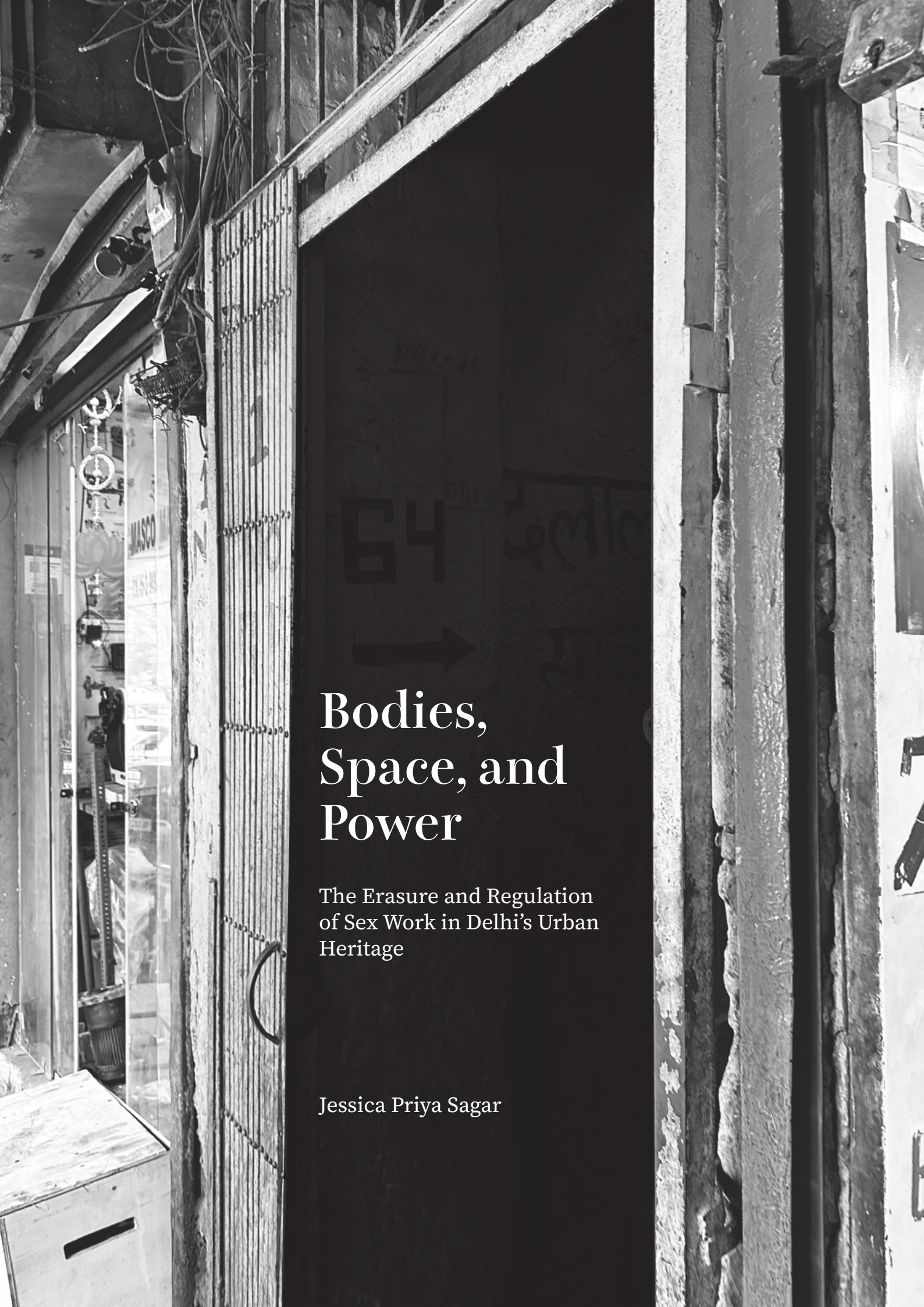


Bodies, Space, and Power

The Erasure and Regulation of Sex Work in Delhi's Urban Heritage

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To the women who endure, remember, resist, rebuild, and carry histories the world has too often tried to erase .

Abstract

(EN)

Old Delhi loves a good monument. Forts, mosques, bazaars, havelis and grand stories of empire are all neatly folded into the language of heritage. But not all histories are granted the same privilege. Some are whispered about, moralised, hidden upstairs, or left out entirely.

This thesis, situated within architecture for heritage, takes G.B. Road as a lens onto one such history. It traces how women's bodies, labour, sexuality and visibility have been shaped by the city over time, from the world of Tawaifs and Kothas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the contemporary red-light district—not as a simple story of decline, but as a layered process of regulation, stigma, erasure and survival.

Through historical research, field observation, mapping and the reconstruction of brothel interiors from fragmentary evidence, the thesis reads G.B. Road as an architectural palimpsest that carries traces of spatial logics shaped through the history of sex work in Old Delhi. The contemporary brothel is understood as a compressed and transformed descendant of the Tawaif's Kotha, where thresholds, courtyards and collective spaces persist in altered forms beneath layers of subdivision, neglect and coercion.

Architecture and urban space, shaped by centuries of patriarchal and colonial power, do not merely reflect the erasure of women's histories, but actively participate in producing it. The central intention of this thesis is therefore to ask what heritage is for, and who it is allowed to hold. It speculates on how power settles quietly into architecture, and how a city decides what is worth remembering and what is easier to call shame. Seen from this perspective, G.B. Road becomes a heritage question not because its present conditions should be preserved, but because its exclusion from heritage has helped render it a spatial blind spot.

Rather than treating heritage only as a record of what a city is proud to inherit, this thesis asks whether heritage might also offer a way of engaging with the violence and neglect that may have been reinforced through G.B. Road's exclusion from heritage discourse. If heritage influences what is remembered, valued and cared for, then approaching G.B. Road through a lens of recognition may create space to recognise histories, architectural traces and forms of cultural memory that have long remained marginal. The question, then, is not simply whether G.B. Road can be considered heritage, but what might become possible if it were treated as a heritage issue.

In this sense, conservation moves toward the recognition of difficult, fragmented and gendered histories. This position is tested through speculative interventions on G.B. Road and across Old Delhi, moving from recognition to spatial occupation and care. Conservation becomes a way of making G.B. Road legible again as part of the city: revealing what has been obscured, reclaiming spatial possibilities that have been diminished, and creating the possibility for care without repeating the erasures that produced the site's present condition.

(IT)

La Vecchia Delhi ama i suoi monumenti. Forti, moschee, bazar, haveli e grandi narrazioni imperiali trovano posto nel linguaggio del patrimonio. Ma non tutte le storie godono dello stesso privilegio. Alcune vengono sussurrate, moralizzate, nascoste ai piani superiori o semplicemente escluse.

Questa tesi assume G.B. Road come lente attraverso cui osservare una di queste storie. Ripercorre come i corpi, il lavoro, la sessualità e la visibilità delle donne siano stati plasmati dalla città, dal mondo delle Tawaif e delle Kotha tra il XVI e il XVII secolo fino all'attuale quartiere a luci rosse. Non come una semplice storia di declino, ma come un processo di regolamentazione, stigma, cancellazione e sopravvivenza.

Attraverso ricerca storica, osservazione sul campo, mappatura e ricostruzione degli interni dei bordelli da testimonianze frammentarie, la tesi interpreta G.B. Road come un palinsesto architettonico che conserva tracce di logiche spaziali legate alla storia del lavoro sessuale nella Vecchia Delhi. Il bordello contemporaneo viene letto come un discendente trasformato della Kotha delle Tawaif, dove soglie, cortili e spazi collettivi persistono in forme alterate sotto strati di suddivisione, abbandono e coercizione.

L'architettura e lo spazio urbano, plasmati da secoli di potere patriarcale e coloniale, non riflettono soltanto la cancellazione delle storie delle donne, ma partecipano alla sua produzione. La tesi si interroga quindi sul ruolo del patrimonio e sulle storie che esso è autorizzato a custodire. Riflette su come il potere si depositi nell'architettura e su come una città decida che cosa meriti di essere ricordato e che cosa sia più facile definire vergogna. G.B. Road diventa così una questione di patrimonio non perché le sue condizioni attuali debbano essere preservate, ma perché la sua esclusione ha contribuito a renderla un punto cieco della città.

Piuttosto che considerare il patrimonio solo come ciò che una città è orgogliosa di ereditare, questa tesi si domanda se esso possa offrire uno strumento per confrontarsi con la violenza e l'abbandono legati all'esclusione di G.B. Road. Se il patrimonio determina ciò che viene ricordato, valorizzato e curato, riconoscere G.B. Road può aprire spazio a storie, tracce architettoniche e forme di memoria culturale rimaste ai margini. La domanda, dunque, non è soltanto se G.B. Road possa essere considerata patrimonio, ma che cosa possa diventare possibile se venisse affrontata come una questione patrimoniale.

In questo senso, la conservazione si orienta verso il riconoscimento di storie difficili, frammentate e segnate dal genere. Questa posizione viene testata attraverso interventi speculativi su G.B. Road e nella Vecchia Delhi, passando dal riconoscimento all'occupazione dello spazio e alla cura. La conservazione diventa così un modo per rendere G.B. Road nuovamente leggibile come parte della città: rivelando ciò che è stato oscurato, riappropriandosi di possibilità spaziali ridotte e creando condizioni di cura senza riprodurre le cancellazioni del passato.

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Glossary

Adab- Urdu/Persianate term for refinement, etiquette, manners, language, and cultivated social behaviour.

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)- Indian government body responsible for protecting and maintaining many monuments and archaeological sites.

Atariya/Atariyas- Upper-floor terrace, balcony, or elevated semi-open space in North Indian built forms. In the thesis, atariyas appear as part of the upper-level life of kothas.

Bagh- Garden. In Mughal and Indo-Islamic urban culture, a bagh was often a designed garden associated with leisure, water, status, and political memory.

Bai- A suffix/title often used for women performers, singers, dancers, and courtesans, for example "Zohra Bai." It signals a feminine performance identity rather than simply a family name.

Bazaar- Market or commercial street. Bazaars are not only shopping areas but also social, cultural, and spatial systems where trade, gossip, movement, labour, and everyday life overlap.

Begum- A title for Muslim elite women, especially in Mughal and Indo-Islamic contexts.

Brahmanical patriarchy- A feminist term describing how caste hierarchy and patriarchal control work together, especially through ideas of purity, sexuality, marriage, inheritance, and women's obedience.

Chowk- A square, market node, crossroads, or courtyard-like open space.

Delhi Sultanate- Series of Indo-Islamic dynasties that ruled from Delhi before the Mughal period. The thesis includes it in the timeline of Delhi's urban and cultural development.

Durbar- A South Asian term that can mean court, assembly, or formal gathering. In the name Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, it is used for a sex-worker collective and is often understood as "indomitable" or "unstoppable" in that organisational context.

Ganga-Jamni tehzeeb- Phrase for a syncretic North Indian cultural tradition shaped by Hindu, Muslim, Persianate, Central Asian, and local influences. "Tehzeeb" means culture, refinement, or civilised manners.

Ghazal- A poetic and musical form, often in Urdu or Persianate literary culture, associated with love, longing, refinement, and performance.

Hammam- Bathhouse, often associated with Indo-Islamic and Mughal urban culture. The thesis mentions hammams as part of Shahjahanabad's urban amenities.

Haveli- Traditional North Indian mansion or courtyard house.

Jali / Jaali- Perforated lattice screen used in Indian and Indo-Islamic architecture. It filters light, air, and visibility.

Jharokha- Projecting balcony or overhanging window common in North Indian architecture. In the thesis, jharokhas mediate visibility between interiors and streets.

Kotha- A tawaif's salon, residence, workplace, and performance space; later flattened into a synonym for brothel.

Kotha malik- Owners, managers, or controllers of a kotha/brothel. "Malik" means owner or master.

Mehfil- An intimate or elite gathering for music, poetry, dance, conversation, and cultural exchange.

Mughal- Dynasty and cultural-political formation that ruled much of North India from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi is a Mughal city.

Nautch- Colonial English term derived from "naach," meaning dance. It was used for Indian dance performances and became tied to colonial moral judgement of courtesans.

Nawab / Nawabi- Title and cultural world associated with regional rulers and courtly elites in North India, especially Awadh/Lucknow.

Paan- Betel leaf preparation chewed in South Asia, often sold at street stalls.

Shah- Persianate title meaning king or ruler.

Stridharma- Sanskrit/Hindi term meaning women's duty or prescribed feminine conduct. The thesis uses it to discuss obedience, modesty, reproduction, service, and gendered control.

Sufi- Islamic mystical tradition. The thesis mentions Sufi culture in relation to Jahanara Begum's patronage and Mughal urban life.

Tehzeeb- Urdu/Persianate term for culture, refinement, manners, and civility.

Chapter 1

Frame

Psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus (1909) once stated, "prostitution has had a long past; however has also had a short history".

1.1 Setting the scene-

Welcome to G.B. Road!

The first time I visited the GB Road in Delhi was in the summer of 2024. By then, I had already spent more than twenty years in the city, visiting Old Delhi hundreds of times, walking its bazaars and streets, and visiting the monuments. Yet, somehow, I had never once set foot on G.B Road. That fact itself is telling. Everyone in Delhi knows of GB Road, as did I; it is almost common knowledge which is often spoken about in whispers—with curiosity, or with a smirk. It is one of the most notorious red-light districts in the country. But as a girl, as a woman, I had never been there, nor even passed by.

On that first visit in the afternoon, the reason became immediately clear. There were no women in sight, not in the crowd, not on the pavements, not among the shopkeepers. The only women visible were those behind the bars of the brothel windows on the upper floors. They looked down at the street, some calling out, some silent, some



Fig 1.1: Brothels of G.B. Road

Source: Photographed by the author

simply watching, simply pausing the endless rhythm of their work. I couldn't help but wonder if they were also asking themselves why I was there.

G.B. Road does not function as a red light district alone but also as a commercial hub. The ground floor occupies hardware stores and mechanical workshops. The acitivities that revolved around such commerce would make one believe that this world belongs to men alone. The air was thick with their presence as the customers, vendors, laborers, rickshaw pullers, were all men.

As I entered the corridor along the roadside, I could feel their eyes on me. It wasn't just a glance here or there, but a collective, unrelenting stare that pressed down on my body until I felt myself shrink. The weight of it became unbearable as I stepped off the pavement and onto the road, trading the safety of distance for the danger of cars and motorbikes rushing past. Even in that chaos, I felt lighter, as if the glare of all those eyes had been briefly cut off. It was then that a rickshaw driver stopped beside me. He told me plainly that if I wanted to cross to the other side, I should get into his rickshaw because it wasn't safe for me to walk. His advice, though simple, carried the sharp edge of truth. Amid the noise of engines, the calls of men, and the lingering feeling of the collective set of eyes of the people there, climbing into the rickshaw seemed like the only sensible thing to do.

From that slight elevation, rolling slowly through the street, I was able to observe more carefully. Fruit vendors leaned casually against their carts, slicing guavas and watermelons. Men sat cross-legged on the pavement, slapping cards down on worn mats while a speaker blared old Hindi songs,

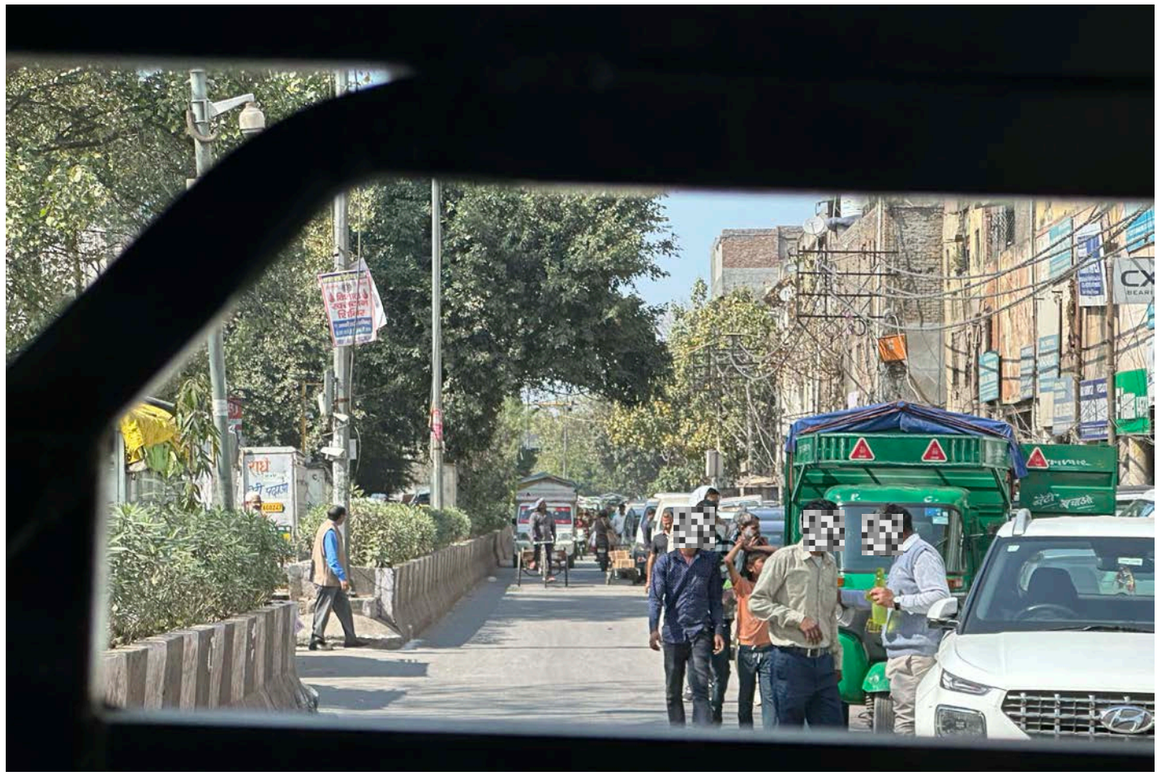


Fig 1.2: View from a rickshaw at G.B. Road *Source: Photographed by the author*



Fig 1.3: View of G.B. Road showing the dominant male presence on the street, and a person sleeping on the divider *Source: Author*

and some men just lay on the footpath, most likely intoxicated. A small booth marked "Women's Police Station" stood awkwardly at one corner, its very presence a reminder of danger. And above all this, the brothel windows.

The dilapidated facades of the buildings were plastered with layers of shop signs and advertisements, peeling posters and boards concealing whatever historical elements of those buildings had survived. However, the upper floors revealed another architecture, windows fitted with iron grills opened into dimly lit rooms, from which women looked out. What struck me was not the windows themselves, but the invisible line they created. The bars marked more than just a physical boundary; they revealed a chasm. On one side was the street: loud, open, masculine, chaotic. On the other hand was a world of women: hidden, contained, excluded, their bodies policed and their existence morally erased. The distance between the two was not measured in meters but in power. It felt like two parallel realities—touching yet divided, visible yet untouchable.

That first walk through GB Road stayed with me. It was not just the unease of being watched, nor the sight of women behind grills, nor the market of hardware and flesh colliding on one street. It was the tension between those worlds, the one in which I stood, and the one I was barred from entering... that defined the place for me. The interesting contrast led me to examine the situation at GB Road critically and inspired me to undertake this thesis.

My first encounter with GB Road raised questions that could not be answered by my eyes alone. I began to wonder how others had seen and experienced this street. How outsiders, passersby, writers, and locals had







Fig 1.4,5,6: Dilapitated Brothel Facades at G.B. Road with shop signs covering remains of older lattice designs

Source: Photographed by the author

tried to describe its atmosphere. It led me to collect these perspectives, fragments of observation that together form a web of impressions; some fearful, some matter-of-fact, some almost voyeuristic. Each of these voices becomes another lens through which GB Road is understood, reminding me that this place does not exist in isolation but is constantly being narrated, interpreted, and imagined.

"We walked past rows of hardware shops in the day, but by evening the shutters came down, and the neon lights above revealed another world... men crowded the street, pretending to look for tools."[1]

"While walking on GB Road as children, we were not supposed to look up... for decent people like us, looking at the kothas was a taboo."[2]

"Walking through the road is an interesting experience, especially if you're a girl. People will warn you not to go because of its reputation, but you still feel pulled forward by curiosity."[3]

"GB Road is Delhi's largest red-light area, and a hub for crime and violence... it cages women & children as victims of sex trade."[4]

"Sex workers here have limited access to hygiene facilities... work until late, and often sleep on makeshift beds in the brothel lobby."[5]

"Women here say, 'humari zindagi toh narakh se bhi bhattar hai' — our life is worse than hell — reflecting isolation and stigma."[6]

"Along with several other women, she sleeps in the lobby of the brothel... 'Other girls who tried to run away were beaten by the kotha maliks... as if they were not human.'"[7]

Reading these accounts alongside my own experience made it clear that a single gaze cannot capture GB Road. For some, it is a place of danger, for others, a place of business, and for many, simply a forbidden street to be avoided. Together, these fragmented impressions form a mosaic of how GB Road is imagined from the outside; always marked by curiosity, stigma, or fear. But beyond these external perceptions lies a much older story, one that connects this street to Delhi's layered history and to the changing place of women within it.

1. Neha Dixit, "GB Road, Beyond the Stereotype of Delhi's Red Light District," ***VICE***, August 16, 2018.
2. "A Book About Life in Delhi's GB Road," ***The Times of India***, June 9, 2014.
3. "GB Road Market, New Delhi," ***So Delh***i, accessed May 16, 2026.
4. Kat-Katha, "Official Website: Ending Forced Sex Work," accessed May 16, 2026.
5. Ashlin Mathew, "At GB Road: Women & Children Bear the Brunt," ***National Herald***, July 4, 2022; "Sex Worker in New Delhi's Main Red Light District Tells Her Story," ***South China Morning Post***, December 4, 2019.
6. Ashlin Mathew, "At GB Road: Women & Children Bear the Brunt," ***National Herald***, July 4, 2022
7. "Sex Worker in New Delhi's Main Red Light District Tells Her Story," ***South China Morning Post***, December 4, 2019.

1.2 How did we get here?

Before becoming a landscape of stigma and surveillance, women's sexual and performative labour occupied a very different place within the urban culture of North India. In pre-colonial settings, systems of patronage linked women performers to courts, elite households, and influential social circles. Music, poetry, dance, and erotic labour were not confined to the margins of the city but embedded within its cultural and political life.[8] These women were not hidden locked away at the city edge, but actively participated in the urban world.

From this emerged the 'Tawaifs', courtesans who were not peripheral figures but central to the cultural economy of Indo-Muslim courtly life. They were educated and highly trained in music, poetry, and dance. They were fluent in etiquette, politics, and the arts, which enabled them to also teach the young men from nobility the same. Their 'Kothas' or salons functioned as spaces of performance, learning, and negotiation, where elite men came not just seeking intimacy but for conversation, refinement, and cultural exchange.[9]

Yet this position was always precarious. With colonial rule, the moral and political frameworks governing sexuality, gender, and public space began to shift. British authorities increasingly treated courtesan cultures as a social problem to be regulated, surveilled, and reclassified.[10]

What had once been a recognised, if ambivalent, form of women's labour was reframed as immoral, criminal, and dangerous. 'Kotha culture' was stigmatised and began to be looked down upon, maiming the agency of these courtesans.

This transformation did not end with colonialism. In the postcolonial city, nationalist ideals of respectability, family, and feminine purity continued the work of erasure, pushing women who did not fit these norms into segregated and stigmatised spaces; socially necessary but politically excluded.[11] Their histories were romanticised, forgotten, or actively denied, while their present-day realities were reduced to shame and silence.

This shift was not just social or moral; it was spatial. The movement from courtesan salons to red-light districts marked a reordering of women's place in the city. From recognised participants in public life to figures confined to city edges, upper floors, hidden rooms, and tightly controlled streets.[12] GB Road is one of the urban residues of this long process, a place where cultural memory, moral regulation, and gendered power have been compressed into a single street.

1.3 Sex work as labour and spatial practice

Sex work is work. It is labour performed through the body, time, skill, negotiation, risk, and emotional endurance. It involves transactions, income, working conditions, clients, intermediaries, and spaces of practice.

8. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," ***Feminist Studies*** 16, no. 2 (1990): 259–287.
9. Saba Dewan, ***Tawaifnama*** (Chennai: Context/Westland, 2019).
10. Ashwini Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
11. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, ***Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*** (London: Routledge, 1993); Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," ***Economic and Political Weekly*** 28, no. 14 (1993): 579–585.
12. Ashwini Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct***; Phil Hubbard, "Revisiting the Red Light District: Still Neglected, Immoral and Marginal?" Geoforum 38, no. 1 (2007): 1–10.

While some people enter sex work through economic pressure, limited choices, or conditions of vulnerability, others may choose it as a form of livelihood, independence, or control over their own labour. Acknowledging this choice refuses the assumption that all sex workers are without agency.

To recognise sex work as work is to remove it from a purely moral framework and understand it as part of the wider economy of gendered and precarious labour. ***The stigma attached to sex work often neglects the fact that sex workers, like any other kind of workers, require safety, rights, dignity, and recognition.***

Sex work is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of gendered labour. Across cultures and history, it has been shaped by unequal relations of power between men and women, the state and the body, and morality and survival.[13] It takes place not just in bedrooms and brothels, but in laws, streets, buildings, and urban margins.

What makes sex work so deeply tied to space is that it is rarely permitted to exist freely. It is contained, hidden, zoned, displaced. Urban authorities decide where sex workers may stand, where they may live, and where they may be seen. Red-light districts, illegal alleys, barred windows, back entrances, and police checkpoints are not accidental formations; they are architectural and urban tools used to manage women's bodies and sexual labour.[14] Sex work brings into view a central urban paradox, which is that ***the city depends on certain forms of gendered labour while simultaneously disavowing the people who do it. The sex worker becomes hyper-visible as a body, yet structurally invisible as a citizen.*** A sex worker becomes an object of gaze rather than a subject of rights.[15]

In India, sex workers are never "fully illegal" and yet rarely protected; they are kept in a permanent condition of semi-legality—tolerated for their labour while denied safety, rights, and recognition.[16] This contradiction is written directly into the spaces that they occupy.

1.4 G.B. Road—An Architectural Blindspot

GB Road is a product of these contradictions. ***It is not simply a "bad area" of the city, but an outcome of political, legal, and moral decisions that have organised sexuality through space.*** Its narrow lanes, upper-floor windows, hidden staircases, iron grills, and controlled thresholds reflect a city that wants the labour of sex workers but not their presence.[17]

From a feminist perspective, this is not only about prostitution. It is about how women's bodies are regulated through space. Who is allowed to occupy the street, who is allowed to look, and who

13. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, eds., ***Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*** (New York: Routledge, 1998); Prabha Kotiswaran, ***Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
14. Phil Hubbard, ***Sex and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West*** (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Hubbard, "Revisiting the Red Light District," 1–10.
15. Prabha Kotiswaran, ***Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
16. Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, India Code, secs. 3–7; Prabha Kotiswaran, ***Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor***. The Act criminalises activities around prostitution, including brothel-keeping, living on earnings, procuring, detention in premises, and prostitution near public places, rather than simply criminalising the individual act of sex work itself.
17. Neha Dixit, "GB Road, Beyond the Stereotype of Delhi's Red Light District," ***VICE***, August 16, 2018; Kat-Katha, "Official Website: Ending Forced Sex Work," accessed May 16, 2026.

must be looked at; who receives privacy and protection, and who is exposed to risk and surveillance.[18]

Architecture draws and repeats these hierarchies through ordinary elements—walls, windows, corridors, and thresholds—turning spatial boundaries into moral ones.[19]

The spatial conditions of sex work can therefore offer a lens through which to examine how urban space regulates visibility, access, and belonging. Architecture and urban design can "locate" sex work and also shape how it is encountered, which is usually through thresholds, circulation, surveillance, concealment, and exposure.[20] In GB Road, this is felt in the split between the street and the upper floors, the ordinary city and the taboo city, occupying the same buildings yet separated by power. Thinking about sex work through feminist urbanism is therefore less about resolving a moral debate and more about reading how gendered power is built into the city and how visibility, access, and safety are distributed through spatial form.[21]

Eventually, ***generations of keeping the sex workers hidden behind the curtains of morality and celebrating the patriarchial values that choose to validate the male histories and erases the ones where the women had agency, takes away the spatial respectability of neighbourhoods like G.B. Road.*** Rendering it vulnerable to urban and architectural neglect, making it a blindspot for any authorities to deem important enough to consider handling with the intent of care.

1.5 Aim of this thesis

This thesis begins from a simple but unsettling question: If Old Delhi is celebrated as a landscape of heritage, memory, and cultural pride, why are the histories of women's political agency and sexual labour excluded from that heritage? Women have always been around shaping the history and urbanism of Old Delhi and sex work has always existed—violent, gendered and politicised but always in space. Yet these spaces have rarely been recognised as part of what the city chooses to remember, preserve, or care for. Instead, they have been pushed into zones of stigma, illegality, and architectural neglect—or simply ignored.

Old Delhi's heritage is often remembered through kings, their ministers and colonial male figures, with streets, monuments and markets dedicated to them, while the histories of women who shaped its cultural life remain fragmented or unnamed. Within this absence, the histories of the female agents and their contribution to the urban life of Old Delhi, the Tawaifs and their Kothas—become part of a wider erasure of female presence, labour, and agency from the city's architectural memory.

18. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, ***Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*** (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011); Leslie Kern, ***Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*** (London: Verso, 2020).
19. Doreen Massey, ***Space, Place and Gender*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Jane Rendell, ***Art and Architecture: A Place Between*** (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
20. Phil Hubbard, ***Sex and the City***; Teela Sanders, Maggie O'Neill, and Jane Pitcher, ***Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy and Politics*** (London: SAGE, 2009).
21. Leslie Kern, ***Feminist City***; Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, ***Why Loiter***?; Doreen Massey, ***Space, Place and Gender***

At its core, ***this thesis challenges the patriarchal and exclusionary spatial systems that shape how cities are built, governed, and remembered.*** Space can reflect and reproducepower, and architecture and urban design decide who belongs, who is protected, who is seen, and who must remain hidden. In places like GB Road, these decisions are made visible through bars, windows, staircases, and streets that organise women's bodies into structures of exposure and control.

Engaging with GB Road and Old Delhi as a heritage site is therefore not about nostalgia or preservation alone. It is about asking what kind of histories are allowed to survive, and whose suffering is rendered invisible. This thesis proposes that heritage has the potential to play a role in confronting the erasure of female histories and the violence embedded in sex work by making its spatial and historical conditions visible, legible, and contestable.

Through the site of GB Road, this research investigates a profound paradox of how the culture of the Kothas and Tawaifs where women held cultural authority, economic agency, and public visibility within the city was transformed into one of moral erasure and spatial confinement, where women were stripped of legitimacy and reduced to objects of shame and surveillance. This shift was not just social but architectural—it was built into the very form of the street.

Overlapping feminist urbanism and spatial justice with critical heritage theory, this work seeks to reimagine GB Road not as a zone of moral exclusion but as a site of contested memory, lived labour, and visual sexual politics. It asks how architecture might shift from being a tool of containment and stigma to a medium of recognition, care, and dignity.

> ***This thesis argues that architecture and urban space—shaped by centuries of patriarchal and colonial power—do not merely reflect the erasure of women's histories but actively produce it.***
> ***Through the case of G.B. Road, it demonstrates how the selective recognition of heritage has compounded the stigma, exclusion, and spatial violence experienced by sex workers today—and proposes that heritage practice itself must become the tool of repair.***

1.6 Scope

This thesis is situated at the intersection of heritage architecture, feminist urbanism, and spatial justice. The scope of the research is not limited to the physical conservation of buildings, but extends to the recognition of intangible, social, and gendered forms of heritage. It studies GB Road as a layered urban condition—historically connected to the culture of Tawaifs, Kothas, Bazaars, and Shahjahanabad, and presently shaped by stigma, legal ambiguity, economic precarity, spatial segregation, and architectural neglect.

1.7 Limitations

This thesis does not claim to provide a complete sociological, legal, or policy-based solution to the complex realities of sex work in India. Issues such as trafficking, policing, labour rights, health, migration, caste, class, patriarchy and violence are deeply entangled with the site. These issues are addressed through their spatial, architectural, and heritage implications.

The research is also limited by the difficulty of conducting extensive direct fieldwork inside brothel spaces, due to ethical, safety, and legal concerns. Also, limited research has been done on similar topics. Therefore, the study relies on a combination of site observation, mapping, secondary literature, historical research, available documentation, and architectural interpretation.

1.8 Position and clarifications

This thesis does not romanticise prostitution, brothel life, or the exploitative conditions that many sex workers face. It recognises the violence, precarity, and stigma embedded in the contemporary red-light district. However, it also refuses to reduce GB Road only to victimhood, crime, or moral failure. Instead, it asks how architecture and heritage can acknowledge both violence and agency, both erasure and survival.

The thesis also does not argue for the simple "beautification" or tourist-oriented heritage branding of GB Road. Its aim is not to turn the red-light district into a spectacle for consumption. Rather, it proposes a feminist and decolonial approach to heritage—one that reveals suppressed histories, questions dominant narratives of respectability, and creates spatial conditions for dignity, safety, memory, and care.

The use of the term heritage in this thesis goes beyond monuments and officially protected buildings. Heritage is understood here as a way of deciding whose histories are remembered, whose labour is valued, and whose presence is allowed to belong in the city.

1.9 Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretive and feminist case-study methodology. It combines historical research, situated field observation, architectural reconstruction, typological comparison, spatial theory, critical heritage analysis and research through design. G.B. Road is approached as a layered urban condition in which architecture, gender, labour, violence, stigma and cultural memory intersect.

The research began with my first visit to G.B. Road. Experiencing the street as a woman immediately revealed conditions like the strong male occupation of the street, the feeling of being watched, the difficulty of moving through the colonnade, and the sharp separation between the commercial activity at ground level and the women visible behind the barred windows above. This encounter became a form of situated and embodied observation. It established my position as both a woman familiar with Delhi and an outsider to the lived realities of the women working on G.B. Road.

The second stage consists of a diagnostic

and layered historical analysis. Rather than presenting Delhi's history as a purely chronological narrative, the timeline compares recurring themes across different periods. These include women's public presence, domestic and cultural life, sexual and performative labour, changing architectural typologies, legal regulation, morality, respectability and heritage recognition. Historical texts, maps, photographs, paintings, legal documents, journal articles and other published material are read together to trace how tawaif and kotha cultures were gradually transformed, marginalised and reduced to the category of prostitution. The purpose of this timeline is to identify the social, political and spatial processes that contributed to the present condition of G.B. Road.

The contemporary architecture of G.B. Road is then studied through visual-forensic reconstruction. Very little official architectural documentation of the brothels is available, and direct access to their interiors is restricted for practical, ethical and safety reasons. As a result, the plans and sections developed in this thesis are reconstructed from fragmented evidence. This includes field observation, façade documentation, street photographs, journalistic videos, interviews and publicly available hidden-camera recordings.

Spatial information was extracted by comparing visible circulation routes, doors, staircases, corridors, windows, furniture, structural relationships and human scale. Repeated sequences across different sources were used to build probable internal arrangements. These drawings are therefore not presented as verified measured surveys, but as interpretive spatial hypotheses.

The reconstructed brothel spaces are subsequently compared with historical haveli and kotha configurations through speculative typological analysis. It examines processes of subdivision, compression, commercialisation, enclosure, overcrowding and the disappearance of collective or performative spaces.

This comparison does not claim to prove a direct and linear transformation from every historical kotha to the contemporary brothel. Instead, it uses architectural speculation to consider how earlier spatial principles may have been altered over time. Elements that once supported performance, sociability and controlled visibility may have remained physically present while acquiring new meanings: balconies become barred enclosures, staircases become concealed access routes, and shared interiors become overcrowded spaces in which work, sleep and domestic life are compressed together.

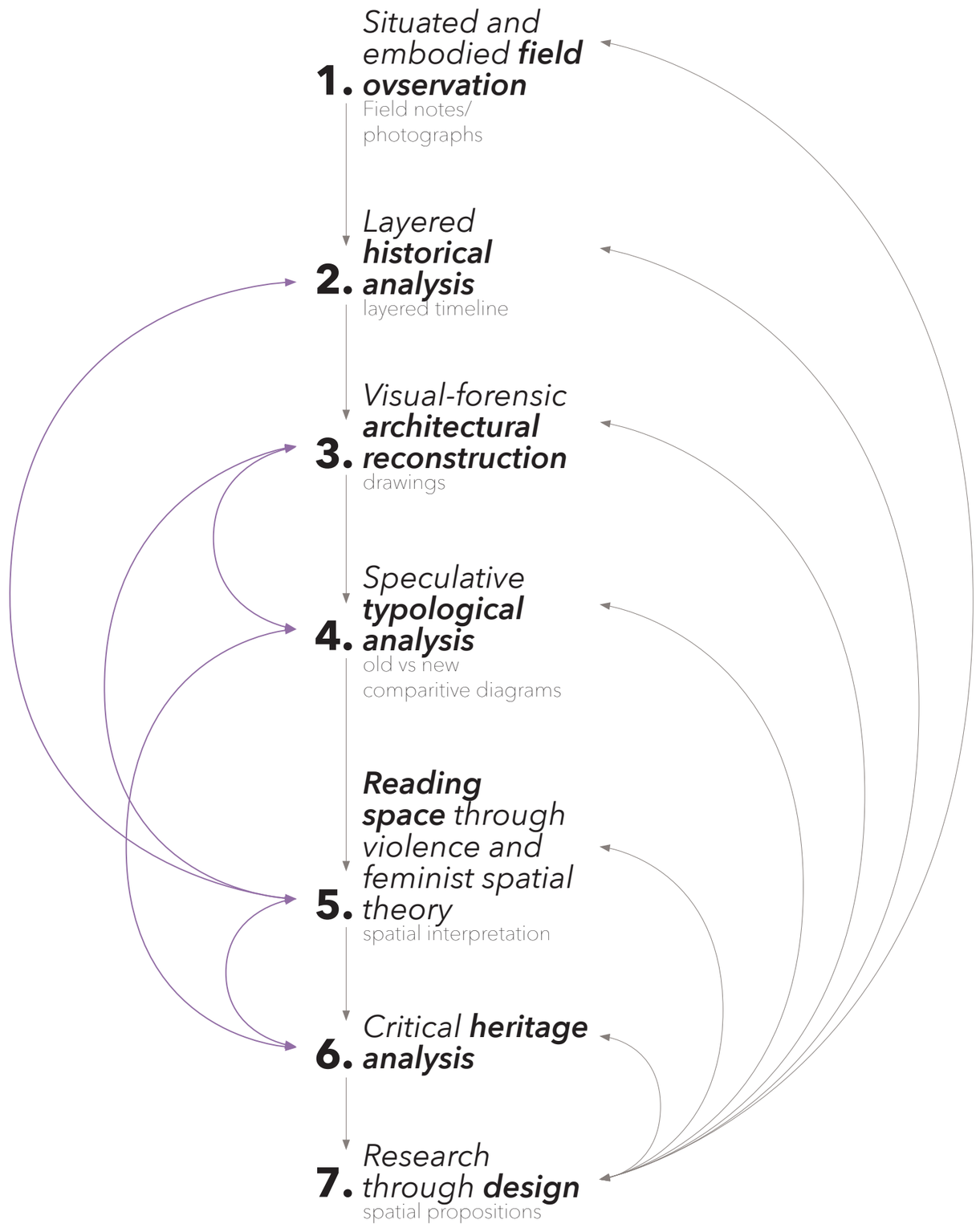
The architectural evidence is then interpreted through literature on violence and feminist spatial theory. Violence is understood not only as direct physical harm, but also as a condition produced through space. Overcrowding, confinement, surveillance, unsafe circulation, lack of privacy, inadequate sanitation, material neglect and exclusion from public life are examined as forms of spatial and structural violence. In this way, architectural elements are read beyond their physical form.

Feminist spatial theory is used to examine how mobility, visibility, safety, privacy and access are distributed unequally across the site. This theoretical reading also supports the transition from analysis to design by translating questions of gendered space into principles concerning collective occupation, bodily autonomy, care, visibility and dignity.

The thesis then develops a critical

heritage argument around the histories of tawaifs, kothas and sex work. It examines how these histories have been excluded, simplified or moralised within dominant narratives of Old Delhi's heritage. Their recognition as difficult and intangible heritage does not imply romanticising prostitution or preserving exploitative living conditions. Rather, it acknowledges the cultural labour, performance traditions, spatial practices, memories and histories of exclusion connected to these women and spaces. Heritage is therefore treated not only as the preservation of monuments, but also as a process through which certain histories are remembered while others are silenced.

