

Urban Sprawl and its impact on Heritage spaces

1.0 INTRODUCTION

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any (Mahatma Gandhi).

This Gandhian view signifies the necessity of global interaction, while also establishing that this may not necessarily offer the most desirable option for use within our context. The 21st century has been characterised by free flowing information and an exchange of ideas, a scenario that has influenced most areas of human activity. In the context of urban development this phenomenon has led to the emergence of design prototypes derived from a Western perspective. Through this paper, the author discusses the planning and design preferences brought into the Indian milieu as a result of international trends and their impact on historic urban landscapes.

Citing the examples of Pinjore Mughal Gardens near Chandigarh, Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens in Bangalore and Sim's Park at Coonoor, the author attempts to understand whether the current international exposure is serving to enhance the value of these heritage spaces or proving to be detrimental to their significance.

2.0 HISTORIC TRENDS OF SPACE PLANNING AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON LANDSCAPE DESIGN

1.1 LANDSCAPES IN THE HINDU ERA

In Hindu mythology the human form is believed to represent the cosmos with its plant, animal and human life. The built settlements in turn are composed of house, temple and city thus duplicating this cosmic form and are based on square *mandalas* symbolic of the *purusha* (or human). The *vastu purusha mandala* signifies the essence of site, and along with form, this has been used in the basic plan of a temple thus recreating cosmos in a geometric and controlled manner. (Sinha 1995, 4)

It is also widely believed by scholars on the subject that the urban culture of ancient India incorporated features of the natural landscape in royal gardens and urban public parks (Sinha 2001, 13). The holy Hindu treatise, the Ramayana, depicts a design ideology based on a 'naturalistic' landscape, picturesque, dotted with temples. The use of water in canals and tanks as against ornamental fountains, planting of tree groves as compared to parterres or topiary suggest an attempt to imitate nature and not dominate or improve upon it as is seen in later influences.

Further, a typical garden then would be a combination of spreading trees, lotus ponds, stepped bathing tanks, pavilions, floral displays, fruits and flowering trees and swings along with jasmine and fragrant creepers forming arbours inviting the royal family to retire in orchards and parks on the city outskirts, or spend time in hunting

preserves. There is also evidence of sacred groves in forests in close vicinity of human settlements (Sinha 1998, 30).

Therefore, recreational activities in ancient India gave rise to spaces that maintained the spirit of a natural landscape thus creating minimal conflict with nature itself. This was to change under subsequent regimes and with pressures of development. In examples to be discussed later, both Pinjore Mughal Gardens as well as Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens there is mention in historic sources of the existence of an earlier garden, which may in spirit have been a product of the above mentioned design ideology.

1.2 MUGHAL GARDENS

As against dictates of the gardens of ancient India, the Mughal gardens 16th century onwards exhibited a sense of place reflecting a *Quranic* paradise and definitely not the naturalistic imagery of forests or countryside (Wescoat 1991, 10).

The Mughals in India were concerned with incorporating the tenets of Islamic gardens while also preserving their own immortality through everlasting statements of landscape and architectural design. Therefore, while many of the gardens were magnificent in scale, they retained an intrinsic meaning and symbolism. Islamic garden design as a result had moved on from an introverted organization and humble exteriors to adopt a more powerful statement of using the natural landscapes to enhance the pleasures of the nobility. The invading Mughals perceived these creations as a means of establishing their territorial identity in India. While Taj is a mausoleum, the pleasure gardens laid out such as the Bagh-i-Gul Afshan or Ram Bagh were solely developed for enjoyment and also for displaying power and wealth of the empire. Therefore, the tradition of 'riverfront gardens' introduced by the first Mughal emperor Babur (1483-1530) in the form of the Ram bagh, on the banks of the Yamuna in Agra, continued for another century and culminated in the tomb garden of the Taj Mahal (in the reign of Shah Jahan, 1593-1666).

The gardens in Kashmir, on the other hand, were uniquely crafted to best showcase the spectacular natural setting. Designed as a series of stepped terraces created for activities of pleasure, these gardens, in their geometry, were simply adaptations of the typical Islamic garden of the Plains. Shalimar Bagh in Kashmir, for example, is designed as a series of terraces where each terrace was conceived as a *chahar bagh* in itself.

However, besides serving as a means of display of prosperity each of these gardens in whatever scale they were conceived, in their designs attempted to recreate their version of paradise on earth thereby binding them with Islamic gardens elsewhere in the world.

