

New Urbanism in New Delhi

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The economic growth and rapid urbanization of India has resulted in widespread development in New Delhi. For the most part this growth is in the form of exurbs and ribbon growth, a pattern of unsustainable sprawl. A matter of local concern is that the inefficiencies of poor planning will slow economic growth and discourage true prosperity. Of global concern is that the type of growth India chooses is one of the vital environmental issues of the coming decades. This paper examines the effects of New Urbanism in New Delhi and sets a path for increased engagement.¹

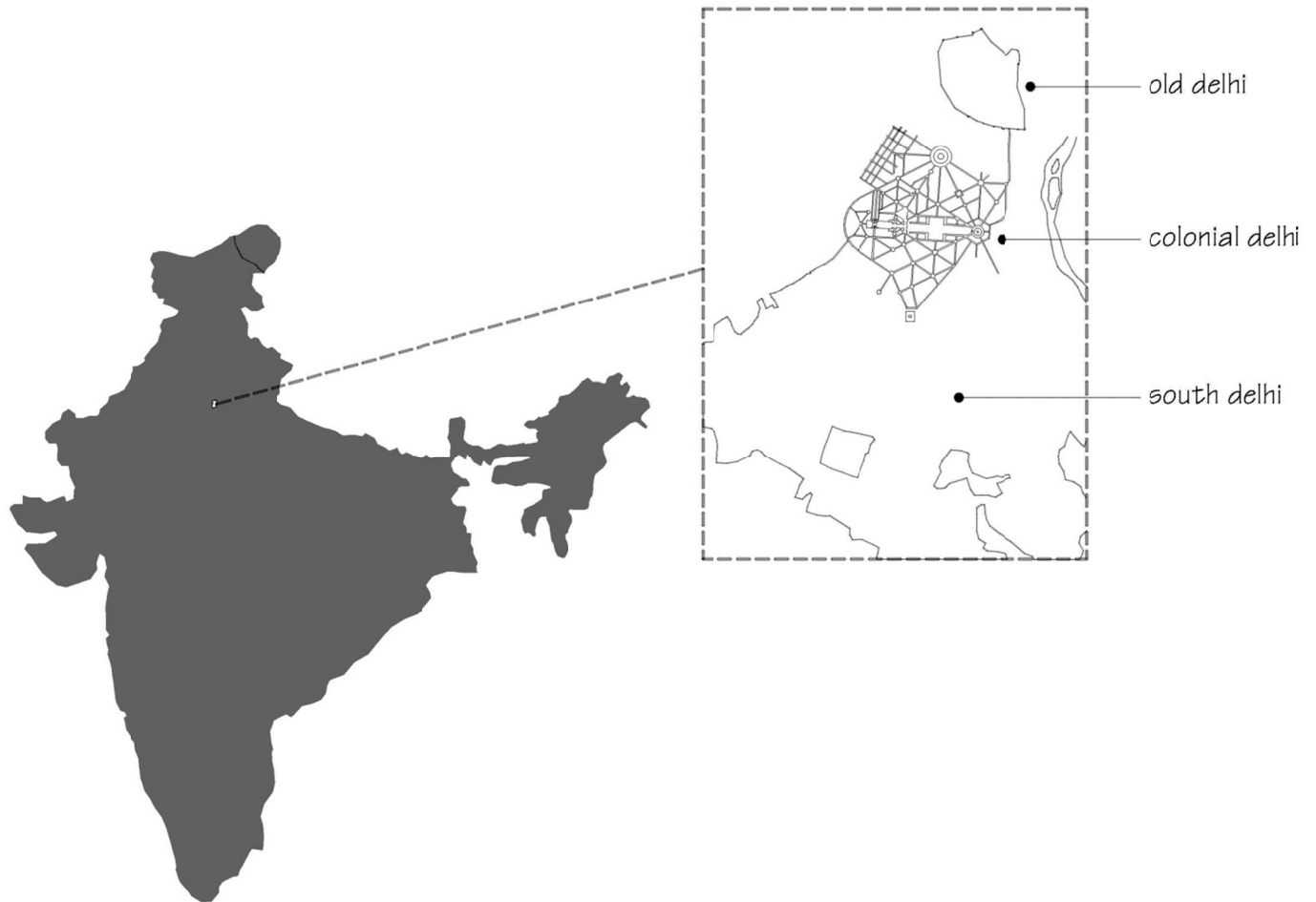


Figure 1: Outline of India showing the location of New Delhi

In 2007 the International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture & Urbanism (INTBAU) held a conference in New Delhi with the goal of setting a local New Urbanist agenda that would be based on existing Indian patterns of urbanism. The New Urbanism in the United States can look at town and city patterns from available American and Continental models that have proven successful and sustainable. Into these existing models it incorporates the advantages (and requirements) of contemporary life. In India the term New Urbanism has a different usage. New Urbanism means getting the city right for the first time. There are not past or existing models that are politically acceptable², sustainable or able to incorporate the contemporary needs of Indian life.

This paper will look at which principles of the New Urbanism can be generalized outside of a North American context and which cannot. One of the advantages of New Urbanism is that it reinforces a sense of place. As a basis of urban design in North India, the local historical models which are desirable and attractive are in Rajasthan. These cities, such as Jaipur, are essentially organic and medieval in structure. While often suggested as a model for indigenous urban place making throughout North India, it has proven difficult to accept the necessarily small scale of the pre-modern city. Additionally, the idea of planning 'organic' growth is counterintuitive though it is interesting to speculate on a set of form-based