

»Painted a *sarkari* dullish pink«: The Aesthetics of Bureaucracy in ›World-Class‹ Delhi

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Introduction

In March 2019, India's inaugural public art district, Lodhi Art District, was officially opened in the neighborhood of Lodhi Colony, a previously quiet public housing colony in South Delhi. Spearheaded by *St+Art India Foundation*, an organization dedicated to proliferating street art nationwide, the initiative collaborated with the Central Public Works Department, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, and the Delhi Urban Arts Commission, all under the purview of the central government of India. This partnership underscores the increasing involvement of street art organizations with the Indian state. However, the introduction of any art project in public space is dependent upon various economic, political, and bureaucratic factors. Notably, the Indian government's support for public art projects is channeled through initiatives such as the Swachh Bharat Mission (for urban sanitation and cleanliness) and the controversial Smart Cities Mission (for urban renewal and retrofitting), both launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. These schemes aim to enhance cities' livability and transform them into global hubs of finance and information.

This aligns with the global rise of place-branding efforts seen in cities worldwide, where Indian cities

participate in city-branding programs supported by both state and central governments. A report from 2018 titled »Transforming Urban India: Art and Culture to Play a Pivotal Role« jointly prepared by the Confederation of Indian Industry and Price Waterhouse Coopers, suggests the measures to be taken by both government and industry actors towards cultural place-making in India.¹ The report highlights a significant surge in city-branding efforts since the initiation of the Smart City Mission in India. Interestingly, industry expectations from this mission extend beyond numerical gains to include a shift in the perception of cities. This focus on urban perception underscores the neoliberal city's dual emphasis on finance and spectacle. Consequently, the Smart City Mission is anticipated to enhance the image of the city, with urban and street art playing a crucial role in crafting this image through literal image-making, thus rendering the city both financially speculative and visually spectacular. In keeping with these goals, New Delhi has witnessed the implementation of comprehensive guidelines by the Delhi Urban Arts Commission regarding the integration of public art into the cityscape. With the establishment of a comprehensive *Delhi Art Master Plan*, the city has

emerged as a model for all 100 smart cities to follow. Speaking at the »Smart Cities, Art Cities« event organized by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry in February 2018, Union Culture and Tourism Minister Mahesh Sharma insisted that art become an integral part of the ongoing Smart City Mission.²

While state involvement in urban development is not a recent phenomenon in India, the current emphasis on leveraging populist art forms for political purposes marks a departure from past practices in both scope and intent. The Bhartiya Janata Party-led central government has made substantial investments in infrastructural projects aimed at aesthetically restructuring urban India. The reconstruction of the Central Vista in Delhi, one of the biggest projects taken up in the national capital, is perceived as a homage to Prime Minister Modi, part of a broader trend of aestheticizing politics and urban spaces by neoliberal governments. The demolition of traditional modernist buildings in favor of new »world-class« residential complexes, underscores a nexus between urban economics, tourism and the art world in Delhi. Further, urban artists who are on commission often employ symbolic political language, as seen in works like Japanese street artist Suiko's portrayal of the lotus flower, the BJP's party symbol, as well as French muralist Chifumi's depiction of a hand transforming into a lotus, representing political change. Both of these murals adorn the walls at the Lodhi Art District in Delhi.

Keeping this in mind, I observe that contemporary urban aesthetics in India reflect ideological and economic imperatives to revamp Indian cities in order to: a) redevelop the city to match »world-class« urban aspirations; and b) glorify the current administration of the Narendra Modi-led central government while undermining the developmental decades of post-Independence India. I examine such urban aesthetics in Delhi through the lens of art statism, focusing particularly on the Lodhi Art District, where street art embodies both inequitable urban redevelopment and right-wing ideology. In the first section of the paper, entitled »Whither/withering Modernism?«, I delve into how the Lodhi Art District mirrors a larger trend of urban revitalization driven by state and commercial interests, overshadowing the neighborhood's historical significance and conflicting with the ideals of Indian

modernist architecture. In the second section, named »*Sarkari* lives, *sarkari* aesthetics«, I examine how urban regeneration initiatives, especially in public housing complexes in Delhi, use narratives of moral decay and renewal to justify the blurring of boundaries between art and place-making as well as to symbolically rewrite Delhi's modernist past. For this, I analyze the policy and journalistic discourse surrounding bureaucratic aesthetics, framing contemporary aesthetic urban transformations as synonymous with progress and renewal, while influencing perceptions of public space and national identity.

