

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Nasimgaon Khalabazar, Dhaka, April 2009

One day in April 2009, Afsana as usual prepared to sell vegetables from a small market place in Nasimgaon, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Previously she used to put a wooden bed onto the sandy open field for display of the goods. But in recent months, after the election of a new government, this sandy field has been claimed by local leaders, affiliated to the now ruling political party, who subsequently established a concrete platform for market activities. They subdivided the platform into eleven units and distributed ownership of these units among themselves. The vendors who had previously used wooden beds to sell fruits or vegetables now had to pay rent to the new ‘owners’ of the public space. Because of her own affiliation with the ruling political party, Afsana was not made to pay rent but was given ownership of one unit. But the exact position of her unit remained contested due to contradicting oral and written agreements. Thus on this particular morning, she found that her neighbour had removed the vegetables she had planned to sell on that day. Seeing this she got angry and exclaimed: “You have removed the vegetables. If you can then remove me; I will not move from here. If you have power, then take possession of the *bhit* [shop unit<sup>1</sup>] by removing me.” To underline her claim she called Roxana, a respected female political leader of the ruling party beyond the local level, to whom she was close. Roxana told one of the local leaders who had been involved in claiming the public space and establishing the concrete platform: “If Afsana files a case on the issue of woman torture then I will be the main witness”. After this incident Afsana for a while did not get disturbed again in carrying on with her business. (This account is based on an interview with Afsana, conducted on 23.03.2010)

This was not the last encounter between her and the local leaders, and, along with the similar stories that could be told of other vendors in the same place, this narrative reveals the importance of the use of public space in the local economy as well as the continuous dynamics and contestations of access to public space in everyday life.

## *Setting the research problem*

The above scene of everyday life is set in Dhaka, one of the densest cities worldwide, with an average density of 30,000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and low-income neighbourhood densities of 200,000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, and a total population of 12 million inhabitants. Given these tremendous densities, public spaces are a scarce resource. At the same time, many urban livelihood activities are based on access to public space. In Dhaka, pavements, street spaces, vacant plots, public parks and city squares are used intensively for all kinds of economic activities, i.e.

1 The Bengali term *bhit* generally refers to a raised platform in a variety of contexts, for example in agricultural production or shop units in a market place. Here it refers to such shop unit demarcations on a concrete platform.

vending, production and provision of services. There has been considerable research on access to public space in the ‘visible arenas’ of cities, i.e. central areas that are to some degree controlled by state or municipal actors, even if these statutory actors apply informal modes of regulation. Bayat (2004) identifies the street (public space) as an “arena of politics” and draws on research experience in the Middle East, while Etzold et al. (2009) work on the contested spaces of street food vendors in the central localities of Dhaka. The above example, however, indicates how access to public space for livelihood activities is also contested on a neighbourhood scale and how inhabitants and local actors continuously negotiate and dispute access arrangements to use public space. These negotiations can, however, not be limited to economic livelihood activities only. Access arrangements to public space also include other uses, such as recreational activities or festivals as extra-everyday events.

The above narrative furthermore underlines how these ‘negotiations’ of access to public space are closely interwoven with political power and the ability to draw on sources of power, i.e. Afsana was able to make her spatial claim in opposition to a powerful political leader of the locality because she was able to get the support of Rizia, a politician active in higher level party organisations. This example thus also points at a local institutional setting shaped to a considerable degree by politics and political authorities. With the city ever-expanding, settlements of low-income groups only receive minimal attention from statutory authorities who are more engaged in serving the middle to high-income groups. While this does not mean a complete absence of statutory authorities, the low-income settlements are thus largely ‘governed’ by local leaders who, based on political and social definitions of leadership, form the local ‘elites’. Besides the sources of power that became obvious in the introductory narratives, there exist other sources of power actors can draw upon. While the example showed two powerful women, the social gender relations of society in many cases suggest a different picture where women’s access to space is considerably limited by gender norms.

In this context of low-income settlements and scarcity of public spaces, making them a contested resource, I want to investigate the importance of public spaces in everyday life and the underlying access arrangements negotiated among actors in a setting of diverse institutions and power relations.

