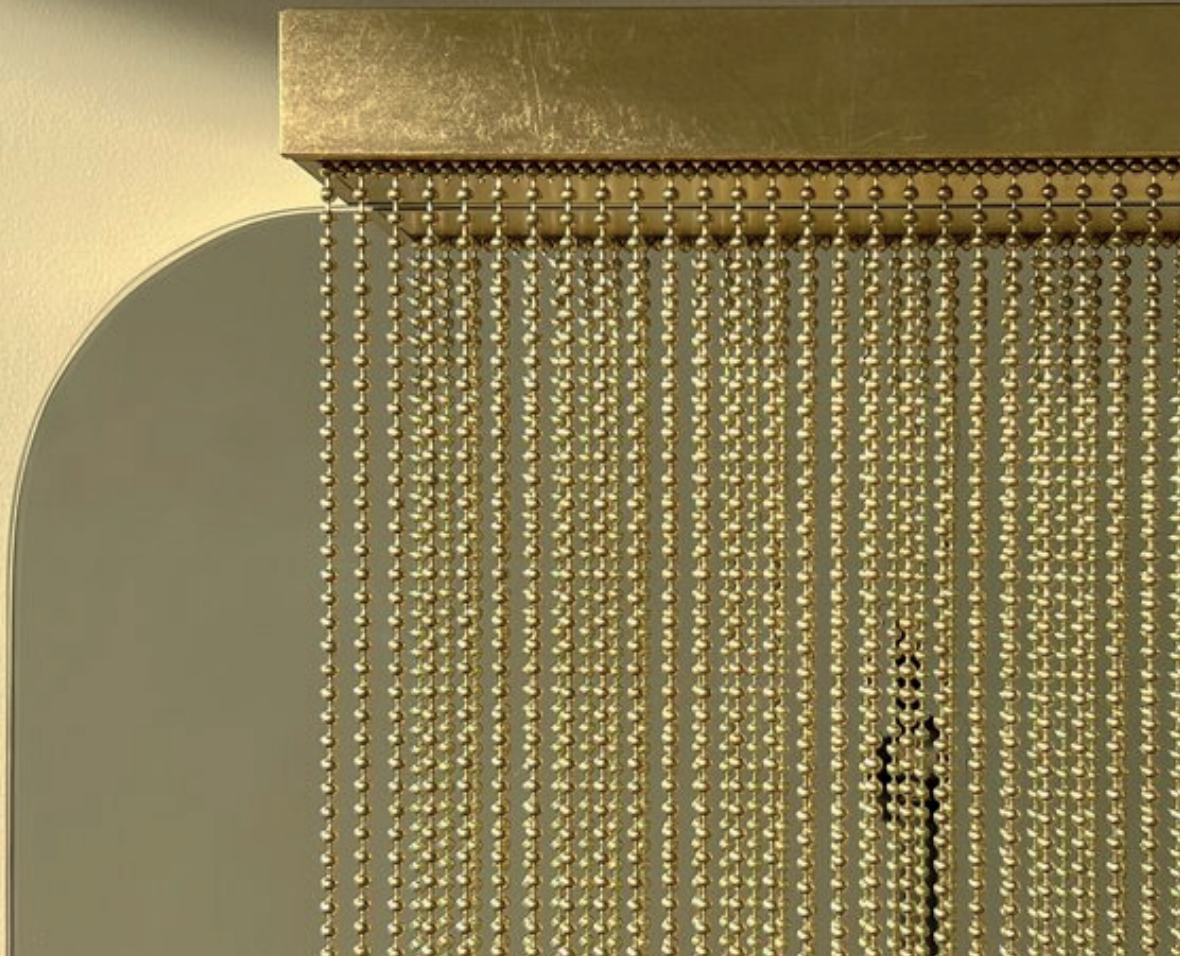


reflection

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A juxtaposition of water and man, where the Bay of Bengal forms the conclusion of the narrative that flows down from the Himalaya in the rivers Padma, Meghna and Brahmaputra through the most densely populated delta on earth.

Comprehending the impact from these two contradicting factors on the history, geography and most importantly the people of Bangladesh frames the venture point of the adventure called graduation that now lays mostly behind us. Constructing our own narrative for a country that not that long ago was not significantly more than a modest dot on the map of South Asia.

getting started

A deep-dive in the Bangladeshi past and present of technology and design quickly resulted in Miro-webs of papers, pictures and other materials of which we thought were of any importance to understand the context in which we were moving. Ninety-nine percent of work which we realized we almost certain would not further incorporate into the waiting design project, but a contribute to the extensive group effort that would result in our own atlas of Bangladesh. A collaboration that forced the whole studio to pick up the pace from day one, while getting to know not only the context we would design in, but also each other.