Whither/withering Modernism?

Since 2015, St+Art India Foundation has organized annual street art festivals in Lodhi Colony. What began with the painting of a few murals, facilitated by the local Municipal Corporation Department (MCD) and permissions from residents, had evolved into a full-fledged cultural event by 2016. By 2018, the neighborhood boasted up to 30 murals by Indian and international urban artists; the number grew to 50 by March 2019, marking the largest urban intervention ever undertaken by a public art organization in India. The official press release for Lodhi Art District in 2016 stated that: »Public Art Districts have been known to improve the visual identity of cities worldwide and, in cases, led to an increase in tourism«.³ The process of officially designating urban areas as art districts had commenced in Delhi, a trend now observed in other Indian cities as well, indicating the Indian state's interest in promoting and enabling art-led urban revitalization efforts. Interestingly, all urban neighborhoods currently designated and promoted as art districts in India have been »low-lying« and visually directly opposed to what may be called an aspirational aesthetic. The only relation that these neighborhoods have had to art before this is that they were supposedly in need of it. In this case, the very designation of a neighborhood as an art district serves to produce the sensibility of artistic space.

The act of designating a dilapidated area that had no prior presence of either art galleries, artist residences, or art educational institutions is reminiscent of Zukin's distinction between naturally occurring art districts

and art districts imposed from above.⁴ Naturally occurring art districts, unlike artificially designated ones like in Lodhi Colony, are understood to emerge organically over time in historically marginalized or neglected neighborhoods, often driven by the creative energy of local communities and artists, who are drawn to affordable rents and ample studio space. Their art programs are not imposed from above, but emerge from grassroots initiatives and community collaborations. Consequently, the aesthetic and cultural identity of these districts is deeply intertwined with the lived experiences and socio-economic realities of the residents. In contrast, the Lodhi Art District exemplifies a top-down approach to urban revitalization, where street art is instrumentalized as a tool for gentrification and commercialization.

The selection of Lodhi Colony, a subsidized public housing colony mainly occupied by government officials, implies that the target audience could be both locals and tourists. For residents, street art could offer a revitalizing cultural experience, while cultivating civic pride and bolstering support for the state's urban renewal endeavors. The use of terms like »world-class« in official discourse signals an intent to attract a broader, potentially global, audience. By positioning the Lodhi Art District as a tourist hotspot, the project seeks to draw visitors interested in art and culture. This investment in commissioned street art also reflects a calculated effort by the government to shape public perception and convey a specific narrative about Delhi's urban progress. The Lodhi Art District, thus, seems to connect more closely to concerns about place than about art. In fact, St+Art India curator Giulia Ambrogio stated in an interview with »Travel & Leisure« magazine that, »through this public art project, we hope to uplift the neighborhood and create an impact in everyone's lives«⁵ and creative director Hanif Kureshi told »Catch News« that »the Lodhi Colony project is like a pilot«, and that if the »experiment« were to be successful, it would be used as a case study for redevelopment elsewhere.⁶

Art historians have long recognized the significance of public art in driving gentrification, a trend observed in cities like London and New York. This analysis extends to cities of the global South like Delhi, where parallels can also be drawn to famous examples like China's 798 Factory Art District. Sociologists Xuefei



Figure 1: A view of Lodhi Colony, now Lodhi Art District. Delhi, 2023 (Source: Author)

