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Balancing Old and New in Delhi

Modern Delhi's Perspective on Built Heritage Conservation

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Introduction

How can a city hope to move into the future if its buildings represent the past? The answer is a paradox only on its surface: in order to sustainably develop a city which accommodates the diverse needs of a bustling metropolis, planners and policy makers must consider the decades, centuries, and millennia of evolving layers of human existence. If we neglect our built heritage, it is to our, and future generations', detriment. Without the monuments to our past, our presence has no meaning, uprooted and detached from the succession of events which carry us into the future.

To their credit, planners have come a long way from the model cities of the Modernist Movement, when entire neighborhoods were mowed down to make space for super highways and uniform housing blocks. International conservation standards, such as ICOMOS' Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas, 1987 stipulate that conservation should be fully integrated into social, economic and development policy, should seek to preserve specific urban character or culture, should involve all stakeholders, and should follow a systematic but not rigid approach¹. Yet, urban heritage is all too often isolated from our quest to achieve perfect efficiency, comfort, safety and equality, and thus becomes collateral damage through diseases of neglect: anonymity, slow decomposition and encroachment.

Scope, Methodology and Limitations

While Delhi policymakers have demonstrated their desire to move closer to international conservation standards through the attention paid to built heritage in the Delhi Master Plans 2001² and 2021³, and the passing of The Delhi Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 2004⁴, conservation continues at a regrettably slow pace. Delhi has been unable to resolve the emerging economy dilemma of rapid development versus heritage conservation, and policymakers' top-down conservation rhetoric is countered by the needs of Delhi's expanding middle class. This paper seeks, through conversations with civil society members, to identify the challenges which exist in the intersection of conservation and development, policy and reality.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) classifies monuments within tiers of importance: first tier monuments are of national importance, second tier monuments are of state importance, and third tier monuments are of local importance. INTACH, a non-governmental conservation foundation, has been instrumental in identifying and documenting Delhi's 1000-plus monuments, and assisting in their preservation through development of local capabilities. In particular, the organization is concerned with the

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protection of third tier monuments; in February 2010, INTACH, Delhi Chapter successfully brought 767 third tier monuments under the protection of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). INTACH further ranks the third tier monuments (grades A-C) on their level of historical/heritage quality and condition. While the condition of many of Delhi's first and second tier monuments is far from stable, this paper focuses on the lower grade third tier monuments, which are often dismissed as regretful but inevitable collateral to urbanization. It is this tier which bears the greatest pressure of population, rapid development and lack of resources.

While existing literature provides solid documentation of conservation policy and legislation, coverage of civil society's perceptions and role within conservation schemes is relatively sparse. This paper seeks to contribute to available research by targeting the opinions of the middle sector of civil society: professors, urban planning professionals, interested individuals and elected municipal representatives. Unfortunately, due to the author's personal limitations as a foreigner (lack of language skills, an outsider's perspective), and the narrow range of interviewed individuals (well educated elite), there remains a scope for improvement. Nonetheless, this paper presents the under-represented perspective of modern Delhi on the policies and realities of heritage conservation.

Case Study: Shahjahanabad

A case study of the walled city of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi) provides a context for research into specific challenges and perceptions. Founded by Shah Jahan in 1637, the walled city is a roughly 1,500 acre quarter circle-shaped area around the Red Fort. The haveli (palace) lined central axis of Chandni Chowk is both testament to the former wealth of the Mughal Empire, and the over-populated deterioration of the quarter following the arrival of the British Raj and the construction of "New Delhi"⁵. Facing the omnipresent Delhi urbanization challenges of over-crowding, unauthorized encroachments, unequal resource management and service allocation, Shahjahanabad is often the target of development schemes. As a neighborhood with one of the greatest concentrations of monuments in Delhi (411⁶), Shahjahanabad is a suitable case study of the realities of heritage conservation within the context of urban development.

