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ERRATA | ISSUE #60 | The name of the author of the article 'Showcasing Tangible and Intangible Heritage' [pages 57-59] was incorrectly published as Debashish Borah instead of **Debasish Borah**. The error is deeply regretted.

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DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION

IN CONVERSATION WITH **BIMAL PATEL**



In the last issue of the Journal [#60], 'Debriefing the Design Brief'—a critique on the international design competition process for the proposed Redevelopment of New Delhi's Central Vista—marked the start of a larger discourse about the project. Here, the selected design consultant for the project, in an extended interview shares his views on some of its key aspects. In the next issue, we plan to share various perspectives and opinions of people from different segments of the society, including professionals, about the project-related views expressed here.

—EDITORS

Bimal Patel joined his father Hasmukh Patel's architectural practice in Ahmedabad in 1984, after completing his undergraduate education in architecture at CEPT University. Then, from 1985-90 he divided his time between work in Ahmedabad – during summer and winter breaks – and graduate education at the Department of City and Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley. He returned to India for good in 1990 and continued to work on his architectural projects and his doctoral dissertation. After completing his Doctorate in 1995 he expanded his father's practice, now called HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd., to also include urban design and urban planning disciplines. Over the years, he has been involved in various significant large-scale, multi-sectoral urban design and planning projects for Indian cities. Some of these are: the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project in Ahmedabad; the Post-Earthquake Walled City Restructuring Project in Bhuj; the Mumbai Port Trust Redevelopment Project in Mumbai, and; the Kashi-Vishwanath Precinct Redevelopment Project in Varanasi. He is presently involved in the prestigious Redevelopment of the Central Vista in New Delhi. Bimal is also the President of CEPT University since 2012. He was awarded the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1992 and the Padma Shri in 2019 for his contributions to the fields of Architecture and Planning.

Architect, urban designer, urban planner and academic, Bimal Patel shares with his views on various aspects of his professional journey, works and his thoughts on the profession and practice in an interview with the Editors.

During your tenure with Centre for Environmental Design CED at Berkeley, you worked closely with Alan Jacobs, eminent urban design practitioner and academician and co-author of *Towards an Urban Design Manifesto* [1980] with Donald Appleyard. Tell us about your inspirations and influences.

How has the multidisciplinary exposure to non design fields such as sociology and economics at CED shaped your thinking about cities?

EDUCATION AT BERKELEY

Through my five years at Berkeley, I had the good fortune of being taught by an array of wonderful teachers. Besides, my father and teachers at CEPT, they played a very important role in moulding me as a professional.

First there was Prof. Alan Jacobs, the eminent urban designer. Prof. Jacobs was not just an academic. Before becoming a professor at Berkeley, he worked in Pittsburgh, Calcutta and, for 8 years, he was Director of the San Francisco Planning Department. Besides studying with him, I was also his research assistant, and worked with him on his book *Great Streets*. Later, I also co-taught a graduate class with him. He believed that as urban designers, we must work towards real improvement of our cities. We must offer solutions to problems and not just conduct analyses and critiques. Urban Design and Urban Planning have to be ‘practices’ not ‘academic disciplines’. Without engaging in practice and testing solutions it is impossible to figure out what is possible and what is not. Prof. Jacobs was, for me, a model ‘reflective-practitioner’ and I learned a lot from him.

Then there was Prof. Peter Hall, the great historian of urban planning who was later knighted as Sir Peter Hall. He was deeply interested in the history of urban planning – particularly that of Britain. His lectures were an opportunity to learn about how the gradual evolution of planning practices and ideas helped improve cities in the West.

I also worked a lot with Prof. Manuel Castells, first as his student and then as his teaching assistant. Prof. Castells was a brilliant leftist urban sociologist and a truly great lecturer. He lectured about the comparative political-economy of urban development and planning in the US, Europe and developing countries. I was immediately drawn to him since I was always interested in questions of social development. How do societies develop and improve? How do they become better? How do they expand their capacities? How can we improve the lives of ordinary people? But it is through Prof. Castells’ courses that I first came in touch with the concepts and ideas that are necessary for productively thinking about the questions that I was interested in.

My doctoral work was mainly with Prof. Richard Walker, who was a Marxist urban geographer – a protégé of Prof. David Harvey. Through him I became deeply interested in the Marxist theory and spent a vast amount of time reading the literature and coming under its spell. My dissertation was about how architecture is transformed once the building production is organized as commodity production – how organising building production as real estate development transforms the dynamics of architectural design. While at Berkeley, and for some time later, I was convinced of the power of the Marxist world view. But later as I grappled with finding workable solutions to real problems, I realised the shortcomings of Marxism. Marxism offers the most penetrating and insightful diagnoses of the ills of capitalist societies. However, the solutions it provides are not only not workable, they are positively harmful. I had to spend a lot of time re-educating myself after my doctoral education!

