



Reclaiming Identity: Colonial Imposition, Modernist Experimentation, and Cultural Identity in Indian Urbanism

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Abstract

The transformation of cities throughout history has been altered by the constant shift in social, political, economic, and technological changes. The current scale of dense urbanization is a relatively new phenomenon, and with most of the current global population occupying urban areas our cities are bound to expand, transform and possibly become utterly unrecognizable. As history progressed to the modern era, not all cities have undergone the same level of gradual and balanced evolution from antiquity to present. This paper will look into the idea that cities are meant to be innately related to their region and historical heritage they come from and how external forces in this day and age are preventing that from continuing into the future. Rather than taking on this idea through the lens of all cities, this paper will focus on the beautiful cultural identity of urbanism in India with a particular focus on the imperial plan of New Delhi and the stark contrast between smaller Indian cities. This topic was influenced by a 15-day trip to India during the Spring of 2025. The firsthand experience of such unique and vibrant urban living in the city of New Delhi and numerous other smaller cities in the state of Gujarat opened my eyes to the importance of retaining the core values of a place intact through the inevitable changes that are required from a continually advancing world.

Keywords

Urbanism; Expansion; Colonialism; Modernism; Culture; Identity.

1. Introduction

Cities are the epicenter of modern-day life, and as they have evolved and grown throughout history they have developed unique and rich histories tied to their regional specific culture and traditions. With significant population growth, technological advances and a world that is quickly adapting to new norms and needs of society, our cities are continually changing. However, the recent transformation and growth rate of cities today is unparalleled compared to the rest of history. As early as two centuries ago in 1800, over 90% of the global population was living in rural areas, but currently that has completely shifted from rural areas to urban areas. Today, over 50% of the global population is living

in urban areas, a figure that is set to reach 68% by 2050 which would add an additional 2.5 billion people inhabiting urban areas by then. (UN-Habitat, 2022) With this sheer amount of change in such a short time frame, many cities are losing much of their unique identity and cultural roots. Although this level of dense urbanization growth is a relatively new phenomena, some cities and urban areas have endured and outlived the countless obstacles that have threatened their existence while still preserving evidence of their historical identity and cultural legacy. In the Western world, Rome and Athens are two cities that date back thousands of years, each having survived the rise and fall of empires, devastating plagues, long wars, and the incessant transformations

marking the shift from antiquity to modernity. However, unlike the gradual transformations that have occurred to cities like Rome and Athens, cities today are experiencing a rapid loss of their culture, tradition, and historical significance. This accelerated shift is largely driven by the forces of imperialism, globalization, and capitalist objectives that are attempting to catapult these cities into the modern world. One such example is in New Delhi, India where the remnants of nearly a century of colonial rule continue to affect the cultural identity of a city urgently trying to return to its authentic form.

India has some of the world's most intricate and vibrant cultures, vast landscapes, and dynamic climates. Yet despite being so rich in heritage and abundant in resources, it has not shared the same historical power as many Western nations, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation. The colonial takeover of India has affected many regions and cities throughout the country which as a whole has encountered a layered history of external rule and influences. These layers can be broken up into three parts and not only relate to the changes that occurred in New Delhi but also cities like Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai): the first part, which was the colonial takeover and imprint of British rule; second, the response to colonialism through the introduction of architectural modernism, as seen through Le Corbusier's work in Chandigarh; and third, the eventual rejection of both colonial and modernist ideals in favor of creating a distinctly Indian architectural identity, that is seen through the work of Charles Correa, Raj Rewal and a variety of other Indian architects.

2. Colonial Takeover and lasting influence

By the middle of the 18th century in 1858, Britain was able to fully establish colonial rule over India and rapidly began to expand its control and dominance over the country. British rule in India was not limited to strictly economic and political control but extended into the reshaping of cities that more closely related to Western ideals and architectural styles. Starting in the late 18th century and into the early 20th century, the capital of India was located in Calcutta, however the city was not located at a convenient location as it was tucked away

near the edge of the country's eastern border. After decades of debate, the decision was finally made to shift the capital to New Delhi which had a milder climate and was more centrally located (Irving, 1981, p.27).

