

The Ford Foundation and Visions of Urban Development in 1960s India

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My PhD dissertation, “Global Townscape: The Rediscovery of Urban Life in the Late Twentieth Century,” is a history of the Townscape movement, a British urban planning movement that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and emphasized mixed-use planning, urban density, and the “life of the street.” In its focus on vernacular, human-scale urbanism, Townscape echoed the ideas of American scholar and activist Jane Jacobs, whose 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (published the same year as *Townscape*, the movement’s seminal text) outlined a similar vision of urban intricacy.¹

My dissertation examines the diffusion of Townscape ideas across the former British empire in the 1950s and 1960s. In the immediate postwar decades, British planners and architects, such as Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew, and Roy Gazzard, among others, fanned out across the postcolonial world, building cities for the newly independent nations of Asia and Africa.² Among these planners was the British architect Gordon Cullen, one of the Townscape movement’s key figures. Two chapters of my dissertation examine Cullen’s work for the Ford Foundation on two city plans in independent India: the Delhi Master Plan of 1962 and the Calcutta Basic Development Plan of 1966.

The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations set the agenda for urban planning in the postwar decades. Indeed, Cullen’s career intersected with these institutions on multiple occasions. Besides his work for the Ford Foundation in India, Cullen was invited to the United States in 1959 to participate in a Rockefeller Foundation-funded initiative on American townscapes. Cullen’s contributions to a proposed book, “Townscape USA,” were never published, having been rejected by a New York editor as unsuitable for publication. Nevertheless, his time in the United States influenced much of his later work in India and Britain, demonstrating how the imprint of American philanthropic institutions can be discerned throughout Cullen’s career.³

Cullen's proximity to these philanthropic organizations was not unusual: urban planners on both sides of the Atlantic participated in transnational networks of funding and expertise. Unlike some of his Ford Foundation colleagues, however, Cullen had little faith in universalist planning precepts, the animating force behind international development planning in the 1950s and 1960s. After all, Townscape extolled urban disorder over rationalized space, winding roads over straight lines. Cullen's Townscape critique thus serves to both illuminate the contours of the postwar planning "moment" and highlight the cultural tensions at its heart.

To learn more about the scope of the master plans that Cullen worked on in India, I turned to the Ford Foundation archives, looking at both the project files and the grant files. Sociologist Douglas Ensminger, the Ford Foundation's India representative from 1950 to 1972, described the Foundation's work in Delhi as "a unique opportunity to study at close range and in detail the urbanization of a large Asian city."⁴ Ensminger viewed the Delhi Master Plan as a source of potentially valuable planning experience that would serve as a model for other urban planning initiatives across Asia.⁵

While many accounts of development planning in India stress the nation's importance as a Cold War battleground, the Ford Foundation reports authored by Ensminger provide a different and more nuanced portrayal of the Foundation's work in India. No Cold Warrior himself, Ensminger shared the view of the architect Albert Mayer, head of the Ford planning team in Delhi, who stressed that the Delhi Master Plan was an opportunity to show that "physical planning is basically linked to economic welfare and progress."⁶ In other words, India would be a testing ground for the postwar planning regime, which sought to intervene in both national economies and the urban fabric. The interventionist scope of the Ford Foundation's work in India and its concern with poverty alleviation are vividly conveyed by a 1960 chart from the Foundation's Overseas Development division that depicts "India's Gap in Food Production," pointing to a caloric shortfall that would be met by the increased production of food grains.⁷

I struggled, at first, to locate Cullen among the flurry of documents on high-yield wheat varieties and food aid, both in practical terms (finding mentions of him in

the archive took some digging) and on an intellectual level. What role could an “urban design consultant” (Cullen’s official role in Delhi) play in a nation where economic growth and development were urgent priorities? Was Cullen a significant presence on the Ford Foundation team of social scientists in Delhi (along with Mayer, the team included an urban planner, public administrator, economist, transport planner, regional planner, and urban sociologist), or simply a quaint anachronism, a reminder of the days when Britain, not the United States, sent teams of administrators to India?

I was able to pinpoint Cullen’s role more clearly by looking through his drawings and plans from his time in Delhi, published as a Ford Foundation report, “Ninth Delhi,” in 1961.⁸ Cullen sought to preserve the unique character of both New Delhi, the capital city laid out by British architect Edwin Lutyens in the 1920s and 1930s, and Old Delhi, the old walled city of Shahjahanabad, the former capital of the Mughal empire. He envisioned bringing together these disparate halves of the modern city by building a Civic Centre, a place where old would flow into new.⁹ Cullen’s ideas for Delhi represented an iteration of the “Indian modernity” articulated by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru—an architectural and cultural idiom that was modern, but uniquely rooted in Indian tradition.¹⁰

Drawings aside, however, Cullen’s place within the Ford Foundation team—and the role of urban design in the task of building the new nation—was still frustrating unclear. Next, I turned to the Ford Foundation grant files for the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning project, which were available on microfilm. As I quickly learned, each Ford grant generated reams of correspondence and paperwork—hundreds of pages of documents. Moreover, my lack of skill with the microfilm reader meant that for several days, I was viewing white text on a black background—not the easiest to read—before realizing that this was easily fixed by flipping the orientation of the microfilm reader.

