

YOUNG LIVES IN NO PLACE

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2023-2024 | Global Housing Graduation Studio | Research Plan



Cover image: A boy trying to climb up the wall (photo by author, 2023);
Back over image: A boy trapped in a courtyard (photo by author, 2023)

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Young Lives In No Place

Creating Child-Centered Housing for Urban Poor Children in Bangladesh

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2023-2024| Research Plan
Global Housing Graduation Studio
Architecture of Transition:
In the Bangladesh Delta

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01_Introduction

1.1 Rapid Urbanization - Urban Poor in Bangladesh

From the 19th century, rapid urbanization has brought a huge population growth in urban areas and it is continuously happening worldwide. According to United Nations (2018), more than half of the population currently lives in urban areas and the figure will rise to 68% in the coming two decades. However, as most of the countries in North America, South America and Europe are already urbanized, eastern Africa and south Asia will be the main growth area for population in the near future. Nevertheless, as a south Asian country, in the census of 2022, the population of Bangladesh already reached nearly 170 million, in which 67 million was urban population (Macrotrends, 2023). In this case, it is inevitable that the economic growth cannot keep pace with population growth, resulting in the emergence and expansion of 'urban poor'. Currently, around 20 percent of urban population is reported living in poverty in Bangladesh, and it is estimated that over half of the poor households will be in urban areas by 2030 (Rahman and Hill, 2019). In *The Truly Disadvantaged* by Wilson (1987), he proposed the concept of 'neighborhood concentration effects' on the urban poor, arguing that the poor families or individuals instinctively tend to gather as a community in the city, which probably become isolated, and then the physical segregation may exacerbate the poverty again. This is indeed reflected in urban Bangladesh, as the gap between the living conditions of slum and non-slum neighborhoods is gradually widening. Although the government of Bangladesh has taken economic measurements which resulted in a decline of poverty rate, the progress is slowing since 2010 compared to the first decade of the 21st century (Rahman and Hill, 2019). Thus, the urban poverty in Bangladesh remains an intractable problem.

1.2 A Special Case of Urban Poor - Sweeper Colony

A special group of urban poor in Bangladesh is called the sweeper colony (or many other names, such as Rabidashpalli, Rishipalli etc.), with a history of nearly three centuries and a population of 3.5 to 5.5 million currently in the country, in which people take up the most arduous but indispensable work for the city, such as cleaning the street and sewer system (Chowdhury, 2011). According to Sultana and Subedi (2016), this group was initially made up of Dalits (the lowest class in caste system), hired by the British colonial rulers for municipal work in the 18th century. Since the land provided by the government is the only place they can use and other land owners refuse to lease land to them, they are completely passive in their lives, suffering from the adaptation to the expansion of family, forced resettlement and displacement, which makes them the poorest group in the country. Moreover, due to the inherent social exclusion based on the caste system, their descendants have no choice but inherit the job as cleaners. 300 years later, urbanization required more land to accommodate the increasing population, so urban poor communities of other religions such as Muslims gradually occupied the surrounding areas of sweeper colony. As a result, besides the common living problems faced by other urban poor, they also have to deal with the possible conflicts with and discrimination from other religions.



Figure 1: Urbanization seen in Dhaka (photo by author, 2023)



Figure 2: A sweeper doing his work in Dhaka (Kazal, 2020)

02_Problem Statement

1.3 A Young Society - Children in Bangladesh

One positive sign shown by demographics of Bangladesh is the high percentage of children and youth, with 36% of overall population under 18 years old (RAPID, GED & UNICEF, 2020). In other words, Bangladesh is supposed to have abundant labor force in the near future when these children grow up. However, one surprising finding by Sharmin (2010) is that there is no one unified definition of children in different files of Bangladesh, indicating an ignorance on children at national level. At the same time, poverty has a wide influence on the country, so a large number of children, for example in urban poor families, do not grow up in a child-friendly environment. Instead, they live without a permanent shelter or basic amenities, severely damaging their health as well as exposing them to dangerous environment. UN General Assembly declared five basic children's rights in 1959 as protection, education, health care, shelter and good nutrition. Unfortunately, none of these rights is fully defended for urban poor children in Bangladesh. By combining the information from Demographic and Health Survey 2022 by NIPORT and ICF (2023) and Survey on Children's Education in Bangladesh 2021 by BBS & UNICEF (2022), children in Bangladesh (both urban and rural) are facing health problems such as childhood mortality, malnutrition and illness, as well as lack the access to education, inducing the problem of child labor, especially in urban areas. Regarding this fact, even if the number of children is considerable, survival is already a challenge for them, let alone contributing to the future labor force. Hence, among all age groups, children need urgent and particular concerns in the urban Bangladesh.

