

## **Overview**

The workshop Ageing in the city took place in New Delhi between 27th and 29th September 2019, in which students from Heidelberg University, Jawaharlal Nehru University and the School of Planning and Architecture, gathered to discuss and set theoretical common grounds about ageing in the cities and the challenges different urban settings might face in this process. They also prepared the two-day fieldwork trips in which observation, interviews, and fruitful discussions took place.

The highlight of the workshop was the design of the fieldwork. The group of around 20 students was divided into four groups, each one assigned with one of the four sites: Mandapur Khadar, Dharampura in the Old City, Chittaranjan Park and a gated community in Gurgaon. Despite of being located in Delhi, these places had completely different participation in the urbanization process of the city. The diversity these four places allowed a fruitful discussion at the end of the workshop where contrasts and similarities arose to nurture the debates on urbanization in New Delhi and its influence in ageing processes.

Additionally, the groups were formed by students of all three institutes; their own academic and personal background strengthen the discussions and allowed an interdisciplinary environment. New perspectives of analysis arose, not only provided by the academic formation of the participants, but by a fruitful and very transcultural exchange of ideas. This meeting point between disciplines and life-experiences, allowed a rich input from each and every student, not only in terms of analysis, but also for the design of the fieldwork, the methodology and the delivery of the findings.

At the end, the possibility to share impressions over the different places visited, to open new venues of analysis and problematizing the entanglements of ageing in a city such as Delhi and the opportunity to contrast the information made in academia with the one-to-one contact with the residents of these areas, allowed the whole group to learn not only from one’s own experiences but the other sites as well.

## **Old Delhi.**

My group was assigned with the fieldwork site in Old Delhi, a very dynamic area due to its high commercial activity. Its narrow streets, the bad condition of the roads, the electricity wires tangled and the congested paths with rickshaws, pedestrians, and vendors, give this area the feeling of chaos. This area provides every visitor with myriad smells of the street, of food, of people, with the colors of the signs with the names of the shops, and with noises of every kind, making this experience something one cannot make part of without involving every sense in it.



*Image 1. Wires entangled in the streets of Old Delhi.*

However, just a couple of streets away from the main commercial road in Old Delhi, the noise starts getting softer and the chaotic spirit of streets that never seems to cease, turns into a space in which people interact with their neighbours, walk along all day long and at certain times of the day are as quiet as if this place was kilometers away from the city centre. Since covering Old Delhi in two days would have been a hard task, the area for the visit was narrowed to Dharampura, a Jain community residential area in Old Delhi where a lot of the commercial activity takes place.

During our time in the field, we realised that most of the occupation of public space was made by men. This was not restricted to the commercial activity in the area but also to those who loitered in residential areas. The conversation with these men broadened our understanding on how the city has been growing and the affectation to the communities who

have inhabit Old Delhi for years. For example, they mentioned that this was for a long time the limit of the city but now they are in the middle of it because of its geographic expansion.

### **Clashing perspectives of well-being**

Dharampura is a place that offers a myriad contradictions between the ideas that institutions and academics propose in terms of development, well-being, urbanisation, and friendly-ageing, and the actual experiences of the citizens. In terms of infrastructure, the area of Dharampura is hardly seen by experts as age-friendly or even disability friendly. The conditions of the roads, the narrow streets and the highly dense constructed area, allows the exclusive fast circulation of pedestrians, two-wheelers and bicycles, which makes it dangerous for elderly or children to live in. This apparent isolation from the main roads, the lack of access of cars and the impossibility to widen the streets could be seen as a problem in terms of “modernizing” the city. However, this does not correspond to the narratives of the place that the inhabitants of Old Delhi have developed.



*Images 2-4. Condition of the roads in Dharampura and Old Delhi.*

The reading people give to what might be understood as *disadvantages* in terms of infrastructure is completely opposite, since they are seen and resignified as advantages. For instance, the fact that the buildings are so tall and the streets so narrow, almost giving the sensation of a labyrinth, allows the ground to stay cooler in summer, in a city that reaches more than 40°C in the hottest days of the year. Following these lines, the old buildings, in spite of being built on top of another without any planning or authorization by the local government, and exposing the higher floors to the high tension cables, have big and thick rock and cement walls that allow the heat to stay inside in the coldest months and to stay cool in the hottest.



*Image 5. Interview while talking to men sharing the tea in a chabootra*

The short distance between the buildings and the fact that the Jain area has been occupied by the same families for years, create special bonds that in certain ways compensate the infrastructure problems. The social bonds created by people were over and over related in the interviews. On the one hand, the inhabitants constantly related to the close bonds of the community that allow them to help each other and to strengthen the community, especially when one of the members was sick and needed to be taken out of the area to go to a hospital. On the other hand, and particularly for the elders, they argue that they barely go outside of the old city and it is possible to see them roaming around all day long saying hello to their friends and neighbours.

The well-being provided by the opportunity to stay in the place where they were born and the community they make part of, as well as enjoying the benefits the infrastructure “problems” offer, show that the discussion held in the academic and institutional settings require more dialogue between the needs of the communities and the expectations imposed by the

discourse of development and progress in cities like New Delhi facing a massive urbanization and growth.

### **Ageing in the Old City**

When thinking about ageing in the city different challenges arise. In a place as particular as Dharampura, the affectations of the growth of the city do not only affect the space but also the relationships that take place in it. Most of the young members of the families decide to move since it is more beneficial for their commuting to their workplaces. Also, when getting married, not all of them stay in Dharampura. Instead, they find new houses in other parts of the city.



*Image 6. Men sharing the tea in the public space*

This affects ageing processes of those who were born and/or grew up in the Old City in different ways. First, some of them do not want to move since they are emotionally attached to this place. The other parts of the city seem chaotic, isolating and hot, with a deep lack of communitary life that they enjoy in Dharampura. Second, they know that these dynamics cannot be avoided so it is very likely that they stay in Old Delhi without their extended family, fact that strongly contrasts with the tradition in India. This creates feelings of solitude and sometimes abandonment. Third, some of the neighbours have also sold their properties and have moved to other parts of the city. This has turned into a commercialization of the ground floors of the houses and the transformation of the socialization places into commercial ones, as it is the example of *chabootras*, once places for interaction, now,

storefronts. The spaces once used for talking with the neighbours feel different for those who stay, creating a sense of social rupture and nostalgia.

### **Challenges of the fieldwork and final thoughts.**

In two days, it is hard to grasp the ways in which people live and engage the Old City. At the same time, it was a big challenge to establish a dialogue with the men in Old Delhi because of the linguistic barrier. However, people are always willing to share their stories, to have an intergenerational dialogue in which they do not only share their thoughts about their lives in Dharampura, but their perceptions on the past, the future, the changes of family structures, the pressures of city growth.

City planning should be thought in accordance with the perceptions and needs of people who have engaged the places they intervene for longer times. This invites scholars and institutions to think about the sometimes paternalistic approaches to people's problems and the need to foresee the positive and negative outcomes of the potential interventions.