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# DESIGNING NATIONAL IDENTITY

## Post-Colonial Capitols as Intercultural Dilemmas

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This chapter seeks to identify some of the political and cultural factors affecting the design of national parliament building complexes in post-colonial societies in order to articulate some of the dilemmas facing architects who take on commissions in highly polarized places. I argue that the architecture of such government buildings, though erected in the name of "national identity" and "national unity," is intimately tied to political forces that reinforce existing patterns of intercultural dominance and submission.[1]

I begin with a discussion of the concept of national identity, stressing that what is put forth by government leaders and their architects as "national" most often contains significant biases towards preserving or advancing the hegemony of a politically ascendant sub-national group. Moreover, what is termed "national" identity is also closely tied to both international identity and to the personal identities of the architects and sponsoring politicians.

Architects who undertake such politically sensitive commissions confront a wide variety of dilemmas. I contend that the architecture of national parliament buildings will be perceived in relation to politics even if the architect claims to be politically disinterested. For architects who actively embrace the political challenge of a capitol commission, other problems remain. For example, efforts to idealize the place of a national assembly in a fledgling democracy may yield a result that is irrelevant at best,

while efforts to portray accurately the minimal institutional power of a national assembly are likely to be rejected by the government client. To best cope with these dilemmas and avoid making flagrantly partisan designs, architects must rely on prodigious powers of abstraction and should recognize that capitol buildings play an ever-changing political role. Above all, designers must become more conscious of the gap between their clients' (and their own) hegemonic preferences and the more inclusive promises implied by a building that is called a "national" assembly.

## Power by design

Throughout history and across the globe, architecture and urban design have been manipulated in the service of politics. Government buildings are, I would claim, an attempt to build governments and to support specific regimes. More than mere homes for government leaders, they serve as symbols of the state. We can, therefore, learn much about a political regime by observing closely what it builds. Moreover, the close examination of government buildings can reveal a great deal about what Clifford Geertz has termed the "cultural balance of power" within a pluralist society (Geertz, 1973, p.245).

The perceived need to make architecture serve politics is most salient in those countries where the form of politics is new and the forms of architecture are old. In the emerging post-colonial world of the middle and late twentieth century, the leadership of newly independent states has frequently attempted to use architecture not only to house a new form of government (parliamentary democracy), but also to proclaim the worthiness of the new regime and advance its status. The professed goal is the development of something most often termed "national identity."

## What is national identity?

The process of decolonization involves far more than a political change of government; it entails a far-reaching alteration of social and cultural consciousness, one not easily or fully achieved. Moreover, as Geertz observes, the battle against colonial rule is not at all equivalent to the "definition, creation, and solidification of a viable collective identity" (Geertz, 1973, p.238). The nationalism that supported the drive for independence in the name of freedom and self-determination is not the same as the nationalism needed after the revolution to define the "self" that has been freed. In their relation to the institutions of the state, the two stages of nationalism may well be diametrically opposed. Crawford Young notes that the state which, before independence, had been "the foil against which unity was forged" is, after independence, "itself the main vehicle in the hands of the nationalist elite for the fulfillment of the mission" (Young, 1976, p.71). For most political leaders, directing this post-independence nationalism remains a daunting task.





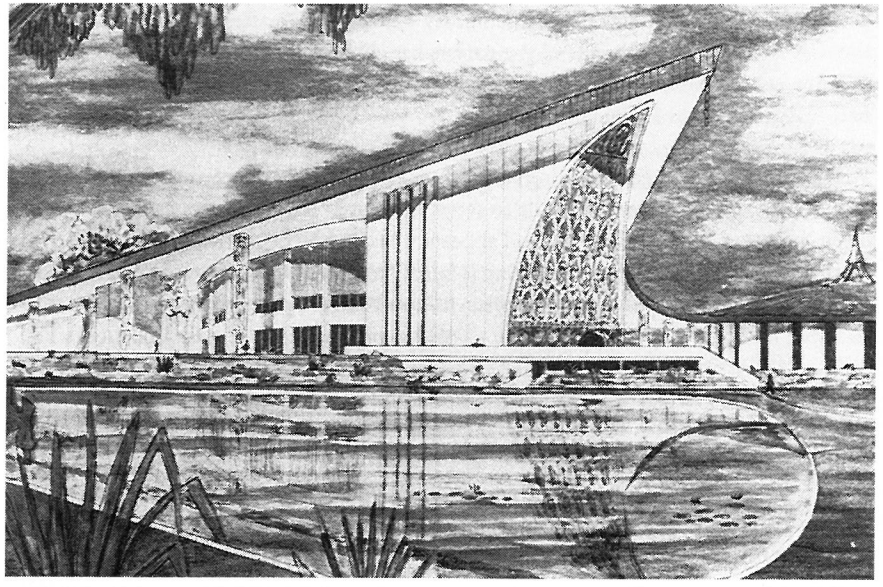
Post-colonial parliament buildings would seem to be ready purveyors of national identity, since they are ostensibly built to serve and symbolize a country as a whole. More often, however, since their siting and appearance is chosen by the leadership rather than by the populace, the resultant building is hardly representative of a truly national identity. Architecture and planning are often used as tools for promoting something called national identity, but many dimensions of this phenomenon remain unarticulated.

In the case of several of the most recently completed national parliament buildings, there are clear attempts to apply indigenous architectural forms to the task of housing a post-colonial government. In Papua New Guinea, for example, architect Cecil Hogan's Parliament House (completed in 1984) is a near-literal pastiche of village architectural forms and artistic motifs, dominated by a forward-leaning facade that attempts to replicate a Sepik Province *haus tambaran* (spirit house) in concrete and mosaic (**FIG. 1**). In Kuwait, Jorn Utzon has claimed that his national assembly building design (finished in 1985) uses concrete to evoke the billows of a traditional Bedouin tent, while it employs a plan based upon the idea of an Islamic bazaar (**FIG. 2**). In Sri Lanka, Geoffrey Bawa's island parliamentary redoubt (completed in 1982) takes more subtle cues from the traditional double-pitched roofs of pre-colonial Kandy; it also manages to integrate references to the waterfront temple complexes of the Sri Lankan past, as well as convey the blocky impregnability of the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial forts which guarded the city of Colombo in subsequent eras (**FIG. 3**).

