How do views shape words?

How do words shape cities?

WRITING CITIES

Hall, Fernández Arrigoitía and Dinardi, Editors

WRITING CITIES 1.

A collaboration between the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT Media LAB, Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard Law School.

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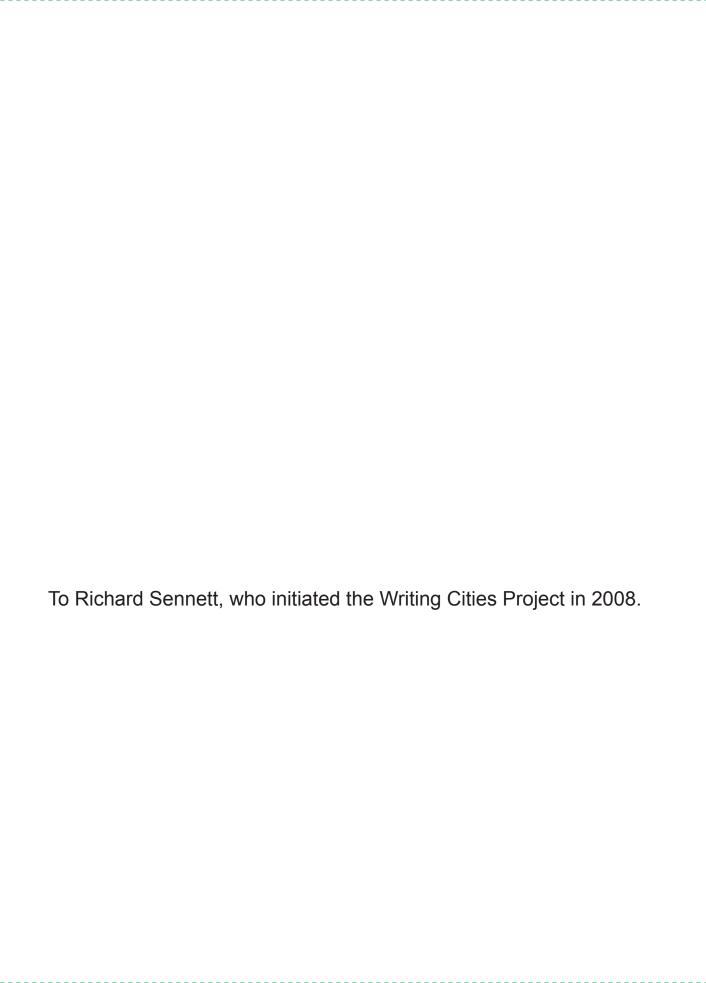**Working Papers Volume 1.**

How do views shape words? How do words shape cities?

A collection of working papers by graduate researchers of the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), MIT Media LAB, Harvard Graduate School of Design and Harvard Law School.

Edited by Suzanne Hall, Melissa Fernández Arrigoitía and Cecilia Dinardi

To Richard Sennett, who initiated the Writing Cities Project in 2008.

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Acknowledgments

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6.   The Mughal Pavilion

Ninad Pandit and Laura Lee Schmidt

In the summer of 2006, a structure of no particular archaeological significance was discovered in the process of clearing the overgrown shrubbery in the historic neighbourhood of Nizamuddin in Delhi. This artefact, presumably a tomb, was marked by a complete ruination of its structure. The cloister vault[1] covering its square base had caved in, the stone latticework patterns were lost, and no markers of the commemorated life remained visible. Engulfed by dense vegetation, the structure went unnoticed by at least a century of formal and informal archaeological listings. The accidental discovery of this ancient[2] object and its subsequent restoration acquires a special significance when seen through the framework of the ongoing practice of its restoration.