Ren and Meng Sun discuss its transformation from an arts hub (akin to SoHo in New York and London) into a sought-after real estate area, being led essentially by official designation by the local government in 2006 and promotion as a prime tourist destination during the Beijing Olympics. The official endorsement, »led to a rapid spate of commercialization, and by the time of the 2008 Olympics, 798 Factory had [...] become a cluster of international galleries and boutique shops catering mostly for tourists«.⁷ By this logic and comparison, the Lodhi Art District seems to be an exemplar of tourism generation by the state, based on entrepreneurial urban policies that prioritize interests of capital and image creation over actual development in the area. One must contextualize the Lodhi Art District within the political and economic landscape of urban redevelopment and revanchism in Indian cities specifically. Understanding the art-districtification of Lodhi Colony requires examining its historical context, ongoing changes, and future redevelopment plans alongside similar initiatives in other public housing complexes in Delhi. Writing a history of the neighborhood, urban demographer Veronique Dupont traces the pattern of residential segregation that Lodhi Colony was established on, that is, the British idea of segregating housing by stature. She writes:

Since the early 1950s, the government built housing estates for its employees who represent a very significant share of the working population in a

national capital city like Delhi. Many such residential estates (locally called ›colonies‹) were constructed in the southern part of the town [...] this specific feature of the urban landscape, and its consequences in terms of segregation along socio-economic lines, has been underlined already in studies on Delhi and even qualified as ›salaried apartheid‹ [...].⁸

Designed in the 1940s by William Henry Medd, who collaborated with Herbert Baker and Edwin Lutyens during New Delhi's construction, the buildings of Lodhi Colony prioritize both utility and community. Reflecting on the role of the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) in the construction of Delhi as a modernist urban ideal, architect Randhir Singh, in his exhibition entitled »C.P.W.D.«, suggests that workers of the pre-Independence Public Works Department were influenced by design movements such as the International Congresses of Modern Architecture and their ideas of rationalized production, standardization, and a need for equitable distribution of wealth with low-cost housing. After Independence, the CPWD continued to promote a modernist ideal with numerous housing projects around Delhi. These modernist housing complexes, spearheaded by well-educated Indian architects, became the ideal to be emulated across the country. They stood, in a way, for the values of a rationalist Indian nation-state.⁹

Now, however, the CPWD is at the forefront of the proposed redevelopment of Lodhi Colony. The aesthetic revamp being carried out in Lodhi Colony is part of the central government's plan to redevelop seven old public housing colonies—others being Netaji Nagar, Sarojini Nagar, Nauroji Nagar, Kasturba Nagar, Thyagraj Nagar, Srinivaspuri, and Mohammadpur—in South Delhi. It is also noticed that:

...along with the destruction of the Hall of Nations, the government is moving to demolish entire neighborhoods of CPWD housing. Some have already been replaced, such as Kidwai Nagar next to South Extension, with high-rise apartment building and bland commercial complexes. Similar demolition plagues the many modernist bungalows that dot the city. They too are being torn down and often replaced with unremarkable developer driven flats.¹⁰

This is in order to fulfill the government's plan to build a Common Secretariat that would bring together the various ministries and departments under one roof. Journalist Sudeshna Banerjee reported in 2018 how this »ties in with the steady demand that sprawling bungalows in Lutyens' Delhi for ministers and senior MPs are remnants of a colonial era and have no place in the world's largest democracy. The suggestion has been that they should be pulled down to make way for high-rise apartment blocks for ministers and MPs«. ¹¹ Delhi Urban Arts Commission Chairman P. S. N. Rao had stated in a press release that »the best way to initiate (the redevelopment) was to start razing existing structures of government flats and replacing them with high-rises, using land for commercial purposes like shops, offices, hospitals and hotels«. ¹² A news report also reveals that in 2016, the »CPWD had given a proposal to the Urban Development Secretary Rajiv Gauba, wherein it said that residential complexes in Lodhi Road will be demolished and the 4000 families staying there will be relocated so that the secretariat can be built in five years«. ¹³

