



SIR EDWIN LUTYENS: ARCHITECT OF THIS HOUSE

by William Mark Pimlott

Empire, fixed there by the great Shah Jahan. Now, the British Empire's largest territory was to be erected there. It was to be an Imperial City, as the King expressed: "It is my desire that the planning and designing of the public buildings to be erected will be considered with the greatest deliberation and care, so that the new creation will be in every way worthy of this ancient and beautiful city."¹

The plan of the new city would be left to a new body, the Delhi Town Planning Committee, headed by a trio of three carefully selected individuals, Capt. George S.C. Swinton of the London County Council; John A. Brodie, the Engineer of the Borough of Liverpool; and Edwin Landseer Lutyens, a successful and already accomplished country house architect in Surrey. Lutyens was selected after exhaustive correspondence between the RJBA in London and Lord Crewe, chief aide to the recently installed Viceroy, Lord Hardinge (whose brainchild was the transfer of the capital). Robert Grant Irving's extensive thesis on Imperial Delhi seems to establish that Lutyens's appointment was perfectly legitimate, and unrelated to Lutyens's connections with Viceregal heritage (Lutyens married Emily Lytton, daughter of Lord Lytton, Viceroy some thirty years before). The mandate of the Committee was solely to determine the siting of the city, to arrive at a Master Plan and to make a report justifying their decision. It

was not until late in 1912 that the responsibility of designing any buildings was actually awarded to Mr. Lutyens who, against the staunch opposition of local British architects in India, lobbied strongly for the task. The commission of buildings, which included four churches, houses for Indian princes, a shopping district, a Records Office, Parliament, Secretariat, and Palace was apportioned by Lutyens to a number of architects. C.A. Blomfield designed most of the Princes' town houses; the Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals were designed by H.A.N. Medd; a third church was designed by A.G. Shoosmith (Lutyens's representative in New Delhi); a fourth was designed by W.S. George; the Legislative Assembly and the two Secretariat buildings were designed by Lutyens's closest collaborator in the design of Delhi, Herbert Baker. In Lutyens's mind, the most attractive piece of the commission was, quite naturally the Government House - the Viceregal residence. It was to be the focal point of the plan the Delhi Town Planning Committee and later, that Lutyens and Baker had laboured so intensely upon. It was to be British rule in India manifest.

The remainder of this discourse will be devoted to this one building, which became known as (much to Lutyens's delight) the Viceroy's House.

The Viceroy's House sits majestically on the top of Raisina Hill, to the

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ON THE MORNING of 12 December 1911, a crowd of one-hundred thousand or more crowded the large arena for the Coronation Durbar of King Emperor George V, to the north of Delhi, India. The event was the last of its type to be held in that country. The King-Emperor and the British Empire would be memories when India gained independence some thirty-six years later. That day, however, a very evident King Emperor announced the transfer of the seat of the Government from the prosperous commercial city of Calcutta (in the east, with a substantial European population), to Delhi, located in the north, on the arid plains bordering the river Jumna. It had been the site of fifteen cities through a history of twenty-four hundred years and most notably the seat of the Mughal



Facing page: The East Front; the bust of Lutyens in the Staircase Court, inscribed: "Architect of this House"; a battered wall, above.

south of the walled city of Shahjahanabad. One proceeds to the Palace along the one and three-quarter mile long, eight hundred foot wide avenue that lays before it like a great carpet, the colours of which, by Lutyens's design, have been restricted to the green, red and cream of the earth and stone, and the blue of water and sky. Visually framing the palace from afar are Herbert Baker's Secretariats (now the Home and Foreign Offices of the Government of India), which rest at the front of Raisina Hill, forming a propyleum to this Indian 'Acropolis'. As one draws closer to these buildings, the Viceroy's House sinks below the horizon, and its imperious dome seems to barely float above the hot, shimmering pavement. Then, the ramp between Baker's buildings that obscures the view of the palace slips away, and its full, broad front is finally visible.

