



## Designing with Place: Contextual Anchoring of a Contemporary City Fabric, the Flux of Urban Management on the City of Delhi

*Sagarika Sharma*

*10th Semester, B.Arch. Malaviya National Institute of Technology, Jaipur, (Rajasthan), INDIA*

*(Corresponding author: Sagarika Sharma)*

*(Received 03 January, 2017 Accepted 28 January, 2017)*

*(Published by Research Trend, Website: [www.researchtrend.net](http://www.researchtrend.net))*

**ABSTRACT:** The shift from the identity destroying “International style” of architecture to the revitalization of local identities is an urban necessity. Critical Regionalism is one such concept that puts Regionalism and Revival of architectural heritage in perspective and makes it contextually appropriate. It opposes a blind revisit into tradition and encourages a critical rethinking of traditional practices and application where suitable in conjunction with the contextual changes. What was suitable a few decades ago is rendered redundant in the present day because the context has undergone changes, predominantly environmental, through the years.

The continuous rapid growth of Indian cities highlights a persistent issue i.e. the exceeding rate of negative impacts than the opportunities that it provides. As populations increase, the chaotic utilization and excess exploitation of natural resources as such land and water can have irreversible negative environmental effects. Water is one of the excessively misused assets of our society, which can be proficiently conserved utilizing the advantages of electronic control systems, and community oriented utility administration. Initiatives such as utilizing grey water to irrigate parks and gardens and sending it back to household units require ‘smart’ control systems and new abilities among city planners and architects, who are so far used to water administration being a centralized function. If these issues are neglected, our cities would just be a step away from complete breakdown. This paper will bring out the social, economic and environmental challenges with regard to water control in urban areas and accomplish a net advantageous outcome in each area, with minimal trade-offs. Consequently, it explores the case of Ahmedabad wherein the level of public acceptability of the above-mentioned initiatives is unsatisfactory and discusses the steps taken by state government in right direction.

**Key words:** Critical Regionalism, Placelessness, Identity, Context, Tradition, Regional Resources, Built Environment, Climate

### **I. PLACELESS ARCHITECTURE- A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPACE**

The concepts of world cities and globalization have become key concepts of social scientists, architects, and economic geographers observing, experiencing, and describing the profound changes that new technologies have been causing for worldwide economic and social development. Planners and historians are following this academic interest and exploring the ways and means of promoting cities and city regions to world cities. The cities in the race of attaining global identity have ended up producing placeless environments which lack the diversity and richness of place experience and profound meaning, attributes which were cohesively woven into erstwhile planned cities. Both capital globalization and modern technology have resulted in more and more standardization of built environments, depriving human

habitats of cultural and regional identity. This farce of standardization is becoming an international malaise as the same building methods, materials and styles are applied. In such a scenario, the challenge of overcoming this placelessness and creating unique, regional and meaningful places within the contemporary globalization context is the prime design challenge.

Geographers have long spoken of the importance of place as the unique focus distinguishing geography from other disciplines. Astronomy has the heavens, History has time, and Geography has place. A major question that geographers must sooner or later ask, however, is “What exactly is place?” Is it merely a synonym for location, or a unique ensemble of nature and culture, or could it be something more?

- David Seamon & Jacob Sowers, *Place and Placelessness*

Architecture cannot be entirely universal. Buildings are inevitably specific to local topographic, cultural and climatic conditions, however, advanced techniques and materials, as well as transport and communication links, have allowed appropriation of Modernist concepts and a universal architectural language throughout most of the world.

*Technological advances such as electric lighting and air conditioning, as well as the physical ability to flatten a site (as opposed to engaging with its natural topography), have had an enormous effect on the spread of placeless aesthetic championed by the pioneers of the Modernist movement.*

- Michael Fry, *Globalization and Placeless Architecture*

Unlike most other artistic disciplines (although classing architecture as an artistic discipline may be at odds with Modernist principles) the format of the built environment in which we live provide a unique experience of the spread of universal techniques and shared global approaches. But it is for this reason, the impact that architecture has on society, that they have struggled for so long with how to engage with, or master, the tension between the local and global.

Unlike the majority of other art forms, an architectural work necessarily takes its place amongst other buildings, or within a specific setting: it is always part of a land, or cityscape. As it takes around six-seven years from the beginning of the design process to the completion of a building, architecture faces a battle to keep up with world developments, and how these may affect the client or location. As similar functions, especially in terms of finance and the service industry, are performed all over the globe then logically the forms of buildings which house these services are likely to be similar, especially now as technological advances make climatic and topographical considerations less important.