Besides the collaborative work on the atlas, the most lasting impressions of the first period had to do with the thematical introduction to the Global Housing studio. The series of readings by experts in the field, started off by the perspectives of authors Charles Correa and Teresa Caldeira, helped me to grasp the essence of the social approach of the studio, having experienced the in many ways different approaches of the Borders & Territories and Architectural Design Crossover studios in respectively Msc1 and Msc2.

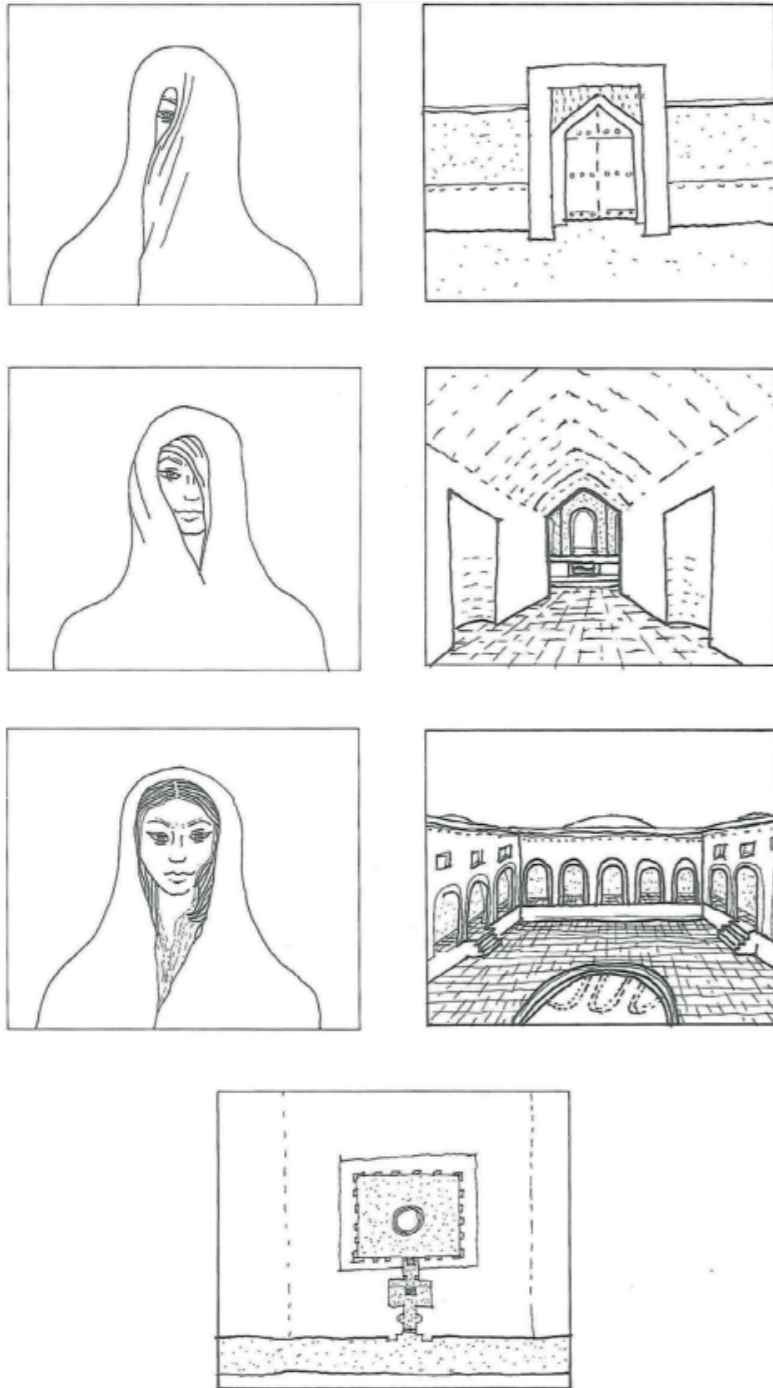
Although my experiences in the other studios have been predominantly positive, the human aspect of the dwelling studio and Global Housing in particular were in from my perspective sometimes overlooked. During the first period of the graduation I realized that the Global Housing studio starts with understanding social and cultural norms which will dictate to be integrated aspects within the process that leads to the design of any dwelling project. The contextual contrasts between designing on a site in the Netherlands, in Western Europe, with one in Bangladesh are substantial and it takes time before one is comfortable and confident enough to navigate through it.

