

BOOK REVIEWS

ARCHITECTURE, POWER, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

by Lawrence J. Vale, Yale University Press, 1992

Reviewed by Jane C. Loeffler,
MCP '71

From my window I can see the new Russian Embassy, formerly the new Embassy of the USSR, a sprawling modern compound on the heights above Georgetown. Construction of this project dates to the 1970s. It was supposed to proceed in tandem with the construction of the new Embassy in Moscow, but due to a regrettable series of events, too complicated (and sad) to reiterate here, the American Embassy remains incomplete; thus the Russian project is "officially" not in use. People do live there, however, and many presumably work there as well.

It is tempting to say that the project and its architecture are unremarkable. Its central building is a six-story, marble-clad, white cube set on a granite-faced base and topped by a penthouse. Curtain wall construction, symmetry, a grid of windows on all sides, the use of small decorative ribs to emphasize the verticality of the

and a remarkable statement about a struggle for power.

No one has done more to help us analyze and understand the logistics of the architectural skirmish than MIT professor Lawrence J. Vale, author of *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*. Although Vale does not examine my neighbor, the Russian Embassy, the questions that the Embassy poses are those that he explores in his thoughtful, informative, and beautifully produced book. Why, for example, do people who know the building often

Like Chandigarh, like so much that Le Corbusier designed and imagined, Brasília, the great monument to Modernism, is an environment that repels.

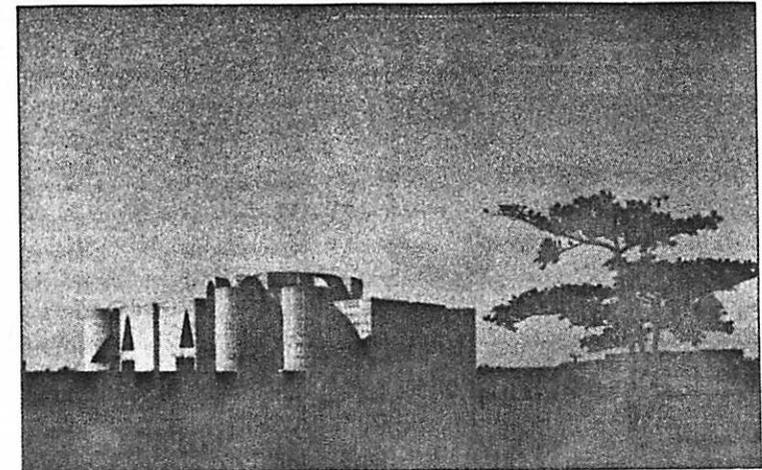
describe it as "totalitarian-looking," while those unfamiliar with its program describe it merely as boxy, ugly, or non-descript? Can we conclude from this that totalitarian architecture is boxy, ugly, or non-descript? Can we even conclude

City, and Louis Kahn's concocted "ruins" at Dhaka.

Not only does Vale describe each place in detail, he also provides an invaluable theoretical framework drawn from the work of scholars such as cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz and historian Eric Hobsbawm. Above all, he points out that nations faced with the task of establishing national identity, particularly former colonies intent on distancing themselves from a colonial heritage, confront not only the problem of recon-

structing a past while pursuing modernity, but also the added dilemma of incorporating into their capitol buildings the often conflicting pasts associated with cultural diversity.

With many voices demanding to be heard, architects face



Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Louis Kahn

sects impose their own arrogance on projects by turning them into personal statements? To what extent do clients actually seek identification with such ego-driven professionals? These are among the questions that Vale leads us to ask, and these are the questions that concern people like me, who study the history of government architecture. My own research reveals, for example, that Louis Kahn's commission to design the new U.S. Embassy in Luanda in 1959 was one of the few to be cancelled by the State Department. Kahn's concept was criticized (by the State Department) for its "highly questionable character, being

among individuals, interest groups, cities, and nations. Those relationships, whether adversarial or not, are based on power. Recently, as architectural historians have turned more of their attention to the significance of patronage, we have seen a new interest in architecture's power to persuade.

