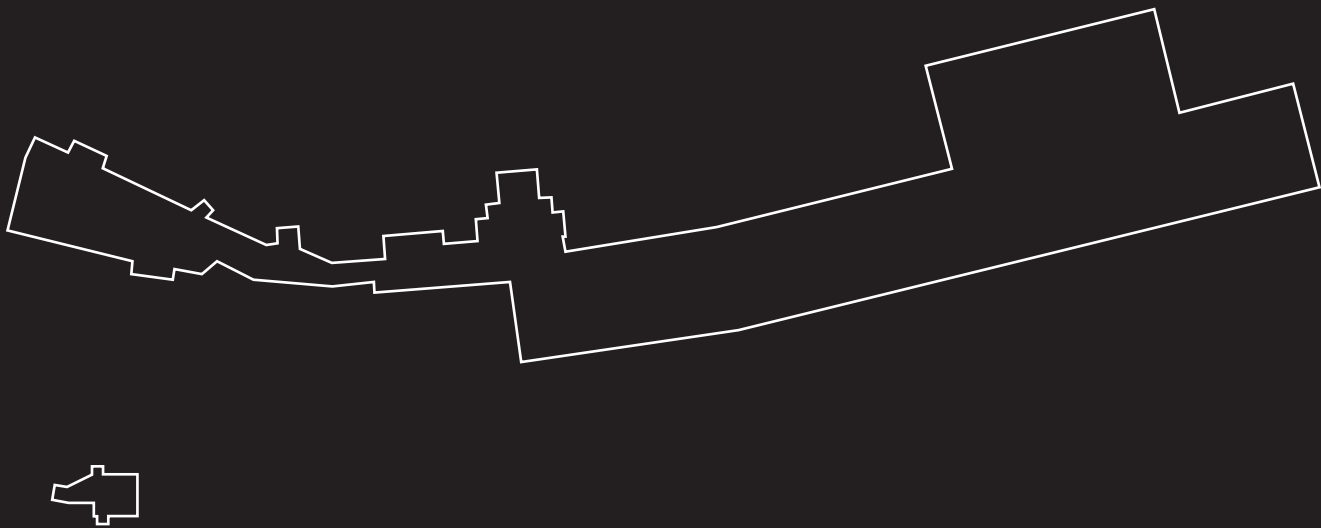


10.5 URBAN RIVER SPACES

Co.Creation.Architects



PP. 133-164

ARCHITECTS

Co.Creation.Architects
– Khondaker Hasibul Kabir
– Suhailey Farzana

CLIENTS, CONSTRUCTION
AND MAINTENANCE

(for Naboganga River Ghat):
Citywide People's Network,
Jhenaidah Municipality
(for Shatbaria Ghat):
Shatbaria Community,
Jhenaidah Municipality

SUPPORTING NETWORK

Platform of Community Action
and Architecture (POCAA),
Community Architects
Network (CAN),
Asian Coalition for Housing
Rights (ACHR)

PHOTOGRAPHY

Asif Salman
Ashar Macha

SITE AREA

4,267m²

BUILT AREA

1,632m²

DATE

2019

LOCATION

Jhenaidah, Bangladesh

Photos 1–2 by Asif Salman
Photos 7, 9 by Ashar Macha
All other photos by Co.Creation.Architects

CO.CREATION.ARCHITECTS



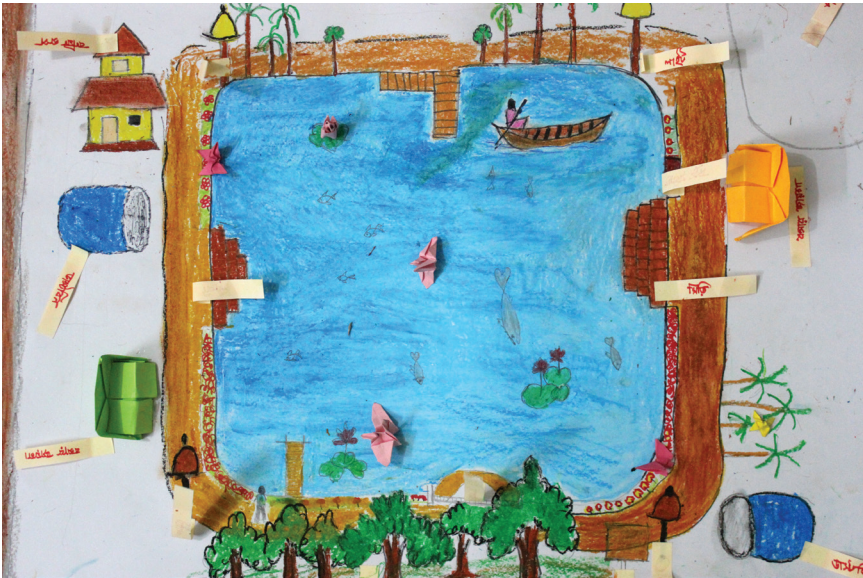
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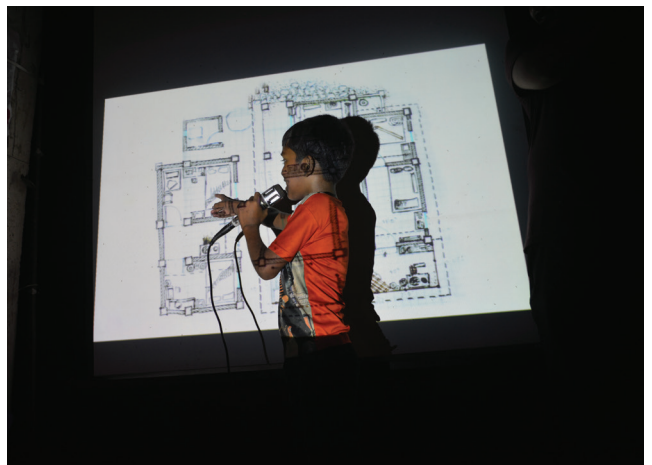


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3-9. Projects of Co.Creation.Architects
 3. Children garden
 4. Pond
 7-9. Korail slum



