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ARCHITECTURE

Amnesty Plan for Relics of the Raj

By JEREMY KAHN

New Delhi

EDWIN LUTYENS, the Edwardian architect who planned New Delhi nearly a century ago, intended it to serve as a grand imperial capital capable of holding its own against Washington or Paris.

Sixty years after the end of the Raj, India's influence has begun to equal his vision for its capital. Yet Lutyens's cityscape is in danger of being obliterated by commercial development and the pressures of accommodating a population that has swelled to well over 13 million from fewer than 900,000 in his time.

Now, a group of prominent Indian architects has advanced a plan to save Lutyens's New Delhi. The proposal has cheered some Lutyens enthusiasts, but it is already drawing fire. Some question whether it does enough to protect this master planner's legacy; others deride his urban plan and his architecture as an outmoded colonial straitjacket at odds with a thriving and chaotic modern democracy.

Working from 1912 to 1931 Lutyens forged a new style of architecture for the city, combining the neo-Classical with accents borrowed from India's Mughal and Buddhist past.

Along the city's axis he set out a vast rectangular mall surrounded by government offices and crowned at its far end by an imposing palace for the viceroy. Tree-lined streets radiated from this central vista and converged in hexagonal nodes. Dotted the boulevards were white bungalows, with colonnaded verandas and spacious gardens, for colonial administrators.

Those white bungalows, now owned mostly by the government and used to house senior officials, have been threatened for decades. Successive Indian administrations viewed them as an unwelcome reminder of the yoke of imperialism and an anti-egalitarian embarrassment in a country mindful of the yawning gap between the rich and poor.

The bungalows were also too expensive to maintain, they argued, and an indefensible use of land in a city where millions are crammed into claustrophobic housing colonies or slums. In 2004 the Central Public Works Department talked openly of tearing them all down. Meanwhile the World Monuments Fund in New York has named central New Delhi, with its imperial buildings and bungalows, one of the planet's 100 most endangered heritage sites.

The new plan, drafted by the Delhi Urban Art Commission in consultation with the Indian government, sets aside a 14-square-mile area in the center of the city as a conservation zone. Construction would be severely limited just south of city's central mall, the Rajpath, where the largest number of Lutyens's bungalows

remain; bungalow facades along 17 major roads running through this area would be preserved and in some cases restored to their original designs. The low red-brick boundary walls and white gates that once surrounded each bungalow, replaced in many cases by high fencing and even guard towers, would have to be reinstated.

Preservation groups, which have long pushed for such measures, would normally have applauded. But the plan also suggests a way in which several small, contemporary bungalows could be squeezed onto some of the sprawling Lutyens-era plots. And elsewhere, particularly north of the Rajpath, the architects have called for bungalows to be torn down for multistory apartment blocks and office buildings.

Some preservationists argue that, rather than conserving Lutyens's cityscape, the plan will pave the way for radical changes. And they accuse the art commission of favoring the interests of real estate developers and big businesses.

"They have considered the development potential of this area and prioritized that over the heritage qualities," said A. G. Krishna Menon, who heads the Delhi chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage.

Charles Correa, the Mumbai architect who serves as chairman the Delhi Urban Art Commission, denied that it had sold out to commercial interests. He said the commission wanted to impose order on the haphazard development that has already unfolded north of the Rajpath.

That goal is consistent with Lutyens's idea of a planned city, he said. "You have to have some sense of cohesion to urban form," Mr. Correa said. "Too much of what we have built in India today looks like the bottom of the sea. It is just everything plunked down wherever it fell."

Still, his presence at the helm of the art commission has raised eyebrows among some Lutyens admirers. Mr. Correa previously designed two modern high-rises near Connaught Place, the imperial-era shopping circle, that critics say mar Lutyens's vision and represent the sort of development they would like to stop.

"We are very wary of the Delhi Urban Art Commission because its chairman is Charles Correa," said Margaret Richardson, a member of the Lutyens Trust, an organization in Britain dedicated to educating the public about his work and helping to maintain his buildings.

Lutyens's New Delhi has been controversial almost from its inception. In 1912 the British decided to move their Indian capital from Calcutta to Delhi, where they thought it would be easier to oversee the country and which was closer to Simla, the Himalayan hill station to which the colonial administration decamped each summer. Lutyens, who had won acclaim designing stately country houses in England, was selected to lay out the new city.

