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The east front of the Viceroy's Palace.
The last of the royal palaces of the
Empire, it was also the largest one
ever built by the British.



Glory of Empire: Imperial Delhi

The transfer of the British Indian capital from Calcutta to Delhi was announced by King-Emperor George V at his Durbar in Delhi in 1911 during the first and only visit of a British monarch to the country they believed to be the “jewel in the crown”. Calcutta had served as the nerve centre of the East India Company since 1774 when Warren Hastings (1774–85) had become Governor General. But, under the Company, the focus of imperial activities was concentrated at the ports and the effective writ of Hastings was intended to control the ports and hinterland of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. However, the rebellion of 1857 changed that strategy since the British believed that the crumbling inland court of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar in Delhi had made a desperate bid to restore its power and had provided the inspiration and facilities for the conspiracy that had incited the troops to rebel. The memory of a splendid Mughal empire centred in the Red Fort in Delhi therefore had to be replaced in the minds of the Indians with the far greater glory of the British empire. Put in terms of heritage, the extraordinary Mughal architectural achievements of Shahjahanabad had to be outdone by an even grander imperial architectural heritage. In the words of Lord Stamfordham, the Principal Private Secretary to King George: “We must now let him (the native Indian) see for the first time the power of western science and art and civilisation” (*Indian Summer*, p. 73).

The energetic construction activities of the Mughal emperors in Lahore, Agra, and Delhi had left behind an unusual architectural heritage that was not only vast in scale but also unique in its grandeur and beauty. The monuments and urban institutions that the Mughal emperors sponsored and funded including Humayun’s Tomb in Delhi, the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Forts in Lahore, Agra, and Delhi, Jama Masjid and indeed the whole of Shahjahanabad and Fatehpur Sikri had brought to Indian architectural history a uniqueness of style and cultural fusion that was truly extraordinary. By the time Shahjahan was forced to conclude his building spree, the Mughal treasury had already been depleted of the earlier surpluses carefully collected during the good times of conquests and trade. Within a few decades, his successors had been reduced to destitute monarchs with an army of retainers who had nowhere else to go and no means to survive except to linger about the citadel and wait for the meagre handouts given by the court officials. Thus it was that a century and a half after Shahjahan died, British soldiers marched their cavalcade down Chandni Chowk, led by General Gerald Lake who summarily took control of the administration of Delhi and formally declared the end of the Mughal empire. Henceforth, the occupant of the throne in the Delhi citadel was to be known simply as the King of Delhi. As Shahjahanabad continued its steep

decline into a dense slum condition, it was once more time for yet another Delhi to be founded. So it was that just over a century after General Lake marched down Chandni Chowk, Lord Hardinge of Penhurst arrived in India as the new Governor General and guided the events which concluded with King George's announcement that Delhi was to become the capital of the empire in the subcontinent.

The intention to move the capital to Delhi meant that the offices of the Viceroy, Commander-in-Chief, the Government of India, the Legislative Assembly, and a host of officials would have to move to the new city. The commercial community in Calcutta deeply resented this announcement. But, as Lord Hardinge explains in *My Indian Years*:

Before I arrived in India, I was well aware that the province of Bengal was seething with sedition, the outcome of the policy of partition [of Bengal done by Lord Curzon]. Dacoits and assassinations of police and informers were almost a daily occurrence in Calcutta and its neighbourhood, and it was practically impossible to secure a conviction by the ordinary process of law.

The partitioning of Bengal had continued to cause enormous difficulties for the British administration in Calcutta. The Durbar of 1911, at which King George was present, therefore presented a unique opportunity to announce that Calcutta was no longer convenient as the centre of power. Clearly it was a declaration to the Bengalis that since they had not mended their ways and had continued to "seethe" they could do so within a lesser provincial territory rather than a national one. Behind the scenes, within the confidential corridors of the administration, there had already been preparatory work done to effect this change of capital. The British had not been happy with Calcutta as capital after 1858. Lord Curzon had considered moving the capital to Agra. Later, Lord Lawrence had mooted the idea of shifting

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The ceremonial approach to the palace is dominated by the base of the Jaipur Column in the centre of the forecourt. It was gifted by Sir Sawai Madho Singh, Maharaja of Jaipur, in celebration of the founding of New Delhi.



