

Conference and Exhibition Report

Post-Colonial Capitals of South Asia: A Critical Analysis of Chandigarh, Dhaka and Islamabad

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Introduction

The British departure from the Indian subcontinent on 15 August 1947 created two independent countries: India, with its existing imperial capital in New Delhi designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1911; and Pakistan, opting for the port city of Karachi as its national capital. Due to the demographic distribution of Muslims - the basis for the creation of the two countries - Pakistan consisted of two halves, East and West, a thousand miles apart. In 1971, the two parts separated to create a third independent country of Bangladesh with Dhaka as its Capital city.



Shortly after their independence and within a few years of each other, the three countries set about building a new capital city - Islamabad and Dhaka as the national capitals of West and East Pakistan, and Chandigarh as the provincial capital of the Punjab. The historic city of Lahore, the provincial capital of the Punjab had become part of Pakistan, therefore, Chandigarh was to be built as the capital of the Indian half of the Punjab. Pakistan decided to replace Karachi with a new purpose-built national capital in Islamabad.

At the same time, Dhaka was to get a new government centre to serve as the provincial capital of East Pakistan which, after the separation of the two halves, became the Capital of independent Bangladesh.

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All three capitals were to be built on green field sites. Depending on the choice of terminology, each was commissioned as a 'post-colonial' or 'post-independence' city to be designed by a renowned foreign architect or planner – a Swiss-French for Chandigarh, an American for Dhaka, and a Greek for Islamabad. Underlying the design aspirations for the new capitals was the implicit aim that each city will somehow reflect a departure from both the colonial and the historic past and symbolise an independent new cultural and national identity.

The year 1997 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan and the 26th of Bangladesh, and provided an appropriate opportunity for a comparative evaluation of the three capitals from a perspective which had neither been possible during design and construction nor shortly after their completion. It was for this reason that Dr. Tasleem Shakur, Director of the International Centre for Development and Environmental Studies (ICDES) at the Edge Hill University College and the Department of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool organised a two day International Seminar for a critical analysis of the three Capitals.

European Architecture in India 1750-1850 (Nilsson 1968) surveyed India's colonial past and also included a chapter on contemporary urban developments. This was followed by the *New Capitals of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1973). These studies explored the impact of imported ideas on the social and spatial hierarchies in non-western cultures. Foreign architects and planners designing in unfamiliar environment, according to Nilsson, seldom understood local climate, culture and urban tradition. He considered such comparisons to be of particular importance since the design of cities such as Chandigarh were often compared with Brasilia and other western cities than with cities in India and South Asia.

While Nilsson focussed mainly on design, in her book on Chandigarh, Madhu Sarins (1982) concentrated on the planning issues while Ravi Kalia (1987) analysed the detailed history of its planning and development. In addition, professional journals - noted in Bibliography at the end - had periodically published reports on the design and progress of the individual cities. What had not been possible so far were the comparative analyses of the three cities; the roles of the various participants; how far the ideas underlying the planning of these cities had succeeded or failed; and how the residents themselves saw these cities.

Based on the Workshop proceedings and feed back from published material, the commentary below gives a background to the inception, commissioning and design of each of the capital cities followed by a concluding summary.

Chandigarh

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and the driving force behind Chandigarh, expressed his vision for the new capital in these words: "Let this be a new town, symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by traditions of the past, an expression of the nation's faith in the future" (Kalia, 1987).

A site in the Himalayan range was selected in 1948 and named Chandigarh after an existing village. Albert Mayer and Matthew Nowicki of the American firm Mayer, Whittlesey and Glass were appointed to prepare the initial master plan. After the untimely death of Nowicki in an air crash, the Punjab Government appointed Le Corbusier to develop the Mayer master plan that was finalised in 1951. With an eventual population of half a million, Chandigarh was to be built in two phases of nine and six thousand acres divided into 29 and 17 sectors respectively. The present population of the city already exceeds this target by over 200,000, most of it in slums within and around the city (Bhatti, 1997).

