Field Report

Multiple Courtyard Mansions of Dhaka: Form and Context

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A number of splendid mansions were built in Dhaka in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A hybrid of cultural patterns, they borrowed monumental formal elements from contemporary and classical European styles at the same time they employed indigenous spatial arrangements. In particular, as in traditional Bengali houses, their interior areas were laid out around courtyards, which played many roles and allowed the mansions to maintain an internal human scale. Today, such dichotomous houses remain the socio-cultural testament to the peculiar circumstances of the native social elite of the period. This article analyzes the form and spatial arrangement of the multicourt mansions and attempts to link them to their socio-cultural context.

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The architectural vocabulary of Bengal (understood to include both contemporary Bangladesh and Indian West Bengal) has emerged over several periods of socioeconomic and political development. The city of Dhaka flourished as the area's capital on several occassions, and as a significant center of trade, education and culture. Many intricately decorated mansions were built during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, distinguished by their huge floor areas, articulate details, and superb craftsmanship. These mansions adopted a monumentality expressive of imperialism, yet their spatial arrangements largely conformed to the patterns of traditional Bengali houses.

Today many of these mansions have either been abandoned by their original users or have been left in a dilapidated condition due to misuse, disuse and neglect.[1] Nevertheless,

they may be understood as a distinct hybrid typology born of the social and political aspirations of an emerging native elite under colonial rule.

THE COURTYARD IN TRADITIONAL BENGALI HOUSES

House form changes with changes in society, culture and need; however, some norms of spatial arrangement may survive repeated periods of change. The courtyard is one such element in Bengali architecture. The traditional Bengali house has long consisted of rooms or inward-looking one-room huts around a court. In well-off households, one hut, fronted by an outer court, might serve as the formal setting for social activities. Other huts, preferably south- or east-facing, would be used as family bedrooms. Meanwhile, the kitchen and sanitary areas would be kept to the west, a little apart from the house proper. Hut structures would typically have pitched roofs and small windows, and sometimes be fronted by verandahs. Conceptually and functionally, such compounds were divided into zones, which defined progressive levels of privacy and accessibility.[2] A central organizing principal was an opposition between domains: front and back, public and private, formal and informal, dry and wet, dirty and clean, etc. This bi-polarity served as a guide to the location of various spaces, and still plays an important role in determining house form (**FIG.1**).[3]

As the focus and facilitator of household and socio-cultural activities in such a dwelling, the court might play many roles: transitory space, religious space, social place, climate modifier, domain divider, etc. In rural areas, with each family identified with a single court, the presence of multiple courts might indicate a joint or extended family. Likewise, family expansion might be expressed by the addition of a new court surrounded by a similar pattern of activities and rooms.

In urban areas the traditional rural house was often reproduced in compressed form. Until the early twentieth century (when such plots became scarce) palatial houses could still be built facing south along Dhaka's riverfront.[4] But more generally, the city developed along narrow, winding streets. Here, a general introverted urban house type evolved, which persists to this day. Neither superfluous nor grand, it perpetuated the traditional arrangement, with little leaks (**FIG.2**).
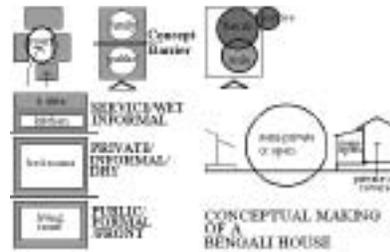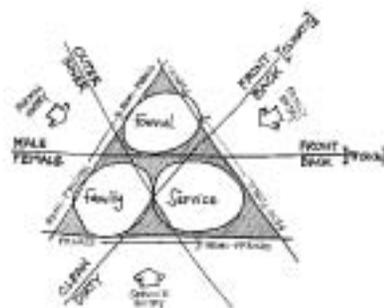
Entry to such a Dhaka house was normally to a sitting room (also named the drawing or living room), a feature synonymous with the front or formal domain of the rural compound. This was sometimes fronted by a verandah or court. Behind this public area, the private part of a house would surround an internal court, sometimes with a colonnaded verandah. The inner court occupied the juncture between public and private space, and served as the conceptual focus of the house. Rooms, if not directly accessible from the court, maintained a conceptual relationship to it, which defined their degree of privacy. In an urban setting, such a court also created a pleasant microclimate. At night it allowed cool air to gather, and during the day it was shaded by its surroundings. In the warm-humid climate of Bengal, comfort requires constant ventilation, and the courtyard induced air flow through adjoining rooms and spaces.[5]

Such a prototype dwelling took shape in a city that itself exhibited certain distinct morphological characteristics. In general, Dhaka's urban development was based on two indigenous concepts: *chawks* (market squares), and *mahallas* (clusters of houses around a *chawk* or along a street).[6] Even though *mahallas* were often not readily identifiable, they served as important internal social enclaves.[7]

Over time, the city's street pattern and subdivision into building lots gave birth to two distinct types of *mahalla*. One contained buildings that were deep and narrow — as much as 40m. deep — with a road frontage of approximately 2.5–3.5m. and a height of up to four stories. This pattern took shape in the pre-colonial period when the indigenous city was dependent on natural and manmade canals for drinking water, waste disposal, transport and communication.[8] Each such long, deep site had both formal (front) road access and informal (rear) canal or service-lane access.[9] The use of such plots for shop-houses played a further role in establishing this pattern.

The other *mahalla* typology was more loosely structured. Its dwellings could generally be found on regular (oblong) plots. But because these were served by an intricate network of lanes and by-lanes, the extent of individual parcels might often only be perceived by the construction of peripheral walls.[10] Such areas were basically developed for residential purposes, using the popular and persistent courtyard form (**FIG.3**).[11]

Two distinct categories of people inhabited these areas. Businessmen, craftsmen, or people from particular occupational groups needing road frontage for their livelihood occu-

FIGURE 3. *Regular plot division with lanes and by-lanes in typical Dhaka mahalla.*

pied the first type (and were predominantly Hindu). Well-off people and nobles related to administration, agriculture and trades (or foreigners, such as Europeans, Armenians and North Indians) usually inhabited the second type.[12]

COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE IN BENGAL

The architecture of Bengal evolved over thousands of years in response to local social, cultural and climatic demands.[13] But as a result both of direct impositions and changes in social context, British colonial rule led to certain deviations from this evolution. In particular, attempts were made during the colonial period (1765–1947) to fit imported styles and forms to the Bengali context.[14]

In Dhaka no evidence remains of houses from the Mughal period (1608–1765). Civic and religious buildings like fort-palaces, mosques and *kuttras* were generally the only buildings made of permanent materials before and during this period.[15] However, urban houses are thought to have been similar to their rural counterparts, except that they were relatively more densely built.[16] British rule, however, introduced various policies that affected the life-style of many of the local people in the urban areas, and hence the houses they lived in.

Early colonial buildings were executed in the Neoclassical styles popular in Europe at the time.[17] In Dhaka, this style first appeared in the city's seventeenth-century churches, but it was subsequently applied to secular buildings as well. Eventually, by the middle of the colonial period, a new hybrid of Mughal and European-style architecture emerged. To some extent this overlooked the existing rich local tradition of architecture in brick. Even though brick was still extensively used, even in delicate patterns, it was usually plastered over with lime and mortar in the colonial manner to give the appearance of stone construction. The new style introduced such foreign stylistic elements as semi-circular and segmental arches; triangular

pediments over Corinthian, Ionic or Composite columns; battlement parapets; traceroid windows; molded plinths; rusticated walls; and foliated decorative motifs. However, the buildings also made definite concessions to their location, and climate was a major inducement leading to the fusion of local and foreign elements. This eventually led to strange mixtures — for example, forcing imported styles to incorporate such local elements as overhanging eaves, wooden lattices, and verandahs. Such popular forms were gradually integrated into even the most grand and permanent buildings.

The emerging hybrid style, called Indo-Saracenic, became popular among those who could afford it and wished to display their power and status. Such buildings were built and used by the British, other Europeans, and the local elite. A number of influences contributed to the popularity of the new style among native Bengalis: the emergence of a local bourgeois class, the prestige attached to alien European forms, and government-encouraged Westernization in all fields. However, an in-built mental map always remained among local users, acting as a guide in their building activities. Buildings erected by the local elite were rarely direct translations of European models, but rather an exegesis of complex socio-cultural and political forces.

Colonial influences eventually led to the creation of two distinct new residential building types: the bungalow and the mansion. The bungalow was the first residential building type adopted by the British in colonial India. In contrast to crowded "native" dwellings, it embodied spatial separation and expressed the social and political divide between ruler and the masses.[18] Located on open land with a front garden, early bungalows were single-story structures of simple symmetric composition, with a large hall or parlor in the center. Many had porticoes for carts — and later, cars. Bungalows expressed a clear separation between the ruler, or "sahib," and native servants. In particular, the kitchen and the servants' quarters were located behind the house. In this sense, the bungalow imitated the bipolar concept of traditional Bengali houses (even if toilet and washing facilities were located on the outside walls, attached to the bedrooms) **(FIG.4)**.

