Fractured Plans: Real Estate, Moral Reform, and the Politics of Housing in New Delhi, 1936-1941

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This article explores the continuities and discontinuities between traditional housing solutions and the policies of modern state agencies. It focuses on state-initiated housing projects in Delhi between 1936 and 1941 that were located on the fringes of the old walled city and imperial New Delhi. From the British colonial government's perspective, these planned extensions were intended to serve as exemplars of controlled growth. However, investigations reveal that plural perceptions and political motivations were also behind them. Eventually, the realities of private enterprise and real estate speculation dominated the process of developing the extensions. In this way, customary building practices contested the authority of municipal codes, professional planners, and imperial institutions to create an incomplete, fragmented, and “informalized” landscape of planned neighborhoods.

Accumulating scholarship on the relationship between housing and culture has indicated that the appearance of dwellings in traditional societies is intimately tied to beliefs, customs, social structure, and geography. Confronted with picturesque and popular images of exotic, handcrafted edifices occupied by people in colorful costumes, experts and policy-makers are easily convinced that indigenous people from different regions are likely to build and use space differently. Nevertheless, as many non-Western countries struggle to provide adequate shelter for rapidly expanding urban populations, definitions of decent urban housing are assumed to be universal. And in the context of unprecedented expansion and commercial development, modern megacities are assumed to be neutral containers that may be painted with the hue of any culture. The implicit assumption behind such conflicting views is that traditional housing forms are the
expressions of indigenous people who live naively outside the influence of the global economy. Also left unstated is the expectation that those with any pretension or aspiration to being modern will learn to inhabit modern dwellings: efficient, functional, safe, easy to construct, and predictable in value. Thus, in the modern metropolis, state agencies and officials, developers, and design professionals frequently disdain and delegitimize indigenous living and housing practices, and modify them to observe rational and scientific standards.

This article employs an historical investigation to explore the continuities and discontinuities between the modern/planned and traditional modes of providing housing. It focuses on state-sponsored housing projects initiated between 1935 and 1941 in the interstices of the walled old city of Delhi and the imperial capital of New Delhi. Here, the extreme milieu of power under British imperialism, the pervasive influence of high modernism, and the reality of a city Westerners perceived as the very picture of the Orient came together to highlight certain contradictions and disjunctures in the provision of state-sponsored housing. A close textual reading of official documents from that time reveals the plural perceptions behind such housing and the political motivations underlying its production.

When the planned extensions were first proposed, a sharp contrast existed between the old walled city of Delhi and imperial New Delhi. On the one hand, housing in the old city was traditional, incrementally developed, and seemingly chaotic. Blatant disregard of government regulations had resulted in illegal development and defiant disorder in its spatial practices, a situation which had frustrated municipal officials for decades. On the other hand, the newly complete capital complex of New Delhi stood as a shining, symbolic and authoritarian testament to the power of British colonial rule.

In initiating plans for the housing extensions, the colonial government intended to use rational planning processes to produce exemplars of controlled growth. As representations of modernity and progress, the new housing areas were to serve as model living environments that would provide a complete contrast to the seemingly random and incremental development of the old walled city. Thus, while the grand architecture of New Delhi would celebrate the state’s imperial authority, the new planned communities would house its ideal subjects.

Between these two poles of settlement form, however, a type of development eventually emerged that mediated between the two extremes, reconciling the rebellious pattern of the old city with the authoritarian form of the new capital. While the extension areas were often filled with a planned landscape of tidy lots and identical units, the actual processes by which this housing came into being suggested certain processes that had long been at work in the vernacular buildings and neighborhoods of the old city. One reason was that the colonial state was torn between a desire to present itself as a social benefactor and a motivation to profit from the development of its real estate holdings. It was also torn between efforts to transform a “traditional” society according to modern, Western ideals and the very tenets of that modernism, which promoted scientific and objective values. In the end, the realities of private enterprise and real estate speculation came to dominate the development of the planned extensions. And ultimately, customary building practices contested the authority of municipal codes, professional planners, and imperial institutions to “informalize” the provision of housing.

The article begins by looking at the picturesque disorder and processes of growth and development that characterized the fabric of the old city. Since the mid-nineteenth century, city officials had become increasingly frustrated by their inability to control development there. It next looks at the grand spatial order of New Delhi, designed to serve as the capital of the British Empire in India. The subsequent section provides a window onto colonial perceptions of the built environment of the old city. What Europeans had once viewed as romantic disarray eventually came to be seen as an unruly monstrosity, where sanitary conditions were believed to have deteriorated to such an extent that they posed a threat to the entire region. As a liberal and benevolent sovereign, the imperial government felt obliged to undertake new housing development schemes to remedy this situation. After discussing some of these schemes, I compare the premises behind them to customary ways of living and building in the old neighborhoods of Delhi. Finally, I conclude with a dis-
cussion of the speculation, profiteering, contestation, and noncooperation that eventually stalled and “informalized” the processes of creating new housing in the planned extensions.

