

From Mansions to Tenements: The Politics of Urban Transformation in Colonial Delhi

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The oft-repeated tale of ideal landscapes, once picturesque and stable, that fall to decay is a familiar one. This paper is about such a city, historic Delhi, and such buildings, the havelis. Delhi, sovereign city of the Mughal Kings during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, boasted of many distinguished havelis, the grand establishment of elites. Havelis in Delhi today as multi-family tenement houses, warehouses, and shops, belie their early grandeur. Rather than accept a universal and simple tale of neglect and decline from Mughal glory in the seventeenth century to their present condition, I contend that processes of disintegration, abandonment and rebuilding have operated simultaneously on the haveli and the city to transform them.

The urbanism of the walled city of Delhi has been studied for the artistic principles of the Mughals and lamented for its present slum-like condition. Aside from a few climatologists, scholars have largely neglected havelis. In my essay I look beyond physical dilapidation to examine the built form in relation to the political and economic changes in the city. As a culturally constructed entity and a microcosm of the city, havelis I argue, provide insights to understand the complex urban environment. I examine havelis in relation to Delhi's urban life, and also the city as a mirror-image of the haveli. The haveli is a microcosm of the city not only in the manner in which it has adapted and changed over time but also as a reflection of the processes that have transfigured both the haveli and the city. In this manner, studying a changing building type becomes a powerful analytic tool: a

way of grasping the transformations in the city of Delhi. Like the city, the havelis, fragmented, commercialized and rebuilt are vibrant even in their dilapidation.

British colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a profound and lasting impact in India. From 1857 to the turn of the century, Delhi underwent marked physical changes due to extensive social, economic and political restructuring under the colonial rule. The British crushed the Indian Rebellion and declared Crown Rule in India in 1858. After this time the reordering and control of the city became significant issues for the colonial government. The impoverishment of the old Mughal aristocracy and the rise of a new entrepreneurial class brought substantial transformations in the way space was perceived and used. British efforts to order the city facilitated commerce and imposed new spatial demands on the city. Viewed from the perspective of these socio-economic changes, urban transformation is a much more complex story than one of simple decline.

Both in the city and in the haveli I argue, disintegration, abandonment, and rebuilding have occurred and **re-occurred**. The decline in the power of the Mughals and the old nobility was not the end of either the city or the haveli. Demolished and rebuilt, adapted and re-used, the urban fabric endured. If havelis were once miniature cities within the city, by the turn of the twentieth century, in their **fragmentation**, and commercialization, havelis were still microcosms of the city.