the capital to Delhi, but the Council was opposed to it. Finally it was Lord Hardinge who determined that the British should push ahead with the move and use the opportunity of the 1911 Durbar to launch the initiative amongst the Indians by making a formal announcement. He was strongly supported by Sir John Jenkins, the Home Member of the Council, who wrote to Lord Hardinge in June 1911 that there was need of "a bold stroke of statesmanship which would give universal satisfaction and mark a new era in the history of India". Jenkins believed that the Durbar announcement would initiate a "change that would be magical since, in the imagination of the masses of the people, Delhi and Empire have been associated from time immemorial". Lord Hardinge was an astute administrator. He realized that he would need to link the moving of the capital to a larger administrative shuffle. He drafted a secret memorandum and circulated it to his Council members asking them to approve of four administrative changes:

1. Move the capital from Calcutta to Delhi.
2. Create a United Bengal and change its status to that of a Presidency.
3. Create a new Lieutenant Governorship for Bihar and Orissa with Patna as its capital.
4. Restore the charge of Assam under a Chief Commissioner.

The Secretary of State in London gave full approval to the four proposed changes but directed that the announcements of the Unification of Bengal and the move to Delhi be kept absolutely secret till the King formally made the announcement. This need for secrecy assumed paramount importance. The Delhi Durbar camp was organized in a way that ensured this secrecy. In order to prepare and print the requisite gazettes, news sheets, and draft announcements, a secret "press camp" was established and called "mystery camp". It was surrounded by troops and police and all the announcements were sealed in envelopes to be

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The Mughal-styled pleasure garden of the Viceroy in the rear court of the palace was looked after by more than 400 gardeners.



distributed only at the time of the official announcement. Lord Hardinge describes that moment in his memoirs of India:

The King rose and read the statement in a clear voice which was heard distinctly by all the 4,000 principal Durbaris present. It came like a bombshell. At first there was a deep silence of profound surprise, followed in a few seconds by a wild burst of cheering. At the same time, the Government officials broke the seals of the official Gazette prepared beforehand in the "Mystery camp" and distributed them broadcast throughout the amphitheatre.

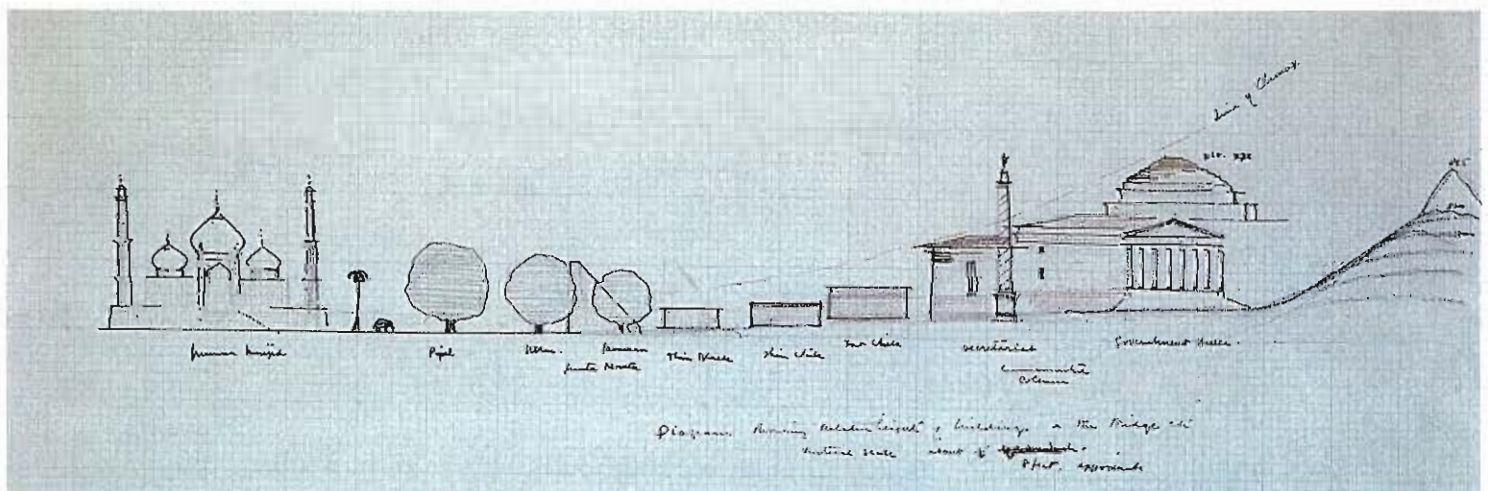
Many at the time interpreted this move as the first sign that England intended to stay in India permanently. Somehow there had always been that lingering feeling amongst many Indians that as long as Calcutta was the capital of the empire in India, there was always a possibility that the British would leave by sea as they had arrived, either of their own accord, or in the event of a revolution led from Bengal.

