



The evolution of Shahjahanabad through the lens of cultural heritage and urban sustainability

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Abstract

The role of culture and heritage in shaping a community's identity and its associated values is quite significant. By preserving these traditions and historical practices, societies often maintain a sense of continuity and belonging, which can also foster a deeper appreciation for their surroundings. This connection gradually inspires more sustainable practices as communities tend to honour their ancestors' ways of living harmoniously with nature. The interplay between culture, heritage, and sustainability can drive a more holistic approach to progress. In this context, the urban precincts of Shahjahanabad provide a vital example for its cultural development. The development of Shahjahanabad navigates the intricate task of preserving its historical essence while also accommodating the demands of a growing population and evolving economy within its surrounding vicinity. The cultural and historical significance of Shahjahanabad shapes its environmental and economic strategies. The preservation of its historical sites is essential not only for maintaining the city's unique character but also for fostering a sense of identity and continuity among its residents. By respecting and conserving these landmarks, Shahjahanabad honours its past while navigating the challenges of modern development. The paper will explore the multifaceted dynamics of Shahjahanabad, focusing on the interplay between its cultural heritage, environmental sustainability and economic growth. The paper will also analyze how Shahjahanabad balances the preservation of its rich historical and architectural legacy with the demands of modern development and will examine the strategies employed to integrate the economic growth, such as sustainable tourism and local business support, while also maintaining the city's historical essence.

Keywords: Culture, heritage, economic development, sustainable practices, conservation, preservation

Introduction

During the Mughal Era in Indian subcontinent, the cities that they ruled and designed occupied a central place in the fabric of social, political and cultural landscape that still persists today. These cities in modern times are seen as examples of safe havens that led to flourish civilizations than the typical uncontrolled and lawlessness manners of wastelands. The new capitals that were designed particularly in Delhi were the example of this and the three prominent emperors that were the frontier of these were – Humayun, Akbar and Shah Jahan.

A thriving example of the meeting point of environmental sustainability and cultural continuity is the medieval urban core of Shahjahanabad, which is now a part of Old Delhi. This city, established during 1627 at the prime of Mughal reign by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, represents a singular fusion of architectural magnificence, socio-cultural vibrancy, and ecological practicality that was much ahead of its time. Shahjahanabad, an essential point in the development of urban planning, offers an engaging perspective for analyzing the ideas of sustainable living and cultural heritage conservation. In addition to showing the socioeconomic vitality of Mughal-era society, the city's complex network of bazaars, havelis (traditional residences), mosques, and gardens also indicates a profound awareness of environmental balance, especially in its resource utilization and spatial arrangement.

The capacity of historical precincts like Shahjahanabad to influence current urban development policies makes them relevant to examine. Rapid urbanization, environmental preservation, and cultural preservation are frequently incompatible in modern cities. Because of its original urban

fabric, which represents a careful blending of human requirements, climatic circumstances, and cultural values, Shahjahanabad provides important lessons in resolving this dilemma. For example, Delhi's stepwells (baolis) functioned as both water reservoirs and gathering places for the society, while the city's winding alleys and shaded courtyards were intended to lessen the city's intense summers. These elements show how forward-thinking its planners were in creating areas that promoted long-term environmental resilience in addition to meeting urgent needs. The ability of medieval urban centers to adapt and prosper in shifting socioeconomic environments is further demonstrated by the cultural continuity evident in Shahjahanabad's surviving customs. Shahjahanabad has evolved over the years, including colonial incursions and post-independence development, but it has managed to maintain its reputation as a center of trade, handicraft, and religious variety. From the vivid festivals held in the area of Jama Masjid to the culinary customs of Karim, its long-standing cultural practices demonstrate a strong socio-cultural environment that has withstood the test of time. Developing resilience in modern urban environments can be facilitated by knowing how these customs have been upheld in the face of changing difficulties. Its natural resources and historic infrastructure have suffered from the stresses of contemporary development, population expansion, and environmental deterioration. The delicate equilibrium formerly upheld by its planners is under danger due to air pollution, encroachments, and poor waste management. Thus, the analysis of Shahjahanabad is both a cautionary tale and a source of inspiration, emphasizing the significance of sustainable urban activities based on historical and cultural knowledge.