THE PICTURESQUE AND THE DISORDERLY

Until the middle of the nineteenth century Shahjahanabad, the old walled city, had been the focus of urban life in Delhi (FIG.1). Its web of narrow winding streets contained palaces, mosques, temples and residences. The Mughal elite had once lived here in mansions consisting of interconnected apartments, pillared halls, and courtyards. By the late nineteenth century a typical middle- or upper-middle-class home consisted of pavilions or rooms around an open courtyard (FIG.2). One measure of the size of such a house (and the wealth of its residents) was the number of its courtyards — usually one or two. A two-courtyard haveli included a separate public reception area, which was primarily a male domain, and an interior courtyard, which was the territory of women. Several extended families might live in proximity to each other in such a residential setting. Typically, the household might include a patriarch, his wife, his married sons and their families, and unmarried children. But sometimes younger brothers of the patriarch and their families, and/or widowed sisters or daughters and their families, also were included in a single, multigenerational household. In such houses, the enclosed courtyards were the most important living spaces, and they were often furnished with shrubs, trees, bowers, and small fountains or ponds.

In the old city the process of growth and development was incremental. Intertwined as the buildings were, owners added to and extended their properties as they saw fit and as they could agree upon changes with their neighbors. Thus, as a family enlarged or contracted, or as a household’s occupations changed, they might add a room here or a floor there, sell off an entire wing, or converted streetfront rooms to shops. But for long-term residents and property owners, the need to maintain community respect — as well as avoid community censure — was paramount. In daily acts of living and building, rights were determined by custom and by the relative social positions of those involved. Property lines and construction was socially sanctioned, and disputes were settled by community and custom, without written rules.

Customary spatial practices, however, were frequently in disagreement with the official municipal vision of the city. Thus, when Kanhiyalal, a ficticious but typical resident, wanted to subdivide his property to make shops and add a floor, he did not apply for permission from the official Building Committee of the Municipality. Instead, he left the streetfront untouched and stealthily added the extra floor at night and over the weekend. The following week, when the municipal inspectors objected to the illegal construction, Kanhiyalal was adamant that the entire structure had always been there and predated the building code, and his neighbors and influential friends vouched for him. From an official perspective, such cases only proved how disorder reigned in the city (FIG.3).
In response to such a prevailing disrespect for government control, city building regulations had been revised and made more elaborate and stringent over the years. Yet city residents found ever more ingenious ways of getting around these regulations and frustrating administrators’ attempts to “safeguard” their health. For example, since building inspections typically occurred only once during construction, property owners often temporarily arranged buildings to conform to building ordinances, only to change them later. And after construction, property owners also took advantage of loopholes to legalize illegal structures. Renewing applications, filing appeals, and appealing to higher courts were other strategies citizens routinely employed. Municipal reports are replete with details of court proceedings pitting the city against residents in cases of irregularities in building. Despite the best efforts of the municipality, such problems persisted because the population of the city was rapidly increasing and the demand for living space far exceeded the supply.3

The seemingly random acts of building were not the only cause of disorder in the city. Over the decades, conflicts had also intensified over the definition of “public space” and the right to privatize it. Typically, here too, the more the authorities attempted to regulate, the more the people seemed to violate the definitions. The state’s effort to control deviance ultimately extended even to definitions of acceptable public behavior. In an unwavering effort to restrict and control the use of streets and squares, the municipality created an elaborate and detailed set of rules intended to articulate not only the physical character of public spaces, but also their meaning and the activities that were permitted in them. And as new committees and officiating bodies were formed to guide the planning and building of the new capital complex, further attempts were made to limit activities in the public sphere. City government even took on the task of organizing and administering fairs.4

Yet even as the municipal administrators inscribed stringent regulations against takths (platforms) and other projections from shops on to streets, the appropriation of public space by hawkers and vendors became ever more institutionalized. Sidewalks were routinely taken over by small-time traders with push-carts, temporary stalls, or just a couple of boxes. “Foot-paths were intended for pedestrians but at present they are infested with beggars and hawkers,” officials bemoaned.5 However, when police or health officials confronted offending individuals, they would simply pack up their goods and return after a short while:

*It has been a daily experience that a hawker would leave a place when asked to but would invariably return to it a few minutes after. He gives a false name and address and can not be traced when prosecuted. If we are able to find him out the Courts take their own time for the disposal of such petty cases. At the end the transgressor is fined a rupee or so.*6

Officials felt frustrated in their efforts to keep the city free of such daily acts of appropriation.

