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# Architecture of low-income widow housing: ‘spatial opportunities’ in Madipur, West Delhi

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This article is based on a study of Madipur widow colony in west Delhi, built as part of the UN International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987. Designed to accommodate widows from squatter settlements in Delhi, very few of the original houses now survive and very few of the original owners remain. The spatial stories of the participants suggest how and why and under what circumstances a State’s visions of empowerment as translated into utopian architectural projects are transformed by the people who inhabit them. They illustrate how a particular set of ‘spatial opportunities’ built into the widow colony are manipulated and seized upon by the participants to produce an uneven geography of architecture and empowerment. This article thus extends the important work on critical geographies of architecture to the architecture of low-income housing in the global South.

**Keywords:** architecture • development • empowerment • gender • housing

## Introduction

1987 was an important year. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) declared this as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. This was the year when the first ever Indian National Housing Policy was drafted. This was also the year when Madipur Widow Colony was conceived as a demonstration project for low-income widow housing in Delhi. Claimed as a success of public-private collaboration and innovative financing,<sup>1</sup> this was given the National Shelter Award for that year. Twenty years on, very few of the original houses survive and very few of the original owners remain. Those who live here now have demolished and rebuilt the original houses; they have appropriated available land; and they have transformed the architecture in ways that have enabled new forms of empowerment.

This article illustrates how, why, and under what contexts development initiatives of the State that are translated into utopian architecture/planning projects undergo transformations in the hands of the users. Central to this article are the particular set of familial, social, and architectural potentials for change – what I will call ‘spatial opportunities’ – that are seized upon and manipulated by women to remake their spaces and themselves. I focus on women’s empowerment not simply because Madipur widow colony was built for women, but to firmly situate their experiences within the dominant discourses in global and national development

plans that use women's empowerment as markers of 'success' or 'failure'. Indeed as Raju<sup>2</sup> suggests, women have often been defined as a 'problem' by various Indian plans, and women's issues are often written around (or under) the state's desire to control female bodies. By focussing on women's narratives, I explore the critical role of architecture as a tool of the State in transforming women's gender relations, and subsequently as an embodied political practice among women in transforming themselves. In this article, I ask how and under what conditions architecture engages with civil society; how and under what conditions architecture of low-income housing presents possibilities of transformation; and under what conditions architecture becomes the terrain of political practice and empowerment.

Various United Nations developmental initiatives have seen the inclusion of women in political and economic realms as key to their empowerment in the global South. Their architectural translation into housing in Madipur for particular gendered and classed subjects underline not just the Indian State's alignment with these goals, but also the role of architecture in international development. Yet, housing for the urban poor is seen not as an architectural issue, but as a development issue – the provision of basic services – electricity, water, sewerage, and habitable space understood as the panacea for housing and empowering squatters.<sup>3</sup> Housing projects such as Madipur widow colony are common in these contexts.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, these were often designed by well-known Indian architects<sup>5</sup> on vernacular ideologies that made references to rural and pastoral nostalgia.<sup>6</sup> In the South, such utopian projects have recently come into sharp criticism by local practitioners and academics,<sup>7</sup> although they are often awarded national and international accolades – a phenomenon which Verma<sup>8</sup> describes as 'emperor's new clothes'.

Literature on feminist development<sup>9</sup> have argued that the 'woman' who the State and international agencies seek to empower is 'irretrievably heterogeneous', and that her empowerment is shaped not only by class, caste, and religion, but also other power structures within households, neighbourhoods, and communities.<sup>10</sup> Mayaram<sup>11</sup> further suggests that neither the State nor society can 'empower' women since both are permeated by androcentric interests in these contexts. In other words, women's empowerment cannot occur with the mere inclusion of women, but through an alternative politics that imagines new ways of being.<sup>12</sup> Hence, often State-sponsored empowerment approaches that claim to be 'speaking out for'<sup>13</sup> those women who they seek to empower do not address the lived realities of women's lives. In ways that he calls 'seeing like the State', Scott<sup>14</sup> proposes that State schemes to shape new citizens and reorder their social worlds have failed because they have been based on simplifying complex social realities. Indeed, Madipur widow colony has 'failed' to produce State-imagined empowerment of self-sufficient widows; but its transformation in the hands of the users suggest other politicized practices of empowerment and disempowerment, which I seek to illustrate in this article. I suggest that the State's social engineering models of empowerment as translated into low-income housing are also part of grassroots agency; and that their subsequent transformations in the hands of the users should not be understood simply as 'failure' but as imaginative acts of social agency enacted through architecture.

Recent scholarship in human geography has made calls for a 'critical geography of architecture',<sup>15</sup> suggesting that the 'built environment is shaped and given meaning through the active and embodied practices through which it is produced, appropriated, and inhabited'.<sup>16</sup> An increasing number of geographers have now moved beyond a reading of architecture

produced by architects, to examine the processes through which architecture becomes an embodied performance of both architects and users. This is evident in the work of Llewellyn<sup>17</sup> who suggests that we need to engage with the wide range of individuals who are ‘implicated in the process of designing and inhabiting the built forms produced’.<sup>18</sup> Llewellyn calls this the ‘thick description of home’,<sup>19</sup> where architecture is understood as a productive activity. Jacobs<sup>20</sup> suggests that this approach should also ‘effectively broach the question of how a building comes to have a “presence”, how it is stitched into place by fragmented, multi-scaled, and multi-sited networks of association’. This is effectively summed up by Massey<sup>21</sup> in her theory of ‘power-geometry’, which suggests that particular places are constructed through the multiple and overlapping relations of power at different spatial scales, and that different individuals are placed in very distinct ways within these relations. These discussions provide the conceptual field from where I wish to extend the work on critical geographies of architecture onto agency and empowerment.

