

## “CHATBARI” DESPAIR TURNED TO DELIGHT

We were staring at complete nothingness. It was hard to believe that this emptiness was once a settlement of twenty-four families, most of them lower caste Hindu. Now all that left was the scars of disaster, and despair hung in the air. At one corner was a pile of salvaged bricks, some arranged to form an enclosure with pieces of polyethylene spread out as the roof. It was impossible to comprehend how these people were going to rebuild their homes. Our task was to pulsate life back into this void named Chartbari on the outskirts of the Botanical garden in Dhaka, completely destroyed by the 1988 flood. A group of medical students had already visited the site to provide medicare and stop the onslaught of communicable diseases. Their efforts were futile as there were no sanitation and fresh drinking water; absence of shelter and use of contaminated water was taking a toll of the health condition of the inhabitants. Mashkur, an MBBS student and Sara, a law student took the initiative to raise funds and find professional help to reconstruct the village. Patrick Austin, a student of planning at Liverpool University, UK, working on a slum in Dhaka, and I was asked to volunteer.

We were greeted by a shock on our arrival to the site. There were no fund, no infrastructure, no support, no spirit and almost no hope – and the time was running out. The hardest part was to decide what to do. Many similar projects have failed because when housing is provided free, the receiver takes it as handout and contributes it towards his good fortune. In fact, Chatbarians did not want any shelter and were asking the fund to be distributed among them. We were aware of their intentions of spending a lion part of it on food or other commodity which would leave them in shelterless and inhuman conditions by choice. Settlers without legal right to the property find it useless to spend on any kind of permanent measure. Housing is quite low even to the

landowners' list of priorities. Also lack of education and understanding of hygiene and sanitation make them reluctant to spend on housing. Once it was made clear that they would not be given any money, they asked for GI sheets for roofs while the rest would be built up by themselves. GI sheets are a commodity they could sell easily, therefore, were denied that too. At this stage, the project came to a standstill due to their non-cooperation. However, we told them that we knew that they were squatters and the property demarcations were fictitious. We also told them that we were not from any organisation and were only volunteering our services. At the end, they reluctantly agreed to see our plans. Objectives of the plan were:

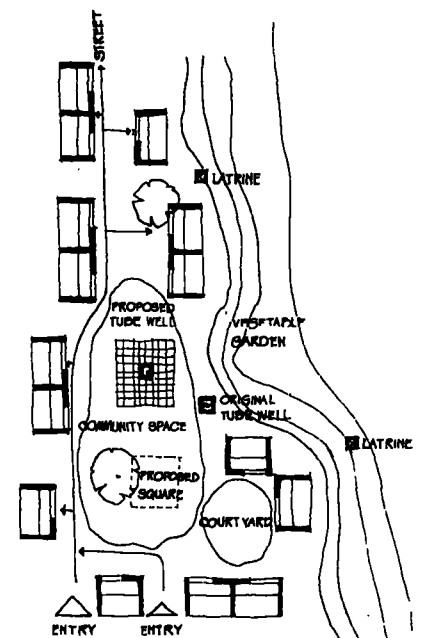
- to organise the homesteads controlled by a master plan compatible to the original settlement;
- to avoid disputes;
- to develop a healthy environment with proper sanitation and drinking water;
- to evoke community participation to ensure a sense of belonging; and
- to support the vernacular architecture in design.

It was the whole-hearted support of the students and teachers of St. Joseph School that saw this project through. The students at times donated their tiffin money to fund the project. The scarcity of fund was explained to the community and who was asked to work on a food for work basis. The men, who used to work as daily labourers, were told that they would be provided food if they worked in the project. It generated a sense of participation and at the same time, cut down on cost.

