

# DELHI AND ITS INHABITED IMAGINARIES *LIVING ARCHITECTURES\**

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## 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT BEHIND THIS VOLUME

This volume aims at shedding light on the city of Delhi and its surroundings by looking closely at the different architectures of the city. Architecture here is broadly understood. It includes places of worship and street bazaars; slums, housing developments, skyscrapers and five-star hotels; the busy street, the vehicle-jammed highway and the museum; gardens, hospitals and the sidewalk; but above all, how people live and interact with each other, creating collective habitats and surroundings, which have both hermeneutical as well as physical dimensions. In a nutshell, how the city is lived as well as interpreted.

The diversity of Delhi is one of a kind. A panoply of collectives inhabits it, sometimes consolidating physically in specific all-inclusive quarters throughout the city with a village-like character to them. As a matter of fact, the city includes a good number of urban villages. It is no coincidence that Meeta Mastani, one of the authors contributing to this volume and a friend living in Delhi, explained to me, while discussing the roots of this project, that only thanks to her experience of living in villages in Rajasthan can she understand the complexities of the quarter just behind the housing-complex in which her house can be found. And that en-

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tails, among other aspects, how people relate to each other in those public spaces, what the shops, small temples and other architectures, sometimes very improvised, mean to them.

By gathering different standpoints and living experiences, this volume elucidates the living complexities of the city, and how they relate to architecture: how different modes of existence are shaped by the architectures of the city and, most importantly, how the former shapes and reconfigures the latter. In this regard, this publication pays special attention to living alternatives, juxtapositions and reconfigurations of the city of straight lines and radial roads that was once projected under British rule. And it does so with a twofold purpose. On the one hand, with a view to casting light on how colonial India has been superseded by a countless number of the most heterogenous organic inhabiting processes, while, on the other hand, revealing that colonial India remains all too real, both latently and explicitly, in all kinds of excluding practices, coexisting with a splendid display of different conceptions of how to be, of how to inhabit and how to live, that intersect and intertwine, reconfiguring one another. In direct and indirect ways, these articles bring into view how it is possible to speak of an intricate city culture, showing points of convergence in which the presence of history in the multiple layers of the living city suggests that there is a sense in which the past, the present and the future coexist meaningfully. In this manner, this volume aims at making sense of living processes that, despite being tangible to the city inhabitants, might bewilder those from other geographies.

## 2. ON THE INTERNAL LOGIC OF THE VOLUME

This volume was conceived while enjoying a research affiliation during the summer of 2019 at the Institute of Economic Growth of the University of Delhi, for which I am indebted to Dr. Amita Baviskar, as she was the academic who kindly agreed to support my project in the institution. But if there is someone without whom this project wouldn't have been possible, that person is Meeta Mastani, who helped me immensely to put these authors together.

The issue opens with an article by Sohail Hashmi, who takes us along with him in a unique journey through the many Delhis that there have been, combining his insights as a historian, a filmmaker and a heritage activist. I would like to draw your attention to his understanding of how cities come into existence. How cities need “time to grow organically”, developing “its own traditions of workmanship, of scholarship and of intellectual discourse”, “its own wholesale markets”, “its own cuisine, its own taste for music, its own rhythm that makes it tick with life”, or “a special lilt in its language”. In contrast, building an administrative area and palatial accommodations for the rulers, adding enough things in the surroundings for it to operate, as it happened under British rule with what was to become the Imperial capital, doesn't make a place to grow into a city. British rulers forgot the core to any city, its people, in such a way that ordinary housing was not part of their plan. On Hashmi's view, the actual pro-builder and anti-poor strategy of city planning shares such a colonial logic. For to come into existence, a city also ought to be cosmopolitan

and welcome its migrants. But that is far from reality today, in Delhi and almost everywhere, including Spain, where I write these lines. In this manner, Hashmi brings to light the direct relationship that exists between workers and peasants toiling outside, somehow surviving, and the hermetically sealed communities of the elite in today's Delhi. No less intimate, Hashmi argues, is the relationship between the Delhi of today and the Delhis of the past, including the rigidity of the Imperial capital but also the vibrance of the Mehrauli of the Sufis.

