

‘Art of the city’ is dying: The Extinction of the Inherent Fabric in Northern Traditional Townships of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Cities are continuously evolving, driven by urbanization and changing lifestyles, which often intersect and conflict. The impact of climate change is increasingly threatening coastal areas, eroding valuable traditional environments. Concurrently, the encroachment and passage of time are leading to the gradual disappearance of the traditional neighborhoods within cities, posing a threat to our cultural identity. Traditional urban fabrics play a crucial role in a city's development, both actively and passively. The decay of a city can be viewed as an art form¹, transmitting culture, knowledge, and wisdom to its inhabitants, who are nurtured by traditional values and develop sensitive, cultivated minds. Spatial patterns in these environments motivate individuals by creating a conducive atmosphere. In contrast, modern cities, characterized by their sharp, gridiron layouts, often impose a manic, contemporary lifestyle on their residents. While new urban developments are guided by different principles, historic cities hold the potential to preserve and carry forward a rich legacy. This research paper explores the art of urbanism in various parts of the northern region of Bangladesh, closely examining the spaces and fabrics of ancient cities. The study focuses on the character and morphology of these historic urban fabrics, with particular emphasis on their analysis and documentation through sketches.

Keywords: Fabric, Cultural continuity, Climate change, Vicinity, Traditional space, Urban morphology.

1. Introduction: art of the city

Cities and settlements are dynamic and developing entities, undergoing continuous transformation much like a living organism. Urbanization, coupled with excessive migration, presents significant challenges to the implementation of strategic planning. However, migration is an integral aspect of urbanization and development, forming an interdependent relationship that cannot be overlooked. Despite its necessity, this rapid transformation often results in the loss of collective memory and emotional connection to the urban environment, as residents adapt to newly urbanized spaces. In contrast, the inhabitants of older, historic cities maintain a deep connection to their cultural heritage, embodying a sensitive reconciliation with the past. These communities are deeply rooted in cultural values and traditions passed down through generations, not as a means of remaining in a comfort zone, but as a way of illuminating and enriching other communities. This observation, derived from site analysis, underscores the resilience and continuity of cultural identity within these historic urban fabrics.

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In terms of the traditional fabric; in the town, it is distinct with vivid forms amalgamations and mixed cultural senses². The old town activities are momentous by its urban fabric pattern and character of the context. Globally, traditional cities are rooted with numerous fabric patterns, and proportion of spaces are followed by street's hierarchy. Some of the traditional towns in Bangladesh are poured with versatile urban fabric. Those traditional towns could be the precedence of shedding light to improve and to rethink about the designing of new cities. In time, what are the solutions to sort sustainable futuristic smart cities? Elements could be borrowed from the traditional cities like the scale, proportion, street-lane façade, spatial patterns, and art of expression. Climate considerations of a traditional town is entrenched with unique parameters. So every historic and traditional city is associated with the vicinity, cultural continuity and knowledge that disseminate. Eventually, satellite cities or the new cities are lacking behind of those endurance of the issues. Inhabitants in new cities lack the artistic essence that defines the sense of place. A deeper process of continuing traditional cultural legitimacy is faded by slick and glazing shaft like tall building. Architects and planners are trying to incorporate the naturalness in the strategic diagrams of designing new cities. Observations from traditional town researchers in urban labs can gather valuable insights, identifying key elements essential for preserving the traditional urban fabric

2. Objective

To find data from traditional fabric, several mapping and technical survey are to be done with authentic data analysis for understanding transition of the fabric. Focus of the research would be limited to identifying the traditional urban fabric of the city.

- Object of the research would be oriented with survey and observation of old towns of the country,
- Detailed area study and figure-ground mapping would be the focal area to justify the fabric of the city
- The objective of the paper would address different morphology and fabric of the spotted area of the old town.

3. Methodology

The methodology of the study will shed light on

- a. historical literature reviews
- b. significance of the urban landscape
- c. rejuvenation of spatial situation
- d. Spatial proportion analysis.

Above mentioned process of analysis would assist to justify the unique pattern of the traditional cities. The local sections, morphological growth and street-façade dialogues would be other dimension to reinforce the morphological phenomenon.

The methodology will also create a chronological table, representing disappearance of traditional fabric in course of time of different traditional town of Bangladesh.

The methodology employed in this study is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique patterns and characteristics of traditional cities, particularly those in the northern region of Bangladesh. The approach encompasses several key components:

3.1 Historical Literature Review

The study begins with an extensive review of historical literature to establish a foundation of knowledge regarding the evolution of traditional urban fabrics. This review will trace the historical development of cities, focusing on how cultural, social, and economic factors have shaped their growth over time. By examining historical texts, maps, and other archival materials, the research aims to identify the underlying principles that have guided the formation and preservation of these urban landscapes.

