

Sir Edwin Lutyens

AND THE BUILDING

WITH ITS BROAD AVENUES AND SWEEPING VISTAS, THE BRITISH CAPITAL OF NEW DELHI WAS BUILT AS A GARDEN-CITY, WORLD-RENOWNED FOR ITS CIVIC GRACE.

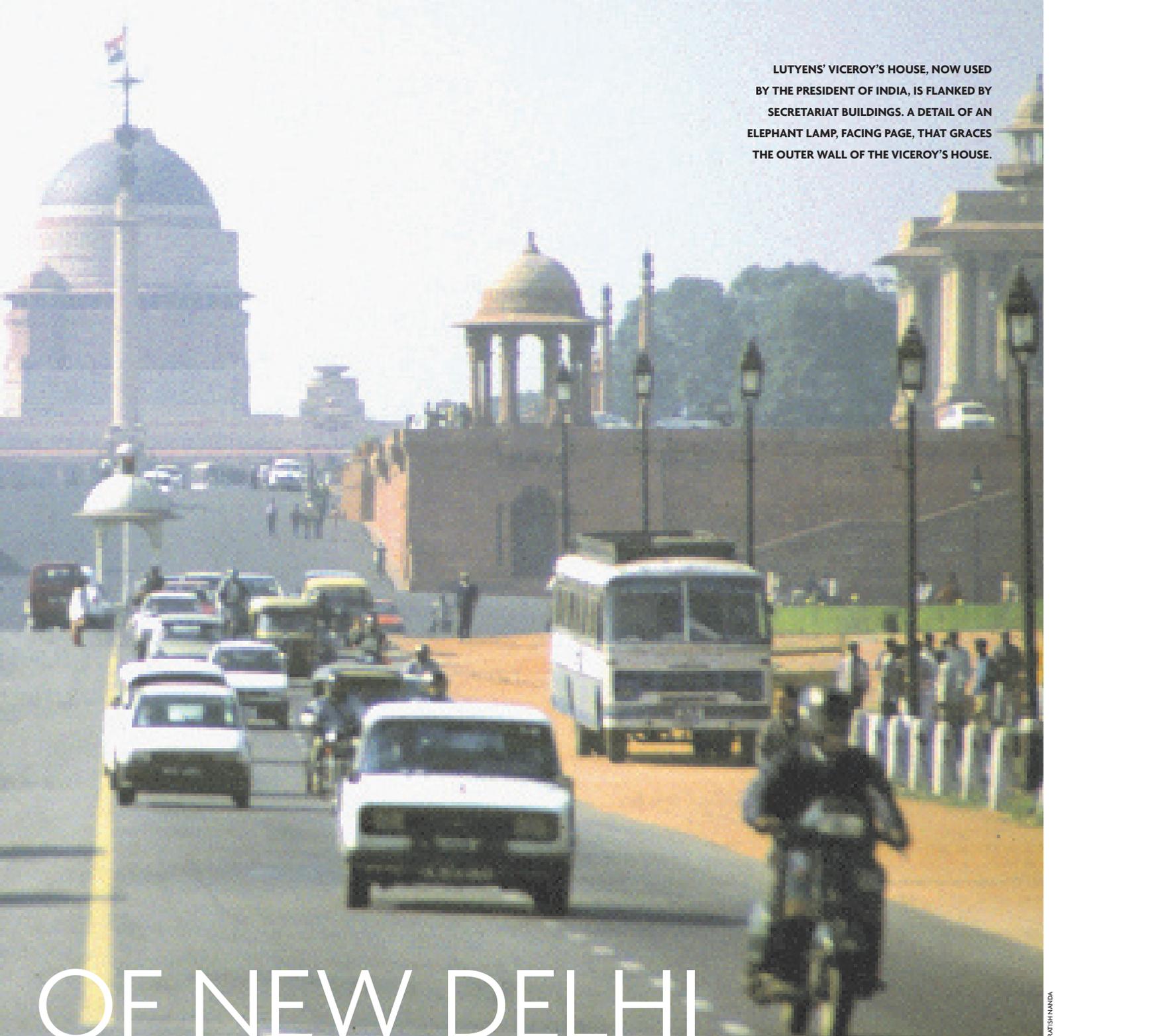
by PATWANT SINGH

In 1585, three Englishmen—William Leeds, Ralph Fitch, and John Newbury—landed on the west coast of India, bearing a letter from Queen Elizabeth I. Her majesty requested that the travelers be “honestly intreated and received,” as a first step toward establishing a “mutual and friendly trafique of merchandise on both sides.” With their arrival, seeds were sown for the founding of Britain’s Indian Empire.