In the second article, designer and art historian Annapurna Garimella homes in on how humble novice tilemaker Gurcharan Singh contributed to making a vibrant city out of the Imperial Garden Capital planned by Edwin Luytens and Herbert Baker. By imagining how the young Panjabi Sikh Singh would have experienced a city that was being demolished as ferociously as it was being built, readers feel as if they were walking in the midst of the demolition of the many pre-Mughal and Mughal structures that were recycled as building material in a terrain that in itself was conceived by the city planners as part of a wasteland. She invites us to hold on to the moment in 1918 when Singh, also a geologist, arrived to a Delhi that was to a substantial extent dust, bare earth and destruction. If we had to imagine a color, she argues, it would be brown, in all its shades. Then we are asked to imagine what meant to him the blue notes that he encountered scattered throughout the surviving decaying tombs, the gurudwaras, mosques and temples and the old city of Shahjahanabad –kept on purpose as picturesque elements across the urban landscape in formation. Singh's grasp of blue as the

possibility of seeing past and future simultaneously in the present is thus revealed as the core to his own practice as a ceramist and his capacity to make the city a place of romance.

Time travels are not less present in architect Chintal Sharma's revisitation of the architecture that once symbolized British colonial power in the context of the press notice that was issued by the Central Public Works Department of India in early September 2019 inviting architects to a competition for a redevelopment project of the Central Vista, which comprises the Parliament and other major ministry buildings, national cultural institutions, Rashtrapati Bhavan and India Gate. Reminding us that historical buildings are representational of a people's collective memory, she argues that the Central Vista Redevelopment Project is a lost opportunity to bring more insight into the troublesome nature of colonial architecture and negotiate the acceptance of past traumas of the city while imagining together alternative futures for the city and its people. By contrast, failing to celebrate the rich history of Delhi, what the Central Vista Redevelopment Project has to offer is further polarization along religious and political lines in an already highly polarized India with no concern at all for secular and egalitarian ideas.

Contemporary motivations behind architectural policies in today's India are further elucidated by architect and visual artist Martand Khosla's piece on his experience of building the Lahori Gate Polyclinic in the heart of old Delhi. In principle, the primary health center was supposed to address the needs of the local migrant population, with a high number

of TB and HIV patients among them, functioning as an early detection and post hospital care center. However, when the project came to completion, ironically, some of the most vulnerable patients for whom the polyclinic had been planned, who lived in hutments surrounding the construction site, were displaced for the politicians to enjoy their inauguration. In this manner, Khosla, sharing the spirit of other contributions and providing us with insightful details, draws our attention to a very specific instance of a politics of exclusion that seems to accompany architectural policies in Delhi since British rule.

Next article deals with settlements of those sorts that do not please politicians, always under the threat of eviction, for they are understood as breeders of diseases and hideouts of vices, as if lacking everything to do with human worth. Revealing the intelligence, sensitivity and creativity of working-class settlements in the city of Delhi, Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education shares their over three-decade experience involving children and young people in research and writing on their own neighborhoods. In the resulting body of knowledge, children of cooks, cleaners, drivers, vendors, cobblers, coolies, garbage collectors and many others share how the architecture in which they inhabit colors their everyday life, vindicating their experiences of the city, their right to speak about them and the importance and validity of their point of view. As examples, we learn about the difficulties that Rama faces when trying to cook before her parents wake up in their 20 square-yard hutment, which is next to a garbage-dump, or about ten adventurous girls who 'open a shop' by making a stove out of

bricks and waste material, selling rotis to poor migrants in search for work who do not have the means to cook food.

Intellectual and All India coordinator for the Congress Party Pratishtha Singh also offers us a minute examination of the micro-politics of the unique case of the peaceful sit-in protest led by women against the anti-secular policies of the government, in particular the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, which uses religion overtly as a criterion for citizenship, discriminating against Muslims, who were not granted eligibility by the law. In such circumstances, the gathering set off an impromptu *adda* for women in the area of Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi since December 2019. The word 'adda', as appropriated in the Oxford Dictionary, refers to informal conversations taking place among a group of people. In India, addas are especially associated with Bengal, where the word is used mostly as a verb, alluding to the very practice of engaging in conversations (especially regarding culturally and intellectually stimulating issues). We have before us an example of what I would say is the most striking architectural genre in India, which basically consists of people gathering together. In this particular actualization of that genre, engaging in conversation is fundamental. In the process, Singh sheds light on how women had been excluded from existing addas across the country and how fundamental it is for them to have access to addas and create and enjoy their own.

