

Changing Scenarios of Public Open Space in a British Colonial City: The Case of the Ramna Area, Dhaka

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ABSTRACT

Dhaka is considered as one of the fastest growing megacity with a population of 15 million ranking 9th among the world. In the process of urbanization, throughout its history, many part of Dhaka has gone through many physical and functional transformations. Ramna area which was produced as a pleasure garden during Mughal period is one of those parts that has gone through consecutive manipulations. This has become one of the major public open space due to its uniqueness. This paper attempts to unfold the changing scenario of present Ramna Area.

Keywords: Dhaka, Urbanization, Changing Scenario, Public Open Space

INTRODUCTION

According to Khan and Nilufar (2009), *"Cities are in a continuous process of change and readjustment of its different parts, which are spontaneously developed or deliberately planned under different socio-economic and political conditions in different period."* Different parts of Dhaka, which is the capital of Bangladesh, the third most densely populated city in the world with over 12 million people, have gone through various physical and functional transformations, throughout the history. The city has grown from a small Hindu trading center to a metropolis and its antiquity can be traced back to 7th century A.D. according to Nilufar (2010). The city of Dhaka has evolved more or less organically over four hundred years and has come to its present state through many phases of governance. The governance phases can be divided in to Six periods, these are pre-Mughal (1205-1610), the Mughal period (1610-1757), the East India Company period (1757-1858), the British colonial period (1858-1947), the Pakistan period (1947-1971), and the Bangladesh period (from 1971 onwards).

Dhaka came to prominence during 1610 AD under the rule of Mughals as the capital of Bengal. In the regime of Mughal they started building a commercial site along the river of Burignaga and Chowk (market place) was the first formal public space in old Dhaka. After the British colonial period, Dhaka City was established as the capital of East Pakistan (Ahmed, 2014). This attracted people from different districts. For this reason the society drastically changed after the British Colonial period. In this multi-dimensional political background of Dhaka, public places have taken diverse forms. Suhrawardy Udyan which is formerly known as the **Ramna Race Course** grounds is one of those public spaces that has experienced transformation through different periods of administration.

The Ramna area which has been re-structured, reproduced, re-appropriated and consecutively manipulated throughout different political periods has played a vital role in the structuring and evolution of the of the city. Through the democratization processes, historic-cultural developments and nationalist movements, the Ramana area established

a unique and layered space due to its consecutive changes. From the Mughal period to the Post-Colonial period it has been transformed from a pleasure garden to a contested space which became the center of the metropolitan Dhaka. This area is in fact a threshold between the indigenous, traditional, and post-colonial contemporary part of the city. It has also become a pre-eminent representative landscape for the nation, standing as an oasis in the middle of the city in the context of Dhaka's extremely dense urban morphology. This lush green area in fact shows a contrast to the dense urban morphology of Dhaka while other public open spaces are evaporating. Even though Dhaka does not have majestic geographical conditions like many other cities, where the city center remains empty and guides the path of urbanization, interestingly Ramna area reveals a vast open green space lined with high density trees forming its unique character. Ramna best reflects the meaning of an open public space that holds historical and cultural importance, a place of meeting, greetings and exchange which played a role to build the nation in many ways. This study tries to unravel the changing scenario of *Suhrawardy Udyan* or Ramna Area.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DHAKA AND SUHRAWARDY UDYAN

Mughal Period

Dhaka was named as "*Jahangir Nagar*" when the Mughal Empire conquered the territory in 16th century. The development of Dhaka started from the southern river bank in the pre-Mughal period, an area that is now a part of Old Dhaka (Ahmed, 2014). The city then expanded to the west and to the north during the Mughal and British periods (Figure 1). During the Pakistani period, the development was primarily towards the north, and later it continued rapidly in every direction (Chowdhury, 2012 as cited by Ahmed) (Figure 2).

So, the attributes of the city can be divided into two dominant urban patterns that developed during its growth; the 'historic core' with compact and densely built areas having narrow and irregular street pattern, known as the indigenous or 'old Dhaka' and the 'new Dhaka' that expanded towards the north (Figure 3). During the Mughal period Dhaka was declared as the Capital of Mughal Bengal and became a center

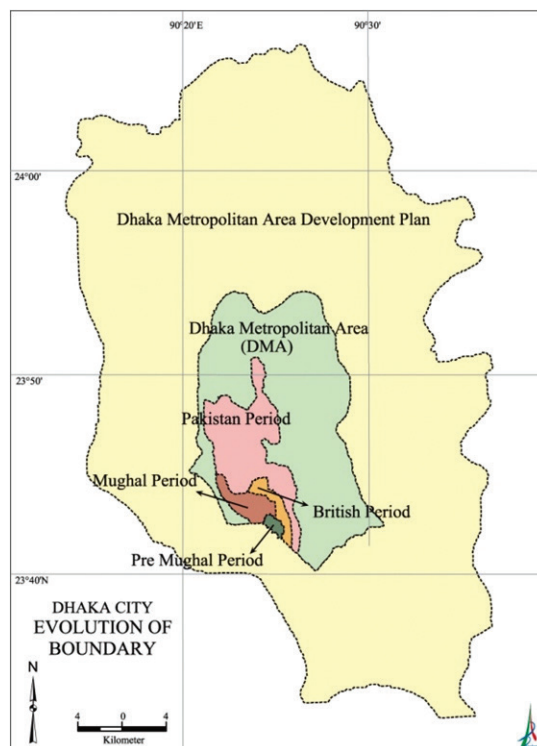


Figure 1:
Evolution of Boundary of Dhaka City
(Source: Banglapedia)

of commerce, hence the settlement grew along the river Buringanga (Figure 4) for trade, transport and commerce. They built their Fort (*Lalbagh*) on the bank of the river and established a 'bazaar' or market place beside the fort. The 'bazar' was the focus of the development. Historically the *Bazzar* and *Chouk* (square) were used as public spaces for commercial purpose and as a central gathering place (Figure 5).

Old Dhaka had another attribute, which was the creation of open spaces by the people belonging to the ruling class. In Mughal period encampment gardens were found inside the fort and outside of the peripheral historic core large pleasure gardens can be found. *Bagh-e-Badshahi* or *Shahbag* (garden of the King), which is now known as Suhrawardy Udyan was found on the periphery of the city which was rather unplanned (Figure 6). According to Nilufar (2010) "Moreover, some garden houses were established by foreign traders".

