

An Assembly of Livelihoods



“It is about designing hope — not as a naive position or as a binary choice between optimism and pessimism, but as a conscious confrontation with reality and the discovery of its potential for improvement. Architectural reflection can be an engine for change.” — IABR 2024

An Assembly of Livelihoods

Graduation booklet
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Global Housing Graduation Studio 2024-25
Architecture of Transition in the Bangladesh Delta

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Introduction

This graduation booklet is divided into three chapters, guiding you along the main themes of the project:

1. Accomodating different *stages of migration*

The project began with the ambition to understand and respond to the shifting realities of internal migration. From temporary, seasonal work to more permanent urban settlement, the design evolved to support a spectrum of lived experiences. It seeks to reflect the uncertainty, transitions, and hopes of those who move in search of livelihood and security.

2. Creating spaces for *assembly*

Recognising the importance of community and collective presence, the project includes shared spaces that support informal economies and everyday interactions. These spaces aim to host different forms of assembly—where work, social life, and healing from displacement intersect. From markets to gathering spots, they facilitate not only economic activity but also social integration and belonging.

3. Aiming for a *just construction process*

Material choices and construction methods are approached critically, with attention to labour conditions, local knowledge, and the environmental footprint. The goal is not only to build affordably and durably but to embed dignity and fairness into the process of making.

Ultimately, the project asks "how architects can meaningfully contribute to building and rebuilding livelihoods" (Fitz, 2023) in the face of ongoing climate change and the social disruption and internal migration caused by it.

Research question

“How can the different *stages of internal migration* to Sylhet inform urban housing models that help mitigate the social impact of climate-induced displacement?”

The research focus has shifted since the initial proposal. Following a visit to Sylhet and its surrounding regions, attention moved from the study of traditional rural settlements to the lived realities of rural-to-urban migration and its profound societal impacts.

This evolution emerged from encountering conditions and complexities that were previously unclear or unknown. In the haor regions, for example—where villages are typically perched on raised edges along floodplains—efforts to reinforce flood protection have intensified in response to increasingly severe climate pressures. Simultaneously, younger generations and entire families are migrating to nearby urban centres in pursuit of more stable livelihoods

Such observations, grounded in field encounters and conversations, reframed the inquiry: rather than seeking out vestiges of traditional rural life, now under mounting threat from environmental change, the focus turned to the urban realm. The Hawker's Market site, located within the dense fabric of central Sylhet, became a lens through which to examine how cities are reshaped by migratory flows.

Large-scale migration is increasingly recognised as both a response to ecological vulnerability and a reflection of shifting socio-economic aspirations. Against this backdrop, the research no longer seeks to preserve a fading rural idyll, but instead asks how urban environments might adapt—architecturally, spatially, and socially—to receive and support those arriving from the periphery.



STAGES OF MIGRATION

This chapter explores the project's social ambitions and how they developed from the initial research phase through to the final design.

Rural-urban migration

গ্রীষ্ম
বর্ষা
শরৎ
হমেন্ত
শীত
বসন্ত



Summer
Monsoon
Early Autumn
Late Autumn
Winter
Spring



Summer
Monsoon
Winter

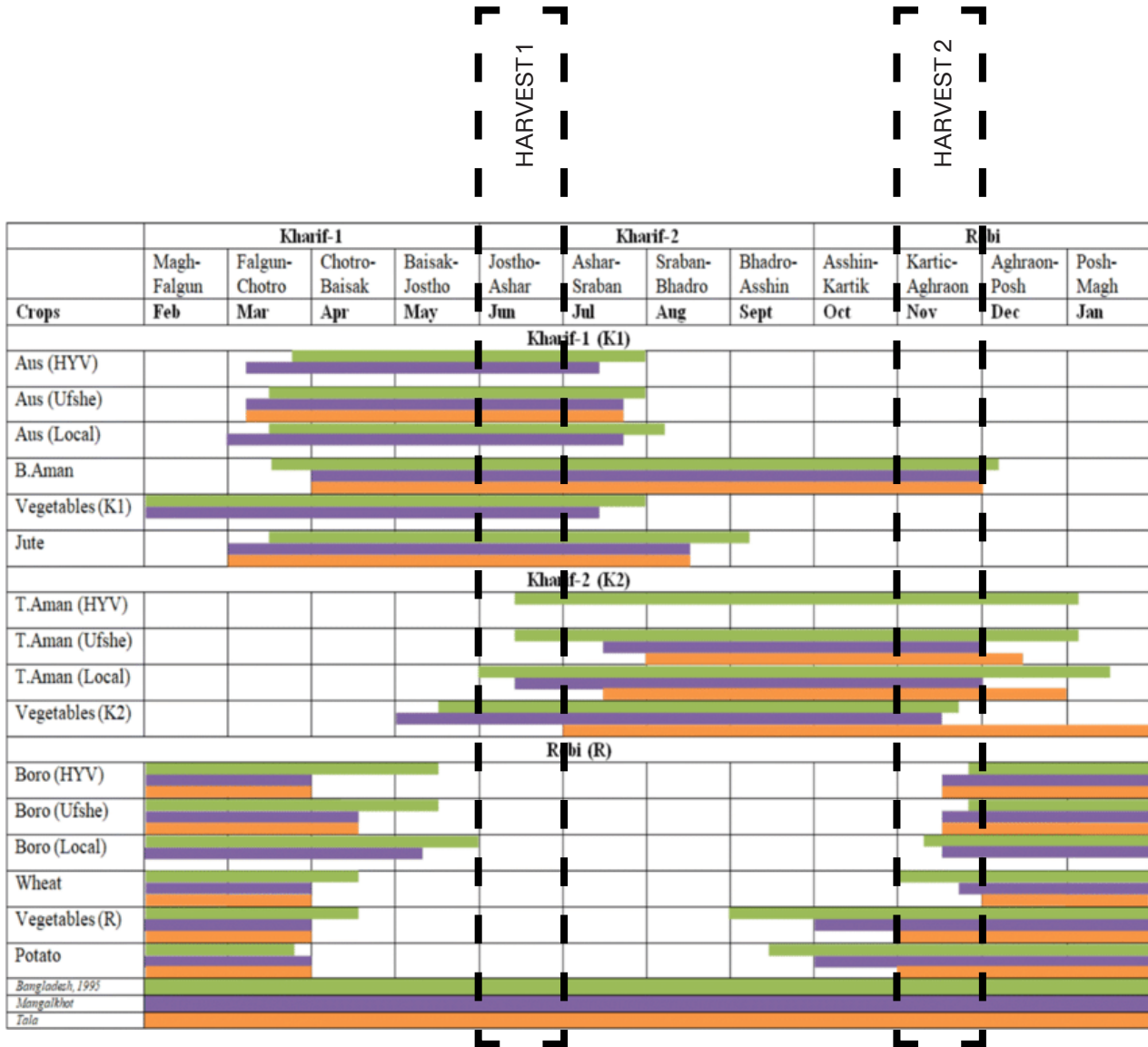
Across Bangladesh, rural-to-urban migration is driven by a complex mix of environmental, social and economic factors. As Hossain (2011) writes, “River erosion, low income in rural areas, job opportunities in the city, and family migration are found to be the major reasons for rural-urban migration” (p. 151). Often, people don’t migrate alone. In fact, about 17% of the urban poor arrive as dependents or partners—especially women, for whom migrating alongside a spouse is a common pattern.

These movements are increasingly shaped by the growing impacts of climate change. In Sylhet, local students often reflected on how Bangladesh’s climate has shifted dramatically over the past decades—from the once-celebrated rhythm of six distinct seasons to just three increasingly extreme ones: a long, hot summer; a heavy monsoon; and a brief, dry winter.

What was once known as the land of six seasons now cycles between suffocating heat and drought, more frequent devastating floods, and unpredictable transitions. Summer, the first season in the Bengali calendar, brings overwhelming humidity and dry, cracked soil. Monsoon follows with torrential rain and frequent floods, which threaten homes, fields, and livelihoods. These worsening conditions are not abstract forecasts—they are tangible pressures that push people to leave their ancestral lands in search of safety, stability, and opportunity in the city.

Migration, then, is not only a social or economic decision—it is increasingly a climate response.

Temporalities of migration



Average crop calendar of Bangladesh. (Source: Bangladesh Agricultural Department; Agricultural Extension Office Keshabpur and Tala Upazila, 2013 with adaptations made by the author).

Migration does not follow a single timeline. People arrive in the city at different moments in their lives, and for vastly different durations—some for weeks, some for years, some indefinitely. In the context of Sylhet, these temporalities range from seasonal labourers arriving during planting or harvest gaps, to families settling more permanently after losing land to river erosion or drought.

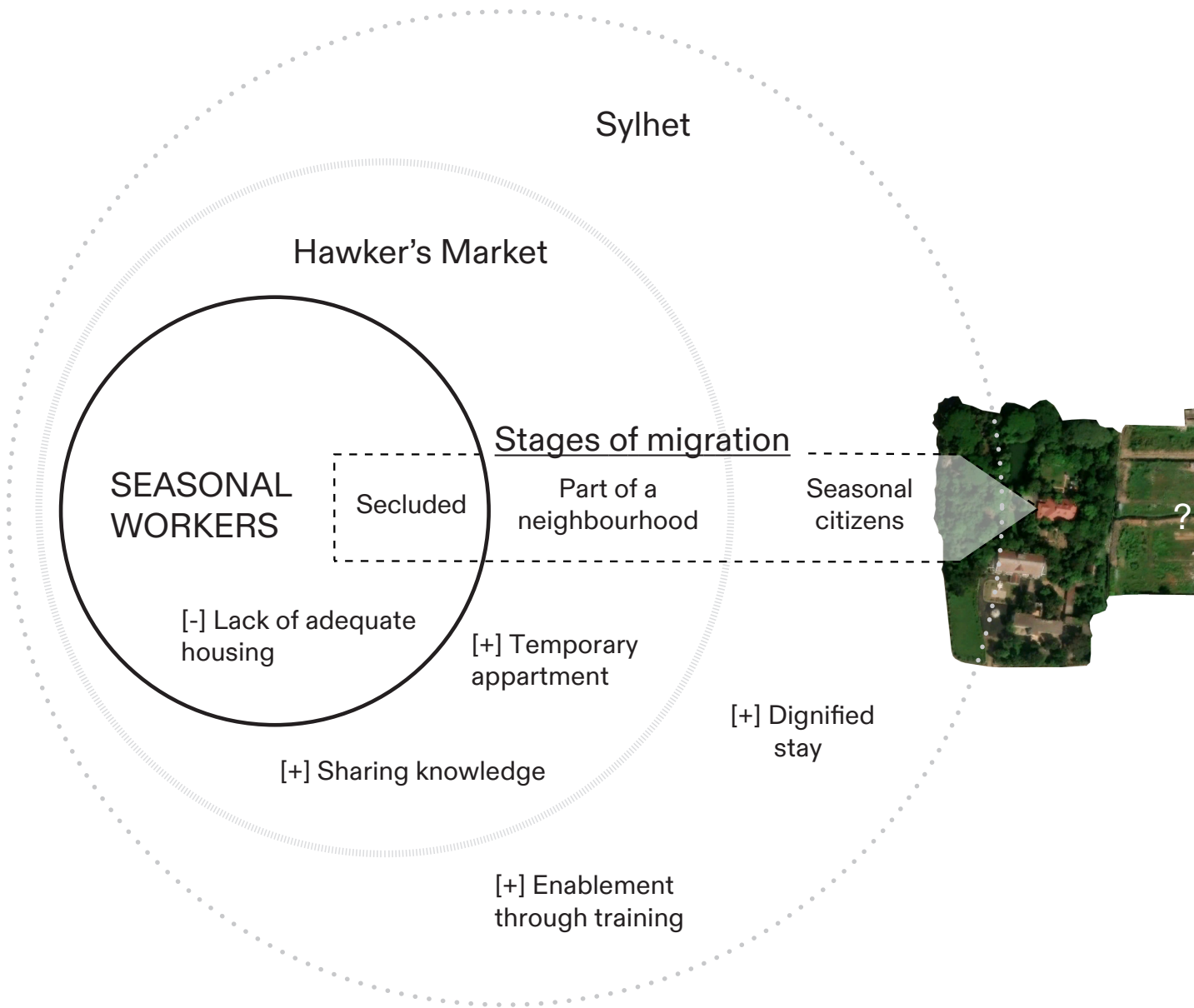
Initially, the project assumed that seasonal workers would stay only a few months, returning home regularly. But through conversations with workers and local students, it became clear that many of these so-called “seasonal” workers in fact spend the majority of the year in the city. They return to their villages only once or twice a year, often around the crop transitions—when one season’s harvest ends and another begins. Usually, they to assist with the harvest, respectively around June and November, mostly for around two weeks before they return to the city.