Historical Evolution of Shahjahanabad

The city of Shahjahanabad was constructed by Shah Jahan during his period of reign from 1627-57 where he decided to shift the capital from Agra to Delhi and laid the foundation stone of Jama Masjid in the year 1650. Currently known as ‘Old Delhi’, the city is known for its grand architectural styles, articulate design and the overall spatial planning that was relevant in that period of time.

Shah Jahan was deeply concerned in architecture and its association with the common people and Shahjahanabad was designed to be a planned metropolis for his reign, when the capital was moved from Agra in 1639. Though the architecture of dwellings, katras, and mohallas was left up to individual preference, the royal planners-built items like

walls, gates, and the main roads and established some regulations, such as the requirement that storefronts in the Chandni Chowk bazaar have the same appearance. The city of Shahjahanabad was built in the pattern of quarter circles and covered 6.1 square kilometers, entirely enclosing itself in a wall. The fortified city had 14 gates in all, and they were always under protection. The Mughals ruled over all of India from their imperial fort and palace, the Lal Qila (Red Fort), which stood in the middle of the city. Shah Jahan built Delhi’s Jama Masjid mosque, which is across from Lal Qila, as a location of worship and an effort to spread Islam. In different locations across the walled city, additional mosques, such as the Fatehpuri Mosque, were also constructed.

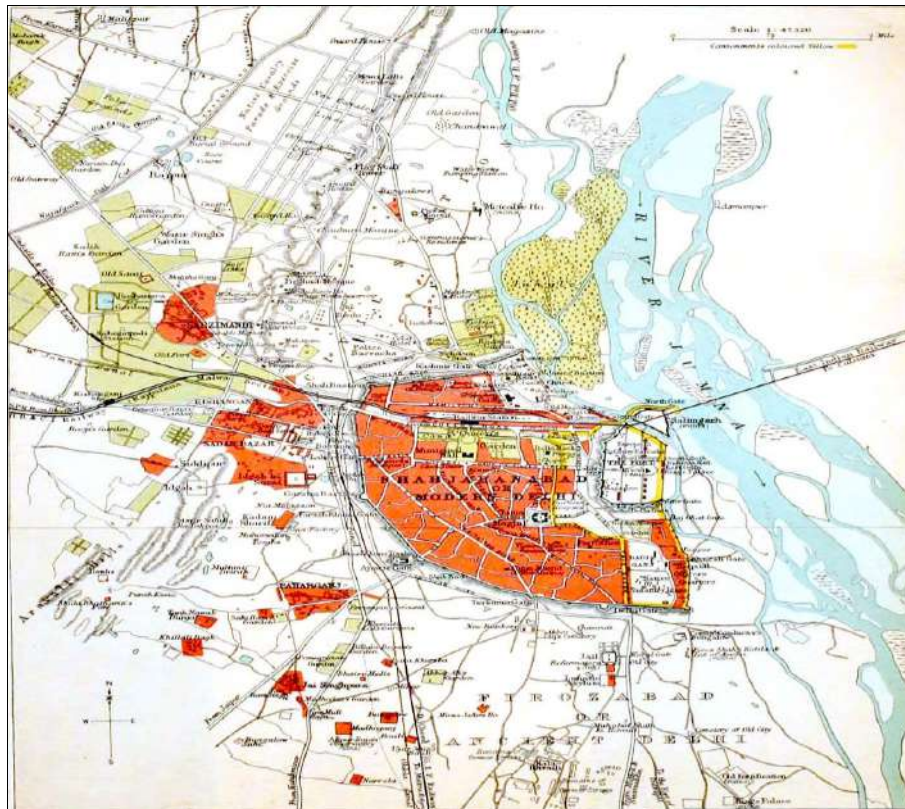
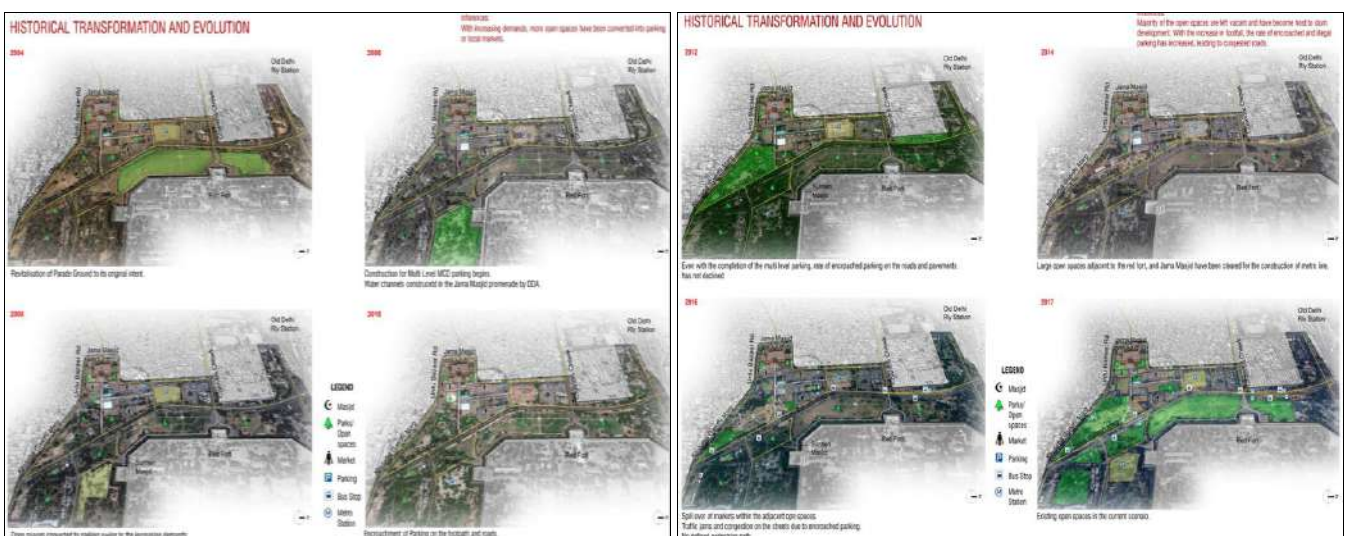


