

***This Being Human* Transcript
Ep. 21 – Marina Tabassum**

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience of being alive better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, architect Marina Tabassum.

MARINA TABASSUM:

To me, buildings are all beings. They're not machines. You interact with it. You have a dialogue with a building, you have dialogue with spaces. So there needs to be a space. And I think I want people to find that space which — where you go and you connect.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

When I first visited Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital city, one of the things that struck me was the rich and varied built environment. It's a dense place, full of movement and colour and life. There's the Old City, a glorious testament to its day under the Mughal Empire. And yet the city isn't stuck in the past. There are also the parliament buildings designed by the famous Louis Kahn, a modern, imposing concrete structure that looks like it's floating in the river. And then there's the memorial to those who died in Bangladesh's war of independence, a towering monument surrounded by a floor of red brick. This rich landscape has served as the backdrop to Marina Tabassum's work — but it's also one she has helped to shape. Her own buildings are both simple and unmistakable. She often uses brick, stone and natural light to make minimal, but striking designs, such as Bangladesh's Museum of Independence or the award-winning Bait Ur Rouf Mosque. She runs her own architecture company, Marina Tabassum Architects, and is the academic director of the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements. Marina Tabassum joined me from her home in Dhaka, where we began by talking about what she loves most about her city.

MARINA TABASSUM:

Well, you know, you wake up in the morning. Every day is a new day in Dhaka. You never know what to expect. So, you know, it's kind of challenging, but at the same time, it's full of a lot of vitality. There's an exuberance about Dhaka, which I really love, especially since last year when

we went into lockdown and the pandemic. All of a sudden the city went quiet. I felt like, you know, you miss that when you don't hear people around, you don't hear the honking of the cars. And so, you know, that's the kind of city it is, which I really like and I love. And the diversity is also quite interesting, as you just mentioned, so there is a lot of layering of Dhaka starting from the Mughal or even the pre-Mughal, to now being this bustling city, which is like really vibrant. Every time — I travel quite a bit, but I'm always longing to come home and, you know, be here. It's my city so I cannot complain about anything. And I think I love everything about it. Except for the jams, though, except for the jams. [Laughs]

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

[Laughs] The traffic jams of Dhaka are legendary.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

As Marina was growing up, Dhaka was also a city recovering from war. In 1971, Bangladeshis fought to gain their independence from what was then West Pakistan. It was a brutal conflict, with estimates that somewhere between 300,000 and 3 million people died. It ended in the creation of the modern independent state of Bangladesh. I wanted to know if Marina had any memories of that time.

MARINA TABASSUM:

Well, you know, I was two years old when the war broke out. So in a way, my memories are really not memories as such, but those are certain feelings that you feel. I have still very uncomfortable feeling when I hear a loud fighter plane or let's say a siren of an air strike. It reminds me -- and there are these feeling of uneasiness, but that's basically what it is. So yeah. Destruction, death, famine, you know, those — introduction to these dark side of life came before our enrollment into, let's say, the elementary school. So we grew up seeing one of the darkest times of life. There was a lot of... The sense of being — patriotism, I would say — or being proud of who you are, the country you come from, was kind of volatile in a way. Like, you cannot be proud of being a Bengali, not the way we are now at the moment. But the city -- it was — I would say now the Dhaka that you see is a megacity of, let's say, 20 million people. At that time, it was a much quieter, it was like a small-town Dhaka. That's where I grew up. And yeah, there was still a very the sense of being a neighborhood, children playing in the streets, walking to the school. You can't even imagine that in Dhaka now. So, so I've seen Dhaka growing from a small town to a megacity. So the transformation has — it's enormous and in a very short period of time.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Before we got into some of Marina's projects and her ideas around what made great architecture, I was curious, what does Marina Tabassum think of as bad architecture?

MARINA TABASSUM:

[Laughs] Well, bad architecture, I don't know. Bad would be an architecture that doesn't touch people's heart, that doesn't connect with human values and experiences. I'm not bothered by the aesthetics. I'm more concerned about an architecture that does not reform society or doesn't

give back anything to the society and the social and the cultural milieu, let's say. So when a building is just designed for the basic program and doesn't offer anything more than that, let's say to the city or to the people, to the community, it just misses the opportunity. That's what I feel. And I'm, I would say, especially repelled by architecture that is commodified. So when I see buildings that are, that are flashy, designed to create this instant appeal of fashion, that really repulses me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

One of Marina's most well-known projects is the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka. It's this fascinating brick building that's lit entirely through natural light. As the light flows through the windows and roof, it creates these shifting patterns on the floor, so that when you go in for morning prayer and then again for afternoon prayer, the sunlight streaming in makes it look like a different space throughout the day. It also doubles as a community hub. The Mosque went on to win the Aga Khan's 2016 architecture award. But the project had really humble roots.