Leeds and his companions eventually reached Agra, capital of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, whose grandfather, Babar, had founded the dynasty in 1526. To the English visitors, Agra appeared “much greater than London and very populous.” One must remember this was 60 years before Akbar’s grandson, Shah Jahan, would build the city’s celebrated Taj Mahal.

A direct consequence of Fitch’s report on his return to England was the





LUTYENS' VICEROY'S HOUSE, NOW USED BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, IS FLANKED BY SECRETARIAT BUILDINGS. A DETAIL OF AN ELEPHANT LAMP, FACING PAGE, THAT GRACES THE OUTER WALL OF THE VICEROY'S HOUSE.

OF NEW DELHI

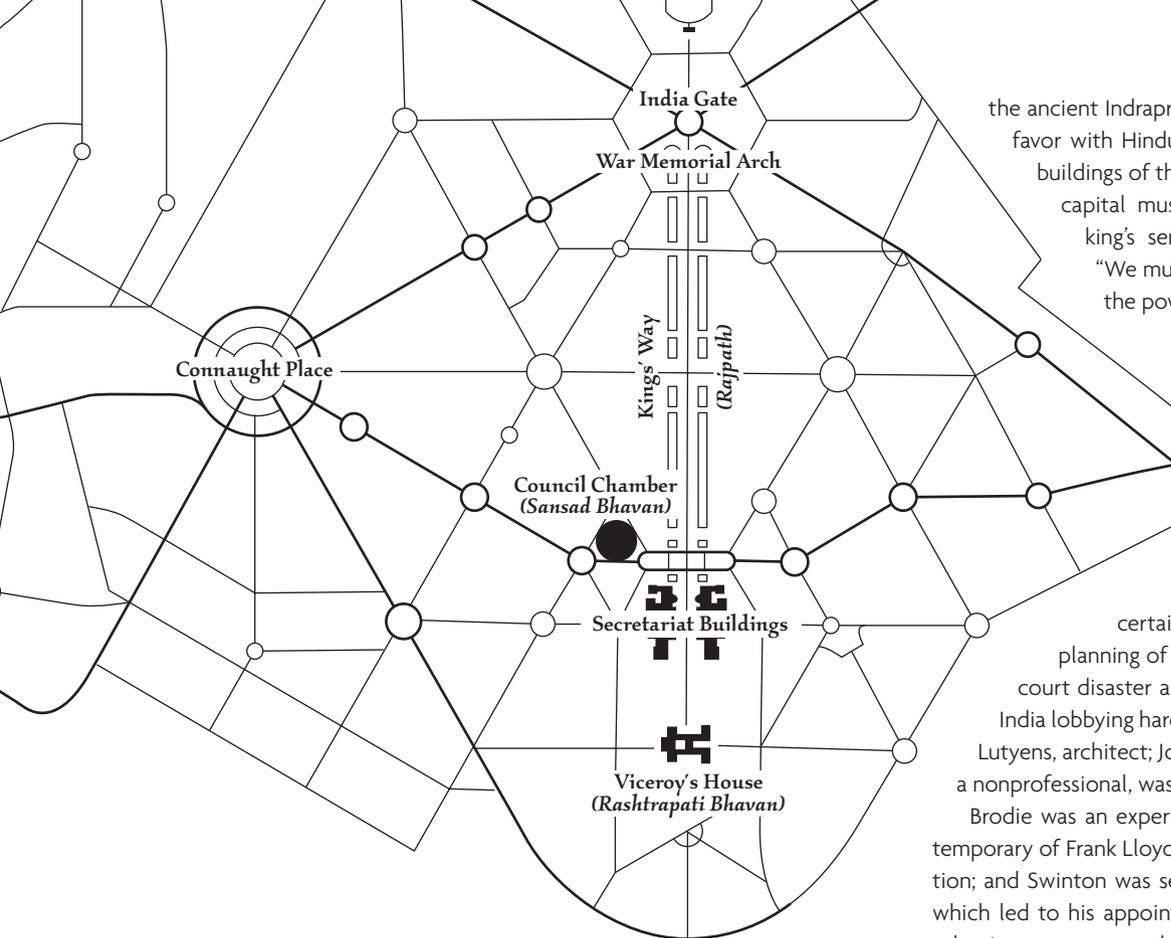
founding of the East India Company, which by the early 1600s had received major trading rights in India. Starting with an outpost at Surat on the west coast, the Company was allowed a factory in Madras in 1639, and another site around 50 years later on the River Hooghly, 80 miles inland from the east coast. Their work on Calcutta began in 1690. As the Company's trading activities expanded, so did its ambitions, which by the eighteenth century had coalesced into a policy of conquest.

