ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

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Designing Post-colonial Domesticity: Positions and Polarities in the Feminine Reception of New Residential Patterns in Modernising East Pakistan and Bangladesh

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Keywords

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Abstract

When Paul Rudolph was commissioned to design a new university campus for East Pakistan in the mid-1960s, the project was among the first to introduce the expressionist brutalist lexicon of late-modernism into the changing architectural language of postcolonial South and Southeast Asia. Beyond the formal and tectonic ruptures with established colonial-modern norms that these designs represented, they also introduced equally radical challenges to established patterns of domestic space-use. Principles of open-planning and functional zoning employed by Rudolf in the design of academic staff accommodation, for example, evidently reflected a socially progressive approach – in light of the contemporary civil rights movement back in America – to the accommodation of domestic servants within the household of the modern nuclear family. As subsequent residents would recount, however, these same planning principles could have very different and even opposite implications for the privacy and sense of security of Bangladeshi academics and their families.

The paper explores and interprets the post-occupancy experience of living in such novel 'ultra-modern' patterns of a new domesticity in postcolonial Bangladesh, and their reception and adaptation into the evolving norms of everyday residential development over the decades since. Specifically, it examines the reception of and responses to these radically new residential patterns by female members of the evolving modern Bengali Muslim middle class who were becoming progressively more liberal in their outlook and lifestyles, whilst retaining consciousness and respect for the abiding significance in their personal and family lives of traditional cultural practices and religious affinities. Drawing from the case material and methods of an on-going PhD study, the paper will offer a contrapuntal analysis of architectural and ethnological evidence of how the modern Bengali woman negotiates, adapts to and calibrates these received architectural patterns of domesticity whilst simultaneously crafting a reembraced cultural concept of femininity, in a fluid dialogical process of refashioning both space and self.

Introduction

When Paul Rudolph was invited, in 1965, to design a new university campus for the Eastern wing of Pakistan, there is little doubt that this leading and increasingly idiosyncratic American exponent of late-modernist brutalism had a mandate to depart radically from precedent. Consistent with the work of other celebrated international architects engaged in the modernisation and development of the region at that same time, a scheme that "hits you on the head, and makes you think"[1] was clearly anticipated.

1. These were the words that Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru famously used to applaud the broader conceptual and cultural impact of Le Corbusier's contemporary work in neighbouring India. Jawaharlal Nehru, "Speech at the Seminar and Exhibition of Architecture," New Delhi (1959), in Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, vol. iv: 1957–1963 (New Delhi, 1964), p. 176.

In the context of post-colonial nation-building, the new campus for the East Pakistan Agricultural University (established in 1961[2]) was to be a domain of higher education and research in agricultural sciences that would serve the principal aim of developing the self-sufficiency and economic potential of an emerging new sub-tropical country whose primary production was still overwhelmingly agricultural. Embodying the 'green revolution' in agricultural technology, the institution was to make 'change-agents' of the scientists and agro-industrialists that would train there and collaborate, with both local and international partners, in rural development.[3] Although the new residential campus was located in the bucolic fringe of regional Mymensingh over a hundred kilometres north of the capital, Dhaka, it was to be an ultra-modern enclave of innovation. Beyond the formal and tectonic ruptures with established colonial-modern architectural norms that Rudolph's designs posited, they also introduced equally radical challenges to established patterns of domestic space-use. Principles of open-planning and functional zoning, for example, were intended to have profound and emancipatory implications for the Bengali academics and their families who were to live on the campus. But, how were these novel patterns actually received?

2. Upon the recommendations of the Commission of National Education and the Food and Agriculture Commission.

3. "About Vision and Mission," Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), last updated 2017, https://www.bau.edu.bd/pages/view.

The present paper seeks to address this question, and consider some of the broader implications of its findings for the critical interpretation of the longer history of the architectural development of post-colonial South Asia after the crisis of the Partition of the subcontinent along religious lines, and the initial surge of nation-building development. The paper arises from an ongoing PhD study that is identifying and critically examining possible relationships over time between architectural change, cultural change, and an impending environmental crisis associated with unsustainable urbanization in present-day Bangladesh. It seeks to ascertain, thereby, how further change in normative patterns of architectural development could potentially contribute to possible alternatives as well.

Methodologically, this larger study centres on architectural plans as a tactical device to drive and focus in-depth semi-structured interviews that may potentially reveal a deeper understanding of how cultural expectations and demands may be challenged or even shaped by architecture over time, and vice versa. Through the lenses of the exceptional versus the normative residential architectures to be considered here, this particular paper examines sub-issues of feminist identity and agency as part of the broader case of cultural change and resistance in the context of modernisation.[4]

4. Many scholars have mapped the evolutions in 20th century domesticity in Muslim societies. Pamela Karimi, for instance, explored domesticity in a different context of modernizing Iran through various themes of foreign influences, consumer culture and gender. See Pamela Z. Karimi, *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era*. (London: Routledge, 2013) and Ela Kaçel, "Information or Culture: The Intellectual Dissemination of Americanism as Common Sense," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 50, Cambridge University Press: (2014): 171 – 88.

