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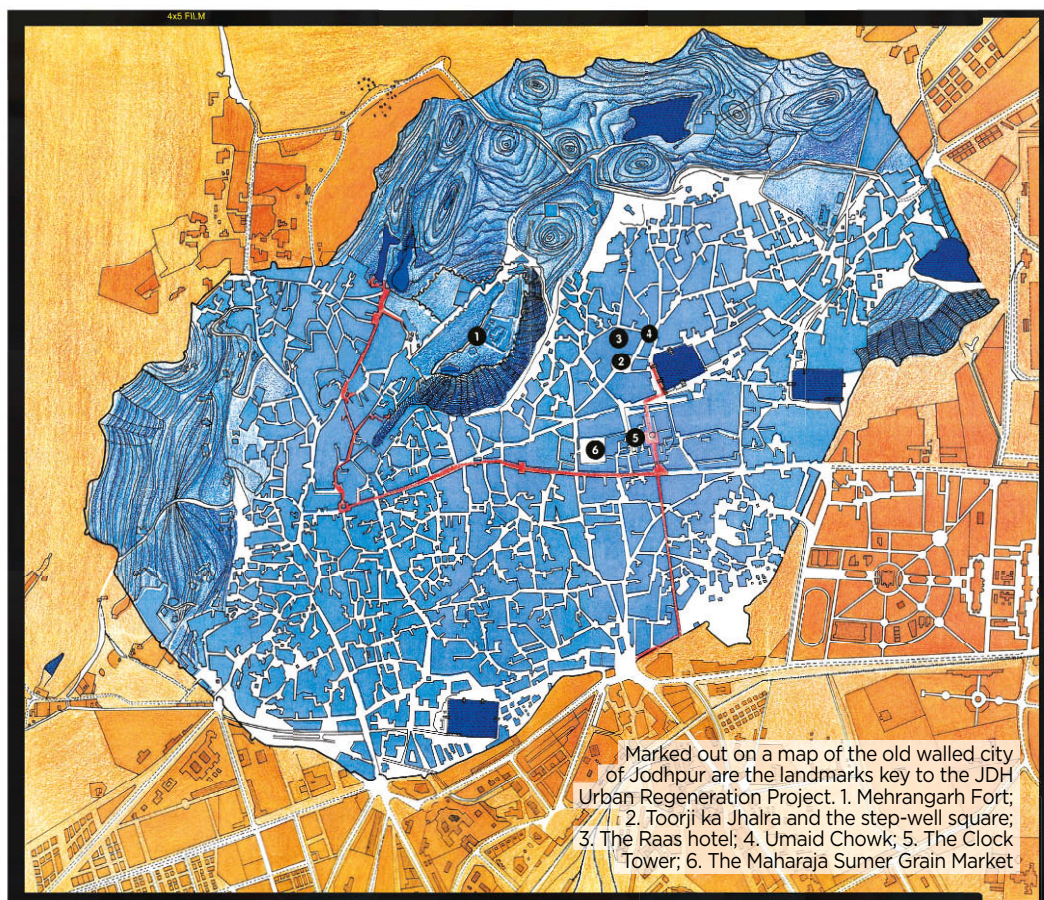
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Inspired by the High Line in New York, the streets of Morocco and Istanbul, the heritage-rich Aix-en-Provence, and London's Borough Market, the old walled city of Jodhpur is set to get a facelift

WRITER ABHILASHA OJHA



Built on an unused rail track, the High Line, a 1.45-mile-long elevated park in Manhattan, is dotted with restaurants, boutiques, public sculptures, art galleries, entertainment and recreational zones, a produce market, taverns, and even a carefully laid out waterfront, that make it the city's most sought-after tourist destination. Come September 2016, and you won't have to travel to Manhattan to experience this. Three experts, in their endeavour to create 'Brand Jodhpur', will bring a similar experience to this enigmatic city of Rajasthan through the JDH Urban Regeneration Project. (JDH is the IATA code for Jodhpur's airport.)