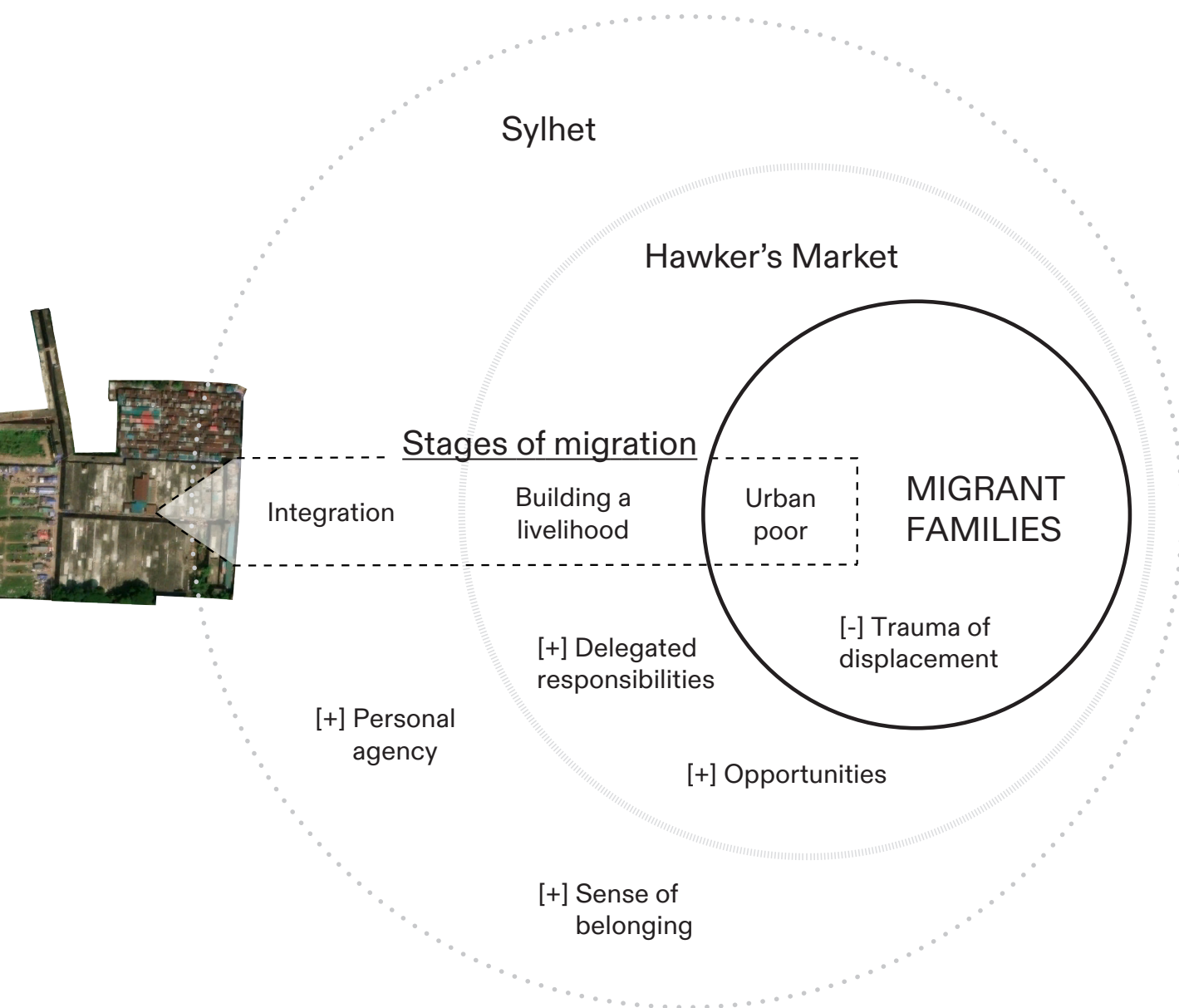
This rhythm creates a blurred line between temporary and permanent presence. Migrants may hold strong ties to their rural homes, but their lives—livelihoods, social networks, and everyday routines—are increasingly rooted in the urban environment. This challenges rigid ideas of permanence in planning and calls for housing that can accommodate flux, informality, and also occasional return.

Designing for these overlapping temporalities means thinking beyond static categories of “resident” or “visitor.” It calls for spatial strategies that can host people in transition, allow for them to grow inside their neighbourhood and start integrating at their own pace.

This pattern suggests that the term *remote* workers may be more accurate, as it reflects their longer stays in the city whilst still having a connection to rural life.

Moving from migration to integration





Scheme of the social ambition of the project to bridge the gap from migration towards integration into an urban community such as the Hawker's Market.

Construction workers



Emon, 18 – Zogali/ construction assistant



Mariyam, 40 – Soil worker



Riaz, 24 – Fish vendor



Emon, 17 — Zogali/ tile assistant



Mariyam, 54 — Soil worker



Mufiz, 35 — Mason

During the site visit, conversations with construction workers revealed the harsh realities of their temporary living conditions in the city. These personal encounters sparked a deeper interest in understanding the broader issue of seasonal migration. While construction workers were my initial focus, it soon became clear they represented a much larger group of rural migrants who come to the city for work without access to dignified housing. Their stories reflect systemic challenges—untrained labour, informal employment, and poor living standards—highlighting the urgent need to rethink how cities accommodate those who sustain their growth through hard, often invisible, work.



Ahmed, 20
Construction assistant (zogali)



Imran, 29
Welder, on-site for five months

Living conditions on site





While the poor living conditions found on site were a starting point, the focus gradually shifted towards the broader issue of migrant workers—highlighting how every industry that draws people from outside struggles to provide its workforce with dignified housing.



ASSEMBLY OF LIVELIHOODS

This chapter delves deeper into the concept of the assembly and explains how it could play a role in mitigating the social impacts of displacement and work migration.

What makes an assembly?



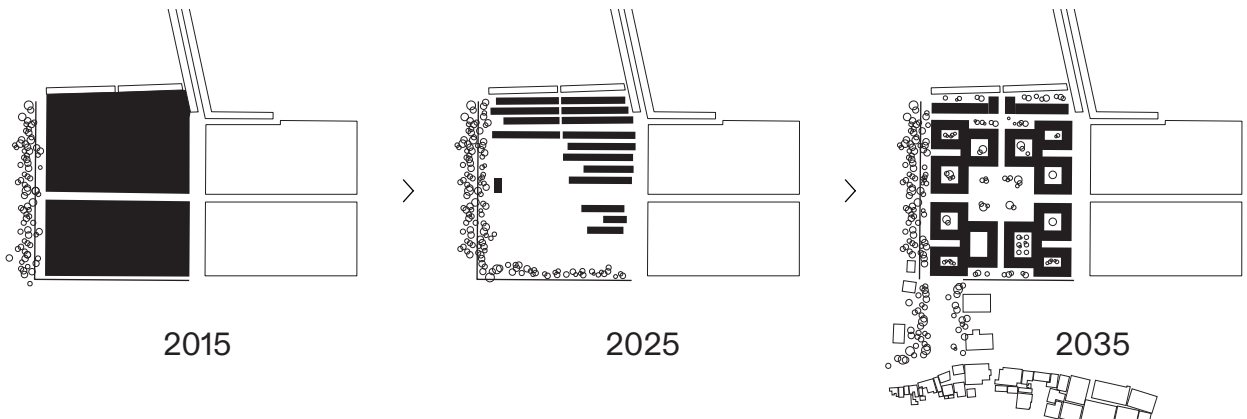
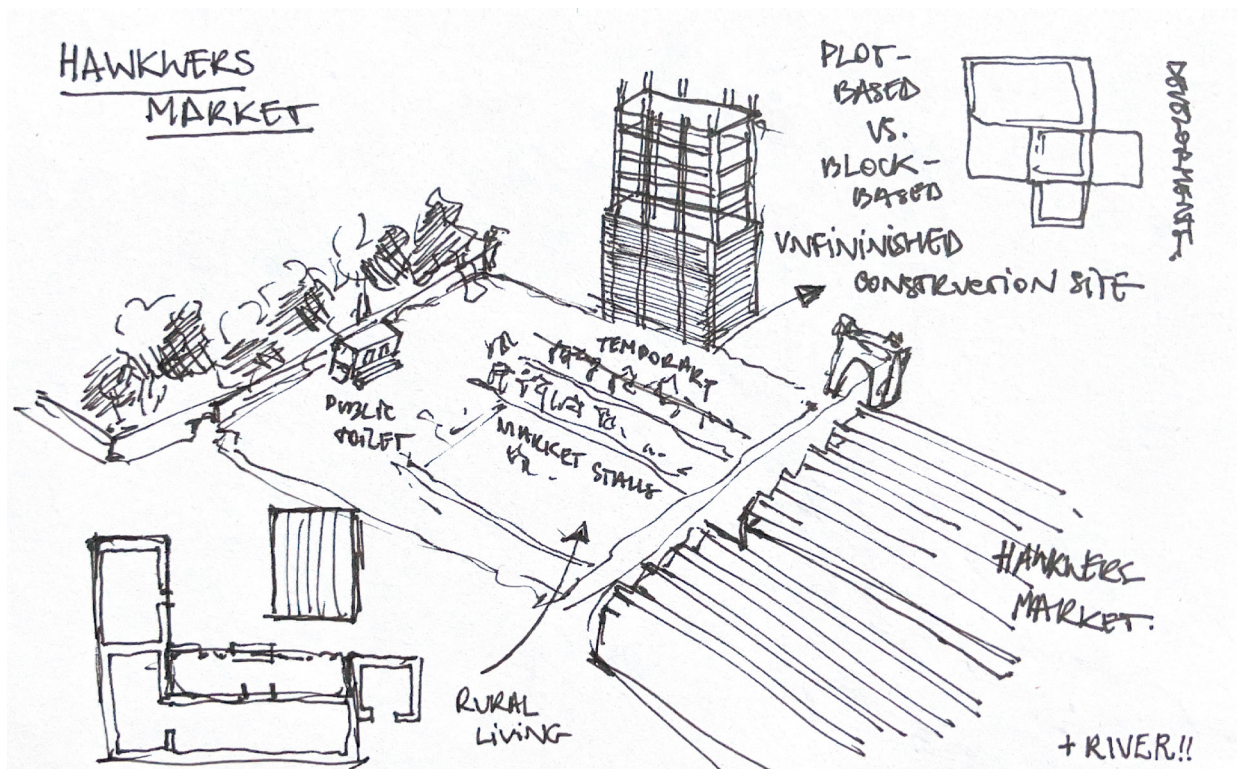
While perhaps shaped by a somewhat idealistic, student-oriented perspective, this project strongly believes in the potential of social mix as a powerful urban strategy. People from different socio-economic backgrounds migrate to the city for the same fundamental reason: to seek livelihood opportunity in order to improve their lives. By intentionally bringing these groups together—seasonal and permanent, formal and informal—a new kind of urban coexistence can emerge.

This assembly of livelihoods envisions a mutual, supportive economy: where informal markets can create stepping stones for more permanent jobs, and permanent structures can host and sustain the rhythms of seasonal work. Rather than separation or competition, the proposal aims for interdependence: cohabitation that allows different livelihoods to complement and uplift one another.

This mix is not just physical—it's social and emotional. It acknowledges the shared experience of displacement, often driven by climate pressures, and offers a setting where people can collectively rebuild their lives. Through shared spaces, skill exchange, and everyday proximity, internal migrants gain strength in connection rather than isolation on the fringes of the city.

By fostering a setting where diverse livelihoods intersect and evolve side by side, the project resists urban segregation and offers a counter-narrative: one of integration, codependency, and urban dignity—for everyone, regardless of when or why they arrived.

Hawker's Market



Located at the heart of Sylhet, near the river and key commercial zones, the Hawkers' Market occupies roughly 2 hectares of publicly owned land. Once the site of a concrete market structure—demolished in 2017—the area has since transformed into a sprawling green field, gradually reclaimed by bamboo stalls and temporary structures. Today, it hosts a vibrant ecosystem of street vendors selling fish, vegetables, clothing, and household goods.

What makes this site particularly compelling is not only its strategic location but also its public ownership, meaning its future remains open to collective decision-making. As a result, it represents both the challenge and opportunity of how cities shape spaces for those who migrate in search of work and livelihood.

The market shows how vendors actively appropriate the street, turning sidewalks and open plots into storefronts. These everyday acts of claiming space speak volumes about the aspirations of different socio-economic groups—those who cannot afford formal shops but still carve out a place in the city's economy.

Seen this way, the Hawkers' Market becomes more than a marketplace: it is a symbol of survival, resilience, and urban agency. In a high-density context, it reflects many of the reasons people come to the city—access to income, visibility, and the possibility of a better life. Its energy and informality became a key inspiration for the project's vision of spatial justice and cohabitation.

'Informal' economy



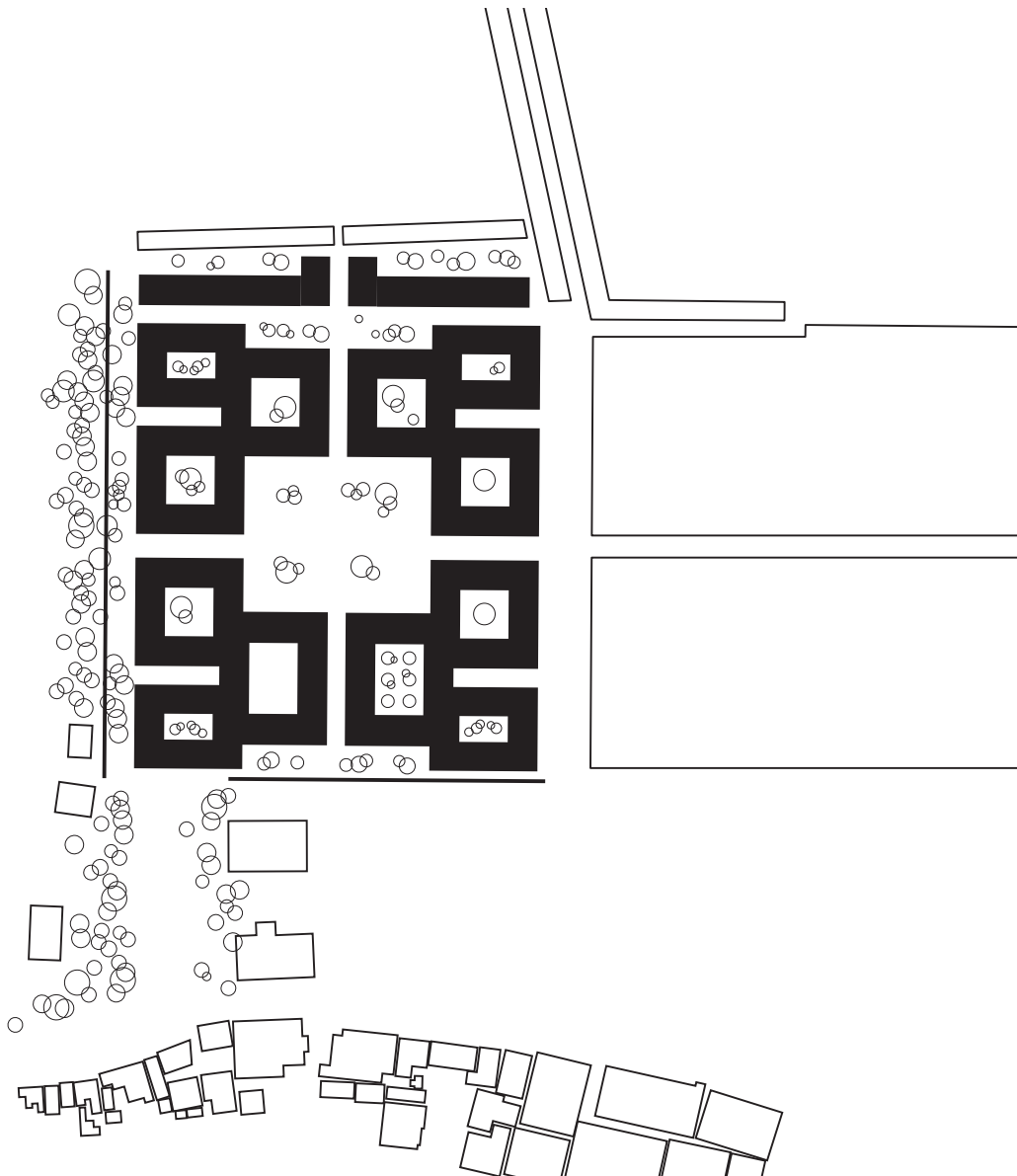
When speaking of so-called "informal" activity, especially in contexts like Sylhet, it's crucial to move beyond the notion of marginality. Rather than a residual leftover from formal economic systems, informal economies often form the backbone of rapidly growing urban centres in the Global South. Street vendors, small-scale traders, domestic workers, and others engaged in informal labour not only ensure the functioning of everyday urban life but also represent a form of economic resilience and self-reliance among marginalised groups.

