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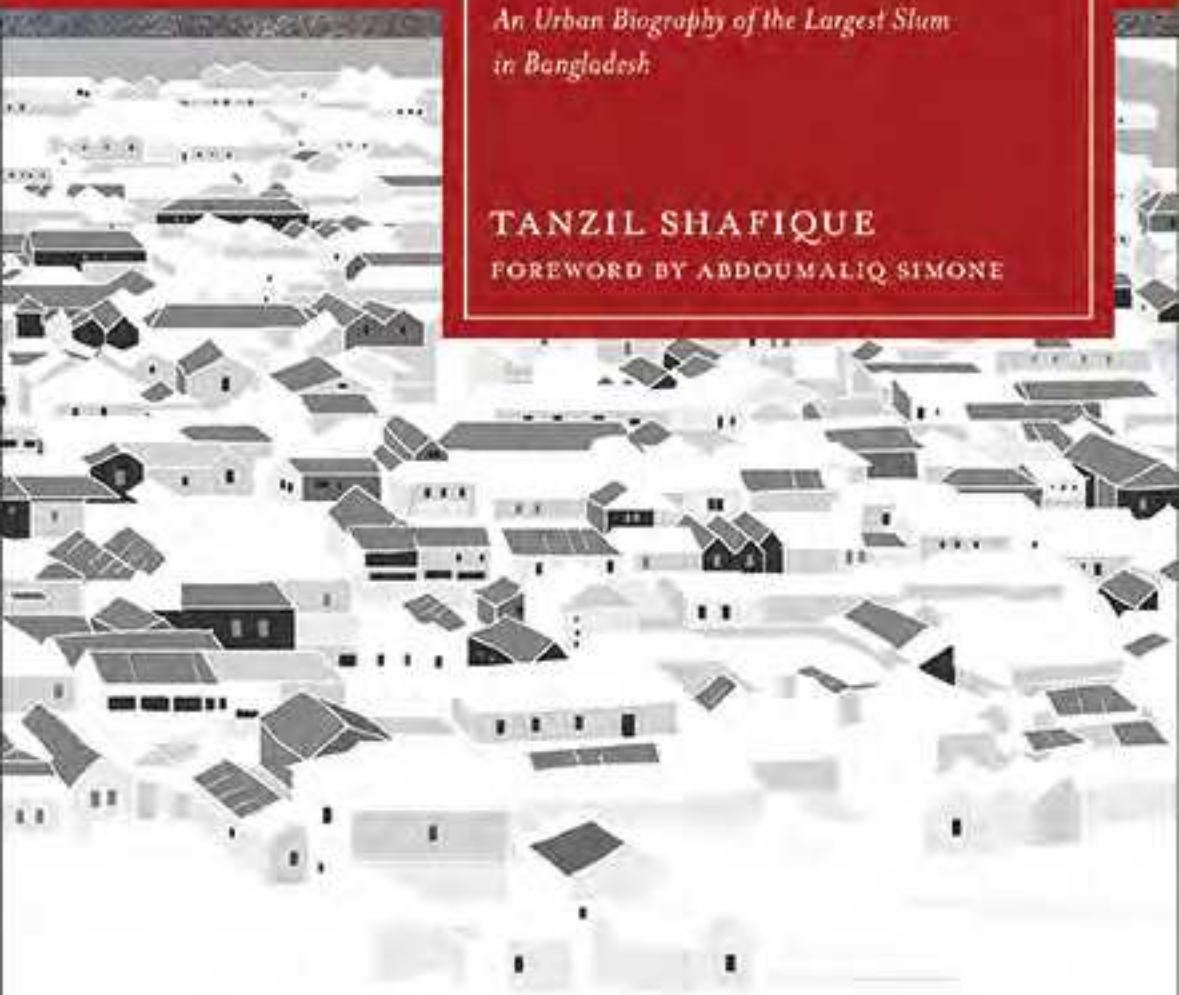
CITY OF DESIRE

An Urban Biography of the Largest Slum in Bangladesh

TANZIL SHAFIQUE

FOREWORD BY ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE



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‘Using a lucid narrative style, Shafique illuminates an understanding of Korail beyond the usual binaries and categories constructed through normative taxonomies. He provides a unique kaleidoscopic view of the adjustments, tactics, strategies, resistances, protocols, and manoeuvred processes by which the settlement is made as well as remade every day. This is a reading that does not privilege any one disciplinary lens and instead collapses, intersects, folds, interrogates, hybridises and synthesises multiple perspectives to present a convincing way of seeing a form of urbanism in which half the urban population on the planet will possibly settle in the coming three decades.’

Rahul Mehrotra, Harvard University

‘After all this time in urban studies, we still know very little about cities such as Dhaka, which are home to a significant portion of the world’s population. This lively and thoughtful book gives us insight into the collective lives being forged in such cities and does so by providing a complex political analysis of community and state.’

Ananya Roy, UCLA Luskin

‘What do we know about informal settlements? Very little or nothing from censuses. Nothing from government and international agencies’ household surveys. So we are reliant on relatively few in-depth studies of informal settlements This ‘biography‘ of Korail is a welcome addition to this. It challenges readers to see not only these settlements but also cities differently, “at least enough to imagine alternative futures for them” – that better serve their needs and concerns within the huge risks brought by climate change.’

David Satterthwaite, IIED / University College London

‘Behind the caricatures of planetary slum life, the logics of another city – braver, smarter and more interesting – are revealed in this brilliant engagement with one of the most important sites of the emergent urbanisms that will shape the 21st century. Replete with detailed and extended engagement with Bangladesh, Dhaka and Korail the text moves beyond thick description, configuring a kaleidoscopic analytic that artfully synthesises skills of ethnography, architecture and political economy to make visible detailed landscapes of the present alongside other worlds that might be possible.’

Michael Keith, University of Oxford

‘A fine and nuanced reading of a place so particular yet so familiar across cities of the Global South, this is an invaluable addition to a growing body of urban work that insists on rooting itself in place before it travels conceptually to offer

us new ways to think of all cities. A wonderful, layered, and engaging read, where the writer's love of place gets equal place as their rigourous analysis of its urban condition.'

Gautam Bhan, Indian Institute of Human Settlements

'*City of Desire* presents informality not as a rarity but as the condition of living in contemporary cities. This biography of Korail situates the lived experience of informality in space and time. Korail acts as a laboratory for understanding the works of power and its hold on people's lives. Korail is a critical perspective that reconnects critical theory to the lived experience of the city. Korail is also a metaphor standing in for the inhabitation practices that sustain life in a precarious world. Shafique shows that amidst attempts to appropriate urban space, social life does not always follow the designs of power; instead, it is assembled from multiple desires. *City of Desire* strikes a hopeful note when it maps immanent solidarities that translate into political propositions, however ephemeral, and into collectives with the capacity to transform the fabric of Korail and its relation to the world through its multiple fragments.'

Vanesa Castán Broto, University of Sheffield

'Shafique's book offers a profound and immersive exploration of everyday life in in informal settlements. Through a series of seemingly disconnected essays, he vividly shows how both formal and informal are entangled in the creation of places. Writing with genuine involvement and without moralising, Shafique underscores the urgent need for a shift in architectural thinking and emphasises the importance of critical theory development to gain better insights into informal structures. He astutely describes how traditional architectural practices often fail to grasp the reality of life for billions of people in such places. It's a compelling and necessary read, offering an invaluable resource for future architects and urbanists who are willing to think otherwise.'

Rob Breed, Architecture-in-Development

'Shafique's book is an indispensable read for all those concerned about the everyday context of urban living, in particular how the everyday organization of lives, matters and capacities and above all, desire operate to produce a city. Dhaka's largest informal settlement – Korail – provides a rich and nuanced lens to think about how we come to know a city. Tanzil works beyond "fieldwork" by blending ethnographic accounts, residents' voices and theoretical notes that span nearly 17 years of research.'

Nausheen H Anwar, Karachi Urban Lab

City of Desire

An Urban Biography of the Largest Slum in Bangladesh

Tanzil Shafique

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This book is dedicated to the very few truly just leaders in every settlement,
who don't give in to the lowly desires for fame, profit or worldly gain,
for they are the ones who assemble the collective desires
into everyday actions that make a city beautiful,
those with a desire to care, a desire for ihsaan …

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About the author

Tanzil Shafique is Lecturer of Urban Design and Director of the Postgraduate Programmes at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture. He is also an Associate of the Urban Institute. Previously, he taught at the University of Melbourne and the University of Arkansas. Tanzil's research looks at southern urbanism, pluriversal architectural practice and informal planning, mainly focusing on the ongoing adaptation and transformation due to climate change led by the local citizens. He recently led a global consortium that won £499,995 from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) for a climate-impacted dweller-led urban wetland restoration stewardship project. Additionally, Tanzil co-convenes the Platform for Just Housing (Najjyo Abashon Moncho or NAM), which works towards housing and climate justice with local activists and citizens. He also co-founded and now directs Open Studio, an architecture and urbanism think-tank. Tanzil has a PhD in Urban Design from the University of Melbourne and an M.Arch in Ecological Urbanism from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York. He is co-author of *Off-Grid Toilets* (2022) and *Atlas of Informal Settlements* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Foreword

AbdouMaliq Simone

All across the world there are lanes that commence with a plethora of the ramshackle, planks and pipes, slabs and tin roofing buttressing and protruding in both a confirmation and disruption of calculable geometries. And as an array of micro-territories in the districts that house such lanes testify, there is no absence of capacity to plot, to uniformly set materials according to the prevailing notions of order and rational planning. In other words, there is no lack of capacity to situate a construction according to the required set-backs, through flows and run-offs. Yet the profuse mushrooming of edges, folds, recesses, overhangs and all of the cumulative wears and tears elongates and multiplies space, rendering the obvious overcrowding of many so-called slums as almost a ruse that occludes the rampant heterogeneity of situations and scenarios underway.

The excessive materiality of the slum, its brazen disregard for visual austerity, has repeatedly been converted into a virtual treasure chest of signification, connoting everything from subaltern resistance, a theory on the urban, an embodiment of structural dispossession, the manifestations of resilience and the failure of governance. While all of these propositions have something to say about urbanization processes they also tend to forget the 'originary scene' or visage from which such heterogeneity is instigated. In other words, the surfaces of the slums do not so much suggest a depth of field or an underlying substrate of fundamental meaning but rather a constant fugitivity on the surface of things.

Not only are the lines separating functions, styles and genealogies of construction, and proprietorship blurred but materials and what they hold are always 'running into each other', marking scores of thresholds, both in the sense of number and music – a continuous dance of circulation that not only entails inhabitant bodies but also materials whose integrity is always being both compromised and extended through unplanned encounters and exposures to the 'elements'. The fugitivity of the surface is not that of depths in which to hide, for maximum exposure is constant. There are no shadows except in the sense that the entirety of the surface is a shadow in the sense that a different shimmer or veneer is always emerging from itself.

As one enters any crowded lane rambunctious with infinite engineering of simply where to put things, discard things; where the very construction of buildings is improbable in terms of where there was sufficient space even to put up a wall, the challenge is where to place a gaze. What is relevant to pay attention to; with so much to pay attention to, what in the short-run informs any decision? Or are such decisions necessarily deferred by the sheer volume of things present, things going on, so that no one entity or scene has to bear the weight of an easy decision, where every scenario need not be preoccupied by the reflections on its relative import because it bleeds into others that become potentially equally implicated in the conclusions of any gaze.

The surfaces of Tanzil Shafique's place of exploration, Korail in Dhaka, move as if, as Solomon Benjamin puts it, chess pieces – move and counter-move whose actions push any conceivable resolution or consensus further back into the horizon, and rather substantiate indeterminate possibilities. So instead of resolving the appropriate unit of accountability, socialization and governance, each house diffuses into the proliferation of interstitial spaces reflecting neither household ownership, collective property, public or private but rather a domain of incessant contestation that waxes and wanes across different intensities. Gardens, kitchens, balconies, repair garages, showers and prayer rooms can become functionally entangled in ways that blur the boundaries of proprietorship and everyday belonging.

It is not so much then that the house occludes the multiplicity of functions, which can always be presented to the outside world under the rubric of individuated ownerships. Rather, what is occluded is the impossibility of a final instance, a superseding definition or framing of the surface according to a final weighting of often competing narratives, a weighting that appeals to time, that is, to who did what first or longest under the prevailing regime of authorization. This occlusion does not obviate vulnerability, as money can be thrown at specific actors to withdraw themselves as a critical piece of an intricate 'lego' construction or chess game. Indeed, such brutal lures exist everywhere. But even here, surfaces are sometimes quick to adapt as the histories of mutual witnessing and conjoint actions mean that everyone is prepared to do the 'jobs' of everyone else in a game of interchangeability that has been known to replicate itself across varying 'replacements'. This is evident when an entire neighbourhood is removed to more structured and rationalized built environment elsewhere. It is not that the former practices are deployed in their former shape all over again, but rather that there is a kind of 'memory-forward', where these practices are translated into new vernaculars and capabilities as if they had been there all along.

Shafique shows us that the density availed by urbanization means not just packing in a lot of things into a limited space. Rather, it is the creation of a particular kind of space where people, with their devices, resources, tools, imaginations and techniques, are always acting on each other, pushing and pulling, folding in and leaving out, making use of whatever others are doing, paying attention to all that is going on, fighting and collaborating. Metropolitan systems throughout the Global South gave rise to the elaboration of 'majority' or 'popular districts' that largely served as an interstices between the modern city of cadastres, grids, contractual employment, zoning and sectorally demarcated institutions and the zones of temporary, makeshift and largely impoverished residence. While folding in aspects of each kind of territory, such majority districts were not simply hybrids, but staging areas for a multiplicity of agendas, operations, social compositions and aspirations.

Across the variegated landscapes of urban life – landscapes that are at once material, affective, discursive and ephemeral – the words conventionally used to narrate their compositions and intersections too often fail us. What Shafique manages to accomplish in this meditation on the heterogeneous desires at work in the creation, management and reproduction of Korail is not only an enriched vocabulary but a sense of how various trajectories and materializations of desiring, of wanting specific things to happen, occupy, perhaps only temporarily, particular modes of production. Here the oscillations of collective effort, self-aggrandizement, accumulation and distribution, as well as the piecing together of disparate forms of life and stuff always generate dynamic tensions that are propulsive in both the sense of virtuous dispositions and dissipative effects.

Few books on urban life have so powerfully explored how disparate desires support and detract from each other, how they shape-shift, often easily, in contradictory ways. Plans, improvisations, impositions, negotiations, contestations, consensual agreements, impulsive initiatives and well-considered strategic manoeuvres always sit uneasily side by side in different rhythms of assertion and quietude. The subjects, assumed to be largely incapable of concretizing multiple collective imaginations, largely operated in the interstices between sheer survival, intensive surveillance and indifference to generate provisional, always mutating forms of urban life not consonant to its hegemonic forms.

This form of distributed agency did not obviate the consolidation of metropolitan and national institutions endeavouring to exert administrative and political control over these districts. Yet as largely interstitial territories – between divergent logics of accumulation and consolidation – they became a

critical arena through which states attempted to configure particular practices of governing. Rather than the state developing as an abstract, clearly delineated entity separate from the realities experienced by the majority of residents, states had to 'find their feet' operating through engagements with various ways of doing things that did not fall squarely within their purview or within legal frameworks. In order for states to attain some traction and legitimacy within the accumulation and management practices of the urban popular, they often had to operate through a wide range of so-called 'informal' logics and practices.

As such, the criteria for determining what works or not, what is sufficient or not, what is endurable or not, always must be reinvented anew as determinations in these regards must continue to be made. Rules and regulations emerge from the melding together of different practices while at the same time legacies are inherited, tricks repeated and superseding claims made.

Shafique manages to navigate these complexities with a sensibility and language that is both lucid and generous – generous to the possibility that there is always much more going on in urban districts such as Korail than meets the eye, than meets the understandings of all of those who have something to do with the place. These occlusions are not simply some repressed knowledge waiting to be discovered, but the very plane of existence through which these districts are inhabited. In other words, the sense of continuous openings and possibilities, the ways in which the political and economic dynamics of everyday life can always be steered in multiple directions, even if ever so slightly, and as the means through which any total dispossession of residents' capacities are warded off, even as homes and bodies may be evicted by powerful agendas and institutions.

After all, places of inhabitation are platforms for the ability to desire, to make things happen and to announce that no matter how hegemonic the forces of capitalist accumulation might be, how suffocating the pervasiveness of fear and anxiety might be, how futile speech and resistance might be, these conditions can be punctured by and through the smallest 'holes in the wall' manifested as the performance of mutual care among inhabitants. Too often the most banal impositions and 'developments' reek of a lack of imagination and miss countless opportunities to interweave a plethora of skills and sentiments into dispositions that could be both just, profitable and enduring.

Plunder has been a key force at work in shaping urban life, and plunder will always generate debilitating hauntings and foreboding, only to be defended against with more plunder. Until very little is left. In the absence of the recognition of the dignity of the majority of urban inhabitants, a sense of plenitude – of what

things could be – is lost. So the very enrichment of urban life for all not only hangs in the balance but is really only materialized through making use of the creative skills of inhabitants often living under marked duress, and where justice is not attained through 'straightening' them out, through incorporating them into the norms and behaviours that pass for efficacy, but of creating openings through which their ideas and practices can grow, spread out and transform themselves and others. It is on this terrain where Shafique offers incredible wisdom, lays the groundwork for 'a thousand different ways to act for our collective desire'.

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Where does one begin? This book has been the result of a collective effort, to say the least. I must thank Prof. Kim Dovey and David Week at the University of Melbourne for supervising me throughout my doctoral training when the bulk of the research for this book was conducted. I must extend my sincere gratitude to Prof. Ross King and Brian Cook as well, who provided detailed feedback. It was in fact Brian's idea that I publish this book! As for how the journey to the largest 'slum' in Bangladesh began, I must thank Ar Hasibul Kabir, who first took me to Korail during my undergrad and opened a world that I didn't know of. Secondly, I must thank Prof. Howard Davis at the University of Oregon and a fateful encounter in San Francisco in 2016 for spurring me on. Paco Mejias has been instrumental in giving me the confidence to pursue this journey, from the time when we were working at the University of Arkansas Community Design Centre in 2017.

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The process of writing the book towards the end and its final framing were immensely helped by long discussions with Sifullah Khaled and Emre Akbil over social injustice, inequality and our role as researchers in a world that is increasingly going haywire due to climate change, capitalism and the apparent lack of an alternative. There is a hint of such an alternative in the epilogue of this book, that points to how our urban world can go beyond just being just, how it can be built upon care at a time of planetary climate crisis.

The encouragement from my parents, Dr Shafiqul I. Bhuiyan and Dr Nowroze Chowdhury, has been incessant, like that of my mother-in-law and brother-in-law, Samsun Nahar and Shakib Bin Ahasan Rafi. Some of the support has been so consistent and fundamental that I have had the privilege to take them for granted. My wife, Rafida Ahasan Ananya, has put up with me throughout these years, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic when the bulk of this work was done. The only respite, and inspiration, to finish the book on time has always been my daughter, Elaina Teenah Tanzil.

Lastly, could I have done it without the miraculous assistance of the Almighty every step of the way? Most certainly not. All gratitude begins and ends with the Most Merciful.

Abbreviations

BDT	Bangladeshi Taka (local currency in Bangladeshi)
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BHTPA	Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (formerly), world's largest NGO
BTCL	Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Ltd.
DSK	Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (local NGO)
NGO	Non-government Organization
NHA	National Housing Authority
PPSIP	Pro-Poor Slums Integration Project
PWD	Public Works Department
RAJUK	Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha ([Dhaka] Capital Development Authority)
UDP	Urban Development Programme (one of BRAC's departments)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WASA	Water and Sanitation Agency

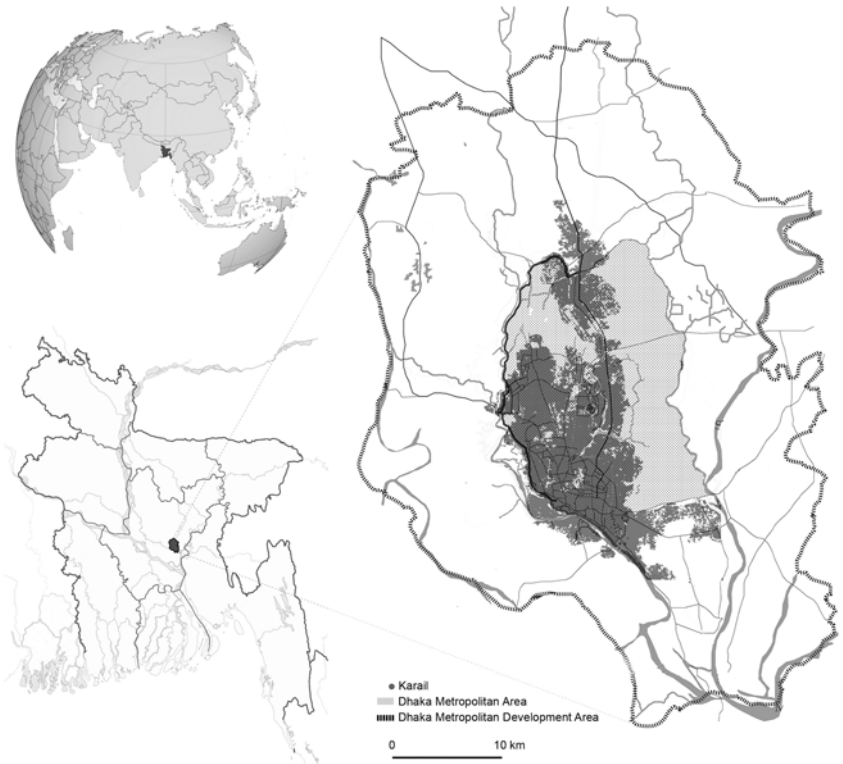

Figure 1 Map of Dhaka and Bangladesh.

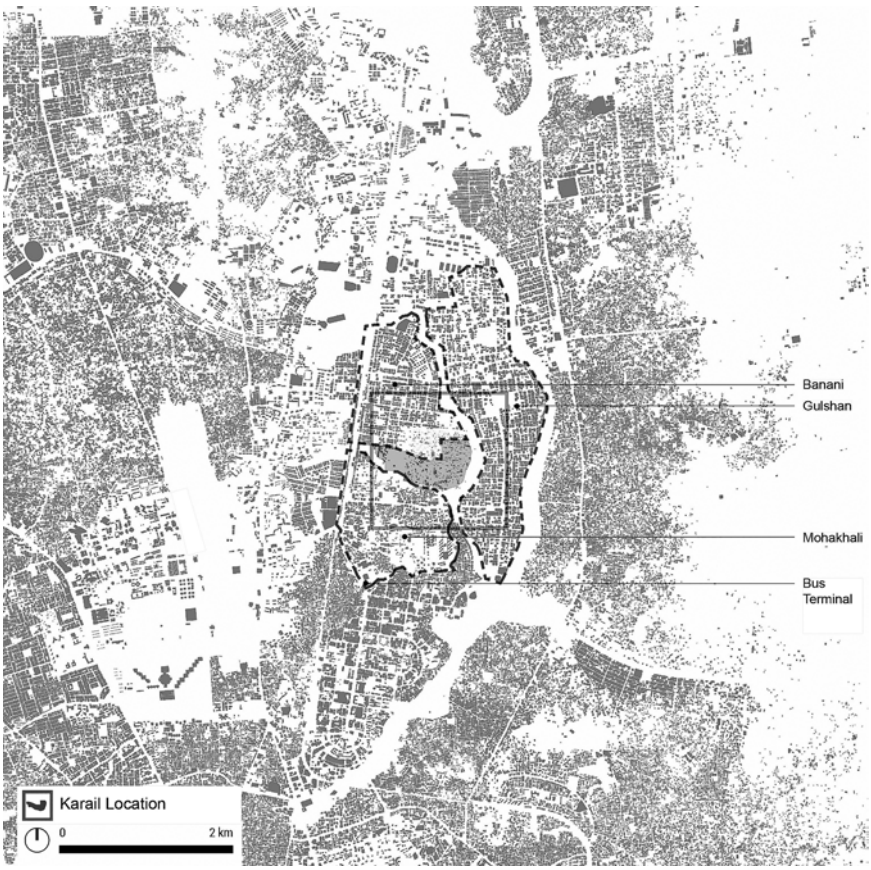

Figure 2 Korail's location within Dhaka's built footprint (10km × 10km).

(The grey in the middle of the box is Korail, surrounded by three formal neighbourhoods of Gulshan, Banani and Mohakhali.)

Introduction

Half the world at stake

> Imagine a community of 300,000. Convivial, walkable, six times the density of Manhattan but mostly single-storied. It provides low-cost services and affordable housing mixed with many productive uses. It is a city within a city. But the streets aren't wide enough to allow cars, the houses seem makeshift and the drains perhaps need work. The continuous adaptations make it look like a place under perpetual construction. In fact, the landholders and community leaders have incrementally built their houses and urban amenities over the last forty years. Ignored by the municipality, they have organized themselves to provide services such as gas, electricity and water. The only catch is that the settlement has been built on unused government land. The dwellers currently face threats of resettlement to allow for 'development' projects planned by the state. Oscillating between the desire for a better urban life and the fear of being evicted, they persist in upgrading their city. At every chance, a roof is fixed, a road paved, a sewer added, land reclaimed, house extended – their efforts collectively constitute a city-building process, but one that we know little about.[1]

Such a place could be anywhere in the world. A billion people around the world currently live in such settlements that are produced beyond the organization of the state or the mainstream capital-driven housing market,[2] and another two billion people will be living in slums in the next three decades.[3] The major population growth in the next half-century will happen in urban areas of the Global South and most of that urbanization will occur informally. Massive internal displacement induced by climate change will only add to this urbanization. There is little doubt that urban informality, in its varied instances, is the 'real city builder'.[4] Their generative processes are often reduced to terms such as 'organic' and 'self-organized', while very few can explain what is actually going on inside these settlements. What processes and relationalities lie behind

the city-building, maintenance and governance? Why are they materialized in the ways that they are? Who governs and who doesn't? These socio-spatial inquiries are at the heart of this book, but before elaborating the agenda any further, perhaps it is best to begin by reminding ourselves what's at stake in asking such questions.

The numbers are staggering. Let me rephrase. Three billion people are expected to be living in such settlements by 2050 – half the urban world – which effectively means 200,000 people settling informally every single day for the next thirty years.[5] In a world with the ever-increasing impact of anthropogenic climate change, these settlements very often are simultaneously places of refuge for climate-displaced people and places that face the brunt of climate-induced disasters, being located in precarious zones and urban margins.[6] While it's still being assessed fully, the latest reports show that the Covid-19 pandemic certainly pushed slum formation further and they remain the most vulnerable in similar future scenarios.[7] For many, this new world constitutes an apocalyptic scenario – Mike Davis called it a 'Planet of Slums',[8] others an 'urban tsunami'[9] – a perpetual challenge that undermines a desired urban order. For them, it indicates the failure of neoliberal planning. 'Slum' thus becomes a heuristic for critical urban theory-making.[10] Some see the ongoing everyday immanent practices as a reincarnation of Henry Lefebvre's notion of the 'right to the city'.[11] For some, the settlements are places of inventiveness and unrecognized capital – a legal title away from being folded into the formal.[12] Current discourse often hints at moving beyond this formal/informal dichotomy,[13] and some call for using different terms, *popular urbanization,* for example, to explain what is going on.[14]

While many of these framings hint at structural reasons for the formation of these settlements, they do not explain what goes on *inside* these places. In other words, the everyday and the ordinary that make and sustain these places remain opaque.[15] Rather than a universal theory-making attempt of all 'slums' everywhere, this book is inspired by what the geographer Pushpa Arabindoo has described as 'sincere engagement with in-depth case studies'.[16] Answering such a call, this book is about diving into just one place – the settlement described in the opening lines – Korail.[17] And it is equally about the world seen *from* Korail. It is about the everyday lives that constitute the making and unmaking of the settlement – 'a city within a city'[18] – but also about generating a new vocabulary with which to speak of the 'long-occluded Southern urban experiences', as seminal urban thinker AbdouMaliq Simone notes in his recent book.[19] Korail was my site of learning from the South, not a site as a geographic entity but more as an interdisciplinary lens to see different facets of urban studies, urban design,

architecture and sociology of a place. Urban epistemes based in Northern-Western contexts have failed to articulate such ongoing processes,[20] which often are also places of inadequate policy formulations. The void of knowledge ranges from the theoretical to the instrumental. While these places have been the site of international donor and multilateral organization-driven development projects, often these projects have failed to achieve the targeted goals as well.[21]

How will we then respond to the billion informal dwellers and two billion more on the way? As they are often the worst impacted by climate change events, how will we facilitate their resilience? Moving beyond the usual norms in international development, calls for decolonizing are growing (in tandem with many other disciplines),[22] which only sharpens the pre-existing call to resist the temptation to dive into these places with preformulated plans, policies and projects with external consultants, and move towards a more participatory, place-based, locally led approach to upgrading and developing.[23] My argument is quite simple: if we do not understand these places and if we are not able to generate a common vocabulary to speak of the internal processes, then we would be no better off even when we have adopted better approaches. To be led by the locals, and to generate an agency of the grassroots, we must learn to see the world from their shoes, or rather, see their worlds, for there are many. Empathy is the first step towards pluriversal justice. The fact that global discourse such as 'sustainability', 'resilience' and 'participation' often are reduced to tickbox exercises in projects and have no relevance to the everyday lives of the people in these settlements, results, at least partially, from our shortcomings of not being on the ground with enough empathy, not being able to learn of their ways of making a city work, of etching out a life, of having different values, a way of being in the world. As for academics, often, we go in with a particular agenda, only to draw data out to support our theories that only end up fortifying the disciplinary silos, producing knowledge that simply does not have a far-reaching impact on formal/informal practices.[24] There is a clear need to do things otherwise, for the planet and its people. In particular, the way international development practices have been dealing with the challenge of informal settlements is not a feasible way to provide basic human rights – a shelter, a livelihood and a morsel of dignity – for the burgeoning millions coming to existing settlements, and forming new ones. If we truly wish to decolonize the development discourse and practice, the starting point must be not just understanding places like Korail better but to do so from their vantage points and on their terms. This is the ethos of this book.

The rest of the introduction provides a brief background on Korail, lays out the theoretical points and an overview of the eleven essays that follow.

Locating Korail in Dhaka

My interest in urban informality itself grew out of inadvertent daily exposure to urban life in Korail. To beat Dhaka's ill-reputed traffic gridlock, I commuted daily through Korail during my undergraduate years. While I was reading urban theories from Western textbooks, my everyday experience of Korail was hardly considered worth studying, being the antithesis of the modernist urban script. My daily observations contradicted the stereotypical notions of the various 'lacks' – lack of order, lack of infrastructure, lack of building standards and even lack of civic sensibility – that are associated with 'slums'. There was a definite sense of functionality and urban vitality in Korail that was missing in the planned areas of Dhaka. Sure, there were overflowing garbage and open sewers, altercations in the alleyways and congestion, but the years of commute helped me notice both sides of the coin. More importantly, the experience allowed me to approach this research even-handedly, neither criminalizing nor romanticizing the urban condition. Furthermore, before starting the more in-depth fieldwork in 2019, I returned to Korail in June 2017 to conduct a workshop for an International Congress, in which local architecture students worked in situ in the settlement and presented ideas to the dwellers themselves. This experience allowed me to generate vital social connections with many local leaders, many of whom have later facilitated the on-the-ground work for this book.[25]

Korail is located in Dhaka, a burgeoning megacity of more than 20 million people where approximately at least three-and-a-half million people live in informal settlements.[26] Internal migration constitutes the major flow fuelling urbanization; with around 400,000 people arriving in Dhaka every year – a rate that has been, and will be, exacerbated due to climate change.[27] The capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka is the only alpha city, generating more than half the country's GDP alone and thus the major employment centre. It's growth has increased remarkably since it emerged as the political-administrative capital following Bangladesh's independence in 1971.[28] The liberal economic policies of the 80s, local entrepreneurialism and the global shift of manufacturing towards Asia favoured the transformation of the national economy towards industrialization. In particular, export-oriented ready-made garments (RMG) became the major industry, currently employing around 4 million workers, mostly women.[29] Dhaka was the centre of that economic transformation, with 80 per cent of RMG factories operating therein.[30] Access to a cheap labour pool of migrants and urban poor, better infrastructure and a knowledge base facilitated this rapid transition.[31] Apart from the socioeconomic flows and intensities,

Dhaka's locational advantage has been widely noted as a significant factor in its urbanization. As the map in Figure 1 points out, Dhaka enjoys a geographic centrality within Bangladesh. It is located at the confluence of two major rivers with access to the Ganges (*Padma*) and the Brahmaputra on what constitutes the largest deltaic plain in the world. Historians have attributed the riverine connectivity and security of the defensible geography to be the key reasons behind the Moghul decision to establish Dhaka as the provincial capital during their eastward expansion in 1608. The spatial transformation in the last four centuries has led to a city now officially spanning 306.4 square kilometers under the jurisdiction of the two Dhaka City Corporations (North and South).

Tracing the spatial transformation in Dhaka reveals two dominant tendencies, each representing a different mode of urban production. On one hand, the history of local urban planning has been largely the creation of colonizer-led rectilinear-grided enclaves, housing projects for the upper classes and cantonments for the military. On the other hand, outside of these enclaves, citizen-led settlements have emerged without a pre-conceived layout usually generating an irregular/'organic' urban morphology. Most informally produced areas are spatially separated from the 'planned' areas and is a social exclusion generated by design – by stipulating certain structural conditions. Nilufar notes that '[Dhaka] depicts a curious mix of these two patterns on the same canvas'.[32] The successive masterplans of the city, even after national 'independence' continued the colonial planning legacy, creating a deeply divided city that is quite visible. Akhter's writing about Dhaka's production of urban space is worth noting here, 'The city's "hyper-defended enclaves" of the rich, the "carefully-manicured residential and commercial ecologies," loudly speak of a brutal social polarization – inequitable management of the city that renders a vast number of its population "a cluster of undesirables" and perpetual outcasts.'[33]

In the spectrum of place-based identities in Dhaka, some informally produced areas such as Korail sit at the lowest social tier and are indeed considered 'slums' in Dhaka's urban narrative and the word has a strong pejorative connotation. This is mainly due to the lack of legal tenure of the land. They are highly stigmatized as places and dwellers of these 'slums' face social alienation. Dwellers here lack access to many of the basic municipal amenities since most services require tax identification or a formal (read legal) address. As we shall see in the following essays, the socially constructed designation of 'slum' attached to these areas actively shapes the desire and imagination of the dwellers therein.

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) defines a slum as 'a cluster of compact settlements of 5 or more, which generally grow very unsystematically and

haphazardly in an unhealthy condition on government and private vacant land'.[34] It identified 2,394 such clusters in Dhaka in a 2014 census, with Korail listed as one of them.[35] The methodology of the survey was to pre-select these 'slum' settlements without clarifying how such settlements were identified in the first place. A previous census in 2005 was much more explicit. It identified 'suspected slum settlements' based on remotely sensed images using morphological traits such as settlement density and roofing materials.[36] A 2005 census identified 4,996 'slums' spread across Dhaka.[37] Occupying only 5.1 per cent of its land area, these slums house more than 3.4 million people, one-third of the entire city.[38]

The strict binary distinction of slum/non-slum based on visual image and illegality has deepened inequalities by framing slums as an 'other' to the planned and modern Dhaka. The effect of this narrative is the middle-class sentiment against 'slums', which legitimizes governmental practices of eviction and forced resettlement in dealing with informal settlements, particularly squatters. While promises are made to replace all 'slums' with high-rise apartments, in reality, eviction has become the norm to pave the way for development projects or civic beautification – a form of 'rule by aesthetics' guiding Dhaka's urbanization.[39] Despite several attempts to erase it, Korail has grown over the last forty years into a city of its own.

Korail's location itself in Dhaka's fabric contrasts the portrayal of informal settlements as marginal – it is located neither on a 'perilous terrain' nor at the periphery of the city.[40] While it is located adjacent to a lake system, the land itself is the largely flood-free plateau that was utilized for Dhaka's northward expansion. Identifying Korail within Dhaka's built form at the city scale (map in Figure 2) reveals its central location and its adjacency to planned neighbourhoods as well as to the major north-south transportation corridor.

The current built form of the settlement, shown in Figure 3, extends over an area of 36 hectares. The land is legally owned by two public entities, qualifying Korail as a squatter settlement. Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority (BHTPA) owns 19 hectares towards the east while the Public Works Department (PWD) owns the rest (17.4 hectares) towards the west. However, the settlement has a contiguous urban form without any formal manifestation of these ownership territories due to the lack of effective control on the ground by either BHTPA or PWD in Korail. The land is under the de facto management of the dwellers. The land to Korail's north is owned and used by Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Limited (BTCL), which has erected a boundary wall – demarcated by the thick line in the map – separating itself from Korail and the city. Along much of the eastern periphery, the land is helmed by the man-made lake – separating

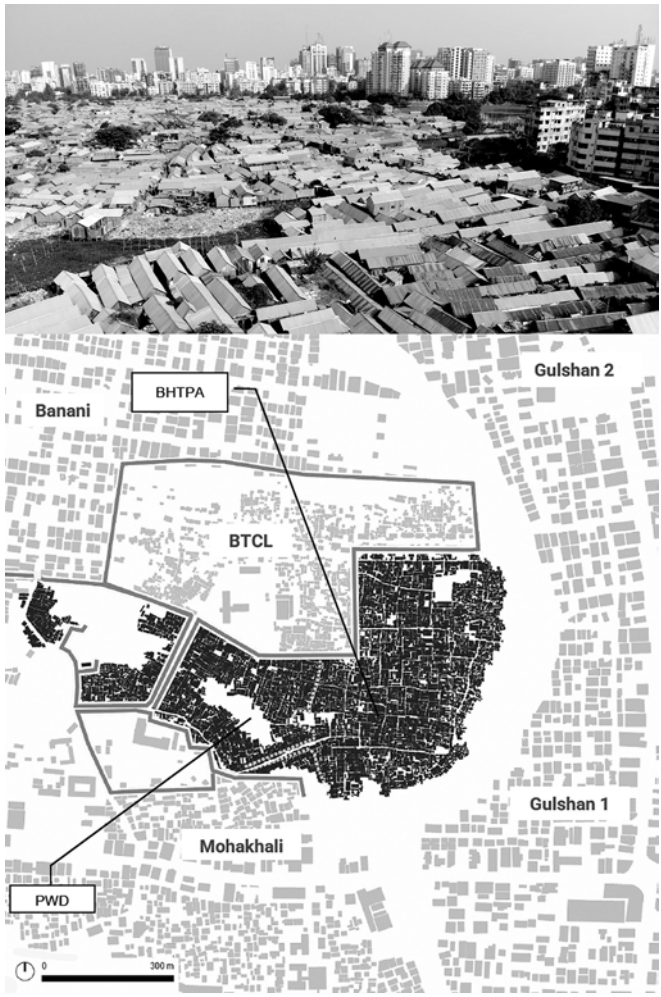

Figure 3 A tale of two cities.

(Korail, in the top photo, is in the foreground, with affluent apartment towers in Gulshan seen in the background. Formal developments all around essentially make Korail like an island, separated by the lake, as seen in the map below.)

Korail from Gulshan. Geomorphologically a valley in the higher plateau, the lake was produced by damming the valley for the beautification of the upper-class neighbourhoods. Along with the walls, the lake constitutes another boundary condition between Korail and the formal city. Parts of the land in Korail have been produced by reclaiming the lake – especially towards the west since 2001.

The primary desire for settling in Korail, at least on the face of it, is the multiple employment opportunities around it. The density of employment

allows the dwellers the freedom to choose between jobs. Towards the south of the settlement, the neighbourhood of Mohakhali has a designated commercial area with a high concentration of ready-made garments factories. Several public offices and hospitals are concentrated around the area as well. To the north and east of Korail are the planned residential neighbourhoods of Banani and Gulshan. These are amongst the most affluent in Dhaka and traditionally have been a source of service-oriented employment – mainly residential support staff and attendants. Beyond these, Korail has three particular synergies with these formal neighbourhoods generating further employment. Firstly, street trading – small-scale shops and tea-stalls; secondly, informal transport – rickshaws being the default last-mile transportation for the middle class; and thirdly, recycling of household and construction waste. Only a few Korail dwellers work in areas beyond the immediate locality, mainly due to a lack of affordable public transport. The employment opportunities mentioned above are largely within a walking distance of half an hour, which is the main mode of transport for Korail's dwellers. Informal transports using rafts are often used to traverse the surrounding lake creating a shorter route.

Administratively, Korail falls under Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC); however, DNCC provides no formal municipal service in Korail due to its illegality. The official city map shows the entire area to be empty, placing Korail literally 'off the map'.[41] However, this vacuum has been filled by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing basic amenities such as schools, clinics, sanitation and microfinance. The high concentration of NGO activities makes Korail a relatively desirable option for the urban poor. Korail is highly saturated with political party offices as well. The presence of the national parties may appear as the dwellers' participation in democratic practices, but as we shall see, things are hardly as they appear.

Currently, Korail houses upwards of 300,000 dwellers, making it the largest settlement in Bangladesh.[42] However, rather than the size, Korail is interesting due to the remarkable urban complexity that has emerged over the last forty years. The urban morphology shows a hierarchical road network, a diverse typology of housing options, a mix of functions, public open spaces and infrastructural adaptations, along with a high degree of social complexity, multiple neighbourhoods and intricate relations with the formal governance of the city as well as NGOs.[43] The central question for this biography is to understand how they have made this remarkable city.

