

# Urban Typography as Artifacts: Activating Collective Memory in Dhaka City

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Urban streetscapes are theatrical constructs of urban memory, relationship, and activity. A street is not a production of just a physical definition of environments—but also the nuanced collective memories of the urbanites. Ubiquitous assemblage and diverse range of both contemporary and decaying wall arts, typographic experiments, political slogans on public wall, storefront displays, and other modes of legible attributes—all create an active identity and shared experience. In this paper, visual occupation of political wall art and graphic illustration of letterform in Dhaka, the capital in Bangladesh, will be evaluated through Rossi's 'locus solus'—a unique characteristic of a place.<sup>1</sup> Historic significance of socio-political expression within city walls since the historical language movement in 1952, multilayered signage system, reusing of same old facades while retaining the façades as street masks—as hybrid urban artifacts constituting totality to establish a 'sense of place' within its traditional urban streetscapes of Dhaka. According to Steven Heller, apart from traditional mediums, urban typography has been popularly used as a hybrid tool to influence the political ethos, visual narrative, and as an impactful vehicle of social voice in the urban milieu.<sup>2</sup> But they are also alive, evolving, negotiated and belong to the "collective memory" involving "agency, activity, and creativity."<sup>3</sup> Here, wall art is the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, joining them together as the palpable messy activity which produces collective memory.<sup>4</sup> This distinct non-western viewpoint attempts to identify the notion of memory and image as vital contributors for urban identity and experience and will argue that the street be understood as a socio-political and experiential place associated with the core of a city's identity. The paper folds together broad theoretical discussion with historical account and contemporary readings of urban space. It also attempts to instigate the image of the city by probing around the following research question—*How can words, type and letters in the built environment contribute to a city's 'collective memory'?*

## INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the dense and rustic core of megacity Dhaka gave me ample exposure to the complexity of a city and its richness of culture. While my interests pulled me to study architecture and graphic design—I was accommodating my inquiry and interest for meaningful synthesis. I was also reading those spaces through a complex visual amalgamation of building facades, images, symbols and letterforms—all those surely nurtured my keen and conceit interest towards the

significance of language, letterforms, politics and the city along with its poetic cores. Having an interdisciplinary academic background—typography and its cultural connotations have always been my research pursuit. Hence, influence of Bengali letterform as a form of urban typography—found an immediate niche in my research on the significance of Bengali letterforms in the urban culture of Bangladesh. The historical meaning, cultural significance, and formal sophistication of the Bengali letterforms are omnipresent all over in the city as a visual artifact, specially, in the political and historical campus of Dhaka University. Dhaka as a megapolis, can be seen as the site of collective political exchange. Quoting Arnheim's understanding of visual landscape, Jakle (1987), states, "Rudolph Arnheim suggested that visual images have three primary dimensions: sign, picture and symbols. He narrates that, words on a billboard convey meaning but they themselves do not picture the thing communicated. As simile or metaphor, the thing portrayed, represents some higher order of abstract meaning beyond itself."<sup>5</sup> The complex matrix of visual displays — all those buildings, people, transportation, signage, shops, etc.—demonstrates a hybrid assemblage of visual elements—connecting the nuances of an ever changing 'kinetic city'.<sup>6</sup> Roles and ubiquity of typography in the urban way of life can be interpreted with "cultural informality" of the urban graphic cacophony and its analogy with vibrant, dense, swirling crowds.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND BENGALI LANGUAGE MOVEMENT, 1952

Dhaka—the 400 years old capital of Bangladesh—has been the historic center of 1952 Language Movement in East Pakistan, where distinctive role of linguistic ethnicity in socio-political construction played an essential role as a key to its emergent national and ethnic identity and led to the Liberation war in 1971 to become an independent nation—Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> The current nations, Pakistan and Bangladesh, were historically part of an undivided India during the British colonial rule. Colonial empire left with a partition founded upon violent religious nationalism in 1947, which created two new independent states, India and Pakistan. Under the name of East Pakistan, the Bengal delta—entirely separated from each other by more than 1500 Km of Indian land—became the part of West Pakistan. Pakistan, predominantly West Pakistan, shared an Islamic identity, corresponded with sufficient anti-India strain—soon realized the ethical, cultural and especially, linguistic differences between the East and West wing. Only three months of post-colonial independence,