Familiarizing myself with the grant files meant realizing that the slides appeared in reverse chronological order, making it necessary to trace back the origin of a particular staffing decision or event several years. Soon, however, I became familiar with the main players on the Ford Foundation team in Calcutta—team

leader and physical planner Edward Echeverria, his long-suffering deputy and administrative specialist Arch Dotson, and various transport planners, economists, and housing experts who were flown into Calcutta for periods of time as short as three months. Cullen was a member of this revolving cast of characters—after several days of microfilm work, I finally located a budget outline that anticipated his arrival in Calcutta in September 1962.¹¹

By comparing Cullen's proposed salary with the salaries of other team members, as well as reading through correspondence relating to his (delayed) arrival in Calcutta, I was able to get a better sense of Cullen's role on the Ford team. Urban design was viewed as critical to the Ford Foundation's efforts in Calcutta from the start, as conveyed by the salary commanded by Cullen and the team's efforts to ensure his travel to India went smoothly. Rather than an afterthought, Cullen's role as urban design consultant had been envisioned at least a year before his arrival.

Yet Cullen's views on Calcutta's urban problems represented only one opinion out of many. The Ford team's involvement in Calcutta was dominated by more powerful voices. One was of American housing expert Catherine Bauer Wurster, based at the University of California, Berkeley, who had visited Calcutta in her capacity as an external advisor to the Ford team. Another voice was that of the American urban planner Ed Logue, a key figure in the renewal of New Haven in the 1950s.¹² With U.S. cities reeling from deindustrialization and rapidly declining populations, cities in the so-called "Third World" represented a testing ground for urban renewal.

Despite the sheer brainpower gathered in Calcutta, however, the planning effort repeatedly stalled. If the Ford Foundation served to catalyze transnational circuits of expertise, Calcutta represented a city where expertise could only go so far. Faced with entrenched poverty, environmental degradation, and the erosion of the city's industrial base, the Ford team's solutions appeared largely inadequate to deal with the urban problems at hand.

Against this backdrop of administrative deadlock, Cullen's urban design proposals for both Calcutta and Delhi appear not as quixotic fancies, but rather as

a vote of faith in the “urban.” The role of “civic architect,” and of urban design more broadly, Albert Mayer wrote in a letter putting forward Cullen’s name to the Ford Foundation’s Overseas Development Associate, Walter Rudlin, “is actually one of the most important and significant elements in the whole complex content of a plan. It is the physical and spiritual working out in third dimension of the thinking and research which go into a plan; the actual embodiment of the plan, or, ‘what it is all about.’”¹³ Cullen’s proposals made the bold claim that even a city marked by extreme poverty, like Calcutta, deserved urban design—spaces that were not only attractive, but also functional.

While Cullen’s “Ninth Delhi” was available as a Ford Foundation report (and conveniently accessible via the Rockefeller Archive Center’s Virtual Vault, a lifesaver for time-strapped researchers), however, there was little of his actual work on Calcutta held at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), apart from a single report. While consulting the Ford Foundation grant files provided a window into the composition and politics of the Ford team in Calcutta, as well as where Cullen “fit” within the team, in order to gain additional insight into his plan for the city, I needed to cross-reference the RAC holdings with other materials, including materials from archives in the United Kingdom and in India.

The RAC collections, however, continued to hold surprises. The RAC holds all 21 volumes of the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation’s “Improvement Programme for Metropolitan Calcutta,” representing a significant portion of the work of the Calcutta planning project.¹⁴ It also holds the only narrative account of the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning project—an unpublished three-hundred-and-fifty-page memoir by the Ford Foundation’s Arthur Tracy Row. It describes each stage of the years-long planning initiative in exhaustive detail.¹⁵ Titled “Calcutta: The Great Experiment,” the Row memoir represents a unique primary source for the Ford Foundation’s efforts in Calcutta.

Moreover, while I had always thought of the RAC as holding solely institutional records, the Archive Center holds personal papers, as well. During my time at the RAC, I worked extensively in the papers of William H. Whyte, an American journalist, critic, and urban theorist who served as editor of *Fortune* magazine, where he published works by Jane Jacobs and Townscape authors side by side.