Textile artist Meeta Mastani brings into view other kind of invisible architecture in Delhi, that belonging to equally invisible people, street vendors. However, unlike addas, in their

case there are structures, with the most varied forms (carts, triangular bamboo stands, plastic squares to sit on by the side of the street, cycles, and so on), though they share the same luck that many of the settlements in which Ankur Society for Alternatives in Education develops their programs. They are not recognized as architectural structures, when the truth is that they are all too real living spaces. These micro entrepreneurs, Mastani argues, create the structures of their mobile shops, which are also those of their own lives, carrying them around, dismantling them and setting them back again every single day. She also draws our attention to other migrant workers, whose vulnerabilities have become particularly tangible as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they were evicted, forced to go home, sometimes walking thousands of kilometers without water or food in their way to their villages. Providing inexpensive, yet essential, services, with no social security, everyone pretends as if they did not exist, including the state. Aiming at making visible their experiences of the city, Mastani conducts a series of insightful interviews, introducing us to people like Ashrafi Lal, who works and lives with most of his workers in his rented 315 sq. ft tailoring workshop in an unauthorized neighborhood in Tuglaqabad extension area. He is fortunate enough to have a toilet in his rented space and manages to go and visit his wife and five children every other weekend at their village, as he cannot afford to bring his family to Delhi. We also learn about the living conditions of Noor Mohammad Ji, one of the hundreds of thousands of people who walked back home during the lockdown. Earning between 135 and 170 USD a month, he pays 14 USD rent for a 5 ft x 6.5 ft room that

he shares with his eldest son in the unauthorized residential area Amarjyoti camp. They can only use the room to sleep side by side, cooking and bathing outside their doorstep, sharing ten toilets for men and ten for women with other 5000 people in similar conditions and queuing for water when tankers visit the camp between 6.30 and 7.30 am.

Sharing the insight that the size and diversity of cities make them susceptible to complementary, even contradictory, ways of seeing, graphic designer and sociologist Sampati Pani brings to light the plastic nature of Delhi. Drawing from John Berger, she advances that Delhi is continuously being made through the relationships of her inhabitants with it and, as such, being one (and many) with such interactions, it cannot be separated from those who inhabit it. When we realize, we are navigating with her this fantastic megacity through its smallness, being witnesses to place making interactions and routines in particular streets, street bazaars, pavements and street shops, getting a very good grasp of the idea that a road is much more than asphalt and concrete, that a street, more than anything else, is its people, how they actualize it in multiple ways, in different uses and practices that coexist and accumulate, creating a special thickness, a distinctive flavor, that makes it unique, recognizable, despite being always in transformation.

There is another important layer to every street. Philosopher and social anthropologist Sarover Zaidi calls attention to the fact that a street is also made of the violence that it was once exercised there, as such a violence does not go away. Motivated by a conversation

with her students at an architecture and urban planning institute in Delhi, future planners and architects for the city who had no idea of the anti-Sikh pogrom that took place in large parts of Delhi in 1984, Zaidi reminds us of the need to keep our collective memories awoken if we want to create spaces for equality, brotherhood and tolerance. The history is there, it informs the street and those who inhabit it, whether they are aware of it or not. Underscoring the importance of incorporating this kind of education in our architecture programs, she makes us wonder whether, if the memory of 1984 was more spoken of, the reality of Muslims, who are today structurally persecuted, would be different.

I believe that Martand Khosla's artwork, which constitutes the visual article that serves as a leitmotif to this issue, manages to convey and articulate such fundamental matters, making clearer the interconnections between the different papers gathered together in the issue by somehow putting ideas from different articles side by side. For instance, his *City Awakes in Anger*, reproduced in the frontpage, could be said to share the understanding that a city has many layers, including its violence. It might be the violence from the 1984 anti-Sikh Riots or the violence experienced by those migrant workers who were forced to leave in the middle of the coronavirus crisis in 2020 with neither the means to do it nor the support from the state. But the city, and its inhabitants, the living city, is also able to rebel, creatively and organically, fighting back through the smallness the politics of exclusion that such practices reveal.

### 3. THREE EXAMPLES OF SPACE MAKING IN DELHI FROM MY OWN EXPERIENCE

I grew up in India. By this statement, I mean that parts of my adolescence and secondary education took place in India, specifically in the state of Maharashtra, in Paud, near Pune, and that such an experience changed me as a human being, including my sense of space and my understanding of the possibilities of inhabiting it.

What I find most striking regarding space making in India is how the most sophisticated places can be made by a few people gathering together. For instance, while trying to go across Delhi by car in 2019 summer, four people on the pavement caught my attention. I had time to observe them because I was in a huge traffic jump. Squatting, about one and a half meter from one another, they formed a perfect square. Two men and two women chatted in the middle of the heat. Their surroundings couldn't be less appealing. There was construction going on very near-by, which added to the noise from road traffic, which alone would have been stress enough. It was as exhaustingly humid as any other day of that summer. To give you an idea, the moment I left my air-conditioned car, I was dripping with sweat. But they were there, as if in the coziest living room, taking pleasure in using their space, both the common space, created by their gathering, and the one that each individual enjoyed, as they kept their distance in a very precise, material manner.

