Designing with the Internally Displaced Slum Dwellers in Bangladesh

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In pursuing human-centered design, we know we need to build sensitivity around people's unique situations. Turning our attention to people's regional and global movements, we come to see that this involves much more than building productive and enjoyable consumer devices. It is about understanding how technologies might entangle with how people sustain themselves—how they live their lives—in ways that cohere to their faiths and belief systems. In this article, we show how the forced movement of people from rural to urban areas of Bangladesh places them in challenging situations, and we begin to think about where technology can play a role.

We still cannot forget the huge blaze raging that night, the massive fire swept through our homes in slums, and we could not manage to get the deadly fire under control. Thousands of people had been injured for life, including eight other men and women, and a girl of 11 years died.

These are the words of Eskandar Ali, a 55-year-old former rickshaw driver who was sharing his experience of witnessing a recent fire in Kalyanpur slum, which the slum dwellers identified as the most heinous strategy to displace the urban poor. Ali has been living in Kalyanpur slum in the north part of Dhaka city since 1989. Like most of the people living here, his family migrated to Dhaka from a remote village after losing their land to a massive flood. Kalyanpur slum is one of Dhaka's largest temporary informal settlements, where thousands of internally displaced poor people like Ali gather to find cheap accommodations. Their shanty houses, made of bamboo and sheets of corrugated iron, are considered illegal under city law. Thus, they do not get the minimum infrastructural support that the city provides to its formal residents (including electricity, gas, and water). The city randomly destroys these informal settlements for various so-called developmental purposes, including city expansion, modernizing transportation, and aspiring toward the aesthetics of other cities [1].

While bulldozing a slum with or without a formal
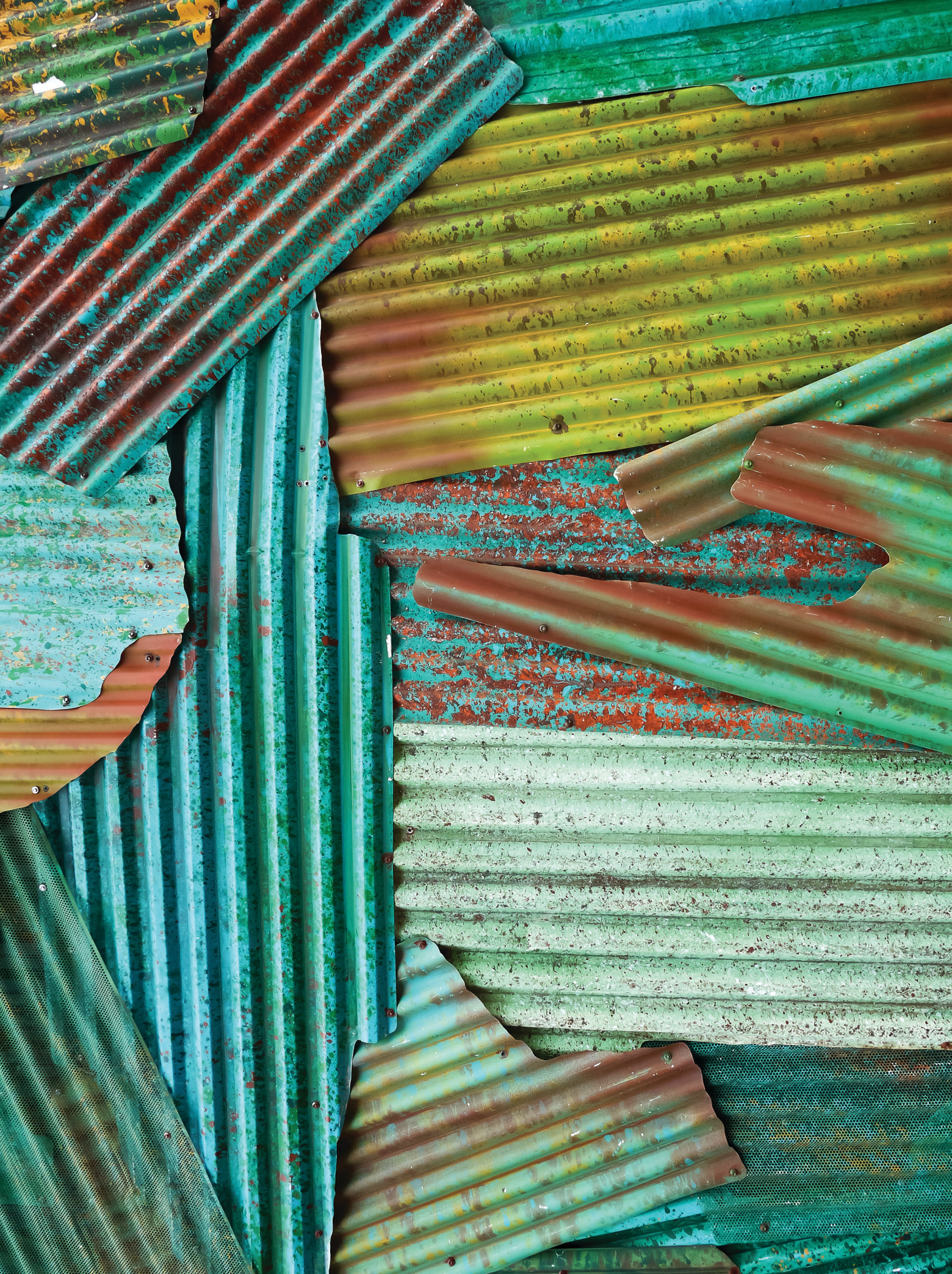
notice is very common, residents of Kalyanpur slum still believe that some local people planned the fire in October 2020 as an act of sabotage [2]. The constant fear of losing everything in a blink of an eye looms as residents struggle to find their livelihood in the city. However, the fire and its destructive force are not the end of the story. An interim decision by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh held that the slum could not be cleared without proper relocation of the residents. However, when the city decided to restructure the entry road of the slum, citizens felt threatened. The road was 20 feet wide at the time of our data collection, but the city corporation, with the public works division's permission, had been planning to double the width, to 40 feet. The slum dwellers saw this initiative as an escalation toward eviction.