3.2 Significance of the Urban Landscape

Next, the research will explore the significance of the urban landscape in traditional cities. This involves analyzing the spatial and environmental aspects that contribute to the identity and functionality of these urban areas. The study will investigate how natural features, such as rivers, hills, and vegetation, have influenced urban planning and the development of public spaces. The research will also consider the role of built elements, such as streets, squares, and landmarks, in shaping the city's character and facilitating social interactions.

3.3 Rejuvenation of Spatial Situation

The methodology will also focus on the rejuvenation of spatial situations within traditional cities. This includes identifying areas where the urban fabric has undergone significant changes or deterioration and exploring potential strategies for revitalization. The study will assess how contemporary interventions can be integrated with historical patterns to rejuvenate these spaces while preserving their cultural and architectural heritage. This component of the research will involve fieldwork, including site visits and interviews with local residents, to gain insights into the current condition of these areas and their potential for regeneration.

3.4 Spatial Proportion Analysis

Spatial proportion analysis will be conducted to understand the geometric and proportional relationships within the urban fabric. This involves measuring and analyzing the dimensions of streets, buildings, and open spaces to identify patterns and regularities that characterize traditional cities. The study will also examine how these spatial proportions contribute to the overall aesthetic and functional quality of the urban environment. By comparing the spatial configurations of different areas within a city, the research aims to uncover the principles that have guided their design and layout.

In addition to these primary components, the methodology will incorporate several supplementary analyses:

3.5 Local Sections, Morphological Growth, and Street-Façade Dialogues

The study will delve into the local sections of the city, examining the morphological growth patterns and the dialogues between streets and façades. This will provide insights into the relationship between public and private spaces, the continuity of building forms, and the visual coherence of the urban fabric. These analyses will reinforce the understanding of the morphological phenomena that define traditional cities.

3.6 Chronological Table of Disappearance

The research will also create a chronological table documenting the disappearance of traditional urban fabric over time in various traditional towns of Bangladesh. This table will highlight the key factors contributing to the erosion of these historic environments, such as urbanization pressures, socio-economic changes, and environmental degradation. By mapping the decline of traditional fabrics, the study aims to emphasize the urgency of preservation efforts and inform future strategies for safeguarding cultural heritage.

The combined methodologies will enable a thorough investigation of the traditional urban fabrics, offering a nuanced understanding of their significance, challenges, and potential for revitalization. The insights gained from this study will contribute to the broader discourse on urban conservation and sustainable development in historic cities.

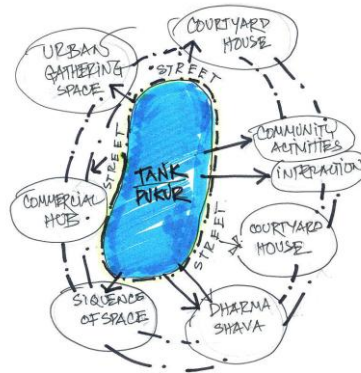


Fig 01: Core socio-spatial pattern of a traditional town of Rajshahi

4. Unique pattern of traditional cities: core socio spatial pattern:

The core socio-spatial pattern refers to the fundamental arrangement and organization of social relationships and spatial elements within a community or settlement. It encompasses how social interactions, cultural practices, and spatial layouts are interrelated and influence each other, shaping the overall structure and function of a given area.

Core socio spatial area exists in every region of a traditional city. Meanwhile, it defines the traditional gathering area, cultural congregation space, bazar and religious hubs. This core space is hierarchically linked with sequential pattern in the vicinity. Unique capacity of core socio spatial pattern creates the oneness in urban fabric. Weaving of traditional cities are a form of art. North Bengal's traditional towns, rich in cultural depth, feature crisscrossed thoroughfares, organic urban textures, and a blend of formal-informal settings. Despite their significance, rapid demolition threatens their existence, with no preservation policies in place. This research highlights these towns, analyzing their unique socio-spatial patterns to emphasize the urgency of conservation.

4.1 Rajshahi, old town

Still some areas of the city are defined with identical pattern. Waterbody are the nucleus of the neighborhood. The vicinity was developed around the tank. Identical loop of ambulatory circulation could be observed edging the waterbody. Street hierarchy still remains at the

region and few courtyard dwellings are tranquil survives. Scale, proportion and the dwelling characters are still depict the stylistic mode of the vicinity. Inhabitants' interaction take place in different time round the clock. Asserting from the morning the landing terrace act as the daily livelihood activities till the night. From time immemorial these activities are generated by upholding the core socio spatial pattern. Dwelling roof terraces and roof tops become vibrant during the summer time; the built forms placed too compact to avoid getting the vertical wall's heat emission. A contextual technique to reduce the tropical glare in the locality as well as the surface. Sensitive climate response and biological settings of network is enhanced; that represents the densified locality a pattern that is unique and original.



