They have the swords in their hands and we were made the shield, so that when people come to Delhi they have to go through us people. What else was the sense of making us sit on the border...?

Ram Singh recalls the resettlement of 30 years ago, from the front steps of his house early one evening. Now in his 60s, he sits solidly on the threshold, taking in the view from his plot on the end corner of the gali (by-lane). In one direction are the built-up, boxy brick houses of the colony, a spindly tree and two of his young grandsons spinning a wooden top on the uneven concrete outside their house, further up the lane. In the other direction, past more recent jhuggis (squatter dwellings), scrub and grass, a couple of Sulabh toilet blocks mark the limit of the colony, and a sparse traffic of bicycles, rickshaws and handcarts make their way along the road running along the border between Delhi and the next state, punctuated by the roar of buses ploughing U-turns at the end of their route.

At the time of the resettlement, the residents of ‘Power House’ (cleared again in 2004 as the site of ‘Yamuna Pushta’) found themselves ‘thrown’ from their dwellings on the banks of the river Yamuna at the centre of Delhi to Punarvaspur on the eastern frontier of the city. Plans for
clearing the ‘encroaching’ jhuggis on the river bank are in circulation once again, ahead of the 2010 Commonwealth Games, to make way for parks and recreation; so Ram Singh muses, are the inhabitants of his home and of the many thousands of others earlier demolished and displaced, to ‘sit on the border’ and stand as a warning to all comers to the city?

As a one-time Customs man, Ram Singh might be expected to have a professional interest in the operation of borders. But sifting through the notes of my conversations with residents of Punarvaspur, it is frontiers, limits and boundaries, and the place of the neighbourhood in relation to the rest of the city, which are a recurring preoccupation for residents, as well as others with an interest in the terrain, such as NGOs and local politicians. The congested resettlement colony, with its mixed and often changing population, is a place of heterogeneous identities, and dense and occasionally fraught spaces, which can become charged with meanings and associations as people negotiate similarity and difference in their relationships with each other, within them. From the time of the resettlement, residents have worked hard to maintain both lives and livelihoods, often far from places of work. While the frontier of the city has since rolled up to and beyond Punarvaspur itself, as residents come and go daily through the same spaces, the borders of social life in the settlement are constantly remade through mobility, speech and assessments of dress, manners and customs. As social interactions are daily reiterated and relationships affirmed, it remains very much a place in progress.

At the Frontier of the City

One of the logics of a frontier is its capacity to transform space through the polarisation of similarities and differences so that new configurations of meaning accrete in relation to each side. What was once an undefined area, like the scrub of abandoned farmland prior to the resettlement, takes on consequence as a frontier is drawn between inside (the colony) and outside (the ‘jungle’); between the city and the neighbouring state, or one gali or the next; one side in relation to the other. Frontiers work to contain and exclude people, objects and associations with them. Continually delineating interiors from exteriors, they may be deployed in an attempt to mark public arenas from domestic spheres, to distinguish family from mere neighbours, to mark one block from another. Yet they are rarely fixed or impermeable.

Punarvaspur was set down in 1976 on the eastern border of Delhi, during the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. Although not one of the more infamous incidents of resettlement, the episode was often no less violent, particularly for those settled in the second round in July of that year, as parchis (paper slips) for plots were traded for fertility.2 Arriving on the site, and for some years afterwards, resettled residents tell of a place that was nothing but “jungle”, describing themselves as “thrown out of the city”. “You could kick the dust there and it would just fly, there was nothing to stop it”, one woman said, scuffing her foot across the concrete of the present day gali by way of illustration. This sense of being pushed to the margins, into the unknown “jungle”, is compounded by grisly descriptions of the place as a qabristan (graveyard), of its use as a cremation ground, of
wild animals and insects. Amidst these symbols of desolation and ruin, stories of intimidation or assault by marauding Gujjars from the surrounding villages, of widespread robberies and theft, added to the sense of insecurity and fear about the place.

