

Were Europe's colonies architectural, as well as political, conquests?

Four historians offer revisionist answers, reviewed by **Jane C. Loeffler**.

### Books of Note

**The Genius of Architecture; Or, the Analogy of That Art with Our Sensations** by *Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières*, introduction by *Robin Middleton*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, 223 pp., \$34.50 cloth, \$22.95 paper. Architecture should stimulate the senses as well as the mind, argued Le Camus, an 18th-Century French architect. This text is a fine addition to the Getty Center's Texts & Documents series of overlooked or untranslated writings chosen for their relevance to the field today.

**John Pawson introductions** by *Bruce Chatwin* and *Deyan Sudjic*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1992, 95 pp., \$28.95. Sudjic argues that Pawson's exclusion of superfluous elements makes his work intensely liberating. The book includes projects by the British architect from 1983 through 1991.

**The World's Columbian Exposition** by *Norman Bolotin* and *Christine Laing*, Preservation Press, Washington, D.C., 1992, 166 pp., \$29.95.

Rather than produce an academic or critical text on the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the authors lead an "armchair travel" tour, replete with archival photographs and drawings.

**Landmarks of Soviet Architecture 1917-1991** by *Alexander Ryabushin* and *Nadia Smolina*, Rizzoli, New York, 1992, 159 pp., \$35 paper.

The tumultuous relationship between architecture and politics in the Soviet Union is well documented.

**The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism** by *Gwendolyn Wright*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, 389 pp., \$65 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

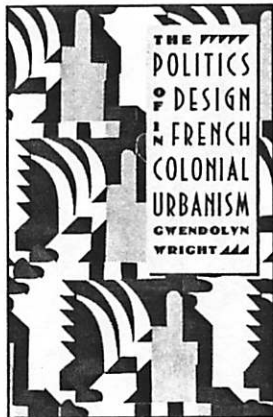
**Architecture, Power, and National Identity** by *Laurence J. Vale*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992, 338 pp., \$45.

**Enclaves of America: the Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad, 1900-1965** by *Ron Robin*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, 208 pp., \$24.95.

**Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise** edited by *Nezar AlSayyad*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Brookfield, Vermont, 1992, 358 pp., \$67.95.

*Casablanca* is more than an immensely popular movie; it is also a real place. But the reality of that place has been reconfigured by different people at different times. The French invaded Casablanca in 1907. To them, the city represented the exotic and the romantic, qualities captured, for example, in already well-known paintings by Delacroix and Gérôme. The French constructed an image of a timeless and unchanging place and projected it upon the old but bustling and ever-evolving city. Their colonial policies reinforced this image.

Colonialism and its legacy are receiving widespread attention these days, as the often concocted entities that were eventually recognized as independent nations attempt to take possession of their own history. Four new books offer insight into the colonial landscape and the architecture of national identity. Together, they add significantly to our understanding of the relationship between art and culture and to the intensifying debate on authenticity and exploitation. These issues are relevant today to the design of public buildings both here and abroad.



In *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, Gwendolyn Wright explores how culturally generated images played a key role in determining urban design policy, and more broadly, how colonial architecture reflected a political agenda. The allure of Casablanca may well be the product of an imperialistic vision, but I think that very fascination with "faraway" places is part of what makes Wright's book so enjoyable. She explores the colonial landscapes of Morocco, Indochina, and Madagascar, showing how design was used to augment French foreign policy, and demonstrating how the French colonies offered planners an unequalled opportunity to apply social science for urban betterment.

Here, as in her earlier book, *Moralism and the Model Home*, Wright investigates the cultural implications of spatial organization and how architectural style can be used to establish identity. Like reform efforts embodied in the model home, French colonial architecture and urban design reflected a widespread need for order amid perceived chaos. But in the colonies planners had the power they lacked elsewhere to control land use. This meant that the political and social agenda that shaped urban design was far more explicit in the colonial context than it was "at home." Under the direction of Georges Cassaigne, for example, garden suburbs were constructed outside of the Malagasy capital of Antananarivo in the 1920s. Ostensibly they were for all residents, but effectively they accommodated only French families because of prohibitive cost, and moreover, because of their design. "The Malagasy rituals that governed the orientation of rooms and of the house itself," Wright says, "found no place in the design of subdivisions intended for Europeans." As she notes, French residents were pleased that simple building codes achieved for them the racial segregation they sought.

In Morocco, segregation was similarly achieved through the creation of dual cities. Historic preservation was the control device that allowed planners to maintain the illusion of charming "timelessness" while confining the Moroccans to "traditional" quarters. As Wright illustrates, Casablanca was the focus of preservation efforts while Rabat became the modern administrative capital designed for foreigners and their commerce.

At times it is hard to follow the careers of the various French officials and their policies because of the organization of this book. It seems clear, though,

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that they learned from experience. When they took control of Algeria, they destroyed monuments, and cleared intricate old towns, replacing them with grid plans drawn by military engineers. Hubert Lyautey rejected that approach in Morocco. Under his direction French architects designed buildings that retained elements associated with Moroccan architecture – pointed arches, stalactite *mugarnas*, tile-work, and unornamented flat white-washed surfaces. Despite such efforts “to show their adaptation to the surrounding culture,” Wright concludes, this architectural inclusivity failed to produce cross-cultural understanding.

