

Case study of Ahsan Manzil and Gol Talab: Assessment of public opinion to access the possibilities of heritage trail in Old Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract: This research aims to analyse various hypotheses on urban heritage conservation in Dhaka, Bangladesh, focusing on public awareness and outdated government policies that hinder heritage protection. Methodologically, extensive literature reviews were given priority to understand the state of the art and were evaluated under thematic analysis for heritage study, ideal authenticity according to world heritage standards. Then, an extensive field survey followed to grasp the public behaviour, and the study will analyse the survey thoroughly to outline a well-desired 'heritage trail' for Old Dhaka, which is currently missing in reality. The possible research findings will primarily focus on the preservation and safeguarding of the surrounding of other dilapidated heritage sites, which are considered elements of valuable cultural and historical significance coming from Dhaka city's kernel, especially when the city is suffering from rapid urbanization that threatens heritage sites with various social forces and ends up with demolition. Through socially equitable and explorable data collection derived from the viewpoints of the public participations, the potential findings will also attempt to restate public consciousness at the same time. Having said that, this paper will examine the pivotal role of the magnificent edifice, Ahsan Manzil, and a natural element, Gol Talab pond from the colonial era, as a case study. The first successful conservation project in Bangladesh, Ahsan Manzil, is taken as a case study as the paper aims to develop a future heritage trail in Dhaka, focusing on accessible, pedestrian-only entry, restricted vehicles, and local culture. Such a trail should be designed to acknowledge traditional custodians of Dhaka's intangible cultural heritage, attract foreign tourists, and provide revenue-generating options through city tourism. The trail will highlight important heritage sites with unique histories, linking them in an affordable route, and adhering to inclusivity through the presence of the historic pink palace of Ahsan Manzil.

Keywords: Ahsan Manzil, Old Dhaka, Bangladesh, heritage trail, public awareness

INTRODUCTION

As a crucial case study and the last hope for other decaying Dhaka heritage sites, this essay explores the Ahsan Manzil building from colonial Old Dhaka, Bangladesh. Being the nation's first successful conservation initiative, it may draw a lot of criticism for future historical trail development in Dhaka, the historic city, where there is a lack of public awareness and outdated or uninformed government regulations. The history of Ahsan Manzil is unique among all the surrounding heritage of Old Dhaka, but still it is not the oldest or prime one. There are lots of other heritage elements that bear witness to the golden period of Dhaka's various germination phases. It was taken as a nuclear element for this study to define the starting point of a proposed heritage trail, which has the potential to connect all the other dilapidated heritage sites in Old Dhaka, as it is already a focused and protected heritage. It will also act like a reference point to the study problem, which is to conserve the heritage of Old Dhaka. If Ahsan Manzil could be well conserved, then other heritage sites should also get the same priority and, as a goal, the study might emphasize the public awareness and predict a possible 'heritage trail in Old Dhaka' for the future urban development.

In the first world, heritage conservation is a prerequisite to ensure proper management of culture, tradition, and history from generation to generation, whereas in the third world context, like Dhaka City, Bangladesh, it is a pity that conservation or preservation is neglected or overlooked despite the city being rich with various forms of cultural, natural, and religious forms of heritage. Promoting heritage conservation, especially in urban areas, is a challenging task in a third-world context like Bangladesh. Coordination and integrated decision-making are crucial since it involves not only maintaining heritage structures but also fostering awareness, increasing a sense of ownership, encouraging impromptu engagement, and safeguarding customs and their legacies for future generations. Above all, it is necessary to incorporate urban ecology to restore its local and natural context, which has been overlooked in favour of heritage and the assessment of the surrounding landscape (Fig. 1). In order to understand heritage awareness, a thorough literature analysis and field survey that considers public opinion are also conducted. In particular, when the city is experiencing rapid urbanization and other threatening forces for heritage demolition, the research will primarily focus on the preservation and protection of other deteriorated heritage sites, which are regarded as components of valuable cultural and historical significance of the old city kernel.



Fig. 1. Heritage lost their view toward the Buriganga River due to encroachment of Rivershore and absence of buffer zone. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

The study will try to illustrate and assess several conflicting phenomena and reality checks with heritage protection theories and the failure of the entire conservation process from an objective standpoint. Establishing a heritage trail might provide a united chain, a series of heritage sites, and safe shelter for both protected and dilapidated buildings. In order to develop a well-linked 'heritage trail' concept and its potential implications for ancient Dhaka, the study will carefully examine the questionnaire survey results. Through a socially fair, explorable, and tabulated evaluation process of collective respondents' answers, this study will match the research findings with scholars' viewpoints coming from literature review. The explored deviations or differences will guide any attempt in the future to restate a bridge between two spectrums of opinions: first, issues like lack of awareness of the majority of this society against the standard heritage protection practices; environmental safeguarding and urban planning solutions should be defined and introduced, and secondly, how all of these issues will interact through effective city tourism.

Research aim

The broad aim of the research is to identify the feasibility of landscape elements through community involvement in preserving the authentic heritage setting in Old Dhaka. This aim could be divided into two major streams: firstly, this study will analyse the current state of a specific neighbourhood centring Ahsan Manzil palace. For this, this study will determine if conservation efforts are possible to relocate the encroaching elements that surround its legal buffer zone, which is a right given by the archaeology-related authorities through the act of heritage protection, visibly a clear violation of heritage law. Secondly, the research will investigate whether the local community has desires to relocate themselves if needed. Additionally, it will also examine whether there is public awareness to conserve the existing landscape elements and natural contexts of heritage building sites, and furthermore, whether city planners, politicians, other stakeholders, and users of the space are interested in providing necessary support for the historic preservation process.

Research objectives

The objective of this research could be derived from the above-mentioned research aim into four steps:

1. To achieve the first research aim, this study will analyse available physical, demographic, and socio-economic aspects of heritage conservation in Old Dhaka to reveal the authority and related community activity patterns in the old city.
2. To satisfy the second research aim, this study will enumerate the dominant factors to form the basis of improvement measures in conservation policy. This will help to understand the real public concern related to heritage preservation.
3. Additionally, to determine the concept of buffer zone, this study will examine various aspects of failure for conservation solutions attempted by different government authorities and identify the contributing factors and the magnitude of their effects towards local and natural contexts;
4. In addition, to examine the analysis, knowledge, and experience of respondents and through the synthesis of survey results, this study will try to develop a management strategy of revitalization of Old Dhaka's local context mainly from two aspects:

- a. Conservation opportunities of heritage infrastructures besides the river bank and its natural and local settings;
- b. Implementation in the planning policy.