Against this backdrop, perched on the precarious frontier edge of the city, a sense of the nascent neighbourhood emerges. These fragile new homes see the materialisation of a new series of relative 'insides' and 'outsides', areas of 'public' and 'private', where before there were none. Scholar Sudipta Kaviraj (1997, p. 94) writes of the home/ghar as "a realm of security, stable and patterned relationships which did not usually contain surprises", in relation to the public outside, the unruly bazaar (Chakrabarty, 1991, p. 17); or here, the fearful 'jungle' beyond the city. But as residents grappled with the uncertainty of the new settlement, with its creation came the production and the inscription of new divides, shaping the new spaces and marking the perimeters of the settlement.

In this uncanny landscape, while many gave up, sold their plots or simply left, residents who remained lived in clusters down lanes towards the centre. Families and people from the same village, or even just the same region, sifted themselves together, often as not away from those who belonged to other castes and religions, sieving like with like into the same galis. Here, old connections or links of kin could more reliably be leant upon, and there was the reassurance of knowing the kind of people you were surrounded by. As the city has come out to meet Punarvaspur and the place become more homely, surrounding land prices have risen; and inside the colony, plot values have escalated too. These surrounding areas are now built up into Gulshan Nagar and Gulshan Extension, areas of DDA (Delhi Development Authority) and privately developed, patchily plotted, four- and five-storey blocks of flats. But the boundaries of Punarvaspur remain physically marked relative to its neighbours by the size and style of its 3 x 7 metre plot development; and its straight, narrow, vehicle-excluding lanes continue to demarcate it from the surrounding flats and jhuggi areas.

The colony's origins as a site of resettlement are commonly known, and borders are maintained through boundary walls and disparaging talk. As residents of Gulshan Nagar and Gulshan Extension refer to people in Punarvaspur as jhuggi-dwellers in terms of criminality and fraud (referring to the trade in houses by the sale of power-of-attorney); so in the opposite direction, people in Punarvaspur speak of the unfriendliness of Gulshan Extension inhabitants who wouldn't give you the time of day. Yet, the divides between them are not in fact exclusive. A busy market and weekly haat (street market) draws residents from all three kinds of neighbourhoods. Women from Punarvaspur and the jhuggi areas work in the flats of Gulshan Nagar and Gulshan Extension, children enroll in primary school there, while many women in Gulshan Extension have come to adopt the Shiv mandir (temple) on the corner of Punarvaspur for their own use. The mandir itself is the project of an ex-Punarvaspur resident, a ration-shop owner and frustrated politician, himself now living in Gulshan Extension. For some new residents of Punarvaspur, crossing the border into Delhi from the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh represents a first step into property ownership in the city, where electricity supply and schools are considered superior to those across the state border.
Yet boundaries remain to be maintained externally between the different areas, and between residents in Punarvaspur. The settlement’s ‘outside’ connotations, as a frontier town on the state border, remains viewed with suspicion, partly fuelled by the nefarious associations between borders, illicit bars, liquor and trafficking. In this peripheral location Punarvaspur also remains a site for ‘development’ – from residents’ perspectives, with the addition of floors to houses, but also in demands for reform and cleaning up, in ways similar to the modernising drives demanded of colonial bazaars as described by Chakrabarty (1991, p. 18). Its location is also marked through the activities of NGOs and politicians as a site of ‘lack’, in need of infrastructure, reform or education. Survey forms are used to marshal the frontiers of categories to tame unruly reality; and electorates are cajoled via the promise of ‘development’ and ‘improvements’. However, the greatest concern for inhabitants is between one area and another – the uncertainty of not knowing whether people are actually who/what they say they are, in the fluctuating mix of neighbours and ‘others’ in this crowded urban terrain.

**Internal Divides**

Elsewhere in the city, in more elite (or “hi-fi”, in local parlance) colonies, the operation of space is already partially structured: residence is ordered by income and access to property, so maintaining and limiting social relationships with others may be more straightforward. In these places, the need to mix extensively with one’s neighbours may be avoided by withdrawal from the ‘outside’ and public spaces, as family life can be conveniently conducted in the prosperous space behind walls. Interaction with ‘others’ is mediated by security guards, colony gates and the time of day, regulating who and what kind of person may be admitted. In Punarvaspur, by comparison, where physical space is a great deal more limited and much domestic life conducted outside in the galis, more subtle means must be deployed. Here, frontiers of similarity and difference are discursively drawn through allusions to caste, class, region or religion, dress and deportment.