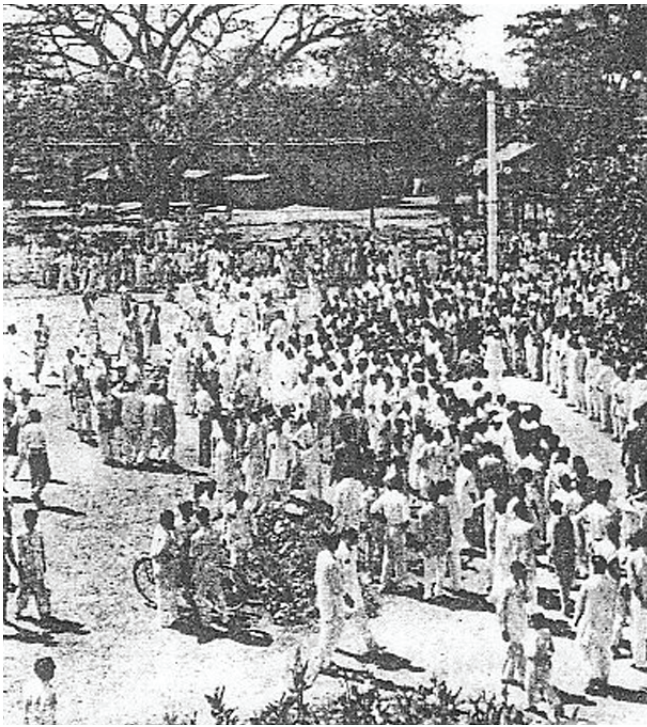


Figure 1. Students are gathered on the Dhaka University campus to protest and demonstration in favor of the Bengali language. 21 February, 1952. Photo courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

a first serious crack in the edifice of Pakistan appeared over the critical question of national language.<sup>8</sup> The Pakistan Educational Council in 1947, proposed Urdu as national Language.<sup>9</sup> In March 1948, amid an active student agitation and in East Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Governor-General of Pakistan at that time declared that, “Urdu, and only Urdu” could embody the true Muslim nation of Pakistan, detesting the Bengali-speaking majority in Pakistan, let alone in East Pakistan. The declaration received an immediate agitation from the students. In Dhaka University, the core of the movement, All-Party Central Language Action Committee vehemently opposed the imposing proposal of writing the Bengali language in Arabic or English script was by Central government.<sup>10</sup> On 21 February 1952, defying the government-imposed Section 144—thousands of students assembled for processions and started marching with placards manifesting alphabets and slogans from the Dhaka University campus. Police baton-charged and arrested students, and eventually disorder spreads. In the height of such civic unrest police open-fired, few students were killed and for the next few days more demonstrations, arrests, unrest exhausted the nation (figure 1). The events of 1952 were critically intriguing and significant, as it exposed the fundamental differences between two ethno-cultural groups. In 1954, the constituent assembly resolved, to grant official status to Bengali. Bengali language became the powerful bedrock of an original ethnolinguistic image—a valiant manifestation of pride and possession. Uniquely, Bengali letterforms and the pivotal

language movement connected a divided and long-oppressed nation into one inspired political autonomy and inhabited in the voice of a nation anointed with martyr's blood.

### CITY, LOCUS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Aldo Rossi identified the city itself as a complex urban artifact and then divides it into its constituent parts—buildings, streets and districts. He employed memories as treasured means; a point of departure for creating architectural artifacts—rich with meaning and potential which enables thinking, reading, and experiencing—the ‘locus’<sup>11</sup> of the ‘collective memory’. In this polemical treatise, Rossi argues that the city, (to him architecture), acts as a metaphysical entity. Among other aspects, Rossi mentioned that cities grow, change and are defined by their ‘artifacts’, which are rich with potential, interruptions, transformations and diversity. He regards the city as a “catalytic” urban artifact. By urban artifacts, he means not just a physical thing in the city, but all of its history, socio-political attributes, geography, structure, and connection with the everyday life in the city.