The decision to shift the nation's capital didn't come without hardships as Calcutta was the most European influenced city in India, which meant that the transfer and new design of similar colonial ideals would then need to be implemented in New Delhi. At this time Edwin Lutyens, a notable British architect, was selected as the primary architect that was to design the new capital. The design unsurprisingly represented a deliberate effort to impose European spatial logic, aesthetics, and symbolic architecture onto the city. New Delhi emerged not as a thorough continuation of local urban traditions but instead was rooted in Beaux Arts principles. Lutyens, influenced by notable British architect Christopher Wren, repeatedly used simple geometrical shapes and the classical arch in his conception of architecture in New Delhi. (Irving, 1981) The design of the city was not meant to merely govern India more efficiently, but to visibly express the power, permanence, and superiority of the British Empire. In the built world this superiority took the form of monumental boulevards, axial symmetry, and grand neoclassical structures.

The implementation of axial symmetry and grand avenues in New Delhi was a completely different design language when compared to Old Delhi or the area previously known as Shahjahanabad. The focus on a walkable city was mostly disregarded in the planning of New Delhi which is still explicitly noticeable in the present-day development of many of these areas. One such example is encountered at the circular marketplace of Connaught Place, which was built in the 1930's and named after the Duke of Connaught. Sitting about two miles beyond the boundary of Old Delhi, the contrast in spatial layout and atmosphere between what was new and old cannot be understated. The circular design of Connaught Place allows for a central park to sit at its core. The innermost circle is just over 300 meters in diameter, while the outermost edge extends to over 600 meters in diameter. (Nanda, Gupta, & Jain, 1999 p.355) The plan follows a radial layout, with roads

cutting through the circles and radiating outward in a design that seemingly prioritizes the movement of vehicles rather than on the movements of people. The movement of people is disrupted through many intersections that also create roadway bottlenecks, and in the context of a modernizing and expanding city, will only increasingly highlight the imbalance between traffic and user experience. The buildings that are in between the radial roads that cut into the circles, feature colonnaded facades with the corners of them

being emphasized by protruding bays. The colonnades and vernadas were superimposed by Lutyens not only in Connaught Place but all across New Delhi to create a sometimes subtle yet dominating imperial presence. These buildings are characterized by a neoclassical style with hints of traditional Indian elements that make them stand in harsh contrast to the vibrant, centuries-old architecture of nearby landmarks like Jantar Mantar and the Red Fort of Old Delhi.



Fig.1 - Red Fort, Old Delhi, 2025



Fig.2 - Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, 2025



Fig. 3 - Connaught Place, New Delhi, 2025

3. Aim for Modernism

In post-independence India, the country's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned bringing modernism to Indian cities in an attempt to become even further distanced from the past colonial legacy that was still lingering strong. Immediately following this independence from British rule, the subcontinent split into two separate nations: Pakistan, which was predominantly Muslim, and India which was predominantly Hindu. Lahore, which was the then capital of the state of Punjab was now located in Pakistan, leaving the Indian part of the state with no capital. Nehru saw this as an opportunity to design an entirely new capital city, that was meant to be modernist, forward thinking and unlike the British imposed design of New Delhi. The master plan of this new capital city was originally assigned to a team led by American town planner Albert Mayer, with the project's first press release going public in 1950. Nehru then let his excitement and ambition for the project be known by declaring *"Let this be the first large expression of our creative genius, flowering on our newly earned freedom ..., unfettered by traditions of the past ..., reaching beyond the existing encumbrances of old towns and old traditions"* (Scheidegger, Casciato, Nievergelt, & Moos, 2010 p.17). But shortly after the press release one of the senior architects on the team ended up tragically dying from a plane crash which forced Nehru to search for a new team of architects. Ironically, Nehru advised senior Indian officials to look in Europe for this new team but made it clear that the search was only for architects who would be able to make this capital, a model city for India. Through this search Nehru decided on a team of architects led by modernist Le Corbusier who was quickly named the architect advisor to the project. Corbusier was given full control and oversight into the implementation of design plans for a new capital and city that would become known as Chandigarh. The design of Chandigarh took over a decade to complete and required the work of many architects and planners from all over the world. Nehru specifically wanted to bring together diverse groups of professionals rather than strictly searching in India, as he believed that was India's best chance of keeping up and integrating

