

RELEASING THE BARRIERS OF OVER SANCTIFICATION OF A SACRED SPACE ***Re-Evaluating Functional Configuration and Usage of Mosques in Dhaka, Bangladesh***

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Abstract

The mosque is a very important component for the Muslim community. Dhaka, the city of mosques is accommodating more than 6,000 mosques which refer to at least one mosque per 0.05km² area. It has its great influence in the surrounding community and social life. Generally, we know mosque as a sacred place for worshipping for the Muslims. But over the period of time mosques have been over sanctified as a place of worship forgetting its subsidiary purposes in the context of Dhaka, Bangladesh. For this, a psychological barrier is being formulated gradually to its users which represents a wrong perception about the usage of mosques. Islamic history reveals its evidence about the multidimensional usage (like learning centre, centre of community, economic activities etc.) of mosques. There has been a failure to communicate the pristine view of Islam and it is oiling religious fanaticism. This study aims about how the psychological barrier of over sanctified mosques can be eradicated and explore the potential attachment of its users. Four different community mosques of Dhaka city are taken for studying this particular issue in this context. Their spatial layout and connectivity with urban morphology are being analysed super positioning the theory of space syntax. Questionnaire survey as quantitative research has done to the local users for the study of perception and usage of mosques. These analyses give a comparative conception about the relationship between the mosques and its user's psychology. This paper discloses how both architectural elements and social morphology are influencing occupants' behaviour and responses of that particular mosques. This inter-relationship between the architectural features and social assemblage can be designated to articulate future mosques in Dhaka city.

Keywords: Mosque, Over-sanctification, Urban morphology, Space re-evaluation, Dhaka.

1. Introduction

A mosque can be defined as a Muslim religious institution where Muslim community offer their prayers, conducts other religious and social activities and controls the authority of the space in which the activities are held. From the initial era of Islam, Muslim architecture has been initiated from the foot print of mosque which was introduced by Prophet Muhammad (Sm.). Gradually Islam flourished and the concepts of mosque were circulated in various countries of the world.

With the invasion of Sultans and Mughal Subahdars in Bengal, the construction of mosque as a built form was introduced in clearly sacred identity but in secular architecture. Dhaka- as a provincial capital and important trade centre for the Muslims majority living here, housed significant number of mosques throughout the history and till to date. Although it is clear that these mosques become a strong degree of urban element in defining the characteristics of Dhaka city, it often failed to address its true role as a community service which can serve beyond the enclaves of five times prayer.

The idea of mosque as a sole religious space where only 'Salat' (Muslim prayer) can be offered has boosted the over sanctification of this sacred structure. This idea kept aloof the communal roles that a mosque could had performed in shaping the communities and expurgating fanatics within its jurisdiction. D. N. Wilber (1936) in delineating the versatile role of mosque on its immediate settings, stated in his *The Religious Edifice and Community Life* –

“Further, these calls to prayer were one of the factors active in bringing into being the feature that many of the streets of the town radiated directly from the court of the mosque. The court of the congregational mosque established itself as the centre of public life. From the first it was a spacious enclosure, in the beginning large enough to hold the entire male population of the town, to which all

the men could be summoned in time of war, or in which they could be accommodated during the great religious festivals.”

From the notion of over sanctification, this paper investigate mosque as religious building type with its possible role in the community. The sample of four community mosques and their immediate settings (Figure 1) in this study was selected as a representative of diversified practice of mosque buildings in Dhaka city.



Figure 1, Satellite images of four community mosques and their immediate settings (*Source: Google earth images*)

2. Literature Review

2.1. MOSQUE AND DHAKA CITY

Dhaka- the capital of Bangladesh, is the largest city in Bangladesh with a population of more than 18 million, with 90 percent Muslim majority. Due to the rapid growth of Dhaka city in the late 1950s, the frenetic capital needed a large number of mosques to care for the increasing Muslim population. According to the Religious Ministry of Bangladesh Dhaka is currently accommodating more than 6,000 mosques which refer to at least one mosque per 0.05 square meter area.