**IMPERIAL ORDER**

After its inauguration in 1931, the imperial capital of New Delhi emerged as the complete antithesis of old Delhi’s spatial order. The total area of its site was about ten square miles — more than five times that of the old city (FIG. 4). On land that had once held scattered villages, farmland, mosques, shrines, mazars, and walled gardens, Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker created a government center as a masterful and perfect whole. The design was intended to convey the idea of a “peaceful domination and dignified rule over the traditions and life of India by the British Raj.”7

At the focus of the design was the Government House, Council Chamber, and two symmetrical blocks of the Secretariats, from which members of the governor-general’s council administered the imperial government. At the eastern end of the great main avenue that led from the government center was Indraprastha, the site of the oldest of all the eight cities of Delhi. “Right and left the roadways go and weld into one the empire of to-day with the empires of the past and unite Government with the business and lives of its people.”8

Behind the Government House were gardens and parks flanked by the general buildings belonging to the viceregal estate. Another broad avenue, set at right angles to the main one, connected the railway station, the post office, and the business quarters to the north with a cathedral to the south. Scattered to the southeast were the tombs of Safdarjang and Lodi in an area desig-
nated for city expansion and public institutions. An artery from the Secretariat to the Jama Masjid was to be the principal business axis. And a processional route leading due south from the railway station intersected the grand boulevard to create the setting for an intellectual center, containing the buildings of the Oriental Institute, Museum, Library, and Imperial Record Office.

The key to the spatial order of the new capital complex was a carefully constructed social hierarchy. At the highest point stood the Viceregal Palace and the Secretariat buildings. Fanning out radially from this core were the bungalows for those in service of the empire. Members of council, secretaries, European officials, Indian princes and chiefs, members of the local administration, European clerks, and Indian clerks: all had designated spaces in the scheme. Those in senior positions lived closest in, while petty workers were located farthest from the center of power. The size of a dwelling and the lot it stood on also reflected the status of the individual who inhabited it. Thus, the sprawling bungalows of senior European officials were set amidst vast gardens on a street with other sprawling bungalows and vast gardens, while lower-ranking workers and clerical staff crowded into two- and three-storied apartment buildings (fig.5). Finally, monuments, architectural splendors, gardens, banks, shops, administrative offices, and hotels were all carefully placed in this orchestrated world to reflect the empire in miniature.

Clearly, Kanhiyalal and his ilk did not belong in the idealized capital; such a splendid capital had no room for the daily humdrum of ordinary people going about their mundane business. The grand imperial city was about government and sovereignty; common folk and ordinary subjects were not included in a landscape whose purpose was to be elevated and awe inspiring. Instead, colonial planners envisioned that such people would be housed in new developments on the fringes of the city, which would provide ideal environments for the consummate citizens of the British Empire.

**SLUMS AND THE CITY**

In contrast with the splendid ordered vision of New Delhi, the old city of Delhi represented to the British all that was threatening, disdainful and different about Delhi’s indigenous residents and their culture. After the insurrection of 1857, the seemingly chaotic and dense pattern of building here seemed to pose a moral, sanitary and military threat. Yet by 1931, when the grand imperial capital was complete, little had been done to improve the situation. In fact, the walled city had become even more congested, and unplanned neighborhoods had proliferated around it.

In January 1934, the daily *Times of India* published an article entitled “Delhi the Death-Trap.” Quoting a recently published report by the city’s Medical Officer of Health, it noted that although the old city was comparatively small, covering only six square miles, its population had increased enormously since the imperial government had begun constructing its new capital. As a result, the old city had become “a hot bed of preventable disease.” By the Medical Officer’s representation, “so great is the overcrowding in some parts of the city that the houses are nothing short of death traps.” The article went on to explain how much of the old city was without sewers, and how conditions were even worse in new suburbs that had appeared to the west of its walls. Readers of the article were no doubt further horrified to learn that in some neighborhoods sewage had found its way into sources of drinking water. Municipal officials blamed irresponsible citizens for Delhi’s condition, while the public held the municipality guilty of neglect.

Such representations of the indigenous city recall late-nineteenth-century portrayals of slums in the industrial cities of Europe and North America. To physical and moral reformers of the time, these were places of tortuous lanes, densely packed quarters, small dark rooms, and inadequate infrastructure: perfect breeding grounds for people of questionable moral standing. As if to confirm such perceptions, the census of 1931 indicated that Delhi’s population had increased by 40 percent in a decade, with an increase of 28 percent within the walled city alone. According to officials:

> This cannot be viewed with any great equanimity...the apparent conclusion is that the congestion in the city is increasing, that buildings which were sufficient for one family are now housing more than one family, that as there is very little room for expansion outwards, extension is going upward notwithstanding the fact that majority of the lanes and streets are narrow.”