Such examples suggest that government leaders and their architects are no longer content to rely on the deliberate cultural anonymity (or, alternatively, the deliberate Western hegemony) of high modernism epitomized by the term International Style, and have instead produced design solutions that are more openly evocative of local traditions. But in each country there are usually many different local traditions, and the decision as to which to elevate into a building that is meant to serve as the symbol of a modern state is never arbitrary.

## Dimensions of national identity in architecture

When one reflects upon the architecture of a national assembly building, it seems appropriate to consider exactly what is being "assembled." Post-colonial parliament



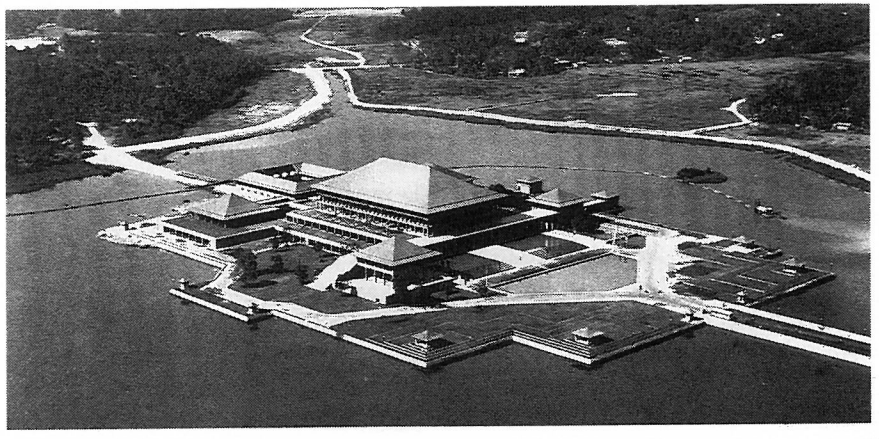
buildings, intended as visual evidence of the rightful existence of a new state, are designed with multiple and simultaneous frames of reference. Yet, to the extent that these buildings are discussed at all, assessments are too frequently couched solely in formal terms. Or, if there is some attempt to interpret form, the building is reduced to a cultural symbol, detached from the social and economic forces that helped produce it. Thus, to begin to assess the role of a parliament building in its culture, many forces must be considered; national identity does not come about easily and is always molded from what has come before.

Conscious efforts by government leaders and their architects at expressing national identity in a parliament building take place within at least three frames of reference, each with its own implications for architectural form and cultural production. In addition to the set of urban design issues regarding the spatial relationship between the capitol complex and the rest of the city, the symbolism of capitols is a product of three factors: 1) the sub-national group allegiances and preferences of the sponsoring regime; 2) the priorities of the architect's long-term design agenda; and 3) the government's interest in pursuing international identity through modern architecture and planning. In other words, what is passed off as a quest for national identity is in reality a product of the search for sub-national, personal and supranational identity.





FIGURE 1. (FACING PAGE) *Architect Cecil Hogan's rendering of the Papua New Guinea Parliament House, with ceremonial entrance based on a Sepik* haus tambaran. *Source:* The National Parliament Building, *Port Moresby, 1984.*
FIGURE 2. (ABOVE) *Tent-like forms of Jorn Utzon's Kuwait National Assembly Building. Photo by author.*
FIGURE 3. (BELOW) *Geoffrey Bawa's Island Parliament for Sri Lanka fuses a variety of indigenous architectural references. Source: Geoffrey Bawa.*



## National vs. sub-national identity

It is simplistic to regard national assembly buildings as an architectural manifestation of national distinctiveness. Although some parliamentary architecture may be meant to demonstrate a visibly unique aspect of the newly constituted state, something that will differentiate it from neighboring states (important, perhaps, if there are significant regional conflicts), nationhood is not easily represented. Government leaders may view the design of a parliament building as an affirmation of the wisdom or necessity of statehood, as visual documentation of a distinct culture deserving of status in the international system of states, but this distinct culture is almost never coterminous with the country as a whole.

New states are rarely, if ever, culturally homogeneous, and national identity is rarely directed at the liberation of a single, clearly bounded cultural group to which all residents claim membership. Rather, much of twentieth-century state making involves the mediation among factions; many potential nations may be forced to co-exist, peacefully or otherwise, within the bounds of a single state. The borders of many post-colonial states are vestiges of an era when a colonial administration was in control, with varying degrees of brutality and effectiveness, over a multitude of groups having divergent interests and multifarious alliances. With the cessation of colonial administration and direct European political control, many of these regional and internecine hostilities were unleashed. Geertz writes of the "nationalism within nationalisms," and notes that virtually every state emerging from colonial rule has suffered from provincial or separatist strains, a direct and sometimes "immediate threat to the new-wrought national identity in whose name the revolution was made" (Geertz, 1973, p.237). To the leaders of such groups, the notion of a unitary state is either anathema or an irrelevance. Governments of post-colonial countries are often recognized by the United Nations long before they are accepted by the factions within the country.

Another factor limiting the perception of national identity among a newly independent population is even more basic. Not only are most ex-colonial states divided into mutually opposed groups, but they also tend to be overwhelmingly rural places in which the only community commanding active membership and loyalty is local rather than national or regional. Identity, according to Young, is "a subjective self-concept or social role" and, as such, is "often variable, overlapping, and situational" (Young, 1976, p.65). Especially since most supra-local identities were not well developed before colonial rule, their cultivation by post-colonial national leadership remains a difficult task. Under these circumstances, national identity, whether taken in architectural or any other terms, becomes increasingly artificial and subject to the dictates of those in power.