Over my five years at UC Berkeley I learned from many terrific teachers, read a vast number of books, attended many courses and got to interact with people from all over the world. But what was truly astounding was the institution itself. An academic institution with thousands of teachers, 30,000 students and 8 million books on the campus – one could study anything in the world that one wanted to. Having already got myself a professional architectural education at CEPT, Berkeley gave me the opportunity to get myself a wide ranging liberal education! So, besides my required courses in urban planning, such as statistics and planning theory, I did courses in economics, development politics, sociology, development theory and even agricultural economics. I was all over the place! My education at Berkeley equipped me with concepts and analytical tools that helped me in forming a clear understanding of the world, within which I could situate my practice as an architect and urbanist.

PRACTICE IN THE PUBLIC REALM

My interest in the design of public spaces was formed before I went to Berkeley. It emerged from my interest in social work and development which was nurtured by a Jesuit priest in my high school, Fr. Erviti. He used to run the school's Social Service League and drew many of us into working in slums, building houses and so on. He also got us thinking, at a very early age, about India's problems and how they could be tackled. He gave us books about development theory to read and engaged us in discussions and, most importantly, he engaged us in the actual work of improving lives. He encouraged us to be reflective development-practitioners.

My interest in questions of development took a turn towards an interest in urban development when I was exposed to life in European cities. This happened when I was in my third year in architecture. During that year I interned at Prof. Frei Otto's Institute of Lightweight Structures in Germany and travelled all over Europe. I was nineteen at the time. I was amazed by how comfortable, productive and fulfilling life could be for ordinary citizens in the towns and cities of Germany, France, England, Italy, etc. This was an inspiring and highly educative experience.

I realised the importance that public spaces play in making cities liveable. I realised that the good that one can do for ordinary citizens by working as an architect on designing buildings is very limited. And this led me to an interest in urban design and planning, the practice of which, at that time, was practically non-existent in India. It is this interest that I took with me to Berkeley.

After my undergraduate education I joined my father's architectural practice. He, like many architects of the time, was not interested in working in the public realm. But even those who were, had gradually lost their voice in

Unlike your father, who practiced mainly for private clients, when you joined his practice in the 90s, you started working in the public realm, and have continued ever since. Tell us more about it.

“I realised the importance that public spaces play in making cities liveable. I realised that the good that one can do for ordinary citizens by working as an architect on designing buildings is very limited. And this led me to an interest in urban design and planning.”

public affairs, largely because they had lost touch with the political class, which, with the deepening of democracy was no longer formed from the traditional elites of the post-independence era. Even today, we professionals claim to like the concept of democracy, but when democracy does its job of putting people in power who think differently from us and have different priorities, we complain that we can't work with them. As a result, since quite a few decades now, we professionals, who should be playing our part in framing urban planning and urban design policy, do not have much of a voice in public affairs.

As I said, when I started to work in the early nineties, urban design was practically non-existent in India as a practice. And, urban planning was the preserve of the government. The private sector was not allowed a role in it. My father's practice, which I joined, was focused on architecture. But I was determined to work in the public realm on urban design and urban planning projects and soon after I completed my doctorate in 1995, I was able to work on a street design project. Very soon, the credibility that this earned me, enabled me and my colleagues, to work on highly sensitive statutory urban plans and on many other larger and more significant urban development projects.

My first urban project in 1996 was the redevelopment of a 2.5 kilometre long street in Ahmedabad — a project that I had initiated. After designing the street, I realised that the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, which at that time was practically defunct and bankrupt, would simply not be able to implement the project. So, supported by the Municipal Commissioner, who I directly reported to, I took over as the project's manager, and did everything that was necessary to get the project done. Though my role as a manager was voluntary and unpaid, I was responsible for everything: coordinating between various municipal departments, dealing with utility companies, managing construction, managing the press, briefing lawyers, communicating with residents and shop owners on the street, garnering the support of corporators and politicians, keeping them apprised of developments and answering their queries, dealing with project sponsors... everything. I also invited my teacher from Berkeley, Prof. Alan Jacobs to Ahmedabad to review the design and help me by sharing his knowledge and experience with the Municipal Corporation. The people who needed to really understand the importance of designed streets were the corporators. Alan gave his first presentation in Ahmedabad to Members of the Standing Committee of the Municipal Corporation and I translated it in Gujarati for them! We also held a workshop for street design for the engineers of the Municipal Corporation. It took over a year and a half to implement the project. I did little else during that period but it was an incredibly educative experience. It was also through this that I built my credibility as a professional who could work in the public realm. It paved the way to being commissioned for larger projects.

If one wants to work in the public realm and design public spaces, one has to work with the government. One cannot just sit back and lament, as many do, that government processes are impossible to deal with; that politicians and bureaucrats do not understand what good design is about; that they have poor taste; or that they lack vision. Such laments often become convenient excuses for not doing anything in the public realm. And disengagement is unlikely to lead anywhere, certainly for the profession as a whole.

The point of constructive engagement is to find areas of agreement and to slowly expand them, through respectful collaboration and mutual learning. Solely focusing on areas of disagreement and then disengaging or being an obstructionist may feel righteous but is of very limited value. My philosophy has always been that instead of focusing on the things I disagree on with my clients I try to focus on what we agree on, then I work to build trust and mutual respect, and then strive to expand the common ground through a process of mutual learning.