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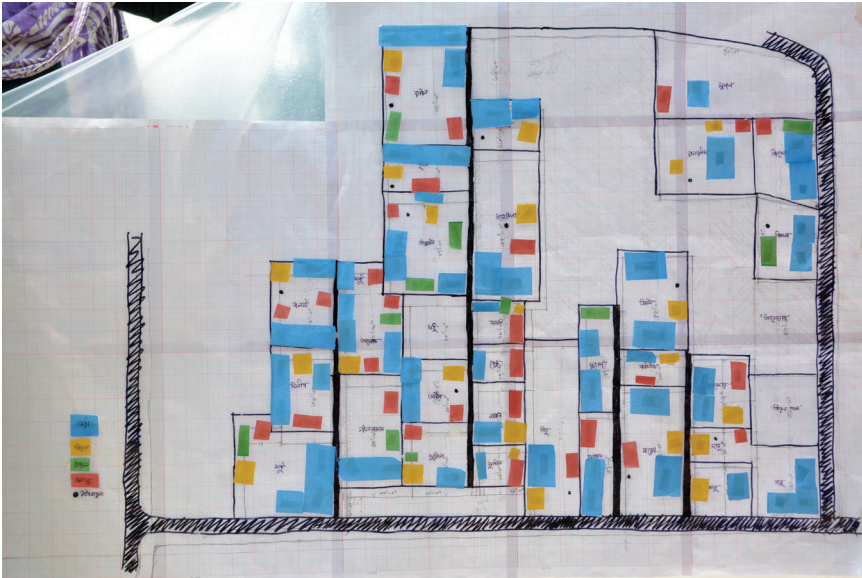
URBAN RIVER SPACES



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10-17. Projects of Co.Creation.Architects
Jhenaidah Housing Process



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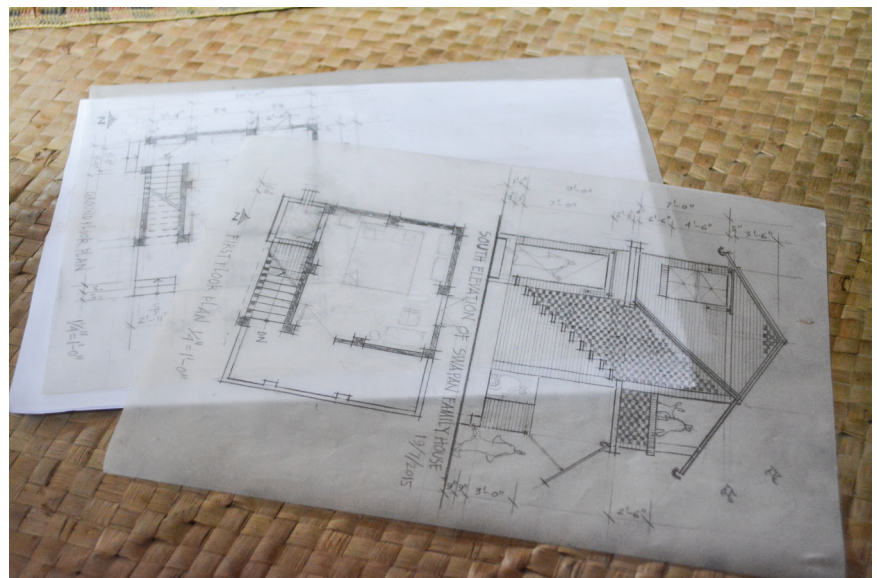


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URBAN RIVER SPACES

Redefining the role of the architect On the work of Co.Creation. Architects in Jhenaidah, Bangladesh

by Niklaus Graber

In times of global climatic and social challenges, the professional identity of architects, which has been cemented over decades, has to undergo major changes. It is obvious that new forms of collaboration must be sought to tackle increasingly complex issues. The days of singular authorship and star architects seem to be fading and the search for less opulent works has visibly begun. However, if the profession really wants to redeem its credibility and influence in shaping the environment, it must not only rethink construction

methods or tectonics, but also strive for a more open and inclusive dialogue to involve actors outside the actual core discipline and self-referential professionalism. While in the Western and Northern hemispheres tangible action in this direction is only hesitantly becoming noticeable, a look southwards shows that already for quite some time a variety of approaches have been established that seriously involve the roots of the population and create future-oriented habitats in harmony with the natural environment. Co.Creation.Architects

in Jhenaidah, Bangladesh are pioneers in this respect, having already facilitated a large number of successful bottom-up projects in recent years. Their work subtly addresses the local context while unfolding global relevance when it comes to new ways of architectural thinking.

Empowering communities

With around 55 per cent of the global population today living in urban conditions, it is sometimes forgotten that in many parts of the world rural conditions are an essential living environment for millions of people. In contrast to the global average and despite the rapid urbanisation process that is currently transforming Bangladesh, around 75 per cent of its 170 million inhabitants still live in rural areas dotted with villages and small towns. Recently, however, an enormous rural exodus in the wake of the global urbanisation trend has been pushing the agglomerations of large cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong to the verge of collapse while rural areas are being marginalised. It has become obvious that the flood of challenges arising in these megacities caused by a massive population influx and the resulting hyper-accelerated, widely unplanned construction activity can no longer be solved by a one-sided debate about the core cities themselves. The key to saving the big cities and preventing the economic disparities between urban and rural areas lies in strengthening rural regions and their small and medium-sized towns, with urban and landscape planning working hand in hand.

In Bangladesh, where the population density is more than 15 times that of Greece, the discourse needs to focus on finding ways to motivate people to stay in smaller conurbations in the countryside – as well as empowering the rural population by making them aware of the qualities of their traditional living environment and consolidating it for the future. Of course, life in remote villages and small towns is not always the easiest, but it can indeed be a viable alternative to life in the bursting megacity, as a visit to the Ganges Delta makes clear. Despite increasingly innovative

planning strategies, the hyper-density of Bangladesh's capital Dhaka for instance, leaves little space for vegetation and water, while residents suffer under the stress of traffic congestion and some of the poorest air quality on the planet.