a social system called purdah

Tasneem Chowdhury's text about the segregation of women in Islamic cultures and its effects on housing was an essential read during this process. It was my introduction to the social system of purdah, the system of segregation, seclusion and veiling of women in Bangladesh and other parts of former British India. Her specific description of the direct consequences of social norms and behaviour on the lay out of public spaces and the floorplan of the dwelling was remarkable. By visualizing the direct effect of purdah on the behavioural patterns of women by means of seclusion and segregation, framed by the limits of the dwelling and its public context. Chowdhury's tangible approach, using sketches and schematic drawings presented next to each other, really stood out and engaged my curiosity in the social system of purdah. Both from a point of genuine interest, as from the more obligated perspective of collecting information for my research plan, I had a certain eagerness to understand purdah as much as I could, aware of my limitations being in a remote country far away and not in the last place that of being a man.

After presenting our own insights and conclusions of Chowdhury's text to the studio group, a discussion about the topic with the role of a kitchen as main focus point with Nelson and Rohan followed. During this session, I had figured out that purdah was going to be at the conceptual centre of my graduation, while at the same time I found it difficult to manoeuvre me through the discussion by the simple fact of not being a woman. To a certain extent this held me back during the first steps of the research. "I am not a woman, so I cannot understand it", is a thought that went through my mind more than once. Who am I to tackle and mitigate the effects of a complex social, heavily cultural, stigmatizing system in a country I barely know.

The more I started reading about purdah and Bangladesh, the more I felt strengthened with my own intentions and angles on the matter. Increasing knowledge by gaining information about the subject helped me to shift this attitude, but specifically the tutoring sessions were really helpful for me to understand that every new view on purdah is worth exploring. Getting towards the end of the first period and the fieldtrip approaching, this was quite a comfortable feeling. I had found a compelling, challenging subject that would play a part in almost any design decisions I was about to make in the next half a year.



I. (un)veiled: purdah & architecture

This sketch by Iranian architect Kamran Diba (figure 1) on the correlation between an increasing level of privacy and the exposure of women in the Iranian Islamic context, for me symbolizes the essence of the thematical coherence between the segregation that lies at the root of the social system of purdah on one side, and the aspirations and attitude of the architect to mitigate through these translucent delineations on the other; by means of trying to (re-)shape and therefore (re-)define these vague boundaries by designing public spaces, dwellings and everything in-between.

It is this exact in-between where it gets really intriguing, to navigate yourself as a designer through this constantly evolving space in-between what is conceived public or private. Effects of rural-urban migration due to the change of socio-economic conditions by increased financial resources, allows men to facilitate a preservation of a strict interpretation of purdah, within the practical notion of space and place. These constraints limit access to labour participation and empowerment of women, restricting their freedom of movement outside the thresholds of the dwelling with the ominous threat of women's public involvement being minimalized. I believe that as an architectural master student in 2024 I am obligated to put in all my effort in the graduation project design to maximize the potential use of this in-between space for every person and those who are being secluded and segregated in the current context in particular. Stimulating and facilitating public involvement of women within the constantly evolving boundaries of purdah, by means of architectural design in general and the implementation of carefully argued design principles that fulfill the role as thresholds in the translucent world of the in-between.

figure 1: a correlation: increasing level of privacy and the exposure of Iranian women, through sketches of Kamran Diba.