codes that would encourage these appealing cities to develop further as contemporary organic cities. A significant group, the middle-class, has only recently made its impact on urban form in India. The question of what is often called 'the growing middle class' is linked to a central tenant of capitalism: the idea that individual selfishness and competitive behavior will result in good societies. It is generally accepted that if India's (and China's) population lived a Western middle class lifestyle with the attendant levels of carbon emissions the global environment would be severely strained. It is crucial to work toward types of growth which are both sustainable and also meet middle class aspirations. A critical research agenda is in 'no-growth urbanism': an urbanism where desirable urban form can be built that creates value without the reliance on the consumption of land and natural resources.

Of the existing patterns of urban development in Delhi, none seem well suited to contemporary urban planning. Reasons range from the cultural memories associated with Colonial Baroque planning to the auto-dependency of the later residential subdivisions (or colonies, as they are called). While different in form, both Mughal Old Delhi and Lutyens' Colonial Baroque New Delhi are highly ordered imperial visions of a city with strong central authority. Old Delhi, previously a walled city called Shahjahanabad of 1500 acres, has an organic structure redolent of a European Medieval city. However, the society that generated the city form was unlike a European medieval town which was largely a marketplace.³ Dominated by the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid, Shahjahanabad was a sovereign city where daily life was organized both literally and figuratively around the court.⁴ Besides the practical problems of adapting the scales of pre-modern urban form to contemporary life, the imagery of civic life as synonymous with court life is an inappropriate model for a contemporary democracy. Lutyens' Baroque planning has, for obvious reasons, unpleasant associations with colonialism.⁵ Additionally the plan was conceived with class divisions in mind: the lower classes were to live at the periphery and outside the central zone.