Design

Rudolph and the BAU commission

Rudolph was only one of several prominent international architectural and planning consultants, including Louis Kahn, Richard Neutra, and Constantinos Doxiadis, who were active in Pakistan in the 1960s. By this point in his early mid-career, however, Rudolph was rapidly emerging as one of the most original and radical form-givers among American architects of his generation, In the geopolitical context of the Cold War,[5] this was a moment of particularly dynamic institutional development and capacity building,[6] and the preponderance of American consultants on this particular scene was a function of Pakistan's increasingly close diplomatic and military ties with the United States.[7] This had prompted the Pakistani government to seek the assistance of American agencies such as the Ford Foundation, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the US Technical Assistance and Productivity Program (TAP) to secure external consultants[8] where appropriately skilled local professionals, such as architects, were in short supply.[9] There can be little doubt, however, that Rudolph's specific and distinctive design vision was sought-out especially for the East Pakistan Agricultural University commission.[10]

Designed and built between 1965 and 1975, Rudolph's work on the new campus – which would ultimately be renamed Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) by the time it was completed in the aftermath of Bangladesh's war of secession from West Pakistan (1971)[11] – followed immediately upon the master-planning and design of a number of other radically unorthodox academic buildings and campuses that he had only recently completed or was still working on at the time. These included The Yale University Art &Architecture Building (1958-64), the Tuskegee Institute and Chapel (1958-69), and his mega-structural campus scheme for the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, commenced in 1963.

Among the first of many commissions from the 1960s onward that would sustain patronage for Rudolph's architecture in Asia long after it had fallen out of fashion in America,[12] the BAU campus reflected the confluence of competing rationalist and expressionist tendencies in the structuring of space and mass that defined his mature work stylistically. The scope of the project was substantial (figs. 1). Along with a new master plan for the expansion of the campus, it comprised of designing an auditorium, laboratories, dormitories and staff quarters, as well as recreation facilities.[13] Rudolph's study models for the architecture of the typical academic buildings (figs. 2 & 3) and drawings for the residential staff quarters (figs. 4 & 5) reflected the architect's openly innovative approach to spatial design and construction, experimenting with different construction materials, methods and structural systems, as well as climate and principles of orientation. Attention to sun angles and the direction of prevailing breezes characterised the overall layout and building designs with an expressive diagonal motif and compositional pattern that reverberated formally in the geometry of expressed structural beams, bearing walls and sun-breakers.

5. Ela Kaçel was yet another scholar to have discussed postwar modern architecture in the Muslim world, especially through her research on modernization in Turkey during the Cold War as a flow of skills and ideas from the United States. For detail, see Aysem Ela Kacel, *Intellectualism and Consumerism: Ideologies, Practices and Criticisms of Common Sense Modernism in Postwar Turkey.* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2009 and Kaçel, "Information or Culture: The Intellectual Dissemination of Americanism".

6. Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

7. Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

8. Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future Modernization Theory in Cold War America;* Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development*; George Rosen. "Western Economists and Eastern Societies: Agents of Change in South Asia, 1950-1970," (1985); Farhan Karim, "Between Self and Citizenship: Doxiadis Associates in Postcolonial Pakistan, 1958-1968," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture 5*, no. 1 (2016): 135-61; Islam, "Foreign Assistance and Economic Development: The Case of Pakistan." The Economic Journal 82, no. 325 (1972): 502-30

9. Nurul Islam, "Foreign Assistance and Economic Development: The Case of Pakistan," *The Economic Journal* 82, no. 325 (1972): 502-30.

10. The commission was purportedly offered personally to Rudolph on the advice of Muzahrul Islam, doyen of Bangladeshi architectural modernists of the first post-colonial generation, who had been a student in the Masters program at Yale during Rudolph's tenure as chair of that School (1958-64).

11. "East Pakistan Agricultural University (Now Bangladesh Agricultural University)," *Paul Rudoplh Heritage Foundation*, last accessed January 15, 2021, https://www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org/196601-east-pakistan

12. Roberto De Alba, *Paul Rudolph: The Late Work*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002); Dixon and Bell, *Paul Rudolph: Inspiration and Process in Architecture*.

13. "East Pakistan Agricultural University (Now Bangladesh Agricultural University)," *Paul Rudoplh Heritage Foundation*.