This research will keep the scope in the urban context, elaborate the improper living conditions of children in urban poor families in Bangladesh, and finally find housing together with other spatial solutions.

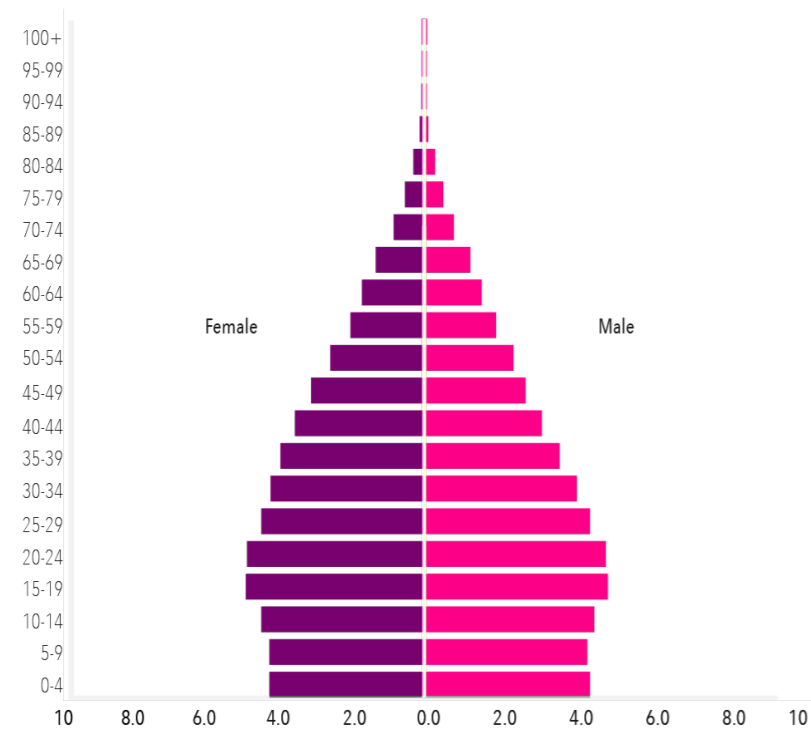


Figure 3: Age pyramid Bangladesh 2022 (Group research, 2023)

2.1 General Situation of Children in Urban Poor Families

As mentioned in 1.3, children in urban poor families in Bangladesh are exposed to multiple threats at different stages of their childhood. Their health is not well protected from infancy and as they grow up, they remain vulnerable due to the lack of proper food and sanitation. Additionally, around 40 percent of children in urban areas in Bangladesh do not have access to formal education, instead, they start working or doing domestic chores from a young age (avg. 9 years old nationally, avg. 7 years old in Sylhet), and change their work frequently. These jobs are basically manual labor offering little salary but requiring a long working hour, and some are even in hazardous environment, which increases their vulnerability (RAPID, GED & UNICEF, 2020). Moreover, when asked how they feel about the present lifestyle, the majority expressed a dissatisfaction with the status quo and helplessness to change it.

In order to encompass these problems more comprehensively, this study will mainly focus on the children **aged 7-17, who are capable of studying or working alone**. The research site is **the sweeper colony and its surrounding areas in the center of Sylhet city, on the southwest side of the Keane Bridge** (figure 4), acting as a example for settlements of urban poor. Chapter 2.2 to 2.4 will discuss **the issue of urban poor children in passive roles in space** at three levels, from family life to collectively in a community and finally to a broader social life. At each level, the problem will be start with the urban poor as a whole and then move on to children.