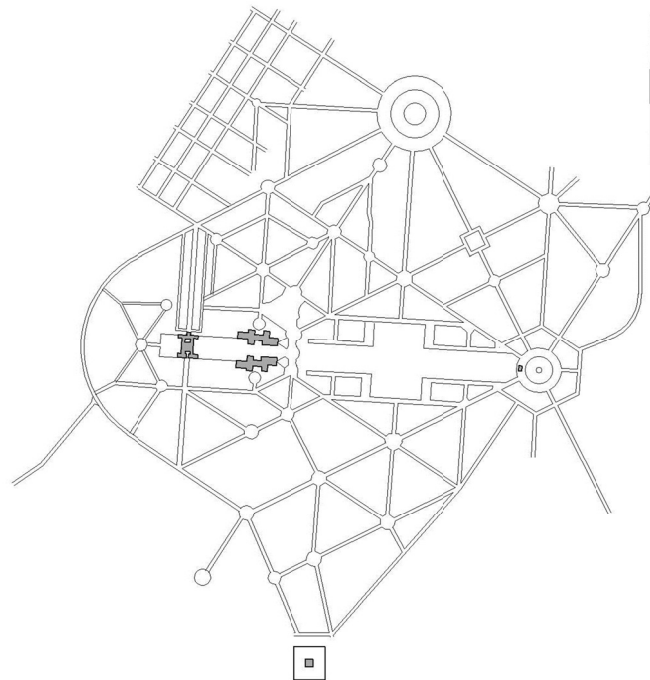


Figure 2: Lutyens' Baroque planning for New Delhi



Figure 3: Outline of New Delhi with patterns of urban form

The overall urban structure of New Delhi is in some ways the reverse of a US city. In New Delhi, the center is much less dense than the surrounding areas. The growth has been concentric with roughly three phases (*Figure 3*).⁶ First: the historic plan consists of wide leafy avenues connected through roundabouts. With the exception of certain prominent buildings and symbols like India Gate, the Baroque planning is disorienting. One of the great qualities of the Baroque, that we know where we are, is missing. This is a result of the vast scale, vistas which do not terminate and the lack of memorable places. Filling in the area between the Baroque diagonals are large plots of land. One acre or more is common. These

are bungalow residences for the powerful and other upper class enclaves such as private clubs. Changing these plots into well designed density would not entail seizing private property. The government owns most of this land and allocates the properties. High government positions typically come with housing. Second: the ring of upper and middle class colonies. These are relatively dense suburbs with multi-family and extended-family houses varying from three to four and half stories high, typically the maximum number of floors allowable. Forty people living to the acre is common. Third: large areas past these colony suburbs which follow a pattern common to developing nations. These are essentially exurbs, different from exurbs in the US but strangely similar to cities like, say, Johannesburg⁷ and Bangkok. In these areas the buildings are of wildly different sizes from single story shacks to forty story high rises, built with little overall organization of land use and with an improvised relationship to transportation infrastructure. These are types residential development for those who can afford housing. The fourth layer of housing is slum development. Slums infill land that no one else wants. There is almost universal agreement that this process of informal housing will continue.

When I asked one of India's leading architects about New Urbanism he told me "there is no such thing as urbanism in India." He was completely serious. How has it come to pass that a country which is a world leader in medical services and information technology, to name just two areas, uses urban planning ideas that are demonstrably unsustainable and have been intellectually discredited for 50 years? There are two main answers: firstly, the inability to manage urban complexity which is common in many fast growing countries. In the words of a Delhi architect: "In India we build first and then we plan." And secondly, all too often the case wherever one looks, the 'planning' is in fact done by traffic engineering. This is one of a series of parallels with Western planning. Although it is widely noted that Western, typically Modernist, planning was never suited to India, it is also widely accepted that this is the model that has been followed.⁸