MARINA TABASSUM:

I really felt a lot of pain when I was designing and building it because, you know, it was a project that was commissioned by my grandmother, as you know. So it was in 2006 that she, she actually commissioned me, meaning that it was really an absolutely formal invitation. So she invited me for a cup of tea. I went to her place and I saw that she was sitting with all the drawings and everything that she has of the land that she owns over there. And she has also asked one of my uncles to be present. So she told me that, "I want to donate a piece of land for a mosque," because there is no mosque, there was no mosque in that area at that time. And I said to her that "Yes, OK, I will take this as a project and I will design it." We had the groundbreaking ceremony in September, and my grandmother passed away in December, the same year. So once she passed away, after that it became mine, and as a promise that I made to her, and so I had to sort of keep my promise. So I became obviously the designer, the architect. I also became the fundraiser. I became the builder. And so I was one and everything. So in a way, you know, I had the freedom to some extent to be able to design the way I want to, but at the same time, there was a community for whom I'm building. So, you know, mosque is — you cannot just design a mosque and give it to people. People have to accept it. But I think the most important part was dealing with what is a mosque, the idea of a mosque. And you know 2006 was not too far from 2001 when we experienced the 9-1-1. Islam and Muslims were being questioned and the values were being questioned, so, identity. And then to me at that point, that was a major question, that "What do you identify with?" Is it, "Are these the symbols or the values that Islam talks about?" So that's why I kind of went back to the very beginning of the prophet's mosque to find out exactly what it was all about and why was that space created by the prophet. And so, you know, it was basically a space for congregation, where you congregate, you say your prayer. But that not only the sole purpose of a mosque is a prayer, but it was also other things about social communal gathering. So I wanted to really address that very essence of that space of congregation where spirituality was the major essence or the main essence and not really the symbolic attributes that we generally identify ourselves with. So you don't see any minaret, you don't see any dome. It's just a basic space, which is very

elemental in a way and takes advantage of the light and the air and, you know, what we get from God. [Laughs]

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

To change track just a little bit, Marina, another one of your most celebrated designs and works is the Museum of Independence in Dhaka. When people think of independence and gaining freedom, they might imagine celebration and light, yet the museum is — there's a bleakness about it. It's concrete, it's underground, there is limited light coming in. It's deeply affecting and deeply dramatic. What were you trying to capture in your design for this Museum of Independence?

MARINA TABASSUM:

Yeah well, you know, the project was basically to design a museum which would be commemorating our independence. But at the same time, we have the independence monument. So it was two projects at the same time. So the idea was that there is a duality about the history of our independence, and the duality is about gaining freedom, but at the cost of loss of life and a war and — and quite a bloody and brutal war, actually. You know, so, one is not without the other. So basically, if you want to celebrate, you also have to remember the loss. And so that's why we wanted to bring both of these together in a way that that you have this plaza but the plaza basically, or the place where people generally gather, was the main element that actually holds these two, two places — which is underneath it, which is a museum, and in the above it is the place for celebration. And our idea was that, you know, the freedom dream aspiration has a preferred direction and goes upwards. Anything that relates to infinite generally takes an upward leap. But then memory, sadness is always urging the subterranean. And, you know, it's something like you, you hold it in your heart, it's within you. You don't, you don't show it to others, but if you want to feel it, you just go inside yourself. So that's the reason why we kind of embedded the entire experience of war and sadness and genocide into the earth. So once you entered, go to the plaza, you just go down through the ramp and it's not entirely dark, there is some daylight coming in. But there is — the light is very somber in a way. And then you come up and then you find this plaza again out in the open and you celebrate. So it's celebration and remembrance, both at the same place. So that duality had to be celebrated in every aspect. So that's how it is.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's Director and CEO. We hope you are enjoying this episode of *This Being Human*. If you like what you hear please support us by rating *This Being Human* on your podcast app or by leaving a review. By sharing your feedback, you will help us grow our audiences and reach more people with the podcast's extraordinary human stories wonderfully told. Thank you so much. And now back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

A major aspect of Marina's work is her reliance on the local environment. That doesn't just mean adapting it to the needs of the community — but also using local materials. It's not about

some grand vision cooked up in the head of a big-“A” architect. It’s about working with what you have.