Nowhere is it more remarkable than at the western edge of the settlement, which has seen the most intensive growth in the last twenty years. As can

Figure 4 Urban transformation of Korail over the last twenty years (left: 2001, right: 2018).

(Note how the lake is reclaimed by the dwellers to build their city. Scale: 500m × 500m.)

be seen in the set of maps in Figure 4, in 2001, the area was largely empty with a lake traversed by two causeways. By 2018, as shown by the map on the right, large sections of the lake had been filled or built over and the settlement had expanded and densified into a heterogeneous set of urban morphologies – differentiated neighbourhoods with a contested and fluid governance mechanism. This period of growth is well captured by satellite images, documenting the urban transformation in detail and forms the core investigation for the socio-spatial ethnography of the complexities of everyday lives behind this generativity.

Moving beyond the settlement itself, the investigation is equally about the impact of the larger city on Korail's urban transformation. Focusing on the processes external to the settlement, the question expands to explore the relations with other entities such as the state agencies, NGOs and surrounding neighbourhoods that enable or constrain the urban transformation. As these lines of inquiry suggest, the investigation requires exploring processes and relations between heterogeneous entities of spatial and social nature, eschewing any binary separation (i.e. it is 'sociospatial'). The inquiries run across multiple scales from the building to the neighbourhood and the city (i.e. it is 'multiscalar'). Therefore, the book answers not only questions of urban spaces and use but forensically extends into issues of tenure, governance and citizenship that enable the urban transformation in Korail, and the underlying intersections of desire that make it a city.

However, it is a city of fear too. Despite being a city in its own right, Korail might not be there by the time this book is published. Informal settlements often suffer that fate, since they become sites of 'development' projects. It is difficult to determine how many remain in their place of settlement in the face of structural violence from the state and/or capitalist institutions. In Korail, as I write this, the wheels are in motion to make way for the government's plans for an IT park and a lake beautification project replacing Korail's dwellers. The technicities of this displacement are yet to be seen, it can range from an eviction en masse to targeted 'resettlement', and to downright arson. The fear is palpable in Korail, it is part of the everyday conversation but it is not debilitating, it does not paralyse the sheer desire to continue to assemble their urban life.

Assembling through desires

In Korail, the urban fabric may seem homogeneous at first glance, but it is anything but. There is a differentiated set of living conditions, employment and housing typologies that are produced by different mechanisms. Rather than starting with a theory of how this differentiated urban production happens in Korail, and using the fieldwork in support of that, I have met Korail halfway. I am not without my share of theoretical lenses, but rather than using them as tools of explanation, I have used them as tools of exploration. In particular, assemblage thinking, drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari,[44] has been a most practical tool to traverse these diverse scales, temporalities and disciplinary silos, and most importantly, to question the convenient binaries of the social and the spatial, the material and intangible, and to import the notion of desire as an analytical lens to understand the urban production. Assemblage thinking, simply put, is an ontological stance that posits radical relationality between bodies and expressions, in which synergies occur between disparate things that are arranged together to produce affect or impact which exceeds the impact of them individually. In other words, assemblage thinking allows studying the differences that are primary to our conception of reality, be it in the production process of a settlement or a city. Lastly, a key point of assemblage thinking is the notion of desire – it is desire that holds the arrangements in place to produce the affects.

Drawn from Nietzsche's will-to-power, desire is fundamental in establishing assemblages. Purcell notes, 'desire drives the process of becoming, of change, of transformation from one thing into another'.[45] The point here is that these

intersecting desires and capacities of different bodies, both human and non-human, generate a field of possibilities that guide the becoming of a settlement or a city. Since human desires can be reflexive and are more than instinctive dispositions, they can be contrary to past desires and therefore are fundamentally unpredictable, making cities not only complex but also 'perplex'.[46]

However, common-sense thinking uses desire only as a synonym for need. What distinguishes Deleuze's concept of desire is the fact that, in his conception, desires are not singular needs in the abstract. Rather, desires operate within a narrative frame and therefore are open to social construction, mediated through the imaginaries of what is possible and memories of what has been. A desire for higher social status may manifest as a house in brick in Korail, but it only works because brick carries more symbolic capital than sheet metal in Korail's socio-cultural narrative. Concurrently, bodies outside the settlement, such as the state planning agency, have the desire to formalize urban production by evicting the settlement, as a response to which, the aforementioned vertical extension may not proceed as an anticipatory strategy. The forces of change in these processes are the differential fields of desires – a 'landscape of desire', so to speak – that themselves are based on the different narratives that thread together capacities and imaginaries. Beneath a naïve empirics of processes and relations, underlie deeper desires that circulate via narratives based on what can be done (capacities) and what we can imagine (imaginaries). The state pushes some imaginaries, such as being a global city, a smart city or a city like Singapore – assembling a narrative of 'development' that fails to accommodate the imaginaries on the ground, a narrative without the citizens. Counternarratives of solidarities of the dwellers contest them, giving a lease of life to their everyday desires, which continue to hold Korail together. Understanding how a city forms, intensifies or faces dissolution in terms of desires is the first ontological point of departure for the book.

'Slums' or informal settlements?

A disclaimer is due before we proceed any further regarding the use of the term 'slum' and informal settlements, which so far perhaps have been used interchangeably. This book is concerned with urban production that takes place outside of formal institutions, which often seems to be equivalently described as a 'slum' or informal settlement. However, it's important to clarify between the two. Some authors acknowledge the pejorative connotations of the word 'slum'

and use 'informal settlement' as a euphemism,[47] while others assume that they are 'one and the same'.[48] In development practice, the most recent UN Habitat III Issue Papers on Informal Settlements acknowledges that 'slums are the most deprived and excluded form of informal settlements', making a distinction.[49] The new Global Action Plan launched in 2022 notes both in its title, furthering the acknowledgement that they can be distinct.[50] While many informal settlements have slum-like conditions, it is equally possible to have similar conditions in formally produced cities. The UN report also identifies informal settlements as possibly being a form of real estate speculation for both affluent and poor urban dwellers, which had been noted long ago in key informality literature.[51]

Surveying the literature around the usage of the word 'slum' reveals the contradictions even further. The popular imaginary often is shaped by books such as *Planet of Slums* by Davis – an apocalyptic vision of an urban future overwhelmed by 'slums'. Davis drew inspiration from Victorian-era England and the works by Engels and paints a dualistic vision where urban informality is squarely equated with slums – 'a looming crisis'. Gilbert explored further the problematics of the use of the word 'slum', especially as it has been brought back by the UN 'Cities without Slums' initiative.[52] He warned that the use of the word in this fashion results in stereotyping the inhabitants at best and acting as an excuse for eviction at worst. As Huchzermeyer reported later in 'Cities with Slums',[53] such has indeed been the case in many countries across the world. Mayne, with his historical study of the usage of the word and the way it is used for moral condemnation and a tool for the oppression of poor communities, makes a passionate case for abandoning the word from the discourse of progressive urban reform.[54]

However, the use of the word 'slum' by community organizations such as the Shack/Slum Dweller International indicates that the word itself is not the problem. As such, scholars such as Appadurai note the socio-political purchase of the term 'slum', as used by dwellers for state recognition.[55] Some scholars make a case for using it as a theoretical construct,[56] which however should not be at the cost of depoliticizing the lived experience of the urban poor.[57] We have argued elsewhere that, beyond the use of language discussed so far, what's at stake here is the conflation of the informal production of settlements with the slum conditions that it may or may not concomitantly produce.[58] Using informal settlement as a euphemism for slums downplays the insurgent and incremental upgrading aspect and focuses only on inferiority and illegality. In other words, what's problematic is the erasure of the ontological distinction between the process and the outcome.

Urban theorist Mark Purcell identified informal production to be pointing towards a radical mode of urban living. He suggested paying attention to 'the creation that is going on there … to seek out the new ways people are inventing to survive beyond the state, beyond the market, on their own'.[59] Studies such as the one on Cairo by David Sims provide empirical evidence for such claims by showing how large parts of the city have been developed informally, a level of development that was impossible for the state to provide.[60] Informality as a mode of urban production predates its recent proliferation due to the neoliberal dynamics of global capital. Sassen reminds us that 'informality has long existed'.[61] There have long been calls to see informal settlements as a form of urban vernacular.[62] On a smaller scale, manifestations of informal settlements can be traced back to instances in Greek city-states, where vacant or derelict temples or public property was seized for uses otherwise. Rome had its 'tuguria' – informal lean-to structures as well as illegal neighbourhoods built by people. Noted historian Fernand Braudel reports thousands of homeless living in shacks around the Paris city wall for centuries.[63] Lisa Goff, in *Shantytown USA*, records the history of informal towns, full-fledged self-built urban neighbourhoods across the United States, including a twenty-block stretch of Manhattan.[64] These shantytowns (also termed Hoovervilles) in New York were reported to be much preferable to private tenement houses in terms of slum conditions. In his wide-ranging study of pre-modern Arab-Islamic and Mediterranean cities, Hakim notes how informality (although not particularly termed as such) has been the dominant mode of urban production throughout history.[65] Such a framing of informality as a mode of urban production is the second key ontological point of departure for this book, as what concerns us most in this book is how the everyday organization of lives, bodies, matters, capacities, imaginaries and desires operate to generate a city, rather than the label with which a place is called.

Overview of a (southern) biography

This book is a biography of Korail, but in no way does it claim to be a comprehensive one, or do justice to the lived realities and struggles that continue to sustain it. I begin the book by acknowledging the 'radical unknowability of the urban life' as Simone and Castán Broto have suggested, speaking on the forms of engagement of the urban researcher with the subjects of their observation.[66] The book is *not* an attempt to give power to the voiceless, to empower or to

liberate the dwellers in Korail, or in other such settlements. Discarding such condescending motivations particularly comes from my own position as a Southern urban scholar, where I have seen time and again how Korail and other settlements (Dharavi in Mumbai, for example) have become a site for well-intentioned but voyeuristic scholarship, using these marginalized sites as a 'research air-BnB' without a long-term commitment to the ongoing struggles of the people who have been 'studied'. Resisting that form of scholarship, this book is very much part of my longer involvement with dwellers of Korail through our collective establishment of 'Platform for Just Housing' (*Najjyo Abashon Moncho* or NAM in Bangla), which works horizontally with the dwellers and civil society activists, lawyers, planners and architects on housing issues, with a particular focus on climate-impacted dwellers.

The need to forefront the 'southern'-ness also stems from the fact that most of the books written on informal settlements are by people from a different context, language and culture, mostly Northern academics trained to write (and think) from a particularly disciplinary silo and ontology. This is not to say that outsiders cannot do justice to the place, but simply that there is a lack of more locally led variants of intellectual work. The lack of a language to describe the southern urban condition in part is due to the inaccessibility of the reality to researchers who have not been accultured in that particular context or do not speak the local tongue. My upbringing in a city like Dhaka, long engagement with the settlement and current research on decolonial urban theory have been instrumental in shaping the book's tone, organization and the generation of a particular vernacular.

Rather than a biography that is conventionally organized by time, I traverse through Korail's life using different thematic registers, a form of methodological slicing to excavate into the dense formation of collective life. This is why, the book is not a neat, linear, sequential biography, but that of multiplicities cutting across, folding into each other. You could perhaps call the book undisciplined. Firstly, there is inherent messiness, repetitions and literary booby traps to throw you off, all in an attempt to facilitate a distinctly Southern position that forces a different form of articulation through a new vernacular. As the reviewers of the manuscript noted, this is a hard task, particularly when I am using English as a medium to do so. I leave you to be the judge of that.

Secondly, the book is undisciplined in the sense that it does not stick to the well-practised script of any single discipline – this is not a book on geography, anthropology, urban studies, sociology, architecture, planning or international development, although it draws from all of these. It doesn't matter and I don't

care. The only thing that matters to me is whether the book can bring forth something new to this world, which takes something for granted (informal settlements) and is able to make it strange by exposing the swarms of lines that traverse its surface. The undeniable reality is the fact that millions live in places like this, our current understanding is not enough and we are all too gleeful to talk about our discipline only, usually from positions of comfort. This book wishes to make you uncomfortable and by the end of it, change you to see not only informal settlements but cities differently, at least enough to imagine alternative futures for them. The biography is a ruse to get us thinking about what makes a city and how remarkable entanglements are arranged to produce a semblance of coherence, how multiplicities of desires hold things in place and how we always operate from within partialities and fragments. This book is one possible iteration of a southern epistemological stance in understanding how a city works – not a theory of cities to explain how they work, but how we could know them differently.

This is the desire to assemble the eleven essays in this book, each loosely focusing on one aspect (but not exclusively), and written in a narrative style that blends ethnographic accounts, dwellers' voices and theoretical notes from a long duration, beyond simply the fieldwork. In total, I have been embedded in Korail for more than seventeen years now at varying degrees and lengths, picked up the everyday accent, made friends with the community (and some enemies too), learnt of their struggle and experienced the complexities and contradictions in their narratives of what's going on. Moving beyond just the anthropocentric ethnographic account, I documented the material practices of the urban production occurring now, using my architectural and urban design background to map the current spatial condition and used them forensically to understand the social narratives and to identify new lines of inquiry. The investigations then were supported by additional archival and document analysis. A more detailed note on my positionality and the broader methodology underpinning the work presented in the book is in the appendix.

The messiness of the essays, in their weaving of the empirics and theoretics, and the conversational tone of writing could be taken as an extension of the particular Southern position from which this book is written. The endnotes in the essays are not simply references but make some supplemental points that are too elaborate, theoretical or boring to be discussed in the main body of the text. Also, in the spirit of protecting identities, wherever appropriate, the names of the local dwellers and other interviewees have been changed throughout the essays. Maps have been used to show the socio-material arrangements and some

images to supplement the text, but I should hope that there is a minimalism to the number of images used. Voyeuristic imagery often defeats the purpose of knowing a place intimately, preconditioning our minds to what an ideal place should look like. Rather, the book is an invitation to actively use your imagination using the clues provided, since the essays are tools to grasp everyday life without 'capturing' everything that is going on. The essays are fragments and are not intended to come together as a complete whole, but to create productive adjacencies. One may enter the book through any of the essays!

For a small measure of clarity and in a purely suggestive formation, the essays are organized into three parts. In Part One, I look at how the state bodies, the NGOs, the people and events act as agents in Korail's urban transformation. In Part Two, the essays orient towards the production of the social and material arrangements of legitimacy, land, housing and access. In Part Three, the essays are about three key urban intensities constituting the collective life – the publicness, the functions and the governance. Lastly, I bring all three parts in a dialogue to theorize the urban transformation in relation to desires, narratives and imaginaries that make a city. This is followed by some parting thoughts, my recent activist work on housing justice and what we could do next to imagine a more just and 'care'ful urban world in the face of the ongoing planetary crisis.

But for now, let us return to Korail and start the journey there.

Part One

Agents

1

Another hole in the wall

One of the first things to notice, as you approach Korail from the west on foot, is a wall. Three metres in height and non-descript – a plastered five-inch brick wall in between concrete columns, running along the length of the settlement until it reaches the lake. Korail lies behind that wall, a city teeming with life, and a nervous energy of the fear of that life disappearing. 'Informal' gaps in the wall allow the dwellers[1] access to the city. The contrast couldn't be greater if you came in from the east on a makeshift raft, where the lake separates Korail from Gulshan, the most affluent neighbourhood in Dhaka. Perhaps, you would be too busy to notice anything, with all your focus on balancing precariously on the rafts made from waste styrofoam. The dwellers came up with the idea of rafts since conventional small boats used by them were banned in the lake by state authorities for the sake of 'security'. From either side, as one approaches Korail, it is quite impossible to grasp the sheer territorial spread of the settlement across such a large area, which however is an everyday sight for the billionaires in their penthouses on the other side of the lake – a sea of CI sheet[2] roofs glistening in the tropical sun, and the tight-knit pattern reminding one of a weaved mat.

While planned as a boundary to separate, the wall within which Korail is helmed in acts more like a border.[3] Korail oozes out into the city from its holes. 70,000 women each morning, walking briskly yet engaged in small talk, go out to serve in the ready-made garment (RMG) factories, all within a 30-minute walk. Vendors set up shops lining the outside of the wall, claiming the city streets for an informal market, while streams of rickshaws pull in and out. Korail is not just home to the 300,000 dwellers but also thousands of rickshaws, which, lacking any planned storage depot in the larger city, end up in the settlement as well. Often the holes in the walls are exactly the size of a rickshaw, down to a precision of a few millimetres. The wall acts as a place of exchange, the gaps in it are points of intensity that have influenced the way Korail has developed into a settlement.

Figure 5 How the newly built wall in 2013 was overtaken (and almost hidden) by 2019. (Structures are built over the boundary wall, engulfing it and obscuring it's view from the street.)

The co-existence of the city outside (the 'formal' city of Dhaka) and Korail reveals itself in material terms along the wall. The heavy metal gate and the lazy gaze of the security guards who stop no one, the formal city street in front and informal laneways running parallel behind it, the barbed wire to prevent any trespasser and the wooden ladders used to climb over them, the signage declaring 'nothing can be built within 20 meters' of it and the thousands of houses built inches away from the same sign, the legal and illegal flows of electricity, gas and water over and under the wall – these point materially to a simultaneous synergy and contradiction between the formal and informal, the state and the dwellers in Korail.

But where did this wall come from? Walls, in Dhaka's context, are material manifestations of territories, a desire to keep out and sanitize the interior. The walls around Korail are no different. However, to generalize the wall as the formal demarcation built by the 'government' (*Shorkar* in Bangla) hides the internal contradictions amongst the many bodies that constitute the 'state'. For Korail, as we shall see, these conflicts and misalignments amongst the state bodies generated the potential for settling in Korail in the first place. The wall thus is a useful device to recount a brief history of the territory on which Korail was built.

A village in what was then the outskirts of Dhaka, Korail and its surrounding area of 68 hectares was acquired from the local villagers in 1962

by BTCL (Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Limited, then the Pakistan Telegraph and Telephone Department) as part of executing the 1959 Masterplan for Dhaka. The acquisition deal came with a particular clause that stipulated BTCL to return the land back to its original owners if it was not required for telecommunication purposes. It became clear with ever-sophisticated equipment that the vast tract of heavily wooded land was of no use to BTCL. In 1989, reneging on that clause, BTCL handed over the leftover 36 hectares to the Public Works Division (PWD), another government body, but not before allowing itself a stroke of avarice. As the story goes, in a vindictive and extractive move, BTCL sold the large trees before the handover, clearing the forest and inadvertently making it suitable for settling. Comparing remotely sensed images of the area at different periods reveals the loss of vegetation and conversion to open fields. Judicial disputes amongst the three parties (BTCL, PWD and the local owners) since the early 1990s meant that the land was effectively under an injunction of the court, stopping any further (formal) development. Land-related disputes are known to take long durations in Bangladesh's legal system, and this bureaucratic slowdown was crucial to ensure Korail's inception and survival. The de-territorialized land was used by the local villagers informally for farming, but otherwise remained fallow for some time, with a trickle of dwellers starting to settle with ad-hoc houses. Geomorphologically the land was an upper plateau not prone to flooding, therefore, the land was well-stabilized and required little effort to host a settlement. And settle they did. By 2001, the settlement was densely built out leaving little room for any horizontal expansion on land. Then the dwellers started producing their own land reclaiming the lake around, but we will get to that in due time.

While BTCL couldn't officially build on the disputed land, at least they could flex their territories. And so they did. The wall along its territories was built in 2011 by BTCL to physically separate its territory from the larger 'slum' (locally known as *bastee* in Bangla) settlement. While there was a barbed wire fence erected to mark the land transfer to PWD in 1989, in the following years the settlers didn't mind rearranging the wires here and there, forming a supple, negotiated, porous boundary condition between the disputed land and BTCL land. What was interesting is the fact that BTCL, since the early 1980s, had allowed its lower-class staff to build their own houses temporarily within the company's land itself. There was an agreement between the staff union and BTCL officials that gave tenure security to the BTCL employees but with the condition that it couldn't be brick-and-mortar structures. A self-organized settlement was already being developed in the empty lands within BTCL when the land transfer

took place in 1989. Further settlement of non-employees outside the edges of the BTCL boundary line emulated the settlement pattern found inside. This resulted in an amalgamated settlement that stretched from within the BTCL housing (known locally as the 'colony', the local term government-built housing for its upper-class employees) to the edge of the lake with contiguous access. The morphological pattern was impossible to distinguish between the legitimately built 'slum' houses on BTCL land and the illegally built ones by the citizens on the disputed land. Much like EU borders, everyone knew on whose land their houses stood, but the everyday interaction was inseparable, with no requirement of border control.

Then, in 2011, came BTCL's version of Haussmann, which used the latent boundary line to build a wall along the entire length of the settlement and to re-inscribe the territory with precision and destruction.[4] The construction of the concrete-brick wall in effect meant that the unfortunate landlords on either side, who had some of their building across the boundary line, had to demolish and reconstitute their dwellings to make way for a 2-metre clearance on either side of the wall. What it did, in addition, was to visually manifest a sharp social distinction between the dwellers of the illegitimate 'slum' and the legitimate 'colony', the ones who were illegal outside the wall, and legal inside, while the material living conditions were identical in both. That distinction plays out to this day.

One of the dwellers caught in this process of re-territorialization was Samsul. An early settler in Korail and a cook by trade, Samsul was one of the pioneers to have erected his house at the edge of the BTCL colony in the early 1990s. A diminutive man with a contoured face, he now runs his tea shop on the ground floor of his house. His living quarters are on the first floor, cantilevering out precariously onto the street towards the wall. In particular, Samsul was one of the community leaders who helped others to build their houses alongside his. He actively participated in growing the community by taking part in funding institutions such as the local mosque and a school. Currently, he had only one shop and two rooms upstairs, which he had to rebuild not just once but twice.

'Why?' I inquired.

'I was a tenant in the local [adjacent] neighbourhood in the formal city for a long time, then in 1994, I moved here. I could not afford the rent. One of my friend's father worked in BTCL, and I asked him if I could move to Korail. It was all empty fields at the time. When he asked me where I wanted to erect my house, I chose close to the BTCL colony, because there were people here already, and I felt it was safer. I bought a house from another slum in the vicinity, which was being evicted. Then I brought the house in parts and rebuilt it here. Then

more people moved after me and asked me where they could settle. I helped them to erect 2 or 3 rooms as they needed for their family. I extended my house a bit in the following years, as did others.'

'Then in 2011, after Mosharof [a local leader; more on him later] died, the BTCL people dared to come and build the wall. Half of my house was on the other side, and they demolished it. I took a loan of BDT 200,000 [£1,400] to fix my house on this side. Then in 2015, I had to demolish my house again for another road widening project along this new wall, done in the name of the community by some local leaders but who did it for their own benefit. They did it so that they could ensure access to the rickshaw vans carrying rubbish to fill the lake up and build,' Samsul paused.

He pointed to the wall in front of us. As if remembering the changes in more vivid detail, he continued, 'When they [BTCL engineers] built the wall, they came and surveyed, they didn't care if the houses were getting demolished. When I realized they were laying out the plan for the wall, I protested. The laneway that crossed the boundary line would get cut off, people need access! I specifically told them that if there was a fire, people needed to get out [through the BTCL colony], so at least don't block off the laneway. I had a big altercation with the director of the project. The next day, they brought 200 Ansars [paramilitary forces]. No one from my community stood up for me. I had to concede. One cannot fight alone. But you see the result. Fearing that I would break it open, the [BTCL] engineers specifically built a 10-inch wall here in front of my shop [everywhere else is the standard 5-inch, a local way of measuring wall thickness based on the width of the brick], making it difficult to break open and reconnect the blocked laneway'. He paused, and I realized this time it was for dramatic effect.

Samsul, grinning, pointed left of the 10-inch wall, and said, 'well, I just broke the next span [the 5-inch wall]. Well, I had to … During the fire [a massive fire in Korail in 2017], there were thousands of people getting trapped here, so, I put all [shop] goods in the water tank underground, and broke open the wall to allow people to get out to safety.'

'I also took my fridge to the other side, the hole was that big', he added.

Some officials came and inquired why the wall was broken and Samsul freely admitted it was him. 'You can file a case if you want, but I did what needed to be done', he tells me that he yelled. Later, BTCL covered up the wall, a tracing of the fresh cement mark still visible where the hole was.

Not all the openings along the wall have such a dramatic history. The typical ones, found along the major arterial road to the west of Korail, were created by

Figure 6 The wall was built with double the original thickness in this particular spot.

simple negotiations between the contractor who built the wall on behalf of BTCL and the dwellers and community leaders who were about to get trapped behind it. The negotiations were both in good faith, with the contractor understanding how vital access was, and with the help of monetary lubrication within the socially acceptable limit. Nothing exploitative was reported by anyone to ensure the openings in the wall. However, the misalignment of the openings and the laneway network seems to suggest the absence of any particular urban design or planning logic to the openings.

The literature on informality usually paints a broad-brush stroke of the state, reducing its function in the legislative domain or at the policy level. Here, Samsul's experience was pointing towards a more materialist-spatial practice running in parallel to those. His experience was particularly useful for me to relate to the lived experiences of the state bodies in Korail. They did not operate

in a domain far away while the dwellers were busy building the 'slum'. The state bodies operated both in assemblages of order-words – regulations, legislations, suo motu, litigations, injunctions, policies – and assemblages of materials, bodies, actions and emotions felt by every dweller.

In Korail, the wall is one of the many forms of 'granular engagement' of the state bodies in affecting the urban transformation, as many other traces can be found. The state bodies that provide service to the rest of the city – DESCO (electricity), WASA (water), TITAS (gas) – are all implicated in servicing Korail as well. Some connections are legal in themselves, raising the question as to why they are abetting what is largely seen by the state as illegal land-grabbing. However, most service connections are not. The popular narrative always places the burden of informality/illegality on the dwellers. 'They siphon off our electricity, gas, and water, and make a profit', screams local newspaper headlines, de-legitimizing their existence. What is missing from the narrative is the informality of the state bodies in that process.

One extra gas connection to Korail is not produced by a singular actor within the 'slum' – there is an extraordinary level of arrangement that makes it possible. That gas connection, on the side of the state (TITAS, the agency in this case), means someone negotiating with the contact within the settlement and making a few extra bucks, adjusting the connection in the ground, re-allocating extra pipe and switchgear, re-adjusting the gas pressure somewhere else in the formal city, covering the traces of the connection from the audit and so on. The product of such granular engagement is unequal geographies of serviced land, which in effect enables or constrains the urban production in Korail. In a conversation, one of the dwellers proudly told me that Korail is never without electricity even during load-shedding,[5] 'since we are connected from multiple sources'. He implied that building more houses was no problem, service-wise. In another conversation, a landholder woman complained about the lack of water in their house for five days without any action being taken. It was a *legal* WASA water line. The tenants would leave soon if it continued, she worried. Her next-door neighbours, who had an illegal water connection, actually had better service response if there was any malfunction from the local 'water-man' – an interlocutor who manages the water connections.

The other major state body that plays an active role in the way Korail is produced is the police. Every new house construction in Korail somehow needs to be legitimated by the police, usually in return for 'light refreshments compensation' (a local euphemism for bribes). However, such relationships with the production process are entirely contextual. Perhaps if you know the local

leader well, he will keep the police away from your construction! In what I term 'reciprocal swaying', the local leadership and the police influence each other's actions on the ground. Keeping a line of communication open with the local police station is a necessity, and the extra cost always is passed down the line to the tenant. As such, nothing is produced without prior legitimization, and I will treat legitimacy separately in a forthcoming chapter.

But my strongest encounter with the state in Korail was not through the material manifestations of state bodies, it was rather affective. An atmosphere that seemed to transcend fear and anxiety, mixed with a certain fatalistic acceptance, kept surfacing in the conversations every day during my fieldwork. 'Are you from the government?', 'Are you here to evict us?', 'Why are you measuring/mapping? To assist the eviction?', 'This is all public land, you can do whatever, what can we do?', 'We are poor, so we have no rights' – such questions and statements inevitably followed once I stood long enough somewhere and engaged with the dwellers to make maps. That affective undertone of anxiety about the security of the tenure and the acknowledgement of the ability of the state to resort to violence to evict them seemed to be the common denominator of our conversations. In one focus group session, one mother of two commented that every day she goes out to work not knowing if she will return to find her home in its place. The state is present in every slum dweller in Korail through the 'affect' it generates, like an overhanging cloud that may overpower any moment. It's not a negation of desire to live, but a co-constitutive presence.

The fear of eviction is not unfounded. Entire 'slums' have been evicted in the recent past in Dhaka, one of which I had a chance to witness during my stay in Dhaka in 2019. Much like the aftermath of a bombing, such evicted settlements are usually razed to the ground, the forlorn dwellers collecting whatever is left of their homes. The evictions always proclaim the court order that compels them to do so, the magistrates cite the law and go home happy with justice delivered. The aftermath is often the same, the dwellers pick pieces of debris that can be reused, or perhaps some utensils that are not damaged beyond repair, or their children's books perhaps … pieces that they collected and reassembled somewhere else in the city. Such destruction is numbing and generative simultaneously, the seed of the next settlement is sown at the very instance that one is torn down. There is no alternative. One must pick up the pieces, take the children, find a spot and erect another house. They need to get back to work the next day too to eat!

Such stories travel fast across settlements. How do these forced evictions affect urban production elsewhere? What I saw in Korail was how the affective domain was shaping the desires, and are in turn shaped by the narratives built on stories

Figure 7 The aftermath of a recent eviction at Bhashantek settlement, Dhaka, 2019. (I arrived just a few hours after it was bulldozed to the ground.)

of evictions and imaginaries of state violence. One of my key informants in Korail used his savings of five years, not to fix his house, extend it and improve his living condition now, but to invest in buying land elsewhere on the outskirts of the city. This is not an anomaly as many others reported this as well, particularly buying land in their ancestral village. Caught between the desire to live better now and the fear of eviction effectively resulted in a self-imposed regulation on the possibility of upgrading. It produced a somewhat ambivalent reaction to the current living conditions. I realized soon into my fieldwork that my investigations were not just about the urban change that had happened in Korail but also about what could have been built but was *not*. The fear of the eviction itself acts as an instrument of negation as it severely impacts the sense of tenure security.

The practice of eviction – bulldozers coming at unexpected hours with armed police – is usually coordinated between the different state agencies, who act largely as capitalist institutions. It is often nested within a set of policies following the desire to 'develop' the land.[6] Such desires entrap the small-scale desire of the dwellers to continue their existence in the settlements which are supposedly freed from illegal activities.

In Bangladesh, eviction practices follow colonial-era laws to cast dwellers as squatters causing a nuisance.[7] Evictions happen within a narrative of 'rescuing' public lands from the 'encroachment of the mafia', in which 'slums' are cast as zones of criminality, drugs and filth. Legal instruments become the expressions used by the state to create 'exceptions', as noted urban planning scholar Ananya Roy has pointed out, to declare the settlements as undesirable and worthy of demolition. Cumulatively, the legal instruments and media narratives become the expression that anoints the informal settlement as the 'slum' and in effect helps to legitimize the abrupt evictions and the consequent erasure of everyday urbanism. The media narratives are unequivocally negative about these settlements, as my archival analysis has pointed out. But also, anecdotally, dwellers in Korail were highly sceptical of journalists for their role in eviction. Apart from constituting negativity towards these places and fuelling the existing stigma before an eviction, dwellers also questioned why the mainstream media do not appear to report on massive evictions, forced resettlements and the plight of dwellers after the eviction.

There have been multiple eviction attempts so far in Korail (major ones in 2002, 2012 and 2017). The actual eviction attempts are only the tip of the iceberg of the larger institutional entanglement that mobilizes itself to dispossess the dwellers. Such measures are readily accepted by the urban upper and middle class, even desired. The political theorist Steven Lukes noted long ago: 'The supreme exercise of power is to get others to have the desires you want them to have, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and *desires* [my emphasis]'.[8] Such forms of oppressions are at work when a large-scale agent such as the state with desires at a much higher scale 'hegemonically' attempts to not just oppose but manipulate the desires and practices of citizens for its ends. However, there is widespread speculation that beyond the manipulation of desires and evicting through legal means, the state can also act illegally from the shadows by relegating to more insidious means, such as arson.[9] None of the investigations of numerous recurring fires in Korail and other settlements in Dhaka has ever seen the light of day, so one cannot provide any proof of any wrongdoing. One can only notice that coincidentally, 'slum fires' often are followed quickly by repossession of the land by state agencies.

Interestingly, these measures by the state often become a source of resilience through collective action and the permanence of the settlement. Using another branch of the state – the judicial courts, dwellers in Korail and elsewhere have been able to stall the eviction and extract a form of security for their settlements. In material terms, the most intense upgrading in Korail started following the

High Court order in 2012 that stopped the state from carrying out the eviction. The courts and the legal system, while being unable to ensure that the dwellers have a 'right to the city' (since there is no such provision in the Bangladesh Constitution), have at least provided temporary legitimacy that has been crucial 'software' in Korail's urban development. Effectively the public interest litigation lawyers had become planners for the urban poor by fighting for these stalls and injunctions on eviction.[10]

What about the most obvious of the state bodies, the Mayor's office (Dhaka North City Corporation)? Is it part of the production process as well? Dhaka City has about 5,000 settlements. The City Corporation has recently employed two Slum Development Officers (SDOs) to serve them. I met with one of them and asked him about the relation of the local government (mayor's office) with the upgrading of such settlements, and Korail in particular. His specific response was, 'What do you mean by the upgrading of the slum, a slum is a slum!' He went into detail to talk about the high-rise projects that are ongoing to rehabilitate the slum population (10,000 apartments are being made by the National Housing Authority (NHA); however, the total units required to house every slum dweller family is more than a million, based on the best estimates). His point was clear, the City Corporation was 'helping' the slum population by building the roads 'around the slum', which the 'slum people' use to go to work, but they can't intervene within. In addition, his office helps coordinate the NGOs and multilateral bodies (UNDP, UN-Habitat) working in slums. They also did what he termed 'software projects' (awareness building) in slums. That seemed to be the limit of the local government's reach concerning slums.

Concerning Korail, he revealed that they can't do 'hardware projects [anything to do with physical infrastructure such as roads, sewerage] in somebody else's land'. They had no jurisdiction over it to build or extend services. As if this wasn't enough to justify the inaction, he added, 'How can we help them [Korail dwellers] in particular when they are not tax-paying?' I could not argue with such a solid line of reasoning and so I left. In the overall conversation, he seemed unaware of the two formal planning projects in motion by two different state bodies on the land where Korail sits. In any case, since officially the land was owned by another agency, what went on inside was none of their concern. The colonial era laws (or new ones shaped in their image) dictated how the state agencies behaved, completely disregarding the thousands of lives being lived on that land.

The land that was transferred to PWD in 1989 by BTCL was further pieced off and a chunk of about 19 hectares was given to the Bangladesh Hi-Tech

Park Authority (BHTPA).[11] BHTPA has a comprehensive plan to establish an 'Information and Computer Technology (ICT) Village' in the 19 hectares land allocated to them on Korail's eastern side. One project document reads, 'The objective of the ICT Village project is to establish knowledge-based industries throughout the country, thereby contributing to the national economy and helping achieve the goals of Vision 2021: Digital Bangladesh'. The notion of a Digital Bangladesh has been the state's guiding desire – a hegemonic mantra of development. The IT park planned in Korail – one out of seven across Bangladesh – with a grand vision to develop a 'world-class business environment' will include rental properties, five-star hotels, convention centres, residences, a boat club and, tellingly, a gatehouse. The current dwellers that this gated community will replace have been given consideration, as the project report indicates, 'the major social challenge will involve the resettlement of this large community. During site preparation, the Korail community has to be moved from the lands and resettled. This must be handled *delicately* [my emphasis]'. The project plan lists six resettlement/relocation options for these 'Project Affected Persons (PAPs)' that include cash compensation, on-site and off-site resettlement. In one such on-site resettlement option, 6,768 units – each about 25 square meters – will be constructed in forty-seven 'economy housing' buildings at Korail's northern edge. The project document does not specify how the beneficiaries will be selected out of the 55,000 families that currently reside in Korail, nor does it make the crucial distinction between landholders and tenants. Such omissions are not simply coincidental or just due to lack of resources. Rather, these 'performative ambiguities' allow ad hoc rules to be made as needed and legitimize under-the-table negotiations for the resettlement. The word on the street is that BHTPA is holding a series of dialogues with NGOs working in Korail as a mediator for the resettlement process. There are many rumours of imminent eviction, further arson attacks and buying off local leaders in Korail to thwart any form of protest. A lack of transparency about the process only breeds these rumours further. What's important to note is the result of such machinations is a constant atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that has become the everyday context in which decisions about their city are taken by Korail's dwellers.

The rest of the land (17 hectares), held legally by PWD, mostly comprises the lake that was slowly reclaimed by the dwellers since 2001 to extend Korail. This area is home to the second state project being planned – a major lake development project.[12] While the previous project is based on the state's desire to pursue a smart/digital city narrative, the second one is based on the desire for a green and clean city. The rationale of the project, in their own words, is to

counter 'lake encroachment by the land grabbers, a severe increase of lake water pollution, deterioration of aesthetic beauty of the surroundings, creation of nuisance in civic life and distortion of a natural resource'. The project entails the removal of about 100,000 people within the territory marked as the 'Lake' in the formal planning documents.

The project masterplan features major lake-front road development, amphitheatres, seating pavilions, parks and skating, which, if implemented, will replace over 100,000 people living within the project boundary. Unlike the previous one, this project does not have options developed for resettlement/relocation. It has allocated a large portion of the project cost for land acquisition, but it is unclear if it is for cash compensation of the displaced dwellers. Currently, the project is ongoing on the eastern side of Korail, slowly progressing towards the western part. The project had already evicted some households without any compensation in 2017, adding to the sense of tenure insecurity.

The irony in this narrative of reclaiming the pristine beauty of the 'natural' lake is the fact that it was not natural at all. The geomorphological mapping at the metropolitan scale revealed that the lake is a valley formation in between two plateaus that acted as natural stormwater drainage only. The 'lake', which is now being planned to be restored, was created artificially by damming the valley downstream during the 1960s to produce a picturesque urban fabric for the affluent neighbourhoods planned at that time.

Through these two state projects, it becomes plain to see how these formal plans epitomize a disembodied instrumental approach to planning that in effect renders the state bodies blind to what exists on the ground, producing a systematized form of 'uncare'.[13] In neither of them, as I scanned the publicly accessible documents, could I find a glimmer of empathy for the actual people who call Korail their home. The gaze of the state at the scale of the city is oriented upwards towards lofty goals. *Seeing like a state* makes them uninterested in the mundane tasks of bettering the real city on the ground, a city that it helps to sustain and even prosper in other inadvertent ways.[14] The lack of empathy for informal city building at the level of the urban plans is particularly surprising because the national policies of the Bangladeshi government mention the need for informal settlement upgrading and integrating them into the urban plans, particularly as an adaptation measure against the impact of climate change.[15]

We started this essay with a supposedly simple wall, which you would otherwise consider mundane. Using it as a material heuristic to understand the multiplicitous nature of how the state operates brings to view the entanglements holding things in place. Let's return to the story of the hole in the wall.

After speaking with Samsul, as I walked back along the path by the BTCL wall in Korail, I was thinking of how our conversation ended on a note of an uncertain future for Korail. Given his lifetime experience of fighting for a place to live, he does not believe there will be equitable resettlement, particularly reminding me of the string of failures of rehabilitation projects by the state.[16] He wasn't being pessimistic, just a realist about how the state operates, and how it has failed him and other settlement dwellers for generations (although he acknowledges the simultaneous positive contribution by some state agencies such as the Supreme Court). Despite all the uncertainty, he remains undaunted. Vividly I remember, as we parted, he said to me: 'I will find some other place in the city, and rebuild my house. There is always a place for people in this city who look hard enough.'

2

Why 'the community' does not exist

The news of the lake reclamation plans and the impending eviction has spread like fire. People have gathered on the streets in Korail. The air is thick with an intensity of solidarity. The bottom-up is set to unleash its collective agency against the state machinations. The community leaders at the front, with the microphone, chanted 'Long live Korail'.

Something along these lines is what I expected to encounter in Korail. It was not the case. Why weren't the people of Korail in the revolutionary mode, despite being constantly under threat, constantly made invisible in state policies and urban plans? Faced with the fear of erasure, where was the 'community' rising up, as often we imagine such communities to be – the grassroots or the bottom-up? I use the following two events to impart a sense of what I encountered on the ground.

I was about to start my fieldwork in Korail on 1 January. As it so happened, the day before was the national election in Bangladesh and I decided to assert my modicum of power through the voting process. My designated voting location was a school in between my house and Korail. As I approached the school in a rickshaw that afternoon, I could see a crowd of people at the school gate. 'My fellow ballot-wielding countrymen,' I thought to myself, yet something didn't feel right. The crowd of about a hundred were all young men, with an angry demeanour. As we approached closer to the school, my rickshaw-puller sensed something was afoot and being a man of quick wits, he did a prompt u-turn. That's about when the crowd started to chase us.

He frantically pedalled, sweat pouring. Other voters were running away from the school as well. I was bewildered, sitting frozen in the rickshaw. In between panting breaths, he explained what had happened. I didn't read him the ethics statement of the research I was doing, he didn't wait to be asked for his consent, and yet one of my most illuminating interviews happened as we both ran for our lives. Well, he pedalled and I held on, listening to his narrative.