The push for high-rise housing complexes in Delhi coincides with the introduction of a revised land-pooling policy aimed at addressing the city's housing shortage. However, it is crucial to question not only whether housing facilities are being reconstructed, but also the nature of the structures replacing subsidized housing complexes. If luxury units are about to replace existing apartments, it raises concerns about the target beneficiaries of these urban reforms. For example, another public housing complex in Nauroji Nagar is slated to become a fully commercial estate, while a significant portion of Sarojini Nagar, a similar colony, will host commercial infrastructure, including service apartments. This shift in housing typology suggests an impending class shift associated with these projects. Researchers Manju Menon and Kanchi Kohli highlight that, »in most of the seven areas, the existing units of type I, II and III are being replaced by type IV, V and VI indicating that there is a shifting out of a class of government staff from these premium areas through this housing project«, ¹⁴ while Former Planning Commissioner of the Delhi Development Authority, Sanjay Pathak, thinks that such »verticalization of infrastructure« in Delhi, by replacing government housing with new ›world-class‹ looking residential

complexes, makes sense only for higher income groups«. ¹⁵ During a personal interview in 2019, Kusumlata, a resident of Lodhi Colony and a government officer herself, reluctantly mentioned to me that some acquaintances and fellow residents who had to move during the redevelopment of other government colonies were unable to return to the new residential complexes due to exorbitant maintenance or license fees. ¹⁶

More importantly, this revamp seems to be an attempt at reshaping the seat of power, the central parts of the national capital, to one-up the important restructuring of Delhi carried out under the vision of the country's founding Prime Minister, the Indian National Congress party's Jawaharlal Nehru. The aimed completion date of the project is not without symbolic value either. The year 2025 not only commemorates India's 75th Independence Day but also marks the centenary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu nationalist organization that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was affiliated with and began his political journey as a member of. The Central Vista Project is perceived as an endeavor to imprint his legacy on the national capital, while simultaneously effacing the imprint of Nehru's vision: »it is grand in scope, a bid to redraw the democratic icon of India's capital, in much the same way his efforts to reshape Indian politics, culture, and the country's understanding of its history are all extensions of his personality«. ¹⁷ The project's chief architect, Bimal Patel, has called the project a »thoughtful modernization« of Delhi. In an interview to *Quartz Magazine*, he argues that »the Central Vista will play an important role in defining new India«. ¹⁸ He draws inspiration from his father, Hasmukh Patel, known for pioneering regional modernism in Ahmedabad and contributing to India's urban modernization with his emphasis on simplicity and utility in design. Bimal Patel's approach to modernism involves incorporating the pragmatic style of architects such as Joseph Allen Stein, Achyut Kanvinde, and Habib Rahman, all of whose architectural influence the city of Ahmedabad is dotted with. Journalist Shikha Trivedy writes:

If Bimal Patel's work is infused with the minimalist grammar of modernism, it's because his early education and sensibilities were shaped by Ahmedabad. Supported by the city's business

community — particularly the textile magnates — the city welcomed modernism in the 1950s beginning with Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. ¹⁹

It is often argued that »modern architecture was adopted during the Nehru period as a suitable vehicle for the technological and social programs of rapid modernization [...] to make a clean break with the cultural forms of the Raj: Modernism had some of the right associations with »progress« and »liberalism««. ²⁰ Further, in post-Independence Delhi, the Indian state was always keen on »a utilitarian and frugal modernism« in urban development. ²¹ Owing to Central Vista's heritage value and its importance as a national space of democratic accessibility, all government committees had always emphasized architectural control and ecological restraint in this area. Patel, however, refers to the pre-existing buildings in central Delhi as »inefficient« and »hotchpotch«, and sees the land as under-utilized. These aesthetic contradictions, which may also be read as competing claims to modernism itself, are reminiscent of what architectural historian William Jr. Curtis wrote in his 1987 essay »Modernism and the Search for Indian Identity«:

Sometimes, the modern is a liberator, which even allows a new way to re-examine basic values in tradition after a period of decadence, fragmentation, or foreign occupation. Much depends upon the strength and relevance of the import, and upon the resilience and cultural depth of the recipient; attitudes towards modernisation will also take on many different ideological shades. ²²