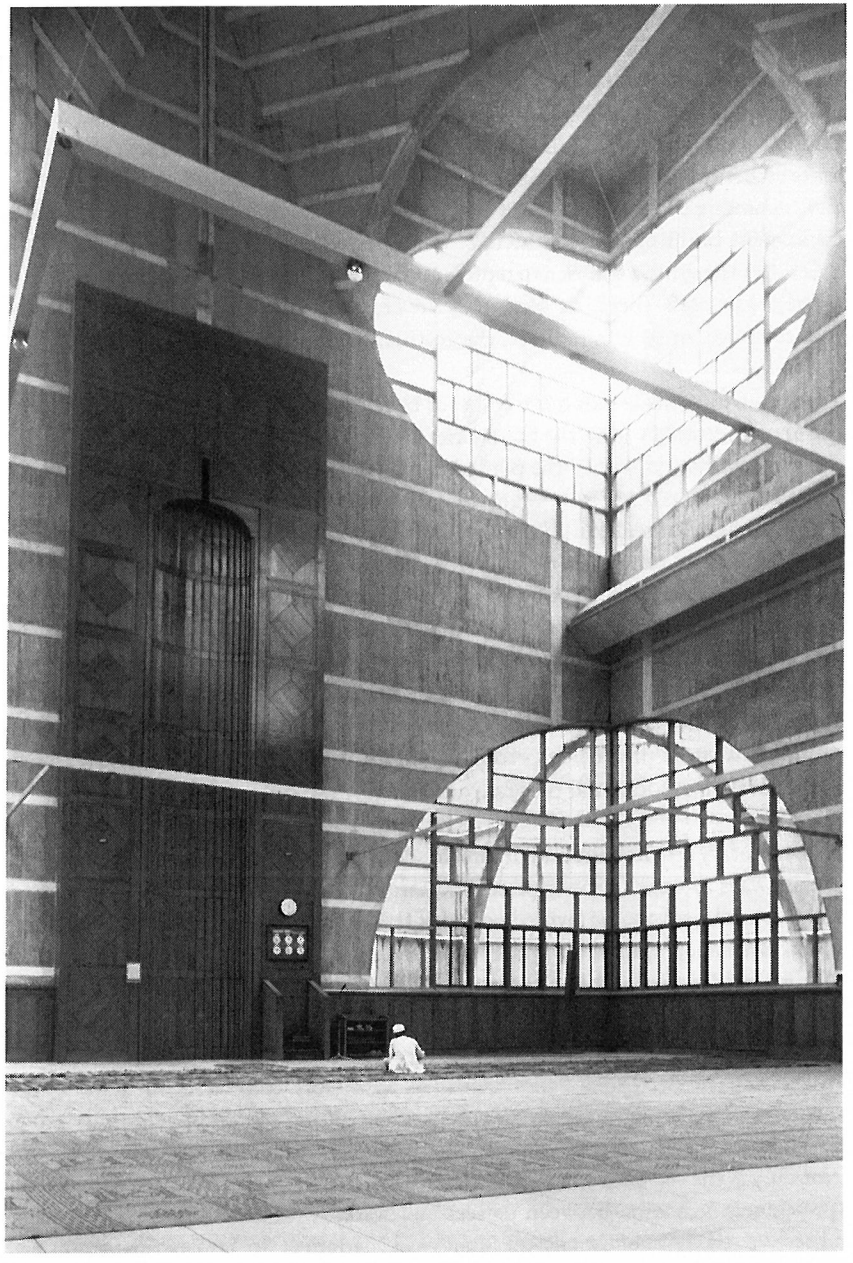


The national identity communicated through the production of a parliament building usually highlights the identity of a dominant group within a plural society. The search for national identity in parliamentary architecture is, therefore, closely related to the political structure of the state. Although there may be some well-intentioned search for a unifying national symbol, normally the choice of symbol, if examined, reveals other, more structural, social and economic tensions. Government leaders necessarily make choices among contending groups and, consciously or not, symbolic structures such as parliament buildings are products of these preferences. The rhetoric may be about unity, but the symbols chosen to represent the state are products of an elite with its own set of group preferences. As such, they are charged with highly divisive associations that reinforce, or seek to redirect, the cultural balance of power.

The situation is made still more complex by the fact that most of these allegiances do not fit comfortably within the boundaries of a single state. In many states, for example, the central division within the population is along lines of religion. Here the issue is complicated by the fact that many religions operate trans-globally. Thus, while the design of a parliament building may adopt some of the iconography of the religious majority in that state, this may do little to assist the consolidation of a specifically *national* identity (as in a pan-Arabic context, for instance). Even without the international component, the relationship between national religion (official or otherwise) and national government is almost always problematical, especially where there are varying degrees and interpretations of orthodoxy. In places like Bangladesh — where a mosque and ablution area are included as integral parts of the national assembly building in a country that is, at present, 12 percent Hindu — religion can prove controversial even at the level of architectural program and imagery (**FIG. 4**).

Parliamentary architecture and urbanism serves the interests of those in power in other crucial ways as well. In many places the national political leaders are eager to assume architectural ties to some favored period of the past. Architecture and urban design are used as an iconographical bridge between preferred epochs, joining the misty palisades of some golden age to the hazy shores of some future promise by neatly spanning all troubled colonial waters.

In this regard, Sri Lanka's new capitol is admirably convincing in its attempt to incorporate multiple layers of indigenous architectural allusions, yet highly provocative in terms of the partisan preferences that undergird its urban-design master plan. Not only is the complex sited on a private island — a clear reference to the traditional (pre-colonial) relation between palaces and water — it is also located immediately adjacent to the ruins of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom of Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte.







As a resplendent royal capital of the fifteenth century, this was a power base for Sinhalese control of the whole island — the last time such total control would be exercised until independence, five hundred years later. With this symbolic return to this formerly auspicious place at a time of renewed Tamil unrest, no doubt President Junius Jayewardene — who sponsored the building and insisted upon its rapid completion — wished he could regain a similar national control.