Further, so strong was the symbolism in these gardens, whether created in the plains or mountainous terrain that while other artistic pursuits of this period had begun to show European influences, these compositions remained fairly true to their original spirit. These were the tenets based on which the Mughal gardens of Pinjore were conceived and designed. It is assumed that the earlier garden, which may have

been more naturalistic in its ideology made way for this layout of stepped terraces, central water channel and composed of other elements that characterise it as a typical Mughal period creation. Though these gardens represent the changing tastes of the ruling nobility and incorporate an imported landscape ideology Mughal gardens today form a predominant component of landscape works in the Indian context, which has earned worldwide recognition.

1.3 BRITISH PERIOD

The desire to create an 'English' garden in India is the central theme of the gardening activities of British in India. ...the creation of an English Garden was also important for the psychological and physical survival of those living a temporary existence in an alien country and in a hostile climate (Roberts 1998,115).

During the colonial era as the British population increased, urban areas became dotted with public parks, pleasure grounds, polo grounds, and ceremonial spaces, as well as scientific sites such as zoological and botanic gardens and cemeteries along with private gardens in cities, cantonment, civil lines and at hill stations. (Roberts 1998, 116)

Contrary to the inward looking design oriented around a central court typical of indigenous residential architecture the British designed using a Palladian plan tailored to the Indian climate by the use of lofty verandas behind classical colonnades and a front portico. Standing in the middle of a large compound for achieving ample ventilation, shade and privacy thereby turning the traditional house inside out, the English bungalow consisted of a garden that served as a significant part of the social and functional aspects of the house along with offering a ornamental canvas for creative and horticultural expression as well as for psychological nourishment. (Roberts 1998, 116, 121). The garden offered opportunity for games, social gathering, rest, and relaxation. "Invariably, the lawn was promoted as the heart of the British gardenthe lawn also performed an important social function since in India it was in use nine months in the year for games and for social gatherings....(Roberts 1998, 122) . Within the boundary of the bungalow the garden design attempted to as closely emulate the 'English' gardening style of the time. Specimen trees, a clump of selected shrubs, a sundial, a bench or other such features were located to be viewed from the house. 6-7 feet wide carriage drives of red 'soorkhee' or powdered brick replaced gravel of the typical English walks. The walks were bordered with wide flowerbeds backed with shrubs and trees. The use of English flowers, with their many associations, as against the vivid colours of native plants in these gardens reinforced this need to recreate as much of the home environment (Roberts 1998, 123).

Roberts (1998, 128) concludes that English gardens in India were often designed to imitate the typical garden back home with little consideration for Indian climate or topography. They were associated with settlements entirely European in concept and thereby were quite detached from the existing architectural or design traditions. The author (Roberts 1998, 132) further elaborates that the typical English garden contrasted with an often harsh and overwhelming landscape and offered a space

that was recognisable and understood and which offered itself for conducting familiar social and cultural rituals.

....but it was an illusion achieved by transferring recognisable design patterns and approaches to the structuring of the garden spaces (Roberts 1998,132).

Besides the residential garden the English brought with them a love for horticulture, which they introduced to Indian soil in the form of the Calcutta Botanic Garden established in 1786 as a scientific and commercial venture but also for offering seeds and cuttings to the general public. This set off a trend to establish other botanical enterprises around the country.



View of Lal Bagh Gardens indicating British intervention.
Seen here is a Western style garden parapet

The Lal Bagh Botanical Gardens was one of them. Though established as a pleasure retreat by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, these gardens were proclaimed as Botanical Gardens by the British in 1856. Dr. Francis Buchanan (1762-1829) describes that by the time of Tipu's reign Lal Bagh had emerged as a treasure house of a rare and valuable collection of tropical and sub tropical plants of indigenous as well as exotic origin. He describes Tipu's interest and efforts towards expanding the plant wealth of this garden citing that plants and seeds had been obtained from the Isle of France (presently Mauritius) by as late as 1798 (Tipu's defeat at the hands of the British was in 1799). There is also mention that Lal Bagh, alongside being a pleasure garden was further developed as an experimental farm to supply seeds and plants to farmers. Unfortunately, however, there is little evidence that remains visible of the layout and purpose of the gardens prior to this period. The interventions made at the time of the British are still overtly visible in the landscape. This acquired status largely influenced the later transformations in the garden and has therefore created the general perception of the Garden as a botanical enterprise extending only until the British period.