'These are "kids" [his choice of word] from Korail. I know some of them. I live there,' he paused for a breath, 'they are just working for the political party's local wing, that's all, they want to chase you away from voting but they mean no harm'. How reassuring, I thought. He continued as if owing me an explanation, 'They are getting paid a few bucks [BDT 300; about £2] to be there and only let voters of their choosing come in'. 'Who do they work for?' I asked. He was unsure but said that there were many local political party leaders in Korail, and they were probably all orchestrating this event, he mumbled a few names that I am avoiding to mention here. Coercive practices are not unheard of in Bangladeshi elections and I didn't think too much of the incident. I had not cast my vote but was happy to be unscathed.

Fast forward three weeks and I was attending the monthly meeting of one of the local Community Development Organization (CDO) in Korail as an observer. A crowd of about thirty women and men, representatives of the local dwellers sat with their leaders in the front with an NGO official. Having earlier met Mohammed Taher – the president of the committee – I had already explained my research project and sought permission to work in their community.

The general secretary of the CDO walked in late and joined at the front of the table. They had their agenda set; they talked about fixing toilets and selecting applicants from their community for an NGO business grant. The general secretary, in what I thought to be a very eloquent speech, talked about empowering the women of the slum, starting with those who had become part of the CDO. Then surprisingly, he explained my research project to the community members and urged them to help me in any way possible. I wondered how he knew about my project. The president must have informed him earlier, I thought. After the meeting, the president introduced me to the enigmatic general secretary, who I realized as the name sounded familiar, was one of the local political leaders the rickshaw-puller had named to be the orchestrators of the chaos at the voting station!

The same individual who, as a local political party leader, perhaps had a hand in robbing my voting rights, had just lectured on women's empowerment and the importance of helping a researcher from abroad for a project on social justice!

He-who-shan't-be-named is a man of many roles in Korail, and conflicts of interest make little sense here. He runs the electricity business in his territory in Korail. His neighbour, another rickshaw-puller, informed me that his monthly earnings exceed BDT 600,000 (£4,000), while the rickshaw-puller himself makes an average of BDT 18,000 (£120). Yet, often in the meeting, the political party leader had referred to himself as a member of the 'poor class living in a slum' to

appeal for funds to the NGO official. As I wrote this, he was building more rental units to add to his already-built fifty-six rooms. He was instrumental, planning-wise, in the latest lake-to-land conversion in the last four years. And yet, he was late for the meeting as he spent the night before in the police station trying to help free a local vendor detained without cause. If you visit Korail, you will perhaps see him inspecting some infrastructure renovation or arbitrating over local altercations in his party clubhouse.

The encounter made me realize that to investigate the urban transformation in Korail, it would be necessary to take a closer look at the social complexity in Korail. The complexity I encountered could not be slotted into the typical rich/poor class divide. The social frictions were not along ethnic or religious lines as well. The multiplicity of roles that had formed in Korail was something invisible initially. In addition, as the opening story illustrates, multiple roles were synergistically coinciding in one person. The repeated encounters in Korail shattered the mythologized narrative of the rural poor coming to the city and constructing their dwelling, which in turn had produced the 'slum'. It's not that it is not true, but it's not enough to understand the nuances of the production. In reality, there was no essential, singular 'slum dweller' that formed 'the people' in Korail. There were differentiations, a mix of subjectivities, roles and corresponding desires.

This is precisely what I allude to in the title of this essay. There is no 'community' in waiting, pre-formed, coherent, singular and homogeneous. Various lines of sympathy and desires are producing different roles, as with any society. They are never purely social since they are always grounded in specific material territories within which the roles operate in Korail. Different factors – alliances based on kinship, political affiliation, *geographical genealogy*,[1] the places they had already lived in Korail, the people within the state agencies they knew and the profession that they are in – perform in the process of differentiation of the roles and social standings. There are conflicts between these particular lines of social assembly but movement from one to the other is common, as is belonging to multiple ones as well. Hence, what results is not a neat mosaic of sub-community groups either, but an admixture and overlaps of multiple communities formed along different lines, which respond differently based on who is it that they encounter.

The question of how 'the community' in Korail responded to the eviction fears mistakenly equates to the homogeneity of the spatial fabric to the social body. Nonetheless, it is a good question to open up two lines of inquiry engaging with roles followed by territories.

The multiplicity of roles

I am not invoking the term 'role' from a sociological disciplinary understanding,[2] although I do utilize the notion that roles come with norms, behaviour patterns, choices, subjectivities and desires. My experience in Korail pointed to a set of roles that was tied to the urban production and the following roles I encountered are key in arranging the settlement.[3] They execute, expedite or hinder the constitutive processes. In a sense, the production of Korail's urban transformation was a theatre, and each of the roles came together to put on the show. The roles were not pre-figured but themselves produced from the play by constant reflexivity and reciprocal determination. The constant becoming of the settlement was shaped by these roles as much as they were shaped by that becoming.

The strongest line of social fracture I sensed in Korail was between the landlords and tenants. Both dwellers and NGO officials put the percentage of tenants to be around 80 per cent of the total dwellers.[4] In other words, 20 per cent of the dwellers effectively held the de facto tenure of all the properties in Korail. These striations are not rigid. As it so happens, often, after a tenant has moved into Korail and lived for a few years, he will start speculating about ways to get his own house. There are cases where the reverse has also happened, with landlords selling their houses or getting evicted internally and ending up in the tenant camp.

Although Korail acts as affordable housing for these tenants, in my conversations with them, almost none are much fussed about the possibility of eviction. 'What does it matter to us, we are suffering in any case,' Russel, one tenant opined during a focus group discussion. I couldn't determine whether his nonchalant demeanour was coming from a fatalistic outlook or the perceived assurance that there were always other settlements in Dhaka he could move to. They couldn't evict all 5,000 of them, could they?[5]

As my investigation deepened in Korail, I realized there was no quintessential tenant as well. On a spectrum of tenancy arrangements, on one extreme were the 'temporary translocators', tenants who came in for a few months from the villages due to seasonal economic fluctuations. They were the least bothered by any eviction. They usually had families back home and owned some property. Mostly working as rickshaw-pullers during festival seasons or as temporary labourers, these translocators often shared a single room like a hostel or often stayed in the rickshaw garages in makeshift temporary arrangements.

Next in the spectrum comes the 'speculative migrators', who have moved recently to Korail and renting a minimal space while looking for economic opportunities in the city. Usually, they are not in a social or financial condition to go back to their homes in the rural villages/towns, as many are victims of climate change-induced displacement. One of my interviewees, Lal Miah, rented a brand-new house at the edge of the lake, where his view is of the pent-houses on the other side. 'Why Korail?' I ask him. 'Some of my friends live here,' he tells me, 'so, when I came to the city, I stayed with them, it was easier to look around [within walking distance] so that I didn't spend money for either accommodation or transport'. Many arrive here based on kinship ties or local village acquaintances. I have not heard of anyone who analysed multiple settlement options from a rational choice theory perspective and then chose the one with the most return. Desires of homeliness and proximity to social bonds often overturn pure economic logic. Renting the same room in other slums in Dhaka would cost Lal Miah half of what it was costing him in Korail (BDT 3,000 monthly for one room, around £20).

Then comes the 'intra-settlement movers', tenants moving from within Korail, and this group has the most diverse sets of motivations. Typical desires include the need for extra conjoined rooms, better infrastructural facilities, avoiding social altercations with tenants in previous accommodation, the potential for buying the rental property and many more. These are more settled dwellers in Korail who look towards ways of 'owning' a house in Korail in the future.[6]

Last but not least are tenants of a very particular variety. These are 'caretaker-managers', who do not pay rent to stay. Often they are long-time acquaintances of the landlords and have been paying tenants. Due to the social capital between the two, the landlord may offload rent collection, maintenance, renovation and other tasks in return for the room rental. The caretaker-managers often are the ones who have failed to build their own house in the settlement and then settle for a role that socially sits higher than the average tenant. Often, they become the site managers for new constructions and take decisions on behalf of the owner with ramifications in the urban fabric.

What about the *landholders* (a term I find more suited to describe the so-called landlords)?[7] They also constitute a field of difference. While it is understandable the different tiers of tenants are perhaps not interested in resisting eviction, how were the landholding class? How would they be reacting to the news of impending resettlement and/or eviction as a community? Surely, I thought, having invested in their own urbanism, they would all unite and form the revolutionary vanguard!

I had a moment of ethical crisis during my fieldwork as my landholder interviewees kept asking me about the government's plans, and I just had learned of the smart village and lake beautification project (which I thought was not public knowledge from my understanding at that time). Do I stick to my questions about how Korail was produced or do I fan the fire by sharing the planning documents I had? I soon realized they knew already, perhaps they asked me to reconfirm. As I probed deeper, their responses were unequivocally different, ranging from sheer excitement at the thought of being resettled to a government-built high-rise flat to declarations of 'fight-till-death' to hold onto the last square inch. What was happening?

In Korail, the primary colloquial way landholders are differentiated is based on the number of *rooms* (*ghar*, in Bangla) they hold.[8] In my encounters, I have met inhabitants who have a single room in their dwelling unit and I have met an Apa[9] (local title of respect for addressing women), who holds about 150 rooms. What I encountered in Korail was that this wasn't just a difference in degree, but at certain stages, along that spectrum of the number of rooms, the roles mutated and new ones started to generate. Let us see the differentiation of landholders:

The 'pioneer-settlers' arrived in Korail at the earliest and tended to be from the local neighbourhood and not rural-to-urban migrants. Not being able to afford the rent in the local [legal] neighbourhood is the usual push-out factor. But, the stories reveal that it was never just about building a room on an uninhabited land. A complex set of negotiations, even to build on the empty disputed land, occurred before settling. Often coinciding with being their material supplier and builder, the pioneer-settlers seized opportunities but at a cost. They faced tremendous pushback from local middle-class neighbourhoods in the forms of social stigma, extortion and harassment. They often both intentionally and inadvertently set up a lot of social norms picked up by the second wave of settlers – a form of path dependency – resulting in very particular settlement organizations and patterns.

This incremental flow of further inhabitants who end up as landholders could be termed as 'subsistence-dwellers', who built/paid to build rooms as they needed for their family. The number of rooms rarely exceeded four, both for pioneer settlers and subsistence dwellers. Subsistence-dwellers can either be self-building their housing from scratch, paying contractors to build or buying 'housing units' developed by others. Four rooms are often ideal for subsistence, where you use two for your family and rent the other two, which subsidizes your cost of living.

A few landholders were more entrepreneurial. In addition to their own houses, they often build a few more, allowing a rental market to develop, both for humans and rickshaws. From my conversations with some of them, these 'housing-entrepreneurs' – next in the spectrum of landholders – didn't exactly plan out the housing production. Most of these developments were incremental, the rate of production hardly indicating a profit-making motive. Rather they saw housing as a possibility of generating an extra income. One of the interviewees, another Bhai (local title of respect for addressing men) had built sixteen rooms over five years, but then sold off rooms as needed to cover some unforeseen costs. Only one of his rooms remains. Others have successfully maintained their rental properties. As most of these landholders live in the same housing compound as the tenants, they are more invested in the quality of the built environment. The exact number of rooms at which it becomes a rental business for profit is hard to say, but to generate a net income equivalent to an average rickshaw-puller, one would require around eight to ten rooms (BDT 25,000, roughly £150). Such housing-entrepreneurs are at the risk of losing the most during eviction or even resettlement. If they are given a single studio apartment during resettlement, they lose their rental income and thus their livelihoods.

On the far side of the spectrum, some landholders are the 'grabber-developers'. They operate with a clear capitalist logic and operational unit designed to mass produce rooms, for selling or renting out.[10] Often, they grab land, pay the authorities, develop housing units and sell it off before repeating the process. Almost in every case, it is someone who has strong ties outside of the settlement, either to the political party leaders or the police. Interestingly, often there are flows of investment from outside. These 'grabber-developers' have little regard for any community actions against the evictions having off-loaded the risk onto the buyers, or already having accumulated enough wealth.

In terms of the proportion of these roles in Korail, only one neighbourhood was developed entirely by such 'grabber-developers', but most are a mix of pioneer-settlers and subsistence-dwellers, with a few housing-entrepreneurs.

In addition, four particular roles are important in the production of the settlement that cater to the desire of the roles outlined above or fulfil some additional tasks in the process of settling:

The 'legitimator' (referred to colloquially as the *elekar matha/neta/gonyo-manyo*) is the role that arranges a permissive milieu for the construction or holding to take place. Local leaders often play this role and often are co-constituted by the police. In some spatial production, local mosque or bazaar committee heads can play that role.

The 'financier' is a role that can be played by themselves, local individuals who have started moneylending as a business (*Shudi Mohajon*) or local committees funded by the larger NGOs. No formal-sector banks operate in Korail. We will explore the financing aspect in the next essay in more detail.

The 'supplier-seller' is a spectrum of roles that arranges materials to be available on-site. Most of the time, the landholder buys the materials himself from the sellers, while for landfilling purposes it's always the supplier who caters to the need and brings the material to the site.

The 'designer-builder' is an array of technical persons with particular skill-sets who are usually available for hire and operate with a logic of co-production. In other words, they are quite receptive to designing together with the landholder in situ. I have observed long negotiations on-site with the landholder or the developer regarding the design of the architectural form or the particular arrangement of flows around the site. The 'designer-builder' often can coincide with the 'subsistence-dwellers' and 'pioneer-settlers'.

Last but not least, 'the service-profiteers' are the ones who arrange services to households including electricity, gas, water, cable, waste management, street cleaning, night security and infrastructure maintenance. As alluded to in the last essay, these roles are closely connected with state bodies. These operations run in a highly extractive manner, particularly since it wouldn't be possible for an unserviced room to be rented. For example, in one neighbourhood, each household gets five minutes of water every day and they have to fill up as many canisters or drums as they can within that five minutes. They pay BDT 500 (£3.50) for the five-minute slot, then use the stored water for all their daily needs. As for electricity, they pay based on the number of electrical connections in the room. Even at a minimum, one light, one fan and two points for TV/fridge or phone charging would be four connections, each costing BDT 250. On average, each room pays about BDT 1,000 (£7). Now imagine the total revenue from a settlement with 55,000 rooms (around £5 million alone for electricity is extracted out of the settlement).

I do not claim these roles are mutually exclusive or are the only ones involved in the urban production process. Since there are particular agencies each one entails, they matter in developing an understanding of the urban production process. The roles desire different things and desire differently resulting in the differentiations we are at pains to understand in the urban fabric. The seemingly homogenous fabric from far lulls us into thinking that there exists a homogeneous community lying in wait. Unless seen from the perspective of the ground, we stay blind to these roles.

However, there is a territorial specificity to these roles, as they operate within particular spatial boundaries, a multiplicity to which we turn next.

Territorial multiplicity

Geographically Korail is a bounded entity, but there are multiple striations of space and constraints on urban production in particular territories. The larger settlement is fractured into distinct neighbourhoods in a seemingly poly-nucleated form of governance, where each territory has a different set of people for the same roles. These territories are contested, informally defined and often with no material manifestation, but end up impacting key aspects of how Korail operates. For example, the recent road-widening project in Korail makes a seemingly abrupt stop after extending for 250 metres. When I inquired about the sudden stop in the road works, there was no satisfactory answer from the dwellers. Having later studied the different territories and mapping them, I realized the roadwork only extended within one particular neighbourhood, and ended at the border with the next. The NGO implementing the roadwork had been able to negotiate the development work with one of the local leaders but failed with the one from the next territory. Therefore, all NGOs operating in Korail, as a rule, have to take into consideration these territorial lines to work with different communities.

Depending on the relations between the leaders of the different neighbourhoods, the ability to be present or work or even walk in another's territory differed significantly. There was once a leader walking with me and was lost in the conversation. Suddenly he stopped abruptly and then smiled sheepishly at me and said he does not want to walk anymore. He had realized he had crossed the edge into someone else's turf. However, if this indicates a sense of enmity among them, I must note here that the different communities in Korail are in a relatively peaceful co-existence even with strong tensions. Rarely do the tensions manifest in violence along territorial lines.

The major striation is due to the way local political parties organized their local wings. They follow the municipal ward boundaries (the state's organization of the city). Since the local inhabitants played a pivotal role in elections, party higher-ups are sympathetic to their electoral boundaries, creating uneven geographies of power relations. The local political clubs in Korail (that are subsidiary of the national political parties) and their territories are involved in legitimizing the urban production hence this affects the differences of urban fabric the most.

There are minor striations as well, for example, the territories of the locally generated names for places. Places are often differentiated based on particular uses (bazaar, 'Kapor potti' or cloth village) as well as based on the relatively higher densities of inhabitants from particular places in Bangladesh (Barisal potti/Comilla potti, named after two regions in Bangladesh).

Under the apparent homogeneous urban fabric lies invisible territorial formations at multiple scales and intensities, each one with its own agential realm. Edges are both distinct and blurry based on the criteria of mapping, but in general, all the people I interviewed knew precisely in whose area their house was. My investigation focused particularly on the western part of Korail, where the urban fabric formed mostly since 2001 by reclaiming the lake. The map

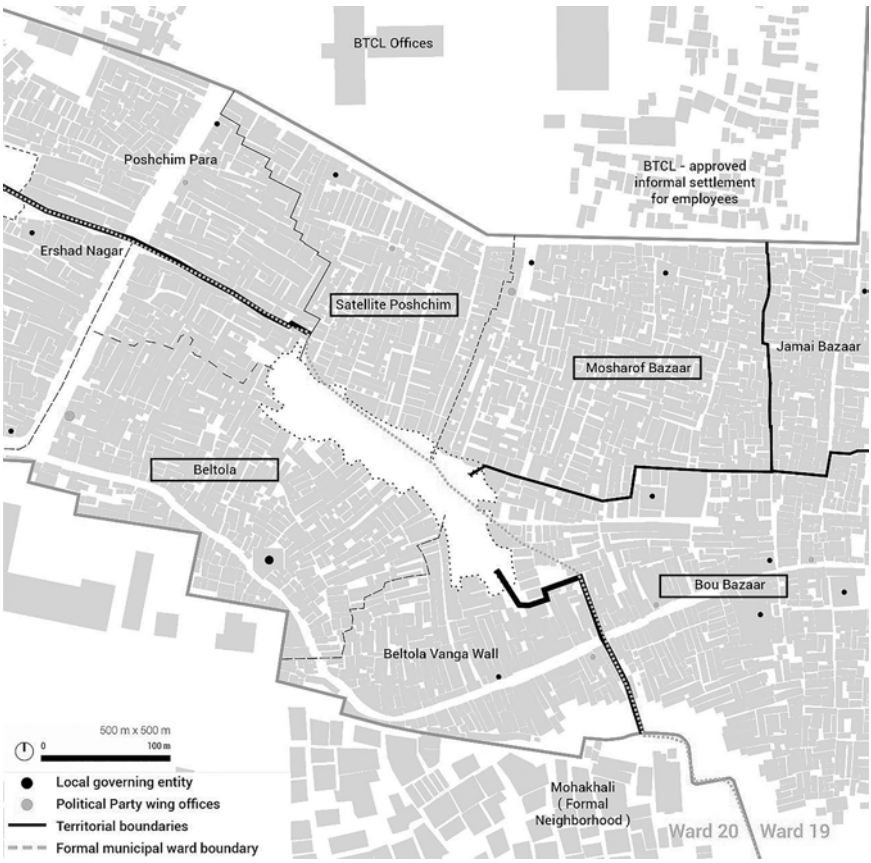

Figure 8 Multiple forms of territorial striations in Korail's western side (500m × 500m).

The four neighbourhoods (Beltola, Bou Bazaar, Satellite Poshchim and Mosharof Bazaar) are key areas for this book.

above shows that even within the 500m × 500m area (a scale that is conducive to studying the neighbourhoods), there are particular territories identified locally as Beltola, Mosharof Bazaar, Bou Bazaar and Satellite Poshchim, which are key for the rest of the book. The thickness of the fracture lines in the map in Figure 8 is indicative of the relative stability of the edge of the territory.

The revolutionary imagination with which I started this essay was almost non-existent in my quotidian encounters in Korail. People were busy with their lives, falling into this role or that, hardly bothered by the impending eviction. Their desires were myriad and often in contestation with each other. However, that is not the full picture either, as there are moments in Korail's past when there was a temporary coalition of all striations into a larger body politic for achieving a collective goal. I expected to encounter it in Korail because I witnessed firsthand the power of that community long ago. This essay ends with that story.

> On April 04, 2012, more than 2,000 households have been evicted within a few hours' notice. In addition to these 2,000 households, at least another 4,000 households faced different kinds of losses during the eviction such as snatching of their assets, and physical harassment by law enforcement agencies and other miscreants. A young child has also been crashed down by the bulldozers during the eviction the baby was in a sleeping situation. Overall at least, 20,000 populations have been displaced from their shelters and still more than 10,000 households are staying on [*sic*] the open sky.

The above quote isn't fiction, it is taken from an NGO report on a large-scale eviction in Korail from 2012.[11] The event had impacted the dynamics of local communities, and for a brief period, there was a coalescing, an assembling of inhabitants across the differences in roles and territories. The following day after the eviction, something remarkable happened. People from Korail did something unusual. They didn't show up for work: the factories, the homes, the workshops, the rickshaws. They blocked the main streets around the city in protest, but they refrained from a violent demonstration. They didn't harm anybody, and not a single incident was reported. I observed the community protest then from my undergraduate school and didn't know what to make of it. I was told by everyone that slums were filled with people who were criminals, and a peaceful protest by them seemed unusual.

Two legal sector NGOs came forward and a combined petition was filed. On 10 May, any further evictions were deemed illegal by the High Court. The collective agency had dissipated quickly following the court ruling since they couldn't afford to not go to their work indefinitely.

In 2019, I traced back the people who were part of the event and was trying to figure out the impact it had on the everyday transformation of Korail. My temporal maps revealed an increase in the number of new houses and lake reclamation – a growth spurt – in late 2012. Is there any relation between the perceived sense of security increasing in Korail after the court ruling and the acceleration of landfilling? Secondly, I was interested to understand the alignment of desires that must have been orchestrated to organize the protest seven years ago.

I heard the insider story from Hannan, the man who worked as one of the community leaders during the 2012 protest,[12] 'We just couldn't take it. We went from house to house, shop to shop. We asked everyone to close everything, we asked people not to go to work. Then we marched into the streets.' He made it sound simple but I can understand that it was not easy. Hannan continued, 'We assembled 100,000 people (almost all the dwellers in Korail at that time). There was no violence. Even when university students protest, they break cars [vandalizing cars and rioting during protests are very common in Dhaka]. We are illiterate people, but we behaved better than how the city treats us. We are cleaners, maids, guards and drivers. When we don't turn up, nothing gets done. We serve the city, so acknowledge us', Hannan went on, 'tell this story in your book'. And it wasn't just him. Few others also had simultaneously taken that role, which arises only in exceptional circumstances and is almost impossible to see during everyday encounters.

These empathic and transgressing community leaders produced something anomalous.[13] On that morning in 2012, no one had predicted the response, the NGOs didn't activate it, and there was no external community activist. They had managed to put very heterogeneous factions together momentarily for a day to produce a mass of bodies on the street of Dhaka that didn't follow the conventional rallies of political parties, there were no fiery speeches but more a display of collective presence.[14] It was enough to send a strong message to the state bodies and in the end, led to at least a temporary arrangement of tenure security through the court ruling. Hannan's story made me realize that Korail may operate in a fractured way in everyday life to the point where it doesn't make sense to talk of it as one singular body for most purposes, but the potential to form a collective agency of the 'community' remains immanent in its many fragments.

3

The silent partner

The main street in Korail (called Beltola Road) is more of a public living room than a street. A walk down that street is a sensory overdose – saloons with blaring Hindi music a few metres away from the religious hymns in front of the mosque, kids playing in the nooks and crannies while community leaders discuss important agenda right on the street, the horn of the electric rickshaw giving you a warning of their impending crossing, the vendors with diverse goods and their prices being haggled, the lazy eyes on street cast from the refuge of the tea-stalls, and the intensely political discussion there-in, the concrete surface of the road intermittently cut away to make way for the makeshift water lines – it is like a cacophony of public activities, and some seemingly private ones too. I once saw someone brushing his teeth there.

However, the intense street life was not always the case, but thanks to a recent road upgrading project in 2017, it has turned into a vibrant high street now, particularly as local businesses have intensified along it. The street was originally 3m wide, as opposed to the current 6m. The mud made it unbearable to walk during monsoon and rickshaws would get stuck often. The goods being delivered to the bazaars inside took too long. The material condition didn't afford public activities while the width meant no access even to ambulances or fire trucks to the interior of the settlement. I visited both before and after the street was widened in 2017, and the change was visible to all: the surface cast with concrete and drainage integrated, faster flow of traffic and wider space for social activities. It had a significant impact on the urban growth of the settlement and not just the houses lining the street. Most street-lined houses had vertically extended to two stories and the functional mix diversified from housing to more commercial functions within six months of the upgrading process, adding empirical evidence to the growing call for using streets as a tool for urban transformation in informal settlements.[1] There was no doubt about its impact, but the question was, who had upgraded the road?

Figure 9 An aerial view of the main street as it makes its way through the settlement.

Everyone that I talked to claimed that they did it. The local community, in whose territory the road was, claimed to have done it. The local Bazaar committee members said they are the ones behind it. When I looked further into it, the local Community Development Organization (CDO) seemed to be the one orchestrating the urban change. The CDOs acquired cash from BRAC, the largest NGO in the world.[2] They negotiated with the City Mayor's office, who were adamant about not helping directly, but ended up helping in kind by providing bulldozers, excavators and other support for construction work. For the road widening to happen, there were negotiations with all the landholders who had to voluntarily demolish their building frontages and reconstruct them.[3] For the 250-metre length of the road, road there were about 100 landholders who were part of the negotiations. From the surface, based on the initial narratives, it looked to be a classic case of bottom-up planning and mobilization of local dwellers coming together to upgrade their settlement.

Then I enquired how the CDOs were formed. Interestingly enough, Farida Apa, one of the leaders, explained in detail:

> The CDOs are convened by BRAC, although their officials are not part of it. People volunteer to be part of the committees and then there are elections to elect the leader. Then there are CBOs (community-based organization) that is formed by DSK (Dustho Shastho Kendro), another NGO operating here. I myself am the president of the Committee created by NDBUS (a local smaller NGO).

She didn't let me in on the fact that usually the same local leaders ended up in most of the NGO committees and also the elections often were questionable, to say the least. Also, the huge number of women in the committees may portray

gender equality on the surface but in many cases, they were representing their husbands. In a sense, there was an orchestration of how these committees were formed, but on paper, they reflected all the tickboxes of practising democracy, grassroots leadership and local empowerment. I learned of these local intricacies and manipulations regarding being on a committee much later.

The list of NGOs didn't end there. It seemed to be the normative operational procedure of NGOs in Korail. Since they realized it was difficult to work with 'the community' as a whole, they loosely formalized the existing territorial structure into local committees. BRAC UDP (Urban Development Programme) created four CDOs. DSK created five. Other NGOs followed suit. The earliest trace of local committee formation that I found was by the UPPR (Urban Poverty Reduction Program) funded by UNDP. Theirs were called Community Development Clusters. Now defunct, their way of striating Korail remains, particularly in the way different areas of Korail are named now, based on their original demarcations.

In total, around thirty different NGOs are operating in Korail now,[4] but the number fluctuates since often they are funded by grants with specified periods. Only a few at the scale of BRAC and DSK have sustained operations throughout the settlement. Many international NGOs use the local NGOs as boots on the ground. Good old-fashioned hierarchical structures are not uncommon but often shrouded in community-oriented terminology.

One way to understand the Beltola Road upgrading program was to look at the cash and in-kind contributions. For the 250-metre road, BRAC had paid BDT 1.5 million (£10,000) while the leaders of the Beltola CDO arranged about BDT 2.5 *lac* (250,000; £1,700), collecting it from local businesses and dwellers.[5] 'This is called the "contribution" money,' Shamim informed me.[6] He works for the BRAC UDP Regional Office under which all operations in Korail fall. He continued,

> As development workers, we have ruined our own work because now the community demands more. The 'leaders' are always looking to make some money from the work we do. I made the local leaders work in the desired way and they couldn't do any graft with me. I was kicked out of their meeting when I said that they have to put in the contribution money and also that we would not be using them as road-building contractors and suppliers! However, I didn't care. Later they called me back to do the road project. However, I didn't question the local leader's tactics to raise money.[7] They bring the contribution money, we do the work, no question asked, we don't want to 'get into trouble'. One has to get along with them. People have complained to me that they have raised more money than they have contributed to the project, but that is none of my business.

Was it a case of mutual self-preservation and entrenching existing power relations? Or is this a necessary evil to get work done? 'To help "them", one needs to be tactical with them,' Shamim went on to impart some more valuable lessons to me: 'if they know so well [about urban problems], why would they need me or why would I help them. If they were well-mannered and able to do things by themselves, they wouldn't need us. No one [NGO] could do that road for a long time and we have done it, that too with their money.'

From his account, and many other interviews with NGO workers, it was apparent that the NGO fieldworkers were very clear about the ambivalence of their work. On one hand, they worked to provide vital services but were careful to ensure that the status quo remained. They acted as mediators between state officials and locals, were friends with both, but at the same time ensured they remained operational. They worked across scales, getting grants from the World Bank, for example, on one hand, but pressing locals to raise pennies on the other. Most importantly, they worked quite silently, staying away from questioning too much the local unjust power relations or raising the socio-political awareness of the dwellers.

The usual suspects in the narratives of informal settlements are the state or capitalist institutions at the 'top' (the Machiavellian neoliberal) and the citizens at the 'bottom' (the heroic entrepreneurs). Where do NGOs (non-governmental organizations) sit in that spectrum? NGOs often remain invisible, not only in intellectual discourse but also remarkably silent in popular narratives about slums.

What I found in Korail is that there was no single essential 'NGO' type.[8] The term encompasses work carried out by a local community leader who has a staff of one at one end of the spectrum and large, multinational NGOs such as BRAC on the other.[9] Given the wide spectrum, how does one make sense of the impact NGOs had on Korail's urban transformation?

From my encounters in Korail, I note multiple modes of operations by NGOs, as expanded below, which can spread across a wide range of partnerships, from physical/direct facilitation of infrastructure to a more indirect impact by providing multiple forms of capital (social, financial and symbolic).

Infrastructure

Jamaibazaar, an older neighbourhood in the north, seems to be the most developed out of all in Korail. It has a clear urban block structure, with paved roads and a vibrant urban realm. The majority of the roads were upgraded

during the UPPR project (2008–15), funded by UNDP. Road upgrading projects by NGOs such as this one and the recent one from BRAC most often are not part of any larger-scale physical planning and/or re-blocking initiative. I have not come across any road that was proposed anew, most are a material upgradation of an existing path that the dwellers had laid out earlier. Even choosing which path to upgrade seems to be out of a pragmatic concern about the negotiations with the local leaders rather than any urban design logic. One could find the road in front of a local leader's house to be in much better condition than the rest. In other words, despite millions being spent on infrastructure by the NGOs, they are piecemeal and ad-hoc, rather than following a clear planning process. However, they are never random, as some individual desires often trump the collective desire, and shape the location of infrastructural improvements.

In some cases, where there is a semblance of an overarching plan, things often do not go according to it. One of the major infrastructure upgrading schemes in Korail is based on issues of water, health and sanitation hygiene (WASH). DSK, another major NGO, has laid down water lines in a planned manner to connect each of the laneways to a water main in some parts of Korail. Ironically, while the water-carrying infrastructure was in place, there wasn't water actually in the pipes even after a year. While no one was too keen to share why that was, all evidence points to a probable failure by DSK to negotiate a deal with the water 'service-profiteers' whose business will be hampered by the new water lines. The local politics of the infrastructure provisioning and the necessity of it is often downplayed in NGO reports and official narratives, but it became very clear to me that NGOs that operated well and could change things for the better in places like Korail were the ones with the best-skilled people who could engage with the locals, facilitate the project socially and were able to convey the project into an imaginary well before the technical tasks had even started.

However, the afterlives of such well-intended projects often end up very different from how they are planned. Take, for example, the case of NGO-built community toilets in Korail. Many of the 'community' toilet blocks were built as neighbourhood commons, to be shared by the wider public. They were built with community consultation, and sited in places that were deemed to be accessible by many. In many cases, as I observed during my stay, these toilets were slowly engulfed by adjacent housing. In some of them, the toilets have been engulfed into an expanding house, new house units have used the toilet as a party wall and have even constructed a second floor on top. The toilet block has often become used as a seed for further development of private housing.

Most NGO toilets are currently within private housing compounds. From the perspective of the NGOs, who are very aware of such forms of the capture of their built infrastructure, it is not seen as the privatization of a public good, but rather a practical way to ensure at least that the housing compound gets access to hygienic toilets.[10] The site for the toilet block is often chosen by the community leaders and then negotiated with the NGOs, the leaders often vying for it to be close to their homes for a possible future expansion to capture it.

Figure 10 A house built on top of the 'community' public toilet that is no longer public.

Civic amenities

If you happen to visit the largest public space in Korail, a large open field in the Jamaibazaar neighbourhood, you will find very impressive-looking buildings lined up along the edge. It's where I met Abdul Adam, a teacher at the Neuro-Developmental Disability (NDD) Center located on the ground floor of an adjacent building. The Center is run by BRAC but the building houses schools by other NGOs also. Across the field, stands one of the oldest primary schools in Korail. Kids playing with makeshift bamboo see-saws and running around, with educational institutions all around, the place feels almost like an educational campus. Adam reminds me that dwellers do understand the need for better civic amenities for a liveable city, and their locations are quite key in making decisions about where to live.

According to figures reported in 2013, there were now forty-two schools in Korail, mostly run by NGOs. The exceptions are the Islamic schools, which are established and run by the local communities and leaders. Concerning health and childcare facilities, there were eight clinics, five daycare centres and three delivery centres that are run by NGOs.[11] These amenities in Korail are one of the important pull factors for tenants from across Dhaka city and for investing in further growth for existing landholders. There is a much higher demand for housing close to amenities. Perhaps parents want to live next to good schools everywhere in the world and Korail is no exception.

Most often, the NGOs rent properties to run the amenities, with very minimal renovations or adaptations. This is to avoid any particular issue regarding ownership and to avoid building any permanent structure that will surely be damaged in an eviction drive. Therefore, these amenities do not make any changes to the urban fabric or the housing form. Hence, it is difficult to discern the amenities from the buildings built as housing. Rather the program (the class size, number of patients accommodated etc.) of the respective amenity is tailored to suit the limit set by the architectural form. As you walk around in Korail, you might peer into a window in a house and be surprised to see a batch of twenty students staring back at you, closely packed yet cheerful.

Empowerment (or not)

As mentioned in the previous essay, a vital and most impactful intervention by legal support NGOs (such as BLAST and ASK) has been to provide pro-bono services to start public-interest litigation and facilitate Korail's inhabitants to

file writ petitions, as after the 2012 evictions. While only a few of the actual dwellers are involved in the process, it has a knock-on effect on many others. In everyday conversations, people referred to utilizing the courts as a way to thwart any possible eviction. Rather than the legal details, the fact that such NGOs will be there to provide a form of support in judicial courts is crucial.

Engaging with NGOs and going through the procedural aspects of organizing has translated into the local dwellers' everyday actions. By creating local jobs and opportunities to raise voices, most NGOs have had a positive impact on gender equality. Most importantly, dwellers have become more aware and well-versed in many critical issues such as sustainability and climate change. Some of the local leaders now have started citizen journalism, building up from the confidence gained by speaking at NGO meetings, forums and conferences.

However, a more subtle form of negative impact is the formalization of the territories and the social legalization of clientelist roles. The way the NGOs operated meant that certain power relations became more entrenched, as well as associating their name with NGOs lent social legitimacy to certain inhabitants. By acquiring the role of 'president' or 'general secretary' of the local Community Development Organization (CDO), one could be in a position to negotiate with different bodies on behalf of the community leading to 'inequitable empowerment'. Asef Bayat has made the point that 'the professionalization of NGOs tends to diminish the mobilizational feature of grassroots activism, while it establishes a new form of clientelism', which leads to Mike Davis's following point, 'perhaps it is the NGOs who have benefitted most in Global South following the turn towards more participatory forms of operation'. As Davis notes, the inadvertent impact of NGO-ization 'has been to bureaucratize and deradicalize urban social movements'.[12] Would there be a different power structure had there not been such a transfer of social capital from the NGOs to the opportunist variant of 'local leaders'?

Financial services and extraction

Out of all the activities that NGOs are doing that affect the urban transformation in Korail, the most invisible aspect is the financing of urban growth. And it happens in two particular ways.

With no formal financial sector entities within Korail, there are only a few options for financing the extension of a house or renovation. Interestingly, there is no home loan service in Korail run by NGOs, only loans for businesses. One

of the major lenders in Korail is BRAC Microfinance, whose factsheet from 2017 shows outstanding loans upward of BDT 25 million that was disbursed there. Their microfinance loan products are for business and entrepreneurship. This contradicted my repeated encounters with landholders in Korail who kept referring to the loan they had taken out from BRAC and other NGOs to finance their house upgrading and expansion. What was going on?

I held a focus group with field-level NGO workers from BRAC Urban Development Programme to understand the way things were operating on the ground. It seems that, in addition to the genuine loan applicants for business, there were landholders who got the loan without an actual entrepreneurial or business idea. These fake applications were often in the name of the wives since they are deemed financially more stable and have greater chances of getting the loan by playing the gender card. As per the stories heard in the focus group discussions, in many cases, BRAC MF checked the reliability of the applicant by ensuring they had properties either in Korail or back in their ancestral home, but not the genuineness of the business proposal.[13] The loan was diverted informally towards the housing market, expanding and densifying the houses and landholders renting them out to pay the instalments. As per their information, BRAC MF interest rates are at 26 per cent as opposed to the standard home loans of around 12 per cent in the formal financial market. The recent densification in Korail in the last ten years seems to be tied with the flow of the capital from microfinance loans, albeit informally, but not unknowingly. One NGO worker commented that 'there would be no new house without the extensive loan programs. No one really cares too much about the idea because the microfinance program needs to disburse loans, that's the point, they don't care what you use it for as long as you can pay it.' I wonder how much of the BDT 25 million was used for the housing growth spurt in recent years.

While this is a traceable impact of the microfinance program, the discussion revealed an additional invisible effect of the NGO operations in Korail. One of the focus group members suggested that over the last twenty years (BRAC microfinance has been operating since 1997 in Korail), there has been an informal transfer of forms of knowledge and tactics from the NGOs to the people. On one hand, the way the NGOs mobilized people and organized them at the grassroots level was picked up well by some local leaders. On the other hand, the idea of microfinance transferred horizontally giving rise to an informal financial market in Korail in the form of 'lending cooperatives' run usually by individuals.

One of my interviewees gave me a practical example: 'if you are a landholder with twenty tenants, and you see them borrowing from an NGO, you see the

opportunity to form a "*shomitee*" [a cooperative] with your tenants, and you give them extra benefits since you are the landlord as well. Since the loan repayment is now weekly, even daily, you set up a system very fast and use that income to increase more houses for more rent.' The 'shomitees' charge exorbitant interest, anywhere in the range of 180–240 per cent.[14] Why would anyone borrow from them, I wondered. Multiple reasons, and the same ones that you could find in predatory lending practices all over the world. The tenants often have no collateral to offer, they have a low social capital to borrow from the locals, and often they face an event that needs immediate cash. For example, after the fire in Korail in 2017, people needed immediate capital to build. The longer loan approval processes and the background checks at the microfinance NGOs meant that the only option left was these unregulated moneylending practices.

I looked for actual inhabitants who had taken loans from such 'shomitees'. There were many. Nasima, who lost all six rooms in the fire in 2017, borrowed money from BRAC microfinance and built a two-storied house with thirteen rooms. However, the instalments kept rising and then borrowed from the local 'shomitee' to pay off the other debt. She continues to pay around 70 per cent of her rent in instalments, leaving her with a large house and a larger trap.

There were counter-claims that there were predatory lending practices by individual money lenders in Korail from before and the NGOs didn't have to teach them the trick. While I am no judge of that, as I walked through the post-fire redeveloped part of Korail, I couldn't help but reflect on the popular narrative of the NGOs partnering with the people for glorious bottom-up development.

On the last day of my fieldwork, I met Hannan, the local 'assembler' who led the protests in 2012 against the eviction drive, to share the maps I made of Korail during my stay there. He seemed sombre. He had heard from specific sources that the government agencies have asked the large NGOs to retreat from providing any legal support to the resistance against any eviction/re-settlement drive. Hannan had seen enough in his sixty years to speculate that there was some level of co-opting occurring. After all, he commented that the big NGOs have too much to lose if the 'government puts them in trouble, just like they did to Dr Mohammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank'.[15] And, he suspected that there were 'back channel' negotiations going on through the political party wings with the local leaders in Korail – that there would be some form of compensation to the local leaders to thwart any movement if the eviction moves forward.

If the NGOs conform to such a co-opting mechanism, then one could surely call them 'the silent partners', not just in building the informal city but also in tearing it down.