Fig 02: Satellite image of traditional fabric of Rajshahi old town

4.2 Natore, old district

Natore, an old district, exhibits a linear and spine-like development pattern centered on its historic districts. The homestead pattern is predominantly shaped by streets and lanes, with water bodies flanking both sides of the urban fabric, making aqua permeability a priority throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The town's layout features strip-like urban fabric that emerged wherever streets or lanes intersected the locality. The backyards of dwellings typically include a service yard and a water landing terrace adjacent to the water bodies. The streets, façades, and scale of the locality exude a sense of humility, creating a profound atmosphere. The vicinity showcases both courtyard and double-storied dwellings, surrounded by expansive water bodies and anchored by a royal palace property.



Fig 03: Satellite image of traditional fabric of Natore old town

Source: Google

4.3 Saidpur, Munshipara area

More formal cluster layout could be witnessed in this area. However, linear and strip arrangement are to be seen in the area of traditional town. Other common patterns are also perceived among those. However, Munshipara urban fabric is combined with mixed-use residential masses. The structures are in traditional scheme and maximum two storied structures are surviving. In the traditional urban scheme, spatial environments evolve as a continuation of cultural heritage within a defined territory. However, the traditional urban fabric—characterized by its porosity and interconnected courtyards of varying scales—faces a steady decline. Homestead courtyards, once seamlessly linked to streets and lanes, and are gradually disappearing. In the near future, this organic pattern will be overtaken by multistoried structures, erasing the city's memory and replacing its historic identity.



Fig 04: satellite image of traditional fabric Saidpur

Source: Google

4.3 Puthia, Rajshahi

The small town of Puthia, located 23 kilometers from Rajshahi, holds a distinct and intricate urban fabric. Its layout reflects late Mughal and colonial strategic planning, centered on multiple waterbodies. These water features not only served as protective barriers but also created an isolated island-like settlement within the mainland. At the edge of the royal precinct, a bold and well-defined urban pattern remains intact. The residential zone is modest, with narrow streets lined by small row houses. Courtyard homes, seamlessly linked to the streets through outer verandahs, foster a tranquil environment. The waterbodies play a crucial role in regulating the microclimate, while a pinwheel-like circulation system weaves through the town, anchored by a central water tank and an ambulatory street. Instead of forming a dense cluster, the built structures are interspersed within lush greenery, maintaining harmony with the landscape..

5. Case Observations: Analyzing and Justifying the Urban Fabric of Traditional Cities

5.1 Alignment with Water Bodies and Built Forms

The connection between streets, lanes, and traditional built forms with water bodies demonstrates a harmonious integration of natural and urban elements. This alignment not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the urban environment but also plays a crucial role in the functional organization of the space. The proximity to water bodies may influence the orientation and layout of these urban features, contributing to the overall cohesiveness of the urban fabric.



Fig 05: Satellite image of traditional fabric Saidpur

Source: Google

5.2 Orientation towards Dwellings and Courtyards

The orientation of streets and lanes to open towards dwellings and courtyards reflects a deliberate design choice that prioritizes social interaction and accessibility. This spatial arrangement fosters a sense of community by creating interconnected spaces that facilitate movement and engagement among residents. It also highlights the importance of courtyards as central elements in traditional urban design, serving as gathering spaces and nodes of activity.

5.3 Microclimate Generation by Water Bodies

The presence of water bodies and lakes plays a significant role in the creation of microclimates within the urban environment. These water features help regulate temperature, humidity, and air quality, contributing to a more comfortable and sustainable living environment. The generation of microclimates by such natural elements underscores the importance of integrating ecological considerations into urban planning, particularly in the context of traditional cities where natural and built environments are closely intertwined.

Comparative analysis of traditional Towns in North Bengal, Bangladesh							
Figure ground pattern of Rajshahi old town	Planning organization	Domain (public to private)	Courtyard component	Construction materials	Climatic response	Thoroughfare patterns	Facade and street scale
	Tightly knit clusters within a group.	Clear and sequential	Frequent and dominant	Continuation of Traditional method	Sensitive	Embedded with hierarchy	Street= a Facade= 2a>3a
	Linear pattern development: Connected to the traditional built forms, aligning closely with the water bodies.	Streets and lanes are directed to open towards the dwellings and courtyards	Dotted with central TULSHI TOLA (Courtyard with ritual plant)	Traditional brick construction with thick lime mortar	Sensitive	Single street prominent with lanes	Street= a Facade= 2a
	Planning organization is clustered with small dwellings	Direct entrance towards the homestead	Small courtyard	Traditional technique of course of construction	The presence of water bodies and lakes contributes to the generation of microclimates.	Central thoroughfare pattern is pinwheel.	Street= a Facade= a>2a
Remarks: The alignment of streets and lanes with water bodies and traditional architecture enhances urban cohesion and supports social interaction. Water bodies also generate microclimates, regulating environmental conditions for a more sustainable living space. This integration reflects the importance of blending natural and built elements in urban planning.							

