

RETHINKING,  
REINTERPRETING  
— AND —  
RESTRUCTURING  
COMPOSITE CITIES

Edited by  
GÜLSÜN SAĞLAMER, MELTEM AKSOY,  
FATMA ERKÖK, NURBİN PAKER, PELİN DURSUN ÇEBİ



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Pelin Dursun Çebi

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## CHAPTER 3

# THE MEGACITY OF DELHI: COLONIES, HYBRIDIZATION AND OLD-NEW PARADIGMS

PILAR MARIA GUERRIERI

### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the analysis of one of the most complex and contradictory “composite cities” in the world: Delhi, the capital of India. It addresses the transitional period before and after independence, which marks the passage from the birth of the megalopolis to its contemporary form. This case study treats the ways in which a mega-city can be built in distinct parts, each with different ways of organizing distinctive urban areas, as well as contributing towards a better understanding of cultural hybridization, the analysis of how foreign elements are reinvented and reinterpreted by local culture.

Delhi has always shown a great ability to absorb foreign influences, letting itself be hybridized, while at the same time maintaining a character of its own. The city from its very beginning has been built in separate “cities”, in completely or nearly autonomous parts. Even after independence, with the influx of refugees from Pakistan and the apparent unification of the various “historic” cities, Delhi was continually built in autonomous parts. The colonies, originally British and reinterpreted by the Indians after 1947, are possibly one of the most interesting elements in studying the development and characteristics of the megalopolis. These neighbourhoods, which with the refugees had become the city’s main form of expansion, have filled the gaps between pre-colonial and colonial settlements, following the historic “in parts” logic.

This essay will analyse these people-oriented neighbourhoods: an imported element that was reinterpreted and readapted. Hereunto it can initiate a reflection on the structure of contemporary megacities. The colonies provide an understanding as to the potential of polycentric cities to inspire thought-provoking solutions, while at the same time they also demonstrate how cultures can merge and endure, creating opportunities



and resources. Delhi with its unique neighbourhoods allows to pass from the realm of ideas to that of architecture and the city, to observe the results of the hybridization of cultures, to learn the “how” of an architectural practice for composite cities. It gives new, possible paradigms for a future expansion of the megalopolises.

## 1. The Urban Areas

Delhi's peculiarity is that, from the beginning, it was formed by a system of distinct nucleuses, real founding cities. Even examining travellers' reports and archaeologists' reconstructions, it is yet unclear how many the original cities actually were. Some say 7, others 12, others still maintain them to be 14. There are many reasons for which the cities were *ex-novo*. It often depended on the will of a monarch, as was the case of the imperial cities Shahjahanabad and New Delhi. Each city could be in turn divided into sub-areas: such as the *mohallas* in which the Mughal city is sectioned, or the "mini-city" that coincides with the Red Fort, or other different areas that constitute the capital. The diversity of the various parts of Delhi, however, is infinite and involves more than just the ancient foundation cities. There are the fortified cities, the garden cities, the villages, the New Towns, the colonies and the shantytowns. A variety that makes any form of classification precarious.

Once fortified citadels and now gigantic ruins, the pre-colonial cities have been absorbed by the megalopolis, as well as over a hundred villages of various sorts, from urbanized to rural. The nineteenth-century hamlets of Paharganj and Subzimandi must, nonetheless be considered separately. Even though the main city area built by British colonialists was New Delhi, in the first phase of their rulership they founded Civil Lines and Cantonments, today still recognizable as autonomous entities (Rao et al., 1965). Just as identifiable are the Ring Towns and the New Towns (Koenigsberger, 1952) founded after India became independent. Significant examples of these are Faridabad (Vagale et al., 1959, pp. 84-108) or Rohini. Finally, the hundreds of colonies, increasing in number after 1947, each of them self-contained, are of great importance.

"It is seen [...] that population growth during the years 1891-1912 is very small" (TPO, 1956, p. 105) and Delhi only began to grow rapidly during the late-colonial period. In fact the birth-date of the megalopolis can be considered to be 1947, when the separation from Pakistan sees the influx of thousands of refugees into the city. Suketu Mehta, in his volume *Maximum City*, considers the growth of megacities an Asian phenomenon, pointing out that eleven of the fifteen megalopolises in the world are in Asia (Mehta, 2004). Delhi is certainly one of these.