No discussion of cultural conservation would be complete without mention of the eternal debate of "Whose Heritage?" In a rejoinder to Prof. Ashok

Kumar's paper "Whose Heritage, Why Conservation, Whose Ends?" for ITPI Journal, Prof. Kavas Kapadia (School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi) stresses the emotive nature of conservation, with the power to be mobilized for nationalistic pride and destructive hatred alike⁷. For example, several Muslim monuments in Delhi were destroyed during Partition, and professor of History at Delhi University, Dr. Sunil Kumar warns that issues of religion and caste are still very much alive under the surface of the conservation debate in Shahjahanabad, with its prominent Muslim architecture. History itself is not simply a timeline of events, but rather a complex weaving of perspectives, and Kumar asks to which point in history a building should be restored. Emphasis is placed on conserving a building's "authentic" history, which implies original condition, yet every building has multiple stories to tell, and true authenticity exists in the centuries of use.

With this in mind, it may be more prudent to advocate for sensitive reuse of third tier heritage structures, rather than isolating them from the local population by attempting to return them to an outdated function. Yet, the local population is itself one of the greatest threats to heritage conservation. Originally planned for a population of 60,000, Shahjahanabad had 325,000 residents in 2001⁸. Over-population has not gone unnoticed, and municipal Council woman Renuka Gupta has been particularly outspoken about her concerns regarding population pressure on heritage buildings, as well as local government resources and social structures. Residences which were built for a single family are often subdivided amongst male heirs with each successive generation, leading to a situation in which 16 families may occupy a space which was originally designed for one. Councilor Gupta suggests that provisions should be made in the building bylaws to permit structures to exceed the current FAR allowance so that pressures of encroachment can be relaxed by allowing the neighborhood to grow upwards. Given the uncertain foundations and proximity of structures in Shahjahanabad, such a change should not be undergone lightly, and at the very least would have to be well-regulated for every instance of construction.

Subdivision of heritage structures presents an even more complex set of issues, notes Ajay Kumar of INTACH, Delhi Chapter, for while one family may have the resources and inclination to actively conserve their residence, the project can never be realized without the financial and physical support of the other 15 families. Under the Delhi Master Plan, 2021, the walled city has been declared a special zone to protect the urban character, and Section 115 (1) (vi) exempts from

property tax heritage sites which have been notified by ASI⁹. However, economic incentives are not available to private owners of lesser monuments. On the other hand, Councilor Gupta observes, government schemes are in place to provide funding and loans to owners seeking to convert residences to commercial purposes, a policy which makes commercialization of property more attractive than conserving the original residential program. While commercialization has substantially lowered the population of Shahjahanabad, the encroachment of wholesale industries and manufacturing and trade of noxious materials pose serious hazards to quality of life and built heritage. Redevelopment agents propose relocating these industries to new campuses outside of Old Delhi, but Councilor Gupta states that owners are reluctant to shift when facilities are not equal to, or better than, their current situations. Rather, she advocates that owners be allowed to retain storefronts or offices in Shahjahanabad, in order to maintain contact with clientele, while their warehouses and noxious industries should be removed to another location.

Private owners are not the only stakeholders without sufficient resources; local government has inherited the impossible task of solving Shahjahanabad's overburdened and out-dated infrastructure with limited finances. The neighborhood has benefitted from the construction of the Delhi Metro system, but the roads are still congested due to commercial encroachment from the informal sector and automated vehicular traffic, neither of which were planned for by the original city planners of Shahjahanabad. The health of the population and of heritage structures alike is compromised by the lack of an effective waste management system and poor sanitation. As is the trend globally, infrastructure is increasingly relegated to the private sector and to public-private partnerships, such as the Shahjahanabad Redevelopment Corporation, which has recently launched a project to bury the notorious tangles of electrical wires along Daryanganj Marg and Chandni Chowk¹⁰.

