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Imagining Gender and Space in New Delhi

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***Abstract**: This paper shall attempt to understand the imagining of space in New Delhi with respect to gender. In this context, the focus would be on understanding spatial configuration within homes. The idea of privacy was central to this gendered imagining of space. In this context, the housing designs of New Delhi have been analysed in detail. These specifications were sourced from documents and files at the National Archives of India, New Delhi.*
***Keywords:** Gender, Privacy, New Delhi, Space, Urban History.*

I. Introduction

This paper begins by understanding the traditional housing in existence in the early 20th century. The spatial configuration was very different in Indian homes. the existence of a courtyard located inside the homes effectively blurred the boundaries between the inside and outside. This courtyard was a common space to be used by the family or community. Moving on to the differences with the colonial housing styles, it is argued that the space imagined within homes was based on ensuring privacy for officers. Finally, it is argued that this privacy was in fact, gendered privacy.

II. Existing Housing In India

Madhavi and Miki Desai have worked extensively on the dwelling units in India, especially the bungalow built under colonial rule in various parts of the country. According to them, there were two bungalow categories: the urban and the rural. The latter were inhabited by British residents of India such as managers of various kinds of plantations or factories. They also included the dak bungalows and other dwelling structures that were spread all over the districts of British India. [1] At the beginning of the twentieth century, the bungalow was the most common form of residential house type for British military, colonial administrators and business people as well as a small group of wealthy Indian elites. It was symmetrical in form and spatial organization. There was a hall in the centre and rooms on each side of the hall. There was a veranda in front facing the garden and sometimes also on both sides. The kitchen and servants' quarters were separate in most houses. [2]

III. Planning The Houses In New Delhi

In January 1915 the IDC submitted plans and estimates for five residences in class IV with elaborate specifications. While some of the specifications were similar to the 1914 guidelines, some new ones were also added. The houses were expected to have conveniences such as ovens and fireplaces. There were instructions to ensure ample ventilation through windows and the need for sunshades was also mentioned.[3]

In March 1915 the Committee submitted a design for class III by Mr. Baker. Earlier, in January 1915, Baker and Lutyens had submitted 4 designs for class III and 1 for class IV, but the Committee rejected all of them as they did not conform to the instructions issued by the Government of India. The design did not comply with the conditions specified in previous orders. It was, however, sanctioned as an experimental measure subject to revision to comply with the conditions laid down. The only new point raised in connection with this design was the suggestion for differentiation between hot and cold weather designs and it was decided that no material difference could be made.[4]

IV. The Issue Of Privacy

As highlighted above, the official designs of the houses included residences of servants within the structure itself. The plans of the homes imply a strong urge to keep out of view certain aspects to the servants. Such a demarcation existed in the traditional Indian homes as well. However, what made the New Delhi plans stand out was the apprehension of the native gaze on the sahib. The colonial gaze was turned on its head and now, the sahib had to be constantly on its guard against the untrustworthy native servant/peon. Even though privacy was a concern in traditional homes, in case of these new homes the discomfiture of the colonial administrators with the possibility of the gaze being

turned on them. In New Delhi, this concern reached the level of obsession because of an underlying fear of the native as voyeur. The idea of the verandah becoming a "highway" for the coming and going of servants was central to the approval of the designs. It was specifically ordered that the verandahs were not to act as "highways for the servants." [5]

It is easy to detect the private in the public structure through the verandahs and waiting rooms. In the homes, though the question of privacy was dual- from servants and staff as well as from the public outside. The files record a detailed note on the need for a porch in houses which illustrates this concern. At a meeting held on February 2nd 1916, at which were present "the Hon'ble Mr. Hill the Hon'ble Russell, the members of the Imperial Delhi Committee and Messrs. Lutyens and Baker, the questions of providing porches to Residential Building in classes IV and upwards was discussed. The present orders are that porches for classes III and upwards are to be provided, and in class IV a porch if possible, otherwise a hood." It was decided that the Government of India should decide the question.[6]

The Government of India decided that "for protection against the sun and rain, some place immediately adjacent to the Indian houses is essential in which carriages, or motors of callers, can stand out of the rain or the sun as the case may be; that a porch provides this facility more conveniently and at less cost than would a separate building for the purpose."[7] It was further explained that a porch was an essential necessary convenience for persons arriving at, or departing from a house when it was raining, especially when guests were arriving or departing from. Moreover, a porch was seen to be useful for the protection it afforded the house, or the verandah, as the case may be. A porch was expected to cost about Rs. 700. Much of the feeling in favour of a porch was attributed to "the robust conservatism which hankers after sweeper staircases and single-storey houses and objects to the simplifications which are the sequel to modern, as opposed to the existing primitive, sanitary appliances."[8] Evidently, this concern of privacy was only for the British. The fear of the native as a voyeur on the life of the sahib comes through in these discussions. The aspects of life that the servants could see within homes were implicitly visualized and what was to remain hidden was explicitly clear.

Looking into the visualization of New Delhi becomes layered when one expands the concepts of privacy to include tensions in social interactions. Legg places the social interactions in context of spatial and racial segregation.[9] The housing plans suggest an astonishing level of emphasis on hiding and revealing selective aspects of both the colonial and Indian life. The comforts of home were to be visible to officials while the discomfiting aspects were to be banished from their line of sight. Similarly, every attempt was made to exclude the staff from the officer's life. While the exclusion itself was neither new nor surprising, it is difficult to miss the strong urge to make the servants invisible. On one hand, their presence was a necessity but their existence was inconvenient.

V. Gendered Privacy

We now turn to the subject of the interrelationship between gender, the concern for privacy and voyeurism. Legg argues that the interaction was gender specific, especially between servants and wives of officials.[10] This idea of gendered privacy assumes a bigger role when placed against the backdrop of traditional architectural design of homes in India. The division between the zenana and the mardana was clear in Indian homes. The houses of New Delhi did not have such a clear demarcation of space on gendered lines. Rather, spatial demarcation was based on interaction and a suitable distance to be maintained between officials and servants. This interaction was probably visualized in gendered terms. When the plans of the houses are analyzed from this perspective, the hierarchies become more complex and entangled with each other. The officer was visualized as keeping a safe distance from his servants. The women and children though had to interact with the staff and the greater concern of privacy for them remained a worry.

Evidence of the gendered spatial visualization comes from the details available in the plans for the kitchens for the officers bungalows. The jallis specified were to be of terracotta and covering all the walls of the kitchen. The areas for drying meats, the dhoolies, was preferred to be kept out of sight.[11]

VI. Conclusion

Thus, it would be correct to conclude that the imperial vision of a new capital did not confine itself to the physical sense of bricks and mortar, architectural grandeur and opulence of the Government House and Secretariats. The visual and aesthetic ideals could not overlook the inherent tensions and distrust which were never resolved. For the majority of the residents, the vision fell drastically short on practical considerations.

References

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[8]. Ibid.
[9]. Legg, 2007, pp. 50.
[10]. Legg, 2007, pp. 50-51.
[11]. GoI, P.W.D, C.W.B, Part B, Proceedings Nos. 69-75, July 1916, pp. 12.