2.2. EVOLUTION OF MOSQUE IN DHAKA CITY

Mosques have been at the centre for religious life in Dhaka, situated along the course of Buriganga, since shortly after the Sufi missionaries arrived in the 13th century. With a glorious past of 400 years of establishment as a capital city, Dhaka houses many mosques of the Bengali sultanate (which controlled the region until the 16th century) and Mughals-who ruled the area until the rise of the British East India Company in the 18th century. During Colonial period many mosques were established under the patronization of Nawabs. In the early years of independence after 1971, the city’s mosque architecture was mostly mere imitation of foreign traditions like-Turkish domes, Mughal arches or massive Arab minarets which was more adaptive to global Islamic framework. Proliferation of mosques was another reason of growing Islamic sentiment that boosted in people to establish charity mosques. Most of these mosques are ill-planned in the both building and city scale. Until recently, some group of contemporary architects have been involved in mosque architecture and presented some exemplary mosques in the city life of Dhaka. Baitur Rauf Jame Mosque by Architect Marina Tabassum, Gulshan Society Mosque by Architect Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury, Mayor Mohammad Hanif Mosque by Architect Md Rafiq Azam are notable.

2.3. OVER SANCTIFICATION OF MOSQUE IN DHAKA CITY

Mosques function as the core religious structure to house the five times daily prayer, Jummah prayer (Friday congregation noon prayer), Iftar (breaking of fast in Ramadan month), Janajah (prayer after death) and some other core religious activities of Islam in the mosques of Dhaka. Public perception holds a holy and sacred notion about it where one cannot enter without proper ambulation. Most community conserves strict opinion that no social or philanthropic activities can be performed within the mosque premises other than performing ‘Salat’ (Muslim prayer). This over sanctification of this religious structure breaks the bridge of mental accessibility of the user from the physical presence in this holy space. Building mosque without the spatial quality to act as a multipurpose hub, lack of connectivity and direct physical accessibility along with confined in usages are the visible reasons behind over

sanctification. Lack of proper religious knowledge is hindering mosque from performing its social and political activities and turning it into an unreachable fortress. Which is inaccessible to the mass community and in the broader end it is boosting intolerance, disparity, fanatics along with building religious tensions and ambiguities.

2.4. MOSQUE IN VIEW OF ISLAM

Since the primary assignment of man on earth is to worship Allah, the whole of the earth has been declared a mosque for the Muslims (Bukhari, 7: 1). Though mosques have been performing tremendous effects on the lives of Muslims, it is sadly observed that it has been considered only as a place where daily prayers are offered ignoring greatly other roles it could have played in the lives of the Muslims. Most scholars have only concentrated on religious rulings or architectural designs of some mosques with little or no reference to the socio-economic and political use of mosques in the society. But it is in the mosque where practical learning of virtues are demonstrated and practiced in Islam. As Muhammad Ali (1973) has illustrated,

“Once within the doors of the mosque, every Muslim finds himself in an atmosphere of equality and love. Before their Maker they all stand shoulder to shoulder, the king along with his poorest subject, the rich arrayed in gorgeous robes with the beggar clad in rags, the white man with the black. Nay, the king or rich man standing in a black row will have to lay his head, prostrating himself before God, at the feet of a slave or a beggar standing in the front. There could be no more levelling influence in the world. Differences in rank, wealth and colour vanish within the mosque, and quite a new atmosphere, an atmosphere of brotherhood, equality and love, totally differing from the outside world, prevails within the holy precincts.”

The Prophet (S.M.) used the mosque as a centre for educational persuasion and studies in Islamic lifestyle. He elucidated the message revealed to him, explained the meanings of the revelations through sermons and lectures. Eventually, the mosque flourished as a centre of learning. As per history, in the fourteenth century, 12,000 mosques were used as centres of learning in Alexandria (Nakosteen,1964). Another notable contribution of the mosque to intellectualism is in the form of attaching libraries to some of the mosques which were later turned into universities.

At the time of the Prophet (S.M.), judgements, dispute resolution, announcement of punishment on offenders were made in the mosque. The mosque also served as a place for initiating marriage contract; place for resettlement, and for preaching empathy. Economic function were also performed in mosques such as- collection of Zakat (Islamic taxes) and Sadaqah (Islamic charity) from the rich and giving it to the poor. In addition, there are also mosques with shops in their premises or even attached to the mosque.

