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# Reclaiming the Streets for Play: Design Ideas for Play Streets in Dhaka

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Abstract: Past research conducted by one author found an interesting pattern of street usage for play in densely populated urban neighborhoods of Dhaka. Near-home street pattern was found to be associated with children's time spent outdoors which is diminishing at an alarming rate in rapidly growing megacities of the world. The study showed that no matter how narrow a dead-end street was, children living near that street had a significantly longer duration of independent outdoor playtime compared to children living in thorough-traffic streets. The general assumption is that a dead-end street is safer for play in terms of traffic volume and speed. Also, the notion of a 'defensible space' is evident in those streets where parents probably feel safer to let their children play and wander outside their homes. What is unique about these streets is how narrow they are. Unlike the 'play street' examples found in cities in the developed world, the dead-end streets of Dhaka have little to offer space-wise. But children seem to care little about that and were found to engage in all sorts of sports and play in those narrow, linear spaces. Dhaka, where a continued intense battle for lands dictates land usage, it is not hard to imagine what is in fate for these last refuges for free play outdoors. Can innovative design interventions empower children to reclaim the streets? This discussion offers four innovative, and maybe utopian, design ideas that may create, transform, and protect the play streets of Dhaka.

Keywords: Children, Play, Streets, Design, Street Pattern, Dead-End Streets.

## Introduction

Let us start this discussion with a quote from Tim Gill's recent book *Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design can Save Cities* (2021) – "The presence of children shows the quality of urban habitats, in the same way, the presence of salmon in a river shows the quality of that habitat." How often do we meet children in our mundane city life in Dhaka? Just do a quick revisit of your last workday and count the number of children you saw on your way back and forth to work. Of course, you met some of them. You met the kids who are out there to earn their living – the desperate flower girl, the boy selling Harry Potter books totally unaware (and eternally deprived) of the magical school of Hogwarts. Maybe, you have seen a group of sleepy school-goers, caged in a rickshaw van amidst the deafening noise of the busy streets of Dhaka, trying to catch their breath in the endless routine of school, coaching centers,

homework, and private tutors. But how often have you met children engaged in free play? Or children wandering the streets carefree in their neighborhoods? The answer is probably not one to be excited about. This is where Tim Gill's quote becomes relevant. When we think of Dhaka's unfortunate ranking as the 4<sup>th</sup> most 'unlivable' city in the world, we rarely think from the point of view of children. We are so caught up with air and noise pollutions, traffic jams, unbearable heat island effects, crime, and fear; that we never consider how the 'urban habitat' has deteriorated for children in the past few decades. If we believe we should change one thing about Dhaka, it should be its urban habitat to accommodate children's presence and free play in its cityscape. Because a city that works for children, probably works for everyone. Just the way the presence of salmons indicates the health of a river's ecosystems, the presence of children in its cityscapes shows the habitability of an urban ecosystem.

We probably can imagine that Dhaka is not the greatest of cities to spend the most precious segment of one's life - his/her childhood. But how dire is the situation? It is challenging to find up-to-date data on Dhaka children's play behaviors, physical activities, and daily outdoor times. But the limited research (Islam 2016, Monsur 2017) findings that we have on these largely ignored areas tell us that majority of Dhaka's school-going children spend zero minutes of weekly outdoor times, are rarely allowed any independent mobility or unsupervised free play, never visit friends' homes in their neighborhoods - and all of these conditions are much worse for girls than boys. If you find it difficult to agree with the data, you can ask any known schoolgoing young citizen of Dhaka about the state of his/her daily leisure activities. You would not find something drastically different. But why should we care? Children's time spent outdoors is associated with multiple developmental domains - it increases physical activity, supports creativity and problem-solving skills, enhances cognitive abilities, improves academic performance, reduces Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) symptoms, enhances nutrition, improves evesight, improves social relations, reduces stress, and the list just goes on and on. We seem to be oblivion of the fact that these are not just the things children need, these are their rights as established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) - "That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." Ironically, Bangladesh was one of the first countries to sign this UN treaty on January 26, 1990.