The intended Sinhalese character of the Sri Lankan capitol complex is made readily apparent in the proposed master plan, which clearly shows the purposes behind the juxtaposition of modern parliament and ancient citadel (FIG. 5). In the ambitious and multifaceted attempt to convey the Buddhist heritage of the country, ancient Jayawardhanapura operates by analogy as well as by proximity. Both the fifteenth-century fortress city and the twentieth-century parliament are on islands, both evince an obsession with security, and both are dominated by places for ceremony — an architecture of walls and temples. One island protects the embattled Sinhalese politicians, the other gives sanctuary to exalted Sinhalese traditions.

As in most cases in which elements of the past have been recalled in ways that serve the needs of the present, Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte is remembered with an artful interweaving of history and myth. Just as Sinhalese and Tamils have each sought to justify their contemporary political causes by contending that theirs is the most primeval presence on the island and in its traditional homelands, so too has claim to the site of the island parliament become charged with wishful meanings. And, as Stanley Tambiah has argued about the situation in Sri Lanka more generally: "The resurrection of long dormant politico-religious myths — as if they were memories continuously alive, energizing the actions of present day actors — opens up a number of problems for scholars concerning the uses of the past for present purposes, the role of ideology in interested action, and the contemporary functions of historical symbols" (Tambiah, 1988, pp.295,306).

Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte was the seat of the most powerful of the three sovereign kingdoms found by the Portuguese when they arrived in 1505 (the others were based in Kandy and Jaffna), but its position in the grand scope of Sri Lankan history is far from preeminent. Within fifty years of the arrival of the Portuguese colonists, "Kotte sought Portuguese aid and devolved into a Portuguese client state," and its king even

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FIGURE 4. (FACING PAGE) *Louis Kahn's mosque/prayer hall is a prominent feature of his National Assembly Building in Dhaka. Photo by author.*

converted to Christianity in 1557, outraging many Sinhalese (Duncan, 1990, p.31). Though undoubtedly the most nationally prominent of the historic sites near Colombo and a telling example of the changes brought to the island by European colonialism, Kotte's relatively brief period of power pales before that of either Kandy or those of the earlier ancient kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa (c. 500 B.C.—1200 A.D.), regarded at least by Sinhalese as emblematic of the island's golden age. Because these other sites were located too far from the power base of contemporary Sinhalese control to be plausible bases for national administration, the historical case of Kotte needed a certain amount of exaggeration to fit the political needs of the moment.

As the Sri Lankan example suggests, a new parliament building should be viewed in the context of that which preceded it, especially in relation to past capitol buildings and past capital cities. While national identity may be promoted through attempts to demonstrate architectural evidence of cultural uniqueness, such identity may be forged oppositionally as well. In the most obvious instances, the new building (and, in some cases, the new capital city) is seen as the alternative to the old quarters of the colonial guardian. Stylistic differentiation — whether at the level of city form or architectural language — may itself become a virtue. If, however, the old quarters cannot be surpassed in scale and grandeur (as in New Delhi), they are sometimes appropriated.

The notion of appropriation suggests that the construction of parliament buildings is, above all, a demonstration of power and a search for legitimacy. Most often in the post-colonial period this power has been invested not in a political system but in a single regime. The decision to proceed with the design and construction of a new capital city or a new parliament building — a decision which often implies a budget-straining commitment by a poor nation — is made by a regime, not by a nation. The classic case is, of course, Kubitschek's Brasília. In the case of capitol complexes, where the smaller scale of construction usually permits a faster realization than is possible for a capital city, the identification between a particular ruler and a building is often very close. The project, whether seen as a success or a debacle, becomes associated with that regime politically and perhaps iconographically.

## National vs. personal identity

A second influence on the design of parliament buildings is personal predilection, both that of the designer and that of the sponsoring politicians. These preferences may be colored by group affiliations, though it seems important to stress that design decisions are often made by individuals whose own sense of identity is projected onto that of the





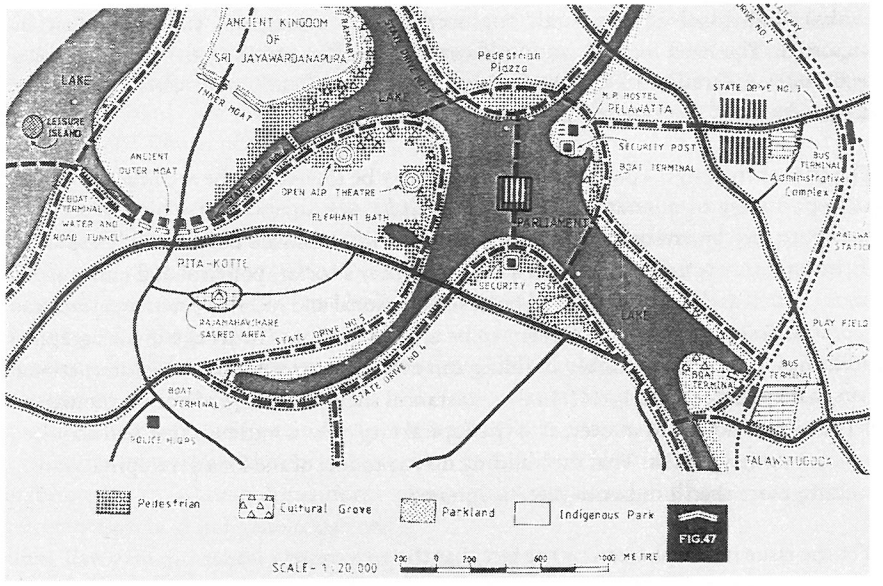


**FIGURE 5.** *A modern parliament house joins an ancient kingdom. Source:* Master Plan for Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte, *Sri Lanka.*

nation they seek to build. The designer's professional identity is consequential, especially since government leaders frequently import designers from afar. Understanding this component of identity entails examination of architectural culture: the ways that a building is a product of the education, office practice, and aspirations of its designers. To date, most internationally prominent architects in the developing world have been educated in the West or have received a Western-influenced architectural education closer to home. Moreover, in an age of increased communications and the rapid dissemination of glossy periodicals, an architect designing a large public building in a developing country can scarcely avoid being aware of Western trends and preferences, especially since these may be his or her own as well. Such global architectural consciousness, fed by international competitions and prizes, makes a purely local design solution unlikely.