Scopes

Old Dhaka has a rich history of Mughal and post-colonial architecture that played a crucial role in the city's historic development as the capital city. Preserving these monumental buildings, which are over at least 100 years old, is crucial for developing a true understanding of the natural and local progress of Dhaka. Community participation is essential in the conservation of these architectural treasures, but it is also important to include its natural settings. This research provides scopes to explore the various possibilities for historic neighbourhoods, local contexts and associated communities to come together and conserve the architectural and environmental heritage of Old Dhaka for the future generations. The previous researchers demonstrated the positive impact of nature on the quality of life in cities, contributing to the physical and psychological wellbeing of any community. Even in contemporary society, it is important to remember the journey that led us from old to new (Pickett and Cadenasso, 2008), especially in areas like Old Dhaka where rapid urbanization is acute, resulting in a built environment comprised of only functional architecture, not respectful of landscape and local context. Different monuments along with landscape features, if maintained properly, would in turn allow the residents of Old Dhaka to witness and experience their civilian benefits.

Limitations

The main challenge appears to be the incomplete nature of the construction, as well as the scarcity of archaeological materials, literary evidence, and epigraphic texts available to architectural historians or even available sources are inadequate to decide their heritage values. It is neither realistic nor expected that the social, physical, and economic conditions of urban existence around these two historical sites can totally be changed. Anticipation and planning may help to rectify the anomalies to a certain extent. Bridging this gap with these seemingly inconspicuous materials has undoubtedly confounded the existing conversation about this monument. It raises a slew of concerns about its initial

master plan, function, and construction history, to which we have yet to offer definitive answers due to the telescopic distance.

For several centuries, the original natural layout is changed and most of the cases erased from the context, which is a prime obstacle to relating the local context with heritage buildings focusing on Ahsan Manzil. Due to economic and time constraints, only a part of Old Dhaka, the Buriganga River shore, was chosen for the collection of primary data on the adjacent areas of Ahsan Manzil. Official complexities and lack of systematic data collection hinder the collection of important aspects such as heritage awareness, conservation education, utilities, transportation, business volume, and exact heritage management activities. Despite the need for public awareness and historical district development, attempts have been made to rectify the absence of data through observations, interpolation, and common-sense in actions.

Literature review

If the literature review requires establishing arguments, it needs to introduce some terms coming from heritage studies and for linking the critical thinking to derive possible findings and analysis; the research will also include terms from analytical research methods next to it. Together, they will construct the main discussion and analysis based upon the tabulated results coming from data collection. Thus, in the literature review, it is really important that the study clarify some definitions in its upfront stage regarding heritage study and data collection and analysis. These are the following:

1. Authenticity

According to Nara Documentation of UNESCO, authenticity is an essential element in defining, assessing, and monitoring cultural heritage. It only applies to cultural properties and to the cultural aspects of 'mixed' properties. Authenticity can be seen as the link between attributes and Outstanding Universal Value. Any heritage must meet the conditions of authenticity, the attributes includes from the Operational Guidelines of UNESCO: form and design; materials and substance; use and function; traditions, techniques and management systems; location and setting; language and other forms of intangible heritage; spirit and feeling; and other internal or external factors (UNESCO, 1994).

The authenticity of the Lalbagh fort is already on UNESCO tentative list. For Ahsan Manzil, it could be evaluated from its historical value. After the long-awaited Dhaka visit of Lord Curzon on 18–19 February 1904, it was obvious to create a separate Muslim state in India. This building witnessed the creation of a state named Pakistan—the adobe for Indian Muslims. It is the cradle of Muslim political awareness as the 'All India Muslim League' was launched here in 1905 under the leadership of Nawab Khwaja Salimullah. Unfortunately, the building's origin is quite obscure. The concept of a sovereign separate state for Indian Muslims, the state of Pakistan got its political base from this 'pink palace'.

2. Integrity

Integrity applies to both natural and cultural properties, and is defined as a measure of the completeness or intactness of the attributes that convey Outstanding Universal Value. The key words to understanding integrity are 'wholeness', 'intactness', and 'absence of threats'. These can be understood as follows: Wholeness: all the necessary attributes are within the property; Intactness: all the necessary attributes are still present—none are lost or have been significantly damaged or have decayed; and Absence of threats: none of the attributes are threatened by development, deterioration or neglect. (UNESCO, 2013)

The Old Dhaka's heritage sites could be included in attractive tourism, if connected with surrounding heritage sites within the natural settings both for domestic and foreign tourists. They are depended to its history and integral germination of this historic city. This integrity will help to provide a base for the concept of a 'heritage trail' in Old Dhaka.

3. Heritage trails: Heritage trails are established routes linking significant items of an area's heritage. They are usually promoted in tourist pamphlets and are often supplemented by interpretive pamphlets or cassette tapes. Some trails incorporate plaques or signs on particular structures to provide additional information (NSW Heritage Office, 1995).

4. Survey: Survey is something an examination of opinions, behaviour, etc., made by asking people questions. A set of limited questions will be provided to respondents, unlike the open-ended interviews. It will facilitate the problem identification in this study. Why is survey important for research? Such observation that emphasizes people's behaviour, is a less intrusive research method than interview. Because of its effective prominences, survey can grasp the meaning of human behaviour and decide the direction towards any particular value of any research aim; it can also secure the actual events regarding the validity of time-space relationship and the inlaid reasons behind it (Kitchin and Tate, 2013).

5. Eisenhower Matrix: By displaying important-urgent scenarios—where the important can never be urgent and the urgent may not be important—the Eisenhower Matrix, sometimes called the Time Management Matrix, helps researchers to determine which areas to prioritize for each given research topic (Rodriguez, 2025). The Eisenhower Method, which divides the results into four categories, depicting priorities based on the importance and urgency. Here, the most urgent and significant quadrants are given the highest priority and should be finished right away. Conversely, long-term projects without a set deadline are referred to as essential but not urgent tasks. These are not urgent but inconsequential aims, and since they pale in comparison to the previous two, they can be assigned to other experts. Finally, the majority of insignificant and distracting jobs fall into the non-urgent and non-important quadrants, where finishing them is considered a waste of time (Victorino, 2023).