As Tonkiss (2012) writes, "The economics of self-help has a long history among poor urban populations and, in particular, groups that experience systematic forms of economic exclusion, notably women and minorities." These are not simply survival strategies, but enterprises born of exclusion, responses to the lack of access to mainstream labour or credit systems.

In this sense, informal activity is not a sign of disorder, but a form of urban intelligence—improvised, adaptive, and rooted in local networks of care. Especially for migrant communities, the informal economy offers entry points into city life, creating space for anticipatory action, mutual dependency, and collective survival.

The project asks whether the ethos of care and adaptability found in informal settlements can be integrated into a designed urban framework—not to formalise informality, but to honour its value and embed its logic within the heart of the city.

Financing the assembly



1 Start digging the pond and cleaning the ditches as an act of revaluating the site

2 Start sales of apartments for city officials and middle income as cross funding

3 Start construction low-income housing
> with participation of future residents following masonry training

4 Moving temporary market into first shop apartments

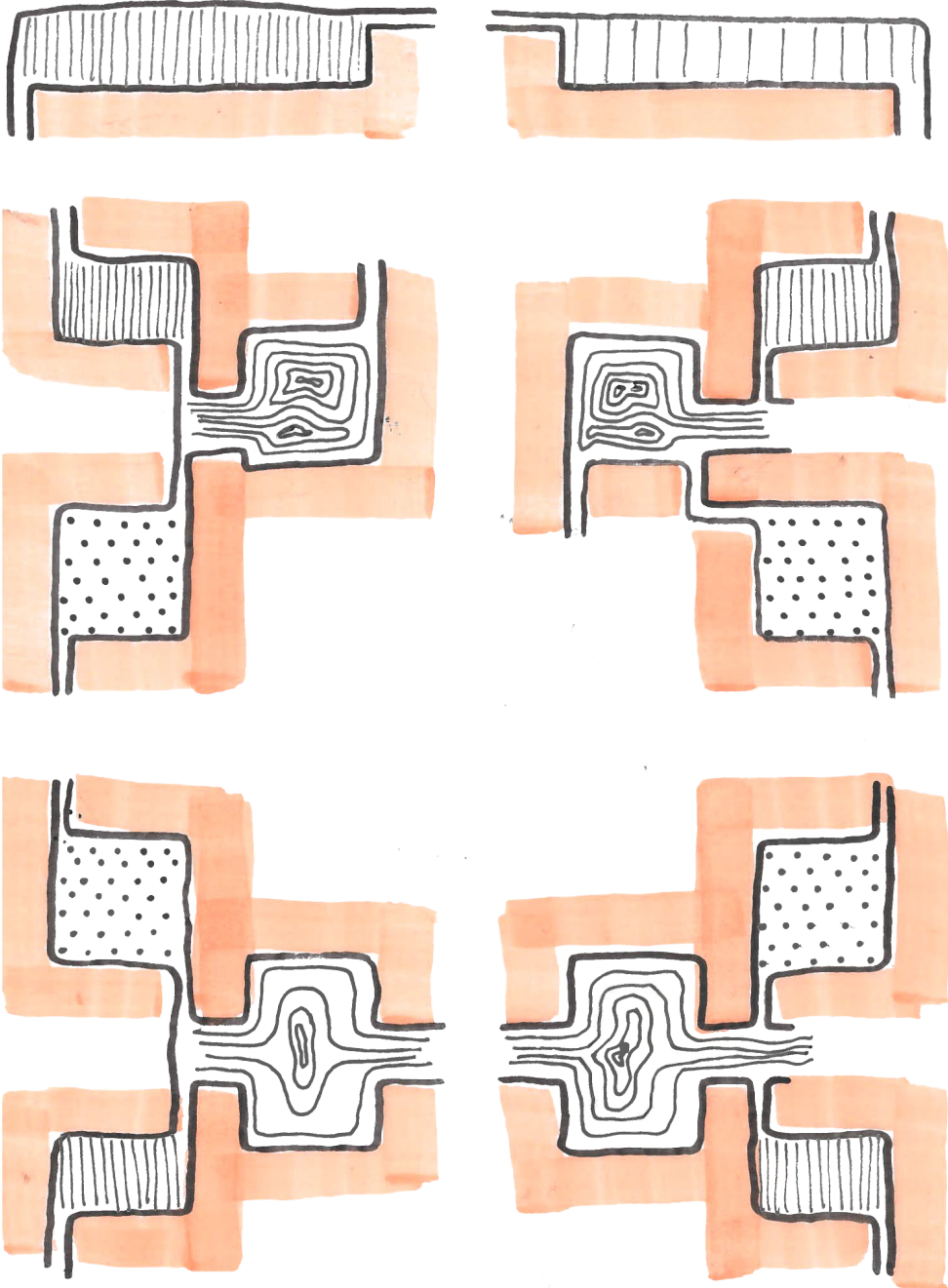
5 Start construction middle-income housing and city officials apartments

>> Creating connections to the riverfront and the new Surma promenade

Rather than relying on conventional, profit-driven, plot-based development, the assembly proposes a community-led managerial model rooted in affection, care, and mutual responsibility. Management of the site is envisioned as a distributed system of delegated tasks and collective governance, in which residents—both permanent and seasonal—take ownership over their shared environment. Key to this is the establishment of a local council inspired by traditional shalish conflict resolution practices, adapted to suit the complexities of urban life. This council would mediate disputes, oversee shared facilities, and ensure fair use of resources, nurturing a culture of cooperation instead of competition.

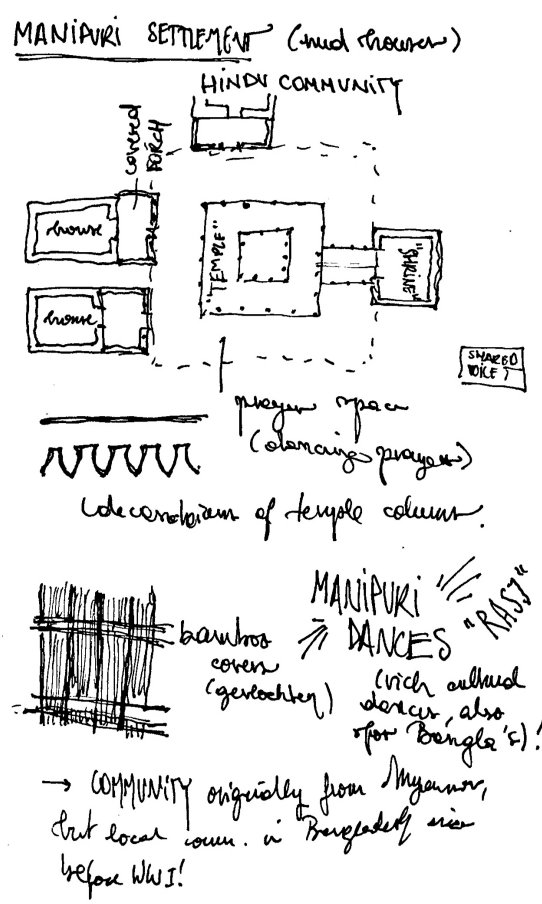
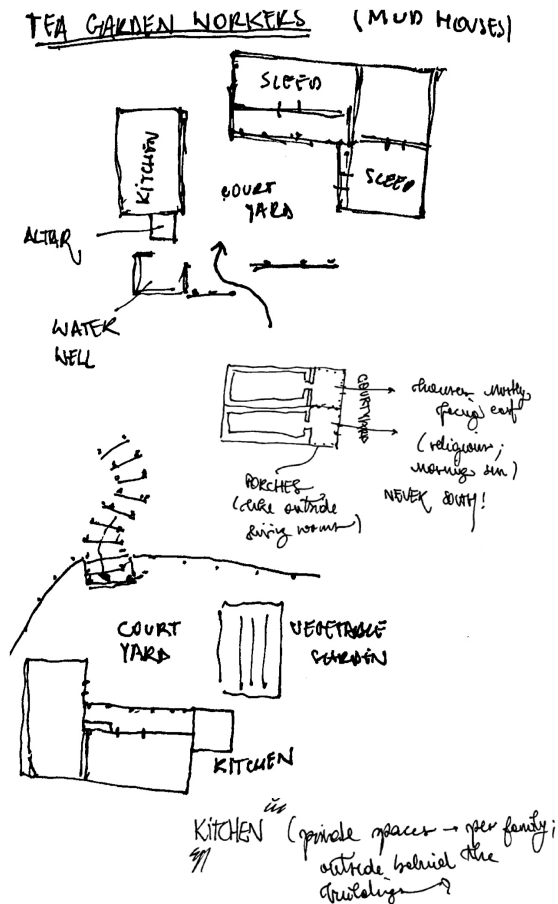
Financing would initially be supported through public investment, ideally from the city's commitment to improving housing conditions for the working-class population sustaining its economy and public life. Over time, these costs could be gradually repaid through rental income from residential units and shared commercial activity. A key aspect of the model is cross-subsidisation: higher-income residents, such as the city officials or commercial tenants help subsidise housing for lower-income groups, ensuring financial sustainability without compromising affordability.

