

Jatio Sangsad Bhaban: Aspiring to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site

Bayezid Ismail Choudhury
Department of Architecture, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, KUET
bayezid1966@hotmail.com

Abstract: The Jatio Sangsad Bhaban (JSB) or the National Assembly Building of Bangladesh is an internationally renowned architectural masterpiece designed by eminent 20th-century American architect Louis I. Kahn. Its unique Architectural merit makes it one of the most significant buildings of the 20th century. The impact of this iconic building encompasses all spheres of Bengal life including culture, heritage, ethos and lifestyle. Its architectural values also evoke national identity, symbolizing the hopes and aspirations of the people of Bangladesh. However, despite its international and national material, social and human significance, it is yet to be nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS). This paper argues for the potential of the JSB to become a WHS.

Keywords: *Jatio Sangsad Bhaban, Louis I. Kahn, UNESCO, World Heritage Site.*

1. Introduction

The Jatio Sangsad Bhaban (JSB) or National Assembly Building of Bangladesh occupies an area of 610 acres located at the heart of the city of Dhaka (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). It was commissioned in 1962 by Pakistani military dictator Ayub Khan. His primary purpose was a political one, aiming to demonstrate to the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) their emerging national identity; he also sought to mobilize this sense of national identity to shift the focus of the people away from their low levels of social and economic development and their political subjugation (Choudhury and Bell, 2011). He hoped a monumental building bringing together symbols of Bangladeshi culture and history would become a focus of national pride. The appointment of renowned American architect Louis I Kahn was a result of Cold War politics. A local Bangladeshi elite and architect, Muzharul Islam, had studied at the prestigious Yale University, as a result of the Smith-Mundt Act, a cultural and educational exchange program intended to foster understanding of the US internationally and commonly viewed as a means to counter communism by disseminating US propaganda, or 'public diplomacy'. Here Islam became acquainted with architect Louis Kahn (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). Later, when Muzharul Islam became Chief Architect of East Pakistan, he invited Louis Kahn along with Finnish Architect Alvar Aalto and Franco-Swiss Architect Le Corbusier to submit designs for a National Assembly Building.

Kahn was eventually commissioned to design the building (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 from Pakistan, the JSB realized its role as a symbol of national identity for the people of Bangladesh (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2012). The struggle to complete the enormous building project at great expense became inextricably linked with the efforts of the Bangladeshi people in earning their independence. After a tumultuous struggle for independence, the nation was devastated but as the building took shape it took on a special significance for the new nation, faced with economic hardship but with aspirations for a bright future. Construction was finally completed in 1983, with the project taking around 21 years to build, the same as the Taj Mahal. The building has been widely acclaimed for its modernistic architectural significance and its multi-layered cultural associations. However, it has not received enough attention worldwide to earn a place on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). This may be due to its location in a developing country in Asia. Previous studies have identified that the WHL is politicized and favors developed countries (Meskell, 2015; Keough, 2011). This paper argues that the JSB fulfills many of the six criteria of cultural heritage set out by UNESCO to become recognized as a World Heritage Site (WHS). The paper also presents some case studies to argue the comparative merit of the JSB in comparison with other WHSs.

2. UNESCO World Heritage Sites

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is an offshoot of the United Nations. It which was formed 75 years ago in 1945 just after World War Two to promote and conserve

educational and cultural aspects of the world. Its first initiative in regards to the conservation of tangible heritage took place in 1959, with the launching of efforts to preserve the temple of Abu Simbel in Egypt. The temple, along with other archeological sites, was threatened by the Aswan High Dam on the bank of River Nile in Egypt (Meskell, 2015; Keough, 2011; Frey et al., 2013). There was a long gap before another UNESCO effort, this time, activities are undertaken in 1966 to save Venice, which was threatened by rising water levels.

After that UNESCO'S activities to protect heritage internationally gained momentum, with the adoption of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage at its 17th session in Paris in November 1972 (Meskell, 2015; Keough, 2011; Frey et al., 2013). According to Keough (2011), the convention's mission is 'to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity'. UNESCO enacts this mission by encouraging countries to be signatories to the World Heritage Convention and to take necessary measures for the protection and conservation of their natural and cultural heritage. It asks countries to prepare a national list of potential WHSs that can be included in its WHL. It also supports countries to prepare management and operating plan for WHSs and provides technical and professional training, as well as assisting in developing a strategy to conserve and preserve WHSs. UNESCO advocates in the case of any threats to WHSs, providing emergency assistance where necessary. Finally, it raises public awareness of the importance of world heritage (Keough, 2011). To date, 190 member states have ratified the UNESCO convention, and there are 1,121 sites on the WHL, 869 of which relate to culture, 213 to nature and 39 are mixed. The WHL is highly regarded worldwide and the listing of a WHS has been highly sought after. Strasser (200) argues that it is 'The most effective international legal instrument for the protection of the cultural and natural heritage'. There are two overarching criteria for UNESCO listing – cultural heritage and natural heritage.