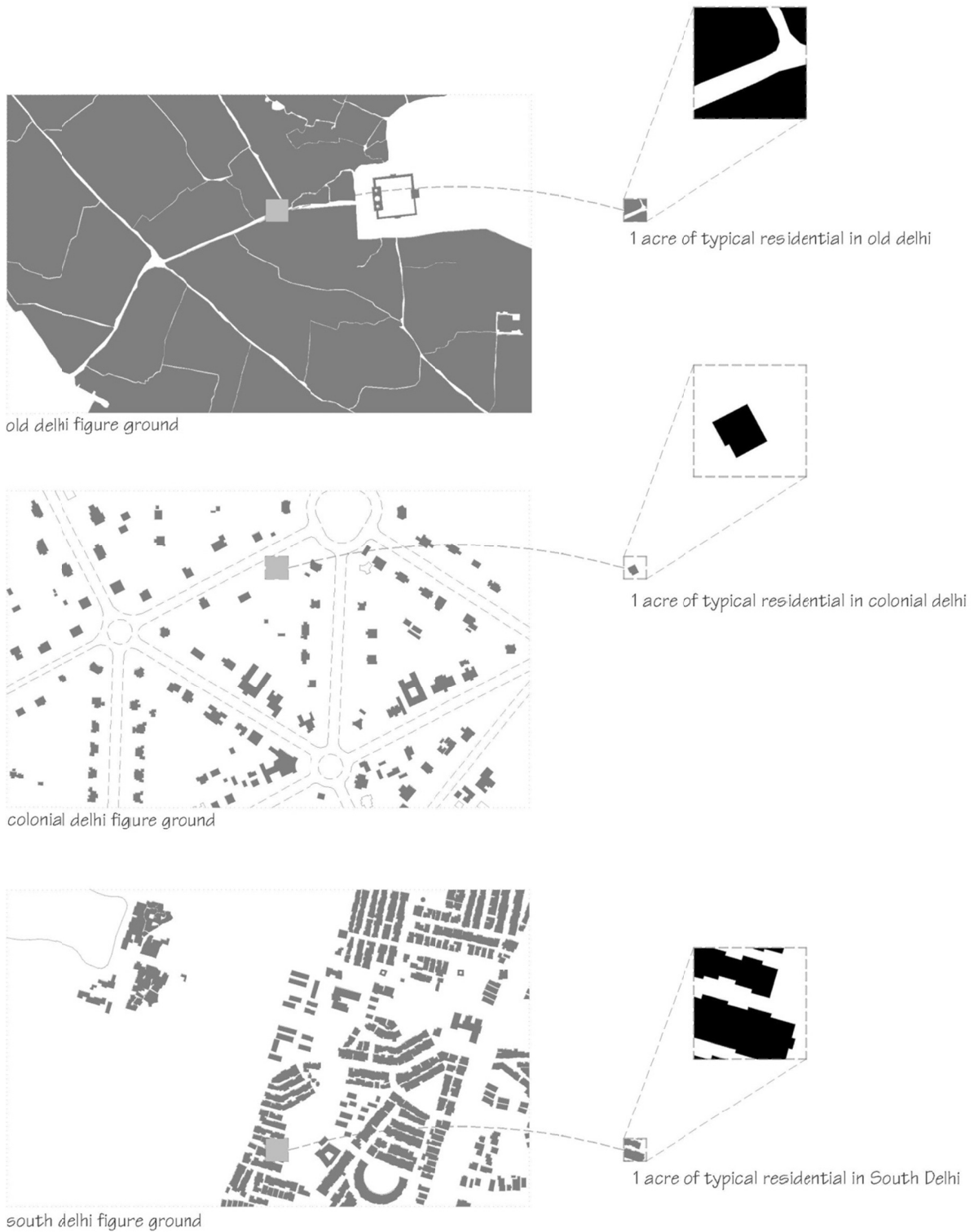


Figure 4: Patterns of urban form drawn at the same scale

In 1957 the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was established to manage the problems of urban growth.⁹ It has controlled and developed a huge amount of urban land. The DDA's record has been controversial. A primary part of its mission is to provide affordable housing. Of course all housing is affordable, it is a question of who can afford it. The DDA provides housing in two ways, through allocating land for private development and building housing itself. It is clear that the DDA has provided decent housing to people who otherwise could not afford it, by one calculation 260,000 units.¹⁰ Criticisms of the Authority cite its lack of transparency and failure to provide sufficient quantities of housing for the poor. Most serious are the allegations that the DDA may in reality be running a reverse subsidy in which profits from projects for the lower class are used to subsidize housing for the middle class and in extreme cases the wealthy. The DDA is the sole authority for the implementation of New Delhi's Master Plan though almost no one thinks it actually has the power to do so. Another challenge to sustainable urban development in Delhi are the many layers of government. Multiple agencies appear to have overlapping jurisdictions with unclear chains of accountability to higher levels of government.¹¹ A contrasting example would be Singapore, known for its flat government in which many decisions can be made at one level. Singapore is ranked as one of the easiest places in the world to open a business.