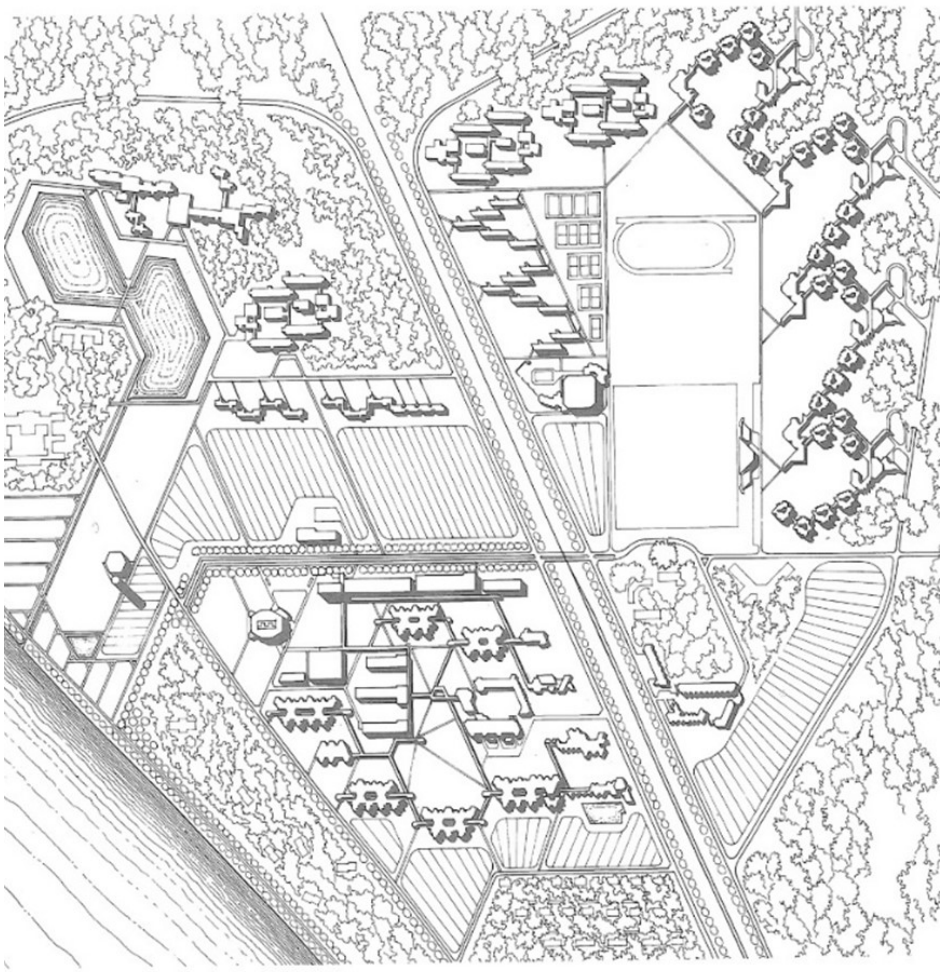

Figure 1: Master plan of Bangladesh Agricultural University (East Pakistan Agricultural University), Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Source: Paul Rudolph & Toshio Nakamura, *Paul Rudolph 1946 – 74*. (Tokyo: A+U Pub. Co., 1977).

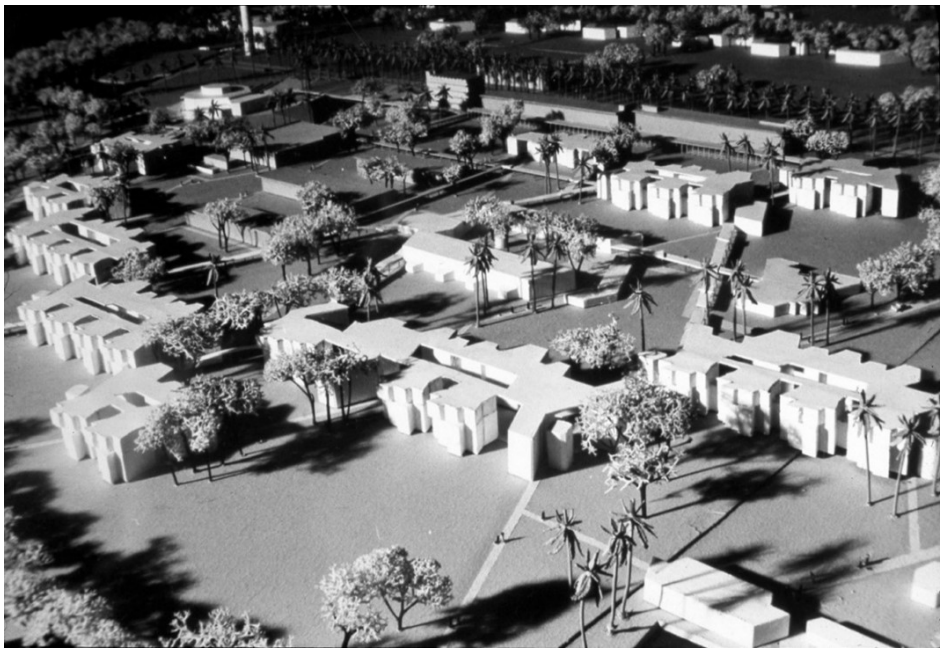

Figure 2: Photo of Project Model showing a portion of the master plan. Bangladesh Agricultural University (East Pakistan Agricultural University), Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Courtesy: The Estate of Paul Rudolph, The Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation, https://www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org/196601-east-pakistan?rq=bangladesh, collected in December 2020.