Any sense of urban culture was submerged beneath this growing trend, any individuality of location was lost under the functional constructions that emerged from 'nowhere', bereft of any links to community and serving to alienate the individual from the city as a dynamic cultural environment.

## II. CRITICAL REGIONALISM- OVERCOMING PLACELESSNESS

*Uniqueness, originality, regionality, expressiveness, and hybridity are the essential qualities of a good place. These qualities should be considered as the basis objectives of place-making. They can be achieved by using regional or local metaphors and by drawing*

*inspiration from art, nature, local history, science and intellectual tradition.*

- Chang-Shan Huang, *How can we avoid Placelessness? (University of Pennsylvania)*

Alvar Aalto, who developed a distinctive style of regional Modernism in Finland, rejected the 'technical functionalism' of the Modern style as it violated individual identity of a building. He made it a point to work with the topography of the site, to 'cultivate' its location and therefore firmly give it context, as opposed to the abstraction of typical Modernist design. Avoiding placelessness does not mean abandoning the progressive effects of Modern Architecture, but refusing the notion that a single universal style of architecture is applicable universally, without regional alternation.

*"Beyond the best technical and performance intelligence, are the local needs, regional resources, and comparative social values that require recognition and visibility within decisions about the built environment. Design decisions and construction practices about the built environment must go beyond their technical correctness, by their aesthetic and community responsibility. In this manner, "design with climate" has become "designing with place", to incorporate the performance expectations internationally with local resources."*

- Arvind Krishan, *Climate-Responsive Architecture*

The movement of Critical Regionalism is incomplete without a discourse on the ideologies of Kenneth Frampton, the prominent propagatory academician of the movement, with his eminent literature 'Towards a Critical Regionalism- Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance'. In the text, two of his points - Culture vs Nature-Topography, Context, Climate, Light and Tectonic Form, and The Visual vs The Tactile - he elucidates the struggling opposing forces between these conflicting yet conjunctual ideas.

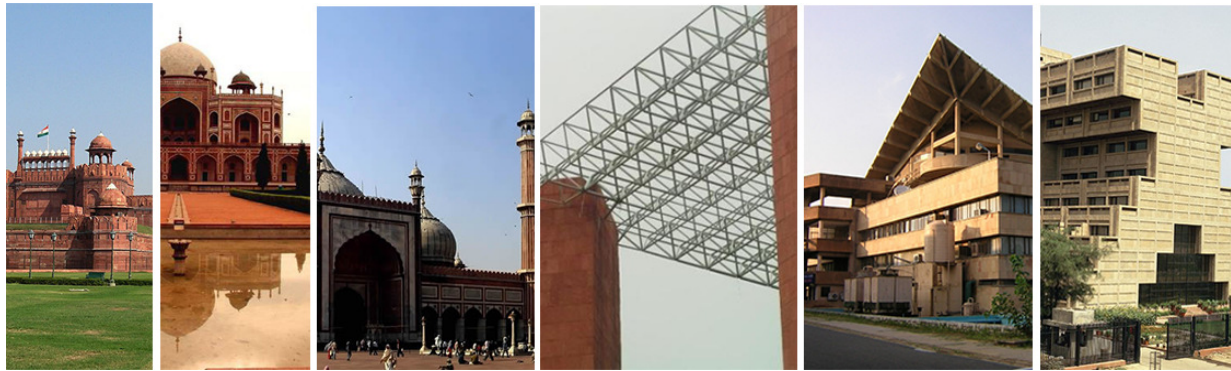
## III. IDENTITY-BUILDING ARCHITECTURE

Despite Delhi holding a place of diversity, both in culture and architecture, the architectural endeavours which intend to impart an identity should be in the form of landmarks or iconic buildings for the people. Therefore, personal residences and private buildings do not condone identity creation. It is usually large-scale buildings of public or administrative nature which suit the purpose.

*"Identity is a process and not a found object. It may be likened by the trail left by the civilization as it moves through history. Secondly, being a process, identity cannot be fabricated. We develop our identity by tackling what we perceive to be our real problems"*  
- Charles Correa, 1968

*"Climate is a crucial determinant in this process. For instance, the question of whether a church should be an enclosed box, or a mosque have a courtyard, would depend on what they were being built. Places like Delhi require thorough ventilation, because of their hot humid climate. I find that climate helps determine form on two different levels. One, it is an immediate determinant, finding expression in courtyard or in through ventilation. Two, at a much deeper level, climate helps determine the patterns of culture and rituals." - Charles Correa, 1968*

Hence, according to Charles Correa, these identities are not actually created with the express intention of doing so, but in reality a cause-effect, problem-solving means - which inevitably creates the desired identity.