Unsanitary conditions in the native quarters of Delhi had long been a source of anxiety for British administrators, and the Medical Officer’s report confirmed their worst fears. If the old city of Delhi had become a slum, then direct intervention to eliminate blight was called for. Slum clearance and the building of new, planned extensions were the obvious solutions.

![Figure 5](image-url) - Bungalows set in vast gardens with low compound walls lined the streets of New Delhi. Compound wall, trees, hedge, garden, and verandah formed some of the many layers that screened the private quarters from the street. (Photo by author.)
The report of A.P. Hume, a special officer appointed by the government to look into prevailing conditions, proved instrumental in initiating this process. Hume’s *Report on the Relief of Congestion in Delhi* documented a twofold problem of congestion: congestion of people in houses, and houses on land. It indicated that there was an excess of population in the old city for whom better accommodation ought to be provided. And it identified numerous well-defined “slum” areas of “the meanest type.” In addition, Hume’s report portrayed the city as abounding in “insanitary lanes and dwellings constituting a menace to the public health of the whole urban area of Delhi.”

Hume argued that without concerted action to remove slums and ameliorate unsanitary conditions, the problem of congestion would not be solved. And he went on to propose that large numbers of people be moved out of the walled city to reduce densities there to acceptable levels. Hume saw a need to provide a total new building area of 1,160 acres, sufficient to accommodate 106,000 people. This meant developing government lands on the outskirts of Delhi to full capacity. In addition, “vacant” lands would need to be acquired from private owners, and thickly populated “slum areas” would need to be redeveloped.

In 1936, following the recommendations of the report, the colonial government created the Delhi Improvement Trust (dit) and gave it authority to administer a large government estate and deal with problems of slum clearance. Officials imagined that eventually the projects of the Delhi Improvement Trust, like Lutyens’ grand design for New Delhi, would create a new vision of order that exemplified everything the old city was not (fig.6).

**FIGURE 6.** Layout showing the relative positions of the old city of Delhi and New Delhi. The projects discussed here are indicated by dotted areas. The Delhi Improvement Trust worked on the fringes of the old city and in the area to its west. (Drawing based on Delhi Improvement Trust Works and Schemes 1937-1939 and Delhi Improvement Trust Works and Schemes 1939-1941, Delhi Improvement Trust, 1939 and 1942.)
VISIONS OF ORDER

As established, DIT’s principal responsibility was to manage the colonial government’s real estate holdings in the Delhi area. But it was also understood the trust would propose alternative visions of an orderly landscape that would help create healthy, moral and responsible citizens. Thus, it was also given the tasks of relieving congestion, improving living conditions, and providing areas for new housing. In subsequent years the fate of DIT-sponsored housing projects came to signify the difficulty of reconciling these multiple purposes. Several of the DIT schemes are described below.

The Daryaganj Development Scheme

Between 1936 and 1939 a scheme was undertaken for the development of Daryaganj South, a government estate that lay within the city walls. Once an area of princely mansions, Daryaganj had been included in the clearances around the old fort following the insurrection of 1857. On this estate, the DIT developed housing for affluent residents. Conceived as townhouses, these dwellings were three stories high and occupied lots which ranged in size from 300 to 550 square yards. Also included in the layout were some bungalow sites a quarter of an acre in size (FIG. 7).

As part of this redevelopment project, the main commercial spine through Daryaganj, the once prosperous Faiz Bazaar, was reorganized into shop sites. While design controls on the new residential lots in the area mainly took the form of restrictions on heights, the DIT enforced a standard frontage on shops along Faiz Bazaar Road. Another feature of this project was a grassy central park of about 2.5 acres surrounded by a neat hedge. Lots created as part of the development were auctioned on 90-year leases with an initial premium and an annual ground rent.

The Andha Moghul Housing for the Poor

In contrast to the Daryaganj scheme, DIT projects for housing poorer residents (referred to as rehousing projects) were frequently sited in less desirable locations. On the outskirts of the city, their densities were generally much higher, and their typical units much smaller. Of the projects designed to house the “poor class,” the Andha Moghul colony was envisioned as a way of removing gypsies and “undesirable” people from the heart of the Western Extension scheme, a prized DIT middle-income housing project. The idea was to develop a site to accommodate a group — categorized as “criminal tribes,” but also including tanners and pig keepers — whose continued presence, officials felt, would jeopardize the success of the scheme (FIGS. 8, 9).