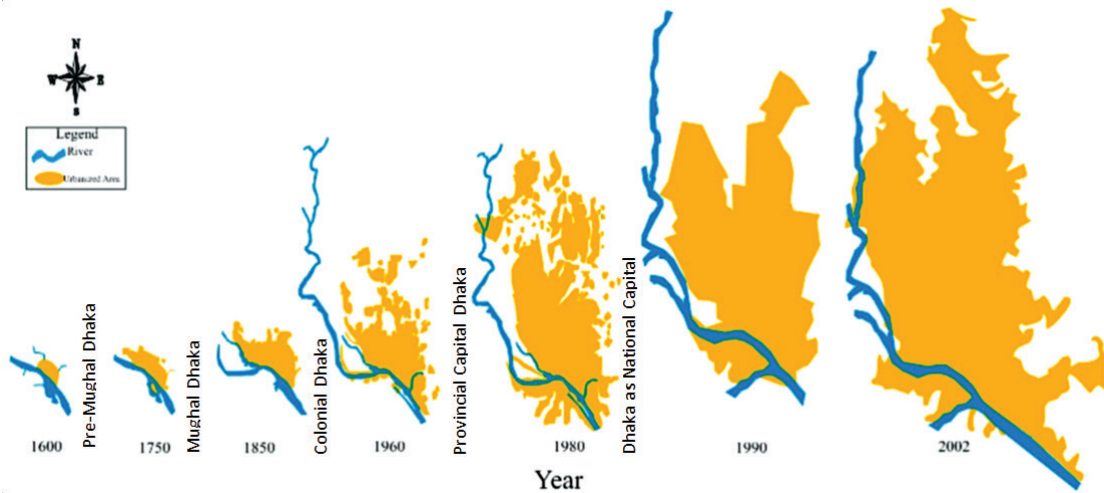


Figure 2:
Physical development of Dhaka City at different stages of its growth
(Source: Ahmed, B., Hasan, R., & Maniruzzaman, K. M. 2014)

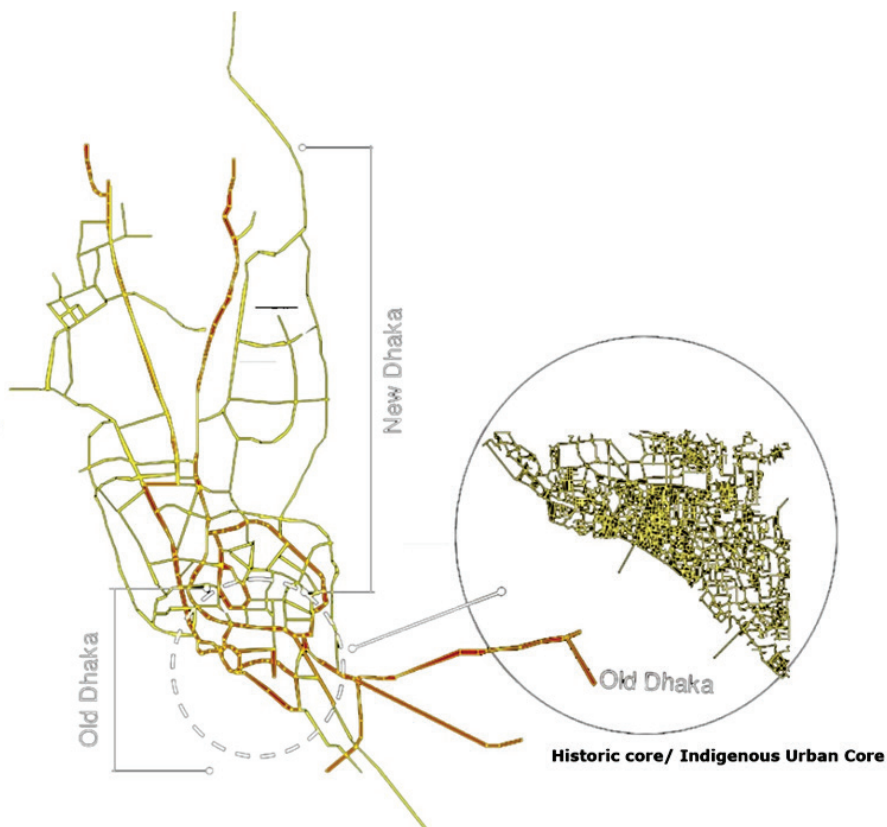


Figure 3:
Two dominant urban patterns of Dhaka
(Source: Nilufar, 2011)

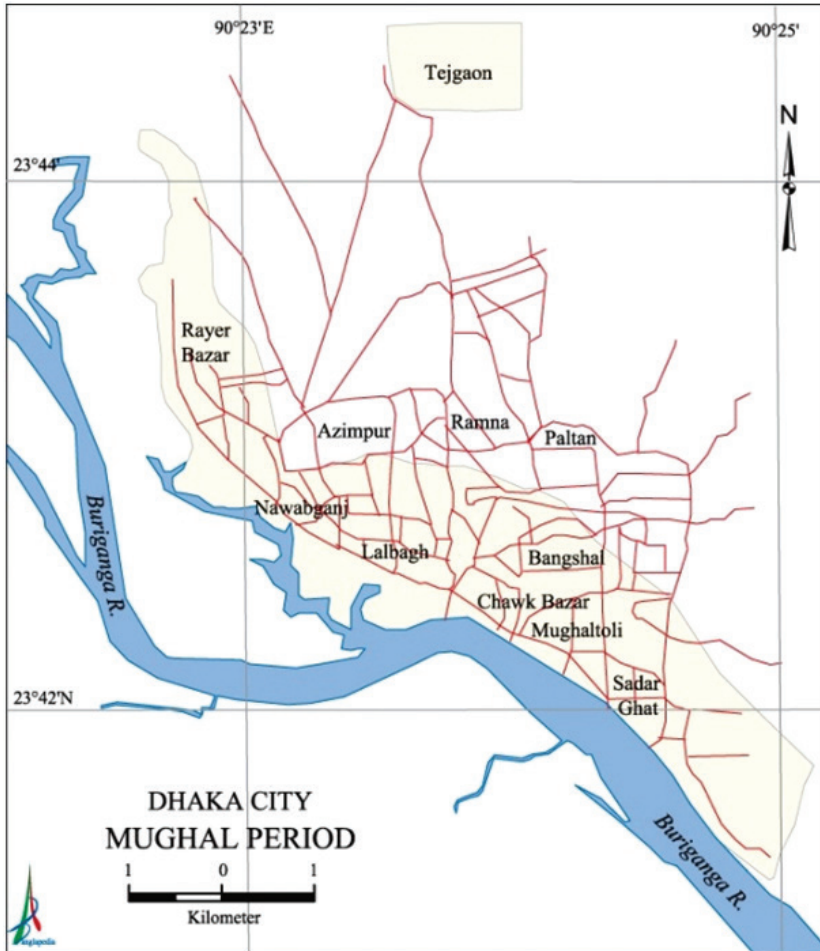


Figure 4:
Dhaka city in Mughal period
(Source: Banglapedia)