Figure 4: Site location (Google Earth image, 2023)



Figure 5: Simple shelter of urban poor in Sylhet (photo by author, 2023)

2.2 Privacy: Family Life and Dwelling

On the basis of a family-centered culture in Bangladesh, the family life is strongly valued by all Bangladeshis, including children. According to the survey by BBS and UNICEF (2022), a safe family life is desired the most by children (far more than the second top answer), especially staying with their nuclear family. Even the ones who lost the connection with their families aspire to company from peer group, also indicating the needs of intimate relations. Dyson et al. (2009) affirm the symbolic meaning of home to children, as a spiritual sustenance and protection from the 'outside'. Another study exploring the effects of different housing conditions (shelter, transitional housing program, own place and so on) on family relations (Mayberry et al., 2014) shows that a stable housing condition facilitates healthy family routines and rituals, which thereafter promote the development of children's habits, especially in poor families. However, on the contrary, Ghafur (2006) in his study on social exclusion suffered by urban poor in Bangladesh, points out that the housing situation of the them is not stable. Especially under the conditions of land scarcity in recent years, their living area is compressed before the other social groups, resulting in either super dense informal housing, or those simple shelter made of the cheapest and most accessible materials (e. g. corrugated metal sheets) (figure 5). In both cases, people's living spaces are drastically reduced, limiting family activities only to eating and sleeping, so that children's development is hampered due to the loss of a healthy family routine.

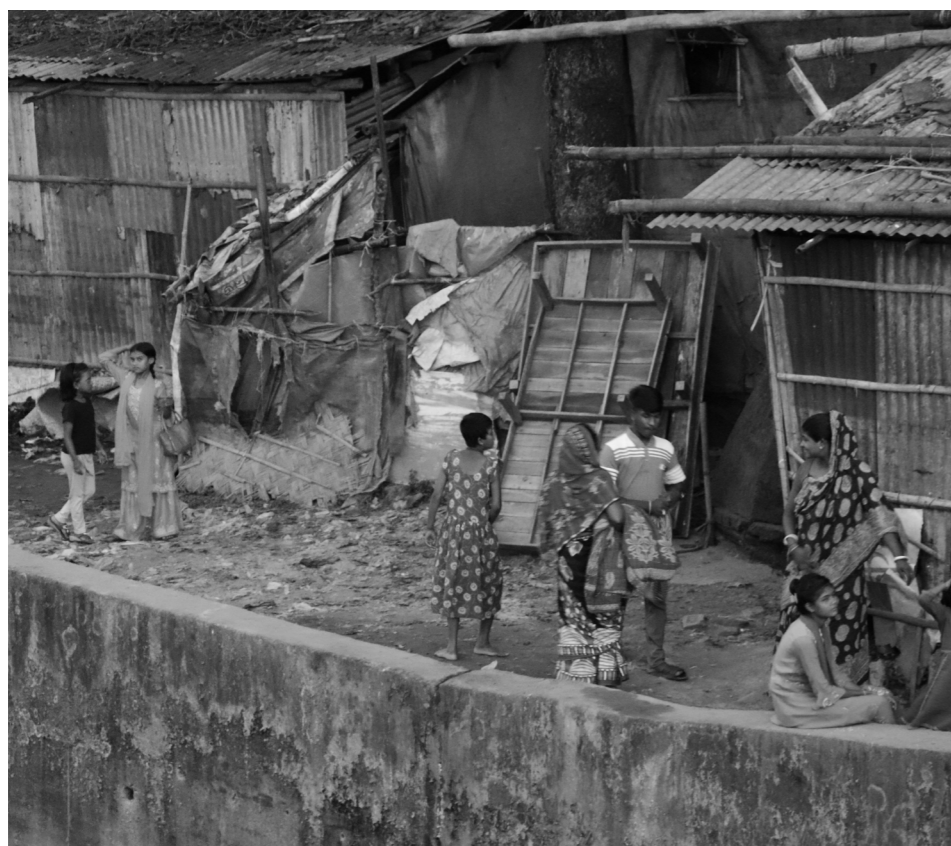


Figure 6: Children playing on the street (photo by author, 2023)

2.3 Inward Publicness: Collective Life and Common Space

Besides the interaction with family members, urban poor in Bangladesh predominantly live a collective life. Normally, the range of 'collective life' extends to urban scale, but in this study, it is limited in community scale. The place required by collective life is called 'common space' in this research, similar to public space but more about the facilities shared in daily routine. According to Lata (2021), the urban poor, seen as informal population, usually do not have their common space in their colony as all spaces that they have tend to be fully used for family life. Consequently, they take for themselves the 'community commons' such as the street, through which not only do they fail to meet their own needs, but they hinder the collective life of the community as a whole as well. Similarly, as children of urban poor reported, their collective activities largely rely on random places, such as the street or open spaces between houses, rather than specially defined areas (RAPID, GED & UNICEF, 2020) (figure 6). In fact, Woolly (2015) names these two types of open space in her research about children's spatial agency as found and constructed space, where the former exactly means the space generated by children themselves unconsciously. In addition, Elsley (2004) proves that children have their own opinions on public spaces, which are commonly not heard unfortunately, because they are seen subordinate to their family. Another finding in the same study says that children prefer playing in informal spaces, which provides a basis for a rational exploration of the value of the space occupation issues mentioned above.