MATERIALS, DATA AND METHODS

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, this research aims to use quantitative research methods to study the heritage sites of Gol Talab and Ahsan Manzil together, located on the bank of the Buriganga River. These are as follows:

1. To achieve the first objective, the study will first use qualitative data collected through field visits and surveys, with an open-ended thematic analysis to derive the possible hypothesis of results. To gather primary data, a set of questionnaires will be designed to evaluate whether the community should conserve the natural settings associated with heritage buildings together or not. As the questions get into deeper conversations, respondents will be asked about local context and natural settings related to architectural heritage and what socio-economic factors might constrain such conservation efforts with relocation and rehabilitation.

2. The survey will be conducted among the local people and visitors of the selected lanes and routes including land or building owners, tenants, and vendors, along with the tourists. Before the questionnaire survey, a reconnaissance survey was conducted to understand the study area and finalize the survey questions. Also,

published secondary documents from various sources were reviewed meticulously. All activities were completed to achieve the second objective.

3. Then, to achieve the third objective, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach, i.e., both qualitative and quantitative approaches will be examined. The findings will be categorized and analysed thematically to provide insights into the conservation techniques of architectural heritage in the area, with the consent of inhabitants.

4. To develop a management strategy for this study, we will follow a two-segment approach to satisfy the last objective, splitting it into two parts:

a. A descriptive design of a questionnaire was used to investigate SWOT-TOWS. Reverse relationship with SWOT-TOWS (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat—Test, Opportunity, Weakness, Strength) exploration was performed and matched to disclose external and internal driving forces. On a broad scale, strength and opportunity are found as internal, whereas weakness and threat are contemplated as external factors. These assist in tracing different significant issues that may help to find a worthy and sustainable pathway for heritage conservation (Abu Hassan et al., 2014; Jiang et al., 2018).

b. The evaluation of sub-factors of internal and external drivers as well as SWOT categories themselves, was followed by a applying a prioritizing tool to identify a bunch of weighted criteria of the factors for developing hierarchical order (Bottero et al., 2020; Dalalah et al., 2010; Saaty, 2008). Verbal assessment during the survey was used to understand and summarize public opinion along with academic knowledge. For example, considering the strength as an internal factor under which three criteria need to be stated and sorted by the expert or scholar judgement to develop an effective proviso (Hasan et al., 2022) for possible heritage trail in Old Dhaka.

Research rationale: Selection of case studies, Ahsan Manzil and Gol Talab

Ahsan Manzil is the first successful conservation project of Bangladesh. In 1901, Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah died and no heir took interest its maintenance. It was rented to tenants that caused damages to its original aesthetics. In 1952, East Pakistan Government acquired the property under the East Bengal Estate Acquisition Act. After the independence, the successors of Nawab family called an auction which was cancelled by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on 2 November 1974 and he wanted to establish a museum and tourist centre here. In 1985, the National Museum was bestowed with the authority of its possessions and the conservation work began under the supervision of the Directorate of Public Works and Architecture in 1986. The Government acquired a land of 22,864 square metres, but it was eventually possible to develop a museum complex within 20,072 square metres of land including the palace.

On 20 September 1992, the historic Ahsan Manzil was reopened to the public. It is the very first example of successful conservation project in the country, its conservation was led by architect Abu H. Imamuddin (Dani, 2009). The main palace was occupied by less wealthy members of the family, and divided into smaller apartments that made it structurally unsound. Other buildings and the grounds were occupied by slum dwellers. These residents were evicted in 1985, and the property was restored (Zahiruddin, 1990). Unfortunately, the link between Ahsan Manzil and Gol Talab is missing today due to illegal encroachment and

the absence of a buffer zone. If the heritage trail protection is initiated with this site, then it would be possible to link all other enlisted but dilapidated heritage sites of Old Dhaka one by one.

Architecture of Ahsan Manzil

Architecture of Ahsan Manzil is called Indo-Saracenic architectural style that developed during the British colonial period of India. But Ahsan Manzil's unique style is also identified some heritage specialists as Indo-Saracenic Revival in architecture (Mowla and Afrin, 2019). On the western side, there are a few smaller living rooms engulfed by a massive dining hall, ballroom, and the Hindustani room. In the middle of the five rooms, there is a secret vault room to store the treasures on the ground floor. The eastern side comprises a large drawing room, card room, library, state room, and two other guest rooms. The river facing front has an open stairway leading directly to the first floor's quiescent and vast open terrace projected in the middle, and a grand triple-arched portal is acting like a back drop. Once, there was a fountain amidst the garden in front of the stairs; it does not exist today. This two-floor palace is constructed as brick masonry with 0.78 m thickness. The building was conventionally erected on an elevated platform of 1 metre to avoid flash floods. Its footprint area has a dimension of 125.4 m x 28.75 m. The height of the ground floor is 5 m from its plinth and the height of the first floor is 5.8 m. There are two porticos on the northern and southern sides, each 5 m in height. Wooden beams supporting the roof load and roof are constructed with brick chips and lime mortar (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Entrance of Ahsan Manzil today. (Photo: Authors, 2024)

In the interior of the drawing room and Jalsaghar (performing dance), vaulted and wooden artificial ceilings were decorated with lavish Islamic geometric designs. Floors of the dining room, chest room, and Darbar halls (assembly) are ornate with a variety of ceramic tiles: yellow, white, and green. The floors of the spacious verandas and bedrooms were covered with marble, and it continues in the upper floor, from the north end to the south end. Doorways are comprised of semi-circular arches, and every inner door had colourful glasses in their panels. Gorgeous wooden stairs with iron-made balusters have ornamentation of vine leaf patterns. On the first floor of the east side, there were three rooms: a living room, a library, and a guest room. On the ground floor, on the east side, was the dining room, and the Darbar Hall (court) was on the west. There were the same number of rooms on both floors. Huge columns were decorated with colourful

glasses that were in the shape of clubs. The marble used in the floor of Ahsan Manzil was as dark as buffalo skin (Ahmed, 2023).

History and background

Ahsan Manzil was a significantly influential edifice in the history of Dhaka, especially between the 1900s to 1925s in the political arena of whole Bengal in previous century. The British government bestowed the Nawabs of Dhaka with the land-lordship of the vast Dhaka region. Aristocracy, prejudice, and pride are reflected by this building as a leading figure for the Muslim majority of Eastern Bengal. This was the official and residential palace of the rulers of Dhaka and their honourable guests (Alamgir, 2021; Kabir and Parolin, 2012; Iqbal, 2013).