The colonies are key to Delhi's growth, not its cities, nor the slums, let alone the New Towns. The colonies connected the pre-existent parts and actually determined the structure of the megalopolis. They first surfaced during the colonial period and have remained the city's primary form of development even until now. The 1962 Master Plan, which is Delhi's first

town plan after independence, emphasises the importance of colonies within the polycentric city. They are near to self-sufficient, self-contained, and predominantly residential neighbourhoods, which include schools, religious areas, shops and other collateral activities. Each has its clearly identifiable community, whereby all essential necessities are within walking distance, often with the provision of parks, gardens and recreational areas. In the pages to follow an attempt is made to better understand the origin, development, characteristics and potential of these “micro-cities” within the city.

## 2. The neighbourhoods before 1947

The British came to Delhi in 1803 and at first settled within the Mughal capital of Shahjahanabad. Later, as their influence and rule grew, they tended to separate themselves from the local population, founding new areas of the city (King, 1976). These were of different types; among the earliest were the Cantonments, areas of military functions North of the Mughal capital, and the Civil Lines, which were residential settlements. With the economic growth generated by the British Empire’s satellite activities, new towns developed outside the city walls, such as Paharganj, along with the first slums, which the British inadvertently tried to suppress. It is in the nineteenth century, that the first colonies began to appear. At first they were sections inside the historic city centre, later becoming autonomous settlements outside the city walls.

In the early years, the British and their troops settled within the walled city, around the Red Fort and Kashmere Gate. They partially reconstructed the Old City Wall, and they developed a residential colony named Mubarik Bagh. [...] Subsequently, several schemes to meet the demands of the growing population were undertaken outside the walled city, which included the development of Sadar Bazar, Kishanganj and Deputyganj.

The first modern ‘suburb’ in Delhi is British. It was Trevelyanpur or Trevelyanjunj, north of Paharganj, one of the four estates belonging to Englishmen in the early decades of the nineteenth century (Lang et al., 1997, pp. 75-77).

The growth of the city was relatively contained until the 1911 decision to move the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. However, as can be read in P.B. Desai and V.K.R.V Rao’s *Greater Delhi*, the population increase, which determined a strong urban expansion came later, about ten years before the declaration of independence. As early as 1937, the British

established the Delhi Improvement Trust, with the rationale of finding solutions to the impending growth. The map (Delhi Improvement Trust, 1939-1940) drawn by this authority between 1939 and 1940 clearly depicts the new expansions. Some of these were already completed, such as the Andha Mughal Colony or the Darya Ganj South or Western Extension; others were under construction, like the Roshanara Extension and the Northern City Extension II; others had yet to be begun, such as Sarai Rohilla and the Town Expansion. In period reports more precise and detailed information can be found in comparison to what is provided by the maps. In them, for example, it can be gathered that the colony of Andha Moghul was completed between 1937 and 1947; that it covers an area of 23.4 acres, of which 12.5 acres were set aside for the construction of buildings and 11 acres for public areas, also that it could hold approximately 1400 people. The Western Extension Area Scheme, on the other hand, was completed between 1937 and 1949 and built on an area of 778 acres, of which 220.8 acres were allocated for residential buildings and 557.2 acres for public areas, planned to house 55,500 inhabitants. Similarly, there are ample other tailing other colonies.

Beginning in 1911, it is possible to identify two main typologies of neighbourhoods built by the British. The first type of neighbourhoods built “for Indians”, of which Karol Bagh, Dev Nagar or Jangpura are examples.

Settlements exclusively for Indians started a hundred years later, 1930, in Karol Bagh, Western Extension Area (WEA) and Paharganj. These areas were originally orchards (hence the ‘bagh’ in Karol Bagh which was, along with Jorbagh, possibly planted during the reign of Ferozshah Tughlaq in the mid-fourteenth century). Karol Bagh, the colony, was set up in 1937 as a Delhi Improvement Trust scheme to accommodate the spillover from what was regarded by British administrators as the increasingly congested city. Dev Nagar, too, had been founded a little earlier, home to junior-ranking Indian officials who had not found space in New Delhi (Lang et al., 1997, p. 58).