Since development values were estimated by the government after improvements, removing undesirable people from a project area increased the profitability of government schemes. And since such people had to be moved to land that was less valuable than that from which they came, the Andha Moghul housing was located on a canal bank near a sewage pumping station. The Andha Moghul project also included rehousing for...
poor families dispossessed in other slum clearance schemes. In this way, official efforts at “improvement” actively involved restructur- ing the social landscape of the city by creating ghettos and enclaves. The poor, the dispossessed, and the socially marginal were relegated to new “slums” in less desirable locations.

The Delhi Ajmeri Gate Slum Clearance Scheme

More than a decade before this project was initiated, the municipality had identified the area adjacent to the city wall between the Delhi and Ajmeri Gates as an urgent need of sanitary improvement. The DIT proposal for this area, perhaps the most ambitious of all its projects, involved bringing down the city wall between the two gates, acquiring outright all areas classified as “slum” (together with other “congested, insanitary and ill-arranged buildings”), clearing the acquired land, and redeveloping it according to a preconceived layout. This layout would not only provide new, wide roads and expansive open spaces, but set aside space for such community facilities as playgrounds, schools, welfare centers, and health centers. The initial scheme required wholesale clearance of the neighborhood to a general depth of 150 feet from the city wall, and the rehousing of more than 2,500 families. In addition to the redevelopment of large plots of government land, the scheme proposed acquisition of more than 42,000 square yards of privately owned land. In all, the intention was to make some 65,000 square yards of land available for residential construction. A total of 4,000 people were likely to be directly affected by the scheme. Although the owners of much of the existing property in the area were prosperous, a vast majority of the inhabitants were poor tenants: sweepers, barbers, mochis (shoe-smiths), tongawalas (horse carriage drivers), and ghosis (dairymen).

In contrast to the considerable amount of open space in the scheme, its new housing component was to include multistory blocks. In particular, eighteen blocks of modern buildings, shops and residences were to line the development frontage where it overlooked New Delhi along a mile-long green belt. This frontage was eventually designed as five- and three-story buildings, with the first floor containing large shops and showrooms, and the upper floors containing offices and flats. But in order that the DIT could maintain control over the type and use of such buildings, individual lots were developed on perpetual leases rather than as freehold.

CUSTOMS AND COMMUNITIES

DIT housing schemes, such as those described above, were critical of existing traditional patterns in several respects. Most obviously, the planned developments offered a new model for the process of city development. Large capital investment, centralized decisions, and a single vision informed by experts and professionals replaced micro-investments, local control, and multiple competing visions. Furthermore, in a city where development had traditionally been piecemeal and incremental, the new projects involved construction all at once on large tracts of land to preconceived plans featuring lots of uniform size and wide, straight roads. Such designs celebrated the virtues of homogeneity and efficiency. They also reinforced sharp divisions between public space and private property, in contrast to the old city, where custom and negotiation determined the ownership, usage and meaning of space.

The layout and design of the new DIT-sponsored housing was meant to provide the model for more sanitary and healthful spatial practices and life-styles. Officials even went so far as to promote the installation of Western-style toilets rather than the customary squatting-type. Density and building regulations that officials had unsuccessfully attempted to enforce in the old city could also now be accomplished in the new designs. In purporting to advance a model of living that was more healthful to the body, officials also attempted to instill spatial customs they hoped might improve the moral health of the citizens. Toward this end, clean streets and predictable homes helped police deviant behavior. And new norms of usage and activity in the public realm were more easily regulated in visually penetrable layouts.

Classification of activities and people was another critical component of the DIT designs. Although spatial segregation and sorting had been integral to the development of modern cities in Europe and North America, Delhi seemed to resist such neighborhood classification by income, religion, and social status until the time of World War II. Although the elite had moved out of the old city to the new Civil Lines area, the middle and lower classes seemed to coexist comfortably in the old city. But the new planned extensions would sort people by income, and express class differences through lot size, house size, and access to open space. In the extension projects, the location of housing, the sizes of lots, and the sizes of units would all correlate to real estate value. And each of these characteristics would signify a resident’s relative position in the new social structure. Thus, wealthy neighborhoods such as those created by the Daryaganj project would feature large houses on sizable lots around parks, while the less fortunate would be shipped out to less desirable parts of the city and packed together in tidy rows of small units. The implicit goal of this effort was to replace inherited caste and community with income and class as identifiers of social position.

The new system of categorization was supported by the designation of areas within typical units as single-activity spaces, such as “kitchen” and “living room,” rather than allowing for the development of more traditional multipurpose interior spaces, as in the old city. Likewise, the new housing did not reflect such culturally significant and customary features of the old neighborhoods as transitions from public to private space and the segregation of men and women within the household.