Chandigarh and Bhubaneswar are post-colonial India's first examples of planned cities. They demonstrate that, divorced from history and citizen participation, new towns can easily become mere physical developments. New ideas of design and construction do not by themselves create better environment. New planned cities cannot be better or worse than the planners who design them and the people who implement, manage and live in them (Kalia, 1987).



Chandigarh represents a unique example of a new city that reached its design population of half a million within a short span of fifty years. It ushered in an era of planned growth, rational development, effective management, and new standards of development. But Chandigarh today is a city of dualities and contradictions. The quality of life and environment varies considerably between different sectors and within the same sector. Conflicting standards have been applied in different sectors that have created socially stratified and uneven developments. At present, every tenth resident of the city lives in slums that have become a permanent part of the urban landscape. Uncontrolled growth of commercial activity on designated green and open spaces have effectively created 'urban villages' within the city and overwhelmed its social and physical fabric.

There is high concentration of public services in some sectors while others, often with a much higher density of population, remain under-provided. The city's population has not been evenly distributed in its 46 sectors as the planning policy has been directed towards building apartments

only. The periphery of Chandigarh has acquired large-scale substandard development such as Mohali and Panchkula. Industrial expansion within and around the city has added to the pressures on the existing services and infrastructure. Chandigarh today is in crisis that can only be ascribed to ineffective planning policies and lack of control and management (Gupta, 1997).

The three main buildings of the Capital Complex - the Assembly, the Secretariat, and the High Court - were studied during August 1996 to evaluate their environmental performance in terms of design, materials, construction, orientation, detailing and landscape. The analysis of the data indicated that the layout of the Capital Complex and the buildings were good examples of climate-conscious design in the hot, tropical climate of Chandigarh. The Assembly building was able to maintain a steady internal environment throughout the year and the High Court building, with its double roof, was found to perform most satisfactorily. Since its construction, space-use in the Secretariat has altered considerably resulting in poor ventilation in the building (Ali, 1997).

Whilst Chandigarh has been extolled as a great planning experiment, it is often overlooked that it also symbolises India's post-independence attempt in solicited cross-fertilisation with western ideas of urban planning. The history of India is full of examples of architectural assimilation - Mughal, British, Dutch and Portuguese - and in this sense, Le Corbusier was perhaps the most distinguished architect selected by the world's largest democracy to plan its provincial capital. There was an underlying desire to give the city a consistent 'modern' image for it to be an exemplar for other cities. To achieve and maintain this image, an array of regulations and controls was devised but despite all these, within 45 years, contravention of Regulations and increasing pressures of growth have brought about many serious concerns, which include:

- ✍ high population increase, slums, and uncontrolled development within the protected periphery;
- ✍ inadequate public transport, traffic jams due to population increase, and pollution;
- ✍ increasing pressures on infrastructure and services;
- ✍ disparity in demand and supply of land resulting in violations of building controls and density regulations;
- ✍ illegal construction, increasing nexus between politicians, developers and slum dwellers (Thakur, 1997).

A study of the relationship between Chandigarh's residents and its buildings was carried out by Mathur and Madgwick (1978), to assess whether its planning and architecture accommodated or hindered Indian life and social behaviour. The planned population of the city had already doubled due to the migration of the poor from the surrounding countryside. While over-sized road network had been planned for future increase in vehicular traffic, no provision had been made for the 130,000 bicycles in the city. Shortage of water had made the extensive parks into sun-baked dust bowls. Segregated land use, suitable for large industries in the west, had proved detrimental to street vendors and the small businesses so prevalent in the Indian cities. There had been no critical analyses to learn lessons from the experience other than that its obvious mistakes were being repeated in other cities: rigid and clumsy layout of buildings, over-scaled streets and dusty

open spaces. “And yet for all this, Chandigarh has been manipulated by the local people into a working compromise between street life in Calcutta and life in a ‘City of the Future’” (Glancy, 1978).