While this recent interest in architecture among geographers has provided analyses of public buildings, high-rises, and social housing in the North, domestic architectural geographies of the poor in the South remain largely unexplored. A critical geography of architecture has not yet reached the spaces of the urban poor in the South, although it can be argued that the user transformations in Madipur widow colony are forms of ‘vernacular’ architecture that are indigenous to time and place, and adapted to local needs and resources. By studying Madipur widow housing, I extend geographical scholarship on architecture to low-income housing in the global South; I extend critical geography’s engagement with ‘big things’ of the global high-rise<sup>22</sup> to the ‘small things’ of poor widow houses; and I extend its realm to an architecture that is produced in a global developmental context. I suggest that it is important to examine low-income housing for the opportunities it presents for politicized practices, to examine its architecture for the ways that it is produced by multi-scalar actors, for the ways its architecture becomes the terrain of interrogation and re-inscription, and to chart out the processes through which the everyday ‘tactics’<sup>23</sup> of creating liveable places are tied to particular forms of empowerment.

These connections between agency and architecture have been under-researched in feminist geography. Feminist geographers have illustrated that social action is deeply embedded in particular places,<sup>24</sup> and that agency should be understood not just as resistance to dominant forms of power but also as everyday practices of embodied political action, that produce particular kinds of places.<sup>25</sup> Massey suggests that it is this aspect of agency that make places and spaces part of the ‘practice of interrelation’<sup>26</sup> which are continuously shifting and multiplying. If architecture is the site of active and embodied spatial practice, then like space, architecture too is tied up with the ‘entanglements of power’<sup>27</sup> that shape and are shaped by productive acts of agency. I suggest therefore, that the transformation of Madipur widow housing by its residents illustrates how architecture can become a dynamic terrain of agency, the medium through which social relationships are practised and transformed.

These discussions lead me to the key idea in this article, that of ‘spatial opportunities’ – a particular set of social, cultural, political, familial, and material possibilities of change that are embedded in and made possible through architecture. I use the word ‘spatial’ to suggest that these possibilities of change include both material and social realities that are transformed through architecture. I use the word ‘opportunities’ to suggest that spatial contingencies are

available to different users on account of their specific locations within different power structures. Hence transformations of the self and of architecture are only possible through subjects' respective relationships with power; which indicates why 'empowerment' is not evenly distributed among the residents of Madipur widow colony. It is this unevenness of empowerment experienced through spatial opportunities, which I examine through the 'spatial stories' of five women.

## **Methodology**

In 1994, I visited Madipur widow colony as part of a college project. At that time, most houses lay vacant, and the appearance of the colony generally reflected that of the original plan. In 2002, as part of a research project examining the connections between gender, space, and power, I approached the widow housing again. This time, I found it difficult to locate since it had completely changed in appearance, integrating with the neighbouring resettlement colonies through commercial and retail streets. My observation that not all houses had changed or expanded in the same way, while some of the residents had become much better off than others, was the inspiration for this article, which is based on the detailed research in 2002.

In this study, I have used a mixed method of architectural mapping and semi-structured interviewing. Architectural mapping was used to record physical changes in the houses. This involved walking around the colony with the architects' drawings, and recording on them current building use (domestic, work, or mixed), demolitions, new constructions, heights, encroachments, and so on. This was supplemented with photographic evidence. Since it is clear that the changes are a continuous process, and building activity within the colony a permanent feature, the architectural mapping in 2002 is intended to provide a snapshot of transformations at a particular time in a particular social context.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Hindi with 18 residents (of which four were men) to understand the reasons why many beneficiaries did not move into the colony while others moved in, changes they made to the units and why, perceptions of their colony, and so on. The interviews were later translated and transcribed to English by the author. Only two of the participants were original allottees. The rest were mainly from lower middle-class families working as government employees in clerical grades, or engaged in small businesses and retail activities in the city.

The combination of interviewing and architectural mapping was intended to understand and locate participants' accounts within actual physical evidence of change, as well as to understand physical changes in their units through participants' familial and social contexts. The main objective was to understand how and why and under what circumstances changes had occurred in the houses, and how participants understood these changes. It has to be kept in mind though, that there is a dearth of information on this project in official documents. Often it is only mentioned in passing, and always as a 'success' story. Therefore, a lot of the information has been pieced together from various informal accounts by residents and architects.

Background information and drawings in this study were provided by HUDCO who designed this project. The architects who had been in charge of this project, however, had left the organization; hence no one could answer my questions about the design concept.

The analysis of the design therefore reflects the UN description, residents' critiques of the design, as well as my own readings. The housing cooperative refused to participate (and threatened me with physical harm when I approached them) since they were going through litigation with the residents.

In the next section, I provide a brief contextualization of Madipur widow colony within the geography of squatter settlements and resettlement colonies in Delhi. After this, through the spatial stories of five women, I discuss how particular spatial opportunities enabled them to empower themselves in different ways.

## **Geography of squatter settlements and resettlement colonies in Delhi**

At the time of independence in 1947, with the launching of a national planning process in India, the public sector was visualized as having a crucial role as the provider of low-income housing.<sup>28</sup> This was delivered through national Five-Year Plans, which regulated most urban development in Delhi till 1957, when the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was constituted. Soon, experts from DDA and Ford Foundation worked to produce the first ever Masterplan for Delhi (1962–1981) – their aim was to remove 'surplus population' to a series of 'satellite towns' around Delhi. DDA and Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) also shared the responsibility of slum clearance, and the DDA became the single planning authority responsible for the development and disposal of land in the capital.

Along with the Slum Areas (Clearance and Improvement) Act in 1956, the first Masterplan had made provisions for the resettlement and upgrading of squatter settlements. During 1961–1977, the DDA developed 47 resettlement colonies of 200,000 plots accommodating about 240,000 households on the fringes of the city. The plot sizes allocated to resettled households were 80 sqm, with provision for attached toilets. In 1962, the plot sizes decreased to 40 sqm. During 1975–1977, this came further down to 21 sqm.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1980s the larger resettlement colonies were concentrated in the north-western fringes of the city and east of the river Yamuna – areas which were primarily industrial (see Figure 1). These were also far from the city centre, and the high-income neighbourhoods in South Delhi, from where the squatters were relocated.<sup>31</sup> It is in this north-western part of the city in Madipur, that a number of resettlement colonies were established and later, the widow colony was located. In total, this area accommodated 21,610 persons within 22.5 hectares in 4322 plots varying in sizes between 21 and 31 sqm. Although constituting a large portion of resettled households, women were not explicitly mentioned as target beneficiaries of these schemes.

