodhan Villa); in the sculptural animation made by varying reliefs, deep shadows and juxtaposition of materials; in the spatial composition (again, as in the multi-levelled organisation of his own house); and, finally, in the manner the artifacts confronted the setting, more as an assertive and a self-referential stance than a mediative one. In the late 1960s, with the commission of two university



S.O.S. Yough Village, Mirpur, in Dhaka by Raziul Ashan, Nahas Khalil (C.A.P.E.), 1984.

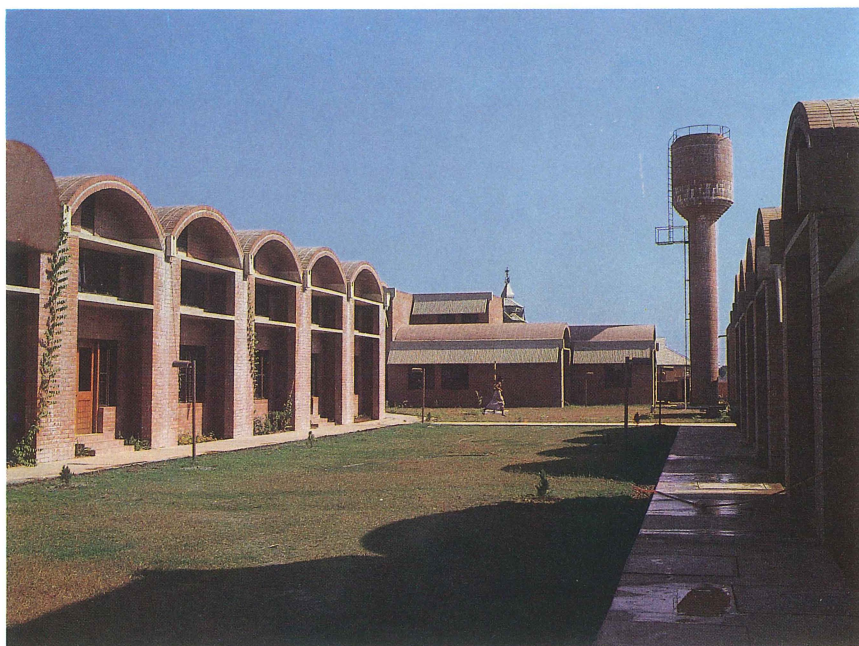
projects, involving large-scale organisation, began his later phase. While the pervading order, as in Jahangirnagar University and the housing for Jaipurhat Limestone Factory, is an *a priori* geometry, the concern is to generate an 'urbanised' order by the formation of communal spatial enclosures, streets and continuous facades. The individual buildings are of exposed brickwork, where spaces and voids seem to be carved out of masonry solids which, despite their often curious geometrical purity and unlike the skeletal nature of his earlier projects, form a more earth-hugging ambience.

It was in the National Library at Dhaka, his most recent work (1979-84), that 'distortion' of the idealised form itself become the generator of architecture; the ultimate artifact acknowledges more explicitly the conditions of the "place" — the context and the contradictions. The building, by its geometry, solidity and spatial order, makes a convincing dialogue with the neighbouring ensemble by Kahn, which has by now formed an important context or fabric in the north of Dhaka. While geometric abstraction and a consummate skill for physiognomic articulation provide a continuity in all his work, the urbanity of National Library is a world removed from the Public Library of 1955.

Muzharul Islam singly formed the first generation of contemporary architects and laid the basis of a profession and an intellectual discipline. His work ultimately seemed too reserved however in proposing an iconography which would be evocative of a Bengali sensibility. This is the concern that seems to engage a group of small but conscientious architects today and this is where the significant thrust of thoughtful production will lie in the future.

Unfortunately, the important promoters of building activity — the state and the upper-middle class clientele groups — still adhere to an image of progress set in machine aesthetics and industrialisation. The largest group of architects, in quick and easy responses, have continued a fallacious interpretation of the rationality and aesthetics of functionalism and technology — evident in the monolithic expressions, uncritical use of materials and technology, and a nonchalance towards the figurative aspect of architecture.

Architectural strategies in Bangladesh



are locked, to a great degree, within the global politico-economic conditions of today, and within these transitional times when the country is again at a loss for a collective vision. Under such conditions, it is probable that design propositions will still be shaped by an Eurocentric language, but what is really disconcerting is the still uncritical, and overt allegiance to it by the majority of the practitioners.

There is a far more undesirable tendency, seemingly 'liberated' from the early clutches of international "modernism", which has found its *modus operandi* in the worst form of hybridisation. By remorselessly implanting neo-Classical devices on Bengali cityscapes, or grafting pseudo-Islamic motifs on European planimetric organisation, this attitude forms the most self-interested group of commercial practitioners, and the more likely agent of trumped-up state ideology. In short, absolved more from the rigours and responsibilities than from stylistic constraints, this group is apt to do the least service, and most damage, to evolving architectural principles.