Figure 5:
The Chouk, view of market place in 1885
(Source: The British Library London)



Figure 6:
Gate of Bah-e-Badshahi, Mughal pleasure garden
(Source: The British Library London)

Dhaka lost its status as capital when it shifted to Kolkata in 1706. With the inception of British power around 1760 the importance of Dhaka declined and the city did not expand much. But the second half of 19th century showed a new beginning of Dhaka. A new modern Dhaka rose with metalled roads, open spaces, street lights and piped water supply (Farida, 2010).

Spatial Imprints of Colonial influence on Dhaka

The Colonial state of Dhaka began in 1757, when the British East India Company (EIC) gained military control of Bengal (Figure 11). In 1765, EIC took over the civil administration of the country. One of the immediate consequences of the take-over of Bengal, as observed by Dasgupta cited by Mowla (2014), was the rapid de-industrialization and de-urbanization of the territory. The city's housing stock had fallen from 44,000 houses in 1801 to 10,830 in 1838 (Taylor, 1840 as cited by Mowla, 2014). To accommodate the colonial district administration many of the older settlements were occupied. Bagh-e- Badshahi was one of them with the construction of a race course by the EIC settlers (Figure 7). In 1858, the British Government took over the administration of India from the EIC after the mutiny. A restructuring of the city's morphology followed the consolidation of the British power which lead to the development of civic spaces in locations that was preferred by the British, closer to the river as well as some of their factories (BPWD, 1862 as cited by Mowla, 2014). British used the local elite and existing institutions of power to manage and control rather than imposing European authority. The influences of colonial regime were seen in the development of the riverfront, a race course and clubs which are different from the Mughals.

Dhaka's physical environment was mostly influenced by the English; the Civil lines, the civic station, a railway colony and the cantonment are the main components (Mowla, 2014). These combined attributes brought a fundamental structuring in the layout of Dhaka. Colonial notions encouraged the functional zoning therefore all the residential buildings were built near the river in order to have comfort and easy access to the water routes as

that was the major source of communication. But by 1820, the discomfort of living in Mughal's quarters prompted them to move to the indigenous core of Bangla Bazaar/Farashganj area (Figure 8) which was close to their factory sites and the new cantonment in the Mill Barrack area (Mowla, 2014).

A new cantonment area was built by Dawes to the northeast of the city (by clearing *Dilkusha*-an area just beyond the *Nawabpur and Thatari Bazar*). It was formally built with barracks, officers' quarters and a parade ground. But the site selection proved to be unhealthy and it was abandoned in 1853 due to its unhygienic situation. The site is known as *Purana Paltan* or *Old Platoon*. Later on part of this open space was converted into a garden and the other vacant part was used for athletics, a parade ground for military and a shooting range. This is how the unhygienic place turned into a beautiful place, preserving it as a *Maidan* (large open field or vast ground) with constant care. The ground was handed over to the Municipal Committee (Mowla, 2014). The cantonment area shifted to the old part of Dhaka which is the Old Mughal Lalbagh Fort and Peel Khana military area (Habib, 2010).

In 1862, the formation of a European sector was begun when the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Cecil Beadon, expressed his dismay over the chaotic situation after visiting Dhaka (Mowla, 2014). On his orders the offices and colonial administration were moved to one site on a strip of land about 1000 meters. (Figure 8 & 9) The land was selected by the Divisional Commissioner Buckland to concentrate the colonial administration from the west side of the public road to the north (along Johnson Road) of the city. The courts for the District Judge, Magistrate and Collector and other subordinate offices along with other private and public organizations were shifted to this new location by 1866 (Habib, 2010). The whole new formation of this development is known as civil line. Another development, which is a significant event of this period, is the construction of an embankment with a promenade along the southern front of the city in the river shore line in 1864 by Buckland. This river front promenade determined the colonial urban morphology in Dhaka (Figure 7). In 1872, when the British EIC was gained *dewani* (power to collect the administrative revenues) of Bengal, they established their headquarters in the old Mughal area.