This front, like the remainder of the house, is immense, some six hundred and fifty feet wide, presenting one with its noble colonnades, and an imperial presence. Unlike Baker's Secretariats which flank the Raj Path in the Viceroy's House's huge forecourt, and unlike all buildings carried out previous to it by the British, (which 'fused' Victorian and

Indian 'styles'), the building seems to be a pure mass, which has been modulated in order to allow light and shadow the honor of articulating the elevations. The modulation and description of mass, as opposed to 'architectural construction' is what contributes to the success of the exterior of the House, and what places it far ahead of the buildings of his contemporaries in India. The control of the qualities of the mass, which only Lutyens (and by training, Shoosmith) had mastered, became known as his 'Elemental Mode'. The 'Mode' really only attempted to achieve two things - to allow light and shadow to provide most of the articulation of the form; and to make the mass 'sit' better on the ground through such methods as the battering of walls.²

Of course, Lutyens's skill made these aims much more complex in practice than they seem in statement. Indeed, the proportions developed by him in execution are unique (there seems to be a strange 'rightness' about them); in attempts to emply the technique, they are quite unattainable. In the case of the Viceroy's House, Lutyens uses broad horizontal banding in the form of simple mouldings as a device which permits the retreat of the wall from the vertical to occur above each

band. So, the walls are both stepping back and battered ever so slightly. This operation is intimately tied to those Lutyens carried out in his earlier, 'Surrey Vernacular' houses, where their long, low roofs are analogous to the horizontal bands of the Viceroy's House, and their simple battered or buttressed walls find their analogy in their subtle counterparts here. The bands that wrap around the entire periphery of the building also break down the scale of the walls by introducing shadows of varying depth - an 'ornamentation' of sorts which humanizes the building's otherwise bare surfaces.

What makes this eastern entrance front so immensely successful, though are the gestures made to invoke major interruptions of these masses, and through these gestures, their subsequent modulation and choreography.

Firstly, by physical methods, Lutyens breaks up the plane of the walls by using loggias, aedicules, and the central entrance porch; dividing the predominant form into smaller monumental blocks, connected by colonnades. The blocks are tied together through the continuity suggested by the colonnade; a continuous red sandstone base (brilliantly using its colour to emphasize its importance as a linking element to the forms above, executed in cream sandstone); and a broad, raking cornice or *chujja* which wraps around the entire building, serving as a common line for the columns of the aedicules, loggias, and porch to 'drop' from. The red sandstone *chujja* is indeed a crucial element of Lutyens's design, for with its depth of eight feet it casts a tremendous shadow along the facades, both breaking down the scale of the monumental walls and allowing the spaces in behind the various colonnades to be obscured to comparative blackness - exactly as Lutyens had intended those functions behind them to be.



East Front, The Dome

Of course not only the eastern entrance front, but the entire building is brought into a calm order by the great, unusual dome which rises 166 feet from the house's precise centre, directly over the State Throneroom, or Durbar Hall.³