Although based loosely on the British cottage, bungalows also integrated many local characteristics, including large verandahs. To the colonizers, these were primarily a climatic device,
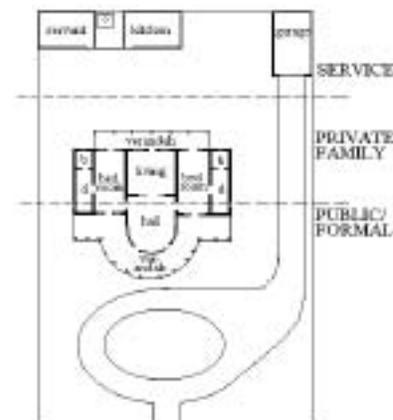

FIGURE 4. *Typical colonial bungalow plan. (Based on A.D. King,* The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture, *London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p.29.)*

but for the local people they also served as an important semi-private space. As a building type, bungalows eventually influenced local house form to the extent that they encouraged it to become more consolidated — i.e., to bring formerly detached rooms together under one roof. With the inception of social and technological changes, the bungalow form also became increasingly imposing and grand. However, the extroverted spatial arrangement of the colonial bungalow in the middle of an open plot, its consolidated form with rooms sharing common walls, and the attachment of sanitary areas to private rooms were all stark contrasts to the traditional Bengali house (**FIG.5**).[19]

The mansion was the other main typology that resulted from colonial influence. By the end of the nineteenth century, many native Indians had begun cautiously to adopt European values and aesthetics. The first structures to undergo transformation were large local houses, which started to borrow facade elements and styles from colonial civic and administrative buildings. However, with further urbanization and the introduction of rudimentary town planning, new types of houses on regular plots also emerged.[20] These small villas were draped with foreign decorative elements and were mostly owned by members of the local elite, and later the emerging middle class.[21] However, spatially, they

were still organized around internal courtyards for functional, planning and climatic reasons. Thus, even though they featured spaces such as entrance porticoes and living rooms or parlors furnished in European style, they still expressed a local sense of privacy — particularly for women.[22]

THE URBAN ELITE AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

The spread of new house typologies among native Bengalis was facilitated by the creation of new social classes under colonial rule. With the decline of Mughal control, a new society gradually emerged in Dhaka on the ruin of the old royal aristocratic order. Prior to the colonial period, land had been the main form of property, and patterns of landownership formed under Mughal rule had determined the structure of society. But the arrival of the British changed this leadership structure markedly and eventually led to the creation of a new social elite based on mercantile activities.[23]

Even though relatively similar numbers of Hindus and Muslims lived in this predominantly agricultural region, Hindus were the first to realize the possibilities for social mobility afforded by the new mercantile emphasis. Within
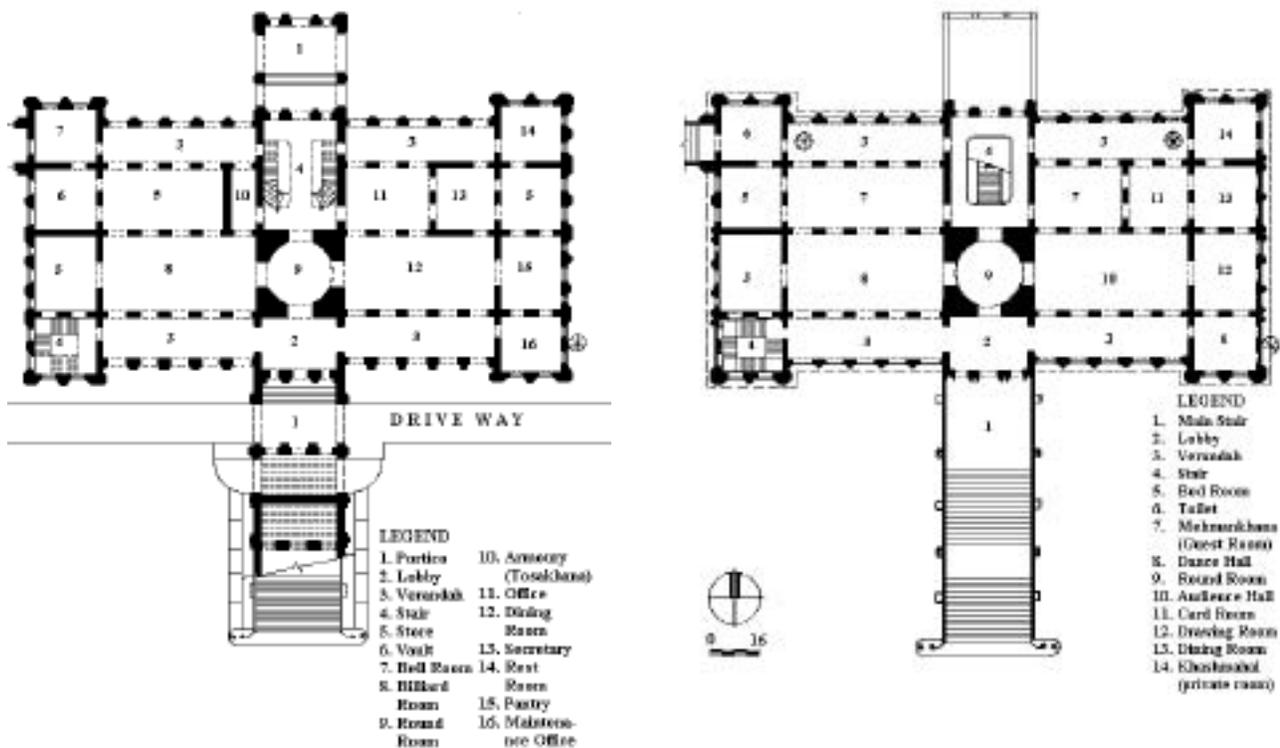

LEGEND
1. Portico
2. Lobby
3. Verandah
4. Stair
5. Store
6. Vault
7. Bed Room
8. Billard Room
9. Round Room
10. Armoury (Torakhana)
11. Office
12. Dining Room
13. Secretary
14. Rest Room
15. Pantry
16. Maintenance Office

LEGEND
1. Main Stair
2. Lobby
3. Verandah
4. Stair
5. Bed Room
6. Toilet
7. Mehmankhana (Guest Room)
8. Dance Hall
9. Round Room
10. Audience Hall
11. Card Room
12. Drawing Room
13. Dining Room
14. Khashmahal (private room)

FIGURE 5. *Ahsan Manzil, one of Dhaka's largest mansions, was the largest bungalow-style residence in Dhaka. Unlike most other mansions, it had no internal courts. Originally built by French traders, it was eventually bought, repaired and extended by Zamindar Ali Mian and used by the Nawabs. The mansion features a big living room, library, billiard room, and dining hall, all furnished in European manner. (Redrawn from S.A. Zahiruddin, "History of Architectural Conservation and Government Initiatives in Bangladesh," in A.H. Imamuddin, ed.,* Architectural Conservation Bangladesh *(Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1993), pp.86,88.)*

their otherwise rigid birth-ascribed caste system, leeway for social and occupational mobility did sometimes exist — most significantly in the upper and middle castes.[24] Thus, when their incomes could not support their desired life-styles, many Hindus left their traditional occupations and sought new jobs or professions. Normally, such a failure to comply with pre-scribed ritual would have resulted in social ostracism, but in the changed environment of colonialism, the implications of such switches were often not clearcut.[25]

For their part, Muslims were divided into Ashraf and Atraf — high and low classes. Class affiliation was not based on a single occupation: some Ashraf were *zamindars* (land-lords) or had been high officials under the previous reign; others were religious scholars. But by claiming noble ances-try, Ashraf maintained an attitude similar to that of high-caste Hindus — for example, refusing menial jobs, which they considered disgraceful. The Ashraf were contemptuous of the Atraf, who were mostly workers. They were also con-servative in nature, and sometimes obscured or misinterpret-ed religious rules and regulations to their benefit.[26]

One of the most significant impacts of the colonial takeover was the gradual transformation of the existing feudal system. In the new capitalistic environment, contact between *zamindars* and their land grew more tenuous. Many became infatuated with the pursuit of aristocratic values and adopted luxurious new lives in urban areas.[27] From there, they came to depend increasingly on tax collectors, middlemen and touts for revenue collection. *Zamindars* also cautiously guarded their social status, and practiced intermarriage among families with similar status.[28] And some collaborated with the colonial gov-ernment and even helped the East India Company during the 1857 Sepoy Revolution. Such acts were aimed at retaining power and superiority, and in response, the colonial govern-ment often nominated *zamindars* to local governing boards.[29]

The legal basis for this new landed aristocratic class was the Permanent Settlement Act, enacted by the East India Company in 1793. This act mostly benefited high-caste Hindus, who were already favored by the British for their performance and obedience. In effect, it allowed any rich person to buy land, and thus offered merchants the opportu-nity to rise socially by buying *zamindary* (feudal estates).[30]

The rise of the new merchant group in the eighteenth centu-ry was facilitated by the great complexities involved with the local currency.[31] This meant plenty of work for currency brokers, espe-cially Hindu merchants, who could become rich through exchange transactions, and who could exert considerable influence on all who became indebted to them.[32] This debtor group eventually came to include European traders and administrators who were unfamiliar with local weights and measures and monetary exchange and marketing systems. A significant section of Bengal's top social echelon emerged from among these currency dealers, and from the business group which benefited from their activities.