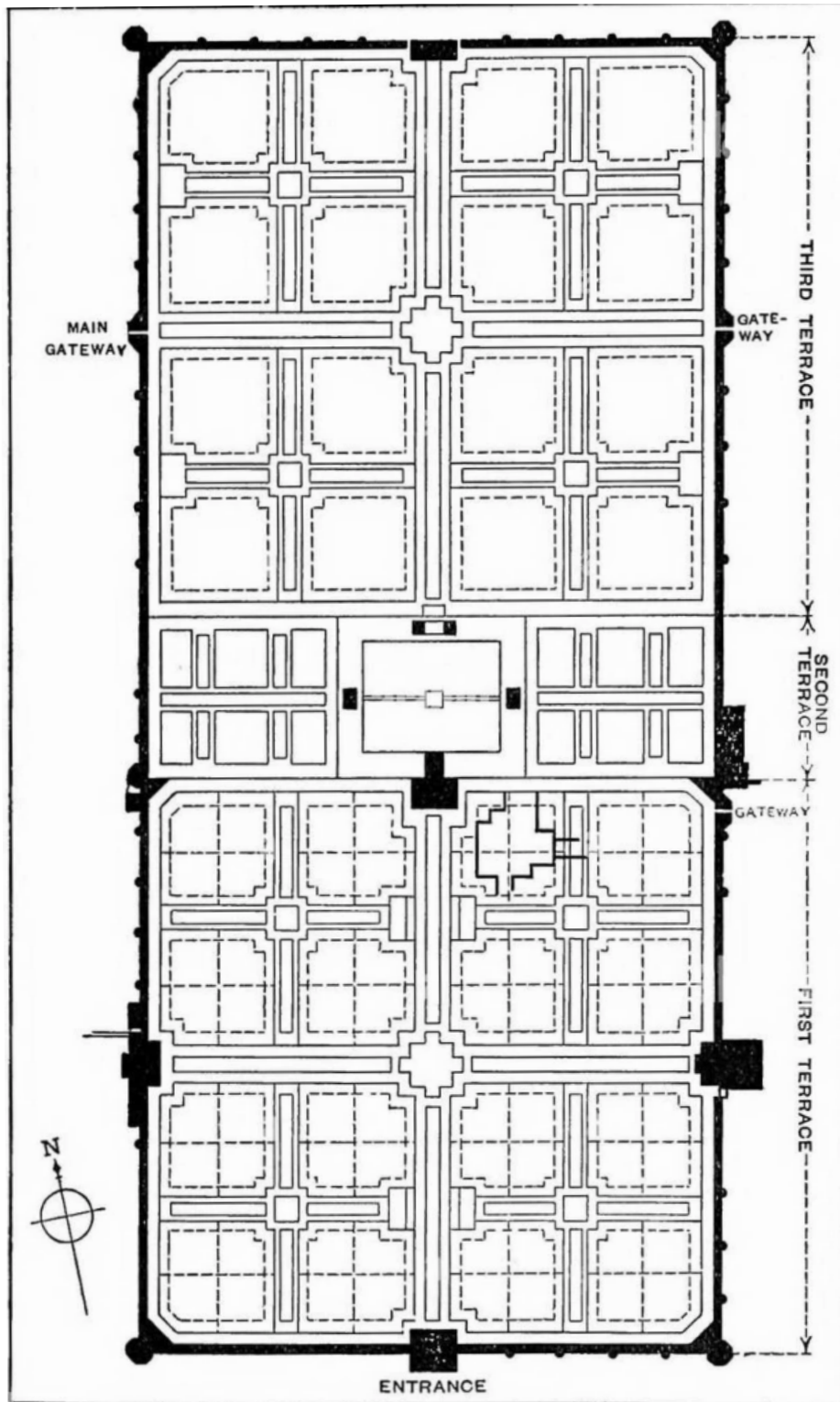
Network of courtyards

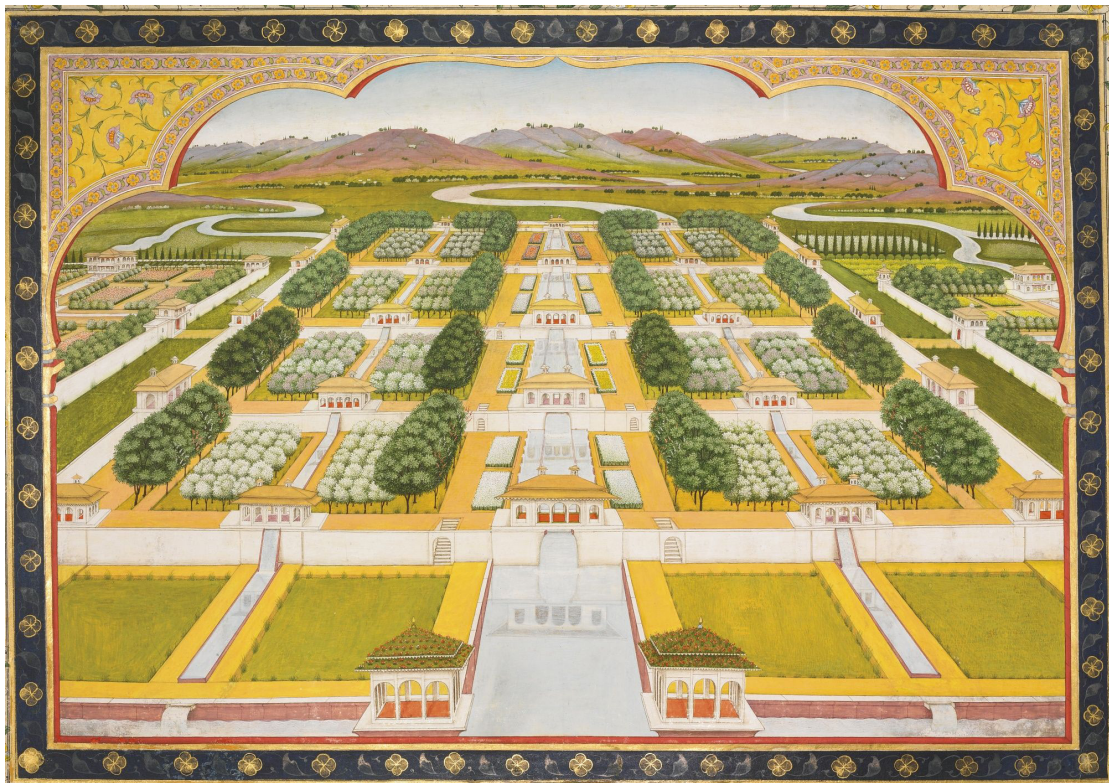


A main ingredient of the assembly is the spatial gradient from vibrant, public commercial activity along the water's edge to quieter, private residential spaces deeper within the site. This transition unfolds gradually, with arcades guiding movement from the street into a layered, labyrinthine network of courtyards that function as (semi-)private zones. These spaces soften the shift between the collective and the intimate.

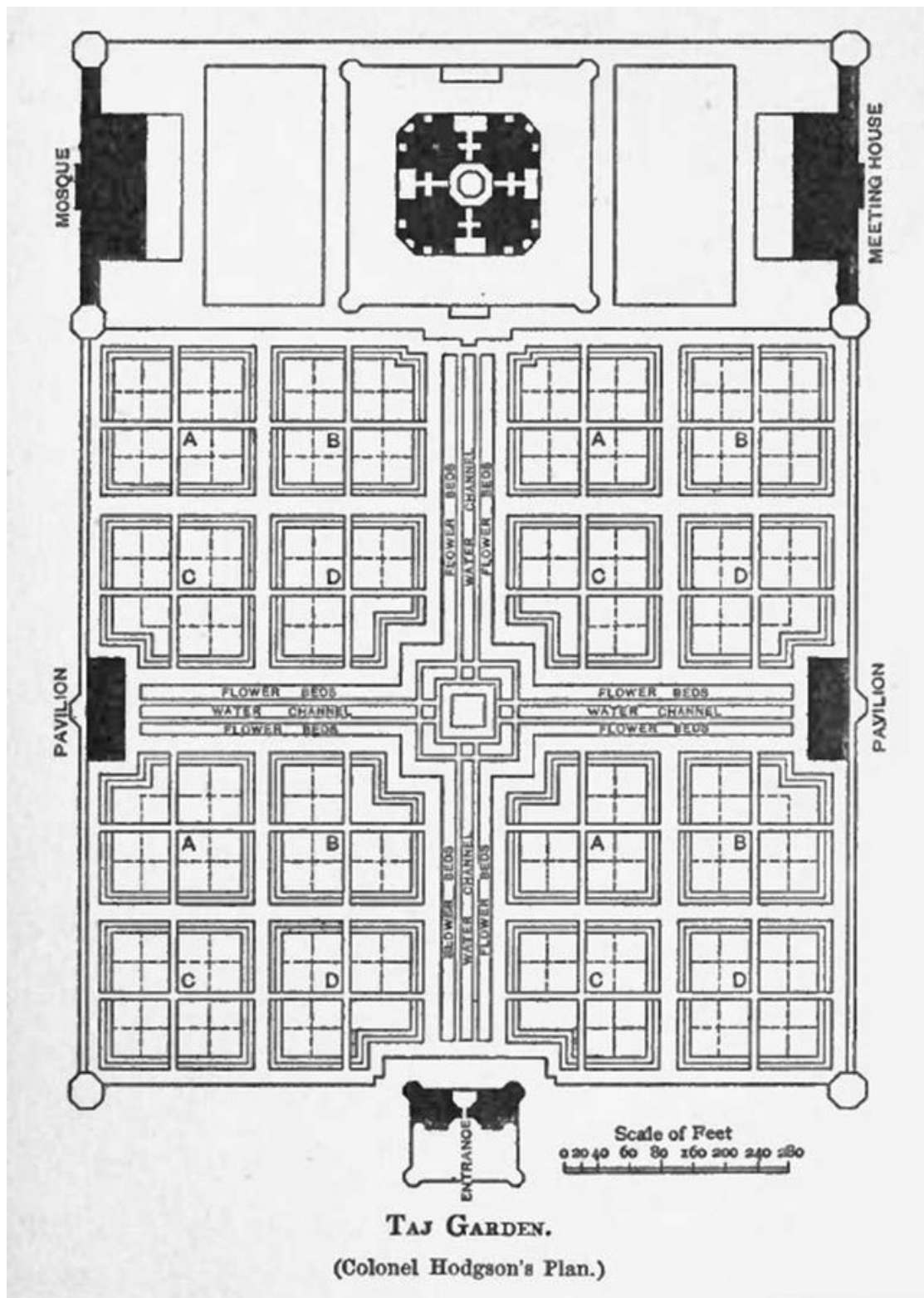
This gradient is not only present at the urban scale but continues into the clusters and individual housing units, where degrees of openness and enclosure mirror traditional patterns of settlement. The approach draws inspiration from courtyard typologies and rural village structures we observed during our fieldwork—where life flows naturally from shared paths to inner domestic spaces, with the level of porosity giving each space a distinct character.



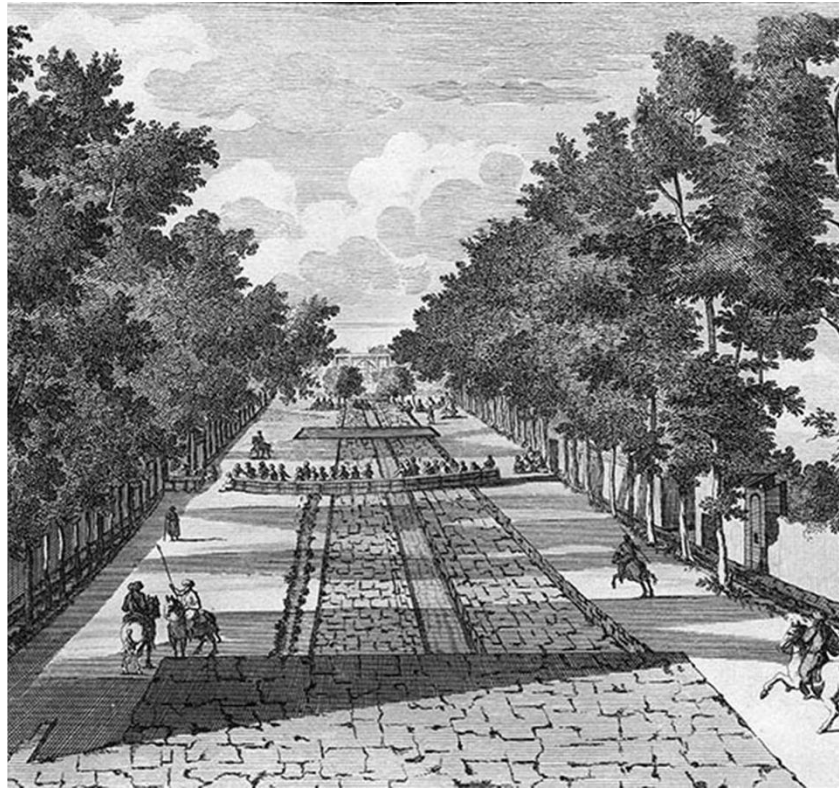




The urban plan draws subtle inspiration from the symmetrical garden layouts of the Mughal empire, found throughout Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. While the site's division by water emerged organically after introducing the central pond, I later recognised its strong visual and symbolic resonance with traditional Mughal gardens. In Bangladesh, Lalbagh Fort in Dhaka is a well-known example. The illustrations show *Shalimar Bagh* in Lahore, Pakistan (1641–42), a garden which was completely designed according to the classic *charbagh* design principles: dividing the garden into four quadrants and several terraces, axial water channels, and symmetrical planting, reflecting the Persian paradise garden ideal. The middle terrace features a central rectangular pool and pavilions—much like the pond and its nodes on the Hawker's Market.



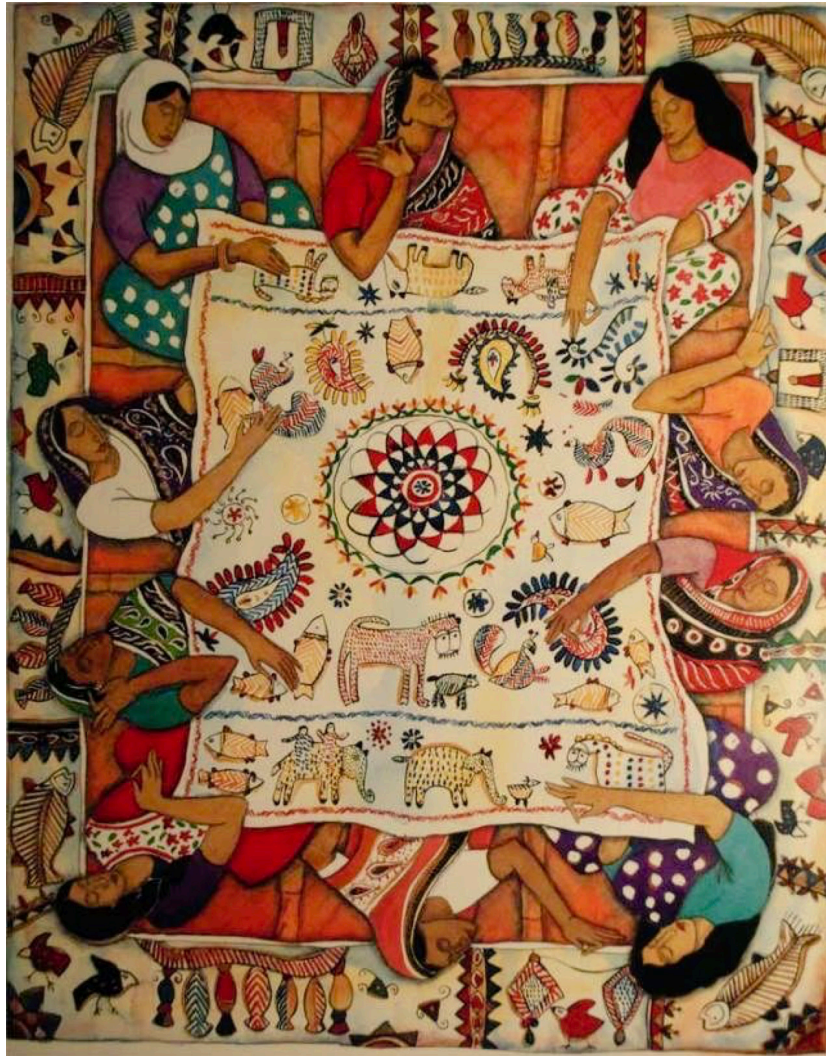
TAJ GARDEN.
 (Colonel Hodgson's Plan.)



Another fitting reference would be Hodgson's plan for the garden of the Taj Mahal. Although a colonial reinterpretation of the traditional Mughal designs, it also clearly illustrates the *charbagh* layout—dividing the garden into four quadrants with strong axial water channels. While the overall layout seems rigid, a strong sense of hierarchy of spaces can be noticed in their planning, as is the case for the proposal of the Hawker's Market, with a gradient from public to more private areas. Heavy symbolism lies in re-appropriating this colonial reading of Mughal order in a socially progressive way. This connection lends new meaning to the plan—as a kind of palace garden for the urban poor, honouring those whose labour sustains the life of the city.