The contradiction in the narratives around architectural modernism is most strongly felt today in the redevelopment of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, also being carried out by Patel's company HCP Design under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister of India. Designed by modern architect Charles Correa, the Ashram has been a pivotal representation of India's relationship to the modernist style of architecture in the 1960s, with its »brick piers, concrete beams and low pavilions [...] intelligent blending of Le Corbusier and Kahn [...] humble scale and meandering route [...] the Indian vernacular [...] encapsulating the moral restraint

of Gandhi».²³ Activists and residents fear, however, that the Ashram's »world-class-making« may be a ruse for an appropriation of Gandhi's ideology as well as a commercialization of the compound.²⁴ All these aesthetic decisions in urban space seem to reflect the concept of the »real estate state« in India, characterized by government actions that favor developers and encourage land speculation.²⁵ While aesthetics may not directly cause gentrification here, they serve as a distraction and incidental pleasure. Street art appears to mask and enable an unfair urban redevelopment process, while ignoring the grassroots movements and cultures of the places in which it is introduced. The residents I spoke with during field visits in Lodhi Colony were unhesitant in expressing their discontent with the new situation of their neighborhood (ever since it was turned into an art district). What, according to resident Kusumlata, used to be a »safe and quiet« residential colony, is now thronged by »all kinds of people«, including »boys who create a ruckus« and »girls who wear any kind of clothes they like and step out«.²⁶

The process of Central Vista's reconstruction has also been criticized for eroding spaces of open participation. According to a Times of India report, the Indian Institute of Architects (IIA) had opposed the Delhi Development Authority's proposed changes to the Central Vista in Delhi, citing violations of Delhi Master Plan norms for public sector units and recreational use.²⁷ A coalition of environmentalists, architects, heritage conservationists, urban planners, and citizens had also urged the Delhi Development Authority to reconsider the redevelopment proposal. Concerns included the anticipated loss of open and green spaces in central Delhi, as well as the perceived lack of transparency in the government's approach to the project. Recalling her strolls through the Central Delhi area, writer Anandi Mishra recalls that »the boulevards dotted with white bungalows some pristine, others dilapidated—that had colonnaded verandas and spacious gardens made the area feel like not just a relic from a colonial past but a special part of our present too«.²⁸ Much like Kusumlata, Mishra's tone belies a nostalgia for democratic and authentic spaces in Central Delhi. More importantly, both their narratives reveal differing but equally pertinent visions of an urban modernity no longer accessible. The ongoing debates surrounding projects like the Central



Figure 2: Lodhi Colony housing after turning into Lodhi Art District. Delhi, 2019 (Source: Author)

Vista reconstruction underscore a broader question about a withering modernism in India, as the ideals of democratic participation, architectural authenticity and heritage preservation contend with an exclusivist and privatizing idea of urban space.

Sarkari lives, sarkari aesthetics

In official paperwork surrounding above-mentioned redevelopment projects, one notices a strategic rhetoric that attempts to render the need for structural urban regeneration in aesthetic terms, installing a new visual paradigm of gauging developmental progress. In the art projects introduced into the area, a general glorification of the neighborhood and self-reflexivity towards the very site is noticeable. Even within the content of the artwork, a reference to the place where the piece of art is being made or displayed is not uncommon. However, the invocation of the site in such street art further invokes creative place-making initiatives; the art is not specific to the site, so much as it produces a place to suit the ends of redevelopment. Art critic Jeff Kelley distinguishes between »site« and »place« when it comes to public art, especially site-specific art. For him, site is an abstract location in such art, whereas place refers

to the particularized culture bound to a geographical region.²⁹ Praveen Prakash, Joint Secretary of Ministry of Urban Development and the Director of Swachh Bharat Mission, stated in the press release for Lodhi Art District that »the wall art would also promote Lodhi Colony, which has always been known for maintaining clean surroundings«. ³⁰ Thus, even as art finds itself aligned to the site, it becomes instrumental in reifying the place. In doing so, it serves to conceal the economic-political agendas behind this reification.

