

The Truth about Billboards: Appraisal of Resolutions for a Safe and Scenic Dhaka

Tamanna Rahman¹ and Nadia Monzur²

¹Housing Division, Housing and Building Research Institute

²Dept. of Architecture, Rajshahi University of Engineering & Technology

E-mail: ¹trisha.arch.07@gmail.com, ²nadiamonzur@live.com

Abstract—In a bustling megacity like Dhaka, which is the home of every major institutes and brands in Bangladesh, abundance of billboard is a common sight. The skyline is covered with sky hoardings that are rooted in spaces ranging from public platforms to private properties, to social and religious institutions. The space around us is instrumented with neon lights, and under those radiant billboard bonanza and their spectacular messages, exists a city jeopardizing the safety of the citizens as well as hampering the cityscape. Survey of some of the major nodes around Dhaka Metropolitan area reveals that, billboards rather than serving their sole purpose of advertising are becoming an agent of ever deteriorating cityscape. Adding to the ignorance towards aesthetic concern fueled by reluctant authority, the rising numbers of illegal hoardings, with unsound structure, pose a threat towards daily life of the inhabitants. Acknowledging these issues, it becomes a prime concern to walk through a different approach which should work as a trigger for the governing authorities to make a bigger effort towards stopping the illegality in this prospect and thus avoiding future catastrophes that awaits us. Nothing destroys the distinctive character of a sustainable city more rapidly than uncontrolled signs and billboards, which is why strategic measures need to be taken to stop their proliferation and encourage their strategic removal. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the hazardous and penetrating effects of unplanned installation of billboards in jeopardizing the safety of the citizens and deteriorating the cityscape of Dhaka. As these billboards are embedded in the city architecture and have become integrated in the visual appearance and profile of the cityscape; this paper also aims at provoking a discussion on the possibilities of making a better scenario by arguing on some ideas.

Keywords: Billboards, Cityscape, Urban life, Safety, Visual impact

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world overflowing with advertisements. Wherever we turn we are bombarded with a symphony of colors, textures, lights or sound with advertisement; a significant portion of which are carried out on billboards. Billboards are large outdoor advertising structure typically found in high traffic areas. They are attractive and ephemeral advertising vehicles. Strategically placed within high trafficked areas, billboards serve many purposes namely to-

- Communicate and disseminate information
- Raise awareness
- Provoke thought and ideas
- Provide a platform for visual expressions

However, beyond their capacity of attracting, they also influence our surroundings in many ways. They have the power to influence a cityscape and create attractive urban perspectives. Studies have shown, along with advertising purposes; billboards are responsible for a number of things concerning our environment, safety, community, cityscape and overall our daily life. Visual pollution, sky-trash, environment and natural scenery abuse, psychological impact, effect on safe driving are some facts which reveal the other side of Billboards. Observing these aspects of billboards suggest that the consequence of such issues should be addressed as a rising problem in our country. Especially the impact on the fast urbanizing areas and the existing cityscape along with the question of illegal and poorly constructed billboards should be brought into the light.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this particular study is,

- To explore the impacts of billboards on a cityscape, by surveying the impact of the abundance of it around the major nodes of Dhaka.
- To enlighten the mass people about the safety issues, by highlighting the illegally and poorly constructed billboards around Dhaka city.
- To provoke a discussion on the possibilities of making a better scenario by arguing on some ideas.

3. SCOPE

In a bustling mega city like Dhaka, which is the home of every major institutes and brands in Bangladesh abundance of billboards is a common sight. Therefore the impact of

billboards in our daily life is inevitable which acts as the rationale behind this study. The scope of this study leads to three consecutive aspects_

- In a country like Bangladesh where the authority is reluctant, mushrooming of illegal billboards is only natural. The scope of this report is regarding the plethora of unplanned billboards which results in a repellent cityscape.
- Sequentially, the scope also relates with the safety issues that rise from the question of poorly constructed billboards.
- And finally the scope extends to the point concerning Architects and planners who are capable of improving the situation by acknowledging these facts to offer us a better urban life.

4. LITERATURE REVIEWS

For collection of different factual events this section contains a literature synopsis on the revelation of different happenings, opinions expressed through newspaper, blogs, web articles and reports related to the topic.