Most often, the signifier of the *mahaul* (ethos/environment/atmosphere) is consciously as well as instinctively used to mark internal divisions within the colony. By associating certain kinds of people with the *mahaul* of different kinds of places, people come to interpret each other, and to structure their interactions accordingly. More concretely, spaces may be marked with shrines, or occasionally with gates to galis. These stand as physical markers of an affiliation to a group or a lane, as the organising principles of an informal frontier – of proximity and similarity, as well as distance and difference – are informally achieved.

But while clarity may be striven for out of the messiness of everyday life, it is rarely simple. The *mahaul* as a concern is frequently offered as an explanation for, or statement of, disquiet about the place or people there, both by residents and those regarding it from the outside. The scale of the term is relative and variable; it can refer to the entire settlement, or be as narrow as one end of a lane compared to another. While *mahaul* often
gets flatly translated as ‘environment’, it also connotes ‘atmosphere’, a sense or feeling about a place or of the situation there, also implying that it may change or be changed, rather than it being fixed or immutable. During my fieldwork I was often advised that I should not go to a certain block, or speak to people in a particular gali, as “…the mahaül is not good there”. On other occasions the mahaül was the explanation for a child’s lack of progress at school, or for bad habits that people were afraid their children would pick up.

This is similar to Daniel’s (1984) analysis of the Tamil ‘ur’ (village) as a place where those people sharing the ‘substance’ of the locale, or compatible with its ‘atmosphere’, will thrive. By contrast, others who are not ‘compatible’ with its atmosphere, will have to do work on the locale to improve it, or to change their ways of inhabiting it to avoid taking on what may be seen as its ‘bad habits’ or negative attributes. But while scholars such as Daniel focus on understandings of personhood in rural south India, here I am more interested in understanding how people use these understandings of personhood to order and negotiate social relations with each other in a continuously changing urban space, and how they draw lines between domestic life and public space.

Knowing Who the Neighbours Are

Such knowledge is a matter of some import in Punarvaspur. With small plots built up on three sides, often with three generations of family resident, or rooms let out to tenants, much everyday life takes place outside in the space of the gali. A curtain across the front door often draws the boundary between the private space of the house and the gali, admitting the chance of a cool passing breeze but excluding invasive stares. Yet the space of the gali is neither quite private, nor totally public. Conventionally, more private areas such as those used for cooking and sleeping might be at the rear of a dwelling; more public spaces would be found at the front, where visitors can be received and access to the interior can be regulated (Vatuk, 1972; Dickey, 2000). In Punarvaspur, however, light and ventilation are available only on the roof, or at the front of the building, so that day-to-day tasks and social interaction most often happen on people’s doorsteps. In this way, access to houses and the gali itself is monitored by the informal surveillance of residents. From steps and thresholds, or sometimes rooftops, acquaintances are greeted, gossip and information exchanged, or enquiries made and challenges issued to strangers.

Women dominate the gali during the daytime, especially if there is a power cut. It is a place for household chores, vegetables prepared in the daylight for a meal; washing is done here, and otherwise idle moments filled with home-based jobs, often embroidery work or beading. As the day goes on and men start to arrive home from work, the gendering of the space becomes more mixed, but remains domestic; mechanical items are repaired, motorcycles of wealthier households washed and checked, handcarts put up and autorickshaws parked for the night. While it is a quasi-domestic space, the gali remains open to anyone to walk down, accessible to inquisitive gazes from the public street. Yet the galis are also regulated as persistently as household spaces, just as the main road from which they branch off, is not.
As several girls put it, “In our gali, everyone is an ‘uncle’ or an ‘aunt’”; and while ‘boys’ or young men might stare and pass comments in the street, this would be unlikely to be tolerated in the presence of parents, elders and neighbours in the gali. Neighbourly surveillance also has a gendering effect on the space of the gali, so that an eye to one’s reputation regulates an individual’s behaviour to that appropriately gendered in the domestic space of home. While men might play cards, talk, pass whiskey or simply pass time on the street, such activities are not appropriate within the gali, making it difficult for men and boys past school age and without work to be at home during working hours. Domesticity can also be marked by dress: working men may return home to divest themselves of their ‘day wear’ of shirt and trousers, and re-emerge from the house clad in lungi (sarong-like lower garment) and vest. Conversely, dupattas (long scarves) may be dispensed with entirely by women for the rigours of housework or tied round the body so as not to trail, but are pulled back into place or the pallu end of a sari adjusted into a ghunghat over the head, to partially or fully veil the face on physically leaving the ‘domestic’ gali for the ‘public’ street.