Whyte's papers contain revealing critiques of the trajectory of U.S. urban renewal in the postwar period—in his 1956 classic *The Organization Man*, he condemned the managerial character of postwar society, calling for a renewed individualism that echoed critiques of urban homogeneity and sterility on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁶ Besides providing valuable context for Townscape and the rise of urbanist thinking in the postwar period, Whyte's papers also contain lighter fare, such as a poetic tribute to spaghetti, inspired by a menu item at a classic red sauce joint:

Oh! How good is the freshness and deliciousness
of this spaghetti! And the sauce!!! just out
of this world! It is made from a recipe absconded
at great risk by Mrs. Toffenetti, herself, at
Bologna while perusing some ancient, secret
recipes, zealously guarded in the treasure
house of the Count of Bonpensier.¹⁷

While archival ephemera like this poem may seem incidental to the broader research questions animating our work as scholars, it provides a valuable reminder of historical subjects as human beings, with quirks and foibles. I found similar items—love letters, Christmas cards, prose poems—in the archives of other figures who feature in my dissertation, discoveries that enlivened the weeks and months of archival research.

More significantly, it was this sense of quirky individuality that the Townscape movement embodied and sought to renew in the urban fabric. With its focus on sense of place and urban character, Townscape was in many ways antithetical to the universalizing social science that reigned supreme at mid-century. Like Jacobs, Townscape celebrated an urban scene that was unique and idiosyncratic, characterized by the spontaneity encapsulated in Jacobs' famous "sidewalk ballet": the everyday "dance" of passers-by on her West Village street corner.¹⁸

Indeed, tracing the ways in which the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations shaped these urban currents in the postwar period reveals the landscape of postwar urban planning as complex and multifaceted. Far from simply an extension of the project of top-down urban renewal pursued in U.S. cities, the Ford Foundation's

urban planning projects in India contained myriad contradictions and tensions. Gordon Cullen's own presence as part of the Ford Foundation teams in Delhi and in Calcutta demonstrates not only that the Ford presence in India was not limited to American experts, but that a significant (and largely unrecognized) Townscape thread ran through the Foundation's work in the subcontinent. We can view the Ford Foundation, then, as a centrifugal force that brought together the imperatives of U.S. empire, British welfare, and postcolonial development—three strands that converged in Cullen's work in India.

¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

² See Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, "Modernism in Late Imperial British West Africa: The Work of Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, 2 (2006), 188-215; Jesse Meredith, "Decolonizing the New Town: Roy Gazzard and the Making of Killingworth Township," *Journal of British Studies* 57, 2 (2018), 333-362.

³ Record of telephone call from Jason Epstein, Vice President, Random House, to Chadbourne Gilpatric, Rockefeller Foundation, November 14th, 1962, RG 1.2 (FA387A), 200/456/ 3902, RAC.

⁴ Douglas Ensminger, "A Master Plan for India's Capital," February 1958, Ford Foundation Report 000504, (FA739A), RAC.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Albert Mayer, quoted in Ibid.

⁷ "India—F.F. Program Charts, 1960," Box 93, Folder 1623, Ford Foundation Photographs, Series 3_10 Overseas Development, (FA738), RAC.

⁸ Gordon Cullen, "Ninth Delhi," February 1961, Ford Foundation Report 002224, (FA739A), RAC.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For Nehru's vision of modernity, see Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), 130. Nehru viewed the new city of Chandigarh as an opportunity to realize

this distinctly Indian modernity. See Annapurna Shaw, "Town Planning in Postcolonial India, 1947-1965: Chandigarh Re-examined," *Urban Geography* 30, 8 (2009), 859-860.

¹¹ "Calcutta Metropolitan Plan Project: Revised Budget Estimates," 1961, Ford Foundation Grants E-G (FA372C), RAC.

¹² For Bauer's role, see Arthur Tracy Row, "Calcutta: The Great Experiment," 1998, Ford Foundation Report 134184, RAC. For Logue's time in India, see Lizabeth Cohen, *Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019).

¹³ Letter from Albert Mayer to Walter Rudlin, "Re: Civic Architect Gordon Cullen," December 17, 1958, Ford Foundation Grants E-G (FA732C), RAC.

¹⁴ Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organisation, "Improvement Programme for Metropolitan Calcutta: 1964-1971," October 1964, 307.154 WES, Volume 5, Ford Foundation Archive, RAC.

¹⁵ Row, "Great Experiment," Ford Foundation Report 134184, RAC.

¹⁶ William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956).

¹⁷ William Whyte, Untitled Poem, Series 2: Personal, Box 30, Folder 546, William Whyte Papers (FA272), RAC.

¹⁸ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 50-51.