**Fig. 1.** Visual Character of Delhi- an amalgamation of the past and present.

If one attempts to pictorially paint the architecture of Delhi-the images presented in the sensibilities of most of the people are of "Delhi is the Rashtrapati Bhawan" or "Delhi is Qutub Minar, or the Red Fort". Yet, geographically Delhi spreads for almost 1500 square kilometres; and Lutyen's Delhi amounts to about 43 kilometres, while Old Delhi is even smaller. How fares the rest of Delhi?

The contemporary architecture of Delhi, the Capital City' is an extension of what transpired after Independence and Delhi was given the title of capital. In this case it becomes important to understand the post-independence scenario of the architecture of Delhi. The processes and events which led to the creation of contemporary architecture depend on this time of change.

#### V. POST-INDEPENDENCE SCENARIO

Delhi is understood as an amalgamation of many cities and an aggregation of vivid cultural backgrounds, as the latter is largely determined by distances. Having established that, the architectural exhibits in Delhi of the post-independence time impart a multiple imagery, which, while being conflicting, is nevertheless interesting. There is an eternal search for identity.

Therefore, buildings of suitable scale and importance are exclusively selected and analysed on the basis of how they contribute to identity development of Delhi in the contemporary era.

#### IV. ARCHITECTURE OF DELHI

Delhi retains its position as one of the oldest surviving cities in the world, in the modern times. It is in actuality an amalgam of eight cities, each built in different eras on a different site - each era leaving its mark, and adding character to it - and each ruler imparting to it an individualistic layer of architectural identity. It has evolved into a culturally secular city - amalgamating different religions, diverse cultures, both foreign and indigenous- and yet functioning as one organic entity.

*"The question of how best- if at all- India's architectural heritage could be used to self-consciously create architectural expressions has always been a complex one. With political independence in 1947 came a desire for new ways of thinking, which together with the entrenched ways, resulted in a dual set of values that continued to shape the work of architects. One set focused on the future and the other on the past"*

- A.G.K. Menon

The post-colonial influence of architecture on buildings in Delhi is not as strong as that of the colonial era. When we analyze the cities of Shahjahanabad or New Delhi, a strong character is visible in these areas, apart and aside from that of the rest of Delhi.

But this is so because these were planned, and that is why we find distinct, distinguishable characteristics associated with them. From this, the deviation of post-independence architecture was apparent due to changes in cultural value system, no unified centrally controlled government, and lack of cohesive vision.

*"The identity we are searching for is going to be pluralistic, it is not a single mono-centric one"*

- Charles Correa

Senior architect and then Chief architect of CPWD, Habib Rahman was responsible for several of the buildings that provide central Delhi its current character, the post and telegraph building (1954), the auditor and general's controller's office, the Indraprastha Bhawan, the WHO building (1962) and the multi-storey flats at RK Puram and Patel Bhawan (1972-73). The work of Gropius and international style became a source of inspiration for the architects then and during 1950's the influence of the international style began to be evident in houses, whether or not they were designed by architects. Several buildings, like Vayu Bhavan, Krishi Bhavan, Udyog Bhavan, Rail Bhavan, Vigyan Bhavan and the Supreme court (1952) feature proliferant use of the traditional Rajasthani elements of 'chattri' and 'chajja', with domes to impart a distinct Indian visual character.



Fig. 2. Vayu Bhawan, Supreme Court, Rail Bhawan, Udyog Bhawan.

## VI. DELHI - CONTEXTUAL STUDY

A shift towards contemporary architecture of Delhi occurred in the period after Independence - The roots of this period trace back to the founding of New Delhi in 1912. This was when the actual building boom in Delhi started, and it was also when the production of architecture became a self-conscious exercise.

Delhi is an ancient city. It is a city of ancient monuments and traditional settlements that coexist within a modern metropolis. This history is not manifest as a continuous narrative, but appears as discrete elements in the urban-scape. Its ancient monuments have not had a significant impact on the local architectural imagination.

Even at the time of Independence the debate amongst architects was on whether Revivalist ideals or the emerging ideas of European Modernism was appropriate for a newly independent nation. This dialogue was being carried out primarily in

Government offices and resulted in two styles of architecture being built in Delhi.

