

Encounters with the Past: Sustainable Tourism and Cultural History in Agra for the Taj National Park

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PROJECT HISTORY

Several cross-cultural encounters influenced the direction and development of this project. The governments of the United States and India signed a memorandum of understanding for site planning of cultural heritage sites in the city of Agra. This led to a series of studies by the United States National Park Service, the Civil Engineering Department of the University of Roorkee, the National Transportation Planning and Research Center, the Center for Advanced Development Research, and Delhi University. The reports covered possible strategies for the development in Agra, and addressed aspects of Agra's environment, focusing primarily on the immediate surroundings of the Taj Mahal. The results of those studies indicated critical issues regarding Agra's tourism industry and environmental conditions. In 1994, the U.S. National Park Service published its Agra Heritage Report, outlining the concept of Taj National Park on the eastern bank of the Yamuna River across from the Taj Mahal. This report put forward initial ideas of controlling the development on the east bank and restoring the historic Mehtab Bagh garden. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Department of Landscape Architecture provided a proposal, addressing ecological, land uses and access, and socio-cultural aspects in further detail.

THE MASTER PLAN

In August 1999, the Uttar Pradesh Department of tourism invited the Department of Landscape Architecture of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to develop an illustrative master plan for an area across the Yamuna River, opposite of the Taj Mahal, to be known as Taj National Park. This land has been denoted a conservation area to

reduce sprawl, pollution and environmental damage from wind-borne particulates. No further development beyond the existing squatter villages would be permitted in the park boundaries, thus making a pre-emptive move to keep tourist infrastructure from eyesight of the Taj Mahal. Taj National Park, acting in tandem with the proposed and Taj Nature Trail and existing Shah Jahan Park afford a sizeable three-sided buffer zone around the spectacular monument. This park creates a greenbelt area around the Taj, as required by a court order in 1994. These green spaces keep large amounts of vehicular traffic away from the Taj, and reduce and absorb diesel emissions in close proximity to the monument. The two proposed parks, and Shah Jahan park work in conjunction with other regionally planned green belts protect the Taj from erosion from sand particles windswept out of the Thar Desert outside of the city. These heavily planted areas reduce wind speed, to drop the airborne load into the parks.

It became obvious to the design team that the park needed to function as part of a larger framework that needed inclusion of models to cope with urban sprawl, ecological system, economic development, cultural heritage, narrative history and agriculture. The team recommended a master plan that critically incorporated a tourism plan that would benefit the city economically, but be driven through a narrative that displayed the history of Agra, not just the Taj Mahal. Agra has a rich cultural heritage that involves the decentralization of the Islamic garden. Several historians note the Agra as a first instance of the pavilion moving from the center of the Mughal garden to the end, where it would face the riverfront. The riverfront contains infrastructures developed by the British, Mughal and Hindu cultures and provides opportunities to see the rituals of how

each culture relates to waterfronts.

This narrative approach would provide opportunities to ameliorate tourism problems in Agra. Most tourists take day trips up from New Delhi, taxing the infrastructure of the city without making any financial contribution other than the fee to see the monument. The Indian government had already noted the discrepancy in visits to between the Taj and the other monuments in Agra. Even monuments within a mile of the Taj display up to an eighty-percent drop-off in tourist attendance. The government advanced the idea of a 'Taj Trapezium,' incorporating the Taj and forty other monuments in Agra, the sacred sites of Mathura, and Vrindavan, Bharatpur bird sanctuary, and Firozabad, a city known for its glass industry. The 'trapezium' affords Agra the opportunity to generate revenue from overnight stays, and meals, among other tourist necessities. By creating tour packages that involved other key monuments, visitors could understand the relationships between these monuments and the rich and underappreciated history of Agra. In addition, longer stays of up to three days would bring revenue to the city, that would help pay for the creation of infrastructural improvements.

The tourist experience is fragmented and at times daunting due to the poor circulation systems in Agra. It was evident that Agra was not fulfilling its potential tourist revenue. Under the present road circulation, the trip from the Taj across the river to the Taj National Park takes about an hour. The unpaved roads in Agra contain pedestrians, bicycles, human and animal rickshaws, livestock, camels, and two and four-wheeled vehicles on a typical day. The team identified the key monuments and recommended the creation of a cultural heritage district along the Yamuna Riverfront. This district would emphasize the relationships between the Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal, in addition to the gardens and nurseries, and industrial sites, water wells, and riverfront. This district could contain a circulation infrastructure that would create a formal relationship for the city, back to its riverfront, and create a more cohesive experience for the tourist separate from the existing roads.

These new circulation routes would allow the Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism to market specific tours to the visitors at Agra. During the team's stay in Agra, we identified travel times to all of the monuments, setting up potential tours throughout

the city based upon time of stay in Agra, and modes of transportation. These tours range from the simple two-hour visit to the Taj Mahal to a three-day stay including a visit to the nearby historic Islamic complex at Fatehpur Sikri. Simple packages such as these may be marketed easily and heighten the tourist's awareness of other spectacular sites in Agra and its surrounding areas. The design creates a marketing scheme for attracting tourists and generating revenue. This additional revenue can fund infrastructure investment that can be the first step to reversing the environmental situation in Agra, which is unquestionably grim. Such improvements are crucial to address the insufficient quantity and poor quality of water in the area, and the dense haze of pollution that shrouds the city from dusk until dawn. This project helps realize the "Green Agra, Clean Agra" idea that is just beginning to take hold in the city.

