

Landmark - Delhi redefined

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In this 1952 picture, President Dr. Rajendra Prasad is seen driving in State, to address the Parliament session. Courtesy: The Hindu Photo Archives

A hundred years ago, Delhi was indeed a different place from what it is today. Rakhshanda Jalil looks back at the last Dilli Durbar and the sequence of events that contributed to the capital's transformation.

This month as Delhi observes the 100 anniversary of the third and

last Delhi Durbar and 100 years of its existence as New Delhi, it is time to do a quick rewind and remember a day a hundred years ago and its consequences on a cityscape that was to change irrevocably.

The Dilli Durbar of December 12, 1911, heralded the return of the imperial capital to Delhi from Calcutta and the onset of feverish building activity in the new city. In its own time, the Durbar had evoked mixed reactions among the Indian populace with some deriding it openly and others lining the streets of Delhi to welcome the royal couple and celebrate the “high noon” of British rule in India. Many of the city's old residents, especially the Muslims, were pained by what they saw, rightly as it turned out, as the end of an era.

Buildings emerge

However, undeterred by the misgivings among the local populace at the death and destruction of a way of life that had once revolved around the shabby grandeur of the *Quila-e-Moalla* (meaning the “exalted fort” as the Red Fort was then called), the imperial architects set about gilding the lily that was New Delhi.

Apart from the monolithic Government House that was being built to house the Viceroy and the officials of the Raj, colonial-style bungalows came up beside broad, tree-lined avenues. As did a host of ancillary buildings to house new hospitals, post offices, police stations, schools, colleges, shops and hotels. In 1922, the University of Delhi was established and a cluster of grand buildings came up in the vicinity of the Civil Lines. Prior to the building of the university, the Lady Hardinge College had been established for women doctors in 1920. The Record Office was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi in 1926 and eventually housed in a building designed by Lutyens and called the Public Records Office (subsequently renamed the National Archives of India).

While the Viceroy's House and the secretariat buildings flanking the Central Vista were being built (from 1914 till their completion in 1931) amid mounting acrimony and disagreement between its chief builders — Edward Lutyens and Herbert Baker — a clutch of other buildings were designed and swiftly executed by the Chief Architect to the

Government of India, the relatively lesser known, R.T. Russel and his subordinates. It was Russel who built the commercial hub of Delhi — the Connaught Place — in 1933 as well as the Gol Dak-khana, the Central Telegraph Office, the aerodrome, the law courts, the Flagstaff House that was later occupied by Nehru and renamed Teen Murti House, and the Eastern and Western Courts to house visiting legislators as well as approximately 4000 bungalows of different kinds meant to accommodate a small army of government minions.

E. Montague Thomas designed and built the first secretariat building of New Delhi which set a style for the bungalows that are today considered such a distinctive part of “Lutyens Delhi”.

Herbert Baker, W.H. Nicholls, C.G. and F.B. Blomfield, Walter Sykes George, Arthur Gordon Shoosmith, Henry Medd and other British architects designed several public buildings meant to house hotels, banks, schools, etc. The greening of Delhi was conducted with masterly precision using P.H. Clutterbuck's list of Indian trees. W.R. Mustoe, Director of Horticulture, ordered the planting of avenue trees and Mustoe along with Walter Sykes George landscaped and planted the garden planned by Lutyens inside the Governor's House, a Mughal-style garden included at the insistence of Lord Hardinge.

The 1930s also saw the construction of four big schools, namely, St. Columba's, Saint Thomas's, Somerville and Modern schools; the swanky Imperial Hotel, the Regal cinema in the Rivoli building, a multipurpose stadium called the Irwin amphitheater, a picturesque 27-hole golf course spread over 177 acres, and the present ECE House and the Scindia House, both built on the fringes of Connaught Place; and the Free Mason's Hall whose foundation was laid by Lord Willington, the Viceroy and Governor General of India in 1935. Earlier, in 1930, the foundation was laid for a hospital, to be known as the Irwin Hospital, in what was till then the Central Jail complex. The Irwin College for women was established in the same year and later, the Willingdon Hospital. It took the builders of Delhi 19 years to build a modern, new capital that they were destined to rule for a mere 16 years!

While the new city north and west of Shahjahanabad continued to

grow into a modern metropolis and a showcase for rising western architects out to display their talent and ingenuity, the old city of Delhi disintegrated after the Durbar of 1911. No attempt was made to restore the buildings that had been destroyed or razed during the Revolt of 1857, nor was any effort expended on linking the old city with the new. An invisible cordon sanitaire divided the two: the old was cramped, diseased, decaying and poorly-serviced whereas the new was spacious, sanitised, well planned and well laid out. In a word, while the new was “organised”, the old was “unorganised”. Pockets of abysmal neglect and wanton disregard for normal standards of health and hygiene co-existed with oases of privilege between the two Delhis.

“At the stroke of the midnight hour when the world sleeps, India will awake to freedom and life,” declared Nehru on August 15, 1947. As the nation kept its tryst with destiny, the city of Delhi underwent several dramatic changes in its topography, topology and demographics. As a substantial chunk of the city's Muslim population migrated to Pakistan, refugees from western Punjab flooded in and changed the socio-cultural fabric of Delhi forever. Also, the 4000-odd government quarters occupied by members of the colonial administration were found wanting for the throngs of babus of the newly set up government departments. New housing complexes were built and new “colonies” hived out of the many urban villages in the vicinity of New Delhi. A new sort of architect was needed to quickly provide the burgeoning needs of a capital of a fledgling republic. The most prominent among those who fashioned the city's post-independence landmarks — many especially commissioned by Nehru who wanted “the temples of modern India” to take the place of older, conventional ones — was Habib Rahman, the creator of several modernist buildings such as the Gandhi Memorial, Office of the Auditor General of India, the *Post and Telegraph* Bbuilding, Indraprastha Bhawan, WHO headquarters, a hostel for in-transit diplomats, a warren of flats for junior to middle-level government servants, Rabindra Bhawan, the *mazars* of Maulana Azad and President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad to name just a few.

Renaming spree

In the years after Independence, parks, hospitals, streets, crescents, avenues and neighbourhoods were re-named after new and emerging heroes — alas few from the city of Delhi itself with the majority being from the national mainstream who had little to do with the city itself. The functionality of several buildings too underwent a change: The Viceroy's House became the Rashtrapati Bhawan, Kingsway was named Rajpath, the Council House became Parliament, and so on. The statue of King George V was removed from the canopy facing India Gate; it remains empty till date as no consensus has ever been reached as to who should succeed His Majesty who presided over the last durbar of Delhi. With the government maintaining a studied silence on whether or not it was a good thing that the capital shifted to Delhi and whether or not we ought to celebrate so colonial a venture as a Durbar, the empty space beneath the canopy remains prescient with possibilities.

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Keywords: [Delhi history](#), [Delhi 100th anniversary](#)