Do specific politics generate certain distinct architectural styles or do those styles acquire political connotations only by association? How have new nations reconciled the Modernist imperative with the necessity for cultural continuity? These and other questions raised by Wright’s work are superbly analyzed by Lawrence Vale in *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*. This is a beautifully produced book, replete with photographs, maps, and fine drawings. It offers a remarkable opportunity to visit and examine post-colonial capitol complexes in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kuwait, and Papua New Guinea as well as designed capital cities, including Chandigarh and Brasília. Vale’s broad background in design and international relations is evident in his analysis, which draws also on recent ethnographic work.

Too often architects refer to “Le Corbusier’s Chândigarh,” as if the architect had not only designed it, but possessed it like a collectible object, as if it existed apart from its context. The same is true of Louis Kahn’s citadel at Dhaka, Bangladesh, more often examined as a work of art or an isolated monument than as the capitol of a poverty-stricken nation wracked by religious differences. Although barely occupied, Vale says, the Dhaka National Assembly requires year-round air conditioning and costs \$2 million a year to maintain. As he indicates, its annual energy consump-

tion equals that of nearly half of the rest of Dhaka. If Kahn disregarded economy in his design, he also disregarded local climate, the religious sensitivities of the sizable Hindu minority, and moreover, the undemocratic nature of the government itself. “As a result,” Vale writes, “the discontinuity between Kahn’s architectural ideogram and Bangladesh’s political reality is acute.”

Elsewhere politicians and architects have similarly attempted to package national identity. In Modernism, Brasília’s designers found a language that was at once anticolonialist and anticapitalist, but the Modernist vocabulary produced little more than another “privileged sanctuary,” according to Vale.

Neither its newness nor the formal attributes of its capitol buildings prevented the military coup which followed Brasília’s construction. Civil war between the Buddhist Sinhalese and the Hindu Tamils, likewise, put an end to free elections in Sri Lanka just after the completion of an impressive new parliament building there. The fact that its architecture draws only on Sinhalese tradition did not cause the strife, but does reflect the cultural and political situation that fuels it. In these and other situations, architects are faced with the puzzling problem of how to construct national identity where nationalism barely exists.

Papua New Guinea, for example, is a rural nation made up of 1,000 tribes speaking more than 700 different language dialects. The architect Cecil Hogan incorporated a wide array of indigenous art into his design for its new national parliament building. His solution, a soaring concrete structure embellished with mosaics, is modeled on a men’s village house found in the prime minister’s own home region, but alien to most other parts of the country. Is this anything more than “tourist architecture,” Vale asks. Could anything possibly symbolize such a diverse place?

In *Enclaves of America: the Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad, 1900–1965*, Ron Robin studies the symbolism of

American battle monuments and embassy buildings. He sees these projects as imperialistic gestures and condemns them for the “jumbled messages” they convey. The subject is fascinating and important, but the book is overly subjective and lacks solid methodology as architectural history. Buildings are more than their façades, and meaning is more than simply a surface phenomenon.

Those intrigued by the cultural connotations of the built environment will welcome Nezar AlSayyad’s collection of essays, *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*. Underlying these essays is the assumption that all urban development is inherently colonialist. AlSayyad’s own essay, for example, links the Arab conquest of the Middle East to colonialism. The Islamic city of Damascus, he shows, was first laid out as a Roman city on a grid. Seized as part of the Byzantine Empire, Damascus saw the construction of Christian churches. Conquered by the Arabs, it saw its churches turned into mosques as the new rulers sought to establish their own dominance, spatially and spiritually. What is authentic or native and what is foreign, AlSayyad reminds us, is often indistinguishable.

For a book about design, this one is not designed well. Photographs and maps are tiny and few, the small type appears to be faded, and there is no index. Still, the collection is provocative and useful. Michele Lamprakos, for example, presents a fine study of Le Corbusier’s Plan Obus for the city of Algiers in the 1930s. This scheme featured a Casbah preserved as a mere relic, lying beneath an elevated highway linking the business district with modern French residential enclaves. Through rigid zoning, the plan maintained the separation of old and new, local and foreign. Though never implemented, it stands as a monument to the arrogance and elitism of its architect/author.

In “Cities of the Stalinist Empire,” Greg Castillo examines how the Soviet Union tried to demolish its architectural history,

how Moscow controlled design in its East bloc satellites, and why the State was threatened by such apparently small details as horizontal strip windows. Mia Fuller uses Italian architectural journals to study how Italy sought to unearth the Roman past in its Libyan colony, an effort to establish its legitimacy there. Fuller, like nearly all the other contributors to this collection, draws on the recent work of Anthony King, author of the final essay. King calls attention to the “voices” that have yet to be fully heard with reference to colonial dominance. His ideal is for people to “have control over their own culture.” Unfortunately for his thesis, national boundaries do not fall neatly along cultural lines, nor is nationalism, as expressed cultural identity, always a liberating force. In an interconnected world, control by one culture often leads to exploitation of another.

The more possessive people become of their pasts, real and imagined, the harder it is for architects to find a common language of expression. Lawrence Vale observes that cultural diversity in large places like India, and even in small places like Papua New Guinea, makes it nearly impossible to identify any one cultural voice for a city, let alone an entire nation. The architect must listen to all voices, he says. But what if he or she hears only a cacophony? The voices must listen to each other as well. These books are steps in that direction.

**Jane C. Loeffler** ■

*The author is an urban planner and doctoral candidate in American Civilization at the George Washington University. She is the author of “The Architecture of Diplomacy: Heyday of the United States Embassy-Building Program, 1954–1960,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Sept. 1990.*

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