What is collective memory? It is a valid category for studying how the city works and accepted by contemporary society as useful in the description of architecture in the city. Aldo Rossi's answer to those questions was, in many ways, collective memory is another way of describing what the city actually is. Collective memory exists not as an abstract category of thought, unverifiable by scientific means, but it exists in the relationship between the urban fabric of the city and the urbanites. Here we can interpret that any individual building form is less important than the way the urban subjects construct and are constructed by the architectures (or ‘artifacts’) they collect around them. The city is one continuous surface on which the polis collects and organizes itself where the treatment of that surface has enormous political consequence and semantic armatures. Rossi conceives the architecture as an inseparable creation of the civil life and of the company in which it demonstrates but constructed with few elements that come from archetypes of the collective memory.

It has already been mentioned that, a street is not a product of the physical definition of environments—but also the nuanced collective memories of the urbanites. They are structured so that they attract and hold memories and voices; they are sticky, shared, experienced, engaged, multifaceted, occupied, claimed and appropriated—as an ‘everyday practice’ of ‘social production’. Rossi employed memories as treasured means; a point of departure for creating architectural artifacts—rich with meaning and potential which enables thinking, reading, and experiencing—the ‘locus’ of the collective memory. The locus inhabits the material dimensions of its architecture, the events that take place there, the minds of its architect, and the unique relation between place, building and activities that occupy it. Rossi reminds us that all those relationships are equally important to create

a successful architecture, urban condition, in and outside of the city. According to Rossi, 'locus' is a relationship between a definite location—a "situation," a "site"—and the buildings in the context with its Roman mythological association. The locus emphasized the conditions and qualities within undifferentiated space which are necessary for understanding an 'urban artifact.'

### URBAN LETTERFORMS AS ARTIFACT

Words and letterforms—as signs and artifacts—have an immense potential to convey meaning and construct social image and urban memory. Letterforms are the 'architecture of language'—they build narratives and create inquisitive interpretive territory through which the reader experiences meaning and situate 'collective memory.'<sup>12</sup>

Unique to letterforms is the distinctive manner in which they can be used to occupy space, convey characteristics, portray personality and physique, and situate dimensionally or even be associated with variety of emotions. Type is an art form, providing immense pleasure to the everyday observer, reader and speculator.<sup>13</sup> Here three projects will be briefly discussed with the scale and scope of urban interaction and opportunities of social statements and collective memories. Firstly, Jenny Holzer's<sup>14</sup> urban projections manifest theatrical flair, initiate conversations and arguments among the audiences, and through this endeavor she resurfaces text as a hybrid medium and the public space as an ideal platform. Holzer's projects openly challenge social norms and political structures. Secondly, the documentation series of Amsterdam's urban letterform by Alessandro Colizzi and Ramiro Espinoza—which focuses on how the traditional 'Krulletters' (curved letters) broadly based on Dutch Mannerist calligraphy of 17th century —profoundly visible on numerous cafe windows of Amsterdam, especially with the city's bruin cafes ("brown cafes"), have contributed to the city's café-culture and urban visual identity<sup>15</sup> Lastly, "Forever begins when you say yes"—at first glimpse seems like nothing more than a corporate advertisement.<sup>16</sup> Then suddenly it becomes something dimensional, romantic, and more enigmatic—a hand-painted 'love-letter' at monumental billboard-scale by Stephen Power (figure 2). With the help of his friend, Dave Villoriente, a prolific New York based graffiti artist in the bustling Brooklyn area of New York, Powers transformed the bland surfaces of Macy's garage near Fulton Mall with a series of personal messages in a conversation with someone. The work, thus, resurfaces the voice of the common man in a community and projects it as a legible artifact beyond just a tag of typographic art. According to Powers, Everyday conversations, circumstantial and malleable memories along with a "vivid first-person account of growing up in Brooklyn in the 1980s and '90s by Powers" instantly connect the collective memory and construes concurrent gentrification through such design in the urban environment.