We all want changes, but we often get stuck at the very early stage – where do we start? If we look at Dhaka from distance, we are going to see a large mess of concrete, bricks, underconstruction high-rises, packed streets with traffic jams, and a constant battle for space – all valid indicators of how child-unfriendly this city is. But if we look closely, we may find fascinating patterns of space-usages within Dhaka's dense urban fabric. That was the case when one of the authors of this chapter visited sixty (60) school-going Dhaka children's homes in 2010 to understand how neighborhood street patterns influence children's independent movements and daily outdoor times in Dhaka. Children living near dead-end streets were found to be enjoying a significant amount of longer duration of free outdoor times compared to children living near non-dead-end streets (thorough traffic). The author visited these dead-end playstreets of Dhaka to understand how they function as mini playscapes in an environment where free outdoor play seems to be quite impossible to happen. Children cared little about the narrowness of these streets; cricket, football, and what not – Dhaka's last refuges for play were busy in the afternoons with neighborhood children. Unlike most other neighborhood streets of Dhaka, deadend and narrower streets were almost free from traffic loads. These narrow alleys also created an enclosed space where residents are more familiar with their neighbors. Less traffic and a sense of community played an important role in parents' sense of safety which is one of the most critical determinants of children's free outdoor times. A dead-end playstreet worked as a 'defensible space' as proposed by the famous architect and city planner Oscar Newman (1996) where a residential environment's built pattern allowed inhabitants themselves to become key agents in ensuring the security of their kids. Protecting these playscapes and reclaiming other neighborhood streets for play could be a starting point for improving Dhaka's urban habitat to accommodate children's presence and free play. The chance of success is higher since nearhome dead-end streets are already functioning as popular play destinations for neighborhood children.

'Reclaiming the Streets' is not completely a new concept. Residential streets were accepted playscapes for children before the dominance of cars and other motor vehicles. Other important factors which contributed to the gradual decline of children's freedom to use the streets for play are parents' fears of assault and molestation in residential streets. However, the fear of traffic dangers and the fear of crime and assault are connected concerns. Parents living on busy residential streets often perceive their neighborhoods to be unsafe to allow their children to enjoy free times outdoor. One other reason which may have contributed significantly to this gradual decline of free play is the staggering buildup of academic pressure of children in large cities. The competitive grade-based model, unwarranted parental expectations, and a constant race to get into reputed institutions have only increased over the years and rationed children's daily times to engage in recreational activities. Not to mention, addiction to screen time in various electronic devices cut a big share out of whatever outdoor free play time was available to these kids. The latest pandemic-enforced lockdowns and distance education have only worsened the situation. Like in many big cities of the world, Dhaka children's spontaneous and informal outdoor play is gradually being substituted by organized activities which are formally supervised, often car-dependent, and in most cases expensive and beyond the means of the majority of middle and low-income families living in the city. Organized activities may merely fulfill children's daily need for moderate-to-vigorous physical activities, but it can never replace the need for free play which increases children's territorial range providing room for exploration and place attachment (critical to improving awareness as future citizens).

Despite living in the age of touch phones, gaming, virtual and augmented realities, children value the opportunity to engage in free play with other kids in their neighborhoods. This is why we found (and hopefully will continue to find) children playing in the narrow dead-end neighborhood streets defying so many constraints of free play in the contemporary cityscape of Dhaka. We as designers need to put our collective imagination at work to come up with design solutions for reclaiming the streets for play. Most of the 'playstreet' models popular in the western big cities are not applicable for Dhaka which has its own unique built patterns. However, we must consider the vast diversity of built environment patterns that exist in the urban fabric of Dhaka. Four authors of this book chapter have developed four unique concepts for reclaiming the streets for play in four distinct Dhaka neighborhoods – the Mirpur area, the Karail slum area, Puran (old) Dhaka, and the Dhanmondi residential area. The reason why we

chose areas that have varied built environmental and socio-economic contexts is that we would like our ideas to work for all Dhaka kids living in different types of neighborhoods. 'To engage in free play and recreational activities is the right of every young citizen of Dhaka and within the limited scope of this book chapter, we wanted to show a range of ideas that could reclaim the streets for all.

