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Lutyens' demolitions will start mid-Dec, 800 houses targeted

RASHME SEHGAL

New Delhi, Nov. 3: The historic Lutyens' Bungalow Zone (LBZ) is going to be axed. Work on demolishing what the New York-based World Monuments Fund has listed as being among the 100 most endangered heritage sites in the world will begin from the Sunehri Bagh end starting from mid-December.

"For a start, we are going to pull down three bungalows in Sunehri Bagh. We will bifurcate their big lawns so that we can build an additional 16 houses there. In all, we plan to build 32 smaller bungalows in place of 19 bungalows," said CPWD chief engineer L.P. Srivastava, who is the government's pointman for this job.

The Union Cabinet has given the go-ahead to the CPWD's proposal. A nod from the PMO is required for any alteration or demolition in the LBZ.

The demolitions will not end here, because the CPWD has sent a report to the PMO describing another 800 as being "hazardous" and asking for their immediate demolishing.

Says Mr Srivastava: "Our engineers have checked out the 1,114 houses that comprise the LBZ. From these, 800 bungalows have outlived their use and have been found to be structurally unsafe. They were built as temporary structures with a limited life expectancy. We are already spending Rs 3.6 lakhs on their annual upkeep. How much more can the government keep investing?"

He added: "We have prepared a blueprint for the construction of new bungalows that needs to be executed right away."

As per the plans prepared by the CPWD, the entire Sunehri Bagh area will be redeveloped as one large complex, to include a community centre, a clubhouse and a swimming pool, with video cameras and baggage scanners at the entry and exit points.

The CPWD had originally planned to provide facilities such as video-conferencing, bathrooms with Jacuzzi and central airconditioning in each of these new houses. Fearing criticism, it has been decided not to introduce these facilities in the first phase.

Conservationists, architects and NGOs are aghast at this decision.

Writer Patwant Singh said: "Delhi is one of the three great heritage cities in the world. The CPWD is looking at this zone as though it were one more residential complex, without understanding that it combines history, heritage and conservation."

Mr Patwant Singh rubbished the claim that these houses cannot be repaired. "If the Qutub Minar, made out of brick and lime, can be repaired, why can't houses made out of steel and cement be repaired?"

Urban town planner Syed Shafi, who has taught at the School of Planning and Architecture, points out that the government needs to come up with a proper urban renewal plan for the city. "Restoration and renovation cannot be done on a piecemeal basis," he said.

"Lutyens' Delhi is a rare example of a garden city capital that was based on the combined principle of a triangle and a hexagon. Lutyens maintained a visual link between Raisina Hill and Sher Shah Suri's Purana Qila. The line from Parliament Street goes straight down to the central zone of Jama Masjid. The British had a sense of history, we unfortunately have none," said Mr Shafi.

- He goes on to add: "Destroying Lutyens' zone will mean the destruction of a great urban fabric. Government officials seem to forget that it is the foliage of the indigenous trees that grow in this complex which have ensured the temperature of the city remains five degrees less than the adjoining areas."

Mr S.K. Mishra, chairman of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach), said he opposed additional construction taking place within the city.

"If any demolition has to take place, for example, any barracks or old structures have to

come down, the government should convert these into green spaces," he said.

Conservation architect Ratish Nanda describes Lutyens' open garden plots as being the "heart and lungs of Delhi." He said: "This green cover provides cleaner air to two million people who travel through this area every day. If it is destroyed, we will end up facing a major pollution crisis."

CPWD officials hasten to point out that the Delhi Urban Arts Commission has given the green signal for these demolitions.

"No less an architect than Charles Correa, chairman of the DUAC, has studied these proposals carefully and then approved of them," pointed out Mr Srivastava.

Architects in New Delhi have expressed surprise at how Mr Correa could have approved of such a project.

"He (Correa) is a Mumbai-based architect who has little empathy for the city's heritage and culture," several Delhi architects said.

Many conservationists believe that a powerful lobby of realtors and politicians have been pushing for these demolitions as this is one of the most exclusive real estate zones left in the country.