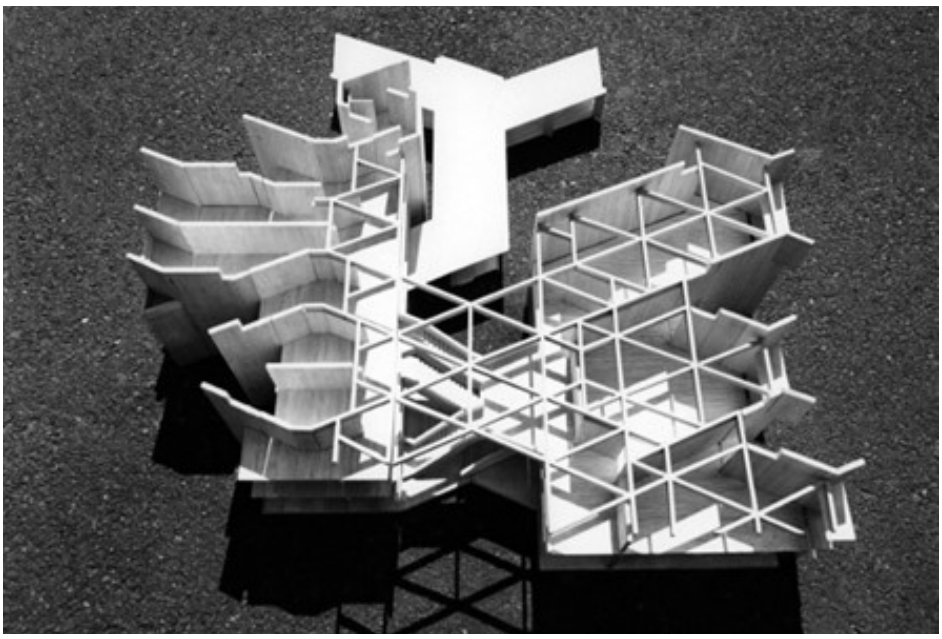

Figure 3: Photo of a study model for a typical academic block of one of the faculties. Bangladesh Agricultural University (East Pakistan Agricultural University), Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Courtesy: The Estate of Paul Rudolph, The Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation, https://www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org/196601-east-pakistan?rq=bangladesh, collected in December 2020.

Residential planning at BAU

Further innovation was attempted in the spatial planning of the Rudolph designed academic staff quarters (figs. 6 & 7). Relative to the established norms of government and institutional accommodation – which had routinely been designed previously by Public Works Department engineers in line with utilitarian schedules of accommodation and aesthetics little changed since the end of colonial rule (figs. 4 & 5) – these were a radical re-think.

Rudolph's transformation of traditionally confined domestic lifestyles into an open plan was a controversial but influential early instance of a new pattern that was to impress itself in principle, if not directly in form, upon the evolving typology of modern Bengali residential architecture over the decades that followed. Whereas, previously, public zones such as the living and dining spaces had effectively been enclosed within walls of 'privacy' in typical residential layouts, the open plan conjoined the individual dining and living rooms into a spatial continuum. At the same time, this central cross-ventilated 'public' zone of the open living-dining area cleaved apart the now distinctly 'private' zone of the bedrooms from the service zone of the kitchen and servant's accommodation.

The porous character of his open planning principle was articulated emphatically in Rudolph's own original perspective projection of the plan for a typical lecturer's flat (fig. 6). Whilst subsequent iterations reproduced and adapted by campus engineers as late as the 1980s modulated the harsher orthogonality of Rudolph's original lines with expressive baffles and inflexions more in keeping stylistically with his academic buildings for the campus (fig. 3 & 7), the essential planning principles remained unchanged.

