Transformation and changing trend of urban living spaces: A case of Dhaka city

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ABSTRACT

With the changing communication technology, the traditional living spaces need to be redefined with the changing forms and functions. The living space is no more a very private space but a space within the space and a window to the virtual communities. Houses have changed as people are becoming physically and socially more integrated with the outside world. Houses being built now differ radically from traditional houses in many aspects, from their material and structure to style and appearance. With growing urban living spaces, houses being built in most areas are becoming less influenced by existing traditions and more influenced by popular trends and communication patterns. This study aims to examine the transforming changes and trends of the urban living spaces by comparing houses built in different time periods in order to trace the factors implying the changes. Some of the changing factors of trend and adaptation includes; cultural practice, family size, technological changes, and influence of land value. The case of Dhaka has been put forth, focusing on influences from outside world, distinguishing globalization from a more general process of modernization. This paper attempts to track the changes of domestic spaces over time in underlying functional structures. This paper focuses on how changes have come about within the domain of the residence, discussing it in four broad phases: the urban beginnings, the mid twentieth century, the post independence and the present developer housing phase. Spatial patterns from various house types not only illustrate different domestic experience but also identify the impact of physical transformation by the process of urbanization.

Keywords: Changing Factors, Traditional, Trend, Urban living space, Urbanization.

INTRODUCTION

Living spaces are a special kind of private space, where one seeks comfort and rest, among other members of the family or by oneself if the person is single. The intimacy of the home first lies in the simple fact that it is a delimited space, whose borders are recognized as such by outsiders as well as insiders. Apartments are delimited by walls of course, but houses, too, are more often than not surrounded by some kind of wall or fence, with a gate that can be locked.
If not, there is always an invisible line that separates it from public space and of which neighbors are fully aware. The interior space, whether of a house or an apartment flat, is the heart of the domestic space, which extends to some degree to the outskirts of the building. Houses customarily derive pattern and style from many factors, such as physical setting, topological climate, social, culture, symbolic meaning and lifestyles. Around the world, most of houses reflect the basic needs in a particular locality. Both physical and socio-cultural factors that shape houses have been changed and modified over time. In recent years, a global phenomenon has overwhelmingly influenced the transition of local contexts from traditional to modern housing by introducing new processes of communication technology. Factors that determine cultural change in houses become more complex since there are various ways to explore the relationship between cultural content and the design of built spaces, as in technology, economics, and symbolism and sociopolitical aspects, and they are based on different value systems.

The design of houses is a direct expression of changing values, images, perceptions and ways of life. This study focuses on the physical transformation of living spaces as a way to define the connection and the understanding of the relations between built spaces and culture. The investigation of evolution of domestic space by tracing the development of spatial pattern over time indicates culturally linked phenomena among the housing patterns and helps to identify the problems of consistency and transformation of pattern.

THE IMPACTS OF URBANIZATION PROCESS

The design of space is created basically to accommodate people’s needs; it changes from time to time in order to correspond with a new lifestyle and contextual settings. Indigenous design judged as being the best and the most efficient response to topographic, climatic and economic constraints have been influenced by a global phenomenon. Because the urbanization process affects traditional culture, the impact of these changes becomes physically evident, particularly in most rural settlements and vernacular houses. As in many Third World countries, the transition of living spaces in Dhaka from traditional patterns to what is considered as essentially different from existing local patterns is a significant turning point in the development of living pattern. Such transitions have been mentioned by many scholars as unsuccessful and responsible for shortcomings (Brolin, 1976.) (Lang, 1987.). It is argued that the transition is not smooth and successful because both house patterns do not support the same lifestyle and cultural content. As indicated in many housing studies, Le Corbusier’s design of Chandigarh in India (Kalia, 1987), the resettlement of Cappadocia cave dwellers in Turkey to subsidized housing provided by the government (Emge, 1992.) And the urban housing projects in African countries (Potash, 1985. ) are a few among a large number of examples that point out the problems of transitional process resulting from the differences in spatial design.

There are many external factors driving regional development, such as modern culture, political systems, social and family structure corresponding with global phenomena. Architectural evolution has also reflected these trends. The transition has been causing a discrepancy between the traditional lifestyle and modern housing design. The transition from the traditional house form and space is a sudden shift, including the adoption of new style and materials that appear to transform spatial and cultural aspects of houses. Newly acquired house styles, associated with patterns unfamiliar in local contexts, reveal a profound adaptation of the interior arrangement and user’s domestic routines.