The second type consists of the neighbourhoods built “for government employees”, a prime example of which is Lodi Colony. In the first case, the neighbourhoods had regular roads running perpendicular to each other and two-storied buildings, with shops on the ground floor and residential apartments on the second floor. In the second case, the allocation of space is based on a grid-logic and plots with low-rise buildings following a residential block or apartment logic. If in the first case the attention to open spaces is limited to a few public areas, in the latter there is more emphasis and awareness on the planning of private and public gardens.

The density of neighbourhoods meant for Indians was certainly higher than in those intended for government functionaries. Both the perpendicular layout of the settlements for Indians and the gardens and parks of those intended for government employees demonstrate the same level of consideration to the theme of “healthiness”.

The aim was to segregate the population according to criteria of “race”—Indians on one side and Europeans on the other—, as well as separating the Europeans according to their social standing and hierarchy. Karol Bagh Colony and Lodi Colony are valid examples of this *modus operandi*: the first was exclusively for Indians catering to a population lower in prestige and of lowly positions; the second was planned for Western government employees and divided in sections, corresponding to position and income.

When New Delhi was built, Lutyens & Baker—British Architects, purposely segregated the orthodox and unorthodox clerks whereas Gole Dakhana (New Delhi Post Office) area was developed for unorthodox clerks. This policy continued to be followed during the last war and additional housing colonies were built on the same principles (Lang et al., 1997, p. 58).

In the residential neighbourhoods of India’s capital, a hierarchical system was in force, following a pyramidal logic concurrent to the respective positions of power held. The Public Works Department and the Delhi Improvement Trust were two of the principal authorities responsible for the planning of the layout and construction of neighbourhoods during the British period.



Fig. 3.1. Delhi Improvement Trust Map, 1939-1940.

### 3. The growth of colonies after 1947

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees, following the separation of Pakistan from India, was cause and the actual basis for the transformation of Delhi into a megalopolis.

Refugees from Pakistan started flooding into the capital city. In a matter of decades, they became the driving dynamic behind the enormous transformation of Delhi from its stolid imperial identity of 1947 to the brimming, prosperous, ferocious city of multiple universes it is today. This Delhi has been inverted by refugees. Delhi accommodated some 496,000 of the 4.75 million refugees who had left their homes in West Punjab, Sind and the North-West Frontier Province. In the space of the two months leading to Independence, Delhi's population has doubled. Refugees started to arrive before August 1947 and continued to arrive until well into late 1948 (Jain, 1990, p. 75).

To confront and find resolve to the acute refugee emergency, the new Ministry of Rehabilitation, lead by K. C. Neogy, on September 6, 1947 began to allocate areas for the construction of camps and colonies for the refugees; these were located in Kingsway Camp, in the Tibia College area in Karol Bagh and in Shahdara (Annual Report, 1947-48, p. 44).

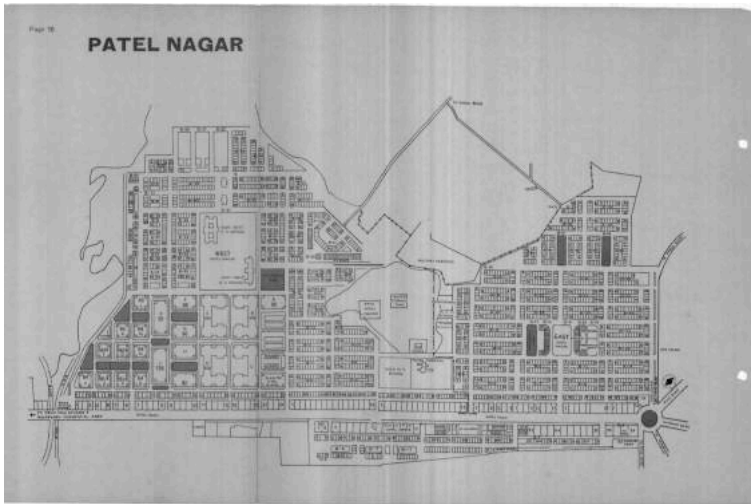


Fig. 3.2. Patel Nagar, Resettlement Colony, post 1947.

