Architecture, Power, and National Identity
by Lawrence J. Vale, Yale University Press, 1992

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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 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 reconstruction but also the dilemma of incorporating into their capitol buildings the often conflicting pasts associated with cultural diversity.

Like Chandigarh, like so much that Le Corbusier designed and imagined, Brasilia, the great monument to Modernism, is an environment that repels. Yet, as architects imposed 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-
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.

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

Certainly it is a losing game to choose between a bland, placeless international style and an eclectic local pastiche. Vale includes well-known capitals like Chandigarh and Brasilia, 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 Carmen Sandiego. He [as] cold and forbidding as a place of detention. It was a concept “from which he seemingly would not or could not depart.” In addition, his proposed structure was spatially inefficient and vastly exceeded its budget. Knowing this, I am not surprised to read Vale’s devastating analysis of the Dhaka National Assembly, a project begun just two years after the failure of the Luanda project. Vale explains how Kahn either deliberately misunderstood or just grossly miscalculated costs, energy load, climate, materials, and religious sensibilities, not to mention the fundamentally undemocratic nature of the government of Bangladesh.

While Vale does not suggest that a commissioned architect has the power or influence to change a political situation, it is unclear what he expects of someone faced with the challenge, for instance, of designing a home for a tyrant. Should he or she reject the job or take it? If the tyrant does not want to appear tyrannical, is the task more or less problematic? One wonders what the author would say.

Buildings acquire meaning by virtue of their formal arrangement and by association. Architecture is and always has been used deliberately and unintentionally to define relationships