In contrast, people living in rural-oriented settlement patterns benefit from the green expanses of the lush riverine delta. What they lack, however, is contemporary infrastructures for education, health and culture, as well as attractive employment prospects going beyond agricultural self-subsistence. They also need robust housing that can withstand wind, weather and flooding, without consuming the entire household's energy. And most importantly, the implementation of attractive public spaces is a key factor in creating identity, strengthening the sense of community and empowering the people.

To meet this need, an intensive social and economic policy debate is required to put an end to the ever-increasing gap between the poor rural population and the rich cities. However, politics alone cannot solve the problem. Independent initiatives in settlement planning and architecture are becoming increasingly important to improve the living conditions beyond the megacities.

Co-creation: Everyone working together

Architects and landscape architects Khondaker Hasibul Kabir and Suhailey Farzana have been working tirelessly to address these issues for years. In 2015, they left their professional and teaching positions in Dhaka and moved to their smaller hometown of Jhenaidah, close to the Sunderbans – the largest mangrove forests in the world. Here, the couple leads the team at Co.Creation.Architects, taking radical approaches to urban planning. A series of questions the architects posed when launching their work in Jhenaidah reveals how fundamentally they are redefining the role of architects and architecture: "What are we doing? Is it enough? Who is architecture for? If it is for everyone, then how can architects reach the 90% of the population who have not benefited

from architecture yet? How can we acquire the skills and understanding to reach them?”

Co.Creation.Architects are convinced that it is essential to get everyone on board to achieve sustainable urban development: laypeople, artisans, planners, creative artists, teachers and politicians. The future residents play the leading role, under the motto: “Let the people be the solution.” In their participatory initiatives to help low-income communities help themselves, Ha-sibul Kabir and Suhailey Farzana see themselves as enablers rather than designers. The declared goal is true collaboration, involving a wide range of actors from the outset. Another goal of a true co-creating process is to see architecture and landscape architecture as equal disciplines; the natural environment must always be integrated into the built structures: “We co-create with people and nature, trying to find the identity of a place that is both ecologically and culturally grounded. While listening to local people and places, we let the context guide us along. In this way we try to co-create an opportunity to build a partnership between the human realm and the non-human realm”.

Organised in a city-wide network, the small communities pool their savings and set in motion a constantly growing funding cycle. In the past years, the cooperative model in Jhenaidah has for example led to the construction of around 50 houses at the incredibly low cost of around 1,300 euros per house. The future residents are involved in the funding and the design process from the very beginning of the project. What should their dream house look like? What social and climatic functions should the yard fulfil? What kind of pond should be created? Answers are developed through sketches, diagrams and architectural models. In a painstaking process, the team reconciles budget, form and status.

Identity-building aesthetics

The openness of the planning and construction process is important: the key is to create a building

that can be continually developed according to the resources available. The architects describe such processes as “organic”, commenting: “Architecture is successful when our signature is not visible anymore. Architecture is work in the shadows, and an architect must know when he does not have to intervene. True to the principle “People build cities. Poor people can too”, non-hierarchical cooperation between all stakeholders is the key to giving communities more confidence and influence, thereby facilitating their access to education and employment.

An important tool for giving the poorer population a voice and influence is to provide them with information. Just as the building co-operatives aim to do without third-party funding, they also contribute their own ever-growing pool of knowledge. The condition of the settlements is meticulously charted in hand-drawn local plans. Children help with the mapping process, along with their parents and grandparents.

Co.Creation.Architects provide key expertise for sustainable construction of the buildings, while taking the utmost care to meet individual requirements. Together with local crafts(wo)men, the future residents build their homes with refinement and attention to detail. The building retains the poetry of natural qualities, while details are not fetishised

Co.Creation.Architects see no contradiction between economical building methods and good form. On the contrary. Despite all the pragmatism required for economic construction, aesthetics is a high priority within the overall concept. “We question our perception of historically recommended aesthetics and ethics towards nature and try to achieve an ecologically balanced sustainable environment.” The residents’ sense of beauty must be reflected in their individual buildings. The identity and appreciation of a location will only be strengthened if those affected are personally involved at all levels of the design process.

Networks: regional, national, continental, global

In the newly densified settlements, women's groups in particular are playing a key role in the process, passing on the gathered knowledge to their colleagues in other districts. The irrepressibly contagious work continues, as the seed of co-creation has by now germinated far beyond the southern delta region. Throughout the country, like-minded professionals, interest groups and local NGOs are involved in the networks such as POCAA (Platform for Community Action and Architecture). The network has meanwhile grown far beyond Jhenaidah. Low-income housing projects have also been built in Dinajpur, in northern Bangladesh and in southern Jessore with the support of Co.Creation.Architects. When it comes to creating bearable living conditions, co-creating advice is also in demand in the Rohingya refugee camps on the border with Myanmar, where one million people have been living since 2017. Co.Creation.Architects know that the participation of marginalised population groups in planning and construction can bring dignity and identity to a fateful life course. Architecture is a suitable tool for this, when applied in a participatory manner.

Thanks to a non-hierarchical, "organic" approach, the locally developed co-creation strategies can easily spread beyond a nation's border. ACHR (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights) and CAN (Community Architects Network) operate on a continental level, collecting, refining and sharing open-source knowledge. In 2017, a CAN workshop was the driving force behind the first construction of local architectural visions in the Jhenaidah settlement network. Since then, more and more groups of architects and students from abroad have visited the place to gain first-hand knowledge of the work in the field. Workshops with international students, e.g. from GSD Harvard, have recently increased. Joint sessions involving students, professionals and the local community are the best way to spread the concept of co-creation in the spirit of learning by doing.

In running the workshops, the Jhenaidah hosts are convinced that people need the freedom to make mistakes in order to learn from each other.

Spending some time in Jhenaidah, visiting the different parts of the city under the patient guidance of the architects, shows how much has been achieved within their network in recent years. In addition to the incremental housing projects in various neighbourhoods, a craft centre has been built on the principle of co-creation, with female masons being trained during construction. City squares and streets have been made more pleasant with greenery and water elements. Jhenaidah's willingness to open up new spaces in the truest sense of the word is demonstrated by the transformation of the former prison district, where a permeable part of the city is being created through the penetration of surrounding walls. How urban and rural qualities can be interwoven in everyday life can be seen at a recently opened safe-food market, where local products from sustainable cultivation are offered for sale in the heart of the city, and when children start planting tomatoes and flowers even in sparse green spaces.