2.4 Outward Publicness: Communal life and Social Space

Another topic usually discussed in urban contexts is the spatial equality, as the city is shared by multiple social groups at the same time and the social space in which is supposed to serve for everyone. Taylor (1989) argues that 'one cannot be a self on one's own', but it is the social network that forms each individual. Communal life is therefore inevitable, and its realization is related to the corresponding space. The theory of Production of Space, developed by Lefebvre (1974/1991), proposes that every society produces its own space, which covers three attributes, namely lived, conceived, and perceived space. Trussell and Mair (2020) named the social space as 'judgement free space', where everyone is equal, so people can get rid of the discrimination brought by races, poverty and other factors. Nevertheless, the urban poor in Bangladesh do not experience 'judgement free' as supposed. On the one hand, they are active participants of communal life, particularly in street vending, but on the other hand, they are explicitly prohibited from accessing some social spaces, or in the case where they can access, they still face the risk of exclusion or even eviction (Etzold, Hossain & Rahman, 2013). Similar contradiction happens to urban poor children, as they are involved in social spaces, but in a dangerous way, suffering from abuse or harassment, especially when they are working. Hence, the existing social space in urban Bangladesh does not reflect spatial equality for children.

In conclusion, the urban poor children in Bangladesh are facing three main issues. Firstly, from the private perspective, they **lack the most basic surviving conditions in dwelling**, so that an ideal family life cannot be realized; secondly, the **common space is either absent or not well-defined** both in general and specially for children to form a close-knit, healthy community; lastly, they **do not experience equality and belonging in communal life and social space** in the city. Combining all three aspects, it indicates the passive position of urban poor children in space especially housing.

Figure 7: Preliminary social space within informal settlements (photos by author, 2023)



Figure 8: A man and a woman doing washing and shower beside Surma river (photos by author, 2023)

03_Research Question

3.1 Main Research Question

How can design help to build child-centered housing for urban poor children in Bangladesh?

3.2 Family Life and Dwelling

Sub-question 1: What are the rituals and daily routine of urban poor children? What kind of spaces do children need and expect to improve their family life?