Where neighbourly relations are good, this informality of domestic life can be a way of reducing difference and boundaries between residents of a gali. Good relations between neighbours are necessary where the luxury of withdrawal from the space of the gali and attendant social interactions is difficult. Indeed, while some families do attempt to withdraw almost entirely from life in the lane, they do so at the risk of being regarded as haughty and aloof. But when the surveillance of neighbours fails, and the boundary of the private home is too strong, the results can be most shocking. They can be simply criminal, as with the pyramid-scheme seller and his family who disappeared one night with the savings of many neighbours, leaving only the debris of broken trust. More horrifying was the debt-driven suicide of a despairing tenant who killed himself after giving his young family poisoned milk to drink.

However, before relationships can be formed, there is the more complicated task of assessing the kinds of people that putative neighbours or acquaintances are, as Gurminder, a forceful mother of three in her 40s, married to a frequently absent lorry driver, and her coterie of neighbours agreed.

Repeating herself again, Gurminder emphasises that this residential block is “developed”, “it is healthy and clean”. Dominating the conversation, she speaks of the personal cleanliness of houses and clothes, casting an appraising eye over Khatun’s house, in which we are seated. “Your clothing also matters, but many people don’t bother”. She gives the example of her tenant, who she says dresses very nicely, so much so that until recently she didn’t know the tenant was illiterate – “but often her children don’t even go to school”. There is a murmur of assent and nodding from Gurminder’s listeners, as if this was to reveal what kind of people the family really are. “In Punarvaspur, people in the jhuggi areas don’t wear fresh clothes everyday. People there spit paan (betel-nut juice), there is rubbish – it is dirtier. There is greater need, and people cannot improve their mahaul. We can’t sit with each other...”
Everyone clustered around Gurminder speaks at once, but the conclusion is that “here people can live better”, “educate their children”, and so “people are smarter”.

The persistent mention of a ‘good’ mahaul as Gurminder describes it is largely a claim of class and aspiration through a desire for and acquisition of better education, better modes of dress and behaviour, as compared to others in surrounding blocks. As Gurminder points out, appearances are not always reliable indicators. But this assessment of a person relative to the mahaul is usually the only index available when deciding on what kinds of interactions to have with someone. Here then, her tenant’s dress and deportment were convincing.

For Gurminder, the effect of the mahaul is evident as she points out the ‘inevitability’ of certain kinds of behaviour of people ‘there’. This is a major concern, particularly to upper-caste people in a ‘reserved’ (lower-caste) constituency, where political power does not lie with them. These terms compelled Gurminder to comment both about others in the neighbourhood and elected representatives without using explicitly caste-based language. More pressingly, though, is the uncertainty at the level of everyday interactions. As another woman grumbled: “People here are mixed. I don’t know who you are, but if you say you are a Brahmin, I have to believe you... We are not related here; we are all from different villages...”

Physical Boundaries

Things are not always so indeterminate. Some galis were more or less recreated from those at the original settlement sites, others are clustered around regional or religious associations with the lane. ‘Masjid-Wali Gali’ has a large mosque in the park at one end, and but only one ‘Madras’ (south Indian) family remains in ‘Madras-Wali Gali’, while the name and association remains with the small ‘Madras’ mandir at the end of the lane. Another gali has subtly, silently, become populated mainly by Brahmin and Rajput families who,
concerned at the mix of residents belonging to other castes, regions and religions, collected money to put up tall gates at the ends of the gali. Shut at night and half-open during the day, they stop small children running out into the main street beyond, but residents were also pleased that fewer male vendors with handcarts came into the lane, and that it was no longer used as a shortcut, keeping the mêlée of the main road at bay. Ramesh, a resident in his late thirties with a young family, works as a peon in an MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) office. Arriving home from work on his rickety scooter to impose himself on the conversation at large, he argued that the successful collection of money for the gali gates was evidence of the peaceful, orderly relationships between householder in this gali, from which the fights and poor mahaul of other lanes, as well as the commotion of the main road, had been excluded.