4.1. Insubstantiality of Cityscape

A report published on 'The Daily Star' on May, 2011 entitled "Defacing Dhaka with Billboards" makes the claim that, the characteristics of aesthetic beauty of Dhaka city is gradually diminishing due to unplanned mushrooming of billboards and neon signs, prompting de-facing of the city at a quicker pace. It is needless to say that billboards in Dhaka city have become a booming business for both outdoor advertising companies as well as the city corporation since they both earn substantial amount of money (Hyder, 2011). This report partly reflects the prevailing state of the billboards in the city. However, the practice of approving billboards should be done with due care and sincerity. Another article published on August 2012 on the 'Global Voices' blog entitling "Bangladesh: Ugly and Deadly Billboards" states that, according to the Environmental Performance Index 2012, conducted by American universities, Yale and Columbia; Dhaka is the 31st most polluted city out of 132 cities across the world. There are approximately 250 micrograms of dust in the air of Dhaka city which is five times the average. Besides this pollution, Dhaka's skylines are covered with commercial billboards, which block view of the sky. Inside Dhaka city, the number of large billboards has increased to more than 2500. Rules stipulate that the billboards should not be bigger than 600 square feet, which is also not followed. These oversized billboards decrease the beauty of the city and also hinder air flow (Rahman, 2012). The article concedes that, advertisement lust of big conglomerates is not only covering the faces of the city and its dwellers, but is also killing people.

4.2. Peril overhead

Some recent incidents show the jeopardies caused by billboards in Dhaka city. Deaths and damages of property due to collapse of poorly-mounted billboards have been in the news for quite some time. Two people were killed and eight others injured when a loosely mounted hoarding on Gulshan Shopping Centre at Gulshan-1 collapsed on March 15, 2009. One got crushed under a billboard near Shah Jalal International Airport on May 6; 2009. A number of illegal billboards at a filling station on Kuril Biswa Road collapsed and killed two people on June 16, 2006. A security guard also lost his life in a similar accident on Pragati Sarani (Ali, 2011).

On July, 2015 a student was injured and a rickshaw was damaged after a huge unipolar billboard collapsed at Shapla Chattar in the city's commercial hub of Motijheel. In April, 2015 a gigantic hoarding collapsed near Dhaka Club. Two rickshaw pullers were wounded and a lawmaker's car, a police van, three minibuses and several rickshaws were damaged. According to official records of fiscal 2014-15, the two city corporations had approved installation of around 1,000 billboards. Moreover, government agencies and private building owners have rented out spaces and rooftops for billboards without permission from the authorities concerned. (Alam, 2015)

Although there is no exact log of illegal rooftop billboards, Rajuk sources said the number is no less than 4,000. Rajuk (Zone-1) identified 600 illegal rooftop hoardings in Dhanmondi, Lalmatia, Panthapath, Green Road, Manipuri Para and Sutrapur areas in 2007. Till 2010, the number of DCC-authorized billboards was 846 -- 294 on DCC land, 200 on private land and 352 on central reservations of roads, said DCC Chief Town Planner Sirajul Islam, adding that, the rest -- a several thousand are illegal. He said, "DCC can demolish only three to eight hoarding during a drive." In 2007, Rajuk issued a notice asking land owners and advertisement firms to remove all unauthorized billboards from roofs. In reply, Rafiqul Islam, president of Outdoor Advertisement Owners' Association, filed a writ petition in September that year challenging Rajuk notice and the HC stayed implementation of the notice. The stay was extended in October and since then advertising firms went on setting up hoardings (Ali, 2011).

5. OBSERVATION AND FINDINGS

5.1 Impact on Cityscape

Surveying some major nodes of Dhaka city on the year of 2013, the following findings have been documented. The following pictures clearly depict the hazardous visual environment where the clutter and confusion creates a state of continuous displeasure. These show the glimpses of visual pollutant and reveals how all-pervading is their unpleasant effect on the entire visual horizon in an urban set-up. The threat is that they become a part and parcel of the urban life

which actually degrades the quality of environment in several subtle yet significant ways.

Science Lab Node: The site is a highly dense urban area featuring surplus of billboards rooted along the road or on the rooftops. The following images show the impact of existing billboards on the related cityscape. The current scenario conveys a very unattractive urban perspective with billboards standing here and there without actually fitting into the rest of the scene.

5.2 Safety Issues

Unlike other advertising media, billboards are an ambush media that can't be turned off. Even the Outdoor Advertising Association of America boasts, "You can't zap it. You can't ignore it." While the industry would like you to think billboards are harmless, their negative effects on our health and our safety have been well documented (Islam, 2010). The incident on Gulshan Avenue, Dhaka should force us not just to take this extremely seriously but also to look at how many other things are happening around us that are illegal and hazardous with the authorities oblivious about these. The reason for turning a dream into a nightmare is the criminal indifference and involvement of regulatory authorities, realtors and those "lucky" few who own land on the avenue to build there. Among some of the high rises are being constructed without permission, on the avenue have taken over the footpath, exposing the pedestrians using the avenue into life threatening hazards (Islam, 2010). Due to reluctance of the authority and opportunities like these the erection of illegal billboards has increased to an alarming rate.

5.3 Billboards or Deathtraps?

In the world that we live in, billboards are weaved with the lanes in an inseparable way. So each step that we take might just be a walk into a death-trap. But the findings through this study suggest that the safety issues could be traced back to the rising number of unauthorized billboards much of which are poorly mounted and prone to dismantling.