Officials also emphasized visual harmony in the exterior composition of buildings. The DIT impressed from the beginning the necessity of imposing design controls in the interests of improving “standards of architecture in buildings.” Thus, in 1938 the trust set up a standing subcommittee to advise it on architectural questions and pass along recommended elevation types and standard plans prepared under the supervision of Western-trained architects. The trust exercised its design control either through provisions in land leases or through direct admin-
istration of building bye-laws. Such anxiety for visual conformity was yet another expression of the desire for social unity on the part of officials, who deemed it essential that residents subordinate their individual identities to the interest of civic good.

Finally, DIT’s proposed new housing and neighborhood designs were premised on a particular functional interpretation of the home. The house was where a wage-earner retired with his family after a day’s labor. Official concern for the residential life of the ordinary citizen, and the attendant effort to reform people by controlling home life, had appeared in Delhi by the turn of the century. Municipal records reveal that by the early decades of the twentieth century the provision of quarters for municipal workers had become a significant issue. However, in old Delhi, unsupervised, small-scale, home-based manufacturing and cottage industries were typical among lower-income families. Women and older children were active participants in such income-producing activities. Despite this, standard designs for the new poor-class housing in the DIT-sponsored extensions excluded the space necessary for such production. And although some designs were meant to be large enough to accommodate joint families, they did not account for the possibility of extended families living in proximity to each other across several sets of apartments. Official preoccupation with orderly layouts and orthogonal lines assumed a household’s allegiance to class-based neighborhoods and a civic community rather than real social and economic networks.

In actuality, DIT’s vision for new housing in the planned extensions was rarely achieved. The schemes were premised on the vision of a benevolent government providing a grateful and passive populace with what they could not provide for themselves. Yet, for their part, the citizens were distrustful of the colonial state’s commitment to their varied individual interests. And social and political complexities muddied the waters further: citizens who were also officials acted according to split loyalties; colonial agents acted as speculators; and, above all, the colonial government, which presented itself as paternal and protective, was consumed by a desire to maximize profits as it further: citizens who were also officials acted according to split loyalties; colonial agents acted as speculators; and, above all, the colonial government, which presented itself as paternal and protective, was consumed by a desire to maximize profits as it

“INFORMALIZING” THE “FORMAL”: SPECULATION, PROFIT, AND THE PLANNED EXTENSIONS

The DIT schemes were undertaken largely on government property or on lands the trust acquired from private property owners. This included lands the colonial government had appropriated from the Mughal king, or which it had acquired after 1911 in connection with the new capital project. The DIT’s mandate was to defray the heavy expense of laying out the extensions by generating development profits. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that within six months of initiating its program, both residents and officials of the old city disparaged the DIT’s work. The chief criticism was that the DIT only took up extension schemes that were self-supporting or that were likely to yield a good margin of profit. Nothing was done in reality, commentators observed, to remove slums from inside the city.5 Furthermore, since the DIT finances were not under city control, critics argued that its projects were designed only to bring profit to the imperial government. Even when the DIT undertook slum clearance, critics accused it of proceeding incorrectly. The DIT first dispossessed poor slum dwellers before it even acquired a property. Only after it had acquired, improved, and sold a property at a considerable profit did it take up the task of rehousing those it had originally displaced. As a consequence, the poor were pushed to the outskirts of the new developments (forced to huddle together in slums) with no alternative accommodation, let alone continued access to former economic and social networks.

As an arm of the imperial government, the DIT also acted to protect colonial interests by retaining proprietary title to lands through long-term leases, and selling few lots outright. Not surprisingly, municipal officials found the DIT culpable of profiteering. Each year the DIT expenditures were considerably less than the income it earned.6 Meanwhile, expenditure on rehousing schemes was exactly equivalent to receipts, most of which came in the form of government loans and subsidies. This meant that the surplus income earned by the trust’s real estate activities was never put back into housing. Rather, the rehousing account was entirely separate.

Like other city improvement trusts, the DIT assumed slum clearance as one of its main responsibilities. But contrary to rhetoric, it attempted to profit from this activity. The owners of slum sites were thus to be paid a minimum compensation, inhabitants were to be given building sites elsewhere, and the slum land was to be improved and provided with all essential services before being leased long-term to other tenants or sold at a public auction. In the process, a slum would be removed, a new sanitary colony would be established, and the DIT would gain a considerable sum of money.

Such a speculative pattern of activity was not limited to the DIT, however. Private enterprise flourished around the margins of DIT schemes in ways the DIT had never anticipated. One reason was the DIT’s programs embodied the contradictory goals of stimulating private capital while attempting to control it. On the one hand, the DIT maintained a clearly stated policy of encouraging private development. This involved expediting the extension schemes and providing facilities to speculators to develop land outside the city.7 On the other hand, when an improvement scheme was still at a conceptual stage, the DIT usually issued a legal notification under the Land Acquisition Act which was intended to fix land prices and prevent speculation before the scheme could be realized. Officials feared that without such a notification, speculators would endeavor to take advantage of extension schemes the government proposed to undertake itself.