# Concept 1: Mirpur Area

The first concept (Figure 1) attempts to narrate the determinants of 'topophilia'. Topophilia is a broad term that refers to a person's emotional attachment to his physical environment. Mirpur area is one of the densest neighborhoods of Dhaka city with most residential streets being narrow with no sidewalks. Many of these streets serve as shared places where children play and people walk, with vehicular traffic occasionally sharing the route. These streets have the potential to be reimagined into a play area for the neighborhood children.

The residential street illustrated in Figure 1 is a dead-end one with almost 14 feet width located near Parise Road of Mirpur area. The neighborhood of this street is dense but with low traffic volumes of private cars, rickshaws, and cycles, the street layout has created a segment that serves organically as an area for children to play and residents to use as a gathering area. Getting a youngster to a playground or park is challenging for the residents of this neighborhood. The street, on the other hand, is right there, waiting to be claimed. The street's existing paved surface is monotonous. A variety of colors is proposed in the conceptual design to create a fun environment and to define pedestrian-friendly zones. Depending on subsurface utilities and other existing conditions, drainage channels would be adjusted by giving outlets with multicolored blocks. Street furniture, such as streetlights, connecting wires, and planters, can help create a recreational place by subtly separating the temporary vehicular route from the children's play area.

The street would be like a blank slate containing hidden and dynamic opportunities for imaginative play that a prefabricated structure cannot offer. The street would serve as a colorful canvas for children. They can draw their imagination on the street surface with color pencil or chalk, can play "twister" with color blocks, also by manually drawing grids children can play popular games like "Kutkut", "Tap the flower", "Topabhati", "Sixteen cocoon", "Three cocoons" etc. Improved qualities of the street may bring people together across generations. The more kids that are playing in this street, the more it will attract the elder generation.

Introducing a pinwheel spinner on the roofline would help children to learn the science of wind flow and wind dynamics. The climbers on the sidewalls would improve their gross motor skills. Educational graffiti can be used to teach children about wildlife. Defining the central 10-feet strip of the street for sports like cricket and badminton and using the narrower side strips for other games with rules would create an opportunity for parallel play for boys and girls of a diverse age range and abilities.



Figure 1: Mirpur Area, Figure 2: Karail Slum Area, Figure 3: Puran Dhaka, Figure 4: Dhanmondi Residential Area

## **Concept 2: Karail Slum Area**

The second concept (Figure 2) envisions reclaiming streets for play in the challenging built environments in a site located in the Karail area (also known an Karail Slum). Streets in the slums tend to be multi-layered entities, and instead of being defined areas for specific usage patterns. They host multiple activities which co-exist, overlap, and replace each other at different times of the day. Being an informal housing, the Karail slum has opened up scopes for almost every perceivable informal activity including informal commerce, informal schools, informal daycare centers, and amidst all; informal play opportunities.

Due to the narrow width and organic growth of housing units, the slum has very limited accessibility of vehicular circulation which makes it suitable for play. However, innovation is needed to turn such narrow alleys into playscapes and children's imagination knows no limit when it comes to playing. Children from different age groups participate in these activities almost daily, making the streets a place for enjoyment, fun, and gathering. Children's imagination helps them to perceive such narrow spaces for play. Adults, however, are often blind to such possibilities of turning narrow slum alleys into mini playscapes.