It has been argued that one of the reasons behind the rapid growth of squatter settlements in Delhi since the 1970s is due to the Masterplan.<sup>32</sup> During this period, DDA built only 50 per cent of planned low-income housing units, which increased pressures on affordable housing.<sup>33</sup> By 1982, more than 62 per cent of Delhi's population were living in various forms of informal housing<sup>34</sup> across the city – along roads, river banks, railway tracks, parks, and other public or private land. In 1983, the taskforce on Housing and Urban Development published by the Central Government<sup>35</sup> was critical of the resettlement schemes not to have considered other equally important aspects of housing – tenure and landuse. The second

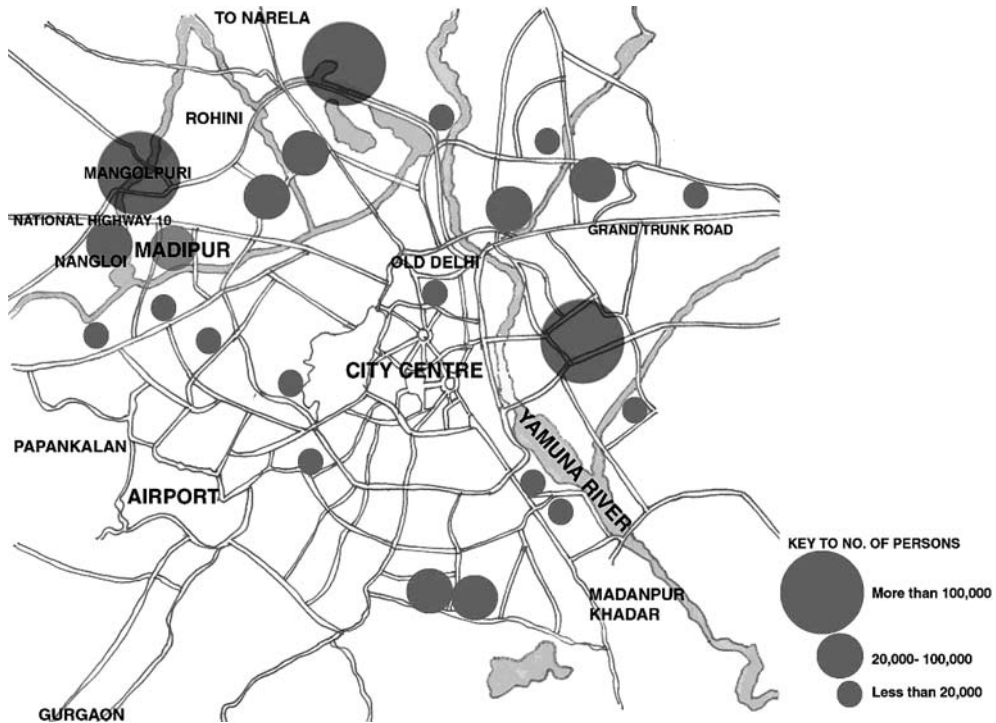


FIGURE 1 Map of Delhi showing the geography of resettlement colonies in the 1980s.<sup>30</sup>

Masterplan (1982–2001) therefore promised resettlement to around 49,000 squatter households, with provisions of income earning opportunities within or in proximity of resettlement colonies. Madipur widow colony was part of this phase of Delhi’s urban development.

Around that time, the UN General Assembly expressed serious concern that, ‘despite the efforts of governments at the national and local levels and of international organizations, the living conditions of the majority of people in the slums and squatter areas and rural settlements, especially in developing countries continue to deteriorate in both relative and absolute terms’.<sup>36</sup> Thus, 1987 was proclaimed as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. Its specific focus was on those living in slums in ‘developing countries’. Following this, the ‘United Nations Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000’ (GSS) called for the crucial role of women and women’s organizations in solving the crisis of adequate housing to be fully recognized. In line with the inclusion of women in other development programmes, it argued that women should have equal participation in all aspects of the housing initiative, which should utilise the resources of all governmental and non-governmental actors in the field of human settlements<sup>37</sup> to their full potential.

In 1988, the first National Housing Policy<sup>38</sup> (NHP) of India aimed to provide a ‘prescription in tune with global concerns’, describing itself as a ‘war against human indignity’, and laid down legal and regulatory reforms to speed up the process of housing construction. The State’s role in the NHP, however, was to be an enabler which meant that housing for the poor was

to be delivered through 'public-private partnerships'. The Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985–1990) therefore earmarked an amount of Rs 20 million for a project entitled 'International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and International Cooperation'.<sup>39</sup> In 1985, a special housing scheme was launched for squatters where a group housing society comprising of widow registrants were allocated land at Madipur.<sup>40</sup> Although the Indian State had made concerted efforts in the past to legitimize women's entry into the economic, legal, and political spheres,<sup>41</sup> and the DDA had made 1–2 per cent reservation for War-Widows in some of its low-income housing schemes,<sup>42</sup> this was the first time that widows were mentioned as beneficiaries in a housing policy, and a colony was conceived exclusively for them.

In 1988, the Ministry of Urban Development advertised in the local newspapers about Madipur widow housing. Officers from the Slum Wing contacted potential beneficiaries in Sadar Bazaar, a designated slum area close to Old Delhi which was being resettled at the time.<sup>43</sup> The units were then allocated through lottery. Each beneficiary was given a 20 years subsidised mortgage to pay back the costs, which were transferred to a private cooperative society.<sup>44</sup> The Society was responsible for collecting the mortgage payments. In 2001, Madipur Widow Colony was described by UN Habitat as an 'International Year of Shelter for the Homeless initiative to demonstrate a new approach to human settlement problems, one appropriate to the life-style of the people'.<sup>45</sup> It received the National Shelter Award in India soon afterwards.