The final stage uses *research through design not to produce a resolved architectural product, but as an investigative method through which the findings of the thesis can be tested spatially*. Design becomes a way of exploring how feminist spatial principles — including care, collective occupation, bodily autonomy, visibility, access, safety and dignity — might reshape existing relationships between women, architecture and the city. Working across the urban, street and building scales, the project develops situated spatial propositions that extend the research rather than conclude it. In this sense, design becomes a feminist spatial practice through which alternative relationships between bodies, space, memory and the city can be explored, tested and made visible.



1.10 Structure and Progression

The thesis develops from the contemporary condition of G.B. Road towards a broader reading of how women's presence, labour and visibility have been shaped within Old Delhi. It begins with the street as it exists today, where commercial activity, sex work, gendered occupation and architectural neglect coexist within the same urban fabric. From this condition, the research looks back historically to understand how changing ideas of morality, respectability, labour and gender altered the position of women within the city, particularly through the transformation of the Tawaif, the Kotha and later the red-light district.

This historical trajectory is then brought back into the present through studying the architecture of G.B. Road. The thesis examines how questions of visibility, enclosure, access, privacy and collective life are embedded within its spatial condition, and how these relationships can be read through wider questions of violence and feminist spatial theory. From here, the argument expands into heritage, asking why some histories are protected and made visible within Old Delhi while others remain marginal, stigmatised or absent.

The thesis ultimately brings these strands together by positioning G.B. Road not only as a place where histories of gender, labour, architecture, violence and cultural memory overlap. It concludes by asking how architecture and heritage might respond to these conditions without erasing the existing city or reducing it to a problem to be solved, and instead work towards forms of recognition, care and spatial dignity.

Chapter 2

History

This chapter offers a partial and deliberately selective reading of the city's past, shaped by the scope of this thesis and its focus on G.B. Road and Old Delhi. Historical moments, spaces and transformations are examined to help trace changing relationships between women, sexuality, labour, urban space and the city. The chapter moves across different periods to identify the social and spatial conditions through which the contemporary landscape of G.B. Road gradually emerged. Because architectural documentation of G.B. Road is often fragmentary, information was cross-checked across multiple historical, visual, journalistic and secondary sources to establish the most reliable reading possible.

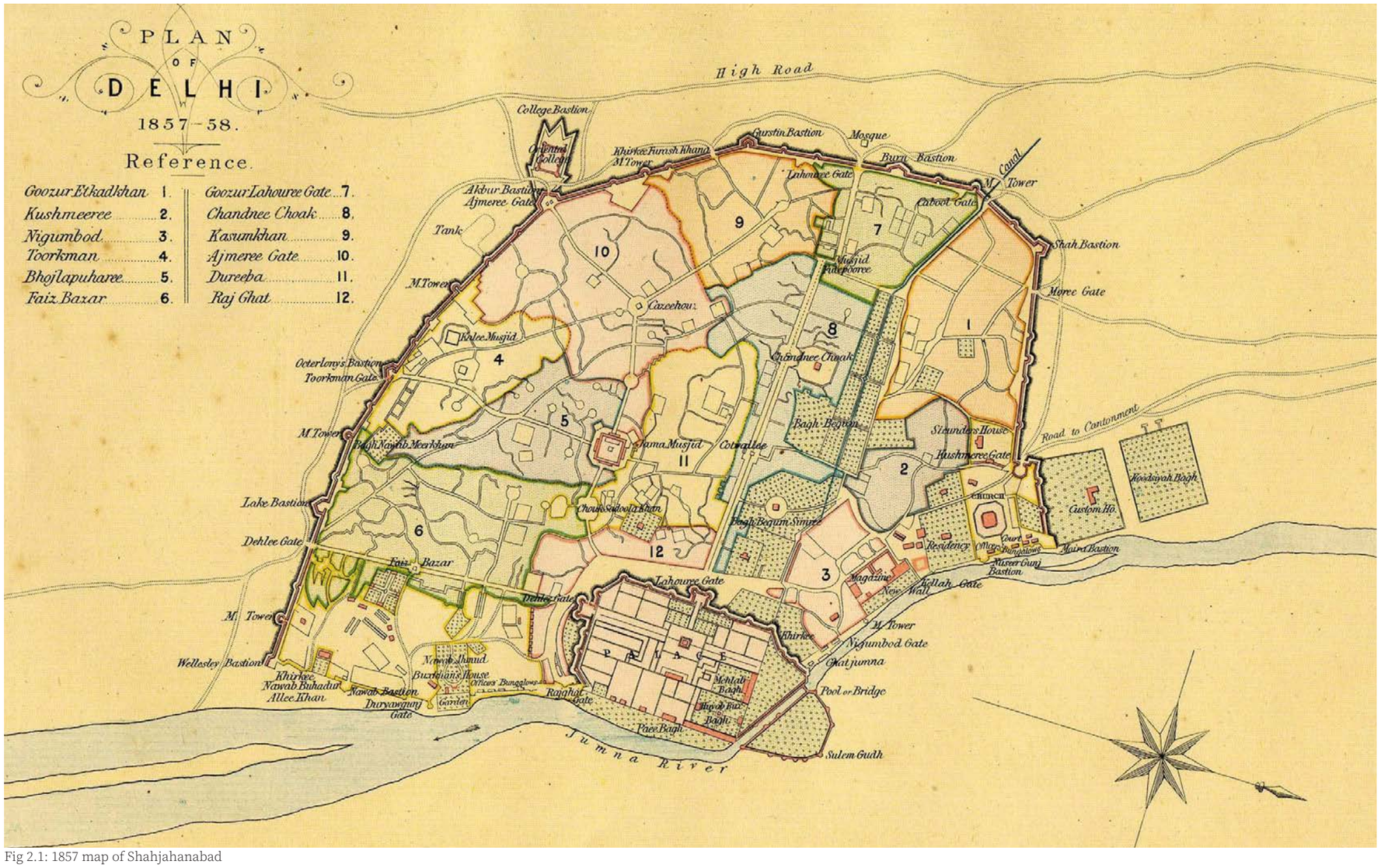


Fig 2.1: 1857 map of Shahjahanabad

2.1 Delhi

Delhi is India's national capital territory, covering approximately 1,500 square kilometres in northern India. It is home to nearly 23 million people, including migrants from across the country who come to the city in search of employment and economic opportunities. Situated along the banks of the River Yamuna, Delhi has historically occupied an important strategic location, making it a favourite place to be conquered by several dynasties and empires throughout its history. This long history, together with continuous migration, has contributed to the city's diverse and vibrant culture.

Delhi never existed as a singular city, having been repeatedly built, destroyed, renamed, and occupied by different dynasties, empires, communities, traders, and colonial powers. It is often described in terms of its "seven cities," though this number is symbolic rather than absolute. The landscape of Delhi has included earlier and later urban formations such as Indraprastha, Lal Kot or Qila Rai Pithora, Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Firozabad, Dinpanah or Shergarh, Shahjahanabad, and eventually New Delhi.[1] These were not simply separate cities that replaced one another in a clean chronological sequence, but accumulated across the same geographical terrain, producing a layered urban palimpsest.

This layered history makes Delhi a remarkably dense, culturally assorted landscape. It has been shaped by powers and dynasties such as Rajput, Sultanate,

1. Rana Safvi, ***The Forgotten Cities of Delhi*** (Noida: HarperCollins India, 2018); Percival Spear, ***Delhi: Its Monuments and History*** (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Mughal, Afghan, Persianate, colonial, and the post-colonial mix of different democratic Indian ruling parties. Other than that, it was also influenced by the everyday presence of merchants, artisans, religious communities, migrants, performers, labourers, and residents. The city's cultural life was never produced only by rulers or monuments. It also emerged through trade, food, language, music, craft, ritual, neighbourhood life, and informal social exchange. One such example being, communities such as Banias and Jains, who played an important role in the economic life of Old Delhi because of their involvement in trade, moneylending, mercantile networks, and bazaar economies.[2] Their presence helped shape the commercial character of many neighbourhoods, showing that Delhi's urban culture was not simply imperial but also mercantile, religious, domestic, and everyday.

Shahjahanabad, which is today's Old Delhi, must be read within this comprehensive history of urban layering. Founded by Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century, it became the Mughal imperial capital and was anchored by the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid.[3] Yet Shahjahanabad was never only a political centre. It was also a city of Bazaars (market places), gardens, shrines, Havelis, Caravanserais (rest houses), Hammams (bath houses), workshops, poetic gatherings, and performance cultures. Its identity came from the overlap between imperial power and everyday urban life. Authority was expressed through architecture and ceremony, but culture was produced through markets, streets, neighbourhoods, and social practices.

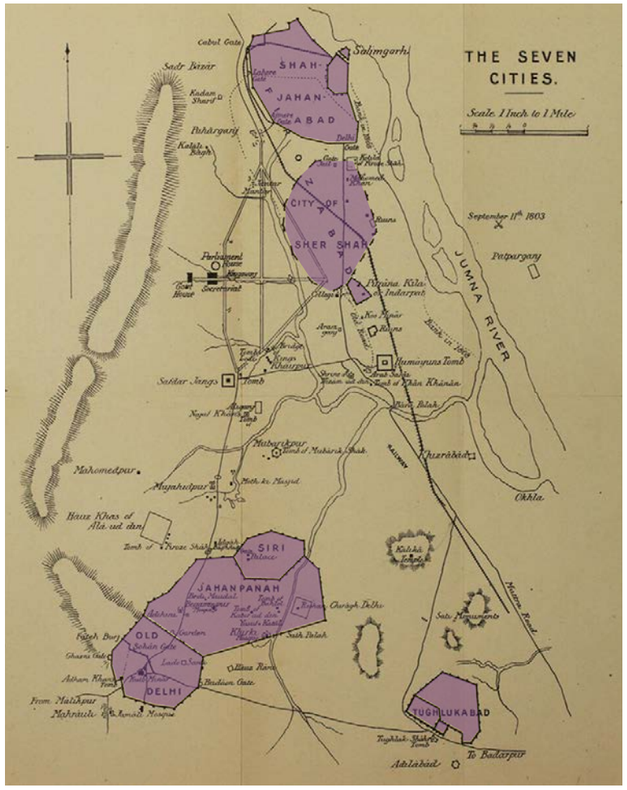


Fig 2.2: 7 Historical cities of Delhi

Source: Sarmaya Arts Foundation, 1928

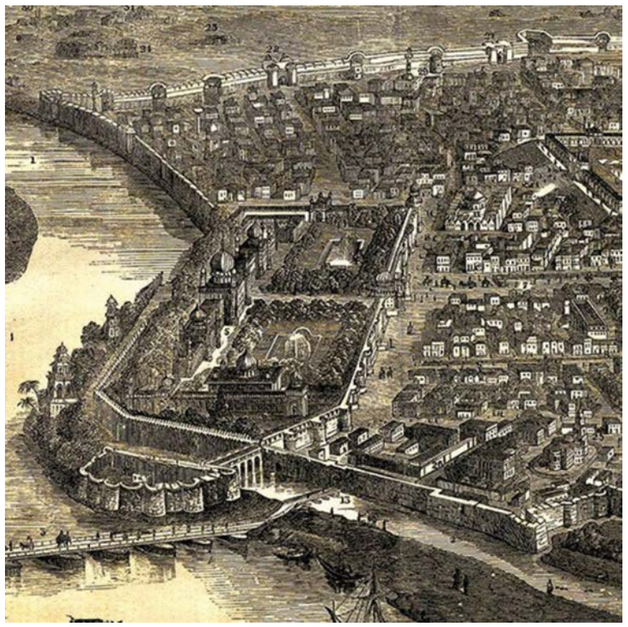


Fig 2.3: Walled city of Shahjahanabad

Source: Illustrated London News (1858)

2. Narayani Gupta, ***Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803–1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth*** (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).
3. Stephen P. Blake, ***Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal Indi***a, 1639–1739 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Stephen Blake describes Shahjahanabad as a "sovereign city," where urban form, courtly ritual, and social interaction together produced a landscape of power.[4] In this reading, sovereignty was not confined to the Red Fort or the court. It extended into the surrounding urban fabric through processional routes, markets, gardens, neighbourhoods, and symbolic axes. Streets and Bazaars were therefore not neutral spaces of circulation. They were active sites where power was performed, witnessed, negotiated, and reproduced. For this thesis, Blake's reading is important because it shows that architecture and urbanism in Delhi are not passive backgrounds but essential tools that shaped social relations and cultural practices.

Jyoti Hosagrahar argues, as well, that cities such as Old Delhi were shaped through "indigenous modernities," where built form and social practice evolved through negotiation rather than through rigid planning.[5] This becomes important for understanding the dense mixed-use character of the city. Commercial, domestic, religious, and performative spaces were often layered vertically and horizontally within the same urban fabric. Shopfronts opened onto the street, storage spaces sat behind them, families lived above, courtyards mediated between public and private life, and balconies allowed residents to observe the street while remaining partially concealed. Hence, the city functioned through gradations of access and visibility rather than through strict separation.

This produced a distinctive urban condition in which public life was intensely sensory and performative. The sounds of hawkers, prayer calls, poetry, music, conversation, animals, craftsmen, and processions filled the streets. Bazaars such as Chandni Chowk, Chawri Bazaar, Dariba Kalan, Khari Baoli, and Ballimaran were not merely commercial zones. They were social and cultural environments where trade, leisure, gossip, patronage, religious practice, and entertainment overlapped. The architecture of Shahjahanabad supported this condition through arcades, thresholds, courtyards, jharokhas, jalis, upper floors, narrow lanes, and shared street edges. Public and private life were not separate opposites. They were constantly negotiated through architecture.

This layered urbanism is central to understanding the later history of Kothas, courtesans, and eventually GB Road. ***The presence of women performers within Shahjahanabad was embedded within the very same bazaar culture that sustained trade, sociability, and performance.*** Before these spaces were reduced to the language of prostitution and brothel districts, they formed part of a larger urban world in which music, dance, poetry, etiquette, patronage, and commerce existed together.

4. Blake, ***Shahjahanabad.***
5. Jyoti Hosagrahar***, Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism*** (London: Routledge, 2005).

2.2 **Women as makers of Shahjahanabad**

Now, when we realise Shahjahanabad as this site of vibrant urbanism, comprising a blend of cultural richness, it is central to understand the spaces that housed this lifestyle. Though the traditional narrative of today's times glorifies the monumental and patriarchal angle of history, a deeper study of the architecture and urban planning of Shahjahanabad suggests that women played an important role in shaping the city as well. They commissioned streets, gardens, mosques, sarais, hammams, havelis, and spaces of leisure, which were essentially the spaces that allowed for the rich culture of Shahjahanabad. Their contributions complicate the assumption that women only occupied the private or domestic interior. In several important cases, elite women shaped the very public life of the city.



Fig 2.4: Painting of Princess Jahanara Begum — *Source: British Library (1632)*

The following are a few of the many prominent female figures associated with Shahjahanabad who were studied during the research process to examine their roles, influence, power, and contributions to the city's social, cultural, and political life.

Princess Jahanara Begum (1630-80) offers one of the clearest examples of this feminine urban authorship. The eldest daughter of Shah Jahan (emperor who built the Taj Mahal) and, after Mumtaz Mahal's death, effectively the first lady of the empire, Jahanara was one of the most influential women in seventeenth-century Mughal India. She possessed immense wealth, maintained commercial interests, patronised learning and Sufi culture, and commissioned major architectural and urban works.[6] Her role in Shahjahanabad was not ornamental. She used architecture and patronage as instruments of urban, cultural, and spiritual power.

Among Jahanara's most significant contributions was Chandni Chowk, conceived not simply as a market street but as a richly layered civic axis. It connected the Red Fort to the wider city and combined processional space, water, commerce, hospitality, leisure, and public life.[7] Historical accounts describe a central water channel, associated with the Faiz Nahr, running through the bazaar and reflecting moonlight, giving Chandni

6. Ruby Lal, ***Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ellison Banks Findly, ***Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
7. Swapna Liddle, ***Chandni Chowk: The Mughal City of Old Delhi*** (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2017); Swapna Liddle, "***Women Patrons and the Making of Shahjahanabad***," Sahapedia, 2017.

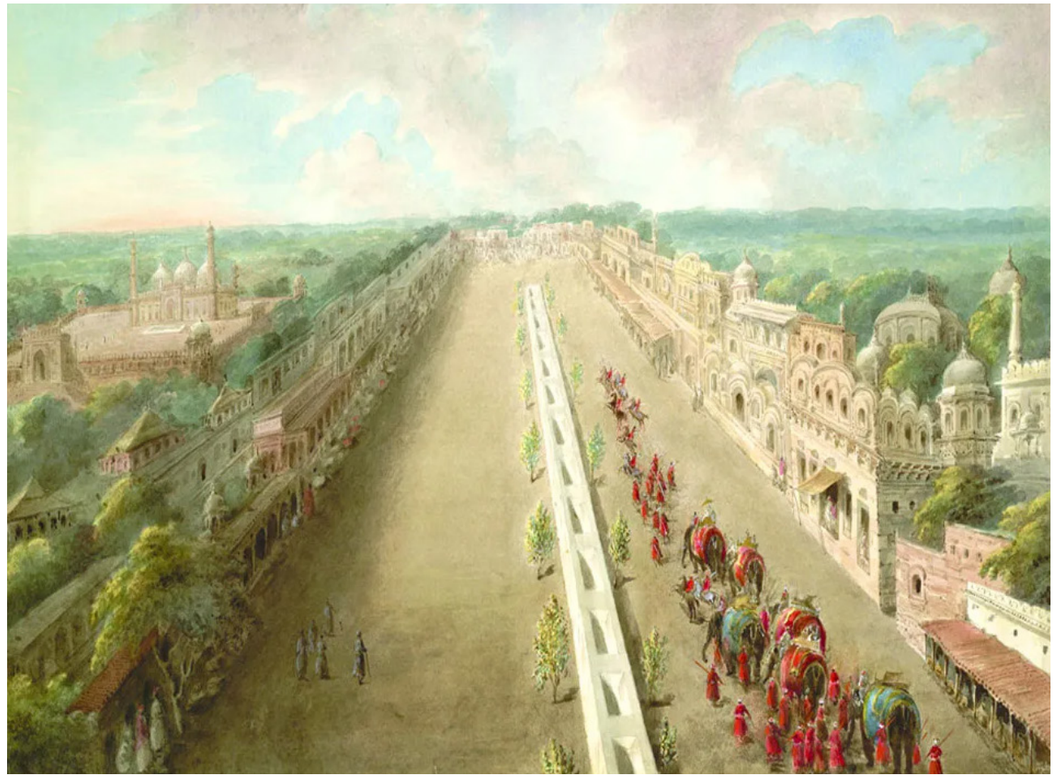


Fig 2.5: Painting of Jahanara's Chandni Chowk (~1650) — *Source: British Library*



Fig 2.6: Present day Chandni Chowk — *Source: Incredible India (2021)*

Chowk its poetic name.[8] The street was lined with shops and trees and supported a dense commercial life. To its north stood a grand Sarai (rest house) associated with Jahanara, while Hammams, gardens, and other urban amenities formed part of this larger landscape of care, rest, and exchange.[9]

Jahanara's architecture can therefore be read as a form of "matronage," where female patronage shaped not only buildings but also the rhythms of public life. Her urban projects connected trade with hospitality, spirituality with commerce, and movement with repose. Sarais supported travellers and merchants, gardens provided leisure and relief, Hammams created spaces of bodily care, and Bazaars enabled exchange. Her work suggests that women's architectural agency in Mughal Delhi was not confined to private palaces. It actively shaped the

8. Liddle, ***Chandni Chowk***; Blake, ***Shahjahanabad***.
9. Liddle, "***Women Patrons and the Making of Shahjahanabad***."

public, economic, and cultural life of the city.

Yet today Jahanara's name is far less visibly attached to Delhi's public memory than that of her father. Chandni Chowk survives as one of the most iconic urban spaces of Old Delhi, but its connection to female authorship is rarely foregrounded in mainstream heritage narratives. The issue is not that Jahanara is entirely forgotten, but that her authorship has not been granted proportionate visibility.

Roshanara Begum (1658-68), another daughter of Shah Jahan, offers a different but equally important example. Known for her political role during the Mughal war of succession and her support of Aurangzeb, Roshanara also shaped Delhi with the creation of Roshanara Bagh.[10] This Mughal garden was not only a retreat but also part of the wider landscape of imperial leisure, water, and cultivated nature. Over time, however, the garden was repeatedly altered. Under colonial and later municipal interventions, parts of its Mughal character were changed, and the site became associated with recreational uses such as the Roshanara Club and cricket.[11]

The history of Roshanara Bagh is significant because it reveals how women's urban legacies can be overwritten without being completely destroyed. The site remains known, but its original association with Roshanara's patronage, Mughal garden culture, and feminine spatial authorship has been weakened by later transformations. Its memory has been absorbed into other narratives: colonial recreation, club culture, cricketing history, and urban park management. This is a different form of erasure. The place survives, but its gendered authorship becomes secondary.

Zeenat Mahal (1840-57), the wife of Bahadur Shah Zafar (last Mughal emperor), further complicates the relationship between women, domestic space, and political power. Her haveli in nineteenth-century Delhi was not simply a residence but a political interior, a place of negotiation, influence, performance, and courtly sociability.[13] The haveli as a typology is especially important because it mediated between public and private worlds. Courtyards, gateways, halls, screens, and inner rooms allowed elite women to exercise influence while remaining within spatial systems associated with enclosure. In Zeenat Mahal's case, the domestic interior became a political stage. Her role during the period surrounding the uprising of 1857 also demonstrates why the British saw Mughal women not only as symbolic figures but as potential political threats.[14]

Jahanara, Roshanara, and Zeenat Mahal represent forms of elite female power. **Mubarak Begum** (died 1878), though, represents a more difficult and revealing case—a woman remembered through stigma. Coming from a poor family, she pursued a career in dance and became a Tawaif. Later became a concubine of a British army officer (David Ochterlony) and used his influence to rise to power. Associated with early nineteenth-century Delhi and with the mosque at Hauz Qazi known as Masjid

10. Catherine B. Asher, ***Architecture of Mughal India*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Anoushka Jain, ***Badass Begums: The Incredible Women Who Shaped Mughal India*** (Noida: HarperCollins India, 2025).
11. "Roshanara Bagh: From Mughal Baghs to Cricket Runs," ***Live History India***, June 21, 2017.
13. William Dalrymple, ***The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi***, 1857 (New York: Knopf, 2006).
14. Dalrymple, ***The Last Mughal***.



Fig 2.7: Painting of Masjid Mubarak Begum *Source: British Library*

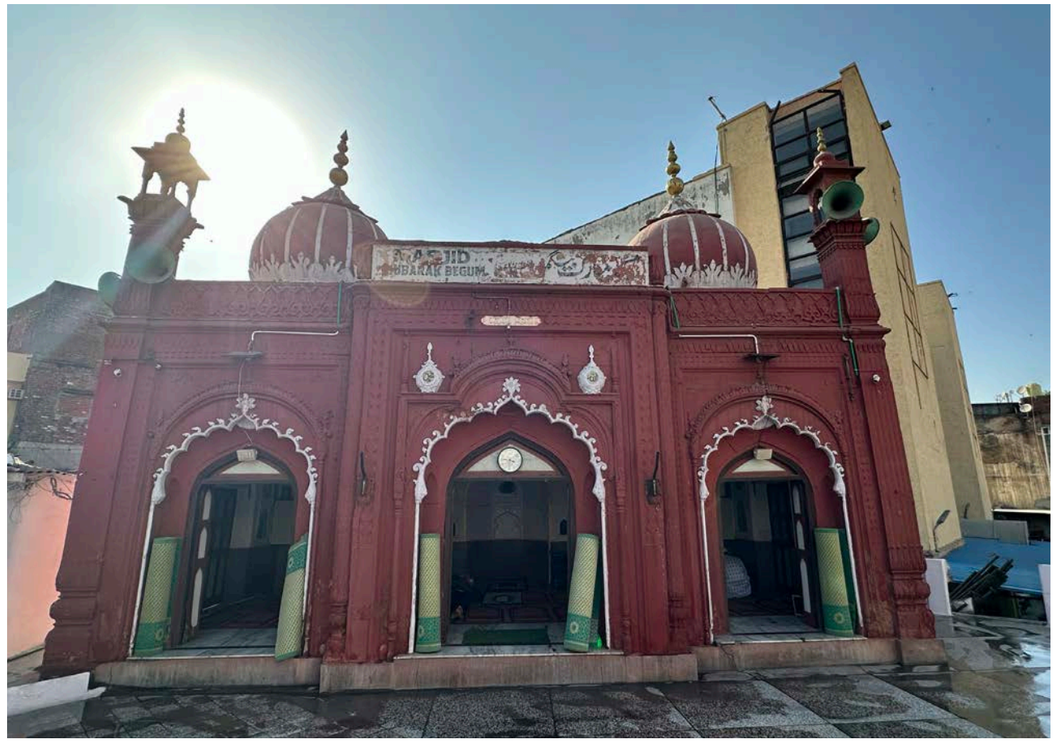


Fig 2.8: Present day Masjid Mubarak Begum *Source: Photographed by the author*

Mubarak Begum, she appears in historical and heritage accounts as a socially ambitious and influential woman who used her wealth to commission a religious structure in the city. Maulvi Zafar Hasan records that the mosque was built in 1822–23 and named after her.[15] Later historians, including Swapna Liddle, have also noted the importance of the mosque as an example of female patronage in Shahjahanabad.[16]

Yet the afterlife of the monument reveals how women's histories are degraded through moral labelling. Because Mubarak Begum had earlier been associated with dance and because her social ascent unsettled both colonial and elite respectability, the mosque acquired the derogatory epithet "Randi ki Masjid," often translated as the prostitute's mosque.[17] ***The monument therefore survives not as a celebrated testament to female patronage, but as a site burdened by sexualised insult. In heritage terms, this is not neutral remembrance. It is gendered distortion.*** The woman who financed and named a mosque is remembered less for her architectural agency than for moral stigma.

Begum Samru (1753-1836) offers yet another crucial example because her life connects directly to the world of tawaifs, kothas, Chawri Bazaar, and female power. Born Farzana (well-versed in the knowledge of the Kotha), she is widely associated with a background in performance culture before becoming the partner of the European mercenary Walter Reinhardt Sombre and later the ruler of Sardhana.[18] Historical accounts describe her as having emerged from a kotha milieu and eventually commanding troops, governing territory, and exercising political authority.[19] Her story complicates the later colonial and nationalist reduction of courtesans to fallen or immoral women. In the eighteenth-century world of North India, tawaifs could occupy complex positions as artists, cultural figures, companions, patrons, property holders, and sometimes political actors.

Begum Samru's trajectory matters for this thesis because it shows that the kotha was not only a sexualised space. It could also be a site of training, cultural refinement, social mobility, and political connection. This does not mean that such spaces were free from exploitation or hierarchy. Rather, it means that their historical meaning was more complex than the later category of the brothel allows.

Taken together, these women reveal a broader pattern. Women were involved in making Delhi through streets, markets, gardens, mosques, havelis, sarais, political interiors, and performance cultures. Yet their memory has often been displaced, softened, moralised, or overwritten. ***Jahanara is under-credited, Roshanara is absorbed into park and club history, Zeenat Mahal is remembered through intrigue***

15. Maulvi Zafar Hasan, ***Monuments of Delhi: Lasting Splendour of the Great Mughals and Others***, ed. J. A. Page (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1997), originally published as List of Muhammadan and Hindu Monuments, Delhi Province; see also the discussion of Mubarak Begum Mosque in The Indian Express.
16. Liddle, "***Women Patrons and the Making of Shahjahanabad.***"
17. Zafar Hasan, ***Monuments of Delhi***; Liddle, "***Women Patrons and the Making of Shahjahanabad***."
18. Julia Keay, Farzana: ***The Woman Who Saved an Empire*** (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013); Mrinalini Rajagopalan, ***Marks She Made: The Art and Architecture of Begum Samru*** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023).
19. Keay, Farzana; Archana Garodia Gupta, "***Begum Samru: The 18th Century Dancer Who Grew to Rule a Principality and Rescue the Mughal Emperor***," Scroll.in, April 30, 2019.
20. "***The Tawaifs of Shahjahanabad***," Live History India, March 10, 2020.



Fig 2.9: Painting of Begum Samru's household (~1805) *Source: Chester Beatty Library*



Fig 2.10: Begum Samru and her army, made 1805–26 *Source: Chester Beatty Library*

more than spatial power, Mubarak Begum is marked by insult, and Begum Samru's tawaif origins are often treated as scandal rather than as part of a larger history of female agency. This pattern is central to the thesis because it shows that the erasure of women from Delhi's heritage is not accidental. It is spatial, moral, and historical.

To understand Shahjahanabad as more than a physical city, it must be read alongside the lives that animated it. The social meaning of the city is produced through these relationships between bodies, labour, culture, power, and space.

Earlier in this chapter, several notable women from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were introduced. However, to develop a more comprehensive account of the feminine palimpsest of the city, it is necessary to examine the spaces, roles, and conditions occupied by women across different historical periods in northern India, Delhi, and, eventually, G.B. Road. From sacred performers and courtly courtesans to wives confined within domestic quarters, and from women working in bazaars to those labouring in brothels and backrooms, different forms of womanhood were enabled, regulated, or suppressed through the organisation of space. As the city changed, so too did the conditions under which women could be seen, heard, represented, or concealed.

Historical studies, films, literary narratives, and popular media often romanticise earlier traditions of courtesanship, portray women exclusively as victims, or marginalise female experiences altogether in favour of narratives centred on male rulers, patrons, and political elites.

Much of their actual history was never formally recorded, while the material that survives is fragmented, selective, and often shaped by the moral, social, and political assumptions of those who produced it. The absence of documentation is itself significant, revealing whose lives were considered worthy of being recorded.

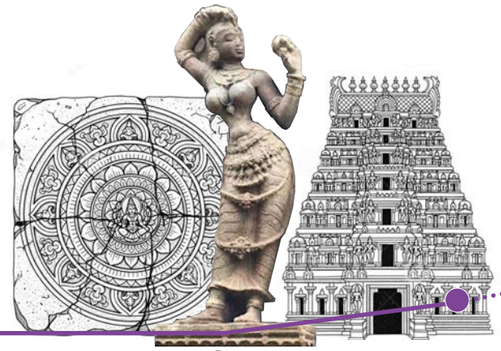
For this reason, the present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach. It brings together historical and theoretical literature with social, economic, legal, political, and spatial sources to examine how prostitution and courtesanship were transformed across time.

The timeline that follows has been constructed through this diverse body of material and assembled into a broader history of women's lives, labour, sexuality, and urban space. It does not propose a single linear narrative of progress or decline. Instead, it identifies a series of overlapping regimes of visibility, respectability, mobility, patronage, regulation, and control: periods in which women's public presence was culturally valued, periods in which it was selectively tolerated, and periods in which it was restricted, stigmatised, displaced, or violently erased.

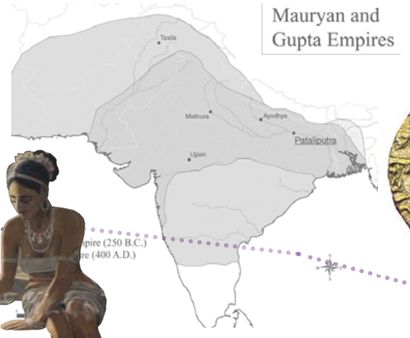
For greater clarity, this history is divided into four major eras. Each era is examined through a consistent set of parameters, including women's domestic and public roles, forms of labour, economic position, caste and class relations, cultural participation, spatial organisation, mobility, visibility, systems of patronage, and modes of social and state regulation. Particular attention is also given to the changing status of courtesans and sex workers, whose histories reveal wider transformations in the relationship between gender, morality, labour, and urban space.

Each era also centres on the lives of two women: one a courtesan or sex worker, and the other from a different social or occupational background. Information gathered from a wide range of literature was compiled, mapped, and used to create AI-assisted reconstructions of two representative lives for each period. These narratives help illustrate what women's everyday experiences may have been like, making the layered timeline more engaging, accessible, and easier to interpret. The timeline can therefore function not only as a research tool, but also as a means of communicating women's histories to a wider audience and raising awareness of experiences that have often been overlooked.

Reading these eras together allows G.B. Road to be understood not as an isolated aberration within Delhi, nor merely as a site of prostitution, but as the spatial outcome of long historical processes that have repeatedly reorganised women's position within the social, economic, and urban fabric of the city.

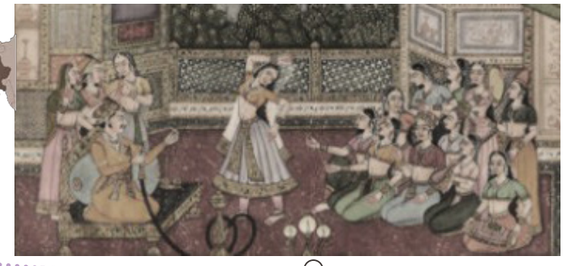












200 BCE

Devadasi Tradition

Culture — Devadasis perform music, dance, rituals

Sex work

Urbanism — Temples as centers of art and female agency, not just worship.

Space

Gender

Power — hold respected religious and cultural positions.

300 BCE - 300 CE

Tamil Sangam Literature

Mentions of professional female performers and dancers, celebrated in poetry

320 BCE - 550 CE

Gupta Empire

Patronage of Arts
Court dancers and musicians flourished under royal patronage

kama-sutra was written

Court performances

public women with dignity and social roles

1200-1300

Delhi Sultanate & Early Islamic Urbanism

Rise of Mehfil Culture

Early forms of professional courtesans emerge

Shift to urban elite culture in Delhi
gathering spaces for poetry, music, court performances.

Changing Power Structures

Women's public performances start becoming more tied to male elites

ERA 1

Women, Ritual, and Early Gendered Control

In early and medieval South Asian societies, women's roles were shaped by a tension between visibility and restriction. Normative texts and social codes often tied women to domesticity, kinship, sexual control, and family honour. The idea of 'Stridharma' framed women's lives through duties of obedience, modesty, reproduction, and service to household structures.[1] These codes should not be read as exact descriptions of how all women lived, but they do reveal the ideals through which women's conduct and mobility were imagined, regulated, and judged.

At the same time, not all forms of women's public presence were forbidden. Certain women occupied visible roles through ritual, performance, and religious institutions. ***The 'Devadasi system', for example, placed women within temple cultures where music, dance, ritual service, and performance formed part of religious life.*** Devadasis were not simply entertainers; in many regions, they were attached to temples as ritual specialists and custodians of artistic traditions.[2] People from the whole village used to come and watch the Devadasis perform in the temples, their presence was very important in every ritual and ceremony linked to the village, and in ancient India temple was the most significant social place. So, their visibility complicates the assumption that women were always confined to the domestic interior.

Yet this visibility was never the same as full autonomy. Devadasis could be culturally valued and socially constrained at the same time. Their labour was sanctioned because it served religious, aesthetic, and patronage systems, but their bodies and mobility were still governed through institutions controlled largely by men. Over time, the boundaries between ritual performance, patronage, sexuality, and exploitation became increasingly contested.[3]

This early history matters because it reveals a pattern that returns throughout the thesis—women's public presence was allowed only under specific conditions. A woman could be visible as a ritual performer, cultural figure, or servant of sacred institutions, but that visibility was mediated through role, status, caste, and control. The same society that revered feminine divinity could also regulate actual women's bodies with great force. This paradox — symbolic reverence alongside lived restriction — becomes an important backdrop for understanding later histories of courtesans, tawaifs, and sex workers.

1. Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State," ***Economic and Political Weekly*** 28, no. 14 (1993): 579–585; Kumkum Roy, The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power: Explorations in Early Indian History (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).
2. Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," ***Economic and Political Weekly*** 20, no. 44 (1985): 1869–1876; Saskia C. Kersenboom, Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).
3. Davesh Soneji, Unfinished Gestures: ***Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Lucinda Ramberg, ***Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion*** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

Women of Era 1:
Spatial Lives Behind the Archive

This thesis introduces two composite figures drawn from historical patterns—not as fictional stories, but as spatial portraits of how different categories of women moved through and were contained by the built world of their time.

Madhavi and Sita emerge from a society that simultaneously revered and controlled women. Madhavi's ritualised public presence as a temple performer shows how women could be elevated as sacred and culturally central, yet denied autonomy over their own bodies and movement.

Sita's confined domestic life reveals the other side of this order—women whose labour sustained households and lineages, but whose visibility was tightly restricted in the name of honour and purity. Together, they show how ancient social and spatial systems created a world in which women could be symbolically powerful yet structurally constrained, laying the foundations for centuries of gendered control over space, mobility, and visibility.



Fig 2.11: AI Generated image of the lives of Madhavi and Sita from 200CE, depicted in an inspired ancient Indian artstyle (Madhubani)

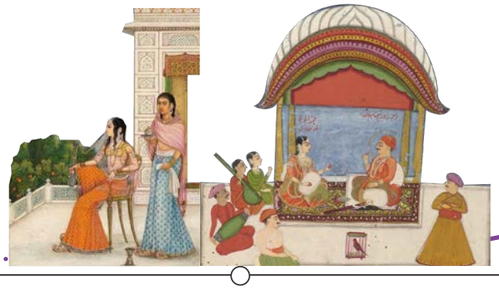
Source: AI-assisted visualisation generated by the author using OpenAI, March 2026.

Madhavi-
The Temple's Daughter

At dawn, the temple stones are still cool under Madhavi's bare feet. She knows every crack, every echo. The air smells of oil lamps and wet earth. When she lifts her hands to dance, the whole courtyard seems to breathe with her.
People bow when she performs, whispering that she is blessed. But when the music fades, so does her world. She cannot walk beyond the temple road without permission. The same men who praise her purity decide the limits of her freedom.
Still, in those brief moments when her anklets ring louder than the priests' chants, Madhavi feels untamed. A woman carved out of rhythm and rebellion, even if no one else can see it.

Sita-
The Quiet Householder

Sita's home is small, but the expectations inside it are vast. She moves through rooms like someone carrying invisible weight — water pots, family honour, unspoken rules.
The village sees her as the perfect woman: gentle, obedient, always busy. But sometimes, at the well, when the breeze lifts her hair, and no one is watching, she imagines walking beyond the fields and not turning back.
Her life is stitched out of duties she never chose. Yet somewhere beneath the folds of routine, there is a stubborn ember of selfhood that refuses to go out.









1639-48 | **Late 1600s** | **1757-1790** | **1803** | **1857** | **1860**

Mughal Era - Golden Age of the Tawaif

(Beginning of Decline)

Pre-Colonial & Early Colonial India

Culture Sex work	Tawaifs are artists, scholars, cultural educators and train princes in etiquette, poetry, politics.				
Urbanism	Founding of Shahjahanabad- with distinct commercial, religious, and elite zones.	Chawri Bazaar rises as an elite mehfil and kotha area	Decline of Mughal Patronage Courtesans started to be associated with moral decay, excessive luxury, and threat to British masculinity.	Anti-Naach & Reformist Movements	First War of Independence (Collapse of Mughal patronage for courtesans)	**Indian Penal Code (IPC) Section 366A** First law to criminalize "procurement for prostitution."
Space	Big Cities like Delhi, Lucknow, Benares, Hyderabad become Tawaif Urban Networks Kothas (salons) emerge — architecturally rich houses in city centers.		Gender, race, and space become highly regulated.			Courtesans displaced from the center of the city
Power	Mehfils become key sites of power, culture, diplomacy. Some tawaifs become major landowners, patrons themselves, and shape urban landscapes by their influence.		British see Tawaifs through a Victorian lens of morality and sin and begin framing them as prostitutes, not artists. As Mughal power declines and British influence rises, courtesans lose elite backing.	**Tawaifs lose elite protection**		

ERA 2

Tawaif Culture and the Kotha as Urban Institution

In the early modern period of North India, especially under Mughal and later Nawabi court cultures, the Tawaif emerged as a figure who unsettles modern assumptions about women, public life, and sexuality. Tawaifs were courtesans, but the term cannot be reduced to prostitution in the contemporary sense. They were trained in music, poetry, dance, etiquette, conversation, and forms of cultural refinement that made them important participants in elite urban life.[4]

The Kotha, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, was the residence of the Tawaifs and was not simply a room of sexual transaction. It functioned as a salon, performance space, training space, social interior, and cultural institution. In these spaces, mehfils were organised, poetry was recited, music and dance were performed, and elite men were trained in adab — refinement, language, manners, and sociability.[5] This does not mean the Kotha existed outside patriarchy or hierarchy. It was still shaped by patronage, class, gendered dependency, and unequal power. But it did represent a form of feminine publicness that was not yet reduced to shame.