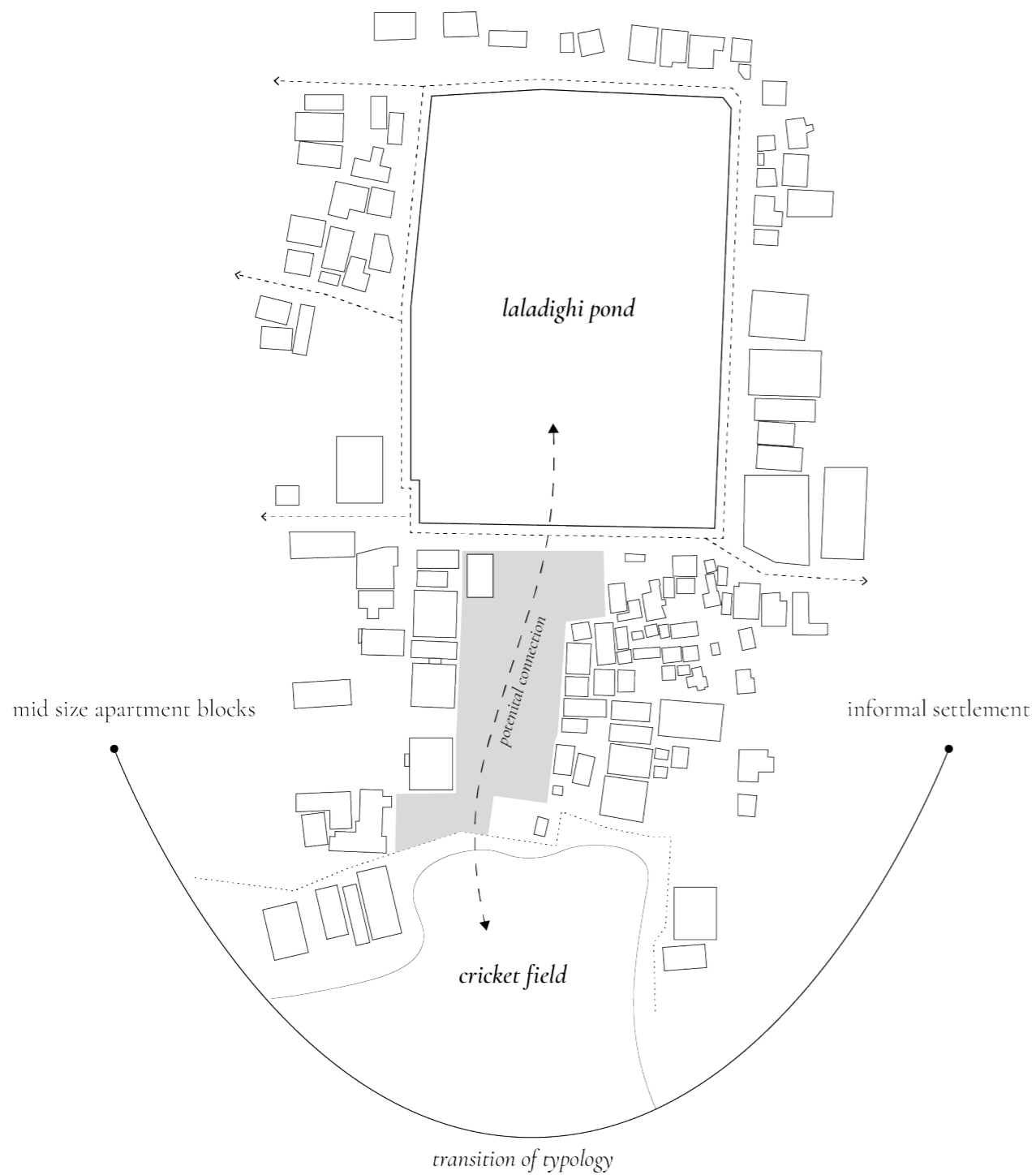


figure 2: first observations on the site in laladighi par

II. that afternoon in sylhet

Right before we were about to travel to Bangladesh, I felt a bit like I was in some kind of vacuum. Because of the fact that I already had the first few weeks of research into purdah and its effects on the Bangladeshi dwellings behind me, not having been on the actual location, in Sylhet, in Bangladesh, even in South Asia in general, aroused a certain carefulness in me to draw conclusions too early. A sense of excitement about almost flying out to Dhaka, got mixed up with a peculiar type of responsibility I felt about the urge to use my time in Bangladesh to the fullest, knowing that we would only be there for a little over two weeks. When we arrived at Laladighir Par for the first of only two times in total, the urge of trying to capture as much as possible overwhelmed me. "The pond is the spatial center of a diverse community consisting of primarily Muslims and Hindu ethnic Manipuri people. A walk around the pond displayed a wide variety of housing types. A walled and vacant, trash-strewn greenfield immediately catches the eye, located right in between an informal settlement on one side and a few mid-size apartment blocks on the other," these were my first observations on the site (Figure 2). Observations made under the pressure of time, of a specific Monday afternoon, in a specific season of Bangladesh's calendar, being part of a group of almost thirty mostly Western looking strangers that acted around a normal housing area like it was of the utmost importance to understand every little aspect of it. The character of the circumstances of these first observations can therefore be misleading and not totally true, although these first observations, my first pictures, my first interactions with kids playing around the site, would be fundamental for my perspective on the urban strategy I designed and implemented in the context of Laladighi in the weeks after being back in Delft.

