



Fig. 1&2, Ruplal Mansion of old Dhaka with its grounds encroached by squatter settlements – Rajib Dhar, The Business Standard

ACKNOWLEDGING THE INFORMAL IN ADAPTIVE REUSE - EVALUATING THE DESIGNER'S ROLE IN USER-LED ADAPTATIONS

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Long before architectural practitioners of the 20th century coined a term for the reuse of historic buildings, adaptive reuse existed as a natural course of action as the most rational way to continue building across civilizations. When a building is abandoned for long enough in an urban setting, it becomes a canvas for public use as they see fit. This occurs in the form of urban squatters, informal marketspaces, or abandoned castles serving as elaborate labyrinths for neighborhood children. Yet when evaluating the historic value of structures from the lens of a practitioner, the spontaneous use value of such projects is often sidelined. Such unplanned and informal reuse of buildings persists not only within the context of Europe but also beyond, especially in regions where heritage buildings receive less nuanced attention than in the West. Often, such public appropriation and continuous adaptation of historic buildings have prevented them from falling into severe disrepair and ensured their survival through time. This contribution aims to explore the theme of unplanned adaptive reuse and its continued relevance in architectural heritage by presenting the Ruplal mansion in Old Dhaka as a case study. Located in old Dhaka, the Ruplal House is one of the countless mansions that are symbolic of the city's colonial history. Built in the 1820s, the mansion served as residences, ballrooms, and a hub for several other cultural activities. Following the independence of Bengal, it evolved as an informal residential and commercial complex featuring one of the biggest spice and vegetable markets in the city, while also accommodating urban squatters. Today, while countless other colonial buildings have already faced demolition, the Ruplal house's survival is owed to its informal occupation. A key concern when addressing such a phenomenon is that of authorship. If a historic building can belong to its users without formal mediation, at what point does a legislative body need to intervene to formalize the "As Used"? The role of a designer in such cases becomes especially nuanced, where one must intervene just enough to sustain the characteristic chaos and informality of such adaptations. The designer's role thus becomes to enable a framework that sustains such reuse. By analyzing the case study of the Ruplal house and its user-led appropriation which has often been portrayed as problematic, this paper takes a different perspective on the topic of unplanned adaptations and their acknowledgment in the field of adaptive reuse.

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- [2] Sadiqur Rahman. "Ruplal House: From viceroy's ball to disputed property." *The Business Standard* Accessed September 27, 2022. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/ruplal-house-viceroy-s-ball-disputed-property-440566>
- [3] Nayeem Shah. "Ruplal House: The magnificent past of farashganj". *Offroad Bangladesh*. Accessed September 28, 2022. <http://offroadbangladesh.com/places/ruplal-house-farashganj/>

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