3. Objectives

The objective of this paper study the psychological barrier of over sanctified mosques and how it can be eradicated and explore the potential attachment of its users. Four different community mosques of Dhaka city are taken for studying this particular issue in this context. Firstly, their spatial layout and connectivity with urban morphology is being analysed super positioning the theory of space syntax. Secondly, questionnaire survey as qualitative research has done to the local users for the study of perception and usage of mosques. These analyses give a comparative conception about the relation-ship between the mosques and its user’s psychology.

4. Methodology

To carry out the research in a rational way four mosques of Dhaka city were selected with different context and attributes. They are, *Tara Mosque, Chawkbazar Shahi Mosque, Sobhanbag jaam-e Mosjid, Azimpur Graveyard mosque (Mayor Hanif Mosque)*.

This research has been carried out through three steps of analysis.

- Comparative analysis of the attributes and spatial quality of the mosques through filed studies.
- Contextual analysis of the mosques about its impact on urban morphology through space syntax.
- Perception of the users of the mosques through questionnaire survey regarding different attributes of the sanctification of mosques.

5. Analysis

5.1. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ATTRIBUTES AND SPATIAL QUALITY OF THE MOSQUES

Tara Mosque- A historical Mosque of Mughal style located in the old portion of the Dhaka city, Armanitola. This mosque is highly decorated with motifs and other Mughal style ornamentation. It has a grandeur effect in its existence which is accompanied by a big open courtyard and a star shaped waterbody in front. This mosque is also a very attractive destination not only for the common people here but also for the tourists for its historical and architectural value.

Chawkbazar Shahi Mosque- This mosque is located in one of the most distinct oldest commercial centre of Dhaka city, Chawkbazar. The mosque was constructed in 1676 and called ‘Shahi Mosque’ which had direct connection from the Buriganga River and served as central mosque for the Sultans. But chronologically this historic mosque has undergone many consecutive demolition and renovation phase resulting distortion to its original planning and exterior elevations. The adjacent areas gradually became over crowded with commercial activities and thus the initial open settings were lost with layers of consecutive extensions. Even its ground floor is totally occupied with commercial activities today. Now the total mosque is physically confined within commercial masses making it psychologically aloof from the people of the community.

Sobhanbag jaam-e Mosque- Sobhanbag mosque is located along one of the major route of Dhaka city, Mirpur road in Dhanmondi. And Dhanmondi is also one of the major residential area of Dhaka. This mosque is like a typical mosque in the Dhaka city residential context. The mosque has very little openings, with no court-yard. This is not only fortified with heavy elevation walls with very little openings but also surrounded by multi-storied residential buildings. Only the front elevation is open to one of the most busy and significant route of Dhaka; Mirpur road.

Azimpur Graveyard (Mayor Hanif Mosque)- Azimpur Mosque is located amidst the residential setting beside the Azimpur graveyard in Dhaka which was built in 1746 AD. The mosque was built during the reign of Mughal Nawab Alivardi Khan but sadly demolished to make modern mosque with increased capacity. Renowned architect Md. Rafiq Azam designed the mosque with through connection between community, mosque plaza and graveyard. This mosque had ample opportunities of public gathering in the mosque plazas which made a positive impact in the surrounding high density residential zones of Azimpur colony.

Table 1, A comparative chart showing the difference of physical attributes of the four studied mosque in Dhaka city.

Mosque	Year of establishment	Layering (Veranda/Central praying spaces)	Articulation of elevation	Spatial Grandeur (Open courtyard/plaza)	Subsidiary activity (Shops, Madrasa)
Azimpur Mosque	1746, demolished & rebuilt	yes	Contemporary (formerly)	yes	no

	2018		Mughal)		
Chwakbazar Mosque	1676 demolition –renovation several times	yes	General (formerly Mughal)	no	yes
Tara mosque	18 th century	yes	Mughal architecture	yes	no
Sobhanbag mosque	1991	no	General	no	yes

5.2. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE MOSQUES ABOUT ITS IMPACT ON URBAN MORPHOLOGY THROUGH SPACE SYNTAX.

The four mosques are analysed as the integration core using visibility graph analysis of space syntax. The degree of connection has been identified taking a catchment area of 500 by 500 meters, where the integration core i.e. the mosque with its surroundings is analysed Visibility Graph Analysis using Depthmap. The objective is to examine the extent up to which the mosque renders its effect as an urban element and explores relationship with its surroundings.