What is identifiable as modern architecture in Delhi can best be described as utilitarian modernism: genealogically rooted to the International style, but constrained by the limited repertoire of the available building technology and an equally limited budget. These twin constraints continue to bedevil the architecture of Delhi, because, following colonial imperatives, construction costs are treated as they are reflected in the budget as 'capital expenditure', to be pared to the minimum, and not recognized as the generators of economic activity, with a diverse multiplier effect on the economy as a whole.

Utilitarian modernism got established by the '60s. During this period, to relieve the drabness of utilitarian modernism, buildings displayed murals on their facades. The virtues of utilitarian modernism were its concern for climatic factors (the budgets for most of these buildings could not afford expensive mechanical services), functional efficiency and aesthetic restraint.

**Housing Sector:** The housing development of this period were characterised by flat roofs, external surfaces finished in plain plaster with cement or lime wash, with functional sun shades providing the only relief to an otherwise bland facade. People still slept on terraces, and the norm of the '2 1/2' storied residential building became a common volumetric model: one floor for personal occupancy, one for rental, and the '1/2' referring to the 'barsati' for open-to-sky living. In certain up-market residential colonies of the period like Sunder Nagar, one notices the lingering influence of art-deco features. The independent bungalow, the semi-detached house and the row-house were the common housing models, and except for the size of the dwelling, most residential buildings used similar architectonic features. The exceptions were the bungalows for the elite.



Fig. 3. R.K. Puram and Sunder Nagar Housing, New Delhi.

The architectural ideals of the elite were realized by the German émigré, K M Heinz. Heinz's productions of ersatz palazzos, with pastry icing-like decorations, pompous ducal crests, baroque mouldings, curlicued metal railings, improbable Corinthian capitals and other

incongruous European architectural elements obviously satisfied his elite clientele who craved for things 'foreign' in these austere times. One notices in these fantasies and craving for foreign imagery, the incipient desire even amongst the middle-class house-owners builders of Delhi for the flamboyant architectonic gestures. These proclivities soon developed into the exuberant, if comic, characteristic of Delhi's residential architecture in the '80s and the '90s, which has been vividly captured in the writings of the Delhi architect, Gautam Bhatia.

The other development really took off from the '80s, and can generically be referred to as 'developer housing'. With the dramatic rise in land values in the city, it became economically attractive to redevelop the individual bungalows, often built barely 20 years earlier, into apartment blocks, pushing to the limits (and usually, beyond the limits) the permissible building regulations.

**Commercial Sector:** In an analysis of the major characteristics of commercial projects commissioned or built by DDA, two recurring problems stand out which have defied the architectural imagination of the contemporary architect: the architectural controls proposed by architects are at variance with the manner in which they are put to use by the public, and second, the significant urban spaces have been designed with little understanding of the socio-cultural ethos of Indian urbanism.

**Alternative Construction Technology:** The development of alternate construction technology and low-cost building materials has however, had a greater impact on the Architecture of Delhi than the work of the structuralists. The construction of the Development Alternatives headquarters buildings brought together several young architects who have continued their commitment to this genre of architecture and widened its influence in the production of architecture in Delhi. HUDCO patronised cost-effective architecture and set up a country-wide network of building Centres to research and propagate appropriate intermediate technology and these initiatives have had a significant impact on the development of architecture. - A.G.K.Menon



**Fig. 4.** Development Alternatives Headquarters and India Habitat Centre.

## VII. THE PRESENT STATE

Despite the great architectural period of post-independence, Delhi finds it difficult to emerge from the influence of Lutyens and the imperial past. Although the chief parameter of post-independent architecture was not intending to create identity, but this is an inevitable process. The responsibility for this lies with the buildings of national and regional importance, including public buildings and imposing structures- both in size and character. Buildings dated not more than 15 or 20 years are appropriate to be analyzed in this respect.

Identities created in present Delhi are multi-dimensional, not mono-centric - this includes various styles of architecture, from buildings having imposing glass facades, constructed regardless of climatic context, to buildings which are more sensitively designed, tuned to respond to climate, tradition, culture, context, etc. For example, the Civic Centre building (2008), having come up very close to an area of immense historic context, completely defies that character. Such situations are created by designers who have negotiated with the cultural context and landscape. "Even the most successful projects are the result of negotiations of cultural landscape by the bureaucrats and politicians who funded these projects. These negotiations, in the process, create a multiplicity of simultaneous fluid identities. They have been trying to Indianize Indian architecture since the time of modernization. In this process to achieve this Indianness they use old mythical Indian traditional methods and symbolism. These practices don't seem true to Indian architectural identity and India won't be able to draw future on past which in case of India is very diverse and complicated. It's like creating a tradition by himself."

