Post-Covid Public Spaces: A Chance of Making Our City More Rhythmic and Livelier

Sharmin Akter[1]

"Have you ever expected passing the year 2020 like this way? Even imagined to go out maintaining a physical distance of six feet? But that's the reality. In 2020, Novel Coronavirus Pandemic has given a lot of new experiences in our daily life. We are experiencing new realities of home-schooling, working from home, self-quarantining for a couple of months and short-time unemployment problem. This situation is not only causing a huge loss in our economy, education, and, other sectors along with human loss of the country but also affecting our daily life in many ways. Peoples facing so many new complexities in their daily life that creating massive mental health trauma, collaterally increasing domestic violence. Most of us are used to navigating serpentine traffic jams on potholes ridden roads on the way to work every day. And this situation is much more common in urban areas like Dhaka city that makes urban workers more stressed, irritable and, anxious. According to the Centre of Urban Design and Mental Health (UD/MH), cities are associated with higher rates of most mental health problems compared to rural areas; an almost 40% higher risk of depression; over 20% more of anxiety and double the risk of schizophrenia in addition to loneliness, isolation and, stress. In both situations (Covid-19 and normal situation) peoples are looking for high quality, well maintained urban spaces with diverse activities to support their mental health. Even our rooftop or window views with natural settings may have some sort of benefits to reduce loneliness, depression, and stress. A simple survey among college and university going students shows that around 82% of them are getting bored and stressed in this quarantine and badly wants to go through some open spaces having fresh air. John Kher Kaw, World Bank Senior Urban Specialist in his book "*The Hidden Wealth of Cities*" highlighted that "Cities that successfully create and manage great public spaces and places buck this trend. They reap the rewards from the enormous value that is created, including the environmental and social benefits that go beyond the economic gain." But due to Covid-19, all of the vibrant and active public places came to a standstill and we are going through a terrible year without any public place. We have already lost a million lives and the world is on the verge of a second wave. Not a single vaccine succeeds over the

[1] Student, Department of Urban & Regional Planning (URP), Rajshahi University of Engineering & Technology (RUET)

pandemic. What if the vaccine fails to prevent this pandemic? Is only wearing a mask, sanitizing our hands, and maintaining social distance is enough to be safe? Is it possible to maintain sociall distancing over the onward years? So, the Covid-19 pandemic situation again recalls the importance of effective urban planning and design in the city design manual. Although it's impossible to prevent the pandemic completely through urban planning, it can be effective to some extent to ensure public health safety in the urban area. And this quarantine is an opportunity to define how we want our "Post-Covid" normal life.

If we talk about urban design, that can be a great source of mental happiness of the city dwellers at this lockdown and Covid-19 period. The design of urban spaces that can merely call as social spaces or public spaces. These places help to reduce people's sense of isolation, loneliness, and depression. It is not important public space must be parks or other large spaces, it can range from the large public square to the small tea stall. But it is this place must be open and accessible to all stages of people where all peoples get interacted with others. So, we can also call them "urban interaction spaces". According to Kevin Lynch and post Lynchian, "City image, link, node, edge, landmark, and districts are the major attractive points to the city dwellers". In most of the cases, a large number of un-designed interaction spaces is growing according to the need and unintentional psychological matter of the city dwellers having a great impact on making the city more livable, attractive, and viable. Again, many urban void spaces have a great potentiality of making these places an effective urban interaction space. Urban pocket spaces are the best example of those types of spaces. As these types of space don't require much space and mostly available at all levels of the community, so, these types of space can be used as an effective one to reduces people's working or travel time anxieties. But it's a matter of wail that most of the cases our city planners overlook these kinds of spaces at the time of city planning. After Covid-19 urban planning, these places must have great potentiality. Developing urban community pocket spaces, unused void spaces as a social space may reduce the frequent need for large scale-spaces. It's also easier to maintain social distance, health, and hygiene issues in small spaces.

Image 01: Unintentional development of street side urban interaction space,
Location: C & B Mor, Rajshahi, **Photo:** Tanmoy Dev

Another one of the most important urban design elements that can be used for public place purpose is roads. We walk less and more dependent on different kinds of transportation modes. In our country, most of our traveling ways, the roads are nothing but a piece of a concrete structure. But if we look around the developing worlds, they not only focus on the geometric structure of the road, rather they also put much importance on streetscape design. The thing is, if we can develop our roads into the streets, we can develop life over the streets. If we design our streetscape with different types of herbs, Serbs, different plants, different types of sitting arrangements, utility facilities, and public arts, we can turn our monotonous, boring travel time into an enjoyable journey time. This will not only help to make our travel time more enjoyable but also will decrease car dependency at travel time by encouraging walkability. In that case, transportation voids can enhance the scope of streetscape design. Besides, in the congested city area, street alleys are commonplace of children's playing spot. Decorating these places with adequate safety may be helpful to reduce the need for large scale children's playing spot. Through proper maintenance and safety issues, these places must be trusted and vibrant children's playing spot to their parents.

If we talk about the last one thing that is the most important one but most of the time neglected by the city planners and city dwellers is building façade. In this modern technological era, we often talk about heritage conservation, but we don't ever think of developing our building in resemblance to a heritage building. Research by university college London five years ago was among the first to link heritage sites and mental

wellness. It showed that contact with heritage sites, whether as a visitor or a volunteer, frequently improved mood and even promoted a sense of citizenship among isolated and disadvantaged groups. So, developing the building in resemblance to heritage building may be helpful to keep us away from the trapping of modern life.

Effective management of the above mentioned and other social public spaces can be financially sustainable without dependence on the public budget. But strong collaboration among the government, private sector, and community are must require to peak the use of these hidden resources. In New York City, the operation and maintenance of Bryant Park are fully sustained by revenues from park activities and contributions from surrounding business improvement districts, without any reliance on public funds. (Murray 2010). In spontaneously developed areas, there has a lack of planned playfields, parks, but these areas are more vibrant with the activity and spatial attachment of people with the activity spaces. These places create a kinship between the built environment and the urban users resulting in the mental satisfaction of the daily users. It's high time to make our city livelier, where children will runabout at the building alleys with no fear, elderly spending quality time in the mini-parks, officials sipping a cup of tea in the street-side natural environment, women will not spend their leisure time through watching TV. Moreover, let's enhance our happiness in urban life.