

My City **INVISIBLE** MONGLA



Hanna Ruszczyk
Istiakh Ahmed

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Shahin Alom
Abu Naser
Rubaiyat Hossain
Kobir Mondal
Monjurul Islam

Keya Shaha
Bithi Rani Mondal
Jahanara Begum
Shaila Begum
Aklima Akter

Foreword

Hidden, forgotten, overlooked, or perhaps invisible – there are parts of the city that only a ‘local’ can ever know and appreciate. These are the ‘private domains’, side streets, and ignored neighbourhoods that seem to hold little attraction to the visitor, or remain ‘off-limits’ and ‘off-grid’. Equally, locals can become somewhat blinkered to the familiar and everyday, overlooking the novel, intriguing, and successful aspects of the environment they shape through their everyday lives. ‘Fresh eyes’ and a new perspective can spot these phenomena and identify what makes them special. The My City InVisible project set out to consider multiple understandings of ‘good’ and liveable cities.

Spatial practices in cities of the Global South are complex and varied; often viewed as challenging and problematic in planning and design discourses. In the context of established planning orthodoxy in the Global North, facing unprecedented functional and environmental challenges in a post-pandemic Climate Emergency, cities of the Global South can offer an interesting lens for re-imagining city environments. The rich everyday socio-spatial narratives that characterise Global South urbanism demonstrate opportunities for adaptation, negotiation and transformation of diverse societies, and can inform social innovations, imaginaries, and the development of new policies addressing environmental and economic inequalities in cities not only in the Global South but in the Global North as well.

Existing city planning, policy and design discourses often overlook the heterogeneous needs, aspirations, perceptions, commitments, preferences, identities and capabilities of citizens in favour of generic top-down initiatives. The My City InVisible project moves beyond the dominant ‘western’ framings of ‘what is a good city’, and renders visible the invisible characteristics of successful communities.

Capturing the local perspective

Every city has popular points and landmarks that are visible to all, places that can be easily noticeable and which attract tourists and outsiders. However, beyond these places, a city also comprises many spaces that are important to the city dwellers but not so visible to others. Sometime these spaces are of huge significance to a specific group of people but not to all and thus remain invisible to others. With the My City InVisible project, we tried to capture local perspective of spaces and places in Mongla and to explore what is important for them as residents.

Mongla, a coastal regional city, is dealing with several environmental stressors including salinity, cyclones, floods and drought and these crises are only getting worse due to evolving changes in climate. Residents with very limited capacity to cope, are struggling but they still like their city. The city's location has also made it an important point for industrial development. It is only 20km away from the sea and has a port as well as an Export Processing Zone (EPZ). Many industries have emerged in recent years creating job opportunities for both men and women. This city receives a regular flow of in-migration from surrounding districts.

Photography

During the month of September 2021, ten randomly selected residents of Mongla, Bangladesh were given a camera for three days to capture pictures of places and spaces which have a significant meaning to them. When selecting the participants, we tried to ensure there was a diversity in age, sex, economic situation and geographical location. The participant photographers included five men and five women. There were two students, two housewives, one labourer at a garment factory, two daily labourers, one government employee, one shopkeeper and one teacher. The participants were given a brief for this assignment and the freedom to take as many pictures as they wanted.

After the photographs were taken, each participant was requested to select 10 pictures that reflected their perspective and to explain orally to the group of participant photographers why they selected these pictures and what value these places carry in their life. These explanations were captured by the research team as captions for each photograph. At a later stage in February 2022, the number of pictures were reduced to three in consultation with the participants over phone to be able to fit in the artistic map produced for this project.

My City INVISIBLE

Each photograph is a reflection of its photographer. While most participants tried to capture hardships they face in their everyday life such as drinking water sources or roads; an interesting difference has been noticed between male and female photographers. Most male photographers have taken pictures of mosques and most female photographers have taken pictures of schools. After we queried these photographs, we learnt that female residents of Mongla are optimistic about changing their next generation's future through education. Similarly, male residents of Mongla have a strong tie with religion and have a dependency on their belief to survive their harsh reality. Additionally, the police station, recreational places, agricultural lands, the boat yard, the sea port and the EPZ are a few other places which were frequently represented in the photographs.

Impact of COVID 19 Pandemic

The pandemic delayed the project by several months and even when we were able to visit Mongla to conduct the project, the evolving impact of the pandemic made it difficult to get respondents to participate in this project. We needed to be sensitive to the fact that many people were struggling with pandemic lock down induced food crises and we adapted to suit the needs of the participant photographers. However, we do not think the pandemic has unduly influenced the topics of the photographs taken – participants mostly mentioned issues related to environmental crises and economic opportunities while explaining their photographs.

Map of Mongla through the lens of local people

With the selected pictures from the participants, an explanatory map has been developed to visualize the spaces that are important to the local residents, and which they use on a regular basis through different illustrated icons using their GIS locations. In addition to the map, all the pictures are exhibited with captions from the photographer participants.