The government planned “resettlement colonies” for the refugees as rapidly as was possible (Bopegamage, 1957; Misra et al., 1981). Delhi sheltered over 300,000 people (Rao et al., 1965). In the span of one year the amount of colonies built, in fact covered 3,000 acres of land. A clearer understanding of the sheltering capacity the colonies had, can be gained in Sabir Ali’s contribution, *Environment and Resettlement Colonies of Delhi* (Ali, 1995). The layouts of the colonies were manifold. Some plans dominated by curving lines, as was the case in Nizamudin East and Lajpat Nagar III & IV, or the enlargement of Jangpura, while others tended to consolidate residential areas around courtyards, such as Nizamuddin West. Other colonies had a regular, almost monotonous yet systematic plan with perpendicular roads as was the case of Rajinder Nagar Old or Patel Nagar. Others yet, attempted to integrate straight lines with curves as in Malviya Nagar. At times the settlements were organized around a centre, as with Rajinder Nagar New and Ramesh Nagar; or they may have had several centres, such as Patel Nagar; notwithstanding, others did not have any, as was the case with Kirti Nagar. In most colonies the houses were built on plots differing in size, from the small 15’x60’ house plot in Ramesh Nagar, to the more common 30’x60’, to the bungalow plots that range from 75’x90’ to 100’x200’. The relationship between the residential areas and the immediate gardens surrounding the single plots are of particular interest. Similarly, even the gardens shared by a cluster of plots and the parks intended for the entire colony are worthy of notice. All colonies are provided with facilities, and in all, though to variable extents, schools, movie theatres, playgrounds, market spaces, hospitals, large and small parks and religious buildings of different denominations can be found.

In this first phase following independence, the colonies grew autonomously from one another, in an informal and disorderly manner. At the end of the 1950s, as they multiplied, it is all the more difficult to describe them unitarily or classify them. “In the post-Independence period, Delhi grew haphazardly” (Singh et al., 1989, p. 82). The government intended to deal with the crisis giving it due urgency, nonetheless they did not completely abandon the way the colonialists worked previously and in many ways actually adhered and maintained the methods once used and the discriminations that were associated with them. Both the refugee camps and the new settlements followed the colony logic. After 1947, colonies were no longer isolated cases, they became crucial elements of the urban structure. The lesser important settlements assigned to Indians during the colonial period eventually became the main building pattern of the capital. It must also be pointed out that the colonies not only changed



the physical shape of the city, but its social and economical structure as well.

Emergency and haste led the central government to loose its ability to direct or oversee construction work and resulted in a state of confusion in terms of the roles assigned between individual institutions. Some such noteworthy institutions were the Central Public Works Department (an evolution of the Public Works Department founded during the colonial period), the Ministry of Works, Housing and Supply, the Ministry of Rehabilitation, the Delhi State Administration, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Committee and the Delhi Improvement Trust, which became the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) (Draft Master Plan, 1957, p. 100). Often basic information was lacking and contradictory. Private enterprises began building in the colonies and the main developer was Delhi Land and Finance (DLF). Furthermore, Cooperative Societies built many housing areas as well. The sheer volume of organizations in charge thus was also reflected in the variety of architectural styles and urban structures, which, in fact, was cause to controversial debate, whether or not housing and settlement developments should remain under public control or be left at the behest of, if not allocated to private enterprises.

In 1962 the new Master Plan, developed by the Town and Country Planning Organization Committee in association with the American Ford Foundation, tried to bring some sense of order and organization to the urban growth. Still “The basic concept of the Master Plan had been the ‘development of the neighbourhoods’” (Sing et al., 1989, p. 35). The “neighbourhoods” were no longer just a British legacy, nor were they inspired by American culture. They were moreso an urban fact, which remains extremely complex and difficult to define.

The colonies built before and after the Master Plan became effective, were different to one another and singular in nature. In 1961:

nearly 60,000 acres of land were acquired and used to develop various types of housing estates. These ranged from houses on plots to walk-up apartments. Community facilities as stipulated in the Master Plan were built in these housing estates (Saha, 1991, p. 88).