In this essay, we locate the site of this discovery and the actors in the preservation process. We argue that the relationship between the two - site and conservationist - is a conflicted, albeit fleeting, one. Moreover the fleeting character of this relationship can be revealed only through writing the process. By conceptualising the project as a series of decisions executed at the level of the discipline of conservation - rather than mandated by the object itself - this paper provides a close reading of the structure in a future urban context, arguing that the discipline is driven by a vision for Delhi. Here we contrast the work of the conservationist[3] with that of the historian for determining the point of origin of a monument in order to understand its autonomous history as emblematised by the work of Alois Riegl. Conservation legislates meaning induced by the modern subject's engagement of the monument. As this engagement is historical, so too is the practice of conservation, even as it attempts to overcome its own historicity. This tension is manifest in the present-day mandates of conservation that are fulfilled by cultural institutions but are made real by disciplinary consent.

A transhistorical site

The current city of Delhi is an aggregate of seven centuries of history, and the logic of its modern urban planning often makes way for a historical artefact that may find new purpose as a traffic roundabout or a folly inside a public park. The Nizamuddin neighbourhood (figure 1) in contemporary South Delhi bears traces of much of Delhi's built history, with shrines and tombs dating back to the thirteenth century AD. Following the burial of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin[4] at this location; the site gained a special spiritual significance. Several important people from the city chose to be buried in this vicinity over the next few centuries, converting the site into an extended funerary landscape. Located within this site (figure 2) now are the historic shrine to Nizamuddin; the Nizamuddin *basti* - a thirteenth-century historic neighborhood that developed around the shrine and continues to thrive; the Mughal Emperor Humayun's tomb[5] built in the fifteenth century (figure 3); and Sundar Nursery (figure 4) - a large twentieth-century nursery spread over 67 acres[6].

This extended landscape is currently the focus of an ambitious restoration project by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), a project that began with the restoration[7] of the Humayun's tomb gardens in 1997. Between 2003 and 2007, the project further expanded[8] its scope to encompass the restoration of Humayun's Tomb, the adjacent Sundar Nursery and the historic Nizamuddin *basti*. Following international convention,[9] a decision was made to restore Humayun's Tomb back to its fifteenth-century condition. The landscape around Humayun's tomb - the Mughal *charbagh*[10] - was restored back to the nineteenth-century condition when it was modified by the British. As the project expanded, it was also decided to restore the Sundar Nursery back to the 1920s when it was a fully functional nursery, (figure 5) while the individual tombs contained within will be restored to their sixteenth and seventeenth-century conditions. In the future, the landscape immediately around each tomb will also be redesigned in a "Mughal" style of *charbaghs*. Thus, the site is a transhistorical landscape, in which different "restored" historical periods are juxtaposed for the viewership of the modern subject. (figure 6) In fact, the site becomes transhistorical only as it is confronted by and modified by the conservationist.

Figure 1. Delhi and its immediate environs, 1909, red highlighted by authors. (Murray 1909)

Figure 2. Satellite image showing location of three parts of AKTC project. (Google Earth)

Figure 3. View of Humayun's Tomb (restored). (Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

Figure 4. Entrance to Sundar Nursery. (Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

Figure 5. Sundar Nursery showing plantation. Note the tomb in the background. (Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

Figure 6. Trail connecting the various historic structures in Nizamuddin precinct. (Overlay by Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

Restoring the nursery, restoring meaning

Prima facie, the ASI's decision to reinstate the nursery's original program from the 1920s, and to restore the tombs to their condition in the sixteenth and seventeenth century appears to be a tactical decision based on an immediate threat to the site. A new highway extension (NH 24) planned by the Delhi Development Authority proposed to slice right through the Sundar Nursery. A monument-focused approach of valorisation of the structure, if pursued further, could have led to a design solution where the highway would weave its way between the monuments, creating pockets and islands of historical significance as it passes through. The only way to oppose this construction was to establish the historical specificity of the site or the landscape, both its ancient history as a funerary site as well as the relatively modern one drawn from its use as a nursery. The potential highway problem thus at a deeper level afforded an opportunity for the project's development as a landscape conservation project. By identifying and documenting the historicity of the contiguous landscape, it became possible to assign a collective meaning to the site, and resist its division - both literally and figuratively.