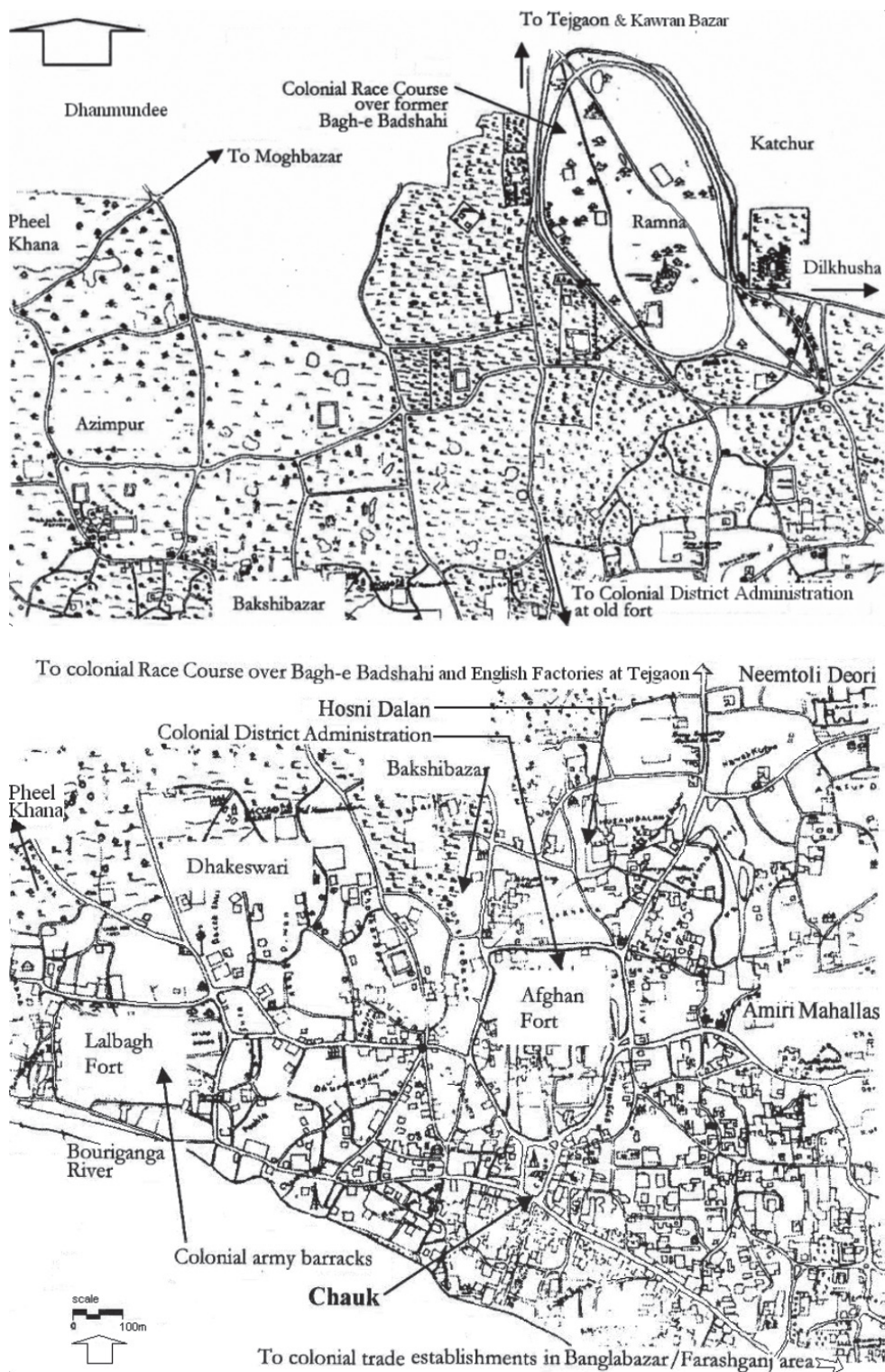


Figure 7:
Footprints of Colonial Urban Morphology over indigenous layout: Colonial Race Course over Bagh-e-Badshahi (Source: Mowla, 2014, originally found in Bengal PWD Proceedings, XVI 59).

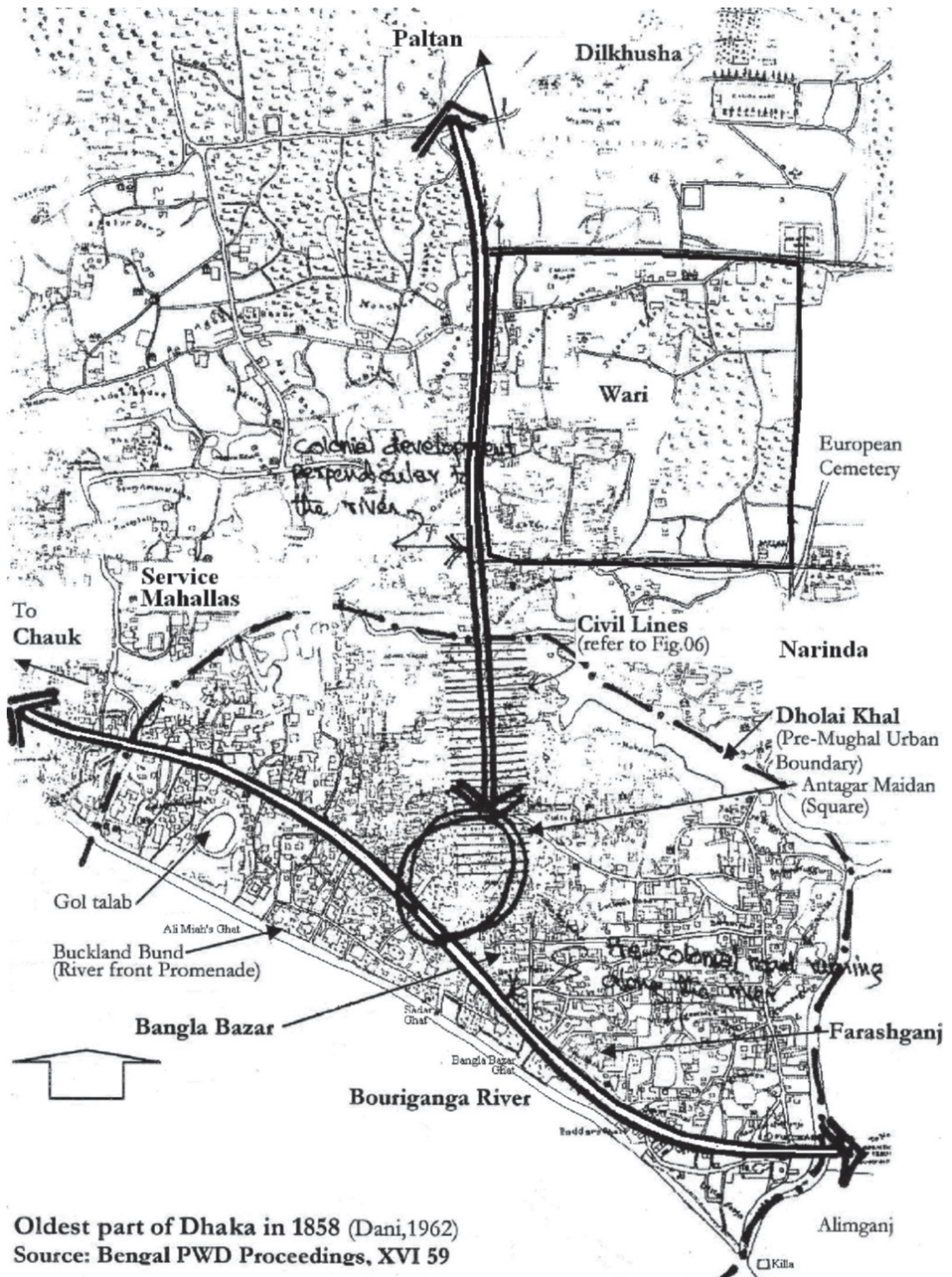


Figure 8:
The beginning of the Colonial Impact: clustering of colonial structures (Source: Mowla, 2014)