The spatial position of the Kotha is central to this thesis. Unlike the secluded domestic interiors associated with elite respectability, ***Kothas were often linked to active urban corridors, markets, and cultural districts. Chawri Bazaar, located centrally in Shahjahanabad near Jama Masjid, became associated with Tawaifs, Kothas, music, dance, and elite sociability. Accounts of Old Delhi describe this area as part of the "Bazaar-e-Husn," or the "market of beauty," where courtesans lived, trained, performed, and interacted with patrons.***[6] This term itself shows that the space was historically understood not only through sex but through beauty, refinement, performance, and cultural

4. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," ***Feminist Studies*** 16, no. 2 (1990): 259–287; Saba Dewan, Tawaifnama (Chennai: Context/Westland, 2019).
5. Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance"; Pran Nevile, ***Nautch Girls of India: Dancers, Singers, Playmates*** (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996).

6. Priyanka Dikshit, "Lost Histories of Courtesans in Delhi's Chawri Bazaar," ***The Hindu***, January 23, 2024; Mayank Austen Soofi, ***Nobody Can Love You More: Life in Delhi's Red Light District*** (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2012).

exchange.

Chawri Bazaar and Bazaar-e-Husn historically operated through a vertical urban arrangement: the ground floor was commercial, occupied by merchant shops. In contrast, the upper floors contained Kothas where tawaifs lived and performed. This arrangement produced a layered street life in which trade, waiting, looking, music, paan, grooming, and patronage all overlapped. The ground floor was not separate from the kotha culture above; it formed its public threshold. Paan sellers, merchant shops, and later hardware and metalware commerce shaped the lower level, while balconies, atariyas, and mehfil halls animated the upper level.[21]

This Kotha culture was embedded within the commercial and social centre of Shahjahanabad. The street below and the performance space above formed a single urban system. Patrons, merchants, performers, servants, musicians, paan sellers, artisans, and residents all participated in this layered environment. The kotha was therefore not an isolated interior but part of a larger street ecology.

The architecture of the kotha depended on thresholds. Stairs, balconies, screened openings, courtyards, mehfil rooms, and upper-floor chambers mediated the relationship between public street life and semi-private performance. Women could be present and visible without being fully exposed. Patrons could



Fig 2.12: Painting from a Kotha balcony (Chawri Bazaar) from early 19th century with a view of Jama Masjid

Source: William Carpenter (1818-1899)

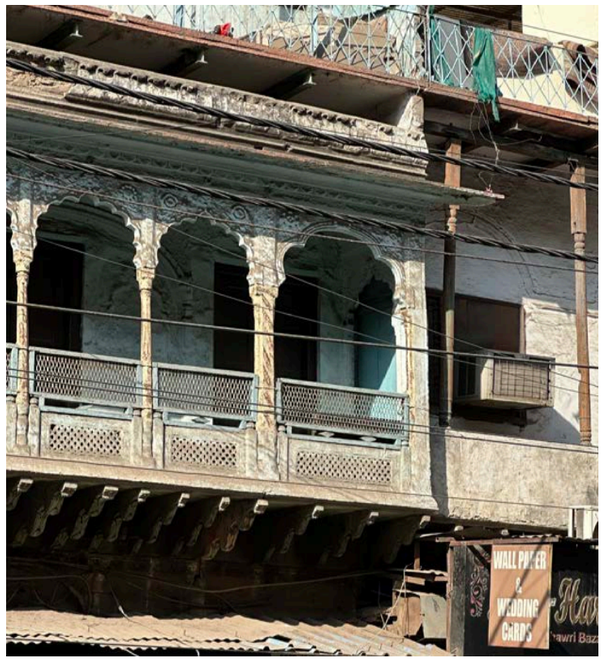




Fig 2.13-14: Present day images of the historic Kotha (from the painting) in Chawri Bazaar

Source: Author (2025)

21. "On a Walk, Discover the Lost Histories of the Courtesans of Chawri Bazaar," ***Hindustan Times***, October 29, 2016.

enter through controlled routes. Music could move outward into the street while bodies remained framed by windows, jalis (lattices), or balconies. It structured the terms of encounter: who could enter, where they could sit, how performance was staged, and how the tawaif controlled her public presence.[7]

The Kotha culture offers a historical moment in which women's labour, sexuality, cultural authority, and urban space were organised through a more complex spatial logic than the contemporary brothel allows.

Tawaifs could own property, manage households, support musicians and poets, negotiate patronage, and participate in cultural economies.[8] Their power was uneven and always vulnerable, but it was real enough to trouble the later idea that public women were only degraded or marginal.

The Kotha was also an economic institution. Leading tawaifs were not necessarily dependent on a single patron—many functioned as entrepreneurs within the cultural economy of the city. They owned property, managed large households, sponsored musicians and poets, and in some cases became among the wealthiest taxpayers in urban centres such as Lucknow.[9] Their establishments supported networks of labour that included performers, tutors, servants, cooks, and apprentices. In a period when many women's economic roles were mediated through male relatives and domestic structures, some tawaifs exercised an unusual degree of financial autonomy, managing property and negotiating patronage relationships in their own names.[10]

From the perspective of urban analysis, this economic agency helps explain why Kothas occupied such prominent positions within city life. They contributed to the nighttime economy of Mughal and Nawabi centres and formed part of wider networks through which artistic knowledge, social prestige, and cultural capital circulated. ***The Kotha can therefore be understood not only as a private residence but also as a node within a larger urban system of exchange.***

Beyond their economic role, tawaifs exercised considerable cultural authority. Their mehfils served as spaces where literary and musical traditions were refined, transmitted, and popularised. Forms og music, art, and dance such as the Ghazal, Thumri, and Dadra flourished within these environments, where performance was closely tied to literary discussion and aesthetic appreciation.[11] In Awadh and other cultural centres, Tawaifs contributed significantly to what

7. Oldenburg, "***Lifestyle as Resistance***"; Dewan, ***Tawaifnama***.
8. Oldenburg, "***Lifestyle as Resistance***"; Ruby Lal, ***Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
9. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," Feminist Studies 16, no. 2 (1990): 259–287; Saba Dewan, Tawaifnama (Chennai: Context/Westland, 2019).
10. Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance"; Sanchari Chanda, "The Courtesan Project and the Tawa'ifs' Cultural Commons," International Journal of the Commons 15, no. 1 (2021): 1–15.
11. Vidya Rao, ""Thumri' as Feminine Voice," Economic and Political Weekly 25, no. 17 (1990): 31–39; Saba Dewan, Tawaifnama.
12. Abdul Halim Sharar, Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture, trans. and ed. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (London: Paul Elek, 1975); Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance."

later came to be described as Ganga-Jamni tehzeeb — a syncretic urban culture shaped by Persian, Central Asian, and local Indian influences.[12] Their salons became places where language, dress, etiquette, and artistic taste were cultivated and circulated among elite society.

This cultural authority challenges the simplified image of courtesans as merely entertainers. They can instead be understood as cultural intermediaries who shaped artistic taste and transmitted knowledge across social groups. Within Mughal cities, their establishments functioned as spaces of education where young aristocratic men learned not only music and poetry but also conversation, etiquette, and social behaviour. Their presence within the city was therefore not solely tied to sexuality but also to artistic production, intellectual exchange, and cultural leadership.

The world of the tawaif also complicates modern ideas of feminine respectability. Today, respectability is often associated with domesticity, chastity, and withdrawal from public life. Tawaifs operated through a different set of values. Within elite artistic circles, public visibility and mastery of performance could be sources of prestige rather than shame. A tawaif could perform before aristocratic audiences, accumulate



Fig 2.15: Lithograph titled 'Dancing Girls', from 'The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing' *Source: William Godolphin Osborne (1840)*



Fig 2.16: Nautch Dance at the Delhi Durbar / Imperial Assemblage, 1877 *Source: British Library*

wealth, compose poetry, and maintain a recognised position within cultural networks.[13] This does not suggest that tawaifs existed outside hierarchy or moral expectation. Their lives remained shaped by patronage systems, gendered norms, and political power. Yet their visibility created an alternative form of feminine publicness organised through artistry, education, and cultural exchange rather than domestic seclusion.

This is why the Kotha is important for an architectural thesis. It offers a historical moment in which women's labour, sexuality, cultural authority, and urban space were organised through a more complex spatial logic than the contemporary brothel allows. Tawaifs could own property, manage households, support musicians and poets, negotiate patronage, and participate in cultural economies. Their power was uneven and always vulnerable, but it was real enough to trouble the later idea that public women were only degraded or marginal.

Seen from this perspective, ***the decline of tawaif culture was not merely the disappearance of a profession. It was the dismantling of an entire urban world in which women's performance, sexuality, refinement, economic agency, and cultural authority had occupied a visible position.*** What later came to be read only as prostitution had once belonged to a broader field of culture, training, performance, education, and social negotiation.

13. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," ***Feminist Studies 16***, no. 2 (1990).

Women of Era 2:
The Tawaif world

Zohra Bai and Amna inhabit a moment when women briefly held visible cultural and spatial power in the city. Zohra represents the tawaif at her zenith. A woman who owns property, shapes elite taste, and commands the public through music, language, and architecture. Amna, by contrast, reveals a girl whose future depends on training, patronage, and a social order that can withdraw its approval at any moment.

Together they show that the tawaif world was neither simply emancipatory nor merely exploitative, but a carefully balanced urban economy in which women used space, performance, and architecture to negotiate agency within a patriarchal system that was always ready to undo them.



Fig 2.17: AI Generated image of the lives of Zohra Bai and Amna from the 17th century, depicted in an inspired Mughal style painting

Source: AI-assisted visualisation generated by the author using OpenAI, March 2026.

Zohra Bai-
Queen of the Mehfil

Zohra Bai's kotha stands above a row of cloth merchants near Chawri Bazaar. From her balcony, she watches the city breathe; carts grinding past, the call to prayer rising, silk unfurling in shop-fronts below. When evening comes, her rooms glow with oil lamps and polished floors, and the city's elite climb her stairs.
Inside, her mehfil is a theatre of power. Musicians tune their sitars, poets wait their turn to recite, and noblemen sit cross-legged on carpets that cost more than most houses. Zohra sings, and the room stills.
Zohra owns this building. She paid for the carved jharokhas, the painted ceiling, the musicians' salaries. Young men come not only for pleasure but to learn how to speak, how to listen, how to be cultured. Some of them will go on to govern cities; all of them will carry her voice in their memory.
Outside, people may whisper that she is a courtesan. Inside, everyone knows she is an institution.

Amna-
The Woman Behind the lattice

Amna arrived at the kotha at twelve. She learned to walk softly, to sit straight, to lower her eyes and raise her voice at the right moments. The older women taught her Urdu couplets and how to read the moods of men. Her fingers ache from hours of practice on the tanpura.
From behind the jali screen, she watches the street, the same bazaar Zohra sees from her balcony. But Amna does not yet belong to it. Her world is layered inside rooms: practice hall, sleeping mat, dressing corner, narrow stairs.
Sometimes she hears Zohra Bai singing above, her voice floating through the lattice. That sound feels like a future that might belong to her if she learns fast enough, if she pleases the right patrons, if the city allows it.
For now, she waits suspended between girlhood and womanhood, between anonymity and becoming visible.















1864 — 1883 — Late 1800s — 1910s-1920s — 1930s-1940s — 1947

Erasure of diversity

Culture / Sex work: sex workers were stripped of social identities and reduced to regulatory objects.

repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in India by 1883.

British missionaries (Josephine Butler's allies) began to challenge the government's policies and **recasted Indian prostitutes as victims of colonial abuse and moral decay**.

Urbanism: **Garstin Bastion Road established**
Originally built for military barracks; commercial hardware shops begin informally growing populating lower floors. Brothels move "upstairs," creating Delhi's red-light "layered façade" typology.

Even after the Act was repealed, sex workers were left without rights, housing, or recognition

Space: They were no longer entitled to state-managed spaces but also had no protection or status.

Power: **Contagious Diseases Act introduced** to control STDs among soldiers.
Lock hospitals set up to regulate and check sex workers' bodies

Liberation" didn't mean freedom, it meant loss of social space and further marginalization.

Women are policed, not the men.

Nationalist Movements & Urban Reconfiguration

Courtesans targeted as "immoral" in nationalist discourse; sex work framed as shameful.

Focus shifts to New Delhi (Lutyens' Delhi); Shahjahanabad areas (like GB Road) seen as old, congested, marginal.

Partition brings refugees to Delhi; GB Road becomes even more commercial/residential mixed use.

Indian independence

The Devadasi Abolition Acts
criminalized dedication practices but left women economically stranded.

ERA 3

Colonial Regulation and the Reclassification of Public Women

The encounter with British colonial rule fundamentally reshaped the socio-spatial existence of the Tawaif, transforming her from a culturally embedded figure into a marginalised subject of surveillance and control. ***What had once been a respected and visible form of public womanhood rooted in performance, pedagogy, and urban sociability became gradually redefined through colonial lawmaking, Victorian moral codes, and emergent Indian reformist discourses.*** The decline of Mughal and aristocratic patronage weakened the networks that had supported courtesans as cultural figures. At the same time, colonial administrators, missionaries, and reformers increasingly interpreted public women through Victorian moral frameworks. The tawaif, who had once been understood through categories of performance, refinement, and patronage, was increasingly collapsed into the figure of the prostitute.[14]

This shift was not just moral; it was administrative. Colonial governance depended heavily on classification. Diverse figures such as tawaifs, nautch girls, devadasis, performers, and women engaged in sexual labour were increasingly gathered into regulatory categories that treated them as problems of morality, disease, public order, and urban hygiene.[15] The effect was to erase distinctions between artistic labour, ritual labour, and sexual labour, reducing complex female worlds into a single image of immorality. As colonial authorities and reformers equated all public, commercially active women with prostitution, ***the "respectable" woman was redefined in opposition to this figure, thus producing a stark binary between domestic virtue and urban immorality.*** This moral binary was not merely linguistic; it was spatial and legal.

The most explicit institutionalisation

13. Ashwini Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

14. Ratnabali Chatterjee, "The Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject: Bengal, 1864–1883," ***Canadian Woman Studies 13***, no. 1 (1992):
15. Chatterjee, "***The Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject***"; Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct***.

of this transformation was achieved through medico-legal regulation. The Contagious Diseases Acts and related colonial regulations made this control especially visible. These laws were not designed to protect women. They were designed largely to protect soldiers and colonial men from venereal disease by subjecting women suspected of prostitution to registration, medical inspection, and confinement in lock hospitals.[16] ***Male clients were not regulated in the same way.*** Women's bodies became the site through which the colonial state managed anxieties around health, sexuality, race, and military order.

This produced a new relationship between gender and space. Women who had once been visible within cultural and urban life became objects of surveillance. Their movement, residence, and bodily condition were increasingly treated as matters of public regulation. The "public woman" became a figure through whom the colonial city defined the boundaries of respectability.[17] Women whose performances had been integrated into central city life were increasingly relegated to peripheral or hidden districts. Once all women in urban entertainment were viewed through the same lens of moral danger, their visibility in central public spaces came to be interpreted as evidence of deviance rather than artistry.

Indian reformist and nationalist moralities intensified this transformation. Anti-nautch and anti-devadasi campaigns framed performers and courtesans as signs of social backwardness, sexual danger, and moral decline.[18] Women who had once been associated with artistic refinement were now placed outside the image of the respectable modern nation. Respectability became a political language, and women's public performance became increasingly difficult to defend within that language.

It is in this colonial context that the spatial logic of Delhi's red-light districts began to take form. Stephen Legg's archival work shows that the regulation of prostitution in interwar Delhi involved repeated municipal attempts to remove, contain, or relocate women identified as prostitutes. In 1922, Delhi municipal policy allowed public prostitutes to reside in certain areas including Chawri Bazar, Ajmeri Gate Bazar, Mandi Pan, Tanda Natniyan, and land near the slaughterhouse outside Turkman Gate. Later, by 1939, the municipal area was prohibited for prostitution except in specific zones including Garstin Bastion Road, Tanda Natniyan, and Jhandewalan Road.[19]

The creation of Garstin Bastion Road (later GB Road) as a commercial and military support zone reflected a broader pattern in which sex work was spatially segregated and obscured. The stronger evidence suggests a more gradual and bureaucratic process — dispersed female sexual labour was made into a municipal problem, debated through petitions and committees, and then spatially contained through law. Garstin Bastion Road became one of the spaces

16. Chatterjee, "*The Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject*"; Stephen Legg, ***Prostitution and the Ends of Empire: Scale, Governmentalities, and Interwar India*** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
17. Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct***; Legg, ***Prostitution and the Ends of Empire***.
18. Davesh Soneji, ***Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Saskia C. Kersenboom, ***Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*** (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987); Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "***Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India***," Feminist Studies 16, no. 2 (1990): 259–287.
19. Stephen Legg, ***Prostitution and the Ends of Empire: Scale, Governmentalities, and Interwar India*** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 58–59, 70–71.

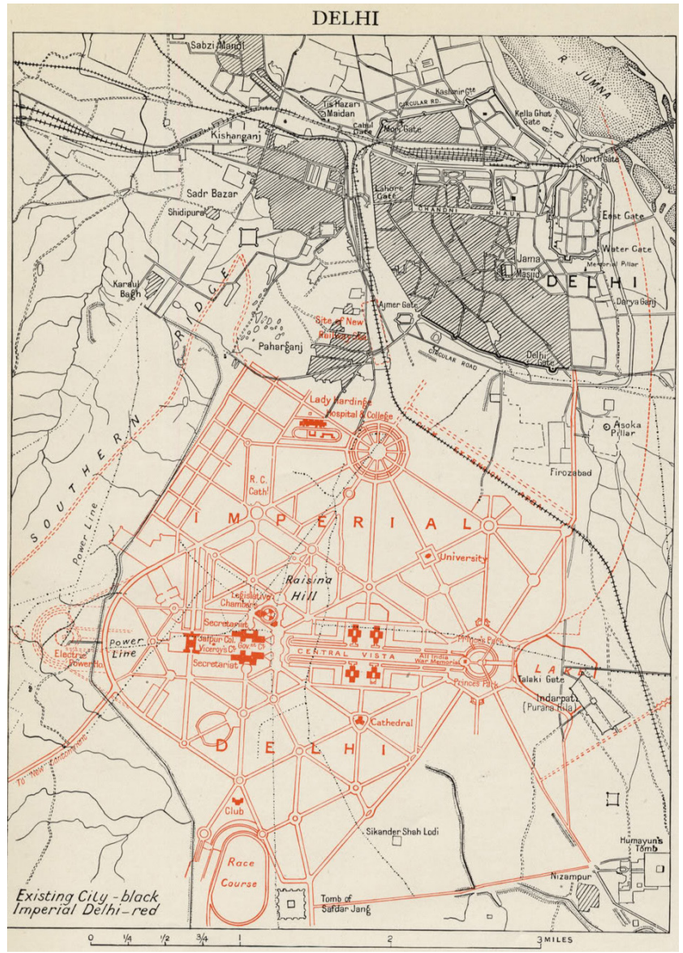


Fig 2.18: Project of Imperial Delhi, 1910 *Source: Encyclopedia Brittanica*



Fig 2.19: Newspaper excerpt with the newly completed Parliament House in New Delhi, 1927 *Source: Exclusive News Agency London*

where this containment materialised.

Hardware shops, warehouses, and repair workshops filled street fronts, while upper-floor rooms behind shuttered façades became the sites of hidden sexual commerce.[13] ***This 'layered façade' typology, visible commerce below and stigmatised intimacy above, was not simply an accident of planning. It was a direct outcome of the colonial city's attempt to extract economic benefit from women's labour while simultaneously disavowing their presence in the public eye.*** Women's visibility was tolerated only insofar as it could be bracketed off, regulated, and confined behind screens.

The result was a shift from cultural visibility to regulated tolerance. Sex work was not erased from the city; it was reorganised into spaces where it could be watched, stigmatised, and separated from respectable urban life. This is one of the key historical processes behind GB Road. The colonial encounter reduced the cultural status of Tawaifs and produced a system of spatialised moral control that reconfigured the city, the body, and the social meaning of female labour. GB Road is one of the most visible architectural legacies of this transformation: a space where economic necessity continues to coincide with moral exclusion, precisely because its historical memory was never recognised or preserved. The erasure of women's cultural and spatial history under colonial rule is thus inscribed in the very fabric of the city's streets.

Women of Era 3:
Colonial & Early Nationalist India

Kamla and Lakshmi emerge from the violent reordering of women's place in the city under colonialism and nationalist moral reform. Kamla embodies the woman whose cultural labour has been stripped of legitimacy and recoded as criminality, her world pushed into backlanes, upper floors, and legal grey zones. Lakshmi, marching for independence, reveals a different contradiction: a woman allowed into public space only so long as she serves the nation's political goals, then asked to retreat once her visibility becomes inconvenient. Together they show how colonial law, Victorian morality, and nationalist respectability dismantled earlier forms of female public life, replacing them with a system that demanded women be either invisible or domesticated.



Fig 2.20: AI Generated image of the lives of Kamla and Lakshmi from the late 1800s, depicted in an inspired from a 1890s style painting

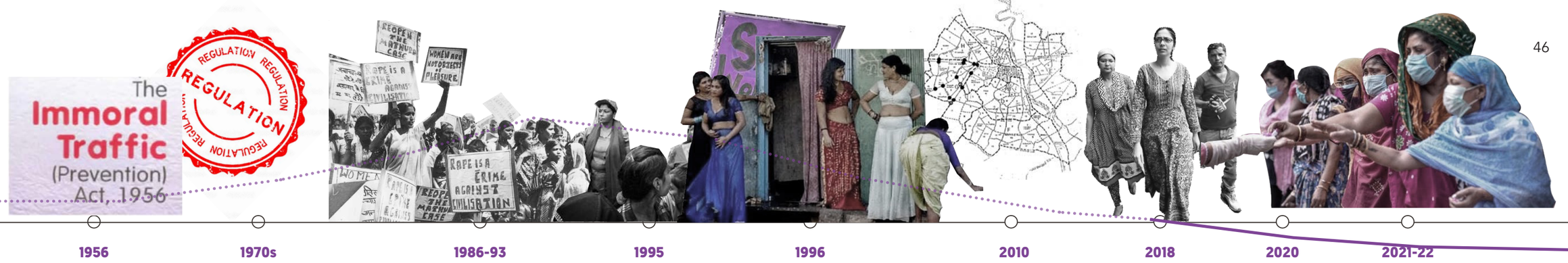
Source: AI-assisted visualisation generated by the author using OpenAI, March 2026.

Kamla-
The Woman in the Backlane

Kamla lives in a room no bigger than a jail cell, tucked behind a hardware shop near Ajmeri Gate. The front of the building sells bolts and pipes; her world begins where the staircase turns dark.
She was trained as a dancer once. Her mother sang thumri. Her grandmother performed for nawabs. But Kamla's Delhi has no courts, no patronage, no patience for women like her. The old salons have become brothels. The mehfils have become transactions.
The police come often. Sometimes they take bribes. Sometimes they take women.
Kamla keeps her jewellery in a tin box. Not because it is precious, but because it is the last proof that she belonged to something else before the city decided she was only a prostitute. When the men leave, she hums the ragas her mother taught her. No one is listening anymore, but the walls still remember.

Lakshmi-
The Marching Woman

Lakshmi walks through Chandni Chowk with a banner in her hands. It is 1930. The streets are alive with slogans, with the promise of freedom. Men shout about independence. Women march for dignity.
For the first time in her life, Lakshmi is allowed to be visible.
But when the rallies end, the rules snap back into place. She is expected to go home, to become quiet, to become respectable. Public womanhood is welcome only when it serves the nation, not when it threatens its moral image.
Lakshmi watches the kothas close. The dancers disappear. The city pretends this is progress.
She understands something most men don't:
the same independence that frees a country can cage its women.



Legal Regulation & Modern Urban Planning

Resistance & Transformation

Gentrification & Digital Era

Culture

Women in Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) organized to demand **labor rights and legal protection.**

Health crises brought NGOs and the government's focus to red-light districts.
Programs aimed at condom use, health checkups, and awareness were introduced.

Smart City Missions & Gentrification Pressures in Delhi

Supreme Court hears sex workers' rights cases

COVID-19 Lockdowns

Rise of Dalit (lower caste) Feminist and Intersectional Voices Critique of Savarna feminism's blindspots

Sex work

SITA (Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act)

Sex workers become more visible to the government

Urbanism

Formal criminalization of brothel-keeping, solicitation but NOT sex work itself. Spatial crackdown begins.

Rise of second wave of Feminism in India Mathura rape case (1972) sparks major women's movements — but little attention to sex workers' rights

Master Plan Delhi 2001 "Unauthorized colonies" grow. **GB Road remains "problematic" zone** in planning docs.

GB Road faces urban erasure under the guise of development.

Legal Ambiguity and Planning Conflicts- India still doesn't criminalize sex work per se, but it criminalizes the ecosystem.

Space

Power

Rejectig the victim narrative and calling for recognition, rights, and dignity.

While helpful in some ways, they also reduced sex workers to public health subjects, not full citizens.

loss of income, no spatial access to aid.

sex work and caste pushed into center stage

ERA 4

Post-Independence Law, Planning, and Sex-Worker Agency

The fight for independence from British colonial rule in India ended in August 1947. But independence did not undo the stigma created under colonial and reformist regimes. Instead, post-independence India inherited and reworked many of the same moral and legal contradictions. In 1956, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act was passed, later renamed the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. The law did not simply criminalise consensual adult sex work itself, but it criminalised many activities around it, including brothel-keeping, solicitation in certain spaces, living on the earnings of prostitution, procuring, and related activities.[20]

This produced a condition of legal ambiguity. ***Sex workers could be tolerated as long as their labour remained hidden and informal, but the structures that made their work possible were criminalised.*** In practice, this exposed them to police harassment, eviction, raids, dependence on intermediaries, and the constant threat of being treated either as criminals or as victims without agency.[21] ***The law therefore shaped space and pushed sex work into hidden rooms, upper floors, informal arrangements, and areas where illegality could be managed through negotiation, corruption, or neglect.***

Urban planning reinforced this invisibility. The Delhi Master Plan of 1962 organised the city through formal land-use categories such as residential, commercial, natural, historical, industrial, and public/semi-public uses.[22] Within such a framework, sex work had no legitimate place. GB Road could be understood as a commercial corridor, especially through its ground-floor hardware and machinery trade, but the brothel spaces above were not acknowledged as legitimate residential, labour, or cultural environments.

20. Government of India, ***The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act***, 1956, Act No. 104 of 1956; Government of India, ***The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act***, 1956, India Code, secs. 3–7.

21. Prabha Kotiswaran, ***Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
22. Delhi Development Authority, ***Master Plan for Delhi, 1962*** (New Delhi: Delhi Development Authority, 1962); Pilar Maria Guerrieri, ***Negotiating Cultures: Delhi's Architecture and Planning from 1912–1962*** (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ground floors operate through visible commerce — hardware shops, loading and unloading, wholesale trade, repair work, and male-dominated market activity. Above them, brothel spaces persist through a different register — hidden staircases, upper-floor windows, grills, corridors, rooms, and thresholds. The street is therefore not simply mixed-use in a neutral sense. It is vertically divided between recognised and unrecognised forms of labour.

From the 1970s onward, feminist politics in India increasingly addressed violence, rape law, bodily autonomy, and women's rights, especially after cases such as the Mathura rape case.[23] Yet sex workers' struggles often remained marginal within mainstream feminist discourse. Many debates framed prostitution primarily through exploitation, without fully addressing sex workers' own claims to labour rights, safety, livelihood, and dignity.

By the late twentieth century, sex workers began organising more visibility for themselves. In Kolkata, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee emerged from the Sonagachi HIV intervention project in the 1990s and developed into a major sex-worker collective demanding recognition, health rights, legal reform, and labour dignity.[24] This shift is important because it challenged the idea that sex workers could only be spoken for by reformers, police, NGOs, or the state. It introduced a politics of self-representation—sex workers as workers, organisers, mothers, residents, and citizens.

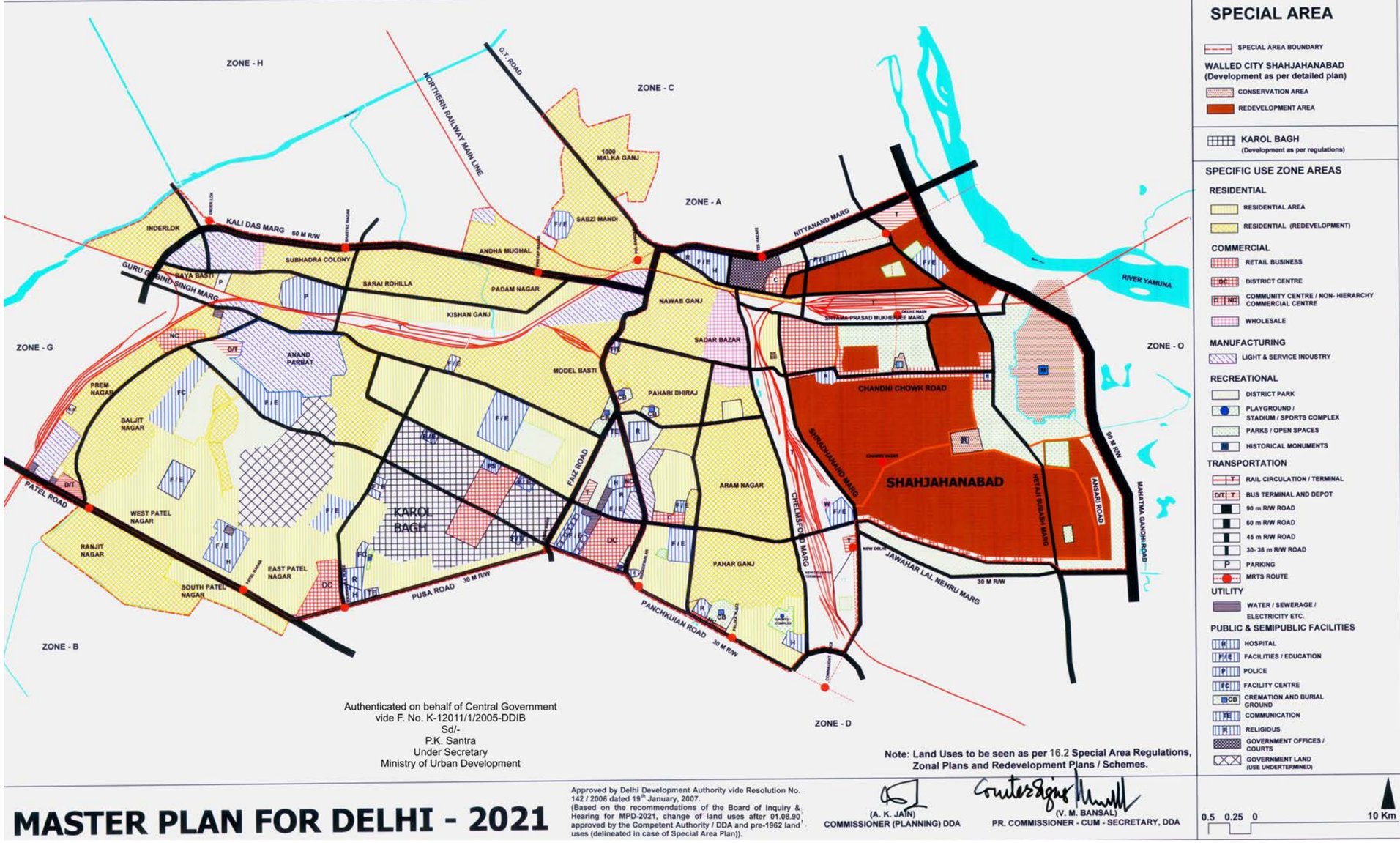


Fig 2.21: Delhi Masterplan 2021 rendering most parts of Old Delhi as areas to ungergo 'redevelopment'

Source: Delhi Development Authority

The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1990s brought further attention to red-light districts through public health interventions. These programmes often helped expand access to condoms, testing, health services, and peer education. At the same time, they also risked reducing sex workers to public-health subjects, valued mainly in relation to disease control rather than broader questions of citizenship, housing, safety, and labour rights.[25] The Durbar model connected health work to collective agency rather than treating sex workers only as vulnerable bodies to be managed.

In the 2000s and 2010s, redevelopment pressures, legal ambiguity, policing, and welfare exclusion continued to shape red-light districts. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, sex workers in Indian cities, including Delhi, lost incomes almost overnight and often struggled to access relief because of stigma, informal work status, and lack of documentation.[26] This exposed sex workers as part of the city's economy, but not fully included in its systems of protection.

Across these decades, the meaning of GB Road became increasingly layered. It remained a commercial market, a red-light district, a site of policing, a place of survival, and a space of stigma. Its architecture absorbed these contradictions.

23. Flavia Agnes, ***Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India*** (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, ***Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*** (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).
24. Smarajit Jana et al., "The Sonagachi Project: A Sustainable Community Intervention Program," ***AIDS Education and Prevention 16***, no. 5 (2004): 405–414; S. Ali et al., "A Qualitative Examination of a Community-Led Structural Intervention: The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee," ***Global Public Health 9***, no. 5 (2014): 574–589.
25. Jana et al., "***The Sonagachi Project***"; D. Swendeman et al., "'Whatever I Have, I Have Made by Coming into This Profession': Economic, Social, and Health Consequences of Sex Work by Durbar Members in Kolkata, India," ***BMC Public Health 15*** (2015): 618.
26. Pankhuri Yadav, "Delhi Covid-19 Lockdown: Sex Workers Run Out of Food, Essentials," ***The Times of India***, April 1, 2020; Sam Jones and Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "'They Are Starving': Women in India's Sex Industry Struggle for Survival," ***The Guardian***, April 29, 2020.

Women of Era 4:

Post-Independence & the GB Road World

Rekha and Anita are not opposites; they are produced by the same urban and political system. Rekha embodies what happens when sex work is tolerated but never protected, when buildings are allowed to decay because the people who live inside them are considered illegitimate, and when women's labour is economically necessary yet politically disposable. Anita, by contrast, reflects a form of urban feminism that has been separated from caste, class, and informal labour. A feminism that speaks of safety, freedom, and empowerment while remaining blind to the women who are pushed out of the spaces it claims to improve. Together they reveal a city that celebrates modernity, mobility, and women's rights on the surface, while continuing to rely on hidden architectures of exclusion that keep women like Rekha confined to the margins of the urban imagination.



Fig 2.22: AI Generated image of the lives of Rekha and Anita in the post independence age, depicted in a contemporary digital style artwork

Source: AI-assisted visualisation generated by the author using OpenAI, March 2026.

Rekha-

The Woman of GB Road

Rekha lives three floors above a hardware shop. From the street you see hammers, pipes, and flickering tube lights; from her window you see men and the constant negotiation of survival. The staircase that leads to her room is narrow and dark, worn smooth by decades of feet from customers, police, brokers, and women like her.

Rekha was born after Independence. She never knew the old kothas, only this version of the city: half-legal, half-forbidden. The law tells her she is not a criminal, but the building tells her otherwise. Brothel-keeping is illegal, so no one repairs the staircase. Soliciting is illegal, so she cannot stand on the street. Living off another's earnings is illegal, so even the woman who cleans her room is always at risk. Police raids come without warning. NGOs come with forms and moral questions. Politicians come only during elections. But it is the women in her building who keep each other alive — sharing food during lockdowns, hiding one another when the police arrive, pooling money when someone is sick.

Anita-

The New City Woman

Anita works in an office near Connaught Place. She takes the metro, scrolls Instagram, and argues about feminism over coffee. She knows GB Road exists, but she has never been there. To her, it is a moral problem, not a spatial one.

She believes in women's freedom, but a version of it that fits neatly into clean streets, safe cafés, and respectable ambition. When she talks about safety, she means lighting and CCTV, not whether a woman can live without being evicted from her room.

Sometimes Anita passes near Old Delhi and wonders why the city feels so tense there. She doesn't realise she is walking on the edge of a neighbourhood built to hold women like Rekha out of sight.

They live in the same city but they do not inhabit the same Delhi.

Conclusion- What This Tells Us About the City and Its Women

The partial history traced across these eras shows that women's sexual and performative labour did not begin at the margins of the city. In different historical forms—ritual, artistic, courtly, and commercial—women's bodies, voices, and skills were embedded in the public and cultural life of South Asian cities, even when they remained constrained by patriarchal systems. Their presence was never free of control, but it was not always treated as shameful, hidden, or outside the life of the city.

The tawaif world of Mughal and early modern North India makes this especially clear. ***Courtesans did not merely inhabit the city; they helped produce its culture.*** Through the kotha, the mehfil, and the cultivation of music, poetry, etiquette, and social refinement, tawaifs participated in shaping the cultural life of places such as Shahjahanabad. Their spaces were woven into the commercial and social fabric of the city. The balcony, the courtyard, the salon, and the street formed a spatial continuum through which women negotiated visibility, economic agency, and cultural authority.

This was not an isolated form of female urban agency. Across Delhi's history, women such as Jahanara, Roshanara, Qudsia Begum, Zeenat Mahal, Mubarak Begum, and Begum Samru also shaped the city through patronage, politics, gardens, mosques, havelis, markets, and performance cultures. Yet ***their memory has often been softened, moralised, or absorbed into male-centred narratives. The later disappearance of kothas and sex workers from Delhi's heritage therefore belongs to a wider patriarchal pattern in how the city remembers women.***

The colonial period fractured this relationship between women, labour, and urban space. British regulation, Victorian morality, and later reformist respectability recoded women's performative and sexual labour as a problem to be controlled. Courtesans were increasingly collapsed into the category of prostitutes; salons became brothels; ***public women became moral threats.*** This transformation was not only ideological. It became spatial, through surveillance, municipal regulation, and the gradual containment of sex work within tolerated but stigmatised districts.

Nationalist reform and post-independence planning did not fully undo this violence. Instead, they often continued it in different forms. In the name of respectability, progress, law, and urban order, sex work was tolerated but rarely recognised, present but rarely protected. ***GB Road emerged within this contradiction: central to the city's economy, yet excluded from its moral and heritage imagination. Its layered façade — hardware shops below, brothels above — is not accidental. It is the built expression of a society that uses the labour of sex workers while denying them full spatial, social, and political legitimacy.***

What emerges from this history is a clear pattern: women's sexual and cultural labour has always been organised through power. The question has never been simply whether such labour exists, but where it is allowed to exist, how it is seen, and who is permitted to claim legitimacy in the city. GB Road is therefore not an aberration, but a historical residue. Its staircases, grills, windows, corridors, and upper floors carry the traces of courtesan culture, colonial regulation, nationalist morality, and post-independence neglect.

To understand GB Road is to understand how Delhi has repeatedly regulated women's bodies, labour, and visibility through space. Heritage cannot be limited to monuments, mosques, gates, or bazaars alone. It must also confront the uncomfortable histories of women whose labour shaped the city, but whose presence was later made unworthy of memory. The violence and precarity that mark sex work today are not inevitable conditions; they are the result of centuries of spatial, legal, and moral decisions. If these conditions were produced through history, then they can also be questioned through architecture.

The next chapter moves into GB Road itself, into its streets, staircases, windows, and plans, to read how colonial zoning, law, and moral stigma have been built into its architecture. By mapping, drawing, and analysing the street as it exists now, the thesis shifts from historical narration to spatial diagnosis, revealing how the long history of women's exclusion continues to structure everyday life on GB Road.

Chapter 3

Present

3.1 Old Delhi: Urban Dense Fabric

Delhi after becoming the hub for opportunities for Indians and the people from the neighbouring countries to work and settle, underwent a population explosion. The city never could grow in the urban and infrastructural sense as quickly as the population grew. This resulted in overcrowded urban spaces, Old Delhi's central position suffered this circumstance the worst. An important commercial zone that it was, attracted a great chunk of the Delhi population to settle here, with the cost of repeated bisecting of the original havelis. ***The houses got smaller and the number of families and inhabitants increased, which led to encroachment of every possible square meter of usable space to be exploited much before any laws for protection of Old Delhi's heritage could even be formulated.*** This caused the laws to never be enacted in a serious manner since the damage was already done. Which brings us to today's Shahjahanabad—A home to 750,000 people across an 8 square kilometer area.