Besides its general outward expansion, the most visible urban changes in the past decades in the Indian capital city concern auto use. Road capacity is being added due to increased car ownership. It has been measurable for half a century that strategies of adding traffic lanes only increase demand. This principle of diminishing returns is sadly but predictably observable in Delhi. One of the prominent congestion relieving strategies was the construction of flyovers at major intersections. Through traffic on one arterial road, instead of stopping at an intersection, 'flies' over the other road on an elevated piece of highway. The flyovers were completed only within the last few years. This strategy worked initially but the traffic jams have returned, this time up in the air. The flyover construction has a similar look and feel to the highways that run through the downtowns of US cities. Unlike the resulting blight in US cities, the population pressure in India is such that areas adjacent to the flyover remain crowded, but the public realm of the street becomes scaled to vehicular transportation and is increasingly hostile to pedestrians.

Delhi has recently opened a world-class metro. Its success has resulted in the immediate planning of new lines. This praiseworthy investment in public transportation aside, why the resource dedication to auto use? It is typical for a high level job in India to come with a car and driver. Important politicians and bureaucrats who make transportation decisions are chauffeured through the city. They do not walk and they do not take public transportation. Can their personal interest and experience help but shape the policies for which they are responsible? The question of what types of infrastructure are funded based on the social class of the decision maker is a highly relevant and under-examined area, but not a new one. The powerful in India, the higher classes, historically have seen urban infrastructure equating to infrastructure that facilitated commerce, primarily roads. They have been willing to respond to the needs for other urban infrastructure, such as sanitary and health improvements for the masses, when the decisions and investments could be justified on commercial grounds.¹² Therefore, a New Urbanism argument for improved urban form on the grounds of its economic value would be contiguous with the manner in which these advances have been made in the past.

The pedestrian experience in Delhi is frightening. At first it appears that this is because of severe congestion coupled with casual observance of traffic laws. But the hostility of the public realm has a deeper cause: transportation is a class issue. The car owner has the right of way and takes precedence. Car ownership has extended to the middle class but the legacy of the auto as a thing of prestige carrying a person of power remains. Pedestrians (the poor) are expected to exercise caution. The very idea of infrastructure serving the entire public is recent. Urban infrastructure is funded from the tax base. The English colonial administrators were reluctant to tax the princes and merchants on whom their control of India largely depended. Under later post-colonial governments taxation was justified by using it to provide for the tax paying classes. Merchants and businessmen wanted roads which could support commercial use not public transportation.¹³ Of course Delhi roads are not filled only with the powerful. Growing middle class car ownership is becoming widespread for reasons of mobility (until the opening of the metro Delhi's public transportation network was entirely busses) and status. Practical urban results have a good chance of success if they work with human nature. The growing middle class wants to buy a

car as a status symbol as well as a mode of transport. Due to the density of Indian cities, car ownership that requires the relatively wealthy users to pay the real costs¹⁴ (including externalities) could provide great benefits to a large number of the poor.

For the land that is available in New Delhi prices are high and the acquisition process opaque. Adding well designed density on existing urban sites is virtually impossible. The large scale development that does occur, for the same reasons as in the US, is that which is relatively easy to approve and construct. For example, a large development company, called DLF, has built extensively for purely short term profit. They are of course not alone. Most new large scale development is at the periphery of Delhi and is speculative, following the profitable pattern of auto-dependent high-rise 'luxury' buildings on greenfield sites. The real costs of road infrastructure and air pollution are externalities paid for by the public. DLF is responsible for many of the luxury high rise buildings that segregate the population by class and are entirely auto dependent. No attempt is made to connect to the larger urban area, in fact quite the opposite, they are gated communities. DLF also builds malls. Predictably, when the streets and public places become unpleasant and in fact dangerous, people respond to the controlled environment of the shopping mall. The real short term success will no doubt encourage more of the same but it is not a long term sustainable solution from either an environmental or societal point of view.