4

Shaped by fire

4 December 2016
2.50 pm

No one knows exactly how it started, but it didn't matter. A fire had broken out in the Bou Bazaar neighbourhood in Korail. A frenzy ensued, dwellers running out of their rooms, focused on getting out. Some had their TV in their hands, the most expensive item in their house. It doesn't take much for the fire to spread, the houses are too densely packed. CI sheets folded voluptuously when it became too hot, and the bamboo and wood structure turned to charcoal. The roads were not wide enough to allow the fire trucks then. By the time some spontaneous local volunteers put out the fire, 534 dwelling units were razed to the ground. The Google Earth archive captures this morphological erasure well (see erased area in the Google Earth image in Figure 11). As the image from 9 December 2016 shows, the charred ground stands out against the shiny tin roofs untouched by the fire.

The next image two weeks later shows a remarkable recovery where almost all the houses have been reconstructed. The urban fabric appears to have regenerated, like a wound healing itself. The new roofs were green CI sheets, rather than the usual silver, making it easier to spot exactly where the urban 'regeneration' had occurred. From the Google Earth aerial data, it was difficult to assess whether exactly the previous urban configuration was reproduced in terms of the laneway network and separation between units or whether there was some improvement. It seemed to be an invaluable investigation to understand urban production in Korail since the regeneration happened so quickly. What was the process of the re-constitution? Who were the actors of change?

Interestingly enough, I stumbled upon the story of the 'Korail fire' and 'the reconstruction process' in an unexpected place, the International Union of Architects (UIA) Congress in Seoul (held on 3–7 September 2017). A group

Figure 11 Satellite image showing the area burnt by the fire.

of architects and academics from Dhaka presented a paper there sharing their experience of working in the reconstruction process, pro bono of course.[1] The paper described how the fire had prompted a recovery response initiated by BRAC Urban Development Programme, in which these architects were asked to join as the design experts.[2] For me, then, this was an opportunity to study the interaction between the formally trained architects and local dwellers as well as the three-fold relationship between the state, community and the NGOs in an actual circumstance of a post-disaster urban reconstruction.

The paper described their involvement in detail:

> We provided support to the house-owners, particularly on the site planning and widening of the narrow roads. We followed certain steps such as assessments of the housing needs of the community through community mapping, studying the existing housing condition … and preparing a draft house layout plan with wider roads and house ownership through site visits and continuous community consultations. Finally, the development of a house layout map for the affected areas was done, after the agreement of land contribution for road widening was agreed upon by the house owners and the final site plan was displayed to the public. [See that plan in Figure 12.]

The paper concluded that 'there was a remarkable improvement … with wider access roads, ventilation and creation of inner space in housing clusters' while being humble enough to acknowledge that 'in some cases, the community did not follow our plan'. How many cases exactly and why not? The paper presented a remarkable improvement in the area, so I was in Korail to find out if that's so. That and why everyone used the green CI sheet (which had a remarkable impact on how the settlement looked from the formal city)!

I had a discussion with Ramjan, one of the Regional Managers at BRAC Urban Development Programme, who led the response team after the fire incident,

> I was there on the ground from day one after the incident. First, we (an undifferentiated team from state bodies, different NGOs, and different parts of BRAC's apparatus) made a listing of all those affected. On the second day, we did a needs analysis. Contrary to what we thought before, we realised what they needed were plates to eat and not food since there was help coming from the rich communities around Korail [Gulshan and Banani] and also personally by the local Ward Councillor (City Corporation). Therefore, we created a relief

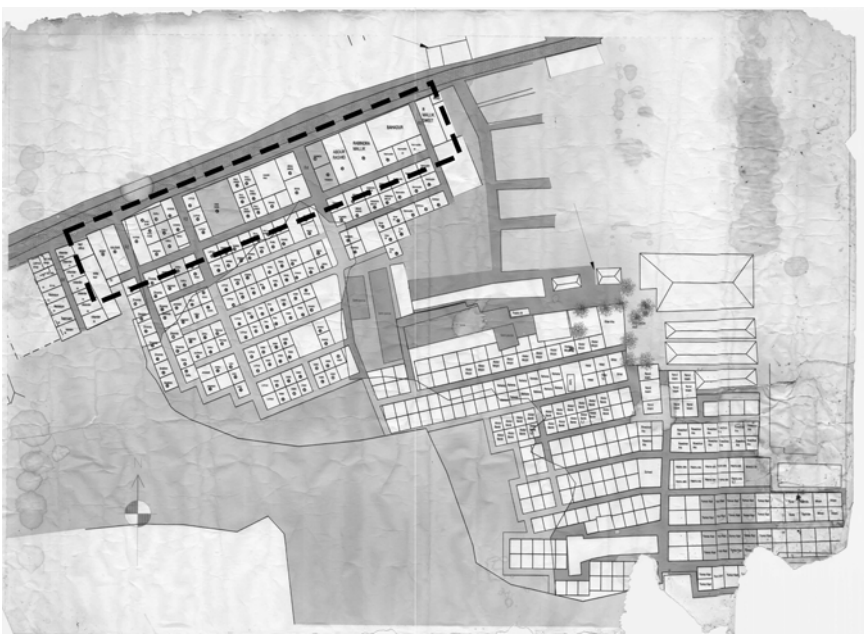

Figure 12 The rehabilitation plan by the architects.

(The black box demarcates the only part that was constructed in reality, the rest of the masterplan area reverted to the original configuration before the fire. This map is a scanned copy of a local copy, collected from a local leader with consent.)

package with basic items. In the meantime, we got in touch with UNDP, who provided BDT 13,500 (£100) to each of the affected families. That concluded the response phase.

His story made it apparent that each of the NGOs slowly became aware of their agenda and differentiated into their domain as time passed. While fires were a common occurrence in slums, there is no standard protocol to deal with them, and the reconstruction. Even in 2024, it is left to ad-hoc in-situ planning and response at the mercy of the desires of the NGOs. Most often, people are left to fend for themselves. Getting back to Korail right after the fire in 2017, numerous archival photos showed that many of the landholders erected a makeshift tent and stayed right on the top of their burnt house, while most of the tenants had moved in with relatives or rented elsewhere already. Why were the landholders sleeping on site under an open sky, despite having other options? That desire is specific to the way their claim to the spot of land operates. One might leave and come back to find that the neighbour has encroached upon his/her territory. Leaving the land might mean losing its tenure. Usually, as I heard from many of the interviewees, NGOs can help with the physical reconstruction of the place, but they cannot help with resolving these socially-decided matters, such as tenure and ownership that have no evidence on paper.

One particular thing Ramjan remembers was the fact that it was the Mayor of Dhaka who approached BRAC UDP and asked about how to lead reconstruction. I paused for a bit as I heard that and considered how contradictory it was for the Mayor to help the people who were termed by the state as the 'mafia' and 'landgrabbers' for devouring public land! If the housing was illegal, then helping to reconstruct them back again should be like abetting a crime! Keeping the satirical thought aside, I brought myself back to the conversation. Ramjan went on to explain how the architects and academics were requested to join their efforts. In the meantime, BRAC UDP had secured BDT 3 million (£20,000) from different donors. In his words, 'the architects surveyed the existing area, then the landholders demarcated their plots using ropes and sticks (83 of them). Then we did a consultation session where we convinced them why road widening was important. They voluntarily willed to let go of their land to make way for the roads during the planning. Then the architects drew the revised layout, the masterplan. We affixed one to the facade of one of the nearby houses [for reference]. Then it was stolen one day.'

How did BRAC UDP construct the roads and houses? 'Well, we gave them the tin [corrugated iron sheet]. The Mayor's office provided the wooden poles and nails for the frames. Then the landholders built the houses, and we

helped them,' Ramjan answered, and then went on to reveal the mystery of the green tin, 'It was pure coincidence, we realised the tin was green only after we received it on site. The Mayor had arranged the tin to be supplied from a factory he knows, bypassing the usual procurement mechanism to get it faster on the ground.' The new image of Korail with the green CI sheets everywhere is a purely contingent change!

To ensure equitable reconstruction, BRAC UDP had negotiated with each of the eighty-three landholders to ensure that they would not charge the tenants for the next eight months since they also lost everything. This was in exchange for help in rebuilding the house. There was even a formal signing between the landholders, tenants and BRAC. Ramjan tells me that it's usually the landholders who had rescinded within the first few months.

If they could go back on deals that were even formally signed, what about the 'masterplan' that was created for and by them, the one the architects had presented at the conference in Seoul? To find out how much of the plan was implemented, I mapped the neighbourhood re-built during reconstruction and compared it with the master plan. Out of all the proposed internal roads of the grid-like network, only a major one was constructed cutting through the plots (the dashed box in Figure 12). The previous narrow laneways were widened to provide access, but that's where the similarities stopped. The rest of the plan was a re-actualization of the previous tenure pattern, with houses rebuilt in places that are clearly marked as 2-metre laneways in the master plan. Also, there was new housing constructed extending into the lake, going beyond the formal plan's dictation of where the housing edge should end.

The process of formulating the plan was participatory and followed the 'industry best practices' (such as community consultation) to work with the poor.[3] Almost all of the landholders had univocally accepted the widening and changes to their laneway network for better access and to reduce the risk of future fires. They looked at the architectural models and all nodded to build that! And yet, they had built back by and large their original settlement, save one extra laneway. Why?

It was time to talk to one of the affected landholders.

Ilias had twenty-four rooms. All were burnt in the fire. His narrative started precisely from where Ramjan's had ended. 'The one extra laneway they did, the BRAC people, with their engineers [architects], it was good. But where are the rest?' he asks me, before answering himself, 'You see, there was supposed to be a road beside my house. They moved it.' Ilias got up, opened his cupboard and extracted a long sheaf of paper. It was the architect's master plan that he

saved from the consultation phase (Figure 12 is a scan of his copy, taken with permission). He points out plainly that,

> the plan that was created after the fire, that got adulterated [his word specifically], with some exchange of money, the roads were reduced from 5 feet to 3 feet, then houses were inched forward, to the point where we were back to the same old settlement. Some local 'matbor' (local leaders) and some local BRAC people revised the plan in situ when the buildings were built back, they went back on the plan intentionally despite us all participating in producing the new masterplan.

As I mapped that one new public street that was introduced into the neighbourhood, one could see the difference created by widening the pathways and restricting the upper floors from cantilevering out. The lighting and ventilation were significantly better. However, the fact that such measures of building something do not mean a permanent change was clear. At the other end of the new laneway, a more audacious landholder had extended his house from either side narrowing the street down and connected them at the second floor, creating a tunnel. He wasn't particularly warm to my questioning of his motivation for doing it.[4]

In the following March (2017), there was another fire, this time eviscerating 5,000 dwelling units in Korail in another neighbourhood. I will not go into detail about the process of its reconstruction but what needs elaboration is the surprising fact that most of the major streets had been widened from 1 to 2.5 metres by the dwellers themselves during reconstruction. The Google Earth archival images confirm the widening of the laneway network, and so did my visits (see Figure 13). This second time, BRAC was not even involved other than to donate the CI sheets, there were no pro-bono architects, but still what resulted was a more spontaneous road upgrading program by the landholders and local leaders themselves. I would imagine that they were as concerned about sacrificing one inch of their land for the public domain as the landholders in the previous fire. Many NGOs were trying to do a road-widening programme before, but their rational persuasion didn't work. How were the dwellers able to do a road-widening project on their own, when NGOs had failed before?

Talking with Moksed, a local leader and others whose houses had burnt down during this second fire, revealed an interesting phenomenon. I asked them why they had voluntarily reduced their building footprints. It seemed the narrative of the event of the previous fire was a dominant motivator. Although they were not affected by the fire in 2016, the stories of the fire were a crucial talking point for months in Korail. After the second fire, the local leaders announced in the mosque

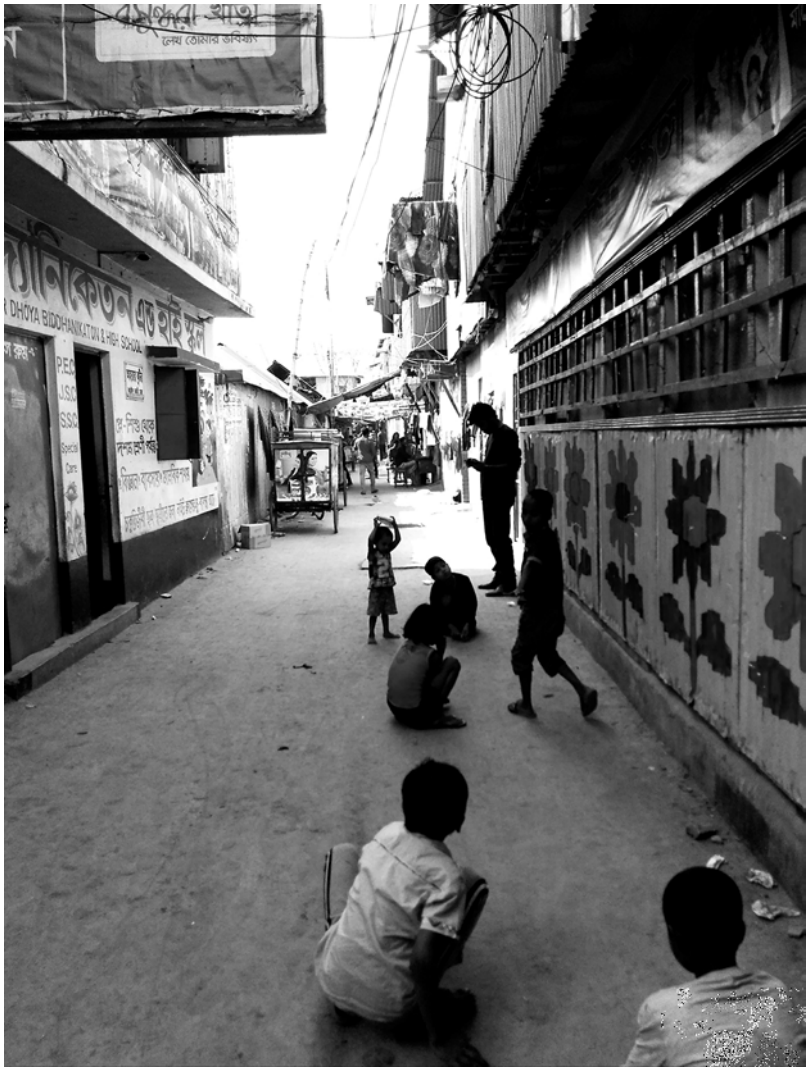

Figure 13 Self-widened roads, an example of how changes in the narratives shape desires, which in turn affects urban transformation.

microphones across the entire neighbourhood that there had to be a minimum 2.5-metre width for the major streets in front of the reconstructed houses. Moksed, walked me proudly around his neighbourhood showing how easy the access was now, and how the wider access was so beneficial for other uses as well.

In the hours of conversations, I kept noticing the role of the fire, and disaster events in general on the way narratives were constructed. The narratives were shaping what people found acceptable and what wasn't.[5] The self-widened roads

were not because of a long-negotiated process done by the communicative planning work of external planners and architects. The event of fire was more than the actual burning of the houses. It had an afterlife in the form of the linguistic expressions it received. It became part of the semiotic aspect of Korail's assemblage.[6] The consecutive fires within three months had an immense impact on the narrative that went on in the tea stalls where the men spent most of their evenings as it did in the internal courtyards where women gossipped. One can imagine how there was an internalization of the fact that there was a trade-off between the footprint to maximize rent and safe access. The landholders wanted more profit, but not at the cost of the lives of their loved ones, as Moksed reminded me, 'Kids are the highest priority'.

What was noticeable in the reconstructed houses in Bou Bazaar was the prevalence of brick-mortar construction, at least the walls, if not a concrete roof. Previously a lot of these were wooden post-CI sheet wall construction, more susceptible to fire. Moksed himself had upgraded likewise. It didn't make sense to build back the same, landholders always tried to build back better. I realized the road widening and the material upgrading were epiphenomena of the shift in their desires affected by the narrative of the fire.

I wanted to pursue the role of events, especially disasters, in Korail's urban transformation. Not just how they reshaped spaces by physically affecting them, but also how they played a role afterwards in the local narratives. A focus group discussion with a few of the oldest inhabitants of Korail shed more light on this. Jerina, one of the first to arrive in Korail and build, didn't have to think twice about my question. She chronologically went over the history of Korail, which started revealing the role of disaster events in the way the settlement transformed.

When the houses were built in the early 1990s, they were all bamboo mat walls and plastic sheet roofs. There was an influx of rural people after a major national-scale flood in 1988. People were driven by economic liberalization and the growth of the private ready-made garment (RMG) factory. As noted earlier, Korail is next to Mohakhali which was and still is, a major production hub of RMG. The economic condition of exploitative low wages meant that only the bamboo mat and recycled polyethene were affordable as building materials.

In 1998, there was another major flood, and afterwards, the roof was converted to CI sheets in most of the houses, even those not affected by the flood itself. I imagined a raised house as a response to submergence, but why change the roof? I didn't understand how they were related. Jerina smiled and patiently continued, 'You see, the bamboo mat walls just washed away, so people built with wooden poles or bamboo frames to resist that. However, at the same time,

these were more load-bearing and now people could put the CI sheets on them before they would collapse. Seeing the benefit of the tin roof, and the rainwater it prevented, other people soon copied them. This is very common in Korail.'

She thought for a while and added:

> Then there was the fire of 2004, and even though it affected some parts, many people started changing their bamboo mat and sack walls into CI sheet walls. It was very difficult to repair a bamboo mat wall, as you need ample space beside your house to do it. By then Korail was already very dense, so, it was also a convenience that people wanted, so they changed. CI-wall frames could be assembled elsewhere and brought like a kit of parts, making it easier for construction. Then, as the situation got better in Korail [in terms of safety], more people started to come, and there was no more space to build. People who had money already started to build a few brick houses, but not many. For a long time, it was that way. Then the fire of 2016/17 has happened. And, then people were pushed over the edge, they say that CI-Sheet houses are not safe from fire, and now everyone wants a *pucca* (brick) house. You can see the recent boom.

I thanked her as I departed, the story of all the disasters the Korailians faced through all these years reverberating in my head, and also the future ones to be brought on by climate change, particularly the urban heat island effect in such a congested territory. It was apparent that every disaster event had resulted in further adaptations and subsequent transfer of that knowledge across the communities. Even when the event was localized in one part, the impact of it was settlement-wide, and this led to significant changes, through what can be conceived as a form of horizontal transference of awareness. In Greek mythology, a phoenix is a bird that rises from its ashes. One might think of Korail as that, but I don't think that is the case. I think Korail is more in line with Hydra, the mythical serpentine creature, which grows two heads when one is chopped off.[7] The almost fatalist attitude in Korailians hid underneath a kind of 'whatever happens, I will do better' defiance.

But I wondered, how would they face a disaster that may wipe out the entire settlement – for example, the impending potential eviction?

One evening I was sitting with my friend Azim on the roof of the local mosque overlooking Korail. He commented casually that if there was no fear of 'eviction' in people's minds, they would have built high-rises in Korail, and they would have invested more to make it better. I realized that the event of 'eviction' was real in the sense that it was producing an affective atmosphere through expressions but just hadn't been actualized materially yet. The eviction was already alive, it was shaping desires in a way that affected the city already.

Azim himself had recently purchased some land in Dhaka's outskirts, saving money for years. The only reason he gave me was the possibility of eviction. He could have extended his house two stories upwards with the money he spent on buying that land. He could have spent it fixing his son's room, to make his shop more fireproof. He could have installed an extra fan to battle the ever-increasing annual heat waves. Yet, for many, these changes remain unrealized.

Korail was both a city that the dwellers had built and the one that they didn't.

Part Two

Arrangements

5

The social imperative

There is a huge sign perched on top of a gate that greets you as you enter Korail from the west. The signage is courtesy of the local ward councillor of the Mayor's office. It proclaims Korail renamed as an *Adorshonagar* (literally translating to 'the Ideal City'). The city corporation people had come and installed it recently (in 2019) and also claimed that this slum *should be* called *Adorshonagar*. The irony is not lost on the dwellers, who walk nonchalantly beneath the sign and fail to comply with such demands. Why would the councillor's office go to such lengths to formalize the entrance to a slum that is deemed illegal by the state? While they aren't interested in upgrading the settlement itself, why the tokenistic engagement over a trivial matter? Was this an attempt to confer a certain legitimacy to themselves by portraying a sense of support for the settlement? Do such efforts from formal bodies confer any legitimacy on the settlement itself? Would the bulldozers be any kinder during a forced eviction?

This essay is about the notion of legitimacy. However, I begin with a disclaimer that I do not speak of legitimacy in the sense that is often implied in the legal/illegal narrative regarding informal settlements. It isn't about whether the dwellers are squatting or not, or whether they have access to the land titles. I want to pursue legitimacy from the perspective of the dwellers in their everyday lives, and how arranging the legitimacy is a key concern before any action related to the urban transformation. In my numerous encounters with dwellers involved in actual building activity as well as conversations in tea stalls and focus groups, what came up frequently was how someone had to 'legitimize' what they were doing before they could start.

Perhaps it's best explained from Meema's perspective, a 25-ish-year-old landholder who was studying for an upcoming exam when I visited her house. She had gone back to school after raising children and working for a few years. I sat in her small courtyard, two metres wide, but which had a guava tree. She picked one as I sat and offered it to me before agreeing to sit for the conversation. Meema explained,

> We have been living here for 11 years, renting for a long time. But we wanted to get at least a room for ourselves. We started with a request to the local leaders (both community and political) for somewhere to build a room. Because we lived in the area for some time, we know the leaders well. Then, we offered them some money to drink tea.[1] Then their people came with bamboo sticks and put them in watermarking the area at the edge of the lake where we could start to produce the land and build the house. They usually stuck around as we worked [intermittently] until the job was done. They don't work. Their job is to just mark the area and to see how the work was progressing.

Then she remarked off-handedly, 'This is how everyone does it. You need to stay here, know them a bit [accrue social capital], and then you will intuitively know when to ask for permission.'

How about the fee paid to facilitate this consent, almost like a planning application? How much was it and how did they know, I asked. It is understood locally how much is enough through the words on the street. She said it's never taken in one go, one of the benefits of knowing the legitimators socially. 'Also, it's not just them, we had to pay this neighbour BDT 6,000 to make the laneway,' she points to the narrow laneway that connects their house with the public lane. And the layout of the house? 'Well, they show the location of the rooms, we negotiate, then we design it in situ during construction, working on the design with the labourers.'

Later in 2017, as they extended the house into the lake, they had to get it legitimized beforehand through similar socio-financial lubrication. But wasn't this extortion, I asked. Meema says that it is what it is, it is the local system. The same leaders ensure that no one else eyes their property, conferring internal tenure security. If anyone else tries to evict them or grab their land from within Korail, they know that the leaders are there in the same neighbourhood. 'If they take the money, then they are accountable', Meema quipped.

I looked for other instances of this legitimization process, and I had a hunch that this was not the only process to generate legitimacy.

I looked for members of the local political party wings, who seemed to be playing a huge role in conferring legitimacy to the urban production process. Kamal, someone I knew by then, was a young recruit of the current ruling party, who had built his house recently too. Unlike Beltola or Bou Bazaar, where extension into the lake was common once a house was built on the edge, in Satellite West, another neighbourhood to the north of the lake, the legitimacy did not include any right to extend onto the lake. He built his four rooms. He wasn't the party leader then, so he had to pay the local leader, who later turned

out to be his current boss. But where was this payment going? To track this chain of legitimacy, I needed to follow the money. He explained to me,

> The money that you spend for the permission and demarcation of the area to build, that is not just for the leaders, the police officer who is assigned to this area gets something, all pricing is set from before. The negotiations always happen long before anyone can do anything on the ground. For us, [implying the local leaders], the cut of the fee is much less. The leaders need the money for running the party office.

The social arrangement is always invisibly but invariably present in a multitude of forms, particularly as the settlement got larger and land or lake edge to build became more precious. There was an arrangement between the police, who represented the state's power to use coercive means and violence, and the local party leaders. In a quid pro quo relation, the legitimization process meant a constant flow of cash to the police in exchange for security from harassment such as unwarranted arrests, if not straightforward violence.[2]

There are exceptions of course. There is one particular group who draws their legitimacy from a different source, and they are not subject to the same treatment by the local leaders. They were often the children of the pioneer settlers and very respected elders. They are quite a few, at least in the new parts of Korail. Take for example the case of Anowara. She is one of the largest landholders, with forty rooms (each rented by a family) and she is barely thirty-five. Her father was one of the first settlers in Korail and was a local leader for many years. As her daughter, she had a sense of a right to extend her housing compound, which she did into the lake and also maintained effective control for a long time now. She says she just had to keep up good relations with the local legitimators even after her father died, but she never had to pay for any permission. She insisted she keeps out of local politics, so they aren't doing her any political favours as well. While she enjoys a form of exception due to an inheritance of social capital, newcomers are not so lucky.

A central question to me was how these leaders showcased their validity, and how the desire for a house was always conjoined with a desire for legitimacy from these leaders. Why was everyone accepting them, treating them almost as state operatives? The instability of systems of authority where they lack their own legitimacy is noted empirically quite widely in political science. What was stabilizing their identities as local leaders in Korail? Surely it wasn't based on how justly they were managing the affairs of the settlement. What was the chain of legitimacy? This is where the national-level political parties came in.

Often during my conversations, I had heard the term 'present party' being used to describe the legitimator's affiliations. 'Present party' is a colloquial phenomenon of denoting the political party in power, and it's quite common for local leaders to change their national party affiliation after any election to always align themselves with the party in state power.[3] These settlement leaders often operate from the local political club premises located throughout Korail (now about twenty of them, I have termed them 'chameleon's powerhouses'). The benefit to the national parties is obvious.[4] Someone in a tea stall conversation had noted how easy it was to get party posts if someone could pay a large sum every month to party funds/upper-tier leaders. He added that there was a slow homogenization between the service profiteers, the large landholders and the political party leader in recent years.

These local-level leaders in Korail are at the lowest echelons of the formal party hierarchy. The party itself is organized along the state's territories. For example, Dhaka is divided into wards as part of its official urban governance, which has both the formally elected representative, the 'Ward Commissioner', as well as numerous branches of the political party that are formed pseudo-formally. Most of the leaders I met in Korail, at some point in our conversation, implied their close ties with the commissioner and were eager to show it. These leaders 'supplied' manpower to local elections for cash, filled up the political rallies and took part in the spectacle of democracy at the national scale. In return, they were given a sense of legitimacy to decide the affairs inside the settlement. In this arrangement, there is a mutual conferral of legitimacy and flow of cash in-between the Korail dwellers, local leaders and political leaders. This is something that I cannot prove since none admitted to it, but this is the word from the streets of Korail.

What was the spatial manifestation of this double flow of finance, legitimacy and power? How does this relate to the urban transformation in Korail? I mapped the eighteen years of urban growth from 2001 to 2018 (see Figure 14). As can be seen, the largest 'growth spurts' happened in 2010 and 2015, coinciding with the national elections held the year before. While during other years, the filling up of the lake and construction of new houses were slow and incremental, there seemed to be a massive burst of urban production six months after the election. In terms of the land conversation area, these two years alone produced 60 per cent of total lake reclamation. The tenure mapping shows that the rate of approvals for new houses and extensions had increased after the elections.

While for me it was a revelation, for Saidul, one of the oldest dwellers in Korail, it was quite obvious. He even explained the six-month wait.

Figure 14 Urban transformation in Korail's western part from 2001 to 2017.

(Black implies older houses. The lighter in shade, the more newly built it is. Note that the greying is uneven around the edge of the lake, the northern areas of Satellite Poshchim have grown much more than the southern neighbourhood of Beltola. 500m × 500m.)

> The [local] leaders are tentative after any election, even if the candidate they support wins; there is a wait-and-see period. Because of the work they do in the election, then comes the benefit period. They act as if they own the slum. The upper party leaders know about all these, but why would they stop it? Even their silence is taken as a form of giving permission.

Because of the blurred lines between the government and the political party, the legitimacy conferred upon the elected government (the legal-rational kind) gets translated laterally to the party that won the election and then distributed down hierarchical lines to the settlement's urban formation.[5]

Dwellers in Korail see this connection to the larger political party as a validation of the local leaders' authority to legitimize their new construction

and renovation. The relationship with the local police adds a further layer of validation. These alliances are not hidden. Rather for them to work, there needs to be an elaborate display. Korail is replete with signage, posters and festoons of these different political parties. The local clubhouse in Beltola is filled with posters of the councillor to the point where there is no wall to be seen, only the councillor's face and two portraits of past and present prime ministers hang dead centre (see Figure 15). The streets are lined up with posters of various sizes – the local leaders face prominently shining along with other comrades in the hierarchy. At the very top, usually sits the image of the current prime minister, as the figurehead of all. The visuals are only one half of the spectacle.

More important are the narratives spun in tea stalls and clubhouses by the local leaders: tales of their connections with councillors, ministers and higher-ups in the party, selfies taken with them, visits to their houses in the formal parts of the city, going on a tour with them, call lists in their mobile phones that have the number of the police higher-ups – all of these are assembled somewhat consciously to 'create an impression of impregnable power, which is pointless to resist, to create an aura', emanating a legitimacy by association.[6] An

Figure 15 A local clubhouse, which acts as the local political party office.

(Note the walls plastered with posters of the local ward councillor, with portraits of him, the current Prime Minister and her father, the 'Father of the Nation'.)

enormous amount of daily life is about such generative 'adda' (chitchats), which are seemingly idle talk; they are anything but.

The legitimacy, thus produced, does not manifest only in the form of approving new buildings/extensions/renovations, oftentimes also in the forms of administrative tasks and 'informal formalizations'. For example, Mahmudul Hasan, president of one of the Community Development Organizations (CDOs) in the Jamaibazaar neighbourhood, has taken on the extra duty of providing address plates to the landholders in his territory. Even the councillors's office also gave out similar nameplates in other areas of Korail, albeit informally since the City Corporation does not even service the slum in any capacity. These plastic plates, detailing the name of the landholder and assigning an address to the house, are fixed outside of each house (see Figure 16). Landholders have applied and paid for them to be installed despite knowing that they don't add any legality to their tenures. Neither are the assigned addresses used for delivery.[7] Yet, people are very proud of their nameplates. In a sense, it is a visual reminder

Figure 16 Name and address fixed to the front of the house, a sense of legitimacy conferred.

(Name and address erased for anonymity.)

for them and others of their legitimacy of existence, even if only from the local legitimator. The nameplates serve to cater to a deeper desire for dignity, to speak to others from a position of having done things fairly, to belong.

Since my investigation looks at urban change, I wanted to dig deeper into Korail's past and see how the legitimization process worked during the time of the first settlers. Perhaps these early settlers had it easy, I wondered. After all, all they had to seemingly do was to put up some bamboo mat houses somewhere in the empty land cleared by BTCL.

'Not at all', Jerina – the elder from the previous essay who was also a pioneer-settler – laughed at my theory when I met her and told her so: 'I was in the first group to settle in the early 90s and I paid BDT 100 [£0.75] for every foot of land.' That sounded ridiculous to me, so I asked her to explain in detail. Jerina elaborated,

> The land [on which Korail has settled] was never returned to the original owners even after BTCL didn't need it. Many of these original owners lived in the nearby Mohakhali neighbourhood. They formed a committee to reclaim [in the court of law] their land from the state. They are the ones who had put up some houses in Korail. They had a sense of legitimate claim on the land because it belonged to them before. The more entrepreneurial young ones from them, also who had ties to the local party, were the ones who started selling bits and pieces of land to people like me, arriving from another slum in Dhaka or maybe rural villages.

'Oh, so they just made plots and sold it!' I exclaimed, now crystal clear. Jerina nodded in disagreement. 'There were no plots demarcated. Because we lived in another slum nearby, we knew some of them, so, it was easy to approach them. The news spread that were some houses erected [close to the south edge of Korail]. They had come up with a rule to "sell" the land. The land had to be 3 metres in width and BDT 100 for every foot you wanted in length. It was up to you how much you could afford. I bought 11 feet.' Jerina elaborated that there was an additional 1 metre on one side for a veranda and 1 metre at the end for a kitchen and toilet that was added free of cost to the land sold, effectively making a plot 4–5 metres in width while the length varied according to the needs or financial situation of the buyer. The length varied, but since there were no services to speak of, only the poorest and people with no option came to buy. The financial condition put an effective limit on the length of the plot being two or three rooms (2.5–5 metres). However, everyone involved knew that the land itself was not being sold in any way, rather they were just buying the local legitimacy to develop it.

What about the location of the plot? Was it negotiable? 'Usually no, they walked with you where they wanted you to have the plot, unless you knew them well, or paid extra,' she added.

So in short, a socially legitimate, yet-to-be-decided legal/illegal land's usage and development rights (not property rights) were sold to intra-slum and rural-to-urban migrants, not in the form of pre-defined plots but through in-situ negotiations with rules and rates that were fixed before! Jerina agreed that was the case in the beginning. The placement of these plots was not part of a larger land development scheme but just piecemeal and ad-hoc.

Jerina is now an advocate, president of the local CDO in Bou Bazaar and a regular advocate for slum rights, working with different organizations to help Korail. She drew legitimacy from her stories as well, and they were different from the political party legitimacy route. She spoke of the struggles of trying to make it in Korail and make Korail a place worthy to live in. The times she was beaten or held at gunpoint to stop organizing the slum dwellers, for being the first woman in Korail to go to college against all odds and above all, the fact she remained in the slum even when she could be out of it – all contributed to a charismatic persona that generated an authority immanently. When I talked with other people, they had a sense of reverence for her. They accepted her advice and judgement on social issues and trusted her that she was not a leader who was there to siphon off money. Her staying with the trouble of continuing to live in the settlement was deeply moving for many, and she was respected for it. And it was why perhaps she was still there. Outside the slum, she would be a nobody.

There was one part of the legitimacy puzzle still unresolved. There were already some houses and people using the land intermittently even before Jerina arrived in Korail in the early 1990s. Who were they? What was their claim to legitimacy?

I found the answer coincidentally during a conversation with Helena, a landholder living in the north. She was showing me her childhood pictures in Korail. Her father was an employee of BTCL and they lived in the official housing quarters for the staff (colony). They would often visit the empty fields in Korail in the late 1980s. She casually mentioned how they had moved from the village and how her dad had made sure that he could still have some cows and till the land by himself, even after working in the office. He didn't feel at home without them. He, along with other staff, sought permission from the top management of BTCL to build farmhouses on the disputed land, right next to BTCL boundary. The higher-ups in BTCL didn't care too much about that, but that permission socially legitimized a hold over the land. As we shall see, this seemingly

inconsequential conferring of legitimacy from a state agency later shaped the urban transformation very differently in the northern neighbourhoods of Korail.

The stories of gaining legitimacy in Korail show that the beginnings were never from notions of insurgency or revolutionary ideas, as is often romanticized in theorizations. Rather the multitude of forms of the beginning of the settlement was a re-affirmation of the quiet settlement of the ordinary, noted by Bayat a long time ago.[8] In effect, the two major sources of legitimacy of the first settlers – disgruntled locals aiming to reclaim their land towards the south and BTCL employees expanding their agricultural uses towards the north of Korail – were the two anchors that generated the seeds of the future settlement pattern. By 2000, they had expanded from edge to edge, maturing the laneway networks and having already created a stable urban block pattern, despite having very different beginnings.

What the stories also show is how seeking legitimacy is a manifestation of a desire to be socially accepted, whether as a landholder or as a leader, even when you have the financial ability to build or the capacity to use violence.[9] The imperative to be socially accepted often is the most unnoticeable aspect when we think of informal settlements and the billion slum dwellers. The arrangements to ensure a sense of dignity in the process of everyday life are more than the fear of violence or eviction, it is not simply a rational calculus to avoid certain ends. The desire to be socially valued and accepted does not sit mutually exclusive to the other desires discussed so far in the book, but rather, often is the productive force behind them that economic motive is not sufficient to explain.[10] To me, this is the largest caveat in international development as it relates to tackling the global challenges of slums. We have so far failed to understand the fact that oftentimes, the social imperative, the desire for social status and collective values trumps all other dimensions.

For now, let us return to Korail to see what happened with the disappearing lake, and the arrangements behind it.

6

Lake? What a load of rubbish!

While on my way to Korail one morning, I noticed a rickshaw van – human-powered tricycle for carrying loads – right outside my apartment.[1] I was curious because I had seen similar rickshaw vans taking loads of cement bags into Korail as well. I asked my rickshaw-puller to follow them. Surely enough, this van, being pedalled by one and pushed by another, slowly made its way to Korail, and into the narrow streets. They parked the van outside a small laneway too narrow to allow the van. The driver and his helper picked one cement bag each and made their way in. I was on their heels. They were slightly intrigued by my intrusion but were too busy to ask me anything.

The labourers followed into a narrower lane that ended directly into what looked like someone's home. It was. Through the bedroom, we went to the back of the house, and in between other houses, there was an open area, children playing and men working. The labourers dumped the cement bags onto the designated places in the ground. The bags were full, not of cement, but building debris – chunks of plaster, bricks chips, concrete pieces – all seemingly gathered from a building demolition site. The owner of the house, Sohel, was working on one end of the site. As I approached him, he cautioned me, 'It's all water [yet], step carefully.' I obliged. What I stepped on was a curious mixture of all sorts of household waste and water hyacinth. Like stepping on a large sponge, it wobbled under my feet and yet did not give in. I asked him what was going on.

Sohel had decided to extend his house, and the only side open was the edge towards the lake. After the 'usual' process of obtaining legitimacy, he marked his increment of extension using bamboo poles on the lake. Thankfully, he adds, since his neighbour went ahead and built around his demarcation, leaving him with a gap to build in but cutting off his chances of any future extension beyond the gap. He didn't complain. His existing house was built on stilts, but he wanted his new one to be on land. So, instead of extending his house as such on stilts, he went ahead with filling up his demarcated piece of the lake. I asked him what the process was and the specific materials used in the filling.

Figure 17 Filling up the lake to make new land!

'Oh, that is what we call "rubbish". There are people here in the slum who we get in touch with when we have to do some "filling" – the rubbish guys. Per bag, we pay BDT 50 [about £0.50], and we buy by van-loads. For my rooms, I will probably need 20 vanloads.' Sohel had been preparing his land for quite some time. First, he had paid the local community waste collector to dump household waste that was gathered from the neighbourhood. Once the water receded after a copious amount of garbage was dumped in, the ground became a bit firm, like where we were standing. Then the 'rubbish' guys started filling in with the construction waste. Once the ground level was somewhat close to the plinth of the older house, Sohel would use fresh sand to seal off the land. Then the minimal foundation needed for the house would go on top of that. He went back to fixing a bamboo fence at the edge. I went back to my investigation of this reclamation process – the landfilling.[2]

In the following three months, I came back often to see how the construction was progressing, but we shall come back to Sohel's story later.

One of the most ubiquitous urban transformation operations underway in Korail is the filling up of the lake. Like death by a thousand cuts, the lake reclamation happened incrementally, bag by bag. Almost 50,000 square meters

have been reclaimed in the last eighteen years. Given an average depth of 7 metres, that's about ten million bags of rubbish and waste into the lake! The particular bag used to transport the rubbish is recycled cement bags, their extreme durability and watertightness making it particularly favoured by the day labourers. With their rickshaw van, these 'rubbish' droppers constitute a constant flow into Korail, like a geological deposition of different materials that eventually coalesce to form land.

Mapping the lake edge at the settlement scale leads to an interesting insight (see Figure 18). The lakefilling was unevenly distributed. The eastern edge had almost no extension into the lake, while the interior of the settlement and the western fringes had most. At this larger scale, there is a collective awareness of the gaze of the formal city. The eastern edge is the public face of Korail; it faces Gulshan, the formal city. People at this edge acknowledge that

Figure 18 Lake reclamation area denoted in lighter grey (1.5km × 1.5km).

extending is not an option, since the 'authorities' would see them. There is a self-imposed control of growth. That narrative is not baseless. There were mild evictions, 'trimming of the edge' so to speak in 2012, when some houses on stilts that had expanded onto the lake were demolished. On the western side, the wall that was built in 2012 to keep them outside of the public gaze rather facilitated the unprecedented level of lake filling in the interior (denoted in lighter grey).

But what explains the differences at the neighbourhood scale of that lake interior? Since any material flow is regulated by access, producing land is intricately related to the laneway network. The type, width and material condition of the laneways contribute to the different rates at which a particular area of the lake is converted to land. The distance between the rickshaw van with loaded rubbish bags and the lake edge is one key determinant of the rate of land production, particularly as the last stretch is carried by hand.

One way the relationship can be demonstrated is to compare the landfilling rate in the northern neighbourhood of Satellite Poshchim and the southern one of Beltola. The massive landfilling in the former was aided by the pre-existing larger-width laneways. The rickshaw van carrying the rubbish could reach the lake edge as opposed to Beltola where it had to be parked on the main street and carried much further by hand. Understanding this relationship, the 'grabber-developers' who were landfilling in the north also took on the responsibility for widening the road through a mix of coercion and tactics, as we had mentioned in Samsul's story. They upgraded the road only to allow a faster flow of rubbish since that rate in return determined how fast they could produce the new housing.

The intricate unfolding of land, access and housing (co-evolution) dispels any notion of a linear progression being followed in Korail. Often the land came in the last, as I found out one day. While mapping the access network by demarcating the laneways, I came across Hafiz, who is one of the few landholders in Korail who lives outside the settlement. He had built some of the latest housing units in Korail at the lake edge, complete with services and access. What was missing from his housing units was the land underneath. All the houses were on stilts and the floors were wooden planks with a cement slab on top. I asked him why that was land the last thing on his mind. His answer was very particular, 'I built the houses to rent them out, the newcomers don't care for the land. Once I have some more money to invest, I will make the land underneath instead of replacing the stilt bamboos [bamboo requires replacement every 2–3 years]'. In that process, the floors of his rental units

would be opened up, and rubbish bags dumped to raise the ground, and later cemented on top to recreate the floor. The materials and the technology were the same as in Sohel's house, but the differences in desires produced a different order of unfolding of housing and land.