My City InVisible

My City Invisible shares hidden views of the city. It is not only about geographical locations, it is also about the existence of a certain group of people and their voice. In many cases, residents from informal settlements, ethnic and religious minority groups become invisible in discussions about development and their necessities get overlooked by decision makers. The camera gave power to residents to show what matters to them. By thinking through (in)visibility, this project has given an opportunity to make visible the invisible city.



Visualising what is important to residents

The Map reflects what residents of Mongla view as important in their lives. Clip art is used to represent photographs that have been taken and selected during the project. The size of the clip art is not based on the number of times it has been photographed, rather the clip art only makes visible all the places/spaces in the city that residents focused on.

The map clearly portrays that water is an important issue for residents. Almost all the participants have showed this through their photographs. Religion and belief systems influence their daily life. Education, health and ways to earn a livelihood are three other topics that were prominent. The map is a glimpse into the (in)visible aspects of the city.



Kobir Mondal

Water is life, and you realise this more here in Mongla. This is the only fresh water supply that we have. This is the most important thing we have here.



Aklima Akter

More than 200 households collect water from this tap and we get it twice a day. In the morning and afternoon, you will find all of us round here.



Rubaiyat Hossain

Mongla sea port is the main factor for its economic development. The industrial development has emerged because of this and has created thousands of job opportunities.



Bithi Rani Mondal

This is where I study. For me, this is the most important place in Mongla.

It's the only government senior school in the city.





Jahanara Begum

I see my children's future as better than mine. We did not have the opportunity to study but I want to ensure that my children can study.



Aklima Akter

Without education, we do not have any other means to get out of this poverty. Both my children go to school so that one day they can have a government job. This school also becomes a cyclone shelter when there is a cyclone approaching.



Rubaiyat Hossain

As Mongla's industries grow, it creates jobs and many people from nearby areas come here to seek livelihood opportunities. You will see many informal settlements inside the city. This is a new one close to the port, and it is growing quickly.



Keya Shaha

We have a scarcity of water. We hardly get fresh water for drinking and hence we have to do all household chores at this pond even though the water is not good at all.



Shahin Alom

The EPZ (Export Processing Zone) is like a blessing for us. Many factories have been established here giving us and our wives/daughters the opportunity to work and earn money. Before, we did not have anything to do at certain times.



Abu Naser

Normally people take a shower in ponds in Mongla. People living in informal settlements do not have private washrooms and I think it is more fun here in ponds than the closed washrooms.



Monjurul Islam

Mongla is a port city, so it has many different types of business around it. It is also very close to Sundarban (mangrove forest). Security is a major concern and the police station plays a vital role in maintaining security.

Kobir Mondal

Mongla once was famous for its agricultural products, but with increasing salinity it has been difficult to cultivate rice anymore. Still you can see some paddy fields outside the city.



Monjurul Islam

We are a nation based on rice. However, it has become difficult to cultivate rice here due to salinity. But it is also not possible to import all of our rice because it will become very expensive in the local market. We have to keep trying to cultivate rice locally.





Kobir Mondal

We are dealing with many things everyday. Living with dangers. Without Allah, it is impossible to survive. We must live with his blessings.



Shahin Alom

In the end, everything is in the Almighty's hand. We can try but we have to submit ourselves to him. Nothing is more important than this.





Monjurul Islam

Mongla River and Poshur River are the lifelines of this city. The majority of the population's life/livelihood depends on these rivers.



Jahanara Begum

This is the largest fresh water pond in Mongla and the only pond that contains water during the dry season. In winter, I come to this pond, which is 5km from my house, to get drinking water.



Abu Naser

This is our national monument of independence. It holds a significant value to me.



Aklima Akter

This is the government hospital, right next to my house. However, as we are from the informal settlements, we do not get proper care.

Rubaiyat Hossain

Friendship NGO has established this hospital. It is a little far from the city, but the service is good. Many people come here instead of the government hospital.



Bithi Rani Mondal

We do not have a supply line for water, so we have to depend on the rain water or this hand pipe. But the water becomes saline in the dry season and is unusable.



Abu Naser

Mongla has now a garbage yard (land fill). Earlier, waste was everywhere. Now the municipality has established a system to keep the city clean.





Shaila Begum

Mongla only has a few fresh water ponds left and this one is close to my house. We use the water for both cleaning and cooking.

Jahanara Begum

Mongla has a few shrimp farms and this is one of those and with increasing salinity, there is a possibility that many paddy field will be converted into shrimp farms such as this one.





Keya Shaha

Mongla is just beside the river and we face frequent cyclones and tidal surges. This embankment is the only thing which stands between us and the water.



Bithi Rani Mondal

All of Mongla has electricity and it has helped us to develop further. Electricity has helped me to study.



Shahin Alom

Mongla did not have a concrete road few years ago. I ride a three wheeler and it was very difficult before.

Now with this road, I have a better livelihood.



Keya Shaha

This is the only church in Mongla.
I thought it would be good to show
this in my picture.





Shaila Begum

For me, this is one of the most important places as I have to cross the river by boat everyday to go to my work place.



Shaila Begum

One of the reason I like Mongla is because it has this park. We do not have money, so my children do not have many toys. They can come here and play for free.