Hence, ***Today's Old Delhi, or Shahjahanabad, is often described as chaotic, congested, and overwhelming.*** At first, it does feel that way. The streets suddenly become narrow, buildings almost lean into each other, and movement happens from every side at once. There are people walking, rickshaws pushing through, carts stopping without warning, scooters trying to pass, shopkeepers calling out, and wires hanging so low that they almost become part of the street itself. It can feel confusing, even exhausting. But after spending more time in it, this chaos begins to feel less like a disorder and more like a system that has learnt how to survive.



Fig 3.1: Map of Delhi with all the districts

Old Delhi has been reshaped again and again over centuries. Its streets, buildings, courtyards, shops, and rooftops have adjusted to trade, migration, family structures, overcrowding, and informal economies. Nothing seems to remain used for only one purpose. A building is rarely just a building. It becomes a shop, a house, a workshop, a store, a sleeping space, a meeting point, and sometimes all of these at once. This is what makes the urban fabric of Old Delhi so dense, but also so alive. Residential, commercial, religious, and industrial activities do not sit separately from one another—they overlap constantly, sometimes within the same structure.

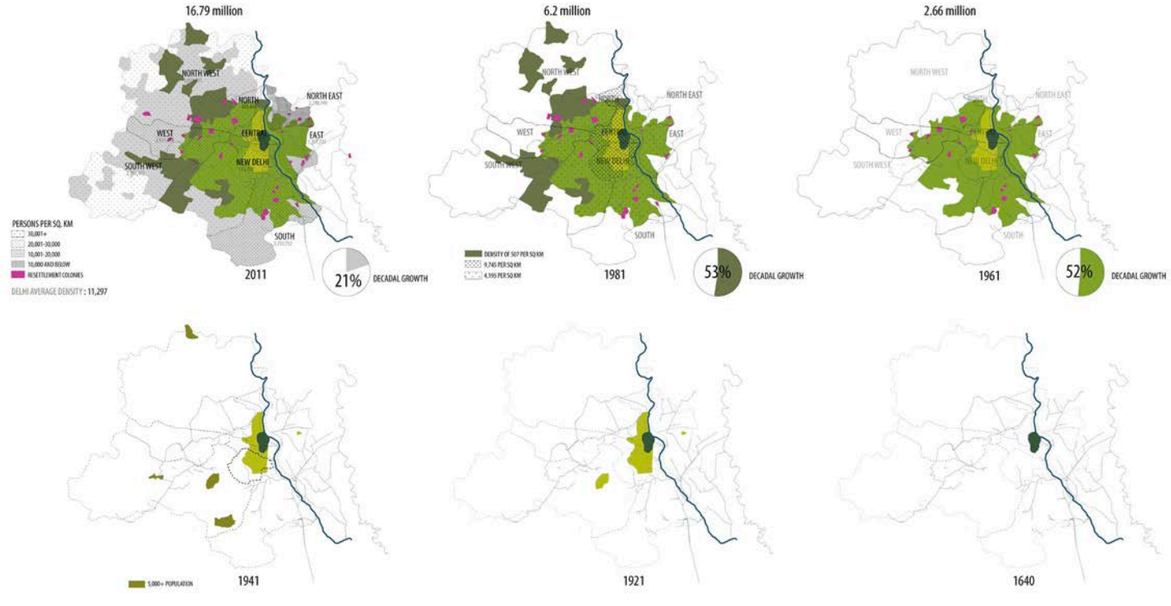


Fig 3.2: Delhi Population density over the years

Source: Alezandra Iccarino (2014)

Every lane seems to carry several lives at the same time. A shop on the ground floor might sell spices, paper, metal fittings, or machine parts. Behind it, someone may be repairing something. Above it, a family may be living. In the leftover corners, goods are stored, people rest, or children move around. Corridors become kitchens, backlanes become playgrounds, rooftops become sleeping areas in summer, staircases become places where people pause, talk, wait, or watch the street below. The street is not only a route for movement. It becomes an extension of the house, the shop, and the workplace.

This is also why the street in Old Delhi is almost never empty. Vendors occupy the edges of the road. Mechanics repair machines in the open. Children move between carts, scooters, and people. Men stand in groups outside shops. Women appear in doorways, balconies, and thresholds. There is always some sound in the background: metal shutters, temple bells, azaan, bargaining, traffic, footsteps, utensils, construction, or someone calling out from across the lane. Even when the city slows down, it never really becomes still.

The density of Old Delhi is therefore not only physical. It is social. Families



Fig 3.3: Present day satellite image of Old Delhi showing the dense urban fabric *Source: Google Earth (2024)*

who have lived there for generations share space with migrant workers, traders, labourers, tourists, and daily visitors. Everyone is moving through the same narrow lanes, but not with the same relationship to the place. For some, it is home. For others, it is work. For some, it is heritage. For others, it is just a difficult place to pass through. Public and private space are constantly being negotiated. Conversations spill into the street, goods spill out of shops, balconies overlook the lanes, and movement slows down because every few steps require adjustment.

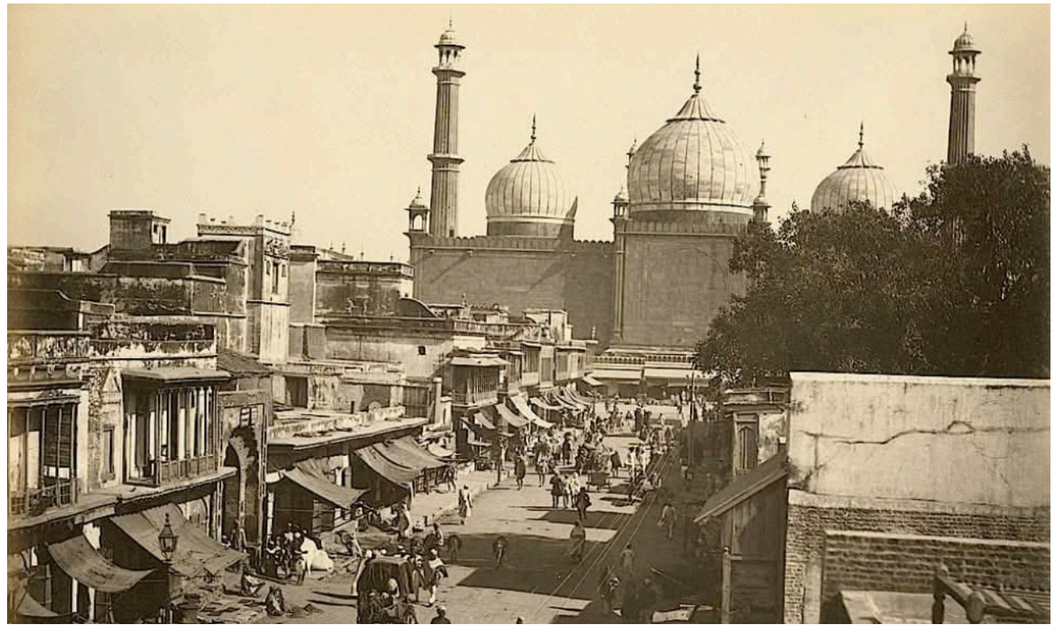


Fig 3.4: View of the Jama Masjid from Chawri Bazaar Road in 1880 *Source: Indian Reunification Association*



Fig 3.5:Present day view of the Jama Masjid from Chawri Bazaar Road *Source: Author (2026)*

In Old Delhi, even walking becomes a negotiation.

Within this dense fabric, monuments such as the Red Fort and Jama Masjid rise above the surrounding city, but they are not isolated from it. They are surrounded by markets, food stalls, traffic, people, pigeons, tourists, worshippers, and everyday routines. They are part of daily life, not just distant historical objects. Still, they are treated very differently from the ordinary buildings around them. They are cleaned, restored, protected,

photographed, and repeatedly described as symbols of heritage and national pride. Their value is made visible through the care they receive.

A few streets away, however, the same boldness and density are read very differently. Ordinary buildings, streets and traditions that have also carried generations of use are not always seen as heritage. They are more easily described as damaged, illegal, congested, or problematic. Their age does not automatically give them value. Their cracks, wires, extensions, and repairs are seen as signs of disorder rather than traces of continuous life. Infrastructure struggles to keep up, buildings deteriorate under constant pressure, and most interventions remain small, temporary, or cosmetic. The city continues to function, but it functions through adjustment, Jugaad (a funny hindi term for 'hack'), and everyday labour rather than through proper institutional care.

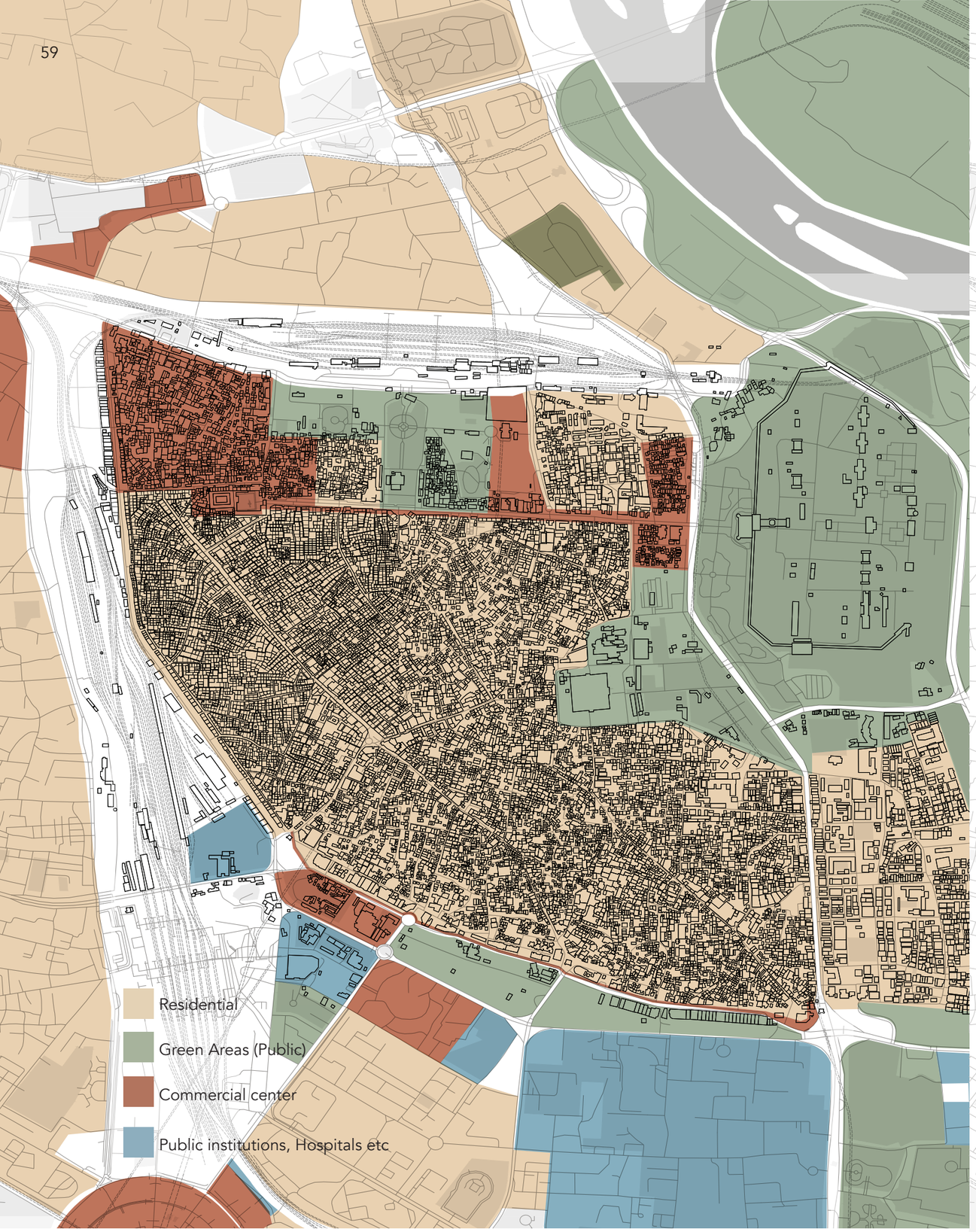
This chapter looks at G.B. Road through this spatial reality. Through maps, drawings, sections, and site analysis, it studies the area not as a moral exception, but as an urban system. What first appears chaotic begins to show patterns—how people move, where they stop, where women are visible, where they are hidden, how buildings have been divided, and how different activities are layered vertically. The street, the shop, the staircase, the brothel, the window, and the corridor all become important because they show how power is organised through space.

Right
This map shows the street network and figure-ground of Shahjahanabad in detail. The area is characterised by an extremely dense fabric of narrow lanes, short blocks, and irregular plots, reflecting centuries of incremental growth rather than planned expansion. The fine-grained street network supports a high level of pedestrian movement, informal trade, and mixed-use activity, allowing residential, commercial, and social life to overlap within a very compact area. What appears on the map as a tight web of lines corresponds, on the ground, to an intensely layered and lived-in urban environment.



Fig 3.6: Present day map of Old Delhi

Source: Google Earth (2024), Generated by author



The land-use map shows that most of Old Delhi falls within the residential zone, with some areas marked as commercial. In reality, however, almost every building functions as mixed use. Along the northern and eastern edges of Shahjahanabad, this dense fabric is interrupted by larger heritage precincts and green areas, creating a sharp contrast between monumental open spaces and the tightly packed figure ground of the old city.

Fig 3.7: Map of Old Delhi - Land Use

Source: Delhi Masterplan 2041



1. Khari Baoli Market (spices), 2. Fatehpuri market (wholesale clothes), 3. Katra neel market, 4. Nai Sarak Market (stationery, printing), 5. Kashmiri Gate, 6. Bhagirath Palace market (surgical supplies), 7. Kinari bazaar (mix clothes), 8. Dariba Kalan market, 9. Red Fort, 10. Jama Masjid, 11. Matia Mahal market (street food), 12. Chawri Bazaar, 13. Ajmeri Gate

Fig 3.8: Map of Old Delhi - Markets and protected heritage

Mapping the distribution of recognised heritage, infrastructure and everyday urban spaces across Old Delhi reveals an uneven geography of care. The pattern almost begins to resemble a landscape of “pride” and “shame” where certain places are protected, restored and publicly celebrated, while others remain visible within the city but outside the forms of recognition through which heritage value is produced. The Red Fort, a seventeenth-century Mughal palace-fort and UNESCO World Heritage Site, continues to receive conservation attention and investment through the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), including restoration and rejuvenation works concerned with its built fabric, water systems and public experience.[1]

Such celebrated sites are supported through physical conservation and also through interpretation, tourism infrastructure and institutional visibility. Their historical significance is made legible and dominant within narratives of Delhi’s heritage. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), for example, has introduced heritage-marking initiatives through the installation of plaques at historic structures across the city, reinforcing which places are publicly identified as historically important and therefore worthy of continued care.[2] Heritage in this sense becomes visible through the systems that continually identify, maintain and narrate it.

As the map moves outward toward the edges of the historic core, including the stretch where G.B. Road sits, the pattern of heritage care becomes uneven rather than absent. G.B. Road lies close to Ajmeri Gate, a surviving gateway of Shahjahanabad that remains under ASI’s protection, and it is also adjacent to the New Delhi Railway Station precinct, where large-scale state-led upgrading and redevelopment projects reflect continuous public investment and tight infrastructural management.[3] In this sense, the street is surrounded by spaces that are institutionally recognised, regulated, and continuously invested in.

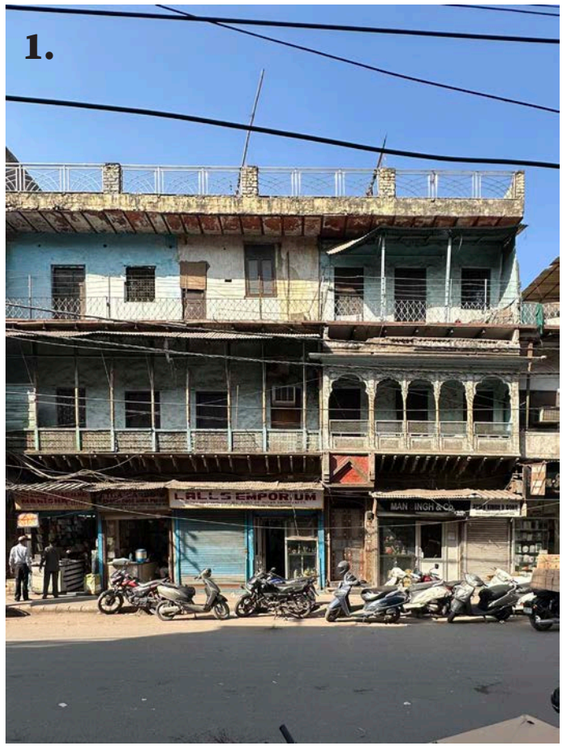
This contrast becomes particularly significant when the ordinary fabric of Old Delhi is considered alongside its monumental heritage. Buildings, streets and practices that have accumulated generations of occupation do not automatically acquire the same cultural legitimacy as protected monuments. Extensions, repairs, grills, wires and subdivisions are frequently read as signs of congestion or deterioration rather than as material traces of continued occupation and adaptation. G.B. Road intensifies this contradiction. Its contemporary condition being shaped by physical ageing and the accumulated effects of regulation, stigma, policing, neglect and survival.

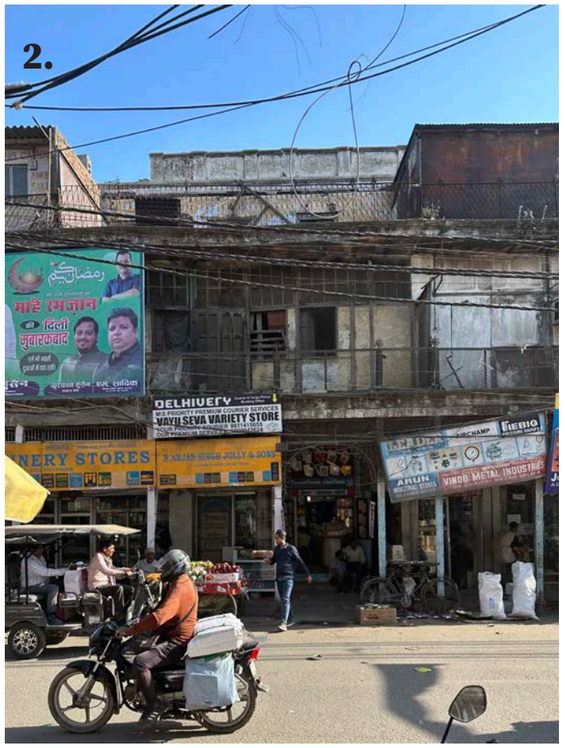
Right
The following map introduces a gendered layer to this uneven geography of heritage by locating sites associated with women, historical kothas, and present-day brothels across Old Delhi. It maps women’s cultural and spatial histories that are dispersed through the historic city. The comparison between historical kotha locations and contemporary brothels also reveals a spatial shift in where female sexual and performative labour has been accommodated over time, providing the basis for moving from the wider city scale toward the specific condition of G.B. Road.

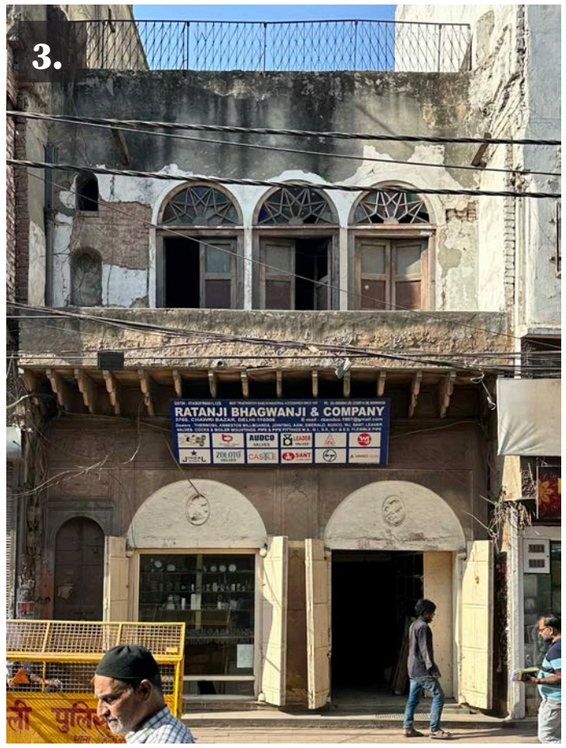
1. Archaeological Survey of India, “Red Fort,” accessed June 2, 2026; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Red Fort Complex,” accessed June 2, 2026; Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Cultural Restoration and Heritage Conservation of Historical Sites and Monuments,” July 21, 2025.
2. “MCD Enhances Delhi’s Heritage with Plaques at 55 Historical Sites,” The Times of India, December 8, 2024; “MCD Begins Adorning Delhi’s Heritage Sites with Blue Plaques,” Aga Khan Development Network, December 9, 2024.
3. Archaeological Survey of India, List of Centrally Protected Monuments/Sites under the Jurisdiction of Delhi Circle, accessed June 2, 2026; Shahjahanabad Redevelopment Corporation, “Heritage Buildings under ASI,” accessed June 2, 2026.

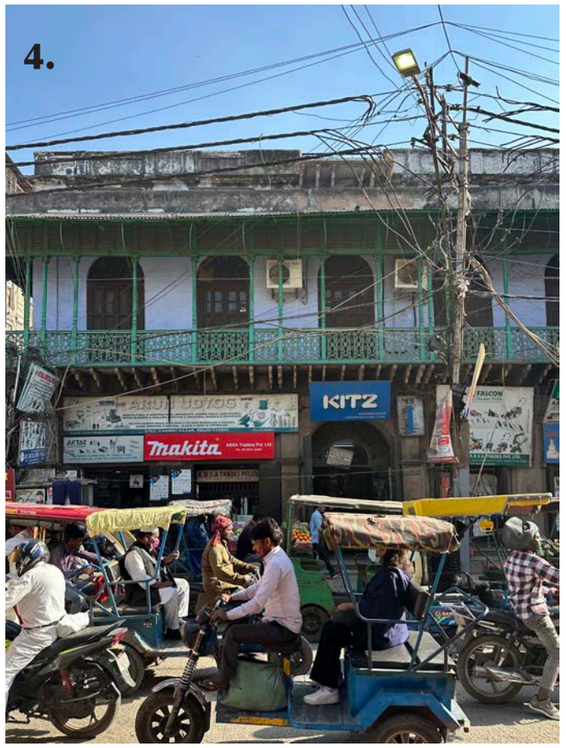


Fig 3.9: Map of Old Delhi - Women's Heritage













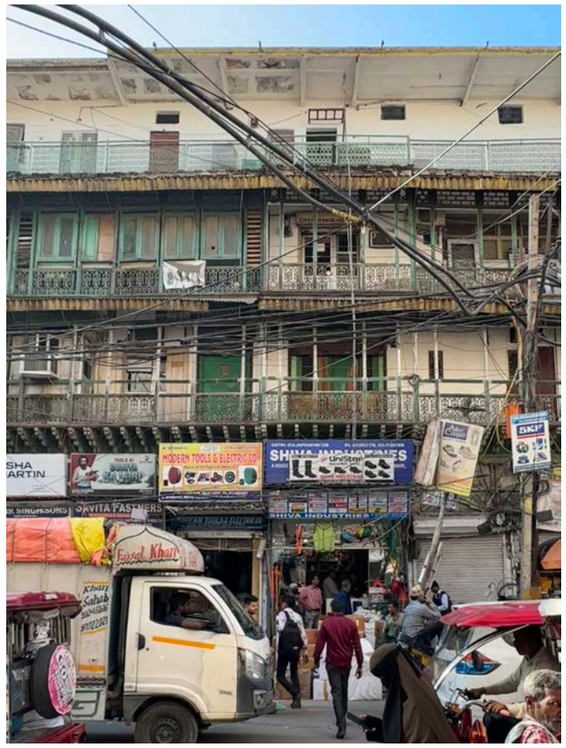




Fig 3.10-17: Traces of old Kothas on Chawri Bazaar road

Source: Author (2026)

3.2 G.B. Road: Street as a Layered Programme

As mentioned in the beginning of the thesis, walking along G.B. Road, the separation between different forms of occupation becomes visible in the architecture of the street. The ground floor is dominated by hardware and machinery shops, repair work and predominantly male activity. Above this commercial layer, the upper floors are occupied by brothels, visible through grilled windows, balconies and covered openings. The women can be seen from the street, while the spaces they occupy remain largely inaccessible. Entrances are narrow and often concealed between shops, staircases are easy to miss, and corridors lead into interiors that are barely visible from outside, creating a strong vertical division within the buildings. These layers simultaneously remain connected through shared entrances, staircases, corridors and thresholds.

The street functions as an extension of the activities taking place on the ground level of the buildings. Footpaths and the colonnade are frequently occupied by shop spillover, stored goods, repair work and temporary displays, while parts of the carriageway are used for informal parking, handcarts, and loading and unloading. Street vendors occupy the road edges, often becoming gathering points around which people, predominantly men, stand, wait or socialise. Most brothels and commercial units are concentrated along the western side of the road, while the eastern edge, adjoining the railway station, contains comparatively inactive stretches. These areas are often occupied by informal parking, waste accumulation and other residual uses.

The road, therefore, functions as more than a traffic corridor. Much of its width is occupied by commercial spillover, parking, vending, goods movement and informal activities, leaving a limited portion for continuous vehicular movement. Despite this, traffic continues to pass through the street, requiring circulation and everyday activities to constantly adjust to one another.

The following pages map G.B. Road at multiple levels, beginning with the figure ground, distribution of brothels, commercial activities, institutions and services, and then moving into the everyday practices that occupy the street. This layered mapping makes visible how formal functions and informal uses overlap within the same limited space. It also reveals the different systems operating simultaneously along the road—commerce, sex work, mobility, surveillance, social gathering and logistics—and how these activities compete for and reorganise space throughout the day.

Right →
The following map positions G.B. Road in Old Delhi lining along the tracks from the New Delhi Railway Station, revealing the figure ground and surrounding conditions.

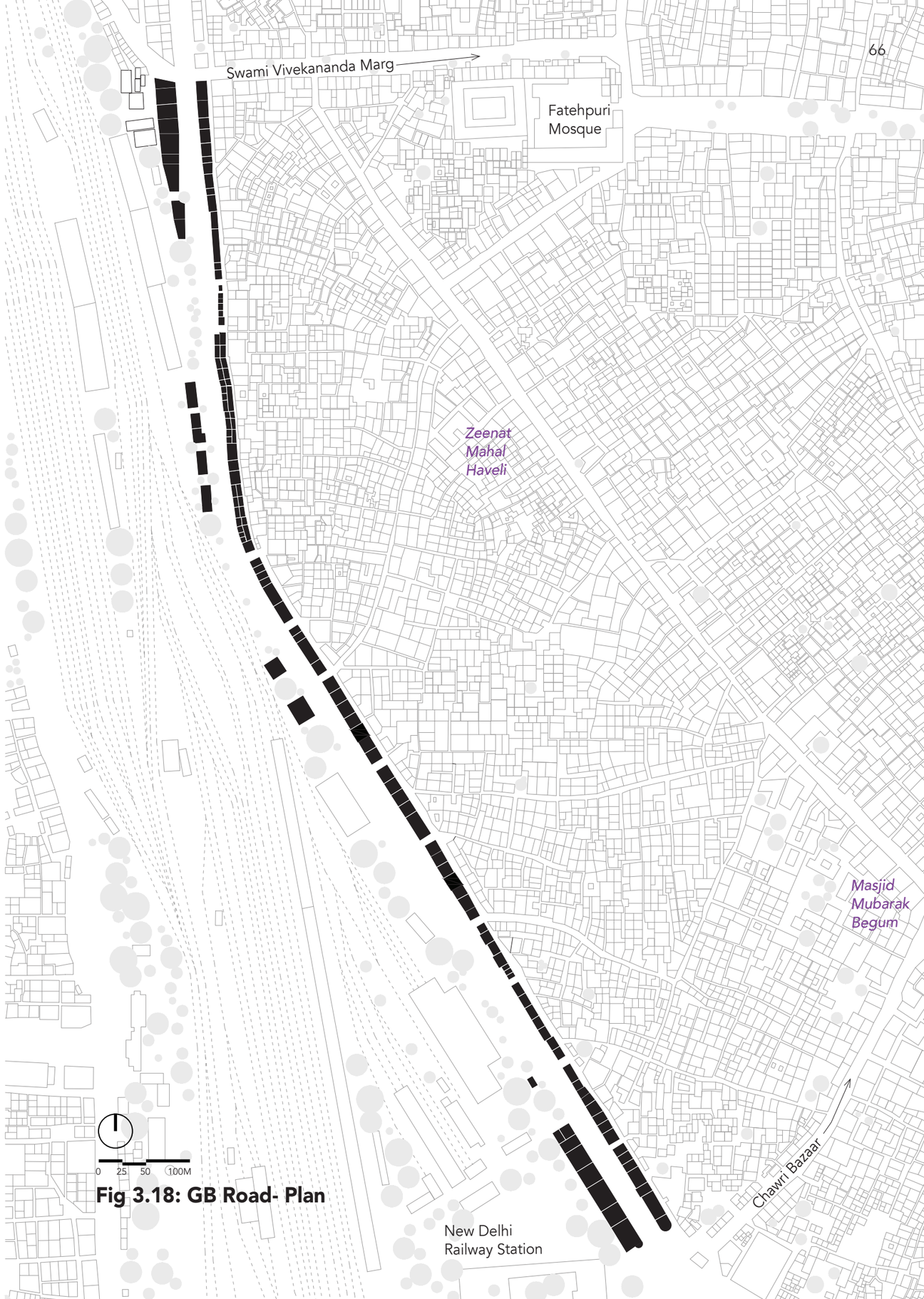


Fig 3.18: GB Road- Plan



Fig 3.19: G.B. Road- brothels

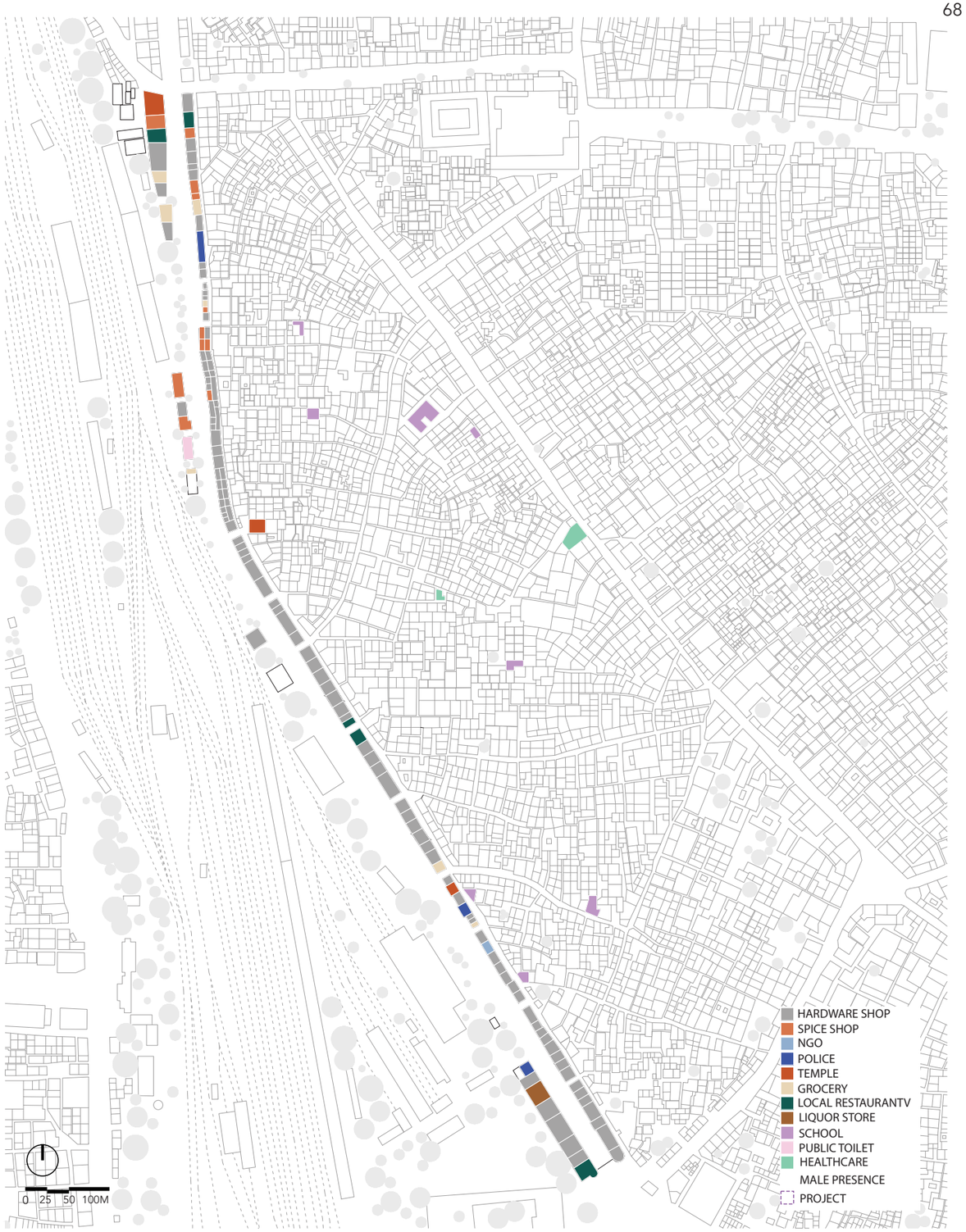


Fig 3.20: G.B. Road- ground floor functions

these maps show G.B. Road as a dense and layered urban system. The street's compact physical footprint contains clusters of brothels alongside temples, mosques, police booths, schools, and NGOs, all within a few metres of each other. This close proximity reveals how spaces of sex work, care, worship, and control are tightly interwoven, shaping everyday life on the street through constant negotiation between support, surveillance, and survival.

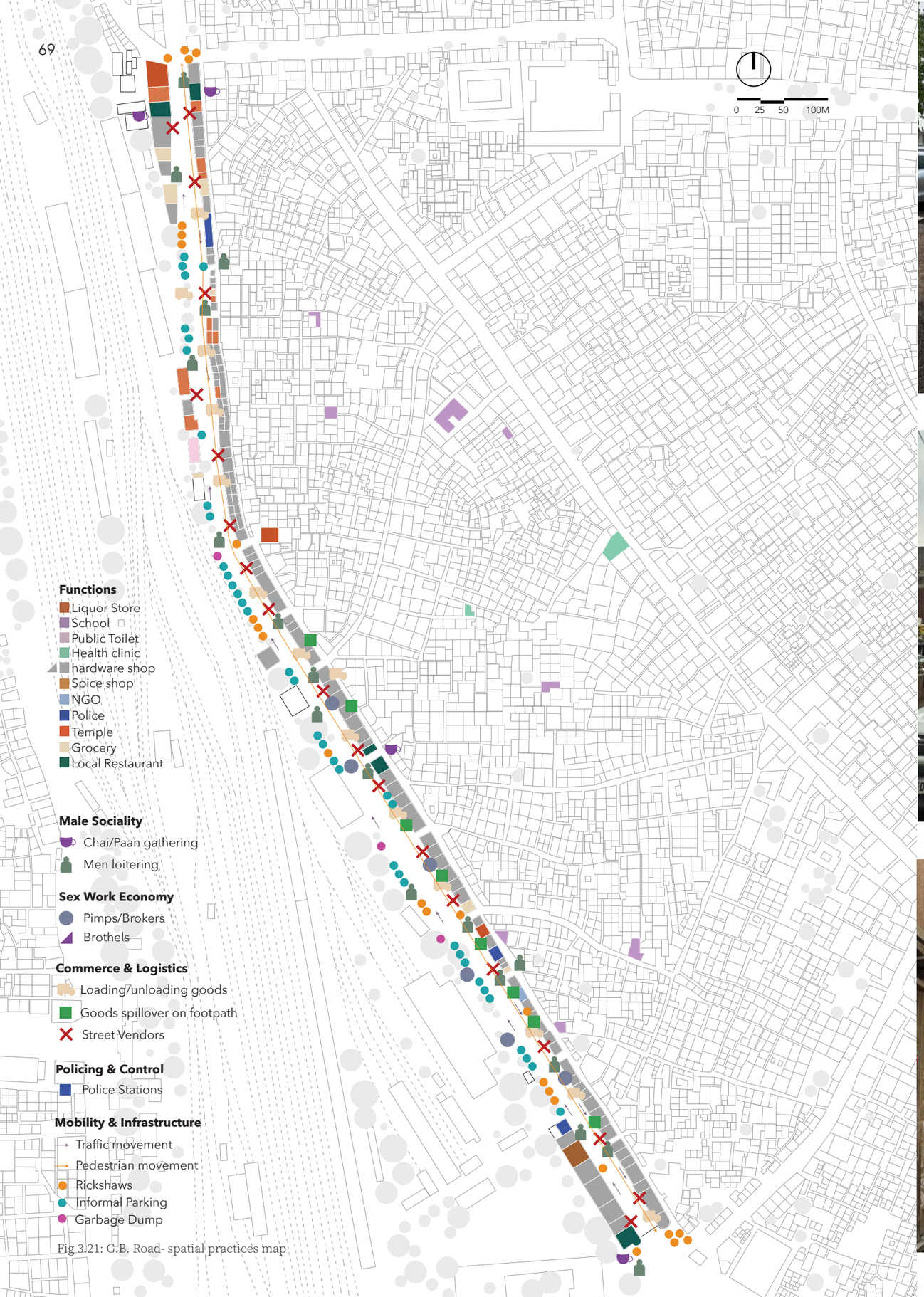
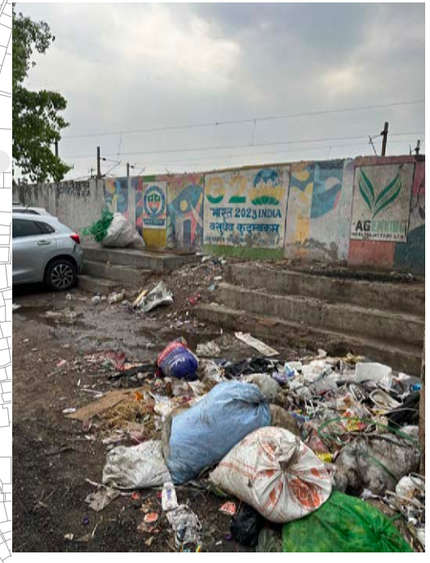