Different sequences of land and housing production can be observed simultaneously even when the starting conditions are similar. Take the two causeways across the lake for example, one in the west connecting Beltola to the BTCL office area, and the other connecting it to Bou Bazaar. In both of them, the initial condition was a causeway with the lake on either side of it. On one hand, along the Beltola-BTCL road, the land was produced first using waste, but not upgraded to rubbish grade. It was then put to different uses such as rickshaw garages and only later converted to housing. On the other hand, along the Beltola-Bou Bazaar road, the housing was produced first using stilts, and it was a long time before the landholders slowly upgraded the land, inverting the sequence. In the first one, the land was filled speculatively by very few local leaders and kept tentatively without any further urban production. The first use was a rickshaw garage because it required no further investment except the land. In the latter one, the landholders formed a cooperative, distributing the lake edge amongst themselves, 2 metres each, along the water. They didn't care for producing the land, they constructed bamboo stilt houses (called 'tong' or 'macha') first.

It is common for subsistence-dwellers to have land as the last priority, thereby focusing on housing. They often coexist with large pieces of empty land that are prepared a priori but without any construction for a long time. This is the closest to what can be termed as a 'plot' in Korail, and there aren't many of these. I talked with Mohsin, who was one of the landholders of such a piece of land (see Figure 19). He had the land ready for building. There were clear demarcations using bricks where the housing units would go up. So, what was stopping him? 'Well, I spent all my money filling up the land, I didn't realise it was so deep,' he admitted. Such undeveloped land often is used as a space for playing and community gathering, with the tacit approval of the landholder who had produced it. When I chatted with some of the people gathered there in the de facto public space, they acknowledged that this land belonged to someone (implying the tenure condition is well known) and they were here just temporarily.

Such speculative landfilling can be mapped in some parts of Korail where the edge of the lake is completely filled with waste, but yet to be layered on top by rubbish. The waste, from the city outside as well as from Korail, produces a 'land-in-waiting' that could be then differentiated along different lines. Perhaps

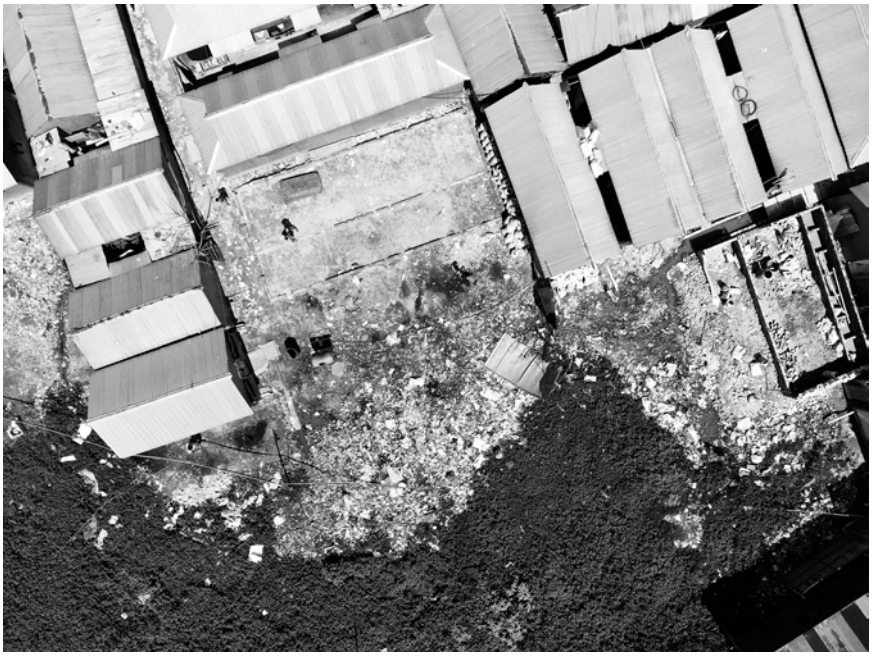

Figure 19 A reclaimed plot at the edge of the water.

the landholders are waiting for the opportune moment or finance approvals from NGOs; maybe the legitimacy of future construction is being worked out; maybe the rubbish guys are busy filling up elsewhere. The possibilities were many and the answer was often unpredictable: that much I had learned in Korail by then.

But what of the rubbish itself? Where was it flowing from?

By talking with the labourers bringing the rubbish in, I could trace it back to the new developments in Dhaka and not just in the immediate formal neighbourhoods. In a synergistic arrangement, at one end the formal developers were paying the informal rubbish guys to clear the building waste away and make space for the development in the formal city. On the other end, these labourers got paid to dump the rubbish to lay the ground of an informal city. Building waste in Dhaka is neither formally collected by the City Corporation nor is there any formal facility for its disposal. Ironically, the informal management of waste in the formal city intricately supported the construction of the very ground of the informal city.[3]

However, the production of land in Korail has a discordant flip side in its arrangement with the formal city. The deposition of land gets in the way of another vital material flow – water.

Tracing the water flows at the metropolitan scale, it was easy to identify the adverse multiplier effect every bag of rubbish was having on the overall functioning of Dhaka's stormwater drainage. While it has been named as such, it is misleading to use the term 'lake' to describe the waterbody running through Korail. In reality, it is part of the natural rainwater run-off stream flushing the rainwater out of the city into the adjacent Balu River. Blocking it intensifies water logging and flooding upstream. One could even locate the specific areas upstream in Dhaka which are getting waterlogged more in recent years during the monsoon season just as this new land was created in Korail. Moreover, dumping rubbish and garbage has severely contaminated the lake water and has led to loss of biodiversity.

People in Korail are aware of this. The lake, locally called the 'jheel', has always been an important part of their narrative of Korail. It features prominently in fond childhood memories of fishing and swimming. Its loss is lamented by the same legitimators who have been overseeing the landfilling operations. Waterlogging perhaps hits home because parts of Korail are now getting waterlogged precisely because of the reduced flow of water through the lake. Often, the leaders told me it was time to do something about the 'jheel', otherwise it would give the state agencies an excuse to come and evict them. On the other hand, there are some who didn't care much. In response to my question of what happens if the whole lake is landfilled, one responded, 'Well, we will figure out a way to make the water drain out, we will have a big drain down to the middle, we will sit together and figure it out.' The landfilling will go on until then, it was implied subtly.

I encountered this subtle given-ness of the need to have land during many conversations. Most in Korail spoke of landfilling as a right, as 'natural'. Was it because land meant less smell from the stagnant water underneath? Was it to have a stronger foundation of the houses? There are many examples of informal settlements on water that remain on stilts for a long time, for example, in Southeast Asia. Why have not Korailians done that? Perhaps there was something more to land than its materiality, its technology and its relations across multiple scales.[4] Something beyond an immediate instrumental reason. What did land signify for them – not its meaning (signification), but its significance (importance)? What narratives were pulled into producing the land in Korail? 'What was the nature of relations between elements for there to be a desire' for land?[5]

To understand that, I held a focus group in which we discussed the narrative of land in the cultural landscape of Bangladesh. The Bangla word for land is

jomi and has a particular connotation that is missing in 'land'. Etymologically, land indicates the original Germanic sense – 'a definite portion of the earth's surface owned by an individual'. We speak of 'landing a job' precisely in the sense of obtaining it. However, in Bangla, *jomi* means more than the instrumental relation to property. 'Jomi' means not just a thing, but it has performative action: it also provides the 'ground' (which, as the etymological evidence shows, has a sense of 'deep place, source or origin'). Often my interviewees talked of this wanting a piece of land in the sense of providing for themselves a new grounding in the city.

I think it is difficult to represent words in terms of other words, something always escapes in translation. If you allow me to digress, perhaps excerpts from a famous poem by Rabindranath Tagore, the 1913 Nobel Laureate from Bengal, could impart a sense of the significance of land for a largely rural, sedentary culture of 3,500 years. The poem chronicles how a peasant was dispossessed of his land by the local feudal lord (Zamindar). In a particular stanza, the peasant in the poem rhetorically speaks to the land:[6]

> Shame, oh shame on you, my shameless little plot of land!
> How is it that you yielded so easily to the seducer's blandishment?
> So bountiful once, so caring, sweet and pleasant,
> once a goddess, now you're a mere servant!

For the landless coming to Korail, the narrative of reclaiming land was powerful since a lot of them had lost not just material land but the grounding it provided. To be landless conferred a low social status. The landholders in Korail were in a different class, but within them, those who had permanent land and structures were higher on the ladder. And it is nothing essential to Korail. To own 'jomi' is a particularly strong cultural drive in Bangladesh. Discussions in tea stalls in Korail are often about where to buy land – back home in the village, or on the outskirts of Dhaka. Rental housing on stilts is seen as inferior. Housing with a tree (confirming contact with the ground) is seen as better. If we are to go by the logic of the housing market, it is clear that the developers operating in Korail responded to that need to have land. They have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that they fill the lake up before building the houses, and not only because of structural necessity. Bamboo stilt houses just would not sell. People desired land, a desire within the larger aggregate of what constitutes a home.

This may seem like a detour but I think it is necessary to understand desire in the sense of how it operates within an assemblage of materialities and narratives, of physical objects and affects. The urban operations are not driven by a singular logic, yet are not incoherently assembled either. There is a multiplicity behind that simple operation of dumping a few bags of rubbish into the lake. Dwellers in Korail are not after just 'shelter' but desire a home with all its concomitant entanglements.

7

A desire for 'six arms'

From afar, Korail looks like a metallic woven mat. The closely packed building footprint reveals the staggering density of the urban form. The sheer repetitiveness of the green and silver CI sheet roofs creates a very distinct urban image that sits in contrast with 'modern' Dhaka on the other side of the lake. The average population trends towards 250,000, with the seasonal variation taken into account.[1] The dwelling density is a staggering 1,400 people per hectare. In comparison, Manhattan is 280 people/hectare. Starting with a population of 0 in 1990, how did the growth occur? How did it reach this incredible density and how could I make sense of the housing arrangements? In this essay, I wish to pursue housing not because I want to focus on the particular function in the instrumental sense, but rather because housing is the most fundamental desire for the formation of Korail. The later differentiations into the other functions often are 'housed' within the structures produced earlier as dwelling units.

After my many visits there, it seemed the fundamental unit that was repeated endlessly in various permutations was the 'single-room dwelling unit', much like a studio apartment. The rooms usually contained all the infrastructure for making life possible, the sides of the wall being used to hang clothes, the water drums to store water and the raised bed providing key storage space underneath (see Figure 20). It wasn't much, but for many it was ample. The repetition of this unit all over Korail made sense, as I had reconciled my conversations with the elders and the pioneer settlers. The one thing common to their narratives was the desire of 'six arms' – referring to the single-room dwelling unit.

An arm's length is a local unit of measurement. Six arms (*choy haat* in Bangla), roughly equivalent to 3 metres, denoted the minimum width of a room that they required. Any less than this restricts the possibility of a domestic life, and any more simply costs more to build. So they leased land from the local legitimators in those terms, adding six arms length for each room. Along Bou Bazaar Bridge, as I had mentioned earlier, a local cooperative had used the same measure for

Figure 20 Inside a single-room dwelling unit in Korail.

allocating the edge of the lake amongst their members. The 'six arms' room is the unit of increment or the module of growth in Korail's urban transformation. It is a good place to start inquiring about how that one unit is produced.

Of course, the rule varied according to financial abilities and personal preferences, but the idea of an apartment in one room was established in Korail from the very beginning, as in many informal settlements in the world.[2] This is the minimal size of renting; anyone needing a bigger house will rent perhaps two rooms. The story of this single dwelling unit seems to be the manifestation of the notion of form following function, a 3 × 3 metre room is just enough. However, as I soon found out, the story of built form is much more perplexing than it appears.

I was walking along the laneways to map Beltola. The metal mat urbanism seen from the air was no different in the ground. The walls were made of CI sheets as well, especially in this newer western neighbourhood. What was surprising in my walk was the lack of something very particular. In the long stretches of unyielding metal facades hugging me from either side, I could not locate a single window. When I finished mapping the interface between the public and private realm, noting the location of openings, there were only four windows in the

entire 50 × 100 metre area (in an interface length of 350 metres, windows were a mere 3 metres). All of these were residential rooms. It did not make sense since the CI sheet houses became extremely hot during the summer. What was going on? Why weren't there any windows?

I asked around and there was no particular issue of security, the tenants told me. Korail was quite safe from theft. How about privacy? Windows would mean exposure to the laneways. Well, it wasn't an issue in other neighbourhoods where the houses had ample windows, for example in Mosharof Bazaar. After much digging around, I realized that the major factor influencing the difference was the fact that the resale value of the CI sheet goes down significantly once windows are cut into it. In Beltola, the landholders were still tentative in terms of their tenure, having built their houses in the last few years and half-expecting that there would be evictions. Their decisions are taken in an affective tone of temporariness. In an anticipatory design move, they decided to keep the CI sheets intact and ensured they retained the maximum value. If an eviction happened, they could convert the CI sheets into cash.

Was this all there was to the story? Not so.

I had an interview with Huraera Jabeen, an academic who has been studying house form and adaptations in Korail for the last decade. Her decade-long involvement and research tracking adaptive changes within houses led to some nuanced insights. Why did the tenants accept such an arrangement of windowless rooms? She pointed to the fact that most tenants, arriving from the villages, are used to windowless rooms in thick mud houses in rural Bangladesh. The cultural acceptance allowed the landholders to get away with the logic of the economy. Moreover, in the seemingly impermeable metal sheet rooms, the construction of the roof over the walls leaves a gap in between the frames allowing a draught to pass.

Even a single feature such as a window or its lack was a manifestation of an intersection between functional need, material limitations, construction techniques, cultural norms and expectations, perceptions of home, the household composition and tenure security. How did all of these factors affect the single dwelling units and the multiplications that cumulatively created the urban fabric?

The functional need to put a bed placed a minimum limit on the room's size, but why an upper limit of about 9–12 square metres? Surely someone with more cash could build a larger room/house? I asked a caretaker-manager for the reason. He was surprised: 'Why would someone have a larger room, if you can afford it, then get one more unit!' Then I looked into the material itself and the economy of

construction. It seems like a room of roughly 9–12 square metres with a pitched roof can be constructed from 1 *bund* of CI sheet (1 *bund* comprises 72 feet, in 6, 8 or 9 feet modules). It didn't make economic sense to build a larger room and be left with half a *bund*. From my observations, I see exceptions, but the material logic is often clearly visible at work. The economics isn't the only factor. Using CI sheet means a wooden frame inside and the frames can be built separately and brought in. This provides flexibility in construction and ease of access.

A major influence on the urban form is the perception of the home of the landholder, which is often tied to his/her rural geography. This 'geographic genealogy' has connotations not only in the form of the house but the larger urban structure as well. People who are from flood-prone areas (such as Comilla) often will pay more to have higher brick plinths, as opposed to people from downstream locations, who may build with footings and columns. Since territories in Korail have formed according to high concentration of these geographic diasporas, there is a significant difference in the character of houses in different areas with Korail, even within close proximity.

The effect isn't related to just construction details. People from the more riverine rural locations are used to removing their houses wholesale and moving them to new locations due to river erosion and flooding. Someone commented that he had moved his house thirty-two times in his life! When the river came too close, they just opened the parts of their house, put it on a rickshaw van and moved it to a new location. How did this ontological perception impact the changes in the urban fabric in Korail? The area populated by landholders from these regions showed a greater willingness and faster adaptation to road-widening and upgrading programs, as the very idea of reconfiguring one's home was natural to them. The result is a much more developed and wider road network in Jamaibazaar compared with Bou Bazaar, where the road upgrading uptake was much slower.

How two-storied houses became a trend in Korail sheds particular light on how the geographical genealogy shapes urban form and subsequent living conditions. The rural migrants from the south of Dhaka, particularly Barisal, use timber in their rural construction, unlike with only mud that is common elsewhere. The construction workers arriving from there brought this particular knowledge of constructing the second storey with minimal foundation and screw joinery. Unsurprisingly, the first houses to have a second storey in Korail were in Barisal Potti.

What's remarkable is the speed at which the knowledge of such construction details spread across the whole of Korail. The few houses shaped the desire for the rest of Korail. Once the option was available and examples were erected,

suddenly the desire shifted across the different neighbourhoods. This competitive tension between different territories in Korail is a significant driver of urban transformation.

One adverse multiplier effect of this vertical intensification in Korail is the 'entunnelling effect'.[3] Cantilevering during the second-floor construction, when done from either side, results in a loss of light and ventilation, and general degradation of the public space underneath. This is a significant effect that can be observed in Korail, particularly in Bou Bazaar. This is more prevalent in areas which had a narrow road width to begin with. Conversely, in places where the road is sufficiently wide, the cantilever often enriches the public space underneath by providing shelter for different street activities.

Housing unit clustering

The major determinant of how single-room dwelling units are formed into one housing cluster is the organizational relation with the access corridor. All the single-dwelling units had to be accessible from the common corridor. It had to be open to the sky to allow light into the dwelling units through the door opening, often the only opening in the unit. This simple heuristic ensured that not only there was a repetition of the dwelling units, but also the clustering could happen only within certain combinatory limitations.

These 'single-room dwelling units' forming a cluster by itself are very rare in Korail. A tenant may buy a single room within a larger housing cluster. It may be that the tenant buys his rental unit. These single-unit landholders become the most minimal subsistence dwellers; their rent is saved but they still have to pay the bills. Single units in Korail may range from BDT 30,000–60,000 (£250–500). Omar is one such owner. He runs a tea stall opposite the mosque in Beltola and he bought one room after being a tenant for about ten years, longer than the average of five years. Owners like Omar often carry out internal renovations and micro-spatial changes. Omar had built a small shower area in the corner of his room; he is uncomfortable with his wife sharing the communal toilet. Such modifications are common. Another single-unit dweller I met was Kabir. Unable to extend his house into a second storey, Kabir had built a one-metre-high wooden mezzanine on top of his single room, accessed via a ladder. He had no other option with two daughters growing up.

Usually, most landholders in Korail have at least a cluster of few rooms, and many with their housing cluster. Oftentimes, the landlord will live in one

room and rent out the rest. The clusterings have a major impact on the way the laneways emerge, which in turn limits the possibilities of future clustering. The simplest clustering is the elongated form of multiple dwelling units arranged with a circulation spine attached to the side of the rooms (Figure 21).

These elongated clusters usually share the smaller side of the street and are often found at the lake edge. The backside serves as the place for incremental additions, either on stilts or on lake-filled land. The longest elongated clustering within my study area is 62 metres in length. Consisting of twenty rooms in succession with intermittent spaces for shared toilets and a kitchen, it was built incrementally onto the lake. However, I have been to other clusters where such rights have not materialized. The potential to extend does not always coincide with other enabling factors.

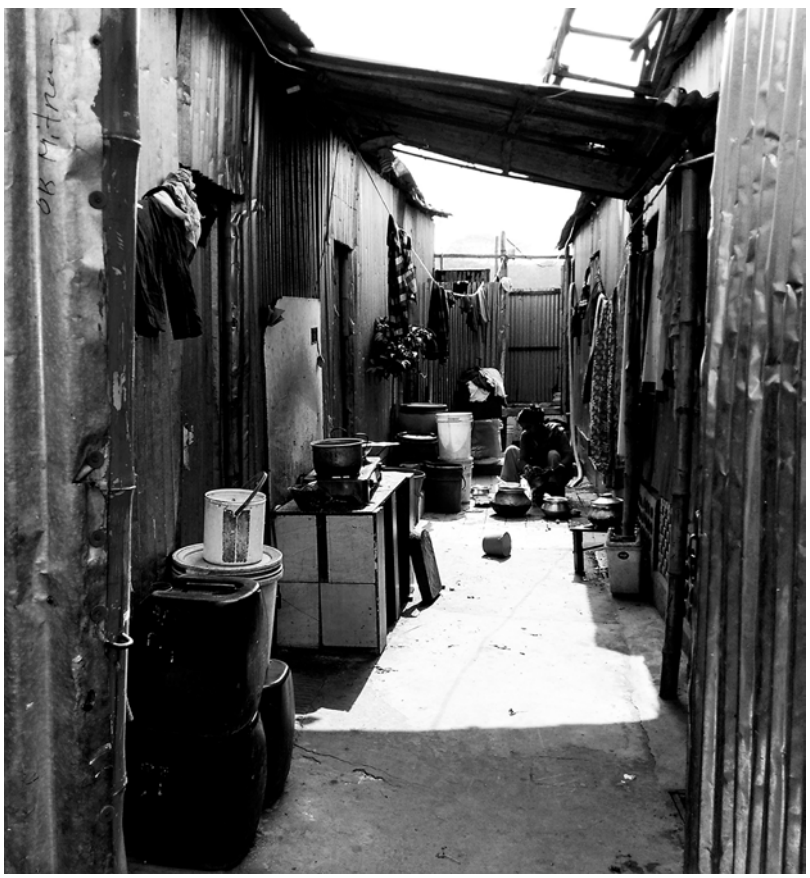

Figure 21 A housing cluster with single-room dwelling units on either side of the access corridor, which doubles as communal space.

The other elongated house cluster – which runs parallel to the laneway – is particularly prevalent only in the neighbourhood of Satellite Poshchim. Here, the land and housing were built by the landgrabber-developers and then sold to subsistence-dwellers. The optimal number of dwelling units for subsistence dwellers seems to be four. Out of the four rooms, the new owners usually live in two and rent two out, which covers their bills, making it a lucrative investment to buy for the subsistence-dwellers.

The shared facilities in these clusters are usually the toilets, wash facilities and the kitchen, and often their number regulates the number of housing units within that cluster. As I mapped the toilets, kitchens and wash area, the upper limit of the ratio was around one of each service for eight dwelling units, effectively thirty to forty people sharing one facility. This seemed like the highest socially workable limit of sharing services. Later, when talking with both landholders and construction workers, I realized that they are aware of this and the new rental constructions often are planned with this ratio in mind. For example, the most common house clusterings extend to a limited length of about four rooms on either side of a double-loaded corridor – effectively an eight-pack, on a plot of about 10–12m × 15–18m. Housing clusters with more than eight units would have to construct an additional toilet and a stove point increasing the cost of the whole project, thereby this works to impose a limit. Such emergent rules based on social norms and behaviour account for repetitions of certain forms. The outward formal repetition cannot be understood without understanding the arrangement of everyday life.

There are other social reasons which often contribute to smaller housing clusters. Often a landholder might feel that more tenants will be socially problematic. Therefore, a smaller number of rental units per cluster is perceived as more manageable, imposing a further limiting condition. Eight rooms with roughly four- or five-person households will mean dealing with forty tenants within the housing cluster. This happens particularly if the landholder lives within the same cluster and there are reservations towards new or unknown tenants. One interesting spatial implication of this social phenomenon is the fact that often the landholder will stay in the unit closest to the entrance to ensure that the tenants feel that they always are under watch (much like a linear form of panopticon!). There are exceptions to the roughly eight-unit limit of clusters; there are clusters where there are forty to fifty rooms, but they are comparatively rare.

There is a housing cluster based around courtyards that is prevalent in the older urban fabric of Mosharbazaar, Jamaibazaar and Bou Bazaar. Often averaging around 100 square metres, the courtyard form is very clearly a reflection of the perception of the home of the older generation who had spent considerably

more time in the rural areas. In terms of liveability, the courtyard clusters offer more benefits, both socially as well as environmentally. The urban transformation in the older fabric is often the conversion of these courtyard clusters into larger, two-storey buildings leading to a loss of communal space and collective life.

I tracked the only new courtyard cluster in Beltola. Rukhsana, a tenant who was cooking in the kitchen under a shade on one side of the courtyard, showed me around. She lamented the lack of social spaces in the new developments in Korail and was particularly happy with this house because of the courtyard. The ownership of this house was shared by two landholders, one of them a police officer, who also stayed within the same housing cluster. This afforded an added sense of security to the house. Later, I realized that whether the landholder lives in the same cluster or not is a fundamentally key distinction in the perception of housing in Korail.

Although almost all the housing is produced by repeating and clustering of the single dwelling units, two exceptions prove the rule. They sit on the two ends of the housing spectrum in Korail. The first one is not even considered as housing. It's the rickshaw garages.

There is a large seasonal influx of rickshaw-pullers to Dhaka, particularly when the rural agricultural economy hits the yearly trough and during the yearly festival seasons. Often, these rural migrants do not rent even the single-room units but sleep temporarily in the work shed in the rickshaw garages. The sleeping mat and pillows are stowed away in the morning, hiding any trace of the rhythmic use. Such use of workspaces to multifunction as sleeping berths is a logic often reserved for the most marginalized and used outside of Korail as well; for example, child/youth labourers working in restaurants in Dhaka.

On the other end of the spectrum, the only multi-room houses that are used by a single family are usually the ones inhabited by the local leaders. Invariably, they are upgraded into brick-concrete construction and some are even air-conditioned. Curiously, most of them are deep inside the settlement, as if burrowed into, and often no trace of the building can be seen from the public gaze.

Renter's account

What about the tenants? What is their role in the development of housing, and the arrangements behind its everyday use? They form 80 per cent of the population in Korail and any understanding of housing would be incomplete without their perspective. I ran a focus group with a few of them.

Firstly, I asked, how did they know where to look for a rental property?

Rasel, a rickshaw-puller, gave a detailed account of his process of finding a house in Korail. First, he enquired in local tea stalls of the neighbourhood he wanted to move to and simultaneously used his existing network of friends to give him any news of rental options around their houses. Once options were identified, he did an inspection and more importantly held a conversation with the landlord. 'His [landlord's] reputation and social behaviour are very important, my family will be there all day', he tells me. One of the determining factors for him, as well as others, was the number of tenants within one particular housing cluster. His wife was very particular about the number of people with whom they had to share the toilet and the kitchen. Therefore, they always looked for smaller compounds, ideally one with fewer than eight dwelling units.

How about any direct involvement in making changes to the house, I asked the focus group. It is unusual for tenants to carry out any structural modifications to the housing units at all. However, they often appropriate many external elements into the house to do 'light adaptations'. In particular, I have seen tenants fixing paperboards to the ceiling to reduce the heat, planting vegetation on the bamboo trellis covering the access corridor and other such minor changes. Again, there is a difference in kind between newcomer tenants and ones who have stayed for a long time. Usually, the changes are made by the latter.

Effect of gender on housing form and production

In Korail it is difficult to notice or experience directly how the different genders affect the design and production process. In the interview with Huraera Jabeen, whose research focuses particularly on gender dynamics concerning the built environment in Korail, she identified a few key ways that happen.[4] 'If it is a female-headed household, as is often the case, the layout of the clustering will have an indirect entrance,' she said as she showed me her case study houses. 'This is because the female body, being subject to different social forces, will have subtle differences of desire than the male counterpart. The L-shaped access corridor, as opposed to the straight corridor, means a different sense of privacy and public visibility from the laneway,' she explained. I wondered if that is the reason why the older fabric had more of these, where the housing was more 'grown' by landholders (men and women), as opposed to the developer housing 'built' now without such considerations.

That was not all. In most cases, the women were in charge of making changes within their reach, while men would be asked to step in when some larger change was needed. She also pointed out how the perception of home was different for each. For men, the street outside and the tea stalls were the living room, while the women, in charge of the household chores, were the primary users of the internal shared space. While I didn't find such a stark binary division of space, often men sitting inside the house and women in the public sphere, I can see the prevalence of the difference based on the quotidian usage.

Interestingly, women predominantly received loans from NGOs, as often the husbands were irresponsible with it. The wives often carried out negotiations with construction workers and supervision. This was particularly true if the husbands were working outside the settlement during the daytime. The women were almost exclusively behind the smaller details and modifications of the housing. Particularly, the vulnerability of women to violence often led to surprising material and spatial adaptations.[5] In a counterintuitive case, Jabeen showed me how some local women had replaced the metal door of a toilet built by the NGO with curtains. The metal door was much more unsafe since it could be locked from inside. The very fact that it was solidly built ended up being its weakness. It also showed how cultural and social insensitivity was present even in projects done with good intentions.

More than 'six arms'

I have described housing so far as a collection of distinct parts – dwelling units connected by an access space. However, in reality, you will find that although the individual dwelling units are centred in the individual rooms, the act of living is not bound within that. It is perhaps more prudent to talk about housing in terms of the activities that occur in the communal space such as the corridors (see Figure 22).

Cooking, washing, preparing, bathing babies, gossiping, applying oil to hair, fixing things, playing, drying food items, hanging clothes, gardening, raising chicken and pigeons (as pets), storing water and shoes (always outside) – these are just a few of the activities happening in such spaces. It makes little sense to call this space simply a corridor. This collective realm, more like a micro-commons,[6] is often the most vital space of the housing cluster; this is where the sense of belonging and community is bred – it is where the 'associational life' plays out.[7] While these spaces were enjoyed by most, and provided many vital functions

Figure 22 Corridors become the lifeline of the community.

for domestic life, it is interesting to note that this is not an explicit desire by the dwellers. In other words, no one spoke specifically that such shared life to be a concern for them, despite this being an issue during choosing where to live. Choices were made on the ground that gave a better chance for a collective life. The desire for 'six arms' never truly was the desire for a disjointed piece of land or a self-sufficient room, separated from others. Rather, the 'six arms' they wanted were always enmeshed into a larger imaginary of the collective life.

In other words, the living condition of a housing cluster is vastly different depending on the shared realm for collective life, even if the dwelling unit

itself is otherwise identical. Housing, in the context of informal settlements, upgrading and resettlement, often is reduced to the individual units in which the focus is on designing a better unit by itself. The lack of understanding of the conviviality generated by the communal spaces leads to the development of large housing blocks to resettle these dwellers, which only caters to their explicit demand for a 'flat' or an 'apartment'. The implicit desire for the collective life remains unfulfilled.

How had this domestic communal realm changed during the years in Korail? One important aspect was the impact of service technologies, particularly in relation to cooking and washing. The shared space in older housing clusters had to be larger to accommodate water wells. Now with piped water, the water wells were disused, and in the new clusterings, there is not even any provision for that. In addition, before using piped gas, the stoves were built of mud, requiring larger spaces for operations (also requiring storage space for the firewood). Therefore, the newer housing clusters have more constricted shared areas.

Last but not least is the particular object that you will encounter repeatedly as a territorial demarcation of the housing cluster – the gate at the end of the corridor that leads out into the settlement. Often decorated and a signifier of status, these housing cluster gates are discretely pinned to the wall during the day to blur the distinction between the internal communal realm and publicly accessible laneway, and to provide ease of access. But how were the laneways themselves generated? Were they coincidental to the production of the housing clusters, or inscribed before to impose a limit on the possibilities of clustering? In other words, was the laneway layout planned out in which the housing emerged, or the other way around? To understand that, the transformation of the laneways is where we turn next.

8

Through the eye of the needle

My first days of fieldwork were in the Beltola neighbourhood and many parts of it matched the mainstream narratives of slums. The popular image of the labyrinthine alley with the right mix of dirt, narrow spaces and tight turns – Beltola didn't disappoint. I was lost soon after entering the laneways from the main road. Churning this way and that, it was hard to see what the organizing logic behind the laneway was, if any. Some were so narrow that I hardly fit! However, when I arrived in the northern neighbourhood of Satellite Poshchim, I was surprised to see the laneways there. Quite wide by Korail's standard (2.5 metres), the laneways ran perpendicular to the main street; there was none of that labyrinthine stuff. Both neighbourhoods were produced during the same period. What could be the source of this discrepancy?

I inquired in Satellite Poshchim, the locals who lived there could not give specific answers. They told me, 'This is how it was, and, we just bought houses here, so we can't tell you'. From the morphogenic archival data, it was interesting to note the fact that the neighbourhood of Satellite Poshchim didn't start as housing. Google Earth images from 2005 show large chunks of land dedicated to what primarily was used to store rickshaws, and this was before the housing clusters were built. On the other hand, Beltola started as a housing agglomeration. As I chatted with Karim, one of the first inhabitants of Satellite Poshchim, he confirmed that there were only rickshaw garages here before. There weren't lanes, just a workmen's shed with intermittent gates to enter the rickshaw. Karim knew because his uncle had been the landholder and the community leader who converted the farmland into rickshaw garages. 'He even used a rope to measure the width of the laneways to ensure a rickshaw would fit through,' Karim added.

And fit it did. The even distribution of laneways and the width was no coincidence. The body of the rickshaw became the determinant factor of the width.[1] The garage gates had become the opening of the laneways as the

Figure 23 Two extremes: the narrowest lane in Beltola on the left and the average laneway in Satellite Poshchim on the right.

neighbourhood expanded inwards. As the functional arrangements changed and housing was developed in place of the garages, the road width remained as before. The initial conditions of settlement had impacted the future growth, where the initial gap was taken as the normative road width to follow. However, these norms remained local to the place where it was generated and didn't migrate across Korail entirely, as the difference with the development in Beltola showed.

Even now the remnants of the past remain in Satellite Poshchim. It has the highest concentration of rickshaw garages and the associated industries with it. What this larger road width did was it also allowed vans carrying the 'rubbish' for landfilling deeper into the settlement. As elaborated in the section on landfilling, the rate of landfilling was directly related to the width of the access laneways. While the buildings here were built faster and in a more legible pattern, the public life was worse. Surprisingly, even with the larger laneways, the social life on the streets in Satellite Poshchim is the poorest that I experienced. The potential for more street activity with wider laneways was not actualized.

A body, human or rickshaw, as a heuristic for determining access led to quite different outcomes. While in Satellite Poshchim it was a top-down planning process by grabber-developers, in Beltola, it was quite the reverse. The lanes

in Beltola are hardly more than 1 metre. The houses were built in a process of uncoordinated settling by subsistence-dwellers. Azim, whose father was one of the earliest to settle there, remembers from his childhood that the houses around theirs were built as more people started to settle, but no one had marked the laneways or made any provisional arrangements for laneways. But how would one ensure access and not encroachment by the other? From the different sources of conversations, the answer unequivocally was the use of negotiations.

One would never be able to erect a house, however legitimated, without a discussion with the landholder already in the vicinity. The laneway was produced only after a collective consensus had been reached. However, once the laneways were established, they could be constricted or widened based on the circumstances. What was the minimum width and how was it determined? As I asked this in one focus group discussion, two elders answered simultaneously. 'Why, all that mattered was if I could walk in, with my umbrella', said the man, while the women contradicted, 'not the umbrella, but if one could walk in with the water bucket'. However, I have been in lanes that seemed not to follow even that rudimentary norm, with a width of less than half a metre. These were houses where even the negotiations had failed.

In comparing the access network in adjacent neighbourhoods, four different morphological straits can be identified (Figure 24). While Beltola and Satellite Poshchim sit on either extreme of a spectrum of organizational logics, one negotiated ad-hoc and the other planned centrally (but locally), the other two show two distinct morphological differentiations and fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

The road network in Bou Bazaar, along the causeway, shows an almost uniformly placed set of laneways running perpendicularly to the main street with almost no connections between them. A good place to understand the formation of the particular access networks seemed to be the stories of how the area was settled. To find out about the emergence of the access network along the Bou Bazaar causeway, I chatted with Gofura, one of the landholders there. Her house is a room deep in width with an access corridor that barely can accommodate someone walking straight. I had to enter sideways as I went in to listen to her story of settling here.

The bridge was not occupied until 2009, after which there was an organized distribution of the lake edge along the bridge in what can be termed as 'cooperative settling'. Thirty-five dwellers joined together to form a collective, planned for months and then occupied the edge simultaneously, each getting 'six arms'. Later there was some trading between the informal cooperative members

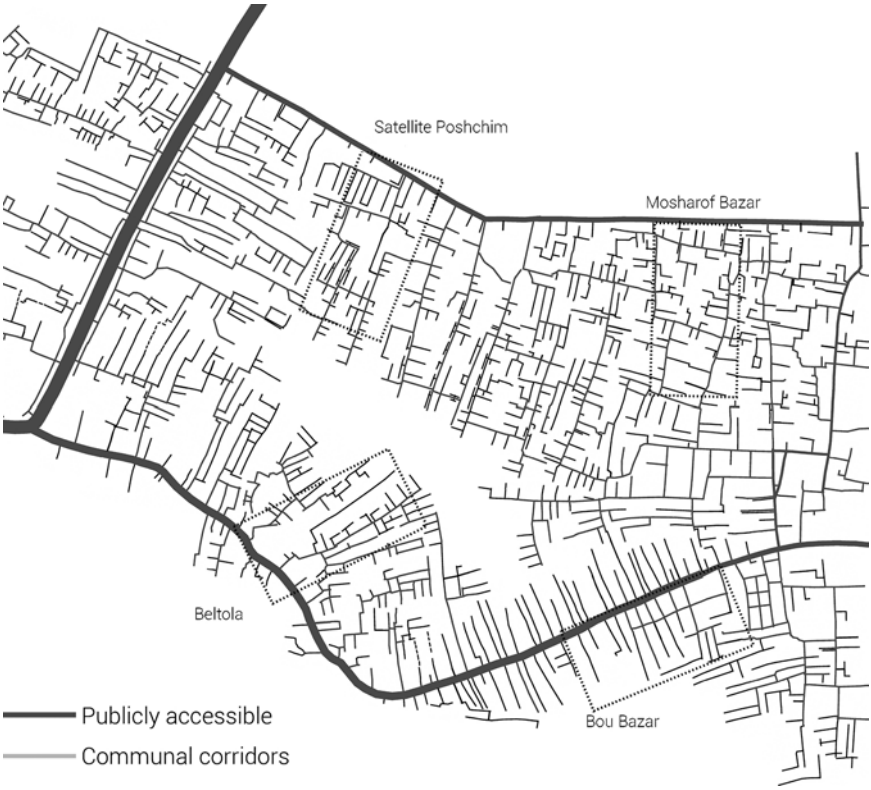

Figure 24 Intricate laneway system in Korail.
(Notice how the pattern is different in the four adjacent neighbourhoods. 500m × 500m.)

to enlarge the plot, but otherwise, the equidistant plot distribution remained in place as they each extended their housing cluster into the water. The geographical feature was an important factor in generating this particular layout. Since the water was treated as the backside, with no other function but drainage, there was no significant function along the water edge. In addition, the construction was much easier along a linear arrangement on water, where the only access was from the short side of the plot adjoining the main street.

Mosharof Bazaar, the older fabric, shows the emergence of a clear block structure. Originally agricultural and forest land, the geographic advantage of a flat land allowed the formation of more typical urban blocks, which are not particular to Mosharof Bazaar only but have emerged at the larger settlement scale in the whole of Korail. The block size varies widely (averages around a very walkable 50 × 50 metres). The way the housing clusters are organized

within the blocks reveals that given the small housing cluster sizes, the blocks could not grow any larger while also providing public access. Except for minor re-routing, the urban blocks in the older part of Korail had become widened, the material upgraded and the functions diversified from housing to others along the block's edge.

I did conjecturally restore a narrative of the process of settling in Mosharof Bazaar based on conversations with the earliest settlers. Rehana and her husband Bazlul were one of the first to move here. Their house is closest to the BTCL wall, a clear indication of who arrived here the earliest. Bazlul was one of the local neighbourhood leaders arranging for people to arrive and set up their houses, like Samsul. I asked him what their allotment process was and also how they decided where the roads would go. He put on a gracious smile, before clarifying, 'Well, I didn't take any money from these [newly arriving] settlers. We were giving them areas depending on how much they needed for their family. There was no "road" except a few dirt tracks preexisting from the agricultural use before.'

Rehana got up and brought me a very old photo album. 'That's me, right here, 25 years ago,' she exclaimed. It was her, about five years old, and behind her was agricultural land with farming plot demarcations. It's the earliest photo of Korail that I could find. What was the logic of placing the houses? Were they next to each other or were they grouped, I asked. Bazlul went on:

> No one really wanted to be stacked up against each other, it was an open field with lots of land available, so people had houses quite far from each other, much like rural homesteads. People had erected somewhat along the dirt track connecting the colony [BTCL Housing] and the Bou Bazaar area but there was no bazaar at the time. It was just a way to get to the Mohakhali [the formal neighbourhood south of Korail]. People had enough land to expand their houses when more relatives came or they wanted to rent out. As they expanded out from each house, [he pointed out], now see not a single bit of space left.

I drew a diagram of the process; he nodded in agreement.

These existing dirt tracks were not intra-Korail, but connecting somewhere beyond the immediate settlement. Studying the road network and existing developments around Korail, it was possible to reconstitute the connections Bazlul and others had mentioned. The current streets in Korail show a clear continuity with the BTCL settlement to the north. Even as BTCL had constructed the wall to formalize their territory, some openings were kept in the wall to allow for some of the continuities to remain. Some were blocked off permanently, as Samsul's story reminds us.

What was common to see across the neighbourhoods was that the most significant laneways were always generated from the most intensive pedestrian flows across certain destinations.[2] One of the major generators of pedestrian flow in Korail was the first local mosques. The five daily prayers ensured a constant stream of people.[3] Bazaars and shops were soon developed to latch on to the devotees, in a way reinforcing the flow of people. Later developments, such as the large open space to the north as well as the government-run school in Jamaibazaar, were the major attractors not only for the people in Korail but also the BTCL colony. Apart from these internal anchors, dwellers needing to walk to their work destinations out of the settlements into the city meant the public/formal roads acted as major points to connect to. These multiple attractors and the constant flow of people, coupled with the housing clusters needing public and solar access, could only resolve itself in the formation of the urban block.[4]

What ensured that the roads were not encroached on? Social norms, it seemed. The fear of social castration was a strong motivation to regulate impulses. Everywhere in Korail, landholders know the limits of each other's houses with uncanny precision. Altercations are common over even a small infringement. One of my interviewees had shown me how his neighbour had renovated his house and rebuilt a wall adjacent to a laneway. 'That's the maximum he can do,' he said, pointing at the 15cm the neighbour had brought forward the new wall to maximize the space inside!