From the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the increasing involvement of Bengal in international trade also added to the power and fortunes of this new merchant elite. Following the introduction of railway, steamer and telegraph and development of the port of Chittagong, production increased greatly in such export goods as rice, cotton, indigo, betel nut, leather, hide, oil-seeds, jute and tea. Foreign traders needed the services of local people at different levels, and their businesses could generally only be run with the help of local agents, factory employees, and a contingent of militia. *Banias, mutsuddis, gomosthas, paikers, dalals, kayals, sarrafs, mohrers, paiks, peadas* (all high- and upper-middle-caste Hindus) were also all natives. With their earnings, some of them were gradually able to start their own businesses and join the business class.[33]

In addition to this merchant elite, the Bengali middle class was also born out of socioeconomic transformations brought about by colonial rule. The centralized administra-tive policy of the British opened up many jobs in sectors like law, revenue, health, communication, police and education for local people who could speak English. As the colonial state apparatus continued to expand, *vishayi bhadralok* (materialistic gentlemen) readily accepted English education and formed the first generation of educated urban middle class.[34] Initially, the majority were Hindu. For cultural reasons, Muslims were slower to embrace these opportunities. But educated Muslims who took such jobs in the colonial order were considered members of the same relatively open social group.[35]

This newly educated class joined the already privileged mer-cantile and aristocratic elite atop the pyramid of Bengali society in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Their formal education was augmented by exposure to books and media, visits to Europe, and interactions with foreigners. Since education allowed Bengalis to climb the rungs of the administrative and social ladder, the advan-tages of access to metropolitan social life were obvious.

Another result of exposure to European ideas was an awakening of nationalism, as the new educated classes became aware of revolutions in other parts of the world, politi-cal and civic rights, and self-reliance. One indication of this trend was a rise in various professional groups, especially among lawyers, teachers and journalists. But interest also grew in nonpolitical organizations and societies such as youth clubs, drama societies, etc. Liberal neo-religious groups like the *Brahmas* also began to form.[36] Thus, at the same time that many of Dhaka's urban elite and middle class were increasingly reaping the benefits of colonial rule, many also came to oppose it out of a renewed interest in nationalism.

THE MULTICOURT MANSIONS

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth this new Bengali elite watched as the colonizers erected superb structures incorporating European Neoclassical elements. Such manipulations of the forms and images of imperial glory had a vast appeal to the neo-elite, who aspired to acquire all the habits of the ideal civilized class — that of their British masters. This group

was trying both to rise to positions of leadership in local society and to consolidate their position within the colonial hierarchy. They saw mansions in the Indo-Saracenic style as an ideal way to express allegiance both to native tradition and colonial power.[37]

Typically, as explained above, Dhaka's houses were of the single-court type. But in Dhaka the multicourt form emerged both from practical and socio-cultural concerns. From a climatological point of view, well-proportioned courts in these huge buildings made interiors more intimate and facilitated ventilation, lighting, and thermal control. And from a socio-cultural point of view, they assisted with functional zoning and privacy. In particular, since they made it possible to locate all rooms so they could maintain both a physical and conceptual link with a court, the multicourt arrangement allowed a traditional type of living and propagated a traditional image of the house. And, of course, the multicourt arrangement expressed a tremendous sense of grandeur (FIG.6).

Depending on the two morphologies of *mahalla* discussed earlier, Dhaka's multicourt houses could either be very large on regularly shaped plots in residential areas (moderate villas, mansions, or institutional type buildings), or they could be very deep and narrow, located in busy commercial districts.[38] However, as in single-court houses, each court formed its own zone with the rooms and other spaces that were related to it. And such a grouping or zoning would vary according to whether the court was primarily meant for formal-public, family-private, or service activities.

Typically, the multicourt mansions were two or three stories in height, with a lofty main entry. Their imposing facades might be set back from the street by an entrance court. In terms of their decorative qualities, the buildings borrowed heavily from established European vocabularies. To increase their visual power, they were often placed on high, molded plinths. A variety of column types were employed, often with foliated capitals. Columns might be grouped, placed on pedestals, or integrated with walls as pilasters. Traceroid windows, placed symmetrically in paneled walls, were also common — as was rustication, particularly for piers and at wall corners. Rooflines were often dramatized using battlemented or balustraded parapets with decorative elements at key locations. The tympanum panels of pediments were normally filled with floral patterns, and similar patterns appeared on friezes. Modillion or plain brackets were used to support cornices. Finally, a variety of arches were used to span between columns or over windows and doors. Some of the most common were trefoil and multifoil, three-centered cinquefoil, pointed Saracenic, pointed segmental, Venetian, equilateral, and semi-circular. Such arches would sometimes feature a protruding, decorated keystone. Window openings might further be encircled with winding rope patterns.

Most of the mansions were constructed of brick, a material abundantly available, although wood was also widely used.[39] Brick walls, 50cm. or more in thickness, were usually covered with lime plaster, and then stucco and other ornamentation would be applied to highlight the elegance of the mansion and the taste of the owner. Local craftsmen were used to create other high quality ornamental features, such

FIGURE 6. *The typical internal family court created a pleasant microclimate. Photo of courtyard from house of Adi Basanta Babu, or Sutrapur Zamindar Bari (House of the Landlord of Sutrapur), Sutrapur.*

as cast-iron pillars, ornate railings, wooden carvings, broken ceramic tiles, and terra cotta. Repousse work was also introduced during this period, especially on balcony railings, posts, capitals, pilasters, drop walls and colonnades.[40]

Structurally, most of the mansions adopted the local purlin-and-rafter technology popularly known as the *gangayamuna* system. However, other techniques (e.g., wrought and cast iron and I-section beams), introduced by European builders, were also used to cover large spaces. In particular, these allowed flat roofs, rather than the pitched or vaulted roofs that were accepted practice among local builders.

In plan, the public parts of the building were generally laid out symmetrically to emphasize formal and ceremonial qualities. Such symmetry might be achieved by an entry foyer leading to a main hall(s) (sometimes double-story in height). These entry and living areas, along with the front courtyard, comprised the formal, male domain of the house. These areas might also contain guestrooms, offices, and guard rooms. And sometimes, the front section of a mansion might feature an additional formal court for community gatherings, business activities, or professional counseling.

The public areas of the house were filled with English furniture.[41] Decorative elements might take several forms. For example, hunting had long been popular in Bengal among royal courtiers and aristocrats, and it was a popular pastime of the colonizers too. This meant the display of a hunting trophy in the living room was a perfect way to indicate acquired taste and class. Other common furnishings included large sofas or divans with pillows, gramophones, tiger and deer skins, mantelpieces, false fireplaces, wall clocks, painted portraits, brass smoking pitchers, photographs and banners. Such rooms became display centers of family wealth, status, achievement, association and connection.

The symmetry of the formal front areas of the mansion were often broken in the inner zones of the house for reasons of cli-

mate, function, or site configuration. The inner court(s) were synonymous with the female domain, and accommodated many informal and semi-private domestic activities. The arrangement of rooms here was similar to that in the traditional house — with individual private sleeping rooms surrounding the court and looking out onto a verandah. Similar layouts could be repeated in successive courts, with corridors providing a connection (and taking the place of the gaps between huts in the rural prototype). Service and ancillary facilities like sanitary and washing areas — and sometimes cooking and storage — were generally retained in rear courtyards, which might also include a guest and servants block.

In addition to the formal entry, the main family courtyard in many houses might be reached directly from the outside by means of a secondary building entry — more than one if the site lay adjacent to a secondary road or waterway. Likewise, if the mansion bordered more than one main road, equal importance would be given to its multiple main facades. Stairs would be located so as to serve the groups of rooms around the courtyards. Rooftops might be used either as terraces to overlook the inner court or the front road, and thus would remaining semi-private or semi-public.