From the above we can see that In the case of Lal Bagh, which was designed originally as a Mughal garden, the advent of the British was accompanied by a preoccupation with botanical and horticultural pursuits, which overrode the original Mughal layout as planned by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. Cultural distinctions ranging from the Mughal period to the reign of Hyder and Tipu onto the British regime that subsequently shaped the post independence ideologies have each lent their contribution to the significance of the Lal Bagh garden.

1.4 POST INDEPENDENCE ERA

Landscape design in post independence India expressed a clear leaning towards English gardens. As a result, public spaces were designed with lawn, flower beds, benches and a lake if one could possibly be created in the garden. Stretches of Lal Bagh, with the topiary garden, pseudo- Japanese garden, location of food stalls in the foreground of the Glass House are an obvious attempt to amuse the public that comes here looking for a popular means of recreation.



Sim's Park, Coonoor: Botanical garden also working as popular recreational spot

It is evidently proving to be a struggle for the Department of Horticulture to maintain this garden as a botanical enterprise as well as a recreational park. Many a park in India has fallen prey to this syndrome. Sim's park at Coonoor in Tamil Nadu that also served as a botanical garden now 'proudly' advertises a lake with boating facilities as well as children's play area right in the heart of the space. While this works wonders to attract the average Indian tourist it does little for the ambience and significance of the landscape as a historic environment. In an attempt to address shrinking green spaces in the urban milieu, this transformation of a heritage space in to a recreational park is a common option exercised by site managers all over the country.

1.5 TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

An idea by Andre Frank advocates that globalisation is a constant process that occurs over several millennia and that the recent changes that have taken place are not globalisation at all but basically a form of westernisation (cocacolonisation!). As the saree gives way to trousers and biryani to pizzas, Indian palettes are becoming more familiar with global offerings. However, this is creating a fear that a blind preference towards most things foreign (western) is proving a hurdle in retaining our cultural individuality. In urban development, many a rural landscapes and traditional building techniques are being lost to this quest for 'modernisation'. Further, the need for instant gratification as well as the reluctance to face the natural rigours of climate has made malls a favourite recreational space in many developing nations. While a bazaar street earlier catered to an intimate shopping experience in the day and served as a vibrant residential milieu in the evenings, today malls in developing nations offer spaces for active recreation.

According to Hough (1990, 94), malls are representative of contemporary values making consumption a leisure time activity and creating a world where buying, living and entertainment have become indistinguishable.

The Pinjore gardens in existence since 1669 now find themselves in competition with an amusement park that has been designed within walking distance from them. This, like the advent of malls is another syndrome that is becoming very popular amongst the Indian public. Sim's park at Coonoor has already given in to boating activities. The pressure is on at Lal Bagh to introduce a food court, children's play space etc. Though these may be considered as another layer to the cultural landscape, commend the fact that the historic spaces are allowed to continue, however, these demands in reality serve as a serious impediment to retaining the significance of these historic spaces.

3.0 CULTURAL TRENDS IN INDIA

As is evident in the preceding section, the cultural landscape is layered with inputs from a range of eras. For example, at Pinjore, the mythical references to the *Pandavas* and the remains of ancient temples form a significant component of the townscape. Though scattered remains of *baolis*, temples, mosques remain, the town is known today for the Pinjore gardens, a Mughal response to the natural topography and hydrology of the region. Here, site levels were addressed through the design of a terraced garden and the local spring was tapped to have a central channel as the *raison d'être* of the garden. There remains no evidence of an earlier garden, if there was one.

Lal Bagh is an expression of the next stage in historic intervention. Here the British took over a Mughal inspired design for botanical enterprise as a response to their need for horticultural pursuits thereby making best use of the climatic conditions in Bangalore. Sim's Park in turn represents the post independence intervention on a botanical enterprise from British times. Here, the botanical activities are competing with the recreational aspirations of the local public.

The trend in the 21st century of replicating malls and amusement parks in the name of urban recreation is resulting in creating monotonous environments that rarely reflect their context, physical, social, cultural, ecological or economic. As Hough states,

...it (the mall is) a make-believe world that has no connections with the cultural and ecological realities of the place. The transfer of experiences from their places of origin to where they don't belong has become a universal phenomenon of contemporary urban life. And a major contributor to the sense of placelessness that massive urbanisation has helped to create (Hough 1990, 96).

