

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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Delhi, Old and New: Changing Cityscapes and the Cultural Heritage of India's Capital City

ZSUZSANNA RENNER*

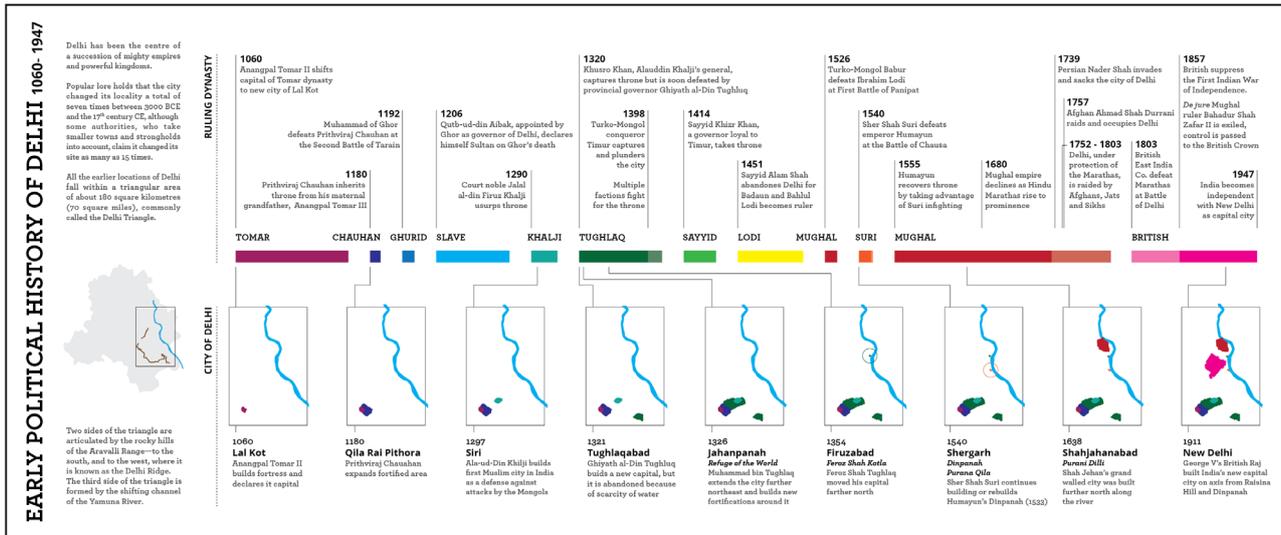
When India won its independence in 1947, its capital city had two distinct parts: New Delhi and Old Delhi. The coexistence of two urban paradigms, the traditional and the modern—or the Indian and the Western—is by no means unique, on the contrary, it is a common feature seen in many north Indian cities.¹ New Delhi, founded by the British in 1911, and Old Delhi (previously known as Shahjahanabad after its founder), erected by the Mughals in 1639, are the most recent in a long succession of capitals built in the area in and around today's Delhi. They are also the ones that have survived until the present day, and as such have the largest share in Delhi's urban heritage. They no longer monopolize, however, as they did until a few decades ago, Delhi's urban landscape has been changing at an unprecedented pace while India makes its way into the twenty-first century. The dynamics of urban development, sociological transformation and changing values pose new challenges to the preservation of cultural heritage. In this paper I reflect upon the evolution of Delhi's urban landscape and its impact on the development and preservation of the city's cultural heritage.

Delhi had been the imperial city of India for over 800 years when the British moved their capital here from Calcutta. Historically, the regional importance of this area has derived from its strategic position on the ancient caravan route known as Uttarapatha (the 'northern route', later named the Great Trunk Road) midway between the Ganges valley in the east and the Punjab plains in the northwest and beyond. The route linked to the Silk Road via the Khyber Pass, and was the road that nearly all migrating peoples and invaders took when entering the Indian subcontinent by land. Most of them duly arrived in the Delhi area and settled there, often ransacking or destroying what they found and building their

own cities since this was a key location in controlling North India and gaining access to the rest of the Indian subcontinent.