As the site's collective meaning had been affirmed, internal contradiction in Sundar Nursery reveals how the monuments provided leverage to attribute to the whole site a jurisdictional status. By virtue of being an operational nursery, the land was under the control of the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) of the Government of India from the 1920s, and the ASI's jurisdiction on the property was limited to the tomb structures and the land surrounding them up to a 100 metre radius. By virtue of the legal framework under which the ASI operates, a protected architectural monument is privileged over any landscape that contains it. On the one hand, this means that the ASI has enough judicial authority to confiscate ancient structures from other owners. On the other hand, this also means that the idea of an *historic landscape* is missing from the legal toolkit of the conservation architect. If the site - given its own particular history and its proximity to a World Heritage monument, as well as its location within the historic Nizamuddin area - were to be appropriately protected, it would necessarily have to be in control of the ASI, the agency qualified to protect it. The only way for the ASI to claim a jurisdiction over the entire site was by simultaneously assigning equal value to all the monuments located within the compound, declaring it a historic complex.

Thus the landscape could be preserved only by sublating its relationship to the monuments it contains. The ASI's strategy of achieving this was to declare the entire Sundar Nursery a historic site and embed the historicity of the object within its landscape. It was declared to be a critical component of the restoration plan for the precinct, and the ASI and AKTC offered to make this park accessible to the public, a "Central Park" for Delhi (figure 7). This effectively made the project relevant not just for its historicity, but also because of the public space that it created, a move that allowed the restoration of the site to immediately become relevant to the city of Delhi itself.

Yet, the discovery of a "new" monument within this contiguous landscape of monuments helps us transcend this *prima facie* - public - case for conservation. Since the monuments, on equal ground with one another, help legitimise Sundar Nursery as a restoration project, the inceptive moment for the modern life of the newly discovered structure - the moment of its discovery - therefore has embedded within it a call to intervene along these lines, only in so far as it is confronted by the conservationist. As the modern subject emerges as the only viewer who can historicise this structure, this historical logic concretely translates into a disciplinary logic that seeks to expand its authority by an aggregation of conserved examples. Its location within Sundar Nursery made this call for intervention an urgent one - significant restoration work had already begun within a year of its discovery. Its identity as an *ancient*[11] structure alone cannot explain such a response; indeed there are several structures in Delhi and elsewhere of greater historical significance and in a better state of repair that are being neglected by the ASI.[12] The compelling nature of this structure is a direct function of its location.

Making the Mughal Pavilion

The structure under question had lapsed from documentary memory at the time of its discovery. A Delhi Heritage listing carried out by conservation architects for INTACH[13] in 1999, was subsequently published as a two volume report titled, *Delhi: The Built Heritage - A Listing*. While this listing documented over 1200 structures in Delhi, the anomalous structure was missing from the listing. It was only in 2006, when restoration work began in the Sundar Nursery that the structure was re-discovered. This newly discovered ancient structure was about 8 metres by 8 metres in size, and in a state of absolute ruination. The walls showed significant structural deterioration, the jamb lining had disappeared, and no indication of the details of the original latticework remained. If the form of the structure was "lost", so was its meaning. There was no indication of the identity of the person buried within this structure. The structural failings meant that the formal elements that gave meaning to the tomb - the vault and the latticework - were lost too. The structure, devoid of formal and functional identity, presented a challenging condition - the ambiguity of restoring a structure with an incomplete knowledge about its past, coupled with the opportunity of assigning new meaning to a historical structure.