During the Mughal era, the landlord of Jamalpur district Sheikh Enayet Ullah built a Rongmohol, a garden house for dance, party, entertainment, and harem purposes. Later, his son, Sheikh Moti Ullah, sold this property to the French merchants who established a trade post (Kuthi) in 1740, during the reign of Nawab Alibardi Khan. The French dug a pool called 'Les Jalla' as a source of drinking water, which still exists today. After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the French were expelled from Dhaka by the British East India Company as they were allies of the defeated ruler Nawab Shiraj Ud Doula.

In 1827, France reclaimed all their previous possessions in India under the Paris agreement of 1814. Eventually, this building was dispensed to them, but they were never able to establish their right against the British monopoly. In 1830, the French sold it to a native landlord, Khwaja Alimullah, and left Dhaka for forever, as the French became the subject of expulsion from Indian territories due to the Anglo-French War (1803–1815), considered part of the Napoleonic Wars and their peripheral conflicts. Thus, it is evident that the early French businessmen had many edifices on the bank of the Buriganga River to establish a business network with Calcutta and Europe and had to transfer their business posts to British colonisers of India (Ahmed, 2023).

The aristocrats like Nawabs converted them to palaces of amusement, thus, people of Dhaka always called it Rangmahal of Nawab and these premises became prevalent as performing and leisure centre (dance hall or ball room) for the local elites (Imran and Rahman, 2014). The first predecessor of the Nawabs of Dhaka was Mr. Khwaza Alimullah, who bought this building from landlord of Bakerganj (Barishal). His son Khwaja Abdul Ghani named it 'Ahsan Manzil' after his beloved son Khwaja Ahsanullah in 1872. He extended the initial palace, constructing a new wing on the east side. The Nawabs renovated the house and added a stable and mosque within the complex.

In 1897, the palace was again devastated by the massive earthquake. On 7th April 1888, a shattering tornado smashed Ahsan Manzil ruthlessly. Both old and new wings were reconstructed by engineer Gobinda Chandra Roy, who came from Calcutta. Its original French style of Rongmohol was restored. After that devastating tornado; a wooden gangway was made to connect the first floors of the two wings, and a high octagonal dome was constructed for the first time in the central round room. The peak of this dome is 27.13 m above the ground. Hence, the square room on the ground floor was converted into an octagonal shape. Heavy brickwork was completed first around its corners, and squinches were added around the roof corners. Then, eight corners of the octagon were slanted gradually to form the dome, which looks like the bud of lotus (kumud koli). The old wing was converted into a private quarter (Andormohol), and the new wing became a public quarter (Rongmohol) for parties and dancing. On the north side, he built a new huge gate. (Mamun, 1993)

Almost all the viceroys, governors, and lieutenant governors of British India who visited Dhaka had to spend some time at the

Ahsan Manzil. To indicate some of such incidents: in 1874, Lord Northbrook visited this place as Governor General of India; in 1888 Lord Dufferin stayed in this palace and in 1904, Lord Curzon visited the place to make the pivotal political decision about breaking the huge Bengal province into two parts. This is also a unique example, the only source of the aristocratic lifestyle of the then socio-political-economic circumstances of the Dhaka city (Alamgir, 2021; Kabir and Parolin, 2012; Iqbal, 2013).

When Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah died in 1901, and no heir took interest in its maintenance. It was rented for tenants that caused damages to its original aesthetics (Fig. 3). In 1952, the East Pakistan Government acquired the property under the East Bengal Estate Acquisition Act. After the independence, the successors of the Nawab family called an auction, which was cancelled by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 2 November 1974, who wanted to establish a museum and tourist centre here (Fig. 4). In 1985, the National Museum was bestowed with the authority of its possessions, and the conservation work began under the supervision of the Directorate of Public Works and Architecture in 1986. The Government acquired a land area of 22,864 square metres, but it was eventually possible to develop a museum complex within 20,072 square metres of land, including the palace. On 20 September 1992, the historic Ahsan Manzil palace was reopened to the public. This is the very first example of a successful conservation project in the country (Mamun, 1993; Mowla, 1997; Bhuiyan and Darda, 2020).



Fig. 3. Ahsan Manzil, illegal occupancy in 1975 before restoration. (Source: Heath-Caldwell, 2015)

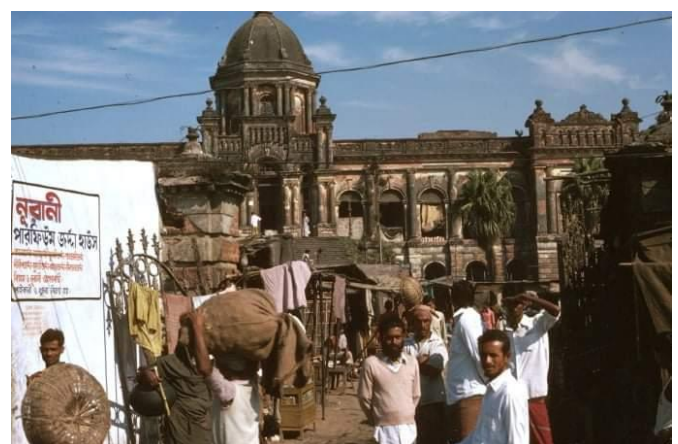


Fig. 4. Pre-conservation state of Ahsan Manzil during 1977. (Photo: Angelo Costalonga; Source: CDSR, 2016)

FINDINGS

Survey results: According to the public's response analysis, Ahsan Manzil Museum is the primary draw for all tourists. Since the palace was originally the principal residence of the Nawab family of Dhaka and represents a glorious past of the city's culture, the majority of visitors have selected the museum as their top attraction. As a result, the primary draw for the others has been cited as this location's cultural significance. Nearly the same proportion of respondents listed the colonial building architecture, museums, scenic beauty, and cultural significance as noteworthy features. The most favoured feature is the museum's indication of interest in the past, which includes images of Dhaka's rulers, culture, and traditions. This is followed by the palace's late colonial architecture and cultural significance. Although the picturesque beauty of the Buriganga River is a primary draw and a top reason for visitors to choose this location for relaxation, water contamination has disrupted tourism there. The site's entrance point was disorganized due to the unimpressive and bad state of its accessibility, as well as encroachment from the surrounding area, particularly along the Ahsanullah road by rickshaw, a common mode of human-powered transportation in all of Old Dhaka. All the respondents were agreed in one question that such heritage places should be kept free from any illegal encroachment, chaos and pollution. In this study, the following survey technique was applied.

