

Re-Thinking A City Born Housing : For The RMG Workers

N.M. Esa, Khan*

Guest faculty in University of Asia Pacific (UAP), Pakistan

Abstract

Most garment workers in Dhaka city live in inhuman conditions in the informal settlements under poverty and in a very unhealthy and miserable condition; and within this filthy situation they are paying almost half of their earnings as rent. These are the people who contribute to the success of garment economy in Bangladesh. Yet their role in the economy and their rights are overlooked by the government and the garment owners. Among these, habitation and lack of domestic spaces is one of the major concern. A widespread negligence towards the RMG worker's housing need inhibit the prospect of finding a viable solution to this problem. Public housing schemes hardly cater for the RMG workers, and its limited provisions are grossly inadequate. Given this background, this paper has conducted a research work on the existing habitation need of the RMG workers and at the end of the study, some initial recommendations have been placed to improve the present conditions of the garment worker's housing and their situation related with habitation, domestic spaces and spaces surrounding their living areas.

Keywords: Dhaka, RMG, housing, habitation, domestic spaces, urbanization

Introduction

RMG exports have experienced extraordinarily high rates of growth, along with the continual entry of new suppliers. From the 1960s, there has been an unprecedented relocation of world manufacturing capacity towards a selection of developing countries, with the export of RMG playing a particularly important role. Bangladesh has observed a remarkable growth in the RMG industry since its beginning in late 1970s. More than 3.2 million people are working in this sector and about 5000 garments factories are scattered across the country¹. 85 percent of the labor force is women, mostly migrants, and in its early days, the industry employed some 60,000 child workers. Women form over 90 percent of production workers in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) factories, which constitutes about 70 percent of the total female employment in the country's manufacturing sector. This booming growth of Garment industry is one of the main cause of a rapid urbanization in Bangladesh and it creates tremendous pressure on housing situation among the garment workers

*Corresponding Author: N.M. Esa Khan, email: esaabrar@yahoo.com

and there is no direction and guideline regarding the development housing commensurate with the RMG industries.

Due to low wages by the Ready-made garment (RMG) workers and high tenancy rent in the nearby location of their working industries, they are housed in informal settlement along with other migrant workers in the city. The situation of the RMG worker's housing in Dhaka is similar in many ways to those of other cities in developing countries. There is a clear pattern of slum and squatter settlements based on the garment industries, scattered all over the city. These slums are characterized by high-density living, unsanitary situation, and unhygienic environment lacking basic services and amenities, high rate of illiteracy, environmental and psychological degradation, and precarious health situation. However, Bangladesh has not shown any inclination towards improving their environment. The existing housing crisis can be resolved to some extent through some innovative design intervention.

Methodology used in the study

The data set for this study were collected both from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include data collected through semi-structure questionnaire. Moreover, group discussion and personal observation were also used to synergize the study objectives. Some of the slums (Kunipara, Korail, and Duaripara) in Dhaka were a sampling basis for the research and design proposition. The research also used secondary data with particular references from internet and various publications for background analysis.

Literature Review

Empirical studies on RMG workers cover a wide-range of issues, however very few literature were found that had delved into the habitation issues. Zohir and Paul-Majumder (1996), Paul-Majumder and Begum (2000) and Zohir (2000) have done extensive research on the housing of garment workers. Their studies show that accommodation in the city at present is not adequate for present garment workers. Absar (2002) investigated on the Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh: the insecurity women face in an urban setting without proper affordable housing, transportation facilities and any form of social security. Bhuiyan (2012) explored the present socio-economic status of the garments workers from Rampura and Badda areas of Dhaka City.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to investigate on the existing habitation needs of the RMG workers and based on that findings, this study intended to propose some design interventions.

RMG Industries in Dhaka

80 percent of the garment industry, which accounts for 80 percent of all exports and employs about two million people in the country, is located in Dhaka. The draw of Dhaka is no surprise – it is a dynamic city and has attracted substantial industrial investments, particularly in the RMG industry, which has created demand for workers and services. An estimated 500,000 workers are employed in the RMG sector in Dhaka. Most of these workers are women, who provide critical support to their

families.²This would indicate potential for increased labor force participation with adequate day care options for mothers with young children.