People commonly refer to the seven cities of Delhi, although this is a rather symbolic figure since the actual number of cities built here is between eight and sixteen, depending on how it is counted.² (Figure 1) The area is triangular, bordered by the Yamuna River to the east-northeast and the northern range of the Aravalli hills to the west and south.³ This area, roughly corresponding to today's National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCT),⁴ has been the setting for Delhi's urban development ever since the first city was founded here. Successive power centres with imperial aspirations on the subcontinent arose as scattered cities in this extensive area. This means that Delhi developed more as a region of perennial nuclear settlement⁵ than as a single nucleated city, with a potential to give rise to capitals of imperial importance within its natural boundaries.⁶ The urban tissue thickened after the Middle Ages, filling in many of the gaps between former individual cities, thus shaping Delhi as we know it today while a few mediaeval city sites still lie in rural areas within the capital territory.

There is a strong popular belief based on the Mahabharata epic⁷ that the first city of Delhi was Indraprastha, the capital city of the Pandavas, said to be located on the site where the sixteenth-century Purana Qila ('Old Fort') stands. Although excavations did not reveal anything comparable in age or scale to the description of the epic,⁸ they did give evidence of a major settlement in the fourth century BCE that continued to be occupied until the Gupta period (fourth-fifth century CE).⁹ The earliest identifiable extant city is Lal Kot in the Mehrauli area of south Delhi where the Hindu Tomara Rajput dynasty had a huge fort built in the eleventh century,¹⁰ later extended and renamed Qila Rai Pitoria by Prithviraj



► Fig.1. Political history of Delhi, 1060-1947 (CC BY-SA 3.0, Bhavika 1990)

Chauhan in the twelfth. This is the point (1192) where the early Hindu history of Delhi ends; a Hindu-majority government was to return to Delhi only some seven hundred fifty years later in the post-independence period, but then to a multi-ethnic, multicultural city.

Extended fortification by the Chauhan king was insufficient to stop the onslaught of Afghans from the northwest who captured Rai Pithora and soon founded the first Islamic state in North India (1206). The next four cities—Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Ferozabad, all in the south Delhi region—were founded by successive independent dynasties ruling the Delhi Sultanate. From the early sixteenth century onward, the Mughal dynasty of Turco-Mongol origin, a branch of the Timurid dynasty, built an empire on the subcontinent. In the Delhi area they founded Dinpanah, Shergarh and, in the sixteenth century, Shahjahanabad. The focus shifted more to the north, to sites on the banks of the Yamuna River. After Muslim rule in Delhi that lasted a little more than six hundred and fifty years, the British took control of Delhi for another ninety years, founding their own capital, before the first democratic government of independent India took power and with it the British-built city as their capital.

This can be seen as a new phenomenon since hitherto all aspirants to imperial power in Delhi had raised their own centres at locations different from earlier ones. It was part of the 'imperial dream', ever newer Delhis launching ever newer eras.¹¹ Nehru, the first prime minister of an inde-

pendent India, was no exception to the rule. He too cherished the dream of breaking with all previous tradition, but his attempt at moving the capital to the Corbusier-built Chandigarh in Punjab (outside even the Delhi capital region) proved to be a failure, and the capital of independent India remained in former colonial New Delhi. Seen from another angle, however, this also fits well into the pattern of acquiring power in the Delhi region which, since imperial power was at stake, was as a rule as much symbolic as it was practical. We can quote many examples of traditional ways of appropriating the symbols of imperial power, from erecting and relocating columns¹² through to the imitation of power displays originally belonging to a hostile power (see below) to the foundation, demolition and partial or, as in the last case, full reuse of the capital cities themselves. By moving into the former colonial city, the Indian government symbolically took possession of all former British imperial insignia, marking its victory over colonial rule and its claim to full sovereignty over the Indian subcontinent.