Fig 3.21: G.B. Road- spatial practices map



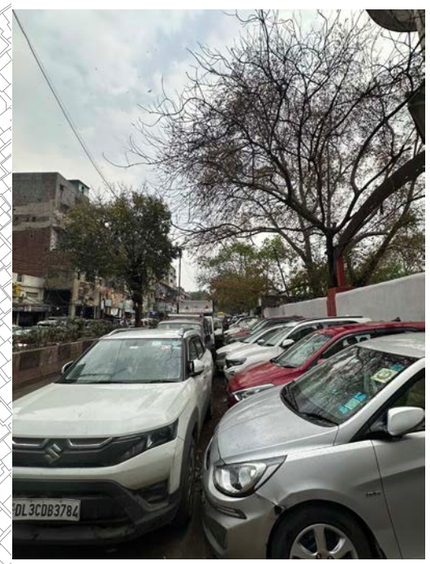





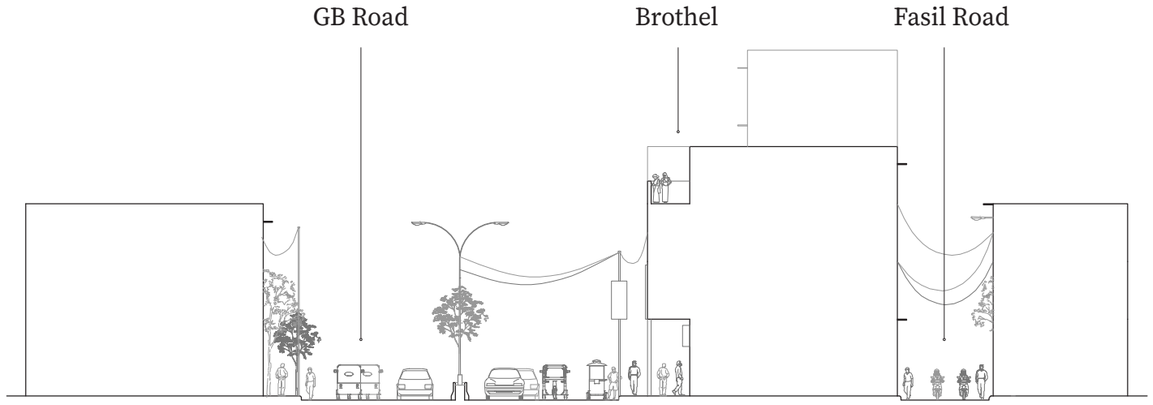




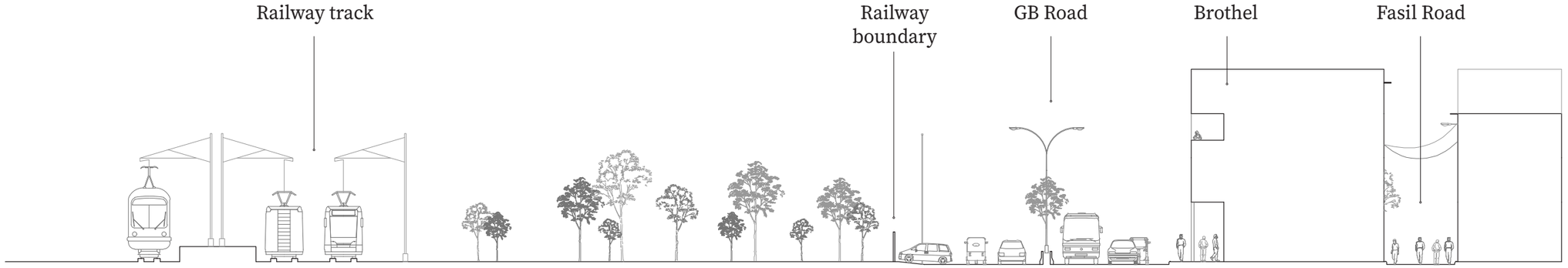
Fig 3.22-30: G.B. Road- existing conditions and spatial practices

Source: Author (2026)

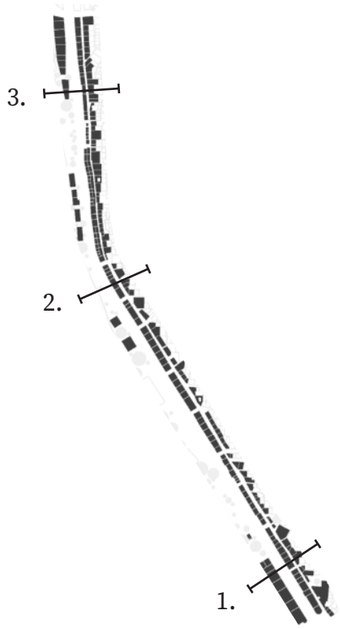
GB Road- street sections

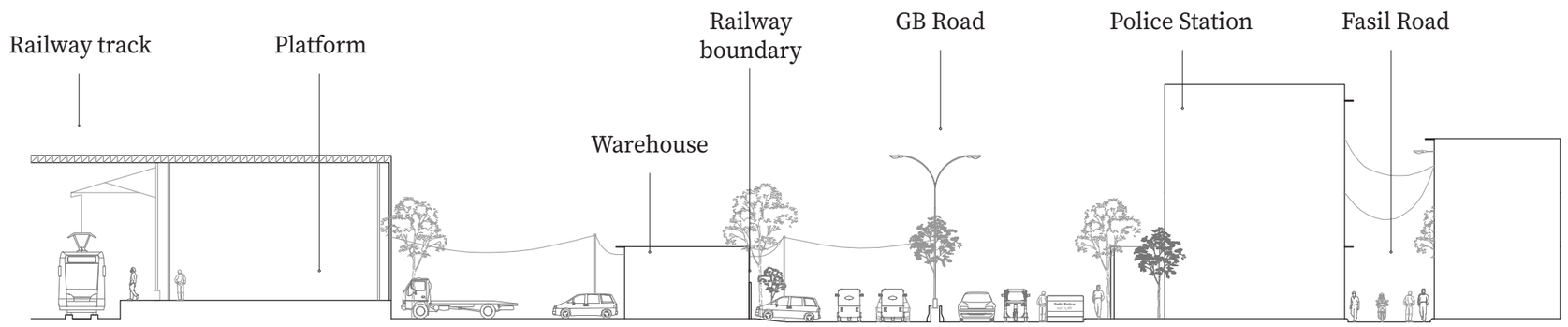


Section 1



Section 2





Section 3



Source: Produced by author

Fig 3.31: G.B. Road- street sections

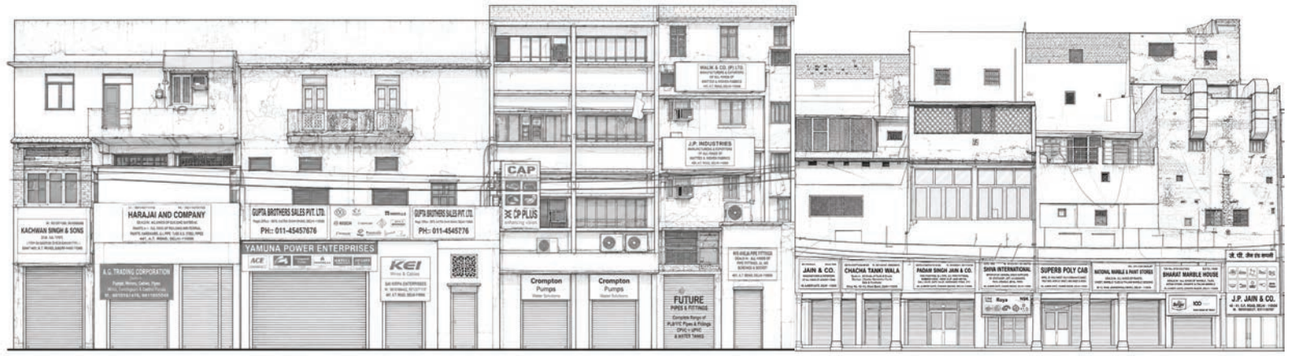
3.3 **Above the Street, Behind the Shops**

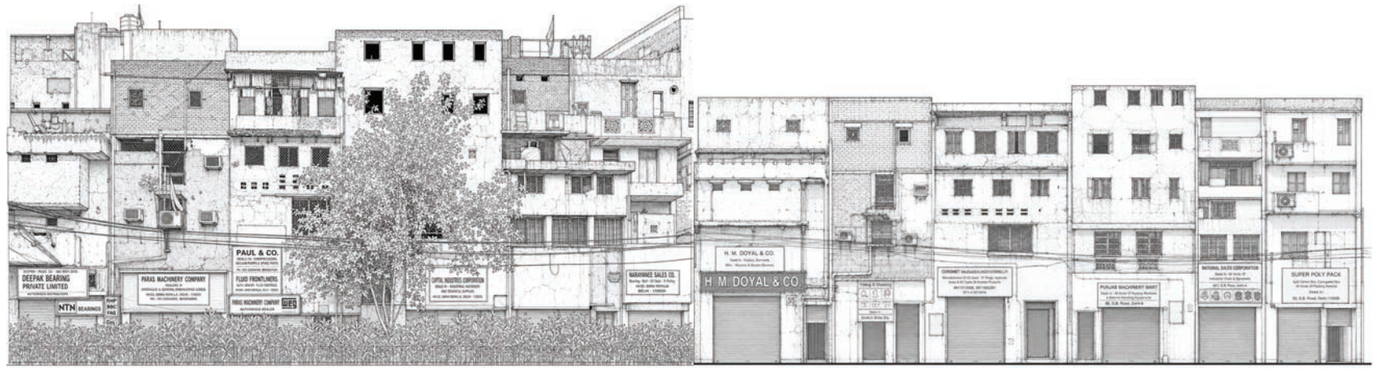
The brothels of G.B. Road occupy the upper floors of the same structures that contain commercial activity below, and from the street they are read mainly through altered openings, grilled windows, balconies, covered thresholds and the presence of women at the upper levels.

The shop signage and architectonic masses plaster the buildings that conceal the evidences from the original built forms of the Kothas. The brothel is therefore visible without being clearly legible as a distinct architectural type. Its presence is understood through occupation and modification of the existing facade rather than through a formal entrance or recognisable frontage.

Access is similarly discreet. Entrances are often narrow and positioned between or beside ground-floor shops, leading to staircases that rise directly toward the upper levels. From the street, these access points can easily disappear within the commercial frontage, creating a sharp transition between the public activity below and the brothel spaces above. The staircase and entrance act as a threshold that connects the two systems while also maintaining a degree of separation between them.

Beyond these thresholds, the brothels are much less accessible to direct architectural observation. Their internal layouts vary and cannot be understood simply from the street, which is why the following drawings rely on the reconstruction of individual examples from available visual and spatial evidence. What can be established from the exterior is a recurring condition of upper-floor occupation, restricted access and partial visibility, in which the brothel remains physically present within the street while much of its architecture is concealed behind the existing facade.







Source: Produced by author stitching site photograps and AI image generation to a layered and detailed elevation







Fig 3.33-35: Brothel entrances at G.B. Road

Source: Author (2026)

3.3.1 **The process of how the drawings were created**

Given the existing lack of value for GB Road in the eyes of the heritage and state authorities, there are no official architectural records or surveys. There are numbers to analyse structural and fire safety, but nothing implying the spatial aspect of the brothels. Personally conducting an architectural survey of the brothels at GB Road is a big challenge, since it requires a set of permissions on multiple levels ranging from legal to generic consent by the brothel owners to being assigned a police officer willing to assist a visit. To complete the permission process alone takes months. Ignoring the architectural analysis of the internal parts of these buildings completely would generate a gap in the research, impairing the results.

So to bridge this gap, multiple news articles, YouTube videos or any available photographic and videographic information online, regarding what the brothels were like inside were procured and compiled. To study the general skeleton of buildings in Old Delhi, other buildings around the GB Road were visited and analysed as well.

After collecting this data, making the use of Google Earth's measurement tools and understanding of Old Delhi's building configuration, it became possible to put everything together to create floor plans and section views of three well known brothels at the GB Road.

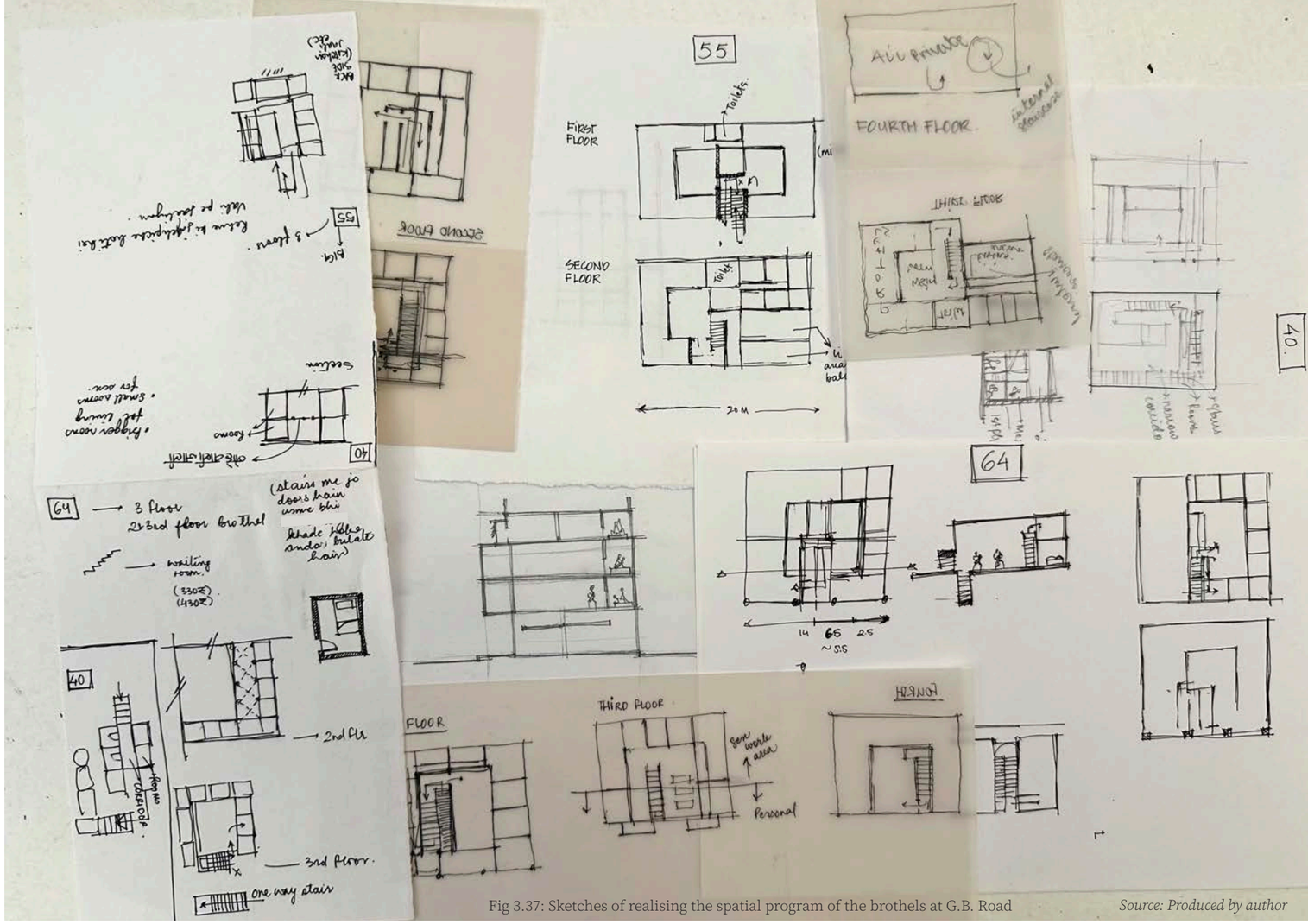


Fig 3.36: Stills from different video documentations of the brothels of G.B. Road

Sources: Times Now Navbharat/YouTube
SinghRider7/YouTube
South China Morning Post
Brut India/ YouTube

Fig 3.37: Sketches of realising the spatial program of the brothels at G.B. Road *Source: Produced by author*

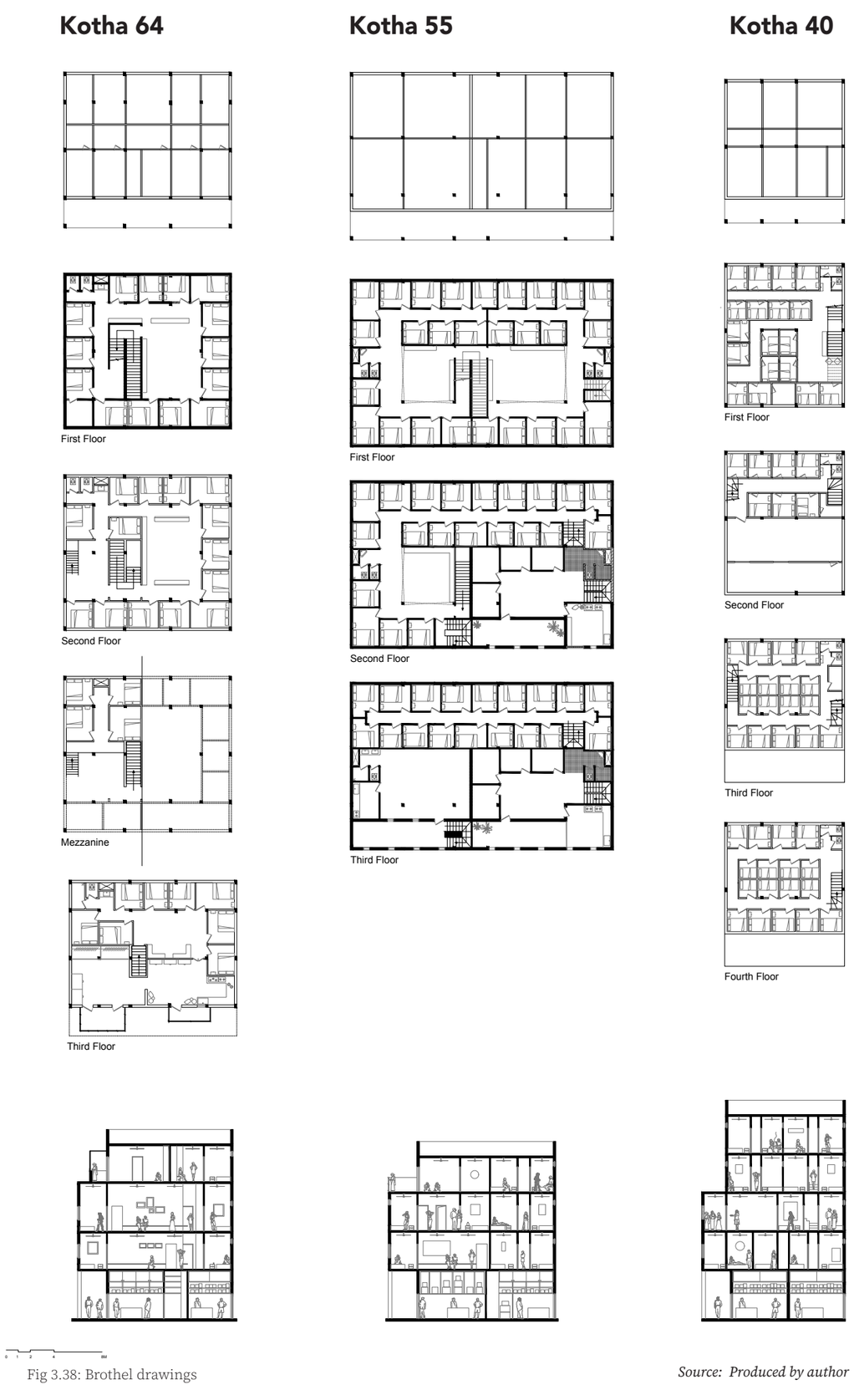


Fig 3.38: Brothel drawings

Source: Produced by author

3.3.2 **Brothel Typology at G.B. Road**

Although no two brothels are exactly the same, the drawings of Kotha 64, Kotha 55, and Kotha 40 show a clear pattern. All three occupy upper floors of mixed-use buildings and follow a similar logic of circulation, waiting, and transaction, even as their scale and degree of formality differ.

Kotha 64 and Kotha 55 represent the more established and well-known brothels of G.B. Road. Both contain a central waiting area that functions as the social heart of the building. This space, often compared to a courtyard, recalls the organisational logic of older Havelis and Kothas, where gathering, performance, and negotiation took place before any private interaction. In these brothels, women wait, talk, negotiate, and sometimes perform in front of clients before being taken into smaller rooms for sex work. The architecture creates a layered sequence—arrival, waiting, selection, and then private rooms. This sequence mirrors older forms of courtesan space, even though the social status attached to it has collapsed.

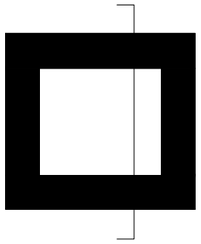
Kotha 40 represents a more compressed and contemporary typology. Here the waiting space is reduced or absent, and the building is filled with a dense grid of small rooms designed for rapid turnover. Circulation is narrow and repetitive. Privacy is minimal. The spatial emphasis is no longer on performance or social interaction but on efficiency and control. This typology reflects the transformation of sex work under conditions of legal ambiguity, police pressure, and economic precarity. Architecture becomes more defensive, more enclosed, and more extractive.

Across all three brothels, the same structural condition repeats—women live and work in spaces that were never designed for care, rest, or dignity. Former residential buildings and havelis have been subdivided, partitioned, and overcrowded over decades of neglect and moral zoning. Light, ventilation, and privacy have been sacrificed in order to fit more rooms, more bodies, and more transactions into a fixed envelope.

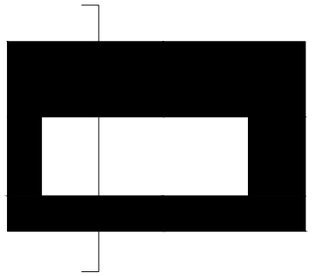
These buildings function less like homes and more like infrastructures of survival. They absorb women into a vertical maze that protects them from the street while also trapping them within it.

G.B. Road brothels are not architectural accidents because they occupy and adapt older building forms that were never designed for the conditions they now carry. What results is a highly structured environment in which visibility, movement, and access are carefully controlled. Rather than being chaotic, G.B. Road functions as a spatial system that continues to organise women's lives through architecture, even as its historical meaning has shifted.

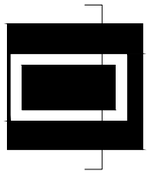
vertical maze that protects them from the street while also trapping them within it.



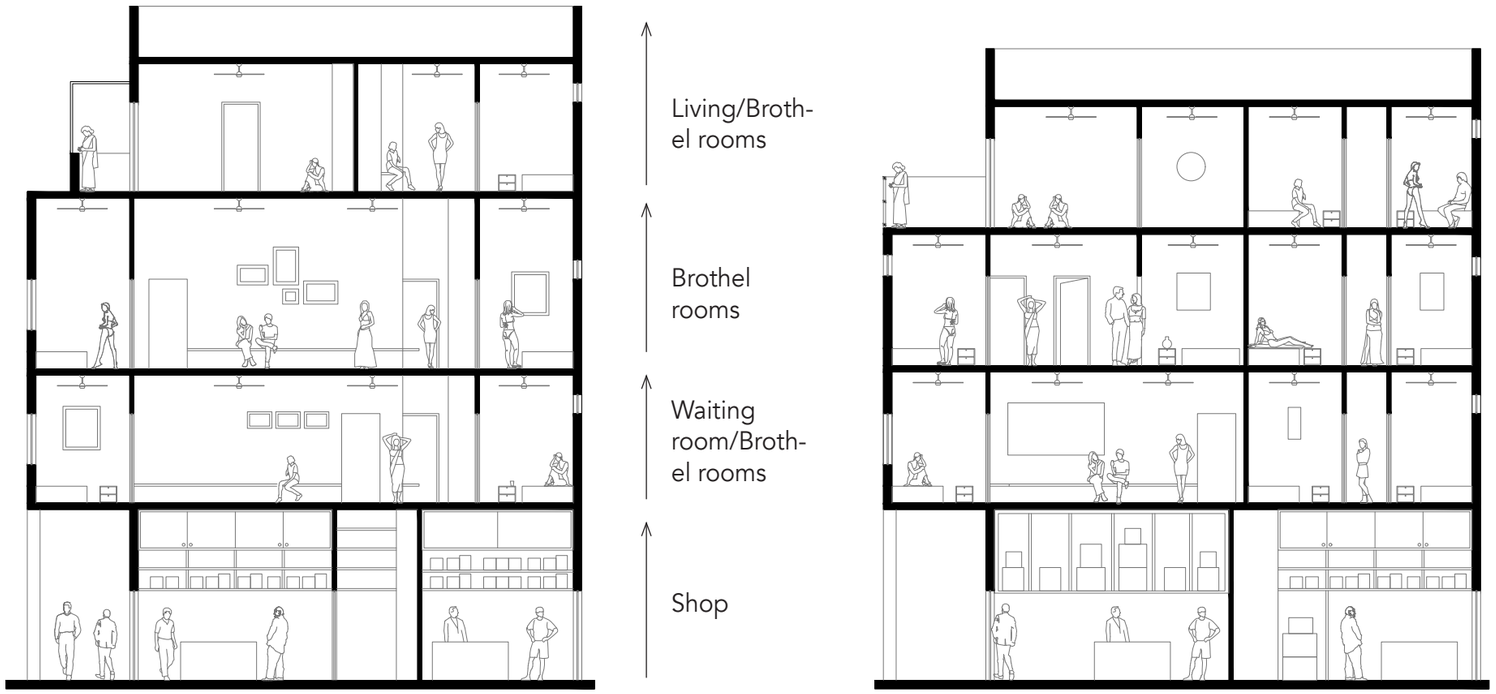
Kotha 64

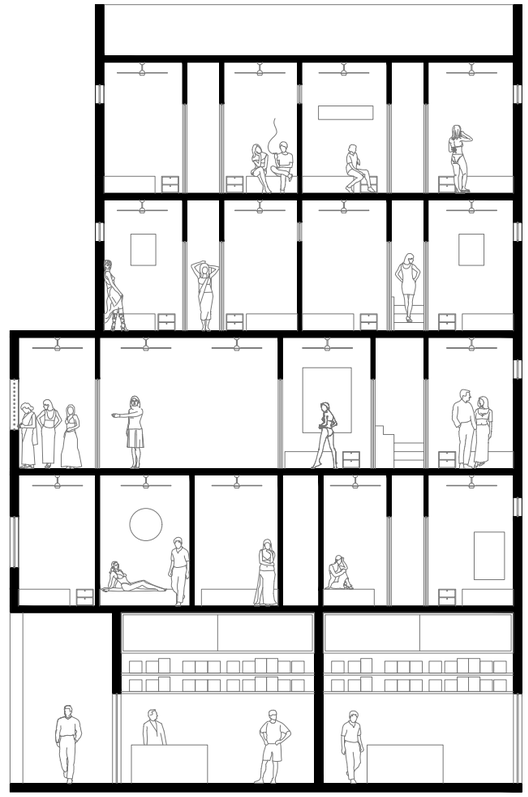


Kotha 55



Kotha 40





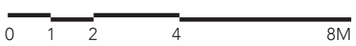


Fig 3.39: Brothel sections and functional scheme

Source: Produced by author

Chapter 4

Reflection

Evolution of Building Typology: From Kotha to Contemporary Brothel

The primary building typology of Shahjahanabad was the Haveli. A Haveli is a traditional Indian house with a courtyard as its main feature. It also comprises other features depending on climate, location, traditional knowledge, etc. In Shahjahanabad, all the buildings were kinds of Havelis of different sizes, depending on the economic and social status of the owner. A Kotha is a type of a smaller Haveli occupied by courtesans, so the word Kotha is now more linked to a brothel building than to a housing typology.

The difference between a Haveli and a brothel is stark in today's Old Delhi. The Havelis are remembered as airy courtyard houses, with carved balconies, shaded verandas, and carefully layered spaces that were airy and well-lit naturally. The brothel buildings on G.B. Road appear as hard, concrete shells full of a network of narrow corridors, tiny rooms, and very little ventilation, which tend to make them crowded and dingy, as if they belong to a completely different architectural world.

At first glance, this contrast suggests a break. It tempts one to believe that one typology has disappeared and that another has completely replaced it. For investigating the architectural style to understand the buildings of G.B. Road better, research on the styles that began



Fig 4.1: Image of G.B. Road in 1870s *Source: British Library*



Fig 4.2: Image of G.B. Road, March 2025 *Source: Author*

to take shape in Delhi since the colonial era was also done. But looking closely, this clean break became less convincing. The buildings of G.B. Road did not appear to stand outside the architectural history of Shahjahanabad but emerge from a long and uneven process of transformation.

For the longest time, ***this contrast can appear like the older domestic architecture of Shahjahanabad was simply replaced by something more industrial or colonial. But when the old maps of Delhi from the nineteenth century are examined closely, a different story begins to unfold. The plots, building footprints, and internal arrangements of many of today's brothel buildings still follow the same logic as the older Havelis and Kothas.*** What has changed is not the basic typology, but how it has been filled, subdivided, and stressed over time.

This distinction shifts the question from the disappearance of an architectural typology to one of architectural pressure. Instead of asking when the Haveli vanished, it becomes more useful to ask how it was altered, who altered it, and under what urban and political conditions. The answer does not lie in a single event, but in a slow accumulation of change factors like pressures of tenancy, commercialisation, regulation, demographic increase, legal precarity, and infrastructural neglect. These pressures distort, compress, and extract from a typology every possible rentable surface they can.

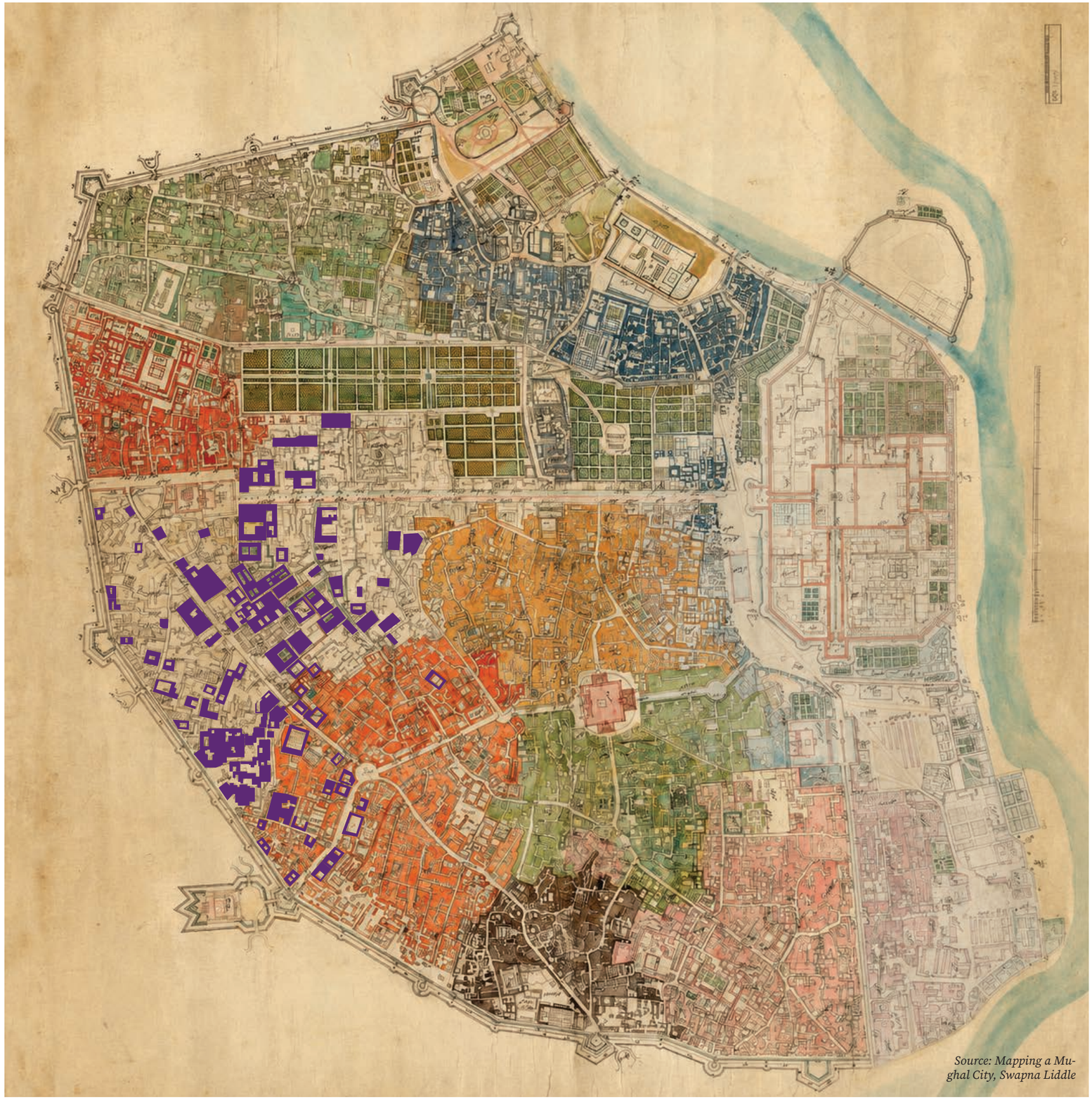
4.1 Reading Typology Through Pressure, Not Style

The contemporary brothel building may look radically different from the haveli, but ***on encountering the nineteenth-century mappings of the walled city and comparing them to present-day footprints it is found that the shift was not a disappearance of the courtyard-house logic, but its incremental erosion.***

What looks like a different "style" is often the same spatial skeleton. The urban plot remains. The internal logic remains in fragments. But every element that once supported spatial generosity has been narrowed, infilled, enclosed, or overloaded.

As scholarship on twentieth-century Delhi shows, domestic form did not change through a single imposed model, but through continuous negotiation between inherited spatial traditions, new regimes of governance, and new pressures of land, capital, and regulation.[1] ***Within this longer arc, the transformation from Haveli to Kotha to the contemporary brothel corridor tracks a parallel shift in the status of women's labour—from domestic respectability, to cultural performance economies, to stigmatised and regulated survival economies.***

To read this transformation only aesthetically would be to miss its political force. A congested corridor is not just a failed spatial condition. It is evidence of how certain lives have been denied environmental dignity. A roofed-over courtyard is not just an alteration—it is the loss of shared air, shared light, and shared space. Seen this way, architecture becomes an archive of social withdrawal. What has been removed from these buildings is not just the ornamental value or openness—but care.



Source: Mapping a Mughal City, Swapna Liddle

1-2. Pilar Maria Guerrieri, ***Negotiating Cultures: Delhi's Architecture and Planning from 1912–1962*** (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jyoti Hosagrahar, ***Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism*** (London: Routledge, 2005).

4.2 The Haveli as Domestic Intelligence: Courtyard, Threshold, and Climate

The Haveli was not simply a "large house" but a spatial system designed to organise privacy, hierarchy, and climate through a sequence of thresholds and an inward centre. In the dense fabric of Shahjahanabad, the courtyard (Chowk) functioned as a lightwell, a ventilation chamber, and a social core, allowing interior rooms to remain habitable even when streets were narrow and tightly packed.[2]

This inwardness was not accidental. It was one of the Haveli's most sophisticated environmental and social devices. Instead of opening directly onto the street as a western townhouse might, the haveli created a layered transition from public to private. Entry did not immediately expose domestic life. One moved through thresholds, semi-public zones, and internal passages before arriving at the main shared void which gave the house a clear internal logic.

This courtyard logic also supported a layered domestic gradient—from the street to semi-public reception areas, to deeper family spaces. In many North Indian courtyard traditions, gendered and social zoning shaped the choreography of movement and visibility within the home, often structured through controlled entries, screened openings, and internal separations.[3] ***The point here is not to romanticise the haveli as a feminist space—it was deeply patriarchal, but to recognise that even within patriarchal structures, the haveli typically provided spatial generosity—air, light, shared commons, and an intelligible organisation of domestic life.***

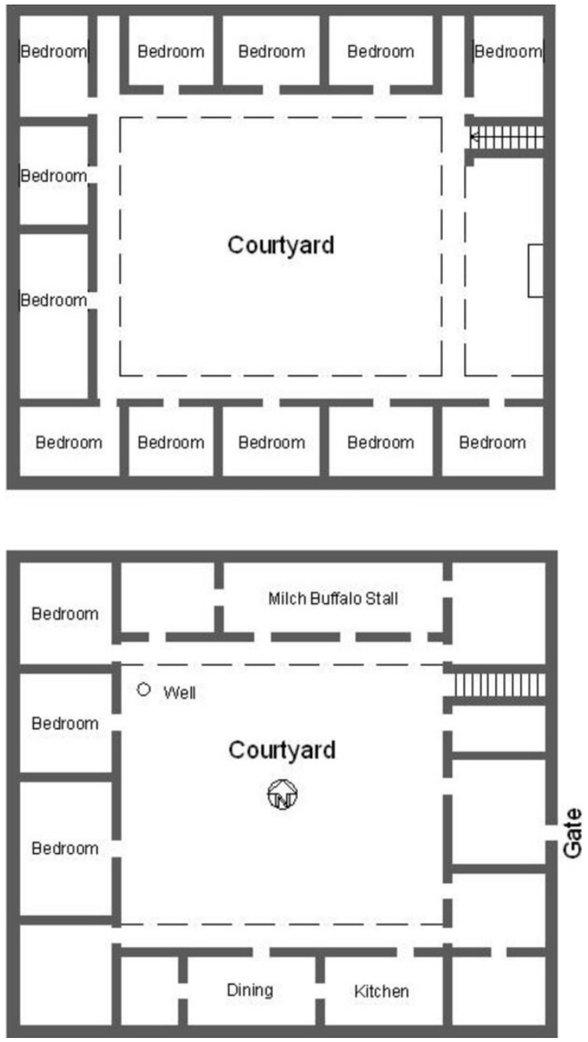


Fig 4.4: Typical layout of a North Indian Haveli *Source: Donia Zhang*



Fig 4.5: Haveli Dharampura before restoration



Fig 4.6: Haveli Dharampura after restoration *Source: Haveli Dharampura Organization, Bhart Aggarwal*

To critique patriarchy within domestic architecture is necessary, but it should not prevent one from recognising environmental intelligence or spatial quality where it existed. The haveli was hierarchical, yes, but it was rarely spatially indifferent. It understood shade, seasonal airflow, thermal comfort, degrees of privacy, and the value of common internal space. Even where movement was controlled, the architecture still provided a certain capacity for breathing, gathering, and dwelling.

Accounts of Old Delhi havelis that survive, or have been restored, consistently describe this courtyard-based environmental performance. For instance, reporting on Haveli Dharampura's restoration—a courtyard haveli in the walled city that received recognition in UNESCO's Asia-Pacific conservation awards—emphasises how the courtyard structure creates natural ventilation and daylight deep inside a congested urban fabric.[4] The restoration narrative itself is important because it shows the courtyard house as a documented typology embedded in Shahjahanabad's building culture and conservation discourse.[5]

Yet this same typology became vulnerable under modern urban conditions. As ownership fragmented and buildings were subdivided, and courtyards were frequently treated as "unused voids" and slowly absorbed into rentable floor area. The haveli did not simply "decline"—it was made divisible, and that divisibility became a key mechanism through which dense inner-city housing turned into overcrowded rental stock.

A mode of living was lost in this process, as once the courtyards were enclosed, their functions did not disappear cleanly but were replaced by compression. The same plot continued to house people, but under increasingly stressed conditions. The house survived physically, while its environmental and social intelligence was hollowed out. This courtyard logic also supported a layered domestic gradient—from the street to semi-public reception areas, to deeper family spaces.

3. Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005

4. Spaces Architects@ka, "Haveli Dharampura," ***Archello***, accessed June 1, 2026; Haveli Dharampura, "Restoration Story," accessed June 1, 2026. The project description notes the courtyard's role in bringing natural light, airflow, and visual connectivity into the haveli.

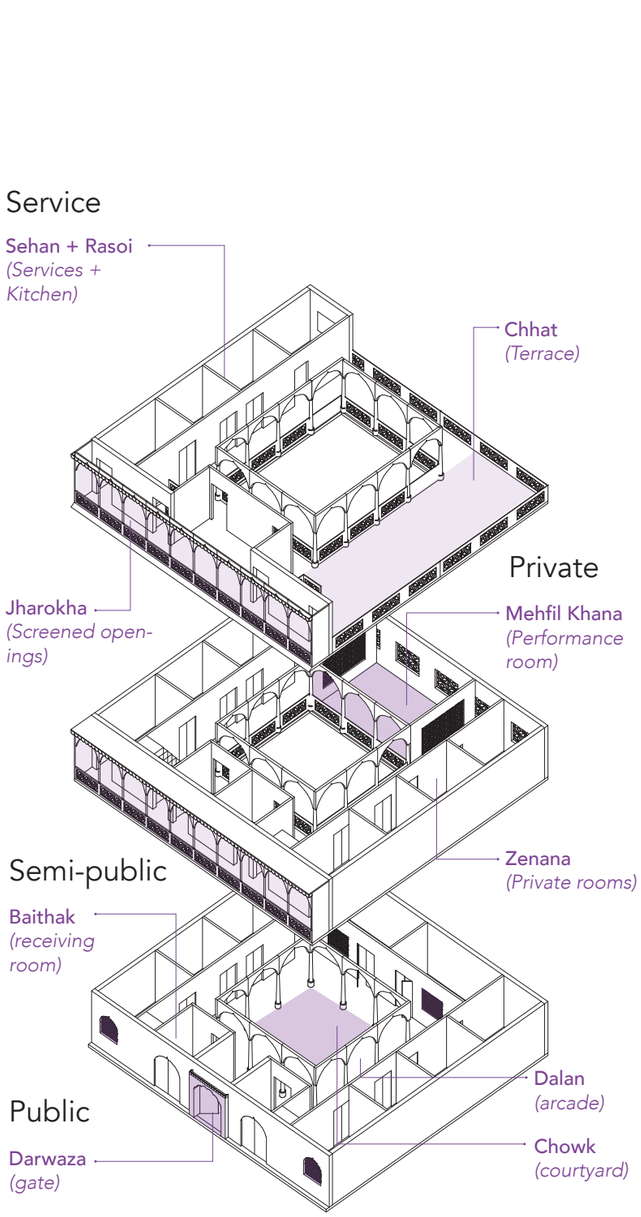
5. UNESCO Bangkok, 2017 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation: Award-Winning Projects (Bangkok: UNESCO, 2017); "Haveli Dharampura, Wellington Fountain Win UNESCO Recognition," ***Business Standard***, November 17, 2017. UNESCO's 2017

4.3 The Kotha as a Link: Performance, Autonomy, and Controlled Access

Between the Haveli and the contemporary brothel sits an often-erased intermediary—the Kotha. In popular speech today, "kotha" is flattened into a synonym for prostitution. Historically, however, the kotha associated with the tawaif economy operated as a space where performance, training, patronage, and social negotiation mattered as much as, and often more than, sexual access.