### *Research objectives and methodological approach*

The above discussion indicates the four topics that provide the main basis for this research, namely the spatiality of livelihoods, the negotiations of access to public space, the discussion surrounding the framing of the concept of urban informality and finally the question of spatial justice. Accordingly, the main objective in starting the research is to explore and analyse the importance of urban public space for the everyday life of urban dwellers and the mechanisms of how access to public space as a livelihood asset is negotiated among actors in an environment characterised by informality as a dominant mode of the production of space. A second

objective is more normative: the discussion of how the findings relate to concepts of spatial justice, and what could be the role of planning in establishing and guaranteeing equal rights to the city and equal citizenship for all urban dwellers.

This research follows a qualitative approach of grounded theory, combined with elements of ethnographic research. The fieldwork thus provided the main input for the generation of findings with the help of emerging categories during data analysis. The methodological triangulation I applied included the methods of observation and participant observation, solicited photography, qualitative interviews and informal discussions. Especially the participant observations as an element of ethnographic research allowed me an in-depth investigation of the local negotiation processes of access to public space. This perspective was particularly useful to understand the power relations at work and the social norms and institutions defining access to public space, especially differentiated according to gender. Given this embedded research, I thoroughly reflected on my role as a researcher and the positionality I assumed and I was assigned by others.

The investigation focussed on two study settlements within the urban fabric of Dhaka. Nasimgaon is a low-income settlement that has been built without planning approval on government land since the 1990s. The settlement today is consolidated and of a high density, while its housing structures remain predominantly single-storey CI-sheet houses. However, the development pressures, which also endanger the existing public space, are made obvious by the internal transformation and densification processes, especially with encroachment on the last remaining public spaces and the introduction of two-storey houses. Furthermore, they are inherent in the continuous discussions about redeveloping the land by real estate developers due to its location adjacent to some of Dhaka's high-income settlements.

Manikpara is an older settlement founded in the 1970s adjacent to the old parts of Dhaka. Today the settlement is of a mixed socio-economic structure, with many low-income households but also an emerging middle class. Manikpara is consolidated, if not saturated, and public spaces in the internal area only exist in the form of the very limited and narrow road network. Accordingly, the public spaces adjacent to the settlement are used intensively. The development pressure on the area is also high due to its location adjacent to Old Dhaka and the plastic recycling industry as a main economic resource of the area. For the last couple of years Manikpara has been undergoing a highly dynamic transformation process into multi-storey buildings.

### *Structure of the research*

This PhD thesis is structured into four parts and twelve chapters. An overview of the structure is provided in Figure 1.

**Part I 'Situating the Research'** begins with a discussion of the most relevant theoretical departures (Chapter 2). Based on these considerations, the research framework and methodological approach are outlined in Chapter 3, while Chapter

4 follows up with a detailed discussion of the application of research methods and reflections on my positionality. The concluding Chapter 5 sets the regional and local context of the research by reconsidering the specific preconditions in Bangladesh and Dhaka concerning the research topic, and introduces the study settlements.

**Part II ‘The Spatiality of Livelihoods’** opens up the empirical parts of the research and consists of two chapters. In Chapter 1, the everyday and extra-everyday life activities taking place in public spaces are presented in a mainly descriptive style in order to provide the reader with an initial overview of spatial practices. These are then analysed and interpreted in the following Chapter 7 which focuses on the production and re-production of spatial practices and the specific public spaces created by social gender relations. Part II finishes with a conclusion of the main results.

**Part III ‘Negotiations of Access to Public Space’** constitutes the second empirical part of the research and consists of two chapters. In Chapter 8, three narratives of the negotiations of access to public space are outlined, focussing on developments in three public spaces in Nasimgaon and Manikpara based on interviews and participant observations. These are then analysed and interpreted in Chapter 1 which analyses the underlying negotiation process in detail, especially with reference to the power sources drawn upon, strategies employed, outcomes achieved and dominant/resistance conceptualisations of space. Similarly to Part II, Part III closes with a conclusion summarising the main results of this empirical part.