Independent India not only inherited New Delhi as a capital city, but also Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), two utterly different cities. Shahjahanabad, built at the height of Mughal imperial grandeur, followed the urban tradition of Islamic cities. The core of the city was the palace fortress (Lal Qila, 'Red Fort') with a wide ceremonial route (Chandni Chowk, now a market area) cutting across the city.¹³ The walled city, as it is often referred to, developed gradually over a lon-

ger period. The pattern of land use was typically urban.¹⁴ The lands around the fort were declared royal lands (*khalsa*), and the emperor donated parcels of land to the chief noblemen who built their residential areas (*havelis*) for themselves and their dependents, courtiers and manufacturers (*karkhanas*) that supplied their needs.¹⁵ Therefore these residential areas developed as introverted spaces and independent social entities, while commercial activities were located along the main market streets.¹⁶

Seen from a rooftop today, the city appears as a dense mass of buildings, an apparently seamless tissue of urban fabric, with a few lone trees here and there. (Figure 2) The only visible landmarks are the fort and the cupolas and high-rising minarets of the Jama Masjid. The main arteries of the city connect the city gates and the palace or important temples, and were used by the elite for processional and representation purposes.¹⁷ Of medium width are the *bazaar* (market) streets where much of the city traffic and commercial activity takes place. On the third level are the *galis* (lanes) winding between *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) and *katras*¹⁸ (a cluster of houses and shops), the basic morphological units of the city.

The present urban fabric can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century¹⁹ when, after the proclamation of imperial rule in 1858, the city was directly controlled by the British Government. The three-month siege of the city by the British in 1857 brought about large-scale destruction, followed by a major restructuring of the city. The Red fort was turned into a garrison and railway lines were laid across the city centre. By repeated divisions the once massive *havelis* of

Mughal nobles disappeared and smaller *havelis*, houses, warehouses and shops grew up with lanes between them.

However, the British did not establish their residential quarters in Shahjahanabad. The colonial government conceptually distanced itself from Indian cities and occupied the cities it had founded.²⁰ In Delhi, a cantonment city was founded outside the city walls of Shahjahanabad as part of a colonial network, a sort of alternative geography, of more than 170 similar cities across the country, connected by the requisites of modern rule: railways, roads and the telegraph. The ‘white’ cantonment was strictly segregated from the ‘black’ city (this principle was followed in the construction of the new capital too). Divided along military and civil lines, it had military, as well as civil administrative and residential functions.²¹

That seventeenth-century sources speak eloquently of the riches of the city, its palaces, *havelis* (residential areas), markets, gardens, bodies of water and avenues,²² makes the currently derelict state of its structures all the more appalling. Sociologically, the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 brought about a complete change in the city’s population. Muslim residents fled to Pakistan and most of them never returned; with them, the memory of an exceptionally refined culture was to a large extent lost. The last exodus from Shahjahanabad took place from about 1960 onwards when most middle-class people left the walled city for the more spacious residential areas, the so-called colonies, in New Delhi.²³

As a result, the character of the city changed from a mix of residential and commercial to predominantly commercial, which, in the absence of owners to care about properties, has been detrimental to its built heritage.²⁴ Commercialisation in general and the presence of wholesale trades and industrial activities in particular are hazardous to the traditional city.²⁵ Another threat is in the minds of people as contemporary urban Indian culture accords a low status to the traditional style of urban living²⁶ where residential quarters tend to be inward looking while elements of private life take place in public spaces. Nowadays, Old Delhi is often thought of as an area of congestion and underdeveloped civic infrastructure with little or no development.



► Fig. 2. Old Delhi from Jama Masjid. Photo: Jon Connel 2010 (CC BY 2.0)



► Fig. 3. The procession of Bahadur Shah to celebrate the feast of the 'Id. Sir Thomas Metcalf, 1843. British Library Online Gallery (CC-PD-Mark 1.0)

Since the downfall of the Mughal Empire in 1858, the British governed their Indian possessions from Calcutta. The decision to move their capital from Calcutta to Delhi was taken in 1911 and announced by George V at the third Durbar held in Delhi.²⁷ The reasons were ideological and practical: Delhi as the seat of past imperial governments had a strong attraction, but it was also strategically better situated than Calcutta to command over the whole subcontinent. By adapting the Durbar as a major ceremonial event, an expression of sovereignty and imperial power, the British not only imitated Mughal courtly symbols of power and legitimacy, but also communicated their complete appropriation. (Figures 3, 4)