## **Design and planning**

This is how the UN described the design concept:

Within Indian culture, communities had to live closely together in viable clusters with common social and cultural identities and similar economic goals. This tradition was borne in mind during the design phase of the project, so it was decided to develop clusters of condominium units built around a private area for community use.<sup>46</sup>

Madipur widow colony was designed by in-house architects at HUDCO (instead of DDA as is common for resettlement schemes). In its site planning, the architects used lower densities (161 units/hectare) to provide courtyards, a feature uncommon in resettlement colonies (with densities of around 200 units/hectare). The size of the site itself at 1.63 hectares, was also smaller than other resettlement colonies (which were usually around 5 hectares) in order to generate a smaller close-knit community. The overall planning was based on a system of courtyards with rear pedestrian lanes, different from the intersecting linear streets common in Delhi's other resettlement colonies. The amount of space (20sqm) in each plot was in keeping with other colonies. Each unit consisted of a multipurpose room, bathroom, and toilet on the ground floor<sup>47</sup> and a provision for expansion on the first floor, reflecting an 'incremental housing'<sup>48</sup> concept. The houses were built with 'low-cost' technologies – low grade cement, wooden planks for doors, and brick latticework for windows. On the site, there was also land allocated for a community hall and a market, where shops were to be made available to the widows for purchase later. The site planning relied on a strict separation between working and living spaces and a uniformity of dwelling sizes, designs, and courtyards. Since the site itself was not orthogonal, the orthogonal shape of the courtyards meant that there were triangular areas left out along the edges of the site.



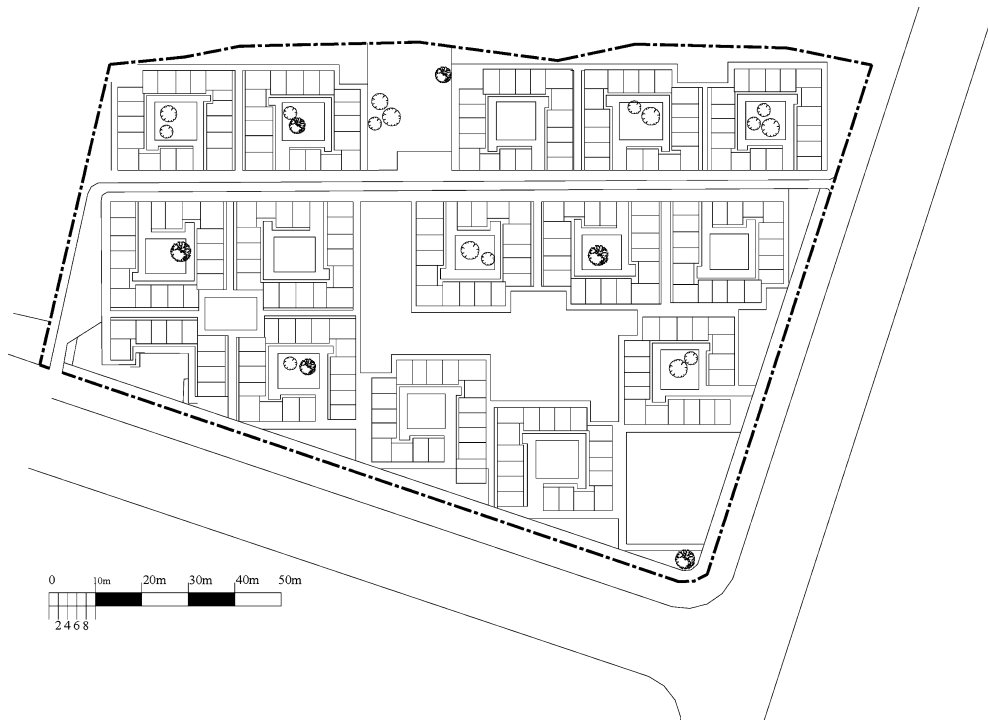


FIGURE 2 Original site plan of the widow colony. (Source: HUDCO, 1995.)

The conceptualization and design of this community were based on the notion of an alternative domesticity that gave precedence to women occupying particular gender and class positions. The presence of courtyards and a community hall reflected the fusion of public and private realms into a community realm; something that might be expected of elderly widows who could provide support to each other. The visual transparency of the brick latticework (instead of shuttered windows) and the one-room dwelling was based on a resident who was single, and did not desire privacy. The external access to the toilet reflected a confidence both in the secure boundaries of this colony and in the lack of threat that the residents in this colony might pose to one another. The ‘incremental housing’ reflected an expectation of a subject who would be able to generate enough economic capital to add another floor over time. These approaches can be read as attempts to produce a gendered subject; an urban citizen who posed no threat to urbanity (as single ‘destitute’ widows). These can also be read as part of the politics of humanitarian endeavours of the State in assuring international development agencies of India’s alignment with global housing concerns.

Madipur widow housing was described as a project where ‘The communities ... were involved in the schemes right from the beginning in all important decision-making during planning, designing and implementation. Post-occupancy management ... is vested with the women. The success ... has led to considerable interest in its replication in other parts of the country.’<sup>49</sup> However, as the houses were allocated many widows did not move in. Others

sold their houses. In the years after allotment, the units changed hands rapidly in the open market.

There were various reasons which contributed to this. First, in 1987, the location of the widow colony on the fringes of West Delhi made it difficult for the widows to imagine its future potential. However, as the city expanded, Madipur's location near the national highway meant that over time it became incorporated within the city. House prices increased and the widows found it easier to sell their units and make a profit. As Simi (a tenant in the colony) explained:

There used to be buffaloes here; and there was a small pond where they used to laze about in. So there used to be nothing in this colony. Really! And that time the rate [cost] was 34,000 rupees and I asked my aunt [who was a widow] to take a plot here. And she said I am not taking it because this place is not developed. And now look at this.