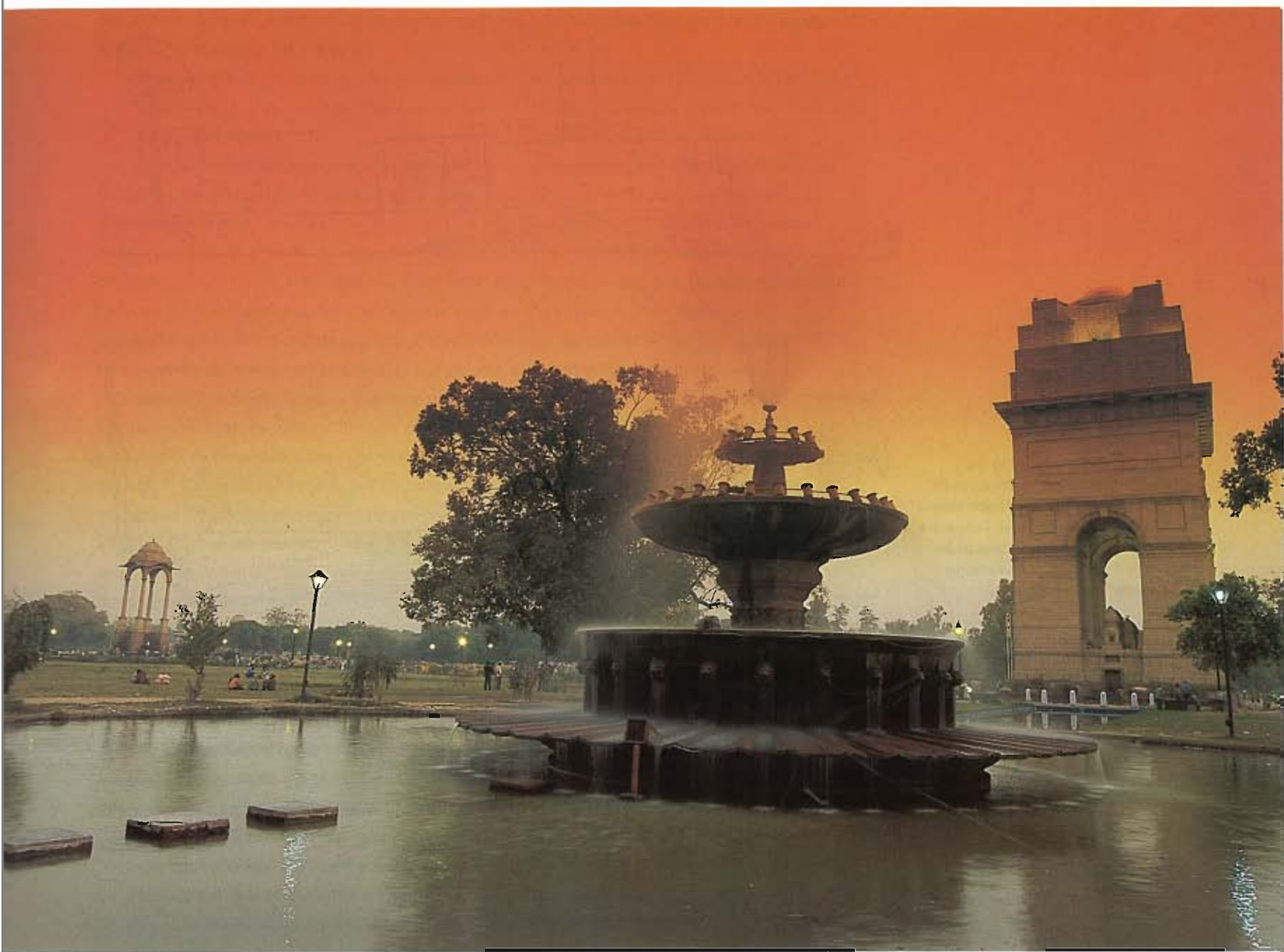
Events moved fast after the Durbar. During their stay in Delhi, Lord Hardinge writes: the King and Queen expressed to me their wish to lay the foundation stones of the new capital of India. The proposal presented considerable difficulty since it was an open question as to where the site of the new city would really be found. It proved later that the site on which they were laid was not selected for the new capital and a year afterwards I had these stones quietly removed and placed in an honoured position in the secretariat building in the new city.