In a section titled »Why Lodhi Colony?« in the coffee table book on the Lodhi Art District, jointly produced by St+Art India Foundation and Central Public Works Department, some of the reasons behind choosing the area are that: it is »a centrally located vast neighborhood, with broad streets and large sidewalks, which makes it a very good space for public viewing«, that »it is not a gated area, the buildings are symmetrically placed on the broad streets«, that they have »large facades which are homogenous and wide with an interesting architecture comprising of elements like arches and windows« and that it has »no visual noise in terms of hoardings«. ³¹ The phraseology used here to describe the neighborhood contrasts with that used by St+Art India Foundation and other media outlets; nevertheless, the Central Public Works Department's intention to put Lodhi on the cultural map is consistent with the general narrative of world-class city-making. The selection of a neighborhood as an art district is evidently linked to its accessibility and foot traffic. Akshat Nauriyal, co-founder of St+Art India, articulates the rationale behind choosing Lodhi Colony for such a purpose in a manner that appears preordained, almost as if lifted from a policy handbook: »we wanted to create multiple artworks in the form of an open walkthrough gallery [...] so Lodhi was a *natural* choice«. ³² The perceived inevitability of identifying an area suitable as a canvas is not as straightforward as it appears. When examined within an economic framework, this assumption reveals the naturalization of spatial choices in the city. One is reminded of art historian Rosalyn Deutsche's demystification of the city when she writes that »the notion that the city speaks for itself conceals the identity of those who speak through the city«. ³³ The notion that Lodhi Colony is a natural or obvious choice stems from ideas rooted in a

value system that dictates how Delhi, as a tourist city, should be utilized and portrayed.

It is the urban interventions made by street art that offer the aesthetic-moral justification for economic projects in Delhi by relying on a binary of taste, with adjectives such as staid versus cool, dull versus colorful, and even symmetrical versus irrational used repeatedly in discussions around these projects. In fact, the whole discourse around the reconstruction and revitalization of neighborhoods such as Lodhi Colony and East Kidwai Nagar is rooted in the need for these to match up to the »world-class« look of the rest of the city. The visual interpretation of modernist architecture is posed as a key justification for its redevelopment, while at the same time utilizing its elements and materiality to enhance the visual appeal of the artworks. While the modernist roots of Lodhi Colony's design are important to popularize the new world-class space it will be turned into, they are also seen as representing an uninteresting and irrelevant lifestyle in decay. Graphic illustrator Amogh Bhatnagar, writing about the arches that are so central to the design of Lodhi Colony and other modernist buildings by Lutyens (and even Stein), says that »the arches in the interior of the colony, unadorned with public art, stand in the centre of giant walls« and that »these arches highlight three distinct styles of architecture — the traditional Islamic architecture of the tombs, an imperial classicism in Lodhi Colony, and the Indianised midcentury modern aesthetic of Stein's India International Centre and other adjacent buildings«. ³⁴

For example, while some murals exploit the arch, common in wide facades in the modernist architecture of Lodhi, by making it a necessary part of the mural's content, some artists said that their murals were inspired by the textures of the colony's walls. ³⁵ Hanif Qureshi explains that street art can add depth and perspective to »symmetrical« spaces, and Akshat Nauriyal says that Lodhi Colony »has *symmetrical* blocks created in a localized typology. The façades that it presented were beautiful, large and *symmetric*, which meant that almost every artist got a similar canvas to play with, and hence, there is a semblance of *symmetry* to the entire project«. ³⁶ The recurring theme of challenging symmetry through art implies a rejection of the modernist aesthetic, rooted solely in utility, in favor of a postmodern, kitschy, and steely visual landscape throughout the city. The