Second, the location of the widow colony made it difficult to access basic facilities such as grocery stores and public transport at that time. Third, community services such as the hall and market had not been built. These issues were clear in Kanta's narrative:

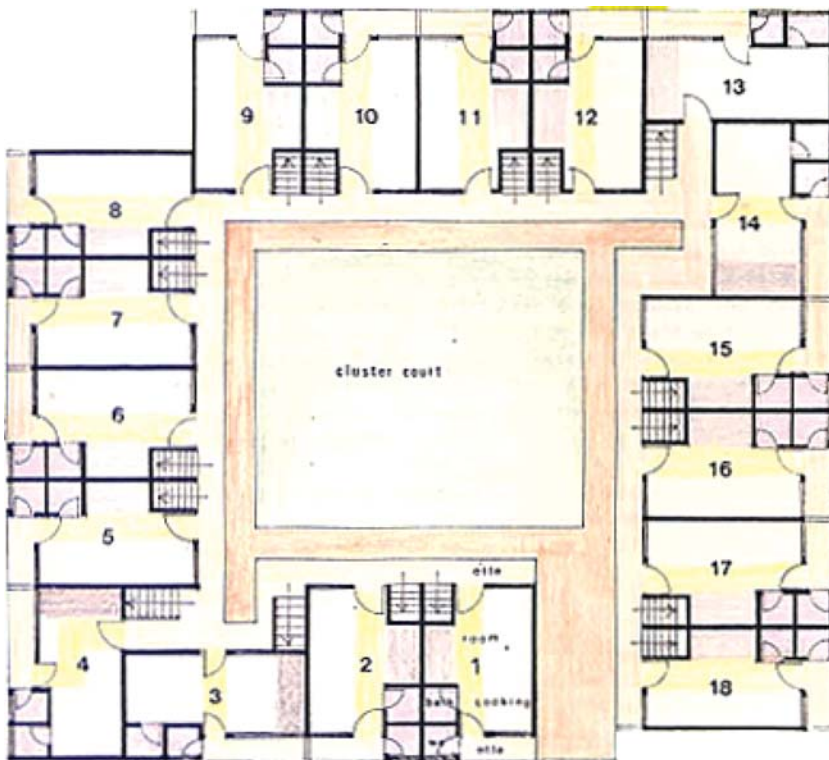


FIGURE 3 Original plan of the courtyard.<sup>50</sup> The numbers denote units. Note how the location of units 8 and 9 allow possibilities of expansion onto the gap. (Source: HUDCO, 1995.)



FIGURE 4 Some of the old houses lying unoccupied. (Photo: Author, 2002.)

The bus-stand should have been close; the milk-booth should have been close, the vegetable market should have been close. She [chairperson of the cooperative society] said they will have a market here but they didn't build it. They said they would build a hall for weddings but that land is lying empty. No proper latrine, no proper bathroom. The bathroom doesn't even have a door. There is no facility for widows over here.

While the widow colony had been built for single widows, it was clear that they were also part of extended households – many had relatives, young children, or even married sons living with them, which meant that the single multipurpose room was inadequate for their needs. The widows needed a substantial amount of money to make these essential changes before moving in, as Kanta said:

We didn't know what they were making us sign to. I am illiterate. I just signed on what they asked us to sign on. I saw the plan and I thought very good, we have got it in a very nice place. Then when we came here, I saw this place and started crying. That's why I kept this locked for three years. I kept thinking, where would we get so much money from.

Finally, those who did move in found that their lease had various clauses – prohibition on renting out or working from units, allowing relatives to stay, and prohibition on children inheriting the unit. Within a few years, many widows sold their units to 'outsiders' who came because of its location close to major roads, because of its changing demographic profile, but also because of its design. The new owners were from nearby resettlement colonies in Madipur, Mangolpuri, and Nangloi, who had become socially mobile, and desired 'nicer' places to live in. As Wajid, a 'new' resident explained:

I like it because it's not congested. The neighbourhood is alright because there are middle-class people living here. There is no fear, because there are no robberies, or crime, or anything. Because the houses have been made in the form of a square, there is only one way to enter. The best thing is that in summers we can open both doors.<sup>51</sup> We had looked at many other [resettlement] colonies, but we liked this best.

The cooperative society, concerned at the rapid change of hands, tried to control this by asking that the widows come in person for the payment of instalments. In 2000, the society



back porches, and expanded vertically. Despite the erasure of the widow houses and the inscription of new kinds of family houses in its place, the courtyards and the central open space did not undergo any encroachment. As the houses became more private, the courtyard became part of the community realm; a place of socialization and entrepreneurship.

In redesigning the houses, the residents were manipulating the spatial opportunities available to them. They were choosing which aspects of the design of units were valid, which changes were suitable for their families, and how much economic capital they could invest. While the old houses translated communitarianism into a 'porous' dwelling, the new owners began the process of asserting the importance of privacy and security by inserting shuttered windows, grilles, and steel doors. While the old houses had relied upon single occupancy, the new owners added areas that established the importance of a patriarchal family through separate living room and bedrooms, separate kitchen, and internal bathrooms. In contrast to the 'low-technology' construction of the original houses, the new houses were built of stronger materials – concrete floor slabs, and solid wooden doors with steel grills. Unlike the single-storey structures of the old houses, the new houses were two- or three-storeys high and sometimes combined two or three adjacent houses. Hence, some houses were now larger and more elaborate than those intended in the original design. For example, the chairperson of the residents' association (identified in Figure 5) who had bought two houses next to each other also encroached on the triangular empty land next to them. His house became the largest in the colony; the only one to be gated, with a 'private' garden. In appropriating, demolishing, and transforming the physical landscape of the colony, the residents produced their own architecture, one that was very different from the architects', State's, and UN's vision of low-income widow housing.