The British government in London moved swiftly to support this move. A committee consisting of Captain Swinton, former member of the London County Council, Edwin Lutyens the architect, and Brodie a sanitary engineer from Liverpool were sent to India and charged with the task of selecting the site for the capital. Lord Hardinge was not too impressed with the committee members and commented that they seemed to have spent their time wandering about on an elephant without having had any success. In 1912, they initially selected a site north of Shahjahanabad, including the Metcalfe Estate, and presented their proposals to Hardinge. But his reaction to this site was hostile. He describes the event in a way that gives himself all the credit for the final selection:

Having been informed that [The Earl of] Crewe's committee of experts had selected and approved a site and that the layout had been flagged for my inspection and criticism, I went from Simla to Delhi with a considerable staff of technical experts, including three of the best engineers. The moment I saw the selected site I realised its objections. It would be hot; it had no views; and it had no room for expansion. After consultation for more than two hours I told the assembled staff that I would rather not build a new capital at all than build it on that site.

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Lutyens' sketch showing the greater height of the Viceroy's Palace over the Jama Masjid in Shahjahanabad. The Jaipur Column's echo of the minarets is not coincidental.



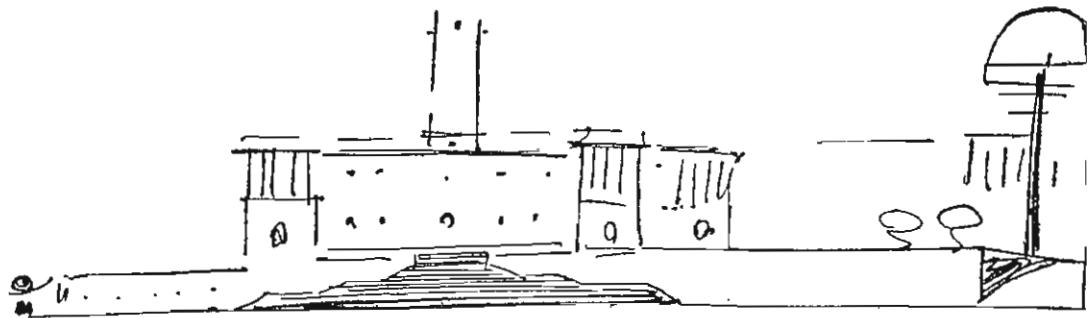


Lord Hardinge was not only a decisive administrator; he took care to be perceived as such by his subordinate staff. He continues his account of events on that day:

I asked to be left alone for a quarter of an hour before coming to a decision, and at its close I rejected the site as impossible. I then mounted and asked Hailey [Later Sir Malcolm and then Lord Hailey, Governor of the United Provinces], Commissioner of Delhi, to accompany me to choose a new site, and we galloped over 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, with the River Jumma winding its way like a 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. On examination I observed that the area of the top of the hill was hardly adequate for a fine Government House with all its necessary adjuncts, but one of the engineers who was present said at once that there would be no difficulty in cutting off the top of the hill so as to make a fine and broad base for building upon. The idea struck me as novel, but it was confirmed and accepted by all and the site adopted. It was equally approved by the experts [meaning the committee] from England.

