

Looking Beyond the Shadow

The Context of Real Issues in Lutyens' Delhi

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Lutyens had planned New Delhi as the imperial capital of India. Since independence, there were a number of efforts to review this area to provide some tangible solutions of how to relate New Delhi with the aspirations of the people of the larger Delhi. Once again, in May 1998, a committee was appointed by the government to study this area and make suggestions for its re-development. Initially the committee, popularly known as 'The Buch Committee', was given three months to submit its proposal, but nothing has come out so far! Instead, the Prime Minister and the Urban Development Ministry's own stated position and counter responses from a couple of members of the committee evoked a sense of apprehension over the whole matter. One of the members of the draft committee was quoted in an English daily as saying that, "the report", "which is conservationist in nature," is technically incompetent to put forth any long-term, durable solutions to the problems existing in the Lutyens' Bungalow Zone (LBZ). That only underlines the dilemma. Hopefully, LBZ would not become one of those areas classified as 'Special Area' without addressing any real issues at all. Before advocating Fabian ideas of conservation, there is a need to introspect into predominant issues with regard to future development in the area.

Reluctance in Recognizing Implications

The basic objectives of the urban land policy in India can be broadly said to be:

- ✦ Achieve optimum social use of land,

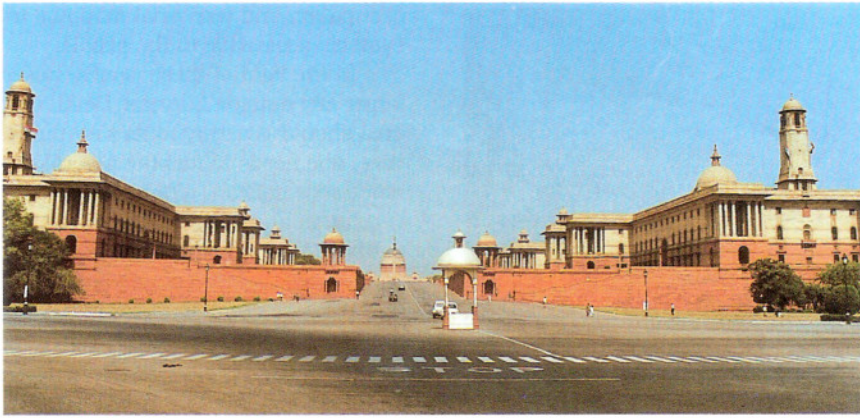
- ✦ Widen the base of land ownership in order to specially safeguard the interest of the poor and underprivileged sections of the society,
- ✦ Promote flexibility of land use in response to changes resulting from a growing city.

In the case of the New Delhi area, the scrutinisation of these objectives brings forward several issues in order to understand contemporary needs and demands. To the south of Rajpath, which has approximately 1-1.5 bungalows per hectare alongwith servants' and *dhobi* quarters, the net density is around 70 persons per hectare. This is ridiculously low as compared to any other low-rise development in Delhi, resulting in extremely high cost of infrastructure and basic services such as, sewage disposal, drainage, maintenance of non-private spaces, etc. These extra costs are recovered from the public who do not even enjoy any of these extravagant facilities. Efficient resource mobilization to reduce overhead cost for infrastructure becomes one of the primary objectives for any possible future redensification, which will have to be formulated on the basis of detailed studies of existing infrastructural capacity of this area.

Apart from some areas north of Rajpath and around the central vista, predominant mono-functional land use in LBZ denies public access. Among the major cities in India, New Delhi has the highest proportion of green spaces but how much of that is for public use? So any further dispersal of public activities from New Delhi to legitimise the preconceived notion of restoring this area should be looked at carefully. On the



contrary, the need for more public activities is highlighted by rapid transformations taking place in and around Connaught Place. Flexible land-use should be specified in this area, which will subsidize the cost of infrastructure, and offer a variety of activities to a larger cross-section of people. That will make LBZ a lively urban place in the city.



