NEW DELHI
MAKING OF A CAPITAL

Not too many new cities of this scale have been built in the last hundred years – and certainly not any with the pomp, splendour and circumstance of and course, the celebration of Empire that is associated with the building of Imperial Delhi, and so aptly recorded in this new book.

There is nostalgia, of course, because it is impossible to speak of Delhi in Delhi without that (too much has been lost), there is Malvika Singh’s text which explains the main events and personalities with a deceptively easy freshness – “The British Crown had a tough example to match and conquer. As a ruling colonial power... there is Malvika Singh’s beauty of it.

More than nine decades have elapsed since the site was chosen, and work started. The central buildings took about twenty years to build. The roads, tree planting, gardens and most of the residential parts were completed earlier; by 1931, when it was formally inaugurated, it was a working administrative enclave, with the beginnings of its own hierarchical culture which was quite the opposite of that found in the mohallas of Shahjahanabad.

From the press clippings presented, it is interesting to observe the various ways the city was written about during these years. In the beginning it was news, and also the subject of learned commentary. The question of an appropriate ‘style’, the shape of a properly impressive imperial architecture, the merits of the site, all were matters of thoughtful opinion and debate. During construction, reports of progress despite logistical challenges, and interviews and articles by the architects, followed in early 1931 by celebratory pieces such as “Miracle of New Delhi” and the inauguration. In January of the same year the Architectural Review (London) devoted a complete issue to the “study of the new capital of India”.

1980 saw the beginning of renewed interest in Lutyens’ city. The fiftieth anniversary of its inauguration was the occasion for a major British Council exhibition in Delhi entitled “The Making of New Delhi”, put up with help from the School of Planning and Architecture. The same year (or thereabouts) saw the publication of Robert Grant Irving’s “Indian Summer”, probably the earliest comprehensive assessment of New Delhi, to be followed in the next thirty years by perhaps five or six more books, mainly focused on dissecting the design of the city.

The present work is refreshingly distinct from its predecessors. It concentrates on the process rather than the product. Page followed by highly evocative page displays monochromatic images of, for example: the barren site, the first excavations, foundations, building sites, stone yards (occupying 22 acres, no less), the various manifestations of steam power so necessary for construction at this scale – for transport, for material movement within the site, and to operate cranes and winches.

There is art in the sequential arrangement of these photographs: the pictorial narrative unfolds in an approximation of cinematic flow, virtually independent of the text. And that is the beauty of it.

This is an exceptional compilation, enlivened with some deft touches: a pair of typewritten letters exchanged between Baker and Lutyens (his now well known misgivings, and Baker’s rebuttals), arranged to appear on facing pages – speaking to each other, almost and even in acrimony there is place for civilised banter: so Baker, with casual erudition: “One thing however pleases... “One thing however pleases...
me in your letter and that is that you have at last taken to reading poetry and your Browning quotation is a very good one.”

A few pages later are the draft and printed versions (surprisingly different texts, but similarly moving in spirit) of Baker’s tribute to his friend after the latter’s death in 1944 – “the equal of Wren” – recalling the camaraderie of travelling and discovery in their younger days, and admiration of his “extraordinary powers”; though whilst speaking of Lutyens’ humanism, the draft also includes a passage which in the circumstances might seem curiously out of place: “the words ordinary meaning today is the human element in life; and in his later years Lutyens tended to live in a world of his own, the dance-steps of which in the words of T agore, regardless of human sentiments and desires and of the innate dignity of Man”.2

There is for example, the much celebrated dome of the Viceregal Lodge. In the words of Robert Byron writing in the Architectural Review: “its character is so unprecedented, so unriveting of comparison with known architecture… that it subordinates everything within view. Its difference from every dome since the Pantheon lies in its solidity… it has the character of a pure monument.”

Today the Lutyens’ precinct presents something of a planning and urban design dilemma: a super-elite enclave – the Orwellian ‘Farmer’s House’ in Charles Correa’s incisive terminol- ogy, of unquestionably unique heriti- age value certainly, but not very well- integrated – perhaps even anomalous – with the requirements of the contem- porary city. It is embalmed in a state of illusory stasis, victims to a suspension of planning enounced in the comfortable terminology of status quo: ‘special area’, or ‘no development zone’. But the status quo is an illusion: arbitrary, unplanned, whimsical and even illegal changes, developments, encroachments within bungalow plots and even public areas have continued to nible away at its heritage value.

 Sadly, there also seems to be a con- viction that public buildings built in this part of Delhi should be in the Lu- tyens’ (or Baker’s) style, which correctly might be referred to as the Imperial Delhi style. More than sixty years into a successful democracy, that attitude is obviously questionable, but the pity is the misguided belief that this can actually be accomplished by architects educated in contemporary architec- tural programmes, blissfully innocent of the rigorous and long education in the traditions and conventions of clas- sical European architecture needed to handle this kind of thing with even a minimum of competence. There are no exceptions to the resultant pastiches and caricatures that publicly dishon- our the spirit of precisely that heritage which we think we are respecting.

In the end, it is fascinating to remem- ber that the birth of New Delhi oc- curred virtually at the ‘moment of Cubism’ (the title of a John Berger es- say), and the construction of this last masterpiece of Imperial architecture overlapped with the early and most sig- nificant days of the modern movement in architecture, but it came into being without any reference to either of these momentous events. It was built for an- other world, another time – another people – and was soon a memorial to sensibilities and conceits destroyed forever by the Great War. That inde- pendent India also chose it as its seat of power is another story.

References
1. A map published in the Sphere 8 February 1913 showing the two locations under discussion for the building of the new capital, on page 13 of the book.