BOOKS

ASIAN STUDIES


The field of Indian historical studies currently is sustaining remarkable change, much of it along new avenues of inquiry in anthropology, global systems theory, and subaltern studies. In Imagining India (Oxford, 1990), Ronald Inden argues that historians no less than Imperial administrators have systematically subverted the agency of Indians in making their own world. In Imperial Meridian (London, 1989), C. A. Bayly considers both the rise of Western mercantile capitalism and contemporary economic and political changes within India as bases for understanding the eventual domination of the subcontinent by the British and the precise manner in which hegemony was articulated. An Indian Historiography of India (Calcutta, 1989), by Ranajit Guha, explores the struggle of nineteenth-century Bengalis to overcome the epistemological roadblocks to political consciousness that were embedded in the histories of India written, commissioned, and sanctioned by the British. Common to all these studies is an attempt to understand India from the perspective of the peoples whose land it had been before the arrival of the British and other Western trading companies. They also examine critically the role of historical scholarship in articulating and sustaining the terms of engagement among Indian and European cultures. In this sort of enterprise it has become necessary to move beyond simple condemnation of British exploitation and imperialism and to examine in detail the means by which imperial control was enabled, accorded legitimacy and authority, and perpetuated—not only from the standpoint of London, but also in the eyes and minds of hundreds of millions of subjects.

It is surprising that in such accounts the role of architecture and urban space has been almost completely neglected. The two books under present consideration—both by members of the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley—provide substantial new insights and resources for integrating the study of architecture and built space into the broader fabric of political and social history. Both focus predominantly on the period of British presence and concentrate primarily on works executed by Western architects and planners or designed according to Westernizing paradigms. Thomas R. Metcalf, a historian, begins his study in the decades immediately preceding the imposition of the British Raj (1858) and continues through to the design of New Delhi in the 1910s, primarily examining individual buildings and complexes as instrumental elements of political discourse. Norma Evenson, a historian of architecture and cities, addresses the entire period from the seventeenth century to the present but limits her study geographically to the three so-called Presidency cities—Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras—as well as Delhi after the British arrival; her attention is concentrated less on individual buildings than on broader processes of planning, development, growth, and improvement.

In An Imperial Vision, Metcalf begins his account in the early nineteenth century with an analysis of several official buildings erected in Neoclassical styles in Calcutta and Madras and contrasts this British readiness to export Western conventions with a much more rarefied acceptance in England of Indian styles (chap. 1). While the latter ordinarily were acknowledged as little more than fantasy-inspiring evocations of the “exotic,” the new bureaucratic structures in India produced an intentional and profound political effect. In the new Government House in Calcutta (1799), for example, Metcalf makes the point that its scale, its siting at the head of the Maidan, and the manner in which it exceeded its ostensible prototype, Kedleston Hall, in scale and grandeur, all projected a powerful presence consonant with the imperial pretensions of the new governor-general, Lord Wellesley. A more extensive analysis might reveal to an even greater degree the means and extent of imperial control that this building instituted. For example, the siting of the building disrupted a major thoroughfare, thus requiring of all traffic a lengthy detour under the hot sun around the extensive grounds in a daily act of deference to imperial authority. And the fact that the prototype of this structure was a residence and not a town hall or other civic structure signaled the investiture of considerable authority in the private individual who held the office of governor-general and so promulgated potent indications of autocratic rule.

Metcalf’s strongest and most revealing analysis lies in his chapters devoted to the historiography of the nineteenth-century “Indo-Saracenic” style: he discusses precedents for the style in “mixed” Indian styles that amalgamated Hindu and Muslim motifs; its widespread application to imperial projects in the decades following the Sepoy Revolt (1857); and its guarded acceptance as well among Indian princes for projects within their own purview. Metcalf focuses in particular on the political advantages to be had from privileging certain periods and styles over others. He shows how instances of “mixed,” “fused,” or “assimilated” styles, culminating in Akbar’s capital city of Fatehpur Sikri, provided convenient vocabularies in which to articulate comparable political objectives of the Raj—to unite disparate religions, ethnicities, and so forth, for purposes of
control. Examining closely such designs as Mant’s Mayo College at Ajmer, the Madras Post and Telegraph Office and other works of R. F. Chisolm, the Bombay Secretariat and Prince of Wales Museum, the Madras Victoria Memorial Hall, and the Bank of Madras, Metcalf argues that Indo-Saracenic style became an essential instrument of British hegemony, proclaiming an assimilation of diverse elements of the population under a single, ostensibly harmonious rule.

Yet, despite Metcalf’s convincing demonstration that style is a powerful instrument for articulating political relations, one might justifiably expect that he address other aspects of architecture as well. Style as discussed here is in large measure a discourse of façades and other surfaces. But in the examples offered by Metcalf, one wonders also how the planning and furnishing of the Mayo College ordered the physical activities, social relationships, and intellectual inquiries of the Indian princes being trained for their roles as subordinate rulers; or how the spatial layout and classified displays within museums likely served to construct the Indian cultural heritage as wondrous, a suitable basis for fantastic reverie, but also as of the past and thus essentially dead.