Cultural heritage applies to sites that are symbolic in terms of national and local identity, expressing the values, ethos, aspirations and culture of a group of people. It provides a sense of belonging and a sense of place. Monuments, groups of buildings, sites and cultural landscapes are regarded as tangible cultural heritage (Roders and Oers, 2011). Initially, only cultural heritage was part of UNESCO'S activities. Since 1968 it has introduced the concept of natural heritage (Frey and Pamini, 2009). Natural heritage applies to sites of outstanding universal value in terms of natural aesthetic view and of significant environmental value. It may include areas that are habitats for endangered animals and plants. To be nominated for WHL, the state where the cultural or natural heritage is located must consider six key criteria and prepare an application relevant to those criteria, supported by extensive documentation. Before the nomination has been received, the merits and otherwise of the project are considered by three advisory boards: the International Council on Museums and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). These boards advise the World Heritage Committee on the nomination. The World Heritage Committee is an association of representatives from 21 member states, who meet annually to evaluate and decide on sites to be included on the WHL. In addition to the six cultural heritage criteria outlined above, four separate criteria are relevant natural heritage sites. To obtain the coveted nomination, the site *must* meet at least one of the ten criteria (Frey et al., 2013; Meskell, 2015).

3. Jatio Sangsad Bhaban – A Site of Outstanding Universal Value

The JSB is widely regarded as an exceptional architectural creation that bears testimony to the creation of a nation. The JSB is considered as the work of a mature architect at his best, encapsulating his education and experience and exemplifying his vision (Gusheh, 2013). It is a timeless creation (Scully, 1987) that reflects Khan's Beaux-Arts teaching background and his experience of Roman ruins, Mughal architecture, the ancient Buddhist architecture of Bengal, and the landscape of rural Bengal (Gusheh, 2013; Choudhury, 2015). Khan delicately translated his knowledge and experience into the JSB complex and its surroundings. His passion for monumentality is evident in the creation of the JSB and it showcases his skill and talent for assimilating and synthesizing a myriad of styles. Khan's visionary approach positions the JSB as a tangible realization of democracy itself. As a symbol of democracy in a newly and proudly independent nation (Choudhury, 2015), the JSB has achieved far-reaching influence not only as an architectural marvel but for its democratic appeal, considered as the Parthenon of the East (Ksiazek, 1995). Architectural scholars consider the JSB more than a building; rather it is architecture with multiple meanings (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2020). The combined

nature of both the complexity and contradiction of JSB provides a richness of meaning over the clarity of meaning (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2020). Therefore, it has the potential to be nominated for WHL. The following subsections discuss this in relation to the UNESCO criteria.

Jatio Sangsad Bhaban – A Masterpiece of Human Creative Genius (Criteria 1): The JSB is considered by architectural critics to be an outstanding modern building of the 20th century. Robert McCarter (2005, p. 258), a Professor of Architecture at Washington University and a renowned architectural critic argues it is without question Kahn's magnum opus. The JSB embodies degrees of creative genius, synthesizing architectural, structural and urban planning with a wealth of symbolism. The richness and diversity of its symbolism have given the JSB iconic status in the world of architecture. Apart from its intrinsic meaning, which revolves around its form and space, its extrinsic meaning is rich in terms of its societal, political, cultural and ethical aspects. Its site was originally on the outskirts of the city of Dhaka during its early construction phase; however, given its status in the city, this site has assumed the status of an urban focal point. It is a city within a city, a microcosm of the world. The JSB is now central to the city of Dhaka, considered the lungs of the city (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). Architecture scholars have compared the JSB with other outstanding masterpieces, such as the Parthenon, Hagia Sophia (Ksiezka, 1993), the Pantheon (Gusheh, 2013), Fatehpur Sikri (Nilsson, 1973), the Acropolis (Vale, 2008), and the Taj Mahal (Choudhury, 2015). These are all WHSs, suggesting that the JSB has the merit to qualify as a WHS. In 1989 JSB received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for its architectural excellence, which is regarded as the most prestigious award in world architecture. Kathleen James-Chakraborty (2014) argues that after it was recognized by Aga Khan Foundation it elevated its status as the world's one of celebrated architecture.