From my conversations in the older areas of Korail, I could find no evidence of any leaders, community groups or NGOs setting up street blocks or even re-calibrating the access network. Rather, what is apparent is that the NGOs (the UPPR project in particular in Jamaibazaar) took the existing street network as the basis for their road upgrading program of these urban blocks. My suspicion that blocks are post-facto was deepened from my encounters with what I call the 'inadvertent blocks'. They are access routes that form a block structure unintentionally by meeting at corners after extending incrementally from two different sides. So, even if now some areas appear to be a grid structure, signifying a predetermined layout, it could be an inadvertent block and not an intentional one.

In the east, the lake separates Korail from Gulshan, the richest neighbourhood in Dhaka. Gulshan has contributed little morphologically speaking to Korail in terms of extending the street network. However, as the source of work for a large percentage of Korail's population, it is a place that needs to be accessed from

Korail. The response from Korail was to slowly generate an informal boat-based transport system across the lake. A journey that took an hour by walking was less than 10 minutes using the boat. The boat terminal in Bou Bazaar neighbourhood was one of the major points that generated a constant stream of pedestrians. Boats in Korail became a particular character of the place.

Since nothing good lasts forever, the state moved in to ban the boats in 2016. The boat service was closed, the boats sunk and the 100 boatmen and their families were left hanging without any compensation as a result of the policy decision. This was in response to a terrorist event in Dhaka in July 2016. While none of the perpetrators resided in Korail, the boat transport across the lake to Gulshan was seen as a security risk. Some people in Korail responded by building rafts using recycled styrofoam to cross the lake. There is nothing to romanticize about this tactical adaptation, and several people have drowned while crossing the lake. No one should have to die to have equitable access.

The narrative of the slum as the breeding ground of dangerous elements has dire consequences for the people in it because the easiest tool of oppression is to manipulate their access to the city. The state bodies are not the only ones exerting such measures. The informally planned but legal neighbourhood south of Korail (Mohakhali) sees Korail as a threat as well. They have closed off the only access route from the neighbourhood into Korail and put up signs warning people of the dire consequences of the trespassers. What this does is block off access to Korail and increase ghettoization. As it stands, Korail is only accessible using one public road that leads into and out of the formal city (see Figure 25).

However, within Korail itself, the access network is highly permeable, making it a very walking-friendly city. To understand the permeability in Korail, we must return to the housing cluster gates. It is important to note the way gates placed in laneways modulate public access. In many cases, the gates are open during the day, blurring the edge between the public and housing cluster boundary. Oftentimes, I have walked into a housing cluster communal space before realizing that I had already crossed the gate. The communal area that serves as the internal access oftentimes becomes part of the public laneway system by virtue of the open gate and allowing pedestrians through. This tends to happen in the larger housing clusters due to the impracticality of opening the gate for each of the tenants and their families. The open gate marks a sign of acceptance of a pedestrian walking through. Therefore, access is not just a physical condition; it's socially mediated and is rhythmic rather than static. Social capital, knowledge of the internal

Figure 25 Unjust spatial conditions by limiting access to the settlement. (The only link with the city is marked by the black arrow.)

through connections and negotiation skills become determinants of whether a pedestrian can use these internal laneways or not – in what can be termed a 'relational access network'.

However, there are cases where there is no physical gate that controls public access. Yet there is a socially constructed form of control that applies. The activities of the shared space, the gaze of the people there and the cultural norms make it improbable for someone to use it as public access even if there is no physical separation. Also in most of these cases, the laneway is already a cul-de-sac, thereby limiting who enters.

There is one more level of permeability operational in Korail, which is in between conjoined shared spaces of different housing clusters. These connections avoid the public domain altogether. Oftentimes, they are through adjoining

functional spaces. I have encountered doors that operated between two shower stalls, between kitchens and often through shops as well. Almost exclusively reserved for the household members, they are not publicly accessible. They operate only between housing clusters whose owners share some facilities such as a water tank or have a high degree of trust. The desire for functionality often trumps privacy.

Part Three

Intensities

9

Fifty shades of publicness

I met two Anowaras in Korail, both living on the same street in Beltola for the last twenty-five years. The older one had one room while the younger one had forty. What is remarkable is how differently they took part in producing public places in Korail. Anowara the elder was cooking when I came across her. I didn't have to go into some shared space, or into any laneway to meet her. Her single room fronts the Beltola main street. The front half of her building had to be demolished during the road widening and upgrading. The upgraded road intensified the public uses, while Anowara's claim to anything outside her 3 × 3 metre room was gone. Left with only the space for the bed, she was up against the street. Since there weren't any windows for light and ventilation, she kept the door open. Electric rickshaws were speeding outside and the increased flow of pedestrians was inches away from her door. Her kitchen, her bedroom, her 'private space' were part of the gaze of the people for most of the day and there was no way she could appropriate the public domain to her benefit. It was too public. She did enrich the public domain but only as a spectacle for others.

On the other hand, Anowara the younger is one of the largest landholders in Beltola. She has a large brick-building house that sits at the entrance to her private laneway in between the rental units. 'It wasn't easy to build these rooms', she tells me of the struggle to incrementally fill the lake, build the rooms, maintain 'connections' with the local leaders and ensure harmony in-between so many tenants (her forty rooms accommodate at least 170 people). She also mentioned how it is difficult for her to make ends meet even with so many rental rooms. 'Why not build more rooms?' I asked, pointing to the open space in between her rental rooms, where the usual 1-metre corridor was more than 3 metres, essentially becoming an elongated courtyard for the tenant community living in her housing cluster. Mapping the activity there indicated that it was one of the most frequented spaces and used for social gatherings, everyday household chores, as a playground for girls and to hold the occasional festival

events. The space was enough to build a few more rooms easily, so I asked her why she would rather invest in maintaining a shared space instead of building a few more rooms. Her answer was simple: 'people need a space to get out and be [out]. When I was extending the house, I had asked the workers to keep the space in the middle. There are not enough places for girls to play in Korail. Also, no community halls or facilities of any kind to host parties. Spaces like these make a lot of difference.' In a housing market with incoming tenants who accept housing of any condition, it was surprising to see her letting go of vital floor space. Her rooms with this additional shared space don't cost more than the others. The tenants were not charged extra for the rooms; some of them had stayed in her housing cluster for decades. Anowara's house had produced spaces dedicated to public life as part of the design, not just the ad-hoc appropriation of spaces one finds ubiquitously in Korail.[1]

A few lanes away from Anowara's house, I arrived at a triangular open space with a large tree. The open space didn't make any sense because it wasn't heavily used, just two women casually chatting with each other. All the houses lining it had their back or sides to it, so there wasn't any particular spilling over of the private life into the public. All I could make out from my archival mapping was that this was the edge of the settlement when the landfilling started. I asked one of the local landholders about the open space, and he smiled sheepishly. 'It was always open. This was the boating point when the lake was here and everyone used it as a place to shower in the lake.' That explained why many of the laneways ended up at this point. The past use of that spot as a public space had retained its influence over time and resulted in a form of insurance against anyone attempting to grab it for their benefit. There was a social attachment from the neighbourhood, which ensured no one had later built on it. It is not uncommon in Korail to come up against small pockets such as these, especially in the older fabric. In settlements like Korail, where designed public places are few and far between, these coincidental spaces become quite essential.

To understand public space on its term in Korail, it's important to note that there is no equivalent term for 'public space' in Bangla. The word literally translates to '*gono* (public)–*sthan* (place)' but if you were to ask people in Korail to show their favourite 'public place', you would get blank faces in return. People do use the English term 'public' but in general to denote the mass people, especially with a democratic connotation, but there is no category called 'public place'.[2] Rather they use only instances of its manifestation, each with its own particular name – the street corner (*rastar mor*), the shade under the tree (*gacher tola*), the tea-stall (*tong*), the area around the well (*kuar paar*), the playfield

(*math*), the lake-edge (*jheel paar*), the roof of the mosque (*chaad*), *eidgah* (field for eid mass prayers), the courtyard (*uthan*) and of course, the laneway (*goli*). All of these places are host to public enactments of various sorts, but are not labelled with the term 'public space'.

Many of these public spaces are co-incidental, granular and ad-hoc appropriations. You could turn a corner in a lane and find four adult men playing a game of cards, in an otherwise narrow space that hardly fits two. The dense packing of housing gave the impression that there are no public spaces, at least the ones that we are familiar with in the West, such as plazas, parks or squares. However, once I had mapped the activities observable in the public domain, it revealed the richness of a thriving social life in Korail made possible by a multitude of public realms.

The space beyond the private space of the 10 square metre dwelling units was very differentiated. To place them all under the category of the 'public' would be reductionist to my experience.[3] The public/private binary has long been problematized in academic circles and there have been additional intermediary types introduced to capture the in-betweenness. It's evident that, instead of the binary, public spaces can be viewed as a field of difference. But the key question here is what would be the basis of differentiating publicness?

As a very simple starting point to illustrate the shades of publicness, one could easily use the size of the public spaces on one axis and the degree of intention in producing the space as a public space on the other axis. There are spaces ranging from the bare minimum for two to stand to the size of football fields, and from ad-hoc public uses to intentionally produced ones (see Figure 26). However, these differences, while useful to show the variations that exist in Korail, do not help us construct a narrative of how they have emerged. It is misleading to see public spaces as variations based only by difference-in-degrees of intention or functional use. Rather, what I am interested in are the differences-in-kind to move beyond the usual public/private binary.

The constitutive element of publicness is the propensity to meet a stranger, as noted by urban sociologist Richard Sennett: 'The difference between public and private lies in the amount of knowledge one person or group has about others'.[4] What then differentiates between kinds of public spaces is the 'density of acquaintanceship'.[5] Based on my observations of the 'proportions and densities of relationship types' present in a given space, I have identified three major kinds of public space in Korail: the domestic, the neighbourly and the communal.[6]

However, it is crucial to note here that these are not types of spaces, but rather tendencies that public spaces may have. Tendencies are dispositions for a certain

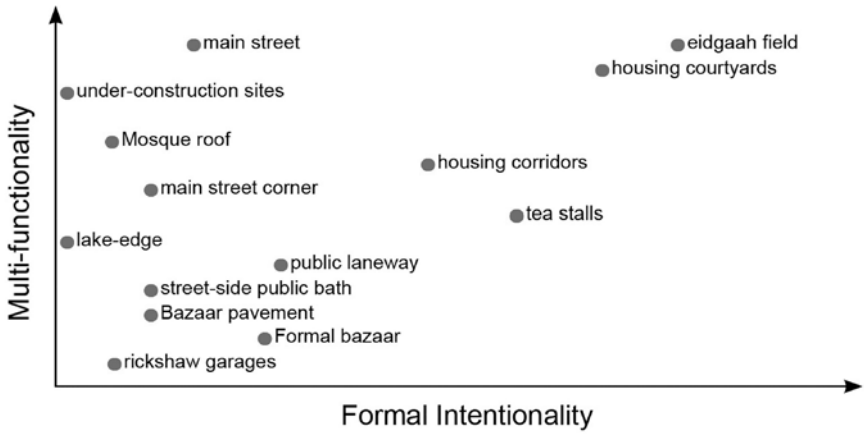

Figure 26 Variations of public space in Korail.
(Source: author's observations.)

attribute to emerge based on contingent events and inherent capacities. In other words, public spaces are not composed of different types but have different tendencies based on socio-spatial conditions. This captures both the fluidity of places based on activities and their rigidity to favour some activity over others.

The most private of the public spaces were the spaces of intimate relations. Between housing cluster-mates, between next-door families, places where the women *and men* sat and allowed a mingling of gossip and work. This is where the home extended out from the 10 square metre units. These places are usually anchored by the kitchen stoves that need to be shared, or the water wells before piped water arrived. Mostly occupied by women because of the gendered role of cooking and house chores, the space and the social body of the housing cluster inform each other. Members of this social group can share their weaning child, borrow money and generate the highest form of social capital. These 'intimate public' spaces usually coincided with the functional spaces of access, wash area or kitchen due to the economic imperative. Most often they are not built separately; there is no functional demarcation of a 'shared intimacy space'. It is tacit and informal and the norms governing the usage of space and services are developed in situ. While constructing the house, often a wider space is left than that is strictly necessary for access. There is anticipation by both the landholder and builder that the slightly wider space will be better for affording such relations to develop, as exemplified by Anowara's case. It would be misleading to designate an exclusive gendered construction of this space, as oftentimes I have met men

as part of the gossiping women or fixing the house. Because of the almost private nature of the space, a visitor perhaps will feel uncomfortable staying too long in that space, as I often did.

People from neighbouring housing clusters congregate in the next level of public space. The most common one is the shaded area around the neighbourhood tea stalls and grocery shops. Tea stalls are a common typology found in rural settings in Bangladesh, which now has a remarkable presence in all urban areas as well. They don't have the same social connotation as restaurants or bars. There is no obligation to buy even if you occupy a spot in the tea stall for a long time, hence the area around is seen as a public space. It is one of the first functions to be diversified from the initial housing stock in Korail. The morphogenic process would involve some entrepreneurs realizing the need for such a place. Then, either through renting or opening up one side of a house, people started selling tea using very rudimentary technologies. A few benches outside under the shade of the awning produce a public space where one generates familiarity with the faces in that neighbourhood. There are norms governing behaviour that apply particularly to that neighbourhood. A particular experience drove the point home for me. For one of the interviews, one of my informants refused to meet me in their local tea stalls, for fear of being identified as providing information to someone from the 'outside'. He didn't even go to the tea stalls in the neighbouring areas. We walked for half an hour to the other end of Korail where he was comfortable that he wouldn't be recognized.

Tea stalls are places where you get noticed if you are an outsider in the neighbourhood, and also the best place to socially legitimize your presence by striking up a conversation with the shop owner and identifying yourself and your purpose in being there. This tacit expectation for an explanation indicates the presence of a social body that is differentiated from the generic body of the public. Many of my meetings, conversations and interviews with the people from the neighbourhood were in such places. They are designed and produced as public spaces with furniture and amenities provided. The impact on the urban fabric is in the way it organizes pedestrian flows and acts as pauses. The quasi-interior spaces might be mistaken as a purely commercial function at first glance. However, due to the remarkable porosity with the adjoining street, the cumulative effect of the granular tea stall provides a large 'neighbourly public' realm. The commercial incentive is there but folded into the desire for the public space.

Other public spaces that operate at this 'neighbourly public' level are street corners, the street space outside of large neighbourhood grocery stores and

undeveloped pieces of land. A particular trend is the use of the lake-filled land in Satellite Poshchim as informal neighbourhood public spaces. The owners are aware of the use but allow it nonetheless, as they know such uses are temporary.

There are exceptions as well. On one of my first excursions in Korail, I was surprised to see a small monument erected to commemorate the fallen heroes of the nationalist struggle of Bangladesh! The monument was a miniature version of the National Monument in Dhaka's historic district. There was a small open space given to the memorial. I enquired as to how was this built, and it seems that it is the pet project of one of the local landholders. The neighbourhood had agreed to allow the space to be used as such. They even celebrated the National Day by placing wreaths at the monument and singing the national anthem in front of it. This pointed towards a complex relationship between the social body, its institutions, national memories and rituals, and how public spaces were shaped even in a 'slum', which are often deemed not to have such sensibilities.

Institutions seem to play a large role in ensuring the production and maintenance of the next level of public spaces. These are the 'communal public' spaces where strangers can be present from the different neighbourhoods in Korail without questions being asked or inviting any attention. These spaces are intentionally produced and significantly need defending from internal encroachment and/or informal appropriation that contradict its use as a public space for the community. The stories of the two large open spaces illustrate the point well.

Figure 27 Lake-edge treated as a neighbourly public space.

The most well-known communal public space in Korail is the Jamaibazaar *math* (field) (see Figure 28). The archival data show intense densification around its edge over the last fifteen years. The open space was originally next to the local government school. To protect it from encroachment, the local community committees built a perimeter wall around it. Also, they allowed further school buildings to be built at the edge, which institutionalized the open space as a part of the school. After that, there has never been any encroachment attempt on the field. The field, although formally part of the school, is informally used for various functions as well as community needs.

The second open field of a comparable size – the *Eidgah math* in Bou Bazaar – has a much more interesting history. Originally at the edge of the lake before landfilling, this land was the farmhouse of an influential local leader, who had fenced it off. After he died in 2011, the local community leaders of Bou Bazaar, after much contestation, decided to keep the area open, motivated by a very particular reason. In a focus group discussion, Hamida, a local leader, elaborated: 'For a long time we all had to use the Jamaibazaar field to attend the yearly Eid congregations,[7] and they kept mocking us because we don't have our own Eid field. So when we got the chance [with this land], we decided to go one-up on them and made our own Eid field here. I even contributed the first two bags of cement for the mosque.' The field was institutionalized under the mosque but then was able to be used for a wide range of purposes.

There were more attempts to use the land for building. Hamida continued: 'We realized some local factions of different political parties were eyeing the land, that's when we erected the madrasa [Islamic school] on one side to stop them building from that side. And then we built the wall on the other side. Also, we cooperated with an NGO to build a large public toilet on the east end to ensure it was protected from all sides. Even now, their eyes are on it.' She and some of the leaders would see to it that they couldn't.

Figure 28 The largest communal public space in Korail.

The stories pointed to two important insights. Institutions, both formal and informal, were instrumental in the production of public space, and particularly in lending their legitimacy to it. In a way, this particular association aspect could be called 'institutional pegging'. In addition, Hamida's story hinted at the internal friction between the local leadership and the unexpected effect it has on the public spaces. In addition, her story shows how narratives about the places play an important role in shaping the affective landscape, which in turn influences decisions of urban change. The urban production in Korail clearly is not just the result of an evolutionary logic of fitness, adaptability and cool rationality, but of much messier contradictions and contestations.

The 'communal public' spaces in Korail still are not considered as a city-scale public place for Dhaka. No one from Gulshan would venture into Korail, even if it's safe. Within the larger city, Korail is just a 'slum', whose public spaces, however vibrant and convivial, are excluded because they sit outside the normative image of the public realm. The exclusion works both ways. In my conversations, I had asked the Korailians whether they go outside the settlement to the larger city-scale public spaces, the great parks, the plazas and the National Monuments in Dhaka. The answer was almost always 'no', even if it was close by or was affordable to travel. Those public spaces were seen as not for them. They had their own.

10

Holy cow!

On the very first day of my fieldwork in Korail, I met my friend Azim in the tea stall he frequented. After the usual chit-chat, he walked me around the neighbourhood to show me the significant things: the mosque, the bazaar, the schools – the usual places that he thought was worth a visit. Perhaps he kept the best thing for the last, or maybe I wasn't terribly impressed until that point. Either way, he took me to a sweetshop in Bou Bazaar Bridge. Sweets in Bangladeshi culture are a love affair, sumptuous pieces of milky goodness doused in sugary syrup. The shop was buzzing with local patrons, and there were tables and chairs set up to have a quick one as you ordered parcels to take home. Azim asked me to follow him to the back of the shop. The sweetshop, a narrow CI sheet building, extended long into the alley. In the dimly lit space right behind the sweet shop, what I saw was a herd of cows, neatly lined along the shed. They were unfussed to see me, busy in their rumination. All the cows were Holstein Friesians, locally known in Bangladesh as the 'Australians'. The irony of a Bangladeshi man studying at an Australian university coming across Australian cows in Korail was not lost on Azim. He smiled and seemed very proud to see my jaw drop. To top it off, he showed me the sweet production factory on the mezzanine floor of the same building! Such an intricate mix of seemingly disparate functions in Korail is the focus of this essay, and why it matters to make it liveable.

The story of the cow cuts across the global and local scale. The Holstein semen is imported from Australia by Bangladeshi cattle farmers and then used to breed with local varieties. Over time, they produce a cross-breed which isn't too far from the paternal source. The sweetshop owner, Rachin, later spoke to me about how he ended up with a 'sweetshop-urban farm-factory' complex. His older brother had started with only the shop in 2002 and that too at the edge of the water along the main street from Beltola to Bou Bazaar. 'Then slowly, our other family members joined him to help run the business, we rented around here and then bought [arranged] along the water edge to build our house. As there

Figure 29 The sweet shop, with a dairy farm in the back.

was more demand, my brother realized that we couldn't make a profit by buying milk from the city. So, we filled the lake a little bit behind the shop and built a [lean-to] structure to keep two cows. Then we used to make the sweets in our home', Rachin explained.

Then over time, with increasing demand and profit, the family extended into the lake incrementally and now has a 25 metre shed that houses twenty-two cows. They built a mezzanine to scale up the production facilities and there were some workers even sleeping there. 'What about the smell? Didn't anyone object?' I asked Rachin. 'Well, it is not a big deal because we were there before, people are used to it. In any case it's right beside the "Bazaar" so it didn't matter,' he replied. Being close to the Bazaar, where there was a section of fresh produce, was particularly important for Rachin. He had made arrangements with the vegetable vendors to collect all the undesirable parts – tops of carrots, cauliflower bottoms and the like – and be delivered to his shop. The synergy meant the vendors didn't have to worry about their waste and Rachin had a source of feed for his cows without paying a dime.

I wondered about the relationships that had become established between the different functions and how these functions came to be constituted in Korail. How did it produce such a variation? And in some parts, why did it fail to? And how did the functional variation lead to the creation of particular neighbourhoods?

One of the most distinct areas in Korail is the *Kapor Potti* in Bou Bazaar. Translated as 'Clothing Village', this is where a large concentration of clothing stores, both of ready-made wearables and of wholesale cloths, tailoring shops and shops servicing them had accumulated over the last twenty years. I interviewed Shampa, a local woman who was there to buy some cloth rolls. It turned out that she runs a tailoring workshop out of her house and she had come here to get her supplies. She took orders from the local neighbourhoods and then in her spare time, after studying for college, she ran the workshop in her bedroom. These home-based enterprises (HBE) are quite common in Korail, and Dhaka at large as well.[1] There is a large number of self-employed women like Shampa, who cater to the local needs. They charge at least 50 per cent less than what the tailor in the city outside would. There is no extra overhead except the additional electricity bill. These HBEs were not workshops in the sense of running a production sweatshop with employing workers; these were mostly women who responded mainly to the local needs. It was difficult to identify them during the mapping since it meant entering the private rooms to identify one. Most of them didn't have to change the architecture of the house itself to run their operation.

There are exceptions. Laxmi, another dweller who runs a similar workhouse, has cut open a window beside her workbench in the bedroom, and you can meet her there to place your order. The awning on the window provides shading, enticing you to stay a bit longer and perhaps have a chat. Laxmi is the landholder of the house and she modified only when she realized that her room was conveniently right beside the laneway. This change in the interface meant she could also hang some of her products in the laneway attracting further customers. This change led to a ripple effect: seeing the increase in footfall, the landholder opposite her house converted the front of his house into an electronics showroom!

One typical pattern to note is the conversion of houses into commercial functions along the main access routes where there is the highest number of pedestrian flows. The edge along Beltola's main street after upgrading has rapidly transformed into a commercial edge, a trend that is noticeable along the major arteries, much like the development of high streets in the UK. The small-scale conversations of the front of houses or the bottom floor have cumulatively resulted in the emergence of a mixed-use fabric without any specific guidelines from the local leaders or centralized decision-making. The granular distribution of shops remains small-scale and very few amalgamations happen over time since the internal demand and buying capacity remains low (see Figure 31).

Figure 30 The dwelling unit converted to a tailoring shop by just cutting a window.

However, not all the functional differentiation happened due to just the internal demand. Some functions have been shaped by the needs of the external formal neighbourhoods – particularly the recycling and rickshaw industry.

Seth Schindler's work on waste pickers in Delhi outlines how informal labour often operates in the formal middle-class neighbourhoods where waste collection generates related functions in the informal settlements.[2] By contrast, in Korail, the waste from the affluent surrounding neighbourhoods is collected formally by the municipal authority. The first stop for this household waste is a waste transfer station located at Korail's western edge. An informal system

Figure 31 Mapping the functional variation.

(The darker greys point to non-residential functions such as visit and work places, including shops, mosques, bazaars, schools, office and other functions. The rest are housing clusters. Some are mixed.)

has been generated in response to its close proximity, where waste pickers from Korail enter the formal waste station in between transfers and collect all recyclable materials. This has enabled recycling workshops to become one of the major 'work' functions in Korail since the waste transfer station began its operation in 2012. The sorting and re-purposing of waste usually occur in converted housing clusters.

The functional relationship between Korail and the formal city, mediated by the waste transfer station, can be regarded as a symbiosis – a self-organized form of co-functioning between the settlement and the city. The functional development starts initially opportunistically, but soon secondary functions are

generated inside the settlement forming an ecology of material and labour. The functional symbiosis can be seen as a form of complementarity, 'the idea that different cities [and settlements] fulfil different and mutually beneficial roles [in an urban network]'.[3] The functional symbiosis also disproves the notion that informal settlements are marginal to the functioning of the formal city.

A more apt example of functional symbiosis in Korail that has impacted the built form significantly is the rickshaw industry. Rickshaws are a mode of transport used extensively in Dhaka. There are more than a million units on the streets according to conservative estimates, out of which only about 80,000 are formally licenced.[4] Without any designated depot in the formal neighbourhoods, the rickshaws are housed in informal settlements like Korail. They are primarily used in the formal neighbourhoods as last-mile transport and for short distances, with minimal use inside of Korail due to the constricted laneways in most areas. Between 2001 and 2018, rickshaw garages (local term for depots) have mainly developed in the northern neighbourhood of Satellite Poshchim.

The major influx of rickshaws occurred in 2006 when a few neighbouring informal settlements were evicted. The symbiotic response in Korail was to convert the agricultural land around the lake edge into the first garages. Later, the garages were extended or shifted to newly reclaimed land from the lake. Typical rickshaw garages are usually open-to-sky spaces surrounded by bamboo fences with an adjacent workshop shed. The locational logic to place the rickshaw garages has been dependent on the ease of access from the formal neighbourhoods, pushing them near the main road along the western causeway. In terms of the tendency to use the reclaimed land as rickshaw garages, this is due to the lower perceived tenure security of the new land as well as its lack of stability. Garages require little investment with minimal built elements and therefore are an excellent intermediary use before both the tenure and land are consolidated over time.

As rickshaws require specific maintenance, metal workshops and associated secondary facilities have developed in those areas around the garages. The clustering of garages and workshops has led to 'creative' innovations to the traditional rickshaw. In the last few years, the local mechanics in Korail have retrofitted the rickshaws with car batteries and chargers to power them electrically. This technical innovation has been met swiftly with a ban by the formal neighbourhood authorities citing safety concerns, although they continue to operate informally nonetheless. While important in terms of generating livelihoods, rickshaw garages play a minimal role in the social lives of the dwellers.

By contrast, the most significant local institutions that have emerged locally are the bazaars and mosques, which show how collective desires can generate social legitimacy and the financial means to act gained from the incremental contribution of the community. Their emergence and growth are key to understanding the urban transformation of Korail. This has been noted historically, as urban scholar Besim Hakim – studying the evolution of Arabic-Islamic cities – has found both the mosque and bazaar to be the foundational anchors for the consolidation of a settlement.[5] In Korail, the mosques have evolved into multi-storied concrete structures while the bazaars have become the largest structure in terms of ground coverage.

All the mosques in Korail have become permanent concrete structures, most of them a few storeys in height. With their five daily prayers from dawn to dusk, the mosques are one of the most significant aggregators of pedestrian traffic and subsequent commercial interests around them. I traced the changes in one of the mosques in Korail, the Gajnabi Mosque. Located in the Beltola neighbourhood, the mosque is a three-storied concrete structure that rises above the single-storied houses (see Figure 32). When the pioneer settlers, predominantly Muslim, started to settle in Beltola during the late 1990s, it was apparent that they needed a place to pray since the existing mosque in the adjacent neighbourhood was too far to walk. A few leaders mobilized the community and arranged for donation drives to raise funds. Donating to mosques is a common cultural trend in Bangladesh, even among the poorest. In 1998, they erected a two-room bamboo mat enclosure on land that was given by a local landholder voluntarily. A management committee was constituted to run the mosque and to cover the costs.

In 2004, the mosque had raised enough money from local contributions to do the first expansion. The material was converted to CI sheet as well and the footprint was enlarged in the east-west direction. In the second expansion in 2009, the mosque expanded in the north-south direction. The land around the mosque was already under someone else's tenure and therefore the mosque committee bought the land from these landholders. In 2014, the CI sheet building was converted to a *pucca* (concrete) building with a foundation for up to five storeys. The incremental flow of donations by the dwellers meant the mosque was a perpetual construction site adding a storey every couple of years. In 2019, the mosque bought the land next to it, not to expand the mosque building itself but to build ancillary functions, such as a large toilet and ablution block on the ground floor and some residences on top. The residences were rented out to generate income for the mosque. As a functional unit, the mosque operates as

Figure 32 Gaznabi mosque in Beltola, Korail (aerial view).

much more than a prayer space. Gajnabi mosque in Beltola is where communal meetings against the evictions are held. It is where you will find older men trying to learn to read after hours and young kids playing around. On the roof, you might find the neighbours using the large expanse of the concrete roof to dry turmeric, chilli and coriander. After lunch hours, you will find dozens of people napping inside. The mosques in Korail function as community hubs, hosting multiple sets of informal activities that have no other physical manifestation in the urban fabric. Mosques, in Islamic societies, do not need approval or any legitimacy from any larger authority such as the pope or national bodies. It allows

the community to form one according to their needs. Beyond the instrumental functions, the mosque is an important aspect of forming a collective narrative of the community, creating a sense of belonging. In other words, the mosque acts to 'collectivize' the otherwise disparate dwellers into a social body larger than the individuals.

Mosques attach a sense of legitimacy to the settlement as well. In some cases, it might even be built to prevent eviction. What is interesting to note is the particular coincidence of the mosque and the local neighbourhood catchment area. The proliferation of mosques in Korail was both a desire of the community to have a communal place to pray and also the desire of the local leader to establish territories. Being the president of the local mosque committee is a significant symbolic capital. Often the role coincided with being the legitimator and/or the service-profiteers. In Beltola, the mosque committee president was one of the largest landholders and also ran the water supply service. In between the prayers, he could be in the laneways in Beltola fixing water pipes to the housing clusters.

The fact that the mosque holds a significant power to re-arrange spatial conditions dawned on me the day I found myself in a roadblock on my way to Korail. The major 'formal city' street outside of Korail had been blocked and a bamboo pavilion was erected to hold a religious event (locally called a *waaj*) hosted by Gajnabi mosque. The structure spanned the 20-metre road and was about 70 metres in width with waterproof shading. Although temporary, this was the largest architectural structure in Korail for a day! Such bamboo pavilions are a common typology to host marriage ceremonies and local parties in rural areas in Bangladesh. Here in Korail, it was adapted to be a community hall. The police in charge of the city traffic tolerated the event. How could they not? The local City Councillor was the chief guest at the event! It was planned months ahead, speakers arrived from all over the country to Korail, and posters were pasted around the city. Thousands of people joined the event not just from Korail but from the surrounding neighbourhoods as well. This was one of the few times the difference between the formal city outside and Korail dissolved. The event, costing millions of BDT, was crowdsourced by the local community. Even formal receipt books were printed to formalize the donation. I know this as the mosque president one day called me aside, handed over one of the receipt books and politely asked me if I could collect some cash for the event from my acquaintances as well!

Just as the mosque coalesces different functions, so does the bazaar. The linguistic connotation of 'bazaar' is wider than just a place dedicated to

commercial trading, so it's difficult to simply translate bazaars as markets. Sure, bazaars are places where small-scale vendors bring their goods and sit in pre-defined stalls, but there is more to it. There is a connotation of local social knowledge sharing in the word 'bazaar' that is missed in 'market'. People just don't go to the bazaar to buy goods; it is where you would go to informally socialize as well as shop. Since buying goods involves haggling, shopping entails much more than the exchange of goods; it is a social game, with winners and losers. It is an urban spectacle.

Unlike the mosque, which needs a ceremonial beginning and a formal structure, bazaars can be ad-hoc, informal and temporary. In the local parlance, to describe the fish market that suddenly sprawls Korail's entrance on some mornings, one would use the term 'sitting' – 'the fish market has sat today'. The minimum unit of the bazaar is not the shop, but rather the human vendor (called *wala* in Bangla). You could have vegetable-wala, tea-wala, fish-wala, even recharge-wala – someone charges your phone. These mobile units of urbanism in Korail also travel the whole formal city servicing them with fresh goods, usually taken from the wholesale markets in the morning. The ecosystem of street vendors, their places in the informal settlement and their daily trajectories merit a separate book (on which I am currently working)!

I was lucky in my mission to understand how bazaars are formed and operate, as one of the bazaars – the Adorshonogor Bazaar – was formed right after I started my fieldwork in 2019, and I traced its development from inception to execution.

Street vendors used to set up daily along the BTCL-built wall at the entrance of Korail. These vendors did not have any tenure security for their spots on the footpath. The informal bazaar was inconsistent since it was based on who gets to occupy the spot first every day. Also, the only way to ensure tenure security and not get evicted by the police was to bribe the police. The locals had said they needed their own 'proper' bazaar. The leaders were eager too. A bazaar means a bazaar committee, one more leadership role to occupy and renting out the stalls is a good investment. Initially, the local leaders were asking if any NGO would be interested in building a bazaar structure for them. They would provide the land for the construction. Soon, without any outside help, they decided to move forward. There was an alliance of leaders who came together to take possession of the houses right behind the wall where the informal vendor market used to sit under the open sky. The leaders assured me that they had compensated the landholders. However, as per my conversations, I do think there was hidden

soft coercion mixed with the removal of people to acquire the land, a form of internal soft eviction.

However, the demolition and the subsequent construction started soon. It started with a few rooms. As the construction proceeded, more rooms were demolished and the market expanded. Over three months, an area of about 1,000 square metres came under the newly built market structure. I observed how the negotiations happened between construction workers and the local leaders every day at the bazaar site, who had differentiated roles. One was managing the soft eviction, while others were busy supervising the construction. The design was developed in situ, as new materials were brought in after demolition. The roof structure was built once, removed after some altercations between the leaders and construction workers and replaced in a different orientation. The construction team leader told me that was the only way to get things done – constant negotiations. Once the construction was complete on one side, a big banner and an opening party declared it as the new local bazaar, and the informal street vendors were the first to move into the new premises. Each stall costs about BDT 2,000 (£15) to rent and they were protected from the police by the leaders. No more harassment on the street!

The act of establishing a bazaar has a performative aspect and is driven by a collective intention that is more than the individual desire for financial gains by the leaders. In the local narrative, dwellers in interviews remarked how proud they were of their new bazaar. This ensured more social capital and legitimacy for the leaders. The bazaar immediately became a new landmark that differentiated Beltola from the rest of the neighbourhoods. Like the mosque, there is a collectivizing effect on the community where it is established. It is remarkable to note that almost all the neighbourhoods in Korail are named after the main bazaar – Jamaibazaar, Bou Bazaar and Mosharof Bazaar, for example. The bazaars are what gave the neighbourhood a distinctive public face. It has been observed elsewhere that the bazaar is often the major 'unifying' feature of traditional cities and guarantees its economic and social life.[6] Korail is no different.

11

The seventy godfathers

While mapping in Mosharof Bazaar one day, I knocked on a door and a lady opened it. I was not looking at her but was transfixed at something on the foyer floor. There was a squat toilet between me and her (see Figure 33). I was confused; did I knock on the toilet? No, she assured me, this was the entrance to her house. The toilet was a remnant from the past. The landholder, Porina, explained: 'We rented three rooms and lived in this house [a ten-room housing cluster], then we saved some money and bought the three rooms from the original owner. Then we had to make a new entrance, so we opened the toilet wall which was facing the laneway and made a door there and made a new toilet for us at the back. We don't use the one in the foyer, why waste money to cover it, it is purely aesthetic.' I couldn't help but be reminded of the French artist Marcel Duchamp's famous piece that used an everyday urinal.[1] Anyway, while the overall configuration of the housing cluster remained almost the same, the subtle change of creating a new door was a manifestation of an underlying system of property exchange and the complicated issue of tenure and landholding in a highly contested settlement.

Porina had bought these three rooms, rented one out, worked and took care of two children going to school. She didn't remind me of the Corleones, or any other mafia kingpin. Yet, the mainstream media keeps perpetuating the presence of the 'mafia' in Korail. One particular narrative that even some of the NGOs are pushing is the idea of Korail being grabbed and run by about seventy godfathers, implying that all of Korail's land is owned and controlled by the mafia. The narrative matters because it delegitimizes the struggles of people like Porina, and when the bulldozers come to evict, the middle class rests assured that it is all done to free public land from the clutches of these mafia. In the opacity of actually understanding how Korail operates in terms of its land management and related governance, different groups are free to portray the tenure condition as it pleases their desire.

Before proceeding further, a few things need clarification. Tenure (or lack of it) has been one of the major defining criteria for both slums and informal settlements.[2] Geoffrey Payne defines it as 'the set of relationships between people concerning land/building or its product'.[3] A more detailed definition is provided in a later UN-Habitat report: 'the way land is held or owned by individuals and groups, or the set of relationships legally or customarily defined amongst people concerning land.'[4]

Following the classical Western conception of individual property titles as the only legal form of tenure, the legal/illegal dichotomy has been a major way

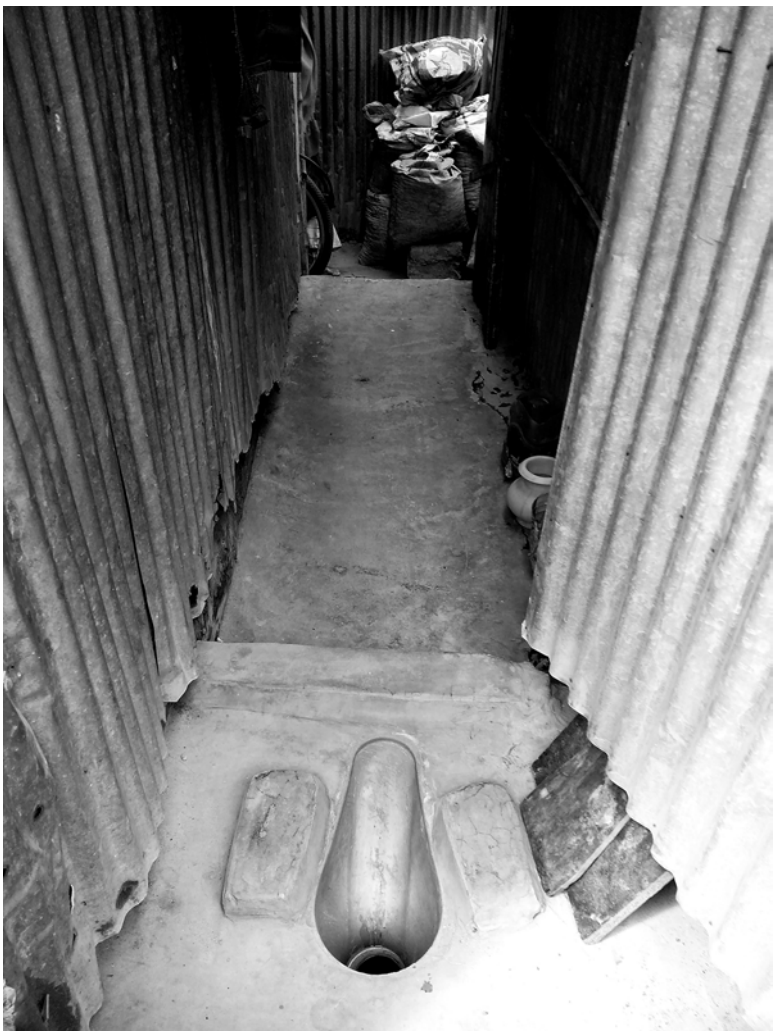

Figure 33 The entrance corridor to one of the houses, *not* a toilet!

to determine tenure conditions. Providing legal land titles became a mainstream market-driven mechanism to 'unlock' the capital held by informal dwellers. According to this conception, Korail, as it stands, can be classified as a squatter settlement on public land and the tenure arrangement is non-formal. During interviews in Korail, dwellers acknowledged that they are not 'legal' owners of the land and often laughingly use the term 'buying or selling the land' referring to their tenure transfers within the settlement. What matters to the dweller's desire to invest or not in building or upgrading is not the legal aspect alone, but the social perception of tenure.

From the focus group discussions, several key aspects were identified as the major determinants of perceived tenure security in Korail. First, actions taken by the community against evictions or forced resettlements, as well as the level of community cohesion and the ability to form protests against eviction drives. Korail dwellers have been involved in court cases and legal battles, aided by pro-bono advocacy NGOs such as Bangladesh Legal Action and Services Trust (BLAST) and Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK). The major vertical intensification and expansion in Korail had taken place after the 2012 High Court ruling against further evictions, which was in effect caused by a rapid mobilization of the entire settlement population in the streets of Dhaka.