For all their monumentality, the mansions incorporated the same simple flow from court to verandah to room that characterized traditional houses. This transition was also evident in the lateral progression into the house: from public court, to semi-private court, to semi-private verandah, to private rooms.[42] A key feature of this transition was a controlling mechanism, or "lock," between the private and public zones.[43] Based on this overall system of zonation, some authors have described the public rooms, or outer house, as a metaphorical window to the outside world, a medium of formal communication and interaction with society.[44]

SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPONENTS

Houses thus conceived and constructed fulfilled many socio-cultural needs for those who lived in them. For example, one of the marks of the English-educated Bengali elite was to adopt a European way of celebrating various festivals and occasions like the New Years. Ball-dances were also held in the big hall rooms, and were equally attractive to the neo-elite. The introduction of large open spaces, entrance lobbies, and lofty halls was a clear consequence of this social predilection.[45]

Hall rooms, front courts, and terraces also played a significant role in facilitating social gatherings, rehearsals, etc. And the public rooms in mansions were used for meetings of the many clubs, organizations and societies that marked the Western aspirations of this social class.

Wealthy and influential society leaders were also often involved in philanthropic activities and charity works, and sometimes these works required a public performance. In these cases, a mansion's outer court might be used for a public ceremony. Outer courts might also be used for community meetings or important social or political announcements.

The celebration of native festivals and rituals was also still an integral part of Dhaka's social life. For example, the *Ashura* had been celebrated at least from the time of the Mughals.[46] After the demise of the Nawabs local leaders continued as patrons of such events. The long procession of people carrying the cenotaph and other icons was magnificent, and women and children could watch and cheer from verandahs and terraces.[47] The gathering of people in a *chawk* or in front of the houses of the *mahalla* elite had great bearing on the design of the public parts of these houses. Though many of these rituals were religious in origin, they were pan-religious in celebration. For example, people from other religions would participate in and enjoy Hindu festivals like Durga Puja (worship of the goddess of war) and Lakshmi Puja (worship of the goddess of wealth). Gradually, it became the responsibility of the neo-elite to sponsor these events, and the outer courts of the mansions came to serve as the sites for such public festivals and rituals.

The courts had other, more private, religious purposes as well. For example, in the family courts of Hindu houses a small altar with a niche would be raised under a *tulsi* (holy Basil) tree, and it was a regular ritual in Hindu households to light a lamp in the *tulsitala* every evening to frighten away evil spirits. Courtyards also played an important role in secular social activities. Programs pertaining to marriage, birth and other such ceremonies, and even death, took place in the court. Both Hindu and Muslim marriage ceremonies were celebrated with great enthusiasm and social meaning, and the associated preparations and activities required a large open space in a house.[48] The segregation of male and female participants at such ceremonies sometimes required the use of separate courts.

Other favorite pastimes of *zamindars* and aristocrats included cock and goat fighting. These events would usually be held in streets and *chawks*. But consideration was also sometimes made in house designs to accommodate them in a large outer court. Kite flying was another popular leisure activity, and was celebrated during a seasonal festival. In the urban context, roof terraces substituted for the open fields that had been used for this purpose in rural areas.

As can be seen from the above examples, the opposite pulls of tradition and Westernization forced the urban middle class and the rural-based elite living in the city to assume a dual life-style. Perhaps nowhere did these dichotomous values find expression more clearly than in the patterns of domestic living. Despite their Western outlook, the neo-elite drew clear boundaries in their mansions between formal and informal activity areas. As in the traditional setting, the degree of access a person was allowed was determined by their relationship to the household. This sense and degree of privacy was synonymous with the demarcation of male and female domains. In general, women had universal admittance to the internal family courts, whereas men had only selective admittance. But female household members were mostly confined to the boundaries of the house, and the court became their breathing space.

CASE STUDY 1: House of Reboti Mohan Das, or Sada Bari (White House), Jaluanagar
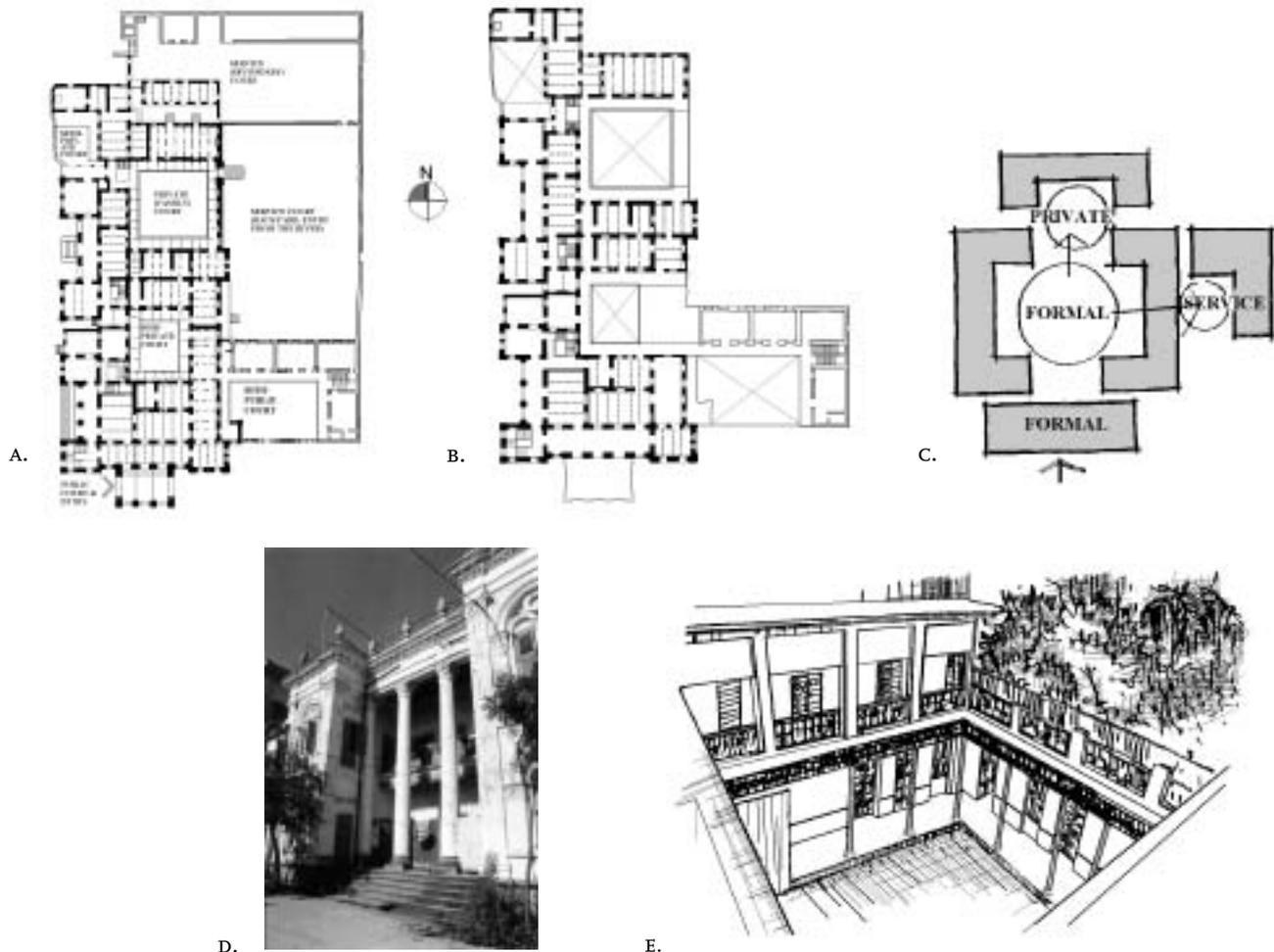

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

FIGURE 7. *A) ground floor plan. B) second floor plan. C) articulation of zones. D) photo of west main facade. E) View of main internal family court.*

REBOTI MOHAN DAS, a moneylender and one of the first elected representatives of the Dhaka Municipality, was involved in many social activities. His mansion, built in the early twentieth century, was one of the grandest in Dhaka.

Das's house was entered from the south through a portico. Just inside, an elongated foyer directed visitors both to the main living room and a staircase to the west. A second monumental entry on the west featured a slender, double-height colonnade cut by a curvilinear balcony. From here, a foyer led to a second living room adjacent to the first.

The three-storied northern portion of the mansion was a later addition by Das's brother. It featured a third formal entry from the west, also employing a symmetrically arranged flight of steps.

There were five interior courts of various sizes in the complex, and three exterior ones. The first inner court integrated various semipublic activity spaces. A larger one to its north featured a colonnade on the ground floor. These two major courtyards were connected by a corridor running along their western edges. In addition, there was a secondary entrance to a small court with a verandah on the northwest side of the complex. This area was connected to the northern main inner court via both corridor and stair. The mansion also had a block projecting east from the main entry, used for servant and guest quarters. This portion of the complex was built around a semipublic courtyard, and was also approachable from the Dholai channel on the east.