Of the three capitals, Chandigarh is perhaps the most famous as it is the most photographed and published. Le Corbusier looked to the future to plan an Indian city for the second half of the twentieth century. Fifty years on, “it is the only one that is gratuitously cruel, depressing and self-indulgent by turns. From Chandigarh you would have to conclude that, as a town planner Le Corbusier was an outrageous impostor. ... Its plan, prepared in 1949, was based on four separate functions: government, work, industry, and residential. With his instinct for dazzling simplification, he declared that Chandigarh’s design would imitate the human body: head (government, judiciary) at the top, stomach (shops) in the middle, lungs (park) near the shops. Why? Because it spared him the trouble of thinking any more deeply about the matter?” (Popham, 1999).

The great bulk of the High Court and the Secretariat Buildings may be impressive but the vast space between the two provides no respite from the summer heat when

“Chandigarh fries, and so too do the unlucky occupants of these buildings (...) The killing harshness of this climate and terrain, which all architecture down the ages here has sought to mitigate, is serenely ignored as being of no significance to the modernist project” (Popham, 1999). Despite their badly weathered concrete, the big showpiece buildings still produce stunning photographs, but it is in Chandigarh’s ‘stomach’, the commercial heart in Sector 22, where it would take a very cunning photographer to bring home anything presentable. The sector is made up of identical, four storey concrete blocks ... In between lies roaming, formless, dreary space, with no character or sense of place stretching from block to block” (Popham, 1999).

To mark its half centennial and to assess its achievements, an international conference was held in Chandigarh in January 1999. In his speech, K. R. Narayanan, the President of India, called it a “befitting capital ... where the mind is without fear and the head is held high”. Chandigarh, to him, was “the best city in India”, a city which had provided “an architecture for the modern age and made Indians aware of the notion of citizenship”. But despite all this, in his view, there still was “no city planning that can face the reality of our society” (Davey, 1999). Not unlike New Delhi, designed as an isolated imperial and ruling city, it is impossible perhaps to design a new city separated from the needs of the people. A city after all is neither ever complete, nor all its problems are solved by architecture and planning alone.

Dhaka

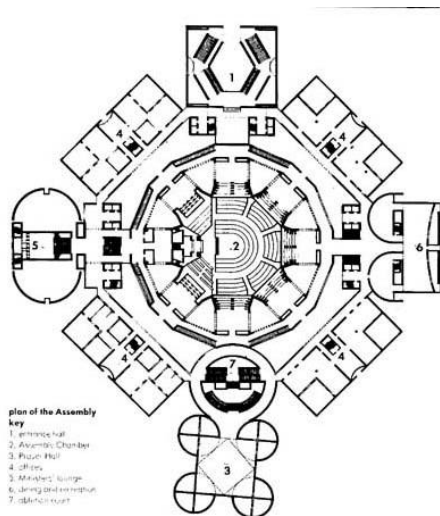
After separating from Pakistan in 1971 and becoming an independent country, the government appointed the British firm of Shankland Cox to prepare the 'Dhaka Metropolitan Area Integrated Urban Development Project (DMAIUDP)? an excellent study which was never considered seriously. In 1995, yet another foreign group, Mott Macdonald in association with Culpin Planning, were appointed to prepare the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan, but as yet there

is no evidence that this plan will have better success (Ali, 1997).

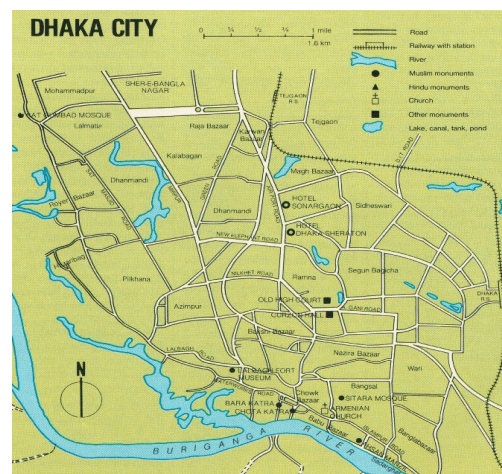
Louis Kahn designed the most important intervention, the Capital Complex, in 1964 as an isolated development that separated the administration from the city and its people. Despite such intentions, population increase and expansion of the city towards the north has now integrated the Capital Complex into the larger city (Nilufar, 1997).

