

MONSOON ASSEMBLAGES

DHAKA FIELD TRIP REPORT September - October 2018

Beth Cullen + Lindsay Bremner



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Monsoon Assemblages is a research project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 679873).

**UNIVERSITY OF
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Horizon 2020
European Union Funding
for Research & Innovation



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Itinerary

Week 1	Sunday 29 th September	Monday 30 th September	Tuesday 1 st October	Wednesday 2 nd October	Thursday 3 rd October	Friday 4 th October	Saturday 5 th October
	Dhaka					Chandpur	
Notes	<p>AM: Meet a research director met on previous visits</p> <p>PM: Worked in Bistro-E</p>	<p>AM: Project planning; arranging meetings</p> <p>PM: Attend Right to Information Workshop; meet architect 2</p>	<p>AM: Madanl Avenue</p> <p>PM: Meet a riverkeeper; visit Jamuna Future World</p>	<p>AM: Visit Farmgate; visit Karwan Bazar (hilsa market)</p> <p>PM: Visit Gaptoli brickfield and brick market</p>	<p>AM: Meet a city planner</p> <p>PM: Meet a dredger</p>	<p>AM: Arcadia Education project + brickfield</p> <p>PM: Meet architect 2</p>	<p>AM: Depart for London</p>

FIELDNOTES

Summary

During September/October 2019, Lindsay Bremner and Beth Cullen spent one week in Dhaka conducting fieldwork. This visit to Dhaka was undertaken on the way back to the UK following three weeks of fieldwork in Myanmar. The aim of the trip was to conduct additional research to complement work done during previous fieldwork and gather additional visual material on specific research themes.

WEEK 1

Saturday 28th September

- Arrived in Bangladesh around 4pm. Flew in small plane (Bim Airlines), could see the whole landscape from Myanmar to Bangladesh. Couldn't work out which delta we were flying over. Monsoon clouds over delta, land completely inundated. Blurring of boundaries between sea, land and sky. Monsoon rain on arrival, not what we were expecting. Fieldwork experiences trouble the monsoon patterns we have read about. Traffic – so different compared to Yangon. Interesting to visit BD straight after Myanmar – conscious of the similarities and differences. Saw lights being erected along streets for festival, Shorashota Puja (beginning of Durga puja?) Seems we have arrived in time for a major (Hindu) public holiday. Bangladesh has gifted tonnes of hilsa to India for the festival (according to online newspaper report).

Sunday 29th September

- Woke up to sounds of construction and traffic! High rise construction just over the water from the hotel. In the middle of Banani, convenient location. Weather a bit sunnier than when we landed yesterday. Humid.

- Going to meet the research director we had worked with previously at 10.30. Hoping to catch up with people in the office. LB to speak with her about the Rohingya situation and Chinese involvement. Planning to also ask her about the role that development aid money plays in Dhaka urbanisation. (Resulting in particular forms of neoliberal development) Spoke about theatre group/film; Turtles ; Rohingya island; Bricks; Hilsa; Agroecology.
- Following meeting we went to Bistro-E to work. Spent time mapping out Dhaka and Yangon stories. BC organised car for Tues and Wed with the driver from the previous trip. Spoke with a member of the research director's staff about meeting on Wed to do brick/Hilsa work.
- Dinner at hotel. Watched Al Jazeera news. Story on Myanmar - Wa State. Late monsoon weather in India (north) Maharashtra causing catastrophic flooding.

Monday 30th September

- Spent morning working on key planning/infrastructure developments; discussion about sites and themes, and overall project framing. Geological and hydrological monsoon stories quite clear but aerial monsoon needs working out for Chennai.
- BC messaged the river keeper about meeting and organised a car to take us to a 'Right to Information' workshop at the Shilpakala Academy, an art institute in old Dhaka. Arrived during summing up speech by Chief Information Commissioner. Right to Information part of attempts to strengthen democratic governance. Access to information important part of people knowing what they can demand from government. Gap between grassroots and government. Civil society plays critical role in bridging this gap. Problem for illiterate people to access information. Revision of official secrets act a "paradigm shift".