Upon arriving he also assigned himself the task of designing Delhi's most important new structures, including the viceroy's residence (which today is the Rashtrapati Bhavan, home of India's president). Lutyens disliked Indian architecture, but at the insistence of the British viceroy, Lord Charles Hardinge, he incorporated native elements into his blueprints for the viceroy's residence: chattris (pavilions), stone lattice screens, carved images of elephants and the colossal Buddhist dome. He also invented his own "Delhi Order"

of neo-Classical columns that fuse Greek and Indian elements.

This hybrid style was echoed by other architects working under Lutyens. The master planner, however, considered designing villas for colonial officers beneath his abilities. Only a handful of the white houses that today are known as Lutyens bungalows and give central New Delhi much of its character were actually built by him. Most are the work of lesser-known British and Indian architects.

Today many of the bungalows have been so extensively modified or are in such disrepair that it is hard to get a sense of their previous grandeur. One Lutyens-era home that has been preserved in close to its original state is 10 Aurangzeb Road, the current residence of the Dutch ambassador, and once the home of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.

Its cornerstone was laid by Lutyens in 1920, but much of the design was done by F. B. Blomfield, the colonial architect who also designed the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi. The house is situated in the center of a massive garden. Its curving white exterior includes Classical columns, arches and cornices as well as flamelike finials and a high dome that are Oriental in inspiration. Inside, the two-story home is arranged around a circular hall set beneath the soaring dome. Off this central hall is a richly paneled library, a formal dining room and one of the house's three bedrooms.

Lutyens's plan and style attract passionate enthusiasts. "The British arrived in a country full of beautiful architecture and left all kinds of horrors," said William Dalrymple, a historian and writer who splits his time between London and New Delhi. "The one thing we can be proud of is Lutyens's Delhi — the buildings, the trees, the streets. It is the best thing the British ever did in colonial architecture."

Nalini Thakur, an Indian preservation architect, praised Lutyens's Delhi as "a very rare early-20th-century capital." She noted that while the city is clothed in neo-Classical garb, it was actually built with the latest technology of the day in mind, with roads designed specifically for cars and an airport incorporated into the plan.

By the 1930s, when Lutyens's Delhi was completed, the sun was setting on the British Empire. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of an independent India, was no fan of the capital he inherited in 1947, calling it a "symbol of British power, with all its ostentation and wastefulness."

Later more than 20 bungalows were demolished to make way for government areas, new hotels and office blocks. Ministers and other officials who were allotted bungalows also made extensive changes, including large additions and the construction of separate staff quarters on the plots. In 1988 Prime Minister [Rajiv Gandhi](#), under pressure from conservationists, froze development in about 10 square miles of the city, which was declared the "Lutyens Bungalow Zone." But the freeze has been poorly enforced. One minister made headlines in 2004 for installing white marble bas-reliefs of prancing cherubs and angels along his bungalow's garden walls and erecting a glass pyramid, modeled on [I. M. Pei's](#) addition to the [Louvre](#), on its roof.

The government continues to talk of tearing down the bungalows because they are expensive and hard to maintain. And the prime minister's office is reported to have approved 16 new government houses on 70 acres of land just south of the Rajpath that are occupied by 19 Lutyens bungalows. Three historic bungalows would be demolished in the process.

Jasbir Sawhney, an architect on the commission, said that the plan should recognize the function the bungalows serve. "Worldwide, buildings for centuries have been added onto," he said. "But it should be possible to retain the character of both the bungalow and the area."

To that end the plan includes concept sketches by Mr. Sawhney for how additional staff quarters and office areas could be constructed on the rear of a large bungalow plot without altering its appearance from the street. He also developed a prototype contemporary bungalow, two or three of which could be built on a plot now occupied by a single Lutyens-era house.

Gautam Bhatia, a Delhi architect and critic, said the very idea of restoring the bungalows to their original state was "farcical." "No one sits out for tea on the veranda, and there are no big patches of chrysanthemums that are tended daily," he said. "The priority now is accommodating the 10 machine gun guards who are protecting you, and making sure the air-conditioning works."

The art commission's plan has been submitted to the New Delhi Municipal Council. It must also be approved by agencies of the central government before taking effect. But since the commission consulted closely with the prime minister's office in developing its proposal, Mr. Correa said he was hopeful it would go through.

Mr. Correa credited the prime minister's office with trying to stop the destruction of Lutyens's Delhi through the hundreds of modifications. "Before, no one had the guts to touch it in any way and because no one touches it, everyone tinkers with it in their own way," Mr. Correa said. "We just want to stop and correct all the illegal things that were put in."

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