Therefore, the team recommended a bypass road from the hotel district southeast of the Taj, to the other side of the river. This in conjunction with a pedestrian bridge attached to an existing bridge by the Agra Fort allows easy access across the Yamuna River. The team also recommended a riverfront circulation system not dissimilar to the walk along the Seine in Paris. This riverfront promenade is accessible to pedestrians, human-powered rickshaws, bicycles and animals. The promenade reduces traffic congestion within the city. The pedestrian bridge, bypass road and promenade easily connect the park areas and monuments to the city across the river. The ring road spurs new development, but the National Park boundary curbs growth near the Taj Mahal. Additionally, this ring road takes through traffic out of the central city, thereby reducing pollution and overcrowding in inner city areas near the Taj.

TAJ NATIONAL PARK

As mentioned above, the Taj National Park performs several functions. It stops development pressures immediately adjacent to the Taj, reduces pollution and erosion from the air, and protects villages and recently discovered historic sites from development. The park program includes demonstration plots for sustainable agricultural practices, ecosystem preservation and pollutant removal, historic archeological digs, passive and active recreation, and event spaces.

A proposed ring road will spur the growth of the

city to the opposite side of the Taj. Working with American agencies, Indian officials in the state of Uttar Pradesh identified key lands acquired them to protect the views to and from the Taj Mahal. Great fears existed that this ring road would lead to multi-story developments that might include Taj View Hotels. These government-purchased lands and consolidate it into one contiguous parcel to be known as Taj National Park. Due to the complexities of land acquisition and the appropriateness of the selected lands to be acquired, the design team agreed with the proposed park boundary. The boundaries however, do encompass all key viewsheds to the Taj. This park allows the visitor at least some sense of how the monuments appeared in the context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during their era of significance.

This land acquisition does have intricacies that need to be addressed. Three squatter villages exist within the park boundaries. These people may not be relocated. This proposal suggests improvement in the villages, by creating a loans program to start small cooperatives, and giving the villagers training and opportunities to become construction workers and maintenance employees for the park. The team recommended that new entry points into the park be located at the villages. These entry points can assist economic development in the village markets. Additionally, the park may continue and preserve the existing 'nursery district' which is currently thriving to the north of the park. New lands will be devoted to nurseries, and efficient land use for crops, giving the villagers another avenue of economic and business development.

The new framework highlights *16 views of the Taj*. This perceptual theme drives the design of the park and the promenade, and becomes a tourism package. Encounters with multiple cultures influence the design ideas, including the paintings of Hiroshige and Hokusai, and the Seine River in Paris. India displays a remarkable penchant for incorporating multicultural expression. Several regimes have conquered the country, but the people embrace many monuments and typologies.

Hiroshige and Hokusai produced paintings that reminded their Japanese culture of its identity. Specifically, in the *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, Hiroshige produces a remarkable set of paintings that show two important points in landscape perception; landscape as identity and reference, and landscape

change. In *36 Views*, Hiroshige includes Mount Fuji in every painting. It becomes a reference point that unites all daily activities in the Japanese culture, from working in the fields, to the market place, to the temple. While Mount Fuji always acts as a reference point, Hiroshige pays close attention to the changes in color and structure in the landscape. His sensitivity to light and color expands the viewer's perceptions when in the landscape.

This framework becomes the narrative and structure for the design of the Taj National Park and Riverfront Promenade. On site analysis for views during varying times of day created key points identified as remarkable vistas to the Taj. These protected and articulated views frame opportunities to observe the changes of shifting light create upon the Taj. These multiple points link the Taj to related sites in the historical narrative and casually locate it within viewsheds where the daily activities of Agra's citizens occur.

Linking the encounter with the past, to future encounters, we encourage sustainable ecosystems and agricultural techniques. Taj National Park, and our proposed Taj Nature Trail become demonstration parks that display sustainable ecological practices. The parks become a wonderful place for education in these techniques due to the amount of Indian citizens that will attend them while viewing the Taj Mahal. We suggest restoring as much of the native ecosystems as possible, especially in the *nalas* (runoff channels). The phytoremediative planting schemes for the *nalas* serve as a model for cleaning highly polluted water with vegetation. By protecting such a large landmass from development and connecting it to existing green networks, the vegetation in the park will act as a nutrient and species sink, clean the air, and be valuable for production of timber, food, ropes and other products. Devoting as much land as possible to these ecological treatments will reduce the energy expended upon the land. This sustainable aspect of the project facilitates field studies in ecological practices; findings may set precedents and dictate future landscape policy in India.