These were not only neighbourhoods preordained to accommodate refugees like the Refugees Colonies, but also many others with different characteristics and objectives, such as the Real Estate Developer Colonies, the Plotted Housing Estates promoted by the DDA, the DDA colonies, the Resettlement colonies, the Unauthorized Colonies, the apartment-type housing estates, the DDA built apartments, the DDA Promoted

Cooperative Apartments, the Slum rehousing and the squatter settlements. “The four major types of housing estates are: traditional, plotted, apartment and squatter” (Saha, 1991, p. 89). Moreover, the neighbourhoods also varied according to the type of inhabitants they were intended to house. For example,

Lajpat Nagar [is] an answer to refugee rehabilitation, Defense Colony an answer to rehabilitation of displaced soldiers from the North, South Extension areas the result of enterprising speculators who acquired large tracts of land and developed them for profit (Town Planning, 1969, pp. 188-189).

In these different colonies, the size of the buildings were assorted, as were the dimensions and shapes of the plots, the extent of green areas and the type of roads—some curved, yet others parallel and perpendicular—, the density and habitual traits of its inhabitants, the elevation in height of its respective buildings and the type or prominence of public buildings.

In the colonies, houses were mainly single-family dwellings, built on owned plots. In the neighbourhoods intended for government employees, the buildings were organized into residential condos. The plots were regulated by stringent by-laws that determined the relationship between the constructed and vacant areas and the number of floors. Depending on the size of allotted green areas in front or behind the respective buildings, the density changed. The plots were sometimes small or even miniscule, 15’x60’, like those allotted for high-density buildings for refugees. At times they were larger, “an average plot in Defense Colony is 45’x60’”, and imitated the colonial neighbourhoods rarefaction (Interim Plan, 1962, pp. 26-31). Plots from the period after independence were a form of mediation between the larger bungalows of New Delhi and the smaller ones of the neighbourhoods “for Indians”, such as Karol Bagh. It can be said, that if a “conversion of bungalow plots into house plots” occurred, on a social level “the process of nuclearization of erstwhile joint families” (Saha, 1991, p. 89) could be considered its equal. The large bungalow plots were predominantly situated along the perimeter of the colony; house plots were usually located more central. The choice between straight or curving road patterns was much debated by town planners, especially during the drafting of the Master Plan. The Indian designers preferred curving streets, quite possibly an inherent opposition to the British chessboard-like structure with the desire to reminisce and resemble the fabric of the historical Shahjahanabad, overcoming monotony and creating a variety of partial views.

When analysing post-1947 colonies, the relationship between the residential dwellings and work places must also be considered. While the capital rapidly grew and Americans introduced the zoning model with a rigid division of areas according to their functions, Indians objected that work places and industry must remain close to residential areas, despite the solution being less “healthy”. Indians were on average poorer than Americans and could not afford an automobile, sometimes not even public transportation, to commute to work. People moved by foot, bicycle or rickshaw, and this made a close proximity necessary between the houses of the workers and the commercial and industrial areas they worked in. Though a co-existence of functions has always existed in the historical city, only few of the colonies were planned with this in mind. Amongst them the most interesting case is that of Malviya Nagar, where industrial plots were included.

#### **4. From the urban sprawl to the city, from a car-logic neighbourhood to a sustainable neighbourhood**

The colonies originated as a form of neighbourhood in the early colonial period, they transformed in the late colonial period, and changed significantly after independence. They were hybrid urban entities subject to multiple transformations and metamorphoses. If at first they were only for the affluent British, who wanted refuge from the crowded and unhealthy Shahjahanabad, later they were assigned to “Indians” at the bottom of the social pyramid. After the declaration of independence, colonies actually became the primary approach and method to build a city “for the people”. Even if these could not sufficiently satisfy the needs of the poor, nonetheless, by virtue of their existence housing was provided to a large part of the population. Eventually, not only their physical and social traits changed, but also their urban meaning. It was a process that involved many different experiences, from the Mughal *bagh* to the garden city, from suburbia to Zen culture. The recent transition from low houses to multi-storied buildings is part of this adaptation and transformation process, which involves more than just architecture.