RMG worker's habitation in Dhaka

High land value and the reluctance and negligence of city development authorities to provide land and/or housing and associated services leave the RMG workers with no choice but to live in informal settlement which are within their affordability, beyond the purview of the formal land market, and possess the least risk of eviction. They almost pay the same amount of money for per square feet as the middle-income people are paying, however are living without amenities and any kind of facilities which they should get.

This paper has discussed the habitation in the slums as a reference to the housing of the RMG workers as they live in the slum areas. Following problems were found during the investigation in the accommodation of the garments workers:

Location: The choice of housing is determined, to a greater content, by close proximity to work place and travel cost. Poor and insufficient public transport system is very poor encourages the RMG workers to live near their work places.

Dwelling units: Each dwelling unit lacks the required spaces for a family to live with their family members. Average room size is 10 feetX12 feet with 5-6 people in average living in one unit. There are variations in residence types according to job categories. The sewing and finishing helpers live mostly with family members or relatives.³The dwellings are laid in very irregular pattern and no proper orientation. House to house gap varies in different spaces and the passageways are filled with dark. Street pattern are also very chaotic and disorganized; there is very little connection with the surrounding major road.

Housing materials: These houses are made of low cost housing materials like CI sheet, bamboo, straw and polythene and are highly vulnerable during the rainy season and susceptible to fire hazard. Roofs are made of corrugated iron sheet or other thatching material.

Shared/common space: RMG workers are living in the slums with people from different professions such as rickshaw pullers, drivers, and hawkers even the drug smugglers, prostitutes. The majority of households have no kitchen or cooking facility and they cook either in a shared room or in open spaces. There is no provision of day care center or any space for the recreation. Children seem to roam around in the filthy environment with other children of different ages as their parents have to leave them alone at home. There is also a lack of open space and vegetation.

²Baker, J. L. (2007) Dhaka: Improving living conditions for the urban poor. World Bank.

³Zohir, S C and P Paul-Majumder (1996): 'The Garment Workers in Bangladesh: Economic. Social and Health Conditions', BIDS

Water: Most slum dwellers get tap water mainly through informal sources; some depend on public water supply points outside the slum. Some use tube wells, each serving 100-200 families. Where potable water is not available the dwellers use unclean water from various sources including polluted lakes.

Sanitation: The slums have temporary latrines, generally shared by multiple families. There is no access to municipal waste disposal facilities, hence they dispose their waste generally to the marshy land adjacent to their settlements, which also pose serious challenges to the living environment. *°