THE CLIENT-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP

One rarely ever meets a client who one completely agrees with on all matters. I have never met a client, in the public or private sector, who I completely agree with or who shares all my tastes. Do my clients' and my opinions have to completely match? No. Can we work together? Yes. The question is how.

When a professional architect and a client work together on a project, the relationship can be of three types. Some architects want to dominate their clients. They want their clients to be in awe of them. They want them to unquestioningly accept whatever advice they give them. Fortunately for such architects, there are clients who are willing to accept such a subservient position vis-à-vis their architects. Other architects are willing to be subservient to their clients. They are happy to set aside their own professional values and judgement and draw-up for their clients whatever they want. I do not like to be in either of these two types of relationships with my clients.

I prefer a relationship that acknowledges mutual dependence, which is based on trust and mutual respect. That is not to say that it is a relationship between equals. The project belongs to the client. For the architect to be successful he must have a sense of ownership for the project but he cannot presume to own it. As in the case of the doctor-patient relationship, whether to finally heed the advice of the professional or not is the client's prerogative. The professional cannot force the advice on the client. Regardless of this, it can be a mutually respectful relationship where both parties acknowledge their dependence on the other. In such a relation much depends on openness on both sides and the architect's skill in persuading the client. In my practice I strive to forge such relationships with my clients. Once, very early in my career, the head of an Urban Development Authority, with whom I was arguing a bit too forcefully, gently reminded me: please remember that you are the only the 'suggesting authority', I am the 'deciding authority'!

INDIAN VERSUS WESTERN

Many people believe that India, or the East, is so different from the West that the solutions to our problems have to be different from solutions that work for the West. I wouldn't deny that there are important differences that distinguish us, but, generally speaking, I do not much believe in Indian exceptionalism. Many, if not most, solutions that have worked in the West are likely to work here.

This is precisely what our national leaders must have felt when, upon becoming independent, they looked around the world for an appropriate political system for India. When framing our constitution, they adopted principles of equality and democratic functioning that are not indigenous. These principles were first articulated in Europe and America. Our national leaders decided to adopt them because they felt that people everywhere are essentially similar and a political system that has been proven to work well in the West can be made to work in India. They did

In your public projects, you have been working with Heads of States, Ministers, Bureaucrats and Councillors while on the other hand you also have private clients. How do you look at the relationship with the "client" in each case?

"I prefer a relationship that acknowledges mutual dependence, which is based on trust and mutual respect. For the architect to be successful he must have a sense of ownership for the project but he cannot presume to own it."

In your works, how do you look at the idea of "Indian identity" as a cultural context which drives design?

“When we have to design cities where millions of people have to live in close proximity, we should not hesitate in adopting suitable solutions that have worked elsewhere. Many societies have faced the same urban problems that we are facing today, and have come up with very good solutions. We should adopt those solutions. We should not insist on reinventing the wheel.”

Since many of your public works are sited in contexts where there is an active engagement of past with present, how do you look at the idea of architecture conservation and restoration – for those structures that are structurally sound and programmatically adaptable?

not claim that we are so distinct that we have to create a system of governance based on distinctively Indian or Eastern principles that are better suited to our cultural ethos or traditions.

That is not to say that our culture, our material conditions, and our problems are not markedly different from those of the West. They are. But I do not think of them as being ‘natural’ or ‘permanent’ or so deeply rooted that we have to develop all solutions anew for India. Many of the features of our society, culture, economy, polity that we think of as being special, or eastern, or Indian, can be found in other societies at a similar stage of development as ours. One only has to read the history of developed countries to see that they were not so different when they were at our stage of development. Our cities are indeed very different from Western cities. But they are also very similar to Western cities of the 19th century. As India develops, its economy, material conditions, culture and ethos will change and we will become similar to other more advanced countries.

There is much to learn from the experience of the western world and there are many solutions that can be directly adopted. And, like the framers of our constitution, we should not hesitate to adopt good solutions when we see them. Thank God we do not insist on Indian exceptionalism when it comes to science and technology – we do not insist on distinctive cars, computers, vaccines, medicines and so on. When we see something that works, we adopt it. When we have to design cities where millions of people have to live in close proximity, we should not hesitate in adopting suitable solutions that have worked elsewhere. Fortunately for us, many societies have faced the same urban problems that we are facing today, and have come up with very good solutions. We should adopt those solutions. We should not insist on reinventing the wheel.

Those who are worried that in doing so our culture and identity will be obliterated, should check if this has happened in the all developed countries that have freely borrowed suitable ideas from one another. After all these years of copying good ideas from one another, the United States, France, England, Germany, Italy, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong remain distinctively different.