Rooms of varying sizes were simply arranged around the internal courts. As mentioned, the house partly rose to a third floor. Stairs to the upper two floors were located in separate zones, and habitable rooms and terraces there were generally oriented toward the channel.
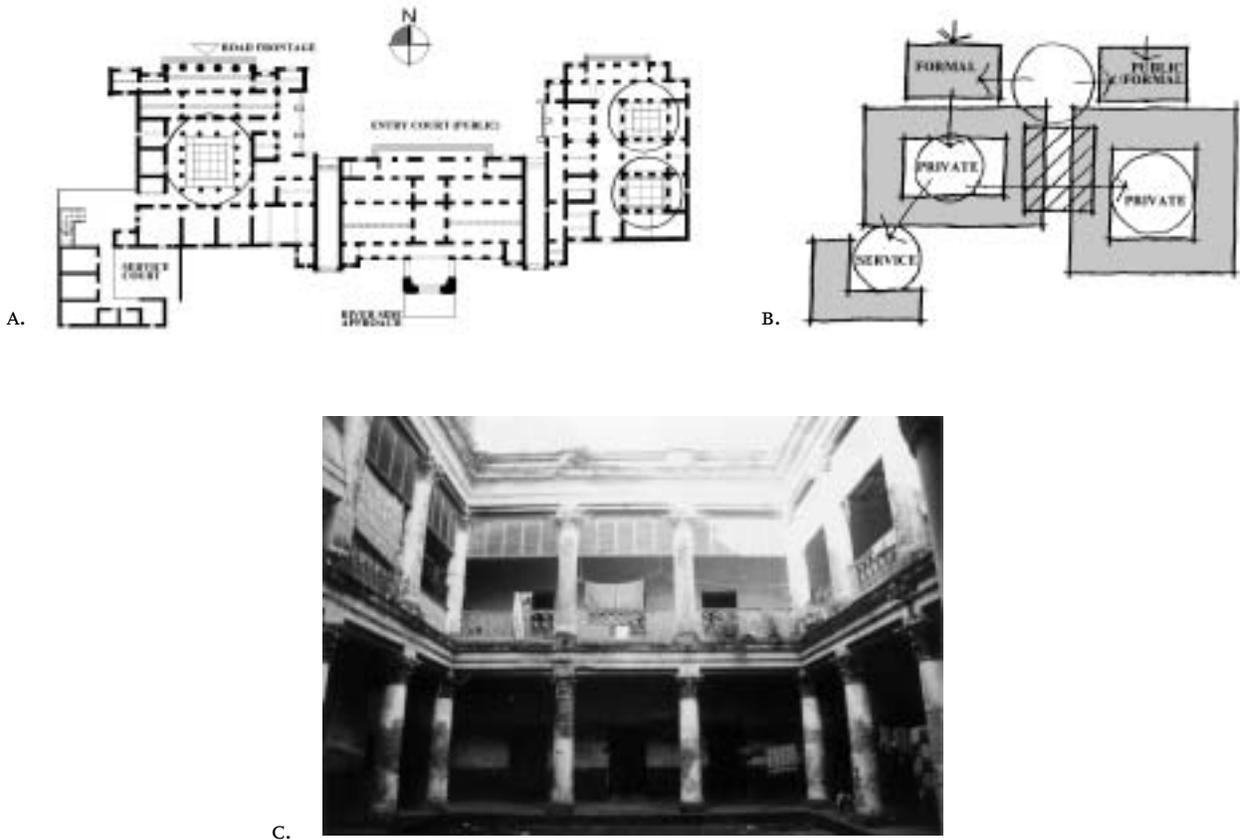
CASE STUDY 2: Ruplal House, Farashganj

F I G U R E 8. *A) ground floor plan. B) articulation of zones. C) photo of main internal family court.*

RUPLAL AND RAGHU NATH, descendants of Mathura Nath Das, bought this house in the late nineteenth century from an Armenian merchant who had accumulated wealth and influence through the salt business. Das had a mint, and was involved in the batta system. With economic prosperity, he had started to issue hundis, but this never earned him aristocratic position. During the late nineteenth century, however, his sons Madhusudan and Swarup Chandra Das (the father of Ruplal) bought vast estates, making the family one of the most influential in Dhaka.

It was Swarup who commissioned the Martin Company of Calcutta to modify and extend the house. The resulting complex was considered second only to the Ahsan Manzil of the Nawabs. Among other activities that took place in the house were Oriental and Occidental musical soirées for the city's social elite, arranged by Ruplal, a connoisseur of music. Both the city's European and native elites were also invited to the house for a ball in honor of Lord Duffrin in 1888, an event facilitated by the addition of a wooden dance floor.

The complex could be approached either from the north from the main road or by a private entry on the south from the river. It consisted of three distinct blocks, with the most imposing western one belonging to Ruplal, and the eastern one belonging to Raghu Nath. The smaller central connecting block, the oldest part of the structure, had been built according to a bungalow pattern, without interior courts.

In contrast to the central block, the flanking blocks were built around inner courts. The north-facing entrances to the flanking blocks were both grand in scale and disposition, featuring double-height Corinthian columns with pediment and entablature. The entries led to living and public rooms. These formal parts of the house were connected by corridors to the internal courts, which were surrounded by a series of rooms.

The external treatment of the eastern block was slightly different from that of the west: its front entry had no arches, and its Corinthian columns were stouter — more like Indian columns. The internal courts in this block were of similar size, in contrast to the arrangement of courts in Ruplal's block, where there was a clear separation between a main court and an oblong service court partially open to the riverside. Although neither flanking block connected with the central block at ground level, the upper floors of all three, used for residential purposes, were connected, and featured terraces with panoramic river views.

CASE STUDY 3: Mathura Mohan Chakrabarty's House, or Smriti Mandir (Memory Temple), Dayaganj
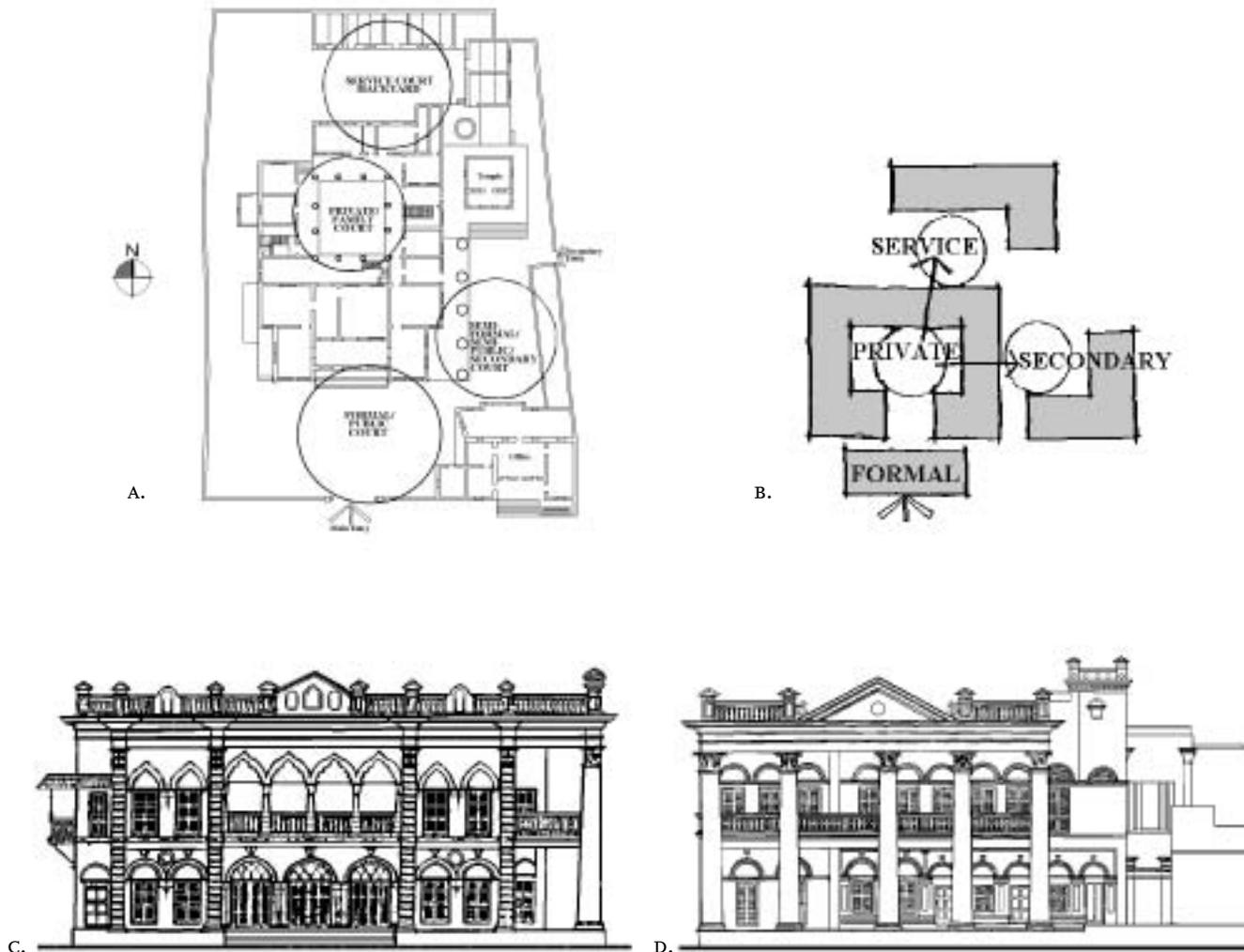

A.