Corrupt practices carry a heavy environmental burden as well as a social one. The newspapers detail nearly daily scandals related to housing schemes and illegal land use. There is a widespread assumption that construction activity and bribery are inextricably linked, in fact bribe money is openly estimated and factored as a soft cost of development. If high level government officials expect bribes for work in their jurisdiction, planning in all but the most piecemeal way becomes impossible. Both slum dwellers and the middle class have engaged in illegal construction. Whereas most slum dwellings are completely untenured, the middle class typically adds a violation to a legal property in the form of, for example, an extra half floor. Past policy changes have regularized these violations, a policy rarely extended to the poor.¹⁵

The city has written and will likely approve a new masterplan called Delhi 2021. The plan commits future growth to environmental standards, often embodied in physical form requirements, that would be welcome in the New Urbanism. What is the local professional opinion? “No one even knows about it and it can’t be enforced. You can throw it in the trash.” This was a particularly strong statement of frustration that reflects an overall sentiment: Indian professional architects have given up on comprehensive urban planning in Delhi.



Figure 5: A typical neighborhood park in a residential colony

New Delhi has a large amount of public space, often in the form of gardens and green spaces, and it is sometimes casually referred to as a Garden City which it is not. The Delhi Master Plan from 1961 did call for a greenbelt¹⁶ which was neither successfully implemented nor controlled. In both its arrangement of form and certainly in its planned

social organization the plan for New Delhi was unlike Ebenezer Howard's program of *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Howard was not primarily interested in the physical form of the city, he was interested in a complete change in the nature of society and social relations. In general and unfortunately, subsequent 'garden city' planning has tended to take the physical aspects of Howard's ideas and ignore the social ones. But nonetheless, Delhi is a city with gardens and indeed it was common for each residential colony to be planned with one. Largely due to the surrounding density, open green spaces in Delhi are successful in ways they are not in North America. The example above (*Figure 5*) shows a typical neighborhood park, in this case in the Safdarjung Development Area, which is bordered by three story residences and contains green space as well as a temple.

The population pressure in Delhi, already a crowded city, comes from large numbers of people moving to the city from the poorer surrounding states in search of work. The influx is a supply of mostly unskilled labor for which, in past rural to urban migrations, there was demand. That there is a need for this type of workforce in contemporary India's increasingly service based economy remains to be seen. There is a difference between looking for work and coming because there is work. In the latter case the absorption of the poor into an urban working class is probable, a situation which is by no means clear in the contemporary city. The risk is that the complex ecosystem of the slum which used to promote a rise in social and economic class may become a simple mono-system, a holding place for a permanent underclass.¹⁷ While it is broadly recognized that slum populations are not only increasing but will be one of the main forms of urbanization in the coming decades, more could be done to generate ideas for how slum building typology and urban form could generate increased social justice.

Real and tangible gains of the New Urbanism movement in New Delhi measured through built projects are few. Acceptance in theory, however, of many of the tenants of the New Urbanism are widespread. For example, a recent manual of street design¹⁸ is a 'complete streets' manual adapted to Indian streets. Professionals are conversant and largely in agreement with New Urbanism ideas though of course there is also debate. One of the central differences between India and North America is in implementation. If a policy

document such as a zoning code is adopted in India it may be unenforceable in very significant ways including being completely ignored. Code violations, innocent or not, are of course common in North America as well, but flagrant violations (an extra floor on a building) are rare.

There are several important areas of urban research for New Delhi: how to improve the living conditions for the growing urban population in slums, how to allow for individual economic improvement without destroying the overall society's prosperity, and how incremental de-centralized urbanism could make inroads where master planning has failed. Incremental urbanism was how urbanism was always done; we did not have the idea of comprehensive master-planning of an existing city and the means to execute it until the Renaissance. In this way master-planning is atypical whereas decentralized urban development was the norm. Medieval urbanism was piecemeal, organic in nature, yet resulted in enduring urban places of value. Using Rajasthani urban form, to name one possible example, as a model for urban projects may have the best chance not only of being built but of reinforcing a sense of place. These projects can serve as positive examples and lead to a wider acceptance of the value of urbanism, an idea which has been largely lost in contemporary Indian culture still rushing to modernize. The process and patterns of urban growth in India are vital environmental and human welfare issues of the coming decades. Given the failures and frustrations around overall planning attempts, emerging practices of incremental urbanism have great possibilities. It will be difficult to work in India in the way that US firms are working in China, and our first export may not be our expertise in executing real projects serving as examples. Given the complexities of working in India, New Urbanism should focus on engaging at the level of ideas and demonstrating that true prosperity is achieved through sustainable urban growth. 🌟