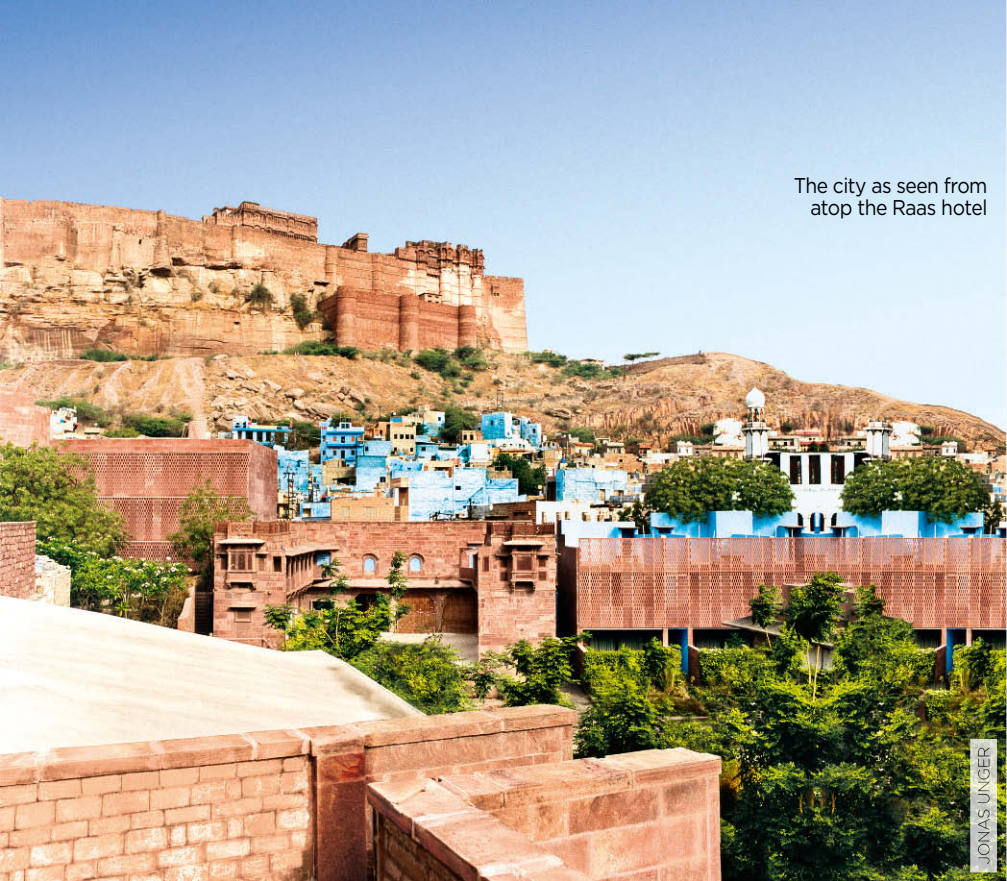
The JDH Project was initiated roughly three years ago by three individuals: Kanwar Dhananjaya Singh, whose family has historical links with Jodhpur; V Sunil, the creative director of the Make in India initiative, and the director and co-founder of Motherland

Joint Ventures; and Mohit Dhar Jayal, co-founder of Motherland Joint Ventures. Together, the three plan to restore the walled city of Jodhpur to its former glory, but with a new spin, by infusing into it new ideas and influences from all over the world.

Experts from a number of countries have spoken about the social and economic benefits of such projects. From improving infrastructure to creating employment, witnessing an increase in real estate prices, and increasing revenue through tourism, retail, entertainment and other avenues, the benefits of such urban regeneration programmes, if done systematically, are immense.

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

But before we proceed to what Jodhpur's walled city is set to become over the next three years—considered the critical first



The city as seen from atop the Raas hotel

JONAS UNGER

phase—let’s pause to understand what makes it compelling even today. Jodhpur is the second largest city in Rajasthan; it has Asia’s largest air base; and its old walled city circles around the Mehrangarh Fort, from where you can see the city sprawl out beneath, smearing its blue tint into the horizon. Chaotic and buzzing with activity, a walk through its narrow lanes—created to shield people from the harsh sun—seems to take you back in time, to when Jodhpur was a city of royals.