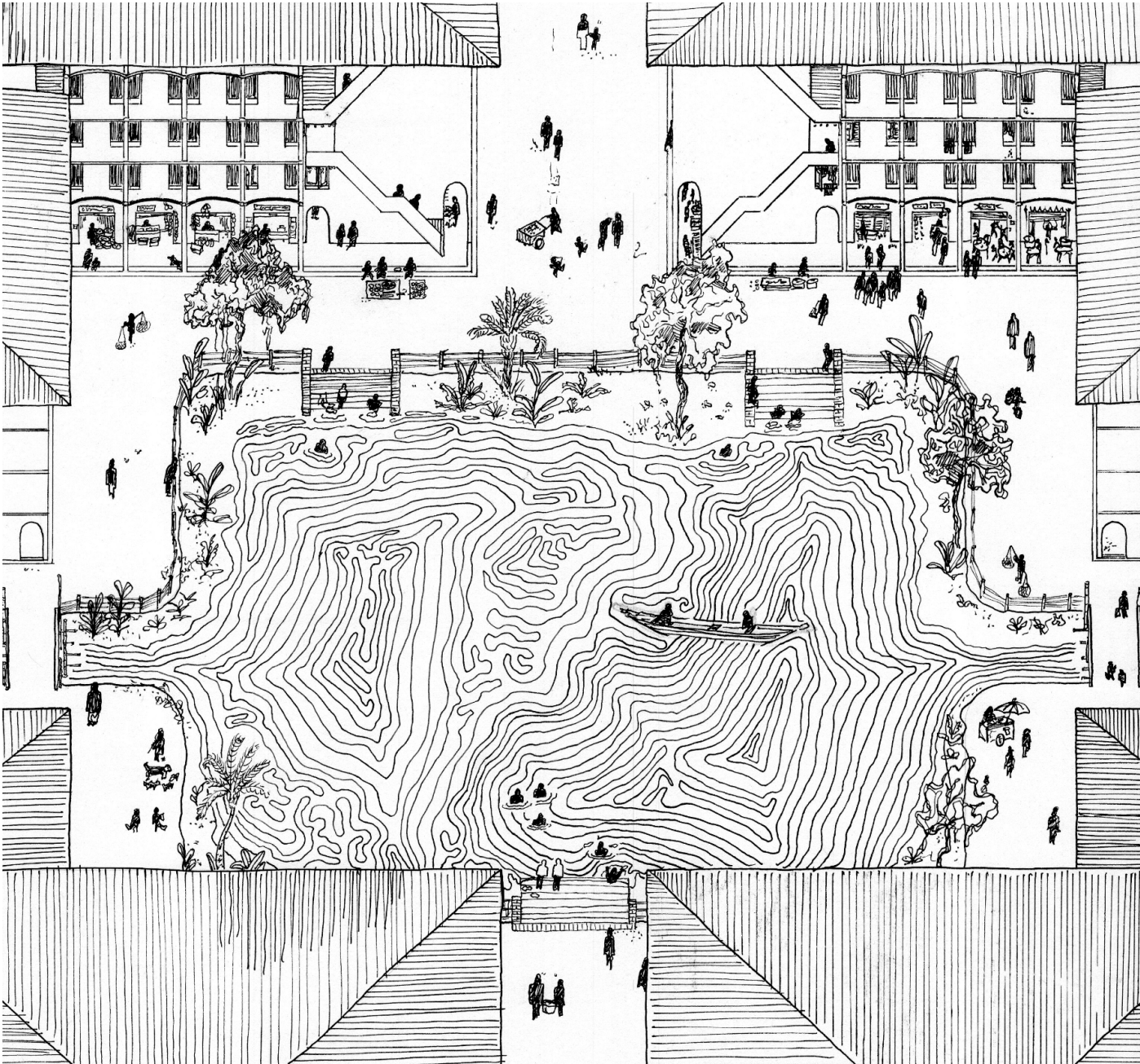
Kashmir shawl of a Mughal palace garden in the Indian region of Kashmir. (Victoria & Albert Hall)



Reinterpretation of Nakshi Kanta (Jackie Morris, 1993)

Thinking of the project as a woven surface—like a traditional **চটাই** (woven mat) or a Nakshi Kantha (embroidered quilt)—has offered a layered reading of community life. These textiles, with their central lotus suns and repeating motifs of fish, birds, and domestic scenes, tell stories of fertility, resilience, and belonging. Similarly, Mughal garden carpets, which once depicted idealised palace gardens in symmetrical, abstracted form, have inspired the spatial order of the project: a blend of geometry and generosity. A central spine becomes a shared public path, while interwoven units of varying sizes wrap around communal courtyards. The result is a soft, tapestry-like plan—where public and private dissolve fluidly, and every element contributes to the collective whole. A spatial storytelling rooted in place, memory, and shared identity.

Waterscape - ecosystem of ponds



At the heart of the assembly lies a large pond—an essential element in both climatic adaptation and social life. Inspired by and connected to the ecosystem of ponds scattered throughout Sylhet, the pond responds to the local tradition of using water bodies to cool their surroundings

On a local scale, the pond's role extends far beyond passive cooling. It becomes a shared, multifunctional space within the project: a place to wash clothes, take a bath after a long day's work, or gather for casual conversation. In this way, it reflects the rhythms of village life within the urban fabric, offering a sense of familiarity and belonging to both internal migrants and more permanent urban dwellers.

Crucially, the pond is also integrated into the site's water management strategy. By cleaning existing ditches and rethinking the open sewage system, water is redirected and filtered according to the needs of the seasons. This makes it both a functional and symbolic centre of the assembly—bringing people together while actively improving environmental conditions on site.

As Marina Tabassum beautifully noted, Bangladesh can be seen as a *waterscape rather than a landscape*—a country where water shapes both ecology and everyday life. As the people of Bangladesh are deeply accustomed to living with the water—adapting to its rhythms rather than resisting them—the project reflects this relationship. Rather than imposing harsh control, the design embraces water as a companion to everyday life. The pond and surrounding systems help buffer against dry seasons while slowing down runoff through infiltration during intense monsoon rains, offering a gentle, site-specific response to Sylhet's seasonal extremes.



Construction workers enjoying a communal bath after work in the nearest pond in Dhaka. Impression of what the pond centrally located on the Hawker's Market could look like.



Most ponds across Sylhet have beautiful brick accesses to the water. Gathering spaces where people (and birds) rest, wash or take a bath.

Hanging laundry



In the streets of Bangladesh, hanging laundry is more than a daily routine — it's a quiet, visual act of claiming space. Draped across lines, fences, and rooftops, clothes bring softness and human presence to the built environment. For many, especially those in informal or transitional housing, this practice marks a sense of belonging and stability. It turns shared or public spaces into something personal, lived-in, and cared for. Laundry becomes an everyday monument to domestic life — a sign that someone is here, rooted, and at home, even in conditions of precarity or constant movement.





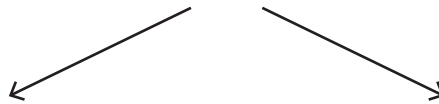
ASSEMBLY



Replicability



Hawker's Market



Mount Adora Hospital



Osmani Intl. Airport

Hospital staff
Nurses
Pharmacy vendors

Caretakers
Houskeepers
Cook for workers

Airport staff
Cleaning

Caretaker
Houskeepers
Cook for workers

Rickshaw Pullers
Bike repair
CNG mechanics

CNG drivers
Workers in agriculture

ASSEMBLY

If the project were to be replicated elsewhere in Sylhet—or more broadly across Bangladesh—it would need to adapt sensitively to the local context and the specific industries that generate livelihoods in each place. Much like the historic housing colonies of Sylhet, these replications would aim to provide dignified living conditions near employment opportunities, fostering a tight link between home and work. Such as for example just across the street of the *Mount Adora Hospital*, offering a home for nurses, pharmacists, drug sellers or cleaning staff. Just next to the *Osmani Airport*, this could form an alternative to the current housing developed for its staff, with gated blocks hierarchised per income group.

To stay true to the spirit of the assembly, a few key ingredients must be retained:

- Communities anchored around the local economy or industry
- A clear spatial gradient from public to private
- Clustered around courtyards that support both permanent residents and ‘remote’ or seasonal workers
- A central pond, acting as both a gathering space and a cooling microclimate
- Everyday spaces that foster interaction—markets, prayer areas, and shared amenities

These elements together should form a flexible but grounded model, capable of responding to diverse contexts while preserving its social and climatic intentions.

Reference – Mumbai's Chawls



Bathia Chawl, Mumbai, early 1900s (Avermaete & Gosseye, 2022, p. 36).

The chawls of Mumbai were originally built as speculative housing for industrial workers migrating from the Indian hinterland. The chawl typology combines residential spaces with commercial activities, offering both accommodation and livelihood opportunities within compact urban footprints.

Originating in Western India, the chawl can be seen as an enabler for migrant workers to forge a productive relationship between their place of work and residence, thereby deepening their connection to the city. Housing diverse communities in close proximity to economically and politically active urban centres, chawls provided residents with a degree of agency and urban presence. This often translated into collective action—through shared community spaces and negotiated rights—allowing residents to assert themselves socially and economically (Avermaete & Gosseye, 2022, p. 37)

As Aniket Dey (n.d.) notes, chawls created "activities beyond just living", opening up several opportunities through their mixed-use form. This historical model offers useful reference points for developing adaptable, affordable housing on the project site in Sylhet, especially since migration, economic integration, and community-building are central themes, just as they already have been for the chawls more than 100 years ago.

Reference – Housing colonies



Housing colonies in Bangladesh were established to provide organised, affordable living for workers in specific sectors such as health, education, or industry. Built mostly in the mid-20th century, these planned communities offered proximity to work and a sense of shared identity. While they provided structured urban living, many now face issues like poor maintenance and outdated infrastructure.

In Sylhet, this sector-based division is clearly visible. During our field trip, we visited the *Medical Colony*, located in the city center. It's a gated, green enclave with several concrete apartment blocks dating back to the 1960s, laid out in a repetitive but spacious pattern. It offered an important insight into urban planning history—but also a principle that is reimaged in the assembly of livelihoods.





REFERENCES



Reference — Ahsanullah Hall Student Housing



←
Towards
university



Open gallery, a
place for shoes
and hanging
laundry



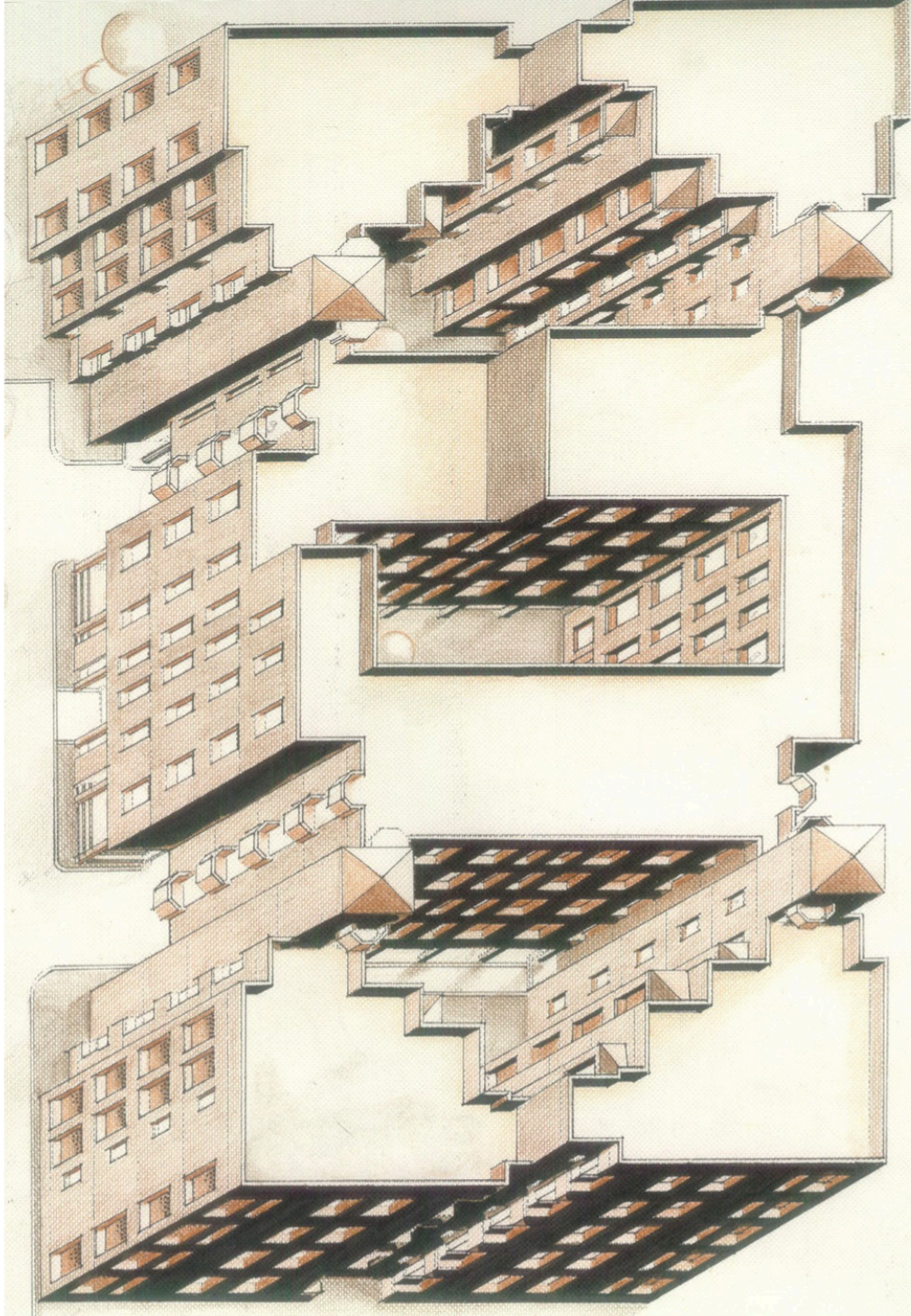
Communal canteen with hired
kitchen staff

Ahsanullah Hall is one of seventeen male dormitories on the campus of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) in Dhaka. During a visit, several students generously showed me around, proudly pointing out their shared Hindu temple and guiding me through their bedrooms—cramped spaces where six boys sleep side by side in aged wooden beds, separated only by narrow desks and mosquito nets.

Despite the modest living conditions and deteriorated state of the building, the dormitory offered something valuable: a strong sense of community anchored by essential shared facilities. These included a canteen with hired kitchen staff, basic but sufficient sanitary units, spaces of worship (both a mosque and a Hindu temple), generous galleries for daily rituals like hanging laundry, and a large courtyard that functions as the heart of the complex.

While originally designed for students rather than migrant workers, Ahsanullah Hall offers insights into how shared infrastructure can support a population living temporarily in the city. Its communal model—based on spatial efficiency, overlapping functions, and social infrastructure—inspired key elements of my own project’s “assembly of livelihoods.” The cornerstones of this assembly echo what I observed at BUET: collective kitchens, shared spaces for rest and faith, and informal spaces to gather, work, and belong.

Reference – Kalindi Apartments





The *Kalindi Apartments*, located in Mirpur, Dhaka, were designed in the early 1990s by Bangladeshi architect Bashirul Haq. The project consists of mid-rise apartment blocks arranged around shared open spaces, with a mix of walk-up units and basic infrastructure for cars on the ground floor. Although gated from the streets and more of a higher income housing, the project still inspired me a lot in terms of materiality, with modest brick details and window setbacks for shadow inside and an appealing facade rhythm.

