

# New Cities

The violent Partition of 1947 redrew borders across the subcontinent, establishing new and often fraught boundaries between nations and leading to a prolonged humanitarian crisis of displacement and bloodshed. To absorb the arrival of an unprecedented number of refugees, some existing cities dramatically expanded, while elsewhere new ones were created.

City construction began soon after Independence and continued apace, in the process articulating political divisions between India and Pakistan. The foundation of Chandigarh, the Indian state capital of the now-divided Punjab region, symbolized the political and economic aspirations of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw the city as a laboratory for his secular vision of modernization and industrialization. In Pakistan, the establishment of Islamabad (“City of Islam”) as the country’s capital spurred bold construction projects for the master-planned city. In contrast to these early cities, the southern Indian experimental town of Auroville, founded two decades after Independence, embodied the vision of universal humanity espoused by Independence movement leader and Integral Yoga guru Sri Aurobindo.

# Templates for Living

The most immediate impact of the 1947 Partition was its human toll. An estimated half million people died, and thirteen million more were displaced. Beyond the urgency of creating housing for these refugees, the newly independent nations of South Asia faced a moral and economic reckoning: to solve the housing crisis, mass-produced, high-density architecture had to remain low-cost while also supporting domestic industrialization, showcasing national visions, and accommodating local ways of life.

Architects responded with new affordable-housing prototypes favoring the use of concrete and brick, cost-effective materials that leveraged a workforce of hand laborers. Governments commissioned large-scale housing schemes with units numbering in the thousands. Many projects featured incremental participatory design, with basic modules that inhabitants could gradually expand as their families grew and financial circumstances changed. In public, private, low-cost, and upper-middle-class schemes alike, architects made use of open-air courtyards and terraces, which, beyond providing shade and ventilation, drew on vernacular traditions and promoted communal living.

# Industry and Infrastructure

Even under colonial rule, much of the struggle for autonomy in South Asia had hinged upon industrial development. In this respect, political independence did not break with the processes of industrialization set in motion before 1947 but instead accelerated their pace and paved the way for state-planned production. Progressive and military governments alike turned to centralized planning, folding private-sector development and state-owned industries into national, self-reliant strategies.

Industry and infrastructure created the economic conditions for South Asian self-determination. In India, these developments were made manifest when Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declared hydroelectric dams and other infrastructural projects to be the “temples of a new age.” For the neighboring island nation of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), tourism was instrumental in post-Independence economic growth, alongside the nationalization of colonial industries and private plantations. With commercial air travel and middle-class mobility bringing in a new stratum of visitors, a demand rose for modernist hotels that could cater to changing cosmopolitan tastes.

# Political Spaces

Governmental buildings, monuments, and pavilions for international fairs and industrial expositions represented the new nations' underlying values and aspirations in architectural terms. Some of these spaces, such as the National Parliament House in Dhaka, served parliamentary functions. Others, such as the Hall of Nations and Halls of Industries in New Delhi, were designed to express distinct national ideas and display the politics of their new regimes.

Throughout South Asia, the expressive qualities of concrete were utilized to great effect. Readily available and comparatively inexpensive, it could be mixed by hand, transported by foot, and cast on-site, all by local laborers. These conditions encouraged significant experimentation and structural innovation. Architects and engineers collaboratively produced breathtaking feats of concrete construction that transformed the ubiquitous material into one with regional singularity, in ways possible only on the subcontinent. From the parliamentary buildings of Dhaka to the fairgrounds of New Delhi, concrete existed as both a symbol of independence and a material that enabled it, aligning political aspirations with industrial policies.

# Landscapes of Education

Education helped set progressive post-Independence agendas in motion. The building of new institutions of learning aligned with the formation of self-determined societies, and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) all established new campuses as well as expanded disciplines. Political leaders across the subcontinent viewed education as a tool for social progress and a way to strengthen national industries through specialized training.

New technical institutes focused on pragmatic applications of science and technology, and access to public education allowed students, including growing numbers of women and other marginalized groups, to break free from the rigid and limiting divisions of British curricula. From small-scale elementary schools to expansive campuses of higher education, architecture reinforced the agency of their students, instilling in them new ideals of citizenship.

# Institution-Building

While exhibition pavilions and capitol complexes conveyed political ideals at a monumental scale, a range of less imposing but equally significant civic buildings exemplified South Asia's social aspirations. These everyday structures—stadiums, cultural centers, governmental organizations, and places of worship—reimagined modern life, bringing renewed focus and purpose to its existing institutions and establishing new ones.

Through a process of institution-building, social and economic relations could be addressed and remade, with the complexities of caste, class, and nationality replacing old colonial markers of difference. Architects expressed societal change by designing public buildings that incorporated regional specifics, applying environmentally sensitive features like verandahs and *jalis* (latticed screens) to modernist architectural forms. New sporting venues converted elite colonial legacies such as cricket into everyday pastimes, and performance halls and research institutes reframed culture and history in national terms. These buildings have stood as backdrops to civic life throughout decades of societal change, serving as enduring symbols of the post-Independence era.