Numerous sketches and working models in the architects' studio reveal what is yet to come and how many endless projects can be inspired by co-creation. The reactivation of an old river bridge as a public space or the creation of natural sewage treatment plants in the form of so-called water gardens, for example, demonstrate the power of innovation when existing potential and natural resources are carefully and collectively activated.

River space project on Naboganga river: When a city turns its face to the water.

The largest and most public-relevant co-creation project in Jhenaidah to date impressively demonstrates how effective the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders can be and how profitably landscape and architecture can merge in climate-positive urbanisation. Although Jhenaidah is located in the world's largest delta, where water in the form of hundreds

of rivers and the monsoon's precipitation has always shaped life and culture, this element has come under severe pressure from a fast urbanisation driven by rapid population growth and short-sighted economic goals. Many small rivers, lakes and ponds have been displaced or filled in by human hands in order to gain building land, and the Naboganga, which flows through Jhenaidah, has been seen at best as a nebulous transportation route and rubbish dump.

Through workshops and informal walks with different community groups along the poorly accessible riverbanks, it was gradually possible to sensitise city dwellers and politicians to the forgotten qualities of the river course as a public space. In order to reconnect the river space more strongly with the city, the access paths and streets that had been blocked by buildings or walls over the years, were reopened towards the banks. This not only increased the visual connection to the water but also improved air circulation and the microclimate in the urban fabric. The river space project aims to make the riverbanks accessible over several kilometres by means of paths and footbridges. Such an undertaking will of course take time and its final result is deliberately not being anticipated. The desire of the people to have access to the water is evident in the projects that have been carried out so far, which in a contemporary form revive the tradition of step-like "ghats" leading to the water.

The "public ghat" accompanies the river over a length of 115 metres and, thanks to its central location, functions as a stage for public life. The various levels, which are adapted to the topography, allow for a variety of activities that serve recreation, contemplation, sports and encounters. On the upper level, all the existing trees at city level have been preserved and turned into desirable shady spots with meandering benches. A lower level, which faces completely towards the water, is accessible via a gently sloping ramp from the city level without thresholds, even for people with limited mobility or for pushchairs.

The ghat is a public stage in the best sense of the word and a place to "see and be seen" that encourages communication. Conversely, it also functions as a public grandstand that provides a view of the performances presented on floating platforms in the river space. Generous wall surfaces are also potential open-air display areas. The entire multifunctional walkable sculpture was built with local labour and all the visible surfaces were made of locally available bricks, giving the linear structure a haptic and sensual feel.

In Shatbaria, just outside the city centre, another initial project was realised on the riverbank in the form of the "community ghat". This stair-shaped structure, which efficiently links the settlement with the river, was also built in brick by local craftsmen and is primarily intended for daily use by a local Hindu community. A small, curved brick screen serves as a discreet changing room and symbolically marks the location in the river space.

Learning from Jhenaidah: Towards inclusive architecture

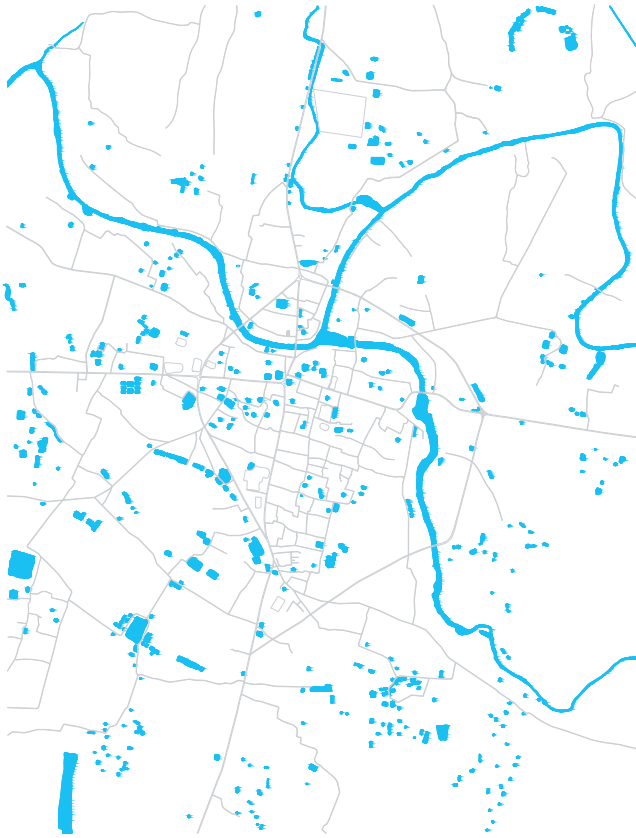
It is safe to say that the river space project will gradually grow under the hands of the citizens of Jhenaidah. The pride of the involved people is already unmistakable. Standing on the sculptural brickwork topography of the rediscovered Naboganga, which visually inspires the imagination of the local community, the Mayor of Jhenaidah proudly explains that his town has become a role model for the entire country in terms of designing and activating public spaces. The strategy of co-creation, of bringing everyone on board and steering them in the same direction, appears to be working very well indeed. Meanwhile, the work of Co.Creation.Architects is also attracting more and more international attention and respect: the river space project was honoured with the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2022.

Even though Hasibul Kabir and Suhailey Farzana have dedicated their bodies and souls to working

in the small town, they are still connected to the big city – once again thinking holistically. It was there that they were once sensitised to the concerns of the voiceless rural refugees. In Korail Basti, Dhaka's largest informal settlement, the university professor Hasibul Kabir volunteered to move in and work with the residents to conjure up gardens and collective open spaces such as the 'Platform of Hope' in the city's endless corrugated-iron-sheet carpet. And what works in the collective on a small scale should now also be good enough for the large scale. Co.Creation.Architects is currently working together with a socially and philanthropically minded contractor on Dhaka's first large, cooperatively organised housing project. The spirit of co-creation does not even need to shy away from high-rise buildings.