The consolidation of the British hold on India is a saga of plots hatched and battles fought, of victories, defeats, and savage reprisals, of treachery and intrigue, and of a relentless struggle for power, enacted against the backdrop of a decaying society's efforts to resist the cohesiveness and single-mindedness of the British. The new entrants skillfully applied their

scientific bent and superior military ordnance to achieve their goals and, inevitably, the fragmented rulers of feudal India lost.

As the Company added new territories to its existing possessions, a system of administration was established under which large provinces were created and their principal cities—Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta—given great importance. In 1773, Calcutta became the capital of British-controlled India, managed by a Governor General reporting only to the Company's board of directors in London. The fall of the northern Sikh Empire in 1849, following the death of its legendary ruler Ranjit Singh, sealed the country's fate.

With British hold over the subcontinent secured, transfer of the capital from Calcutta's remote southeastern location to a more central place



the ancient Indraprastha to the Mughal Shahjahanabad, should find favor with Hindu and Muslim alike.” Given the number of great buildings of the past around, the British were determined their capital must “quietly dominate them all.” Conveying the king’s sentiments to Crewe, Lord Stamfordham wrote, “We must now let him [the Indian] see for the first time, the power of Western science, art, and civilization.”

In keeping with his Sovereign’s desire for the very best, Sir John Fleetwood Wilson, a senior member of the Viceroy’s Council, overruled a mundane panel of names proposed for the Town Planning Committee: “I feel very strongly that this is an opportunity, which has never yet occurred, and which will probably never recur, for laying the foundations of one of the finest cities in the world, and certainly the finest city in the East. To hand over the planning of such a city to three nonentities...seems to me to court disaster and discredit.” With senior officials in Britain and India lobbying hard for their candidates, a team of experts: Edwin L. Lutyens, architect; John A. Brodie, engineer; and George S.C. Swinton, a nonprofessional, was finally assembled to advise the government.