Yet, despite the apparent secrecy of the improvement proposals, Delhi’s real estate investors learned of proposed projects when they were in the earliest stages of discussion, and speculation drove up land prices even before notification could go into effect. For instance, even as the government was appointing a commission to look into the problem of congestion, speculators began to invest in properties to the west of the walled city. Some developers were sub-
succeeded in selling land west of the walled city near the Grand
Trunk Road for almost three times the prevailing prices. Landowners
and developers were clearly aware of the possibilities of making a for-
tune by using the proposed improvements to their benefit.

Uncontrolled speculation by private developers eventually made
the land too expensive for the government to acquire for improve-
ment purposes, thereby complicating its efforts. Furthermore, the
developments that mushroomed without supervision resulted in
precisely the kind of haphazard growth that city officials wanted to
check. Hume noted with frustration that the effect of such bullish
investment sentiment was not only to make the cost of acquiring
land for housing projects prohibitive, but also to create numerous
unplanned, illegal and speculative developments.20

For their part, city residents displayed their disregard for and
disagreement with the goals of the DIT projects in a number of
ways: in their lack of cooperation in forfeiting private land for trust
schemes; in their reluctance to inhabit the projects; in persistent
land speculation; and through formal protests. Thus, despite the
number of government-sponsored schemes, only 242 houses had
been completed by 1941, and only 104 of these had been occupied!

Generally speaking, wherever large-scale land acquisition was
involved, a majority of property owners disagreed with the amount of
compensation they were offered, and appealed to a tribunal set up
by the DIT. For instance, in the Roshanara Extension project, of the
23 owners from whom land was acquired by compulsion, 21
appealed to the tribunal, obliging the DIT to negotiate with them over
compensation.21 In other cases, the DIT was forced to exempt certain
properties from acquisition. Although the owners of such properties
were obliged to pay the DIT a substantial sum (equivalent to the esti-
mated value of the land after redevelopment), many property owners
preferred to make such payments if it meant they could remain in
their old locations. The response of the citizenry was clear: people
were unwilling to allow the trust to acquire their properties to
“improve” the city, because they did not see how their own living
conditions would be improved by accepting compensation and mov-
ing elsewhere. While this is considered a truism in urban redevelop-
ment today, the modernist planning principles behind the DIT
program embodied the view that disparate locations could be consid-
ered equivalent. The DIT officials naively attempted to separate
“housing” from location, social network, and economic production.

Contrary to expectations, the extension areas were also never
developed as spillover spaces for people from the congested old
city. Rather, due to the immigration of entrepreneurs and work-
ers to Delhi in response to the general expansion of the local
economy, totally new categories of people came to occupy the
housing outside the walled city. British occupation, official sup-
port of the mercantile classes, and the decline of the old nobility
had already begun to undermine the established social hierarchy
of Delhi in the nineteenth century. Construction of the new cap-
tal after 1911 magnified this phenomenon. Although the design
of the new capital city included residential areas for bureaucrats
and others in the immediate service of the colonial state, a vast
number of other, less visible people could not be accommodated
either in the old city or the new one. This included laborers and
menial workers employed in the construction of the new capital.
And it included petty entrepreneurs, workers, and common peo-
ple who migrated from across northern India, enticed by the
opportunities of a fast-growing city. This motley group was forced
to squeeze into the old city or its already-overcrowded suburbs.

The unruliness building in the old city, therefore, can be
seen as a response to the displacement brought about by sudden
growth and a transformed social order. In their disobedience, res-
idents protested interventions into their living environments by a
government that did not reflect their customs or their voices.
From this perspective, growth in the old city was not haphazard,
but proceeded according to a different set of rules, as property
owners acted in an entrepreneurial, not an irresponsible, manner.

By contrast, the planned extensions preached a new way of liv-
ing and building that was more in keeping with the grand design of
the new capital. Although the magnificence of the tree-lined boule-
vards and vast bungalows of New Delhi was not meant for ordinary
folk, the controlled and predictable spaces of the new housing
estates still implied that customary ways of building and occupying
urban space were deviant. In particular, hawking, street activity, and
the multiple use of interior space were all errant behaviors. From
the perspective of the authorities, the old city was diseased fabric
that might spread its contagion to neighboring areas.