- Met with artists and filmmakers who had worked in Cox's Bazar on film in a building owned by the academy on the beach. When BC asked them about the rainy season there, they answered that they believed in singing for the rain to come, calling the rain, and that it worked.
- Meeting with architects 1 and 2 at their new office (moved due to airport expansion and fire). Unexpected visit by Chairman – now housed in same building as his offices. He told us that the monsoon has been erratic this year. Usually July and August it rains a lot, with short dry periods between; this year, it had rained in sudden downpours, like the one we experienced the day before, with long dry spells in between. And they were now experiencing late monsoon rains. Normally the rains have ended by mid-September. Severe outbreaks of Dengue this monsoon season but has been under reported in the press. Links between brick production, roads and colonialism. We also discussed our final events in Dhaka. Architect 2 suggested a collaboration to host a Monsoon Week of events. Use the gallery in Dhanmondi?
- Coffee at Art Café (also moved). Dinner with river keeper cancelled – arranged to meet following day. Ate dinner at hotel. BC organised car for following day

Tuesday 1st October

- Breakfast and discussed questions for meeting with the river keeper. Met driver at 8.15 am and drove to Madani Avenue. Pampas grasses everywhere, the research director says they are a sign of autumn. Total transformation of the area – development had progressed a lot since we last visited. No longer possible to get access to the Balu river. Links to key construction groups was very apparent. Lots of security. Drove past Jamuna Future World on the way. Drove from Madani Avenue to Purbachal New Town. Stop along the Turag River at a sand deposit site, see engineers surveying alongside the river. Purbachal hardly laid out, just gate

post and empty land, contrary to appearance on satellite images. Lots of supporting infrastructure in progress (new link road). Being developed by RAJUK.

- Stopped for coffee on Gulshan Avenue on the way to see the river keeper - a bit of a debrief. Again, new knowledge about the dynamics makes you read a site completely differently! Spoke about the need to tell the political stories.
- Drove to the river keeper's office, hard to find! When we arrived man from Rampal [?] was in his office – had been in conflict with new coal power plant development - hundreds of families being displaced from their lands. The river keeper is audio recording their stories and putting them in touch with the press – need to keep an eye on the newspapers, but may not appear in English speaking editions. Offered us lunch. Met friend from Chittagong hill tracts – border with Myanmar. Wife a military general! Contentious area, difficult to get permits to access it. Wonder how situation in Myanmar (and mines) affects that area, which is also politically problematic for Bangladesh? Arranged to visit tannery area on Thursday afternoon with one of the river keeper's staff.
- After meeting drove back for quick break at hotel. Went to Jamuna Future World to see the mall in comparison with the ones in Yangon and Chennai – much more local in character, less high-end brands. Visited jewellery shop – lots of gold, jewellery imported from UAE and Italy. Rings with gold (from ?), diamonds from South Africa, rubies from Myanmar, assembled in India. Burmese rubies the best in the world. Bill boards on the way in to the site showed Jamuna Buildings and Januma News. Huge hotel development at the front of the complex.
- Came back to hotel – really tired. Early dinner.

Wednesday 2nd October

- Early start – left hotel at 6.30am. Drove to Farmgate to meet one of the research director’s staff. Arrived early so did some filming before going to hilsa market. Drove past huge shopping complex and business district – Bashundhara (Bashundhara - means “world”). Sells electronics, clothes etc., been there for 20 years. On the way, our guide from the research director’s office expresses interest in doing a PhD, but says that in Bangladesh our teachers are political persons, they do not have time for PhD students. Dhaka University has only awarded 5 – 6 PhD’s in 50 years. Research negligible in our country he says. Visited Kawan Bazar hilsa wholesale market. Minimum 4 pieces “Hale”. One piece 1,000 or more. Jatka (9 inches or less) 400-500 taka. Massive fish diversity in market – sea and river. Some men not happy with us filming. Problem with politics, our guide says they have had some trouble but no idea what - Sheik Hasina’s birthday.
- Went to try and find Mango Cafe but they had moved. Not sure why they would have moved. Apparently land grabs an issue, wonder whether this is the reason? Newspaper article indicates land grabbing in Dhanmondi; also saw another newspaper article mentioning outbreaks of Dengue linked to construction. Break at hotel then lunch.
- Arrived at the research director’s office just after 2pm. One of her staff is just back from meeting with Ministry of Agriculture – advocating for Agroecology. Chatted briefly with the research director – advising UN body on gender tomorrow. Mentioned Oxfam don’t move around the city but have meetings via Skype.
- Drove out to Gaptoli. Brickfield guy - friend of one of the research director’s staff works in brickfield business. Brickfield located by river because of transport, and partly access to soil. Soil for bricks transported from high land. (Not sure where). Brickfield covered in water. Nearest the ‘shore’ it is 4-5 feet deep, 5-7 feet further