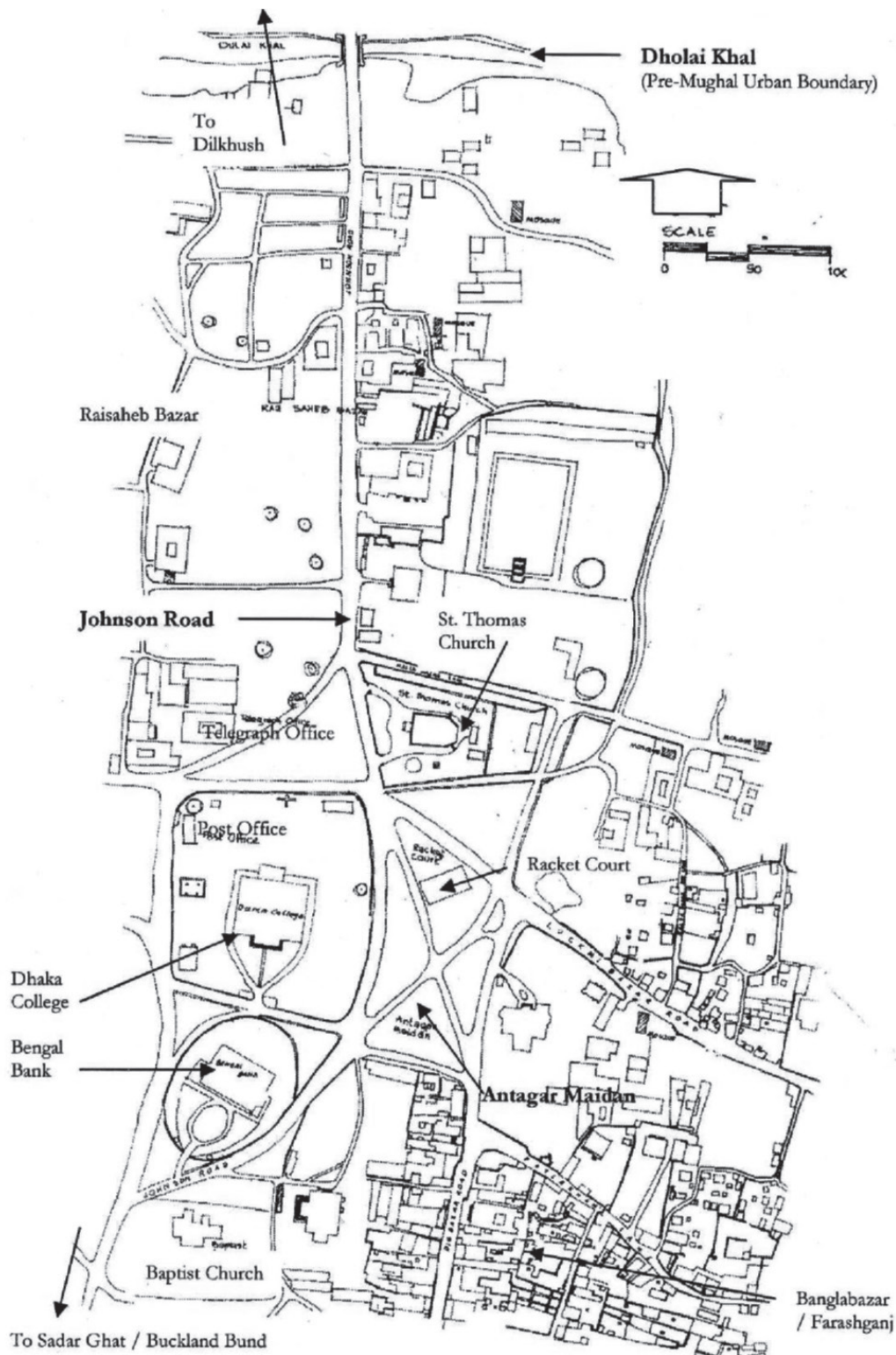


Figure 9:
The birth of colonial civil lines in 1858 (refer to fig 8) (Source: Mowla, 2014)

With the introduction of the railway, in 1885-86 by The State Railway, the importance of riverfront was reduced. It had a lasting impression on Dhaka's urban morphology. To develop the station, workshop, staff quarters and the railway colony about fifty acres of land were acquired and developed. The city

expanded and densified towards north part beyond rail line. According to Dani, as cited by Mowla (2014), the rail line and the station practically demarcated the old (indigenous) from the new (European) developments.