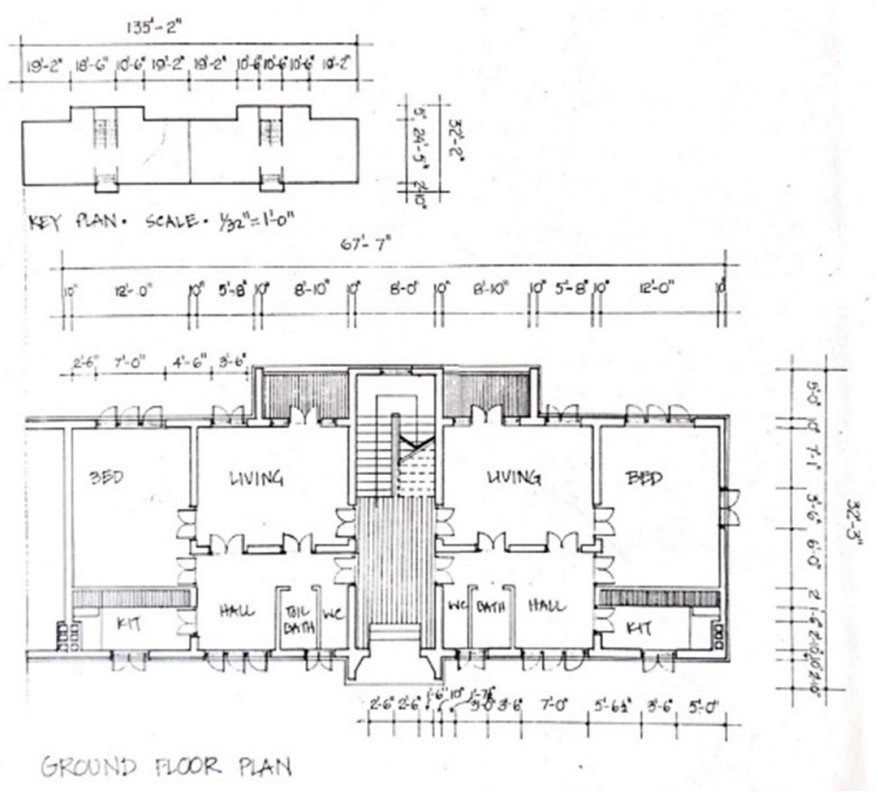

Figure 4: Typical residential accommodation for government service-holders (*Azimpur and Motijheel Colonies*) in the 1950s. Source: drawings collected from the government department of architecture (*sthapotto odhidoptor*) in Dhaka, in December 2018.

Figure 5: 1960s and 1970s Baily Road officers' quarters and *Azimpur* government colonies. Source: Bangladesh Old Photo Archive, http://m.pwd.gov.bd, collected in January 2019

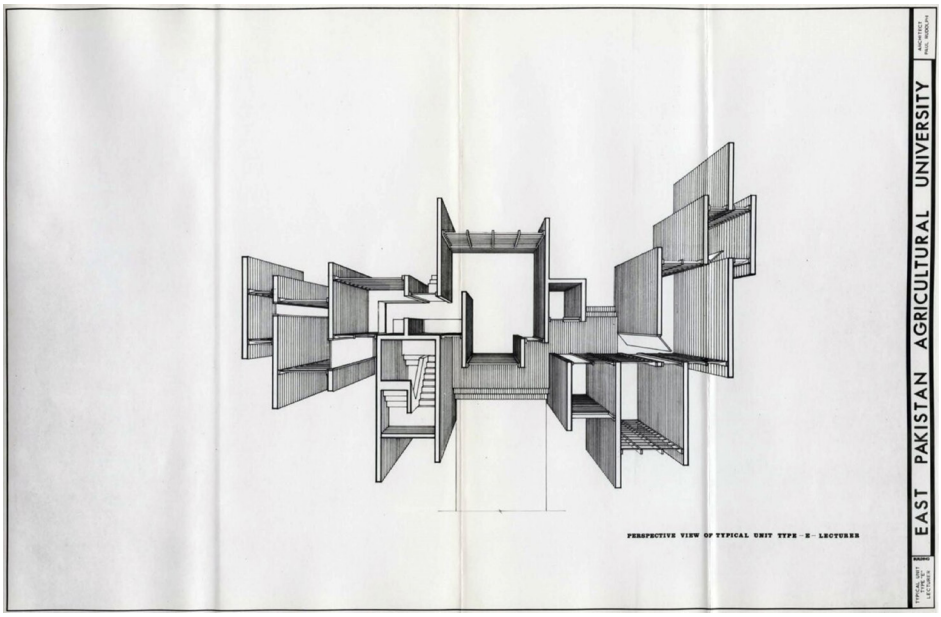

Figure 6: Projected perspective view of the plan of a typical unit (Type E) for Lecturers. Bangladesh Agricultural University (East Pakistan Agricultural University), Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Source: The Estate of Paul Rudolph, The Paul Rudolph Heritage Foundation, https://www.paulrudolphheritagefoundation.org/196601-east-pakistan?rq=bangladesh, collected in December 2020.