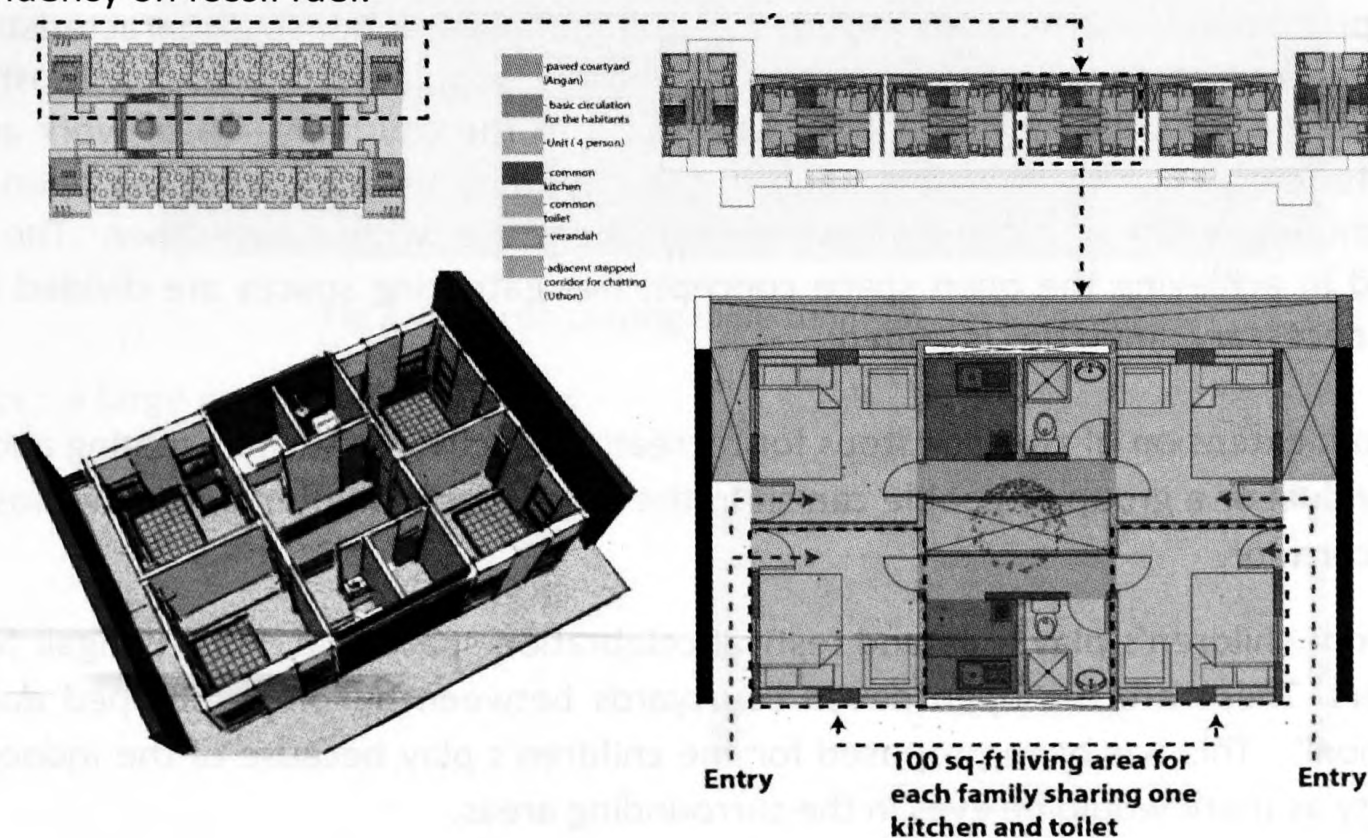
Electricity: Very few slum houses have access to electricity and others have an illegal connection. Some burn kerosene lamp or hurricane as a substitute of electricity.

Gas: In most cases when they don't have municipal gas or gas services, they cook with fuel wood and generally people share cookers.

Environment: The place where the garments workers live is somewhat grimy. Most of their houses are found next to the city garbage or along the putrid area by the big canal, drain or big ditches. Sound pollution for which the environment is not fit to live in normal life.

Design Proposition

Based on the above mention habitation needs, a prototypic four-storey row housing has been proposed for the increasing number of RMG workers in Dhaka city. The housing is proposed with full amenities, hospital, school, market, etc. It was specially taken care in this proposition that the internal relationship and how it grows through spaces and its spatiality. The housing comprised of both dormitories and family units. Shared toilets and kitchen facilities are provided at both corners for easier accessibility. The corridor and the linear stairways is provided next to an open courtyard for natural lighting and better visibility. The top floors are also connected to the nature through vertical courtyards. Solar panels, rain gardens, storm and gray water treatment facilities are proposed to promote renewable energies, as the sun and rain are readily available throughout the year in Dhaka. Sustainable green building materials and technologies are recommended as well to reduce dependency on fossil fuel.