The JDH Project wants that sense of royalty and rich legacy to return to the city. “Think Aix-en-Provence in France, where 18th-century architecture and modern elements are beautifully intermixed. Jodhpur—as a place that truly represents India, with all its havelis culture and heritage—fits this model perfectly,” says Jayal.

Given the vision, by September this year, a significant part of Jodhpur will be protected, conserved, restored and revealed to people. “Restoration isn’t a new concept for Jodhpur. It has been happening since the 1980s because Bapji [the titular Maharaja Gaj Singh II of Jodhpur] is sensitive to the need for urban planning and restoration. While the Mehrangarh Fort has been continuously restored and maintained, the walled city is being restored for the first time,” says Singh, who is an art historian, conservation expert and an author.

PILOT STUDY

Singh and his brother saw the potential of the project when they took an 18th-century haveli in the north-eastern part of the walled city and transformed it into Raas, the city’s first luxury boutique hotel. But while Raas was a good example of how Jodhpur’s urban regeneration should be done, it was a lone pocket. Outside it was an unused step-well filled with muck. Further ahead, the clock tower—from where roads and lanes spider-webbed outwards—groaned under the weight of unsystematic expansion.

It was Jayal and Singh who first spoke of this—of extending the

idea behind Raas to the entire walled city area. The initial meeting between the two boarding-school friends lasted 20 minutes, after which, Jayal says, “I called Sunil, whom I’ve known since my advertising days, and told him there was an opportunity for us to transform this part of Jodhpur.” On his part, Sunil remembers, “Unlike Mohit and Dhananjaya who have lived in Jodhpur, I was exposed to the city through advertising shoots. I must say, the city left me with an impression like no other.” Jodhpur, for each of them, was meaningful. Most importantly, they all understood that it was this city that would understand the restoration of legacy. “We also wanted to create a formula wherein revenues could be earned and ploughed back to benefit the city in the long run. It has to be efficient urban planning, not merely beautification,” Sunil adds.

STEPPING UP

This is what the JDH Project attempts to do. After acquiring some old havelis and other

structures close to the ramparts of the Mehrangarh Fort, a dedicated restoration team came on board, whose pilot project was the aforementioned step-well. Before they could start though, they had to clear out the industrial waste, debris and household trash that had accumulated over the years. Thirty-four truckloads of garbage (and “even an old motorcycle”, quips Sunil) later, under the advice of the restoration experts, the stone was sandblasted, and the water, re-oxygenated. Now, people sit on the red-sandstone steps, as children and fish swim happily in its waters.

The step-well square—the public area around the evacuated structure—too got a facelift, with the nearby havelis being restored to something of their old grandeur. The narrow lanes, which till now captured only chaos, will be a breezy boulevard, with a high-street commercial feel. “Commerce, for want of a better word, is critical to any urban regeneration programme,” explains Sunil.

The opening of the square will be followed by the renovated grain market, which was originally established in the 19th century. The project aims to have a seasonal restaurant running atop the main structure, on the lines of London’s Borough Market. “In the next three years, there will be three islands of activity and the focus will be on providing excellence that will benefit not just the business, but also the local community,” says Singh. The step-well square launch will be followed by Umaid Chowk, which will see the construction of a boutique hotel. The third island, comprising the clock tower and the grain market, will be restored simultaneously. The areas around these “islands” will be beautified and businesses will be conducted with the revenues earned, then ploughed back for bigger-picture urban planning, which will include waste disposal and recycling, water harvesting, solar and wind energy generation, and even rooftop agriculture.

What would the JDH Project want to achieve eventually? Singh remarks confidently: “Jodhpur needs to become... Jodhpur. It has to rediscover what it always had in its roots.” ♦