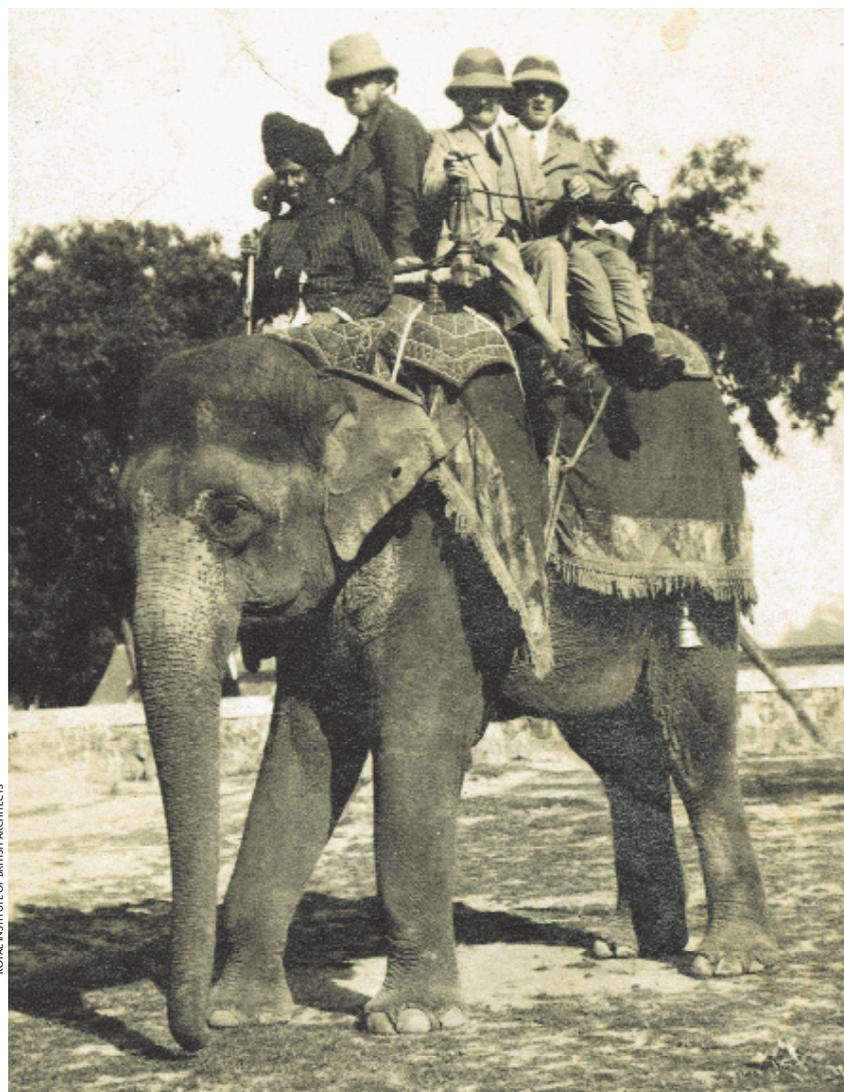
Brodie was an expert in municipal engineering; Lutyens, a near-contemporary of Frank Lloyd Wright, was an architect and planner of distinction; and Swinton was selected for his experience in municipal matters, which led to his appointment as the committee’s chairman. The team’s selection was conveyed to the viceroy by telegram on February 29, 1912, and, before sailing for India at the end of March, it was received by the

WITH ITS ASSERTIVE AVENUES, VISTAS, AXIAL APPROACH, AND FOCI, THE DESIGN OF NEW DELHI WAS INSPIRED BY THE PLANS OF ROME, PARIS, AND WASHINGTON, D.C.

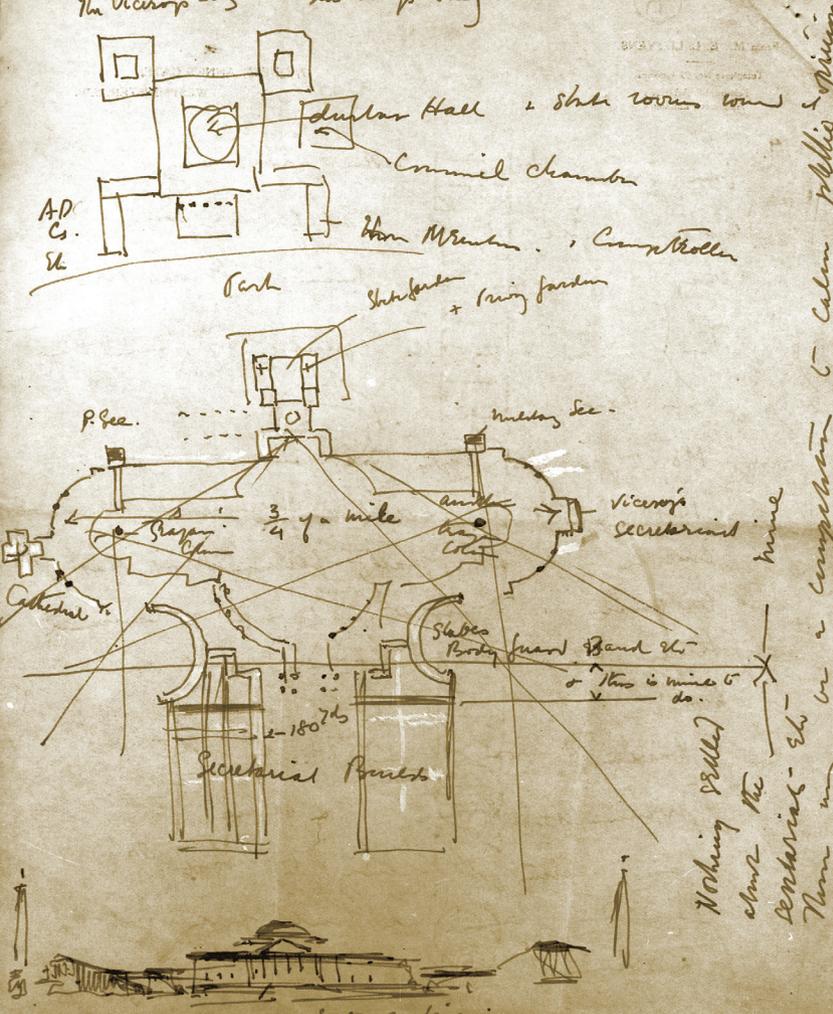
assumed importance. The debate intensified after 1858 when the Crown took over India’s governance from the Company. A decision to shift the capital to Delhi was announced on December 12, 1911 by King George V. It was called “the best-kept secret in the history of India” because of the bitter opposition to the move by Calcutta’s vested interests.