Architects Sir Edward Lutyens and Herbert Baker were entrusted with planning the city. The designated site for New Delhi was south of Shahjahanabad with no connection to the Yamuna River, and it had to be a monument to imperial power that conveyed the idea of rational modern government. It had to impress teach and let the Indian people “see for the first time the power of Western science, art and civilization.”²⁸ The ideology of the imperial capital was quite overtly based on segregation and remaining aloof of the native population. Its geometric network of wide boulevards, roundabouts and radial roads lined by individual buildings and villas set well back from the street in leafy gardens spoke of order,



► Fig. 4. Durbar procession on Chandni Chowk, Shahjahanabad, 1903. Stereoscopic photograph. British Library Online Gallery, Photo: James Ricalton (CC0)



► **Fig. 5.** *Central Delhi. New Delhi's geometric patterns contrast sharply with Old Delhi (on top). Photo: Planet Labs, Inc. (CC BY-SA 4.0)*

cleanliness, reason and logic. Commercial activity was restricted to markets or shopping centres. The dramatic climax of the city was the group of iconic government buildings set on an elevation of the area that is otherwise typically flat and thus occupies a central and commanding position over the surrounding cityscape. (Figure 5)

New Delhi was also intended to be a garden city favourable to its British population. The residential area of New Delhi, the LBZ as it is often referred to nowadays (Lutyen's Bungalow Zone), was the very antithesis of Shahjahanabad's traditional urban paradigm. Here the villas have large windows overlooking the street, but private life is strictly restricted to the interior of the houses, hidden from the eyes of passers-by. Interior design betrays the value given to space and light. Gardens are fenced and most often a car is parked in the drive of the villa. Sections of the residential quarters are security controlled and closed for the night.

Despite all the major differences New Delhi has some important features common with Shahjahanabad. The commanding position of Rashtrapati Bhavan (the Presidential Residence, previously the Viceroy's House) at the end of the main processional pathway is comparable to that of

the Red Fort, both seats and symbols of imperial power. Another feature is the processional pathway itself—here the Rajpath (former King's Way) and the Chandni Chowk in Shahjahanabad—leading to the seat of power and used for representation purposes. We can also add the hierarchy of streets (here avenues) with the two main axes crossing each other in front of the seat of power. The similarities in the concept of public ceremonial spaces and their use by the consecutive imperial powers are striking. Curiously enough, New Delhi has many ancient monuments itself since all previous cities except Shahjahanabad, whether on the banks of the Yamuna River or in the south, make part of New Delhi or are linked to its southern extensions.

What is the composition and status of Delhi's built heritage today? The main components are the city's World Heritage sites (Humayun's Tomb, the Qutb Minar Complex and the Red Fort Complex); identified heritage zones; and scattered historic monuments and heritage buildings. World heritage sites can be disregarded now and also heritage conservation schemes; they are properly maintained and do not pose any problems. In the nomination dossier for listing Delhi as a heritage city, prepared and submitted to UNESCO in 2014 and withdrawn the next year by the Indian Government,²⁹ four areas—Shahjahanabad, Nizamuddin,³⁰ Mehrauli³¹ and Lutyens' Bungalow Zone—were identified as the city's main heritage assets and shortlisted for the world heritage label. The most vulnerable asset is certainly Shahjahanabad, Lutyens' Bungalow Zone is also threatened by the encroachments of development projects. The threat is even greater in the case of scattered monuments.

Schemes for the preservation of the city's built heritage have been currently incorporated into the city development plans. In 2017, a new master plan entitled Master Plan Delhi - 2021 (MPD-2021) was prepared by the Delhi Development Authority which defines much of Shahjahanabad as redevelopment area.³² The tenth chapter (Conservation of Built Heritage) defines six heritage zones, including those in the nomination dossier, and three archaeological parks. The eighth chapter of MPD-2021 (Urban Design) recognizes Shahjahanabad and New Delhi as manifestations of traditional urban design and identi-

fies the metropolitan city centre (Connaught Place and extensions in New Delhi and the Walled City, and extensions in Old Delhi) as significant areas of built environment. The document also includes some important recommendations and confirms that development plans shall conform to the provisions in respect of Conservation of Heritage Sites.