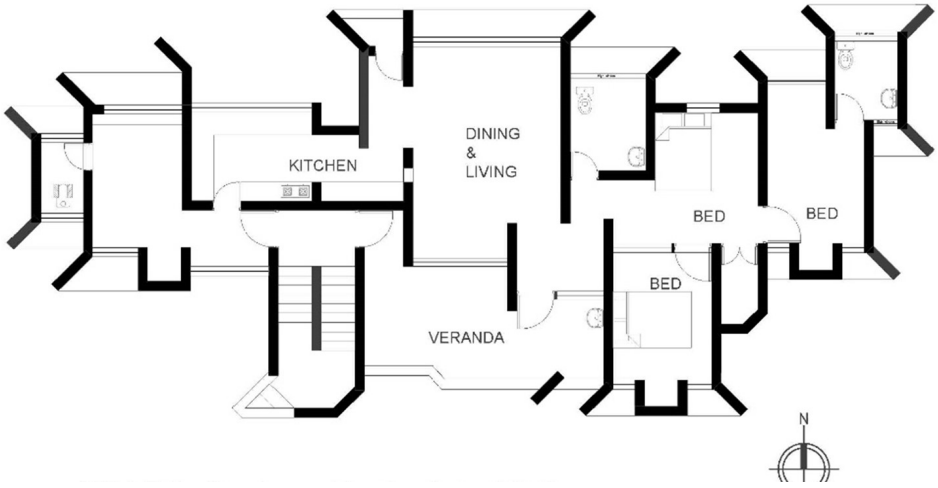

Figure 7: Type-plan for senior lecturers' quarters in a four-storied block of BAU staff flats, constructed ca, 1980s. Plan reconstructed by the first author from on-site sketch in 2019. Dimensions may not be accurate.

Reception

But, how was this ultra-modern residential planning of the new campus actually received? The following section explores the post-occupancy experience of living in the academic staff quarters designed for the BAU campus; interpreting interview-based findings and associated fieldwork arising from one of the case studies of the aforementioned larger study. It seeks to assess the impact of these ultra-progressive new templates for living on the actual people who resided in such institutional microcosms of the broader nation-scale modernisation project of the 1960s.

In this case a retired professor of BAU and his wife, Ms Afroza Begum,[14] a school teacher born in 1957, were formally interviewed at a time

14. The names of all interlocutors have been changed in the paper.

when they had already moved out of the campus and were living in their own apartment in the capital city. This preliminary talk prompted a subsequent day-long site visit to the campus where the researcher not only visited the different quarters designed by Rudolph in which this family had resided,[15] but also closely observed the state of all the staff quarters and their occupancy on the campus. These observations were further enhanced by the opportunity to discuss the campus living experiences of a number of other residents[16] while visiting their homes with a common acquaintance, a young student of architecture, whose father was a former colleague of these residents. Inside the quarters, the plan of the house was hand-drawn with careful readings of detail, while the residents' perceptions of their post-occupancy experience in such dwelling spaces were recorded. Moreover, Ms Afroza was interviewed at length for a second time after the researcher's field-visit to the BAU campus had enabled them to clarify comprehensively its actual layout, context, and residential designs. As an educated professional and Muslim woman, the interlocutor provided her own substantial account of the benefits and problems that she perceived; views that were reinforced by multiple other cases from the campus visit.

15. Notably, they also occupied accommodation on the campus designed by Richard Neutra. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss that experience here.

16. Other residents of the residential campus of BAU included full-time professors (not mentioning names) of the different faculties, such as fisheries and agriculture, who lived in these accommodations with their families. Residences from A to E–Types were covered for interviews during the fieldwork in 2019. The houses ranged from duplexes of a maximum of 335 square metres in Type B and D of single-family residences, flats of 130 square metres (approx.) in Type A to 185 square metres (approx.) in Type D again of multi-storied residences. The case discussed in this paper was referred by the residents as the 'new E–Type' with a flat size of about 150 square metres.

Womanhood and Domesticity: Privacy, Service and Security

Before we consider Afroza Begum's words directly, we first need to discuss her social status and context more specifically. By the 1970s, an increasing number of women from the emergent Bengali Muslim middle class were attaining higher degrees of education and were also often engaged in professions, while still maintaining their domestic attachments as their primary concern. Of particular significance for these post-colonial feminists was the issue of privacy. As Fadwa El Guindi has argued in her work on Muslim women and the 'rhythm' of everyday life in contemporary Arab societies, privacy was a "symbol of power and autonomy and functioned as a vehicle for resistance."[17] Defined and expressed in residential space, the exclusive private domains of women were synonymous with their freedom and privilege within the domestic realm.[18] Contemporary South Asian feminist scholars describe the "new women" of the post-colonial generation as comparably complex if not contradictory sets of self-constructed identities, with strong anti-colonial stances yet committed at the same time to traditional virtues and domestic ideals.[19] Combining Western and post-colonial feminist ideals in their own sense and practice of a 'new womanhood', Bengali Muslim middle-class women of Afroza Begum's generation were simultaneously eager to experience and experiment with new patterns of residential architecture, yet conscious of how these challenged deep-seated notions of domesticity.

In Afroza Begum's experience, the principle of the 'open plan' in Rudolph's designs for the BAU staff residences marked a profound rupture from the ubiquity of clear architectural boundaries in conventional Bengali residential interiors. The autonomy of women in traditional domestic contexts had been effectively secured by architectural patterns characterised by shielding grids of walls and doors. Notwithstanding the relative privilege of living in such a 'modern' dwelling – as the BAU staff quarters were still considered, even when Afroza lived on the campus in the 1980s – Afroza was gravely

17. Fadwa El Guindi, By Noon Prayer: *The Rhythm of Islam*. (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2008), 147.