In general, house styles and arrangements have developed across time in order to accommodate new requirements based on the change of lifestyle and attitudes. The new house
Style design and spatial arrangement influence physical alterations, which consequently affect the interactions among occupants and their daily routines. The way domestic space organizes in built form is the way in which people manipulate spaces, select their choices and adapt an existing design to support personal preference and their behavior. This study intends to examine how the change of living spaces accounts for the way it is used, particularly in the place where both traditional and popular patterns are merging.

HOUSES AS SETS OF SECTORS

House organization has changed through time, constantly adapting to respond to requirements imposed by social relations, codes of behavior and family structure, as well as to express advances in building technology and to absorb new home appliances. Houses are organized in distinctive sets of spaces, arranged in form of domestic sectors (Amorim, 1997). Traditional dwellings were arranged to reassure the unity of the family by setting spaces for interaction (the back room) and isolation (the alcoves) and turning them into a precise realm. This realm was set apart from the spaces solely dedicated to the formal entertainment of guests and the ones for the preparation of food, storage of goods, general services and accommodation of servants. These realms constitute the three main sectors of the pre-modern houses: the visitors, the family, and the service sectors. The visitors sector group’s foyer, entrance hall, waiting room, visitor’s room, reception room, library, music room, and formal dining. The service sector groups spaces primarily occupied by servants, like kitchen, laundry, garage, and backyard and servants quarters. The family sector groups the daily living spaces - dining room, veranda, family room, bathroom, bedrooms, and peripheral spaces, as closet, and toilet. Modern houses, on the other hand, are organized differently, as social and family structure has changed. Modern sectors are the following: the social sector grouped the spaces that generated the interface among the inhabitants and visitors - living, receiving and dining areas; the private sector: provided isolation for the members of the family - bedrooms and study room; the service sector housed the activities that maintained the dwellings life – kitchen and servants accommodation.

In traditional rural houses of Bangladesh houses are organized around multiple courtyards. Open courts are used for most of the daytime activities of the home, segregated for use by female members of the family. The kitchen and toilets are well segregated from the living areas. This form of rural houses has seen very little change through time. In the first instances of globalization - when influences from the west in the form of Islam entered, a change came about in the religious beliefs. But social customs and general culture of the area blended with new customs and merged with the new religion, modifying rather than totally displacing old values. Socio-political changes with the advent of colonial British rule brought about changes in the region, which spurred on a spate of urbanization. Dhaka, the city which had first been established by the Mughals, began to grow. People who migrated to the city from rural areas in search of work in general were adventurous young people in search of new experiences and wealth. The increase in the importance of the status of Dhaka, first as a provincial capital after the partition of India, and then as a national capital in 1971 with the formation of Bangladesh, brought about increasing urban migration, increasing the mix of cultures, modernization and potential globalization. The jump of percent of urbanized population of Dhaka according to statistics is from 14.79% in the 1961 census to 53.94% in the 1991 census, when the city had enormously grown in stature as the capital of independent Bangladesh (BBS, 2001). Introduction of TV to the region in 1965 brought about instant exposure to culture beyond the immediate horizon.

The result has been felt through history in three separate breaks with tradition – the emergence
of the nuclear family from the joint family of the past, spatial and temporal compartmentalization of areas into residential, commercial, recreational etc and this has infiltrated into the plan of residences, manifesting into spaces for different activities like sleeping, dining, studying etc, instead of the single space accommodating most activities (Imamauddin, 1982). Moreover with increased education came yet more exposure, as affluence and the possibility of travel grew. With affluence, international trade allowed the global market to enter even the most remote locality. The telephone increased the sense of closeness and simultaneity. Architecture reflects this slow influx of globalization. Replacing older values slow transformation of new ideas and customs is seen in the residences due to necessity in some cases, and to choice in others. It is with globalization and the new incursion of ideas that choices entered the lives of these urbanites.

**Evolution of Domestic Spaces**

In this section the evolution of the domestic space of the middle to high income group is traced in terms of globalization influences. Discussed below is how the house form seems to evolve as a shift in local customs, influenced directly from extraneous influences – an effect of globalization, rather than pure modernization.

**Phase 01 - dwellings during the urban beginnings**

In early days of 17th and 18th century, the urban house form was no different from its rural counterpart, except when forced upon by densification (Khan, 1982). From the idyllic sprawling low density settlement of rural habitats, the urban house at the beginning had of necessity to be accommodated in more cramped surroundings. Initially houses tended to retain the court, which became increasingly closed as space constraints became acute.