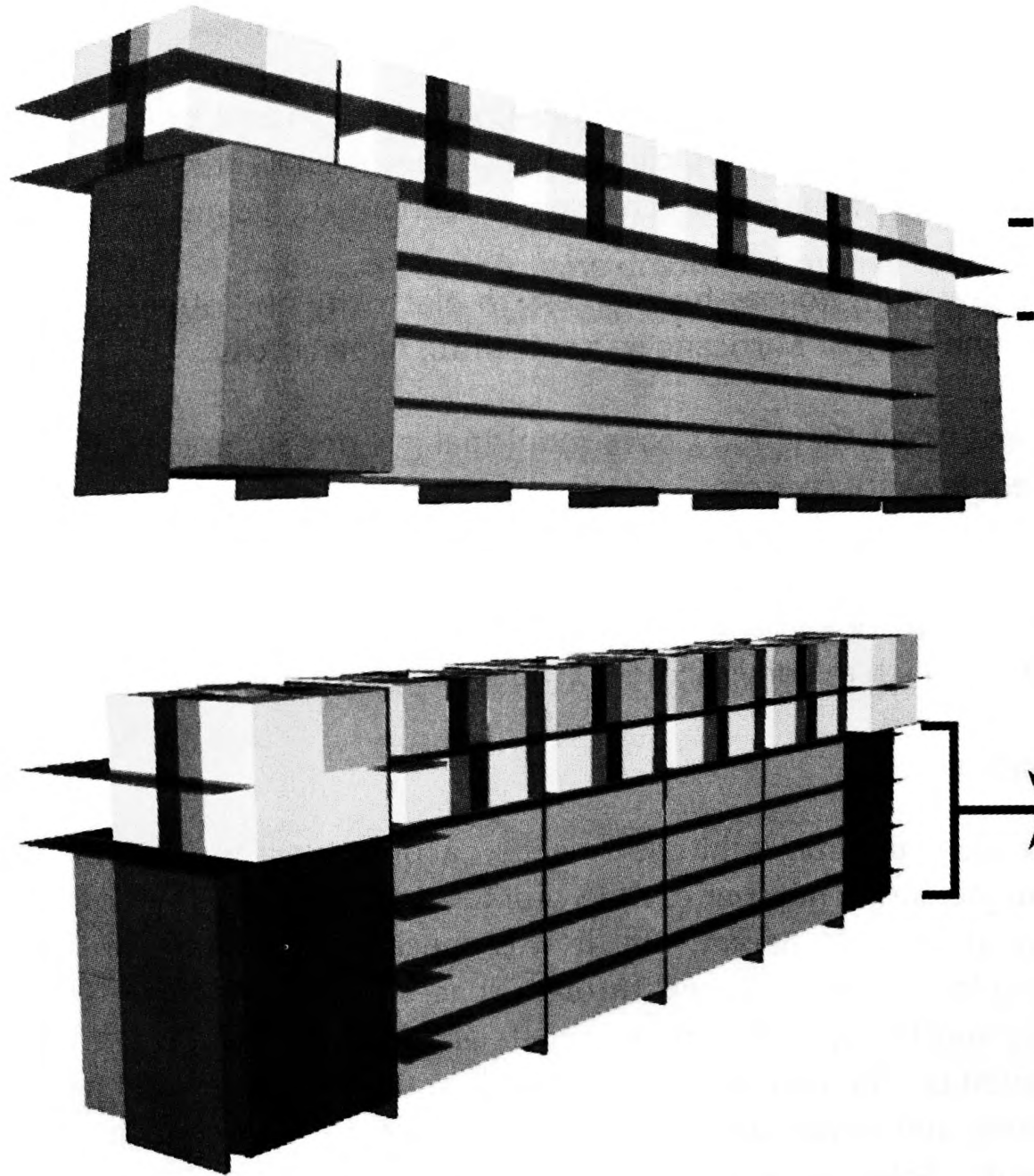


Fig 1. Three floors with dorm units (ground-2nd) and the dorm units are converted into family units at after 2nd floor

The design propositions intended to include the traditional rural housing characteristics within the low-cost mass housing for the RMG workers in densely populated Dhaka city. Most of the RMG workers belong to the migrant population, who came to the city in search of work and for better living opportunities. Prior to their migration in the city, they used to live in an open place with a friendly gathering with a good connection and bondage with each other. The design was concentrated in achieving the open space concept; five gathering spaces are divided into compact spaces with necessary amenities included:

1. *Uthon*: extension of corridor steps for recreational activities such as seating and chatting. An individual or a group of people can sit in the quiet space, uninterrupted by those walking on the corridor.
2. *Angan*: children's play area and festival celebration space (Eid, Puja, Bengali New Year and others). These are the open paved courtyards between buildings, stepped down from the "Uthon". This has been proposed for the children's play because of the indoor setting and safety as there would be eyes in the surrounding areas.