with the rest of the modern world. In a letter addressed to his wife, Corbusier stated "Chandigarh will be the city of trees, flowers, and water... of houses as simple as those of Homeric times and of some splendid edifices of the most extreme modernism". From the beginning of his work at Chandigarh, Corbusier envisioned its landscaping, green spaces, and recreational complexes to be at the core of the urban plan. He focused on creating spaces that would allow for the well-being of the city's inhabitants and began to utilize the natural elements of the landscape to locate gardens and recreational spaces where people could most comfortably congregate (Fynn, 2017, p. 15). Le Corbusier designed Chandigarh to be a grid within a square comprising 47 separate sectors, with each being 800 x 1200 meters in size and was the first city that was entirely organized according to The Modulor. (Seguin, 2014) The Modulor was Le Corbusier's universal system of measurement, embodied by human proportions, and designed to help architects and engineers achieve international standardization. The design of the city through Corbusier's Modulor system enabled harmonization throughout the city, starting from the scale of the whole urban plan, to that of the scale of individual buildings and even down into the scale of the furniture (Seguin, 2014).

Taking from what was already present on site most of the materials used to construct the buildings were local. At the start of construction on one of Chandigarh's first designed buildings 'Secretariat', Nehru gave a speech reaffirming his vision for modernization, making it clear that what was being built should not be seen as neo-colonial even though it was being designed and built by many non-Indians. He emphasized the use of local materials by stating, "The chief materials used are handmade bricks and concrete, but there is also good local building stone." (Scheidegger, Casciato, Nievergelt, & Moos, 2010 p.36-37) This would remain true for most of the buildings designed in Chandigarh with Corbusier's brutalist and modernist style integrated throughout the entire city.

4. Rejection of Colonialism and Modernism for a More Authentic Indian identity

The imposed colonial architecture onto cities like New Delhi in the early 20th century and India's post-independence pursuit to make Chandigarh the incarnation of modernity and progress, set the stage for architects like Charles Correa and Raj Rewal to begin implementing their own identity into the architecture of their country. Raj Rewal was an Indian architect and urban planner, who earned architectural degrees from universities in both Delhi and London. In 1961, he spent a year working in an architectural office in Paris and once he returned to India the following year he set up his own architectural practice in Delhi.

Similar to many Indian architects that were starting their careers in the mid 1960's, Rewal was fairly impacted by the work of Le Corbusier in Chandigarh yet he increasingly became aware of how the ideas of western culture shaped India. Rewal states "Somebody like me who came from India and went to Europe for education naturally embraced all these values. However, when I came back to India, I questioned these values because the West's orientation is totally removed from the Indian situation" (Jahanbegloo, 2010 p.18). With this insight so early on as a young architect, Rewal took a career path that differed from many of the more modernist architect ideals of the time. He believed that the development of cities needs to be in conformity with their heritage and that it is essential to keep as much of this heritage alive in old cities. Rewal's work blends the modern and the traditional wherever it is possible, and this is especially true in his design of the Asian Games Village in New Delhi. Constructed in 1982, the village was a low-rise high-density scheme of about 500 units which was designed to house the Asian Games Athletes with the units later being sold to the public. The design moved away from the new norm of highly dense high-rise buildings that were encased in glass and structured with steel, and instead incorporated the use of materials most suitable to the region while also focusing on the inhabitants. The urban pattern of interlinked housing units organically formed narrow pedestrian streets that were kept alive by nearby recreational squares and clusters of small commercial areas. The central spine

was also free of vehicular traffic, as roads leading to the parking lot were designed to be away from green spaces and set off to the edge of The Village.