Fig 06: Comparative analysis of traditional towns in North Bengal, using specified criteria for evaluation.

6. Policies for Preserving Traditional Urban Fabric: A Path Forward

This research aims to reclaim and preserve the traditional fabric of old towns by focusing on the unique core socio-spatial patterns that define them. These patterns, which encompass the intricate relationships between social interactions, cultural practices, and spatial layouts, are the backbone of traditional cities. They create a sense of oneness in the urban fabric by linking gathering areas, cultural congregation spaces, bazaars, and religious hubs in a hierarchical and sequential manner. In regions like North Bengal, where towns are dotted with significant yet vulnerable urban fabrics, the organic and natural patterns that have shaped these communities for generations are at risk due to modern development. The lack of preservation policies threatens to erase these rooted urban forms. By analyzing the core socio-spatial patterns of these traditional towns, this research seeks to highlight their significance and propose strategies to retain and protect the unique urban textures that define these historic regions.

To effectively preserve the traditional fabric of old towns, particularly those in regions like North Bengal, the following policies are advisable:

6.1 Heritage Zoning

Establishing heritage zones within towns that protect areas with significant socio-spatial patterns. Development within these zones should adhere to guidelines that maintain the traditional urban fabric, including building height, materials, and layout.

6.2 Cultural Heritage Preservation

Implementing policies that recognize and protect cultural sites, including bazaars, religious hubs, and traditional gathering spaces. This can include listing these areas as protected sites and offering incentives for their maintenance and restoration.

6.3 Community Involvement

Encouraging community participation in preservation efforts by involving local residents in the planning process. This can include public consultations, workshops, and participatory mapping to ensure that preservation efforts reflect the needs and values of the community.

6.4 Adaptive Reuse

Promoting the adaptive reuse of traditional buildings, allowing them to serve contemporary needs while maintaining their historical and architectural integrity. This policy can prevent the demolition of old structures and keep the urban fabric intact.

6.5 Regulated Development

Introducing stringent regulations on new developments within and around traditional townships. This includes restricting large-scale developments that could disrupt the traditional urban texture and ensuring that new constructions are harmonious with the existing fabric.

6.6 Conservation Funding

Establishing a fund dedicated to the conservation of traditional townships. This fund could be used for restoration projects, community education, and supporting local crafts and trades that are integral to maintaining the socio-spatial patterns.

6.7 Educational Initiatives

Launching educational programs that raise awareness about the importance of preserving traditional urban fabrics. This could involve partnerships with academic institutions, heritage organizations, and local schools to teach the value of these patterns.

6.8 Documentation and Research

Encouraging ongoing documentation and research of traditional socio-spatial patterns. Detailed records and studies can serve as valuable resources for future preservation efforts and help guide policy-making.

By implementing these policies, it is possible to protect the unique urban textures of traditional towns, ensuring that their socio-spatial patterns are preserved for future generations.

Conclusion

City is like a human body³. It is unique and contains different characters. The smell, noise, hue and people's activities governs the locale. A tradition town is mingled with hustle and bustle of living phenomenon. It is identified in the historic (traditional) town that streets and lanes are spontaneous with the forms of buildings as well as facades. Arcades, windows, courtyards and roof terraces are widespread in the web of spatial relationships. Social structures observed with joint family state. Although, now a day individual family status are seen in the old vicinity. As a result, its impact gradually reshapes the urban fabric, eroding the inherent unity. With each passing day, heritage and cultural values fade away. The art of the city doesn't define a single object of a vicinity but express the collective oneness of a town as well as a city. This collective oneness would be entitled with the open space, public space, river edge or bank, significant or peculiar built form, thoroughfare pattern and lastly socio-cultural pattern of the area. Eventually, these all components, which construct the morphology of a city. It carries the holistic memory and image of a region or a city⁴ (Lynch, 1964). These urban elements hold deep significance, fostering a sense of sentiment and emotional attachment among inhabitants. They shape the mental map of a town or region. Socio-cultural areas act as the core socio spatial footprints which work as the inland hub of a neighborhood. It connects public space, streets and intimate territory (homestead). The case study of the urban fabric of those towns represent a unique statement. Morphological aspects were vivid. The elements of the morph structures (open space, built form, thoroughfare, and waterbodies) are differently getting priorities in separate cases. Nevertheless, a town still existed with the inhabitants' own sentiment, containing the wisdom of cultural continuity and memory of his/her entity. It should be remembered and realized by the development authority while starting a new expansion of a city without pulling down old urban fabric.

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