## **Spatial stories**

In this section, I will discuss the 'spatial stories' of a few women living in the widow colony to illustrate how their spatial opportunities allowed them to exercise their agency in making architectural transformations, and how the new architecture then became the site and medium through which they empowered themselves.

### ***Sharda***

Sharda, a widow in her 50s, was one of the original allottees of the colony. Since her husband died, Sharda had worked as a sweeper in a government office.

The slum officers made us fill up the form because we were without support. They said that we were not members, we were owners.<sup>52</sup> Then they made us fill up the forms for the superbazaar [market] so we get that. But we didn't get that. Why not? My children were young and I am illiterate, what do I understand?

Sharda had come to live in the colony only one and half years before this study. Till then her elder son had lived there. Once he started making enough money, he made essential improvements for Sharda to move in with her daughters. Sharda's house, however, was in the middle of the courtyard layout. This meant that unlike other residents who had built on the

adjacent empty land, Sharda was limited in the ways that she could increase the size of her house.

See how much park he [chairperson] has. Now tell me, does he have an advantage or do I have an advantage? Why is it like this? Now where do I go and build? They have all covered their spaces<sup>53</sup> outside. See how much space they had. Now they have built shops there. Now tell me what do I have here? I want to ask them [DDA] what are you doing for widows? How are you helping them? If they had given me some more space, I could have started my corner shop and made a living here. I am from UP<sup>54</sup> so I am very honest. Many people tell me to sell this off. I say, why should I sell this? This is my house, and I got it from the government. This land was sponsored by international organizations to help those without support, but now they are making money out of it.

Sharda's narratives can be interpreted as a form of gendered consciousness of her ethnicity, family circumstances, social capital (education), and architectural possibilities of change that produced a particular set of 'spatial opportunities'. Her understanding of the differences between herself and some of the other residents were based on their increased spatial opportunities. For example, the chairperson of the resident's association was a clerical grade government employee, his house occupied a strategic place in the colony, was made of expensive materials, and he was able to manipulate law enforcement agencies despite his 'illegal' encroachments. Being from a conservative Hindu family in UP, Sharda's daughters were not allowed to work outside, but a larger house would have allowed them to work from home.

Sharda, however, expanded her house vertically. She had built two small rooms on the upper floor – one for her son, and the other, she rented out to another family. Downstairs, there was a larger multipurpose room with a kitchen where Sharda and her two daughters



FIGURE 6 Sharda's two-storied house with steel-framed windows and doors. (Photo: Author, 2002.)

lived. Sharda's house was made with modest materials. Her rooms were whitewashed and she did not have much furniture. Visitors sat on her bed. Outside, she had plastered and painted the brick walls and installed steel doors and windows for privacy and security. The modest architecture – the size, external appearance, and layout of the house – presented her as a person of modest means. Sharda was not able to change the location of her house within the colony; she did not have the money to demolish and rebuild it; but, she did what was possible – extend it vertically and generate rental income from that extra space.

Sharda's 'empowerment' was shaped by a number of factors. First, her gendered position as a working-class widow was able to ensure her participation in a State-sponsored housing project aimed at women's empowerment. Sharda's access to empowerment was limited in that the location of her house was not near empty land, an issue that created tremendous spatial inequalities within the widow colony. Yet, much of her 'empowerment' also depended on her having an earning son, who was able to invest in the house, and make it liveable. Thus, Sharda's claims to spatial opportunities were not only contingent upon her having access to architectural possibilities of change but also her position within a variety of other power relationships – with the State, family, class, ethnicity, and social capital. This is elaborated further in Anita's story.

### **Anita**

Anita lived on the boundary of the colony along the main road. Anita, her husband, her two children, her mother-in-law, and brother-in-law had moved there from Sadar Bazaar when the unit was allotted to her widowed mother-in-law. This is how Anita described the changes:

The house has changed. The bricks were very yellow and weak. So we had to break it all and make it again. And everyone built this together so there was a change [in the colony]. The houses are more solid, so we don't have problems with that. Otherwise the roofs used to be leaking before, and the floors had termites through them. Then we had to put solid flooring so that the insects don't come through. It took about four, five years total to get it done.

It was significant then that this house was adjacent to the triangular land near the road. Both her husband and his brother had pooled in their earnings, and like other owners along the edge, they had extended their house till the main road. This doubled the size of the original unit. The house now had four rooms on two floors with wide balconies facing the road. As Anita said:

There was no benefit for the widows in here. This was only one room without a kitchen or anything. Although there was a latrine bathroom, there was not enough space. There were three feet on either side and so we all covered that and made two small rooms out of that.<sup>55</sup> That's why we got two rooms made so that one room will be for our mother-in-law and one for us. Because you can't sleep in the same room with your children.

When she had arrived in the colony Anita had sat at home 'not doing anything' until her husband encouraged her to start a shop. Initially, she sold small items but the location of her house on the main road allowed her to expand her business. The front room facing the road was made larger and turned into a grocery store where Anita employed a young man to help her. During the study, Anita was regularly supplying groceries to many families within



FIGURE 7 Anita's house with the grocery store on the ground floor. (Photo: Author, 2002.)

and outside the colony. The store had expanded and announced itself with bold signage. Anita said that since she had started the shop, she and her husband had stopped fighting, because 'now I am independent and doing my own work, I am proud of it. I don't have to listen to anyone'.

Anita's peculiar relationship with the State through her extended family allowed her access to material and social possibilities of change. Her 'empowerment' could not have been realized had she not been part of her mother-in-law's household, or their house had not been on the boundary of the site. The State sponsored widow colony had, however, reproduced the relations of gendered power within families by making Anita's transformation subject to her husband's contribution on economic and moral terrains. Nevertheless, her narrative suggests that although a larger house or economic productivity are not markers of empowerment in themselves, the independence and higher status within her family and wider society that it represents, can become the route to empowerment.<sup>56</sup> Her transformation was an embodied practice of material and social changes to the house and household relationships, through which her spaces of social empowerment and economic productivity had fused. Thus, the differences in the nature of empowerment between Sharda and Anita reflect their locations within the intersections of architectural, familial, and economic opportunities, and which set of spatial opportunities they were able to take up at any given time.