CONSERVING HERITAGE AND PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

We must respect our heritage and conserve it, but we must also not allow ourselves to be held hostage to it. This is akin to the sentiment that we must respect our parents and conserve our community’s traditions, but not be held hostage to them; we must adapt to changing times and realize our needs and aspirations as independent individuals. Of course, there is no way of objectively defining what is sufficiently respectful or what we must conserve and

what we must let go. What one person considers to be sufficient may be insufficient for another. It is all a matter of judgement and balance. This is what makes issues of conservation interesting and also what leads to heated debates and consternation.

Debates and differences in opinion are likely to be more when societies are in flux, when levels of trust are low and there are no settled norms. This, I think, is the case today. During the 50s and 60s people seem to have been far more relaxed about making changes to the Central Vista and its buildings. Parliament House was expanded by building two floors of offices atop it. A whole new street, Rafi Ahmed Marg, which was not a part of Lutyens' original plan, was cut through the Vista. To do this, the water channels and landscape were severed and changed. Later, a whole line of trees was added to the Avenue. No one seems to have cried out in protest at the changes being made.

Today, people have become far more apprehensive and intolerant of change, regardless of how necessary it is. Discussions about heritage conservation are extreme and highly politicised. The design for the Central Vista Project respects all the magnificent Lutyens and Baker buildings. It also respects the structure of the street layout and the lay out of the landscape. Regardless of this, some people claim that the design is destroying the heritage. Perhaps they have not been able to examine the plans and appraise themselves of the facts.

Environmental protection is another area where a similar dynamic is at play. There is no doubt that protecting the environment is extremely important. We should not needlessly cut trees or alter natural features. However, this imperative should not completely freeze us. We can surely find a way whereby the exigencies of environmental protection can coexist with the exigencies of development.

When considering the reordering of a landscape, so far as the benefits to be gained promise to be more than the costs and so far as we are also taking compensatory steps – planting more trees – to mitigate the costs that the reordering of the landscape entails, we should not stop ourselves from making the change. Unfortunately, we seem to have forgotten how to think of making trade-offs. When it comes to discussing the environmental impact of a project, we only want to look at the cost side of the equation and refuse to engage in further discussion.

SELECTING ARCHITECTS THROUGH COMPETITIONS

When setting up a competition to select an architect, one must be very clear about whether the project that one is selecting an architect for, allows one to '*select an appropriate design*' or demands the '*selection of an appropriate architect*'.

Let us say, for example, that one has to build a commemorative iconic structure, such as India Gate or the Taj Mahal. The practical requirements that such structures have to meet are relatively simple and can easily be defined at the outset. But their

What are your views regarding the role and place of landscape in Indian cities?

“When considering the reordering of a landscape, so far as the benefits to be gained promise to be more than the costs and so far as we are also taking compensatory steps – planting more trees – to mitigate the costs that the reordering of the landscape entails, we should not stop ourselves from making the change.”

In regard to the international design competition of the Central Vista Redevelopment, design brief with no background studies, with an exclusive format inviting only a certain scale of practices, an unseen and unheard of jury and an unusual haste for the entire project – the process of conducting the competition, all has attracted much negative press and critical comments. Your views, please.

“When setting up a competition to select an architect, one must be very clear about whether the project that one is selecting an architect for, allows one to ‘select an appropriate design’ or demands the ‘selection of an appropriate architect’.”

symbolic functions are paramount and require the architect to come up with an appropriately inspiring, evocative and meaningful form. The most important part of the design process is complete when such a form has been designed. The design work that remains after this is further developing the concept to make it buildable. In such cases, holding a competition amongst architects and *selecting a design*, from amongst the various designs that the architects have come up with, is a workable strategy. The appropriateness of the architect for undertaking the subsequent work – of detailing the design and making it buildable – is of secondary consequence. If need be, another competent architect can be appointed to develop the concept and make it buildable, in consultation with the original author of the concept.

However, not all projects are like India Gate or the Taj Mahal. Many projects are very complex where a vast number of complicated and conflicting requirements have to be satisfied. With many others, at the outset, it is not even clear what requirements have to be met by the design. In yet others, an initial design has to be done simply to collect more data to understand the problem better. In all such projects, it is impossible to quickly come up with a concept design that one is sure about. The architect has to gradually and painstakingly develop the concept design through an iterative process and in deep collaboration with the client. More often than not, the initial concept design has to be abandoned and a new concept has to be developed. For such projects, it would be foolish to select an architect primarily on the basis of a quick concept developed by the architect. One has to judge the capacity of the architect to undertake the arduous task of the whole design process and to deliver on the final design. The initial concept design may give some clue about the architect’s design instincts, but the selection cannot be these clues alone. In such cases, competitions should be structured not so much to *select an appropriate design* but to *select an appropriate architect* – one who has the capacity to deliver on the final product, not just a persuasive first sketch.

One can run into serious problems when a competition for a complex project is structured to select a design instead of an appropriate architect. It seems to me that a classic case of such a mistake is the competition for the IGNCA building. Here a building had to be designed for a complex institution that had not yet come into being. For the design to be appropriate, it should have been developed through an iterative process and in deep discussion with the clients and users. But the competition was structured to select a sketch design, not an architect who was capable of delivering on the final product. The Jury selected a design produced by an American academic – Ralph Lerner – who received the award and returned to America. The Ministry engaged a local architect to develop the design. This local architect was not at liberty to depart from the initial concept even if, during the design development process, it made sense to do so. This was probably not the best way to select an architect for designing a complex institutional building.