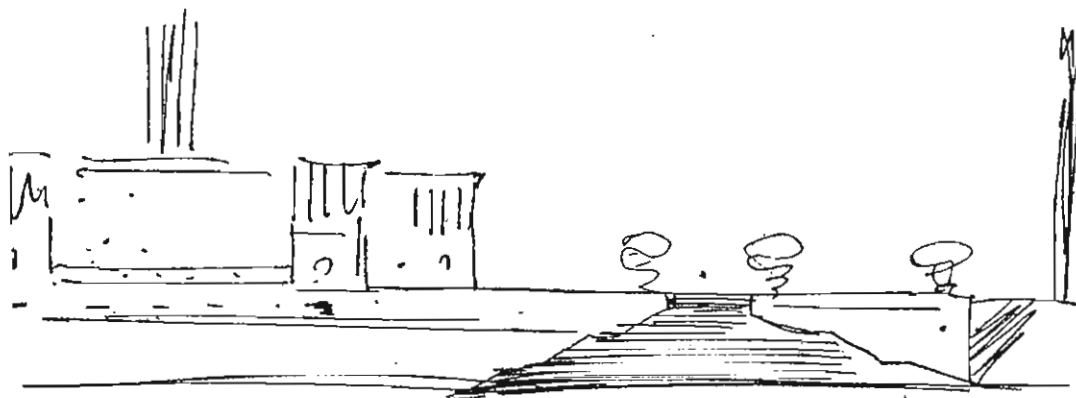
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Three urban symbols of the Imperial city placed as chess pieces in the ordered layout of the capital: the memorial canopy to house the statue of King George V, the perpetual fountains, and the All India War Memorial Arch known as India Gate.



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Lutyens' sketch showing the preferred location of the steps in the upper sketch. The lower sketch showing steps placed in the centre of the capital complex was to be avoided so that the "swarming millions" were kept away.



The Raisina Hill site so selected by Hardinge at the end of a quick gallop was to eventually be the site for the acropolis consisting of Government House (later designated as the Viceregal Lodge) and the Secretariat buildings. Although Hardinge had visualized the site being dominated solely by Government House as the crowning symbol of regal authority over the city, he did concede later, as the master planning drawings and concepts developed, to Baker's proposal for an acropolis that combined Government House with the administrative buildings as part of an architectural ensemble that would serve and be perceived more as a new citadel than the site for a stand-alone palace. The Mughal citadel of the Red Fort was a very significant architectural ensemble that had at one time not only accommodated the entire household of the Emperor, but also the entire facilities of the Mughal government. Enclosed within the fort walls, this ensemble was set around an elaborate Persian-style garden. Such a regal setting within a garden landscape had European parallels too in Versailles and other palaces in France. Thus it was that Government House too became attached to a splendid garden. It was Mughal in style because Lord and Lady Hardinge happened to visit Kashmir and "fell in love with the gardens of Srinagar". Lady Hardinge wrote to Lutyens, "I should love a Moghul garden with terraces to start from the very top of the ridge and come to the house" (*Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens*).

The 1912 sketch by Lutyens showing the dominant position of the Government House over the minarets of Jama Masjid was clearly intended to confirm the diminution of Shahjahanabad to the status of a subordinate native city (*Indian Summer*, p. 78). The effort to demonstrate the superiority of Western civilization was now in full swing and the detractors from that effort were soon sidelined. Robert Byron, a correspondent of *Country Life* wrote in 1931:

Whilst official opinion in England and India was demanding a fusion of national motifs, Lutyens sought solutions on a less superficial basis. Whilst holding fast to the principles of humanist architecture – line, proportion, mass – he discovered from Moghul builders how these principles might be adapted to a land whose material conditions necessitate their modification.

Byron was being accommodating to Lutyens whose own thoughts and reactions were clearly revealed in his quest for greatness:

My everlasting prayer is for the greatness and help of a Wren or Newton. If Wren had built in India, it would have been something so different to anything we know of his that we cannot name it.

For Lutyens, Wren was a model because he merged English architectural forms with Italian prototypes, while Newton symbolized reason and mathematics – cornerstones of Western civilization. It was about the time that Patrick Geddes came to India. He arrived in 1914 hoping to display the panels of an exhibition that he had prepared on a civic city. Unfortunately a German warship sank the boat carrying the panels and Geddes had to tour India without his material. He travelled from city to city, covering the subcontinent, propagating his views on the organic nature of the city. His notion of the city, influenced undoubtedly by the same Garden City movement that had influenced Lutyens, was diametrically opposed to what was being conceived for New Delhi. On the planning of sewers, for instance, Geddes wrote, “instead of the nineteenth century European city panacea – of Everything to the sewer! the right maxim for India is the traditional rural one, of Everything to the soil.” (*Cities of Tomorrow*, p. 245.) Geddes believed that “city life, like organic and individual life, exists and develops with the harmonious functioning of all its organs and their adaptation to all its needs....” Lutyens could not understand Geddes. He commented, “He seems to have talked rot in an insulting way and I hear he is going to tackle me! A crank who doesn’t know his subject. He talks a lot, gives himself away and then loses his temper.” (*Cities of Tomorrow*, p. 247.) Geddes’s approach to the city was akin to that of a biologist who regarded the city as an organism that needed careful surgery and healing in order to protect its historical tissue and its natural dynamism. Lutyens, on the other hand, saw the city as a symbol of not only colonial power, but also of a new environment that would reflect the Fabian concerns of Ebenezer Howard about the ideal place for the ideal citizen. For both Hardinge and Lutyens, the city of Shahjahanabad had nothing to offer that could be emulated or salvaged. It was a living shell with the remnants of a decayed and spent empire and its citizens were potentially rebellious and uncontrollable because they lived in narrow alleys with little daylight and bad hygienic conditions. The new city needed not only visionary planning but also strong civil engineering logic that would pipe in fresh water and carry away sewage for safe treatment.