### *Shanta*

Shanta was another original allottee of the colony. At the time of allocation she had been a widow with a young daughter and son and did not have the money to invest in the house. Shanta had worked as a seamstress till her son started earning and made improvements to the house. 'I used to do sewing and brought him [son] up. Then when he started earning then I gave it up. Now I don't do anything. My son has kept me very happy', she said. It was clear that while Shanta was the symbolic head of the household, she also considered her



well-being as the responsibility of a patriarchal family. Shanta perceived her empowerment through legal markers, which provided her access to power within her household. The house stood for Shanta's higher social position within her family. 'I told my son that as long as I am alive I won't let you sell this house, because it's in my name', she explained.

Like Sharda's house, Shanta's house too was located in the middle of the courtyard module; hence there was no scope for horizontal expansion. Nevertheless, her son had demolished and completely rebuilt the house, covered the front and back porches, and built balconies on either side. Unlike Sharda's house, Shanta's house was neatly divided into private and public zones. The ground floor now had a separate kitchen, bathroom, and a living room. There were two bedrooms on the first floor, one for herself and the other for her son's family. Visitors were made to sit on the sofas in the living room, while her daughter-in-law prepared tea for them in the new kitchen. Shanta also was the only one in the courtyard to have a telephone, a precious commodity in the colony. This meant that she could decide which of her neighbours she would grant 'favours' to by letting them use her phone.

The rear of Shanta's house was adjacent to the main park, which she used for different social occasions. When her daughter got married, she put up the wedding tent in the park. The proximity and access to the large open area meant that she could divide her guests between her house [for family members], the courtyard [for informal guests], and the wedding tent in the main park [for guests from the bridegroom's side]. In the absence of private open space, Shanta clearly viewed the courtyard and the park as extensions of her house and of her domestic realm. She therefore connected the physical and social environments more intimately than Sharda or Anita. 'We are Punjabis so we want nice people to stay here. We want it clean. See my little hut'<sup>57</sup> she said.

Shanta's pride in her house extended to the courtyard where, like many other women residents in the colony, she spent a large part of her day. She had planted trees on her side of the



FIGURE 8 Shanta's house with the wedding tent and the make-shift 'kitchen' in the park to prepare food for guests. (Photo: Author, 2002.)

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FIGURE 9 Boxes ready to go in the festive season. (Photo: Author, 2002.)

courtyard to create a 'pleasing environment'. 'I put these plants so that we can have some fruits. I used to eat my lunch here [courtyard] before. Then as people started coming in and building they dumped building materials in here and all the grass died. So I do what I can do on my own' she explained. It was while socializing with her neighbours in the courtyard that Shanta 'requested' them to make decorative boxes to help her son's box-business. Although this business was highly seasonal, Shanta's use of the neighbours' goodwill and 'respect' of her generation meant that she was able to help her son deliver large orders for boxes on time to make a handsome profit each festival season. She was also lucky in that she could use her sister's unoccupied house next door as a store for the boxes till they were ready to be sold. Shanta's position as the only original allottee in her courtyard, combined with the architectural transformation of her house, its material commodities, and her role as 'employer', meant that she occupied a position of power both within her household as well as among her neighbours in the courtyard.

Shanta's spatial opportunities were produced from her gender relationships both with her son and with the Indian State, which contributed to her taking or not taking up these opportunities. The State's utopian vision of women's empowerment as translated into the architecture of widow housing had not produced Shanta as a single self-sufficient widow. Rather, it had made her more dependent on her earning son to allow her access to a liveable house and to spaces of economic productivity. Yet, in the presence of a supportive male family member, Shanta was able to mobilize the architecture of her house, and her social relationships, to empower herself. The State's vision of empowerment, however, was never completely irrelevant for Shanta or Sharda – both felt empowered on account of their relationship with the State and with international organizations. Their legal ownership of the house became meaningful in providing them access to power within the family and the neighbourhood, although the architecture of the house itself reinforced gender power relations within the family. As they engaged with this architecture as a meaningful and embodied practice of everyday life, transformation both in the houses and in their lives became possible.

## *Simi and Mimi*

Simi and Mimi were sisters who lived with their two younger brothers and parents as tenants in Shanta's courtyard. As a Muslim woman, Simi preferred to work from home, and making the decorative boxes for Shanta provided her with this opportunity. Simi's narrative, however, indicates her perceived disempowerment.

It's a time pass and also a bit of earnings. So kill two birds with one stone. I make about 150 to 200 [boxes] a day. There are about five of us in this square who make it. But she [Shanta] makes a lot of profit on these. One day she was telling us that for one box she makes a profit of 25 rupees; and what does she give us? Only one rupee. What can we say? What if she doesn't give us even that? So we think let it continue that way. I just do it thinking that I make a bit of money staying at home.

Simi's family were the only tenants in the courtyard. Their house was the only one in the courtyard that had not been rebuilt and was still the original design. When they had first arrived, their landlord had not given them access to the terrace. Their house was adjacent to the triangular land facing the road, but they could not appropriate this since they were tenants. Although their landlord had recently installed secure doors and windows, and allowed them access to the terrace, their house still retained much of the character of the original house.

It used to be very difficult to live here before. And have you seen the room downstairs? No kitchen, nothing. And we got this bathroom and latrine made here [terrace]. And we didn't use to have the terrace upstairs; he [landlord] took it out of the rent.

While their house represented a temporary status, their tenure as tenants deterred opportunities of social or architectural transformation.