Fig.4 - Site Plan, Asian Games Village, Raj Rewal

Charles Correa was another notable Indian architect, who understood that it was essential to keep the traditional architecture of a place intact. Correa, similar to Rewal, earned his architectural degrees in both India and in the West. His education in the United States, led him to deeply understand Western architectural ideas and was perhaps influential in stopping him from imposing these same ideas into India. After returning to India, Correa and Rewal both noticed that Western architecture is suited to the cold climate with enclosed 'boxes' that always separated the elements from the user on the interior. From the perspective of non-Westerners this notion was a lot clearer. (Jahanbegloo, 2010 p.20) Correa made sure to design in favor of the warm climate of India, which needed to be dictated by the scorching heat and beaming sun that is so familiar to India. In much of his Indian architecture, Correa included design elements such as the *chatri*, which was an overhead canopy of traditional Indian form as a way to provide protection and shade that was required by the climate. In his design of the Sabarmati Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad, Correa fully embraced the integration of design elements related to India's cultural identity. Through modular design he created spaces that were both opened and covered, each based on

a 6-meter by 6-meter grid, allowing for the seamless continuity of space that would be flexible for expansion. The simplistic form also allowed for the integration of climate friendly materials such as stone floors, brick walls, wooden doors, tiled roofs and louvered windows

that didn't require glass (Khan, Cantacuzino, & Correa, 1984, p.18-20). Raj Rewal and Charles Correa were just two Indian architects who reintroduced cultural identity, authenticity, and indigenous knowledge into the architectural ideals of post-independence India.



Fig. 5 - Sabarmati Gandhi Ashram, 2025. Charles Correa

5. The Need for Conservation of Cultural Identity and Traditions in New Delhi

In an urban area that is ever expanding and is estimated to become the most populous urban area in the world in the coming decades, the need for the conservation of cultural heritage, identity and traditions needs to reach farther than master plans focusing on just a few areas. India's history is so vibrant that it especially needs to be preserved and even reintroduced into its capital and fastest growing city. The colonial urban plan of grand axis and roadways can be vastly improved through a focus on the inhabitants and their everyday needs rather than a rapidly expanding urban area that is continuously losing its ties to cultural roots. The ancient city of Varanasi, located about 500 miles east of New Delhi, has some of the country's deepest ties to religion, rituals, and sacred traditions which make it uniquely stand out in the modern day. Sitting along miles of the sacred Ganges River, the city is filled with

many temples and ghats where locals and others from all over India transport passed loved ones in order for them to attain salvation and freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The dignified rituals of Varanasi display a constant cycle of life and death. Ritualistic tributes of the dead are also on full display, which offer a dignified way of saying goodbye to loved ones. Varanasi is not just an example of where the most sacred traditions of any Indian city take place but an even more exemplary example of the importance of ancient or past traditions living on.

The proposed redesign of New Delhi aims to revive urban clusters of continuous buildings and greenspaces, similar to Raj Rewal's design for the Asian Games Village, where the central road is deliberately oriented away from clusters of green spaces, or Le Corbusier's "Leisure Valley" in Chandigarh, a continuous linear park running through the heart of the city. The future of



Fig.6 - Marnikarnika Ghat, Varanasi, 2025. Sacred Cremation Ritual

New Delhi's urban design can be centered around three typologies, first the shifting of the old imperial axis into a vibrant pedestrian focused axis with spaces of ritual, care, and user based urban development. Second, the reintegration of connected buildings to revive clusters of communities that can expand and develop naturally. Third, the rebirth of climate friendly materials that aren't mass imported such as reinforced concrete, glass and steel. This idea can serve as the basis typology that allow for the conservation of a society's norms and traditions

to flourish in modern day India through the continued development and comprehensive planning policies that are required of the rapid expansion of New Delhi. The dominance of traffic circulation within the current roundabouts is disrupting pedestrian flow; this will be addressed by reducing the roadway footprint for certain radial streets. Building heights will be lowered, and a new network of interconnected earthen structures will symbolically and physically challenge the colonial-era axial hierarchy embedded in the city's original plan.