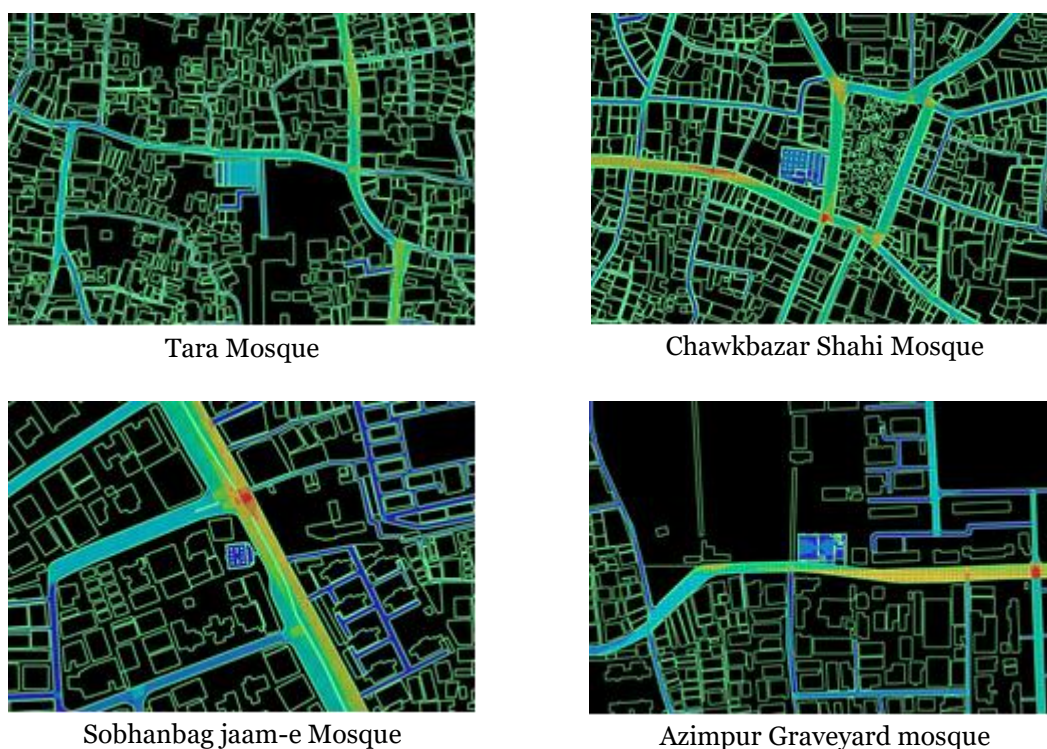


Figure 2, Visibility Graph Analysis of the four chosen mosques of Dhaka city. (Source: Author)

By comparing the visibility results of the four studied mosques in Dhaka city it is clear that Tara mosque shows an increase visual integration. This suggest that it plays a significant role in connecting with its neighbourhood. The positivity about this mosque is the open plaza in front of the mosque which is grand in proportion to the size of the mass of main structure of the mosque. The mosque is situated in an historic context of Old Dhaka and itself bears the testimony of past which acts as a point of tourist attraction into this beautiful mosque. The mosque has integrity from three sides with the surrounding which further explains the positive results in visual graph analysis.

Azimpur Graveyard mosque (Mayor Hanif Mosque) also displays a good degree of visual integration which is connected with the surrounding from two sides. It is not typical mosques which are mostly available in Dhaka rather an example of architecturally designed community mosque in contemporary time. It has an adjacent graveyard attached to it and the thoughtful design integrated the community and mosque with an open plaza which has a direct visual connection with the graveyard. The architectural

attributes clearly added positive contribution in demonstrating increased visibility of the mosque as an urban form.

The lower visual integration is displayed in Sobhanbag jaam-e Mosque and Chawkbazar Shahi Mosque, which represents the typical community mosques of Dhaka city. Both the mosques are enclosed from three sides with surrounding building masses and the approach is only from one side. No public integration space like courtyard, open space, plaza. The only visual connection with outside is through the window/openings on the outside elevation which is incapable of creating proper connection with the surrounding as an urban form.