In order to achieve the goals, 50 people were questioned for a total of 45 individual surveys and 5 Key Informant Interviews. Details like gender, age, education, and employment status of the respondents are tabulated accordingly (Tab. 1). The purpose of

these interviews was to gauge public participation and their perception of the heritage, conservation, and future directions dilemmas. Results show that 90% of respondents believed that there were no options for a history trail in the old city of Dhaka, and 20% of respondents said that certain heritage sites were either directly or indirectly connected to their collective memory. Furthermore, 57% of respondents firmly stated that they wanted to preserve their historical sites by creating a shared route, although 40% of respondents generally agreed that this argument was unrealistic because of practical difficulties. The possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the conservation of heritages are listed (Tab. 2) to help organize the findings and eventually, turn the data into an Eisenhower Matrix (Tab. 3).

Tab. 1. Information on participants of the interview. (Source: Authors, 2024)

Category	Subcategory	Respondent numbers
Gender	Male	30
	Female	20
Age	18-29	20
	30-39	10
	40-49	10
	50+	5
Education	No institutional education	5
	Primary level	20
	SSC-HSC	15
	Tertiary level	10
Employment status	Student	10
	Employed	15
	Unemployed	15
	Self employed	10

Tab. 2. Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat (SWOT) matrix. (Source: Authors, 2024)

Strength-Opportunity		Weakness-Opportunity	
Tourism will boost		Both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage sites will come under conservation policy.	
Economic progress of community through employment			
Generating more revenue for the Government		Mobilization will occur in monetization and resources.	
Craft and culinary culture will reach to international audience			
Hotel business		Competitive mechanism for land value and hotel industry will increase.	
Environmental upgradation		Historic landscape conservation will be possible.	

Strength		Weakness	
Feasible location		Community participation is lacking.	
Accessibility is convenient		Management is not good, ethical dilemmas have deteriorated the quality of life. Lack of dedication among government officials and their unwilling responsiveness in urban planning, financing, development, and archaeology management is acute.	
Authenticity and integrity		Research and resources are limited.	
Heritage value		Conservation work is time consuming.	
Variety of built heritage sites		Lack of public awareness	
Water connectivity		Lack of publicity and advertisement	
Public transportation is available		Authority is lacking professionalism.	
Community cohesion		Various topographical elements, natural and man-made heritage sites in urban landscape are ignored due to poor urban planning policies.	

Strength-Threat		Weakness-Threat	
Over tourism can destroy social tranquility of locals		Less coordination between stakeholders.	
Tourists again will deteriorate the environment		Pollution continues.	
Hotel business will impact badly in city's masterplan		Less public and private investment particularly on heritage, emphasis might shift concentration on trade only.	
		Unprotected and dilapidated heritage sites might be encroached by surrounding land owners.	
Land value will rise high and as cost of life		Lack of accessibility due to narrowing the view and entry.	
		Gap in planning policies and its implementation.	
Crime might increase		Socio-political instability.	
		Lose investment and patronization from private sector.	

Tab. 3. Eisenhower Matrix. (Source: Authors, 2024)

Strategies / Action plan	Planning from present priority	Future planning
Imperative Strategies	1. Development of existing heritage infrastructures and landscapes. 2. Public awareness and community participation. 3. Effective governance and proper maintenance of heritage sites. 4. Environmental conservation.	1. Tourist guide and heritage training for locals. 2. Culinary tourism. 3. Craft business 4. Hotel and accommodation business in planned manner.
Secondary Strategies	1. Increasing research facilities. 2. Publicity and advertisement program arrangement.	1. Search for potential national and international investors and patronizers.
Inconsequential Strategies	Control of crime, which is not related to heritage rather includes various factors from other sources.	Socio-political stability is important but from Bangladesh's context, it is very uncertain and unpredictable.

ANALYSIS

Based on survey results, some recommendations and suggestions are derived below and described against the three main spectrums of proviso (Fig. 5).

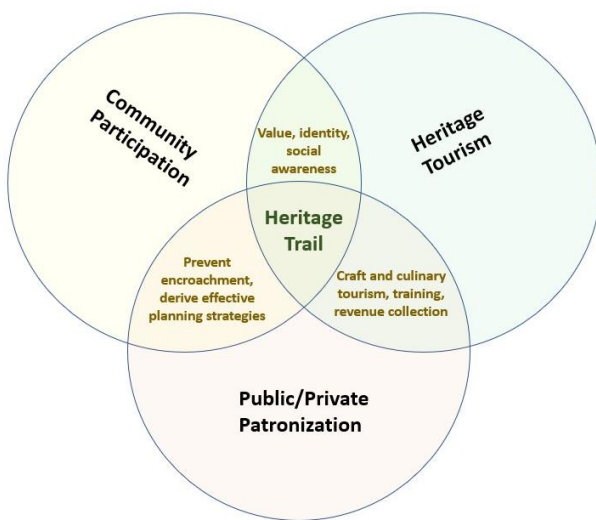


Fig. 5. Proviso of heritage trail in Old Dhaka identified three spectrums. (Source: Authors, 2025)

1. Heritage and Tourism spectrum

1.1. City Tourism: Since the tourism industry generates foreign exchange for the national and international tourists and offers many job possibilities for locals, the government must be heavily involved in the creation of policy guidelines for planning and development, advertising, regulating, and marketing of the industry. It will also serve as a source of income generation for the government and aid in resolving the unemployment issue in the historic core of Dhaka. Under the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB) under the National Tourism Organization (NTO), travel companies that conduct tours in Ahsan Manzil ought to be monitored by the authorities regularly. It is recommended that all travel agencies become members of TOAB. Appropriate steps must be taken to ensure that none of the travel agencies may exist without being affiliated with TOAB.

To ensure seamless operations, it needs to be reinforced with sufficient funding, qualified labour, and technical know-how. In this context, it is imperative to expeditiously execute the 2009 National Tourism Policy and provide the requisite backing to entice the private sector, including tax holidays, loans, reduced rates on taxes and customs, and, in certain circumstances, land allocation. Also, the UNDP/WTO Strategic Master Plan for Tourism, which was created in 1990 and later revised by the WTO, should be put into practice for the development of sustainable tourism in making the desired heritage trail for Old Dhaka (Bangladesh Tourism

Board, 2022). The growth of such a tourism industry might include a wide range of effects on the environment, economics, society, and culture. For sustainable development, a goal should be accomplished by balancing the needs of tourists at present and in the future plan, in an interval of 20, 40, 60, and 100 years, to check the tourism practices in Old Dhaka.