Fig 1: Delhi in 1911, with the walled city, or Shahjahanabad in red. (Source: <https://dreamofacity.com/2018/06/13/old-delhi-ii-the-walled-city-and-the-red-fort/>)



(Source: Author)

Fig 2: Historical transformation of the old city of Shahjahanabad through the ages

Beside the Red Fort, a major marketplace was created and called Chandni Chowk, or the moonlight lane. Jahan Ara, Shah Jahan's daughter, created the design. It is stated that a full moon night offered a beautiful view of the market. About 40 yards wide and 1,520 yards long, Chandni Chowk's main thoroughfare began at the Red Fort's Lahore Gate. In the middle of the road was a canal with trees on either side. Chandni Chowk was surrounded by a number of residential neighbourhoods, including Dariba Kalan, Khari Baoli, and Ballimaran. The merchant community, the nobility, the administrative officers and their families, the military families, and others all settled in the residential sections.

Methodology

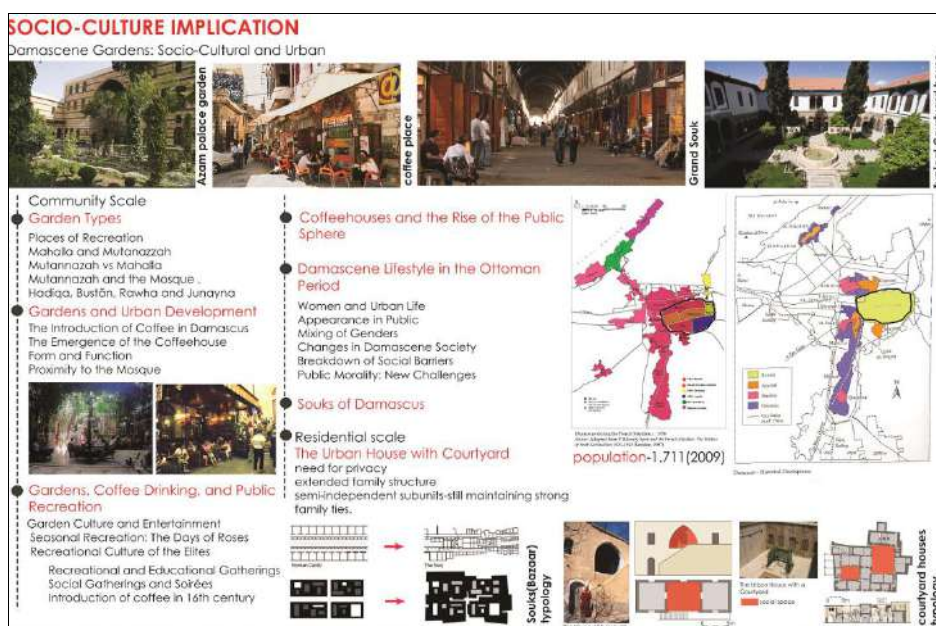
The methodology set for the paper involves a combination of methods that includes site visits and interviews for primary data collection; and literature study, archival research and survey reports for secondary data analysis. The selected area includes the entire precinct of Shahjahanabad and thorough study was conducted within its boundary. Various layers of study were analysed which included activity mapping both during peak hours and festival times, architectural study comprising of open spaces evolution and circulation patterns.

Site Findings and Analysis

1. Socio-Cultural Dimensions

Shahjahanabad is often considered as an exemplar of sovereign city of late Mughal times. This idea was put forward by Stephen P. Blake, where he compared the city of Shahjahanabad to historic capital cities of Istanbul, Isfahan, Tokyo and Peking, which were the capital of patrimonial bureaucratic empire seen during the Asian empire reigning from 1400 to 1750 AD. These cities were dominated by the social, economic and cultural aspects of the city and can be seen dominated by the city's-built form. For the first time in 17th century, the planned rise of the capital city was a major factor in the city of Shahjahanabad's development and growth, which indicated a dynamic process of social and economic transformation.

Shahjahanabad was surrounded by a massive stone wall that served as a barrier to control entry and provide security. The wall was dotted with fourteen gates, each of which led to a different area of the city. These gates, like the Delhi Gate, Kashmere Gate, and Ajmeri Gate, were designed to be both imposing representations of the city's magnificence and practical. They reflected the Mughal love of fine craftsmanship and were embellished with elaborate carvings, elegant Islamic calligraphy, and a combination of marble and red sandstone. The gates that are still standing provide witness to the Mughal era's careful planning and defensive concerns, even if many have fallen victim to time and urbanization.



(Source: Author)

Fig 3: Implications of socio-cultural factors and its impact on the city's formation

The Red Fort, a colossal representation of Mughal architectural brilliance and political might, is located in the center of Shahjahanabad. The Diwan-i-Aam (Hall of Public Audience) and Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience), two of the fort's many buildings that exemplify the majesty of royal ceremonial, were mostly constructed of red sandstone. The fusion of Persian and Indian architectural traditions is emphasized by its decorative elements, which include geometric patterns, exquisite jali work, and floral pietra dura inlays. The vast design of the fort, with its verdant gardens and intricate water system, highlights the Mughal concern on balancing the natural and constructed worlds. Shahjahanabad's other architectural gem, Jama

Masjid, is a prime example of the city's spiritual and cultural importance. It is distinguished by its three imposing domes, tall minarets, and a spacious courtyard that can hold thousands of worshippers. It was built of red sandstone and white marble. The mosque exemplifies the Mughals' commitment to designing areas that were not only practical but also artistically and spiritually elevating through its symmetrical proportions, elaborate arabesque decorations and Quranic inscriptions. Shahjahanabad's cultural imagibility extends beyond its architectural design and is strengthened by its intangible legacy, which includes festivals, oral traditions, and culinary customs. Its visual and performative environment is still