The designers of New Delhi were a mixed team of planners and civil engineers, including the original committee members and the planner Henry Lancaster. They worked under the sharp gaze of Hardinge and his band of supportive engineers. In addition, the planners also had to hear the opinions of other influential amateurs who were well connected either to the royal family or senior government officials in London. One of them was Sir Bradford Leslie who proposed a lake by damming the Yamuna. Once the stamp of the imperial gesture on Indian soil had been finalized in the layout of the new city, the next task of appointing the architects began. Herbert Baker who had designed major buildings in Pretoria for the government of South Africa was invited to join Lutyens as the collaborating architect of the city. The work was divided between the two prima donnas with Lutyens tackling Government House and Baker the vast ensemble of the Secretariat buildings. Baker was quick to realize the importance of Raisina Hill as the key architectural setting of the city. He worked diligently to devise concepts that would enable the Secretariat complex to share the same setting as Government House. Hardinge needed to be convinced. Eventually, in the face of Baker’s persuasive arguments, he made a rather hurried decision without fully realizing the implication of sacrificing his cherished idea of the exclusive setting of Government House on the crest of Raisina Hill. Baker had already drafted a note to Lutyens to obtain his approval (*Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens*):

We are of the opinion that both buildings should be raised on a common platform, so that the approach to the space between the Secretariats and that in front of the Government House should be a dignified flight of steps, with a sloping road for processions and special occasions. Our reasons are:

1. The panorama of old cities and buildings which is a convincing argument in favour of the south site should be accessible to all.
2. The old buildings that have most impressed the imagination of mankind are those raised upon an eminence, such as those of ancient Greek cities and the Capitol of Rome.
3. The raised place, denied to ordinary traffic of streets would have an air of quiet and privilege.
4. The lifting of the buildings on a platform seems to us an important characteristic of those we have seen in India. If we may find it difficult to copy the latter, we can at least follow the spirit of the buildings of the country.