Endnotes

¹ This paper was completed in April of 2012 and was based on primary source material and academic research. Additional material and quotes come from meetings and interviews conducted in New Delhi over a 6 week period in 2011 with architects, urban designers, and academics in New Delhi. All maps and drawings are by the author.

² See Menon, A. G. Krishna Imaging the Indian City (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 32, No. 46 Nov. 15-21, 1997) and Chandavarkar, writing about Bombay but in what could be said to a large extent about New Delhi:

“In Bombay, the specific circumstances created by poverty and limitations of the Indian economy, the particular interests of the colonial state and the perceptions of colonial rulers, and the absence of any significant precursory urban structure, made social policy a particularly savage arena in which social relations were played out.” (Chandavarkar, History, Culture, and the Indian City: essays p.33)

³ Morris writes that “the entire medieval town was a marketplace.” Morris, A. E. J., History Of Urban Form: Before The Industrial Revolutions

⁴ Blake, Stephen, Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639-1739; p. xii; Cambridge University Press/Cambridge; New York, 1991

⁵ See generally: Metcalf, Thomas R.; An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj, Oxford University Press, 2002

⁶ This paper will not address the urban villages, the Lal Dora, though they are a fascinating part of the urban form of New Delhi and have been suggested as an important model for indigenous urban place-making. See Menon's “Imaging the Indian City” where he discusses this possibility.

⁷ A further parallel: as with the building of Sandton as a replacement city for what was seen as a hopeless downtown Johannesburg, Gurgaon represents in part an attempt to abandon the existing city of New Delhi as hopelessly difficult to develop.

⁸ Das, Biswaroop; Urban Planning in India, Social Scientist, Vol. 9, No. 12 (Dec., 1981), p.58

⁹ This section on the DDA and the planning mechanisms in New Delhi draws generally from Maitra, Sipra, Housing in Delhi: DDA's Controversial Role, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 26, No. 7 (Feb. 16, 1991), pp. 344-346.

¹⁰ Maitra (1991), p.345

¹¹ Bagchi, Soumen; Governance in Delhi: Too Many Cooks; Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 38, No. 46 (Nov. 15-21, 2003), pp. 4831-4832

¹² Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan, History, culture, and the Indian city: essays; p.41, Cambridge England; New York 2009

¹³ Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan, History, Culture, and the Indian City: essays p.35, Cambridge England; New York 2009

¹⁴ Mishra, Sanjay, Forestalling Transport Chaos in Delhi; Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 35, No. 24 (Jun. 10-16, 2000), pp. 2061-2065

¹⁵ Kundu, Amitabh, Politics and Economics of Land Policies: Delhi's New Master Plan Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 38, No. 34 (Aug. 23-29, 2003), pp. 3530-3532

¹⁶ See Ewing, Jeffrey R, Town Planning in Delhi: A Critique (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 4, No. 40 (October 4, 1969), pp. 1591-1600) for an interesting view of the state of New Delhi planning in the 1960's.

¹⁷ "Moreover, the rate of urbanization remains slow: the rural population having grown twice as fast as the urban since 1941. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of India's largest cities is probably symptomatic of agrarian decline and rural deprivation rather than economic development." (Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan; History, Culture, and the Indian City: essays; p.225, Cambridge England; New York 2009)

¹⁸ The manual is called "Better Streets, Better Cities: A Guide To Street Design In Urban India" and is available at www.itdp.org/betterstreets.

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