shaped by the Qissa-Khwani (storytelling) tradition, Sufi Qawwalis at shrines like Hazrat Sarmad's dargah, and Urdu literary salons (mushairas). The city's auditory character contributes to its sensory richness, from the vibrant market bartering to the rhythmic chanting of prayers. The city's gastronomic identity as a site of Mughal and Indo-Islamic cultural synthesis is further reinforced by the culinary landscape, which includes famous delicacies like nihari, kebabs, and jalebis. The sociocultural fabric of Shahjahanabad has been changed in the modern era by urbanization, gentrification, and commercialization processes, which have upset the city's traditional spatial hierarchies and community rhythms. The loss of artisanal communities, the invasion of traditional havelis, and the transition from guild-based to mass-market shopping all point to the breakdown of the country's ancient socioeconomic systems. However, the city's continual role as a storehouse of Indo-Islamic history, where rituals, oral histories, and vernacular urbanism maintain its cognitive and emotive imagability, is a testament to its cultural resilience.

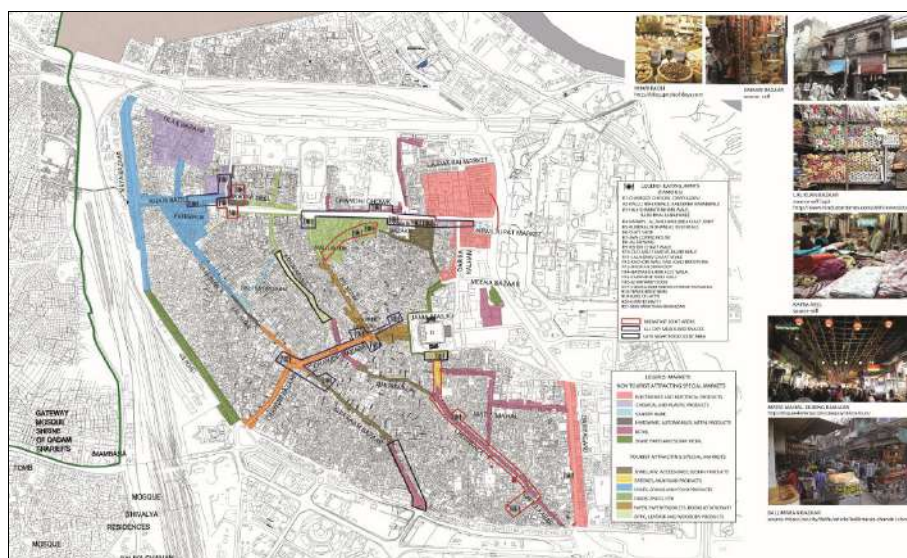
2. Activity mapping of the region

The socio-economic rhythms, spatial structure, and sensory experiences of Shahjahanabad are shaped by its temporal and spatial activity patterns, which have a significant impact on the city's imagability. The unique diurnal, seasonal, and ceremonial activity cycles of Shahjahanabad, a historically administrative and commercial metropolis, support its memory persistence and cognitive legibility. With commercial, religious, and residential roles overlapping to create a complicated yet understandable urban fabric, these activity patterns are ingrained in the morphological structure of the city.

In the city's old bazaars, such Chandni Chowk, Khari Baoli, and Dariba Kalan, where guild groups and kinship-based

trade networks maintain a vibrant commercial environment, the daily economic cycles are grounded. A robust street food culture, especially in Matia Mahal and Ballimaran, replaces the marked ebb and flow of these commercial areas, which see their greatest activity during business hours and then gradually drop in the evening. Religious organizations also influence the city's temporal structure; for example, Friday prayers at Jama Masjid, Sufi qawwali gatherings in dargahs, and temple aartis at Kinari Bazaar punctuate the urban landscape with sporadic spikes in human activity. During the period of festivities, circulation within the precincts seems to be very dense and unregulated. The primary congestion points are along the Chandini Chowk market areas, Chawri Bazaar and Khari Baoli – the spice market of the city. Out of these the Chandini Chowk area is seen to be densely populated not only by the localities but from tourists also. Apart from these areas, along the outer road leading to Red Fort, there's a weekly market known as Sunday Book Market which also sees a heavy footfall from the students and academicians on weekends.