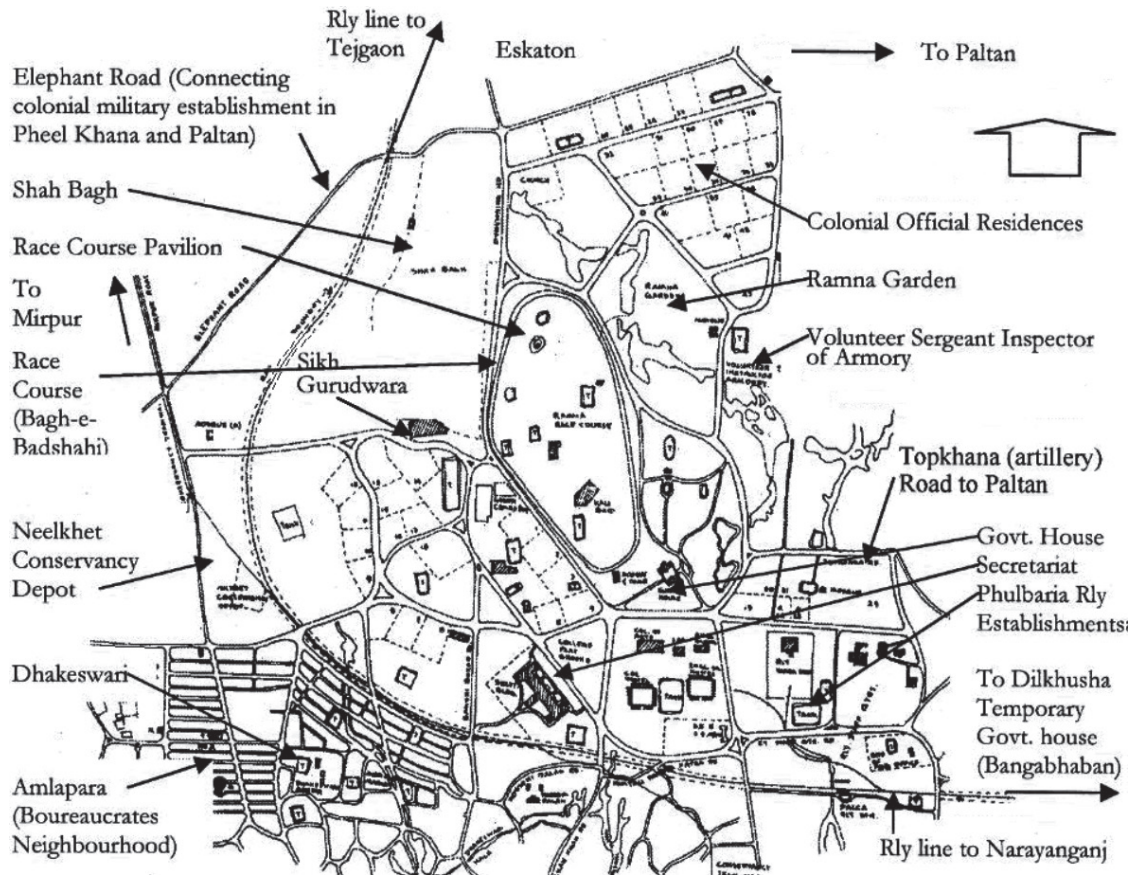


Figure 10 (a):
Map of 1924 showing the upgrading of Dhaka into a provincial capital in 1906 prompted the establishment of Civil Station
(Source: Mowla, 2014)



Figure 10 (b):
map of 1924 showing Colonial Dhaka right after establishment of Dhaka University that started to use the Civil Station Buildings. (Source: (Mowla, 2014))

The Mughal Garden versus the New Colonial Station

In 1825, when the Mughal's abandoned the garden Bagh-e-Badshahi it was appropriated by British as a "race course" (Figure 11 & 12). Dawes, taken with the area, cleared it and laid out a large green space. The Shah Bagh or a large oval in Bagh-e-Badshahi was cleared and enclosed by wooden railings and a race course was established (Mowla, 2014). In

1840, the Nawab family purchased Shahbagh estate from EIC, which is situated at the opposite of race course, where they built their villas. In 1851, the Gentlemen's Club (that was established in 1825) shifted to Shahbag area from Victoria Park which is a significant event. This club is now known as Dhaka Club which operated the race course until the Pakistan period. In 1840, the race course was reclaimed by Magistrate Skinner and a ticket house was built.



Figure 11 (a):
historic map of Dhaka 1859 shows Bagh-e- Badshahi' garden as Race Course
(Source: Banglapedia)



Figure 11 (b):
Map of Dhaka 1924 shows the rail line and the Indigenous and new European developments of the City
(Source: Habib, 2010)



Figure 12 (a):
Ramna Race Course with Military Parade in 1880
(Source: Morad, 2015)



Figure 12 (b):
Ramna Race Course in 1890
(Source: DhakaTribune)

After partitioning of Bengal in 1905, Dhaka was made the provincial capital of newly formed East Bengal-Assam region, which brought a significant scope of development in Dhaka. The new civil stations, which is the new core, was established north of the rail line and around the Ramna race course. This new core overlaid over the previous Bagh-e-Badshahi of the Mughals. The garden city-pattern, similar to the civil stations, was developed in the area and was composed of the Governor's House

(Old High Court buildings), Secretariat (present Dhaka Medical), Town Hall (present Curzon hall), Survey School and many more important buildings. In 1921, another important incident happened. With the inauguration of Dhaka University most of the Government Buildings of the civil station were given to the University (Figure 10). Now the southeast part of race course is surrounded by University. The previous Colonial civil station has been transformed into an educational institute.