Finally, within, the overbearing presence of the two tendencies just cited, there is a maturing, committed trend that encompasses an *investigative* architecture. The central thrust of this group is to evoke the myth and *poesis* of the land within the tension of archaicism and contemporaneity, global and local pressures. With the paralysis of Bengali architectural sensibility in the last 100 years or so, it has become morally imperative and culturally urgent that a significant portion of con-

temporary architecture in Bangladesh become 'archaeological': to excavate from the historical layers of contradictory and imposed ideologies a more "place-responsive" architecture. The 'archaeological' enquiry is not in the sense of uncovering fossils, nor is it in the sense of a trip to "exotica", but rather with the objective of restituting 'cultural' archetypes which still have deep existential significance, and which will be a beginning point for fresh trajectories.

Some of the works of Rabiul Husain (of Shaheedullah Associates) and Bashirul Haq, while employing culturally syncretic devices, mark the tentative beginning of this research. Bashirul Haq has particularly endeared himself for his notable rendition of private houses — quiet, unobtrusive masonry volumes in close affiliation with the setting. His special sensitivity for the domestic realm is meticulously articulated in his own house and studio — light, plantation and construction materials as tactile sensation, and the crafting of space — hierarchical, exterior-interior, private-public, diversely volumed — all create a memorable experience of living. Rabiul Husain, once a close member of Muzharul Islam's studio, has used the idiom of abstract geometric configurations creatively to confront the Bengali sun and rain, the ambience of light and shade, and the sensitiveness of use. His association with S.M. Shaheedullah, a highly creative engineer, has often evolved into fruitful architectural-engineering coalitions, from the experiment with vaults at Begumganj



to the more remarkable BARC building. The office for Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC), with its unique use of brick even in major structural members, takes available materials and constructional techniques to greater lengths and suggests unforeseen potential for what has always appeared to be limited resources and conventions.

Interestingly, it is some of the work of much younger architects which takes the 'archaeological' exploration of evocative types and complex formation to a new level of discourse. This is apparent in some of the work of Uttam Kumar Saha, and the offices of C.A.P.E. and Diagram. The S.O.S. Youth Village at Dhaka designed by C.A.P.E. (architects: Raziul Ahsan and Nahas Khalil), completed in 1984, and the more recent Hermann Gmeiner Social Centre at Khulna by Uttam Kumar Saha (of Consociates Ltd.), completed in 1987, both indicate a tentative beginning in this new direction. While the former is located on an urban site and the latter on a rural one, both the projects engage in similar strategies: fragmentation of volumes instead of a single, cubic monolith, and the resulting creation of contained exterior spaces. The permeability of the space, as in the *uthan* (courtyard) of traditional spatial organisation, forms a link with the public realm and allows pavilion-like settings for the individual volumes. Both projects are convincing responses to their geographical location: the Dhaka project is consciously articulated, in its relationship to the street and in its formal 'impurity', to play its (sub)urban role, and the Khulna project makes a most sensitive interjection in the idyllic Bengali landscape. Again, both the projects employ contemporary constructional means to form their specific roofscapes of remembered shapes.

Some recent projects carried out by foreign architects are also likely to generate debate on the nature of large complexes involving certain architectonic elements and external compositional norms, as the Islamic Centre for Vocational Training and Research at Tongi by Turkish architect Doruk Pamir, completed in 1986; this is true also for the potency of remembered iconology as boldly expressed in the U.S. Chancery building, designed between 1983-86 by the Boston firm of Kallman, McKinell and Woods.

Besides investigation through real buildings, another important domain, which the architectural culture in this re-

gion has lacked, is a more committed enquiry into the nature and significance of 'place-evocative' architecture through academic and research programmes. "Chetana" a group founded in Dhaka in 1981, within the overwhelming gloom of the profession and the incapacity of the academy to foster deeper enquiry, has initiated a significant discourse, involving not only architects but also artists, writers, poets, journalists and historians.

While these small emerging architectural events promise a new water-shed in evolving a 'place-evocative' architectural strategy within contemporary conditions, more formidable issues remain to be confronted: how can architecture, as a profession and discipline, attain a more responsible role in this vulnerable land-water mass inhabited by an incredible number of people? While phenomenal rural exodus requires a closer scrutiny of unprecedented changes in the urban domain, how can the urban-based architects of Bangladesh focus their energies and services when nearly 80% of the people still live in villages? How can architecture be socially responsive at all in the present political and economic instability engendered more than anything by a lack of collective vision? What immediate roles can, and should, architects play, given the range of resources available and political-societal constraints, in order to confront the daunting dilemma of housing and organisation of the human environment?

Muzharul Islam, as early as 1968, talked of the special task of architecture and architects in this critical situation: "When the activities of man eventuate in the creation of either natural or man-made objects on the surface of the earth, they become the concern of the architect. The architect's traditional activities have been in the realm of small-scale structures, but he now feels that without rational and large-scale designing of physical space and objects, it is not possible for him to function fully even within his own discipline; He feels that it is through regional planning alone it is possible to change nature and create the most favourable conditions for his small scale activities"<sup>3</sup>. It seems that the situation in Bangladesh, instead of relegating architecture to an elitist and peripheral role, demands precisely the total involvement of architects and in the broadest scope of visionary and architectural thinking.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