Secondly, NGOs play a crucial role in generating a sense of tenure security. Large-scale NGOs such as BRAC and DSK have made significant investments to build water points and community toilet facilities, as well as have disbursed millions of BDT in microfinance loans. The local perception is that such investments happen only when the NGOs are sure of the continuity of the settlement.

Thirdly, the length of the occupation in Korail and the total population – both are positively correlated with perceived tenure. The older areas of Korail have been developed more, where the dwellers confidently claim that 'if we can last 40 years, we can be here for the next 40!' This contrasts with the more temporary construction in the newly built areas, where respondents identified with a higher risk of eviction and were reluctant to invest in buildings.

Lastly, the inefficiency of the state, the long bureaucratic legal processes and backlogs in resettlement schemes give the dwellers a sense of security. Different tacit forms of acknowledgement from the state have helped increase such perceptions, even if it isn't legalization. Support from the Mayor's office – in the form of building construction materials – during the reconstruction effort after a major 2017 fire incident was taken as a positive sign by the dwellers. The sharp

growth spurt in 2017 can be attributed to a renewed sense of security and flow of investment following the government support in the reconstruction.

However, such perception often is not enough for dwellers to invest.

During one of my rests in a tea stall, I noticed a large portrait of a kid, dressed up like a groom, hanging from the wall. I asked the tea stall owner who he was. It was his child, and the picture was taken the day he was circumcised. The man and his wife went on to explain to me that they had held a 'feast of circumcision' for their boy, a common local custom. They had to, it was a social obligation. 'I spent BDT 200,000 (£1,700) for the occasion, we invited 400 guests,' they proudly claimed. I was surprised. There he was, a tea stall vendor, operating out of a rented tea stall, who had no tenure to speak of in Korail but had spent four years' worth of savings to celebrate his child's circumcision. 'Why didn't you buy a few rooms here?' I had to ask them, 'you could have easily gotten four rooms!' He looked at me and said, 'Why build rooms in Korail? They are going to demolish all of this any day. It's pointless to invest here.'

It just wasn't him; many in Korail diverted their savings elsewhere because of the perception of tenure from the state authority. The informal tenure security was not enough. What it also pointed to was the fact that it was not always the poverty or lack of financial capital that was holding back further development and investment in Korail. There is no denying what the people of Korail wanted from the state – equitable tenure security.

The perception of tenure creates the backdrop of the life of people in Korail. The perception dwindles; sometimes the tide is in their favour, sometimes against. Rumours abound of impending evictions. The spectre of the smart village looms over their head. The fires that happened not only burnt houses but also fuelled speculations that they were arsons,[5] machinations of the state to evict them informally. This affective domain of not knowing what will happen – whether to hope or to despair, whether to plan to extend the house here or look for a place to move away – underlies the quotidian life of the ordinary people in Korail.

Examining the perception of tenure alone does not reveal how control is exercised at the community level. How is the land allocated to new dwellers? Who gets to extend their land into the lake and how much? Who mediates between competing claims on an empty land? How does the inheritance of properties work? To answer these, the investigation now turns to tenure 'as is practised' in Korail.

Tenure etymologically has a sense of the 'condition or fact of holding a status, position, or occupation', and that is precisely what Porina – the landholder from the opening narrative of this essay. She knows she does not have legal ownership

of the land, and she laughed at herself for using the term 'buying the land'. What she meant was that there was an exchange of tenure; her right to hold on to the land (becoming a landholder with all its rights and social status) is de facto tenure. This de facto view of tenure focuses on the actual control of the property on the ground, regardless of the legal status or the perceptual judgement of its security.[6]

This is possible because, in Korail, there exists a local system of maintaining tenure rights. The exchange of tenure that goes on in Korail is quite sophisticated and it follows the formal land trading methods employed by the formal city, although there is no central cadastral registry. The buyer and the seller agree on the price of the land, the building or the room, then papers are drawn up, and then the two sets are printed on government-stamped pads (available for BDT 100 that can be held in court as a legal document). Then the parties sign the paper in front of witnesses of a certain social reputation and once the money is exchanged, so is the tenure.

Every landholder in Korail knew precisely the extent of his tenure. They knew that tenure security is guaranteed for the following rights: the right of development including the right to extend (if there was a water edge), the right to protection from eviction from local sources and the right to access. In addition, tacitly implied is a claim of the social status of landholders and a stake in the local decision-making. The local leaders usually are the ones who ensure that the rights are not violated. However, sometimes these very leaders are complicit in misappropriating the tenure rights or legitimizing ones who have done so.

Tenure is oftentimes the most contentious issue and results in altercations and even violence. Disagreements occur precisely because the management is informal and often is tweaked to oppress the socially weak. The major event in Korail regarding tenure that everyone is aware of but seldom mentions is the murder of Mosharof. Recounting his story will help to understand how tenure can be indicative of the processes underlying the urban transformation, particularly exemplified in one of the neighbourhoods, Satellite Poshchim.

I met with Mosharof's nephew, Faisal, who currently lives in the same neighbourhood and he explained to me in detail how the tenure changed hands here. Mosharof was the son of a BTCL employee. Because of this, and due to ties with political parties as well, he was quite influential in the northern parts of Korail, close to the settlement on BTCL ground. The land north of the lake had an earlier settlement which was evicted in 2003 by BTCL. For the next seven years the land was farmed by Rashid, one of the BTCL employees and the use gave him a sense of de facto tenure. Mosharof bought the tenure of the land from

Rashid in 2009. Mosharof's tenure extended from the existing settlement to the east to the end of the agricultural fields.

Mosharof's first step was to start a market, and later that entire neighbourhood was named after him, 'Mosharof Bazaar'. Mosharof was liked by the local people as he allowed some of the poorest to settle on his land without charging them. He was not a developer and did not think in terms of producing housing. Rather, he planned half of the area as rickshaw garages with regularly spaced worksheds, which later became the wide laneways of Satellite Poshchim. Then he built a house for his extended family with a courtyard. I double-checked with Faisal. However, Mosharof had fallen out with the local leaders soon and his large tenure was a cause for local tensions. He was murdered in 2012 by some assailants. Everyone in Korail knows who they are. They asked me to look at what was built after his death and who benefitted.

Mosharof's death didn't automatically mean the tenure would pass on to his family. The land was up for grabs. From 2013, the parcelling of the land

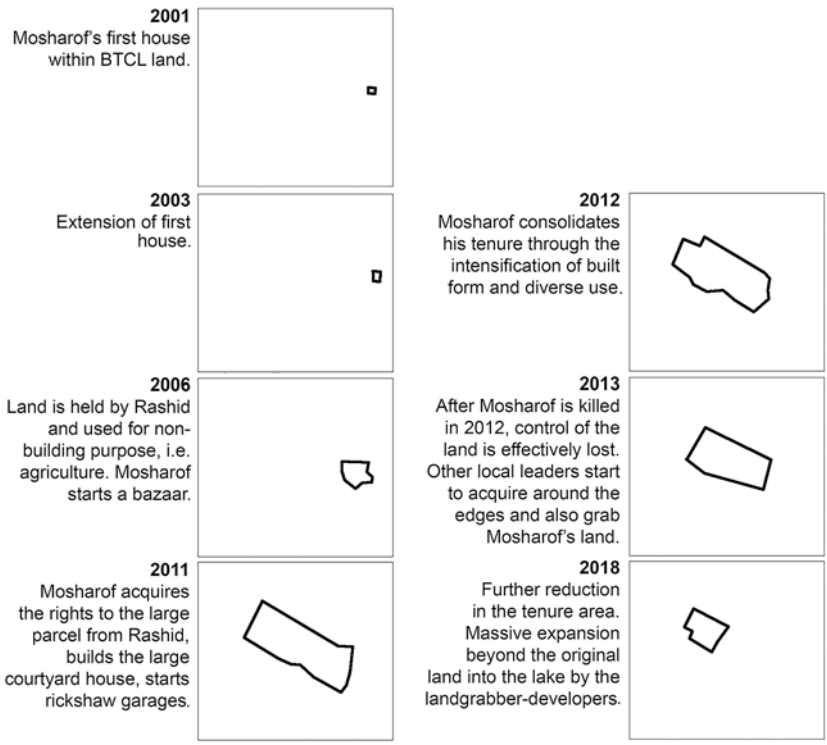

Figure 34 Timeline of the Mosharof family's tenured territory.

(Tenure pattern indicated by grey line changing with time.)

and small structures appears behind the rickshaw garages, followed by more landfilling and the creation of new housing. Mosharof's mother kept hold of the tenure of the large house and the two rickshaw garages behind it. In 2014, she demolished the older courtyard house and built long elongated clusters with forty-nine rooms to ensure the income to maintain the large extended family. The rest of the land with the tenure belonging to Mosharof was captured by local leaders. With the land came the right to extend into the lake.

What followed next, after the election of 2014, was a rapid landfilling and development scheme. In the next four years, hundreds of small housing clusters with four rooms were sold with tenure to new dwellers. The process was to landfill, build a house with the minimum materials and sell it to a prospective client while filling the lake for the next unit. The people who bought the rooms had no stake in any of the urban design or architectural decisions being made. They did not know each other; the only consideration was the money that they could pay, and they had just moved here with the hope of buying the de facto tenureship.

Effectively, the development scheme ran until it reached the current edge of the lake. The leader of this entire operation is also the president of the Community Development Organization Committee constituted by a leading NGO. As for the profit that was made out of the land and housing development scheme, one estimation put the figure at about BDT 30 million (£200,000). Why did they sell the land instead of renting it out like other large landholders? One hypothesis by the locals is that he was unsure of holding on to land that he knew he didn't have any legitimate claim to. By selling the land, he was minimizing risk.

The entire land that was once held by Mosharof was now a mosaic of subsistence-dwellers (the neighbourhood of Satellite Poshchim; see Figure 35). The street scale tenure pattern of 50 × 100 metres shows the repeating patterns of the four-room dwellings, of about 40 square metres on average, that the subsistence dwellers bought, right behind the large land parcels retained by Mosharof's mother. The urban form in Satellite Poshchim – the barrack-like housing clusters with minimal open spaces – can be explained by the process of how the settlement was produced.

The contrast could not be greater with the tenure processes in the neighbourhoods that developed earlier in Korail. Except for a very few, most of the landholders had distributed the land equitably amongst themselves and had slowly negotiated the laneways. The mapping indicates that there was no

significant land-grabbing operation in the earlier fabric, which was confirmed by the elders living in Korail from the very beginning.

The hypothesis can be further substantiated by analysing the tenure pattern of Beltola (see Figure 35). The land was settled in 2001 by subsistence dwellers. However, after 2009 the lake was filled and large tenure holders emerged, particularly those who were at the edge of the lake. There are only a few small-scale landholders in the newly filled land in Beltola. Unlike Satellite Poshchim (where all of the new plots were sold), the reclaimed land in Beltola was held by the large landholders and more rental units were built. Again, the difference can be linked to the difference in the legitimacy of the land. Extending into the lake was seen as legitimate as long as the original house at the edge was legitimately tenured. The tenure map of Bou Bazaar Bridge shows the cooperative that secured their piece along their bridge and how they extended along the length. The pattern now clearly shows how the laneway after the fire cuts through what the landholders consider still part of their tenure and not the public domain. Since the tenure was never socially re-assigned to the laneway, the landholders see extending onto the laneway and building structures over it as the legitimate expression of their rights.

Later, while interviewing an NGO official who worked with sanitation in Korail, I came across a social map that he had personally made of the tenure structure in the Beltola neighbourhood. While his map was not geographically accurate, it catalogued each landholder and the number of rooms they held. He

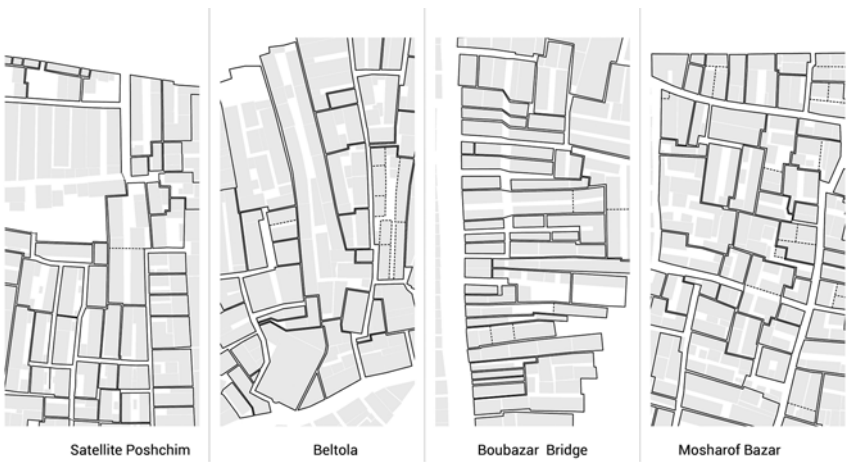

Figure 35 Tenure pattern in the four neighbourhoods under study (see Figure 8 for reference to their locations).

Grey lines indicate the territory held under each tenure (50m × 100m).

made it as knowing the number of rooms under each tenure was helpful for him to plan for sanitation facilities and toilet blocks. His map also suggested the same pattern: the earlier settlement always showed a more equal distribution of tenure as opposed to the later development being in favour of the large landholders or the landgrabbers.

While the tenure map indicates the larger processes that occurred in the production process, it also helps reveal the micro-spatial practices in the quotidian life of Korailians. It reveals how tenure is not a given, inalienable right for them; rather, it is in flux, contested and in need of constant protection. At the end of the mapping tenure across the four street-scale areas, I still could not find the seventy godfathers the media said 'owned' all of Korail. As the maps clearly show, there is a multitude of small-scale landholders, the majority of landholders owning fewer than ten rooms. This does not negate the fact that power has become increasingly centralized in the hands of a few leaders in Korail, but for everyday purposes, there are large numbers of ordinary landholders who enjoy the right to the land for all intents and purposes, albeit within Korail's internal context, the maintenance of which is one key aspect of the governance of built environment in Korail.

Governance

Based on interviews with local leaders and dwellers, I have mapped the relevant social groups within Korail as well as the relevant public and NGO agents involved in Korail's urban production at the larger settlement scale (see Figure 36). The diagram shows their interconnections, some of which are formally acknowledged (black lines), while some are informal and difficult to identify (lighter grey lines).

Rather than listing these governing relations, I trace their temporal dynamics – the emergence of these relations and their impact on Korail's urban transformation – which brings together the agents from Part One and arrangements in Part Two into a singular narrative of a biography of Korail.

The first dwellers – pioneer-settlers – arrived in the early 1990s in Korail. The initial incremental accretion to the north was governed by social norms and tacit approval from BTCL, who was the prior legal owner of the land and currently occupies the northern edge of the settlement. To the south, in the absence of any local governing group to represent them, the pioneer settlers had to negotiate with the leaders of the adjacent neighbourhood in the formal city, who exercised

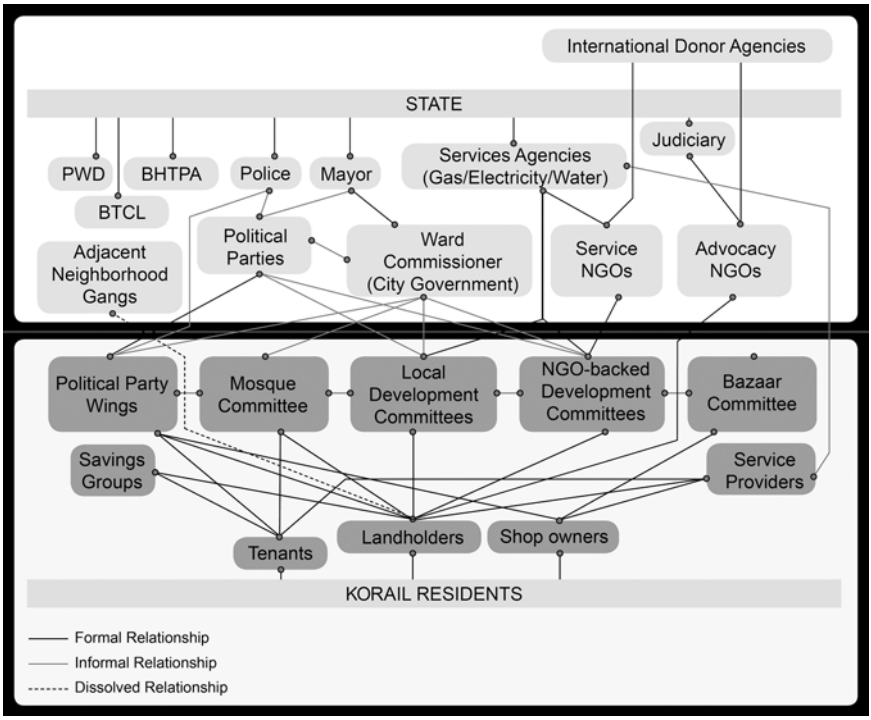

Figure 36 Governing relations in Korail.

loose control over the empty government land. Once settled, the first collective body to emerge was the mosque committees, placed in charge of taking care of the mosque facilities, appropriating land and collecting funding. The mosque committees had limited governance power initially and were not involved in any extensive land allocation or settlement development process.

With this increase in population, around 1998, the first of the NGOs started activities in Korail (e.g. Proshika). One of their activities was to create women's savings groups, which collected a pool of money from its members to be disbursed as a loan to a member in need. This self-governance exercise enabled some women leaders to emerge, who initiated their own savings group outside the diktats of NGOs. Such transfer of governance tools and techniques from NGOs and subsequent adaptation in generating self-governing structures is one of the key features of Korail's urban transformation.

By the 2000s, a significant local economy and more specifically, bazaars emerged in Korail. The bazaar committees were constituted to maintain and ensure protection from extortion by external leaders of adjacent neighbourhoods. Since the tasks of these committees were very loosely defined,

oftentimes they assumed roles that were beyond their intended scope. For example, many road upgrades and sewerage work had been implemented by the bazaar committees as they realized poor road conditions have a detrimental effect on their business.

One particular feature of the social groups discussed so far is their small scale and defined territories. In the absence of legal support from the state, social capital in the form of trust was the major constitutive feature of these social bodies. For the savings groups, this translated into membership being offered to only those who shared the same rural place of origin, ensuring a way to find a member in case of embezzlement. This fortified a sense of geocultural genealogy. As for the bazaar committees, the emphasis was on proximity and daily contact between members.

Another major external body that started to striate the social formation in Korail was the political party in power. Several political party wings (such as the volunteer wing, youth wing and women's wing) started to open extensively in Korail from 2000 onwards. They are housed in what are colloquially known as 'clubhouses'. Leaders of the party wings have close informal ties with the local Ward Councillor, the lowest rung of the formal city governance in Dhaka.

As the settlement was consolidated by 2004, newer NGOs (e.g. DSK) started operating especially to provide physical services such as sanitation and water points. These service-delivery NGOs operated at a larger scale than the prior ones. To operate at the scale of the settlement, they utilized tools of governance such as the formation of community-based organizations (CBOs), running local elections to elect members of CBOs, forms of social mapping and enumeration. In particular, the formation of operational territories by sub-dividing Korail has been subsequently implemented by all large-scale NGOs (e.g. UPPR/UNDP starting in 2008, BRAC UDP starting in 2016). For example, currently BRAC divides Korail into four territories, each with its own CBO. The simultaneous existence of these NGO-backed development committees meant mutually reinforcing territories and multiple leadership roles on offer. Although the NGOs held elections to allow for the participation of the 'urban poor', in reality, the outcome was different. Only relatively wealthy landlords could afford to take part in the NGO activities, excluding most small-scale landholders and tenants by default. Over time, the same group of large-scale landholders got elected in multiple NGO-backed committees that ossified the local power structure.

However, these leaders, in any case, had hardly any participation in the decision-making of the physical infrastructure projects. The morphogenesis of the urban realm in terms of street upgrading and development of amenities

such as community toilets was designed by the NGOs, mostly based on the demands of the international donor bodies funding the specific project. So, a street upgrade that may appear to be self-organized by the dwellers could be in effect decided by a set of external actors. The quid pro quo relationship between the implementing NGO and the local leadership worked well for the NGO operation to ensure the timely delivery of the project and minimal disruption from the community.

The leaders who worked with multiple NGOs simultaneously in urban developmental projects often learnt the tools of governance and operation used by the NGOs. Some of these leaders broke away from the NGO-driven structure and formed their local development committees that work independently. These autonomous small-scale local NGOs exhibit a sense of solidarity and care for the dwellers often missing in the party-led and large global NGO-backed committees (examples of small-scale local NGOs are Korail Research Center, Bijoy Bangla Development Foundation and many others perhaps that are not even registered as such).

Lastly, several advocacy NGOs (such as NDBUS, BLAST and ASK) have worked in Korail since the earliest settlement, providing legal support to ensure housing rights and stop attempts at wholesale eviction of the settlement. Usually, they operate in collaboration with local leaders and owners who are not affiliated with political parties and service-based NGOs. The work of these NGOs is instrumental in generating a high perception of tenure security – the key underlying factor in informal urban transformation. The fight against eviction is ongoing.

From the narrative, three particular governance tendencies can be discerned.

The first can be termed as 'electoral', in which a mutually beneficial connection has been established by political parties and local leaders, mediated by local party wings. The local leaders ensure a 'vote bank', and supply muscle and people for mass rallies in return for assurances of state recognition for the settlement and financial incentives for the individual leaders. This is one of the main firsthand observations during my fieldwork as it coincided with a national election when such tendencies operate the most.

The second tendency can be termed 'developmental'. Since Korail dwellers are unrecognized by municipal services, this form of governance is typically initiated by large-scale service delivery NGOs. Governing tools are imported and implanted in the settlement to ensure swift delivery of physical upgrading of the settlement infrastructure. While on the surface this form of governance employs so-called democratic norms such as participation, further investigation

in this essay will shed light on the clientelist undertone in their operation, noted elsewhere as well.

Often hidden under the first two aspects of governance, the third governing tendency observed in Korail is a more quiet and distributed form of governing relations – 'grassroots governance' of everyday life by the various forms of local committees and individual leaders. Structuring this relation is a desire to organize daily affairs and is led by notions of community solidarity and norms of social justice. While it may seem inconsequential, this form of localized and fragmented governance can be as a site of an alternative political imaginary. The grassroots community leaders have been instrumental in affecting urban-scale changes that go beyond the diktats of the NGOs, political parties or the state. Acting as assemblers, such leaders organize material, mobilize the community and generate support for changes that go beyond simple adaptations; there is something more that seeps out more than the common-sense portrayals. They scuttle under the surfaces of oppressive regimes, both internal and external, to ensure Korail remains a viable place to sustain life. It is this condition of flourishing of life that characterizes Korail: a life worth living from the perspective of the wretched, from those who have etched out an urban home in the midst of an extractive world order.

Conclusion

Bricolage, bazaar and big-box

This is my story of Korail, how it grew and how it continues to operate, to give birth to an urban life for many. I do not say this is comprehensive or complete; cities are far more complex than we give them credit for – there is a radical unknowability embedded in them, perhaps just like our lives.[1] Having said that, how can we make sense of the vignettes we have traversed in this book? Can there be an analytically robust way to speak of the key aspects without reducing the lives and struggles of these dwellers?

I find it useful to draw on the analogy of a three-storied house as a useful metaphor, borrowed from the economic historian Fernand Braudel, as a way to speak about the urban production processes in Korail.[2]

At the first level are the dwellers with the desire to survive. These are the first settlers or the ones with the lowest social capital. The standard of living is the lowest, their existence is extremely elementary and are in constant search for improvisations by scraping through the urban landscape, both in terms of livelihoods and constructing their house. They innovate on the spot, and apparently there is little coordination between them while they build their house, as most imagine that they would be here temporarily. However, such individualistic decision-making is a strategic move in the face of resource and temporal scarcity. While the entire process is usually unguided by a traditional community authority, there are always the usual small-scale processes to generate legitimacy from pre-existing dwellers, and some level of engagement with others in ensuring that their inhabitation is not an imposition. One word to capture this level of urban production can be *bricolage*, the notion of putting together disparate things ad-hoc to get by. (See Figure 37 for perhaps a representative area in Beltola's early settlement area; note the spatial irregularity.)

Most dwellers, over time, start to get organized or arrive and establish their stake in a more organized manner. Up from bricolage, at this second level of the house, there is a stronger sense of commonality and communality, an acknowledgement of the reality of living in the settlement for a longer period and therefore a sense of leading change to make it better, both in terms of living conditions and socio-spatial organization. Dwellers become entrepreneurial, they see the potential for using the houses as a source to generate income, and with the introduction of a rental class, service and planned provision become more important. Community infrastructure and institutions start reinforcing a sense of commons and dwellers operate with a desire to live well, as much as possible within the constraints. This motivates a communal empathy, of doing things together. Of course, there are many internal tensions, but the conditions are fairly egalitarian given that external authorities are not reinforcing some dwellers over others. Many forms of community activity happen with the collective organization. To me, the word *bazaar* is a good shorthand for this level of organization, not in the sense of the market, but as an indicator of collectivity, fair competition, open access to all and fair economic and social life. An example from Korail would be the neighbourhood along the causeway in Bou Bazaar, where there was a collective commoning of water-edge and equitable distribution of land, organized by the dwellers themselves without outside intervention (see Figure 38, the equidistantly placed plots along the road).[3] The decision-making is quite distributed at this level, allowing more direct control of the affairs of the community by the citizens, although of course key assemblers are there to push things along. Most dwellers in Korail reside at this level, but both internal and external factors help in the process of creating a third level.

Figure 37 'Bricolage', an individualistic form of organization.

(Left: Aerial view of Old Beltola. Middle: Key map showing location. Right: Tenure map showing uncoordinated spatial arrangement at a larger scale, desired to survive.)

The third level of the house is one shaped by a desire to profit, a desire to control, a desire to extract and to ensure maximization of one's self. It is perhaps not just about the financial gain, but a form of self-aggrandizement as well. At this level, both power and capital start to accumulate in the hands of the few. These few often pose as community assemblers working for all, while they are behind the largest operations of land-grabbing, service racketeering and syndication. Rather than thinking of them as individuals, it's much more important to understand the political and social relationalities that are part of the process at this level – the ecosystem that sustains them. As we saw, many external authorities and supposed development practices often embolden the local desires to rise to this level. The instrumentality and precision of spatial planning become most organized at this level to facilitate the extraction and recirculation of capital. The desire to maximize profit by increased efficiency leads to standardization and repetition, and throws citizen participation out of the window. In Korail, the land-grab-apartment-development in Satellite Poshchim is a perfect example (see Figure 39). A short-hand term for this level could be 'big-box', not in terms of the actual size, but the connotation it has – large-scale supermarkets, generic housing condominiums and office blocks in cities worldwide. 'Big-box' represents the capitalist condition in the sense that Braudel had pointed to, one that ensures the concentration of decision-making, elimination of competition and formation of a syndicate of the few. The same logic permeates through Korail in producing many aspects of its urban life, particularly in the latter years, when outside entanglements of power enabled such local desires to flourish.

Given the evidence so far, does it make sense to speak of Korail as 'self-organized'? To be 'bottom-up'? Not only there are multiple levels within, but

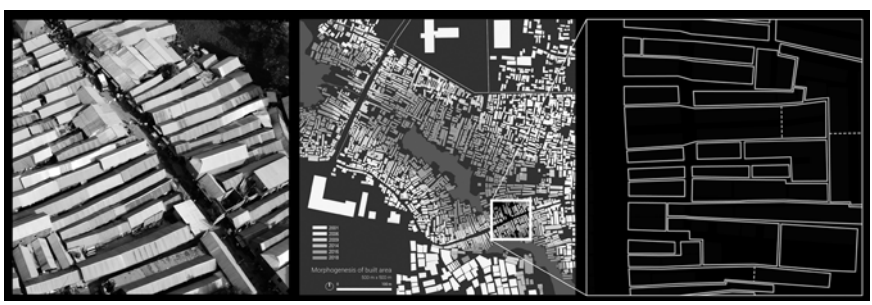

Figure 38 'Bazaar', a collective form of organization.

(Left: Aerial view of Bou Bazaar Bridge. Middle: Location in keymap. Right: Tenure map showing equitable distribution and citizen-led organizing process, desire to live well.)

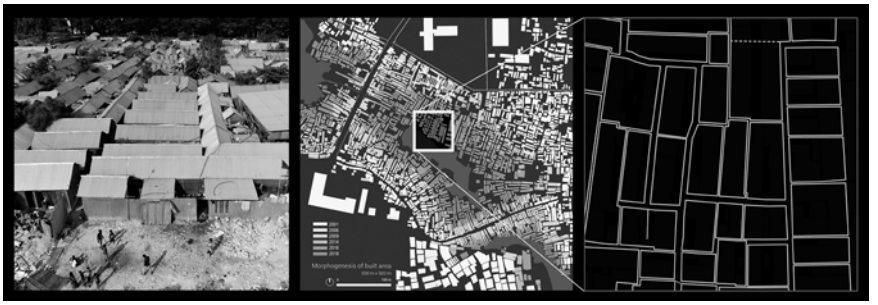

Figure 39 'Big-box', an extractive form of organization.

(Left: Aerial view of Bou Bazaar Bridge. Middle: Location in keymap. Right: Tenure map showing standardized apartments being sold, no longer locally led, desired to profit.)

the actors and arrangements in Korail are fluid, they can often move between the different levels. There are slippages, subterfuge, scale-shifts and burrowing from one level to others that play out in a multitude of temporal scales, which disavows any attempt to know a settlement or a city in its entirety, and thereby 'plan' out a future. While it may come as a surprise to urban planners and development practitioners, within Korail, this unpredictability of urban life is well-known. Such narratives of transgressions across levels above or below create significant turbulence and eddies in Korail's social life, and most importantly continuously shape the landscape of desire. This interchangeability between levels is neither random nor structurally determined beforehand. When we, in our many guises as academics or development workers, engage with places like Korail, we never meet 'people' in an abstract way; each person is a trajectory of past choices, actively motivated by desires towards particular aspects that cumulatively impact urban life. The complexity in understanding Korail, or any city for that matter, is the impossibility of knowing how desires, individually and collectively, will be shaped by future events. Nor can we ascribe a natural historical progression to these three levels: capitalism is not the only option at which we must arrive. In Korail's micro-history, there have been moments when collective action has trumped capitalist moves and shifted the direction of the settlement towards more equitable ends. I no longer find the terms self-organizing and bottom-up to be useful; these are simply conveniences that package perplexing realities into a neat imaginary of a singular process but are far removed from reality.

In our lack of understanding of the internal dynamics in places like Korail, even with the best of intentions to help the vulnerable within (those engaged in bricolage), oftentimes we inadvertently work to reinforce the big-box complex.

The agents of bog-box may masquerade as community leaders, volunteers and ardent helpers, but they fail to work together with others at a collective level (bazaar). Bricolage, bazaar and big-box, for me at least, have become a useful rule of thumb to hold myself accountable in my engagement with not just Korail but other settlements as well. The three levels are suggested to distinguish different plateaus, particular thresholds where the desires mutate, exchange, amalgamate or negate each other, impacting the socio-material arrangements in their wake. These desires, and changes to them, are not held in a vacuum, nor are they something innate. They are made and unmade, conditioned and generated, and attempted to control through certain narratives and imaginaries.

Whose desires will be the ones assembling Karail's future? Which narrative and which imaginary? Will the state get its way around building the hi-tech park by forcefully evicting all the dwellers? Or will there be a resurgence of a collective agency to thwart the state machinery? Perhaps beyond this dualistic conception, there is a different future possible, where desires align between the state and the dwellers, manifesting in strange chimaeras – perhaps a high-tech park nestled within an upgraded settlement, co-existence of diversified functional mixes and the settlement integrated with the city. As urban sociologist Andrea Brighenti notes, the urban interstices, between Korail and the formal city in this instance, can be conceived itself as a crucial site of governance and urban management, rather than dealing with them on their own.[4] By instituting a relational mode of operations that traverses the interstice, there is potential to recast how formal-informal entanglements are dealt with, not only in Korail-Dhaka but globally.

However, based on previous trajectories, perhaps what Korail is heading towards is a slow erasure and a simultaneous resistance: a protracted war. For now, its urban transformation will go on in the face of ongoing threats of eviction. The state perhaps will incrementally carve out small territories, utilizing the local political leaders, if there is a strong resistance to wholesale forced eviction. There will be some form of resettlement or compensation to portray a sense of justice being served, but given the track record, I doubt whether it will be equitable. From the state's perspective, there is a certain givenness assumed in how the future can unfold for Korail. Despite intersecting desires generating a field of possible outcomes, only some options are staged as viable ones. Why can there not be an alterity of outcomes? What forms of entanglements allow certain desires to flourish and some to be overpowered? Which desire counts and which doesn't? These are questions of agency and power – to which we turn next.

Oppression, justice and *ihsaan*

The complexity of the power relations in Korail rears its head in our mapping of the governing relations in Korail (in Figure 36). However, simply declaring that complexity, or even showing its tangents, is perhaps not enough. More than simply things being connected to each other, there are certain detachments, pauses, ruptures, foldings and intensifications of relations, which perhaps can be imagined as a multi-form entanglement of power. A simplistic state-at-the-top and dwellers-at-the-bottom image is no longer tenable to understand what is going on. There is enough critical analytic jargon that describes these entanglements in informal settlements, but I am interested in a very simple method to understand what is going on. As we have seen throughout the eleven essays, there is a certain granularity to the engagements under our microscope here, as well as the contingent nature of these relations in every case. In other words, there is a form of performative ambiguity permeating across the different agents and arrangements. A state agency can act with vengeance on a particular dweller but be benevolent to his next-door neighbour despite being beholden to the same official policy. Is it a structural condition or the execution of agency at the local level? To move beyond the discourse of structure and agency, I find it useful to look at the impact of what is being produced by these variegated forms of entanglements of power in Korail. In my simple understanding, if seen from the most vulnerable and the most marginalized – to see from the perspective of the wretched – the impact of entanglements is often somewhere in between a field of difference that spans from oppression on one hand and justice as the central threshold.

Take the wall in the first essay for example. While legal, the wall built by BTCL was clearly oppressive: it cut off the existing urban life curated over a long period to serve the desire for the state agency to sanitize their view. The power relationship between the state and marginalized dwellers who only start to live in a settlement with a desire to survive is steeped in legality/illegality. The mismatch between the desire of the state agency to not 'see a slum' from their premises ended up ghettoizing a large community and cutting them off from key access points. Moving towards more extreme forms, oppression can be at a higher intensity, as in the form of deliberate arson or forced eviction without notice. But perhaps, beyond these overt articulations of power, the most vicious form of oppression is one that is invisible – the suspended affective state in which the dwellers are left with, a life that oscillates between the desire to live and the fear of losing everything! Not knowing if today is the day that the

bulldozers will roll in. We have also seen that there is an internal asymmetry in how this fear is shared within the settlement. Not everyone is impacted similarly by these large-scale state actions; some perhaps will even benefit by allowing it to happen.

What's also invisible is the internal oppression by the few within the settlement in terms of the processes of extraction and domination. It may seem like a small detail from the outside but in everyday life, acts of oppression such as having your water or electricity cut off, having to listen to unjust accusations and demands from local leaders, the threat of outright violence paired with more oppression from external factors such as the police cumulatively create a stifling atmosphere to live in for most. Given that state/societal protection is nowhere to be seen, the majority remain silent and move on with their everyday existence as best as they can. If you are there enough times, behind the hustle and bustle and the apparent fight for survival, you may hear whispers: 'Is there anyone to take us out of this city of oppression?' Emboldened by NGOs, state and macro-politics, these entanglements of power often strangle the voices of the truly wretched. To take away the desire to speak one's mind is perhaps one of the cruellest forms of everyday oppression.

Where does this desire to oppress come from? Or to put it mildly, how is it that the oppression happening is invisible to many? It reeks so much of the colonial governance regime, times when we, the natives, were treated much differently than those who colonized us. While material decolonization happened over fifty years ago, there remains a lingering presence of colonial mentality that constantly reproduces unjust social strata. Even the London-trained lawyers fighting in the court case for the settlement dwellers would find it difficult to share a meal with them. People in places like Korail are treated as inferior in some way: they are often called 'chotolok' in Bangla (literally translating to 'small people', in a socio-economic sense). People in the upper strata usually use the word 'slum' as a pejorative term to denigrate someone ('bosti theke ashco naki?' – *are you from the slums*?). This stigma is socially produced and maintained, collectively acted. Within that atmosphere justice becomes truly difficult for the millions of settlement dwellers even to aspire to, since the mental perception is so skewed against them. They are not seen as truly deserving of anything better.

The messiness of reality stems from the fact that, even with honest intentions, the impact of entanglements may manifest across multiple points along the spectrum between oppression and justice. Take NGOs for instance; some of their actions taken in good faith have enabled some just actions on the ground, but also inadvertently handed over tools of oppression to some dwellers.

Mechanistic projects that do not pay attention to the entanglements on the ground often do this, and the oppression happens like a butterfly effect without a manifest desire to harm. While I am not suggesting that it is possible to calculate all possible impacts for the standard development projects, lessons from Korail should humble us. It should force us to listen to the ground before we mobilize policies, enact actions, design implementation guidelines and feel so good about 'helping the poor'. This decolonial self-critical stance, one that is beyond official ethics guidelines and rules of engagement, perhaps runs contrary to the efficiency of the project, funding deadlines and organizational checkboxes. But this is often the only line of defence against the more subtle forms of injustice that we become complicit in perpetuating.

The impact of the power entanglements often allows a sense of justice to prevail, even when there isn't any explicit intention to do so, from a serendipitous alignment of desires. Take the relationship between Korail and the neighbouring formal neighbourhoods as an example. By and large, the entanglements primarily are of generating livelihoods and getting services, and both parties benefit. The drivers, maids, RMG workers, orderlies, peons, waste-pickers, milkmen, street vendors, rickshaw pullers and many others sustain the city outside, as much as the livelihood generated sustains them. Of course, there are cases of unjust payments and violation of work rights, but the general context is that of mutual aid, a form of reciprocity that is based on just relationalities. While not explicitly seen through a lens of social justice, this continuous co-dependency is one of the main reasons Korail is much more successful as a settlement than ones in the periphery where lack of access to jobs creates more abject poverty. Korail's centrality in terms of location, its history of external employment and the ability of locals to diversify their housing stock into places of entrepreneurship have allowed a sense of economic and social freedom, key tenets of a just city.

Then there are more explicit forms of relations that pursue justice as an outcome for the dwellers in Korail. There are many examples: the large pro bono legal NGOs that fight in judicial courts on behalf of the dwellers, the lawyers who are pursuing better legal frameworks to ensure rights and better policy and many spatial justice-minded architects who work with the community. What separates them from the oppressive kind of engagement is a clear commitment to social justice, and an understanding of the local dynamics, a reading of the ground. And it is not just the dwellers or civil society actors; sometimes the state actors such as the judicial courts hold the government to account (in very few instances, but a place of hope nonetheless). Just outcomes are only possible

when there is an explicit desire for it at multiple scales by a diverse range of stakeholders without any hidden agendas.

But oppression and justice are not binaries, for justice is the bare minimum that we can commit to: it is a threshold at which oppression is negated. There are entanglements of power and agency that can move beyond justice and produce better outcomes: transconfigurations of solidarity, joy and forms of *care*.[5] And I say this not in the abstract, but from my experience in Korail. Beyond just relations, there is camaraderie, care and grace that is present under the surface cutting across the settlements and the formal city. Aziz, my close friend in Korail, once recounted the story of his neighbour's daughter getting hit by a rickshaw and being injured on the main street. Her parents were not home, and of course, state ambulance services would not come to a 'slum'. The local neighbours raised money from the local shops lining the street, then took her to the hospital, got her treated and returned her home. The parents, both working in a local garment factory, came home to find their daughter in bed with a plaster, and with a lollipop in hand – being taken *care* of. This was not pre-arranged; there was no obligation for the neighbours to do so. This is what it meant to be together, to be settled together, to find comfort in mutual aid. While no one will articulate it as such, there is a plane of radical interdependence in Korail. Some of these stories seeped through in the essays, but to avoid romanticizing poverty, I have not included many others.

What I can confirm is that the fact that there are numerous everyday accounts of such forms of care in the face of adversity; stories of sharing together during times of scarcity, inordinate grace while facing utmost cruelty and kindness of all kinds during times of endurance – the cumulative impact of which is a conviviality of inhabitation for the dwellers that makes Korail liveable, that exceeds the oppression and injustice to allow the formation of a sense of place. It is this excess beyond rational individual utilitarianism, a negation of the 'survival of the fittest' mantra but a form of joy in living together, enduring together, that exceeds simply being just/fair. There is affirmation, joy and beauty in such forms of 'care'-ful entanglements that none of the words described so far holds individually. How to speak of this condition of more-than-justice?

Answering the call for pluriversal thinking on cities that aims to bring about new conceptualization from marginalized ontologies,[6] I find the locally-used Quranic concept of *ihsaan* quite useful to describe such multitude forms of affirmative affect. Dwellers in Korail already speak in terms of *ihsaan* (colloquially pronounced *ahsaan*) as a form of providing ease in everyday life. However, crucially for our purposes here, the concept of *ihsaan* is juxtaposed as

a value that sits beyond deontological duties – *ihsaan* begins only when justice has been ensured.[7] The word is versatile as it sits in the intersection of kindness, generosity, care, grace, beauty and joy, and something more. However, rather than being a conceptual imposition on their collective subjectivity from outside, *ihsaan*, by being drawn from the engagement with Korail's local ontological stance, allows for a groundedness, an affirmative relationality that can be utilized to engage with the dwellers, rather than simply more jargon for the sake of theorization.