View from India Gate towards Rashtrapati Bhawan

Lutyens' Delhi demonstrates an extreme double standard in the life of the inhabitants — lavish under-utilized bungalows on one side and degenerated shelters for servants and *dhobis* in the other. Bureaucratic and elitist access to this government controlled land, pushed the poor to unauthorised illegal sectors. Darker inside lanes in Lutyens' Delhi are now getting filled with slums and squatter settlements behind the shadowy mystique of the outer skin of the fabric. Density distribution in terms of equitable acquisition of land, therefore, becomes a key issue in Lutyens' Delhi. The idea behind a larger land-holding by the government has been to safeguard the interest of all. But here, that justifies neither the interest of the state, nor that of the people. Thus, any intervention, should widen the public access to land through development in a resource-conserving manner towards equitable social use of land.

Indifference to Change: New Delhi, in its inception, was conceived as a close and segregated territory, which has been maintained till date. Shifting boundaries of the LBZ shows, on one hand, continuing demands of the rest of the city, and on the other, total lack of urban design framework for defining the expansion of LBZ. Today's LBZ has a rather politically correct boundary, which has nothing to do with its

morphology but to designate a so-called conserved zone, and in turn, rejects any meaningful change in its fabric. Thus, the purpose of restoring the LBZ in a sacred enclosure and creating a buffer zone between LBZ and the rest of the city will only reaffirm the imperialist position of segregation and sanctity. Instead, the objective should be to infuse public

activities in the strategic entry points to LBZ, which will enhance the dialogue with the larger city outside and create redefined legibility to this part of the city in the coming days of mass transport systems.

Validity of Politically Biased Proximity Relationship of

Spaces: In a colonial set-up, social, economic and political advantages, due to the closeness to the centre of power, were established in a precise manner in Lutyens' Delhi. Alongwith indigenous community, traditional economic competitors were kept out of this city. Today, rapidly growing suburbs, at the periphery of the city, are eventually working as interfaces between city and country, which can capitalise the economic benefits from the city through improved communication system. In this context, the colonial idea of consolidating the centrality of social benefits alongwith political power makes Lutyens' Delhi a space in the city, which acquired obsolescence in time. Considering the desire of the Indian political structure to withhold the proximity relationship (though the relationship is changed) within its domain, the objective of future intervention will be to accommodate these forces into a smaller area to make the city an accessible urban place, to be taken over by the rest of the city.





Inside lanes in Lutyens' Delhi

Perseverance with the Myth of Monumentality: With a desire for segregation, New Delhi was planned with a purpose to erase the Mughal myth and in turn, symbolize the permanence of the British rule in India. Later pioneers of Indian democracy managed to squeeze into the spaces, created by their colonial rulers, in a smooth and obvious manner. Then onwards, there have been attempts from various authorities to maintain the purity of the imperial city. On the other hand, the city outside New Delhi has been transformed during this period. But Lutyens' Delhi, by and large, remained passive in this process of change. Perhaps at this juncture, one is expected to overcome the 'time-lag', which influences the colonised to realise and to be able to subvert and transform the legacies of colonialism, left out as monumental symbols. The objective, then, should be to dilute these symbols, and evolve techniques of spatial

occupation and territorial mapping in order to make these symbols accessible to the people.

In the light of these issues, raised by the demands of the larger city outside Lutyens' Delhi, the existing purpose of LBZ area should give way to its new purpose today. At the same time, one needs to identify several existing factors like, the basic movement network within the city, landscape in terms of vegetation and open spaces, public access to spaces, ownership pattern, monuments and memorials, etc, to form the new base of a city that can accommodate change. Simultaneously, the new purpose of Lutyens' Delhi will be to integrate it with the city outside in terms of linkages, functional disposition, reviewed political structure and image, equitable existence of various social groups, etc, that will constitute the new overlay. This new overlay on the newly organized base can give rise to a transformed position of Lutyens' Delhi in the larger context of the city of Delhi. Nevertheless, the polemic standpoints about this place should be put forward in an unequivocal manner to be able to look into the possibilities of pragmatic change and transformation within the existing fabric as against the static and conservative outlook of retaining Lutyens' Delhi as it is. ✚

Note

In this article, Lutyens' Delhi, New Delhi and Imperial Delhi refer to the same space.

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