We can conclude that for historical urban development reasons (shifting centres of frequently changing political powers and the concomitant abandonment of sites, lack of a single historical city core and the churning of populations) the current inhabitants of Delhi have little or no bonding to the built environment and the cultural values they represent, which results in a general climate of unconcern for their preservation. In this sense, the new satellite cities cropping up on the outskirts of the Delhi metropolitan area with their high-rise office buildings, condominiums, malls, highways and flyovers, the millions of newcomers to the capital city and their associated vibrant lifestyle do not make the difference that they may seem to at first sight. On the contrary, their appearance fits well into the traditional pattern of founding ever newer cities within the capital region, although in these cases the new cities do not represent new political aspirations. The recognition of the built heritage as a resource seems to have occurred on the part of the government authorities concerned; it is hoped that appropriate measures to implement guidelines, recommendations and existing plans for the conservation and use of urban heritage assets will follow.

Notes

- 1 Sunand Prasad, "The Tale of Two Cities: House and Town in India Today," in G.H.R. Tillotson (ed.) *Paradigms of Indian Architecture. Space and Time in Representation and Design* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), p.176.
- 2 Sanjeev Sanyal, *Land of Seven Rivers. A Brief History of India's Geography* (Penguin, 2012). e-Pub.
- 3 "Description," Delhi – A Heritage City. Tentative list, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5743/>
- 4 The National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCT), created in 1957, is a union territory of India and its political administration is closer to an Indian state than to a city. The NCT encompasses the city of Delhi proper and neighbouring areas. The population of the city of Delhi was over 11

million according to the 2011 census, while NCT had a population of over 16 million. New Delhi, the capital of NCT and the seat of government of the Indian Union, is only a small part within NCT with a territory of 42.7 square kms and a population of 257,803 in 2011. Delhi's urban area, extended beyond state boundaries and called the Central National Capital Region (CNCR), includes adjoining regions in surrounding states (Gurgaon, Faridabad, Noida, Ghaziabad, etc.). CNCR has an estimated population over 26 million, which makes it the world's second largest urban area (see *The World's Cities in 2016*, UNESCO, p. 4). The CNCR was created in 1985 in order to plan interstate urban development.

"Description," in Delhi – A Heritage City, UNESCO Tentative list.

- 5 Geographically defined cultural regions in India tend to exhibit a high degree of persistence from the early periods of settlement throughout the ages. The Delhi area can be identified as such a perennial region of settlement. For concepts of perennial nuclear regions or areas of attraction see B. Subba Rao, *Personality of India. Pre- and Protohistoric Foundations of India and Pakistan* (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 1958).
- 6 The peculiarities of Delhi's urban development are clearly reflected in the current administrative setup of the city and its surrounding areas (see note 4).
- 7 Though evidence for the early phases of Indian history comes from traditional accounts that are often controversial in date and cannot be corroborated by archaeological or other data, in popular history their accounts are often taken as historical facts.
- 8 Upinder Singh, *A History of Early Medieval India. From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Pearson, 2008), e-Pub.
- 9 Sanyal, *Land of Seven Rivers*, e-Pub.
- 10 Formerly they had had centre in Suraj Kund and surroundings in the far south of Delhi where they had a large reservoir constructed and a dam in nearby Anangpur. This is variously dated to the tenth or the eighths-ninth centuries CE.
- 11 Sanyal, *Land of Seven Rivers*, e-Pub.
- 12 The column is ancient symbol of power on the Indian subcontinent. Two pillars, originally marking the extent of the Maurya and presumably the Gupta empire, were erected in the Delhi region and were later removed from their original places to be set up in later Muslim capitals. Even the British had a column (the so-called Jaipur Column) erected in front of their newly built presidential building.
- 13 "Shahjahanabad," Delhi – A Heritage City. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Tentative list, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5743/>
- 14 "Shahjahanabad," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Tentative list.
- 15 "Shahjahanabad and its Havelis: Conversation with Prof. Narayani Gupta at the India International Centre, New Delhi, February 2018," Sahapedia, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://www.sahapedia.org/shahjahanabad-and-its-havelis-conversation-narayani-gupta>
- 16 "Shahjahanabad," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Tentative list.
- 17 Prasad, "The tale of two cities," p.176.
- 18 *Katra* is the smallest subset of a residential community. Most *katras* were actually formed by subdividing earlier *havelis*. The lanes within a *katra* were originally not lanes but navigable water surfaces. See "Katrass of Shahjahanabad," e-Heritage Old Delhi, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://olddelhiheritage.in/katra-neel/>
- 19 Varun Shiv Kapur, "Shahjahanabad I: Khari Baoli & Katra Neel," Sarson Ke Khet – Exploring architectural and urban history in India, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://sarsonkeket.com/>