Another key aspect of international architectural culture is that the demands of large-scale capitol complexes in developing nations commonly exceed the implementation capabilities of indigenous firms. Thus, even if a local architect may be found (as in Sri

Lanka), additional architectural, engineering and managerial expertise must be imported. The need for multinational cooperation, often entailing the use of building techniques unfamiliar to the architect or construction team, may affect the kind of design decisions that can be made.

The chance to design a parliament building may be treated by the architect chiefly as an opportunity to reiterate the ongoing formal preoccupations of a highly personal oeuvre, to such an extent that the public issues of symbolism are not rigorously explored. If the architect is unfamiliar with a client country's social, political and cultural climate (as well as the meteorological one), such personal and internal preoccupations can promote design solutions that seem to be alien intrusions. In an age of autographed buildings, a national assembly building can even become subject to the international personality cult of its architect. In these instances the work is judged only as the artistic expression of a revered master, as if the capital city were a museum that had acquired a work by a major artist. That the building may a product of and for a developing country seeking more than a museum piece is ignored.

Yet the issue is complicated by the fact that the government leadership may well *want* a building that is a revered museum piece and an alien intrusion, as long as it can be promoted as a sign of progress. The global architecture of parliament buildings still turns along a single major axis, with the economic pull of multinationalism at one pole and the magnetic attraction of personalism at the other.

For those in power, these poles may exert simultaneous pressure, yielding symbols that seem rooted in some favored aspect of a component culture and that strive toward global homogeneity. As Ernest Gellner has observed: "If the nationalism prospers it eliminates the alien high culture, but it does not then replace it by the old local low culture; it revives, invents, a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with the earlier local folk styles and dialects." This process, which reinterprets folk references in the context of participation in a global capitalist economy, is a reminder that "the nationalist state is not the protector only of a culture, but also of a new and often initially fragile economy" (Gellner, 1983, pp.57,112). The architecture and urban design of capitol complexes, like other large-scale public works intended as symbols of nationhood, can thus exhibit personal preferences with ties to both the local and the global economy.

## National vs. International Identity

A third frame of reference for the design of post-colonial parliament buildings is the government's interest in treating architecture as a visible symbol of economic development. As such, these highly visible public works are supposed to promote national pride through international recognition. Parliament buildings are thus sometimes intended to demonstrate a developing country's ability to equal the West on its own terms. In short, as Edward Shils phrases it: "'Modern' means being Western without depending on the West" (Shils, 1975, p.486).





In this context, national identity is not the overriding issue; the goal is identity in the eyes of an international audience. Consequently, part of the national identity of some developing countries has come to be defined according to the dictates and tastes of Western consumers. Parliament buildings, like many hotels, are designed to be in keeping with the preexisting international image of the country; the building must confirm — and thus perpetuate — a stereotype. The danger is that the cultural richness negated by international modernism will reappear in cartoon form. The box with the flag in front is replaced by a building that is a flag itself. One form of design denies the possibility of an architectural contribution to national identity; the other reduces architecture to a three-dimensional government-sanctioned billboard advertising selected aspects of indigenous culture.

Nowhere is this phenomenon of international cultural advertisement more clear than in Hogan's concrete *haus tambaran* Parliament House for Papua New Guinea (**FIG. 6**). The choice of a Sepik Province *haus tambaran* form for the parliament building entrance is not merely a distinctive and memorable shape or the personal favorite of the Sepik-based prime minister who championed the design; it is also the autochthonous architectural form most widely known to foreigners. For the outsider contemplating the investment of either tourist dollars or development capital, it provides a simplified and catchy visual image without a hint of factional discord — exactly what a government would wish its national parliament to convey.

The forward-sloping thrust of the particular *haus tambaran* type adapted for use as the parliament building's ceremonial entrance may be among the most memorable for the Western observer, but it is by no means a representative piece of architecture for Papua New Guinea as a whole. Although it can conceivably be regarded as a kind of generalized Spirit House, it resonates only with the village architecture of a small part of one province, differing from others in the area that have either twin peaks or no leaning upsweep at all. Moreover, this choice of source material for the parliament building is almost completely alien to the village architecture of the Highland Provinces, where many tribes did not develop even the institution of the *haus tambaran*. While there is an explicit reference to one type of highlands *raun haus*, this is relegated to the recreation block — a clearly secondary aspect of the total composition, and a position which may be symptomatic of the long rivalry between the country's highland areas and

coastal zones. In a country uneasily comprised of a thousand tribes speaking hundreds of languages and dialects, national identity, it would seem, must by necessity be cultivated selectively.

In his essay "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," Paul Ricoeur identifies a central paradox inherent in all efforts at forging a post-colonial national identity: "It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization" (Ricoeur, 1965, p.277). The elements of the paradox, however, are more complex than Ricoeur's formulation would allow. Implicit in his essay is the notion of one national culture rooted in "an old dormant civilization." Yet, even in the most monolithic new state, the residues of old civilizations are not one but many. Alternatively, the old civilizations are seen not as dormant but as being either co-opted by a neighboring state or an active threat to the pursuit of modernity. Solutions, whether political or architectural, can never come easily as long as there is no peaceful correlation between officially recognized states and the multitude of competing would-be nations and affiliations that exist within them. In the attempt to revive the past through architectural design, this pluralism is not well served either by denial or by pastiche.

## Designing National Identity: Coping with Dilemmas

Architects who attempt to make the social and cultural preferences of their clients clearly visible in the design of a capitol complex get caught in Ricoeur's paradox of "Universal Civilization" and "National Cultures," trying to deliver both, while being at least partially aware that either extreme is an impossibility. Which forms, if any, are universal? Which culture is the national one when there are many contenders? These are questions that remain unstated but ever present, necessarily implied by a building type which is asked to symbolize a country both to the world and to itself.