Contemporary Indian architects are constantly in search for the city's identity, and Delhi being a glorious civilization with a vast and rich history - both architectural and cultural - leads them to the past.

*"There is no alternative therefore but to bring the cultural development of maintaining India in harmony with the process of internationalization, while at the same time maintaining country's traditional characteristics and qualities. All agree that aspirations to any single universal style of architecture, whether international or regional, should be rejected as it is incompatible with cultural diversity and the commercial world."*

-Romi Khosla

*"Through exhibitions, festivals and publications about Modern Indian Architecture, a rare relation between architects and their architectural critics has been built up."*

*Initiated by the architects, the publications about modern Indian architecture are mostly produced for a non-Indian market and preferably involve for themselves western architectural critics, who consciously create an image of a specific Indianness of their buildings. "*

*-A.G.K. Menon*

Menon says that a conscious external view of the perceptions of Indian architecture by non-Indians, influences heavily the design aesthetic and sensibilities of Indian architects. In this process, a perceived 'Indian identity' is established, which does not correspond to the local context and requirements, but instead appeals to the interests of the non-Indian market.

### VIII. DETERMINANTS OF ARCHITECTURAL NATURE IN DELHI FROM 1960'S-80'S:

There were other major forces, unique to Delhi, which have determined the nature of its architecture in the '60s, '70s and well into the '80s.

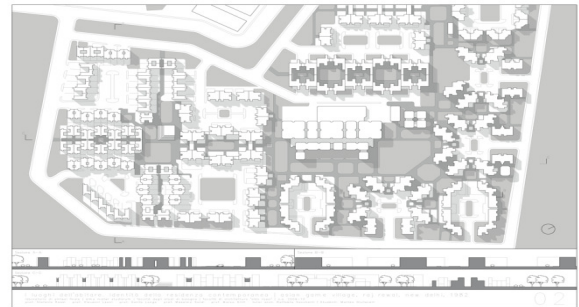


The three powerful forces which can be identified in this context are, first, the implementation of the Master Plan; second, the huge commissions which were awarded for the implementation of both the Master Plan projects and two ad hoc mega-events: the Asia 72 exhibition and the projects commissioned for the Asian Games of 1982; and, third, the practice of conducting architectural competitions to select architects for (some) major projects.

A fourth force, whose influence is more difficult to assess in explicit terms, may also be mentioned in passing, and that is the role of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC), in controlling the architectural character of Delhi.



**Fig. 5.** Asian Games Village Residential Sector.



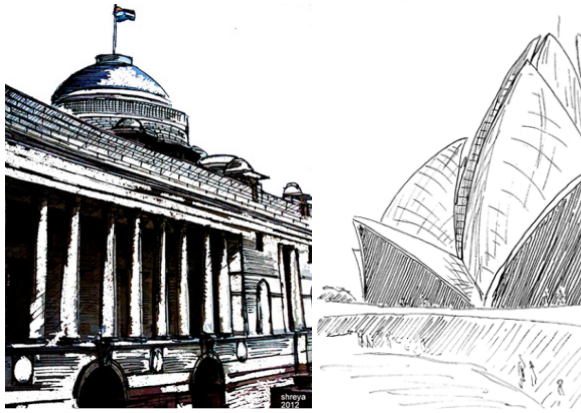
**Fig. 6.** Asian Games Village Site Plan - Raj Rewal.



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### IX. CONCLUSION

The role of cultural memory has not been crucial to the process of form-making in Delhi for quite some time. This memory was consciously evoked in the period following Independence, first in the manner of literal transliteration of historic motifs used to decorate the facades of buildings, and later as abstract architectural desiderata derived from morphological studies of traditional settlements. The choice of models in both situations were examples from Rajasthan, and not local monuments or settlement patterns.



**Fig. 7.** Lotus Temple and Rashtrapati Bhawan.

*Architecture can be responsive without being derivative- it can respond to program, history, culture, and environment without simply recreating the thing to which it is responding. In doing so, both context and intervention are enhanced.*

Delhi inhabits a cultural legacy and heritage of immense value, as has been elucidated in the preceding chapters. Hence it is ironic that the dictates of Modernism can provide a solution to these issues.

The advent of communication and information technology revolution, along with closer international interaction gives genesis to a universal culture - a culture not authentic to Delhi and hence misfits the context.

True regional architecture can only be achieved when it evolves from within its culture.

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