Delhi’s pedigree—compared to Calcutta’s—goes back several millennia. The new capital would be the eighth in the line of seven ancient cities built in and around Delhi’s historic setting, in marked contrast to British-built Calcutta whose architecture, as also of Bombay and Madras, was a quaint mix of styles ranging from Italian Renaissance, English Baroque, Venetian Gothic, to Jacobean, Classical, and Indo-Saracenic. Most Europeans landing in Bombay found the city’s Victorian structures disorienting. “Hideous chaos” was architectural critic Robert Byron’s comment on the scene in which “Hindu ornament and Muslim domes fought for possession of Gothic substructures,” an apt description of the eclectic abandon with which the British designed railroad stations to resemble cathedrals, and museums that looked like mausoleums. The incongruity of Western styles on Indian soil was responsible for the insistence on a more focused architectural expression for the new capital.

The spirited and often acrimonious debates on its design had many eager participants, with King George V himself taking a keen interest. He set the tone while laying New Delhi’s foundation stone on December 15, 1911: “It is my desire that the planning and designing of the public buildings to be erected will be considered with the greatest deliberation and care, so that the new creation may be in every way worthy of this ancient and beautiful city.” The Secretary of State for India, Lord Crewe, felt the new capital should underscore “the permanency of British sovereign rule over the length and breadth of the country.” While the Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge, held that “Delhi’s traditions as an imperial capital, from



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motif” was one option. An “integration of Palladian and Pathan principles” another, since it was appealing to think of “orientalizing” established schools of European design. But Hardinge, the main proponent of this marriage between Indian and European designs, was not having an easy time of it. Robert Irving describes the Viceroy’s uncertainties in his book *Indian Summer*, “‘Western architecture’ in July 1912 became ‘Italian’ in August, some form of ‘Renaissance,’ and ‘a good broad Classic style’ in October. By August 1913 the Viceroy waxed eloquent in favor of a blend of Indian sentiment and symbolism ‘with English (not Italian) traditions.’”

All this was still theoretical since the actual designer was yet to be appointed, although it was becoming obvious that the choice would fall on Lutyens who had, in fact, been working on the Viceroy’s House even before his confirmation in January 1913. Considered a “perennial *enfant terrible*,” Lutyens reached the peak of his career with his plan for New Delhi and the design of the Viceroy’s House.

New Delhi’s layout owes a great deal to Rome, Paris, and Washington, D.C. The eternal city’s layout—with its assertive avenues, vistas, axial approach, and foci—had left a lasting impression on Lutyens and Herbert Baker (who became his principal collaborator in designing some of the new capital’s important buildings). The Roman capitol’s location on a hilltop had also influenced their own siting of the imperial complex on Raisina Hill, because Baker was convinced that: “The old buildings which have perhaps made the most impression on the imagination of mankind are those which are raised up on an eminence, even as those of the old Greek cities and the capitol at Rome.”