Billboards standing tall around our daily path are now creating an atmosphere where they pose themselves as body of fear rather than an attractive media. A simple walk through the streets has become a question of safety.



Fig. 1: View from Science lab area



Fig. 2: Panoramic view from Science lab over-bridge towards New-market



Fig. 3: View of Gulshan and Banani area

5.4 Billboards or Visual Pollution?

On the rooftops of the big cosmopolitan centers grows a jungle of billboards covering the clouds. They may be exemplified as litter on a stick or sky trashes rather than advertisement vehicles. Apart from safety issues, many city residents oppose the massive billboards on aesthetic grounds, considering them an urban blight. Dr. Shamsul Islam Akand, a general practitioner and resident of Dhanmondi, looks on outdoor advertising as a pollution of public space, space that should be reserved for the public good. "You can't even see the green that Dhaka was once famous for," says Dr. Akand. "There is advertising everywhere. You can't turn it off. It's always in your face."

Although a rule that states that, billboards should be erected as a part of the city beautification plan, but this is not followed as a basic guideline. As a consequence the billboards become a litter on a stick, a junkmail on the streets. Due to the ignorance towards aesthetic concern fueled by reluctant authority the mushroom cloud of billboards are gradually emerging everywhere.

There are few reasons why this billboard issue is always ignored.

- First of all, advertising business is a growing industry around the globe. Advertising is necessary for the economic growth of the country.
- Secondly, huge number of people is connected with advertising which creates huge job opportunities.

- Thirdly, no government in this world would like to reduce the growth of its industries as it is an important part of free market economy and government also receives a handsome amount of tax from the industries.

On the other hand, Dhaka City Corporation is inconsistent and poorly equipped to deal with advertising industries. The most alarming fact is that a lot of inexperienced people have entered into this business because of corruption and lack of regulation.

6. REVIEW OF SOME STANDARD GUIDELINES

According to Dhaka City Corporation, the number of large billboards in Dhaka is approximately 3500. Among these the number of enlisted billboards is 485. Which means about 3000 billboards is illegal and hazardous. During storm season the possibility of collapsing become much higher.

6.1 Standards

- Under the Taxation rules, 1986, section 74, a guideline has been promoted namely “Dhaka Metropolitan city beautification and advertisement rule, 2003”.
- This guideline has been redeveloped as the new “Dhaka Metropolitan city beautification and advertisement rule, 2009”.
- Rules stipulate that the billboards should not be bigger than 600 square feet. Where this rule is not followed accordingly the oversized billboards tend to collapse when hit by a sudden gust of wind.
- After the incident on 15th March, 2009, high court directed the authorities not to install billboards in eight areas of Dhaka including Gulshan, Banani, Kakoli, Baridhara and Notun Bazar till further order in 12th June 2012. The bench also issued a suo-motu rule on the government to explain why it should not formulate guidelines on installing billboards in the city. After that guideline were drawn but have not been implemented.

The principal rule is-

- Every billboard structure must be certified by a structural engineer as safe.
- They must also be consistent with the city’s beautification plan.

However, if we look at the billboards in Dhaka city, we cannot find any match with the guidelines.

7. THINKING OF A SOLUTION

The safety issue regarding billboard has become paramount following the fatal accident that resulted in casualty. Different analysis points out that this is a regulatory problem rather than a problem with the medium itself.

“Building a billboard is not rocket science,” says Professor Dr. Sekender Ali, a structural engineer and professor of civil engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). “In itself the gravitational load isn't much. But you have to make sure it can stand the wind load. During a storm, there is wind suction, which tends to lift the billboard. For that, you have to anchor it with a strong cement base, and steel bracing. Unless the billboard is very large, there shouldn't be a problem with most buildings.”

The problems identified through-out this study majorly originates from the ease of erecting billboards without being much bothered about the authority or authenticity. Observing this shortcoming it can be said that the necessity of raising voice against this issue has become of prime importance. And this should work as a trigger for the governing authorities to make a bigger effort towards stopping the illegality in this prospect and thus avoiding future catastrophes that awaits us.

Adding to this issue is the fact that these billboards are embedded in the city architecture and have become integrated in the visual appearance and profile of the cityscape. Meaning that the space around us is instrumented with these flashy displays with incandescent lights which instead of serving as an aesthetic addition to our city, are actually creating an obscene reality. In such circumstances, provoking a discussion on rethinking our situation is obligatory.