To summarise this discussion, it becomes evident that each historic era is responsible for adding another layer of intervention to a space. The Mughal layer at Pinjore took into consideration the ecological parameters yet overlooking the earlier religio-cultural context of the space. Nevertheless what emerged was a space that contributed to the ecological and aesthetic potential of the site as well as offered a

space with recreational use. Similarly, at Lal Bagh, the British preoccupation with horticulture resulting in overriding the Mughal inspired layout from Hyder Ali and Tipu's time has led to a space with immense botanical significance. These may be considered examples of cases where subsequent interventions have not followed or conserved the spirit of the earlier layer yet have resulted in giving a new meaning of equal or comparable significance to the space in question.

However, in the 21st century, this is not what has happened in the case of Sim's Park or with the advent of the malls. Though seen as an obvious answer to recreational spaces in the urban sprawl, the introduction of these uses has proved detrimental to the significance of the historic environment as it has led to creating a landscape with no response to the local context and one that can be transported as such to any part of the world. This may prove to be a positive trend from the aspect of increased familiarity and thus comfort for a global citizen, however, if allowed to continue in its present form this trend is leading to a loss of uniqueness of place. Also as a number of historic spaces are taken over one by one, the importance of retaining the remaining and in a form where their significance is also conserved is becoming of vital importance. As Kostof (1999, 187) states,

Our public places were proud repositories of a common history. We have largely abandoned that sense of a shared destiny, and our public places show it. What is left may not be much, but it is crucial.

There is the larger issue not related to historic spaces in particular which needs to be addressed here. As designers we have begun to emulate western principles and ideologies, which in itself is not detrimental if the characteristics of the local context dictate the end product. As Hough (1999, 34) states that many of the interesting and beautiful aspects of a cultural landscape are derived from vernacular forms that emerge from the practical needs of the inhabitants and constraints of site and climate. These forms dramatise the variations inherent in the natural patterns of the land thereby combining cultural and natural history to create landscape variety (Hough 1999, 36). While the present trend of Westernisation or what is popularly referred to as globalisation is accepted as another era that will make its contributions, the fear is the rapidity with which the process is transforming our landscape to form the resultant monotonous environment that has begun to engulf us. The spread of shopping malls and amusement parks in the name of public spaces that are causing grave concern towards the fast disappearing cultural landscape are the result not of global exchange but rather of the incorrect choices made in what needs to be imported and the knowledge to adapt it to local conditions and needs.

"Therefore it is not so much an issue of whether a way of thought has local or global origins; it is more an issue of the thoughtfulness and intelligence with which one adapts to change." (Chandavarkar 2007, 107)

Further, it needs to be recognised that urban sprawl, hand in hand with globalisation, is creating a new set of users whose demands from their environment dictate the form of the public landscape. Therefore, the way forward to retaining significance of

our historic spaces is not in 'preserving' these in their current form, but rather in adapting them to the changing needs of users while strictly retaining their significance. So while shopping malls and amusement parks are responding to the current desire for a consumerist and fast paced recreational trend, these don't necessarily need to compete with historic spaces by being located close to them. Instead, using rehabilitated land and other such space for this purpose may be a more fulfilling concept.

There is definitely a need to promote these historic sites to make the visitors aware and proud of their heritage rather than contesting with malls and amusement parks. For this the amenities and recreational activities offered at these historic sites need to be developed around an interpretation policy that recognises the current visitor needs. Any modern intervention towards this end needs to be cognizant of the heritage value of the space, structures and constituent elements.

At Pinjore, for instance, it is proposed to introduce heritage related activities for school and college groups, segregate spaces for horticultural and floral displays, open kiosks for imparting heritage information to visitors, incorporate heritage theme restaurants in the bastions. Another attempt towards interpretation is the organisation of heritage festivals. To end, it is important to recognise that "Changing times create changing landscapes" (Hough 1999, 49). In light of the discussion that each historic regime or era has had an impact on a historic space in question, globalisation, or 21st century westernisation, has already begun to rapidly change our environment. In order to ensure that these changes contribute to the richness of our cultural landscape we need to incorporate and adapt international trends to our specific needs and context responsibly and not be blown off our feet as Mahatma Gandhi suggested in the last century.

By Nupur Prothi Khanna

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