B.

C.

D.

FIGURE 9. *A) ground floor plan. B) articulation of zones. C) south elevation. D) east elevation.*

CHAKRABARTY, a schoolteacher, established a famous herbal laboratory in this building, which was served by roads on both south and east. The main entrance court on the south was created by setting the house back 11m. from the road. The entrance arcade, unlike that in the previous two cases, was only one story high. It led directly to a living room, which was flanked by public rooms. Several rooms on the eastern side of the house also opened onto a colonnaded verandah that connected to a secondary building. This secondary block, built on an extended podium, housed a community temple. The build-ing's east-facing colonnade, the temple structure, and another later building used as gatehouse combined to create an oblong court which was used as a public space.

Within the main block there was a secondary, family court. A staircase restricted view of this space from the entrance. It was surrounded on three sides by corridors which gave access to rooms and stairs in the east and west wings. This courtyard was of moderate size and displayed a perfect human scale, providing excellent light and shading. Another court was to the north (back) of the house, which accommodated service spaces.

CASE STUDY 4: House of Jatindra Kumar Saha, or Mangalabas (Goodwill House), Farashganj
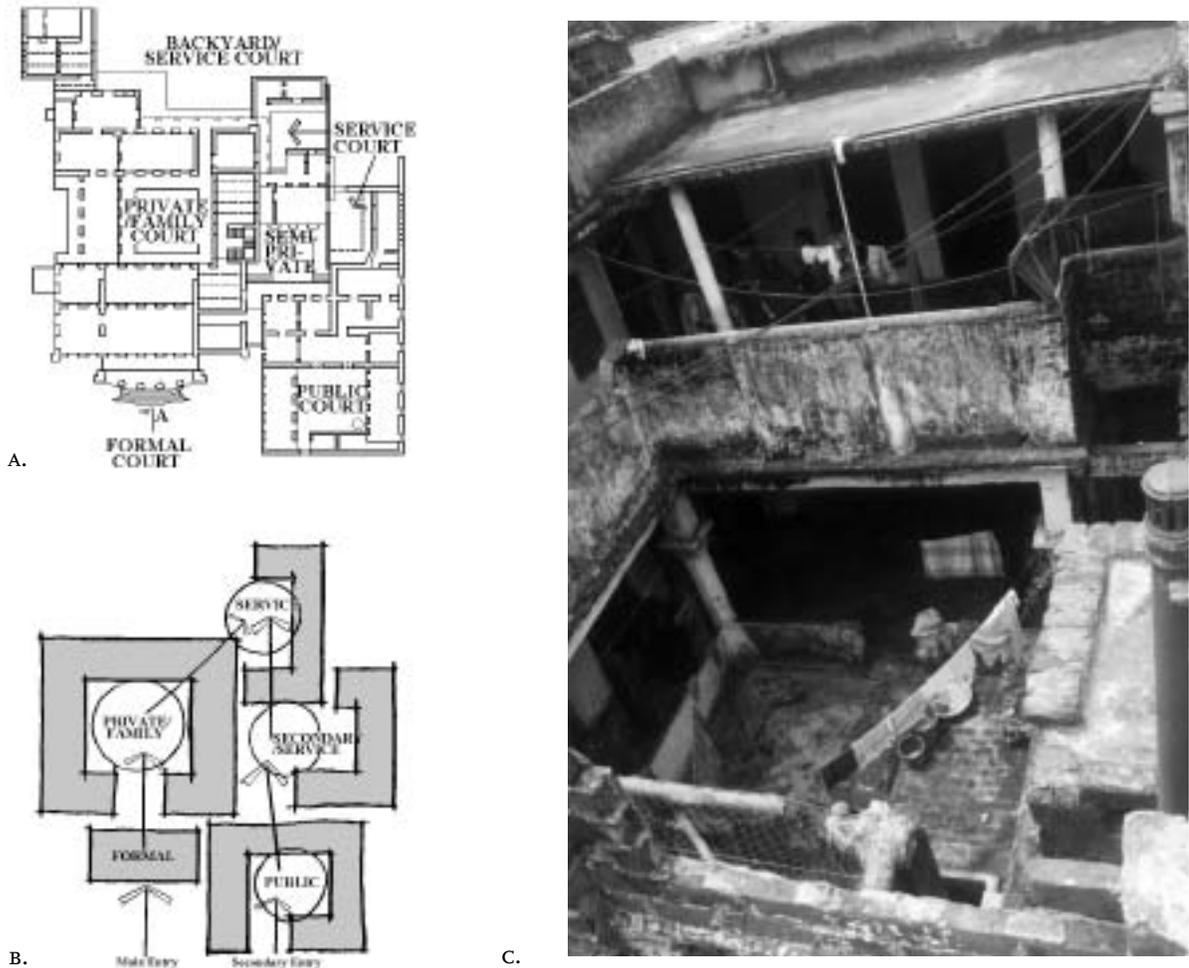

A.

B.

C.

FIGURE 10. *A) ground floor plan. B) Articulation of Zones. C) View of service court.*

THIS STRUCTURE, presently Kabi Nazrul College Hostel, was once owned by Zamindar Saha. The most prominent features of its facade were heavy square piers and a grand entrance foyer, distinguished by a convex protruding podium. The entrance was connected to a large verandah which was flanked by public rooms on either side. The verandah also led to a living room, beyond which was a corridor ran around the main inner court. The symmetrical arrangement of the formal parts of the house was not carried through to its private areas.

This house had four inner courts. A stair, used exclusively by women, separated the main court from a secondary

family court. The rooms around this second court were small and did not relate directly with the main court and its rooms. Another court featuring an independent entry, was located at the northwest corner of the house, adjacent to the road. Together with its surrounding rooms, it was used for public and official functions. The southwest court was a subsidiary area for services, caretakers and servants.

The upper floors of the house had a generally similar spatial pattern as the ground floor. There were terraces on the south and southwest corners of the second floor, while the western portion of the house rose to a third floor.

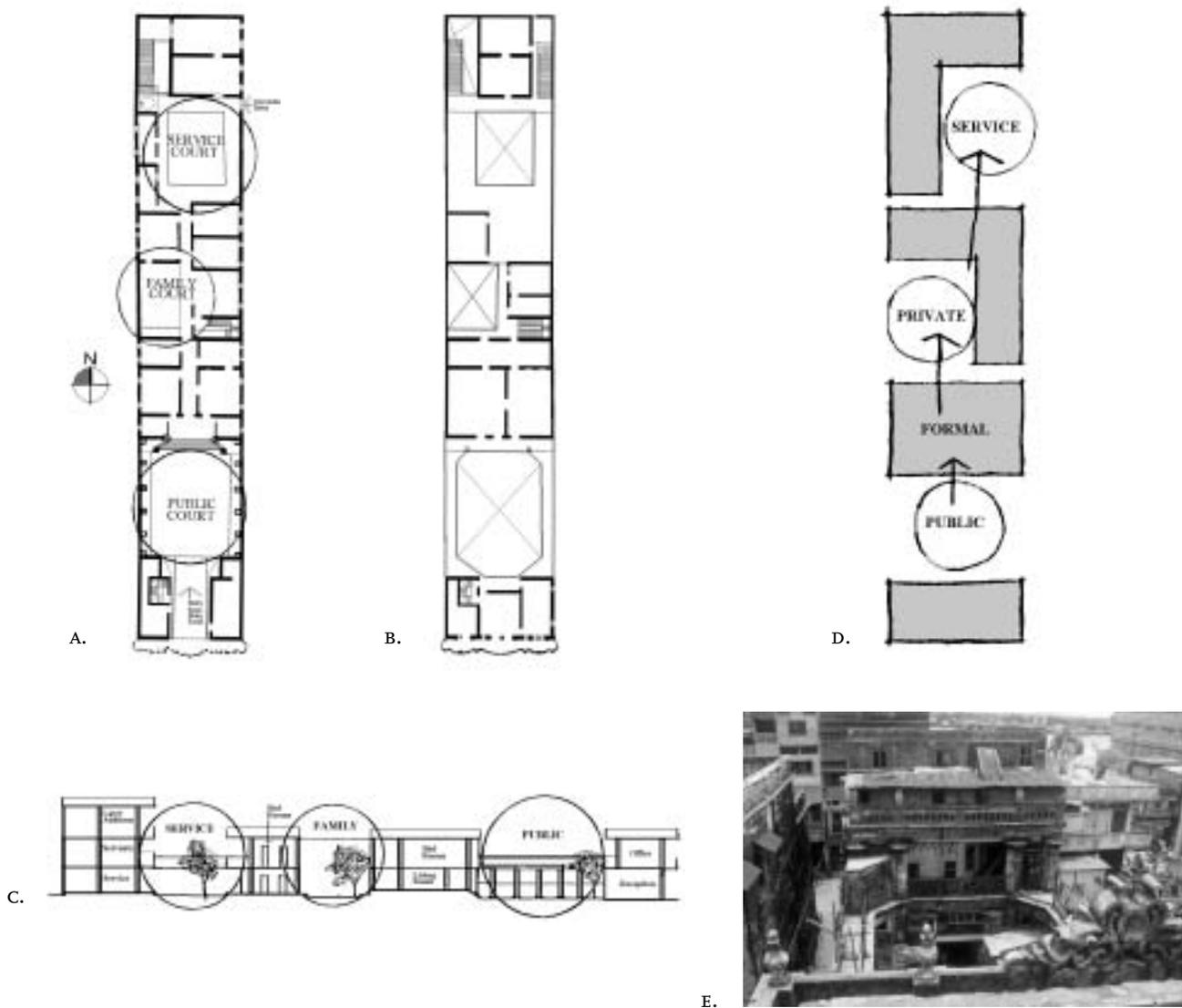CASE STUDY 5: Prasanna Babu's House, or Bara Bari (Big House), Farashganj