The moving corridors of Shahjahanabad are momentarily transformed into ritual landscapes during festivals like Eid, Muharram, Holi, and Phool Walon Ki Sair, which strengthens the city's memory permanence. The adaptive morphologies of traditional Mughal-era urbanization are also evident in the way that seasonal fluctuations affect spatial activity, with the monsoon months increasing dependence on covered arcades, chowks, and havelis. Despite its history as a diurnal city, Shahjahanabad has witnessed a rise in nighttime activities, with night markets, cultural events, and culinary tourism all playing a part in its changing appeal. Daily, seasonal, and ceremonial activity cycles interact to keep the city a multi-layered, experiencing urban entity where modern changes and historical continuity come together to produce a common urban consciousness.



(Source: Author)

Fig 4: Daily activity analysis showing how people have perceived the city in contemporary times

3. Architectural Features of the Old City – Evolution of Open Spaces and their usage

A prime example of domestic Mughal architecture, the havelis of Shahjahanabad were built to accommodate extended families. These multi-story homes frequently included central courtyards, which were essential for

battling Delhi's harsh heat since they allowed for natural light and air. Havelis with elaborate interior decorations, arched doors, and carved wooden balconies, such as Chunnamal's Haveli and Begum Ki Haveli, were on display. Traditionally the houses of Shahjahanabad had central courtyards and open terraces which were used as social

spaces, but with the advent of development and trends in globalisation these spaces over the years had shrunken down. The existing houses in the area had seen that open spaces to be redesigned as additional units which are later on given up on rent or shops and most of the open terraces in these houses are currently converted into storages for the shops at the lower floor or rooftop cafes giving the views of the Red Fort precincts or other heritage structures.

These opulent buildings combined luxury with useful features like water harvesting systems and covered verandahs, reflecting pragmatic considerations despite their magnificence. The urban fabric of Shahjahanabad also had a complex system of bazaars, including Chandni Chowk that brought together social interaction and commerce. Even in the midst of the sweltering summer months, these marketplaces were accessible and comfortable due to their colonnaded shopfronts and frequent canopies. The design maintained the streetscape's visual charm while guaranteeing effective mobility.

The recent redevelopment of Chandni Chowk stretch had also seen the process of incorporating the traditional aspects

of the celebratory pathway within the area as no additional feature was incorporated within it during the development phase. The existing and encroached open spaces along the Chandni Chowk areas were converted into open spaces for the public and community areas. Traditional motifs were used to decorate the shop fronts resembling the Mughal motifs.

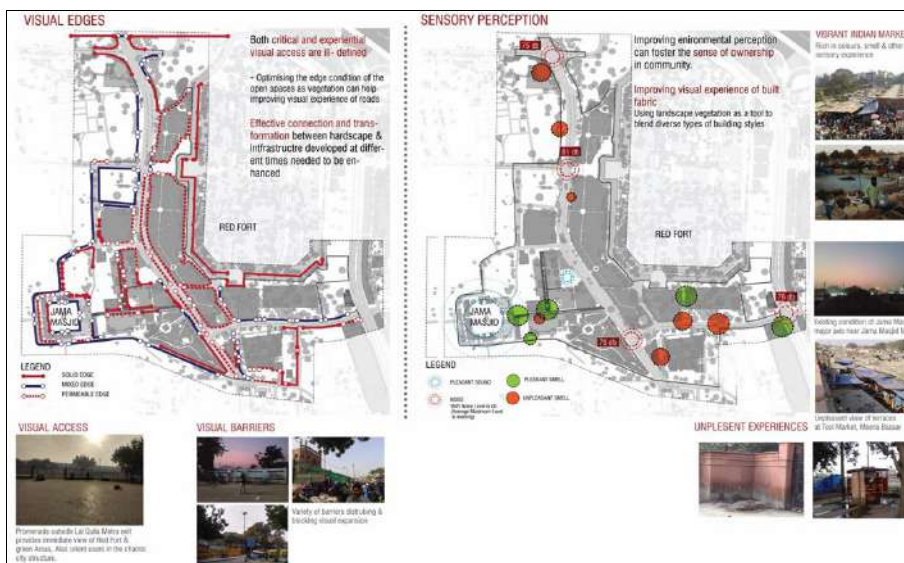
4. Imagibility and People’s Perception of the Place

The spatial organization, historical representation, and architectural beauty of Shahjahanabad all contribute to its unique and enduring urban imagibility. Its layout is a prime example of Mughal urban design, with a hierarchical arrangement of areas and prominent buildings like as the Red Fort and Jama Masjid, which are complimented by Chandni Chowk's busy commercial district. A distinctive socio-economic and cultural fabric was developed by the city's dizzying bazaars, katras (trading enclaves), and havelis, while its defensive walls and imposing gates historically marked its bounds.