There is another, equally consequential dimension of the political nature of architecture: style and form also are instruments of resistance. For although Metcalf does not discuss architecture specifically in such terms, he provides a clear basis in evidence for an examination of architecture as a discourse of resistance. He relates in some detail, for example, how the Maharajas of Jaipur compliantly employed an English architect (Swinton Jacob) for a wide variety of projects in Jaipur and vicinity, such as the Indo-Saracenic Albert Hall Museum, while maintaining a separate public works department, staffed by traditionally trained artisans, for all work within the Maharajas’ own City Palace and other residences and temples throughout the city. The Maharajas’ complicity with the British had its uses up to a point, but the dignity of their own subjectivity had to be asserted, too.

Late in the nineteenth century the English Arts and Crafts movement, not without a role in politics at home, also played a role in articulating the changing course of the British imperial presence in India. Once the British realized the immensity of the task of educating, reforming, and industrializing India, the Arts and Crafts ideal of a precapitalist village economy provided a very attractive alternate framework in which to envision Britain’s role. That framework allowed Britain to justify its presence, as Metcalf states, as a mission for “the preservation of India’s ‘traditional’ society” (chap. 5, p. 154). One major part of this project was the establishment of art schools to train craftsmen in traditional methods, though the issue at hand was, as Metcalf indicates, not aesthetic but rather political: “the power to represent, and thus to control, ‘India’” (p. 162).

But the changing realities of politics, including incipient Indian nationalist movements, required continued attention on the part of the Raj to the terms in which political discourse was conducted. With respect to nationalism in particular, it was in the interest of the Raj to preempt the debate as much as possible, by itself determining politically as well as architecturally how “national” would be defined. In chapters 6 and 7 Metcalf takes up this problem, first examining as a prototype the Neoclassical solution forged in the Union Buildings in Pretoria, by Herbert Baker, then presenting Curzon’s unyieldingly European Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, and finally telling the story of Lyons and Baker in New Delhi. Metcalf emphasizes the political purpose underlying such major enterprises: the need “to create a past for India” (p. 244) as a basis for constructing the authority and legitimacy of the Raj. But given the political urgency of this activity, one wishes that Metcalf had provided more than glimpses of the political debate gripping India at the time. The grandeur of such monuments would be thrown into striking relief if set against the growth of the Indian National Congress (founded 1885), the rise of the Muslim League (1906), or perhaps the militant rhetoric of Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928). In such contrasts the broader dimensions and weight of the architectural discourse as part of the larger political struggle become even more apparent.

In The Indian Metropolis Evenson, like Metcalf, argues that structures built by the British “served in themselves as instruments of cultural change in India” (p. vii), though her focus is somewhat different. Instead of concentrating on individual structures, she also treats street spaces, enclaves, districts, and other aspects of the broad urban fabric. In the process she opens up a wider range of concerns crucial to the life of cities, including trade, industry, materials, climate, ecology, geography, functional separation, and social segregation. Still, as Evenson’s title suggests, her analysis generally centers on modes of intervention in the urbanization process that typically were imported from the West, including systematic planning, large-scale development, zoning, and civic improvement.

Quick sketches of the growth of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay from the British arrival well into the nineteenth century are the subject of the first chapter, “Three Hybrid Cities,” but the result is not a complete understanding of the “hybrid” nature of any of them. Madras, for example, is characterized as “determined” in its “overall form” by British living patterns (p. 12). Without doubt the British preference for decentralized residences in the form of expansive villa estates (called “garden houses”) set the tone for much of Madras as well as Calcutta and to some degree Bombay. But the spatial presence of the British in all three cities was in inverse proportion to their comparatively small population. One longs to know (though admittedly the scarcity of documentary information may preclude it) more about how the social relations and institutions of the indigenous peoples were enabled through built form, how new patterns of urban space and activity among the indigenous peoples evolved in response to the British presence, or to what degree economic and social integration between the British and Indians was facilitated as well as limited by urban form.

Evenson focuses less on the “metropolis” in several succeeding chapters, as she concentrates on private residences (mostly of the British and Indian elites, but with some attention to “native” vernacular), official and religious architecture, and interior furnishing (chap. 2). Architectural ensembles planned as such (e.g., Elphinstone Circle, or the range of government buildings facing the Maidan in Bombay) are treated well, but one misses a concise overview of how all the various parts of the city grew in relation to each other, or how the forces of capital, trade, population, and the like played a role in fashioning the city. To a considerable degree, of course, Evenson’s selection necessarily reflects the nature of the materials available: what the British chose to write about, record, photograph, and preserve—not to mention what they preferred to demolish and
Evenson's approach converges with Metcalf's in a discussion of the problem of style (chap. 3). In considerably more detail than Metcalf, she discusses the rise of architectural scholarship, history, and education in India, and the attendant debates over the relative merits of Neoclassicism, Gothic Revival, traditional Hindu and Mughal styles, and the Indo-Saracenic. Evenson discusses a few major structures in Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay in the context of this debate, but she focuses most closely on proposals for the replanning of old Delhi and on the design of New Delhi. Evenson later returns to problems of education, professionalization, and style with a more pointed focus on the debate over Modernism—whether it represented yet another European style or the absence of style altogether, and how well its emphasis on health, sanitation, clean lines, and plain surfaces accorded with the traditions, economies, technologies, and climate of India (chap. 5).