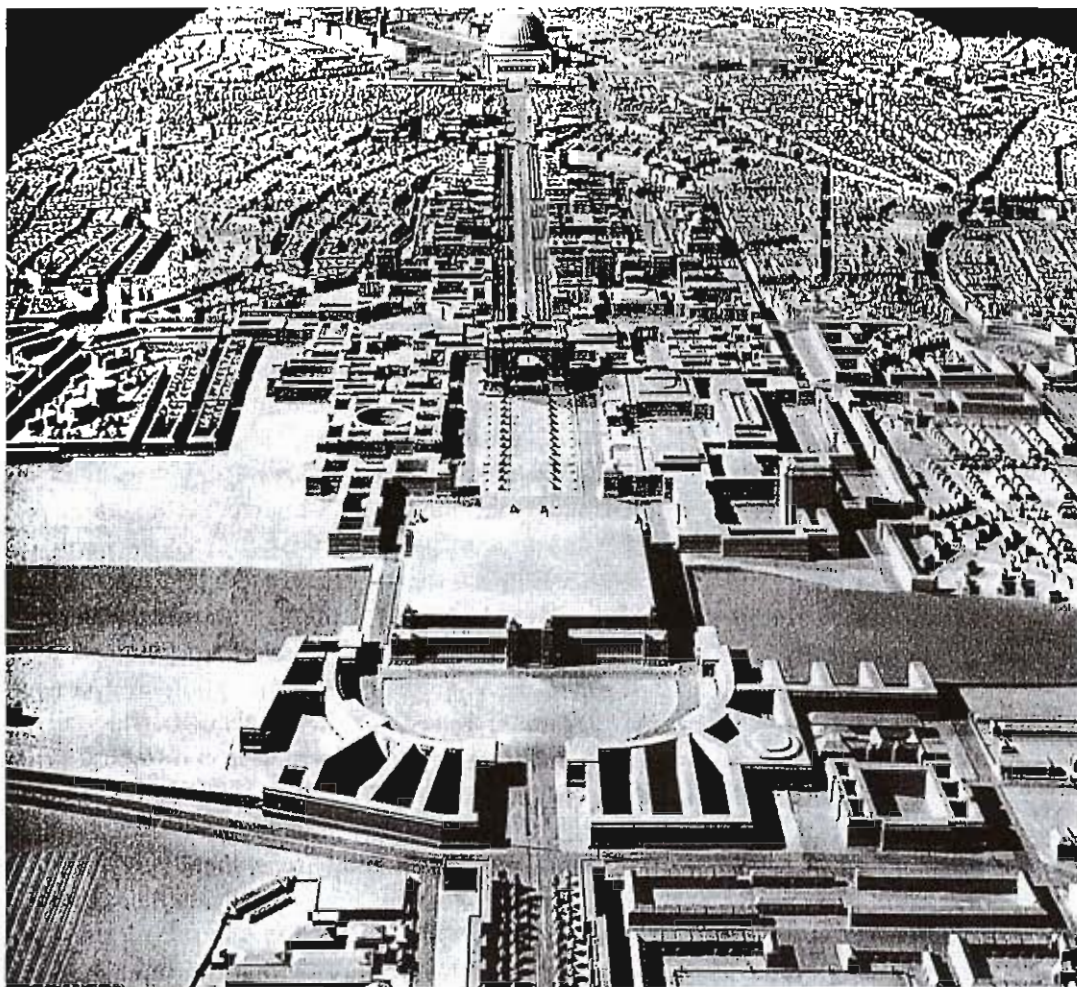
Having ensured that the concerns of imperial planning were effectively in place, the field was left clear for the two architects to battle over their respective masterpieces. Lutyens could not have been happy with Baker's move to convert the stand-alone site of Government House into acropolis, but had to give way in the face of Baker's irresistible arguments. He accepted the idea of some ceremonial steps to gain access to the acropolis but wanted them located on the side. He commented:

They would come very well in themselves, axial with either block; but would this not lead away from the centre – the sun of the Lord Sahib's dome? It looks well centrifugally but I want something more centripetal, and the wider plateau may help this. But we don't want "mosque steps" here like Jami Masjid for the swarming millions to sit on – do we? But if we do, they could be where they could see the procession up the sloping via sacra.

Eventually the steps for the "swarming millions" were detached from the acropolis and were placed on either side of the central vista completely separate from the approach to the capitol complex. The issue of the approach steps was resolved by hiding the steps behind parapet walls that led them sideways to either side of the Secretariat wings. As the work proceeded, the tensions between Baker and Lutyens escalated into a full-scale fight with both



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Connaught Place, built to rival Chandni Chowk, was intended as the premier and fashionable shopping arcade of the new capital city.



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Not unlike Lutyens' Delhi, Speer's Berlin had a triumphal arch, an axis leading to the palace of the Third Reich. Both visions for capitals to last a thousand years.

architects often sitting together at unavoidable meetings but speaking to each other only through intermediaries. However, despite the bitterness between Baker and Lutyens, the emphasis on visualizing the new capital as a city of monuments remained the principal influence that determined the direction of avenues and the location of the key buildings.

Ironically, the unmistakable imprint of New Delhi's monumentality was to impress Hitler's architect Albert Speer whose 1931 vision of the new German identity was symbolized in the New Berlin of the Reich. The similarities between Speer's vision of Berlin and Lutyens' vision of New Delhi are remarkable. Both have a central grand avenue as the key processional axis passing through a Roman-styled gateway. Both avenues culminate at a large domed structure – the New Delhi one to house the viceroy, and the Berlin one for the absolute ruler, the *fuehrer*. (*Cities of Tomorrow*, p. 213). One city was intended to demonstrate the political, military, and economic power of the British empire while the other was intended to do the same for Germany. Both the Empire and the Third Reich were intended to last for a thousand years.

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