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

FIGURE 11. *A) ground floor plan. B) second floor plan. C) section. D) articulation of zones. E) photo of formal public court.*

THIS THREE-STORIED late-nineteenth-century house displayed a magnificent scale and proportion. Prasanna Babu was a moneylender and trader. His house was long and thin, approximately 12m. wide by 60m. long, and was built to the property line. The main road ran to the south, while a narrow secondary road ran along the length of the house to the east. A guardhouse, guestrooms, and office block front the entry. The central aperture through this block, flanked by low rooms on either side, led to the colonnaded public courtyard, from where grand steps led toward an entrance lobby, flanked by two small square rooms. These spaces formed the public zone of the house. From here, a central corridor with symmetrically arranged rooms to either side directed one back to the family court.

The second court occupied the northern half of the width of the house (the southern half being taken up by a room and a staircase). The central corridor extended further beyond this court to a large service court in the rear of the house. There were three staircases in three different zones: public, family and service. The house also featured a curved balcony with cast iron balustrades overlooking the commercial street in front. The front portions of the house were all two story, connected with each other by a colonnade. Part of the building is now three stories tall, but these areas were later additions.

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.[49] While environment modulates space, it is in turn shaped by society.[50] Thus, society retains its basis in forming space, while space, ostensibly a physical entity, conserves the social structure that occupies it.

Starting from the Vedic period (2000–1000 B.C.), Indian villages were formed as clusters of huts arranged in a beehive pattern, many around courtyards. This revealed the beginnings of the social grouping known as *grama*. Even today, the physical organization of villages in Bengal, barring topographical constraints, resembles this Vedic pattern. While society has developed and consolidated from generation to generation, this basic image inherent in the culture has changed little. 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 an urban social elite. This class gradually infiltrated into the administrative machinery by dint of their education, employment, wealth, social position, and association with the British. One means they used to consolidate and express their new position was the construction of grand mansions. Yet contextual analysis of these mansions today shows that their expressive grandeur was blended with more utilitarian layouts that integrated the inherent norms of indigenous living, climate and tradition.

The case studies presented here from different parts of Old Dhaka show how imported elements were used primarily to drape the exteriors of these mansions, and that a traditional layout existed behind these facades. Such norms as space utilization, sense of privacy, domain division, orienta-tion and climate control were strong and resistant to change, compared to short-lived stylistic importations.

Today urbanization in Dhaka has continued and has put tremendous pressure on 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.[51]

As a final note, it is ironic today that the dichotomy between foreign stylistic imports and internal indigenous form has resurfaced in the residences of a new class of Dhaka nouveau riche. Their houses, built since the mid-1980s, use many of the same colonial-import elements evident in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century mansions.[52] These imports are once again being used to express the image of a social elite, alien to the local culture — only this time aspiring to the mantle of globalization. However, the internal forms of these contemporary houses are more Westernized than their predecessors (the mansions described here), perhaps because of the increased availability and affordability of modern and luxury materials and more real exposure and experience of Western living styles.

Multicourt mansions are no longer built in Dhaka. However, they deserve more study and attention, both as evidence of the evolution of local architecture and urbanism and as examples of good design in their own right. Restoring such buildings to their old uses or adapting them to new ones are practices much neglected in Bangladesh. Further study of these mansions may form the basis for such conservation activities.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. See M.M. Ali et al., "Early Twentieth Century Mansions of Dhaka City: Contextual Concepts," in A.H. Imamuddin, ed., *Architectural Conservation Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1993), pp.165–186; and M.M. Rahman, "Old Dhaka's Multi-Court Tenement Houses: The Evolving Ideals," *APJ*, Vol.2 No.1 (December 1996), pp.78–88.
2. For more details, see S. Haq, "Architecture within the Folk Tradition: A Representation from Bangladesh," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.5 No.2 (Spring 1994); and A.H.

Imamuddin, "Bengali House in Urban Context," *BUET Technical Journal* (1983).
3. See Imamuddin, "Bengali House in Urban Context." Also see F.A. Haque, "Multi-Court Houses of Old Dhaka: A Study into Form and Context," M.Arch. Thesis, BUET, Dhaka, 1997.
4. D'Oyle drew sketches of 24 such early-nineteenth-century houses on the Buckland Bundh, a promenade along the river Buriganga. See H. Mamud et al., eds., *Dhakar Prachin Nidarshan* (Dhaka: Academic Publishers, 1991, in Bengali). An excellent description of these riverfront

houses may also be found in M. Mamun, *Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nagari* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1993, in Bengali), p.174.
5. F.H. Mallick and S.N.M.Z. Huda, "Learning from the Past: Aspects of Environmental Design in Old Buildings," in *International Seminar on Future of the Past: Architectural Heritage of Dhaka* (Dhaka: BUET, 1996).
6. I.M. Khan, "Alternative Approach to the Redevelopment of Old Dhaka," doctoral dissertation, Vol.I, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1983.
7. I.M. Khan, "Liveability of Old Dhaka:

Evolving Residential Patterns in Mahallas," in R. Powell, ed., *Regionalism in Architecture — Proceedings of the Regional Seminar in the Series: Exploring Architecture in Islamic Culture* (Singapore: Mapin Publishers, 1985), pp.107,109.

8. Khan, "Alternative Approach to the Redevelopment of Old Dhaka."

9. Rahman, "Old Dhaka's Multi-Court Tenement Houses," p.81.

10. Khan, "Alternative Approach to the Redevelopment of Old Dhaka," p.6.3.

11. Rahman, "Old Dhaka's Multi-Court Tenement Houses," p.81.

12. Ibid., p.82.

13. See M.M. Muktadir and D.M. Hassan, "Traditional House Form in Rural Bangladesh: A Case Study for Regionalism in Architecture," in Powell, ed., *Regionalism in Architecture*, pp.81–86.

14. Many authors have identified this as a "rupture" in the architectural development of the region. See, for example, S. Haque, "Towards a Regional Identity: The Evolution of Contemporary Architecture in Bangladesh," *Architecture + Design* (May–June, 1988), p.25; M. Islam et al., "Introducing Bangladesh: A Case for Regionalism," in Powell, ed., *Regionalism in Architecture*, pp.21–26; and F. Azim, "Bangladesh, Building the Nation" *Architecture + Design* (July–August, 1991), p.18.

15. Some residential buildings during this period must have been made of brick; however, these probably were not very significant in number and size. A *kuttra* was a form of dormitory built around a courtyard, which may have originated in Northern India, from where many of Bengal's old ruling class descended.

16. M. Mamun has claimed that the houses of the general urban population in Dhaka in the early part of the colonial era were copies of traditional rural houses. The materials were of an impermanent, nondurable nature, and the techniques were indigenous and rudimentary. See his *Purano Dhakar Utshob O Gharbari* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1989, in Bengali); and *Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nagari*.

17. Some early examples are the Calcutta Government House, Serampore College, and Dhaka Old State Bank. See Islam et al., "Introducing Bangladesh," p.25. M.A. Naqi and M.A. Khan termed these exact facsimi-

les of buildings in Europe. See their "Society and Syncretism: Attitudes in Sankhanidhi Group," *EARTH*, Vol.2 No.1 (January 1995), pp.24–26.

18. M. Desai, "Colonial Domestic Architecture," *Architecture + Design* (January–February, 1996).

19. A.D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). See also Haque, "Multi-Court Houses of Old Dhaka"; and Imamuddin, "Bengali House in Urban Context."