Tackling the problems that large and complex projects, such as the Sabarmati Riverfront Development, the Mumbai Port Trust Redevelopment and the Central Vista Project pose, requires a vast and diverse array of professionals to work together in a highly cooperative manner: urban planners; architects; urban designers; landscape architects; civil, electrical and mechanical engineers; construction managers; quantity surveyors, surveyors as well as a host of other specialist designers. Such groups, required as they are to work smoothly and cooperatively together, cannot be put together every time a project has to be tackled. They will simply not be able to hold together and deliver on the goods. There has to be something more that holds all the individuals together than a commitment to work on the same project. This is why large firms, that hold a vast array of diverse and experience professionals together for long periods of time and who have experience in ensuring teamwork within themselves and with other specialised firms, exist. They are necessary to tackle large and diverse projects. Many practitioners with small architecture firms are discontent when they are barred from bidding for large and complex projects. Perhaps, on account of their lack of experience with large projects, they do not fully understand what it takes to tackle such projects. To work on large and complex projects, one either has to be a part of a large firm or gradually build one and gain experience by successively tackling larger and larger challenges.

I was fortunate in joining my father's practice and could soon assume a leadership role. It saved me many years of initial struggle. However, my father's firm was relatively small and focused on tackling architectural projects and I was interested in tackling large and complex projects in the public realm. To be able to tackle such projects, starting from the early 1990s, I slowly built a team of highly competent urban planners, architects, urban designers, project managers, engineers, surveyors, technical draftspersons, and so on – within the firm. We slowly learned how to tackle more and more complex projects. Our first project was not as large or complex as the Central Vista Project or the Mumbai Port Trust Redevelopment. It was a tiny two kilometre centre-city street redevelopment that took two years to implement!

Unfortunately, there are very few large, multi-sectoral firms in the country that can tackle large and complex urban projects. On the other side, the challenges that our cities face are immense. If we are to tackle them, we will need scores of highly competent large firms. We cannot rely only on large international firms, for many reasons, but the simplest of them is that we cannot afford their services. Therefore, I hope that our profession quickly builds real capacity to tackle the problems that India faces.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

Sometimes, in projects that are very similar to others that have earlier been built, it is possible to very precisely define the practical as well as subjective requirements that a design has to fulfil. If, for example one is designing a new McDonald's outlet,

In one of your presentations about the Redevelopment project, you stated that the loose and broad design brief gives flexibility, freedom and allows design to evolve as the project progresses. It seems intuitive that a project of such national importance would have a comprehensive space program with a certain degree of flexibility, and well thought out urban design, landscape and architectural guidelines. In this context can you elaborate further on your comment?



ABOVE |
**SABARMATI RIVERFRONT
DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**
AHMEDABAD

The project is one of the significant public spaces and urban development projects in recent times in India. The comprehensive design tries to cater to innumerable interlinked problems in the urban realm. The design approach is an example to demonstrate that building local capacities as well as building trust and consensus by engaging citizens is of utmost importance.

the client's brief is extremely precise. It states all the functional as well as branding requirements in a huge amount of detail. The brief is accompanied by a dossier of details about the site such as site measurements, infrastructure sizes and so on. The architect is supposed to come up with a design that not only meets all the requirements of the brief, but does so within very strict efficiency parameters. There is no room for—or need for—the architect to deviate from the specifications. All the requirements that the design has to fulfil are well known in advance and, more importantly, they are knowable. After all, there are, literally, thousands of well-used and well-tested McDonald's outlets in every possible type of site across the world.

Many projects are similar to McDonald's outlets, for example, hotels, standard housing, streets, etc. However, not all projects are of this type. Take for example, the new campus for IIM Ahmedabad that we were commissioned to design. Despite the fact that they were an already functioning institution with a campus, their brief was loose. They did not want to duplicate what they had. They wanted to explore new possibilities and were unclear about precisely how many students they wanted to accommodate. In fact, they saw the design process as an opportunity to rethink some aspects of their institution. This is precisely how, at CEPT, we worked with the architect when we decided to build a new library on the campus. We wanted to define what a library meant in today's world and in the specific context of CEPT. And this is precisely how families work with architects, when they want custom-designed houses for themselves. They go with a loose list of requirements and vague notions about what they want the house to look and feel like. They want to use the design process to discover what their house can be.

These latter types of projects demand an iterative design process. First a fuzzy concept is developed and then it is slowly sharpened. If, during the design process, more information about the site or the client's requirement is needed, surveys and studies are commissioned and this information is brought to bear on the design. Sometimes, the new information leads to the initial concept being abandoned – a new concept has to be developed and the process commences anew. Sometimes the initial concept turns out to be robust enough to survive the design process and sometimes, the design process may even lead to the conclusion that the project is unviable and has to be abandoned. It is the challenging job of the architect to hold the integrity of the concept in place through the disruptive process of design development and refinement.