The public and private sectors must work together more closely to promote the intangible essence of a city. For Dhaka, some authentic food menus and cultural-religious practices from the Nawabs' days (horseback and elephant riding, Eid or Muharram processions, canon fire, etc.) might be reinstated and well presented. Besides, numerous challenges in the areas of legislation, infrastructure, safety, regulation, image, and marketing are waiting for stakeholders if they want long-term benefits out of it. A global tourist network ought to designate Ahsan Manzil, Lalbag Fort, Dahkeswari Temple, Khan Mohammad Mridha's Mosque, Armenian Church, Ruplal House, Choto, and Boro Katra as major tourist attractions in Dhaka (Fig. 6). Such strategies should be adopted for the total improvement of the tourism sector around Ahsan Manzil, and to achieve that, this study suggests only those management strategies that can cope with and incorporate through sustainable and environmentally friendly development of the tourism sector based on the identified problems and prospects to grow a possible trail (Fig. 7).

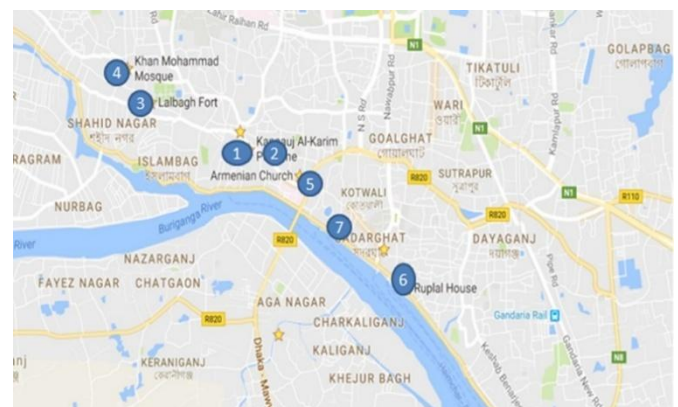


Fig. 6. Important 7 heritage elements of Old Dhaka, on the shore of the Buriganga River according to historical chronology: 1. Bara Katra (Mughal era-1644 A.D.) 2. Chota Katra (Mughal era-1665 A.D.) 3. Lalbagh Fort (Mughal era-1678 A.D.) 4. Khan Mohammad Mridha's Mosque (Mughal era-1704 A.D.) 5. Armenian Church (British period- 1781) 6. Ruplal House (British period-1825) and 7. Ahsan Manzil (British period-1872). (Source: Authors, 2024; locations identified on Google Maps)

1.2. Safeguarding the enlisted heritage: The focus of the Ahsan Manzil palace is to develop a heritage trail for social design intervention through its ever-increasing commercial setup that overshadows the historical urban setting, which is a great challenge for the moment. We need to address the effective local context and economic policies and also involve the international standards in Bangladesh's institutions and agencies related to heritage safeguarding. After weighing all the factors, responses from pub-

lic opinion must be carefully considered, and insightful recommendations should be made based on expert perspectives, personal experience, and other pertinent information, according to international standards.



Fig. 7. Aerial View of possible heritage trail in Old Dhaka, stretching from Ahsan Manzil to Lalbagh fort along with its natural settings on the bank of river Buriganga. (Source: Ahmed, 2023)

The violation of physical regulations by the private sector and inefficient urban regulation by the various incompatible government sectors have created a mayhem within an overall dysfunctional system. It led to hindrances for major urban facilities: lack of accessible spaces for pedestrians; illegally negotiated buffer spaces through land grabbing and encroachment further complicated present heritage issues. Even further, varied changes in the built environment affected the urban environment. Some factors beyond the control of authorities, such as socio-economic habits, affect the planning decisions regarding urban space and transportation as a backdrop for proper implementations of heritage laws.

2. Community participation spectrum

Traditionally, Old Dhaka had strong social bonds, and city governance, called panchayat, is getting faded from their society. But lack of societal participation, change of demographics in inhabitants, corruption, and variety of social rights restricting next generations to contribute to urban development were never observed in their society before. Additionally, providing a safe place of interaction that would allow us to experience the memorable spaces and value shared spaces that is not usually available in a busy place like New Dhaka would be desirable. Thus, community-oriented design philosophy needs to be implemented to create an accessible yet exciting space primarily for pedestrians, people using different kinds of vehicles, and disabled people.

This urban space, with its public character, will be meant to be a simultaneous transitory and stagnant tie through providing greater and easier opportunities of movement as well as it could be used for leisure activities by highlighting particular elements in every heritage site of the proposed trail. This will provide a 'greater conservation safety' and reduce the congestion of commercial and residential use by providing greater accessibility. The western world and Thailand's capital city Bangkok's craft-based street corridors are perfect examples. There, the existing building uses have not been repurposed, and the building dimensions have remained unchanged to avoid the risk of reducing the historical importance and aesthetics of the heritage buildings and the true essence of the adjacent urban area. It will subsequently help to reduce unplanned trade growth by monitoring the illegal activities as an 'indirect approach.' But this study also suggests that it would be difficult to create effective changes within the

current social milieu in Old Dhaka through community space creation due to the provision of awareness.

3. Private or public patronization spectrum

3.1. Urban Planning Policy: Recent policy papers, such as the 2010 National Urban Sector Policy, are just generic sets of goals and policies; without a conceptual framework based on social urban experience particular to Dhaka's heritage, they will not bring effective results. Another example is the Dhaka Metropolitan Plan (DAP), which benefits the privileged classes in Dhaka by allowing conversion of flood plains and agricultural lands for real estate speculation while continuing to make empty promises to the poor (Hossain, 2018). Such failure in urban planning efforts is illustrated by the evolution of the housing pattern in post-independent Dhaka city, where two dominant spatial developments exist: the 'historic core of Old Dhaka,' which is haphazard and dense in growth, and the 'new Dhaka,' to host the elite society's residential and commercial areas.

The new parts have expanded on the lowest-lying areas in the western, eastern, and most recently, the northern parts of Dhaka following the rapid growth and rush towards a concrete jungle within a span of 30 years. In contrast, the southern parts of Dhaka still hold the heritage remains of the oldest buildings but are actually the least developed part of Dhaka even today. This works as a catalyst to ignite the desires of the inhabitants to 'upgrade' their abodes, and they are encouraged to demolish the old and dilapidated heritage. The price of land topples the value of heritage in this way. Also, these new fabrics put pressure on existing Old Dhaka fabric, and every monsoon, the inhabitants face water lodging, which creates death traps for the heritage sites. People who want to knockdown heritage buildings take full advantage of it. This is how environment and heritage are interconnected. Researchers and planners have also identified a lack in emergency rescue plans in preparation for imminent environmental hazards such as cyclones, floods, and earthquakes that could have catastrophic consequences on urban heritage, as the fragile urban layout of Old Dhaka might destroy thousands of lives as the surrounding numerous high-rise buildings would turn the heritage sites into a plane of rubble. Thus, the check of rapid urbanization will be the most prioritized issue for the upcoming days.

