

Elizabeth McKellar - Lutyens, Viceroy's House **(Rashtrapati Bhavan)**

ELIZABETH MCKELLAR: Hello. I'm Elizabeth McKellar, and I'm an architectural historian here at The Open University. I work on British architecture and culture, primarily from about 1660 onwards. And I'm particularly interested in everyday buildings and in cities.

Today, we're going to be talking about one city in particular, New Delhi, which was built by the British between 1911 and '31 to be the capital of their Indian Empire. And we're going to focus on the Viceroy's House. Now, the Viceroy's House was the heart of the plan, the most important building on the site. And it was the home of the Viceroy as well as being the official ceremonial residence for the British State in India.

So the British built New Delhi on a vast scale. The Viceroy's House alone covered 2/3 of a square mile. And if we look at the plan, we can see that it's laid out in a highly geometric form, linked together by big roads which create hexagons and circular intersections. And at the far side of the plan on the left was cited the Viceroy's palace which sat at the end of a great ceremonial routeway called the King's Way, which led up to it. And it was situated at the top of a hill, so it was extremely imposing.

And this kind of planning using a lot of geometry and what would be called formal planning, actually dates back to the Roman period, the classical period, but was revitalised in the 17th century in places like Rome and Paris. So the designer of New Delhi, who was called Edwin Lutyens, was looking at places like Rome and Paris, but also more recent examples like Washington DC, which was re-planned in 1901 when this kind of grand classical planning came back into fashion.

And New Delhi was following very much in that form of what we would call classical or baroque -style formal planning. Now let's think about what the building is made of. If we look at the exterior, we can see that it uses two colours, cream and red. And these are the colours of local sandstones, which were used very widely throughout New Delhi. And they were chosen by Lutyens because they were the traditional form of building material in Delhi which had been used by a previous empire, the Mughal Empire, which existed from 1639 to 1857.

And the most famous Mughal building in Delhi is the Red Fort. And so the very name of the Red Fort tells you what it was made of. So Lutyens was referencing a past tradition through using these materials.

And if we look more carefully, we can see that he uses them in alternating bands running across the facade. And this creates a strong horizontality across the building. And combined with its vast scale, it's as if it's a kind of great geological form of stone strata sitting up there on the top of Raisina Hill.

So atop this great sandstone monument is a dome, which as we can see, is made of a different material. And that's actually copper. And of course, you can imagine that copper captures the sun very well. So it's a gleaming feature.

But we do have shiny materials in the inside. We can see in this main hall here that there's a great use of marble. So we've got this black and white marble floor. And the pillars were actually red marble. So there's a big contrast between the effects of the exterior sandstone and this incredibly shiny, polished marble interior in this main room in the centre of the building.

So now let's think a bit more about the composition of the exterior of the building. At first glance, it may look to you like many classical buildings - imposing classical buildings you're familiar with. It's got a colonnade of columns running along the front. It's got this very prominent dome. And domes are associated with buildings like cathedrals or temples, monumental structures in Western architecture.

However, if we look more carefully at the dome, we can see that it's a smooth form. And its profile, that means the shape of the dome, actually comes from a Buddhist temple in India, Sanchi, which is the oldest stone monument in the country - third century BCE - and extremely important in Indian architecture. So Lutyens used an Indian dome, recognisable to all the people around who lived there to atop this monumental sort of classical building.

And surrounding the dome you can see there are four little pavilions with much smaller domes on top of them. And these are called chhatris. And they, again, are a traditional Indian feature, Mughal feature, that you will find at places like the Red Fort.

If we look down at the columns, they follow the classical idea of having the orders. They have decoration at the top. That's called the orders. And for the Viceroy's Palace, Lutyens invented a new order. So he invented a New Delhi order.

But if we look in the interior, we can see this New Delhi order better. And it consisted of an acanthus motif at the top of the columns with bells, which are important motif in Indian architecture. And in doing that, in creating a new order, Lutyens was following the example of America, where when they created their first governmental buildings, they created a new American order with leaves of corn, sheaves of corn, and so on at the top of the order.

So this is quite a common thing to do in colonial societies, to reinvent classical canonical forms. And the interior itself we can see, like the exterior, is very grand. And it was based on the Pantheon in Rome, which is a vast space like this one under a dome.

So here, Lutyens is trying to evoke monumental, incredibly awe-inspiring places from the past. The Viceroy's House was the ceremonial state centre for the Indian government under British rule as well as the home of the Viceroy and his family. And it consisted of a central block and four wings, one of which was the Viceroy's house, the others of which were given over to offices and accommodation for civil servants.

Another purpose of the building was to literally screen people from the fierce Indian sun. And so the whole building is designed to keep out the heat and the sun as much as possible. So the function of the colonnade on the exterior is not just to have a classical colonnade, but it's actually creating a barrier for keeping the sun from coming directly into the rooms.

If we also look on the exterior, you can see there's a very large overhanging cornice above the columns. And that's actually a traditional Indian feature called a chugha. And again, it was there to act as a sunscreen, but also to keep the fierce monsoon rains out of the building.

In the central block of the building were the state reception rooms. And the most important of these was the Durbar Hall. And you can see in the Durbar Hall at the far side two thrones, which are for the Viceroy and the Vicereine. And they are obviously there to symbolise British authority and the semi-regal figures presiding over the Indian state.

Now, the term durbar is, again, an Indian term. And it comes from Mughal practices at their imperial court. The durbars were a Mughal tradition of ceremonial court rituals intended to display the power and wealth of the rulers. So the British picked up on this theme to display their own imperial might.

Now, surrounding the Viceroy's House was a vast estate of about 380 acres. So in this way, it was a bit like a British country house with the estate around it. And next to the house there were 15 acres of formal gardens.

And these gardens, again, had connections with Indian traditions, the Mughal tradition of water gardens. So there was an extensive use of water throughout the gardens. And of course, in a dry climate like India, using water for such a luxurious purpose is in itself a display of control over natural resources and extreme wealth.

But the most important function of the Viceroy's palace was literally to represent, through architecture empire building, the might and power of the British State in India. One commentator has compared the building, with its smooth round dome, to the toupee'd head of a British soldier with his arms outstretched before him, looming over the landscape below.

After independence in 1947, the new Indian government took over New Delhi even though most of its members have been Indian nationalists who had opposed the building of the capital by the British, particularly because they, as Indian taxpayers, had had to pay for its construction. Nevertheless, it provided them with a ready-made capital to move into. And the Viceroy's House became the president's official residence, renamed Rashtrapati Bhavan.

In this way, we can see how in the post-colonial era buildings can and do take on new meanings and uses. There are those who still argue that these imperial buildings are not appropriate for the modern democracy. But for the most part, Indians have accepted that Lutyens' British-built classical capital is appropriate for a 21st century democracy.