I would say that this kind of private use of public space is another feature that makes

Delhi the city it is. It is as if people were allowed to such a kind of pleasurable intangible architecture of intimacy provided that they don't mind being watched. In this regard, there is something very generous in the use of public space. That being so, it also seems to be true that those most vulnerable and in real need of that space are not so generously welcome anymore to use it, in such a way that one might have to bribe the police, for example, to be able to sleep under a bridge, always under threat.

That was the experience of a family living on the pavement under the left abutment (if coming from Mahatma Gandhi Marg) of the bridge in Sri Aurobindo Marg closer to AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Science) with whom my friend Meeta and I had the opportunity to chat on the Saturday of September 7<sup>th</sup> 2019. They had been sleeping there for about three years, as their eldest daughter had mental health problems and her parents felt that it was important that they lived near the hospital where she was receiving treatment. All of them, including their eldest daughter, were garbage pickers. The money they managed to collect picking up, cleaning, sorting and segregating recyclable cardboard waste, was just enough to eat and pay the police the bribe they demanded every week from them. They were lucky to be under the bridge. The structure allowed them to create their own family dwelling, giving them shelter from the sun and the rains.

The pavement was also the temporary home of many others who could not find refuge under the bridge. AIIMS makes clinical care available to millions of underprivileged citizens of India who are too poor to afford quality

treatment elsewhere. But first they have to get there, which in itself might be a huge investment for them. Often coming from very far, such vulnerable people know no one in the city and cannot afford accommodation while being in Delhi. But let us get back to my visit and the people living there that September. All they used to build their own space was a piece of fabric, mostly rectangular and of rough materials used for sacks. They were mostly families waiting for one of their members to get treatment. There were also patients among them, people who, while getting treatment, had to live on the pavement, as they could not be accommodated at the hospital. There were also people who lived there while they waited for their loved ones who had been hospitalized. Some of them had been living on the pavement for months. The open space inside the hospital complex was no less crowded. It was very hard to find a place in the shade to sit and rest from the heat. Even though my friend and I could not sit together, we did find space close to the AIIMS office, where lots of people were trying to sort out bureaucratic issues regarding the documents that were supposed to make sure that they received medical care. The stories we heard were all equally devastating.

I couldn't help looking fixedly at a very old gentleman, who, squatting, without moving from the little space he had for his own, kept swinging a leaf, as if brushing away the dirt on the pavement underneath. He did not stop doing it the long hour we sat there, and it felt that he would continue doing so all the time he happened to be there.

Sorting out the documents sometimes took long months away from home or travelling

back and forth collecting endless documentation from institutions of all sorts. We learnt in detail about Prem Nath Verma's story, who was there to make sure that his wife, with a serious heart condition, and who was in their village in Uttar Pradesh, could get the treatment she urgently needed. There was a real bureaucratic nightmare, for when she was about to get her operation done, they learnt that her papers were not in order and she had to leave the hospital, return to their village and start the application process all over again.

My last example has to do with the use of the median strip of roads. One continuously encounters all kinds of shops on the sidewalk. Barbershops and cobblers are exciting examples. Sidewalks, when compared to the median strip, seem to be safer, at least as far as traffic is concerned. Nonetheless, many people use the median strip for living purposes. For instance, particularly at night, many people use, to sleep, the median strip of the section of Lala Lajpat Rai Road closer to the Nizamuddin Dargah's area. Let me add that it is really narrow. When noticing such a sleeping practice

for the first time, I felt that the sleepers were doing real exercises of acrobatics, as if they were sleeping on a tightrope. Likewise, it is not rare seeing people brushing their teeth early in the morning in the median strip. I never had the chance to ask anyone why they preferred the median strip to the sidewalk. However, I have the feeling that it might have something to do with the politics of exclusion outlined by the contributions to this volume. By being more dangerous, it is also less used and more accessible and, as such, ironically, also safer. For instance, it is more difficult to corner someone in the median strip than on a sidewalk. Moreover, for being, let us say, less comfortable, its use is also likely to disturb at least a bit less those who don't want vulnerable people, and especially *certain* vulnerable people, around.

I am sure that readers will agree with me that the papers conforming this issue cast light on these examples of mine. I would like to close my introductory lines thanking the authors for their invaluable help for making this project possible.

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