sonkekhet.in/2009/11/07/dilli-darshan-shahjahanabad-ikhari-baoli-katra-neel/

- ²⁰ There were several types of cities and towns founded by the British: major commercial centres (Calcutta, Madras, Bombay); the so-called hill stations for recreation during the hot season; and cantonments. New Delhi as a capital city did not belong to any of these types.
- ²¹ Sunil Khilnani, "Cities," in *The Idea of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999), 116-117.
- ²² "The Architectures of Shahjahanabad," Sahapedia, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.sahapedia.org/the-architectures-of-shahjahanabad>
- ²³ Prasad, "The tale of two cities," 187; "Shahjahanabad and its Havelis," Sahapedia.
- ²⁴ There are a number of other social and economic factors, too numerous to account for here, contributing to the slow decay of Old Delhi's built heritage, including divided ownership, or the Rent Control Act, which keeps rents low, thereby making owners uninterested in the maintenance of their properties in the hope of getting higher rents (see "Shahjahanabad and its Havelis," Sahapedia).
- ²⁵ Master Plan for Delhi-2021 (Incorporating modifications up to 31st March, 2017). Delhi Development Authority [2017], 3.3.2.1 and 5.3.2.
- ²⁶ Prasad, "The Tale of Two Cities," p.176.
- ²⁷ Khilnani, "Cities," p.121.
- ²⁸ Lord Stamfordham, private secretary to King George V, cited in Khilnani, "Cities," p.121.
- ²⁹ Nomination to UNESCO's List of World Heritage Cities. Draft Dossier, August 2012. Yumpu, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/4242>

8573/download-delhi-heritage-city. The proposal was drafted by INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) and submitted to UNESCO by the Archaeological Survey of India. The Indian government has never fully explained the reasons for its withdrawal, but according to media sources fear that the UNESCO tag would limit development may have acted as an impediment. The story has had a wide media coverage from the completion of the draft proposal (2011-2014) through its withdrawal in 2015 up to the present. See e.g. "Delhi's first step towards Heritage City: Dossier ready for UNESCO," *The Indian Express*, Sep 26, 2011, accessed November 3, 2018, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/delhi-s-first-step-towards-heritage-city-dossier-ready-for-unesco/851693/2> and "Why Delhi isn't yet a world heritage city," *The Times of India*, July 1, 2018, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/why-delhi-isnt-yet-a-world-heritage-city/article-show/64810418.cms>

- ³⁰ Nizamuddin, associated with Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, a fourteenth century Sufi saint, is important as a unique historic settlement which is also connected to Humayun's Tomb.
- ³¹ Encompassing the impressive remains of the walled city of Lal Kot and the earliest monuments of Islamic architecture in India around the Qutb Minar, the Mehrauli area is a precinct with more than 900 years of continuous habitation resulting in a complex socio-cultural pattern.
- ³² Master Plan for Delhi-2021, 3.3.2.1. A. Shajahanabad.