



Transition Spaces

'This whole, seemingly transitional space might be irrelevant in many cultures, but in Asia, we perceive water, the courtyard and in the end, the notion of life, in a very different way.' **Lyndon Neri**

Research Plan
Freek van Schaik



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Research Plan
Freek van Schaik

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Introduction 03

In (South) Asian countries such as Bangladesh, spaces that accentuate transition have been playing a far more crucial role in architecture than in most other cultures (Singh, 2015). This intermediate or third space, holds a transitional quality and is therefore in architecture called the transition space. It's defined by the relationship of the extreme zones it's connecting, like private versus public or internal versus external zones. Since these in-between spaces are so frequently passed through, humans are often not even conscious of the themes it has been signifying for centuries: welcomeness, auspiciousness and prominence.

The transition space is full of social and cultural meanings, shaping people's environment and everyday behaviour. For instance, in rural parts of the predominantly Islamic country of Bangladesh, transition spaces like courtyards reinforce the seclusion and segregation of women by influencing the female movement both in public and private spaces (Chowdhury, 1992). Men are able to move freely through the public streetscape, while women avoid open fields and roads. Instead they're circulating via the more private courtyards (anginas) where most female activities take place, like cooking and interacting with other women. Another transition space that's found in most of these dwellings, is the front porch (baithak) which is primarily used for receiving male guests. Women mostly don't feel at home in this space although it is a prominent part of their homestead, and thus making an impact on their habits. Like for females, transition spaces also notably influence the lifestyle of children and the elderly by offering a more private space for daily activities and social interactions.

Besides social and cultural importance, transition spaces are designed to respond to climatic needs of the tropical monsoon climate (Singh, 2015). To illustrate, courtyards provide ventilation and therefore facades facing the street can contain fewer openings, enabling more privacy and creating an open, yet private environment. Transition spaces like verandas offer a greater spa-



Introduction 04

tial quality by providing protection from harsh sunlight and rainfall. In addition, the direct infiltration of heat and glare into the interior is being prevented by the extended roofs, keeping these indoor spaces cooler. Since the in-between space functions as a buffer zone for (severe) climate conditions, a more comfortable transition for the residents is created and the liveable quality of inside spaces is significantly improved.

Transition spaces are capable of either dividing or connecting spaces since they act as a link between public and private spaces (Singh, 2015). For example, at one level it's able to achieve privacy by not placing entrances in direct contact with exterior spaces. On the other level, interaction is being promoted when the space is enclosed through an in-between space like courtyards. In either way, transition spaces are inevitably at the heart of living in many (South) Asian cultures such as Bangladesh. Late Indian architect Charles Correa even believes that a transition space like an open to sky place can make a significant difference between a liveable habitat and claustrophobia in small (low income) housing. Taking into account the importance of transition spaces in Bangladesh' architecture is therefore crucial. People specific themes like gender, ethnicity, religion and income are all playing a key role in the creation of meaningful transition spaces which affect and operate on various scales: the scale of a dwelling, community and city.

02 Various courtyards and verandas, Bangladesh





03 Mass construction of isolated dwellings, Dhaka

Problem 05

Bangladesh is undergoing a process of increasingly rapid urbanisation after the country became independent in 1971 (Hasan, 2022). The cities are growing more than twice the rate of the country's rural area, boosting the level of urbanisation from 28% to 56% in the year 2050. Besides population growth, urbanisation is caused by climate-induced migration: humans trying to find desirable opportunities to live in the city while escaping the environmental vulnerabilities and risks arising in the rural areas (Rana & Iliina, 2021). Not only the capital city of Dhaka has absorbed a great share of the new urban population, secondary cities such as Sylhet, are flooded with migrants from rural parts of Bangladesh and are expected to grow significantly in the future.

The mass migration towards these cities and towns is creating major difficulties, especially in the housing sector (Hasan, 2022). Since the expansion through autoconstruction cannot manage to accommodate the increasing population, local governments and urban planners are obliged to counteract the housing scarcity. Since land in urban areas is valuable and the land shortage is getting more critical everyday, every single piece of land must be planned to be optimally utilised and to house the growing population by enabling density. Only Bangladesh' four biggest metropolitan areas have come up with urban master plans. Smaller urban areas like Sylhet are expanding their territory with hardly any development control or vision from the (local) government.