Because revisiting the site was impossible after October, besides from my almost weekly walking sessions in Google Streetview, the interaction with the tutors became more important. Having shared the experiences of being on site together, but also by sharing the limitation of only revisiting via a satellite. Being helped with anecdotal memories of that afternoon in Sylhet and the vast experience and amount of knowledge of my tutors, it was very joyful to start exploring together the possibilities of an actual design, on an actual plot in-between a pond and a cricket field during the following weeks. I have never questioned the intentions, within the sometimes critical recommendations during the design process, since I understood that everyone is there to help you and above all to try to be part of a process that results in an interesting and innovative design, within the context we explored together back in October.

III. empathy as part of your toolset

Wandering through the slums of Dhaka, with our Belgian guide and translator Willem and his wife, Nynke and I were in the middle of the process of trying to interview Bangladeshi women about the social effects of purdah and the extent of their freedom of movement in general. A few days after we came back from Sylhet, being in the country for almost two weeks, these interviews felt more sincere than the ones we tried to do in Dhaka before we traveled to Sylhet. To understand the situation of the women you interview, but also the men, women and children we interviewed around the Laladighi pond in Sylhet, one needs to be to a certain extent adapted to the circumstances themselves. By which I am not trying to say that I can ever understand the struggles these people go through on a daily basis, but without having an understanding of the contextual surroundings, I could in my opinion have never transformed the women's answers on our questions into a consideration for specific design decisions later in the process

The knowledge gained through the literature review and the findings during analyzing the several case studies helped to determine the scope and extent of my research and would act as the foundation from which I could distill and draw up my first set of design principles. The direct effects of the interviews might have been limited in the extent to which it have played a part in some of these key design decisions, I believe that the knowledge these women shared with us helped me to create an overhead perspective on the subject that would not have been possible without at least trying.

IV. an ethical balance act?

In general, the research on the practice of purdah from an architectural perspective is a field in which there has not been a huge amount of work. While the purdah system involves the majority of South Asia, the rest of the Islamic world knows comparable social systems in which women are suppressed and held back from public participation. Any design proposal within this theoretical framework, based on extensive research through both literature and contextual fieldwork, can address and try to tackle some of the problems the purdah system poses. With the intention to create a type of inclusive architecture where women can thrive, the effects would be beneficial for every actor involved, pursuing to come as close to a form of democratic architecture as possible.

Discussing the ethical aspects of my own project feels a bit uncomfortable, to assess and address my own shortcomings as a researcher maneuvering through this field and possible moral imprudences that come with it would be too shortsighted and in fact probably rather selfish because one could never objectively reflect on a intensive process like this one. However, I am fully aware of the effects that for example my gender, race, Dutch descent or my Dutch education have on the final design. I am quite sure that any other student from any other university in any other country would have made some totally different design choices, however I am also quite sure that both me and this hypothetical other person would use our identity as a strength and not so much as a burden. As I mentioned before in this reflection, I realize that as being a white dutchman, the context of Bangladesh and the effects of a social system like purdah in its society, are impossible to fully understand at once and maybe ever. The fact that we spend some time with the whole studio thinking about this matter and discussing about this status quo, helped me to approach this project in a sensitive, inquiring way to avoid drawing conclusions to quickly and therefore I could try to come as close to the core of the understanding of purdah as one could from my background and intentions.

V. drawing a narrative

The quality of my own drawings is never good enough. It might be an empty statement, but during the design process I always feel like that my products could need that little extra ten percent to be a bit more convincing or visually pleasing. It's part of the design process in my opinion, also and to be fair especially during this graduation project. The pressure of it being the conclusion of seven years of studying has weight on me and has been to this point. Although the perfectionist in me might never be satisfied with all final drawings and products, an objective view on the amount of work that together represent my design and embody the visual outcome of my research is necessary to address the transferability of this specific project.

I believe that the list of products mentioned in the Graduation Manual should allow every person, meaning not architecturally schooled people, to at least have some understanding of the project and its implications on its surroundings, the people and the environment. I think that the personal touch on these drawings by the designer adds a layer of visual pleasing, but more importantly it helps to add a narrative to the work. This visual narrative, even more so than textual descriptions, allows the project to be more replicable and rooted in context. During the process of drawing my plans, sections, details and elevations I never lost track of my narrative, that of facilitating public involvement of women. It may not be as visible in every drawing, but I believe that when something is drawn with a certain intention, the audience unconsciously translates these intentions to their own thoughts. My research can be called successful if people get it, if it inspires people to think about it that little bit more.