

MCD or not, building should be a job left to experts

SUDHIR VOHRA

THE Municipal Commissioner's announcement and subsequent advertisement on involving architects in the process of the proposed reforms of property tax calculation system is a welcome step. It will enable the Corporation to use the expertise and services of a large pool of qualified professionals and bring in accountability, which is missing.

Involving architects in the certification of calculations of covered areas of buildings would mean that the MCD would get accurate, and hopefully true calculations. This empowerment (if that be the right word) of architects is actually a double-edged sword. If the certifying architect is untruthful and gives out false certificates, the MCD can always complain to the regulator of the profession — the Council of Architecture, a statutory body created under Architects Act, 1972.

A system of accountability which is much surer than the present one

where the MCD cannot discipline their own corrupt employees. Incidentally, the NOIDA administration has met with considerable success in the empowerment process it announced three years ago. Building plans in Noida, and in Greater Noida, are sanctioned by the architect of the building, with a copy filed with the authority for record and for random checking. This has cut down lead time in getting sanctions, a lot of headaches have been reduced, and there is virtually no corruption in getting a building permit sanctioned by the municipality.

The result is an improvement in the quality of architecture being practised in NOIDA and Greater NOIDA, faster construction and development, and a better respect for laws concerning urban governance.

The *Newsline* story last week about whether building design is the job of an architect or not, and its connected reactions from the city's Municipal Commissioner, throws up some larger issues and needs to be seen in a larger perspective:

Firstly, urban governance: Should



Poorly planned buildings violate urban laws, are ugly and unsafe.

the architectural development, and redevelopment of Delhi be administered by persons who are not technically trained for the job or who are not licensed to do so? The fact, which prob-

Examples of good architecture — Chandigarh and Delhi's NDMC area — are not far. The MCD Commissioner lives in NDMC-administered area. And takes his morning walk in it

ably the MCD Commissioner is not aware of, is that his neighbouring municipal body (the NDMC) has a department meant for scrutiny and sanction of building plans. It contains seven architects. Such a small number is enough because the NDMC looks after only 27 sq km, most of which is government land.

The NDMC area is known to have very few violations of building bylaws. The difference is evident to anyone who drives into NDMC areas. Com-

pared to NDMC, the MCD is supposed to handle about 2,000 sq km and does not even have one architect to scrutinise and sanction building plans. It has, on the other hand, about 800 "engineers" for the job. It will, of course, be unfair to tar all these "engineers" with the same brush, but the term "engineer" has no legal meaning and even an ITI-trained technician or a diploma holder can call himself an "engineer".

The MCD Commissioner's contention that "there are not enough architects in the city to hire" is also not tenable. Delhi has about 4,000 practising architects — for a population of 10 million, this is one of the highest ratios in the world. About 3,000 architects graduate from 108 colleges every year. What he is probably not aware of is that a lot of them go abroad to work in city halls and municipalities in the very same regulatory function (that of urban governance) that the MCD lacks — there is not one in the MCD. Not one.

The second issue is even more preposterous. The MCD's building bylaws state that a "supervisor" may design

(and as such sign) buildings in plots up to 200 sq metres in area, and that an "engineer" may design buildings in plots up to 500 sq metres in area. The MCD contends that anyone who has a 500-sq metre plot falls into the EWS (Economically Weaker Section), and therefore "may not be able to afford the services of an architect". Hence, the MCD assumes it has the powers to specify who shall design buildings in its jurisdiction area of about 2,000 sq km. The resultant ugly and unsafe buildings, many of which violate urban laws, is there for all to see.

In contrast, the UT of Chandigarh has a Department of Architecture to ensure that quality architecture is available. No building in that city is built without professional architectural advice and design, and none is sanctioned until it passes the scrutiny of the City's architecture department — a department of only licensed architects — much like the cities in Europe, UK and USA. Only if we could learn.

(Sudhir Vohra is a planner who writes on urban chaos)