Looking at the early twentieth-century urban fabric from a planning perspective, Evenson examines the application of Western methods to the “improvement” of Indian cities, particularly through the device of the Improvement Trust, as well as the contributions of such Western planners as Patrick Geddes, Henry Vaughan Lanchester, and E. P. Richards (chap. 4). For the period after Independence (1947), Evenson discusses metropolitan and regional planning efforts to deal with the almost Sisyphean problems of congestion, homelessness, poverty, and economic dislocation (chap. 6) as well as the search for an architectural style that might restore Indian identity to the metropolis (chap. 7). Agencies, commissions, and expensive projects have proliferated, yet Evenson astutely observes that “many Indians have begun to question the large city as a feasible form of settlement in India” (p. 222). Indeed, a major legacy of Britain on the subcontinent is the urban fabric of India’s major cities, built and managed to accommodate Britain’s own economic and political interests; and given the historical expansion of global economies, perhaps it was inevitable that some form of Western-scale metropolis would arise in India, either with or without direct Western intervention.

But Evenson’s observation also offers the basis for a more pointed critique: one might well argue that British attempts to control India’s politics by defining social space according to Western paradigms, or by defining Indian history in terms of a constructed “Indo-Saracenic style,” or by planning a capital city in terms that exemplified the superiority of Western rationalism, ultimately were futile. And one could advance the corresponding conclusion that Western confidence in the universality of its architecture and urbanism was in fact mistaken—that the urban metropolis itself, as a type of community space, was ill suited to the needs and well-being of the indigenous peoples. Evenson notes recent efforts to retain the narrow lanes and densely packed, low-rise fabric of Old Delhi, a kind of “preservation” that explicitly rejects such Western planners’ concerns as low density and good ventilation in favor of buildings and spaces that sustain economic and social practices that are distinctly different from those considered normative to Western cities. In a similar vein Evenson suggests that housing complexes designed by “high-art designers” who are ostensibly inspired by tradition often accord poorly either with tradition or with the needs of those who live within (pp. 233–235). There are lessons waiting to be drawn here for the understanding of incompatibilities among first- and third-world cultures—in terms of epistemics, politics, and economics, as well as built space—with profound implications for reconsidering the terms of Western intervention in so-called developing states around the world.

Metcalf and Evenson offer substantial and complementary accounts of the British presence in India, both of which contribute as well to our understanding of the role that architecture and urban space play in shaping consciousness and constructing social relations. Metcalf’s account, as perhaps befits his situation as a historian, concentrates more closely on architecture as an aspect of political discourse, while Evenson, an architectural historian, situates Indian urbanism within the broader context of a host of environmental and planning considerations. The extensive illustrations in Evenson’s book, many by the author and many in color, are an enormous asset and serve to enrich the reader’s appreciation of her discussion manifold. On the other hand the illustrations in Metcalf’s book are somewhat disappointing. The black-and-white reproductions are poor in contrast and detail, photographs of some of the major monuments under discussion show only a portion or detail of the structure, and some significant monuments discussed in the text are not illustrated at all.

JOHN ARCHER
University of Minnesota

NANCY SHATZMAN STEINHARDT, Chinese Imperial City Planning, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, xii + 228 pp., 161 figs. $38.00.

China is one of those rare ancient civilizations to endure, largely intact, into the modern age. In China, city planning and city building were integral both to dynastic legitimacy and to cultural identity. Yet, in spite of rich data that survive from so much of its long urban history, relatively few scholars, either in China or elsewhere, have attempted to come to grips with this complex story so closely bound up with all facets of Chinese civilization. The terrain is formidable, nothing less than several millennia of time and a vast expanse of space, a complex literary and historiographical record, and a burgeoning archaeological one. In the best of all worlds, the author of such a study would command many fields: institutional history, the history of ideas, cultural geography, architecture and urban planning, cartography, archaeology, and more.

If the volume under review does not deliver all the hypothetical desiderata for such a project, Chinese Imperial City Planning is nonetheless a convenient, brief summary of basic data about most of the major Chinese capitals from the early Bronze Age to modern times. The scope of the volume, however, is both more and less than its title suggests. First, the title is misleading since the volume covers the pre-Imperial period