Unlike other planned capitals such as Brasilia designed a decade earlier, the layout of the Dhaka Complex was not based on a strong pattern or axial vista. Not quite symmetrical, the major buildings are arranged in a formal classical manner but this formality is not reflected in the overall plan. Main roads do not axially focus on major buildings that are approached from the side rather than from the front. As a consequence, there is no evident relationship between the road pattern and the layout of the buildings, but on the whole, the overall layout, scale and height of buildings and landscaping provide a very satisfying urban environment (Uddin, 1997).

Dhaka Assembly plan



Dhaka city plan



With its vast blank bare concrete walls and the wilful circles, triangles and slits, Louis Kahn labelled the National Assembly building as a 'Citadel for Assembly'. Without any precedence in local architecture, the metaphor of the Citadel itself poses the inevitable question of its relevance to the people of one of the poorest countries aspiring to develop democratic political institution after a long period of foreign control.

Given the dearth of building materials and the developing construction industry in Bangladesh at

the time, the fluctuating temperatures and 120 inches of annual rainfall, extensive use of exposed concrete for the Assembly Building is itself bewildering. To overcome the difficult-to-control joints between concrete pours, strips of imported white marble were inserted both horizontally and vertically in the internal and external surfaces of the concrete walls. Given the porosity of exposed concrete, the excessive rain, moss, lichens, urban pollution and cost of regular maintenance, it is unlikely that the passage of time will be kind to the intended image of the Citadel (Taylor, 1979).

Not unlike Corbusier's government complex in Chandigarh, Dhaka's Assembly Building is designed as a monument, perhaps an extravagant one at that. But there comes a point "at which the sensual enjoyment of masonry can begin to sicken from over indulgence and lack of controlling force of reason. One could well argue that the circular and triangular openings lack reason, that they are decorative because they do not reflect the character of the spaces behind" (Dunnett, 1980).

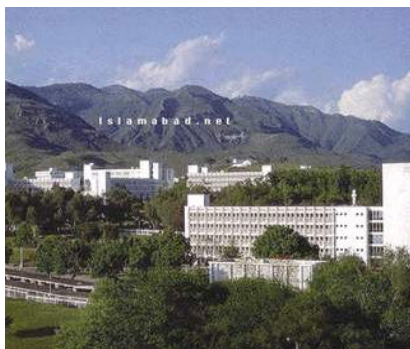
All the materials - cement, marble, aluminium, hardwood for windows and extensive internal panelling, lifts and air-conditioning plant - were all imported. At the time of its construction, the energy required for its 16 lifts and air-conditioning equalled half that available for the rest of city. Calculations carried out by a local architect show that the ratio between the total built-up area and the usable floor space is as low as 41 per cent. (Dunnett, 1980) It is doubtful whether a building of such extravagance and poor efficiency would have been built in a western country.

Islamabad

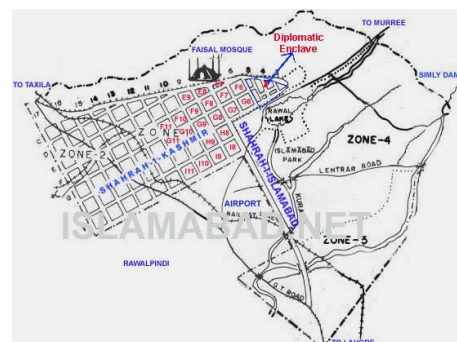
Islamabad is the first planned city of its kind in Pakistan and also very different from the existing cities. Constantin Doxiadis, whose master plan for the city was approved in 1960, based it on his idea of dynapolis - a city endlessly expanding in a linear fan shape from an initial fixed point. Because of its gridiron geometric layout, the plan of the city was considered to be in accordance with the Islamic principles of design (Quaiyoom, 1997).