The Taj National Park contains an important waterfront historic garden designed by Mumtaz Mahal, Shah Jahan's wife (for whom the Taj was created). Mehtab Bagh is an interpretation of the paradise garden set upon the riverfront in Agra. It is speculated that Emperor Babur was buried here until he

was moved to Kabul. Historians and archaeologists consider these gardens among the finest garden architecture in the world. The protection, documentation and redevelopment of the garden creates important policy for the development of managing this cultural heritage. As historian James Wescoat, Jr. notes, no detailed appraisals exist for landscape practices and principles of landscape heritage conservation in Agra, or its region. These gardens shed light on layout, plant species, and uses and implementation of water. Mehtab Bagh and the Taj National Park provide opportunities of oriental/occidental collaboration with the Agra Heritage Project, the Mehtab Bagh Project, Taj Mahal research, and the Smithsonian Mughal Gardens Project.

Mehtab Bagh is the center of the Taj National Park. This garden may be used for moonlight and sunset/sunrise views of the Taj, which are considered to be the best times for viewing the monument. It grants a vista that is not often seen by tourists, who until now have had no easy access to the opposite bank of the river.

Additional program elements such as the amphitheater generate revenue and interest in the parklands. Artists such as Yanni include Agra among other world heritage sites to play globally broadcast concerts with the monuments as the backdrops. These events provide literally millions of dollars per show that contribute to development of Agra's physical infrastructure. Other park programs include, passive recreation areas with interpretive landscapes illustrating cultural responses to wind, water and sky (nighttime observatories). Sustainable agriculture including fields and managed forests fill the remaining areas of the site, creating a bucolic experience with framed views of the Taj.

The Promenade

A Yamuna riverfront promenade is a central feature of the new master plan. The promenade encompasses both sides of the river, spanning from the Taj Mahal and Mehtab Bagh, up to the Agra Fort and Ram Bagh.

This constructed walkway along the bank of the Yamuna River will alleviate traffic congestion in the city, provide a cohesive interpretive experience, and help improve resource efficiency. As stated before, travel times within the city are prohibitive, due to the high vehicular, bicycle, and animal-powered

traffic on the narrow streets of Agra. The present circulation experience takes the tourist on arduous automobile trips throughout the city, taking potentially an hour to travel just a few miles. This experience negates the historical models of circulation in Agra. The promenade creates a series of paths linked with spaces that tie back into the city, re-linking it with its waterfront. These spaces absorb the confluence of traffic in the nodes and distribute this traffic down the separate paths. The segments of the path are linear, aimed at focal points including the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort. In this way, the perceptual experience is similar to the one of the Mughal Garden; a frontal, controlled circulation, fixed upon a final destination. These linear paths occur on levels that gradually step down to the river influenced by the Seine in Paris. This Parisian typology can effectively accommodate grade changes for large animals such as camels, elephants and cattle. The tectonic articulation of this model includes the *ghats* and other Hindu expressions. The promenade organization separates and controls different 'user' groups in a city inhabited by eleven million people. It links the monuments and eases travel between them.

The promenade also serves as a framework for viewing Indian culture and facilitates use of the waterfront by the town citizens. Historically, Agra was a city of riverfront gardens, and therefore must be understood in the context of the river. This is simply not possible with the existing roadways that move back into the town. A visitor experiencing the Agra Fort, Taj Mahal, Mehtab Bagh, and other monuments understands the relationships between them. All of the monuments and gardens relate to the river, as evidenced by their orientation, as well as the few remaining *ghats* (stepped terraces leading down to the water). Along the promenade, several interpretive opportunities have been suggested, not just at the major monuments, but also at historic locations and points where indigenous culture can be viewed and understood. This includes plant nurseries, agricultural sites, laundry washing, religious shrines and local crafts and vending. Signage and interactive experiences are in place so that the tourist can understand the splendor of the monuments in the context of the society that created them.

The rediscovery of the riverfront afforded by the promenade will improve the use of natural resources in the area. To help fulfill necessities for water, and

keep the wooden pile foundation of the Taj intact, dams will be constructed up and down river from the Taj. These dams will keep the water level constant. Present conditions find the riverbed dry during the winter months. The promenade takes advantage of this new water level, providing both a focus and a backdrop for the myriad activities that take place at the river's edge in Indian culture.

CONCLUSION

The collaborative effort between the University of Illinois, the United States National Park Service, and the myriad agencies of the Indian government serves as a model for encounters with the past, landscapes and cross-cultural encounters. James Wescoat, Jr., a contributor to the final report, concludes:

One strength of the Taj Mahal National Park Master Plan is a "landscape approach," which is sensitive to a broad range of environmental, visual and social factors from the site to regional scales.... The next phase of planning should perhaps begin at the local village level and progressively invite and respond to regional, national, and international perspectives. It should also envision progressively greater geographical integration of environmental protection and cultural heritage conservation efforts. The success of plans and decrees for the Taj Trapezium, Yamuna Action Plan and Taj Mahal National Park depend upon both a sober historical perspective on institutional barriers and a visionary geographic perspective on the prospects for integration.