The people of Kalyanpur *Pora Bosti* (burnt slum) always look for informal ways to resist such violence, as the city denies them formal institutional support. A few years ago, they formed a cooperative, *Sheba Sangha*, for the social welfare of displaced people. This community-led organization consists of elderly locals outside the slum community who are experienced in fighting legal and political battles for the slum dwellers. They often organize meetings and marches around important issues. In most cases, meetings occur at the mosque in the middle of the slum. As the only permanent brick building, the mosque is not only a religious home for the slum community but is also a practical space to organize resistance.

During our field visit, part of an ethnographic project that examines the tension between technology-mediated development and tradition in urban Bangladesh, we attended a special meeting at the mosque commemorating the fire incident. People sat together after completing their *Asr* prayer. They expressed their grief for the loss they had incurred and emphasized their need for legal protections as slum residents. We found that the mosque imam, along with other leaders from the slum, played an essential role in shaping community members' opinions and giving them a voice. In general, imams are considered especially educated and wise; we observed that the organizers gave them the responsibility to prepare and read some printed handouts during the meeting. Those handouts described the context of the meeting, evoked the memories of past violence, and explained the importance of remaining united to fight against any current or future injustices to the slum dwellers. We found that citizens trusted those words to be authentic, as the imam said them. We also found that people from other religions also gathered in the meeting and had a similar respect for the imam.

Our study revealed two essential roles of a mosque, as a religious artifact, in the lives of these Kalyanpur Pora Bosti residents. First, since mosques are harder than homes to destroy or dislocate thanks to urban Dhaka's strong respect for religion, they help the migrated communities attain a certain level of permanence in their access to the cityscape. Second, these mosques help the community get organized, share their traumatic experiences, strengthen their community bonds, and raise their voice against any form of injustice. Such roles

for religious-built infrastructures have been discussed in various disciplines, from anthropology to urban studies. For example, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh describes how mosques created a dialogic process between the displaced population and their political engagement with secular and faith-based humanitarian systems in the Sahrawi Camp in Algeria [3]. Similarly, Nusrat Mim has recently shown how the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, through different Islamic religious activities and practices, protect their cultural identities, negotiate with the local governing agents, and maintain solidarity with the host communities in their camp lives [4]. These and many other studies demonstrate how faith-based institutions, initiatives, and activities provide crucial support to migrated populations when secular government, NGO, or international mechanisms failed.

Our ongoing study delves deeper into the potential role of HCI design in these grassroots-level, faith-based resistance activities among vulnerable displaced populations. With them, we are studying and designing various safe digital spaces for preserving stories and sharing emotions. We are also studying the emotional overlaps between the locals and the migrants through the lens of religious sentiment, and the potential of a combined voice for the migrants. Simultaneously, we are investigating how religion may serve as an alternative informal platform for justice for these people when the formal, state-operated justice platforms refuse them. We believe that such integration of faith with HCI will create a better scaffolding for global migrant communities in their struggle for legal rights.

ENDNOTES
1. Ahmed, S.I., Mim, N.J., and Jackson, S.J. Residual mobilities: Infrastructural displacement and post-colonial computing in Bangladesh. *Proc. of CHI '15*. ACM, New York, 2015, 437–446.
2. Fire in slums does not happen it is planned. The New Nation. Nov. 1, 2020; http://m.thedailynewnation.com/news/267592/fire-in-slums-does-not-happen-it-is-planned
3. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival*. Syracuse Univ. Press, 2014.
4. Mim, N.J. Religion at the margins: Resistance to secular humanitarianism at the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. *Religions 11*, 8 (2020), 423.

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