The late German art historian Wolfgang Braunfels wrote on this subject and Vale's work is influenced by his. In *Urban Design in Western Europe, Regime and Architecture*, 900-

Unlike lawyers or doctors, who respond directly to

squat-looking structure — these do not combine to produce a stunning design statement. But there is more to the project than that. From its windows, shielded from sun and surveillance, to its penthouse, jammed with the sophisticated electronics that permitted the Soviets routine access to American intelligence, to the extraordinary strategic value of the site itself, the Embassy, like ours in Moscow, is an artifact of the Cold War

that totalitarian architecture, or democratic architecture, for that matter, exists as an identifiable entity?

Vale would definitely answer “no” and he offers much evidence to support that position. His book focuses on the design of capital cities and capitol complexes, and his wide purview includes places that may be familiar only to those whose children have introduced them to the travels

of Carmen Sandiego. He includes well-known capitals like Chandigarh and Brasília, along with Abuja, Islamabad, and Dodoma. He explores parliamentary buildings such as Cecil Hogan’s eclectic evocation of a tribal house in Port Moresby, Geoffrey Bawa’s “sacred fortress” in Colombo, Jørn Utzon’s concrete version of a Bedouin’s tent in Kuwait

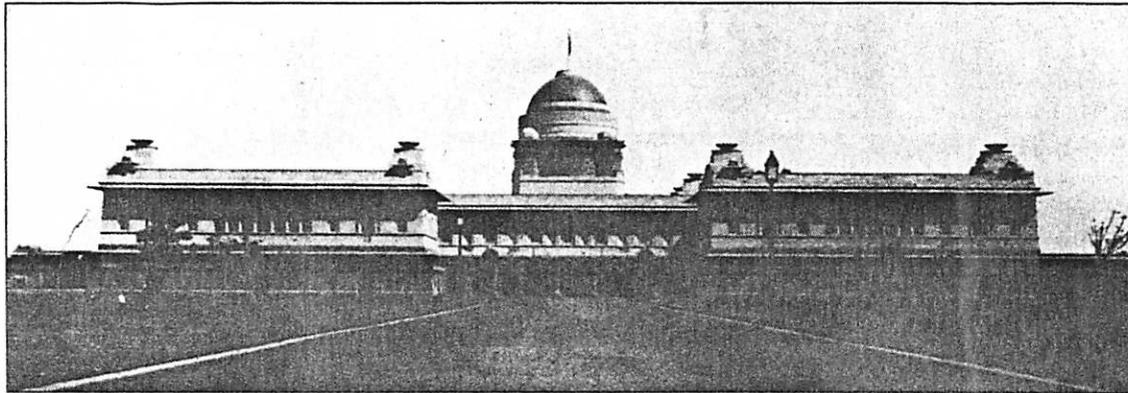
of difficult choices. Certainly it is a losing game to choose between a bland, placeless international style and an eclectic local pastiche. Vale tells us that in Sri Lanka, bitterly divided between its Sinhalese and Tamil populations, the new capitol complex in Colombo reinforces Sinhalese dominance and symbolizes the strife that has destroyed civic order in that island nation. Moreover, in places like Kuwait, the democratic intent so expan-

sively expressed in new parliamentary buildings is often unaccompanied by any actual democracy. Is the architect responsible for this failure of fit between container and contained? To what extent do individual archi-

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problems presented by identifiable clients or patients, architects often design for clients whose needs differ markedly from those of the actual users of the project.

1900, Braunfels similarly interprets skylines and land-use patterns as expressions of political power and cultural hegemony. The most provocative of his conclusions has to do with what he calls the necessity for aesthetic exaggeration. “In every century,” he writes, “anyone who planned only for necessity did not even achieve what was necessary. Humanity had a need of an emotional relationship to its dwelling places; it demanded aesthetic uplift, a creative culture that could lend more than polish to the everyday.” Thus, he maintains, the Piazza San Marco and the Maximiliansstraße in Augsburg each demonstrate how planning can reach out beyond mere necessity to create something extraordinary and lasting.



Viceroy's House, New Delhi, Edwin Lutyens

PENELOPE CHETWODE

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