Ultimately, however, the new planned extensions only spelled
the hope of a government in crisis. By the 1930s the imperial gov-
ernment was finding it hard to sustain its colony in India. Their
hope was not only that the predictable and well-defined use of land
and space in the extension areas would bring much needed
income, but that it would produce subjects to help realize the
dream expressed by the new capital. Dissent and insurrection
were brewing everywhere across the subcontinent, but the new
neighborhoods would be inhabited by “morally upright,” healthy,
orderly, obedient people who would owe their loyalty to the colonial
state rather than to extended family or community. Seen from this
perspective, the new planned extensions were the mediating
ground between the rebellious and unknowable old city, and the
elegant but incomplete authority of New Delhi.

A LESSON FOR THE PRESENT DAY

Delhi was a city that nineteenth-century Western travelers per-
ceived and represented as the very picture of the Orient. However,
the British in the early twentieth century were driven to identify
with the ideals of a high modernism that rejected such traditional
ways of living. Beyond physical structures, the DIT schemes there-
fore sought to impose a new and different way of living and build-
ing on a people who had always built for themselves.

Official disdain for indigenous housing included a disregard
for the processes of urban development. But the culture of a time
and place had resulted in a particular form and process of build-
ing. And even with the displacement caused by modernization
and colonization, the context could not be wished away: one way of
living could not simply be exchanged for another. Furthermore,
the seemingly monolithic identities of state and citizen were rife with paradox and contradiction. The result was an incomplete and fragmented landscape of new development. At once modern and traditional, designed and spontaneous, professionally planned and politically negotiated, regulated and appropriated, developed by the state and driven by speculation, it reconciled the idealized world of the imperial capital with the everyday reality of the old city. Where they did develop, the tidy rows of houses were personalized and added onto in ways that obscured both the original grand design and the chaotic and informal processes that had led to their creation. Such housing was neither as imposed and authoritarian as the capital complex, nor as incremental, spontaneous and particular as the neighborhoods of Old Delhi.

This case example from history brings into focus the persistent duality inherent in the official ordering of state-sponsored housing, which often treats the vernacular as the cherished picturesque while expecting fast-growing metropolitan areas to conform to universal standards. Equally evident is the dominance of political economy in the provision of housing: a reality that overshadows the best of stated intentions. As cities all over the non-Western world routinely struggle to impose urban development schemes that represent modern aspirations, the experience of the DIT half a century ago should provide a warning that even in the most extreme milieu of power, government planners may not be able to disregard or displace customary ways of living and building.

REFERENCE NOTES

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1. For a detailed discussion, see J. Hosagrahar, Design, Domination, and Defiance: Negotiating Urbanism in Old Delhi, 1877-1910, unpublished diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1997.
2. The character of Kanhiyalal and the narrative of his building is fictitious but typical and based on oral histories, interviews, and the municipal reports.
4. Letter No.44 M.&S., from the Deputy Sanitary Commissioner, Delhi, to the Chief Engineer, Delhi, January 27, 1914, Commissioner’s Office, Delhi Division, New File #9/1914.
11. Dr. K.S. Sethna as Medical Officer of Health of Delhi published a report included in the year’s Annual Report on the Administration of Delhi Municipality, 1934.
15. Prior to the commencement of construction, the DIT required lessees and anyone wishing to erect a building to give notice to the lands officer of the trust. Potential builders also had to submit a detailed site plan, floor plans, elevations, and sections of proposed structures at a specified scale, and demonstrate its conformance with all trust bye-laws, including those for drainage. Plans for a residential building were further required to define the function of every room — e.g., as kitchen, bathroom, corridor, staircase, courtyard, etc. In addition, bye-laws prescribed front and rear setbacks for access to light and air for every building.
Thus, no buildings were to be erected within 15 feet of the center line of any street as determined by the trust, and every building not fronting a street was to have a permanent 15-foot-wide air space as part of the building. Similarly, a 10-foot air space was deemed essential at the rear of the building, and any habitable room that did not receive light and air from the front or back of a building was to have one side abutting a permanent courtyard. The trust even retained the authority to decide the kind of latrine that was to be constructed (i.e., water-borne or dry; Indian-style or Western).
18. For instance, The total amount that the DIT expended in 1939-40 was Rs.60,857, a mere 2 percent of the annual income of Rs.32,20,014. In 1940-41 the Trust expended Rs.9,34,871, or 79 percent of an income of Rs.11,76,473. Administration Report of the D.I.T. for the years 1939-1941, 1942, Annexure V.
19. Letter #10-M from A.P. Hume, Officer on Special Duty attached to the Delhi Administration, New Delhi, March 14, 1936, Chief Commissioner’s Office, Delhi, New File #122/B/1935.
20. Ibid.
21. Report of the First Three Year Programme of the Delhi Improvement Trust, 1939, p.25, also Annexure VIII.