As a result, the realisation of a large percentage of new (middle or higher income) dwellings in the cities are being handled through real estate developers (Nabila, Nazmul, Mian & Saifuzzaman, 2022). The focus of these developers is on mass producing and selling isolated dwellings instead of integrating the entities into the urban fabric. Little positive contribution to their surroundings is being made due to the structures concentrating primarily on their individual plots and neglecting the streetscapes around it. Developers underestimate the influence of architectural transi-



Problem 06

tion space between internal and external space, and therefore don't pay attention to enhancing people's experience through improving the urban built environment. It comes as no surprise that the implementation of transition spaces are frequently being overlooked.

Public and private spaces are often completely separated through the use of solid boundary walls and closed gates in the plinths of new residential buildings for privacy and security purposes. Sadly, these features are creating inactive street edges where anti-social behaviour and street crime are more likely to occur instead of becoming a place for informal social gatherings by small groups of people which adds life to the streets. Besides, these spaces often transform into trash dumping zones or parking space, which worsens the road condition. Since street edges are the first points of contact between the private house and the public outside, it has great capabilities of creating meaningful transition spaces (Singh, 2015). Well designed transition spaces have proved for centuries that it offers social, cultural and climatic benefits which impacts the urban context positively. Therefore, the mass construction of isolated residential structures accompanied by little attention to street edges, forms a threat to one of the most crucial elements of Bangladesh' architecture: the transition space.

Questions 07

Since a well thought through transition space of a building impacts the surrounding built environment and its people, it must be an architect's duty to adequately design such a space. Therefore, the designer must have knowledge about the social, cultural and climatic function of a qualitative transition space in relation to the specific site. In my case, it concerns a dwelling in Sylhet, Bangladesh. This leads me to my main question: **'How should transition spaces of dwelling practices in Sylhet be designed in order to positively impact its surroundings?'**

Firstly, to answer this question, it must be clear what types of transition spaces are impacting the surrounding urban built environment, such as courtyards and verandas. Investigating borders and boundaries that influence the use/lack of various qualitative transition spaces in Sylhet is therefore crucial. Thus my first sub question: **'What types of transition spaces, in relation to borders and boundaries, can be found in Sylhet that positively impacts its surroundings?'**

Secondly, we must know what defines transition spaces that are positively impacting the urban surroundings. Understanding themes such as social activity, culture and climate in Sylhet, is critical before designing transition spaces on the various scales. Therefore my second sub question: **'What is the thematic essence of transition spaces situated in Sylhet that positively impact its surroundings?'**

Lastly, after knowing what different kinds of transition spaces are discoverable in Sylhet, there must be a clear overview of the architectural elements that are enabling borders, boundaries and transition spaces to positively impact its urban context. Aspects such as formation, dimension, porosity, tangibility and visibility, should be analysed. Hence my third sub question: **'What architectural characteristics give transition spaces in Sylhet the ability to positively impact its surroundings?'**



Methods 08

The foremost research methods that will be used to attain the knowledge to answer the questions are literature review, fieldwork observations and case study analysis. Prior to looking at the main research question, the findings from the three sub questions will be carefully combined. This process of synthesis will be visualised through a comprehensive catalogue that will form the foundation from which the main research question can be answered. See the diagrams on the next pages.

Since transitions spaces in Bangladesh are perceived differently and have fuller meaning than in most countries in the West, like the Netherlands, a **literature review** of existing (academic) discussions and articles give insight into its significance. This provides a knowledge base which helps to answer the sub questions, especially the second sub question. The theoretical framework in this research plan gives a closer look into the to be used literature.

The **fieldwork observations** in Sylhet will be the most important method used in this research because of its on-site investigations. These explorations should consist of interviews with residents in Sylhet, note-taking on the discovered qualitative transition spaces and a visual analysis of these through photography. Mostly the first and third questions will benefit from the findings done during the field trip.

The process of answering the first sub question and the curation of the research overview, will improve from a more comprehensive research. This is to be achieved by investigating the transition spaces of various **case studies** throughout South Asia. Those can be for instance more contemporary residential projects, like Charles Correa's Belapur Housing and Raj Rewal's CIDCO Housing, both located in India. This additional information will be included in the research catalogue.



Methods 09

07 Catalogue formed by research questions

Sub Question 1
Fieldwork Observations

Sub Question 1
Case Studies

Sub Q2
Literature
Review

Sub Q3
Fieldwork
Observ.