Most importantly, it also clusters housing units around calm inner courtyards — I still remember vividly the calm atmosphere that this created amidst the bustling city, with serene trees and the living rooms facing the courtyards. What I did miss was some activation on the ground floor, as this was only reserved for cars — something that I tried to solve in my design by having the front doors of the family duplexes facing the courtyards.



MATERIAL CHOICES

This chapter elaborates on the material choices made for the project and situates it within the context of Bangladesh's current construction sector.

Importance of materiality



When speaking of housing, one should never overlook its deep entanglement with materiality. Building materials are not just a technical necessity, but an expression of context. Elke Krasny (2023) introduces the concept of material ecology thinking as a design perspective that accounts for the relationships between materials, economies of labour and resources, traditional knowledge, climate, and atmosphere. In rapidly urbanising regions like Bangladesh, where formal building industries are often out of reach for the urban poor, this way of thinking invites architects to reconsider the agency of materials and the construction process itself.

Learning from the work of Yasmeen Lari, who champions the use of local and sustainable materials, the role of architecture can extend beyond built form: to empower, to educate, and to preserve. Her practice focuses on training unskilled or marginalised groups in building techniques, particularly women, thereby creating not only shelter but dignity and autonomy. Through such methods, construction becomes a site of learning and community-building—an act of inclusion in economies and processes typically inaccessible to those on the margins.

Similarly, Francis Kéré speaks of adapting architecture to the conditions of the world's poorest regions. Rejecting high-tech systems, he designs buildings that work with local materials and climatic conditions: cantilevered roofs in areas of heavy rainfall, or open structures to enhance ventilation in dry, hot climates. These choices are not just technical, but social offering resilience through means available to local communities. Architecture, especially in contexts shaped by migration and precarity, must be grounded in these material realities.

Traditional mud houses, often built with tamped earth or clay blocks and topped with thatched roofs, are typically constructed through collective village labour. While these methods are resourceful and deeply rooted in local culture, they are vulnerable to weather, pests, and time, requiring regular upkeep. Increasingly, communities have turned to industrial materials like cement, corrugated metal, and steel for their perceived durability. However, these come with significant trade-offs: they are expensive, environmentally taxing, poorly suited to the local climate, and often disrupt traditional spatial patterns. Over time, this shift has also contributed to the stigmatisation of earth-based construction, now wrongly seen as a sign of poverty, and consequently overlooked in development strategies.

Architects like Francis Kéré and the studio Worofila have criticised the uncritical adoption of concrete as a symbol of progress. In chasing an image of modernity, many have abandoned sensible, climate-adapted design traditions that once shaped thermally comfortable spaces long before mechanical cooling existed. Worofila notes that vernacular architecture was inherently designed for ongoing maintenance and repair. Rather than treating durability as a one-time achievement, it acknowledged the evolving life of a building and its environment. Reviving this approach means designing for long-term use where sustainability isn't just about materials, but also about thoughtful local integration, and adaptability over time.



Material Choices

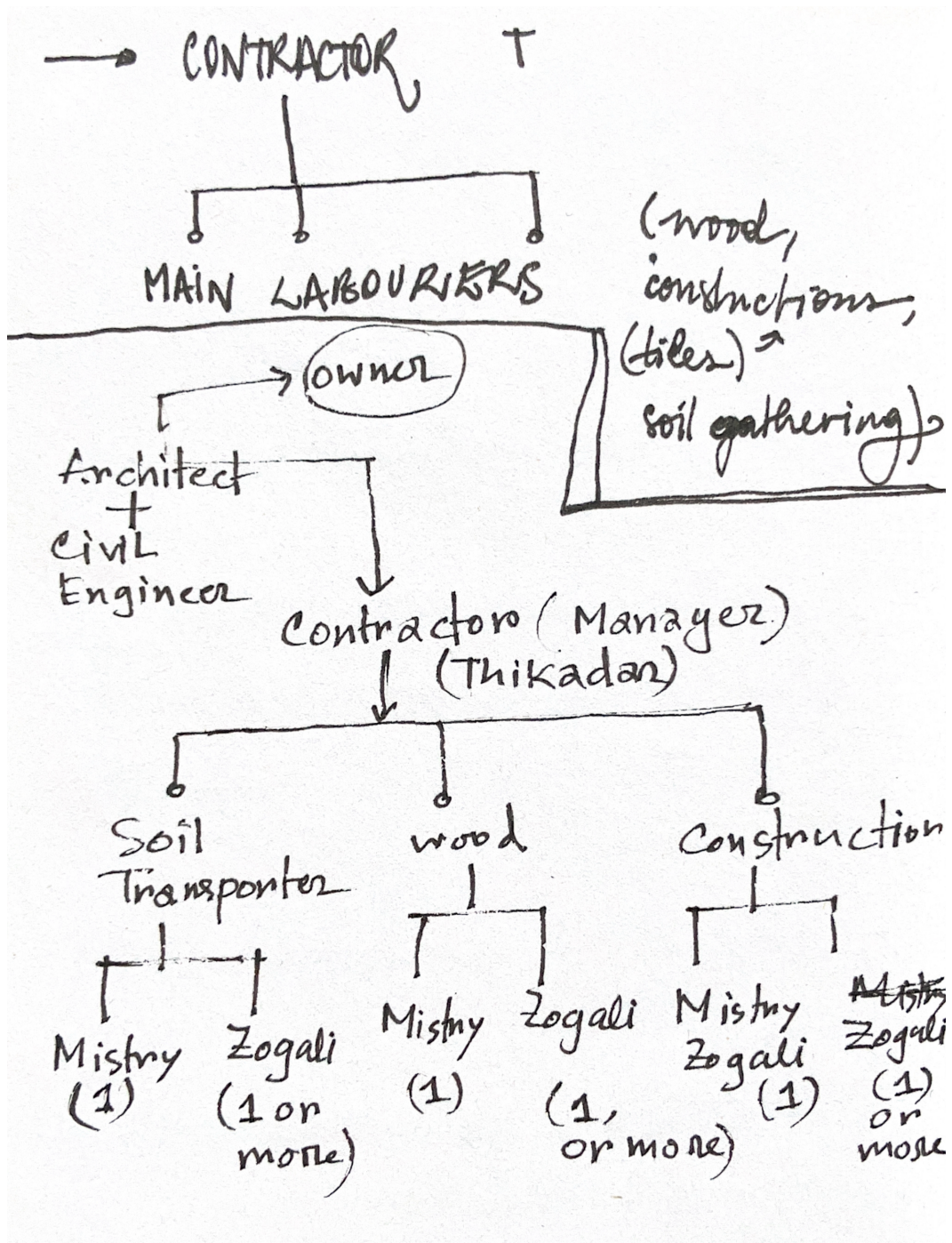


Material choices in this project were made with an emphasis on aligning with Sylhet's local material flows and supply chains, with the goal of supporting local livelihoods and shielding local builders and craftspeople from the pressures of low-cost imported alternatives.

As noted by the EU Delegations and Offices (2018, p. 267), promoting the use of locally sourced materials is one of the most effective ways to help stakeholders navigate rising material costs and reduce reliance on debt. Supporting existing industries, such as concrete frame block (CFB) production, remains vital where they are present. However, the integration of modern earthen construction methods—such as compressed earth blocks (CEB)—can serve as valuable additions to the building toolkit.

Examples from the Mayotte housing program, traditional construction in Sri Lanka, and work by AVEI show that using earthen materials can successfully combine environmental stewardship with economic empowerment at the local level. As architect Anna Heringer (2022, p. 63) puts it in *Everyday Matters*, investing in construction that uses local materials has the potential to "act as real catalysts for homegrown markets and small economies."

More people with less material



MISTRI > ZOGALI > TRAINEE

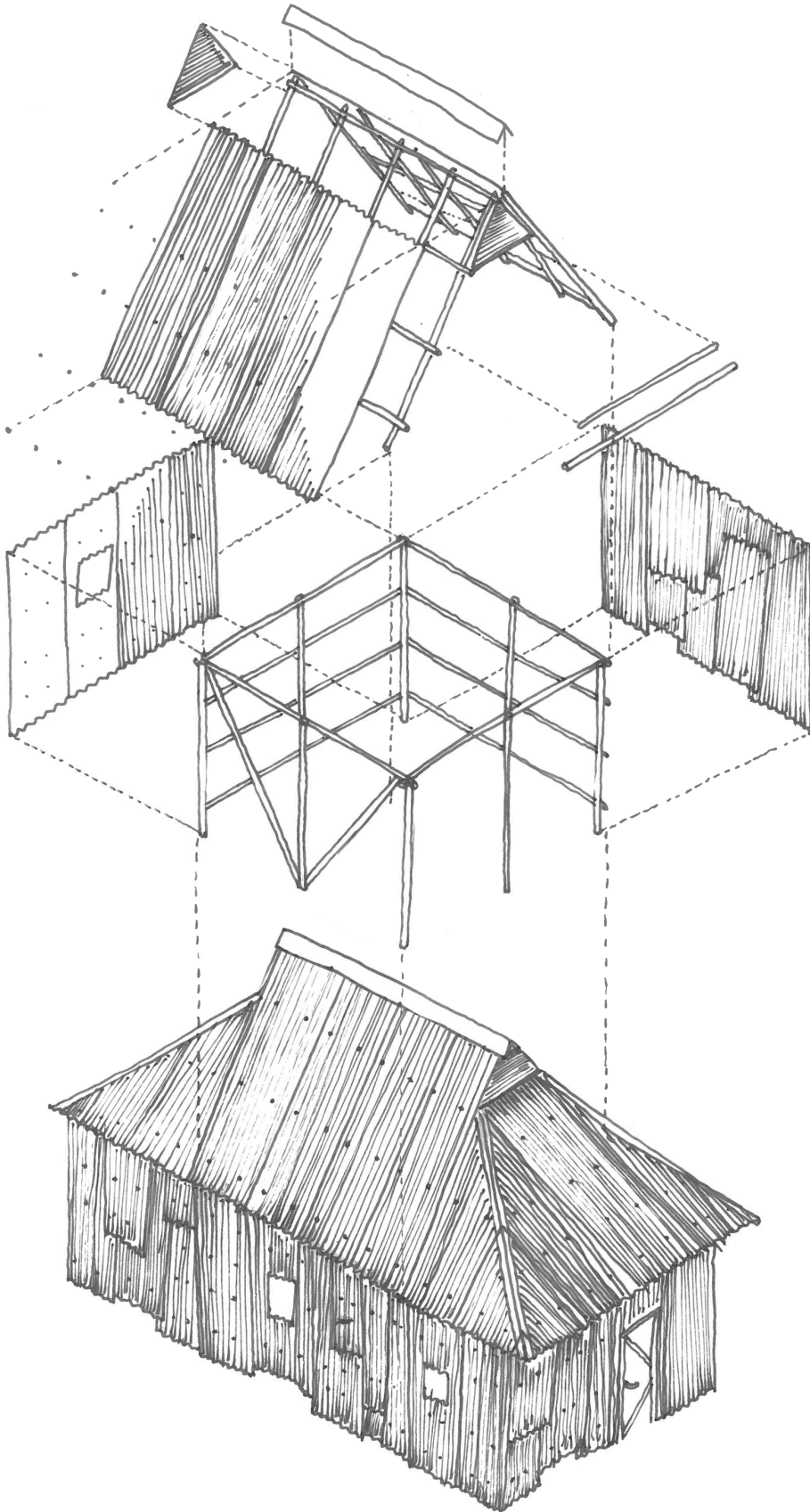
A key objective of the project is to maximize social benefit through material-conscious design—engaging more people while using fewer resources. By prioritizing labor-intensive construction methods, such as the production of compressed earth blocks (CEBs), the project supports inclusive local job creation.

As highlighted in development policy, many countries prioritize productive employment in their national strategies. Small-scale CEB production is considerably more labor-intensive than the manufacturing of fired bricks or concrete blocks, offering greater opportunities for community participation and economic inclusion. This makes CEBs not only environmentally advantageous, but also socially impactful—generating both direct and indirect employment across the supply chain.

On site, combining skilled masons (mistri) with semi-skilled workers (zogali) and trainees reflects a common construction hierarchy in Bangladesh. This structure allows for skill development through hands-on learning, while ensuring quality workmanship.

Moreover, the project embraces a broad interpretation of building-related skills from large-scale infrastructure like bridge-building to small-scale craftsmanship, such as carpentry, masonry, or weaving elements like sun screens. This layered, inclusive approach reinforces the potential of construction to serve as a platform for education, livelihood development, and community empowerment.

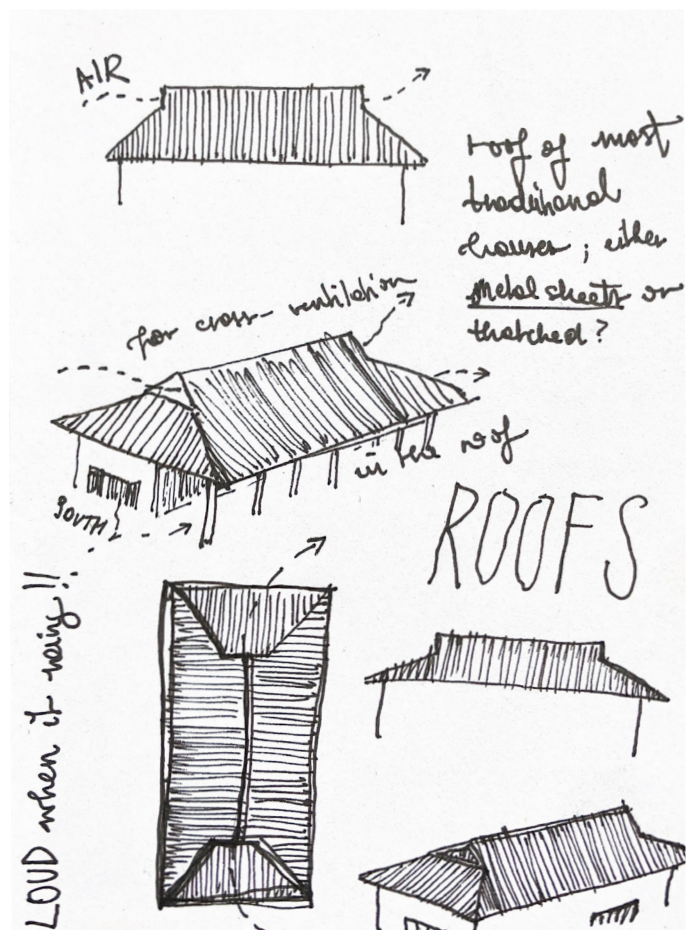
Material Research – CI Sheets



Corrugated iron sheets (also known as CI sheets) are a widespread material across Bangladesh, shaping both self-help housing and local constructions.