But architecture that encourages social justice is not only applicable in a tropical megacity or beneath the shadow of the Sunderbans: wherever we act as architects, the co-creation model reminds us that our profession must continue to have a positive influence on social processes if it is to remain relevant. The strategies and work of Co.Creation.Architects in the often overlooked Ganges Delta can certainly provide more insight in this regard than, for example, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, where exhibitions fantasise about a robot-dominated landscape full of artificial farms and data centres. Relevant architecture has always been, and will continue to be, primarily in favour of people and their environmentally friendly habitats. This basic and simple truth needs to be remembered now more than ever.

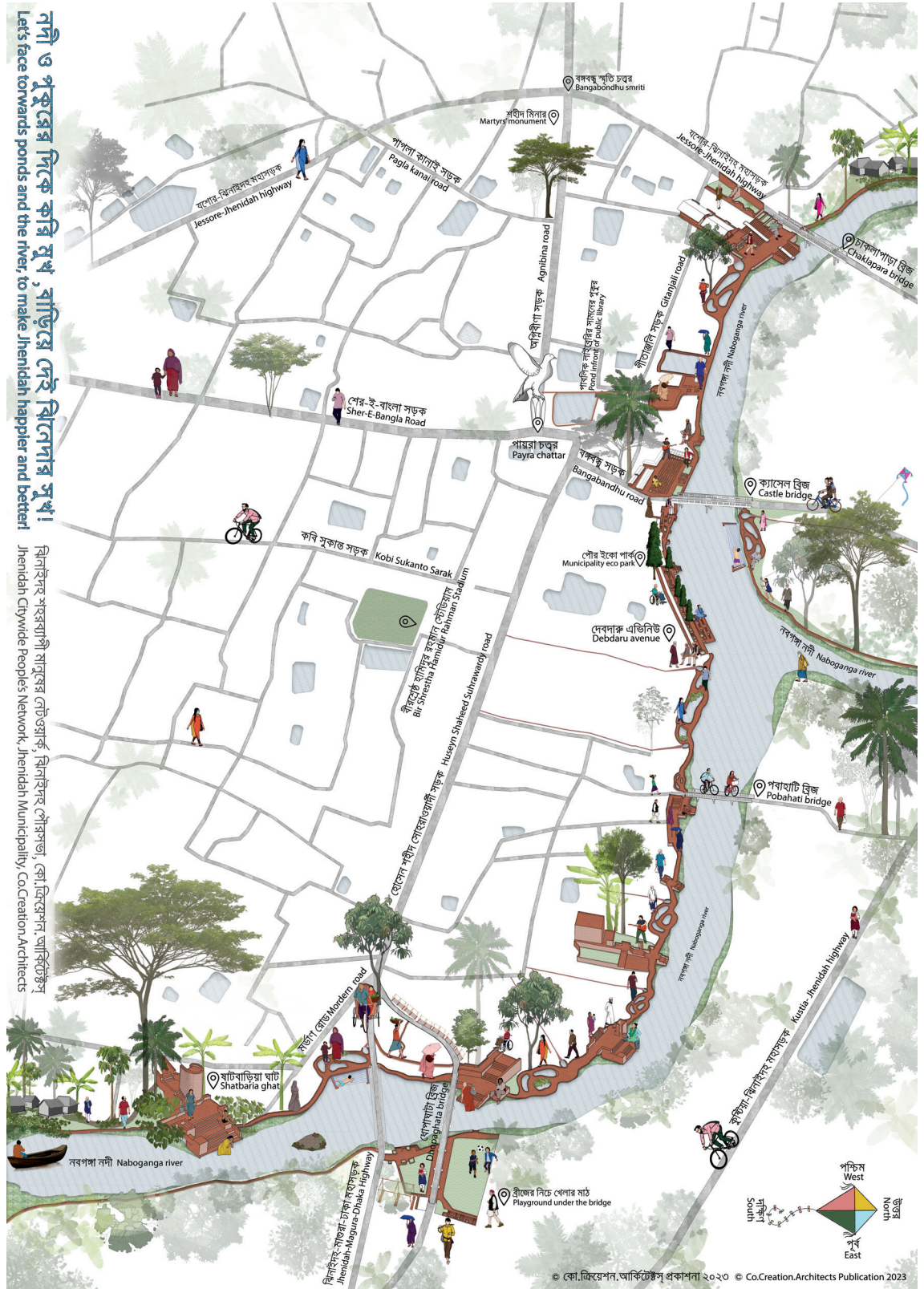
The quotes in this text are taken from various conversations between the architects and the author that took place in Bangladesh and Switzerland, as well as from talks given by the architects (period 2016–2024).



18. River and ponds of Jhenaidah



19. Connecting the existing urban open spaces by the river



20. Pathway of 4km along the river

নদী ও পুকুরের দিকে মুখ, বাড়িয়ে দেবে স্থানীয়দের সুখ!
Let's face towards ponds and the river, to make Jhenidah happier and better!

বিনাইদহ শহরব্যাপী মানুষের নেটওয়ার্ক বিনাইদহ পৌরসভা, কো.ক্রিয়েশন আর্কিটেক্স
Jhenidah Citywide People's Network, Jhenidah Municipality, Co.Creation.Architects