As the British Pavilion’s designer in the Paris Exhibition of 1900, Lutyens’ visits there had also left him hugely impressed with Haussmann’s boldly conceived boulevards, the sweep of the Avenue des Champs Élysées, and its convincing culmination at Place de l’Étoile. Nor had Versailles and the Tuilleries Gardens failed to move him. Where Washington’s plan is concerned, the genius of the planner Pierre Charles L’Enfant was not only admired by Lutyens and Baker, but also Hardinge, who so approved of it during his posting there as a young diplomat that when he became India’s viceroy 30 years later, he sent for its plans to see how L’Enfant’s ideas could help New Delhi’s planning. An interesting footnote to these convergences was provided by Lutyens during his visit to Washington in 1925. He found its plan “not as good as Delhi or as fine,” but admitted that the buildings were “far better.” Possibly because most of them were in marble, while New Delhi’s buildings on the hill were in stone.

Comparisons aside, it is noteworthy that Lutyens personally handled every detail of New Delhi’s planning—a city spread over an area of about 26 square kilometers. Its plan reflects his “transcendent fervor for geometric symmetry,” which is expressed through amazing sequences of triangles and hexagons, through sightlines and axes. Despite Lutyens’ known insensitivity to the numerous tombs, gateways, and old structures which attest Delhi’s rich ancestry, his plan gained enormously from the use of historic structures as focal points at the end of major vistas. New Delhi would have been far less exciting without the texture and character of the relics left behind by great builders.

Lutyens’ plan is also remarkable for the generous green spaces, lawns, watercourses, flower and fruit-bearing trees, and their integration with the parks developed around monuments. What emerged was one of the world’s outstanding garden-cities, not only on account of its refined emphasis on elegance and civic grace, but also because in practical terms its greening reduced temperatures during the hot, dust-laden summer months of northern India. New Delhi’s unique green character was augmented still further by placing official residences—or bungalows—in rolling lawns and gardens.

King’s Way (now Rajpath) was designed as a magnificent boulevard.

NEW DELHI’S TOWN PLANNING COMMITTEE, FACING PAGE, ATOP AN ELEPHANT. FROM LEFT, MAHOUT, GEORGE S. C. SWINTON, EDWIN L. LUTYENS, AND HERBERT BAKER. A SKETCH BY LUTYENS, DATED JUNE 14, 1912, ABOVE, SHOWS A PLAN AND ELEVATION OF THE VICEROY’S HOUSE AND ASSOCIATED BUILDINGS.

king. Soon after landing, the committee found itself in the middle of a major tug-of-war over the precise location of the new capital in Delhi’s historic environs. This controversy was resolved by Hardinge in his own inimitable way: “I, then, after rejecting the Malcha site, mounted and asked Hailey [later Lord Hailey, but then Commissioner of Delhi] to accompany me to choose a new site, and we galloped across the plain to a hill some distance away. From the top of the hill there was a magnificent view embracing Old Delhi and all the principal monuments situated outside the town, the Jamuna winding its way like a silver streak in the foreground at a little distance. I said at once to Hailey, ‘This is the site for Government House,’ and he readily agreed.”

The Viceregal House and the North and South Blocks of the Secretariat were built on the hill called Raisina, with the Council Chamber—which now houses India’s Parliament—a little further away. From the “stupendous platform” of Raisina radiated the vistas, avenues, waterways, and institutional and residential buildings of the imperial scheme. The team’s own lively participation in the selection of the site had been fully encouraged by Hardinge who, once the selection was made, put to the committee his concerns over the form, scale, and symbolism of the principal structures. He wished to avoid a “grave political blunder” by transplanting a Western town in an Indian setting, because of its effect on Indian sensibilities.

In those times, when everyone of any stature was prone to influence designs of major projects, a compromise between political considerations and the designers’ creative freedom was usually reached, often with hilarious results. In New Delhi’s case, “Western architecture with an Oriental



RATISH NANDA

This exultant avenue, broad and gracious in scale and self-confident in manner, starts at the Great Place below Raisina Hill and ends at the War Memorial, two and a half kilometers away. Clear watercourses parallel the grassy expanses on either side, with varieties of stately trees adding to its magnificence. Great Place (now Vijay Chowk)—the vast and spacious plaza with six reflecting pools and fountains filled to the brim—is a prelude to yet another climactic experience after a short drive up to Raisina Hill. For there, on either side of an avenue as broad as Rajpath, were sited the monumental offices of government (the North and South Blocks), terminating ahead in the Viceroy’s House.