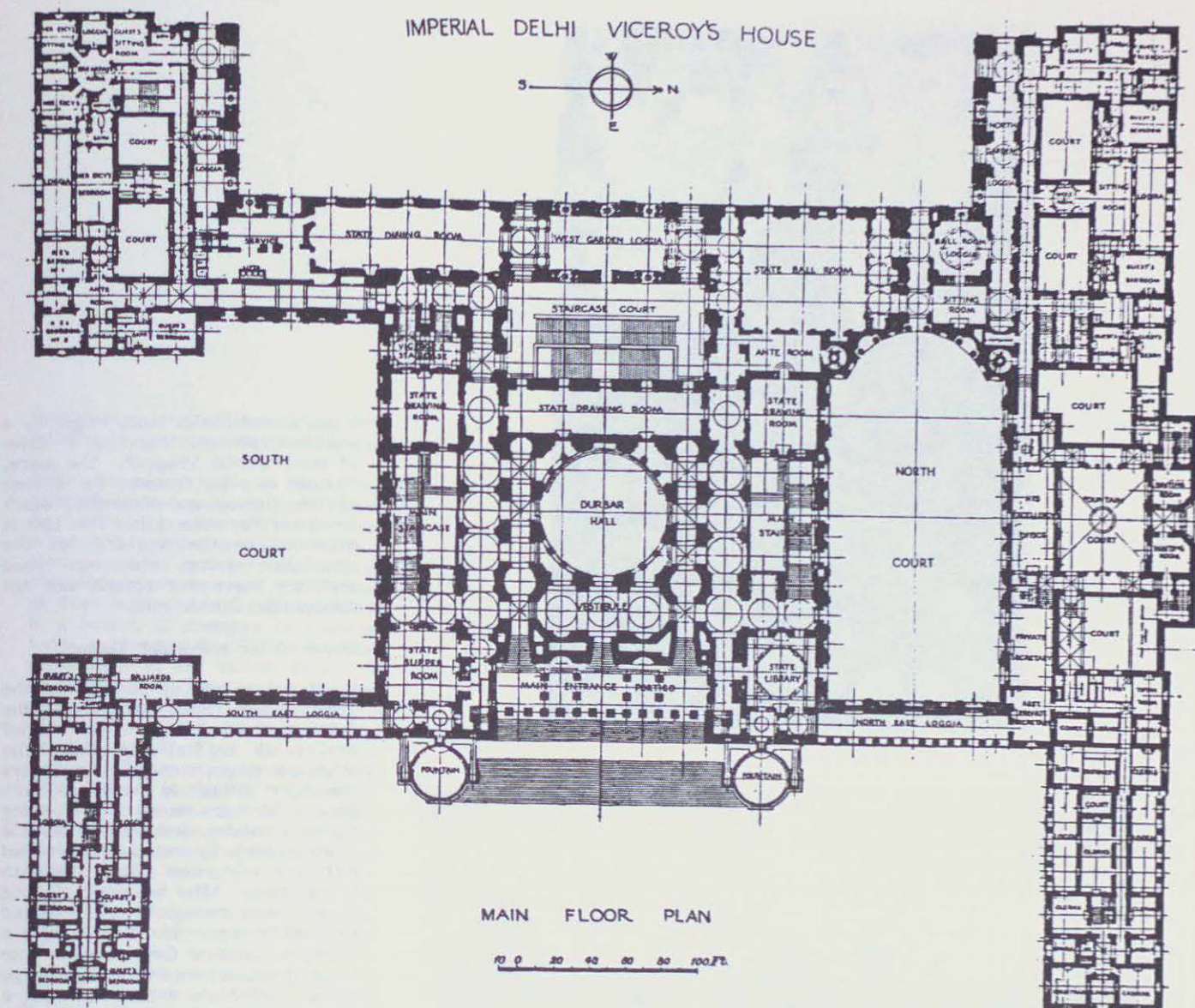
Like the body of the house that it emerges from, the dome is a mass articulated by colour (cream, red, cream, red, cream, and black from bottom to top) and by sculpted horizontal bands forming deep clefts of shadow. Its attenuated drum, split open at the top and emphasized at its corners, suggests not only the image of a fortification (for instance the Red Fort of Shahjahanabad), but also of some watchful Imperial creature (specifically a British lion, by virtue of its 'arms' which create and embrace the forecourt). The entrance front as a whole, then becomes somewhat anthropomorphic (bearing human, or in this case by extension, animalistic characteristics), and it is this very quality which allows both the whole front and specific details to be read in different ways, that is, as 'built-in' ambiguities. It can be said that anthropomorphic qualities render forms 'friendlier', and perhaps this is what allows double readings to take place more easily. For example, the parapet on the east front is punctuated by ten minute interruptions. The *chattris* - basically stone umbrellas with projecting *chujjas*, were described by Lutyens as "stupid useless things."⁴

Yet for all their capriciousness, they at once pleasantly break down the otherwise relentless cornice line, and help pull together (and position) the solid and void elements in the elevation.

Indeed, Lutyens used an analogous device at Orchards, in Munstead, Surrey (1897-99), where the procession to the courtyard and entrance is both fronted and flanked on one side by long sloping roofs. The flanking roof is punctuated by tiny dormers (with rooms behind) while the roof cutting across the procession way features a similar dormer over the gate. However, there is neither a window nor a room behind - the dormer throws a little light on the roof trusses of the gateway. The dormers, therefore, reduce the 'relentless' quality of the roof and bring coherence and order to the processional route and its elevations.