Figure 2. Stephen Powers. "A Love Letter to the City," Brooklyn, New York. Photo credit © Stephen Powers, ESPOs Art World. 2014.

### DHAKA STREETSCAPE AND ROLE OF MEMORY

Traditionally the people of Dhaka inherited the habit of socialization in outdoor places. This led to the formation of traditional hierarchical places- According to Mowla, gali (streets), morh (node), mahalla (neighborhood) and chowk (market square) were linearly formed along the streets.<sup>17</sup> The important characteristic of the indigenous pattern of urban fabric were winding, irregular and intricate street networks directed towards the market square with walls defining the physical boundary.<sup>18</sup> Streets were not the mere sidewalks or just a place of pass through. Streets were at a time path and again, become 'places.'

Other than the consumerization of capitalism, the mega-city was taken over by the abstract collage of political voice, legible words and letterforms however, significantly connecting the historical premise. The Language movement also manifested a significant structure of urban artifacts—Bengali language in the urban milieu. The historical Dhaka University streets with political ethos and eminent artifacts creates collective form of memories. Here Urban spaces are compilation of historical embodiments. The historic building can be seen covered entirely by political posters and banners—creating a spontaneous yet powerful phenomenon. As a historic mega-city, in the context of Dhaka, the traditional public places are the center of city image. These impulsive spaces played a significant role in the physical setting of the city as well as to form community culture, vital urban artifacts and 'social capital.'<sup>19</sup> As a theatre of socio-political action, the changes of Dhaka University area through different political period of times have resulted in a dynamic transformation of its public place and public life as an inviolable memory container. It is an urban museum in its public domain.<sup>20</sup> Buildings from various political rule and historical eras are being reused as academic buildings, activates a continuum of collective memories.

The classic educational phrases of Children's alphabet book have been transformed into political metaphors with powerful illustrations depicting the political, social and national



Figure 3. Urban typography arts were placed opposite to the 'Shahid Minar' area (opposite the Martyr Monument) in Dhaka. 21 February, 1969, East Pakistan. Source: Photographer Mohammad Sakhawat Hossain, personal archive.

ethos by keeping political movements alive at Dhaka University campus in 1970 (figure 3), while at the same time the nation was paying homage to the martyrs to the Language Movement Monument situated at the historical site. International Mother Language Day has been observed annually since 2000 to promote peace and multi-linguicism around the world and to protect all languages.<sup>21</sup> It is observed on February 21<sup>st</sup> to recognize the Unique Bengali Language Movement of 1952 in Bangladesh.

It is dynamic field of Symbolism. The historical meaning, cultural significance, and formal sophistication of the Bengali letterforms are vastly underappreciated today and need for deeper interpretation and analysis of the typography itself-- historically, culturally, and formally. Despite being a unique socio-political phenomenon and having such a historical importance—Bengali urban typography has been over-run by the ubiquitous assemblage and lamentable proliferation of English store-front signage and commercial billboards in the urban streets. Other than the consumerization of capitalism, the mega-city was taken over by the abstract collage of political voice, however, which are almost all in Bengali, significantly connecting the historical premise. In many occasions, especially in the month of February, in Posters, as stage-props in cultural programs, stall-designs in annual book fairs depicting books or dimensional letterforms, fashion design and in various art forms etc. Bengali letterforms are used just in a symbolic manner.

The Dhaka University area has been the historic center of 1952 Language Movement in East Pakistan. The Language movement also gave rise to a new type of political voice in East Pakistan—the Bengali-speaking student politicians. Bangladesh, the newly-formed nation whose lynchpin was the principle of secularism, saw the rise of a national identity based on the Bengali language.<sup>22</sup> During liberation war among many posters and placards. Among many other, one poster vehemently proclaimed the significance of Bengali letterforms in Bangladesh. It reads, "Every bangla alphabet narrates a bangali's life" (figure 4).