Methods 10

Transition Spaces Types (Sylhet)

Transition Spaces Types (India)

Themes

Social
Culture
Climate

Elements

Formation
Dimension
Porosity
Tangibility
Visibility

	Transition Spaces Types (Sylhet)			Transition Spaces Types (India)	
Themes Social Culture Climate					
Elements Formation Dimension Porosity Tangibility Visibility					



Framework 11

The used literature for the research of transition spaces can be categorised in roughly two sections: academic articles that are more focussed on the cultural historical or socio spatial aspects of these spaces. Besides, an additional section of reports on design projects across Bangladesh where the importance of transition spaces is being highlighted, will be incorporated.

The article **'Understanding Transition Space' (Singh, 2015)** gives a thorough analysis of the cultural historical significance of transition spaces in (South) Asian countries like Bangladesh. **'Segregation of women in Islamic cultures and its reflection in housing: A study of spaces for women in a Bangladesh village' (Chowdhury, 1998)** and **'Visibility effecting gender aspects in middle income group apartments in Dhaka' (Gomes, 2015)** are addressing gender segregation in relation to these spaces.

The socio spatial aspects are covered by the articles **'Impact Analysis of Urban Street Edges of Residential Area in Dhaka, Bangladesh' (Nabila, Nazmul, Mian & Saifuzza-man, 2022)** and **'Assessing the Impact of Street Frontage in Streetscape on the Quality of Public Gathering Space: A Case Study in Chittagong, Bangladesh' (Ziad, Fahami & Fariha, 2019)** which zooms in on the effect residential transition spaces have on its built environment and people. **'Spatially Adaptive Courtyard Models for High-Density, Multi-Storeyed Residential Developments in Bangladesh' (Khan, 2021)** gives additional insights into this subject.

To conclude, the papers **'A redevelopment approach to a historical market in Sylhet City of Bangladesh' (Rahman, Islam & Hasan, 2016)** and **'Designing architectural continuity in a historic urban quarter of Dinajpur, Bangladesh' (Shahriar, Mithun, Saha & Ahmed, 2023)** showcase relevant design projects that addresses qualitative transition spaces.



Relevance 12

To summarise, one of the most crucial elements of (South) Asian architecture, the so-called transition spaces, is prone to become undermined in the future (Singh, 2015). Rapid urbanisation in Bangladesh is causing a construction boom of isolated residential structures, not well integrated into the urban built environment (Nabila, Nazmul, Mian & Saifuzzaman, 2022). Little to no attention is given to the transition spaces between private and public or internal versus external. Instead for privacy and security reasons, solid boundary walls and closed gates are used to divide the two zones. This often results in dead street edges where criminality and anti-social behaviour is more likely to occur. This is the complete opposite of what qualitatively designed transition spaces are capable of creating: promoted social activity and a feeling of welcomeness (Singh, 2015).

Not only in Bangladesh are poorly designed transition spaces and dead street edges in newly constructed (residential) buildings being realised, this trend also takes place in other areas in the Global South. In India for instance, where transition spaces are as important as in Bangladesh, fast urbanisation has led to contemporary residential areas where neighbourhood spaces like courtyards are being neglected (Gulati, 2020). As a result, a diminished feeling of belonging and privacy is occurring which eventually causes the loss of orientation and territoriality.

Therefore, this research that focusses on transition spaces in Sylhet, will be valuable to contribute to the discussion about the decreasing implementation and importance of transition spaces in locations where these are also part of architectural culture like in India. The already existing literature and new findings regarding transition spaces in Sylhet during the fieldwork, will offer new insights into the subject matter which is relevant and replicable for other parts of Bangladesh, (South) Asia and the Global South.

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Figures

Cover Colonnade at Bait Ur Rouf Mosque, Dhaka. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

Content Main hall at Ayub National Hospital, Dhaka. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

01 Communal courtyard at Manipuri Para, Sylhet. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

02 Various courtyards and verandas, Bangladesh. Photographs by Freek van Schaik.

03 Mass construction of isolated dwellings, Dhaka. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

04 Solid boundary wall at new dwellings, Sylhet. Photographs by Freek van Schaik.

05 Communal courtyard in rural village, Sonargaon. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

06 Veranda as threshold in rural village, Tahirpur. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

07 Catalogue formed by research questions. Diagram by Freek van Schaik.

08 Catalogue analysing transition spaces. Diagram by Freek van Schaik.

09 Wall segregating various income classes, Sylhet. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

10 Gate segregating public and private space, Sylhet. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

Back Urbanisation creating isolated dwellings, Dhaka. Photograph by Freek van Schaik.