The peculiarity in the history of the colonies is that they derived from foreign models and were influenced by other cultures, but nevertheless became rooted and integrated into the city. Colonies are the result of a colonial “importation” from Great Britain and in part also from the United States, but in fact are remarkably different from British or American suburbs. Colonies as such were severely criticized because they were not considered capable of solving the high population density, an impending

problem, yet, in comparison they were certainly more populated, alive and less sparse than neighbourhoods such as suburban Hampstead in London. Another distinguishing difference was that the Indian colonies, despite having wide roads, did not in fact relate to the car-logic *per se*, which during the same period were characteristic of British neighbourhoods or American suburbs, such as Los Angeles or Philadelphia. After independence automobiles were a scarce commodity and not a widespread phenomenon in poverty struck India, and the lower classes, i.e. the majority of the population, could certainly not afford them. The country's economic impasse prevented any potential risk of urban sprawl. Most communities were closed, and movement was by foot or rickshaw, retaining, however, a bazaar or a market, public parks and gardens, schools and organizations for the collective. In this transition period it can be witnessed that poverty was indeed an obstacle and a limiting factor, but interestingly, a benefactor as well; a chance to change the urban model, a bulwark against waste, a first step towards sustainability.

Another trait typical of these neighbourhoods, which contradicts the *mixité* suggested by the Americanized Master Plan, was the enduring rigor and propensity towards the division and segregation into distinct and recognizable "communities", following the ancient caste hierarchy and the inclination to live amongst one's peers. This natural disunion, the lack or inefficiency of public transportation and the difficulty to establish connections had contributed to making the colonies "cities inside the city". The influences were not strictly foreign but also stemmed from the internal migration of groups from other parts of India as well; creating an exchange system that had transformed the urban areas. The prevalently Muslim Pakistani neighbourhoods had little in common with those inhabited by the Punjabi Sikh, or those housing the Hindu people from the South. Architecture, public buildings and the use of space in the neighbourhoods, all changed according to the origins of their inhabitants. Over and beyond the many Indian communities with their customs and traditions, the colonies had also been transformed by the subtropical vegetation that gave the respective green areas a touch of the local climate and atmospheric history. Thus it can safely be generalised that adaptation assumed many complex forms.

Within the colonies the relationship between new constructions and historical artefacts of the city is an beguiling example of mutual respect and integration. Colonies inevitably became the connective syntax between pre-existent urban areas whilst also subsuming and preserving historical monuments, making them a fundamental part of the urban

structure. For example, Green Park Colony holds the ancient tombs of Bagh-Alam-ka-Gumbad and Dadi-Poti, furthermore

there are several other tombs of different sizes within the Green Park and its neighbourhood, with popular names like *Biran-ka-Gumbad* (Brother's tomb), *Chhoti Gumti* (small dome), *Sakri Gumti* (narrow dome) (Sharma, 1964, p. 70).

In the New Delhi South Extension I,

there are four noteworthy tombs [...] probably built during the Lodi period [...]. At the north end of the colony there are three tombs, collectively known as *Tin-Burj* (Towards a New Truthful Heritage, 1967, p. 73).

Thus the new and the ancient habitually coexisted, with the result that each drew strength from, and was enriched by the other.

The peremptory criteria, which the American-inspired city plan was based upon, did not prove to be particularly credible. It was radically criticized both by Indian architects and by the local population, for example in the document/manifesto *The Delhi Master Plan of 1962. An Anthropological Analysis*. Many Indians have polemically maintained that

even the relationship between density and amount of breeze is a culturally-determined phenomena (Godfriend, 1978)

and that the foul smell an Englishman may have perceived in Shahjahanabad may not have been perceived as such by an Indian. It was an American, Albert Mayer, who had an intuition concerning this matter as he wrote:

I keep wondering whether we are worried too much about wind in Delhi. If the wind were valued, why would they have built the old city with such narrow and winding streets and gaps between houses – where wind can scarcely be expected to penetrate? (Godfriend, 1978).

Although there has been a local response on part of Indian architects and an awareness of these differences on part of some American architects, it is not very clear why in actual practice the tendency was all too often to thin out the slums, to place industries and production far from residential areas and to integrate communities, which continued to remain irreconcilably divided.

Fundamental to the growth of the megalopolis, colonies, despite their contradictions and failures, have embodied the attempt to adopt imported elements into local cultures, provide a feasible alternative to zoning, a valuable model in the integration of residential and work areas and a safeguard against urban sprawl. They have brought attention to open spaces and to the criteria of sustainability. Colonies have preserved and enhanced the differences between local cultures just as much as they have respected historical monuments.