Elsewhere, mandirs and masjids in parks, or smaller ones set into walls, may also mark the boundaries between different groups of people. While often genuinely devotional, they can also have more utilitarian purposes. Kamlesh, in her forties with two teenage daughters, lives between her brothers-in-law, at the opposite end of the lane from the main market. This market separates the two phases of resettlement and different predominant communities, marking an antipathy between the fish- and meat-eating ‘Bengali’ (Muslim) community, and the nominally vegetarian Hindu households. But although the vegetable market lies on the western or ‘Hindu’ side, the vendors throughout the market are predominantly Muslim. This fact, and the anarchic mess and crush of shoppers, is a source of anxiety to Kamlesh and others in abutting galis. As the rush peaks at around 7 pm, increasing numbers of people cut through the lane, bringing the very public cacophony and debris of the market with them.

A mandir containing a statue of the goddess Durga occupies a small space at the market end of Kamlesh’s lane. It was good the temple had been built, Kamlesh explained, adding that it had been set there specifically to deter the market’s vegetable sellers from parking their handcarts on that spot. To this end, the residents of the mainly Hindu gali had collected money and constructed the shrine. “It’s so they [the vendors] could not capture this [space]. It started very small, and then after a couple of years it was built bigger”. Kamlesh’s daughter Archana is more blunt. “On this side of the road, it is good; on that side [gesturing to the market and beyond] it is filthy – there everyone is Bengali, they throw bones [of meat], it is completely filthy”.

While the mandir has not prevented the lane being used as a general shortcut – conversations were often interrupted by the belligerent cough and fart of a diesel tempo delivering vegetables from the Azadpur wholesale market – the lane has been marked as ‘Hindu’, in opposition to the ‘Bengali’ block and market beyond, and has in fact reduced the actual incursion of vegetable stalls into the lane. As reflected in Archana’s comments, on both sides of the market people had entrenched views and prejudices with regard to the social customs and habits of other residents. It was claimed these were detrimental to the mahaul – whether it was vegetarians commenting on meat-eaters, or high castes commenting on low castes. These structures have a rhetorical effect, literally concretising
the frontier between communities, appearing as a banal, everyday reminder of the purported ill effects of the ‘other’ community on the mahaul. They also put into material effect the claims to space and frontiers of the respective communities, and demonstrate each group’s ability to organise the means to mark this.

Conclusion
Frontiers operate in many different ways and at different levels in Punarvaspur in its physical location on the frontier of the city, even if it is no longer surrounded by ‘jungle’. Houses and walls have transformed the scrub and wilderness into an emergent habitation, and through the assessment of the ‘prototypical category’ (Frøystad, 2005) of the mahaul, its residents have marked out its spaces out with speech.

Operating in this way, the mahaul has to be decoded through the uncertain and ambivalent interrelations in the public space of the neighbourhood. Based on previous ‘knowledge’ or associations, and physical attributes, it can provide crucial pointers regarding how to quickly assess and place people in relation to each other and the space they are in. Hence, the meaning of the mahaul and what people draw from it also emerges from the relative positioning within it of people by each other. Produced largely through speech and conversation, it operates deictically, so that talking about others in reference to oneself allows some kind of relative ordering of the unruly and mixed-up nature of the environs. It works as a means of allowing people to ‘know’ something about otherwise yet-unknown ‘others’, and to position themselves accordingly.

In placing Punarvaspur on the edge of the city, perhaps the state hoped, as resident Ram Singh suggested at the beginning of this essay, that such a place would deter future migrants from coming to the city. However, in many ways it was more a very visible declaration of the marginality of the residents in their place in the city. Certainly, in their associations as ‘ex-squatters’ or ‘encroachers’, the slur of illegality and criminality remains, particularly in the naming of the local thana (police station) after the colony; or it being reiterated in newspapers and policy documents as a ‘slum’, and hence of dubious value. In this way it appears as a site in need of ‘development’ and as a locale where a number of ‘target populations’ for NGO programmes may be conveniently found.