![Ground Floor Plan](Fig 01: Three court house. Source: F.A. Haque, 1997)

In early houses the kitchen and toilets were kept as far away as possible from the main living quarters, in a way similar to rural dwellings. A separate service court in three-court houses can still be found in these early residences (Fig 01). The first court served as a semi public court, mainly the entry court to the andar mahal (inner sanctum). Ander mahal occupied by female members of the household. On the outer side of first court was the male zone. The second court was the most private area of the household, segregated from public access. Only family males were allowed there. Female guests were also entertained through this area. The third court which is the service court

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The introduction of new technology like flushing systems allowed toilets to be attached to living quarters. The introduction of cooking gas instead of fire wood allowed the kitchens to be brought closer also, as fumes/smoke diminished. In general the concept of privacy of the individual members of the family from each other was not very prevalent in either rural or early urban living. Bedrooms were often entered through other bedrooms, and windows to bedrooms opened freely onto the courts. The court disappeared generally as soon as land became expensive and density of residential areas began to increase.

Fig 2. A) Ground floor plan. B) Second floor plan. C) View of main internal family court. D) Articulation of zones
Phase 02 – mid twentieth century phase
The emergence of the urban middle class in Dhaka is judged to be a 20th century phenomenon, a direct consequence of colonial rule (Imamuddin, 1982) and spurred on by a growth of Government jobs in the Civil, Military, Police, Railway and allied services. Studies show that in the 1950s a new group of buildings emerged to accommodate this group – colonies for the Government employees (Khan, 1982) in addition cities also experienced the growth of professionals like doctors, engineers and advocates (Imamuddin, 1982). To cope with increasing demand for housing, the Government also started allotting land at relatively low prices in planned residential areas e.g. Dhanmondi R/A (Nilufar, 1997). The plots to start off were large (approximately 1/3 acre each), and the economic and social background of the allottees had a semblance of homogeneity. During the late 50s and early 60’s these areas grew populated, with a family to each plot. Houses were relatively large, normally two storied with a number of bedrooms, each with an attached toilet. The living room (or drawing room as it was popularly termed) was normally segregated from the rest of the more private areas of the house, having its separate entry. The entry to the rest of the house was separate and corridors were extensively used to connect the different spaces. Gardens all around the house served to provide outdoor space for aesthetics/recreation in the front, with vegetable patches at the back and sides. High boundary walls around the plots served to protect the plot holders. Servant’s quarters were normally provided at the back and the kitchen could be entered through backdoors.

Phase 03 – post independent phase
A big change came by the end of the 70’s, when the next generation needed expanded. Discussed here is the case of Dhanmondi, as representing the pattern of urban land ownership, these plots were sub divided among the inheritors into separate plots served by internal private access roads (Akbar, 2006). This trend saw the end of the joint family of the past, though the separate families tended to live in the same plot but under different buildings. During this period many rentable walk-up apartments (usually restricted to four storeys) were constructed. As soon as the single unit house was sacrificed for economic reason, life style saw a new shift. With the grounds no longer under the sole control of one householder, people needed a different space for family gatherings, thus the family living space entrenched in these urban homes. As in previous eras, no longer were corridors used as main connecting paths to individual rooms. This family living space provided the counterpart to the open court of the rural which also opened to the individual rooms and provided a space where
the family could spend much of the free time in the evenings, gossiping or watching TV. Privacy was gaining importance in family living as each family separated from the parent one. During this period, it was still common for the children’s bedroom to be located adjacent to the master bedroom, allowing the mother to monitor growing children.

**Phase 04 – developer built housing phase**

But with the ever increasing population making more demands for housing, and the prices of land rising abruptly. Much of the early housing stock was demolished in favor of apartment complexes. Commonly referred to as high rise apartments, these are normally developer designed and built and in many of the restricted to six storey’s. They are equipped with lifts and controlled by a management society, particularly to do with the use of common facilities and spaces. Community living has brought another change in the lifestyle of the urban dweller. Open spaces are meager due to dearth of land, and any that can be provided in such complexes are no longer private areas. The urbanite now shares these spaces with people they have only recently seen and may not yet have been acquainted with.

![Image: Evolution of the dwelling: schematic phases](source)

*Fig 04: Evolution of the dwelling: schematic phases. Source: (Ahmed, 2009)*
THE CHANGING FACTORS

In this section discussed the major factors of the changing trend like living cost, change in living style, family size, influence of housing society and most importantly influence of technological changes.

Cost of Living:
The cities of the developing countries have always been faced with the growing gap between the earning and the expense of the middle class urban working level families. The growing land price and the affordability of space are dividing the land into much smaller parts and the choice of living space is very limited to the high value. A major share of the average family expenses is to afford the cost of living space, be it in terms of rental or mortgage. With the growing inflation rate almost close 7.93 % for August 2012 as per Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, family earning growth is very limited. The pie chart of the household expense is limited to the same earning number with a major shift in the expense share of the pie to cost of living every year. The high expense is forcing families to accommodate in less space, thus adding to the demand for smaller size urban residential units.

