

# REDEFINING DELHI'S HERITAGE



Manish Chalana tries to bridge the gap between modernity and tradition in Delhi by rethinking heritage beyond the 'monuments and sites' framework.

## INTRODUCTION

As a capital city Delhi has retained a unique position in India's historical geography. It has continued to be a gateway to North India through which global capital and ideas flow into other parts of the country. In the recent decades due to rapid urbanisation, fuelled in part by globalisation, the city has seen considerable shifts in urban infrastructure and development. Since the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, Delhi has actively participated in the global economy and embraced modernity in design and planning – a process that begun at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Edward Lutyens' design of New Delhi, but by no means complete. The pursuit of modernity is certainly not "un-Indian", but it has associated costs, including increasing neglect for various forms of traditional heritage that give Delhi its distinct urban characters. Yet retaining some of these traditional built environments is crucial for maintaining a sense of time and place for residents and visitors alike. It is necessary to focus on the everyday historic environments of Delhi to underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach to heritage conservation that is beyond the 'monument and site' framework used in current practice. The article proposes that using an expanded framework would ensure that Delhi remains 'local' without missing out on the promise of the 'global' in the years to come.

## PAST AND FUTURE COLLIDE

Delhi prepares to play host to the 2010 Commonwealth Games where it hopes to present to the world an image of a global metropolis with a historic soul. But in the face of rapid urbanisation and infrastructure development this may be an uphill task. In an attempt to modernise the city the new master plan: MPD 2021 proposes to abolish previous height restrictions that gave Delhi its low and sprawling urban form. Furthermore to develop modern amenities and infrastructure Delhi is participating in a massive urban renewal program of the central government: Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and using the monies earmarked for that purpose (a lion's share of which is dedicated to major cities including Delhi). With increasing flow of capital funding urban and infrastructural development projects (including a mass transit system) the city's past is literally colliding with its future in dramatic ways. However none of the urban upheaval has faded the appeal of Delhi among global prospectors and rural populations despite urban planners attempt at popularising "dual track" urbanisation to promote smaller and mid-sized cities in India.

## SCATTERING OF MONUMENTS AND SITES

Amidst all the urban restructuring Delhi has been fairly successful in safeguarding its historic monuments and site through the work of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) that manages 172 properties in the Delhi Metro Region. The list comprises largely of exceptional monuments and archaeological sites like the Red Fort and Humayun's Tomb. However the bulk of the historic environment outside of the monument and site framework that ASI uses for listing purposes remain neglected and threatened by rapid urbanisation. As a result non-listed properties are routinely lost to development including the recently in the news Lal Mahal in Hazrat Nizamuddin that was partially demolished in Nov 2008. In the recent decades the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), has argued for an expanded definition of heritage to include historic district and "living heritage" designations. In addition, INTACH also proposes inventorying sites over 50 years (compared to the 100 year cut off ASI uses), and of varying significance at local, regional and national levels. In an attempt to demonstrate the wealth of Delhi's heritage, INTACH produced an exhaustive listing of over 1200 properties in the city (compared to ASI's 172) that it considers retaining archaeological, historical or architectural significance. The listing numbers alone between INTACH and ASI exemplifies inherent ideological difference between the two agencies over what constitutes as 'heritage'. Although INTACH defines heritage more broadly it has limited statutory powers to designate historic sites, or prevent bad things from happening to them.

## EXPANDING MANDATE OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION

The Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC) aspires to see Delhi become a world class historic destination, a task that would be difficult to achieve if the city continues to focus on preserving monuments and sites alone at the cost of surrounding historic (and vernacular) urban fabric. Imagine Paris without its unique *arrondissements* (districts) that retain historic (and contemporary) environments in mix use neighborhoods with distinct flavors. Paris would



not be a world class city today if it had only preserved edifices like Notre Dame and Eiffel Tower. Cities around the world from Prague to Providence have invested, to varying degrees, on their historic built environment that is not monumental. There is no doubt that monuments enrich our lives with meaning and provide a sense of history, but as David Lowenthal notes, interpreting the past entirely from grand sites runs the risk of presenting a skewed perspective on history, which may be far from reality. "Although monuments act as great bundles of symbolism in the collective memories of a nation", notes cultural geographer Peirce Lewis, they alone are like "punctuation marks in a sentence" and while important for understanding the words, "meaning cannot be preserved by collecting punctuation marks." In the last century Delhi has collected numerous "punctuation marks" as visitors' shuttle from one World Heritage Site to another, missing out on the richness of the built fabric surrounding these sites.

### RETHINKING HERITAGE CONSERVATION PRACTICE

Perhaps it is time for Delhi to consider an approach to heritage conservation that might work better for managing its rich historic environments outside of the monument and site framework. For one, the city should consider expanding the types of designations to include different types of sites such as heritage areas, districts, landscapes, trails, and regions. The multiplicity of designations would allow for the development of unique treatments suited for different property types. Second, the city should also consider integrating heritage conservation with planning so that preservation practice is not isolated from the urban context. Third, the roles and responsibilities of different agencies and organisations around heritage conservation work should be streamlined to consolidate efforts and avoid duplication. The case of Lal Mahal is emblematic of the need for intra-agency coordination as it clearly demonstrated that three heritage lists maintained by different agencies (MCD, ASI and INTACH) were insufficient to prevent the demolition of a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Islamic palace. Finally, Delhi should promote adaptive use of historic structures. Given the range of available historic stock in the city a variety of innovative projects could emerge from adaptive use such as the Olive Restaurant on Kalka Das Marg in Mehrauli that takes advantage of the historic ambience of an old *Haveli* to enhance the contemporary dining experience.

### AFTERTHOUGHTS

Delhi's historic fabric is unparalleled in the world, but at the same time the bulk of it remains vulnerable to pressures of urbanisation. The city's planners and policymakers need to reconsider the value of urban heritage not just for the visitors, but also for the residents who have a greater stake in their immediate environment. Already there is a growing awareness in Delhi on the value of places like Shahjahanabad, even if the policies to protect them are not yet in place. A growing engagement with and around heritage in Delhi has found avenues in heritage walks, seminars and workshops that allow Delhiites to experience their city's rich history through the lens of the everyday historic environment. While planning, policy and legislation may lag behind in ensuring that these neighborhoods will continue to remain part of the city's changing fabric, there seems to be increasing grassroots participation challenging the status quo around issues of heritage conservation. ■



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1. Historic image of Lal Mahal, Source: Unclear; Date Unknown. Used by permission from <http://lalmahal.wordpress.com/>.
2. 9<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement of Paris; Boulevard Haussmann seen from the roof of Galeries Lafayette. Photo taken by Thierry Bézecourt, November 2005. Used with permission under the "GNU Free Documentation License". <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Blv-haussmann-lafayette.jpg> on May 16, 2009.
3. Olive Restaurant on Kalka Das Marg in Mehrauli. Photo by Stuart Henshall, Used by permission.

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