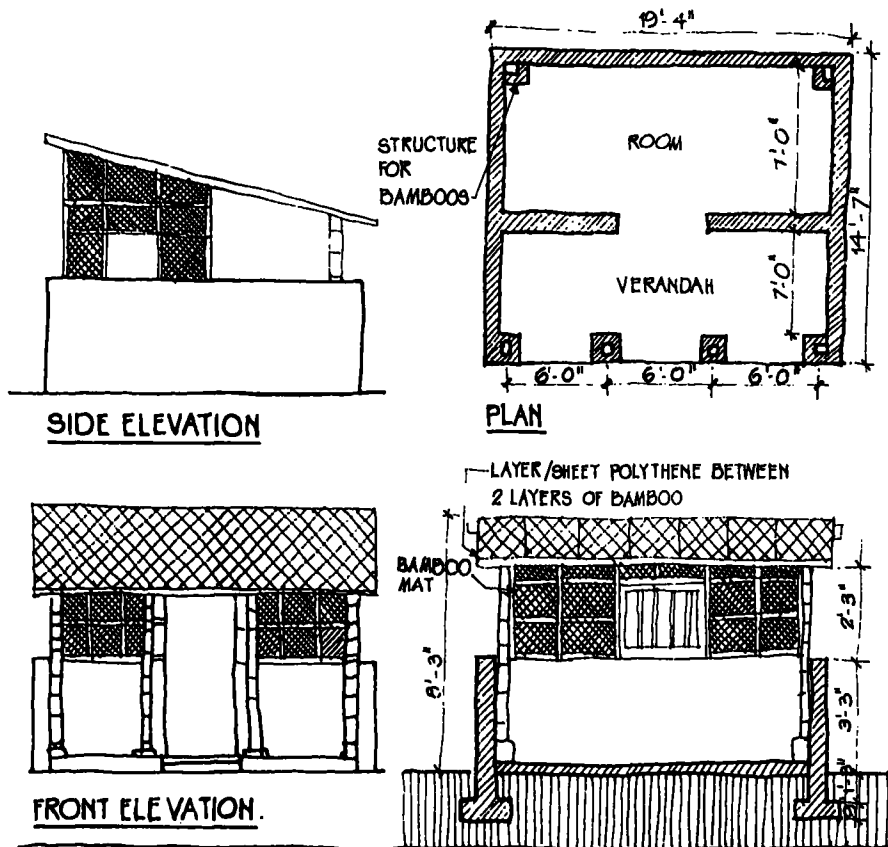
A (master) plan of the new settlement was drawn up according to family size, previous location of home and previous parcel of land occupied with minor adjustments so as to have an

integrated plan incorporating the shared courtyards, a common tubewell and washing area, sanitary facilities far from the source of drinking water, and children's play area. A court for community gathering and altar for worship under a tree was also located. The site was prepared according to the plan; the major consideration was to raise the homesteads by earth collected from the flood-prone lowland by the water-body around the village. Fund was allocated for a tubewell and constructing pit toilets (the latter never realised).

Design of the house came next. After long discussions, we agreed on a model that came from a module of sleeping area and would deliberately be left incomplete to give flexibility in use and adaptability to varied requirements. A pucca plinth masonry walls up to 1m built to provide them with a sense of security and hold against flood water. The walls were provided with two step foundation, the corners designed to hold posts of bamboo or wood which would support the roof. Patrick was a constant source of inspiration during the construction



PROPOSED MASTER PLAN (CHAT BARI)



period who laid bricks himself to save cost. The roof was to be of two layers of bamboo mat with an inner layer of polyethylene to be donated by the USAID. We had to leave before finishing the pit latrines and the roofs due to the drying up of funds. However some of the people picked up the idea and completed the work with slight modifications. The residual amounts were distributed among them to buy bamboo for post and matting.

The reasons for not making the total structure permanent were:

- limited budget;
- it would be gross misutilization of funds for we could also provide permanent plinth for more needy people such as widows who were at a complete loss in the neighbouring locality;
- the rest was left to be finished gradually

according to the people's affordability. Also, pucca plinth would ensure adherence to the master plan and the temporary nature of the structure would facilitate vernacular architecture.

Eventually the total would attain a popular vocabulary which cannot be achieved through systematic design.

The unfinished job haunted us for three years until I revisited Chatbari. I was taken aback with the progress – a **complete settlement has grown out of the seeds we had sown. Adaptability of the plinth was working beyond our expectations. They not only made the modifications we predicted but have also made changes that can only be done in unrestricted growth by incorporating vernacular architecture. Affordability, need and personal taste have given the structures dimensions that has resulted into a generic growth unlike in public housing.** The tell-tale plinths and walls left behind by us have now been amalgamated with the totality.

The kaleidoscope of different houses, cool fresh water, and laughter of the children in the courtyard, speak of the realization of a dream for me and Patrick. It opens doors for those of us

who take on the complexity of developing the right scheme for designing for the poor. **Sometimes the answers are so evident that we overlook or distort them with unnecessary analysis.** After completing the sites-and-services scheme and ensuring the master plan with courts, water-points, drainages etc. we opened up the avenues for modification and the self-participation and the Chatbarians gave the project the completeness. This is no way an exemplary work, neither do we claim it to be a major success. It is but an attempt at understanding the parameters that elude the designers and an enquiry into what needs to be done.

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