The problem of representation in a capitol complex is at least twofold. First, decisions must be made about how to represent the diversity of cultural groups that may coexist within a state — a heterogeneity that, especially in many newly independent countries, is prone to factional infighting. Second, there are decisions about how to

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FIGURE 6. (FACING PAGE) *Papua New Guinea Parliament House's* haus tambaran *facade. Source:* The National Parliament Building, *Port Moresby, 1984.*





represent spatially the political system of the state, judgments about how to depict the legislature in relation to the city and in juxtaposition to other institutions, both civic and governmental.

Given the weakness of most parliaments as institutions, architects can respond in three general ways to the double problem of symbolizing an unstable political system and depicting a pluralist state. First, the architect may claim to be disinterested in the political role of the building, now and forever. This approach seems fundamentally flawed: in the design of a building to serve the needs and symbolize the aims of political leaders, an architect's protestations of political disinterest sound either hollow or insincere. But architects need not promote some unequivocal political message through their buildings or play an active role in ongoing political conflicts. What they should do is make a concerted effort to study the politics and the cultures of the country they are asked to symbolize. Unless the architect attempts to become aware of the group-based biases of the client and the degree of honesty with which this client pursues the aims of parliamentary democracy, the architect may end up with a building that is, at best, elegant but irrelevant and, at worst, overbearing and inflammatory. Moreover, an architect should look inward to identify and confront the assumptions and biases brought to any new project by virtue of personal background and preferences.

Assuming the architect does choose to become more politically aware, there is a second possible approach: he or she can accept the insignificance of the legislature and minimize the monumentality of its architectural treatment both in terms of siting and massing. This concern for presenting the capitol complex as a microcosm of the country places a premium on accuracy of representation. Such a concern for microcosmic accuracy, taken to the level of iconography, would tend to deny pluralism and stress the presence of some dominant group. To the extent that an accurate microcosm reflects poorly on the status of the parliamentary institution or gives symbolic credence to groups who are opposed to the government, this second approach is very likely to be unacceptable to the government leaders who sponsor architects and urban designers. Most government clients have vested interests in promoting the idea of a national assembly and wish to see their own biases enshrined. Regimes that commission new capitols and capitals almost inevitably seek to maximize the presence of the branch of government most belonging to "the people." Whether they support the monumentality of a new parliament building as a genuine move toward democracy or as a form of appeasement that masks the consolidation of executive power remains open to question and, I believe, is a question that architects should ask.

If the changing and often unflattering nature of existing power politics makes the task of designing a microcosm impossible or undesirable, should the architect attempt





instead an idealization of political institutions and intergroup relations? Some architects may think that they can anticipate or even encourage the potential centrality of representative democracy by allowing the visual importance of the building to prefigure its future institutional weight. Similarly, by declining to provide obvious preferential treatment to the architectural and urban-design traditions of the most influential groups, the architect may hope to anticipate or encourage a more equal sharing of political power. Every design solution is, to some extent, an idealization of the political realm. The danger here is that idealization will be used not to anticipate some more perfect future order but to mask the severe abuses of power in the present. Whatever the degree of inclusion and synthesis of past and present architectural forms in the design of a post-colonial capitol, the thing that is least easily assimilated is the institution of parliament itself. However familiar and integrated the architecture, the institution remains alien, itself in large part a product of colonialism. Moreover, the existence of a functioning parliament does not at all guarantee that the legislature is the supreme decision-making power in the state. In new countries, as in many older ones, the executive often reigns supreme — with or without military stripes. In short, the parliament building is usually far more prominently placed in the landscape than the parliament institution is placed within the culture.

Perhaps there is an important lesson to be learned from the slow growth of the United States Capitol in post-colonial Washington, which began as a relatively modest structure on the city's prime site and, over a period of seventy years of national development, sprouted its wings and a series of ever-more-soaring domes. It is a reminder that a symbolic building need not be created in a single flourish, but can be the product of multiple accretions, growing with the stature and stability of the institution housed within it. Equally central to the U.S. Capitol's symbolic resonance is the ability of the American democratic system to keep its monuments so readily and accessibly a part of the public realm. This openness is politically very difficult to achieve and sustain and has little to do with the particulars of architectural form.

Nonetheless, choices about forms and their juxtapositions do matter. I do not claim that a parliament building's partisan iconography or its location within a city or capitol complex is the decisive factor in how it will be perceived, but these acts of deliberate symbolism cannot be discounted. To ask how a designer chooses certain spatial forms as appropriate accompaniment to a given political ideal or preferred model of cultural pluralism raises an even more fundamental question: Who decides which ideals are to be pursued? And what happens when the architect has political ideals of his or her own?

In the case of capitols, this has occurred most clearly in the case of Le Corbusier in Chandigarh and Louis Kahn in Dhaka; in each case, the architect had strong ideas about

the cosmic role of government that bore little relation to the words of any constitution. In the case of Kahn, this resulted in a work of high drama for an institution of low priority. Ignoring the clearly stated executive bias of the Pakistani constitution that mandated the Dhaka project and made clear the parliament's institutional subservience, Kahn designed a building for his own ideal polity (FIG. 7). Because he asserted his own agenda beyond those of his Pakistani and Bangladeshi clients, he cannot escape complicity in the persistent disjunctions of the result. His complicity is, however, of a different nature from that of architects who symbolize the inequities within cultural pluralism more literally. In his otherwise admirable insistence on transcending the time-bound parochialism of political conflict, Kahn may well have gone too far. Surely the denial of all conflict in the name of transcendent assembly is no less a lie than the invocation of partisan symbolism in the name of national identity. The only difference is that, should political conditions improve, Kahn may yet be proven wise.