18. El Guindi, *By Noon Prayer: The Rhythm of Islam*, 147-150.

19. Elora Halim Chowdhury, "Made in Bangladesh: The Romance of the New Woman," in *Rethinking New Womanhood: Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia*, ed. Nazia Hussein (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 47-70; Nazia Hussein, "Negotiating Middle-class Respectable Femininity: Bangladeshi Women and their Families," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 16, no. 16 (2017). https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4397

dissatisfied with the lack of privacy that it secured despite its well-defined public and private spaces, and ample service areas.

During the fieldwork at the campus, this discontentment was echoed in the opinions of other interviewees living in the same flats long after Afroza's occupancy. In the light of her feminist ideologies and her simultaneous Islamic religious affinities, Afroza's complaint about accessing the kitchen through what was often a male-dominated gathering of guests in the contiguous living-cum-dining space revealed how this 'open' plan actually hindered 'freedom' of movement. A culturally ingrained sense of privacy appeared to be aligned with her mobility in this case as it was constrained, ironically, in her navigation of the 'free' residential spaces of Rudolph's modern American imagining.

As for the architectural setup (fig 7), a veranda on the south, as a backdrop to the dining-and-living space, also contributed to the form of access into the residence through its entrance door at one end. Interestingly, the veranda also served as a thoroughfare through its entrance door and the stair-lobby to the other side entailing the kitchen and service zone. While this thoroughfare allowed the women to access the kitchen in privacy without crossing the open living-dining area, this design order was only available to the upper floors. On the contrary, leaving the boundaries of the home and crossing the very public stair-lobby did not comply with the Bengali Muslim woman's sense of privacy. The above-discussed problems identified by Afroza primarily existed on the ground floor, as the only entry to the residence straight from the street was through the front veranda with no separate, secondary access for the residents to the kitchen on the other side. This was an even greater problem for a woman who would be more comfortable with her practice of privacy "under veils."

The open-planning of Rudolph's type-quarters also swept away the culturally-rooted norms of servant accommodation in Bengali middle-class households. In the plan in figure 7, a small opening with a concrete-cast tray exists on the wall between the dining-living open space and the kitchen-pantry, similar to the Western concept of a tiny service gateway to pass the meal through the pantry to the dining. This appeared to be a design device that was intended to prevent a servant from trespassing the kitchen boundaries.

A widely shared belief maintained by Afroza and other residents, was that the American architect had designed these residential layouts with the sensibilities of visiting American academics in mind, who, they imagined, would have wanted to ensure that the Bengali servants in their households were relegated to the boundaries of the 'service zone'. This was the zone limited to the pantry and kitchen and the servant's bedroom and toilet beyond. Although the staff quarters at BAU certainly did not represent poor living conditions for the servants, relative to established norms, Rudolph's plans did seem to enable if not enforce clear social segregation – which does invite speculation about the architect's cultural assumptions.[20] On this matter, Afroza commented,

> I would want to emphasize how inconveniently far apart the servant's 'quarter' was in the house. With a living-dining space and a rather elaborate kitchen in between, there was no way I

20. It is noteworthy that Rudolph grew up in the American South during the 'Jim Crow' era, as the son of a Methodist Preacher. Methodists had long been vocal critics of slavery, but how Rudolph's upbringing and his awareness of the elitist ante-bellum lifestyle (which still relied on African American servants) influenced his own residential designs is uncertain. See: Christopher Domin and Joseph King, *Paul Rudolph: The Florida Houses*. (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 26. The long arm of such classist and racialist thinking in modern American domestic architecture has been explored, for example, in Gwendolyn Wright's historical analysis of slave quarters inside the American elite residences of the 19th century. See: Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*, 1st MIT Press paperback ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983), 41-47.

> could summon her from the distance of my bedrooms. Moreover, she was always too afraid to stay in a separate compartment on the farthest end of the flat, the plan of which seemed to dictate that the servants were not allowed to cross their 'space'. They would only visit the kitchen, cook for us and serve – meaning, at the end of a day, they would return to their compartment and would have no reason to even stroll into our living room. But, we did not use our domestic spaces in such manners. Culturally, we keep young girls or bua who would travel through all our rooms at any time – dust, clean, and mop – whilst being promptly available upon our calls.[21]

21. Afroza Begum, interviewed by author, Dhaka, April, 2019.

The progressive design of the modern flat that seemingly uplifted the standards of domesticity in the Bengali context was, nevertheless, cause for frustration and ambivalence, as Afroza's comments reveal, as a lived spatial experience. Every Bengali middle-class family is accustomed to having servants closely accommodated in a residential domain within the reach of the housewife's control and attention. With the engagement of mostly teenaged or middle-aged women as maids in a household, it became a cultural practice not only to command constant chores but also to ensure well-monitored safety for either party. To an external observer, the plan provided servants with a decent and spacious room of their own, respecting their privacy (figure 7). This notion of social respect seemed to be even further enhanced by the incorporation of the servant accommodation within the household, not outdoors.[22] But what was even more radical, and disconcerting from the householder's point of view, was how the plan challenged the housewife's sense of security as well as privacy.