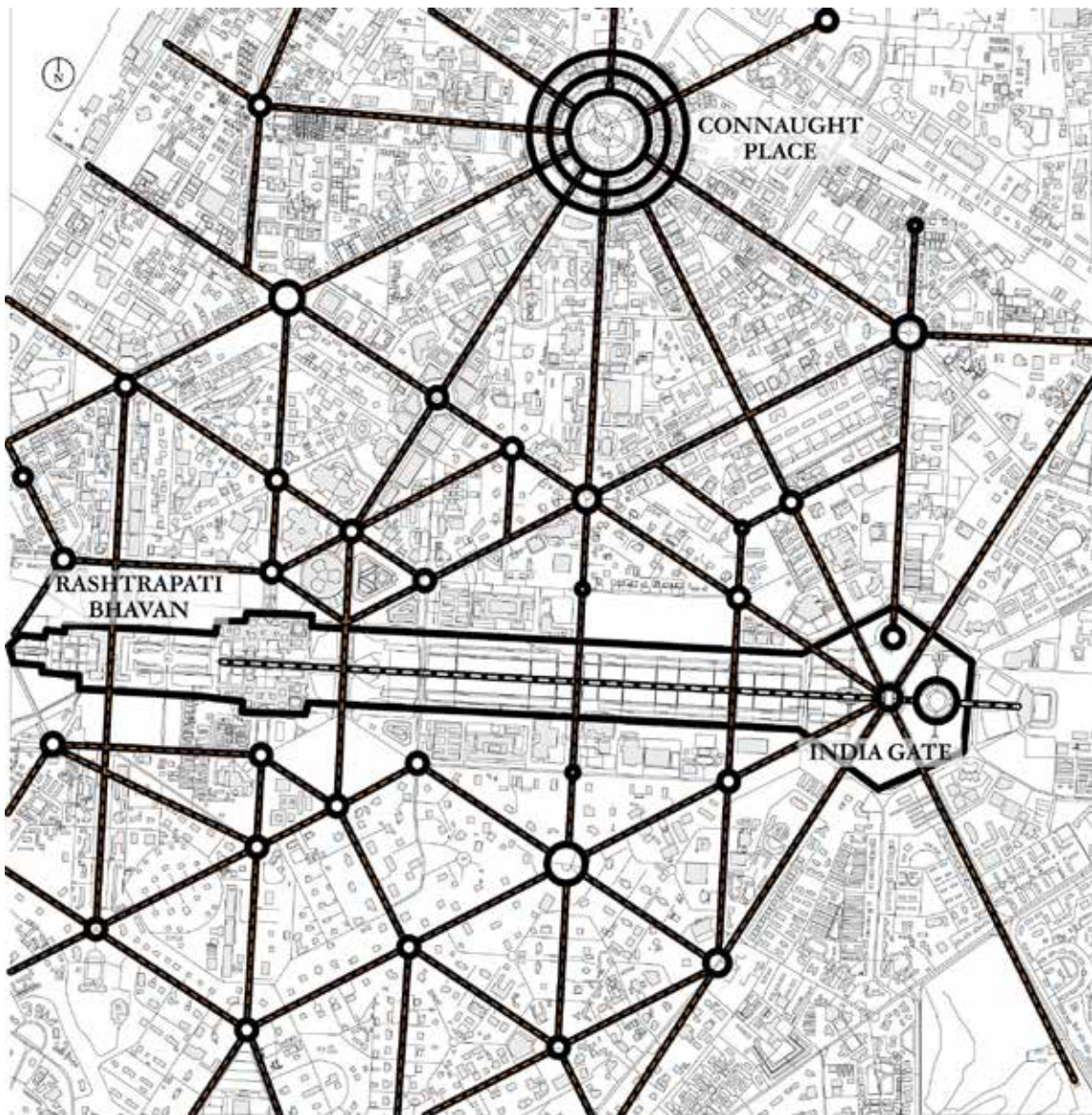


Fig.7 - Current Radial Roadways, Central Vista & Connaught Place, New Delhi

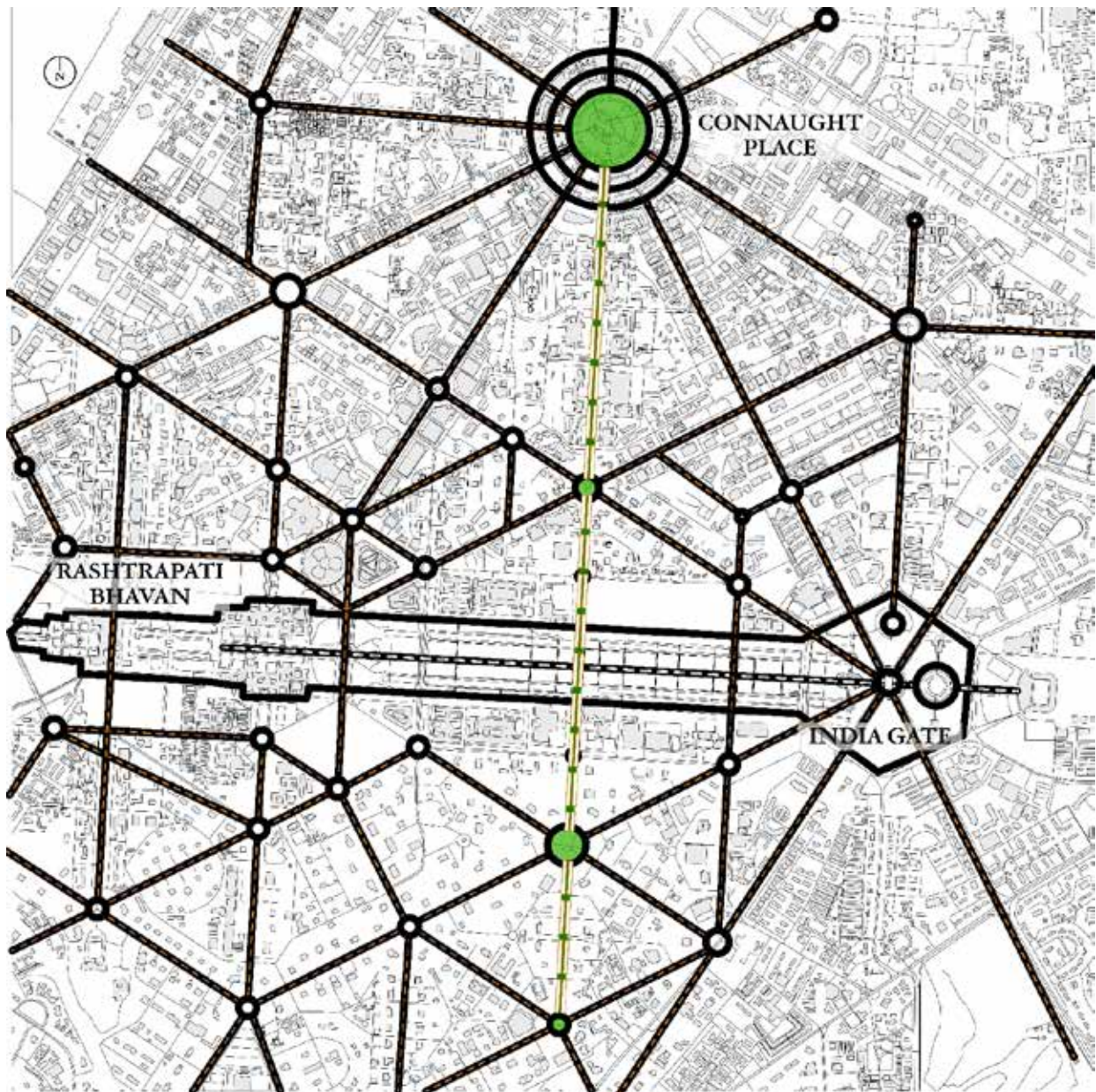


Fig.8 - Proposed redesign of radial axis grid in New Delhi, that would remove traffic entirely while utilizing the width of these grand roads to incorporate a series of clustered linear buildings. These buildings would contain housing, community space and areas designated for rituals to take place. A green linear park would run in parallel, in between the occupiable buildings.

6. Conclusion

India's urban architecture since the beginning of British colonial rule in 1858 has been shaped by a layered history of imposed colonialism, a turn to modernist ideals after the emergence of independence, and an eventual reclamation of true cultural identity. Our cities today are growing at rates seemingly unimaginable compared to the rest of human history, which leaves us sitting in the middle of a time where action is severely needed to shape them for the future. The rejection of imposed ideas on a landscape that does not fit it, such as that of Lutyens' forced British ideology on New Delhi, must be loud and clear in order to avoid missteps that can take decades or even centuries to undo. Modernist architects like Le Corbusier can impact the design and planning of non-Western cities, as seen through his design of Chandigarh, in a forward-thinking way but that doesn't mean it is the best route for preserving authenticity and cultural identity. India has some of the world's most vibrant cultures and deeply rooted traditions, which deserve not only to be preserved but to actively thrive and evolve along with the rapid expansion of its current and emerging cities.

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