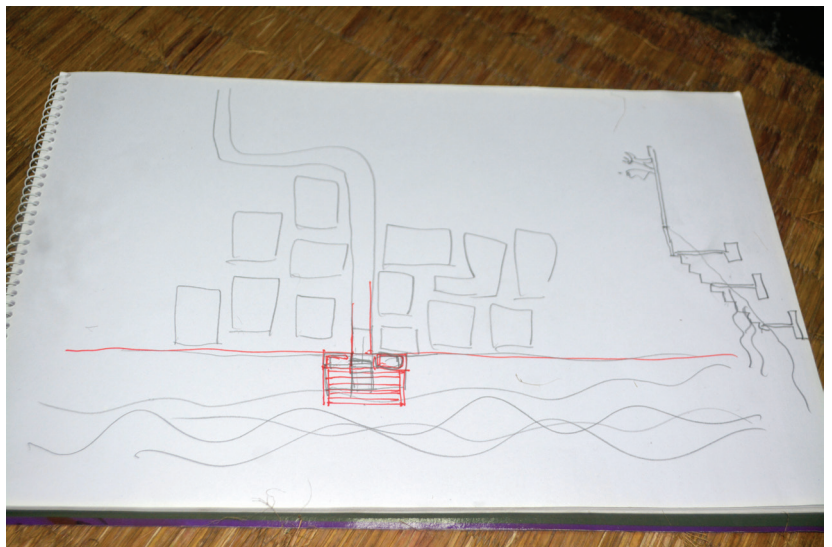


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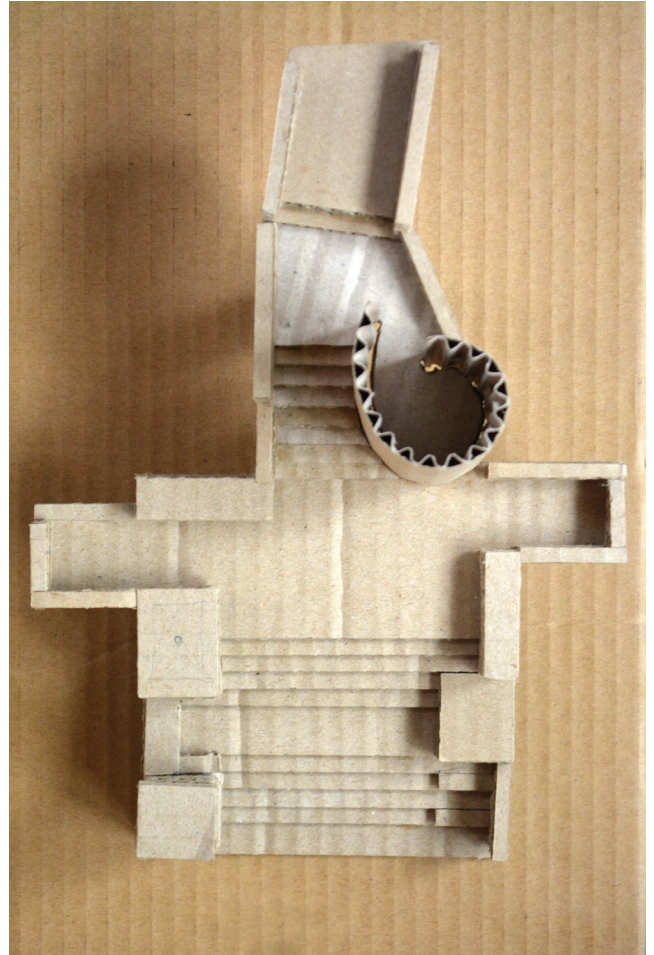
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21-26. Shatbaria Community
Ghat Co-creation Process