20. In 1888 the first planned gridiron residential area was laid out in Dhaka for the emerging elite and middle-class. G.S. Roy, "Wari Residential Area: A Lost Glory," *EARTH*, Issue 9 (May 1998), pp.243–45.

21. Ibid.; and Desai, "Colonial Domestic Architecture."

22. The kitchen was the last area to be affected, since eating habits remained the last bastion of local culture. See Azim, "Bangladesh, Building the Nation."

23. Anarchy ensued in 1763 as the East India Company took over Dhaka. After the administration collapsed, and the activities of bandits, *fakirs*, and *sannyasis* aggravated the situation, the British quickly reacted by imprisoning some of the aristocrats — which induced many others to move out of the city. The British tried to set up a puppet government headed by *mutsuddis* (usurers and merchants), but this failed to bring normalcy. Only the introduction of the post of Naib-e-Nazim, as chief city administrator, helped ease the situation. Such incidents highlighted the powerlessness of existing leaders and diminished the social dominance of the old aristocratic class. S. Islam, "Social Life in Dhaka, 1763–1800," in S.U. Ahmed, ed., *Dhaka Past Present Future* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1991), p.75.

24. A Hindu is born into an unchangeable caste, predetermined by that of his father. In general, the Hindu religion consists of four classical social orders or *varnas* (colors). At the top are the Brahmans, priests and scholars; next are the Kshatriyas, warriors; then the Vaisyas, the business community. At the bottom are the Sudras, or untouchables. In Bengal, there were six castes: in descending order of social status — Brahmans, Baidyas, Kayasthas,

Mahisyas, Rajbangshis and Namasudras. See B. Chakrabarty, "Social Classes and Social Consciousness," in S. Islam, ed., *History of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992), p.170.

25. Ibid., p.172. Chakrabarty cited the 1911 Census Report of India to show how Brahmans and Pundits became shareholders in different profitable businesses — for example, the Great Eastern Hotel Company in Calcutta. They even became actively involved in tannery and brewery businesses, previously the purview of Saha businessmen. Therefore, Sahas could no longer be undermined socially for running wine shops. "When they [Brahmans] intruded on the trades and occupation of lower castes, they had no moral right to protest against their coming up to them and shaking hands with them."

26. Ibid., p.168. Also see A.K.N. Karim, *Changing Society in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Nawroje Kitabistan, 1996).

27. Islam, "Social Life in Dhaka, 1763–1800," p.82.

28. The old *lakherajders*, progenitors of the exiled and dethroned royal courtiers, etc., also belonged to this topmost class. Though their economic and political influence gradually decayed, many retained revered positions, especially members of the Nawab's family.

29. M. Mamun, *Unish Shatoke Purba Banger Samaj* (Dhaka: Samaj Nirikhyon Kendra, 1986, in Bengali), p.99. The British also appreciated their role by awarding titles such as "Maharaja" to Suryakanta of Mymensingh and "Nawab" to Abdul Gani of Dhaka.

30. M. Mamun listed many such examples in his *Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nagari and Unish Shatoke Bangladesher Sangbad Samoikpatra* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1985, in Bengali). *Zamindars* like Mathuranath Das (see case study 2), Jiban Krishna Roy, and Madan Mohan Basak all upgraded their status by buying huge amounts of land. Anada Chandra Roy was a prosperous lawyer before becoming a *zamindar* and being elected the first chairman of the Dhaka Municipal Authority. Jiban Krishna Roy, the most influential *zamindar* of the early nineteenth century, bought a zamindary from business profits. Amiruddin Daroga earned lot of money as a police officer and then bought land properties, and declared himself a *zamindar*.

31. Islam, "Social Life in Dhaka, 1763–1800." During the seventeenth century the value of a coin had been determined by metallic content, and every region had its own currency. As such, there were seven types of currency in use in Dhaka in the late eighteenth century. Since government revenue was collected only in *sicca*, other currencies had to be converted to it for revenue payment. *Sicca* retained its original value only for a year and then discounted *(batta)*.

32. A sunset law strictly maintained the deadline for revenue payment, and the slightest delay put a *zamindary* at risk. This sometimes compelled *zamindars* to borrow from currency dealers to pay the government punctually. "It [would] not be an exaggeration to remark that by the end of the 18th century most zamindars and taluqdars of eastern Bengal fell indebted to the seths and banias of Dhaka." Islam, "Social Life in Dhaka, 1763–1800," p.80.

33. Ibid., p.77.

34. The 1835 minutes of T.B. Macauley, a member of the Supreme Council of India, launched English education in India. It opened the way for the growth of Westernized Indian middle class. Its objective was imparting ". . . to the native population the knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of English language . . . to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern. A class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste." Chakrabarty, "Social Classes and Social Consciousness," p.174.

35. English education was not as popular initially among Muslims as it was among Hindus. However, after the 1857 Revolution, when the British royalty replaced the East India Company as the governors of India, more attention was given to the problems of Muslims, and policies were adopted encouraging Muslims to become educated, take better jobs, and become more active in colonial society and administration. From the early twentieth century, this led to the creation of a Muslim middle class, which began to gain influence in civic, social, economic, political and cultural arenas in Dhaka and Bengal. The process was expedited with the partition of Bengal (1905–11) and the establishment of Dhaka University (1921). Chakrabarty, "Social Classes and Social Consciousness," pp.175–77.

36. Enlightened Hindus who condemned the caste system formed their own modified religion. Many society elite and social reformers (e.g., the Tagores, Swami Bibekananda, and Raja Rammohan Roy) embraced Brahmanism.

37. A variety of writers have addressed this issue. Among them are Khan, "Alternative Approach to the Redevelopment of Old Dhaka"; Rahman, "Old Dhaka's Multi-Court Tenement Houses"; Q.A. Mowla, "Architecture in Bangladesh and the State," *EARTH*, Vol.2 No.1 (January 1995), pp.16–17; Z. Islam, "The Beauty and the Beast: Who Decides for Whom," *EARTH*, Vol.2 No.2 (May 1995), pp.18–19; S. Haq, "Bangladeshi Urban Image: Conception in the Making," *EARTH*, Vol.2 No.1 (January 1995), pp.20–21; and Naqi and Khan, "Society and Syncretism."

38. A limited study of the form of such houses is provided by Imamuddin et al., "Shankhari Pattri: A Unique Old City Settlement, Dhaka," in A.H. Imamuddin and K.R. Longeteig, eds., *Architecture and Urban Conservation in the Islamic World* (Singapore: Aga Khan Trust for Culture-Mapin Publishers, 1989), pp.121–133.

39. A further factor leading to the extensive use of brick was the ownership of nearby brickfields by some of the elite.

40. The ancestors of many of the local craftsmen had moved to Dhaka with the Mughal entourage; others were hired from Calcutta. Ali et al., "Early Twentieth Century Mansions of Dhaka City."

41. Descriptions of these early-nineteenth-century furnishings given by Bishop Heber are available in Mamun, *Purano Dhakar Utshob O Gharbari*. The daughter of a foreign-returned doctor, Begum Shaista Ikramullah, explained the attitude of this class: ". . . our house was furnished to look exactly like an English house. In the drawing room, there were heavy sofas, . . . lace curtains, gleaming brass and silver. . . . The dining room had a fairly massive side-board . . . displaying a love of heavy silver. The hall and the study were furnished in the typical English style of the time . . . ." See Haq, "Bangladeshi Urban Image," pp.20–21.

42. K.K. Ashraf, "Land, Water and Man in Bengal: Themes for a Deltaic Architecture," in F. Ameen, ed., *Contemporary Architecture and City Form: The South Asian Paradigm* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1997), pp.25–39.

43. A. Rapoport, *Human Aspects of Urban Form* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977).

44. See, for example, Imamuddin, "Bengali House in Context."

45. Ruplal House is a good example (Case Study 2).

46. The tenth day of the Muslim holy month of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain, grandsons of Prophet Muhammad, especially celebrated by the Shia Muslims. See K.M. Karim, "Social Structure under the Nawabs," in Islam, ed., *History of Bangladesh*; J.N. Sarkar, "Mughal Cultural Heritage," in Ibid., pp.84–118; and Mamun, *Purano Dhakar Utshob O Gharbari*.

47. M.M. Rahman, "Ephemeral Transient Static: Ritual Architecture and Urbanity," *EARTH*, Issue 9 (May 1998), pp.238.

48. Some examples were Gaye Holud (putting tamarind on the body before the wedding), and Sat Pak (seven ambulating walks during wedding).

49. See B. Hillier and J. Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

50. Rapoport, *Human Aspects of Urban Form*.

51. See N. Shabin, "Search for Regional Identity in the Contemporary Urban Residential Architecture of Dhaka City," M.Arch. Thesis, BUET, Dhaka, 1997.

52. Islam, "Beauty and the Beast."

All photos and drawings are by the authors unless otherwise noted.