Old Dhaka consists of a combination of—adjacency to a large body of water, an overall flat plane, and a humid tropical climate. Rapid urbanization and increasing population exposed a risk of demolition of heritage, and local government roles were identified as prior weaknesses. Despite having several strengths, less research and development on heritage and a lack of a proper heritage priority map, often called a heritage trail, are identified as another weakness by this study. Additionally, building and local context conservation in Old Dhaka is hampered by a lack of appropriate documentation, shifting patterns of use, and financial limitations. However, South Asian cities experiencing rapid expansion must address this issue to preserve the intrinsic qualities of the built heritage and the local context. It is critical to strike a balance between preservation and contemporary requirements, and neighbourhood conservation initiatives can support this alignment.

3.2. Environmental protection policy: From the environmental conservation point and buffer area of the heritage protection act of the Bangladesh government, the missing link between the Ahsan Manzil premises and Gol Talab waterbody is to make them 'breathe' freely, as well as ensure connectivity and visibility options. All the private encroachments should be erased from the city fabric, and human settlements could be reallocated properly. Ponds should be given heritage status along with the built heritage, as the concept of heritage value of landscape elements is totally absent in Bangladesh's context. All respondents did complain about the water pollution of the Buriganga River.

DISCUSSION

The question is, how should this 'Heritage Trail' look on a map? In this study, it has linked every heritage in its way and derived three distinct patterns to create the heritage roads. The map was taken from the same author's book Architectural Guide of Dhaka. For each case, an entry point from the highway road was indicated. On the east side (green line) of Narinda Road, the 'c' entry point indicates the zone for a group of 5 heritage sites, which allows their entry through the Baldha Garden, a colonial landscape element. In the middle, the Bangobazar and Bakshibazar roads will lead the tourists towards a 'loop route' containing the most crowded heritage groups of the Old Dhaka (blue line), totalling 19 in number. It starts with the 'b' entry point, which is the famous Mughal heritage of Shia fabric in Dhaka, Hussein Dalan, and leads south towards the river. In this route, Ahsan Manzil is situated in the middle of this track like a landmark and provides a view of the riverbank; the embankment itself is also a heritage

element from the urban landscape point of view, as it includes the colonial era's Buckland Dam.

On the west side, it starts with an 'a' entry point that takes the Polashi-Pilkhana road as a starting point, and Azimpur graveyard will be its entry element, and the track takes 5 more important heritage sites in its trail (black line). All these three zones could be easily linked to each other for their proximity, but no linking trail is proposed, which might not work in reality due to the proposed restriction of vehicular access and material change of the road; it could be more suitable for pedestrian use. Additionally, it is noticeable that from the entry points like 'a' and 'b', the cultural district of Dhaka, Dhaka University campus, Shahbag, and Ramna Green is well accessible, which is just at the opposite side of these entrances. So, the trail could be stretched on the opposite side of the road, which could be easily said as an extension of the heritage trail with a huge heritage area in its north (Fig. 8).

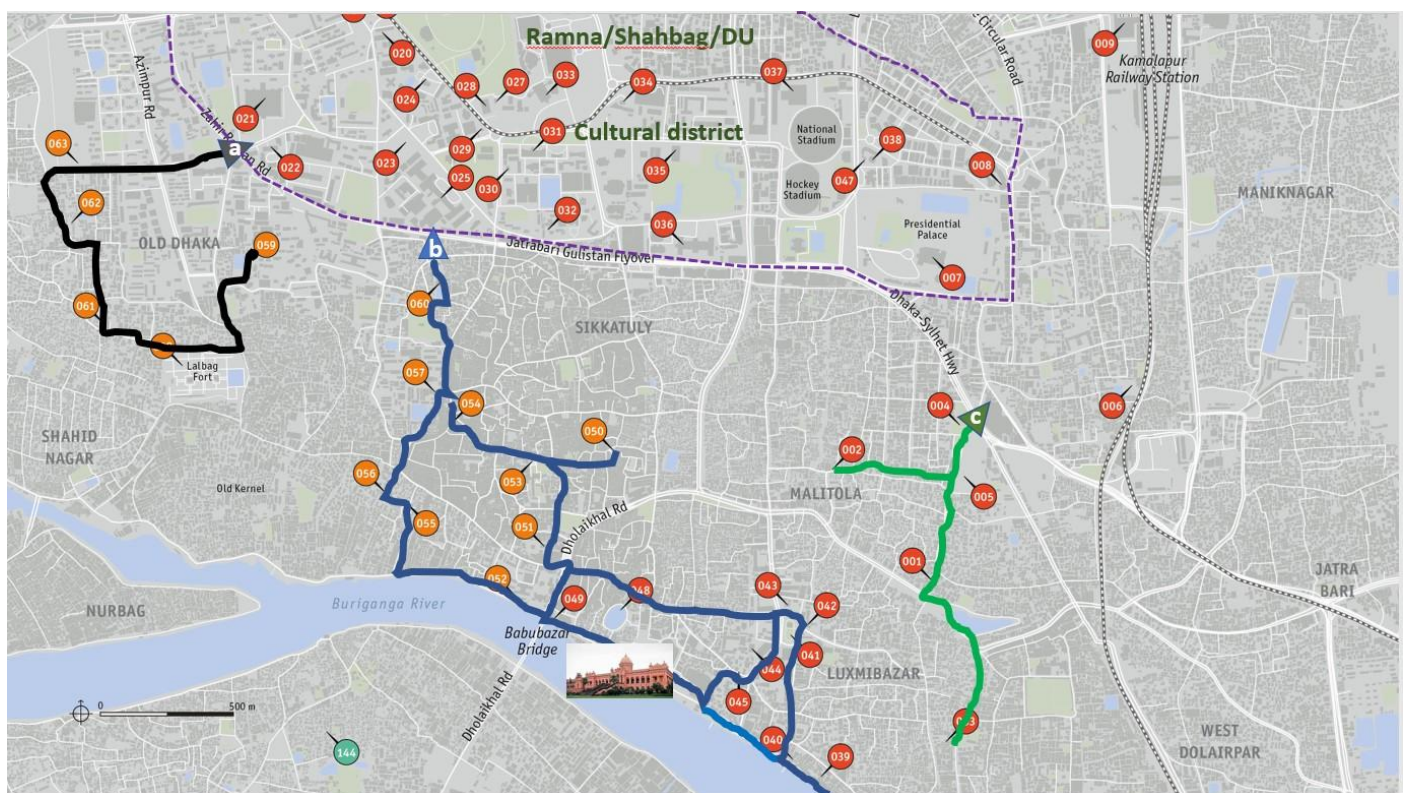


Fig. 8. Proposed 'Heritage Trail' in Old Dhaka with 3 zones and 3 entry points. Additionally, entry point of 'a' and 'b' stretches to a heritage area in its north that includes the cultural district of Dhaka: Ramna Green, Shahbag and Dhaka University campus. (Source: map regenerated from Ahmed, 2023)