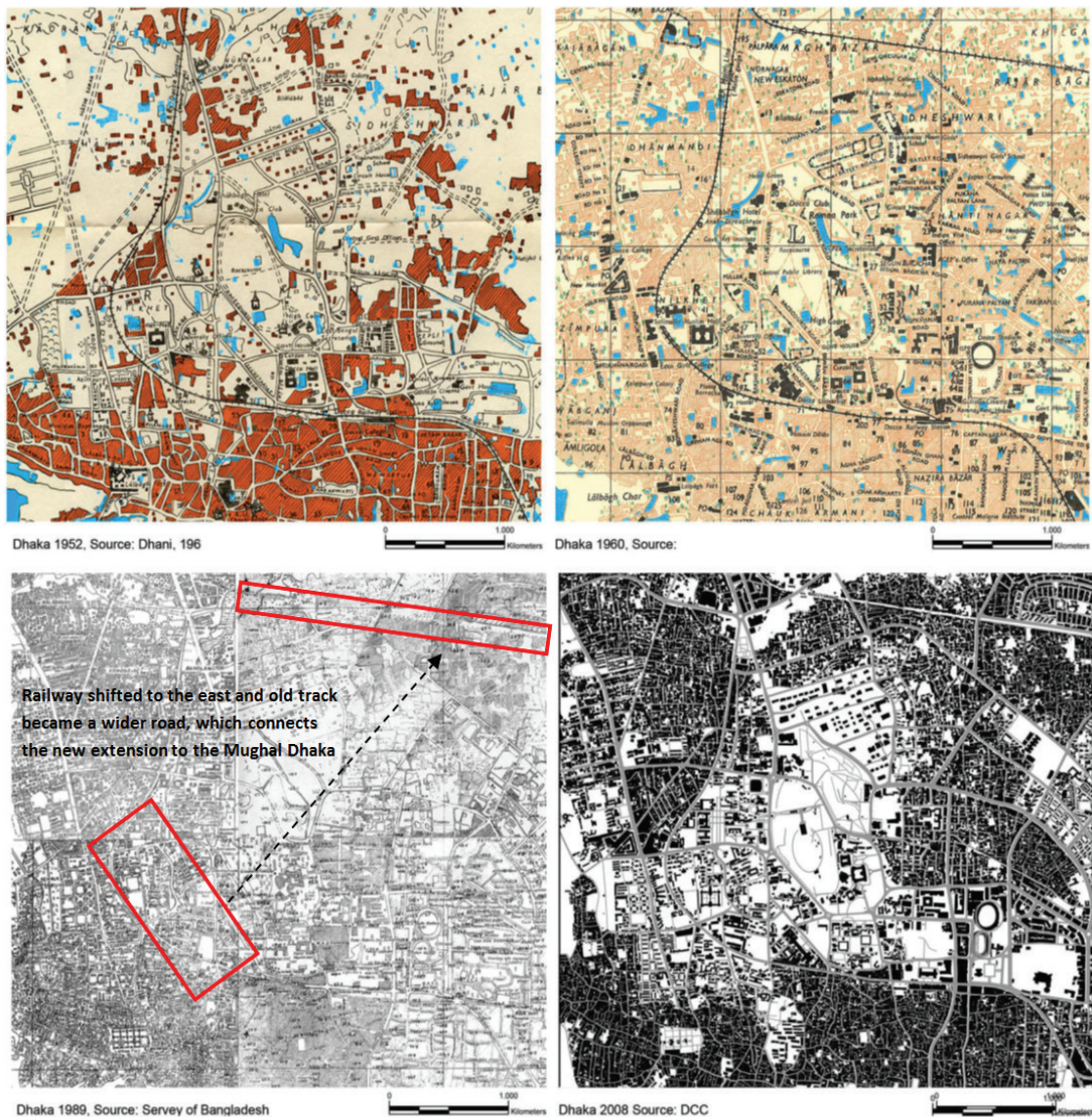


Figure 13:
Map showing Ramna and surrounding area-how the city grew differently in 1952, 1960, 1989 and 2008 respectively
(Source: Habib, 2010).

Post-Colonial Dhaka

Post-Colonial periods of Dhaka can be divided into two major timeframes. First, Dhaka, after 1947, was capital of Pakistan and secondly the capital of Bangladesh after independence. Dhaka obtained the status of the provincial capital of the East Pakistan in 1947, achieving independence from British after the two hundred years of colonization. Dhaka acquired the status of a sovereign capital in 1971.

Dhaka as the Capital in the Pakistan Period (1947-1971)

This is when Bangladesh entered into another era of political subjugation. East and West Pakistan were very different socially and culturally as well as being physically apart. Religion was the only common ground and therefore was a tool that was used politically as a way of internal colonization. A tense political relation developed just after the partition in between two wings of Pakistan due to economic differences, political disagreements and socio-cultural stratifications. So, from 1949 to 1989 the growth of Dhaka followed the limits that were determined by the Mughals in the north to Tongi, to Mirpur in north-west, and in the south-east to Postagola (Nilufar, 2010). In between this development the open spaces were continuously modified, re-constituted by public needs and in response to different political situations. Colonial open spaces such as the Old Platoon, the civic station near Ramna Racecourse and Dhaka University became locations for protests against the domination of the Pakistani Government (Figure14). 21st February 1952, was marked as

the first significant day when students of Dhaka University protested against the Language laws of Pakistan officials. Many demonstrators were killed that day as the police force fired on the Bengali protesters in front of the colonial secretariat (present Dhaka Medical College). Where they were killed a small monument, known as '*Shahid minar*', was built in commemoration of the language movement's 'martyrs'. After a long struggle *Bangla* was given as equal status as *Urdu* which has accelerated the movement. In this context, Ramna performed as a stage for demonstrations where equal status for the Bengali language was claimed.

In 1950s, the colonial-era University City was turned in to the capital of East Pakistan, which resulted in new priorities. Large scale planning, development and construction was implemented to remake Dhaka as a modern capital. A series of symbolic elements and new areas were added which dramatically transformed the area (Habib & Meulder, 2015). Many of the state programs were systematically drawn towards the Ramna area which acted as the threshold for the new urban area and the native city. Ramna had been divided in to two precincts: the Ramna Park and the racecourse, by the 1950's and the rest of the areas was taken over by the government of East Pakistan. The Government took away the Shahbagh garden from the Nawab family in 1951 and gave part of it to Dhaka University. Buildings that were used to show British power were now used for different purposes by the new administration and institutions. For instance, the old house of the Governor of East Bengal and the Assam was adapted as the High Court of East Pakistan along with an office for the Ministry of Defense. Dhaka's first stadium was constructed in the Old cantonment area which was a place for



Figure 14:

- (a) Images showing part of language movement, student gathering in 21st February, 1952 (Source: mtholyoke.edu),
 (b) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman giving historical speech on 7th March, 1971 at Ramna Racecourse (Source: Wikipedia),
 (c) Surrender of Pakistan Military in 16th Decemehr, 1971 at Ramna Racecourse (Source: Google).

mass protest and demonstration by political parties against government. The Railway line was shifted in the mid 60's, the track moved (Figure 13) eastward as necessitated by the developmental thrust. The railway track was converted in to a wide road which connected the new extension and the Mughal Dhaka (Nilufar, 2010). Ramna's openness. The Institutional space has been intricately related to the political events for many years starting with the first language movement to the surrender of Pakistani military. (Figure 13 & 14). Bangladesh as a new nation saw its birth in the former Mughal garden which is the Colonial Racecourse Maidan.

Post-independence scenario

In the post-independence period the journey was not smooth. The military took over the power and control of the country after few years of independence. In this period the open spaces have endured transformations. The city's administrative and institutional area remains in the colonial Racecourse area, whereas the new urban core has shifted north. But the importance of colonial part increased in terms of cultural, social and political aspects. The

Ramna area was first modified by the military rulers converting it in to a park lined with trees and the racecourse currently known as Suhrawardy Uddyan (where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave historical speech) was turned into a children amusement park. By impeding the use of the space from a mass gathering protesting area to a completely recreational park drastically transformed the quality of the space (Suhrawardy Uddyan). In 1990 the military regime ended and in 1996, the government decided to build a *Swadhinata Stambha*, monument of freedom using the (former race course of 65.68 acres), in the commemoration of the nation's father historic speech on 7th March. The construction of the monument was done in two phases. The first phase was initiated by the government in 2006, and then the new government in 2009 completed it with the abandoned tower. In 2012 the government opened it to the public, even though the work was unfinished. Later it was finally completed in 2013 (Figure 15 & 16). This design intervention is symbolic, as it represents an architecture with Bengali ideology. With all its design elements this articulates the place as one of the only public spaces which evokes a sense of Bengali vision of history while the modernist architectural approach gives a new context to the park.