Most generally, a place has been linked to its topographic terrains, culture, economic conditions, linked to identity and place. Unique stand for Bengal is its language and its complex saturation of urban experience. It activates the human psyche and induce it to sink toward the past, the mythical world of collective primordial being – essentially connecting to Heideggerian interpretation. Time and space are internalized, and a deeply rooted personal identity with the city gets established. Most of the surfaces in the streetscape and academic campuses along with architecture becomes the unfurling façade for political language. Architectural façade acts as a blackboard, for powerful political expression the façade gets disappeared. Building becomes the form of signage. Political signage becomes the suggestion and amplifies almost in this age of simulation, Robert Venturi's argument of building becoming the billboard gets reversed in Bengal. Here, the graphic wall scripting is almost becoming the building



Figure 4. Poster endorsing the pride of language in 1971 Liberation war. Poster Courtesy/ Liberation War Museum Bangladesh.



Figure 5. Academic Building (Faculty of Arts, “kala bhaban”) in University of Dhaka populated with political slogans and urban letterforms, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo Courtesy: Mohiuddin Ahmed, Oboyob Photo Archive, 1985.

form (figure 5). Creation of urban space is presented partially with the forms of language and letterings. The authoritative political expression of language even isolates the liberation war sculpture in the foreground. According to Rossi, this relationship between the locus and the citizenry then becomes the city's predominant image, both of architecture and of landscape, and as certain artifacts become part of its memory, new ones emerge.

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to disengage Dhaka City with the expression of political wall graphics and slogans, let alone the analyzed Dhaka University Area, the core of all the historic movements. Every artifact that was used in the liberation war movement in the urban environment predominantly had Bengali letters as a symbolic articulation of identity. The political/historical, the socio-cultural, and the formal graphic approaches each in their own way have illuminated the essence of this unique Bengali identity through translating the images of socio-cultural elements into typography and thus helps in developing a sense of belongingness. It can be said that it refers to something that was formed spontaneously and denotes similar, yet personal collective memories. The letters in urban spaces can help us reinterpret the patrimonial fabric of cities.<sup>23</sup> Here, Bengali urban typography has been acting as an informal representation for long. Moreover, it is

coupled with shared experience and a communal agreement of the urbanites. The urban streetscape is a construction with such urban artifacts. Without these political embodiments the city will be lost, isolated from its locus. The public space of the city turns her almost into the museum to evoke and disseminate the historical continuum.<sup>24</sup>

In Dhaka, essentially in the historical core of Dhaka University, the encounter with urban signboards produces an experience that we can compare to certain perceptions activated in the user when visiting a historic museum. There has been no systematic study on these Bengali urban legible artifacts except unvaried February-long veneration. Nevertheless, it receives least attention in comprehensive research scholarships. Fundamentally, it is desirable to encourage the city dweller to generate their own visual memory and urban image from these legible momentous monuments. The unique urban phenomenon challenging the singularity or object-hood of any particular piece of architecture, opting instead to see the city as a super-surface for the continuous formation of political relations, specifically through the use of Bengali letter forms on modern building surfaces. Additionally, in a similar traction, it can be mentioned that a single architecture within that urban network emerges in many capacities over time, as if in constant formation and political becoming. Predominant urban political typography and graphic art

can be critically questioned how postcolonial contestation and overtly political activism have manifested public space in urban East Pakistan and still have influences in the contemporary Bangladesh. According to Rossi, we often failed to account and accommodate the urban constitution of *polis*, i.e. politics within the city construction. Sacrosanct *locus* governs such local divinity, layers of historical manifestations and collective memory. Politics has always been present in the formal discourse of the construction of a city and relevant image of the city can be projected not only by the city itself but its political institutes and its “collective will.” The tension between Western colonialism and its appropriation by Bengalis in East Pakistan in the form of applying letterforms to the early 1920’s modernist buildings of Dhaka University. It is indeed provocative that the political consequences of colonialism were and are still played out by appropriating diverse and traditional forms of writing onto institutional buildings of colonial periods. The dynamic strength of something so ephemeral yet its significant visibility with constant change creates an urban dialogue and identity narrative. In Dhaka, the emerging, powerful and expressive urban artifacts of letterforms and deeply significant historical and political context thus act instrumentally as an embedded urban artifact and activate ‘collective memory’ in the complex construction process and manifestation of the City.

#### ENDNOTES

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