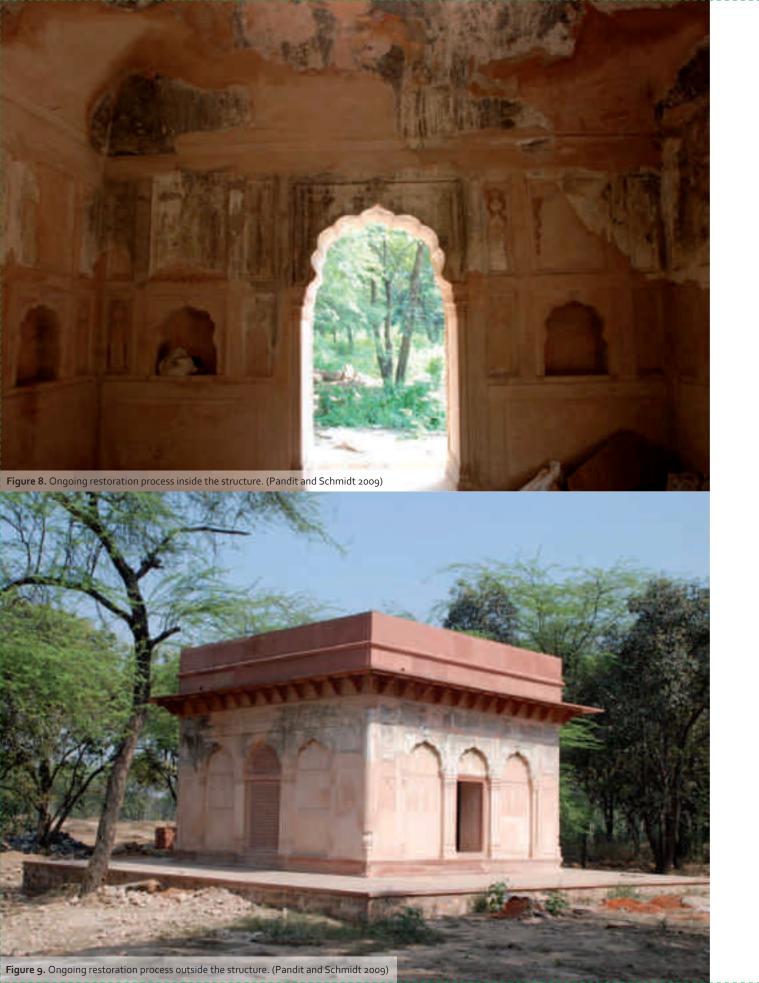**Figure 7.** View of Sundar Nursery. (Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

Conservation architects created the space for the reinvention of the structure. The AKTC drew the structure out of the nature that had engulfed it, the vault was rebuilt, awnings were added on all sides, and a large platform was built around it (figures 8 and 9). The missing latticework was recreated and reinstalled based on samples available from other structures on the site - structures that were perhaps built in different periods. In keeping with its "Mughal" origins, a *charbagh* is to be installed around it in the near future. As the form was recreated - and even reinvented - speculatively, so was its meaning. It was decided to rename the structure the "Mughal Pavilion" - a de-sacralised name for a former tomb. The name of the structure belies a contradiction - a "Mughal Pavilion" is not exactly a new architectural type, but in this case, it was retroactively deployed to signify a structure that was more a result of the logic of conservation than of historical rigor and accuracy in its reconstruction. In the face of the claim for authenticity made by conservation practice, this structure lays bare a problem that constitutes this practice.

"Unintentional" restoration

How does the Mughal Pavilion reveal such a problem? Alois Riegl in his seminal 1902 essay, *Modern Cult of Monuments: its Character and its Origins*, was one of the first art historians to understand the preservation of monuments as a matter of present-day value ascription to works from the past, and he traced how this human relationship to monuments came to be throughout history. Riegl distinguishes between *intentional* monuments and *unintentional* monuments - the first being a commemorative structure that preserves a moment (with 'a claim to immortality'), and the second, growing out of the Renaissance - which he sees as the proto-origins of Modernity - interest in monuments that are designated as "important" enough to conserve long after their commemorative meaning ceases to resound (Riegl 1902, p. 38). These two categories grasp the subjective component of monuments or how they are meaningful to certain people throughout history. Through Riegl, it becomes clear that the way monuments are viewed by modern subjects is "historical"; that is, they possess a certain "historical value" that is derived from the isolation of an object from the conditions that gave rise to it.

