

February 17, 2012, 12:53 PM IST

Delhi Journal: From Slum to Skyscraper

By Tripti Lahiri

An experiment to redevelop a New Delhi slum into a series of low-income housing towers around the city's first luxury skyscraper has reached that critical stage: the impasse.

Late last year, Raheja Developers Ltd. announced plans to build the city's first skyscraper in West Delhi. According to a statement from the firm, it would work with Dubai-based Arabtec Construction LLC to build a 54-floor tower "with skyclub and helipad." Arabtec constructed the emirate's 2,716-foot Burj Khalifa.

The West Delhi building will have roughly 170 premium apartments, according to Navin Raheja, the Indian firm's chairman. He could not provide exact figures for apartment size but said they would certainly be larger than 1,000 square feet each. The building won't actually be called Raheja Phoenix, as the earlier statement said. "I never use English names," he said in a telephone interview on Thursday. Instead, the building will be called Raheja Minar.

Once construction starts, it can be completed in two years, said Mr. Raheja.

But when will the construction clock actually start ticking? It's already more than two years behind schedule.



A general view of a slum in New Delhi

The skyscraper is part of a mixed development on nearly 13 acres of land in Kathputli owned by the Delhi Development Authority, the city's planning agency and its largest land-owner. The area is presently home to a neighborhood of puppeteers, drummers, jugglers and acrobats. In the vicinity of the skyscraper, Raheja Developers needs to build 2,800 322-square-foot flats for these families. Mr. Raheja said his firm plans to build these in six 14-floor towers — that would come to more than 30 flats per floor.

The entire redevelopment is likely to cost three to four billion rupees (\$60 million to \$80 million), he said.

In 2009, the DDA prepared a schedule of construction work that said building at Kathputli would begin in June that year and be completed in June last year. A neighborhood door-to-door survey, which includes recording a video of each family standing in front of their existing house, is nearly complete. But as of this month, there was no sign that construction is beginning anytime soon.

Mr. Raheja says he can't begin work until the residents have been moved into transit camps that he is supposed to build, and for which the DDA has yet to provide him sufficient land. Kathputli colony residents say they won't move until the DDA provides them a list of all the families who are eligible for free flats and promises in writing to return all of them to this site once construction is completed.

Mr. Raheja says that the first site offered for a temporary transit camp for Kathputli residents was embroiled in legal issues, while at two other proposed sites he faced local political opposition. Local residents and their representatives did not want to have the transit camp nearby, and objected to the DDA.

"Nobody wants poor people to be their neighbor," said Mr. Raheja.

A fourth site that the DDA has offered is only big enough to house 800 families, not the 2,800 families he needs to build temporary shelter for, he said.



The impasse this project is facing, and the delay so far, aren't at all unusual for the city. According to a report from real estate consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle India, as many as 63 real estate projects around Delhi that were supposed to supply 40,000 units of housing are four years behind schedule for reasons that range from lack of capital to "socio-political reasons."

The performers of Kathputli — a popular stop in the city for foreign journalists and amateur photographers — have been here at least 40 years, and it may well have been the inspiration for the "magician's ghetto" in Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children". After four decades of negotiations for legal rights to this area or to get resettled in a centrally located neighborhood, and after weathering at least one demolition of their homes in the 1970s, it's understandable that they're a little suspicious of this latest venture.

Since they work for themselves, they depend on being in the center of the city in order to find out quickly about jobs like weddings and birthday parties, which is why they say they have said no over the years to moving to sites that are further away.

Dilip Bhatt, the president of the main puppeteers' association here, said that over a year ago his group had filed a Right-to-Information request seeking answers to their two key questions about the redevelopment, as well as several others. But they haven't got the information they want yet, said the 60-year-old.

He said families were worried that once they moved to the transit camps, the DDA might pull a bait-and-switch, asking them to live there permanently.

In his open ground-floor room, drums line a shelf on the back wall and drum lids are stacked, one next to the other like dinner plates, on another shelf. From under the pillow on the bed he pulled out a copy of a Times of India article about the planned skyscraper.

"What is this? What will be in it? It doesn't look like it's for us," he said. "If this is here, who will let us come back here?"

The DDA did not respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Raheja says he plans to persevere with the skyscraper project, and said he hoped city authorities would be more steadfast in overcoming opposition to the transit camps.

But the experience so far raises some questions over how successful this mixed-development will be if it ever does get built. If Delhi residents don't want to accept Kathputli residents as their neighbors temporarily, won't a luxury skyscraper surrounded by low-income housing towers face similar problems?

"I am building it," said Mr. Raheja, "I'll have to face the consequences."



Pictured, residents of the Kathputli Colony