3.3 Collective Life and Common Spaces

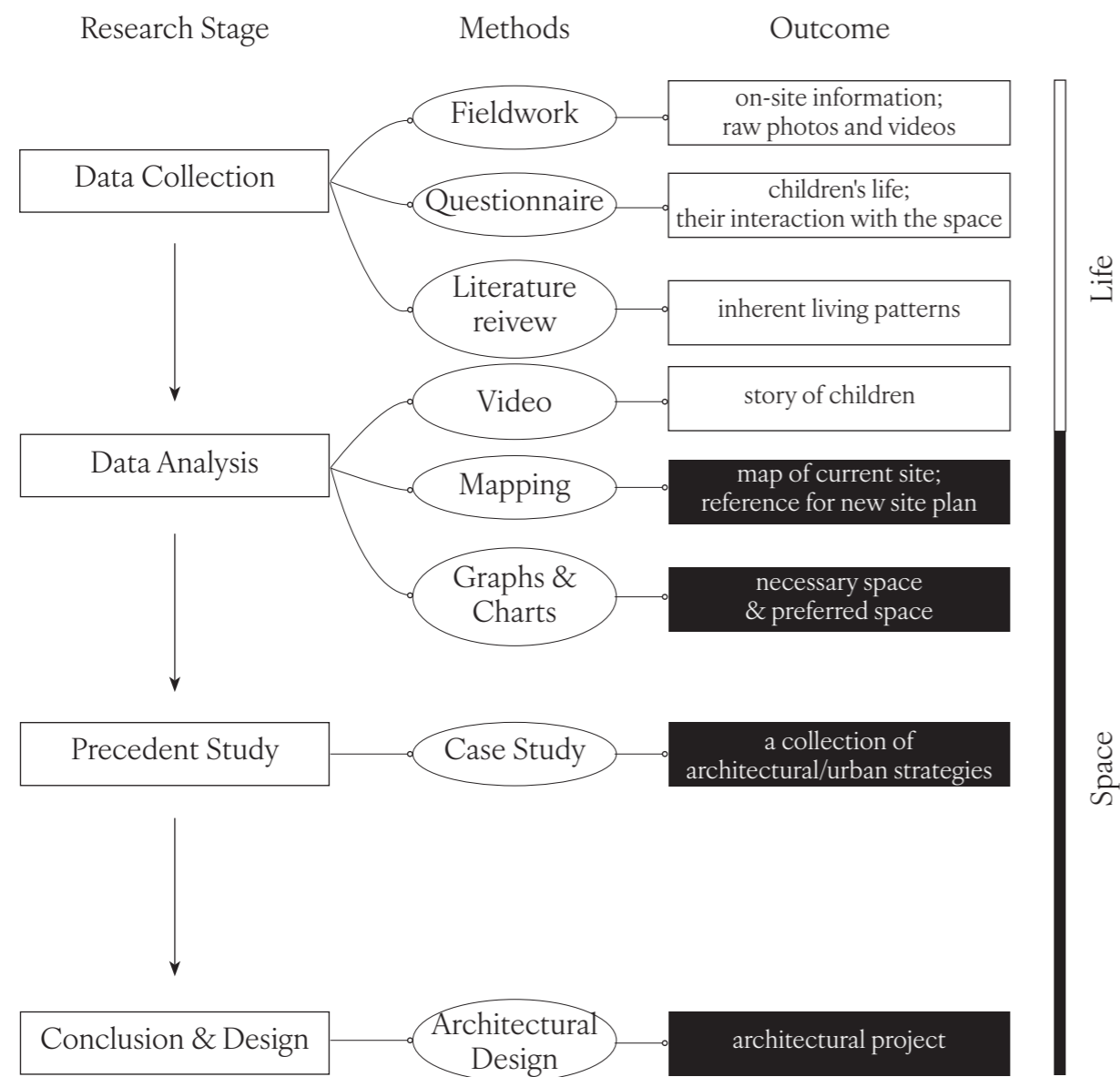
Sub-question 2: How do urban poor children interact with others within a community? How do these interactions define the space?

3.4 Communal Life and Social Spaces

Sub-question 3: How can urban poor children be equally involved into social life through space design?

04_Methodology

In order to explore both the life of children and the corresponding spaces through three levels described in previous two chapters, four steps are needed, namely data collection, data analysis, precedent study and conclusion and design. The research will adopt **ethnography** as the main methodology, but take different methods in addressing each detailed question. With all the ingredients on children's needs of their life and possible spatial strategies, a new model of children-centered community will be created and hopefully, it can be effectively contribute to solving general urban poor children's issues of urban poor in Bangladesh.



Methodology diagram

4.1 Data Collection

4.1.1 Fieldwork, Observation and Questionnaire

The first two sub-questions aim to seek the relation between children's behavior and their needs for space, and then improve their living quality according to their living patterns. Therefore, fieldwork, observation and questionnaire can be helpful for this stage. The fieldwork will be conducted at the research site and its surrounding areas. During the fieldwork, observation will mainly look into the physical and mental state of children, their living spaces and ancillary amenities. Afterwards, questionnaire will be used to construct a deeper understanding on their family structure, daily routine, the use of the existing spaces and their subjective feelings. The distribution of questionnaire and interviews will be conducted with the assistance of volunteers who speak the local language. With a relatively thorough first-hand sources, the research in the first stage is trying to find the one-to-one relation between the problems of children's life and their representation on spaces.

4.1.2 Literature Review

The third sub-question discusses the strong socio-spatial interventions, so literature may be effective in addition to the behavioral and spatial relations mentioned above. The literature used here is to find the function and quality of the social space that is the most suitable for the site.

4.2 Data Analysis: Mapping and Analysis of information from questionnaire

According to the methods in first step, there will be basically two types of data, namely visual data and data from questionnaire, which require different ways to analyze. As for visual data, mapping will be applied to add the third dimension, spatial logic, to the one-to-one relation concluded in 4.1.1. Regarding the data from questionnaire, it will be summarized and analyzed through graphs and charts. The aim of this step is to form a systematic collection of existing spaces related to children through integrating fragmented data.