It is possible to understand the dynamic of the Mughal Pavilion in

Figure 8. Ongoing restoration process inside the structure. (Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

Figure 9. Ongoing restoration process outside the structure. (Pandit and Schmidt 2009)

these terms - the identification of what is "historically valuable" about the Mughal Pavilion has been a problem for conservation. There is not much information about what the structure originally commemorated, and yet those origins are precisely the ones that must be restored by way of the restoration of the monument. What can the restoration of the structure offer Sundar Nursery in its bid to become the central park that the ASI desires it to be? Conservation practice makes answering this question so straightforward that it obscures the question almost entirely. It is only through writing that the question too is unearthed, to reveal a process of decision making about history that is mandated by the future urban setting of Delhi.

The Mughal Pavilion is a conservation conundrum because of its historicity, which is concerned above all with locating its origins and retrofitting the structure to those perceived origins. As it is a typical modern "unintentional" monument, conservationists must locate these origins and hypothesise the commemorative value that it once had and the context in which it once operated. However, considering that in the process of restoration, the structure ceased to be a tomb and was assigned a new "pavilion status," this hypothetical commemorative value might be impossible to estimate.

While Riegl's modern subject is concerned with the present-day meaning of a historical monument, the conservation discipline imposes constraints on the institutions whose work it is to restore the building and the site around it. In the case of the Mughal Pavilion, the tension occurs between what could have been and what is being done. In fact, the limits to the imagination of the monument and those of conservation practice as a discipline are co-constitutive, although it must be borne in mind that according to Riegl, these are symptomatic of a broader consciousness of history in a given time. For the conservationist imagination, these limits take the form of disciplinary restrictions on practice, while for Riegl, they become the very things that place the "modern subject" into its peculiar relationship with history.

The overriding project of conservation and its three separate "sites" - Humayun's Tomb, Nizamuddin Basti and Sundar Nursery - involves making choices about what is "culturally significant", according to Project Manager Ratish Nanda[14]. However, the work used to determine what is culturally significant is already digested in the scope of conservation practice.[15] Clearly, concrete decisions were made to conclude that the ruinous structure discovered on the site of the Nursery would be restored into pavilion status.

'Rubble alone leaves no trace'

One need only look at that discovery to put conservation practice

into perspective: 'rubble alone reveals no trace of the original creation.' (Roegl 1902, p. 33). As the structure lay amongst trees and shrubs, at once buried by and a full-fledged part of nature, the discovery of the monument in the middle of Sundar Nursery would have posed a question: what to do? At the formulation of this question, and at the behest of the disciplinary logic of conservation practice to highlight and maintain the "traces of the original creation," extensive work would have to be done to renew the structure's status as a monument. Leaving the structure as it was or removing it, to name two "extreme" possibilities, would be out of the question on the part of the AKTC, ASI and CPWD.[16] In Riegl's pithy statement, *rubble or ruins* - the most "authentic" marks of a structure's historical life - in fact do no service to remind us of that moment of its genesis (as an "intentional monument") and thus, do not convey the meaningfulness in recognising its origins (http://asi.nic.in). Discovery is precisely the point at which such origins are deemed historical, and the structure is formed to mimetically represent their origin so that they may come "back to life". The discovery of a ruined pile is an observation that has no social meaning: it is only when the ruins are resuscitated to refer to their own past that a real discovery happens (figure 9).