Fig 2. Children playing in the Angan (Left) and Women Leisure activities at Angan (Right)

3. Prangon: backyard with trees and shrubs. Urban farming was proposed for this area. Workers or their family can use these spaces for growing fresh fruits and vegetables and have an alternate source of earning. These harvests can also be served in the dwellers dining as well.
4. Boithokhana: Double heighted vertical courtyards between rooms at the upper floors for different amenities, from day care facilities to children's indoor play area. These spaces are essentially the common rooms for the dwellers.

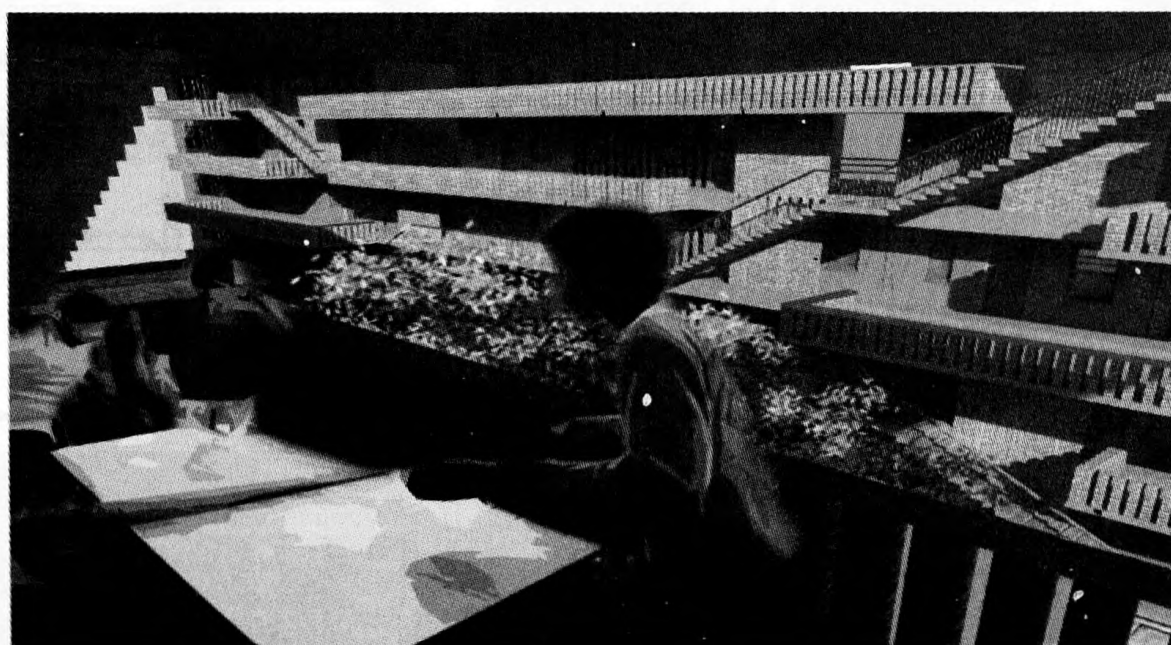


Fig 3. Children playing table tennis at Boithokhana

5. Prantor:: a large open to sky play field

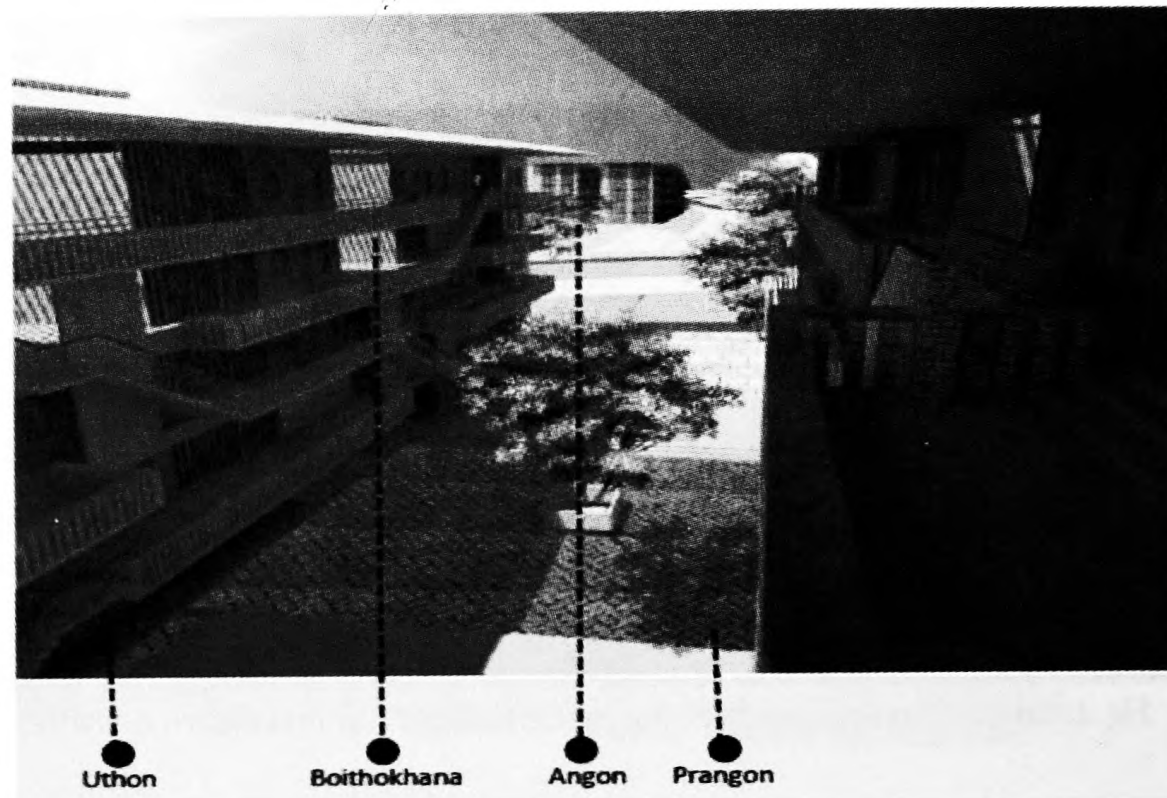


Fig 4. Open space segments

Conceptual sectional analysis

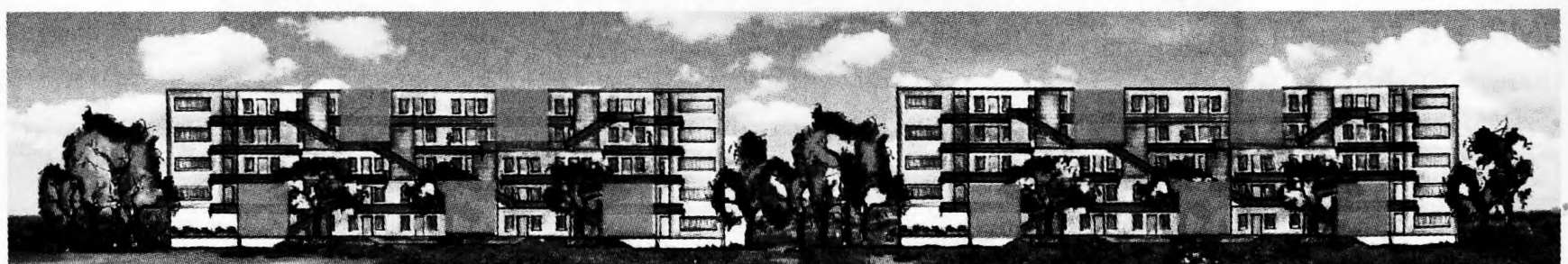
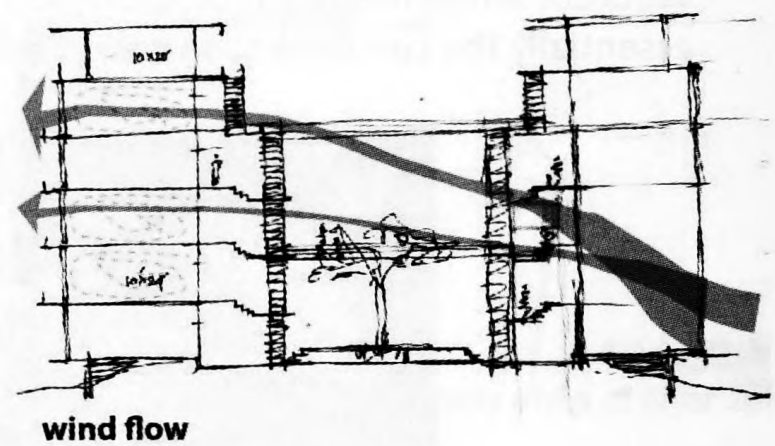
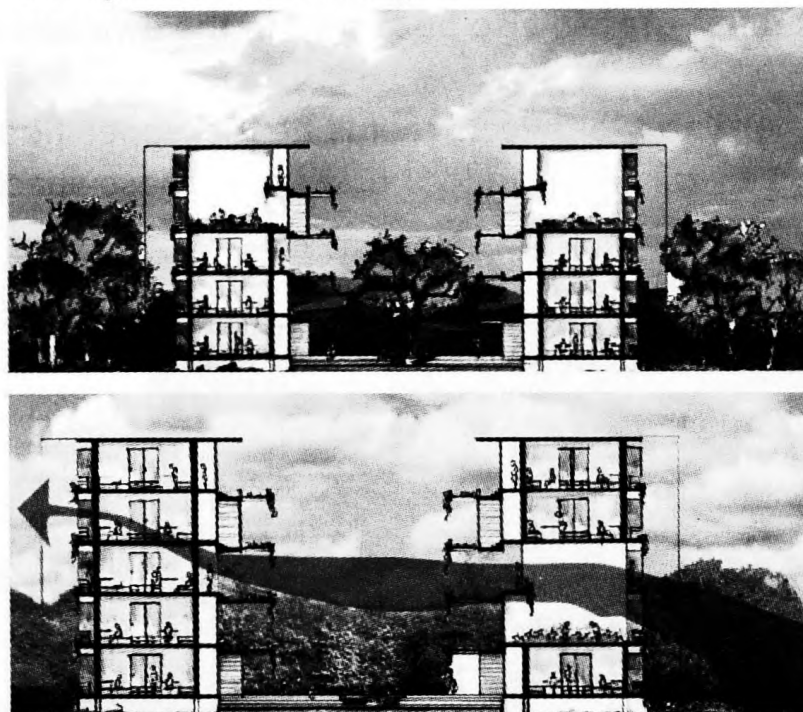


Fig 5. Sectional analysis

Conclusion