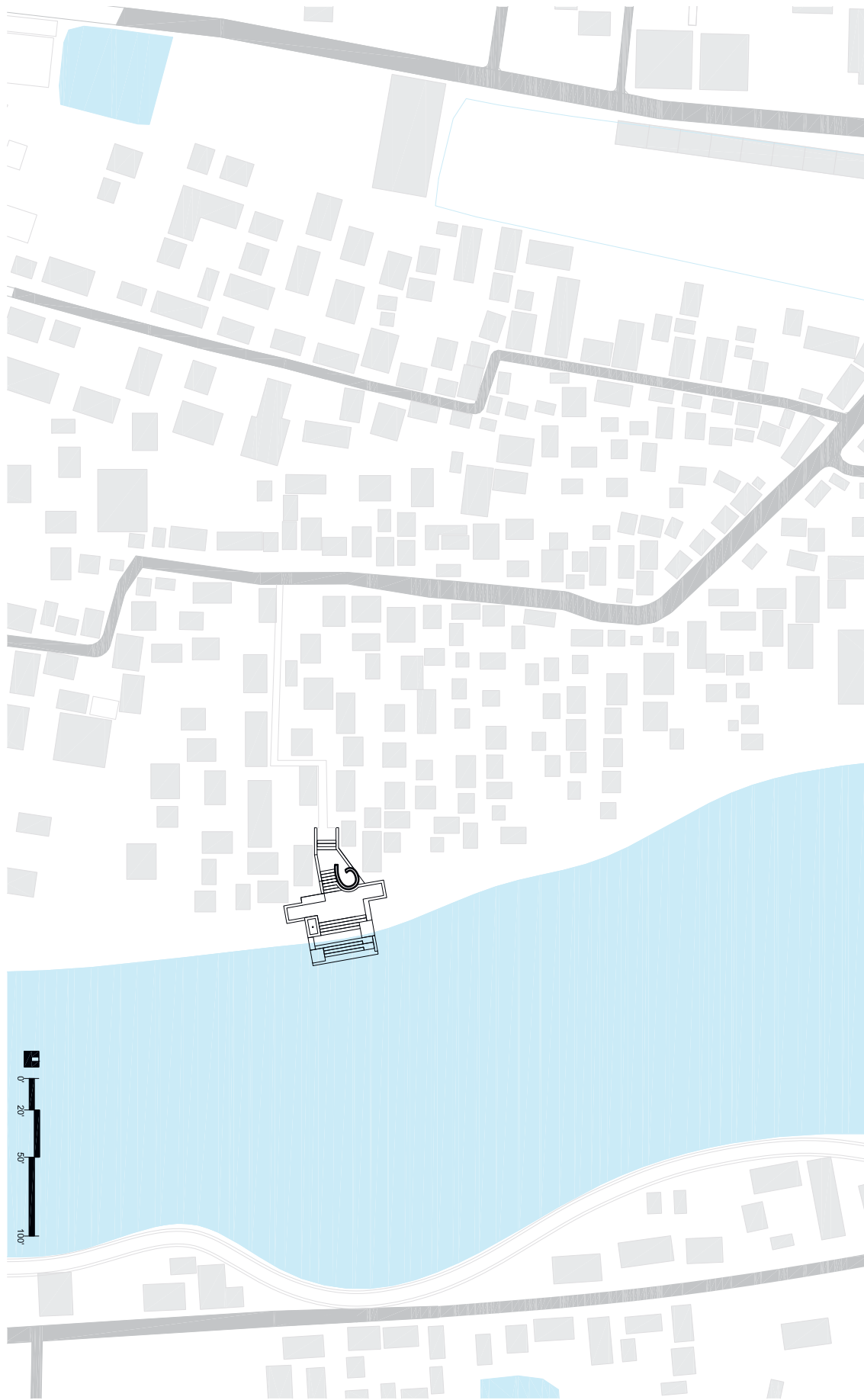
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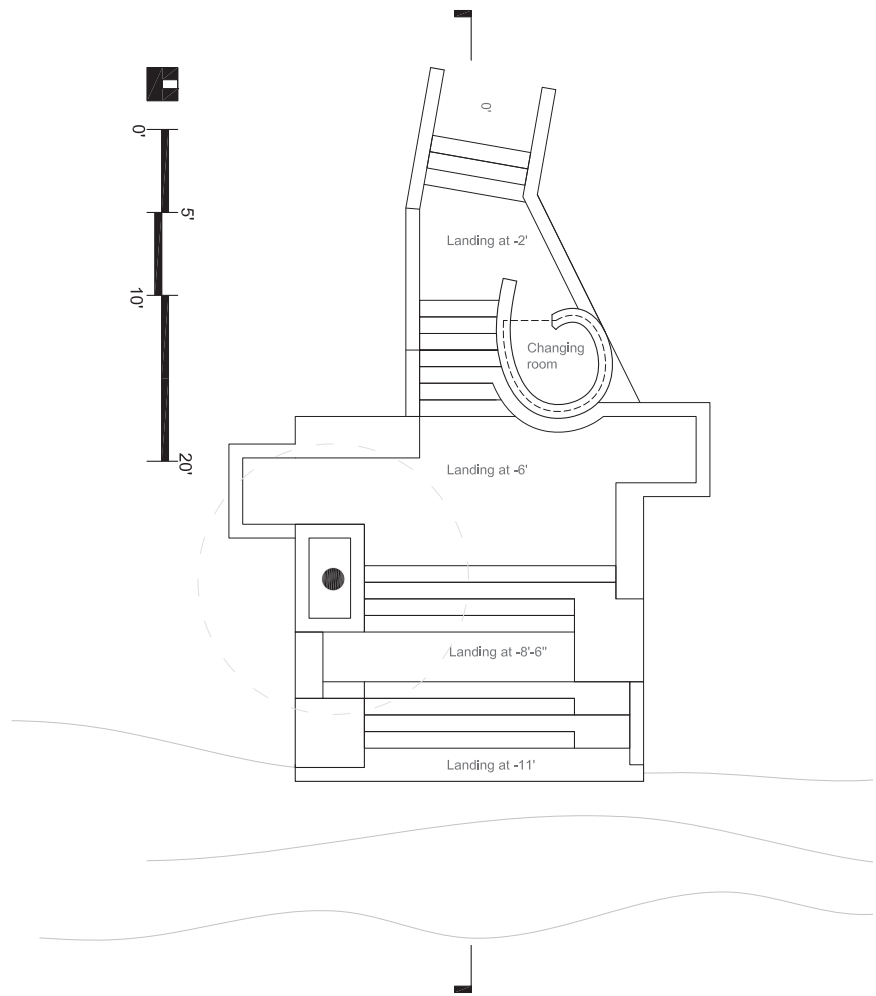
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27-29. Shatbaria Community Ghat Co-creation Process



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30-35. Shatbaria Community
Ghat Co-creation Process