As the potential historical value of a wide array of monuments was increasingly appreciated in the nineteenth century, so too were laws enacted to protect the monuments (Riegl 1902). It is possible to say that the discovery of the Mughal Pavilion, off the books for seemingly all our life can be attributed a legal character. That is to say, conservation practice restores monuments by making them legal objects and normalising the conservationist's relationship to them. A "Monument" status today is nothing less than a matter of legality, and this legal status exists to preserve meaning. The law already ensured that the monument should be restored, as though the law can conceive of a monument as such before it becomes one again. The ASI, an agent of the Ministry of Culture and mandated to 'protect cultural heritage' would anticipate the monumental status of a ruinous structure (http://asi.nic.in), either for its own historicity or that of its site. The Mughal Pavilion, then, having been located in a web of legal decisions, which in turn legitimise design decisions, was conserved according to a practice that need not imagine outside of this rubric; and this is precisely the work conservation practice sets for itself - the smooth preservation of everything it can imagine. Conservation practice bears an uncanny resemblance to legality - both are forms of knowledge that themselves define the limits within which they can operate.

As it stands now, even without archival photos, the *charbagh* landscaping[17] around the pavilion complicates the monument and inserts a wedge in the subtle cracks of conservation practice. The Mughal practice of laying claim to a piece of land by placing a tomb-garden upon it cannot be formally evoked by the actual

restoration of that tomb-garden.[18] Newer programs that were instilled after Mughal rule, such as the British use of the Nursery, would have overrun the original design. Besides the fact that the landscape would have faded away as the plants died out of neglect, the *charbagh's* own commemorative value cannot be reproduced.

Landscape slightly complicates Riegl's discussion as something that might desire to be restored and conserved, but must be entirely reconstructed to visually refer to its historic form: 'Age-value manifests itself...tellingly, in the corrosion of surfaces, in their patina, in the wear and tear of buildings and objects, and so forth. The slow and inevitable disintegration of nature is manifested in these ways.' (Riegl 1902, p. 32). The design of a commemorative garden in the 1600s is easy enough to conceptualise as a historical fact, but hard to reinstate. If "age-value approaches" to conservation seek to highlight the look of wear, a landscape cannot be preserved as such. The landscape's ability to convey this "age-value" is compromised. [19]

Any landscape design in the case of the Mughal Pavilion would add newness as much as it would add beauty. And yet, this "newness" value, another notion of Riegl's, might be precisely the thing that allows us to understand the Mughal Pavilion in a new way. Riegl says, 'Practical use-value corresponds aesthetically to newness-value: for its own sake, age-value will have to tolerate, in the present state of its development, a certain degree of newness-value in modern works.' (1902, p. 32). If a tomb were originally placed in a pleasure garden, one can look upon the discovery of the Mughal tomb as an ironical means to restore the garden that could only be highlighted by the ruinous tomb. But the relationship then gets inverted, as the charbagh is a means to restore the tomb. The landscape has a new relationship to the tomb-pavilion, and it is 'intentional':

> Intentional commemorative value simply makes a claim to immortality, to an eternal present and an unceasing state of becoming. It thereby battles the natural processes of decay which militate against the fulfillment of its claims. The effects of nature's actions must be countered again and again...The intentional monument fundamentally requires restoration. (Riegl 1902, p. 32)

The role of landscaping in the Mughal Pavilion, indeed, its usefulness, is to commemorate the tomb that it once was. In light of this formulation the landscape bolsters the logic of the restoration outcome of the pavilion. A new *charbagh* in Sundar Nursery, the site of the Mughal Pavilion, in turn, reaffirms the meaningfulness of the site, which reaffirms and perpetuates the "train" of conservation. The pavilion reveals a problem, but it is also an affirmation of the discipline, simply because it can be.