7.1 Billboard as a Means of Environmental Beautification in Nigeria

To preface an idea of creating a better scenario for Dhaka, firstly an example can be discussed where the city has been suffering from a similar tragedy but is constantly embarking upon new ideas of recovery to become a more livable place with a more planned cityscape.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines visual pollution as limited to situations in which the outer ambient atmosphere contains materials in concentrations which are harmful to man and his environment. For Instance, in a developing African country of Nigeria signs and billboards can be referred to as visual pollution because they create nuisance, and affect the urbanization planning in Nigerian cities. With increasing concentration of population in Nigeria urban places and the multiplication and growth of urban activities including physical construction and development, pressure on the natural environment inevitably deteriorates its aesthetics. The most critical and visible aspect of this issue is the problem of the visual pollution caused by wrong placement of billboards which should have on the other hand added to environmental beautification in Nigerian cities.

The rules guiding the erection of billboards in Nigeria spelt out necessary and acceptable conditions which could be applied to the control and development of outdoor sites all over the country-

- Billboards can be located on the verges of defined walkways.
- Billboards should not, in any way impede pedestrians and vehicular movements.
- Billboards should not be erected in a way to disrupt, endanger or damage drainages and other public utilities.
- Minimum distance of 100 meters must be allowed for on either side of a T-junction before location of a ground surface billboard in order not to obstruct the view of the motorists (Osunbiyi, 1999).

However the laws were not followed by the agencies erecting the billboards as a result some of the boards and signs create nuisance in the cities. As an attempt to resolve this issue over the years various decrees have been promulgated by the Nigerian government to set up regulatory bodies to help regulate advertising practices in the country and erecting of billboards.

These agencies, according have formed a monitoring body called the Advertising Standards Panel, whose duty is to monitor the erection of billboards. On another note the problems addressed in Nigeria are brought under newer conceptual resolutions that address the term Environmental graphics. According to this, proper functioning of environmental graphics conceptualization should be to foster a symbiotic kind of relationship between man and his environment in such a way that man would take his environment with sympathetic consideration (Bankole, 2013).

7.2 São Paulo a City More Vibrant Without Billboards

In September 2006, São Paulo's populist mayor, Gilberto Kassab, passed the so-called "Clean City Law," outlawing the use of all outdoor advertisements, including on billboards, transit, and in front of stores. Before being enacted, the law triggered grave alarm among city businesses and other economic constituents. Critics worried that the advertising ban would entail a revenue loss of \$133 million and a net job loss of 20,000. Fears, that the city would look worse without the mask of the media alarmed residents. Despite the concerns, the law passed and the 15,000 billboards cluttering the world's seventh largest city were taken down.



Fig. 4 & 5: Some views of Scenic Nigeria and São Paulo

Five years later, São Paulo continues to exist without advertisements. But instead of causing economic ruin and deteriorating aesthetics, 70 percent of city residents find the ban beneficial, according to a 2011 survey. Unexpectedly, the removal of logos and slogans exposed previously overlooked architecture, revealing a rich urban beauty that had been long hidden.

7.3 Hints of Optimism

The two Dhaka city corporations are going to formulate new guidelines to bring discipline in the use of billboards to restore beauty to the capital. Both Dhaka north and south city corporations have already set up separate committees that are working to that end, according to officials of the two city corporations. Once the guidelines are drawn up, measures would be taken to put things in order to make the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) areas more beautiful and greener, said Enamul, the head of the committee.

Ansar Ali Khan, chief executive officer of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), said they engaged a team of experts in preparing guidelines to beautify the city, and it will give the suggestions by next month (Alam, 2015).

8. DISCUSSION

This study has led up to the conclusion that Dhaka like any other city with abundance of unplanned hoardings is a victim of reluctant and careless authority. When too many signs attempt to say too much at the same time, the phenomenon of visual chaos and confusion generated by such uncontrolled street graphics needs to be minimized. Moreover safety issue needs to be resolved without any second thought.

On the basis of the findings of the study the following recommendations are put forward-

- Compliance of the builder's towards the existing rules and regulations of billboard erection.
- Enforcement of rules and regulations and strict vigilance by local Government authority (Dhaka City Corporation) against any kind of illegality.

- Conforming a long term plan that features strategic removal of billboards as well as their appropriate placement.
- Involvement of non- government organization such as advertising agencies, graphic designers in the designing and monitoring of an aesthetically sound cityscape.
- Promoting research on how to decrease the visual chaos by learning from different strategies that other countries have adopted.
- Last but not least, infusing architecture and city planning expertise in a spontaneous way of evolving into a safe and scenic city.

9. CONCLUSION

What could have gone right if we never had those billboards? It is not only that we would be exposed to less degradation of the natural scenery and cityscape, less unsafe walk through the streets, less psychological manipulation, less commercialization of souls, it is also that- we would be less tempted, less opportunist, more allied, more alarmed , more realistic and more equal. It is also that we would be more democratically representative, socially responsible and environmentally ethical. At the very least we would not be in such dangerous delusion of progress.

But reality paints a different picture where this world is inseparable from billboards. Hence this ideology should lead us to a vision of a better, more livable and safer city which could be reborn through conscious, scrupulous and optimistic minds.

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