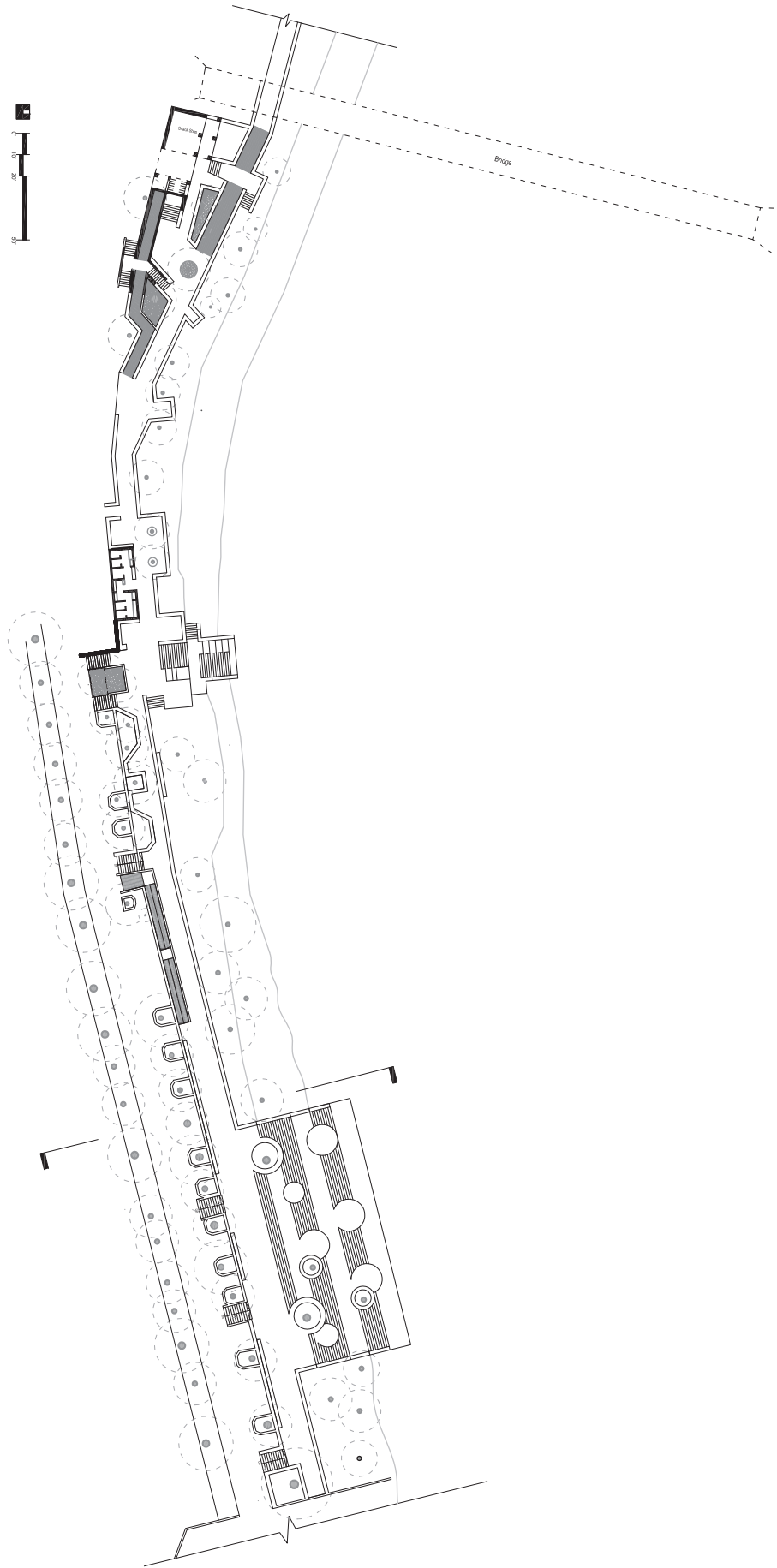
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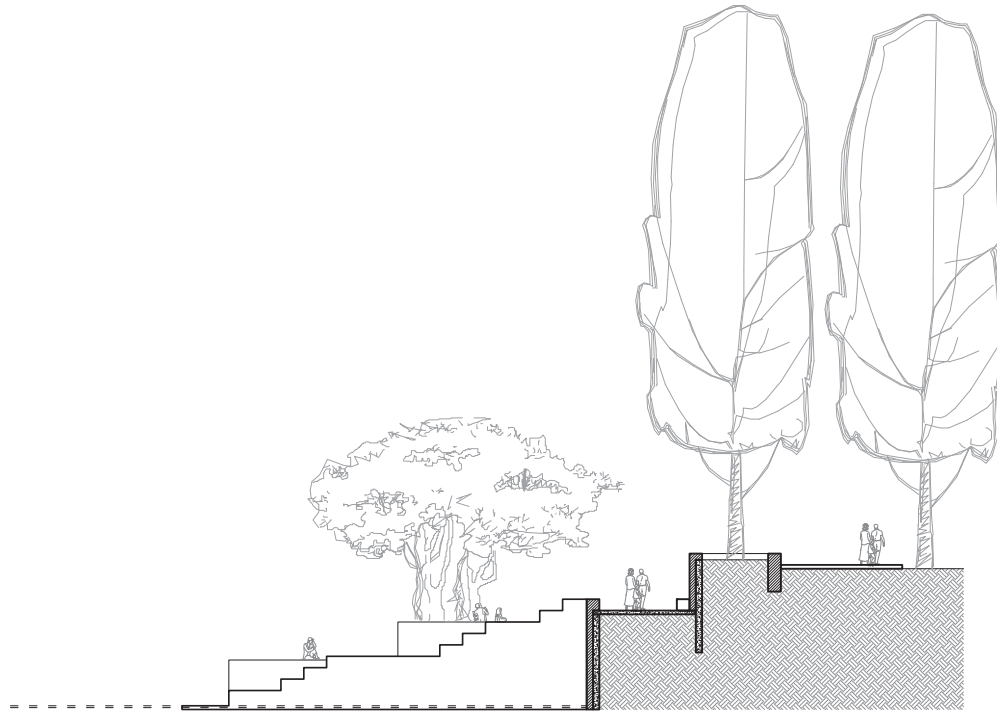
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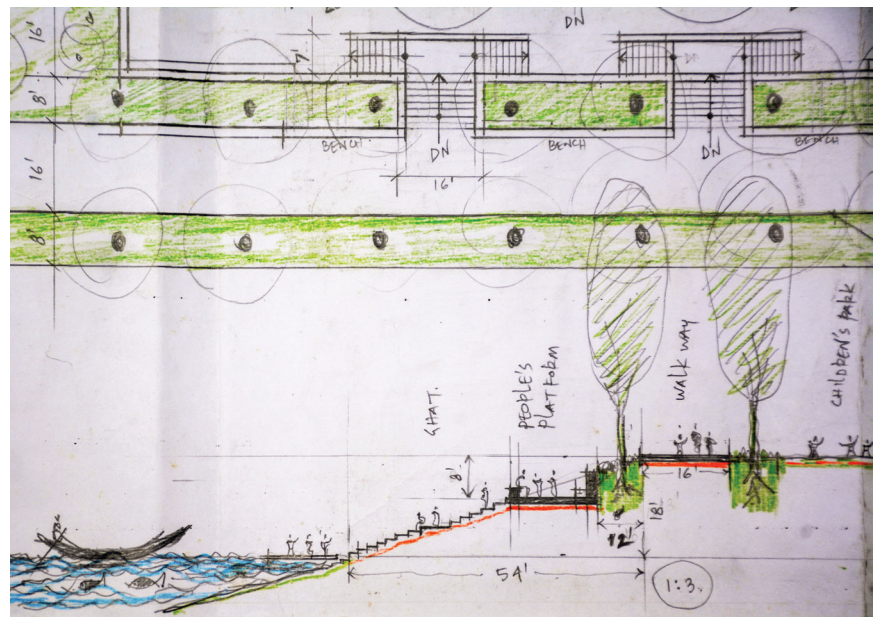
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36-38. Naboganga River Ghat
Co-creation Process



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39-44. Naboganga River Ghat
Co-creation Process



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45-50. Naboganga River Ghat
Co-creation Process



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51-53. Naboganga River Ghat
Co-creation Process





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54-56. Naboganga River Ghat
Co-creation Process