Once the Kotha is reduced to a moral category, its spatial intelligence disappears from view. But if it is understood as a cultural institution, then its architectural logic becomes legible again. It was not merely a room where transactions took place. It was a carefully mediated environment in which visibility, invitation, access, and social atmosphere were all managed. Like the haveli, it was structured through thresholds and controlled transitions, but oriented toward a different kind of publicness.

Veena Talwar Oldenburg's work on courtesans remains foundational for understanding the courtesan household as an economic and cultural institution, and for challenging the assumption that courtesans were only marginal figures.[8] Her analysis helps establish that the courtesan's workplace was spatially crucial, organised around hosting, visibility management, and social encounter. In that sense, the Kotha shares the Haveli's logic of thresholds, but reorganises it around a different kind of publicness.



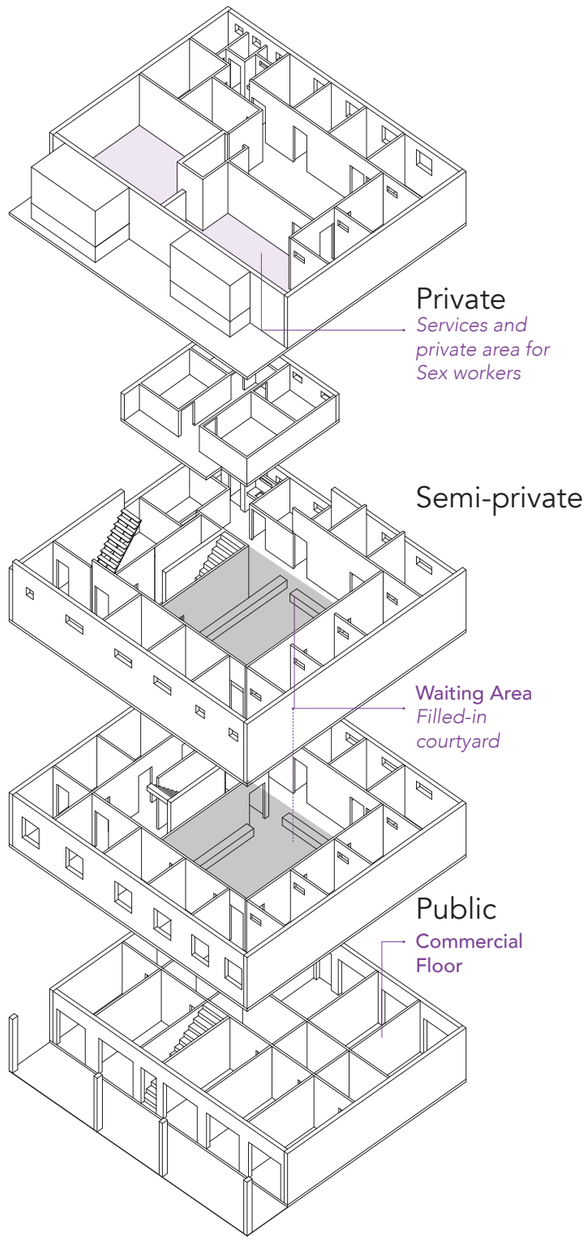


Fig 4.7: Modification of the building typology at G.B. Road

Source: Produced by author

Spatially, the kotha often appropriated courtyard-house structures — upper floors, terraces, and large rooms could support gatherings, music, and instruction; circulation could be controlled to regulate access, and the relationship to the street could be negotiated through windows, balconies, and screened elements. These were not incidental features. They were how autonomy was performed through space.

The balcony, for example, becomes especially important here. It is both an opening and a filter. It allows presence without full exposure, visibility without total accessibility. Similarly, the large room or hall is not simply a domestic chamber but a performative interior. It accommodates audience, instruction, etiquette, and a layered encounter. The Kotha, therefore, cannot be understood through the same logic as either the respectable haveli or the later congested brothel. It is a typological bridge that reveals another possible relation between gender, labour, and architecture.

The Kotha reminds us that women's labour was not always spatially degraded in the same way. ***Through studying about the Kotha, we realise that there were moments when female labour, performance, and urban presence had an architectural expression that was not purely oppressive.*** That condition was uneven, classed, and still patriarchal, but it was not identical to the later brothel corridor. Recognising the kotha as an intermediary helps resist the flattening of all women's urban labour into a single narrative of deviance.

8. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," Feminist Studies 16, no. 2 (1990): 259–287.

4.4 Planning, Regulation, and the Inner City: Producing "Old Delhi" as a Problem-Space

The transformation of these domestic forms cannot be separated from Delhi's twentieth-century restructuring. Colonial governance and later planning regimes produced a strong ideological contrast between the "planned" capital and the "congested" old city. Scholarship on colonial Delhi's urban governmentalities show how New and Old Delhi were governed through different logics of visibility, policing, infrastructure, and social ordering.[9]

This contrast was not only descriptive, but it was also productive. It shaped where resources went, where care was concentrated, and which parts of the city were treated as problems to be managed rather than environments to be supported. Old Delhi increasingly came to be seen through the language of congestion, decay, overcrowding, insanitation, and disorder. Such language often appears technical, but it carries political consequences. ***Once an area is defined primarily as a problem-space, intervention tends to take the form of control rather than care.***

After Independence, the first Master Plan for Delhi (MPD 1962) explicitly positioned the old city's density and overcrowding as a planning problem, shaping policies that sought to manage and redistribute population pressures.[10] While planning language speaks in neutral technical terms, its effects are spatially uneven as certain areas become targets of regulation without receiving equivalent frameworks of care, maintenance, or dignified housing renewal.

This asymmetry is central because regulation without reinvestment does not solve pressure—it hardens it. Inner-city areas continue to absorb commerce, labour, and population, but without the environmental or infrastructural support needed to sustain dignified habitation. The result is not planned adaptation but exhausted survival. In this context, domestic buildings in the old city were not simply "aged"; they were subjected to pressures without stable investment in the living conditions of their most marginal inhabitants.

4.5 G.B. Road Today: The Courtyard Skeleton Under Compression

G.B. Road is often described through a repeated urban pattern—commercial shops at street level, with brothels and small living/working rooms above. This description appears consistently in mainstream reporting on the area. For example, The Times of India's background note on G.B. Road (Swami Shradhanand Marg) describes buildings with shops at ground level and brothels on upper floors that become active at night.[11] Recent documentary journalism similarly describes upper-floor rooms as small, crowded, and often poorly lit, while the street functions as a daytime market.[12]

This familiar description is important, but it is only the beginning. Architecturally, the condition is more layered. ***What appears today as a hardened brothel block often still contains traces of an earlier plot logic. Through mapping and measured drawings, elongated plots, residual voids, and circulation traces suggest earlier courtyard organisations. Even where the courtyard is no longer open, its former presence can often be inferred through awkward light shafts, narrow internal gaps, or unusual building proportions.*** It feels almost like the building remembers what it has lost.

Compression is the keyword here. ***Space has been continuously extracted from these buildings, establishing the spatial expression of a city that permits the economy to exist while refusing the inhabitants a dignified residential status.*** This is particularly evident in the context of sex work because the room must hold too much that it becomes a bedroom, workplace, storage, waiting area, social zone, and private retreat all at once.[13] But because it has lost access to light, cross-ventilation, and internal common space, it struggles to support any of these functions well. The building becomes overburdened by the functional demands placed on it.

4.6 From Haveli to Brothel: What "Changed" Was Not the Plot, But the Value of the People Inside

The contemporary brothel is a built outcome of social abandonment that reflects how certain populations are allowed to remain in the city only under conditions of reduced spatial dignity.

Recognising this matters because it reframes design. If the spatial violence is historical and systemic, then interventions cannot be purely aesthetic or "improvement" projects. They must begin by acknowledging the built consequences of marginalisation and by treating spatial dignity as a political question rather than an architectural luxury.

This also complicates the usual language of conservation. What should be preserved here is not a frozen image of the past, nor an idealised courtyard typology detached from its present condition. Rather, what must be understood is the layered history of transformation itself. The Haveli, the Kotha, and the brothel are not unrelated figures. They are part of one architectural lineage shaped by very different distributions of care, value, and legitimacy. To read that lineage carefully is not only to document form, but to reveal how the city has written gender, labour, and inequality into its buildings over time.

9. Stephen Legg, Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).
10. Delhi Development Authority, Master Plan for Delhi, 1962 (New Delhi: Delhi Development Authority, 1962).
11. "GB Road | Garstin Bastion Road News," The Times of India, November 15, 2017. The background note describes G.B. Road/Swami Shradhanand Marg as having ground-floor shops and brothels above that become active after the shops close.
12. Brut India, "Lives Trapped Behind Closed Doors: Inside Delhi's GB Road," Brut India, accessed June 1, 2026; "Vicious Circle of Exploitation," Deccan Herald, December 31, 2011. Brut describes G.B. Road as a daytime market of hardware shops and vehicle-parts stores, with small upper-floor rooms where sex workers live and work; Deccan Herald describes brothel interiors as dirty and dimly lit.
13. Mayank Austen Soofi, ***Nobody Can Love You More: Life in Delhi's Red Light District*** (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2012); "I Have Not Had a Customer for Two Months. We Have Seen So Much Disease but This Is the First Time I Have Seen Something Like This," Open, April 17, 2020.

Chapter 5

Violence



www.hindustantimes.com

Delhiwale: In Delhi's GB Road, a room caught between two worlds

A peek inside a sex worker's room in Delhi's red-light area



iamishasingh.wordpress.com

Reflections on GB Road: Delhi's largest Red Light Area

Credits: India TV Few would be able to proclaim themselves lucky enough to boast of a probation period in the Indian Police Service spent in Delhi 6. Old Delhi, with its charms and squalor, traders...



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The Indian Express

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Firstpost

Sex worker rescued from GB Road 'kotha' says g...

"I did the sex work for nine months from September 2021 until May 2022 for the upkeep of my child." The complainant has said.



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In the last decade, at least five havelis have been restored. It's a labour of love that needs deep pockets, patience, and a passion for the past-all to bring...



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The Tribune

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Sex workers on Delhi's GB Road battle poor living conditions ahead of assembly polls | India News - The Times of India

India News: Sex workers on Delhi's GB Road, the city's red-light area, face severe living conditions, including poor sanitation, unreliable electricity, and overc



The Hindu

Man kills sex worker for refusing to live with him

He had an extramarital affair with victim



India Today

Delhi Police arrests man for trying to sell wife...

A 23-year-old man came to Delhi to sell his second wife at a GB Road brothel for Rs 1.5 lakh. Police posed as brothel owner to bust the husband who...



The Hindu

Sikkim girl rescued from G.B Road; activi...

The incident has alarmed activists who fear that after Assam, which sees one of the highest number of cases of trafficking of minor girls, Sikkim c...



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Delhi Assembly Elections 2025 | Sex workers on GB Road battle poor living conditions

As political parties gear up for assembly polls on February 5, with vote counting scheduled for February 8, these women, living on the margins of the city's consciousness, are hoping their voices get heard and the new government addresses their long sta...



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Words like 'sex worker' and 'prostitute' are never whispered; they keep a check on what the journalists ask the 'didis' too.



Deccan Herald

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Lives of GB Road women in Delhi red-light district shaped by trafficking, abuse, unsafe healthcare, informal clinics, motherhood struggles...



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Delhi Women's Panel Asks Municipal Body For...

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Read about the rescue of a 17-year-old aspiring badminton player from traffickers in Delhi. Learn how she was lured into a dangerous situation...



The Times of India

Father teams up with son to rescue traffic...

A 16-year-old girl who was trafficked to Delhi and sold at a brothel on GB Road was rescued after she managed to call her father and give a clue that

Honour

Crime

Architectural Neglect

Fig 5.1: Interpretive media map

This map spatialises selected news reports from Old Delhi according to three recurring narratives: honour, crime and architectural neglect. By locating each report approximately where the event, building or issue occurs, the map reveals how different parts of the historic city are represented through very different public narratives. Celebrated monuments and restored heritage are repeatedly associated with ideas of pride, preservation and cultural value, while areas around G.B. Road are more often represented through crime, violence, deterioration and neglect. The mapping therefore begins to expose a wider geography of "pride" and "shame", in which media representation contributes to how different parts of the same historic fabric are valued and imagined.

Sources: Produced by author through articles from Hindustan Times, Firstpost, The Indian Express, The Times of India, The Hindu, India Today, NDTV, Deccan Herald, Scroll.in, ThePrint, Architectural Digest India, The Tribune, The Art Newspaper, ETV Bharat News, Women's Media Center, iamishasingh.wordpress.com.

The transformation from kotha to contemporary brothel is an architectural decline as much as a moral or social one. The space once associated with performance, courtesanship, and cultural labour has been gradually compressed into a stigmatised and concealed identity — reduced, in both built fabric and public imagination, to an overused site of sexual transaction. To study this transformation through the language of "prostitution" alone would be too limited. Violence must also be named. Verbal and physical abuse is something the sex workers face every day. Stigma, police raids, and lack of identity or rights too. But violence needs to be understood not as a single event like the moment of trafficking, beating, abuse, or police raid, but as the daily and spatial systems through which sex workers are watched, judged, contained, underpaid, threatened, and denied ordinary forms of safety.

In addition to studying the transformation of the Kotha over the years in an architectural sense, it becomes essential to study why, in the specific context of G.B. Road, the architecture seemed to deteriorate more than other parts of Delhi. This chapter reads 'violence' as a spatial condition. It asks how gendered violence moves across scales: from the body, to the room, from the room to the brothel, from the brothel to the street, and from the street to the city's administrative and moral systems. At each scale, violence is not simply something that happens in space. It is something that the space produces, normalises, and eventually makes look like the natural character of the place. Violence on GB Road shows up in the room, the staircase, the street below, the police file, the client's tone, the street's gaze, and the city's refusal to care.

Literature linked with violence and sex work/feminism has been researched and illustrated in this chapter from authors, both Indian and international, like Nalini Jameela, Mayank Austen Soofi, Shilpa Phadke and Silvia Federici to support the argument on how violence is a spatial condition.

5.1 The body—violence before the brothel

It is tempting to locate the beginning of violence at the moment of entry — the moment a woman arrives at GB Road, or is brought there. But this is already too late. Violence does not begin with prostitution. It precedes it.

Nalini Jameela's autobiography is important here because it unsettles the comfortable idea that the brothel is where the danger begins.[3] Her writing shows how violence already exists in the family, in marriage, in informal labour, in poverty, and in the texture of everyday public life before sex work ever becomes a livelihood. The home — so often imagined as the safe alternative to the street — can itself be a place of dependence, coercion, silence, and routine harm. For some women, entering sex work is not a fall from safety into danger. It is a negotiation: one form of vulnerability weighed against another, within a world where the available choices are already shaped by conditions the woman did not choose.

1. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," ***Feminist Studies 16***, no. 2 (1990): 259–287.
2. Prabha Kotiswaran, ***Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 3. 2011); Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, eds., ***Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*** (New York: Routledge, 1998).
3. Nalini Jameela, ***The Autobiography of a Sex Worker***, trans. J. Devika (Chennai: Westland, 2007). The published description of the book frames Jameela's narrative as a search for dignity, empowerment, and freedom on her own terms.

To say this is not to romanticise sex work. Trafficking, coercion, debt bondage, and confinement are forms of violence and must be named clearly as such. But ***some women are forced into sex work.*** Some enter because the options available to them are already shaped by poverty, family failure, and social exclusion. Some continue because, within a violent world, it may still offer income, mobility, or a degree of control that other options do not.[2] ***In the process of categorising all sex work into trafficking, adult sex workers lose the right to speak as workers.*** It is important to admit that sex work is also work. It involves time, bodily labour, negotiation, risk, income, skill, and endurance. Nonetheless, sex workers are either criminalised or rescued, but rarely listened to. The body is made vulnerable long before it reaches GB Road. Understanding that is the beginning of an honest spatial analysis and understanding the stand of the sex workers as 'women' in society first.

The stigmatisation of the sex worker is not incidental to this vulnerability. It was built, over a long history, into the structure of how women's sexuality has been socially organised. The control of women's bodies — their sexuality, their reproductive capacity, their economic independence — was central to the formation of modern systems of labour and social order.[4] Women's sexuality, reproductive capacity, and economic independence had to be disciplined to produce a new social order. Society needed women to fit into controlled roles. Their sexuality had to be tied to marriage. Their reproductive capacity had to serve the family and labour system. Their economic independence had to be limited so they remained dependent on men, family, or the household. ***Sex workers are not stigmatised only because of sex work itself. They are stigmatised because they disturb the idea of the "respectable woman."*** A sex worker is a woman who earns through sexuality, exists outside ideal domestic femininity, and is publicly associated with desire and money. ***So society marks her as "deviant" to protect the respectable wife/mother/daughter.***

This everyday violence is not always spectacular. Sometimes it is ordinary and repeated — the insult, the stare, the bargaining over the body, the refusal to use protection, the joke made at the woman's expense, the assumption that consent no longer matters because the labour is sexual. Such violence works by reducing a person to a function, making the sex worker a socially disposable commodity. This boundary is not only a moral distinction. It is a spatial one.

5.2 The street— the gaze that precedes the violence

A woman in an Indian city is expected to move through public space with a legible purpose — going to work, returning home, accompanying family, buying something, travelling between recognised destinations.[5] A woman is

2. Prabha Kotiswaran, ***Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 3. 2011); Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, eds., ***Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*** (New York: Routledge, 1998).
4. Silvia Federici, ***Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*** (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
5. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, ***Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*** (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

expected to move through the city with a reason, like going to work, going home, buying something, meeting family, or travelling between legitimate destinations. A woman who lingers, waits, watches, or occupies space without explanation becomes suspicious.

The sex worker occupies the harshest position within this system. She is not only a woman in public, but she is a woman whose publicness is notoriously read as sexual. ***Her presence is treated as an invitation or a spectacle, and always a moral failure. This tends to lead to the violence against sex workers being easily dismissed. If a woman is already marked as "fallen," harm against her is treated as less shocking, less believable, or almost expected.*** The stigma does not only follow the violence. It prepares the conditions in which violence becomes easier to excuse.

G.B. Road is an arterial road. During the day it carries the traffic of the city's automotive parts trade. The brothels occupy the upper floors of the same buildings where shops and warehouses operate at street level. This vertical arrangement is itself a spatial argument: the trade happens above; the respectable commerce happens below; the two coexist without openly acknowledging each other. The street is saturated with meaning before anyone looks up. The accumulated associations of the area — with sex work, stigma, moral failure, danger — produce a way of reading the space that precedes and shapes every encounter within it.

The gaze from the street is not



Fig 5.2: Sex workers looking interacting with the street through a grilled window *Source: Shoaib Shafi (2019)*



Fig 5.3: Sex workers looking interacting with the street through a grilled window *Source: Ramya Patelkhana (2017)*

neutral observation. It is a form of surveillance that classifies and judges, and in classifying and judging, contributes to the conditions that make violence easier to enact and easier to ignore. Men enter the upper floors with the confidence that what happens inside will not be taken seriously by authorities or neighbours. Women working inside already know how the street reads them. The violence against sex workers is easily dismissed because it is pre-empted by stigma. If a woman is already marked as fallen, harm against her is treated as less shocking, less believable, or almost expected.

The stigma does not only follow the violence. It prepares the conditions in which violence becomes easier to excuse.

5.3 The brothel as building — the staircase, the corridor, the grill

Violence is not only inside the room. It is organised by the functional arrangement of the building itself. The brothel building on G.B. Road has a particular spatial logic— entry is controlled, visibility is managed, and movement is structured to serve the transaction rather than the inhabitant.

The staircase controls who enters, who is permitted to proceed, and under what conditions. It is often narrow, dark, and unmonitored in the ways that would protect the women inside, while remaining permeable to clients, brokers, and police. The corridor that leads to the rooms exposes more than it shelters. The grill that faces the street — a recurring element in accounts and images of GB Road — performs a precise spatial function:

it allows women to be seen without allowing them to be reached as people. It frames them as objects of transaction or moral spectacle, visible enough to attract commerce, marginal enough to remain outside the respectable life of the city.

This spatial logic has a history. The red-light district was not simply a space where prostitution was tolerated.[6] It emerged from a managed spatial contradiction: prostitution had to be made visible enough to be inspected, surveilled, and controlled through public health and policing systems, while remaining marginal enough to be excluded from the moral order of the city. The brothel building was shaped by this double requirement — to contain, to display, and to separate. GB Road carries the spatial inheritance of that logic. ***Sex workers are tolerated when their labour is commercially useful, and denied legitimacy when they ask for safety, housing, health care, or dignity.***

The legal framework compounds this. Sex work in India is not simply illegal in the way public discourse often assumes. What is criminalised is a surrounding set of activities: brothel-keeping, solicitation in certain spaces, living on the earnings of a sex worker, procuring.[7] This creates a legal grey zone in which sex workers are neither fully criminalised nor fully protected. In practice, this means exposure to police raids, eviction, harassment, and dependency on intermediaries — often the same people whose power over them is itself a source of vulnerability. They are managed



Fig 5.4: Brothel entrance in G.B. Road with the words "beware of pimps" written on the wall in hindi — *Source: Author (2025)*

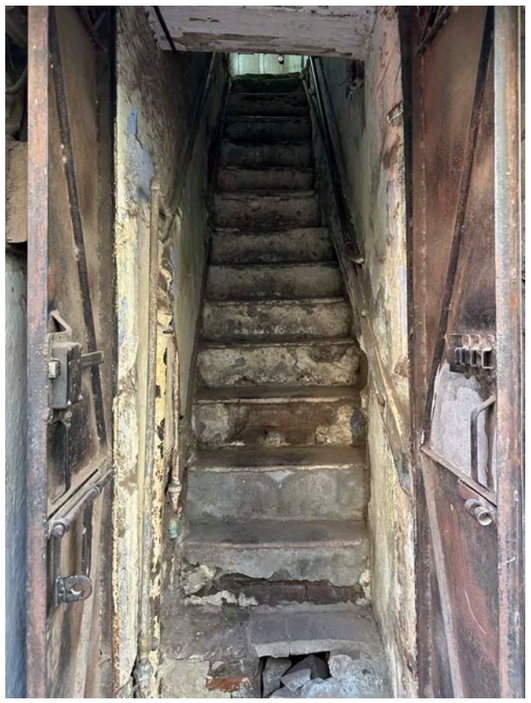


Fig 5.5: Brothel entrance stairs — *Source: Author (2025)*



Fig 5.6: A 2X1 meter cabin used by sex workers — *Source: Priyali Sur (2014)*



Fig 5.7: A sex worker preparing food and feeding her child in a brothel room — *Source: Kat-Katha organization*



Fig 5.8: Room of a sex worker at G.B. Road — *Source: Mayank Soofi (2018)*

6. Ashwini Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
7. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, ***India Code***, secs. 3–7.

rather than protected. ***The building they work in reflects this status: maintained to the standard of something managed, not something cared for.***

5.4 The room—the collapse of home and workplace

A room on the upper floors of a Kotha on GB Road is many things at once. It may serve on the same day as a bedroom, a kitchen, a workspace, a waiting area, a storage room, a social space, and sometimes a child's living environment. Domestic objects and work objects share the same surfaces. Bedding, clothing, cooking utensils, signs of exhaustion, and signs of transaction occupy the same compressed interior.[12] ***The boundary between living and working does not simply blur but entirely collapses.***

This collapse is not a small architectural detail. In the most ordinary understandings of space, the home is supposed to offer rest, privacy, and retreat. The workplace is supposed to organise labour. On GB Road, these categories are forced into the same room — under legal pressure, economic pressure, and the pressure of social isolation that prevents sex workers from accessing the kind of housing that would allow a separation between life and labour. A room cannot protect sleep if it is also a site of sexual transaction. It cannot offer privacy if access to it is controlled by others. It cannot provide comfort if it lacks light, ventilation, sanitation, and adequate space. Within this space, a body inside it is never fully off duty, making the very existence in these spaces strenuous.

12. Mayank Austen Soofi, ***Nobody Can Love You More: Life in Delhi's Red Light District*** (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2012).

The physical conditions of these rooms vary, but the structural conditions do not. Rooms are typically small, often shared, frequently lacking natural light or cross-ventilation. Windows, where they exist, may open onto internal corridors rather than open air. Sanitation is shared across many users. The compression is not only uncomfortable — it is a spatial argument about the value assigned to the people inside. Space is built, and maintained, to a standard that corresponds to the social standing of its occupants as the city understands them. ***Since sex workers are not recognised as residents with full dignity, the spaces they inhabit are not treated as homes worth improving. They deteriorate. And deterioration becomes its own form of daily violence — the slow withdrawal of conditions that allow a person to feel human in the space***

5.5 The city—neglect as policy

The woman trafficked to GB Road at eighteen — promised a hotel job, locked in, sold to a brothel, beaten when she resisted — entered a space already structured to receive her in exactly this way.[10] The building, the street, the legal ambiguity, the gaze, and the economic logic of the area all existed before she arrived. The violence done to her was not exceptional. It was the activation of a system already in place. Clients, brokers, landlords, and police all operate within a framework that tolerates extraction and denies complaint.[11]

Sex worker rights groups have named this contradiction clearly in the context of raid-and-rescue operations: operations that forcibly remove women, separate them from their children, detain them in rehabilitation homes, and treat them as victims without consulting them are not rescue. They are another form of control.[8] The 2008 PUDR and Saheli report on the arrest of 75 sex workers in Delhi documented how these operations produce their own violence — arrest, confinement, separation, and moral correction in the name of protection.[9] The same state that claims to rescue women from the brothel can expose them to a different institutional version of the same logic: bodies managed, choices overridden, testimony rendered irrelevant.

Ashwini Tambe's work on colonial Bombay is proof that prostitution was not simply ignored or condemned by colonial authorities. It was managed through systems of surveillance, policing, public health, and spatial control.[6] Sex workers were made visible enough to be inspected and controlled, but marginal enough to remain outside respectable society. The red-light district emerged from this contradiction — it allowed prostitution to be contained, watched, and used, without being accepted as part of the moral life of the city. A version of this contradiction continues in India today. Sex work itself is not simply illegal in the way it is often imagined. Still, many activities around it are criminalised, including brothel-keeping, solicitation in certain spaces, living on the earnings of prostitution, procuring, and related activities.[7] Sex workers are not always criminalised in theory as simply as public discourse assumes, but in practice, they remain exposed to police action, eviction, raids, harassment, and dependence on intermediaries. They are tolerated when their labour is needed, but denied legitimacy when they ask for safety, housing, health care, or dignity.

What connects the raid, the deteriorating room, the unmonitored staircase, and the missing sanitation is the city's long refusal to treat this area as a space that deserves maintenance, investment, or care. ***Because of stigma, the area is not publicly maintained. Because of legal ambiguity, investment is structurally uncertain. Because sex workers are not recognised as residents, the buildings they inhabit are not treated as homes worth improving. Because the moral judgment on the area is already settled in official discourse, authorities engage through enforcement rather than infrastructure. The result is that the buildings deteriorate. And as they deteriorate, the deterioration begins to read as evidence — as visual confirmation of the city's belief that this is a degraded place occupied by degraded people.***

6. Ashwini Tambe, ***Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
8. Joint Stakeholders Submission, "Violations Faced by Sex Workers in India," submitted for ***India's Universal Periodic Review***, September 20, 2016. The submission states that people in sex work face discrimination and violence because of criminalised status and the continued conflation of sex work with trafficking.
9. Saheli and People's Union for Democratic Rights, In the Name of "Rescue": ***Report on the Arrests of 75 Sex Workers in Delhi*** in January 2008 (Delhi: PUDR and Saheli, 2009). The report is listed by PUDR as a response to the arrest and raid/rescue operation involving 75 sex workers in Delhi.
10. Devanshi Mehta, "Wheels of Change: From GB Road to Her Own," ***The Times of India***, August 4, 2025.

7. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, ***India Code***, secs. 3–7.

5.6 The kotha and what was lost

The earlier history of the Kotha matters here not as nostalgia, but as contrast. The Kotha was not a space without hierarchy or exploitation, but it did carry a spatial logic shaped by cultural labour: by performance, by controlled access, by the cultivation of poetry and musical knowledge, and by a social value that exceeded the sexual transaction. The space had a dignity — however complicated — that the people inside it could draw upon and that the building itself was organised to support. Proportions, thresholds, and the relationship between performer and audience were all encoded in the spatial arrangement of the kotha.

The contemporary brothel shows what happens when that value is stripped away. ***When the space is read only through stigma and extraction, the architecture narrows with the meaning. Rooms become harder, darker, smaller, more compressed. The cultural content of the space empties out, leaving only the transaction.*** And as the transaction becomes the only legible activity, the room that holds it is maintained accordingly — as a space of use, not of living. The kotha's transformation into the contemporary brothel is not only a social decline. It is a decline in what the space is allowed to mean, and therefore in what it is allowed to be.

5.7 Architectural violence—when neglect becomes destiny

This is the most important loop. Violence first produces neglected space: because of stigma, the area is not maintained; because of legal ambiguity, investment becomes uncertain; because sex workers are not recognised as workers or residents with full dignity, their spaces are allowed to deteriorate. But once the space deteriorates, that deterioration becomes visual proof of the stigma. The broken staircase, the dark corridor, the grill, the overcrowded room, the missing ventilation — all of it begins to confirm the city's belief that this is a degraded place.

Neglect becomes self-justifying. The space is read as dirty, dangerous, immoral, and disposable. Because it is read that way, more neglect becomes acceptable. People treat the area carelessly because it already looks abandoned. Clients enter with the confidence that women working in such conditions have little protection. Authorities intervene through raids rather than maintenance. The condition of the building shapes the behaviour that happens inside it. Architecture contains violence, normalises it, and eventually makes it look like the natural character of the place rather than the product of decisions made repeatedly, over time by a city that chose not to care.

The women inside are made to occupy not only unsafe rooms, but unsafe meanings. They live and work inside buildings already read as immoral. Their environment is used to justify the way they are treated. The bad condition of the space attaches to the perceived worth of the people inside it. This is the deepest form of architectural violence: when neglect stops looking like neglect and starts looking like destiny.

The architecture deteriorated because stigma made maintenance feel unnecessary, because legal ambiguity made investment unstable, because the city decided these women's spaces were not worth caring for.

Violence produces neglect, neglect confirms stigma, stigma produces more violence.



An ironic view from G.B. Road: the words "Save the girl child, educate the girl child" are painted in Hindi behind a goods truck, while a police booth sits awkwardly to the left. In the distance, a taller building rises sharply above the street, belonging to the seemingly "better" part of Delhi and standing in stark contrast to the congested urban fabric of G.B. Road. (Author)

Chapter 6

Gender

Feminist spatial theory

The previous chapter traced how violence becomes architectural — how stigma, legal ambiguity, and neglect produce spaces that absorb and normalise harm. Violence against women, including sex workers, often emerges from deeply rooted patriarchal structures. When this violence becomes embedded over time, it does not remain limited to individual acts but begins to shape the spaces in which people live and move. In this way, space itself becomes gendered. ***A gendered space is not simply a space of violence against women, or one used differently by men and women. It is a space where access, freedom, and visibility are unevenly distributed through design, social practice, and the accumulated weight of expectations that control who can be present, for how long, in what manner, and under what conditions.*** Therefore, this chapter does two things. First, it provides the spatial and feminist framework that completes the heritage argument — showing that the inequality at G.B. Road is not only historical but materially structured into the built environment today. Second, it establishes the design principles that will eventually ground the project: what feminist public space actually requires, why loitering is political, and what it means architecturally to give women spatial permission rather than just historical acknowledgment.

When we talk of the gendering of space, to enter G.B. Road as a woman who is not a sex worker is to experience this immediately. The street is overwhelmingly occupied by men — traders, labourers, clients, passers-by — who move through it freely, without scrutiny. A woman's presence at street level is immediately noticed, read, and judged. Her legitimacy in the space must always be explained. For sex workers, this produces a sharper paradox: they are central to the space's functioning, yet remain the most marginalized within it. Their visibility does not translate into acceptance or safety, but further exposes them to stigma and to the spatial logic that confines rather than welcomes.

This chapter reads that spatial logic through feminist theory. It asks how gendered space is produced in the city, how respectability operates as a mechanism of spatial control, and what G.B. Road reveals when viewed through these frameworks.

6.1 Gender and the Production of Urban Space

Cities are not neutral frameworks in which social life happens to unfold. They are produced through historical processes and political relations, and they carry the hierarchies of the societies that made them. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space provides an important starting point for understanding this relationship. Lefebvre argues that space is not merely a passive container for human activity but a social product created through historical processes and political relations.[1] Gender is among the most significant of those hierarchies. It shapes not only who builds the city, but who the city is imagined to serve.

Modern urban environments have historically been organised around male patterns of work, mobility, and leisure.[2] ***Planning systems assume a user who travels between home and workplace without responsibilities of caregiving or domestic labour. This imagined user is implicitly male — and because he is the default, women encounter the city through a series of additional negotiations. They adjust routes, timing, clothing, and body language.*** They calculate risk, visibility, and social judgment as part of ordinary movement. These adjustments are rarely visible in planning documents or architectural drawings, but they are present in every woman's journey.

The architecture of Old Delhi makes this visible in material form. In the denser wholesale and trading corridors — hardware, automotive parts, industrial supply — the social composition of the crowd is almost entirely male. Women entering such spaces become immediately legible as outsiders, not because of any architectural rule, but because the pattern of occupation has been consolidated over time until maleness feels like the natural condition of the space and femaleness like an intrusion. In Chandni Chowk or Kinari Bazaar, the presence of families, female shoppers, and tourists creates a different social atmosphere — one that makes the space feel more 'accessible'. The architecture is not necessarily different. The crowd is different; it is mixed. This distinction matters because gendered space is produced not only through design but also through the patterns of who uses space over time, until those patterns become what the space appears to be naturally.

This is where architecture shifts from being a neutral container to an active participant. Design decisions, planning priorities, and maintenance choices all encode assumptions about whose presence is expected and whose must justify itself. Poor lighting, the absence of clean public toilets, street furniture scaled for stationary male occupation — these are not oversights.[7] They are the material expression of whose needs were considered when the space was made. Gendered exclusions are not always enforced through explicit rules. They operate through the accumulated misalignment between spatial design and lived experience. From a heritage perspective, this also means that historical urban forms do not simply reflect past inequalities — they continue to reproduce them. ***The built environment is a carrier of social relations, and those relations persist in the fabric long after the society that produced them has nominally moved on.***

1. Henri Lefebvre, ***The Production of Space*** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
2. Leslie Kern, ***Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*** (London: Verso, 2020).

6.2 Respectability and the Politics of Public Space

The mechanism through which this spatial control operates most powerfully is not force. It is respectability.

A woman moving through the city is expected to demonstrate legitimacy through her behaviour, dress, pace, and destination. Respectable femininity is associated with modesty, purposeful mobility, and a legible connection to the domestic sphere.[5] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the woman who loiters — who lingers, waits, watches, or occupies space without a clear reason — becomes suspect. Loitering is widely accepted for men, who occupy street corners, tea stalls, and parks without question. For women, the same act carries implications of irresponsibility, moral looseness, or sexual availability.[4] The denial of loitering is the denial of full urban citizenship — the insistence that a woman's presence in public must always be explained.

Traditional domestic architecture in India has historically reinforced this through spatial organisation, associating women with interior domains and men with the more visible, mobile areas of the house.[6] Contemporary cities carry the echo of that arrangement. Public spaces remain environments where women's presence is negotiated rather than assumed — where the question of whether she should be there follows her through the street.

What is important here is that this control does not require a wall or a written rule. It operates through internalization. Women learn, through repeated experience, where to slow down, where not to linger, where eye contact becomes dangerous, where their presence might attract scrutiny or judgment. These are not individual decisions but learned spatial behaviours — the accumulated knowledge of living in a city that was not designed with their freedom as a priority. The line that restricts is not drawn in the fabric. It is carried in the body. Over time it becomes automatic: a spatial awareness that is always active, self-regulating without external enforcement. Women may technically be permitted to enter a space, but the conditions of their presence are tightly controlled. What is being regulated is not only where they go, but how they must exist within those spaces once they arrive.

6.3 Gendered Space in the Markets of Old Delhi

GB Road's gendered character is most visible not in the absence of women but in the ordinary, unquestioned presence of men. Traders stand outside shops, labourers move goods, clients drift between the commercial street and the floors above, rickshaw drivers wait at the edges. Men drink tea, smoke, bargain, rest, and loiter without needing to explain themselves. Through these repeated, ordinary acts, the street produces itself as a masculine space — a space of work, pause, and sociality from which women are structurally absent at the ground level.

The architecture enforces this

4. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade, ***Why Loiter?***, 2011.
5. Phadke, Khan, and Ranade, ***Why Loiter?***, 2011.
6. Madhavi Desai, ed., ***Gender and the Built Environment in India*** (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2007).
7. Kern, ***Feminist City***, 2020.



Fig 6.1: Still from Chandni Chowk (near Red Fort) showing a mix-gendered crowd *Source: Photographed by author (2026)*



Fig 6.2: Still from an arterial market street from G.B. Road with dominantly masculine presence *Source: Author (2026)*

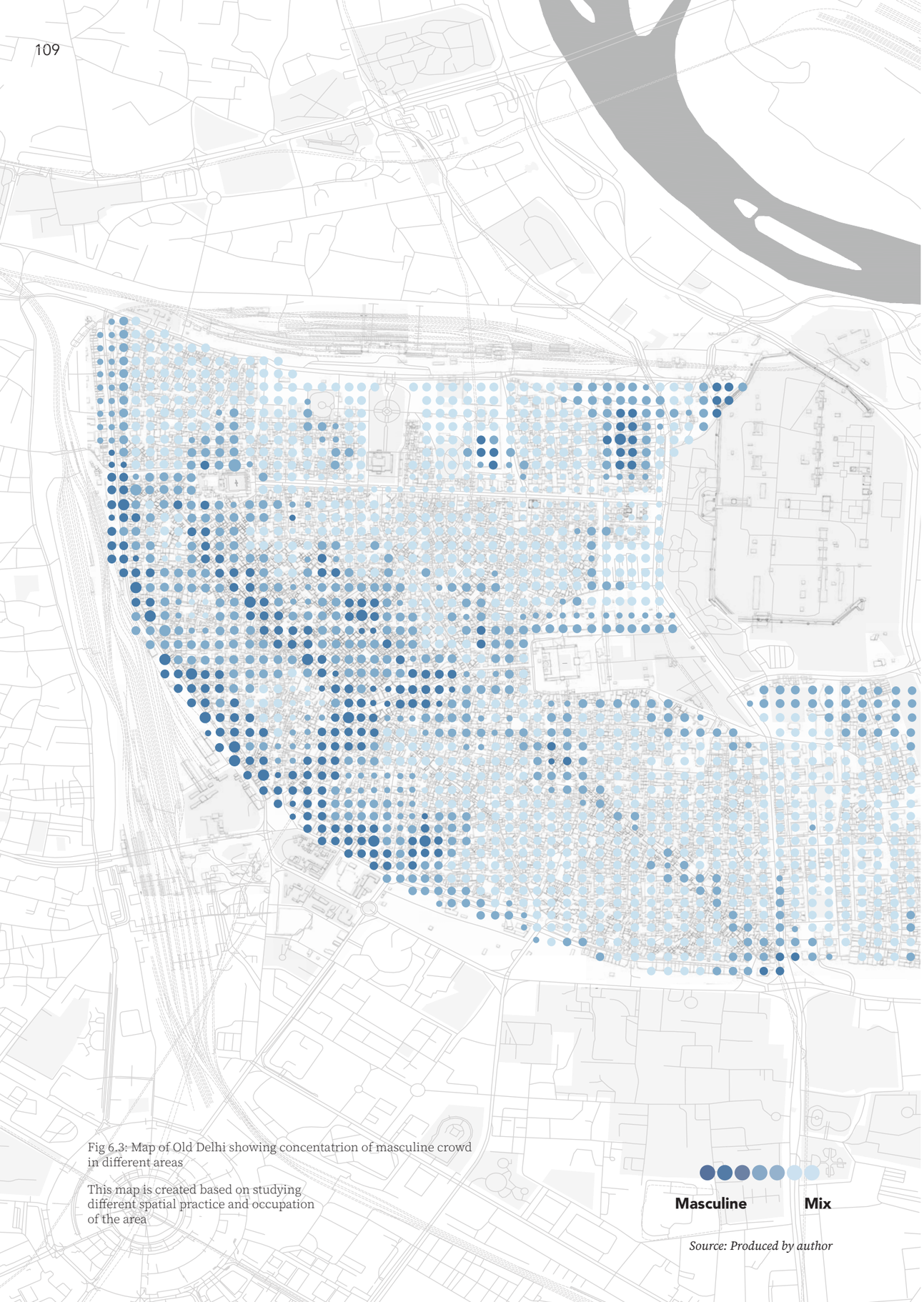


Fig 6.3: Map of Old Delhi showing concentatrion of masculine crowd in different areas

This map is created based on studying different spatial practice and occupation of the area

Source: Produced by author

separation vertically. The automotive parts trade occupies ground floors; upper floors house the brothels. Narrow staircases connect the two worlds, functioning as controlled thresholds — permeable to clients, brokers, and police, but not to any kind of domestic freedom for the women who live above. From balconies overlooking the street, sex workers interact with potential clients. These balconies are the spatial expression of a precise social logic: women are present but elevated and framed. Visible enough to serve commerce, separated enough to remain outside the moral life of the street below. The architecture produces a layered spatial environment in which visibility, concealment, and economic exchange are all simultaneously organised by the same building section.