Most projects that I have worked on are of the latter type – not repeats of already existing 'types'. They cannot be designed in the manner of a McDonald's outlet, where, in a linear progression, first all studies are completed, then, a very firm list of requirements is drawn up, after which through an arithmetic-like process a design is developed. They demand the design process to be iterative and to be a process of discovery of both, possibilities as well as requirements. The Sabarmati Riverfront Development, various institutions like IIMA and houses that I have worked on, office buildings and campuses, industrial facilities as well as the Central Vista Project, have all been open ended design problems.

In case of the Central Vista Project, the initial requirements were very broad: an expanded Parliament House, a Central Secretariat, a refurbished Central Vista Avenue and so on. More detailed requirements, for example requirements for the new Parliament House emerged slowly from dozens of meetings with various users of the building who were shown sketch designs and asked to comment on them. Altogether new requirements also emerged during the design process, for example the idea of creating a publicly accessible Biodiversity Arboretum on land carved out from the Presidential Estate. Buildings, such as the Vice President's Residence, moved around as various alternative sites were explored and abandoned. It was decided to move the National Museum to the North and South Blocks.

FACING PAGE |

[1] CENTRAL VISTA | 1940's

[Based on the original drawing by Lutyens]

'The new capital is not merely the shrine of the glory of India, but it is to be the living centre of the administration' [Herbert Baker]. After 17 years of construction, in 1931, Delhi was inaugurated as the capital of Imperial India. At the time, it was one of the largest such projects in the world, conceived and designed to reflect the spirit, progress and global importance of India. However, the Lutyens-Baker vision remained largely unfulfilled due to tumultuous world events that followed, and a changing, local, political and economic context.

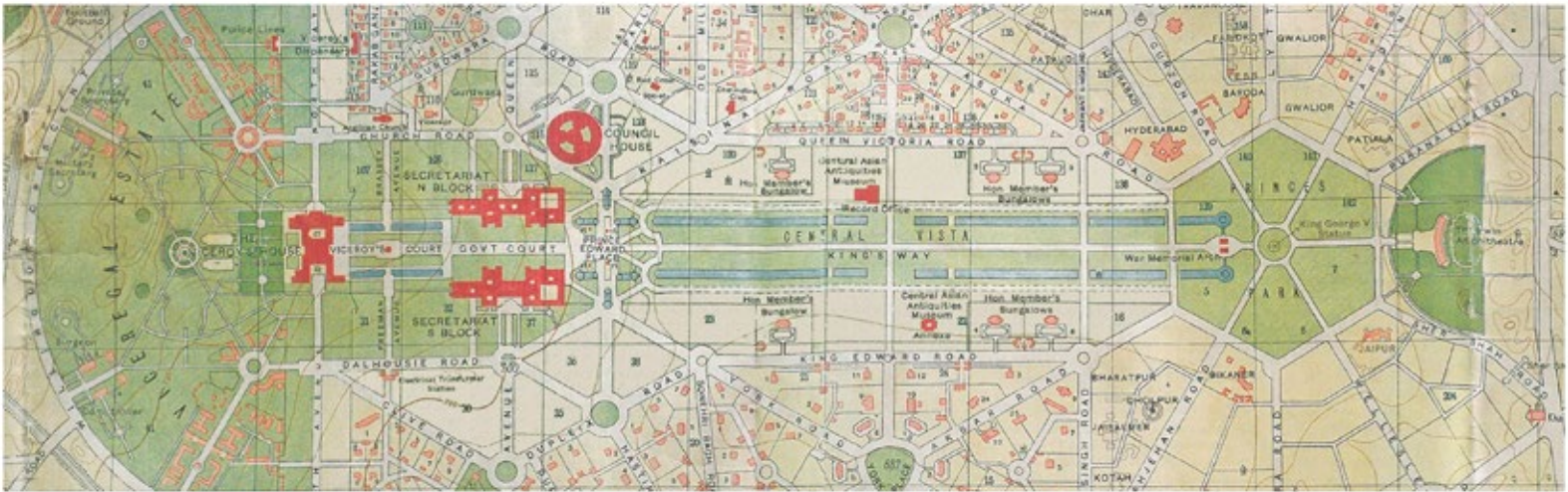
[2] CENTRAL VISTA | TODAY

The Lutyens-Baker plan was sparse, primarily defining the street network and landscape elements and was never sufficiently fleshed out in three dimension, in order to guide the development of buildings – their materiality, detail or architectural language. The development that has taken place, so far, is a response to the rapidly growing post-independence needs of the country. Its full potential to be an icon for the country has remained unrealized. The administrative strategy to carve up plots and allow largely uncoordinated development, has led to hasty construction with no attention paid to synergizing the developments or creating a unifying identity.