out. Apparently this brick field was government approved – converting to Eco bricks. Not happy to answer questions on source of soil for brickmaking. Piles of soil (with plants on top) confirmed that soil weathers through monsoon season. Collect soil from a range of places and mix – clay soil and sand. Asked about class of brick – three classes confirmed. Grade 3 (overburnt) is not sold, but used around brickfield. Confirmed that labour prices vary based on amount of bricks carried and distance

- Visited brick market, much quieter than last time. Apparently 6-7,000 bricks per stack, 8-10 taka per piece. Gravel and sand of different types – mostly from Sylhet. Women’s labour cheaper than mens (100 taka less).

Thursday 3rd October

- Started at 8.30. Meeting with RAJUK planner at 9.30, late due to car refuelling and traffic. She was a young, small woman with a soft voice, who told us that she had only taken up her position 6 months ago, still learning. Sounds like her job is very difficult, juggling many different pressures. Spoke about the Purbachal New Town RAJUK initiative. Conversation very revealing, both through what was said and unsaid. Power dynamics very significant in terms of urbanisation. Dhaka contributes a third of Bangladesh GDP, controlled at national level because they don’t want to devolve power. Dhaka is under the authority of the national ministries. Elsewhere Mayors are more powerful. Vested national interests in keeping Dhaka the power house and centre of the economy and urbanisation. Decentralisation would mean they lose control over budgets etc. Explained that they have problems controlling the large-scale developers who ignore planning policy. Mentioned Hatir Jheel another RAJUK initiative to restore the water body in Dhanmondi. Because it was approved by the PM it will happen even if it takes 5-10 years. Explained that

there are problems with institutional coordination between the various government departments. She also told us that the building an embankment on the east side of Dhaka, along the Balu River is contested. Still debates going on about it.

- Left meeting around 11.30 and had half an hour to get to next meeting which was scheduled at 12.00. Traffic was extremely bad! Problem with address – went to Box Culvert rather than Culvert Road. Ended up arriving at the office at 1.30 (after getting out of the car and travelling by two rickshaws and an Uber and then walking!)
- Met with the manager of a dredging company and two of his engineers involved in dredging, shipping, real estate – housed in Hossain Tower. Mentioned links to Calcutta through their shipping activities. Company has been operating for approx. 22 years, established in 2003? This is second generation Chairman, company previously run by his maternal uncle. Talk over map about classes of waterways, depending on their depth and their work is to keep them to this depth. This is known as 'performance dredging.' Acknowledge that it is not good for the environment, but that in Bangladesh it is necessary to keep water ways open. Speak about the need for monsoonal flushing being prevented by upstream barriers, and the position Bangladesh finds itself in because of powerful neighbours. Many rivers in Bangladesh including the Yamuna are dead rivers. In the dry season, it barely flows. The rivers, and the sediment around Dhaka all contaminated with human waste, plastic, industrial pollutants. Two men that we met with previously worked with government, one for inland waterways and the other for Saderghat port authority. Closely linked with government, River Commissioning Office just downstairs, in the same building. Capital dredging takes place through public-private partnership initiatives. Private companies bid for government tenders. This company is the largest dredging company in Bangladesh, though there are about

100 in business. Explained that the equipment was developed in Netherlands and then brought to Bangladesh in last 10 years. Had some problems initially and had to adjust the technology to Bangladesh context. After this meeting we were taken to lunch in the 12th floor dining room with fantastic views of the city. Were told that dredging viewed as a 'red' category project elsewhere in the world, but in Bangladesh we have to dredge. Generally dredge spoil used for land filling, but cannot use contaminated or saline spoil for this. Where they deposit spoil is decided by the government in a pre-dredging survey. Then a post dredging survey is done to determine the quantity of material dredged. After lunch we were taken for tea in the manager's office. There we are shown three buildings that are part of their property portfolio in the Bushandara laid out area of the city. Meeting ended with the line, "But you're a green architect and we need grey architects!" Gave LB property brochure with details of architectural plans for the developments in Bashundhara. Mentioned national strategy (with funding support from UAE) to develop peri-urban housing to save encroachment on agricultural land. Their company is moving to Karin Bazaar opposite the Sonargoan Hotel shortly as space too small for them where they are.