The layout of Islamabad is based on a rigid square grid of about 1.25 miles (2km). Doxiadis (1960) saw "no reason for the roads to be curved unless the form of the landscape compels us to do so", but despite the undulating terrain of the Potohar Plain there are virtually no curves or slopes. Lack of working with the natural contours and the single-storey houses laid out on a rigid grid has produced the most monotonous housing. The ultimate test of Islamabad must lie as much in the unrelenting level grid imposed on an undulating landscape, as it must in the quality of the social and urban landscape it has generated.

Secretariat buildings



Islamabad master plan



Unlike Chandigarh and Dhaka where Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn prepared the master plans and also designed the major buildings, Doxiadis, not in any case known as an architect, did not design any major buildings in Islamabad. Unlike the other two capitals, the architecture of Islamabad represents a roll call of the international ‘signature’ architects of the time. Robert Matthew Johnson-Marshall from Britain prepared the overall plan of the administrative sector and also designed the National Museum and the National Arts Gallery. The Government Hostel and the Secretariat Buildings were designed by the Italian architects Ponti, Fornarolli and Rosselli. Kenzo Tange from Japan designed the Supreme Court, and following an international competition, the Turkish architect Vedat Dalokay built the huge King Faisal Mosque. A team of architects working under the Colombo Plan was responsible for the municipal offices, schools, housing and markets in various sectors. Derek Lovejoy and Partners from Britain were responsible for the capital’s extensive landscaping which included mulberry trees, claimed to have made Islamabad the most asthma prone city, and the Eucalyptus trees that regularly tumble in the Himalayan winds. There is an Argentina Park in sector G-6, and a Japanese garden landscaped by Tabata from Japan. Other international ‘big name’ architects involved were Arne Jacobsen from Denmark, Louis Kahn and Edward Stone from the USA, all of whom prepared a number of proposals for the Parliament Building and the President’s House, with Stones’ design being eventually built. Like his Institute of Science and Technology with its Islamic dome for the nuclear reactor and a minaret for the exhaust chimney, the President’s house too is a strange concoction of historic derivation.

Given its picturesque setting in the foothills of the Himalayas, a world renowned architect-master planner, a dozen world-famous architects, and a newly independent country seeking to build a capital expressive of its new identity, how should Islamabad be evaluated as a city? Unlike the other two capitals, Islamabad has not yet been subjected to a large influx of the urban poor. Only politicians, civil servants, diplomats and the wealthy can afford to live there while those who serve the city commute daily from Rawalpindi a few miles away. In 1977 at least, Islamabad was a dead city.

“... Community life is non-existent, and there is no natural blending of the different functions that make a city tick. Everything is compartmentalised and ... isolated from its neighbouring sectors. ... No indictment of the master plan could be more severe than that of a senior planner in the Capital Development Authority: the master plan was completely ignorant of the socio-economic and political aspects of the country. It is totally incompatible with the topography of the area. The terrain is undulating and rugged, but the master plan proposes straight roads from one end of the city to the other. ... The master plan does not exploit the natural landscape but forms another landscape of its own” (Tapner, 1977).

Referring to the ‘exclusiveness’ of Islamabad at the time, Tapner observed that this may eventually lead to its own deterioration as was evident from the camps of workers already being established on the periphery of the city. Islamabad ‘has many years’ development ahead of it,” he concluded, “but it will be interesting to see if it can retain its look of a very expensive orchard. A cross section of the inhabitants is needed to bring the community to life, but in the meantime it

remains a city without a heart” (Tapner, 1977).