Housing is one the basic needs of human being and the RMG workers are derived of this right due to negligence by the public and our private sector. Every year millions of foreign currency earned by the Ready-made Garment sector and yet the workers contributing to this industry are living under penury without having any housing facilities. The following steps can be taken regarding the habitation needs of the RMG workers in Dhaka city:

- The public sector can take up schemes to provide low-cost core houses' sites and services schemes, walk-up row housing, tenement blocks, etc. to cater to the needs of the low-income group.
- Housing development in the public and private sector can conform to the development of physical and social infrastructure like, water supply, garbage disposal and sanitation, roads, electricity, gas, telephone, etc.
- Credit facilities can be extended to individuals and institutions remodeled to increase the housing stock as well as improve the quality of housing.
- More research is required to solve this housing and other related issues as soon as possible to hold the flow of the growing RMG development.

References

- Absar, S. S. (2002). Women garment workers in Bangladesh. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3012-3016.
- BGMEA (2007) Directory of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Association.
- Harris, N., Bulbul, L., Mainuddin, K., Meng, K., Naguib, S., & Srinivas, S. (1999). Garment-making and urbanisation: an introductory study of four cases (Vol. 6). Urban Partnership Working Paper Series.
- Hossain, H., Jahan, R. and Sobhan, S., 1993. No Better Option: Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh, University Press Limited, Dhaka.
- Zohir, S C and P Paul-Majumder (1996): 'The Garment Workers in Bangladesh: Economic, Social and Health Conditions', BIDS
- Zohir, S C (2000). Intra-household Relations and Social Dynamics among Garment Workers in Dhaka City, paper presented at the National Seminar on Garment Industry in Bangladesh: Economic and Social Dimensions, Dhaka. January 21-22.