- Went for dinner at Art Café around the corner from hotel. Smell of lake more pungent as we walked back to the hotel. Air felt warmer and more humid than it had at sunset. Huge piles of trash floating in the lake.
- Spoke with Architect 1 in the evening to make arrangements for tomorrow. Apparently, traffic is bad due to unseasonal monsoon rain!

Friday 4th October

- Left hotel around 9am and drove to school site along Gaptoli road. Stopped at village and filmed brick road, had tea at

roadside stall. Drove past plastic and garment factories. Stopped at brick kiln along the way - massive mounds of soil being moved. Brick fields obviously just preparing for the season to start again.

- Arrived at the Arcadia school project – this time it was floating! Walked around and photographed the school. Met two students doing a scoping visit for a documentary film on Bangladeshi architecture for a London channel. LB did interview with them. River had expanded a lot since the previous visit and flooded the banks. Kilns empty. One man removing old fired bricks and brick dust in preparation for the season to begin. Women working in groups to clean the brick field area. These workers were apparently from Mymensingh, Same foreman as previous visit. Soil in mounds around the site, much of it grown over with grasses and plants. Apparently, soil comes by truck from other areas, not mined on site. Men fishing in the area previously used as brick field. People preparing land in adjacent agricultural fields. Spoke about types of bricks – four classes according to the junior carpenter from the school.
- Drove back to Dhaka. Passed garment factory as workers were leaving after the morning shift. Sea of colour! (Unusual to see so many women in a public place). Decided not to go and visit Hatirjheel.
- Dinner with architect 2. Went to Paturi restaurant and were joined by an old friend and fellow architect (currently head of Bangladesh's equivalent of RIBA). Architect 2 spoke about Dhaka – number one issue is traffic. MetroRail won't be sufficient to service the city. Issues of coordination in urban planning. RAJUK as real estate company – not exclusively focused on planning, even renting apartments now. Sand mafia – used to be run using trucks (in the 70s and 80s) but now barges due to transport costs. Less sand pumping than before, now people are constructing huge basements, 6 levels below the building. This is possible due to technological improvements. Apparently, they can construct

almost immediately on sand-filled land due to modern pile driving techniques, doesn't need time to settle. Hazaribag tanneries and garments have been moved. They had a purpose built ETP (effluent treatment plant) built by the Chinese but it didn't work. Some of the factories have their own smaller scale ETP's within the buildings. Effluent still being dumped into the Daleshwari River, so they have just moved the problem further upstream. Dhaka has history of leather / tannery work – link to Chinese migrants from the early 20th century. Used sodium and chromium which is highly polluting. Bangladesh never used to be an agricultural country (according to Architect 2), economy used to be based on village level cottage industries linked through riparian network. This changed with colonisation and British revenue system which placed an emphasis on land based activities. This saw Bangladesh shift into an agricultural economy in order to fulfil revenue demands. Now there seems to be a shift back towards non-agricultural activities, a sense that in some ways Bangladesh is going back to its roots. Garment sector huge part of national economy but there are efforts to diversify, especially into electronics etc. Bangladesh has the potential to transform but needs to ensure a stable economy – can't take on foreign loans if they can't show that they have the capacity to repay them. Infrastructure a major component of the economy. Mentioned coal power plants in Khulna, Sunderbans etc. funded by Chinese and Indian investment. Inland nuclear power plant is funded by Russians. No concerns about sea level rise due to emphasis on growing the economy. Initiatives to develop climate resilient housing in the coastal areas – BRAC initiative funded by IFC, currently developing protocols. An attempt to stop people from migrating from those areas.

Saturday 5th October

- Depart for London.