Inside the brothels, the spatial logic continues in miniature. Rooms function simultaneously as bedrooms, workplaces, waiting areas, storage, and sometimes children's living environments. Domestic objects and work objects share the same compressed surfaces. There is no spatial separation between labour and rest, between the transaction and the private body. This collapse is not incidental. It is the spatial consequence of a system that does not recognise sex workers as residents with domestic needs — only as workers with a function. A room cannot protect sleep if it is also the site of transaction. It cannot offer privacy if access to it is controlled by others. The architecture of the room reflects the status of the person inside it.

What GB Road reveals, more starkly than anywhere else in Old Delhi, is an inversion of the usual rules of gendered space. Across the city, women are expected to minimise their public visibility — to move purposefully, avoid drawing attention, remain at the edge of spaces they were not designed for. At GB Road, this is reversed. Sex workers are required to be visible. Their economic survival depends on being seen, on occupying the balcony, on making their presence legible to the street below. But this visibility does not grant them freedom. It does not move them to the centre of the space. It fixes them within a specific frame — hyper-visible, yet socially excluded; necessary to the district's economy, yet confined to its spatial and moral margins.

The inversion is the point. Most women in the city are restricted from entering male-dominated public space. Sex workers are confined within a space where their presence is simultaneously required and stigmatised. Both conditions are produced by the same underlying logic — the logic of respectability that defines which women belong where, and on what terms.

GB Road does not sit outside the city's gendered order. It is its clearest spatial expression: the place where the city concentrates what it cannot otherwise accommodate, and then uses the concentration as proof that the women inside deserve no better.

Chapter 7

Sex work, an intangible heritage?

The previous chapters have traced a history that is both spatial and gendered: one in which women participated in the cultural and urban life of Shahjahanabad, while the spaces associated with them were progressively transformed, marginalised or erased. Rather than returning to this history, this chapter asks what its survival means for heritage.

The question is particularly relevant in the case of GB Road. Here, heritage does not present itself as an intact monument or a clearly preserved historical typology. It survives unevenly—in altered buildings, fragmented architectural elements, spatial relationships, cultural memory and forms of occupation that have undergone significant transformation. To recognise this landscape as heritage therefore requires moving beyond an understanding of conservation concerned primarily with the preservation of exceptional physical objects.

This chapter asks a deliberately difficult question: can the cultural and spatial history associated with the kotha, and its transformation into the contemporary landscape of sex work, be understood as heritage? The argument is not that prostitution itself should be preserved, nor that the violence and exploitation associated with it should be romanticised. Rather, the question concerns what has survived through this history: women's cultural presence, forms of social and embodied knowledge, architectural traces, collective memory, and the spatial structures through which these lives became part of the city.

Seen in this way, GB Road presents a particular challenge to conventional heritage practice. Its significance lies precisely in the fact that its history is neither monumental nor comfortable. Recognising it requires asking not only what survives, but what has been considered worthy of remembering.

7.1 The Gendered Archive

Before speaking of intangible heritage, it is necessary to confront a more basic problem within Indian urban history—the archive itself is gendered. In the popular imagination and in much conventional heritage discourse, the city continues to be narrated as though it were made almost entirely by men. As Swapna Liddle notes, the physical and cultural fabric of Shahjahanabad bore the clear imprint of women patrons from its inception, while public narratives of Delhi still disproportionately foreground imperial male figures.[1] This imbalance is not simply a historiographic error. It is a heritage problem. What is remembered, named, restored, and interpreted becomes part of the city's legitimate past; what is omitted slips into obscurity.

As described in chapter 2, Women such as Jahanara Begum, Roshanara Begum, Qudsia Begum, Zeenat Mahal, Mubarak Begum, and Begum Samru shaped Delhi through streets, gardens, mosques, havelis, sarais, political interiors, and performance cultures, yet their contributions are often under-credited, moralised, fragmented, or absorbed into male-centred narratives. Jahanara's authorship is overshadowed by Shah Jahan's imperial legacy, Roshanara and Qudsia's gardens survive through altered and partial memories, Zeenat Mahal is remembered more through intrigue than spatial power, Mubarak Begum through sexualised insult, and Begum Samru through scandal rather than the complexity of courtesan agency. These histories show that *women were not absent from the making of Delhi— rather, their presence has been repeatedly softened, distorted, or pushed to the margins of heritage memory*. This wider pattern makes it possible to understand the erasure of the Tawaifs, Kothas, and sex workers not as an exception, but as part of a longer feminist problem within the way Delhi remembers itself.

A market may continue to function, and a mosque may still stand, but if the female histories embedded in those spaces are neither interpreted nor publicly valued, then a crucial layer of heritage has already been lost. This is why feminist history matters to conservation as a method for recovering the hidden authorship, labour, and cultural memory that shape the meaning of urban sites and not just as an act of symbolic inclusion alone

Read in this way, erased feminist history becomes central to the question of intangible heritage. Before one can argue that the Kotha, the Bazaar, or the gendered practices of urban life constitute heritage, one must first acknowledge how women have repeatedly been written out of the city's legitimate memory. Women did not merely inhabit Delhi — they shaped it, financed it, spiritualized it, and gave it public form. To recover these histories is therefore not an ornamental feminist gesture. It is a necessary act of heritage repair. Only then can one begin to understand intangible heritage not simply as custom or performance, but as a field of memory structured by power: a field in which some lives are monumentalized while others are silenced, misnamed, or left to decay.

7.2 What Is Intangible Heritage? Definitions, Scope, and Limits

If erased feminist history reveals how women have been left out of the city's authorised memory, the next question is how such memory might be recovered. It is here that the concept of intangible heritage comes in play. Generic heritage models in India focus primarily on monuments, ruins, and architecturally exceptional fabric; intangible heritage draws attention to the practices, meanings, skills, social worlds, and cultural memories that give places their continued life. It allows heritage to be understood not only as stone and façade, but as a lived relationship between people, space, and memory.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible

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Hussain, Ashna. "Jahanara Begum: Self-representation in the Public Space." *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (2020): 134–154.

Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage as ***"the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills– as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."***[2] UNESCO further emphasizes that such heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, constantly recreated in response to social and historical conditions, and provides communities with a sense of identity and continuity.[3] This definition is significant because it shifts the focus of heritage away from permanence alone and toward continuity, recognition, and cultural meaning. It also explicitly includes associated cultural spaces. Heritage, in this sense, does not reside only in a building as an object, but also in the spatial settings through which social practices are performed, remembered, and reproduced.[4]

UNESCO groups intangible cultural heritage into broad domains such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship.[5] Yet these categories should not be read too rigidly. In real urban life, such practices often overlap. A single social world may include performance, etiquette, bodily knowledge, ritualized behaviour, language, spatial codes, and forms of labour all at once. This is precisely why the concept is useful here. The world of the kotha cannot be reduced to one cultural activity. It was simultaneously a performance culture, a form of urban sociability, a gendered economy, a knowledge system, and a spatial order.

Indian heritage discourse also provides useful support for this broader understanding. ***The INTACH Charter states that intangible heritage includes "traditional building skills and knowledge, rites and rituals, social life and lifestyles of the inhabitants,"*** and argues that together with built fabric these constitute the "living heritage" of a place.[5] This is a particularly valuable formulation for this thesis because it resists the separation of architecture from the lives that animate it. A Haveli, Bazaar, mosque, or kotha cannot be fully understood apart from the practices, codes of conduct, forms of labour, and social memory that give meaning to its spaces. INTACH's guidelines for documentation similarly include "Intangible (Living) Heritage" as a distinct field of heritage listing, suggesting that living practices and associated environments are not peripheral to Indian conservation thinking, even if they are often less visibly acted upon in practice.[6]

By contrast, the institutional framework of the Archaeological Survey of India has historically remained far more monument-centred. The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 is primarily concerned with the preservation of "ancient and historical monuments and archaeological sites and remains of national importance."[7] ASI's public-facing language likewise continues to foreground monuments as material remains representing the culture, art, architecture, and technologies of the past.[8] While this framework has been

2. UNESCO. "*Intangible Cultural Heritage*." Accessed March 20, 2026.
3. UNESCO. "*What Is Intangible Heritage*?" Accessed March 20, 2026.
4. UNESCO. *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. 2003. Accessed March 20, 2026.
5. UNESCO

crucial for the protection of India's major built heritage, it also reveals a structural limitation—*heritage becomes easiest to recognize when it is old, monumental, and materially legible. Practices, uncomfortable histories, and socially stigmatized cultural worlds often fall outside that frame.* This matters greatly in the case of GB Road. Its significance lies not in monumental grandeur but in the layered history of women's labour, performance, visibility, stigma, and survival that has become embedded in a difficult urban landscape. *This kind of practice, in reality, only preserves the 'Ajmeri Gate', which sits at the end of GB Road*, while neglecting the heritage of the road and its culture, which is where the gap in the understanding and recognition of cultural heritage in intangible form exists.

For a heritage architect, this distinction is critical. Intangible heritage does not replace the material city; it changes how the material city is read. It asks not only what survives physically, but what ways of life, what forms of memory, and what cultural worlds remain attached to those spaces even after their social status has been degraded. In the case of Old Delhi, this means asking whether heritage can include not only the monumental heritage, but also the gendered cultural practices that once animated the city and the marginalized histories that still cling to their transformed spatial remains.

7.3 Why Sex Work Rarely Enters Heritage Discourse

Once intangible heritage is understood as living practice, associated space, and transmitted cultural memory, the exclusion of sex work from heritage discourse becomes harder to justify. The question is no longer whether heritage can include social worlds, performative traditions, and embodied knowledge. It clearly can. The real question is why some social worlds are embraced as heritage while others are denied that status.

The answer lies not in the absence of historical depth or cultural significance, but in the politics of recognition. Heritage is never a neutral inventory of everything old or meaningful. It is a selective system shaped by institutions, morality, tourism, nationalism, and public comfort. *What becomes heritage is often what can be narrated with pride. What remains outside heritage discourse is often what disrupts that pride.*

This research shows that women's sexual and performative labour did not disappear from Delhi's history; it was gradually recoded. Through colonial regulation, nationalist morality, and planning neglect, a once-visible cultural world was pushed into segregation, stigma, and political abandonment. The shift was not simply from the elaborate Kotha of a Tawaif to today's G.B. Road brothel, but from recognition to containment.

6. Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). "*Listing and Documentation*." Accessed March 20, 2026.
7. Government of India. *The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act*, 1958. Accessed March 20, 2026.
8. Archaeological Survey of India. "*Monuments/Sites*." Accessed March 20, 2026.

This is precisely why sex work is rarely discussed as heritage. It troubles the moral boundaries on which conventional heritage pride depends. Old Delhi is frequently celebrated for its historical complexity and liveliness. Yet the histories of sex work that are equally part of that layered city are usually omitted from official and popular narratives. What is protected, then, is not only what is old, but what is acceptable to see.

Seen from this perspective, ***the absence of sex work from heritage discourse is not evidence that it lacks heritage value.*** It is evidence that heritage discourse itself is structured by respectability politics. Women's labour becomes narratable only when it can be detached from sexuality, shame, and material discomfort. This is why courtesans may be remembered in romantic fragments, while actual red-light districts are excluded from the sphere of civic care. It is also why built heritage frameworks can preserve the Haveli, the mosque, and the Bazaar, yet fail to recognise the gendered histories and embodied practices that once connected these spaces to a more complex urban culture.

7.4 From Tawaif Culture to GB Road: What Exactly Is the Heritage Here?

To argue that sex work or Kotha-culture belongs within heritage discourse, it is necessary to be precise about what is being claimed. The argument is not that exploitation, coercion, or violence should be preserved. Nor is it enough to say vaguely that prostitution has "history." The heritage value lies in a more complex assemblage—in the cultural practices, knowledge systems, spatial arrangements, social memory, and feminine urban presence that developed around the kotha world and that continue, however damaged, to shape the identity of places such as G.B. Road.

First, there is the '*heritage of performing arts and aesthetic culture*'. As earlier chapters have shown, the **Tawaif world was deeply tied to music, poetry, dance, mehfil culture, and forms of literary and social refinement. The Kotha functioned as a site where artistic traditions were performed, transmitted, and cultivated.** These were not incidental embellishments to sex work but central components of an entire cultural economy. Even when those traditions later declined under colonial and nationalist pressures, the memory of the kotha as a place of performance remained embedded in urban culture and in the social imagination of Old Delhi.

Second, there is the *'heritage of social practice and feminine publicness'.* The Kotha was not simply a private room of transaction. In its earlier form, it operated as **a carefully staged environment of reception, conversation, etiquette, and negotiation**. It enabled a mode of female visibility in the city that did not conform to the domestic ideal but was nevertheless culturally legible and, at certain moments, socially influential. This thesis repeatedly shows that the city once accommodated forms of women's public presence that were more complex than the later binary between respectable woman and immoral woman. The loss of that world is not only the loss of a profession, but the loss of an alternative model of urban femininity.

Third, there is the *'heritage of embodied knowledge'*. Kotha culture involved skills that were transmitted through practice: **musical training, bodily discipline, codes of dress and comportment, linguistic refinement, knowledge of hosting and performing, and the social intelligence required to negotiate patronage, danger, visibility, and reputation.**

Fourth, and most importantly for architecture, there is the *'heritage of associated cultural spaces'.* UNESCO's definition is especially useful here because it explicitly allows intangible heritage to include cultural spaces associated with practices.[9] This means that the significance of the kotha lies not only in what happened inside it, but in how architecture and urban form made those practices possible. **Upper floors, jharokhas, balconies, lattice screens, mehfil rooms, staircases, layered thresholds, and the bazaar-edge location of these spaces all formed part of a spatial culture of controlled visibility.** This architectural research shows that the contemporary brothel on GB Road is not a completely separate typology, but a stressed and subdivided descendant of older courtyard houses and kothas. What has changed is not simply the building, but the social value attached to it.

What survives on GB Road is not a perfect historic object waiting to be restored. What survives is a damaged but legible residue of a much older socio-spatial world. The architecture has been eroded, overcrowded, and morally downgraded; however, it still carries traces of an urban system in which women's labour, performance, and visibility were organised in very particular ways. The brothel buildings of GB Road can be read as records of broader social shifts, including the decline of courtesan culture and the increasing stigmatization of sex work.

9. UNESCO. *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. 2003. Accessed March 20, 2026.

7.5 How the Previous Chapters Have Already Proven This

The argument for intangible heritage does not appear suddenly at this point in the thesis. In many ways, each of the previous chapters has already contributed a different part of it.

Chapter 1 **established the problem.** The first encounter with G.B. Road revealed a street shaped by stigma, gendered visibility and spatial contradiction: a public realm overwhelmingly occupied by men, while the women whose labour defines the identity of the street remain largely confined to the upper floors. The divide between the commercial street below and the brothels above introduced the central question of the thesis: how certain bodies, histories and forms of labour can remain present within the city while simultaneously being denied legitimacy, care and recognition.

Chapter 2 **established historical continuity, but also historical erasure.** By tracing women's roles within the cultural and urban life of Shahjahanabad—from female patrons and urban figures to tawaifs and the world of the kotha—the chapter showed that women were not marginal to the making of the city. Sexual and performative labour existed within a much broader cultural world of music, poetry, dance, patronage, sociability and architectural space. Colonial regulation, reformist morality and later nationalist ideas of respectability gradually fractured

this relationship, collapsing the courtesan into the category of the prostitute and pushing her spaces from cultural visibility towards stigma and containment. G.B. Road therefore emerges not as an isolated anomaly, but as part of a much longer history of women's presence being reclassified, controlled and selectively forgotten.

Chapter 3 **brought this history into the present.** Through field observation, mapping and the reconstruction of three brothel buildings, the thesis examined how these longer processes are experienced spatially today. Hidden staircases, narrow corridors, barred openings, overcrowded rooms, restricted access to light and ventilation, and the sharp vertical separation between commerce below and sex work above reveal that marginalisation is not only historical or symbolic. It has a physical and architectural condition. The present-day brothel becomes evidence of how exclusion has settled into the ordinary spaces of everyday life.

Chapter 4 **established architectural and typological continuity.** The comparison between historical havelis, kothas and contemporary brothel buildings does not claim a simple or direct transformation from one type into another. Instead, it identifies fragments of an inherited spatial logic that have been progressively altered under pressure. Courtyards disappear beneath later construction, collective spaces are subdivided, circulation is compressed, openings are enclosed and increasingly more functions are forced into increasingly less space. What appears at first to be a completely different architectural condition can therefore also be read as an older spatial structure that has been repeatedly adapted, extracted from and deprived of care. The transformation itself becomes part of the architectural record.

Chapter 5 **established that this transformation cannot be understood as neutral deterioration**. Reading G.B. Road through violence showed how stigma, legal precarity, overcrowding, confinement, inadequate infrastructure, surveillance and prolonged neglect become spatial and structural forms of harm. Architecture does not simply contain violence after it occurs; it can absorb, reproduce and normalise the conditions through which violence continues. The deteriorated brothel is therefore not simply a neglected building, but evidence of the unequal value assigned to the people who inhabit it.

Chapter 6 **established how this condition is gendered**. Feminist spatial theory made visible the unequal distribution of mobility, access, safety, privacy and visibility across G.B. Road. The recurring line between street and upper floor, public and hidden, masculine and feminine, legitimate and stigmatised is not merely metaphorical. It is produced through windows, grills, stairs, corridors, thresholds and patterns of occupation. Gendered power is therefore materially organised through the built environment, making the question of heritage inseparable from questions of space.

Taken together, these chapters do more than provide background to a heritage argument. They establish a historical lineage, a process of cultural erasure, surviving architectural and spatial traces, continuing forms of occupation and memory, and a contemporary condition shaped by the consequences of

that history. The cultural world associated with tawaifs, kothas and sex work survives neither as an intact tradition nor as a preserved architectural type, but through fragments, transformations, practices, memories and spatial relationships.

The question for heritage is therefore no longer simply whether something of significance exists here. It is whether heritage discourse is capable of recognising value when that value survives in an altered, uncomfortable and morally contested form.

7.6 Ethical Clarification: What Is Being Preserved, and What Is Not

At this stage, an ethical clarification is necessary. As the argument from the first chapter stated, Kotha-culture or the histories of sex work belong within intangible heritage discourse is not to romanticize prostitution, nor to deny the violence, coercion, trafficking, exploitation, and precarity that have shaped many women's lives. The aim is to clarify that violence is central to this history and to the present condition of GB Road. It appears not only as physical harm, but as structural neglect, legal precarity, spatial confinement, surveillance, and the denial of dignity.

The point, rather, is that violence cannot be allowed to erase history altogether. To preserve heritage in this context is not to preserve oppression, but to preserve memory, complexity, and the possibility of recognition. What is being safeguarded is the record of women's labour, artistic traditions, social worlds, architectural traces, and embodied knowledge that have been systematically pushed out of legitimate urban memory.

This distinction matters deeply. Difficult heritage is still heritage. In fact, some of the most urgent heritage work begins precisely where memory has become uncomfortable. If heritage is restricted only to that which is celebratory, picturesque, or morally easy, then it ceases to be an honest account of the city. A heritage approach to sex work does not seek to freeze existing conditions or defend exploitation. It seeks to interrupt the total disappearance of a history that has already been punished first by stigma and then by forgetting.

7.7 Why This Must Become a Heritage Issue

Old Delhi is already understood as a place of layered history, living traditions, mixed uses, intense social memory, and contested urban identity. It is celebrated precisely because it is not a dead museum but a dense and active historic environment. Yet the histories of sex work that have unfolded within the same urban fabric are left outside that narrative, as though they do not belong.

This research challenges that separation. It shows that GB Road sits within the same historic world as the monuments that receive recognition and care, yet it does not receive the same narrative legitimacy. The contrast is not accidental. It reveals that heritage in practice is shaped by selective comfort.

Some histories are curated into pride, while others are displaced into shame.

For a heritage architect, this is not a minor omission. It reveals a structural flaw in how the city is understood and remembered. Women's narratives have long been pushed to the edges of Delhi's history, not only because some are considered sexually or morally uncomfortable, but because patriarchal systems have repeatedly treated women's authorship, labour, mobility, and public presence as secondary to male-centred accounts of power. If Old Delhi's value lies in its layered and living heritage, then its difficult feminine histories cannot be excluded from that story. The Kotha, the courtesan, the brothel building, the upper-floor window, the invisible line between street and woman are all a part of the city's historic urban condition. To leave them out is to accept a partial and masculinised version of Delhi's heritage. Heritage, in this thesis, becomes a way of confronting historical discomfort rather than hiding it: reading the city not only through glory and grandeur, but also through erasure, stigma, labour, and unequal citizenship.

7.8 From Recognition to Safeguarding

Recognition alone, however, is insufficient. Once the histories and spaces associated with GB Road are acknowledged as carrying heritage value, a more difficult question follows: what should be safeguarded, and what should be allowed to change?

This distinction is particularly important in a context shaped by violence, exploitation, stigma and spatial confinement. To recognise the heritage associated with sex work is not to preserve these conditions, nor to romanticise the circumstances through which women have inhabited them. Heritage cannot become an argument for maintaining suffering simply because suffering has acquired historical depth.

What requires safeguarding instead are the histories, memories, cultural knowledge, architectural traces and spatial relationships through which women's presence remains embedded in the city. These may include a surviving balcony or threshold, the relationship between upper floor and street, the memory of collective and cultural practices, or the broader architectural lineage through which spaces associated with women have been repeatedly adapted and transformed.

At the same time, the conditions that restrict dignity, safety and agency must remain open to intervention. Overcrowding, confinement, unsafe circulation, exclusion and the loss of collective space are not heritage values to be protected. The distinction between safeguarding history and preserving harmful conditions allows conservation to become a critical rather than nostalgic practice.

Safeguarding in this context therefore cannot mean freezing GB Road at a particular moment in time. Nor can it mean reconstructing the kotha as an image of a supposedly more desirable past. Both approaches would reduce a complex and continuously transformed history to a static architectural object. Instead, safeguarding can operate through making traces legible, retaining significant spatial relationships, transmitting memory and creating conditions in which the existing fabric can continue to change without its histories disappearing with it.

This also expands the possible role of the heritage architect. Intervention need not always begin with restoration. It may begin by revealing what has been obscured, creating visibility for what has been forgotten, reopening spaces that have been lost to everyday life, or introducing new forms of occupation that respond to contemporary needs while remaining attentive to the histories already embedded there.

The objective is therefore not to conserve GB Road against change, but to negotiate change without erasure.

This shifts the final question of the thesis. Having established that heritage can reside not only in monuments but also in difficult histories, cultural memory, altered architecture and everyday spatial practices, the question is no longer simply whether GB Road should be recognised as heritage.

It becomes an architectural question:

How can intervention reveal what has been forgotten, reclaim what has been lost, and create space for care without erasing the complexity of what remains?

Chapter 8

Re: *Reveal, Reclaim, Repose*

8.0 From Recognition to Spatial Action

The previous chapter established that the histories embedded within GB Road cannot be understood only through the survival of individual buildings or architectural elements. They persist through memory, cultural practices, altered spatial relationships and the material traces of a much longer history of women's presence in Shahjahanabad. The project begins from this recognition and asks what it might mean to respond to such a heritage architecturally.

The intention is not to reconstruct a lost version of the city, nor to return GB Road to an imagined historical condition. Equally, it does not attempt to erase the accumulated transformations that have shaped the area in the name of conservation. The contemporary brothel buildings, their altered façades, compressed interiors, contested thresholds and surrounding public spaces are themselves products of this history. Intervention therefore begins by working with what remains.

The project operates through a series of strategic spatial gestures at urban, street and building scales. Some are concerned with making histories visible; others with creating greater possibilities for occupation, gathering and retreat. Together, they attempt to negotiate between the conservation of memory and the needs of contemporary life.

This approach shifts conservation away from the idea of restoring a finished historical object. Instead, the project asks how architecture might reveal, reclaim, and care.

At the urban scale, the intervention reveals. A Lost Heritage Trail reconnects dispersed histories of women across Shahjahanabad and brings them into the contemporary experience of the city. The trail works through traces, narratives, surviving fragments and small spatial interventions that shed light on what has become difficult to see.

At the scale of the street, the project reclaims. The focus shifts from historical visibility to the everyday occupation of GB Road by the women who live and work there today. The intervention creates greater possibilities for women to pause, gather, work, play and carry out ordinary domestic activities beyond the confines of overcrowded interiors and allows surviving architectural traces of the brothel buildings to become more legible.

At the building scale, care is translated into repose. The rooftop is approached as a space of retreat from both the compression of the brothel interior and the exposure of the street below. Through light and adaptable interventions, it becomes a safe social space for gathering, resting and informal occupation.

The movement between the three scales is also a movement through different relationships with visibility. The urban intervention asks that forgotten women be remembered.

The project drawings follow this same logic. Each proposal is presented through an existing and proposed condition, allowing the intervention to be read in relation to the spatial problem from which it emerges. The project works primarily through addition, subtraction and soft transformation. It may remove visual obstruction rather than reconstruct a façade; introduce shade or seating rather than create a new building; open a space for collective use rather than dictate exactly how that space must function. These gestures seek to produce greater spatial possibility while remaining attentive to the complexity and density of the existing city.

8.0.1 What Can Be Revealed, Reclaimed and Reposed?

The conditions surrounding G.B. Road extend far beyond architecture. Trafficking, economic exploitation, legal precarity, health inequalities, stigma and broader structures of gendered inequality cannot be resolved through spatial intervention alone. To frame these conditions primarily as architectural problems would risk reducing complex political and social realities to questions of design.

Spatial design can influence how people encounter one another, where they are able to gather, how easily they can withdraw, which histories are made visible, and which forms of everyday life are given room to occur. It can create shade where there is exposure, collective space where there is compression, legibility where heritage has become obscured, and occupation opportunities where spatial possibilities have narrowed.

These changes remain only one component of a much larger ecology of care. Social organisations, health programmes, legal support networks, community initiatives and the women themselves already negotiate many of the conditions that architecture cannot address. Spatial intervention should therefore not replace these systems, but where possible provide more supportive environments within which they and other forms of collective life can operate.

Existing practices, adaptations and coping mechanisms are treated as forms of knowledge rather than obstacles to design. Intervention begins with observation and works selectively, attempting to strengthen spatial possibilities without imposing a singular image of what the area should become.

For this reason, the proposals remain intentionally open-ended. Their value does not depend on remaining exactly as drawn. Spaces may be appropriated, programmes may shift and new forms of use may develop. The intervention establishes conditions for occupation rather than prescribing behaviour.

The architectural project can therefore be understood as the beginning of a process rather than its conclusion. Its immediate task is to reveal what has been obscured, reclaim spatial possibilities that have been diminished, and create conditions for care. What these spaces may become through repeated occupation is allowed to remain open.

8.1 **Reveal**

The existing city contains multiple layers of heritage, commerce, infrastructure, gendered occupation and everyday activity, yet the histories associated with women remain fragmented within this larger urban narrative.

The first step is therefore one of mapping and recognition. Existing heritage sites, female heritage, former brothel locations, markets, transport connections, important landmarks and gendered patterns of occupation are read together rather than as separate systems. The purpose of this mapping is to understand their relationships and identify where connections are missing.

From this reading, the Lost Heritage Trail is introduced as a new layer within the existing city. It connects sites associated with women's histories while also working through the spaces between them. Rather than treating each heritage point as an isolated destination, the project introduces a sequence of small urban catalysts that allow the route itself to become part of the heritage experience.

These catalysts operate through a common but adaptable spatial language. Trees provide shade and mark moments of pause; benches and water points support rest and observation; public amenities such as restrooms make longer movement through the historic city more accessible; paving and manhole covers incorporating Mughal-inspired motifs create a subtle visual continuity between otherwise disconnected places. Together, these elements act as spatial clues, making the trail readable without separating it from the everyday life of Shahjahanabad.

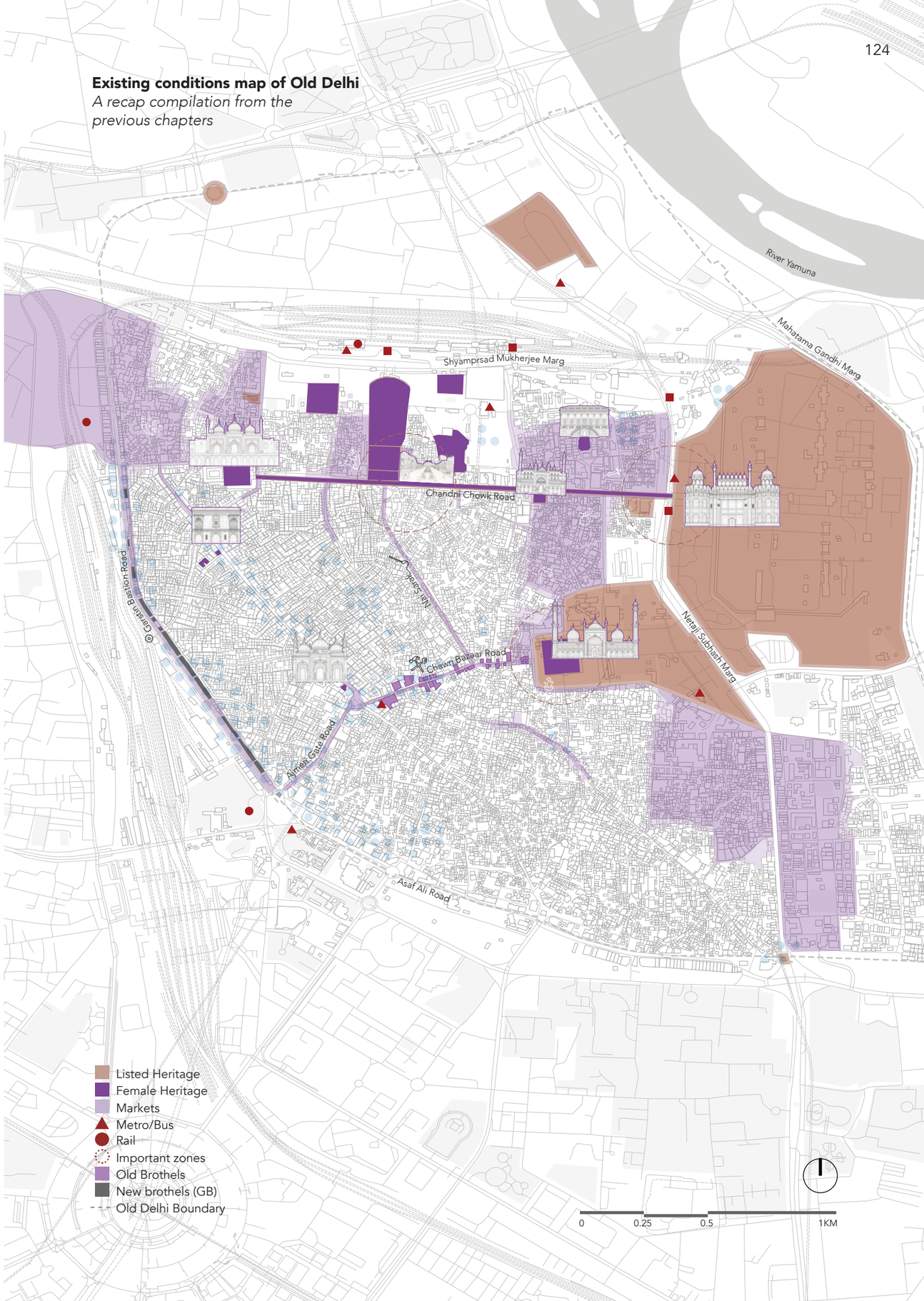
The project therefore does not attempt to monumentalise every forgotten history. Instead, it works through small acts of visibility by decolonising the existing belief of monumental heritage. A pavement detail may draw attention to a site that has physically disappeared; a place to sit may encourage a longer encounter with an overlooked building; an information point may reintroduce the name and story of a woman whose presence has become detached from the contemporary reading of the city.

The trail is conceived as a sequence of moments of encounter rather than a collection of monuments. Existing heritage provides the anchors, while the new catalysts bridge the gaps between them, allowing memory to extend beyond the boundaries of the surviving object.
In such cases, the intervention does not reconstruct what is absent. Instead, it gives absence a spatial presence through movement, narrative and repetition. Walking becomes a way of tracing a history that can no longer always be seen directly.

The project consequently approaches heritage as a network rather than a series of isolated protected objects. Female histories are reconnected to markets, streets, religious structures, former cultural quarters and contemporary urban life, allowing them to become part of a broader reading of Shahjahanabad.

At this scale, architecture therefore acts primarily through revelation. It sheds light on what has become difficult to see, creates connections between fragments and re-inscribes women's histories into the everyday experience of the city.

Existing conditions map of Old Delhi
A recap compilation from the previous chapters





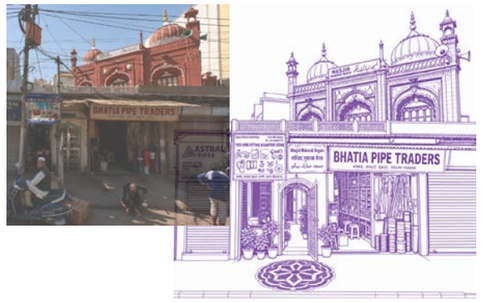
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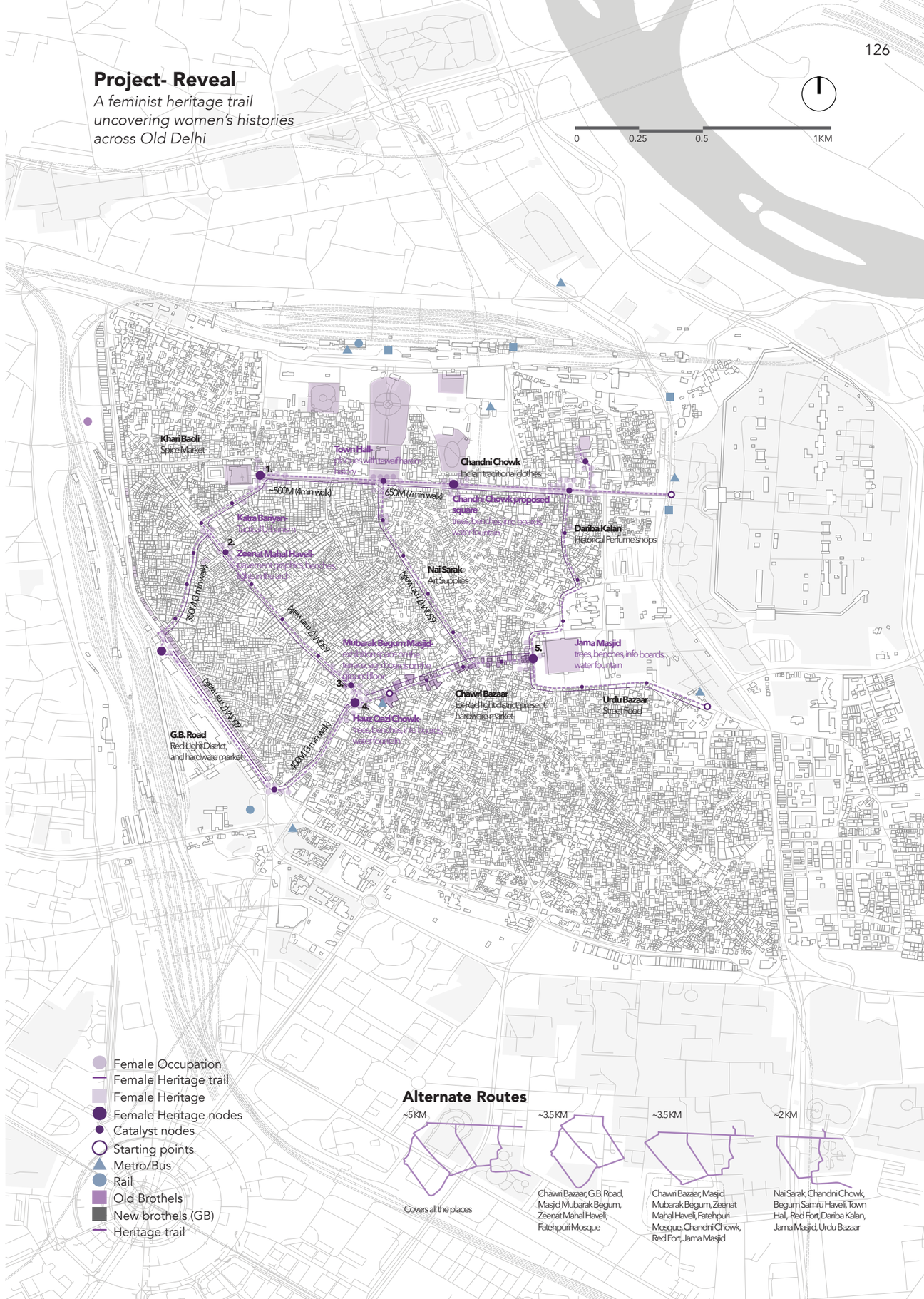
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Project- Reveal

A feminist heritage trail uncovering women's histories across Old Delhi



8.2 **Reclaim**

8.2.1 Making Room for Everyday Life

At GB Road, the project shifts from historical visibility to contemporary occupation, asking how women might gain greater access to the street and its collective care infrastructure.

The street is intensely active, but unevenly occupied. Commerce, traffic and male-dominated activity shape much of the public realm, while women remain associated with upper floors, balconies and thresholds. The intervention therefore treats the street as a collective spatial system, rather than simply a corridor of movement.

Existing healthcare facilities, NGOs, schools, public toilets and other support functions are connected through a more inhabitable public realm. Residual areas are reactivated for play, social activity, small-scale commerce and organised parking, replacing inactive zones with spaces of mixed and continuous occupation.

These spaces also respond to the loss of collective areas within the brothels, where corridors, courtyards and shared spaces were progressively enclosed and subdivided. Rather than reconstructing them, the project seeks to recover their spatial capacity. Playgrounds support children and caregivers; commercial spaces allow small-scale economic activity; and outdoor areas accommodate cooking, washing, sitting and gathering beyond overcrowded interiors.

The street thus recovers something of the collective function once present in the tawaif quarter: not its historical form, but its capacity to extend social and everyday life beyond the individual room.

8.2.2 Reclaiming the Colonnade

The colonnade becomes a key threshold. Currently dominated by circulation and commerce, it is reworked to allow women to pause, sit, meet and loiter. Loitering is treated as a spatial right: the possibility of occupying public space without being tied to work, consumption or movement. Rather than creating an isolated women-only zone, the intervention diversifies occupation and softens the existing gendered character of the colonnade, transforming it from a hard boundary into an inhabited threshold.