The parameters of practice are both historically constituted and

"automated" through various agencies sent forth to handle them. This is something that Riegl was not concerned with, and yet it comes to bear heavily on the conservationist's apprehension of the monument.[20] Having located the structure and examined the relationship that conservation creates between a monumental site of preservation and these parameters of practice, we can now identify why the Mughal Pavilion is "problematical," a complicated issue. This can be achieved only through understanding the structure in a given site, and not as an abstract monument. If the current scale of monumentality is set to the structure, this scale of the "monumental" must be enlarged to encapsulate the site, a larger scale at which meaning is accessed. By extension, the site works in favor of a vision of Delhi. Whatever the old relationship between the tomb and garden, the Mughal Pavilion has provided a new one. This is a crack in conservation practice, as it cannot help but be entirely ahistorical and represent a form of a historical past in garden design - but this is also the closest thing it has to get outside the limits that it sets for itself.

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Endnotes

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[1] A cloister vault is a vault resulting from the intersection of two barrel-vaults crossing in a right angle.

[2] "Ancient Monument" means any structure, erection or monument, or any tumulus or place of interment, or any cave, rock-sculpture, inscription or monolith, which is of historical, archaeological, or artistic interest and which has been in existence for not less than 100 years. See Government of India, The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 (No. 24 of 1958)

[3] By "conservationist," we imply a practitioner engaged in historical conservation and preservation, making technical, aesthetic and historical choices. Often, the said practitioner is a conservation architect, but the term also describes engineers and craftsmen on the one hand, and heritage activists and policy makers on the other.

[4] Hazrat Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya (1238 - 3 April 1325) was a famous Sufi saint of the Chishti Order in South Asia. His shrine is located in a historic neighborhood named after him, and it a very large spiritual and tourist attraction.

[5] Humayun's tomb is a World Heritage Monument that attracts over a million visitors each year. It is perhaps the most celebrated Mughal tomb after the Taj Mahal. Humayun too chose this burial site for its spiritual value.

[6] Sundar Nursery was developed in the 1920s and 1930s by horticulturist Percy Lancaster to be used as a site to experiment with various tree and flower types that could eventually serve the greening of the new capital city, and it serves that purpose to this day. (figure 7)

[7] This was the Aga Khan's "gift" to India on the 50th anniversary of its independence.

[8] The project expansion was in accordance with the vision of the Aga Khan to intervene in ways that will make positive contributions to the lives of people living in the neighborhood and the city.

[9] Most notably UNESCO's "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage", 1972

[10] *Charbagh* or "four gardens" is a Persian style quadrilateral garden that is divided into four parts.

[11] Ancient by its legal definition and by its appearance.

[12] Since this structure was not listed as "protected," there is very little else to explain why it would be preserved except for its specific location within the site.

[13] The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, a trust consisting of prominent citizens that seeks to "...sensitize the public about the pluralistic cultural legacy of India and to instill a sense of social responsibility towards preserving our common heritage." http://www.intach.org/mission_intach.htm

[14] Ratish Nanda, in conversation. 8th January 2009. Humayun's Tomb, Delhi.

[15] Indeed, what types of structures get conserved at all must be handled by this logic. A controversial decision by the team was to reconstruct a relatively late-coming mosque on the site. Another tomb just outside the edge of nursery, and possibly a part of the same complex, is not part of the conservation plan, as its immediate surroundings are currently being squatted upon by a large community of rag-pickers. On the other hand, Bharat Scouts, a large property contiguous to the Sundar Nursery that contains several tombs, is not being included in AKTC's present scope of work only because of a long drawn court case associated with the property.

[16] Indeed, as mentioned previously, according to the legislation that designates the site of Sundar Nursery protected, it would have been illegal to remove it or allow for further destruction of the monument. s.(4) Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains, Act No. 24 of 1958

[17] Here, we specifically mean the *charbagh* landscaping that has been planned around the Mughal Pavilion, and not the larger project of the restoration of Sundar Nursery.

[18] The authors would like to thank Professor Rahul Mehrotra for this detail.

[19] For, the life cycle of plants is short, that of rocks almost eternal, and of water, it is binary - it is either there or it isn't.

[20] A widely presumed form of consumption of the monument, tourism, for example, is a similarly "legal" activity.