5.3. PERCEPTION OF THE USERS OF THE MOSQUES

There are six questions asked to the users of community mosques of the four studied mosques to understand the perception of users towards sacredness or sanctity of mosque. At first, the general information of the respondents are noted. Then above three questions related to user perception of mosque in background to religious ideology is surveyed and last three questions involve the space and perception of architecture regarding mosque from user’s perspective.

Table 2, Age of user

21-30	31-40	41-50	50+
5	12	18	5

Table 3, Academic Background of user

Primary (class 5)	Junior (Class 8)	SSC	HSC	Diploma	Hon’s
6	13	9	6	4	2

The age of the respondents that take part in this study falls from 21 to above and nearly 90% is between 31 to 50+ years old. Their academic background varies from primary, junior, SSC, HSC, Diploma and Hon’s.

Table 4, Mosque is only ritual prayer and meditation center for Muslim

Name	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
Tara mosque	2	7	1	
Chawkbazar mosque	8	1	1	
Sobhanbag mosque	7	2	1	
Azimpur mosque		6	4	

Table 5, Mosque as a Centre for Community for Muslim

Name	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
Tara mosque		3	6	1
Chawkbazar mosque		1	1	8
Sobhanbag mosque		2	6	2
Azimpur mosque	1	3	5	1

Table 6, Can other activity be operated in Mosque

Name	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
Tara mosque		3	7	
Chawkbazar mosque		1	3	6
Sobhanbag mosque		1	7	2
Azimpur mosque		3	5	2

Table 7, Design of the mosque give a psychological impact to sacredness of the space

Name	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
Tara mosque	2	8		
Chawkbazar mosque	8	2		
Sobhanbag mosque	9	1		
Azimpur mosque	6	4		

Table 8, Size, light and material used give some impact towards sacredness space

Name	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
Tara mosque	2	8		
Chawkbazar mosque	7	2	1	
Sobhanbag mosque		7	3	
Azimpur mosque	4	6		

Table 9, Mosque area must be fenced/fortified to protect the sacredness of space

Name	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
Tara mosque		6	4	
Chawkbazar mosque	1	7	1	1
Sobhanbag mosque	7	1	2	
Azimpur mosque		1	3	6

The questionnaire survey comes up with an interesting feedback. The frequency of answers about the perception of mosque function varies with the features and settings of mosque. The majority of users of Sobhanbag and Chawkbazar which mosques are fortified and not connected with the community express opinion as mosque to function only as prayer space with no other community activity. While, users of Azimpur mosque, which has a public plaza and open access, shows more liberal views and agrees with the notion of multipurpose use of mosque. Though Tara mosque has an open plaza in front but it is situated in the Old Dhaka in a community of orthodox mentality which explains the reason of their strict perception about uses of mosque.

The features and quality of spaces affect the sacredness of space which is more or less agreed by all. In case of fortification a notable difference is observed in the perception of users in Azimpur mosque. It clearly shows how a thoughtful design changed the perception of the community towards mosque.

6. Recommendation

The analysis conducted in this paper guides us to some thoughtful recommendations. They are mentioned below-

- Mosques should be adopted as a centre for community for Muslim masses in Dhaka.
- Besides obligatory daily ritual of prayer it should be designed as a multipurpose space where other social, judicial, political and philanthropic activities can be regulated.
- Plan of mosques should adopt more open-ended design principle to act as a platform for the communal activities.
- Architectural spatial quality, design and functional arrangement can act as a catalyst to break the fanatic mind-set of mass people.
- Mosque as a well fenced compound entrenched the mosque from its immediate locality henceforth boundary wall, fencing should be avoided.

7. Conclusion

The spatial quality of a mosque affect the mind-set of its users. Mosques with fortification or enclosed space affect its users to bear a narrow mind-set. On the other hand mosque with openness makes more connectivity with its users. Over the time the fact of over sanctification of mosque has dilapidated its pristine idea. And under the cover of over sanctification its versatile features are prohibited. The versatile features of a Mosque must be taken in account in present-time approaches.

Thus, mosques are not mere religious buildings. From the very beginning of its history it has diversified significance. Moreover, in such a Muslim context like Dhaka, mosque can be an active urban element. Which can greatly contribute in fulfilling the needs and aspirations of its locality and thus boost up positive mentality in the mass people of the community.

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