Ultimately, architects have a power that politicians lack. While the notion of the political promise may have as long and checkered a history as anything known to man, the promise of architecture need never be so literal. In democratic societies, politicians are always being asked to clarify their positions on the issues. Clarity is also a virtue in architecture, but it is not the only virtue. A great building is not only the result of its architect's critical imagination; it must also reward the critical imagination of those who come to see it and question it. As Walt Whitman put it in *Democratic Vistas*, "not the book but the reader need be the complete thing." The building need not provide all or even any of the answers, but it must, to be an effective means to enlightenment, pose questions and frame them in a new way. Yet for rulers of fledgling countries, in which questions are many and answers are at a premium, the prospect of a building that fails to contribute unambiguously to the consolidation of rule may be unsettling. In consequence, architects in the employ of the government are not likely to work against the aims of their clients, but they may — through their buildings — raise important objections.

If architects are well informed about the institutional and group relations that exist at the time a capitol complex is commissioned, they may be encouraged to design more flexibly. Only if the building is able to change along with the rapidly changing society around it can it avoid being the projection of some frozen moment in political and cultural history. The building need not literally be able to move or to have interchangeable facades like some grand opera set, but its architect must be conscious of the gap between the present and some more hopeful future. If the architect is too literal in adapting the iconographic preferences of some politically ascendant elite, the building may enshrine for generations an image that does not retain the iconographical associations that inspired it.





FIGURE 7. *Kahn's "Citadel of Assembly," Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo by author.*

These alterations of meaning over time are beyond the control of architects, especially when complex buildings outlast the society and culture that produced them. No palace architect in imperial Beijing could have predicted the advent of massive portraits of Chairman Mao, let alone more recent events. Meanings associated with prominent institutional buildings do not remain static. Lutyens' viceregal palace can be reused in an independent Indian democracy. Battista's palace can be adopted to serve Castro's Cuba. Kahn's parliament house designed for East Pakistan can later, perhaps, come to symbolize independent Bangladesh. Throughout history, buildings have taken on new functions and been judged in new ways under changed contexts. Where the institutions of government are in flux, as they are in most new countries, the symbolic role of a parliament building alters more rapidly than it does under more stable conditions, changing with the reputation of the institution it houses.

In the design of a capitol complex there would seem to be two rather different client objectives at work. On the one hand, the complex is intended to advance the consolidation of political rule; on the other, it is expected to advance the cause of national unity. In most places this implies a contradiction: the leaders want the capitol complex

to symbolize both the person or the group holding power, and, simultaneously, they want it to represent the country as a whole. It must symbolize both faction and state, both part and whole. If one rejects the idea of attempting to design a literal microcosm, then one must resort to some form of abstraction. Yet, if a building is too far abstracted from any known reference points, it may be resisted, resented, or, worse still, ignored. The challenge is to abstract in a way that contributes to the existing place, that builds upon what is there without exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions. The task is to develop a rich ambiguity, so that the building neither seems to serve one faction nor be so neutral that it could exist anywhere.

Of the capitol complexes I have mentioned, Bawa's work at Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte and Kahn's at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar best embody this kind of progressive ambiguity, though each proves disappointing. Bawa's remains a highly conservative work dramatically sited in a supremely reactionary setting. Though few countries have experienced as long-standing and complex a history of architectural miscegenation as Sri Lanka, Bawa's work on the capitol complex may be seen more as a summary than a critical synthesis that advances the state of Sri Lankan architecture. The design interweaves many precedents but does not stray far from any of them, especially those most redolent of pre-democratic institutions. If it feels Sri Lankan, as opposed to more narrowly Sinhalese/Buddhist or Tamil/Hindu, it does so with caution rather than conviction. It may be that this caution is part of its appeal, yet it is also a mark of its limitations. There is no innovative jump comparable to the great leaps of faith, sponsorship, and architectural skill that characterized the first designs of the once-startling, now-timeworn precedents upon which Bawa draws so lovingly. At base, the most important symbolic aspect of this new capitol may well be its site rather than any component of its architectural form. Above all, it is a building on an island in a sea of Sinhalese nationalism. If aspects of the highly contentious master plan are implemented around it, the ethnic neutrality of Bawa's design could easily be subverted.

Kahn's complex suffers from just the opposite problem: it dominates its site too much. Right now it is possible to envision the Dhaka assembly building as more appropriate for some other country, one with closer links to the traditions of Roman Classicism and the urbanism of the European Baroque. Yet maybe it is becoming a symbol *of* Bangladesh even if much of its inspiration was not derived *from* Bangladesh. At what point, one may ask, did the pyramid become an "Egyptian" form? At first those sentinels at Giza must have seemed far more alien than anything Louis Kahn has conjured for Bangladesh, yet today they remain the unchallenged architectural symbols of Egypt. And, like the pyramids of Egypt or the Eiffel Tower, the Citadel of Assembly may someday be seen as being quintessentially *of* its country as well.





This "of/from" distinction is fundamental to the concept of national identity and to distinguishing among the various methods by which this elusive goal is pursued. An excess of concern with making a building seem "from" its country can easily lead to a design that looks like a national-tourist-office pastiche. There are other ways of promoting a collective identity that are both more subtle and less retrograde. Only if the traditional architecture of a given country's component cultures (cultures that have always been open to outside influence) is abstracted and combined into new and inventive hybrids can that architecture, often wonderful in itself, also play an active and progressive role in the modern world. It is possible to attract both an international audience and a sincere local empathy for a building without making instantly recognizable architectural allusions which, once noted, may be quickly dismissed in favor of the "real thing" (be this desert tent or village house). Even advertisers sell by evoking a mood rather than by explicitly plugging a product.

In recent years the term Critical Regionalism has come into vogue as a way of categorizing and praising certain buildings that, in Kenneth Frampton's words, attempt to "mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place" (Frampton, 1983, p.21). Frampton draws a sharp distinction between the "resistant" capacity of Critical Regionalism and the "demagogic tendencies" of "Populism." The latter are viewed as "simple-minded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular." "In contradistinction to Critical Regionalism," the primary vehicle of Populism is the "communicative" or "instrumental" sign, Frampton writes. "Such a sign seeks to evoke not a critical perception of reality, but the sublimation of a desire for direct experience through the provision of information" (Frampton, 1983, p.21). The distinction between Populism and Critical Regionalism may be of use for understanding the difference between buildings such as Hogan's and Bawa's. The issues of national identity raised in this discussion of new capitols, however, also suggest that regionalism as a mode of architectural analysis has limitations.