Changing Life Style:
Present day urban family size is becoming very limited to the its size and life style, with an average single family counting to husband, wife and two children, the traditional join family concept is fading its way of the urban scenario. With more working parents and opportunity of urban activities, one might term this as a western influence or modern culture, but the facts remain for the growing cities culture and life style changes with the changing factors of globalization. The influence of international work place practices inflit within the living spaces and is a combination of private and public life that redefines the urban life style. Daily living practices starts to define the need of space and the functional aspects of the living spaces. Play fields of urban communities are redefined in individual apartments with play station and game room. Public libraries have turned to windows of information resources with a laptop demanding now additional space. The interior space have adapted to multiple functions and changing spatial space with the change of activities, a screen in the house is at one time an entertainment center, a study resource and a games hub of fun as and when the activity defines the function of the space. This changes of life style has taken away the need of individual spaces and infused a more open space adaption to the growing demand of urban living spaces.

Small Family Size:
With the growth of urbanization and cost of living, the share of expense has forced families to step out of the tradition and culture of combine family spaces. Responding to the changes in more open society, the concept of joint family house of multiple generation and siblings is taken on new form of multiple urban units with occasional coming together of families to celebrate major events. With smaller families and less private space need, the smaller urban apartment units are making its ways into the housing market. This demand is higher within the families with working professional parents wanted to be part of urban apartment society with shared communal spaces and having a sense of security.
Neighborhood Community to housing Society:
The high demand of land and smaller family size has given way to the urban residential areas to go from neighborhood community to the concept of small housing society. These housing societies are a concept outfall to share the limited land parcel to build multiple dwelling units building under the corporative cooperation system. This in turn forms a society to jointly take the ownership of the land and the building facility. The transition from family house to apartment society has made its way to the adaption of urban land value and adding smaller units to one building jointly owned by a number of families. Traditional family courtyard houses have been replaced by the condominium buildings with spared amenity spaces.
Technological Space Changes:
Modern day technology has again and again tried to define the space it demands, within the homes and in public spaces. The introduction of TV once changed the functional aspects of family living area of a house and with the coming of personal computer demanded space for its functional needs. As the technology changes its form and shape, so does the need of the space that caters to its function. With the present day Wi-Fi connectivity and easy hand help touch screen devises the need of defined spaces is no more applicable and the devices around the living space can easily flow within the open planning interior space of small urban units as and need of the activity. With TV on the wall, cell phone in hands and washing machines the interior spaces and be one in all and all in one.

CONCLUSION
Social and spatial structures, one abstract and the other material, are closely interrelated; however, in everyday life the experience of spatial formation is largely intrinsic. While environment modulates space, it is in turn shaped by society. Thus, society retains its basis in forming space, while space, apparently a physical entity, conserves the social structure that occupies it. Even in the urban context, these powerful social influences have guided the development of physical patterns. One direct consequence of colonial rule in Bengal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the creation of urban social elite. Today urbanization in Dhaka has continued and has put tremendous pressure on limited residential land. As a result, house form has become even more consolidated, and buildings have increased in height. Nevertheless, the traditional image of living around a court continues to guide design decisions in urban areas, despite limitations caused by a lack of land, rigid road layouts and the expense of modern materials, building techniques, and services. Urban development patterns so far point more toward the transformation of the courtyard form rather than its disappearance. Even in the latest emerging morphology of multistoried flats, the court is being replaced by an internal family lounge. Every day practices are always changing, the need of space is changing, the activity relative to the central space is changing, yet the very basic idea of space hierarchy continues to redefine its space arrangements to reflect the climatic need of the building and the cultural respect to the architecture that is very much home grown.

Transformation of living spaces and its changing factors from traditional houses to present developer housing have been identified through the different sections of this paper. Globalization and its impact on the society and culture, and ultimately on living spaces have been identified here. Societies are formed through cultural continuity, and are through the ages exposed to different influencing factors. The paper has focused on the transformations of urban dwellings for the middle class urban population of Dhaka representative of urban working majority. The factors discussed are influencing the space needs and it is off responsive to this need that the coming of new form of buildings are emerging to cater to the changing urban fabric. The shift in the division of the space distribution of a building is emerging to its new identity, one that is not just imported and dropped into the city but rather a careful response to the society need, economic feasibility, and environment sensitive and culturally welcomed.
REFERENCES


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