Their affordability, durability, and ease of transport make them a democratic building solution, widely used for roofing, walls, and temporary structures in rural and urban areas alike. Despite their accessibility, these sheets undergo a highly industrialised process – starting as imported hot-rolled coils from abroad, then further processed in Bangladesh and distributed nationwide.

This paradox highlights the material's dual nature: both a product of modern, high-carbon industrial supply chains and a fundamental element of informal, self-help construction practices, omnipresent in the country's built environment.





MATERIAL CHOICES

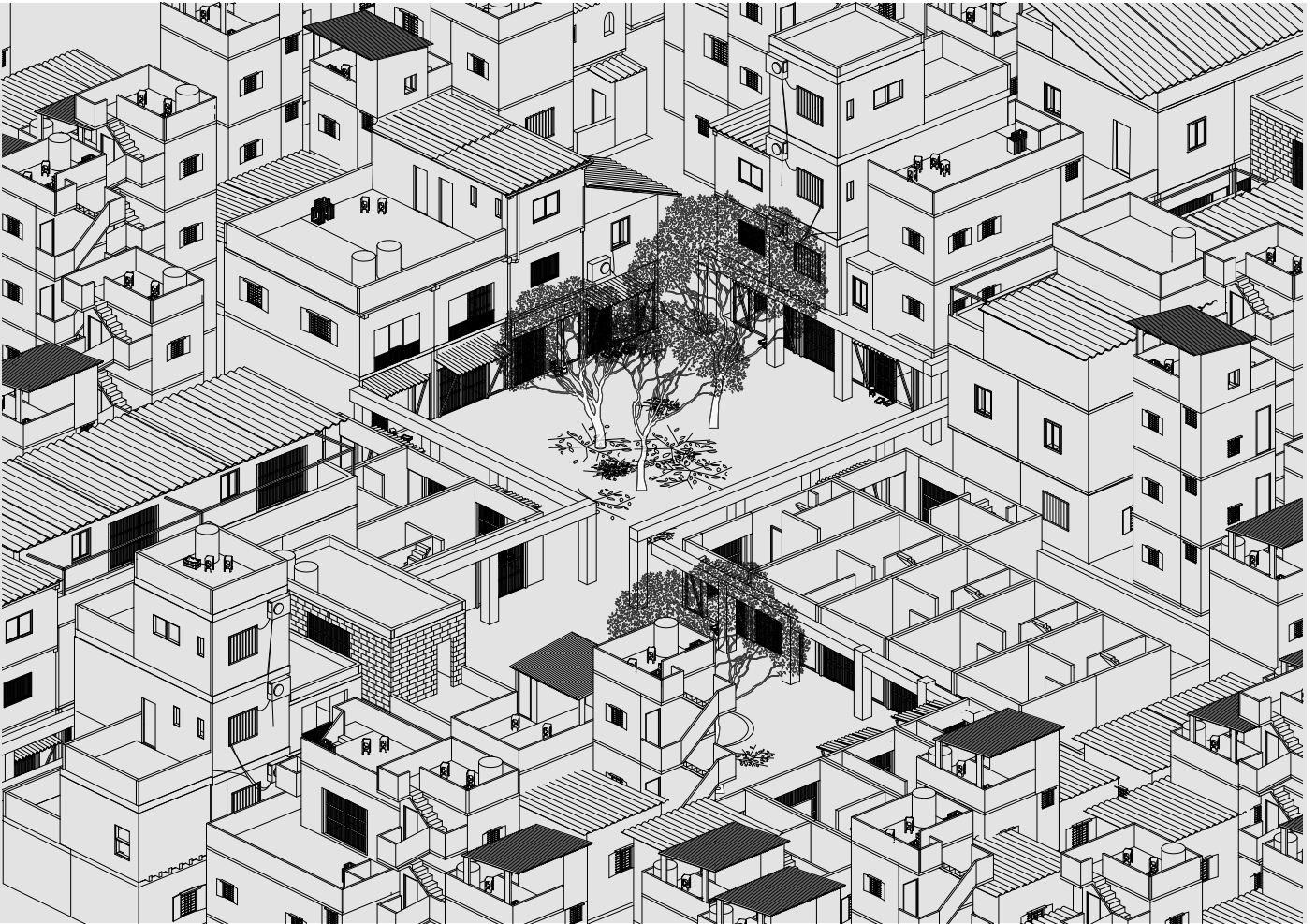




MATERIAL CHOICES

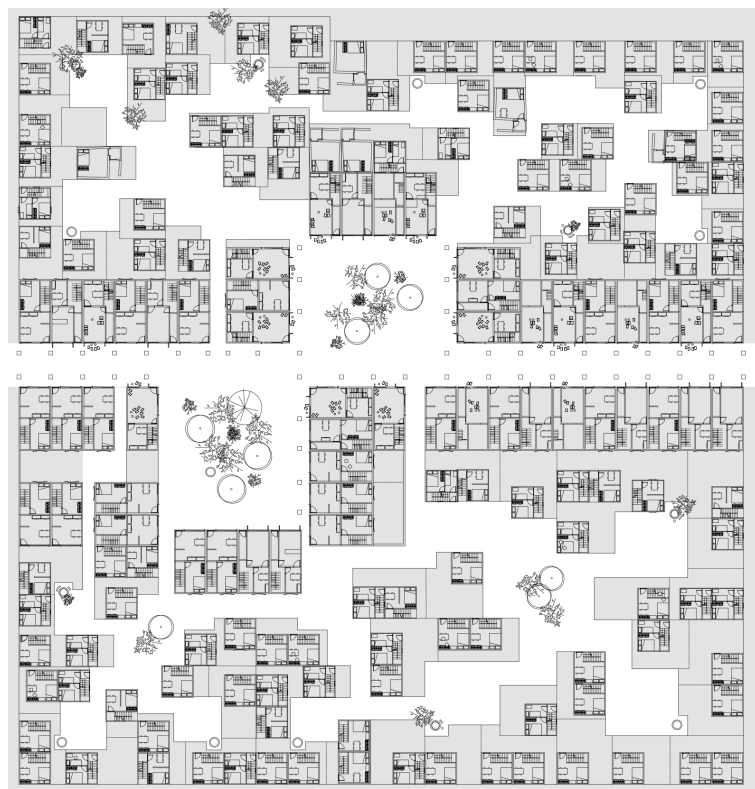


Pilot Project



MATERIAL CHOICES

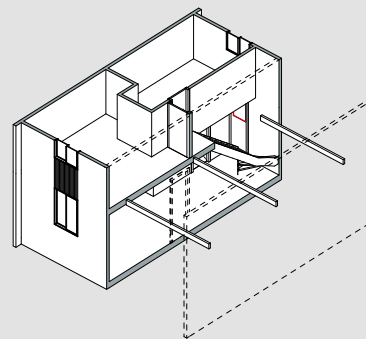
The pilot project was carried out as an exercise in the first semester of the graduation studio. The task was to combine housing precedents into one project that would reach a certain FSI. Although FSI=1 is not a high value at all, one could see that the plot could still get filled up quite a lot. For the exercise the *Belapur Housing*, Steven Holl's *Manila Project* and the *Geneva Camp* in Dhaka were analysed and the respective core elements were translated into this so-called 'pilot project':



Villa Verde

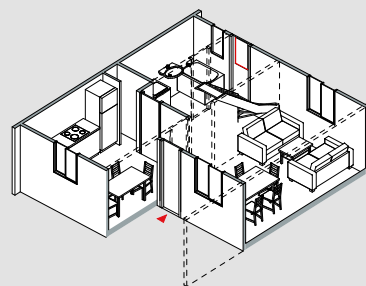


The Villa Verde project by ELEMENTAL was analysed early in the year as part of design research. Driven by a personal fascination with the studio's 'half a good house' approach, the exercise combined key figures — such as FSI, GSI, and dwellings per hectare — with a visual study of how residents adapted and expanded their homes over time. While the project is located in Chile and unrelated to the context of Sylhet, it offered valuable inspiration. It demonstrated how thoughtful housing design can leave space for user-led growth and flexibility — a principle that resonates globally.



Apartment Type – Initial

Area: 57 m²



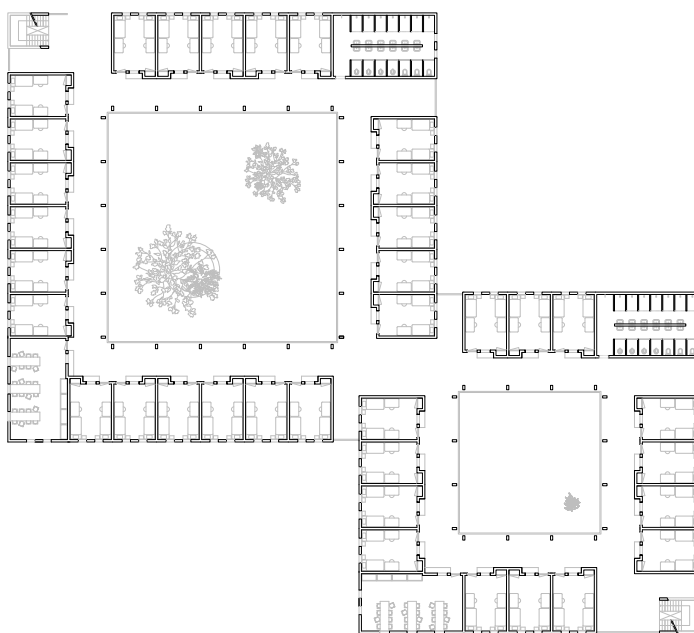
Apartment Type – Extended

Area: max. 85m²

Process

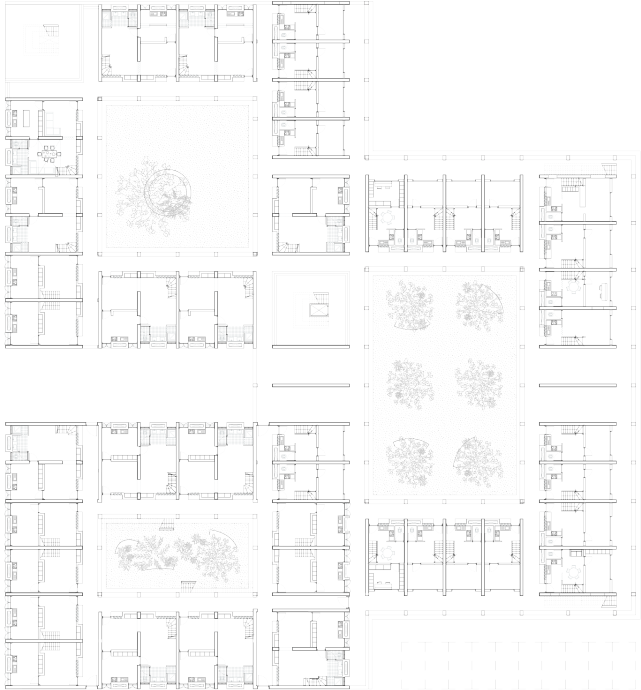


P2 Ground floor

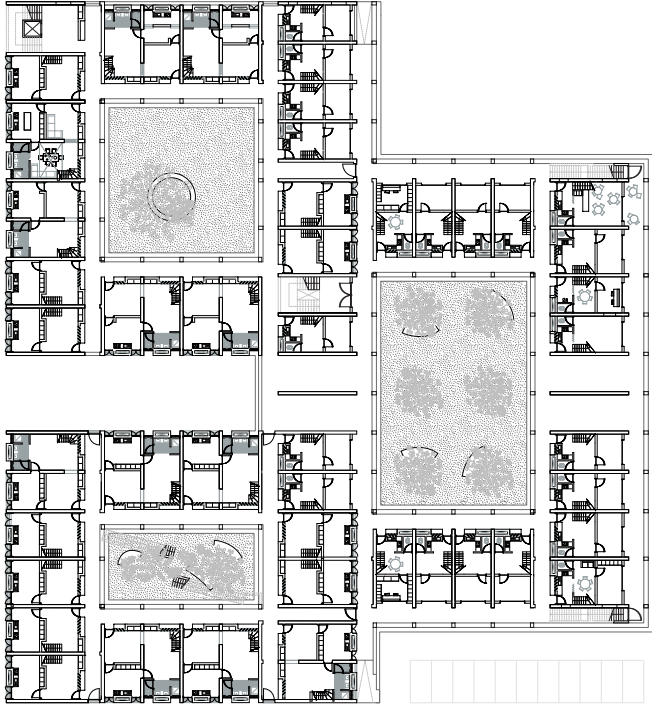


P2 Second floor

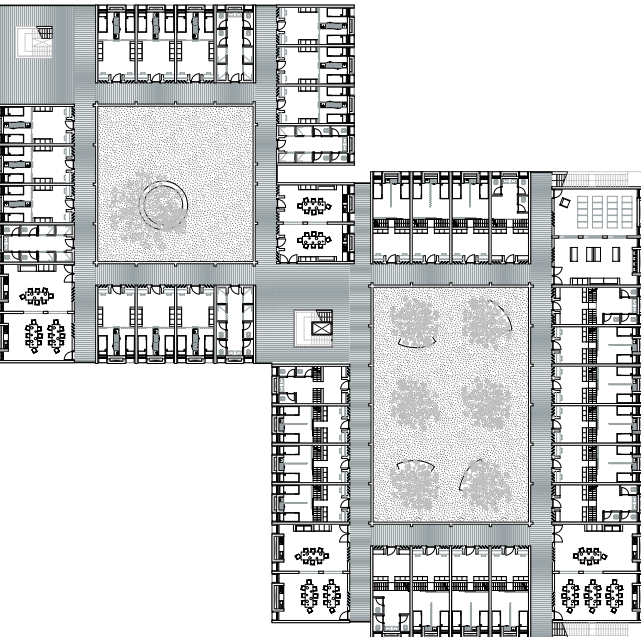




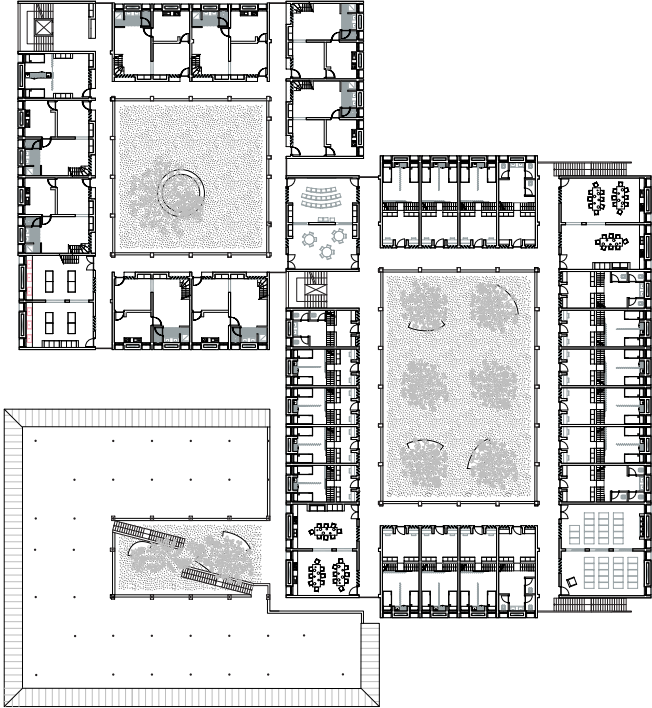
P4



P5



P4



P5



Reflections on the 5As of Adequate Housing

This is a reflection of the project based on the insightful lecture given by Dr. Alonso Ayala as part of the Global Housing Graduation Studio, where he shared his 5A strategy of Adequate Housing with us:

Accessibility

The project is centrally located in Sylhet, ensuring proximity to livelihoods, services, and transport—especially vital for recent migrants. Integrated circulation systems and inclusive spatial planning promote both physical and social accessibility, avoiding (visible) segregation and supporting shared use of pathways and communal spaces.

Availability

A diversity of unit types and tenures addresses the housing needs of both short-term and long-term residents. By layering temporary, transitional, and permanent options within the same framework, the design enhances availability for different stages of internal migration without isolating user groups. Through inclusive design decisions on a central site, it makes the project more available for people seeking a livelihood and avoids the site to be taken over by profit-driven plot-based developments, which would mostly serve the 'well-off'.

Affordability

Affordability is approached through compact unit design, potential for commercial activity on the ground floor, and shared infrastructure. Cross-subsidisation and low-cost, climate-responsive construction strategies aim to reduce both upfront and long-term costs, making the project viable for low- and middle-income groups alike. Nevertheless, either the municipality or an involved NGO would have to cover the initial costs, which could eventually be paid back through a rental system.

Acceptability

Cultural and social practices are embedded in the design through features such as community ponds, prayer spaces, courtyards and surrounding galleries (verandahs). A shared architectural language across income groups avoids visible hierarchy, promoting dignity, familiarity, and collective identity among residents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Nevertheless it's important to note that I did the best i could from my perspective and the short insights that I got, but I wouldn't dare say that this is the best way for Sylhetis to live. Up to here I could translate my outsider perspective into an architectural mitigation, but for it to really accommodate and become a thriving community, i am convinced that it would need more local perspectives; Only by combining the design development with someone's lived experience could the project become a lively home for people.

Adaptability

The most obvious adaptability of the project lies in the ways owners of the shop houses can fill in their commercial space. But it also responds to Sylhet's seasonal climate with the hybrid water management and the connection to the ecosystem of ponds and canals. Evolving family structures can grow within a cluster by moving to another block. Flexible thresholds and multi-functional spaces for the community make it possible for residents to fill the architecture (essentially only the backdrop for life to take place) with elements of daily communal life. Adaptability extends beyond the physical—by enabling informal livelihoods and community-led governance, the project anticipates future shifts in use, ownership, and migration patterns.

Final reflection

Looking back at the overall design process throughout the semester, I would say that most decisions were shaped by the fascinations that emerged during the field trip to Bangladesh. Meeting construction workers and witnessing their on-site living conditions helped me connect personal narratives to what had initially been a rather abstract and faceless research plan at the beginning of the year.

As I now see the design coming together towards the end of the semester, I realise it has been a constant balancing act—applying the architectural knowledge and design techniques I've acquired both in my previous studies and throughout this year, while critically evaluating them against the backdrop of the new impressions Bangladesh has given me.

The noisy streets of Dhaka, the colourful markets of Sylhet, and the lush landscapes of the haor regions are things I could never have imagined without experiencing them firsthand. The same goes for the people—their traditional dwelling patterns, their (rural) livelihoods—topics I had initially planned to study remotely, but which only became clear to me through direct conversations, where I could ask about their aspirations and everyday lives.

In conclusion, I would summarise the process as follows:

1. Exploration and Initial Confusion

A period of broad investigation—reading, learning, and researching extensively, though without a clear focus. While case studies offered some direction, my range of interest remained wide and somewhat scattered at this stage.

2. Field Trip – Confronting Reality

Experiencing the context firsthand reshaped my understanding. Seeing the situation with my own eyes led me to question earlier assumptions and evaluate them against the lived realities in Bangladesh.

3. Early Design Attempts

I began processing the insights gained and attempted to translate these ‘soft’ values—such as personal stories, atmospheres, and cultural beliefs—into ‘hard’ architectural outputs like floorplans, sections, and density calculations. This proved particularly challenging. The project statement video became a crucial tool here, helping to merge the experienced atmosphere with a clear ideological narrative.

4. Refining Design Decisions

At this stage, I began developing the design across various scales—from individual dwellings to the neighbourhood level—and made material choices based on what is locally available. However, in focusing on architectural elaboration, the design began to feel more detached from the site, and I risked losing sight of my initial motivations.

5. Reflection and Integration

In the final phase, I worked/ am working to ensure the original narrative re-emerges in the design. This involves critically evaluating the entire process in the context of Sylhet and striving to integrate livelihoods, design, and storytelling into a cohesive and contextually grounded whole.

How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

Since my initial research plan, the focus of the project has shifted considerably. While I began with an interest in the community-oriented dwelling patterns of the haor regions, over the course of the year this gradually transitioned towards migration from these rural areas to urban contexts like Sylhet.

This shift largely stems from the many aspects that were unclear—or entirely unknown to me—before visiting the country. Once in Bangladesh, it became evident that searching for traditional dwelling patterns outside the city was more complex than expected. Many haor villages, typically located on elevated edges along floodplains, have had to intensify their flood protection measures drastically. At the same time, many younger men and families have been migrating to nearby urban centres in search of income. These observations, along with conversations on the ground, made me reconsider the broader trends of rural-to-urban migration in Bangladesh, where climate change is increasingly undermining the viability of rural livelihoods.

As a result, the project took on an urban focus, with the Hawker's Market site situated in the heart of Sylhet's consolidated urban fabric. I began to see this large-scale migration as an inevitable response to both environmental pressures and shifting socio-economic aspirations. This reframed my approach: rather than romanticising traditional rural life in the wetlands—now under threat from global climate change—I became more interested in imagining how cities might accommodate and support incoming populations.

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

The field trip, which in itself constituted a substantial research method, fundamentally reshaped the goals I had initially set for the project, influencing both the trajectory of my research and the final design outcome. It reaffirmed the importance of being on site—of being present where the "afterlife" of a design will unfold. While it remains essential to return to the sketching table (aka computer) to develop and refine ideas, I believe the project could have been even more grounded had I returned to Sylhet several times throughout the year, or stayed there for an extended period.

Nevertheless, engaging directly with local students and learning from the places they showed me really deepened my understanding while being there. Afterwards, maintaining contact with them online proved highly valuable. These exchanges helped me better grasp their design approach and allowed me to integrate it meaningfully with my own design aspirations.

I would have loved to experiment more with ethnographic methods. Although I had the opportunity to speak with many construction workers on-site in Bangladesh, I now feel that I could have prepared this aspect more thoroughly in advance. Had I known earlier which personal stories would resonate most deeply with me, I might have been able to develop a more precise and intentional ethnographic approach. But perhaps that's also part of the process—the magic, even. The excitement of going to Bangladesh without fixed expectations, experiencing everything first-hand with fresh eyes, and being amazed by every detail the country's vibrant streets had to offer.

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

For this reflection, I reviewed my graduation plan for P2, which summarises the ethical aspects I have aimed to carry through to this stage of the project quite well: "The specific focus of my project reflects the broader role that the studio plays within the faculty, which, as I see it, lies in promoting a more human-centric approach to architecture. This approach emphasises the equitable distribution of knowledge and resources, aiming to decolonise architectural interventions in the Global South. By recognising migrant workers in Sylhet as a specific group in need of better living conditions, I aim to research their work and living conditions while also understanding their aspirations. This exercise — identifying a problem or challenge within a societal context that is not your own, responding with sensitivity, and translating it into a design that embodies elegance and dignity — brings together all the crucial elements I feel every architectural project should address."

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

Every design emerges from a specific socio-economic context and it should be firmly rooted within it. In my case, the Hawker's Market and the internal migrants it attracts are site-specific. However, the way the project enables different livelihoods to coexist within a condensed urban fabric could be applied to other cities facing similar challenges. The design anticipates these nuances by responding to local conditions—such as existing ditches and market vendours—while maintaining an architectural

language that is adaptable and replicable. It is not intended as a one-off solution, but as a context-sensitive approach that can be translated elsewhere with care.

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track and your master programme?

Although the topic of my project has evolved since P2, my view on the relationship between the overall programme and my own work has remained consistent. In fact, I'm glad to see that the design still addresses the very aspects I felt were so valuable for my own development:

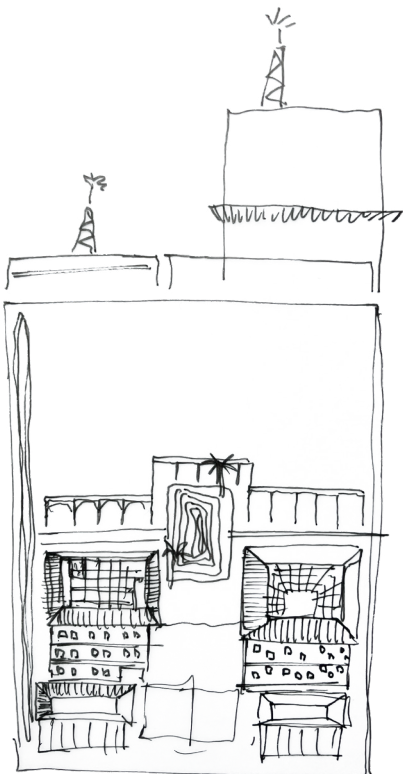
"My previous education lacked a strong focus on translating people's everyday lives into architectural form – despite human dwelling behaviour being central to the architectural profession. The endless personal stories that make up a city, with lives running parallel and intersecting in public spaces, have always been a source of deep fascination for me. The way cities evolve over time, embody the collective memory of their communities, and still function as interconnected networks remains, to me, nothing short of magical.

The field trip to Dhaka and Sylhet perfectly aligned with this interest, offering me a first glimpse of cities where public regulations or cultural memory remain an open question. Its systems appear inscrutable, and so much seems to happen informally, yet the collective energy of its people keeps the city alive and thriving. The challenges faced by its inhabitants are far more visible in the streets, yet their resilience and will to live shine even brighter. For me, this experience represents a crucial broadening of my perspective as I prepare to finish my architectural education."

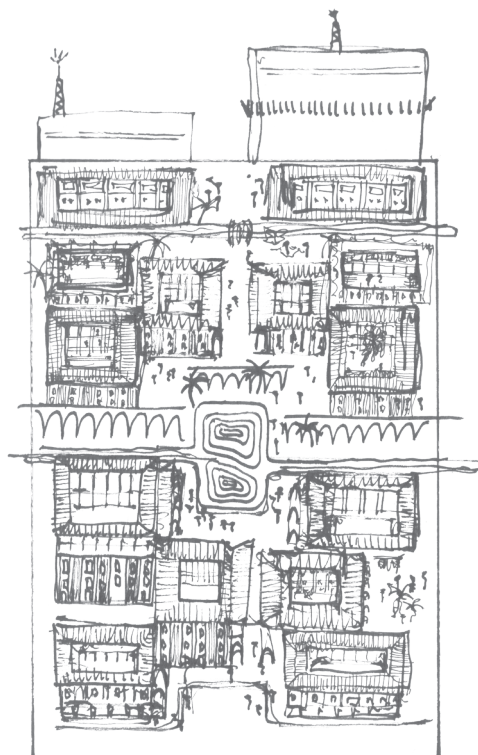
The upcoming phase, as the graduation manual suggests, will largely focus on the representation of the project. For me, this means not only documenting the architectural and technical aspects, but above all, visualising the social qualities that the project seeks to address. It's about bringing Sylhet back into the work—about reintroducing the myriad personal stories I encountered during the field trip last December.

Over the semester, while the project has developed significantly on an architectural level, I often felt a growing distance from the vibrant, colourful streets of Sylhet. The project started to feel like a site of its own—abstracted, detached from its original context.

As Marina pointed out during our last session, it's natural to lose touch with the site and its social context at



P2



P3



P5

certain points in the process. After all, the physical building also needs to develop through the technical knowledge we gain during our education. What matters most is that, in the end, the original intentions clearly re-emerge and shape the final outcome. That is precisely my goal for this final month of work: to align the project with both architectural and ethical precision.

One specific way I intend to achieve this is by further detailing the overview drawing I've been developing since P2 (as shown below). I plan to scale it up to A1 and gradually enrich it with everyday moments and lived details—layer by layer. This process will be guided by two personal questions I want to keep asking myself throughout this last phase, particularly in how the project is projected onto the social aspects:



?

1 Did my/ would my project achieve the assembly of livelihoods that is so crucial to my overall story and that is deeply rooted in places like the Hawker's Market?

2 In what ways does the project offer not just a physical structure, but a meaningful response to the cultural, economic, and environmental conditions it emerges from? (the architecture as a canvas for everyday life to unfold)

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