But beyond the concept itself, I speak of *ihsaan* as a praxis for the informal settlement dwellers in this particular sense of moving beyond efforts to provide minimal rights, which see justice as a tickbox exercise that remains invisible to how those rights are translated into everyday socio-material reality. There are few entanglements between Korail as a whole and external entities that can truly be seen through the lens of *ihsaan*, in the same way that the dwellers employ it for each other. Even the pro-bono lawyers working for the dwellers have a sense of 'doing enough'; they see that they have already done their part by helping with the litigation but anything beyond that is not achievable, so there is a general air of resignation when I ask them what's next for Korail's future. There is no lack of recognitional justice – planning documents readily acknowledge the contribution of the dwellers and advocate justice for them in the strongest term – and yet that justice is partitioned off from implementation.[8] In that narrative, allowing them to stay in the city is seen as justice enough, doing NGO projects with them is going beyond what's expected and fighting for them in court is something no one else does. But I must say, this is not enough; *ihsaan* isn't simply a form of obligation. *Ihsaan* begins with empathetic justice – to understand the other's place and ends with actions that afford everyone the dignity they deserve; it's seeing their most beautiful potential, and striving collectively to achieve that, as the culmination point of transitions beyond justice. Moving towards *ihsaan* at a planetary scale is the task at hand for alternative futures to emerge.

Towards pluriversal cities

I am writing this book in unprecedented times. The climate crisis has begun, the neoliberal global order is falling apart and the universalist reign of Western coloniality is questioned at every turn. The sirens of the pluriverse are blaring – the many worlds within this world that have been suppressed, subjugated and brushed aside as inferior are being called for and acted on.[9] This call

has extended to rethink urbanism as well. What does it mean to think of cities in such times of pluriversality, and in particular, how do we engage with places like Korail? My insistence is for a radical complication of the current form of scholarship that has become ossified and cycloptic. Let us bring a multitude of hitherto unknown concepts from our different ontologies, from the many worlds we traverse. Pluriversality for me is not a negation of the existing canon, but rather the affirmation of many possibilities of articulation that are fluidic and intersectional, and yet maintain their exclusivity. The canonical way of dealing with informal settlements has failed and it is not due to the lack of good intentions. As shown in the recently published *Atlas of Informal Settlements*, there is a wide range of forms and rhythms of such places, and they happen in widely different contexts, or rather, worlds. Reporting from these places using universalist language and only particular discourses is problematic for both expanding the scholarship on cities/informalities and those places themselves. Poor conceptualizations that do not have relevance to the locational ontology end up impacting global policy space and international development projects with ideas that fail to bring about *ihsaan*-ful entanglements on the ground. Given the resource scarcity and potential scale of climate change impact, brought on and exacerbated by the failure of capitalist systems and state-based global governance regimes, we need radical alternatives. We need new formations of collective life in many different forms that can brace the onslaught of the rapid changes foreseeable in the future. We need to learn how to endure. Perhaps places like Korail have a thing or two to teach us.

A parting note: this is an unfinished book, simply because I think there is still more to unfold in Korail. As its biographer, I can do nothing else but to continue my engagement with it. I write with the full conviction that beyond the desires of oppression and their machinations, an alternative equitable, just and *ihsaan*-ful built environment is possible in Korail, and the majority of such settlements around the world. There will not be singular visions, plans and checklists for how to do so, no formualic way of urban development will work. In each instance, there needs to be work on the ground, meaningful engagement with the true community leaders and members, and a strong insistence on a local vernacular to emerge. Inevitably, such work will confront existing desires of extraction and exploitation, and thus the work must be done in solidarity with others, in collective formations that can resist machinations of state, capital and lust for power. The work will be arduous, and yet, if we are true to our desire to be scholars, activists, designers, planners, NGO workers

and researchers who want meaningful change, then we need to stand with this hidden majority. We need to invent a thousand different ways to act for a city of our collective desire. And the time is now.

Figure 40 Other futures are possible!

Appendix: A note on methods

Korail provides a compelling illustration of informal urban production at a large scale. In contrast, 84 per cent of 'slums' in Dhaka have less than a thousand households.[1] Most importantly for the investigation of urban transformation, Korail has a rich archival Google Earth dataset of aerial images that allows spatial analysis of the morphological changes from 2001 to 2019. Also, the presence of original settlers, established leaders and long-time dwellers allows longitudinal inquiries of the social aspects. Since it is well-established that the presence of the researcher and his fieldwork practices have ethical and political ramifications[2] – both for the community and the data – one cannot wilfully ignore how the data has been gathered. Knowledge production is always 'situated' and needs to be made transparent, and that is the hope in this note.[3]

Research on informal settlements is often difficult due to the lack of access, local connections and perceived threats to the researcher as well as a lack of familiarity with the context. In my case, there were multiple challenges to the study.

One of the first challenges, as already indicated, was to gain access to the community and seek their permission to carry out the research project. There have been multiple cases in Korail where NGO workers and researchers who had not sought permission before commencing work were 'persuaded to leave', as a local leader mentioned to me casually in 2017. It was evident to me that such a detailed and invasive study could only take place if the community agreed. The response was positive and enthusiastic. One of the factors facilitating the successful negotiation was my familiarity with the local context in Korail and my prior established relationship with a key informant while conducting a workshop there in 2017. The local acquaintances made then were instrumental in initiating the discussion about access to the community.

The second challenge was much less apparent. Even within the 500 × 500 metre neighbourhood-scale study area, there was no single community but multiple neighbourhood territories that had different leadership, often with contestation in between. Gaining access to one neighbourhood did not automatically confer it to others. What this meant was an arduous process of identifying relationships

from the first neighbourhood to the next that could be used as a reference, much akin to a snowball sampling. Within my study area, there were seven different communities with whom access was negotiated individually. One aspect of the challenge was the misconception held by local leaders of my capacity to bring development funds and facilitate upgrading projects in the community. Some saw me as part of the elite upper class with whom a good rapport would result in some future potential benefit. A common manifestation of this was their insistence to take a group photograph with me. While it was difficult to stave off these notions, in the end, the research in Korail happened without any incident or hindrance in terms of access and threats to my safety.

The third particular challenge, having gained access to the different communities, was to earn their trust. Trust building was an important prerequisite for the interviews and the focus group discussions. One of the particular trust-building exercises was for me to share the details of the research project, particulars about my life abroad and to share everyday stories. Answering questions regarding their houses, appropriations, landfilling and their motivations was often considered personal, and respondents were more comfortable once I shared some personal information. Trust is also operated by association. I carried around business cards made in the local language that noted my position as a student at a foreign university. It also noted my previous experience of teaching at a local university, which in Korail was considered to be of high status and demanding respect. These associations, made tangible by the physical card that was handed over to new acquaintances, conveyed a sense that, while I was an outsider, I was not from the government or the police and therefore was not a threat.

However, on the flip side, sharing information with the community often poses ethical challenges. While doing document analysis, I came across details of government projects regarding the public land on which Korail sits. The plans implied imminent eviction and resettlement to allow for the development projects to be built. The dilemma that I faced was whether to share the newfound information with the respondents. On one hand, it seemed that it could cause widespread panic and unnecessary strife, and on the other hand, withholding this knowledge would mean staying silent in the face of a state-led injustice. Fortunately, the situation resolved itself when the local leaders informed me that they had been notified of these plans and they were acting accordingly to mobilize the community.

In contrast to the more unsettling ethical challenges, there were many mundane ones, usually procedural. During the photographic survey, the initial

method of taking still pictures proved to be impossible due to the curious onlookers who gathered around to 'observe the observer'. Particularly while studying public space and pedestrian flows, this was impacting the activities themselves by becoming an anchor and drawing attention. This was resolved by using inconspicuous techniques of capturing images such as a body camera while walking. One other issue of the photographic survey was the inadvertent violation of privacy. Since the uses of the laneway spaces and courtyards were very fluid between public/private, it was difficult to anticipate what was happening before walking into a space. Also, in carrying out interviews, a key challenge was how to engage respondents in a longer conversation. The respondents were of heterogeneous backgrounds and hence it was important to anticipate which time would be suitable for each. Respondents who worked full-time preferred evenings or weekends, while respondents at home most often had time available after lunch. For the focus groups, it was difficult to gather participants. This issue was resolved by taking the organizational help of a local NGO (BRAC), which arranged regular community meetings to share information and communicate its development agenda. While this meant easier organization, not being able to include all segments of the community was a limitation.

Last but not least, is the issue of communication itself. While I speak the same language (Bangla), most participants and dwellers use a different dialect of a more street-talk variety based on their rural areas of origin. Being able to speak in their tongue would mean a more friendly and engaging conversation as opposed to a formal Q&A.

As opposed to the research strategies described in the previous part of this essay, in the tactics here attention is drawn to certain practices, stances and desires that influenced the fieldwork activities and the use of the methods. The tactics operate within an overarching desire to gather data most efficiently but not at the expense of being unethical. To reflect on this underside of the research process, the tactics outlined follow loosely a chronological order of the fieldwork. However, the tactics overlap and are not mutually exclusive to any singular phase.

Selective ignorance

In this preparation phase before starting the fieldwork, I used archival research materials to prepare the morphogenic maps at the city, settlement and neighbourhood scale – producing primary data. Additionally, I looked at

NGO reports to identify the possible participants of the research. However, I selectively ignored most of the literature on Korail as a tactic. Korail is one of the most researched informal settlements in Dhaka and therefore well represented. Google Scholar search returns more than 1,000 research articles on Korail from different disciplines, many regarding urban production itself. Ignorance is not the same as neglect – it is constructed and purposeful. What was the purpose here? It was to avoid building a pre-conceived hypothesis by absorbing the particular ways Korail was already conceptualized by others. While there may be no escape from my positionality and background becoming a lens through which I would experience Korail, the first tactic was to avoid any self-confirmation bias or premature hypothesizing concerning urban production.

Unstructured immersion

This particular frame of mind – to experience Korail on local terms – consequently meant an unstructured beginning. While I made contact with the dweller whom I already knew, I tactically refrained from conducting any research activity except informal conversational interviews. For about three weeks, I immersed myself socially there. I participated in various everyday practices, was shown around Korail by the new acquaintances that I made, sat with the elderly in the street-side tea stalls, went to the community NGO meetings as an observer, ate in their houses when invited and shared my life stories, the research project and the mapping tasks in plain language. While the immersion was unstructured, the nascent desire was well-defined – to establish multiple beginnings and relationships, to learn the local norms and dialect and to understand how best to relate to their lives.

However, this was more than just social capital and trust-building for the social inquiry to follow. The immersion helped me to familiarize myself with the spatial layout. While initially I was getting lost, over time the smallest differences in the urban fabric were becoming visible. Later, this embodied spatial knowledge was crucial to map large sections at a fast pace. A significant unforeseen benefit of such unstructured immersion was about three weeks into this process, one of the local leaders called me and asked me when would I start the actual mapping – he even suggested starting with his neighbourhood out of the many. He invited me to the next community gathering and introduced the research project himself. This conveyed a sense of ownership of the research project by the members of the community and signalled to me that it was time

to move towards a more structured data-gathering phase. During this time, I learned to converse in the local dialect as well during this time.

Analytical improvisations

Phase 3 focused particularly on mapping and initial spatial analysis. The primary method was in-situ morphological mapping, aided by the photographic survey. The first step was to prepare a base map for the neighbourhood scale – the key study area (500 × 500 metres). The Google Earth image was not of sufficient resolution to allow for detailed mapping, which I discovered only after starting to map. The issue was solved by using drones to generate aerial images. While this was not planned before, Next, the laneways were identified in the base map and then each of them was videographed. It is often difficult to stand for a long duration and note physical data on a map in situ. The video was useful to go through the laneway multiple times later to identify different aspects. This was possible for the physically evident attributes such as material conditions, cantilever lengths and building types and uses. The mapping was interjected with periods of participant observation of different practices. Since many of these practices are informally arranged, it was difficult to plan. Rather, the tactic was to improvise by literally 'following the actors themselves', in a Latourian sense, as I encountered them during mapping. This often led to unfinished mapping and surveying for that day but revealed insights for other practices. Wherever applicable, the observations were also integrated into the draft final maps. While some researcher has followed the procedure of mapping manually on-site using field notes, I opted to produce drafts of the final maps in between fieldwork days. Fieldwork mapping was conducted four days a week, the rest being invested in processing the field notes and the videos to produce the analytical maps. This process was instructive to raise very particular questions regarding morphogenesis that were asked later during the social inquiry. Furthermore, mapping at one scale also pointed to entities that needed to be pursued at a more micro-scale. Therefore, the progression of morphological mapping from the neighbourhood scale to the street scale, and then to the building scale was particularly helpful. Based on the learnings from the process in one neighbourhood, the method was fine-tuned for the next. In this way, the analysis informed the ongoing improvisations of mapping. However, certain maps such as identifying the tenure boundaries required interviews and hence were pursued only after the social inquiry had begun in the next phase.

Micro-sensitivity

At the end of phase 3, I spent more than three months in Korail. By then, many local connections were established and from the larger pool of 200, 50 key respondents were identified for semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The sampling criteria were to reduce bias due to gender, age and their relative position within Korail's social structure. As for the interviews, moving beyond asking the 'right' questions, a key methodological imperative is to be 'sensitive' towards the research participants and the process itself. The illegality of the settlement, the precarity of the tenure condition and the internal conflicts meant that the subject matter of investigation – asking questions regarding why they built their houses/laneways the way they did – was perceived as a sensitive topic to talk about. Several tactics were employed. Firstly, informed consent was not treated as a singular event at the beginning since often particular topics emerged out of the conversation that required re-iterating the need to ongoingly negotiate consent. Secondly, interviews and particularly group discussions often led to competing narratives and tensions between neighbours/leaders/dwellers that required a reflexive adaptation and manoeuvring of the topic using interpersonal skills. Lastly, but most importantly, the interviewing conditions were crafted for each conversation paying close attention to the personal preference of the respondent (leaders often liked talking in front of tea-stall crowds, some in the quiet space of the mosque following the prayer service, and some on rooftops to avoid being seen). Co-presence during interviews was a significant issue, as what was said depended also on who else was there. What helped particularly during the interviews was my ability to speak in the local dialect as well as the knowledge of the everyday situation and the individual background of the respondents (accumulated during the first three months). In other words, the friendly conversational tone that was beyond just a 'data collection' disposition was crucial. Taken together, these tactics underlie a 'micro-sensitivity' practised during the social inquiry.

Continuous reciprocity

Towards the end of the fieldwork, as a gesture of reciprocity, I conducted workshops presenting the maps to the different neighbourhood communities and discussed their potential use in collective upgrading and better management

of the community problems. The workshops allowed the community to visualize themselves spatially for the first time, analogical to self-enumeration. This was followed by handing over both paper and digital copies of the maps to the local community leaders for their use in negotiating with the government bodies as well as the NGOs. These reciprocal acts underlie an 'ethical research relationship'.

However, beyond the transactional nature that ends with the fieldwork with vulnerable communities, there is a deeper commitment to 'research justice' (a notion discussed with Ananya Roy in personal communication) that permeates this book to its end. Such a commitment is not a negation of the intellectual detachment needed to analyse urban production. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the role of the researcher beyond the fieldwork. Developing an understanding of the everyday processes underlying the urban production in Korail can contribute to changing the current stereotypical narrative and have policy implications for how informal settlements are managed more equitably. In a way, this intellectual project for me is in itself a form of continuous reciprocity.

The primary outcome of the inquiry was ninety-four morphological maps at five scales, 101 audio recordings of interviews and multiple field notes. From these sources, the most interesting instances of morphogenesis were identified and used to generate a set of 'closed vignettes' – empirical stories that provide detailed and theoretically informed accounts of processes and serve as the basis of theoretical generalization and analysis. Narrating through vignettes follows Bruner's concept of 'hermeneutic composability'[4] – story-making as an intellectual activity for generating explanation, as has been attempted throughout the book.

Following the fieldwork, there is a continuous set of engagement with the dwellers and the context in Bangladesh through repeated visits, evaluation of the stories and doing design activism work, as charted in the conclusion. Most of this work feeds into my research, which I have elaborated elsewhere as dirty research, a decolonial response against the more extractive forms of knowledge engagement.[5] During my fieldwork in Korail, a common comment I received was: 'We have seen many researchers over the years, you guys come and collect data, and go back, you get your [research] degrees but what do we get in the end? We are still living in the same condition for years'. Korail, in its forty years of existence, has been the empirical laboratory of more than fifty PhDs, where researchers from architecture, planning, public health and social sciences have descended into Korail, marvelling at the wonder of the 'slum' and yet, beyond this extraction of the data, the researchers have not been involved in the local

struggles. Their methodologies have been clean, extracting situated knowledge, and yet being themselves detached from the everyday processes, where their data and analysis could have been quite crucial in the dweller's struggles. With my involvement in this community for over seventeen years now, I have come to be critical of the process by which we produce 'knowledge', in which we advertently objectify collective experiences into 'data', heterogeneously threaded collectives of human and non-human into 'communities' and all in all, even with the utmost sensitivity, extract and distil the lived realities into publications and books that enrich our own CVs and job prospects, perhaps a form of prostitution of scholarship. We do so little to be an ally from whom we have extracted the data. If this is not a form of (colonial) extractivism, then what is? The knowledge we produce may explain their struggle to a wider audience of academic interest, but can we not also generate knowledge simultaneously that is useful to them, as a form of reciprocity with parity? Research as care?

Therefore, in any mode of engagement with urban informality – from design to research – we need to be cautious of how our desires might get entangled with those already there. As the analysis in Korail has indicated, the different scales and desires of actors there belie the apparent homogeneity often ascribed to such settlements. How can we know who to work with, if we accept the premise that both design and research in these settlements will need the active participation of the community? Who might we embolden when we work in these settlements and foster local partnerships? Are we able to tap into the collective struggles of the place or are we entrenching some syndicates and furthering their cause by our very presence? When we work with the state, how do we proceed while ensuring equity and reciprocity with the settlements?

For me at least, these are not abstract questions, but ones that I continue to face with my ongoing engagements in Korail and other marginalized communities. There are no easy answers, as in many cases there is no other way to work in those places without negotiating and compromising. And yet, we have been operating on the ground. It is from that very ground that I have written this book. Our research, activism and design work are ongoing, co-created and co-led by the actual community assemblers and proactive citizens. As part of the Platform for Housing Justice (NAM), we have been working with local activist architects to rebuild houses that burned down in a recent fire. We have been working with Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) to rethink legal and policy-level instruments. With other academics, youth activists and social businesses, we are forming an even larger alliance to tackle the challenges of climate change and its impact on the dwellers. We have been proposing international

grants together with local collectives, co-authoring essays, including with the local citizens, as well as facilitating citizen journalism that aims to chronicle the ongoing collaborative work as well as the everyday lives. There are perhaps a thousand more ways to engage with this reality to ensure justice and care, no matter our disciplines or our backgrounds. There is a lot more work to be done. The future is open-ended but it must be just and *ihsaan*-ful.

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 1

1 Throughout the book, I use the term 'dweller' as a way to indicate a spectrum of characters who are entangled in the settlements beyond simply an accounting for inhabitation as the only criteria; see Michele Lancione and AbdouMaliq Simone, 'Dwelling in liminalities, thinking beyond inhabitation', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39, no. 6 (2021): 969–75. The word is also an ode to Shack/Slum Dwellers International's use of the word.

2 Corrugated Iron (CI) sheets is the most common material used for walls and roofs in most settlements in Bangladesh, and also rural areas.

3 Sennett makes a key distinction between border and boundaries, the former a zone of activities and exchange, and the latter characterized by separation and stasis. See: Richard Sennett, 'The public realm', in *The Sage handbook of the 21st century city*, ed. Suzanne Hall and Ricky Burdett (New York: SAGE, 2017).

4 Baron Haussmann was largely responsible for creating the Parisian boulevards by clearing the preexisting city.

5 Load-shedding is an intentionally engineered electrical power shutdown where electricity delivery is stopped for non-overlapping periods of time over different parts of the distribution region. Common practice in Dhaka during peak demands periods.

6 Interestingly in Dhaka, all major autonomous government agencies who hold large chunks of land have turned into real-estate developers one way or another. Land is no longer seen having a social or public function but only seen through the potential to be 'developed' into real-estate products.

7 Ghertner, *Rule by aesthetics: world-class city making in Delhi*.

8 Steven Lukes, *Power: A radical view* (New York: NYU Press, 1974), 23.

9 See news report: 'Korail slum dwellers claim fire was premeditated arson attack', *Dhaka Tribune*, 17 March 2017, https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2017/03/17/Korail-slum-fire-premeditated-arson-attack.

10 See work by Efadul Huq, my close collaborator and co-convener of Platform for Just Housing (NAM), from which we have worked with one such lawyer organization called BLAST: 'How did the Supreme Court start housing planning for

Dhaka's poor?', *The Daily Star*, https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/how-did-the-supreme-court-start-housing-planning-dhakas-poor-3033391.

11 IIFC, *Feasibility study for development of Mohakhali ICT village* (Dhaka, 2014).

12 Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara Lake Development Project, implemented by the Capital Development Agency (RAJUK), a body within the PWD. I sourced an official presentation file which shows the extent of the planned project.

13 Henri Lefebvre, *The urban revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]).

14 Borrowing the phrase 'Seeing like a State' from James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

15 See the elaboration of this mismatch in policy at national and urban scales, which we call discursive partitioning, and its underlying dynamics in Efadul Huq and Tanzil Shafique, 'People move, policies don't: discursive partition against climate-impacted dwellers in urbanizing Bangladesh', *Environment and Urbanization* 35, no. 1 (2023): 91–100.

16 Bashantek Rehabilitation Project, which was built after clearing a slum, has been an utter failure. Only a few of the actual dispossessed got the flats, most taken up by a cabal of local political leaders. The high-rise design itself is now dubbed colloquially 'concrete slums'. See Rasel Hussain et al., 'State and the low cost housing for the poor: fall of Bashentek Rehabilitation Project (BRP) in Dhaka city–Bangladesh', *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 13 (2015): 1–12.

Chapter 2

1 The affiliation based on which region in Bangladesh the migrant has originated from.

2 Cass R. Sunstein, 'Social norms and social roles', *Colum. L. Rev.* 96 (1996): 903–68.

3 See Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977). Deleuze talks of personae, I use the more accessible term 'role', but with the same conceptual implication.

4 BBS, *Census of slum areas and floating population 2014*.

5 BBS, *Census of slum areas and floating population 2014*.

6 Owing not in the strict juridical or legal sense of the word. Everyone is aware that this is public land. Owning here refers to owning the usage and development rights in the context of the settlement.

7 I use the term landholders instead of landlords, which I think reflects the insecure tenure condition better. Holding hints at the active nature of maintaining tenure, as opposed to landlord, which has a strong connotation of permanent control and title

over the land. The local term of landholders is *bari-wala,* which literally translates to 'house-vendors'. In colloquial conversation, they are never referred to as land-owners (*malik*), but always in terms of having the *dokhol* (holding) of the land. *Dokhol* implies in Korail the right of usage, the right to build (usually upward, but also to extend out to the water), and the right to trade. However, locally *dokhol* has a negative connotation in the upper- and middle-class narrative, people who usually have legal ownership. To them, '*dokhol*' implies land-grabbing and is correlated to mafia/syndicated efforts to illegally occupy public land. In the essay on legitimacy, I unpack the way linguistic devices and affective tones embedded within those devices are often assembled and employed to delegitimize the existence of settlements like Korail.

8 Rooms, or single-room dwelling units (SRDU) to be more precise, are the fundamental housing unit in Korail. Think of a studio apartment with shared bathrooms and kitchens. This is the usual unit for a family of four, where intelligent interior planning allows the room to be used in multiple ways throughout the day and night. This is elaborated in Chapter 7.

9 *Apa* is a title of respect for elder women in Bangla that translates to sister, a convenient way to tell the tale without resorting to the name (male equivalent is *bhai*, which translates to brother).

10 See Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, *Vol. III: The Perspective of the World*, vol. 3 (Oakland: University of California Press, 1992). Braduel makes the key distinction between markets and capitalist logic. For a concise initiation to Braudel's thoughts, read Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Braudel on capitalism, or everything upside down', *The Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 2 (1991).

11 Shiree-DSK, *Moving Backwards: Korail slum eviction Dhaka, April 2012* (Dhaka, 2012).

12 A case of the idea of 'assemble' by the multitude? Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

13 To produce such a perplexing response is very much within capacity. Being reflexive is a key aspect of human cognition, see both Deleuze's concept of perplexity as well as Alva Noë, *Strange tools: art and human nature* (Hill and Wang, 2015).

14 'Assemblies of physical bodies have an expressive dimension that cannot be reduced to speech, for the very fact of people gathering "says" something without always relying on speech. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's view of action, yet revising her claims about the role of the body in politics, Butler asserts that embodied ways of coming together, imply a new understanding of the public space'. Commentary on Judith Butler's work 'Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly', Harvard University Press, 2018, https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674983984.

Chapter 3

1 UN-Habitat, *Streets as tools for urban transformation in slums: a Street-led approach to Citywide Slum upgrading* (Nairobi: Un-Habitat, 2012).
2 BRAC's head office, coincidentally, is on the other side of Korail, across the lake.
3 There are other CDOs convened by other NGOs (which might be named differently), interestingly often with the same community members.
4 BRAC, BRAC Urban, DSK, ASA, ESK, EDUCO and PSTC are the major ones.
5 *Lac* is a local unit, equivalent to 100,000.
6 Names have been altered for anonymity.
7 The local leaders, who hold the posts in the BRAC CDO committee, raised the money from the community. Some locals have pointed out how they have raised more money than it was asked for by BRAC. Money was somewhat extorted or raised from street vendors, local shops lining the streets and the local bazaar committee.
8 There is a strict national guideline to formalize an NGO in Bangladesh. Such formalization means that there are some informal non-government actors who would not be able to identify themselves as NGOs.
9 BRAC, with an annual revenue of US$720 million and a staff of about 100,000, is like a parallel state in Bangladesh (which now operates subsidiary companies such as its bank, university, agro industries and other for-profit enterprises). Manzurul Mannan, an anthropologist who has studied BRAC for seventeen years, comments, 'it combines three features: a nonprofit nongovernmental organization, a for-profit nongovernmental organization that has established an internal market, and a profit-making industrial and business concern.' In Mannan, 'BRAC: Anatomy of a "poverty enterprise"', *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 20, no. 2 (2009): 219–33.
10 Most houses in Korail have a toilet within their compound and are mostly built by the dwellers. The usual ratio of use is one toilet for eight families. The issue is not the provision of toilets, but what to do with the waste generated, which is now usually dumped into the lake, causing an ecological crisis. Interesting to note that it is not just by the informal settlement dwellers, but also many formally designed and approved buildings around the lake do the same.
11 'Frugal map making: experiences from Korail', 2013, http://blog.brac.net/frugal-map-making-experiences-from-Korail/.
12 See Davis, *Planet of slums*.
13 The specific MF instrument without the follow-up check is called *Daabi*. The other product, *Progoti*, has much more rigorous checks and balances.
14 Rashid Faruqee et al., 'Multiple borrowing by MFI clients', *Policy Paper, Institute of Microfinance, Dhaka, Bangladesh* (2011). https://inm.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/policypaper_multiple_borrowing.pdf.

15 'Global figures urge Bangladesh to stop harassing Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus', 2023, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/international-support-muhammad-yunus-nobel-03082023103257.html.

Chapter 4

1 Afroza Ahmed et al., *Should Architects Work for Mastaans for House Reconstruction Activities?* (Dhaka: Department of Architecture, State University of Bangladesh, 2017).

2 The 'response' and 'recovery' segments of the disaster response cycle seemed to have merged. For more on the Disaster Management Cycle, see Corina Warfield, 'The disaster management cycle', *Disaster Mitigation and Management*, 2016, https://www.gdrc.org/uem/disasters/1-dm_cycle.html.

3 The architects followed the National Housing Authority-issued 'Guidelines for planning, design & construction of PPSIP settlements' (2015). PPSIP stands for Pro-Poor Slums Integration Project.

4 Actually, his house was one of the very few houses in Korail that had a third floor. I enquired why he built that. It was for his pet pigeons!

5 Narratological agency, see Buchanan commenting on Deleuze: Ian Buchanan, 'Assemblage theory, or, the future of an illusion', *Deleuze Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017): 457–74. Also, in a recent work, economist Robert Shiller argues that studying popular stories that affect individual and collective economic behaviour – what he calls 'narrative economics' – has the potential to vastly improve our ability to understand change. See Robert J Shiller, 'Narrative economics', *American Economic Review* 107, no. 4 (2017): 967–1004.

6 This directly correlates with the Deleuzian conception of the 'event'. As Paul Patton notes, Deleuze's Stoic thesis about the relationship between events and the forms of their linguistic expression: 'while the event proper or pure event is not reducible to the manner in which it appears … the nature of the incarnate or impure event is closely bound up with the forms of its expression. The manner in which a given occurrence is described or "represented" within a given social context determines it as a particular kind of event [post-facto]. In their discussion of language use, Deleuze and Guattari employ the concept of "incorporeal transformation" in order to describe the change in status of a body or the change in its relations to other bodies which occurs when it is subject to a new description'. See Paul Patton, 'Deleuze and naturalism', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 3 (2016): 348–64. Also, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

7 See more on the concept of antifragility: Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: things that gain from disorder*, vol. 3 (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014).

Chapter 5

1 A colloquial expression that means an amount of money that is used as a soft bribe, working as a social lubricant to facilitate deals.
2 Nearly 30 per cent of families reported that at least one family member had been arrested or detained without a warrant: Choudhury et al., 'Poverty and violence in Korail slum in Dhaka'.
3 Bangladesh has a multi-party democratic governance system, at least on paper. There are two major political parties, the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Most leaders in Korail either fall in one or the other.
4 Brent Edelman and Arup Mitra, 'Slums as vote banks and residents' access to basic amenities: the role of political contact and its determinants', *Indian Journal of Human Development* 1, no. 1 (2007): 129–50.
5 The current political party has manifestations in Korail as: the man party (Awami League) and its subsidiaries, the Students League (Chatro League), Jubo League (Youth Front), Volunteer League (Shechhashebok League), Tati League (Weavers League), Sromik (Workers League) and finally, inexplicably, a Krishok (Farmers) League. There are no professional farmers in Korail. Not all these wings are active in Korail; a lot of them have party offices called 'the clubhouse'.
6 'It is this aura of impregnability, he [James C. Scott] argues, rather than of moral superiority, that is essential to the stability and durability of power. In so far as legitimacy claims matter, it is they who need to be convinced of the rightfulness of their rule if they are to have the self-confidence to maintain it; they constitute the chief audience for their own legitimacy claims.' See David Beetham, 'Political legitimacy', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*, ed. Edwin Amenta, Kate Nash and Alan Scott (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
7 If you are wondering how courier services work and the post is delivered in Korail, there is an informal mechanism, where some local landmarks are used as the receiver's address. Once the package arrives, there is someone delivering the package or its arrival is communicated using mobiles.
8 'The silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives. This is marked by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action – open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology

or structured organization'. A. Bayat, 'From "dangerous classes" to "quiet rebels": globalization and the politics of the informals in the global south', *International Sociology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 539.

9 See Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect* (OUP, 2013). Lieberman inverts Maslow's hierarchy of needs to show how social acceptance is the most fundamental human need.

10 See Elizabeth Anderson, 'Beyond homo economicus: new developments in theories of social norms', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2000): 170–200.

Chapter 6

1 Human-pedalled three-wheeler, with a flat surface at the back, on which things are loaded. My house is five minutes away from Korail's western edge.

2 The same technology and materiality are lauded as 'innovation' in different contexts, for example, see 'Wasteland: Tokyo grows on its own trash', *Japan Times*, 18 February 2017, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2017/02/18/environment/wasteland-tokyo-grows-trash/#.XZISh0YzaUk.

3 See Schindler's work in Delhi about informal waste management service and the synergistic linkage with the middle-class neighbourhoods in Seth Schindler, 'Beyond a state-centric approach to urban informality: interactions between Delhi's middle class and the informal service sector', *Current Sociology* 65, no. 2 (2016).

4 Tania Li makes the point that '[land] is an assemblage of materialities, relations, technologies and discourses that have to be pulled together and made to align', in Tania Murray Li, 'What is land? Assembling a resource for global investment', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39, no. 4 (2014): 589–602.

5 Deleuze notes: 'you speak abstractly about desire because you extract an object that's presumed to be the object of your desire. [But] you never desire someone or something, you always desire an aggregate. If a woman says, "I desire a dress," or "I desire (some) thing" or "(some) blouse," it's obvious that she does not desire this dress or that blouse in the abstract. She desires it in an entire context, a context of her own life that she is going to organize, the desire in relation not only with a landscape, but with people who are her friends, with people who are not her friends, with her profession, etc. I never desire some [*sic*] thing all by itself, I don't desire an aggregate either, I desire from within an aggregate.' Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*.

6 'My little plot of land', *The Daily Star*, https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-87362.

Chapter 7

1 Some dwellers are seasonal, arriving in Korail in months in between harvest/growing seasons from their rural homesteads for supplemental income.
2 See Dovey and colleagues' recent book that compares fifty-one settlements from across the world in terms of their urban design logic: Kim Dovey et al., *Atlas of informal settlement* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023).
3 This can be seen as a tragedy of the commons, the notion that excessive use of a common pool resource, the street in this case, is exhausted from unregulated over-use. See Garrett Hardin, 'The tragedy of the commons', *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243–8. See similar effects in other settlements in Matthijs Van Oostrum, 'Appropriating public space: transformations of public life and loose parts in urban villages', *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 15, no. 1 (2022): 84–105.
4 Huraera Jabeen, 'The built environment and gender dynamics for asset-based adaptation in urban poor households in Dhaka, Bangladesh' (Doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2013).
5 See report on violence in Korail: Choudhury et al., 'Poverty and violence in Korail slum in Dhaka'.
6 Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
7 Kazi Nazrul Fattah and Peter Walters, '"A good place for the poor!" Counternarratives to territorial stigmatisation from two informal settlements in Dhaka', *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 1 (2020): 55–65.

Chapter 8

1 A Japanese invention that travelled to Bangladesh in the late nineteenth century and now has become a particular symbol of local culture. Ubiquitously present in Dhaka, the rickshaws are seen as an informal mode of transport and are not regulated by any state body at a national level. What also it means, from the planning perspective, is that there was never any provision for storing the rickshaws. There are currently more than a million rickshaws in the streets of Dhaka, almost all of them being housed in informal settlements like Korail. The particular garages in Satellite Poshchim were the result of the demand created by the demolition of a few nearby settlements.
2 Often mentioned as 'desire paths'.
3 See Besim Hakim's work to see similar ways the mosques and bazaar generated flows and activities in the Medina in Tunis: Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic cities: building and planning principles*.

4 Netto writes: 'The block system at the centre of the view of cities as driving forces of social and technical complexity'. Vinicius M. Netto, '"The social fabric of cities": a tripartite approach to cities as systems of interaction', *Area Development and Policy* 2, no. 2 (2017): 130–53.

Chapter 9

1 Such use of streets and pavements as the main public spaces has long been observed in informal settlements, see Carlos Niño and Jairo Chaparro, 'El espacio público en algunos barrios populares de la Bogotá actual', *La calle: lo ajeno, lo público y lo imaginado. Bogotá, Barrio Taller* 4 (1997): 98–103. Additional public spaces are produced by co-incidental and ad-hoc appropriations. The resulting multiplicities of spaces confirm Amin's notion that there is 'no archetypal public space, only variegated space-time of aggregations' in Ash Amin, 'Collective culture and urban public space', *City* 12, no. 1 (2008): 5–24.

2 In contrast to the formally planned cities, as Pojani notes, informal settlements are characterized by a lack of 'representational public spaces' such as plazas or parks. The spatial corollary of this phenomenon is the dense packing of housing indicated by the very high coverage. The failure to preserve public space after 'encroachment' is often seen as a manifestation of the 'tragedy of the commons'. Also, Public spaces in informal settlements are often the least studied aspect, especially in comparison to housing and services. See Dorina Pojani, 'The self-built city: theorizing urban design of informal settlements', *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research* 13, no. 2 (2019): 301. Also, see Hardin, 'The tragedy of the commons' and Jaime Hernández-García, *Public space in informal settlements: the barrios of Bogotá* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

3 Lyn Lofland introduces a third category in the public realm, the 'parochial' spaces. Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998).

4 Sennett, 'The public realm', 586.

5 William R. Freudenburg, 'The density of acquaintanceship: an overlooked variable in community research?', *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986): 27–63.

6 This characterization echoes earlier observations of public spaces by Charles Correa in Indian cities: Charles Correa, *The new landscape: urbanisation in the third world* (London: Mimar, 1985).

7 Eid is one of the two major annual festivals celebrated by Muslims.

Chapter 10

1 Home-based enterprises (HBEs) in informal settlements account for about one-fourth of informal employment in Dhaka; see Iftekhar Ahmed, 'Role of adaptive home based workspaces in coping gender inequality in Korail slum, Dhaka', *Civil Engineering and Architecture* 5, no. 5 (2017): 161–72. In Korail, the different types of HBEs noted from fieldwork observation are wood-carving, tailoring, commercial cooking, craft production, pottery and weaving, farming, recycling, food processing etc.
2 Schindler, 'Beyond a state-centric approach to urban informality: interactions between Delhi's middle class and the informal service sector'.
3 Hague and Kirk, cited in Evert Meijers, 'From central place to network model: theory and evidence of a paradigm change', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 98, no. 2 (2007): 245–59.
4 Meheri Tamanna and Md. Kamrul Hasan, 'Life in a megacity: livelihood strategies and survival mechanisms of rickshaw pullers in Dhaka city', *Millennial Asia* 6, no. 1 (2015): 44–60.
5 Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic cities: building and planning principles*, 57.
6 Mohammadreza Pourjafar et al., 'Role of bazaars as a unifying factor in traditional cities of Iran: the Isfahan bazaar', *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 3, no. 1 (2014): 10–19.

Chapter 11

1 The famous sculpture by Marcel Duchamp titled 'Fountain' (1917).
2 UN-Habitat, *The challenge of slums: global report on human settlements 2003* (London: Earthscan, 2003). Also see UN-Habitat, *Slum Almanac 2015/2016*.
3 Geoffrey Payne, 'Urban land tenure policy options: titles or rights?', *Habitat International* 25, no. 3 (2001): 416.
4 UN-Habitat, *Secure land rights for all* (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2008), 5.
5 'Were the Dhaka slum fires arson?', *The Dhaka Tribune*, 2016, https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2016/12/24/dhaka-slum-fires-arson.
6 Jean-Louis van Gelder, 'What tenure security? The case for a tripartite view', *Land Use Policy* 27, no. 2 (2010): 449–56.

Conclusion

1 Simone and Castán Broto, 'Radical unknowability: an essay on solidarities and multiform urban life'.
2 Braudel analyses economy as having three tiers 'in the sense of an extremely elementary economy'; a second story that he usually calls 'economic life'; and a third or top story that he designates as 'capitalism,' or sometimes 'true capitalism'. In Wallerstein, 'Braudel on capitalism, or everything upside down'.
3 See similar cases, particularly in Latin America in Dovey et al., *Atlas of informal settlement*. In this book, we catalogue and map urban transformation process in fifty-one settlements across thirty-three cities globally.
4 See Andrea Mubi Brighenti, *Urban interstices: The aesthetics and the politics of the in-between* (London: Routledge, 2016).
5 Beyond the case presented by Davis for an ethics of care for cities, which reads synonymous as social and spatial justice, I take the tripartite structure from the Islamic studies scholar Omar Suleiman, who takes it from Ibn Rajab, a fourteenth-century scholar: oppression, justice and 'ihsan'. 'Ihsan' loosely translates to beauty, grace, care, love and social excellence. For more on care, see Juliet Davis, *The caring city: ethics of urban design* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2022). Also, Omar Suleiman, *40 on justice* (Markfield: Kube Publishing, 2021).
6 See U. Moreno-Tabarez et al., 'Pluriversal urbanisms', *City* 27, no. 5–6 (2023): 691–6.
7 See verse 16:90, 'Surely God enjoins justice, ihsaan and the doing of good to kin.' See also MA Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For explanation of the verse: 'ihsan which has no equivalent in English. This means to be good, generous, sympathetic, tolerant, forgiving, polite, cooperative, selfless etc. In collective life this is even more important than justice; for justice is the foundation of a sound society but ihsan is its perfection. On the one hand, justice protects society from bitterness and violation of rights. On the other hand, ihsan makes it sweet and joyful and worth living. It is obvious that no society can flourish if every individual insists on exacting his pound of flesh. At best such a society might be free from conflict but there cannot be love, gratitude, generosity, sacrifice, sincerity, sympathy and such humane qualities as produce sweetness in life and develop high values'. Quoted from: https://islamicstudies.info/reference.php?sura=16&verse=90.
8 Dhaka Detail Area Plan draft analysed during the work for our paper: Huq and Shafique, 'People move, policies don't: discursive partition against climate-impacted dwellers in urbanizing Bangladesh'.
9 See work by Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2018).

Appendix

1 Angeles et al., 'The 2005 census and mapping of slums in Bangladesh'.
2 Farhana Sultana, 'Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6, no. 3 (2007): 365.
3 Donna Haraway, 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 53–72.
4 Jerome Bruner, 'The narrative construction of reality', *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 1–21.
5 Shafique, 'Dirty research: a call towards decolonial urban knowledge production'.

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