The multiplicity of readings as demonstrated by these strange but friendly *chattris* allow the readings of the building as a whole to be more flexible, and permit Lutyens to easily change the character of the House from formal (as on the east, north, and south) to domestic (as on the west front, where a Mughal garden, rather than a one and three-quarter mile processional route, faces the House). The west front overlooks the arid, barren plains outside of Delhi, and behind its facade, (similar in

configuration to the east front), are the guest bedrooms and royal suites, the nursery, the Dining Room and the Ballroom. Unlike the east front, with its bold contrasts between solid and void, the garden elevation presents no such contrasts, and instead, deals with more traditional models by punching window-like openings into the continuous wall. The undynamic facade (apart from the strong line of the relentless *chujja*) is quite homely and entirely approachable. Its remarkable quality is its apparent change in size from the east front. Lutyens has, by placing the bedrooms and major entertaining rooms on this 'rear' facade, allowed functions within the House to communicate with the exterior, unlike the 'front' facade, which contains and conceals the activities within. Because of the double storey height of the great rooms (some thirty-four feet in the Ballroom), window openings are free to be larger than usual. Also the loggia which would have been enclosed by colonnades on the east front, are on the west enclosed by walls, and light is brought to them by large, two-storey openings, and aedicules, common to all facades of the building. The oversized treatment of the openings causes the wall surface to be read as 'smaller'. Furthermore, the great dome which sits on the intersection of the diagonals of the plan (the centre of the building), does not sit in the centre of the central block. The outstretching arms of the west front are shorter than those of the east, causing the centre to be located closer to the eastern facade. Thus, on the formal side the dome appears to be large and omnipotent, yet on the domestic side it recedes, seeming to decrease in height and become 'smaller'.



The ability of the building to negotiate between the demand of expression of a formal edifice and a domestic house, both within what many would call the 'straightjacket' of Classicism, is indicative of its subtlety, refinement and Lutyens's immense control and skill.

Lutyens's talent may be seen as well in the plan, which, although having been discussed with respect to the general disposition of State rooms, has not yet been examined in terms of character or quality of the procession through the building. Indeed, the classical plan of the Viceroy's House, like the Classical Plan as a type, is dedicated to procession, theatre and the rites of passage. The plan shares in common with all other Lutyens's plans a few basic premises. Firstly, one's movement through the building is

intended to be a procession through a sequence of spaces. The spaces vary in character and proportion, yet they are always finite and felt to be enclosures. There is a rhythmic pattern in the sequence, quite often expressed as a great change of the quality of space (for example, open area to constricted space to open space, and so on). The circulation spaces in the Viceroy's House, which surely dominate the central portion of the plan, are quite complex, and amply demonstrate Lutyens's interest in the ceremony of passage and its effect on the significance of major spaces, the apparent size of the building and the experience of the individual. Two 'walking tours' (one brief, one long) through the major circulation spaces leading to the central Durbar Hall will illustrate these preoccupations.

Sequence for a Visitor to the State

From the great court formed by the flanking arms of the east front, the visitor walks up a broad flight of stairs to arrive under the entrance portico, where there is a triple row of thirty foot high columns. Going through the entrance doors, the space remains tall, yet is long and constricted, directed towards the centre of the building. Then, there is a three-bay vestibule and a reversal in the orientation of the space. Semi-circular walls at the narrow ends terminate the enclosure. Major corridors then extend beyond these ends which lead in both directions to the outer edges of the building. However, at this point they bear little significance, for between all three openings of the long side of the vestibule, one sees the end goal, the



Above: View of the Dome from the Mughal Garden; the West Front;
Below: the central portion of the Plan of New Delhi. The Viceroy's
House is N°1; Opposite: the Cobra Fountain in the South Court.



great domed Durbar Hall, ringed by a marble screen which shelters a series of semi-circular 'chapels'. The space, circular in plan, features the thrones of the Viceroy and Vicereine, which terminate the major axis. This fact is essential to the workings of the circulation system, which are based upon the movement **around**, and not **through** the Durbar Hall.