While delegating development in this manner relieves some of the load on weak government structures, Councilor Gupta and other MCD officials have complained that agencies are not appropriately consulting all of the stakeholders in the planning and implementation of redevelopment schemes. Redevelopment bodies counter that when they invite stakeholders and government representatives, they do not attend the meetings. It is therefore difficult to determine which is the true account; in all likelihood, both are correct in various instances. However, when proposals are not universally approved, projects fuel

public discontent and are indefinitely stalled by PILs. This issue may be solved through better consideration of stakeholders, but Leon Morenas (Professor at the School of Planning and Architecture) criticizes schemes such as the Chandni Chowk Redevelopment Plan as being too heavy handed. He and other young planners would like to see more creative solutions to the problems of traffic, program and disrepair, and Sunil Kumar notes that the situation in Chandni Chowk is far more complicated than the proposal indicates.

Policy Recommendations

The sheer number of stakeholders, agencies and authorities in this situation is a daunting prospect which could prove to be Shahjahanabad's strongest asset, if they were well coordinated to ensure that all bodies were aware of their roles in relation to each other, and were then held accountable for accomplishing their goals. However, "conservation continues to be seen as an elite oriented movement," according to Rastish Nanda¹¹, and until conservation is perceived as complementing, rather than opposing, development, conservation policy will remain rhetoric instead of practice. With the challenge of mobilization in mind, this paper will attempt to offer several policy suggestions:

Educate: Sunil Kumar correctly dismisses the notion that education is the panacea for conservation woes; however, programs should be implemented to encourage local understanding of heritage resources. Schemes should naturally be targeted at schools, but should also develop local heritage appreciation organizations to promote neighborhood ownership of heritage. Training in appropriate conservation methods would increase local jobs and improve the health of heritage structures.

Improve Oversight: Already existing and future organizations must be well coordinated to improve allocation of resources. In addition, perceptions of government ineptitude need to be reduced through the promotion of a social audit system to monitor government conservation efforts (perhaps the aforementioned local heritage appreciation societies), increased transparency, and involvement of all stakeholders and interest groups in the formation of development/conservation schemes.

Inclusion: of all stakeholders to reduce distrust. In particular, the informal sector should not be ignored in planning, as it is responsible for much of the encroachment at the street level. Informal sector individuals should be treated as stakeholders, and formally adopted into the system in order to control development and stabilize their role. Schemes could

include licensing, resources, semi-permanent locations/stalls, respect from local authorities.

Sustainable Tourism: While Old Delhi should not be Disney-fied, steps should be taken to make first and second tier monuments “bankable.” Given the capital-intensive nature of development, tourism revenues would help maintain monuments and provide a source of income for the area. There is increasing pressure to make some monuments ticketed, and to improve the walk-ability of Delhi to encourage tourists to move through heritage and commercial areas.

Creative Conservation for Third Tier Monuments: concessions should be made to the demands of the developing middle class within the lower grades of third tier monuments. We do not have the resources to conserve the entirety of Delhi's built heritage, but neither should we allow lesser-known heritage structures to be neglected. First, the third tier needs to be subdivided to reflect the INTACH grading system, as there is a significant difference between an A-grade local monument and a C-grade local monument. A-grade monuments should be treated like monuments in the first two tiers, while flexibility may be introduced in the conservation approach to B and C-grade structures. This

would allow lesser monuments to continue to develop with the local population's needs and would contribute to the buildings' longevity, as legitimizing the status quo would help to enforce standards. Building Codes for non-heritage buildings should be made more flexible to release pressure on heritage buildings.

Consulting Facilities: should be available to individuals and organizations to provide advice and give approval of building projects.

Conditional Funding: for individuals, institutions and organizations wishing to undertake projects, provided demonstrated ability to acceptably complete the project.

Naturally, the government should continue to improve infrastructure, as tangential development issues such as over-population, traffic congestion and waste management have significant bearing on the stability of heritage buildings. Above all, policies must be enforced. While the intention to conserve is clear in government policy, the vision fails to be properly implemented or required of individuals. By mobilizing local populations and encouraging responsible ownership of heritage structures, the government may be able to use its limited enforcement resources more efficiently.

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