A region is at best a hazy notion. Regions may be sub-national or supranational and are rarely coterminous with a country. My informal survey of the use of this term suggests that the largest of such alleged regions are often those which are farthest from the home base of the critic who purports to identify them. Only through ignorance of the importance of political conflict can Switzerland's Ticino and the Indian subcontinent be equivalently classified as "regions." In a politically charged environment all forms are not available equally to the architect, and all sites within a region are not ideologically equal: any regionalism that is to be truly critical must embrace this realization. If the goal is to foster *national* identity, should any regional influence that is non-national be discouraged? Perhaps especially in less well-established states, non-

national and pseudo-national alternatives to an all-inclusive concept of nation abound, and such sub-national and supranational affiliations often coincide with the group preferences of a government client/ruler. Given this history of abuse, the chief value of national identity as a concept may be as a tool for diagnosing the societal ills that work against it.

However, at a time when architects and their clients are seeking buildings which are more overtly tied to their place and culture than during the heyday of high modernism, Frampton's cautionary insistence that references from the region must be drawn "indirectly" is another way of stressing the need for abstraction. In the case of national parliament buildings and other politically charged institutional environments, this need seems of special import. In these buildings it matters not only which references are made, but whether they are well integrated. Skillful architects such as Kahn or Bawa may be able to fuse many layers in a novel, evocative way, but contentious issues are raised by those layers that stick out. An institution that is supposed to be the seat of a representative democracy is not well served by a building that too obviously symbolizes the preferences of any single elite — be it a regime, a province, or a rising class of Western-influenced taste makers. Such a building, however, reveals an immense amount about the power structure of the nation it is asked to symbolize.

## National identity: can it be designed?

Thus far I have suggested that designers of post-colonial capitols face two critical dilemmas: how to reconcile the client's group preferences with the needs of the diverse cultures that comprise a plural state, and how to cope with the client's wish for a monumental edifice, given the political reality of a fledgling parliamentary institution. These central contradictions, in turn, suggest four further dilemmas, none of which allow for a full resolution. First is the dilemma implied by the program and its distribution: the capitol complex must house a large modern series of functional and ceremonial spaces, and it must accommodate a vast and expanding bureaucracy without letting it symbolically overwhelm the legislative chambers, whose membership grows much more slowly. Second, there is the dilemma of security: the capitol must be defensible, yet appear open to the public. Third, there is the dilemma of visual communication: the capitol must have a memorable and easily reproducible silhouette, yet it must not be openly derived from any one particular architectural source. The architect's ethical position regarding his or her commission suggests a fourth dilemma: the commission is an opportunity to design not only a building but an ideal, even though the ideal may be incomprehensibly far from the present political realities of the country for which it is designed, or even opposed to the political desires of the client government.





What can the architecture and urban design of capitol complexes accomplish? Which of these accomplishments can the designer hope to control? These are two very different questions. The problem of national identity, while it may be addressed by the siting and symbolism of a capitol complex, is not, in the end, something the designer can firmly mold. Architects must recognize that all symbolism depends upon interpretation. Because they often fail to apprehend that the associations between architectural objects and cultural ideals are fundamentally unpredictable, many architects, when describing their work, emphasize control of precisely that aspect of the built environment where their influence is least assured.

Architects cannot determine symbolism over time — least of all a symbolism as amorphous as a national one. They can, however, accept their complicity with the regimes that commission them and try to act responsibly. Responsible capitol architecture would work against the hegemony of any one group by careful cross-breeding of architectural parentage. Almost by definition, hybrids are both hardier and more beautiful. Yet, however carefully they are planted into the landscape, there is no guarantee of a perennial bloom.

In instances where the programmatic requirements of a capitol complex are distributed into a silhouette that has a single focus, great symbolic weight will be placed upon this most central place. And when a single form is charged with becoming a major symbol of the state, one may assume that the choice of that form is a matter of significance. Whether it be a Bedouin billow, a *haus tambaran*, or a Kandyan palace, the chosen parliamentary icon — since it is ratified by a government client — seems likely to be related to the government's vision of, and for, the state. Only when the central form is abstracted to the point where it takes on multiple meanings, as at Kahn's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, is the limited and time-bound nature of partisan iconography partially transcended. Sometimes, as with Kahn, the personal quest strains the bounds of appropriateness to the place. Yet it is surely possible for a building to take part in the search for both personal identity and international identity before finally settling down to being accepted as a national symbol.

## Note

1. The arguments outlined in this chapter are developed much more fully in Lawrence J. Vale, *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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14

# RETHINKING COLONIALISM

## An Epilogue

*Anthony King*

I might, in deference to one of the most incisive contemporary critics in this field, have called this chapter, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Colonialism" (Spivak, 1988, ch.10). What the chapter reflects, after fifteen or more years of thinking, reading and writing on the subject of colonial architecture and urbanism, are some unfinished thoughts: thoughts stimulated by students, colleagues and reviewers, but especially by the experience, once more, of moving between cultures and states, of issues of "place and displacement" which are at the heart of many questions in the study of colonial cultures: a decentering, a relocating, not only in geographical, political and cultural terms, but also intellectually.[1]

The problem, for anyone who writes, is knowing who will be the reader. In writing this, not just in the United States, but at a university in upstate New York, I am conscious that it reflects my unavoidable engagement with American as well as other issues. Yet, while the editor is originally from Cairo and other contributors originate from as far apart as Delhi and San Francisco, can there be a common reader's experience? Is there a common theme? As I shall try to suggest here, the challenge is to steer a difficult route between the universal and the particular, evading the risk of invoking the postmodernist's most serious term of abuse, that of "totalizing," yet equally not retreating into the backwaters of the particularistic. For, if the old adage that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" is still true, then pursuing some broad theoretical generalizations may still be a way of identifying what is distinctive to the particular situation and instant.