The grouping of these three buildings, and the gradient of the road leading to Raisina Hill, sparked a bitter controversy between Lutyens and Baker, estranging these onetime friends and professional colleagues, who had thrilled at the challenge of designing New Delhi, or the Great Quest, as Baker put it. It was initially assumed that only the viceregal residence—symbolizing Britain’s imperial presence—would occupy the commanding position on the hill. But since Lutyens was the designer of the Viceroy’s House, Baker, as the Secretariat’s architect, also wanted his building on the hill so the two would represent “one composition expressing unity in the instrument of government.” Although Lutyens initially agreed, differences soon developed, and it was generally felt that the two “perversely severed halves” of the Secretariat diminished the capitol’s composition and the exclusivity of the Viceroy’s House. Lutyens was even more mortified by the gradient of the road to Raisina Hill since it all but obscured the Viceroy’s House from Great Place, and was only visible when a visitor reached the crest of the hill. He viewed this as the ultimate betrayal.

Despite all this, the Viceroy’s House remains one of the twentieth century’s outstanding buildings. Altogether different from the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier—both of whom admired Lutyens—it is nonetheless an astonishing tour de force of styles, forms, ideals, and impositions which converge to make a convincing design statement. This is due to a combination of the balance the architect always strived for, plus his puckishness, but mostly because of the building’s proportions. Once, when asked by a student, “What is proportion?” Lutyens replied: “God.” And the proportions of this building, of about 190 meters by 160 meters, covering around 1.8 hectares, are indeed striking. As is the unflinching attention to detail with which the multiple functions of its 350 rooms, service areas, corridors, staircases, and circulation patterns were handled.

Various types of houses—called bungalows at the upper end of the scale—also reflect a lively attention to detail because of Delhi’s climatic changes. Mostly single-storied, whitewashed in lime, with deep verandas to protect rooms from direct exposure to the sun, high ceilings, and ventilators to ensure cross-ventilation, their designs were functional and free of flamboyance. They made a marked difference to

AMONG THE BUILDINGS IN NEW DELHI DESIGNED BY HERBERT BAKER ARE THE COUNCIL HOUSE, NOW PARLIAMENT HOUSE, ABOVE, AND, AT RIGHT AND BELOW, HOUSING FOR SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS.



THE DOME OF THE SOUTH BLOCK OF NEW DELHI'S SECRETARIAT, DESIGNED BY HERBERT BAKER. THE PILLAR, INSPIRED BY THOSE ERECTED THROUGHOUT INDIA BY THE THIRD-CENTURY B.C. KING ASHOKA, IS TOPPED BY A FULLY RIGGED BRONZE SHIP, SYMBOLIC OF BRITAIN'S MARITIME EMPIRE.