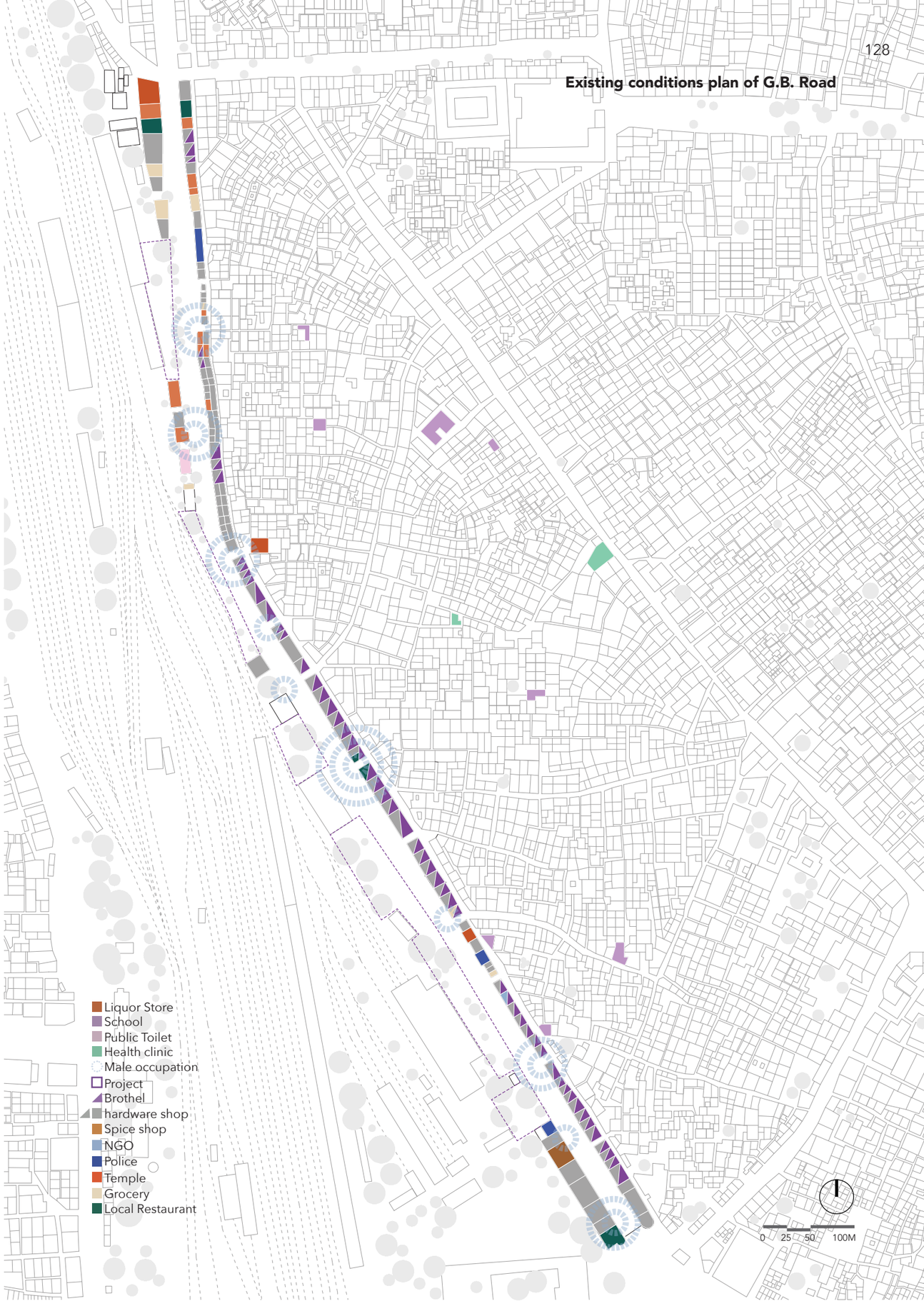
8.2.3 Revealing the Brothel Buildings

Reclamation also concerns architectural visibility. Commercial signage, grills and incremental additions currently obscure much of the surviving façade.

Rather than stripping these layers away, signboards are rationalised and reduced to a consistent scale, allowing balconies, openings, columns and façade proportions to become more legible.

This is selective revelation rather than aesthetic cleansing. Contemporary commerce remains part of the street, while the architecture behind it becomes visible as a layered record of transformation.

Together, these interventions reclaim public presence, collective space, care infrastructure and architectural legibility—not by simplifying GB Road, but by creating more room within its existing intensity.









Women's commons
seating, waiting, loitering, informal gathering

Mix Colonnade
reclaiming the street and making it function as a system for the residents of G.B. Road

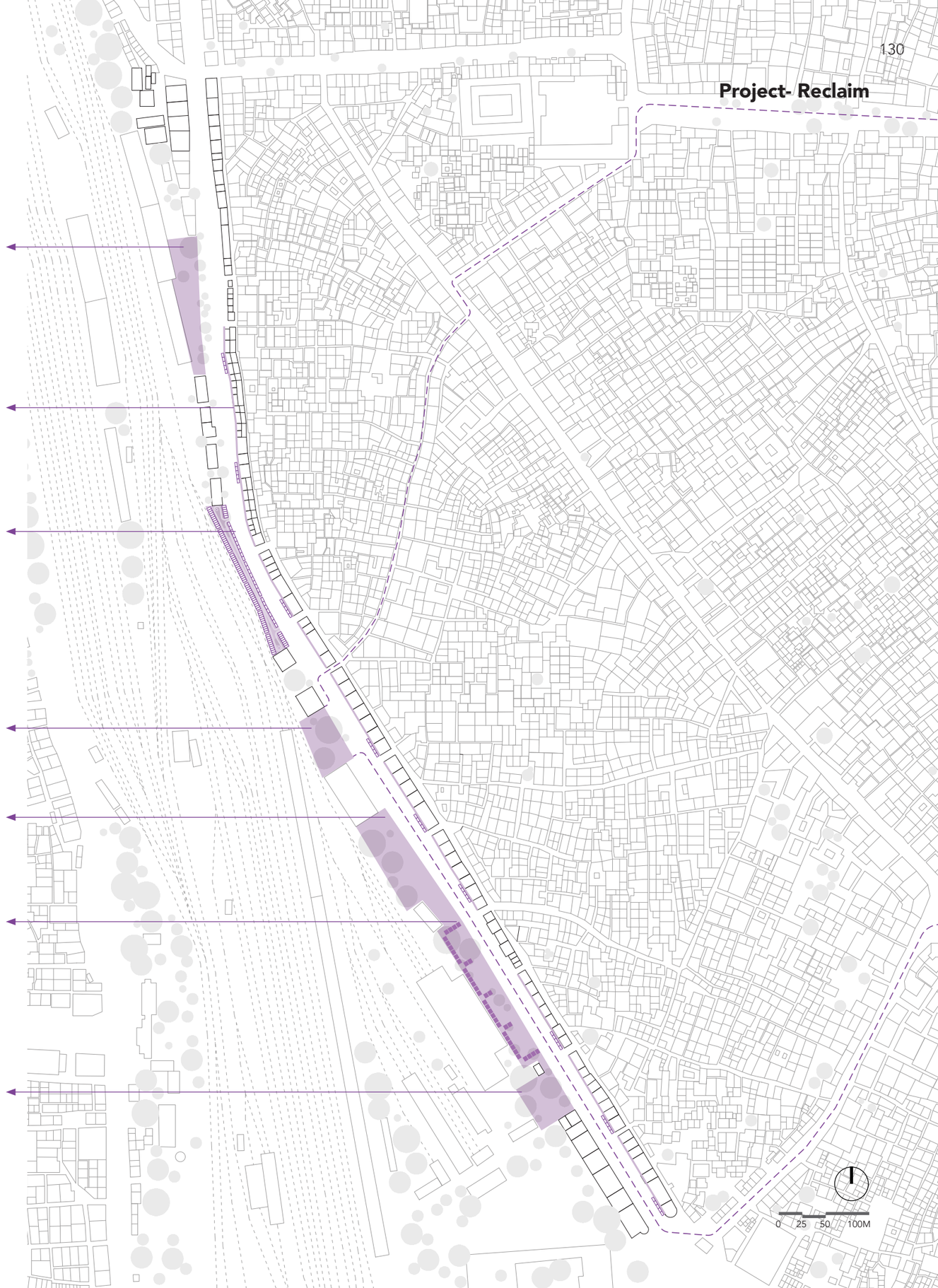
Managed Parking
organised parking replacing residual/dead roadside space

Trail Node
feminist history trail + pause/gathering point

Domestic Commons
outdoor cooking, washing, drying clothes, socialising

Market Commons
kiosks, crafts, food, informal commerce

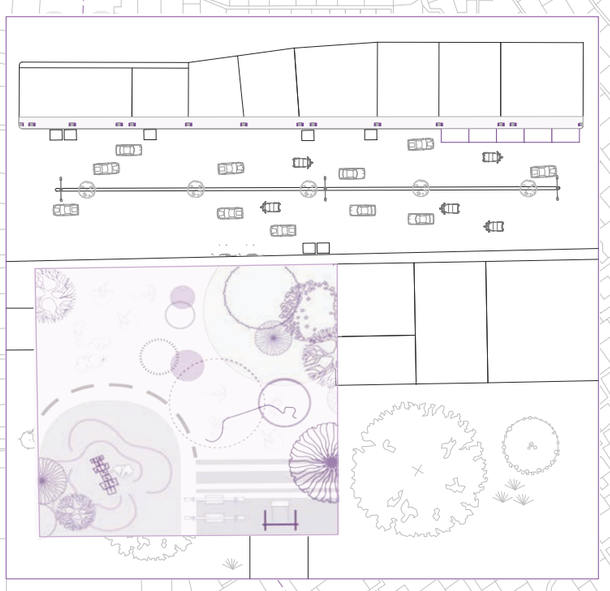
Play Commons
children's play + caregiving



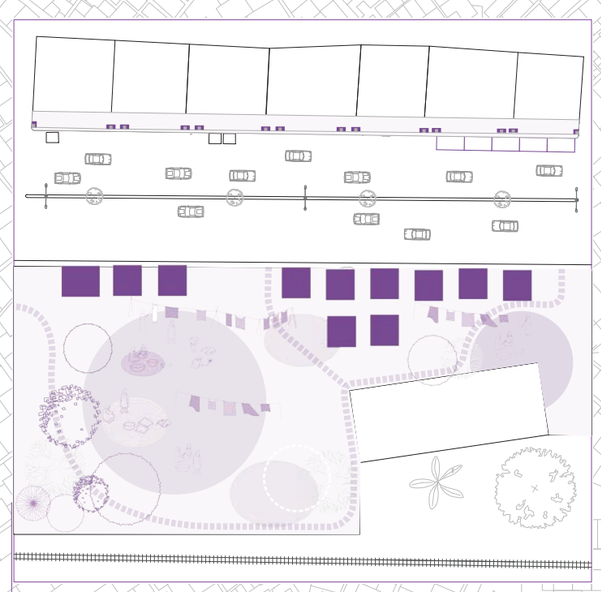




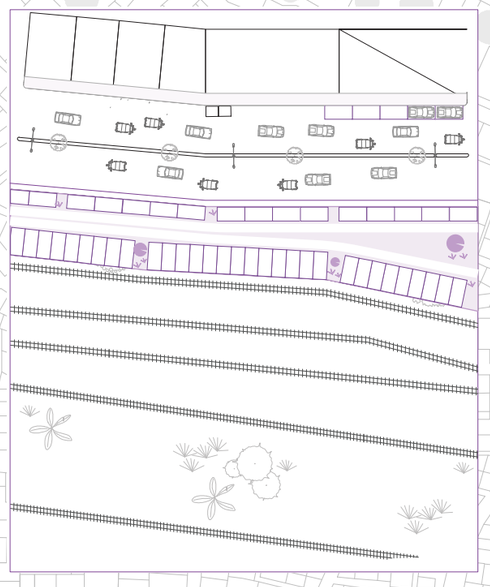




Playground



Open area for commerce and everyday activities



Vehicle Parking

Uncover

Revealing the Fabric

Standardised shop signage exposing the layered historical facade



Gather

Urban room

Creating shared common space that partly compensates for the loss of collective spaces within the brothels.

Share

Sharing the threshold

Mixing occupation of the colonnade so it is not dominated only by shops.

Mix

Activating the edge

Introducing more diverse commercial and everyday activity.

Linger

Softening the Space

Seating/loitering space for women

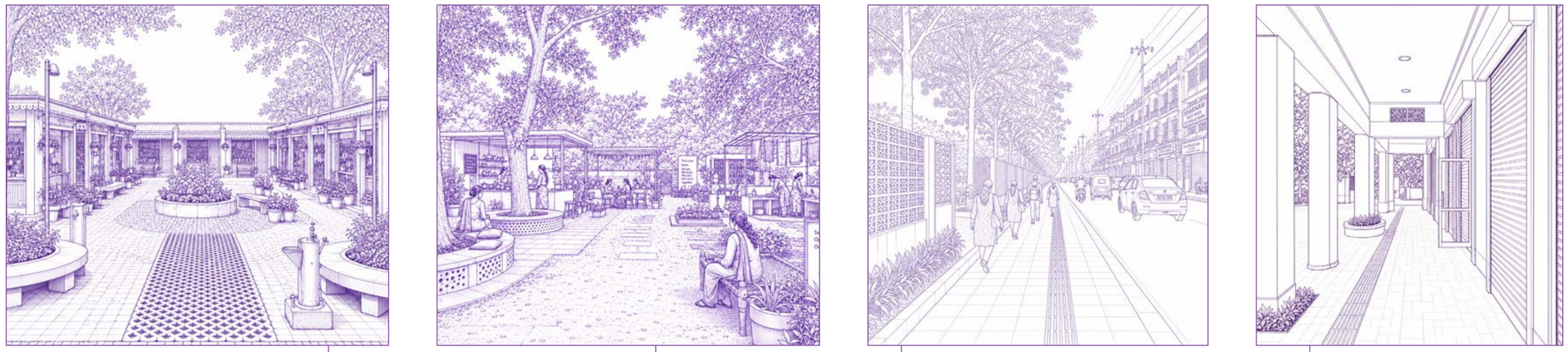
Trace

Marking memory

A pause point along the heritage trail, unveiling women's histories



Existing- *Section A-A'*





Project- *Section A-A'*

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8.3 **Repose**

At the building scale, the intervention turns away from the visibility and activity of the street toward a more intimate spatial need: the possibility of retreat.

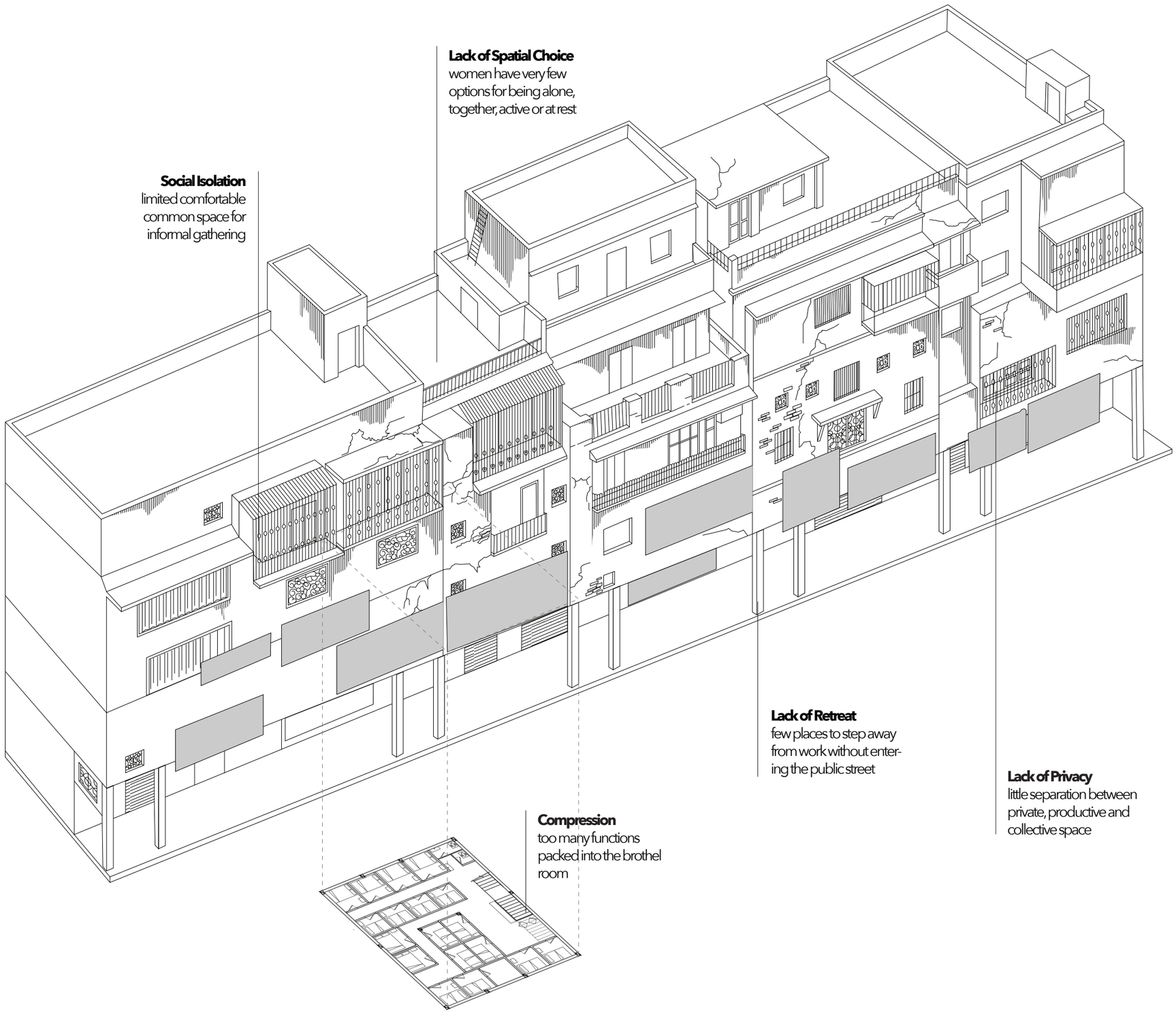
Within the brothel, a single room may accommodate several overlapping functions, leaving little distinction between productive, private and collective space. The density of occupation therefore produces physical compression and a lack of spatial choice.

The rooftop offers an opportunity to introduce a different condition without further enclosing the building.

The project reclaims the roof as a safe social space: an open and adaptable environment where women can leave the intensity of the interior without necessarily entering the public exposure of the street below.

Here, the intervention becomes deliberately light-touch. Shade, seating, planting and flexible elements provide basic conditions for comfort and occupation while avoiding a heavily programmed architectural solution. The rooftop may support conversation, rest, eating, informal gathering or moments of solitude, but its use is not prescribed in advance.

The roof provides something that the multifunctional brothel room cannot easily offer: **separation**. It creates distance from work without requiring women to leave the building; distance from the street without forcing complete enclosure; and the possibility of being social without being publicly exposed.



Project- Repose

A rooftop refuge creating space for rest, retreat and collective life

Shelter
Creating Shade

Lightweight canopies create protection from Delhi's heat without enclosing the rooftop

Breathe
Softening the Roof

Planting improves ambience, microclimate and the overall comfort of the roof

Dwell
Everyday Life

Flexible areas allow cooking, drying clothes and food, eating, sitting and other ordinary domestic activities

Nurture
Everyday Care

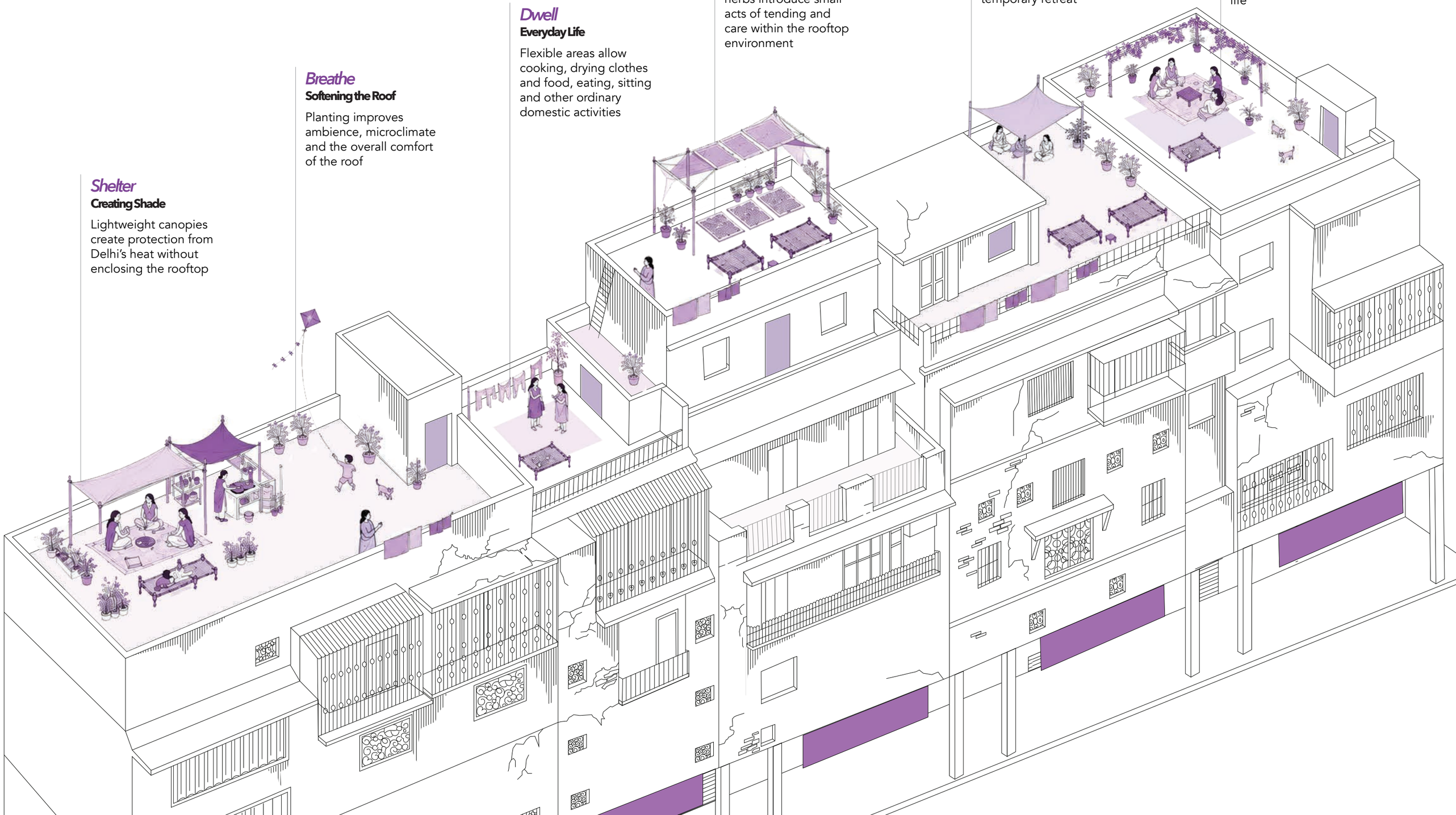
Plants, including tulsi, and drying spices and herbs introduce small acts of tending and care within the rooftop environment

Withdraw
Micro-Privacy

Curtains, furniture and small spatial divisions create places for individual rest and temporary retreat

Gather
Rooftop Commons

Shared areas support conversation, informal gathering and collective life



8.4 Over Time,

8.4.1 From Intervention to Impact

The proposed drawings represent an immediate spatial transformation, but the project is not conceived as complete at the moment of construction. Its longer-term impact depends on how the spaces, histories and networks made visible through the intervention are occupied, adapted and recognised over time.

This projection is necessarily speculative. It does not predict a fixed social outcome, nor suggest that architectural intervention alone can transform the wider political and economic conditions surrounding GB Road. Instead, it considers the possibilities that greater visibility, occupation and recognition may create over time.

8.4.2 Immediate — Reveal

The first impact of the intervention is one of legibility.

At the urban scale, the Lost Heritage Trail connects previously fragmented histories of women and gives them a visible presence within the contemporary heritage landscape of Shahjahanabad. The intervention nodes create moments of encounter between these histories and everyday movement through the city.

At GB Road, spatial and architectural traces that had become obscured are made more legible, while residual areas are opened for collective occupation. At the building scale, the rooftop introduces an additional spatial choice beyond the overcrowded interior and the exposed street.

The immediate project therefore does not attempt to transform the identity of the area. It begins by making existing histories, spaces and possibilities easier to see and access.

8.4.3 Short Term — Occupy

Through repeated use, the interventions begin to acquire meanings beyond those represented in the drawings.

Open spaces may develop rhythms of play, work, gathering and domestic activity. The colonnade may support more varied forms of occupation. Commercial spaces may be adapted according to the needs of their users, while the rooftop may develop informal patterns of social and individual use.

At this stage, the architecture begins to move from a designed intervention toward an appropriated environment. Its value increasingly depends not on the precision of its original form, but on its ability to support changing forms of everyday occupation.

8.4.4 Medium Term — Recognise

Repeated visibility and occupation may gradually alter how these places are perceived beyond the immediate community.

The heritage trail creates a public narrative through which histories that were previously dispersed or marginalised can become increasingly familiar. GB Road is no longer encountered only through the identity of a red-light district, but also through its relationship with the longer histories of women, kotha culture, architectural transformation and the urban development of Shahjahanabad.

This greater public legibility may create opportunities for documentation, research, advocacy and institutional recognition. The project therefore understands visibility not as an end in itself, but as a condition through which overlooked heritage can begin to enter wider conversations about what deserves to be recorded and safeguarded.

8.4.5 Long Term — Safeguard

Over a longer period, increased recognition may encourage heritage institutions, municipal agencies, researchers and local organisations to engage more directly with the histories and architectural traces identified through the project.

Chapter 7 demonstrated that frameworks for such recognition already partially exist. Intangible and living heritage approaches allow cultural practices, social memory and associated cultural spaces to be understood as part of the heritage value of a place. The difficulty lies less in the absence of conceptual tools than in which histories are selected for recognition.

The long-term ambition of the project is therefore to contribute to a gradual shift in this field of recognition. As neglected histories become more visible, documented and publicly legible, institutions such as heritage trusts, local conservation bodies and, where relevant, statutory heritage agencies may have a stronger basis from which to acknowledge, document and safeguard them.

Such safeguarding need not mean freezing GB Road or formally monumentalising every site along the trail. It may take different forms: documentation of vulnerable architectural elements, recognition of associated cultural histories, conservation guidance, interpretation, funding for maintenance, inclusion within heritage inventories, or partnerships with communities and organisations already working in the area.

8.4.6 CONTINUITY.

Continuity does not mean permanence of form. The spaces may be altered, maintained, extended or reprogrammed as needs change. What matters is that change does not once again result in the disappearance of the histories embedded within them.

The long-term ambition is therefore larger than the preservation of the interventions themselves. The project seeks to create the conditions through which overlooked histories may become increasingly difficult to ignore — first spatially, then publicly, and eventually within the institutions responsible for deciding what the city chooses to remember.

Epilogue

What remains

This research examined how the heritage of Shahjahanabad extends far beyond the histories made visible through its recognised monuments. Women's presence was woven into its streets, cultural practices, domestic spaces and economies, yet much of this contribution was gradually fragmented, marginalised or pushed outside dominant heritage narratives.

GB Road emerged as one of the clearest expressions of this condition. Its value was not found in an intact historical object, but in the continuity between altered architecture, cultural memory, spatial practices and women's urban histories. The transformations of the brothel buildings did not erase their significance; they became part of the record itself, carrying traces of the social and spatial pressures that reshaped them over time.

The thesis therefore established that conservation in this context could not depend on restoring an earlier image of the city. What required safeguarding were the traces through which history remained readable: architectural fragments, spatial relationships, memories and associated cultural practices. At the same time, exploitation, confinement, overcrowding and inequality could not be preserved simply because they formed part of that history.

The architectural intervention translated this distinction into spatial action. It showed how conservation could work through legibility, occupation and care without fixing GB Road into a singular historical image. It also revealed the limits of architecture: spatial intervention could create more supportive conditions and strengthen existing networks of care, but it could not independently resolve the legal, economic and social structures surrounding sex work.

The research itself was necessarily assembled through fragments. Limited access, scarce architectural documentation and an incomplete archive meant that the drawings and reconstructions remained interpretive rather than definitive. Yet this incompleteness echoed the very condition of the heritage being studied. Marginalised histories rarely survive whole; they remain scattered across buildings, memories, images and everyday traces.

Ultimately, the significance of GB Road was found precisely in what remains: altered façades and thresholds, spatial memories, fragments of women's histories, and contemporary lives continuing within them. Recognition does not require returning these fragments to what they once were. It requires allowing them to remain visible enough to be remembered, understood and carried forward.

The thesis therefore does not end by monumentalising GB Road, but by widening the field of what heritage is allowed to hold. What remains is not a complete past, but a layered one—and perhaps the task of conservation begins there: by refusing to let difficult histories disappear simply because they are uncomfortable to inherit.

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AI-Assisted Visualisation: Prompt Log

Prompt 01 — Era 1
Madhavi and Sita: Women, Ritual and Early Gendered Control

Create a long horizontal illustrated spatial portrait showing two composite women living within an early South Asian social world around 200 CE. I have constructed these figures from my literature review; do not independently invent their historical circumstances. The purpose of the image is to visualise the spatial difference between a woman whose public presence is culturally sanctioned through ritual performance and a woman whose everyday life is primarily organised through domestic labour.

On the left, show Madhavi, a composite temple performer associated with the historical spatial conditions of the Devadasi tradition. Place her within a temple complex rather than a palace: stone paving, a ritual courtyard, columns or shaded edges, oil lamps, musicians and a small gathering of people watching her perform. Her body is publicly visible and culturally significant, but the architecture should also suggest that this visibility is conditional. The temple courtyard, threshold and road should define the limits of her recognised world. She may be celebrated within this ritual space while still lacking unrestricted mobility beyond it. Avoid sexualising her or depicting her simply as an entertainer.

On the right, show Sita, a composite householder whose life is structured through domestic work and ideals of feminine duty. Place her in a modest dwelling with a small internal or semi-open courtyard, water pots, household objects and spaces for cooking and everyday work. A village well, fields or road may be visible beyond the domestic threshold, close enough to see but spatially separated from her everyday sphere. Her environment should convey the contrast between the large amount of labour performed by women within the household and their limited public visibility.

Make the spatial contrast legible: Madhavi is publicly visible but institutionally controlled; Sita is socially respectable but spatially contained. Neither woman should appear simply liberated or simply victimised.

Use a restrained Madhubani-inspired visual language with clear linework, flat spatial layering and simplified figures. Keep the composition minimal and architecturally readable rather than densely decorative. No modern objects, fantasy architecture or generic royal palace imagery.

Prompt 02 — Era 2
Zohra Bai and Amna: The Tawaif World

Create a long horizontal illustrated reconstruction of the spatial world of two composite women in seventeenth-century Shahjahanabad. The architectural and social conditions are based on my literature review of tawaif culture, the kotha, Chawri Bazaar and Mughal urban life. Do not turn the setting into a generic royal palace or an exoticised brothel.

The larger environment should show the vertical relationship between bazaar and kotha. At street level, depict an active commercial street with cloth merchants, small shops, paan sellers, pedestrians and the dense urban life of Shahjahanabad. Above this commercial layer, place the kotha: an upper-floor cultural and residential interior connected to the street through a narrow staircase, balcony, jharokha and jali screens.

On one side show Zohra Bai, a composite established tawaif at the height of her cultural and economic position. Her kotha should include a generous mehfil room with carpets, cushions, oil lamps, musicians, poets and elite patrons seated for a performance. Include architectural elements such as carved jharokhas, screened openings, painted surfaces and a balcony looking down onto the bazaar. She should appear as the organiser and centre of the space rather than as a passive object within it. The scene should communicate property, cultural authority, hospitality, performance, education and controlled access.

On the other side show Amna, a younger apprentice within the same kotha world. Her spatial environment is more restricted: a practice area, tanpura, sleeping mat, dressing corner, narrow staircase and jali screen through which she can observe the street without fully participating in it. She is being trained in music, language, etiquette and performance. Her future depends upon the hierarchy, patronage and discipline of the kotha.

Make thresholds central to the image. The street, stairs, balcony, jali, mehfil hall and private rooms should show different degrees of visibility and access. The kotha should read simultaneously as a residence, performance space, training environment, social institution and place of labour.

Use a Mughal miniature-inspired visual language, but keep the architecture clear and relatively minimal so that the organisation of space is understandable. The image should communicate the ambiguity of this world: neither a romantic fantasy of complete female freedom nor a simple narrative of victimhood.

Prompt 03 — Era 3
Kamla and Lakshmi: Colonial Regulation and the Reclassification of Public Women

Create a long horizontal historical illustration

representing the transformation of women's spatial position in Delhi under late colonial and early nationalist rule. I want the image to show the transition from the culturally legible world of the kotha toward regulation, surveillance, spatial marginalisation and the production of the modern red-light district. The historical conditions and spatial elements are based on my literature review; do not independently invent a generic colonial scene.

On one side show Kamla, a composite woman whose family once belonged to a culture of music and performance but whose own labour has been reclassified as prostitution. Place her in a small upper-floor or back-lane room near Ajmeri Gate/Garstin Bastion Road. The street-facing ground floor should contain visible commercial activity—hardware, goods or workshops—while her environment begins after a narrow, dark staircase. The room should feel materially compressed compared with the earlier kotha. Include only traces of the older cultural world: perhaps a piece of jewellery kept in a small tin box, a musical instrument or a fading decorative fragment. The point is not poverty as spectacle, but the loss of cultural and spatial legitimacy.

Introduce colonial regulation subtly through the environment: police presence, surveillance, notices, controlled movement or the spatial memory of lock-hospital and prostitution regulation. Do not depict colonial control as one dramatic act; show it as something embedded in streets, institutions, thresholds and the increasing concealment of women's labour.

On the other side show Lakshmi in approximately 1930, participating in a nationalist procession through Chandni Chowk. She carries a banner and occupies the public street alongside other women and men. Her presence should contrast sharply with Kamla's concealment: Lakshmi is temporarily invited into public space because her visibility serves the nationalist movement. At the same time, suggest the contradiction that respectable female publicness remains conditional and that women are expected to withdraw again into domestic respectability.

The two scenes should therefore communicate two simultaneous processes: the public woman associated with sexual or performative labour is increasingly criminalised and hidden, while respectable womanhood is selectively permitted to enter the street under nationalist conditions.

Use a visual language inspired by late nineteenth-century / early twentieth-century Indian lithographs, colonial prints and nationalist-era illustrations. Keep colours muted and the spatial organisation clear. Avoid glamorous courtesan imagery, eroticised brothel imagery or simplistic British-versus-Indian caricature.

Prompt 04 — Era 4
Rekha and Anita: Post-Independence Delhi and the G.B. Road World

Create a contemporary horizontal illustrated spatial portrait of two composite women inhabiting the same city but experiencing radically different forms of urban access. The scene is based on my research into post-Independence law, Delhi planning, G.B. Road, sex-worker organisation and feminist urban theory. Do not reduce G.B. Road to neon signs or a stereotypical cinematic red-light district.

On one side show Rekha, a sex worker living several floors above a hardware shop on G.B. Road. At street level show the recognised commercial city: hardware shops, pipes, loading and unloading, carts, traffic and predominantly male occupation. Above it, show the less recognised domestic and working world of the brothel. Access should occur through a narrow, dark and worn staircase leading to corridors and small rooms. Include grilled windows, tube lights and limited daylight.

Rekha's room should visibly perform several functions at once—sleeping, work, storage, dressing, eating and informal social life—because the architecture offers very little separation between private, productive and collective space. Do not depict the women as isolated victims. Include traces of mutual support between women: shared food, conversation, pooled domestic activity or care. Police and NGO presence can appear in the wider environment as part of the complicated network of surveillance, intervention and support.

On the other side show Anita, a contemporary middle-class woman whose daily urban world is materially different. She works in an office near Connaught Place, travels by metro, uses cafés and comfortably occupies clean, publicly recognised spaces. She may use her phone, discuss feminism and understand women's safety through lighting, CCTV, mobility and professional independence. She should not be presented as a villain; rather, her spatial world should reveal the limits of a feminism that can overlook caste, class, informal labour and women whose livelihoods occupy legally ambiguous spaces.

Make it visually clear that Rekha and Anita inhabit the same Delhi but not the same spatial citizenship. One moves through recognised public infrastructure; the other inhabits an upper-floor world that the city economically tolerates but does not adequately acknowledge, maintain or protect.

Use a clean contemporary digital illustration style, with architecture and thresholds remaining more important than facial detail. Avoid voyeurism, excessive tragedy, red neon clichés or sexualised poses. The objective is to visualise differences in access, visibility, care, privacy and legitimacy through architecture.

Appendix

AI assisted workflow for visualising the interventions

Here are a few examples of how Open AI's Image Generation tool was integrated with the design and conceptualization of the project.

Example: Urban scale (Reveal)

Input → **Control** → **Generation** → **Post process**



Site image (Hauz Qazi info point)

frame selection/ cropping

Source: Google Maps

Perspective correction/cleaning

Architectural reading



Input for adding elements: sketch on image with different colors representing different objects (green for plants, cyan for tactical paving muhal motifs, magenta for info board)

Prompt: Use the annotated image as a spatial guide while preserving the existing architecture and camera position. Add potted plants at the green markers. Introduce an information board for the feminist heritage trail within the magenta rectangle. Integrate subtle Mughal-inspired motifs into the paving following the cyan lines. Treat all additions as small-scale, reversible interventions within the existing public space.



Graphic standardisation

AI-assisted image translation

Translate the image into a clean architectural line-art illustration. Preserve the exact composition, perspective, building geometry and proposed interventions. Use fine black and purple linework on a white background, with minimal shading and restrained detail. Clearly distinguish architecture, vegetation, people and paving while maintaining a consistent architectural drawing language. Do not introduce new objects or modify the design.



Prompt refinement

Reintroduce a small number of people naturally occupying and moving through the public space. Include women prominently within the scene. Keep the intervention, architecture, paving pattern, planting and information board unchanged. People should remain secondary to the architectural proposal.

Iterative correction
fix distortions • clarify facade • simplify vegetation/details

REFINEMENT 01
Simplify the vegetation and reduce visual noise. Keep all architectural geometry unchanged.

REFINEMENT 02
Make the Mughal paving motifs clearer while retaining their exact location and scale.

REFINEMENT 03
Refine distorted figures and architectural edges. Maintain the existing composition and intervention exactly.

Example: Street scale (Reclaim)

Input



Site image (Footpath on G.B. Road- Railway station side)

frame selection/ cropping

Source: Google Maps

Control

Perspective correction/cleaning

Architectural reading



Prompt: Use the reference image for the material and pattern of the new boundary treatment. Replace the existing opaque/corrugated boundary with a red terracotta jaali wall while retaining its original alignment and approximate height. Add a narrow planted strip along its base. Preserve the existing pavement, trees, road and surrounding architecture.

Graphic standardisation

AI-assisted image translation

Generation





Prompt: Transform the cleared pavement into a continuous pedestrian space. Retain the existing street geometry and mature trees. Introduce a simple, accessible walking surface with subtle Mughal-inspired paving details and planting along the boundary. Keep all additions restrained and integrated into the existing streetscape.

Iterative correction

fix distortions • clarify facade • simplify vegetation/details

Prompt: Populate the intervention with everyday pedestrian activity. Add women walking individually and in small groups, alongside a limited number of other pedestrians. Keep the pavement comfortable and uncrowded. Retain the architecture, jaali wall, planting, paving, road and camera position exactly as generated.





Post process

Prompt: Translate the generated intervention into a clean architectural line-art illustration. Preserve the exact perspective, street geometry, buildings, vegetation, people and intervention. Use fine purple linework on a white background with minimal shading and a restrained level of detail. Maintain the visual language of an architectural thesis drawing rather than a photorealistic rendering.

Some other examples of visualising the interventions at street scale:







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In many ways, this thesis was also made possible by distance. Living in Turin gave me the perspective to look back at Delhi differently. Being away from the city allowed me to return to it with a more critical eye and to question forms of access, visibility, movement, and occupation that I had previously accepted as part of everyday life.

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