Now, how will this heritage trail effectively work for Old Dhaka? After considering the analysis section of this research meticulously, it is very possible to derive a common solution for all the problems in the built environment of Old Dhaka's heritage scenario with the concept of a 'Heritage Trail.' Such a trail could become reality with the help of some sequential procedures. First of all, if all the enlisted heritage elements are protected and conserved first, then they all could be connected in a common route. For that, community participation is needed through creating public awareness, and once awareness is settled there, people would like to accept sacrifices for vehicle restrictions and give up privately owned lands for such heritage sites to create minimum buffer zones and also will not demolish it. Once this goal is achieved, then it will be much easier for the authorities to propose heritage-oriented planning policies and environmental conservation policies to protect trees, ponds, and pollution control of the Buriganga River, which might fit easily with heritage conservation, as all will be linked together in an effective series.

The most important thing will happen in the intangible dimension, not physically, and it will ensure social monitoring and law-abiding forces for the heritage trail. This will be the local people's instinct and intuitive drive for a united identity creation, which they are very proud of: we are from Old Dhaka. They will conserve their heritage sites and environments spontaneously so that they can understand the heritage trail will create a rare scope, where they may continue their legacy through built heritage for the next generations to come before it is too late. Most importantly, from the Dhanmondi Eidgah congregational area via Ahsan Manzil to Chowkbazar Mosque, this used to be the historic route of Eid processions for Old Dhaka inhabitants up to the end of the British era. The heritage trail proposed by this study might also facilitate the revival of this extinct practice, which is an intangible heritage related to Dhaka's glorious history.

CONCLUSION

Heritage conservation is a prerequisite to ensure proper management of culture, tradition, and history from generation to generation, where the Dhaka city is rich with various forms of cultural, natural, and religious forms of heritage. Promoting heritage conservation, especially in urban areas, is a challenging task in a third-world context like Bangladesh. Because it does not only mean preserving heritage structures but also promoting awareness, raising the sense of ownership, spontaneous participation, and maintaining traditions and the heritage for the future generation(s), coordination and integrated decision-making are essential. And above all, involve urban ecology to regain its natural and local context. Engagement of the government and institutions can enhance community awareness and participation. Stockholders in the government, like the Ministry of Culture, the Department of Archaeology, NGOs, policymakers from different sectors, and civil society, should work hand in hand. Furthermore, in tourism-based heritage conservation, the establishment of heritage archives can contribute to heritage promotion and conservation.

Both environments and structures having historical significance can be used for community inclusion, drawing tourists, and as such they need better upkeep. On the other hand, the revised master plan for Dhaka prioritising heritage and community-based monitoring cells may help protect heritage structures and areas from illegal embezzlement, while the percentage of greenery can easily fit the question of 'local and natural context' for ecological purification. To overcome the knowledge gap and help the upcoming generation learn about their inherent heritage, universities should offer more courses on heritage, and secondary school curriculum should include heritage chapters. For the public to emotionally engage with heritage and comprehend its significance and worth, heritage interpretation is crucial. It takes more than awareness, upkeep, and prevention to attain sustainability.

The potential results of this study may lead to the proposal of a history route that would showcase the significant historical sites with distinctive histories that have influenced the nation's capital city over the course of 400 years. In order to draw attention of foreign visitors and generate income from municipal tourism, the trail will attempt to incorporate some relics and favourite spots across the historic palace of Ahsan Manzil. It should be mostly accessible and suggest pedestrian-only access, which would take a few minutes to finish on foot. Additionally, this will honour the city's traditional guardians and showcase local crafts, culture, and creative talent to the global community and make profit. In order that visitors can take a break and experience the warmth of famous and well-known restaurants, craft stores, and institutions, many of which have opened up new possibilities for Dhaka's ancient buildings these should be properly maintained and organized.

In fact, from the grand buildings in the city's old quarter to the roadside shops, schools, places of worship and prayer, craft quarters, factories, priceless greenery like parks and trees, and unique modules of dwellings in the haphazard urban neighbourhoods, Dhaka's Mughal and colonial built environment tells stories of this fantastic city's heritage and has enhanced its cultural landscape. In addition to the official tour-based walks, there must be some self-guided heritage trails around Old Dhaka so that city dwellers can enjoy the histories of each and every nearby suburb. This program will help them to discover the rich history of many urban locations and occasions that have influenced Dhaka's development over time by following a path. Apart from the self-guided heritage paths, residents and investors must learn how to highlight their own cultural practices, like as crafts and cuisine, for which Dhaka has long been renowned. The purpose of this

self-guided history trail tour should be to give visitors some background information on the important historic structures that contribute to Dhaka's distinct yet laid-back vibe.

With its comprehensive area development project, the Old Dhaka region's Heritage Trail should be started by local stakeholder partnerships and the city government. The project will be carried out and managed in collaboration with the National Museum, the Department of Archaeology, the city councillor's office, and art and craft galleries that receive funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and foreign subsidies. Other heritage plaques located across the Dhaka City Corporation could serve as the foundation for the project's expansion. New historical trails should be found, investigated, developed, and promoted by local organizations and individuals, such as professionals, academics, historians, architects, and civic associations. The project can offer excellent job possibilities and training to raise public awareness.

For the benefit of the local youth, volunteers, and architecture students and famous designers could be involved in the project in order to create the finest possible heritage trail design in a visually appealing and competitive style. New trails will be developed when more volunteers participate. Once the trails are established, the volunteers and project team can assist in creating the new requirements and resources required to create and maintain heritage trails in the future. Volunteers can concentrate and provide input or guidance to individuals or small groups who wish to establish a self-guided heritage trail in this way. In time, such a route will become commercially feasible and sustainable, preventing individuals from destroying them or doing any harm to their urban heritage.

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