Figure 3: The arch in the facades of the housing at Lodhi Colony. Delhi, 2023 (Source: Author)

binary of boring symmetry and artistic eccentricity is carried forward by journalist Sneha Bura, who, in a conversation with Kureshi, writes that:

In the well planned Lodhi Colony, built by the British colonial establishment in the 1940s to house government employees, the neatly aligned residential buildings are equidistant from each other and are monotonously similar in scale and color. The drab pink walls are sometimes sullied with posters, with paint chipping off in small, sporadic sums. The pedestrian friendly neighborhood is devoid of gates and the large, empty walls of the housing colonies are blanks canvases waiting to be exalted by compelling artistic expressions.³⁷

This exaltation of the artistic is actually the takeover of the modernist by the spectacular, but under the very garb of modernism. Randhir Singh has remarked in his C.P.W.D. exhibition description that »the narrative

of modernism in India largely ignores these CPWD housing projects in favor of large, signature projects, often built by Western architects«. ³⁸ It represents what he calls India's tortured relationship with its modernist identity. Instead of a mere nostalgic revival, cities are witnessing a swift conversion of Nehruvian-era cultural complexes, paralleling the disavowal of the developmental, progressive, and secular legacy of the country. In »Why Lodhi Colony?«, CPWD comments on the architecture of Lodhi Colony thus: »(it) represented a typical case of society's apathy to civil values and decaying blocks of Government quarters [...] Huge walls were *painted a sarkari dullish pink*«; ³⁹ and the artworks are seen as bringing a civic upgrade, even by the organization that was formed during India's years of modernist development.

The walls in many of these public housing colonies are painted a pastel shade of pink, channeling »the everyday mundanity of the *sarkari* aesthetic.« ⁴⁰ By using aesthetic binaries such as beautiful/ugly, dull/bright, staid/cool, etc., to describe public housing of the modernist decades and by pathologizing the bureaucratic lives associated with it, such articulation seamlessly interweaves aesthetics with economics and facilitates the right-wing's delegitimization of India's modernist past. Indeed, it is not solely the street art movement, but also the surrounding popular cultural narratives that steer us toward a seemingly rational conclusion regarding the essential requirement for visual enhancement. In recent academic discourse, it is stated with utmost candidness that »although the Habitat Centre is surrounded by staid government housing projects, the cool quotient is reinforced not just with many designers and premium brands located here, but also by the »wall art« that one gets to see around«. ⁴¹ Sudeshna Banerjee begins her report on the »most ambitious makeover« of the apparently »now-crumbling government colonies« in Delhi thus:

Decaying structures that stand out like forgotten outposts of a lost era against the backdrop of world class modern buildings mushrooming in other parts of the city are being pulled down to make way for the kind of high-rise structures that sometime back would be unthinkable as government housing.⁴²

This pervasiveness of an aesthetic discourse around infrastructural projects in the city, in fact, suggests nothing less than the installation of a new paradigm of viewing and gauging developmental progress in urban India. The metrics are not arithmetic anymore; they are visual, for, as interdisciplinary geographer D. Asher Ghertner writes, »the world-class aesthetic operates as a regime for partitioning visual attributes of spaces«.⁴³ Banerjee goes on to say:

*As one drives through the gates of East Kidwai Nagar one can only gape with awe at the 21-floor high-rise towers. Government flats never looked this glitzy; the new complex is nothing short of a metamorphosis. Not long back here stood the old colony for government servants, low-rise match-box structures that reflected the drudgery of life behind bulky files.*⁴⁴

Compare this with another description from the same report: »the new homes for government servants have modular kitchens, hot and cold water supply, solar lighting, a club with a swimming pool, tennis courts, jogging tracks, terrace gardens, a shopping complex, a primary school and banking facilities«.⁴⁵ The easy interweaving of a purely aesthetic outlook towards architecture with an almost pathological outlook towards the lives associated with it, which are articulated in narratives around Lodhi Colony as well, helps to naturalize the world-class aesthetic as not only desirable but also inevitable in the 21st century. It serves to justify the need for regeneration as an almost natural metamorphosis. While modernization would imply bringing civilization to a certain area, »regeneration« seems to stand for something far more beneficial. It implies that a previously thriving or progressive environment has undergone a regressive decline and requires revitalization. The analogizing of the city to a natural organism has been a common trope in cities in need of capital investment across the world, »from Manchester in the 1860s to Detroit in the 1960s to modern-day Bangalore«.⁴⁶ Such a pathologization aids the development of a conception of public space that hides its own political and economic nature.