They [neighbours] keep taunting us that we are tenants. They say why are you talking so much? You are tenants. Those people who put in shanties illegally and stay, the government thinks of them, gives them legal land. Then they sell it three times. But the government has never thought of the tenants. Those people who have no place and are paying rent ...



FIGURE 10 Private tuitions on the rooftop terrace. (Photo: Author, 2002.)

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In contrast, Mimi was the only member of the family to be educated in university. She wanted to start a master's degree but due to her family's economic condition was compelled to work full time. During the day, Mimi went from house to house in the neighbourhood, taking private tuitions; but since the landlord gave them access to the terrace upstairs, every evening Mimi also tutored the neighbours' children there. Their parents, however, were continuously reminded by their extended family that they had not married off their daughters. For their father with failing eyesight, who could not work as a tailor anymore, this was a double shame. He was taunted by relatives for being unable to provide for his family and 'living off' his daughters' earnings. Indeed, in their family, the women were the sole earners – their mother was a childminder in a nursery, while their older brother was unemployed, and the younger brother was still in school.

For Simi and Mimi, the architectural quality of their house and their status as tenants increased their sense of marginality. Nevertheless, both used the courtyard and the terrace for different politicized practices. The possibilities of architectural transformation were limited, but they both seized their spatial opportunities in different ways – Simi by box-making in the courtyard and terrace, and Mimi by taking tuitions in the neighbourhood and on the terrace. The differences in their empowerment were shaped by their uneven access to social capital, as well as their personal transformations made possible through this access. As Mimi explained,

It [opportunity] depends on oneself too. These people [gesturing towards Simi] are just lazy. They don't want to go outside. You know, there was such a nasty place in Madipur in C-block. They said that if a decent girl goes in that neighbourhood, she can't return with her honour intact. And I taught in that lousy area for three years. Nothing ever happened to me. No one ever said anything to me.

Simi's and Mimi's spatial stories emphasize the continued (albeit limited) relevance of the State in shaping forms of women's empowerment. As tenants, their family had never squatted on public land, which denied them access to various State resettlement schemes. Instead, they were reliant on a different set of spatial opportunities to transform their lives. Unlike Sharda, Anita, or Shanta, their economic participation was induced in the absence of any earning male family member. Yet, they did not occupy positions of power within their families similar to Sharda, Anita, or Shanta. Further, Mimi's rejection of Simi's desire to remain within the house as 'laziness', suggests that despite being located within similar contexts of architecture, family, religion, and tenure, Mimi's access to social capital had transformed her in ways that she was able to redefine her relations with gender, religion, and place. Thus, their relationships with the State, society, family, and material places of the house and neighbourhood provided access to another set of spatial opportunities, whose take-up depended on their personal choices, which subsequently shaped their unequal geographies of empowerment.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This article's focus on women's stories situated within the architecture of widow housing, illustrates the limits of development discourses that envision women's empowerment through housing and tenure as disconnected from their families. 'Empowerment', when architecturally

translated by the Indian State into a utopian low-income widow colony in Delhi, was transformed by the users as they sought to remake themselves and their spaces. The spatial stories of the women in Madipur widow colony indicate the ways in which architecture can become the pre-condition, medium, and outcome of women's social agency and the terrain of their politicized practices, but this agency is always embedded in familial ties. Their stories show how a particular set of political, social, economic, family, and architectural contexts contribute to a set of 'spatial opportunities' which are selectively taken up by women to empower themselves in different ways.

These spatial opportunities exist under a particular set of conditions. These include the State's vision of women's empowerment as translated into the architecture of low-income widow housing, gender relationships within the family and the State, and individual subjective agencies of the women who seized upon some of these 'spatial opportunities' to transform themselves. From the spatial stories, it is clear that the role of the State as the provider of tenure to women is a critical one, since this gives them access to forms of power within their family and neighbourhood. Yet, the visions of empowerment that were espoused by the State and were translated into architecture ignored women's gender relationships within the family and wider society, while at the same time allowing the possibilities of physical transformations. The spatial stories further illustrate the centrality of gendered relationships within the family in producing women's empowerment – the presence of a supportive male family member able to provide women (such as Shanta, Sharda, and Anita) access to spatial opportunities that would transform their lives. Further, in the absence of these supportive gender relations (as in the case of Mimi and Simi), women's cultural capital becomes crucial in shaping personal decisions to take up certain spatial opportunities while rejecting others. These 'power-geometries' of space and place produced by multi-sited and multi-scalar networks of gender relationships, practiced and realized through architecture, provided opportunities of transformation in women's lives. Their gender relationships with the family, State, and architecture shaped their spatial opportunities and contributed to an 'uneven geography of architecture and empowerment' in Madipur widow colony.

This article thus indicates the wider contribution of architecture to a critical geography of architecture in the global South. It suggests that in order to truly engage with architecture as a multi-sited, embodied and embedded, political, and productive practice, critical geography has to extend beyond the North to the 'messiness' of squatter settlements and resettlement colonies in the South. It suggests that it is important to recognize architecture as a heterogeneous political practice within particular social, familial, and material contexts. Finally, it suggests that it is important to examine architecture within the developmental context of the global South – particularly in circumstances when it is being transformed through the politicized practices of its users – in order to fully understand its role in civil society.

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## Notes

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- <sup>30</sup> Map prepared by author with information from DDA Slum Wing.
- <sup>31</sup> Since 2000, resettlement has taken place in 11 relocation sites further away from the city – Papankalan, Rohini, Madanpur Khadar, Narela, and so on.
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- <sup>51</sup> The house could be entered from the courtyard or from the rear pedestrian lane. It is rare in other resettlement colonies to find plots with two sides open.
- <sup>52</sup> Most widows had been under the impression that they were freeholders of the land. They came to understand later that the housing cooperative owned the land on which they were required to pay instalments on leasehold.
- <sup>53</sup> As translated from Hindi, 'space' here refers to an empty piece of land or area, rather than the geographical concept of space.
- <sup>54</sup> Refers to Uttar Pradesh, a northern state in India.
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