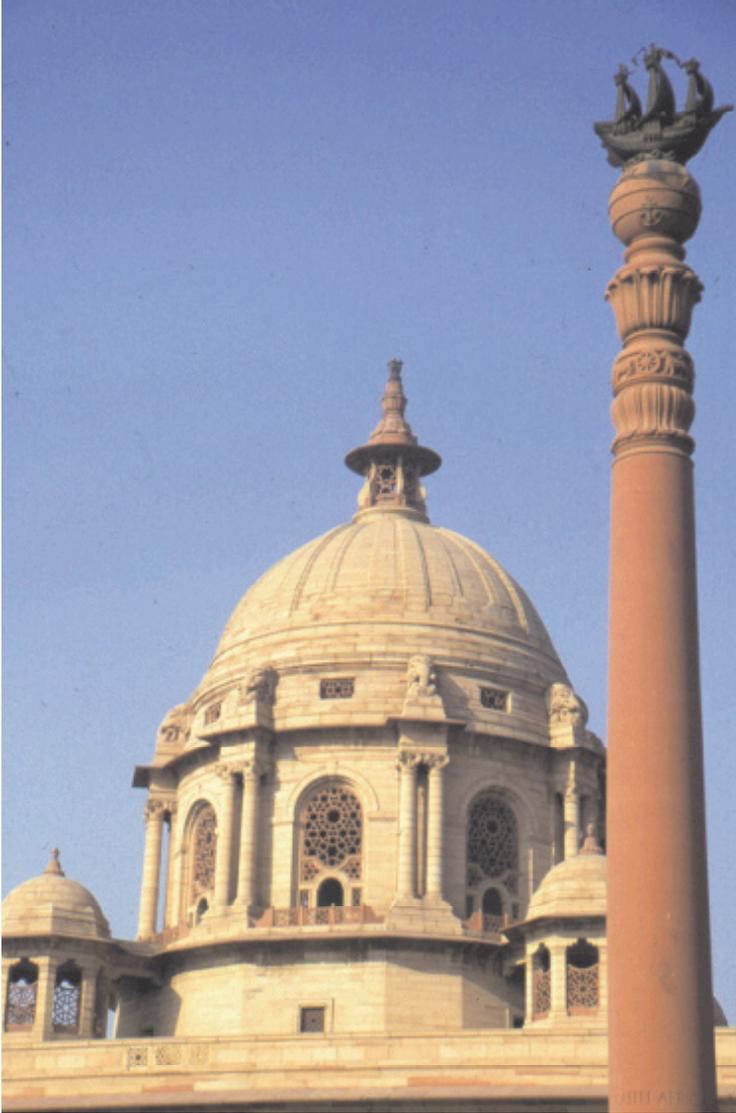
the quality of life during Delhi's oppressive summers, before the days of air conditioning. Even now these bungalows—mostly government-owned—impress with their human scale, clean lines, and appropriateness of materials used. They are a tribute to their architects, many of whom worked under Lutyens' watchful eye.

But he was not responsible for all of New Delhi's buildings. Aside from the Viceroy's House and staff residences on the Viceregal estate, Lutyens designed the War Memorial, palaces for the Maharaja of Baroda and the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the National Archives. Herbert Baker designed the Council Chamber, a superb, colonnaded, circular structure, as well as six houses on King George's Avenue (now Rajaji Marg) and one on Akbar Road.

Several other remarkable buildings were designed by architects working with R. T. Russell, the government's chief architect. These include Connaught Place, the splendid shopping plaza—a great, two-storied circle of elegant shops, restaurants, cinemas, and hotels. Conceived by William Henry Nicholls, its detailed drawings were prepared by Russell and his staff. Russell also designed the Eastern and Western Courts, and two legislators' hostels of graceful proportions on either side of Queen's Way (now Janpath).

New Delhi, built to celebrate “the permanency of British sovereign rule over the length and breadth of the country,” was inaugurated more than 70 years ago in February 1931. But its permanence proved ephemeral. Within 16 years of New Delhi's inauguration, colonial rule ended, and India attained the nationhood for which it had long struggled. Designed for a population of around 65,000, the city now houses more than 1.5 million. Yet, in spite of many ill-conceived and insensitive violations of its plan since independence—like the demolition of gracious, old bungalows that were replaced with out-of-scale high-rise hotels and office blocks—New Delhi retains the beauty of a garden-city.

How long it will retain its distinctive character is a critical question. An unholy nexus of greedy politicians, officials, developers, and equally avaricious architects, lured by the money to be made by redeveloping the Lutyens Bungalow Zone of 2,800 hectares of houses and open spaces, is keen to push through proposals to build a rash of high-rise residential and commercial buildings in this only green lung of the capital. Conservationists oppose the destruction of this unique legacy. Convinced that its preservation is possible through alternative and adaptive uses that will not detract from New Delhi's green and gracious character, they are determined to prevent the city from turning into another urban nightmare. WMF, recognizing the threat to this city of gardens, included New Delhi on its 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Given its capacity to absorb the many distinctive cultures that came its way, India cannot evade the responsibility of conserving this noble heritage, which resonates with the creativity, feelings, energies, and faith of those who gave it form. As the proud inheritors of an incredible range of wealth from past civilizations, Indians must give pride of place to New Delhi in the rich mosaic of their incomparable culture. ■



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