(Source: Author)

Fig 5: Imagebility of the City



(Source: Author)

Fig 6: Visual Edges and Sensory Perception occurring with the precincts of Shahjahanabad

Its navigability and mental mapping by both locals and tourists were facilitated by the interaction of constructed form and movement corridors, such as Dariba Kalan and Nai Sarak. Mughal miniature paintings, colonial maps, and literary narratives—most notably Mirza Ghalib's poetry and travelogues from the 19th century—have all historically depicted it. Its architectural integrity has been compromised by post-colonial development, nevertheless, since encroachments and widespread commercialization has changed its original shape. Its importance as a historical urban landscape is further supported by a detailed examination of its spatial intelligibility and changing identity when viewed through the prism of Kevin Lynch's elements—paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks.

The Yamuna River, arterial roadways, and defensive walls all serve as physical and perceptual limits for the city, defining its borders and influencing how people travel about it. The walls and remaining gates, such as the Delhi Gate, Kashmiri Gate, and Lahori Gate, reinforce the city's clear spatial perimeter and act as historical markers. Furthermore, there is a noticeable shift between the imperial and commercial realms due to the visual contrast between the open, axial grandeur of the Red Fort precinct and the dense, low-rise traditional fabric of Shahjahanabad. The city is further enhanced by sensory perception, creating a multisensory urban experience. An immersive urban scene is created by the tactile sensation of its twisting, narrow alleyways, the potent aromas of Khari Baoli's spice bazaar, and the soundscape of street sellers, temple bells, and Jama Masjid's call to prayer. Its visual richness is enhanced by the contrast between the patina of old buildings and the vivid color scheme of shopfronts, textiles, and Mughal-era sandstone façade. A dynamic feeling of depth and movement is produced by the interaction of light and shadow in covered bazaars and arcaded streets, which strengthens the sense of spatial layering and exploration.

Conclusion

The historical district of Shahjahanabad provides important insights for current urban debate by shedding light on the complex relationship between environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. Shahjahanabad is a microcosm of Mughal-era inventiveness and a superb example of how environmental factors and strongly held cultural values may combine to create resilient urban ecosystems. A heritage of sustainable urban planning that is in line with contemporary ecological balancing principles is reflected in its spatial structure, which is characterized by climate-responsive architecture, effective resource management systems, and community-centric designs. A dynamic and unified urban identity is fostered by cultural resilience, which is further demonstrated by the city's enduring traditions, which are reflected in its lively marketplaces, culinary legacy, and community rituals.

However, Shahjahanabad's development highlights how vulnerable old urban areas are to unbridled modernization and environmental disregard. Its ecological and historical integrity are under danger due to encroachments, deteriorating infrastructure, and the depletion of natural resources. Shahjahanabad's accomplishments and difficulties present it as a source of ageless knowledge as well as a warning to modern urban designers. Even if its cultural vibrancy and adaptability are still apparent, unless intentional and well-informed interventions are put in place,

the lessons woven throughout its urban fabric run the risk of being eclipsed by the demands of contemporary urbanization. The need of incorporating sustainable development and historical protection into urban policy frameworks is therefore highlighted by the Shahjahanabad research. Its illustration supports a well-rounded strategy in which old urban areas are restored as vibrant places that balance tradition and modernity rather of being treated as static artifacts. Planners may create urban settings that honor cultural traditions while providing for modern demands by learning from Shahjahanabad's achievements and tackling its problems. The potential of historical wisdom to direct the development of cities that are both sustainable and firmly anchored in their cultural ethos is poignantly highlighted by Shahjahanabad in an era of worsening environmental and socioeconomic challenges.

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