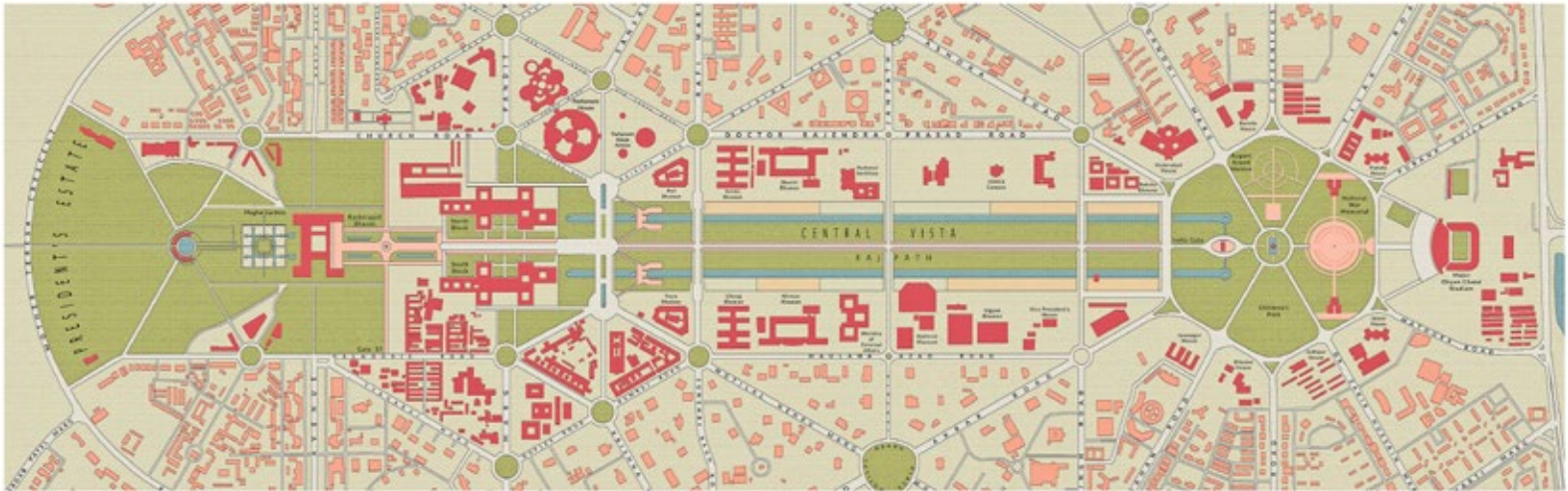
[3] CENTRAL VISTA | PROPOSED

The Master Plan is a coherent overarching vision for the Central Vista. It proposes several new building along the Rajpath, whose scale, form and quality respects and completes Lutyens and Baker's vision for the Central Vista. Focused on better land utilization, refurbishment, provision of efficient buildings, additional infrastructure and a befitting public space, it is an effort to create a new icon for a resurgent India.

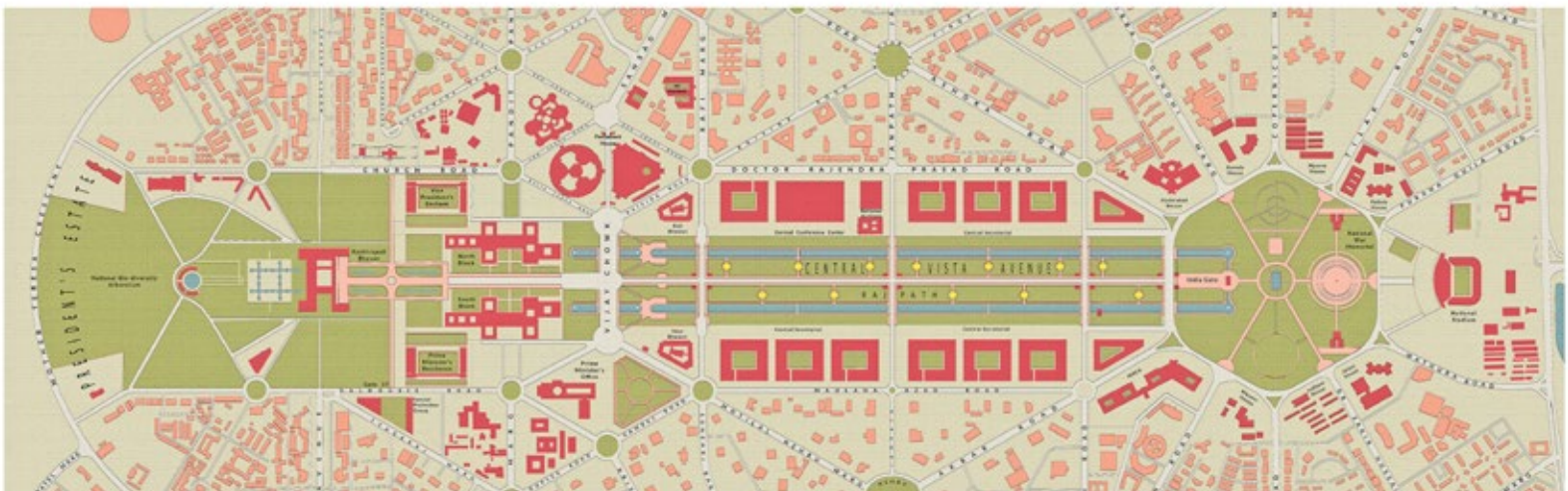
There have been many studies in the past regarding redevelopment of Lutyens' Bungalow Zone, LBZ [including Central Vista], a designation given to New Delhi capital city in the 80s. Do you propose to reference these studies while you work out details of the urban design and landscape schemes?