Sequence for a Regular Visitor

In this case one is driven into the great eastern court, then through the front of the building. After a brief series of formalities under the groin-vaulted porte-cochere, one enters the more intimately scaled southern court, further tamed by trickling Cobra fountains, and then enters the central block by means of a vaulted carriage-way, one storey beneath Durbar Hall. After being let off, one is sent west through a small, vaulted compartment, then south into a fabulous Staircase Court - made into a finely proportioned room by a large coved cornice which does not meet a conventional ceiling, but rather, the open sky. The court permits one to either go directly to the West garden loggia, to the Dining Room or the Ballroom by briefly crossing the major circumferential corridor. Here though, the presence of the **dome** is most evident (it is, evident everywhere), looming above the court as one looks through the open ceiling. One is led to that major corridor, itself a repetitive series of spaces (all domed and on semi-circular arches), which in turn, when surrounding Durbar Hall, leads to an inner corridor of smaller proportions. From a small enclosure here, one enters one of the semi-circular 'chapels' spoken of earlier; which is an expanding space, opening emphatically into the great domed space, three steps below.

The plan is choreographed masterfully, and as theatre (which a public part of a palace surely must be), it celebrates the spatial experiences of the

individual, who is drawn through the building by the magnetic Durbar Hall.

Both in plan and in form, the Viceroy's House remains a work that is astonishingly versatile for its treatment, position and size. With a floor area of around two hundred thousand square feet and a collection of three hundred and forty rooms (this is a house), it manages to maintain both a formal attitude (as the centerpiece of the British Empire in its largest colony) and a domestic one as an English country house, complete with garden, which is home of the British Raj. The Viceroy and Vicereine (Lord and Lady Irwin), who first moved in (in 1931, seventeen years after construction began) found their new accommodations a bit large at first, but commented that "it was quite a livable house."⁵

The tool for this mediation was Lutyens's own classical language, augmented by his sense of humor and wit in life and in detail. To him, Architecture was a civilised practice with the measure of Man as its basis. In Modern Architecture, he recognized and regretted "the passing of Humanism."⁶

The Classical language, however, with Palladio and Wren as the precursors whom Lutyens most loved, placed Man at the center and celebrated his existence. Lutyens's infusion of love and wit into his Architecture, his mastery of form and proportion, are all poignantly manifest in the Viceroy's House, and are what makes it so magical, and so right.

Roderick Gradidge, one of the few English architects who maintained an appreciation for Sir Edwin Lutyens's work during its years of unpopularity (1945-1970), wrote that "Lutyens's achievement was tremendous, the Viceroy's House is magnificent in its form, its plan, and most particularly in its architecture. A subtle mixture of Classical and Mughal details, it is unsurpassed by any secular building built in the last two centuries."⁷



Lutyens, who loved Architecture and who loved Man, has fully earned this praise, for he was not a capricious Romantic "caught in the box of his time",⁸ as some have maintained, but an Architect of profound sensibility and maturity, whose example bears tremendous importance for us all. □

Notes

1. Robert Grant Irving, *Indian Summer*, 1981, p. 13.
2. The notion of 'sitting better' has to do with our visual perception of the building - how a wall visually recedes. Lutyens batters the walls to make the base feel broader and the walls feel slimmer, more elegant. Lutyens also uses this subtlety to advantage in the loggie and entrance porch colonnades, where the spacing between columns increases slightly above arched openings and in front of the main entrance doors. The device introduces a subtle rhythm which breaks down a possible monotony in the colonnades and renders the facade 'more restful'.
3. Gavin Stamp, "The Rise and Fall of Edwin Lutyens," *Architectural Review*, November, 1981, p. 312. From H.S. Goodhart Rendel's February 1945 speech to the RIBA: "...The dome of the Viceroy's House, also, has a suavity that must come from a rare subconscious perception of imponderables, and in many doorways,

chimneypieces, and bits of furniture of Lutyens's design one meets the sudden unanalysable felicity that makes one catch one's breath."

4. Irving, p. 174.

5. Irving, p. 206.

6. *Imperial Delhi*, a film by the Arts Council of Britain, 1981.

7. Roderick Gradidge, *Edwin Lutyens: Architect Laureate*, 1981, p. 70.

8. Stamp, quoting Peter Smithson, *RIBA Journal*, 1969, p. 316.

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