And as to the architecture and the urban ambience of the city, “The architecture is generally monotonous. The vast areas of single storey high-density housing gives an impression of standardised uniformity. Islamabad lacks the drama of Brasilia and the monumental scale of Chandigarh’s civic centre. The fact that the main civic and cultural buildings have been isolated in the administrative area emphasises the anonymity of the city and produces a lack of identification and sense of belonging among the residents” (Tapner, 1977).

Twenty years later, it is interesting to note a more recent comment from a journalist based in Karachi. “Karachi and Islamabad make a fascinating juxtaposition. ... The only inhabitants one is ever aware of (in Islamabad) have the outlook of the members of a small, select exclusive country club. The rest of the world is as unreal to them as they are to the rest of the world. There is nothing wrong with that kind of social serenity except that it does not offer the best perspective when it comes to running the affairs of an over populated developing country” (Ghani, 1997).

Conclusions

All three capitals were built as single-function political towns dominated by the government, each aiming to be a status symbol to somehow signify a post-independent national identity. Following the precedence set by the colonial capital of New Delhi, each in its own way was designed to distance the government from the people. In terms of urban services and environment, consumption and life-style, none of the capitals appear to much relate to the country in which it exists.

The choice of the foreign consultants and the planning approach adopted at the time was influenced as much by the desire to undo the old stigma of ‘backwardness’ as it was by the lack of local architects and planners capable of undertaking projects of such complexity. The ‘modern’ approach adopted for the three capitals was essentially a continuation of the breakaway from the past which had been initiated, albeit for different reasons, during the colonial period. Foreign consultants and ideas of architecture and planning, methods and materials of construction, dependence on foreign aid and loans altogether reinforced this shift of architecture and urban planning from the environmentally more appropriate local to the ill-affordable and energy-intensive international modern. It was only later that the issues of dependence after independence, of cultural duality, of contradictions between tradition and imported values and of the nature and relevance of modernity, modernism, modernisation came to the fore and which still remain to be addressed.

Fifty years on, the idealistic and theoretical master plans have been overtaken by political and influential group interests, speculative greed and the pressures of poverty and increasing populations. While there is some evidence of the increasing social, cultural and environmental sensitivity among those in the urban professions, it is doubtful whether these are as a reaction to these capitals. In any case, given the generally dominant modern ideology and foreign training of the architects at the time, it is doubtful whether the few local architects could have taken a

different approach.

So, after all this, what are we to make of these cities: as national and provincial capitals, as urban and environmental experiments, as exercises in 'modernisation' and 'development' by the newly liberated countries? Did these cities project the image and accessibility appropriate for the capitals of democratic and modernising countries, since as it was, these cities were the least accessible to the vast majority. How long can these cities remain exclusive and continue to maintain their better quality of buildings and infrastructure? Are these contemporary Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani cities, and do they really represent the kind of urban planning and architecture that might eventually lead to better cities in the region? What other such cities can these capitals be compared with and what criteria can be used to explore these questions?

If these cities neither were an outcome of the culture, history, climate and resources of their countries nor were they accessible to most of the population, have generated neither much debate nor viable ideas for the future, then what are they? Are they just one-off absurd and authoritarian 'ruling cities' designed and built by and for the governments, to be inhabited only by those who rule and govern? Were these cities just irrelevant exercises in urban 'modernism' of the time, or do they represent a hybrid for South Asian cities of tomorrow? This indeed was, in essence, the main thrust of the comments and observations made by the participants at the ICDES Workshop.

For the present at least, no reliable assessment yet seems possible and the answers to these questions remain far from clear. The three capitals are neither generic nor large enough a sample to provide any coherent methodology of urban analyses in their national context. Commissioned within a few years of being de-colonised, the only familiar model of governance and of political decision-making was the ruler-ruled structures developed during the colonial period. Similarly, the only urban model available at the time was that of the isolated capital of New Delhi and the few cantonments and middle-class model towns built as appendages to existing cities. After over a century's political domination and denigration of indigenous cities and architecture and the promotion of the superiority of western ideas, the only possible approach available for these capitals - whether designed by the local or foreign architects - could have been none other than the one proffered by Pundit Nehru for Chandigarh: "Let this be a new town, symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by traditions of the past, an expression of the nation's faith in the future."