4.3 Precedent Study

On the basis of understanding the current life and existing space of children, it is worth to explore the ways to improve the latter on the basis of the former. By browsing through projects from all over the world dealing with similar issues from the past to present and taking children's wishes into account, basic characteristics of a space in different scales can be summarized. Although the cause might vary under different context, the result appears alike reflected in children's livelihood. The outcome will be spatial elements that can improve the situations of 4.2 and used for generating the community model in 4.4.

4.4 Conclusion and Design

With a collection of spatial elements, a new model can be created by reorganizing them. Finally, the housing project should be child-centered for urban poor children in Bangladesh.

05_Theoretical Framework

According to the process in which the research will be conducted, the theoretical framework consists of three parts, namely the theme and scope of the research, the relationship between children, life and space, and global cases of child-centered housing or other projects. Each of them can be further divided into sub-topics and supported through literature.

5.1 Scope of the Research and Related Terms

The research is revolving around the children in urban poor in Bangladesh, so these keywords need to be explained contextually with the help of existing literature.

Urban poor: people living in the urban area in a poor condition, who are mostly immigrants from surrounding. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson (1987) mentions the urban poor as a group and explains why they usually emerged in the form of mass; Rahman and Hill (2019) discuss the current situations of urban poverty in Bangladesh and propose four potential measures that may mitigate the problem; Choguill (1988) then relates urban poverty with low-income housing by examining the impact of national finance, housing policies and urban planning.

Sweeper colony: originally known as Hindu community, working as cleaners or other municipal jobs. Chowdhury's (2011) research introduces both the history and status quo of sweeper colony, and points out the biggest issue for them is landless; Sultana and Subedi (2015) show how sweepers in Dhaka as a marginalized group resist the social discrimination.

Children: aged 7-17, who are capable of studying or working alone. Sharmin (2010) discusses the abuses and exploitation experienced by children in Bangladesh, and finds surprisingly that the definition of children varies in different files, which indicates a lack of attention on children at the national level; Hosen, Khandoker and Islam (2010) look into the child labor, child education and malnutrition issue in Bangladesh, and call for concerns on education as well as reducing the wealth gap.

5.2 Children, Life and Space

The second part includes three most essential elements that is discussing in the research. Through literature, the relations between each two of them can be found, and each set of relation will be sub-divided according to the publicness of life or space.

5.2.1 Children and Life

Different experiences in life result variously in physical and mental states of children. Family rituals and routine are one of the essential indicators that contribute to family processes mentioned Mayberry et al. (2014), which may firstly help to maintain the health of parents and then indirectly benefit children especially in poor conditions. Research on families living in hardship in Bangladesh by Dyson et al. (2009), after interviewing 70 low-income households with various background regarding culture, ethnicity and class, emphasizes the significance of faith, protectiveness and symbolism of home and the diversity of community contexts. Besides, Ginsburg (2007) and Woolley (2008) both stress the developmental benefits of play for children, but in terms of family bonds and social participation respectively.

5.2.2 Children and Space

Children are influenced by but also shape the space around them. Woolley (2015) defines two types of open space, namely constructed space and found space, differed from the space designed on purpose or not. As for children, although there are constructed spaces including playgrounds and skateparks specially designed for them, the found ones such as the open spaces between housing areas are used more frequently. Moreover, Elsley (2004) suggests that children have their own understandings and attitudes towards public space,

which change with age, but decision makers usually ignore their voices because of their subordinate status to their family. For example, they prefer to play in informal places and after reaching a certain age, they tend to choose places far from home.

5.2.3 Life and Space

Life and space are proved to be relational and transformable by literature. Lefebvre (1974/1991) emphasizes that each social space presents uniquely as 'social practice' due to the specific social groups behind, and Atelier Bow-Wow (2010) further explains that the behavior of each individual has the power to define a space. Additionally, Trussell and Mair (2010) focus on the homeless people and find that leisure time, connection to a broader community and safe private space are factors to improve their living quality.

