

The Making of the Cathedral

B.G. Verghese



The Cathedral Church of the Redemption is not the oldest church in Delhi but, with the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, by the Gole Post Office at Alexandra Pace, is linked to the making of New Delhi. The Delhi Durbar of 1911 heard King Edward VII's proclamation that the capital of India was proposed to be shifted back to Delhi from Calcutta. Plans were immediately set in motion to work out the details of the Eighth City of Delhi that was to become New Delhi - the site, architectural design, layout, materials, estimates, architects, timelines and logistics.

The first cut of an overall blueprint for the new city was finalised by the Delhi Town Planning Committee in 1913. Edwin Lutyens had been selected as the principal architect and Herbert Baker, his associate. The site had been disputed. The choice, based on available space, existing habitations, the location of the ridge and river, ranged from the northwest of the city, beyond Subzi Mandi, to somewhere around Malcha Marg. However it was Raisina Hill that was finally favoured with two axes, West-East along Kingsway (Rajpath) from the complex of Government buildings to the Purana Qila, and North-South, along Queensway (Janpath)) from Jama Masjid (through Connaught Place) towards Safdar Jang's Tomb. The object was to blend Old Glory and heritage with the majesty and power of the Raj as exemplified by the dominating presence of Government House (Rashtrapati Bhavan), the Secretariat (North and South Blocks) and the circular Council House (Sansad Bhavan) on the northern flank of North Block.

Where does the Cathedral fit into all of this?

Malavika Singh and Rudrangshu Mukherjee's recently published "New Delhi: Making of a Capital" by Roli Books, lets out a little known or remembered open secret. Along with the blueprint for the layout of the new city, the volume reproduces an 'aerial perspective of the proposal' setting out Lutyens's hexagonal plan for the city. The 'aerial' plan actually shows a round shaped basilica or church behind the eastern end of South Block opposite Parliament House, its central rotunda enclosed within an outer circular but un-colonnaded structure.

The authors' caption reads, "Originally a church had been planned to create symmetry with the Council House, but the plan was subsequently dropped".

It is almost certain that the proposed church there, if built, would have been the Cathedral Church of the Redemption and not the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, as pride of place would most certainly have been given by the British to the established Anglican Church. Both Cathedrals were designed and built under the supervision of Henry Alexander Nesbitt Medd who joined Lutyens's office in 1915 and subsequently worked for Herbert Baker as well. He designed many other buildings and remained in the country long after New Delhi was formally inaugurated, rising to become chief architect of the Government of India from 1939 to 1947.

It is as well that the Cathedral was not architecturally designed or located to "balance" Parliament House or to lend greater symmetry to the splendid Government complex around Raisina Hill and the Great Place. It was in fact built entirely through private subscriptions. A little over 2000 years ago, someone said, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is His". That was good advice for all time - not only for town planners but for others too.

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