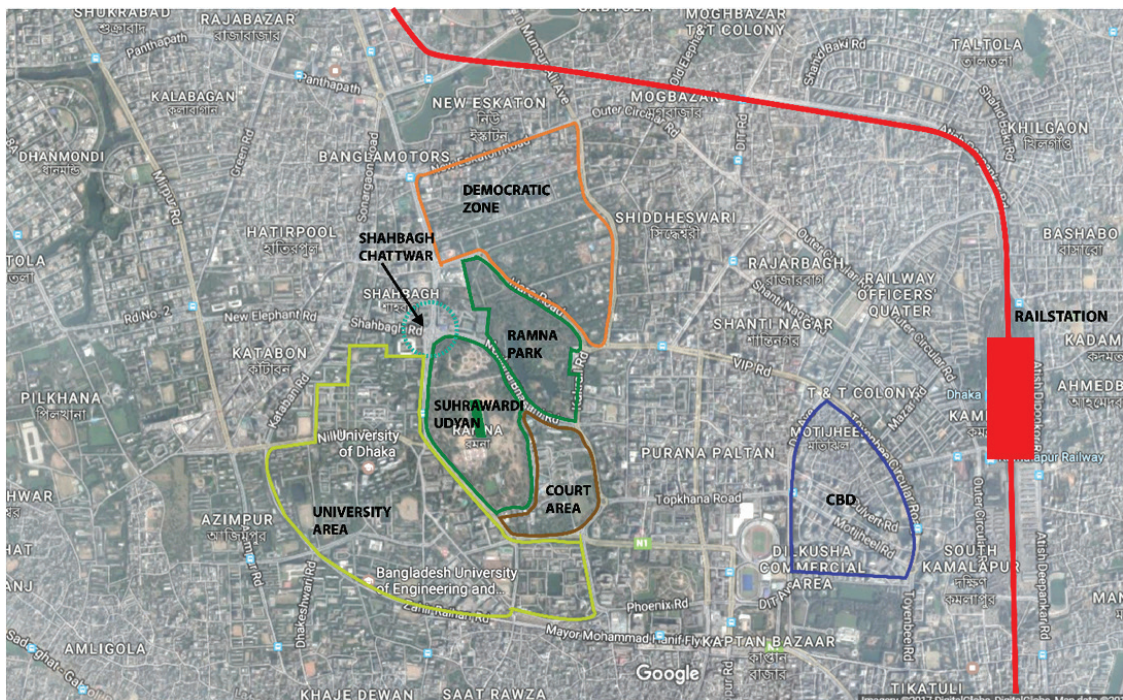


Figure 15:
Present Shahbagh map adopted by author



Figure 16:

(a) View of Swadhinota Stambha (Source: Wikipedia),

(b) People were joining rally of Gonojagoronmancha (Source: Daily star, 2103)

Apart from the political suppression, the Ramna area has a significance in the everyday life. This space hosts several national events and cultural activities throughout the year. Every year in the month of February, to commemorate the language movement, a national book fair takes place where a part of this *Uddyan* also hosts the book stalls. This place is also appropriated by the people on the first day of the Bengali new year when the celebration starts at the Fine Art Institute, located on the west side of the former race course. The celebration eventually starts with a morning event in the Ramna Park, which was actually inaugurated during the Pakistani period.

This place is still in use as a venue for protests. In 2013, students from Dhaka University and online activists demonstrated for the highest punishment of war criminal. The protest was known as *Gonojagaran Mancha*, a platform for awakening the nation. A rally at the historical venue where Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered his historical speech on 7th March in 1971, was organised by *Shahbagh Gonojagoron Mancha*. Thousands of people were staying in the *Mancha* demanding the death penalty of the war criminal from 1971.

At present, Ramna's park like environment demonstrates multiple dualities with its administrative, cultural, educational and recreational buildings. With the massive development on the north side of the city and native city on the other hand, Ramna became a central space at the junction between north and south holding a hybrid quality. Due to its central position within the dense urban context, Ramna incorporates a broad definition. Therefore, Ramna can be defined as a university campus, an administrative center, a cultural center and a natural park within the city.

CONCLUSION

While discussing the changing nature of the Ramna area along with the morphology of Dhaka, it is seen that three dominant phases represents three different socio-economic phases in its social evolution. Although the city has gone through a gradual transformation, certain phases were still significant. The *Shahbag* area (Ramna) shows its everchanging character throughout history; the Mughal's pleasure garden to British colonial recreation, from a garden to education center, and from a racecourse to a contested public space. This change or the process of rebirth was an organic process rather than a superimposed plan. The fundamental Mughal garden component was reconstructed during colonial period as a recreational park with civic amenities. Colonial architecture was used as a medium to show political power in Ramna when the British envisioned the city as the provincial capital of East Bengal and Assam. The city was re-imagined as a University City which broadened the perspective when the status of the provincial capital was stripped from Dhaka. With the interconnected spine of government functions, institutions and park Ramna became a backbone of the city's civic axis.

In the post-colonial era, the colonial environment was re-established with an emphasis on the nation building paradigm. The collective memory of the struggle of the nation and hostility of Bengali's to suppression can be seen in the production of symbolic monuments, through the restructuring of the park by constructing the Tower of Light and the Liberation War Museum. Today this place is one of the city's largest spaces that hosts a number of political and cultural manifestations

throughout the year. The whole changing scenario is a representation of the socio-political and cultural transformation of the region. The physical boundary of *Shahbagh* area has been changed in tandem with the political objective through time.

Ramna, memorial-cum-city park at present is inevitably the main venue holding a variety of spectacular events; whether national (i.e. Independence Day), cultural (spring festival day), religious celebration, and other festivals along with its magnificent history of transformation. Ramna played a vital role in the history of urban development within Dhaka city and became a part of everyday urban life; where politics, tradition and culture are patronized in the new liberal society and the nationalism process.

Ramna's spatial settings and porous tissue allows a huge flow of people and makes it a central space, a ground for the nation to celebrate, protest, and demonstrate. The multilayered history of this space along with the number of various types of use gives it a hybrid quality in the center of the city. Simultaneously, the collection of the number of adaptations, alterations, and additions without following any proper guideline or master plan have turned the city into an unplanned metropolis.

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Source of Images and Maps:

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