Bureaucratic aesthetics, in general, pertain to the visual and stylistic components linked to bureaucratic systems and settings, and have been characterized by

monotony, repetition, impersonality, and colorlessness, reflecting the standardized and procedural essence of bureaucratic procedures. Structurally, they have been seen to prioritize uniformity over customization, resulting in an aesthetic of detachment and formality, while neutral shades and muted tones dominate these spaces. These aesthetic attributes not only influence the physical manifestation of bureaucratic spaces but also impact the wider cultural interpretations around bureaucracy, communicating ideas about predictability, organization and stability, while also evoking a sense of rigidity and an absence of spontaneity. But, this pathologization of Indian bureaucratic structures associated with the Nehruvian era dovetails the populist narrative of moral decay associated with what is known as Lutyens' Delhi— a term denoting the central area of New Delhi, named after the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens— of which Lodhi Colony is a part. Writer Kapil Komireddi notes that Lutyens' Delhi, once symbolizing the nobility of republican India, gradually transformed into a phrase associated with moral degradation, synonymous with corruption and decadence. It is no wonder, then, that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's project to redesign these areas in the center of New Delhi, has also been seen as a populist and nationalist attempt to remake the national capital in his own image, »on a promise of draining »Lutyens' Delhi« of the remnants of the Anglo-Indian encounter«.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Analyzing the evolving urban landscape of contemporary Delhi reveals that the transformation of urban aesthetics in Delhi is not merely about art or efficiency; it is equally about the takeover of city space by commercial interests. The government's intervention in transforming Lodhi Colony into an art district reflects a calculated effort to rebrand the neighborhood and attract investment, rather than an organic response to local artistic expression and community needs. By transforming the once-monotonous government quarters into a cultural hub, the neoliberal state strategically leverages street art to signify a break from the past and to appropriate and dismantle the legacy of modernist ideals in India. The discourse

surrounding bureaucratic aesthetics in the context of infrastructural projects, such as the redevelopment of Delhi's government colonies, extends beyond mere visual appeal. It intertwines with broader narratives of societal progress, modernization, and populism. Generating a new visual paradigm of urban progress, the transformation of bureaucratic spaces is portrayed as necessary and as moving away from perceived stagnation and decay. The contrasting depictions of Delhi's old and new government quarters illustrate how aesthetic perceptions are deeply intertwined with political agendas and economic imperatives. The juxtaposition of drudgery with glitz in public housing not only reflects a shift in architectural style but also a reimagining of bureaucratic ethos. By pathologizing the previous state of government quarters as emblematic of moral decline, the discourse rationalizes the imperative for regeneration as a natural and inevitable process. This transformation transcends mere aesthetics; it symbolizes a deliberate effort to rebrand public spaces and reshape the narrative surrounding urban development. The emphasis on street art as a catalyst for urban regeneration serves to veil the underlying neoliberal agenda of privatization and commercialization. Finally, examining this phenomenon through the lens of regulatory governance, particularly in the context of initiatives like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, provides insights into how the state might eventually employ populist art forms like street art as a mechanism for social control and urban management.

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Abstract

I argue that contemporary urban aesthetics in India reflect ideological and economic imperatives to revamp Indian cities in order to: a) redevelop the older parts of the city to match ›world-class‹ urban aspirations and b) glorify the Indian state's policies, while undermining the developmental decades of post-Independence India. I focus especially on the Lodhi Art District, which becomes representative of the state's conflicted relationship to architectural modernism in India, as well as the aesthetic face of inequitable urban redevelopment.

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