MARINA TABASSUM:

I never have any preconception about what to design with. The project dictates in many ways — where you are, your location, your client, the people you're designing for. So, you know, when we are designing these \$200 homes, let's say in the coastal areas, where the main focus of the project is about mobility, so that people can move from one place to another. And then at the same time, it's lightweight. You can easily assemble and disassemble. So, yeah, I mean, and as I said that it's a \$200 project because we wanted to keep it low budget so that we can give it to people who are the lowest of the lowest of incomes, or no income. I call them, basically, “no-income” population of Bangladesh — landless, ultra-low income, actually.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Let's stay here for a second because you because you speak of architecture that is basically socially responsible. And you speak about these houses on stilts and it's worth noting that it was this design, amongst other things, that earned you a spot on *Prospect Magazine's* list of the top thinkers of the COVID-19 age. How did the project itself sort of emerge?

MARINA TABASSUM:

We were researching quite a bit on the southern part of Bangladesh, and quite often you see you see the villages, small towns, just completely get washed away by the rivers because the rivers are quite mighty. But at the same time, we were actually commissioned by the Sharjah Architecture Triennial to do research on what happens to inheritance in these areas. How do people inherit when your land is washed away, but then again, re-emerges? And you hear all kinds of stories, how the family has moved from, let's say in one generation, moved five different locations. And those who have the ability to buy land, they buy land in different places. And sort of when the land washes away, they basically go to another place. It's really some kind of a really unique way of living. But, you know, there are people with the ability to afford, but there are also people who have lost everything and have nothing at all. So they basically move from one sandbed to another sandbed. So we call these sandbeds [speaking Bengali] in Bangla. So they basically move from [speaking Bengali] to [speaking Bengali]. And that became our focus that, you know, “How can we do something about them?” And you know we try to keep it as minimum cost as possible — lightweight, so that two people can actually build it or dismantle it. And yeah, and I think that's so much rewarding, you know. It's so much more rewarding when you give something to someone who has never really had an experience of living in a proper house. And that's the only reason why we do it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

If someone wrote you a check for a \$100 million and said, “Marina, do what you want with it. Build what you want with it. Design what you want with it.” What would you do?

MARINA TABASSUM:

Whoa, never thought about that [laughs]. How much is a \$100 million dollars?

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

In Bangladeshi taka I'm not sure, but I think it's a lot.

MARINA TABASSUM:

Yeah, I can imagine, yeah. Well, just imagine how many houses you can build. At the moment, we have we have the mission of building 100 houses. Let's hope we can do that much at the beginning. The inequality and the inequity in this world is so enormous that maybe a \$100 million dollars could do at least some bit to bring a little bit of equality — if not equality, at least giving some people some dignified way of living in this world.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You talked about feeling and you talked about what people feel in the spaces that you've created or helped to create. In all of the projects that you've done and all the work that you continue to do, is there one overarching feeling that you hope that someone will experience when they enter a Marina Tabassum structure or building?

MARINA TABASSUM:

The thing that I kind of really try to do is I walk myself through the spaces when I'm designing. So it's always about, "What do I feel? What do I want to feel when I go into this space?" So to me, buildings are all, all beings. They're not machines. You interact with it. And I think I want people to find that space which where you go and you connect. And that connection could be that prayer hall maybe or that central chamber in the museum. Or it could be, you know, when you go to maybe in the resort, just sitting on the veranda. I don't know. But, you know, you need to find that that connection, that soul of the space. And that's what's important to me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Marina Tabassum, what does this being human mean to you?

MARINA TABASSUM:

Well, being human to me, I would say, is about treating the earth gently, being the custodian of what is given to you and pass it on in a better way rather than in a poor way. Whatever you get, you know, make the best out of it and leave a better situation for the ones to come. And I think I would like to gently tread this earth and leave behind something which would be useful at the end. I'm the guest.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Thank you so much. What an honour it has been for me to have you with us today. Thank you so much.

MARINA TABASSUM:

Thank you so much. It was really wonderful talking to you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual, and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum, go to www.agakhanmuseum.org. The Museum wishes to thank Nadir and Shabin Mohamed for their philanthropic support to develop and produce *This Being Human*.