5.3 Cases of Child-Centered Projects

The final part consists of cases focusing on different aspects of child-centered housing and other projects in global context. For example, with the lens of the whole community, Chatterjee (2015) analyzes and compares two successful cases of slum renewal projects in India which faced the same child issue as Bangladesh do; in terms of single spaces, van Lingen and Kollarová (2016) collect the information of the seventeen playgrounds designed by van Eyck, served initially for children but finally as urban catalysts.

5.1 Scope of the Research and Related Terms

Terms	Definition	Topic	Literature
Urban Poor	People living in the urban area in a poor condition, who are mostly immigrants from surrounding	Cause of formation	Wilson, W.J. (1987) The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy;
		Current situation in Bangladesh	Rahman, H. Z. & Hill, R. (2019) Poverty in Urban Bangladesh: Trends, Profiles and Spatial Differences;
		Poverty & housing	Choguill, C.L. (1988) Problems in Providing Low-Income Urban Housing in Bangladesh.
Sweeper Colony	Originally known as Hindu community, working as cleaners or other municipal job	History & Status quo	Chowdhury, S. L. K. (2011) Traditional Profession and Livelihood: A Study on Sweeper Community;
		Resistance	Sultana, H. & Subedi, D. B. (2016) Caste System and Resistance: The Case of Untouchable Hindu Sweepers in Bangladesh.
Children	Aged 7-17, who are capable of studying or working alone	Neglect of child issue at national level	Sharmin, S. (2010) Children in the Socio-Cultural Context of Bangladesh;
		Child education & child labor	Hosen, A., Khandoker, M. S. H. & Islam, S. M. M. (2010) Child Labor and Child Education in Bangladesh: Issues, Consequences and Involvements

5.2 Children, Life and Space

Topic	Literature
Children's health & Family rituals	Mayberry, L. S. et al. (2014) Families Experiencing Housing Instability: The Effects of Housing Programs on Family Routines and Rituals;
Children & home	Dyson, C. et al. (2009) Bangladeshi families living in hardship: findings from research using a life-history approach;
Children's play & family bonds	Ginsburg, K. R. (2007) The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds;
Children's play & social participation	Woolley, H. (2008) Watch This Space! Designing for Children's Play in Public Open Spaces.

Topic	Literature
Pre-defined and randomly formed children's space	Woolley, H. (2015) Children and Young People's Spatial Agency;
Children's experience & public space	Elsley, S. (2004) Children's Experience of Public Space.



Topic	Literature
Society & space	Lefebvre, H. (1974) Production of Space;
Behavior & space	Atelier Bow-Wow (2010) Architectural behaviorology;
Leisure time & space	Trussell, D. E. and Mair, H. (2010) Seeking Judgment Free Spaces: Poverty, Leisure, and Social Inclusion.

5.3 Cases of Child-Centered Project

Topic	Literature
Slum renewal	Chatterjee, S. (2015) Making Children Matter in Slum Transformations: Lessons from India's National Urban Renewal Mission;
Children's playground	van Lingen, A. and Kollarová, D. (2016) Aldo Van Eyck: Seventeen Playgrounds;
Social space for everyone	Finotti, L. (2014) Futebol: Urban Euphoria in Brazil.

- Privacy
- Inward publicness
- Outward publicness

Theoretical framework diagram



06_Relevance

Sixty years after the 'five basic rights of children' was first introduced to the global discourse, it is a pity to note that there are still numerous children around the world who do not have full access to these rights, or even worse, do not have access to any of them, and the children of urban poor in Bangladesh are one of them. The issue of children in poverty is urgent and significant in the context of Bangladesh, as it concerns the future development of the country. However, it has existed for years but few proper solutions or positive results have been seen, and therefore, requires more considerations in academia. Admittedly, child issue is a topic in the field of sociology, but existing research and theories suggest a connection between behavior and space. Thus, this study will try to dive into this connection more, aiming to establish a relatively comprehensive spatial logic from the perspective of children, which may thereafter complement the common top-down planning approach. Additionally, the study will explore children's lives from individual to communal, reflected as a transformation from private to inward public and outward public in space. Compared to most of the existing research for Bangladesh with the focus in Dhaka, this research is based in Sylhet, intends to bring non-capital cities into discussion when considering child issues in the future. Basically, this research aims to find the possibilities for housing design in changing the passive position of children, especially urban poor children, in space, and in creating a child-centered community.

Figure 9-10: A girl playing alone in the river (photos by author, 2023)

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