The three capitals thus reflect the attitudes, aims and ambitions of the politicians and decision makers who assumed power after independence and of the international planners and architects they selected to design these cities. In their present form, the three capitals reflect not only the ideas prevalent at the time but also, to a varying degree, the constraints, political interventions and vested interests as well as the pressures of rapid urbanisation of the last few decades. As it is, the future of these cities therefore is being determined less by the master plans but by these pressures and disparities in the supply and demand of land, rising values, the market mechanism, and often the power and political manipulations of the planning system.

At one level of analysis, Kahn's 'citadel' in Dhaka is not so much a city but an isolated complex

of buildings conceived as a 'monument' for the government. Its evaluation therefore can only be based on the appropriateness of its design and performance as buildings. Its architectural expression, language and detailing were very personal to Kahn and are unlikely to have more than a superficial impact on local architecture. Similarly, it might equally be interesting to imagine Chandigarh without its photogenic buildings - the Assembly, Secretariat and the High Court designed by Le Corbusier - and evaluate the city, not for the architecture of these buildings, but for the social landscape and urban environment which has emerged. Without such noteworthy 'monuments', Islamabad, dominated as it is by the relentless "dynapolis" grid of Doxiadis, seems neither to have produced a coherent image and urban character nor led to any sense of national identity. One thing common perhaps to all three cities is their deliberate break from history, their fragmentary hybrid character, and their different styles of buildings and urban structures where conflicting styles of life and architecture continue to collide and coexist.

As centres of government and seats of power and influence and of better services and amenities, these cities have become desirable to those who can afford to live there. Most of what has been published about these cities has been more because of their 'signature' architects - Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn in particular - than for their relevance and appropriateness or otherwise as functioning cities. Essentially the three capitals are not exemplars but one-off cities that seem neither to have much improved architecture and urban design nor provided any direction for the future. There has neither been much critical evaluation to learn what can and ought to be done to the political, economic and urbanising processes, nor any debate about the education of urban professions for them to evolve more relevant roles in their societies.

With the benefit of hindsight, we are eventually left with the inevitable questions: could these cities have been different - more responsive to climate and culture; more expressive of urban history and tradition; more accessible and inclusive of the diverse cultures and life styles of their peoples? Could they have been more affordable and sustainable, based less on extravagant 'monuments' for the governments but more integrated into their own society? Could their own urban history have provided viable sources for the vision of contemporary cities more in harmony with climate and culture and rooted in the needs and problems of their fast urbanising populations? Based on accessible institutions of democratic debate and governance and of education and culture, could these capitals have better expressed their "nation's faith in the future"?

The history of urban culture in the Indian sub-continent stretches back a few thousands years, and during this period, more so over the last thousand years, diverse peoples, cultures and traditions have influenced its town and cities. Through a long evolved process of 'inclusion' rather than 'exclusion' of others, the sub-continent has successfully absorbed and accommodated these influences without being overpowered by them. Given this long history of cultural 'absorption', will the recent urban and architectural intervention - not unlike the many earlier ones - be absorbed, assimilated, and in time made local?

Cities are a manifestation of the culture and civilisation of the people who build them and reflect the choices they make as a society about the built environment they want to live in. The

experiment of the three capitals seems not to have succeeded in showing how India, Pakistan and Bangladesh can learn from their urban culture and history and at the same time use contemporary ideas and technology to evolve an appropriate structure for cities in the sub-continent which can address the spatial needs of their urban populations. Ultimately, it is this that will determine whether their societies will be able to recover their own urban memory and confidence and come to terms with tradition, modernity and external influences without losing their respective identity.

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