22. Servant quarters used to be constructed along the outer peripheries of a large plot in the architectural patterns of the former colonial bungalows and most other government houses and apartment buildings.

Over the course of time, nevertheless, the design of this once shockingly new residential pattern ultimately seems to have struck a balance between the needs of visiting academics, with their international outlook, and its reception by the local Bengali faculty members who lived in it day-to-day. The pattern would continue to be reproduced by campus managers and their draftsmen for years to come as what had evidently become an integral component of the institutional DNA.

Translation

The institutionalisation of Rudolph's residential type plans for BAU was a revealing preview of issues that were to be worked-out in the decades that followed as the evolving architectural norms and patterns of the urbanising Bengali Muslim middle class sought to accommodate changing lifestyles and expectations whilst continuing to re-calibrate both their traditional and their modern cultural identities to their evolving surroundings.

The Post-feminist Pragmatism of the Bengali Muslim Middle Class

Let us conclude by briefly considering this continuing dialogical process in the case of Shakila Hossain (b. late 1960s), another highly educated Bengali Muslim woman half a generation younger than Afroza, and practicing professionally in the discipline of Architecture itself.[23]

23. Shakila Hossain, interviewed by author, Dhaka, December 2018.

A photograph of Shakila as a young child with her older siblings and mother, smartly clad in a sari, (fig. 8) indicates a multi-generational continuity of identities that were and are simultaneously pious as well as progressively modern. As Shakila related in her interview, her mother was far from conservative, encouraging her children to expand their skills and perspectives through participation in extra-curricular activities, which even included live television performances.

Figure 8: Young Shakila, her mother and siblings. Source: Collected by first author from Shakila's personal album during her interview in December 2018.

Shakila subsequently completed her education overseas, with a higher degree in Architecture at the University of Sydney, and today is both a practising architect and a senior academic in a leading Bangladeshi school of architecture. She is also a religiously oriented person who has performed *Hajj* and multiple *Umrah*.[24]

24. *Hajj,* being one of the five pillars of Islam, constitutes of seven stages performed over a period of several weeks in a particular month of the Islamic calendar, whereas the *Umrah*, although sharing some common rites, can be completed in a few hours and performed any time of the year.

Figure 9: Plan of Shakila's apartment in Banani, Dhaka where she and her family resided from 2003 – present. Plan reconstructed by the first author from a sketch drawn by the interlocutor, Shakila, during her interview in December 2018. Dimensions may not be accurate.

Compared and contrasted with the case of Afroza, Shakila represents the liberal Bangladeshi Muslim woman of the early twenty-first century who is relatively more empowered and recognizes her capacity to self-construct her womanhood, simultaneously embracing culture, faith and profession. Shakila retains a heightened degree of agency in the manner she exercises her reason to not only engage, dressed in modest attire, in the public sphere but also to advocate for separateness within the private sphere of domesticity. As a wife and mother of two children, her adherence to the principles of reserve and respect is reflected in the architecture of her own residential interior. The commercially built apartment unit in which Shakila has raised her own family over the past two decades[25] (figure 9) reflects the pragmatic yet discerning design choices that were exercised consciously in selecting and inhabiting this seemingly generic residential layout. Here the modernity of the unit and its occupants is still grounded in the open-plan living and dining zone at its core, but the particular configuration of these spaces allows Shakila to prioritize the privacy of her domestic movements despite the potential presence of guests. The position of the doors to the bedrooms

25. Changes in residential typologies and associated living patterns over multiple generations of Shakila's and other interlocutors' experiences, from childhood to present day, were architecturally and ethnographically recorded in the PhD research. Typically, this revealed upward mobility and increasing evidence of the exercise of choice in acquiring higher architectural standards.

on the south defines a concise circulatory connection with the kitchen door, offering Shakila the desired privacy in her movements without any physical barrier. In contrast to the most common apartment layouts that builders were producing for upper middle-class residents in the rapidly urbanising Dhaka of the 1990s, in which large rectangular living 'halls' were the dominant feature, visibility is mediated in Shakila's apartment by the geometry of the L-shaped dining and living zone, providing a necessary visual barrier when needed.

Through such close-to-the-grain readings of the architectural history of domesticity in modern Bangladesh, the cases sampled in the present paper reveal the paradox of how modernity according the universalist assumptions and architectural templates for open planning that were propagated globally in the second half of the twentieth century was not so obviously and unquestioningly embraced as the seemingly generic high-rise apartment development that defines the skyline of Dhaka today appears to confirm. The interplay between the continuity of tradition and the evolution of the feminine modern self presents yet another angle to interpret architectural development historically, and to better understand the impact of 'the new'.