Under constant consideration, the mahaul is a strong issue around which to pragmatically organise. Accordingly, promises to improve water supply or remake drains, or to ‘mobilise’ people to form community sanitation squads to ‘improve the mahaul of the place’ have all been promoted by both local politicians, as well as NGOs. While this might motivate the community because such actions or policies can produce visible, tangible, local benefits, it is also because residents know that what they really desire – stable jobs, income, reliable education, to be able to move beyond the mahaul of Punarvaspur – are aspirations which in fact cannot be achieved by these organisations.

Meanwhile, the mahaul as it is invoked offers the means of producing new boundaries of constituents, or groups of people prepared to participate in the more modest aims of
NGO programmes; or simply producing in day-to-day life the further creation and organisation of resilient demographic frontiers.

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Notes

1. This research was undertaken as part of a wider doctoral research project exploring the role of ‘civil’ and ‘political society’ in the history and development of the neighbourhood, through the relationships between residents, neighbourhood organisations, NGOs and local politicians. Positioning myself as a student with a particular interest in the history of the colony and experiences of residents over the years, served to distance me from NGOs in the neighbourhood (and a litany of complaints about public services in the locale), particularly from the periodic tours of international donors to projects there. The majority of the research was carried out through a combination of casual conversations and more directed but informal ‘interviews’; and also some ‘snowballing’, as I was directed to individuals who people thought I should talk to. The names of local residents and sites used in this essay are pseudonyms.

2. In the intervening period between the first round of resettlement in the first days of January 1976 and the second round in July of the same year, the ‘Family Planning’ campaign seems to have gathered considerable momentum. Newspapers of the time reported ever-increasing numbers of people as having been ‘motivated’ to undergo voluntary sterilisation. However, the brutal realities and Faustian bargains brokered are better recorded by Emma Tarlo in her book Unsettling Memories (2003, also 2000 and 2001), based on research in the Welcome locality in Seelampur, also an East Delhi settlement.

3. Both Chakrabarty (1991) and Kaviraj (1997) explore shifting conceptions of ‘inside’, ‘outside’, ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the interactions of colonial conceptions of public space and the domestic private realm beyond the state. While their trajectory is different from the one developed in this essay, they also, however focus on the negotiation of frontiers in the politics and meanings of space.

4. Freud writes of “unheimlich”, often translated into English as “uncanny”, as that “realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (2003, p. 123); but which on closer investigation, is also “everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away”, but “has come into the open” (ibid., p. 132). After the upheaval and violence of the resettlement, it is easy to see how many one-time villagers, then ex-city dwellers, might feel they had been thrown somewhere quite ‘uncanny’ – where it was difficult to know what aspects remained hidden or exposed in the anarchy of dislocation and the upheaval of lives turned upside down. The converse, “heimlich”, more often translated as “homely”, also covers “what is concealed and kept hidden” (ibid.); and perhaps also what is built up in secrets and shared histories within families and between neighbours over time.

5. This can be quite literal, as broken bricks and spare concrete from a house construction is very often the source of materials for a small shrine in a gali.

6. In this respect, the ‘mahaul’ as a concept works within larger South Asian ‘ethno-sociological’ understandings of the connectedness of persons and substance; hence the ingrained belief that people
can be affected by polluting places or occupations. Related to Dumont’s work (1981) on purity, pollution and hierarchy, Marriott (1990) also argues for an ‘ethno-sociological’ approach, taking vernacular concepts as categories – in this case, the shifting of substance between persons and place. This is also used by Daniel (1984) to explore the openness of persons to the interrelationships between physical environment and person: physical, mental and moral. More usefully here, Parry (1989) argues that this view of the openness of people is better understood as an ideology that serves to stabilise and direct relationships.

7. This varies from enquiries or news about family members, to information about new home-based work opportunities. In this way gals are rich conduits for information, as much as progressive layers of boundaries. It was striking how rapidly this kind of information could travel.

8. Similarly, Anita Weiss (1998) also explores the ways in which the differently gendered use of physical space has been transformed by the relocation of people from the walled city of Lahore to newly built suburbs on the outskirts.

9. This is very similar to the routine ‘flagging’ of symbols and habits of language in the shaping and reiteration of ‘community’ that Michael Billig notes in his study of ‘banal nationalism’ (1995).

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