Jatio Sangsad Bhaban – Exhibits an Important Interchange of Human Values, Over a Span of Time Within a Cultural Area of the World, On Developments In Architecture Or Technology, Monumental Arts, Town Planning Or Landscape Design (Criteria 2): The JSB is a product of the nationalist movement of the Bangladeshi people over a period of time within the cultural area of Bengal. It is the tangible result of a longstanding movement towards independence, which began after the British colonized the Indian subcontinent in the 18th century. After the British left, dividing the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan based on religious affiliation, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) continued its struggle to become an independent nation. The JSB is the result of that continued struggle (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). What started as a nationalist movement driven by human values in Bengal, culminated in the tangible form of JSB with its awe-inspiring monumental form and magnificent landscaping? Kahn's approach to the JSB is to reinterpret the wisdom of the past. According to Scully (cited in Gusheh, 2013), a 'Roman union of concrete and brick became Kahn's special delight' (cited in Gusheh, 2013, p. 45). The JSB is regarded as a socio-political construction of space, in the way the landscape and urban space are intertwined in its social-political context (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). Choudhury and Armstrong (2013) argue that JSB is an unquestionable successful urban structure within the city that establishes an idealistic vision.

Jatio Sangsad Bhaban – Bears a Unique or Exceptional Testimony to a Cultural Tradition or to a Civilization that is Living or has Disappeared (Criteria 3): In symbolizing the national identity of Bangladesh, the JSB transcends its architectural significance to represent the collective sentiment of a homogenous group of people who share the same color, race, religion and cultural affiliation. It essentially is a built embodiment of the Bangladeshi constitution, which is the heart and soul of Bangladesh. Choudhury and Armstrong (2013) argue that the JSB's democratic value constructs a parallel under the auspices of unfolding national identity outline in the constitution. The constitution of Bangladesh is a living unique entity and represents the values, ethos and cultural traditions ingrained in the geography and people of Bengal. In this way, the JSB can be positioned as a tangible testimony to a living cultural tradition. It is inextricably linked to Bangladeshi culture and deeply rooted in the spirit of Bengali nationalism. Leading Bangladeshi Architect Muzharul Islam (cited in Gusheh, 2013, p. 85).

Who was instrumental in commissioning Kahn states, 'During the British rule we lost everything. This building has received our sense of cultural identity. The whole complex – the way it deals with the climate, the spirit of the region – has a local connotation for me ... I know that we do not have democracy, but you see, the building is there; the aim is there'. Philosophically and psychologically the JSB not only embodies Bangladeshi culture and value, but it also represents global living culture. Kahn imbued with architectural

spirit and monumental aspects of the JSB with the flavor of American democratic idealism, assimilating ideas that are deeply entrenched in American democratic values in the creation of the JSB. The JSB reflects the power of American individualism, the notion of civic accountability and obligation, and the practice of pluralism by referencing the form of Roman ruins (Gusheh, 2013). Gusheh (2013) argues 'In this narrative, the capitol complex in Dhaka was described as the culminating point in Kahn's career and was viewed as the project where he most successfully captured an American vision for a new and idealized democratic monumentality'.

Jatio Sangsad Bhaban – An Outstanding Example of a Type of Building, Architectural or Technological Ensemble or Landscape that Illustrates a Significant Stage(S) in Human History (Criteria 4): The JSB is an outstanding product of geopolitics and signifies a period when America and Russia were locked in the Cold War. During the Cold War period, art and architecture were used as a vehicle to demonstrate power by two giants. According to Choudhury and Armstrong (2013), 'with the escalation of the cold war in the late 1950s, creative media like architecture and the arts were engaged more and more to expand the supremacy of the two superpowers'. For strategic reasons, Pakistan became important to the United States during the Cold War period. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the United States provided Pakistan with significant amounts of military, civil and cultural aid, with the expectation that Pakistan would be influenced by the beliefs, democratic tradition and values of the United States. It was against this backdrop that American architect Louis Kahn was commissioned in 1962 (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013). As such JSB is a vivid example of a significant stage in human history, that is, the Cold War era.

Jatio Sangsad Bhaban – Directly or Tangibly Associated With Events or Living Traditions, With Ideas, or With Beliefs, With Artistic and Literary Works of Outstanding Universal Significance (Criteria 6): The JSB is directly and tangibly associated with the National Assembly of Bangladesh, which represents 300 geographical constituencies. It is the heart of government, where decisions are made and enacted relating to the development of the country, and the nation's beliefs, vision and ideas, its politics, tradition and culture are conveyed through elected representatives. The JSB first and foremost symbolizes Bangladeshi nationalism. Nationalism is a living tradition that conveys the inherent beliefs of a nation and as such, the JSB is a nationalist product (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013), insofar as, according to Choudhury and Armstrong (2013), the power of nationalism lies in the cultural terrain of a nation. It is constructed through a collective spirit of its people that can be conceptualized as the spirit of love, memory, myth fantasy and whim. The JSB links and is associated with the social and political constructs of nationalism. Moreover, it also represents the duality of nationalism; emancipation and opportunity and oppression and the repository of danger. Oppression is represented in its controversial birth, which was essentially politically motivated. Opportunity is reflected in its standing as world-class architecture and its position as the center of democracy (Choudhury and Armstrong, 2013).