This design iteration aims to enhance the already existing play activities among the local children, and open up the scope for creativity for the imaginative minds of children. The design consists of minimum intervention with an effort to keep the existing activities mostly undisturbed. The major part of the design intervention goes into cleaning the debris from the alley that is stored after various types of works such as construction, recycling, and daily household activities. Then, if required, a minimum level of reconstruction would make the rough surfaces a bit smoother, such as brick soling in the uneven streets, or repairing and plastering of the boundary walls around the dead-ends. Implementation of the design elements such as painting in the streets and walls, and strategic plantation around the place would take place. The resulting playscape may accommodate traditional play, pretend play, and street theatres. The reclaimed playstreets can function as a community space at a different time of the day allowing slum dwellers to socialize and interact with each other.

## **Concept 3: Puran Dhaka**

Puran Dhaka is a term used to refer to the historic old city of Dhaka, the city's historic heart and the commercial nerve. Puran Dhaka is an extreme example of dense and unplanned urbanization, that occurred naturally and spontaneously. This area with several hundred years of urban settlements has thousands of people who live in a diverse historical urban fabric and with a hierarchy of spaces: courtyards, narrow lanes, nodes, and bazaars that manifest the socio-cultural quality of urban life. The complex narrow streets form the boundaries of different neighborhoods creating a web of interlinked connections in the urban blocks. This highly dense area has hardly any open space for the community people, older adults, and children to play for, as most of the open spaces have become hostages to urban development and due to a lack of maintenance and the apathetic nature of the services rendered by relevant/current authorities/government agencies. However, the complex street networks create some pockets of spaces in various locations which create diverse opportunities for the residents and children to play, explore, think, and learn.

The third conceptual design (Figure 3) in the context of Puran Dhaka would enhance the opportunity of traditional street games for children. It would allow them to figure out how to use their environment in creative ways on their own and at the same time, learn natural sciences. By introducing some regulations for vehicular movements, loading and unloading timing in the particular area, setting play time for children (according to day, year, events, festive, so on), and ameliorating the existing affordances with minimal intervention within existing context, this zone can be turned into a unique playscape for children. Establishing temporary and portable elements like painting tools, blackboard, chalk, plantation wooden box, sticks, music wall, etc. can help children to learn and play. Introducing natural elements like plants, twigs, leaves, shells, and sand would increase a connection with nature in playful ways. Such intervention could improve children's sensory, constructive, dramatic, functional, and cognitive development by accommodating traditional play, physical play, science play, and pretend play contributing to children's motor skills, spatial awareness, and emotional intelligence.

# Concept 4: Dhanmondi Residential Area

The fourth and final concept (Figure 4) finds opportunities for reclaiming residential streets for play inDhanmondi residential area – comparatively an affluent neighborhood. This example focuses on minimal intervention to make a child confident of playing in the streets and accept reasonable risks to develop skills related to outdoor activities and play.

Street textures and materials play a vital role in determining the playability of residential streets. The existing asphalt is hot and hard which is not the best choice for outdoor play in Dhaka's climate. In order to prioritize children's play, slow down motorized vehicular movements, and encourage children's confidence in playing on the street poured-in-place rubber surfaces can be introduced. This simple change of surface material can completely change the streetscape – cautioning motorized vehicles about the play zone with changes in colors and textures and at the same time allowing children to play street games confidently without fear of injuries.

# Conclusion

Reclaiming the street for play in different neighborhood contexts of Dhaka has fascinating prospects for regaining the city's urban habitats to accommodate children's playful presence in its cityscape. Such playful presence of children can make an environment which is engaging, interactive, and enjoyable for citizens of all ages and abilities. These conceptual ideas may feel like tiny drops of water compared to the vast ocean of Dhaka's challenges of becoming a more livable city in the coming years. Implementation would require a combined effort of regulators, planners, designers, community and child-activists and children (if included in the design process). However, ideas are essential for incremental changes and ideas can be transmitted from one neighborhood to the others. Small local changes collectively no longer remain small. Such ideas for reclaiming the streets for play, if implemented, would uphold our honest gestures for taking our first steps towards building a child-friendly city. If we could somehow make Dhaka livable and enjoyable for children, it would automatically be livable and enjoyable for all.

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