**Part IV ‘Reconnecting the Research to the Theory Debate and Urban Planning’** seeks to review the empirical findings of the research in two chapters. The first Chapter 10 discusses the findings of the empirical research in relation to the concept of urban informality and explores how the research can contribute to this theory debate. Chapter 11 then discusses the research findings in relation to spatial justice and provides entry points to utilise the outcomes of this research in urban planning.

Finally, in Chapter 12 I conclude this research by summarising the main findings, reflecting on the key issues of the research methodology and suggesting entry points for further research.

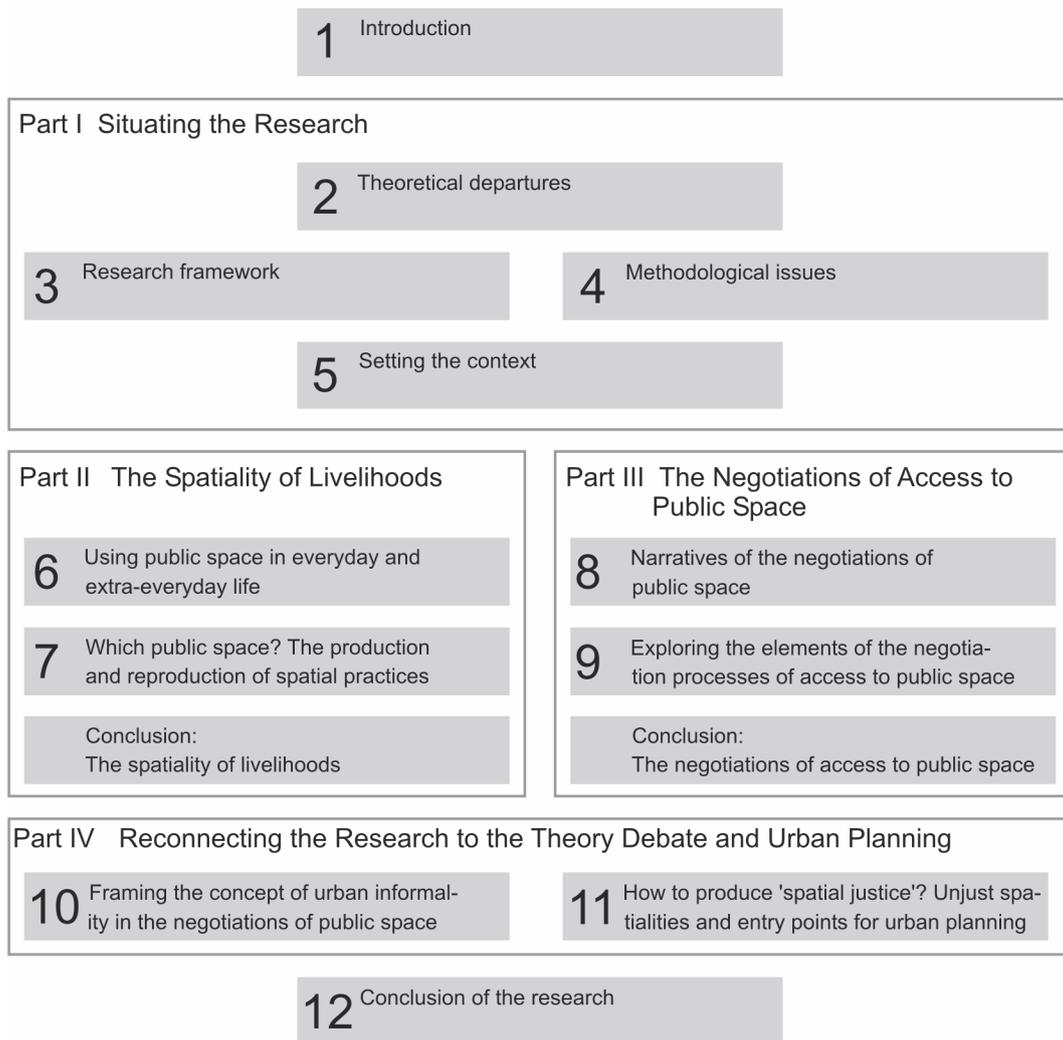


Figure 1: Structure of the thesis