4. Case Studies

This section provides case studies of WHSs to establish the potential for the JSB to be given WHS status. These buildings have been chosen because they are comparable to the JSB.

Sydney Opera House: Built in 1973, the Sydney Opera House was listed as a WHS in 2007. It fulfills only one criterion (Criteria 1) of the six criteria of cultural heritage requirement. It is regarded as an outstanding modern architectural masterpiece, revered for its technical complexity and innovation. Compared to the JSB it is not as rich in its multiple complex layering of meanings and historic significance. The building's purpose is to house world-class performing arts and while it has cultural significance it does not represent national identity like the JSB.

The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, An Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement: In 2016, 17 sites by master architect Le Corbusier were listed as a UNESCO WHS. These projects are significant for their architectural vocabulary that is a new language in architecture. These works are found in seven countries built for more than 50 years. One of these is the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh in India. Le Corbusier was commissioned to design this building in the early 1950s, before the commissioning of Kahn for the Dhaka project. These projects as a whole fulfill three criteria (Criteria 1, 2 and 6). Although the Capitol

Complex of Chandigarh is a British post-colonial product similar to the way the JSB represents a point in history, it does not reflect the socio-political context of the Cold War era. The vision underpinning its commissioning is a simple one. Indian President Nehru wanted something modern to inspire the nation. Unlike the JSB it is not the result of a nationalistic movement. The theatrical drama of the JSB adds value and richness to its historical background, which is absent from the Chandigarh complex.

The 20th Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright: Wright's works were included as WHSs in 2019. They meet one criterion for WHL (Criteria 2). Along with Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright is regarded as one of the master architects of the 20th century. He introduced the concept of 'Organic Architecture'. The WHL comprises eight buildings by Wright constructed in the early half of the 20th century. The buildings represent unity in diversity with their wide range of function, scale and setting. The architectural significance is accentuated by the innovative use of materials, especially steel and concrete. Projects are located in cities, suburbs, forests and deserts representing global architecture within one country, America. But as they are in one country they do not represent cross-cultural practice, unlike the work of Khan. It can be argued that if Wright's work is eligible for WHL, then Kahn's works, including the JSB in Bangladesh, inevitably qualify for listing, given their successful transcendence of one nation, one culture, embodying an international architecture of outstanding value.

5. Conclusion

The JSB is an exceptional creation that transcends local architectural boundaries and appears as a landmark in the global landscape. Due to its outstanding value, it is expected to achieve a global mark by receiving global recognition. This paper argues that it meets the requirements to be given WHS status, qualifying based on five of UNESCO's cultural heritage criteria 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6. The Bangladesh Government should apply the necessary documentation to UNESCO as the first step towards a nomination for the WHL. The Government Department of Archeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs should work together with professional bodies (Institute of Architects Bangladesh, etc.) and academics to formulate a working paper aimed at a nomination for the JSB to become a WHS. The proposal should take a detailed, inclusive, holistic, innovative approach, providing a protection and conservation plan for the management of the site. It should also include how knowledge regarding the site's management and related issues can be passed on to future generations (Rodgers and Oers, 2011). Given the JSB is an exemplary work by a leading American architect, both Bangladesh and American governments could jointly proceed with the WHS nomination for Kahn's masterpieces. The support of the US Government is likely to garner more attention. It is understandable from the case studies that the JSB has considerable potential to be listed as a WHS.

The JSB is living heritage, a highly functional building that holds the Bangladesh National Assembly several times during any given year. As a working building, the project is regularly maintained and preserved hence no extra funding from UNESCO (which has funding constraints) is required to conserve and preserve the building. What the JSB will gain from being on the WHL is recognition of its importance, nationally and internationally, and through this recognition adequate planning and preservation by future generations. WHSs are sometimes criticized as attracting unwanted visitors that bring negative consequences associated with tourism, such as crime (Caust and Vecco, 2017). However, the JSB is likely to attract those who appreciate history and architecture so the risk of social issues associated with tourism is low, while the benefits to the Bangladeshi people are high. Increased tourism as a result of WHL status will make contribute to the local economy and generate employment. Considering the deep-rooted historical antecedents, diverse landscape and large population of Bangladesh, It has very few number of WHSs. At Present Bangladesh has three WHSs: the historic mosque city of Bagerhat listed in 1985 (cultural), the ruins of the Buddhist Vihara at Paharpur listed in 1985 (cultural), and the Sundarbans listed in 1996 (natural) (Islam, 2018). Given The JSB would make a worthy addition to these existing WHSs and would provide recognition of the 'the beauty of Asian heritage [that] lies in its cultural pluralism' (Chapagain, 2013).

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