Indians have proven with the elaboration of the Master Plan that they were not passive interlocutors, but capable of establishing dialectics and making the dialogue between different points of views fruitful.

Delhi has been able to preserve its ancient past, assimilate and transform the British heritage and question American culture, offering alternatives. It is difficult, however, to explain why local critique and suggestions have had such minor influence or impact, unless it stems and is blamed on deeper-rooted political agenda. Nonetheless, the city and its planners have over time constructed an internal point of view and elaborated an alternative development of the megalopolis; they have indicated, often implicitly, a prospective of both resistance and democracy.

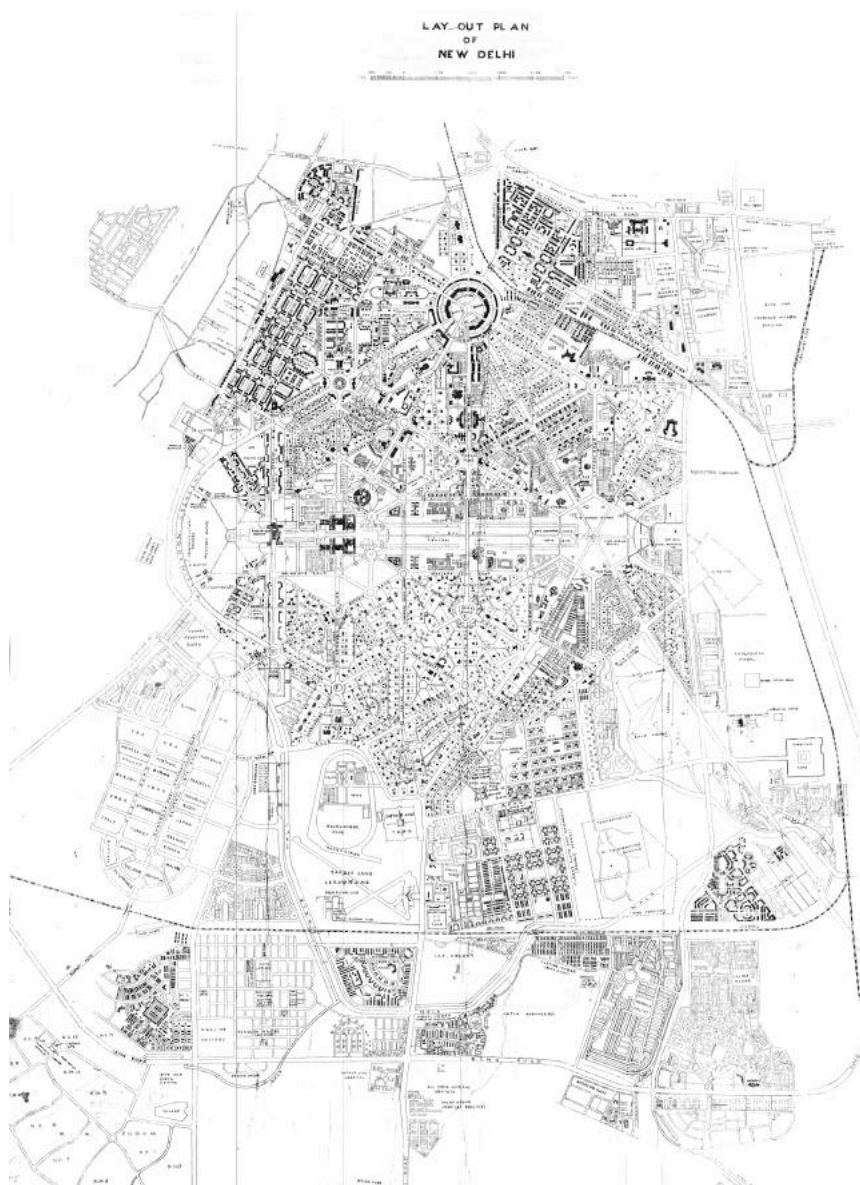


Fig. 3.2 . Colonies in South Delhi, after 1947.

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