[1]



[2]



[3]

Several studies were commissioned to assess the impact of the proposed buildings on the existing infrastructure and site, for example, traffic studies, tree inventories and infrastructure maps. Experienced architects, particularly those who have worked on bringing a fuzzy brief and concept slowly into sharp focus, are very familiar with such open-ended, iterative designing – where the design work runs parallel to studies and surveys.

DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION AND CONSULTATION

Many people seem to think that, because we live in a democracy, all important issues must be popularly decided. And therefore, for example, designs for public spaces must emerge from participatory design processes, or some form of popular decision making. But what does this really mean? Can complex design/policy issues be popularly decided through participatory processes? If not, how can people be involved in decision making?

It is a fact that different people see and value things differently. Therefore, in a group of people, consensus over complex issues – particularly those that involve trade-offs – is unlikely to emerge spontaneously. This is why all societies require a system for making decisions that affect the collective. Sometimes, and on some issues, it is possible to take a popular vote. However, it is not practically possible to take all decisions through popular votes, and often, the issues to be decided upon are complex, and require deep expertise to understand and decide upon. As a consequence, some people have to be authorised to take decisions for the collective. In a democracy, these decision makers are popularly elected for pre-defined periods of time. Once elected, they are expected to apply their minds and take decisions, not to continually go back to the people. In areas where deep subject expertise is required for making sound decisions, they are expected to consult experts. In areas where popular inputs can enrich the decision making process, they are expected to undertake public consultations – not to turn over the decision making to the public. In addition to this, democracies also allow for a free press, so that public opinion can be made known to decision makers, regardless of whether they consult members of the public or not.

In India, opinions are freely expressed – either through the press, or now, through a variety of other mediums. In many areas of decision making, authorities are also required by law to undertake public consultation. While it is absolutely true that these consultative processes can be much better structured, it is also true that many people are unwilling to respect processes unless what they want is met with. Very often, these processes are also abused for purely political purposes – regardless of the merit of the issues, decisions are opposed to express opposition to the decision makers. Having worked much in the public realm and having interacted with both sides – activist professionals as well as decision makers – it is clear that there is deep mistrust and misunderstanding on both sides.

As you mention that more studies and surveys are now being carried out, in light of such new site discoveries and your own comments about design flexibility, are you open to the idea of modifying the urban plan you have set up?

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In public projects, how do you look at the idea of public participation, especially in context of democracy like ours?

Many professionals resort to ‘activism’ because they are interested in using their professional knowledge to influence projects and policies in the public realm but are convinced that it is not possible for them to do so by engaging with government as professionals. The reasons for not being able to engage as professionals can be many, for example: the opportunities for engagement are very limited; it is very difficult to work on public projects and requires a stance that they are unwilling to take; the belief that government is manned by people who have no vision, or have no interest in the public good, or are unwilling to be persuaded. Whatever be the case, convinced that it is not possible for them to work in the public realm as professionals, they either become public critics and use the press to put their views across, become advocates for a cause and work through a non-governmental-organization, or become legal activists and use the Courts to influence public projects and policies. These forms of engagement are usually well-intentioned and absolutely necessary to keep governments in check. However, having abandoned the creed of the professional to find workable solutions to problems by making meaningful trade-offs, many critics, advocates and activists end up taking immoderate, partisan, strident and ideologically driven positions. This approach causes more harm than good. It only vitiates public discourse and reinforces mutual mistrust.

You mention that there is a trust deficit on both sides, State and Professionals, in their mutual relationship. Can you please elaborate on this? How do you propose to bridge the gap?

On the other side, many people in the government do not believe strongly enough that it makes good sense to constructively engage with the public. There can be many reasons for this, for example: they are deeply suspicious of the motives of immoderate critics, advocates and activists; they have never experienced open and transparent governance because they are themselves from traditional backgrounds where blind faith, obedience and firm, top-down exercise of authority are all seen as virtues; because the organizational set-up they are within has no systems for constructive public engagement. Whatever be the reason, the corrosive dynamic of immoderate criticism, advocacy and activism only reinforces non-transparency and disregard for constructive public engagement wherever it exists in government.

Perhaps the situation will only change when more professionals put in the effort to constructively engage with government as problem-solving professionals rather than as adversarial critics, advocates and activists. In the meanwhile, I try to the extent that it is possible, to bridge the gap between self-appointed advocates of the public interest and those who are duly elected and appointed to take decisions in the public interest.



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