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Un Pavillon – Un Monument: The Modern Palace and the Case of the U.S. Embassy in Karachi, Pakistan (1955–59)

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***Abstract*—**This paper investigates civic representation in mid-century diplomatic buildings through the case of the U.S. Embassy in Karachi (1955-59), Pakistan, designed by the Austrian-American architect Richard Neutra (1892-1970) and the American architect Robert Alexander (1907-92). Texts, magazines, and oral histories at that time highlighted the need for a new postwar expression of American governmental architecture, leaning toward modernization, technology, and monumentality. Descriptive, structural, and historical analyses of the U.S. Embassy in Karachi revealed the emergence of a new prototypical solution for postwar diplomatic buildings: the combination of one main orthogonal block, seen as a modern-day *corps de logis,* and a flanking arcuated pavilion, often organized in one or two stories. Although the U.S. Embassy relied on highly industrialized techniques and abstract images of social progress, archival work at the Neutra's archives at the University of California, Los Angeles, revealed that much of this project was adapted to vernacular elements and traditional forms—such as the intriguing use of reinforced concrete barrel vaults.

***Keywords*—**Modern monumentality, post-WWII diplomatic buildings, theory of character, thin-shells.

I. Introduction

ONE of the main concerns in civic architecture during the Interwar Period was related to the representation of civic buildings. In the Western World, features varying from ancient classic to more eclectic elements aimed to characterize a style for the job. But with the adoption of Modern Architecture as a new style for the federal building — and the whole abstractionism and internationalization that involved such architecture, it became paradoxical to conciliate both nationhood and borderless approaches at the same time. Diplomatic buildings were perhaps the most affected by such issue: programs that were supposed to represent the State on the one hand; and address a set of different cultural backgrounds on the other. Typologically, diplomatic buildings are relatively new programs, emerging by the end of the 19th-century. In the United States, President Cleveland officially implemented diplomatic buildings in the federal agenda during his annual message to Congress in 1895 [1]. The Lowden Act in 1911, in turn, authorized the acquisition of sites and buildings for the diplomatic and consular establishments of the United States. From 1926 to 1946, new construction centered on building embassy residences only in other American republics. In Europe, some grand old palaces were purchased or received as gifts [2].

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After World War II, the increased foreign possibilities and the foreign currency assets of the United States stimulated a vastly expanded embassy construction program. The modernization of these buildings was fostered mostly by the State Department and the Office of Foreign Buildings Operation (FBO). Between 1946 and 1958, for example, the agencies financed most of the construction overseas, using post-war foreign credits and other funds collected by lend-lease settlements, sale of properties, war assets agreements, and federal programs such as the Economic Cooperation Administration. As a result, embassies reached their peak in scope and popularity, becoming showcases of American culture abroad [3].

Since 1949, when most civilian federal building programs were consolidated under the newly founded General Services Administration (GSA), federal real estate holdings have expanded exponentially, commissioning architects and engineers to pursue a new form of architectural symbolism [4]. Diplomatic buildings are now supposed to express an "affirmation of national seemliness" and promote concepts such as the "innovative," the "risk-taking design," and the representation of American success as a society [1, p.xv]. Moreover, the concern of losing prestige in commercial and political relations abroad pushed agencies, such as the American Embassy Association (AEA), to make a case for the promotion of more luxurious diplomatic buildings.

From 1946 to 1953, the FBO executed over two hundred projects in 72 countries, most of all following the modern corporate idiom through templates such as the so-called "glass-box" building (e.g., the U.S. Consulate in São Paulo, Brazil, by Mies van der Rohe, 1958, unbuilt). Although, in 1953, a directive from ranking officers of the State Department surprisingly ordered that all buildings henceforth were to be designed in the "Georgian and Renaissance Neoclassical styles," which led to the suspension of 21 projects [1, p.442].

Pressures for an official style were finessed by the establishment in 1954 of an Architectural Advisory Panel of private architects to advise on the designs and architects for new embassies. The team, composed by the architects Ralph Tomas Walker (1889-1973), Henry Richardson Shepley (1887-1962), and Pietro Belluschi (1899-1994), became a permanent feature of the embassy design process, gaining the most critical attention of federal construction programs. Projects for new diplomatic buildings started to be concerned with diversity, local vernaculars, and critical regionalism; a

combination epitomized in cases such as the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India (1954-59), designed by Edward Durell Stone.

The result of all of these heated discussions led to a complex reconfiguration of the diplomatic building, called in this paper, the *modern palace*. Through comparative analysis, literature review, and archival work in the case study of the U.S. Embassy in Karachi, Pakistan (1955-59), this research highlights the rise of a prototypical solution that combines the abstract rationalism of the glass-box with the abstract symbolism of the historical barrel vault. Seen in a broader scale, the case of the U.S. Embassy in Karachi echoes the very fast modernization of the urban landscape that was happening in the country (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Electric trams, camels, trucks, and carriages, all existing side by side in the traffic of Karachi, Pakistan, c. 1950 [5]

A. The Critique of the Architectural Forum (Jan, 1959)

In January 1959, the *Architectural Forum* published a set of articles concerning civic, public, and government architecture, highlighting Edward Stone's U.S. Embassy in New Delhi as one of the forerunners in the construction of a "contemporary government character through creative design" [6]. The Editorial note set the theme under "the creation of a more agreeable and attractive society, which is to say, the creation of a new civilization" [7]. Accordingly, the time had come for a re-examination of what is meant by "civic character" and of what the U.S. can hope to accomplish through better planning and architecture, which, at that time, could not be considered a land of universal grace and beauty. There was a generally "shoddy, unkempt look" about much of America, and a "lack of dignity and character" in public places and avenues and buildings, deteriorating public architecture ever since the Jeffersonian era. "Can a democratic, middle-class, capitalist country like the U.S. hope to create a great civilization? Can it exercise the necessary wisdom and cultivate the necessary taste? Will it accept the implicit restraint and inevitable infringements of property rights that such a civilization implies?" [7, p.68]. The council chambers should unmistakably be a "separate, distinct, and important element," often raised on massive columns to emphasize its monumental character and thus given "greater importance than the much larger office tower to its rear" [6, p.81].

> What Ed Stone sought to do [at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi] was to design a building that would represent this country's democratic vitality and romance, its pleasures as well as its power, its strength, all without ponderous weight. Just completed, its graceful, glittering, eye-luring structure (…) fulfills most of the extravagant hopes aroused by first sketches three years ago, which awoke many people to the possibilities of a new government style. (…) Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker has sounded one note of warning, however. He sees a resemblance between his headquarters and a subsequent Stone design for a pharmaceutical plant [Stuart Pharmaceutical Company in Pasadena, CA] in the U.S., implying that this use of the New Delhi-type of the pierced screen and other devices could debase the governmental character of this architectural currency [6, pp.84–86].

B. Two Contrasting Partis, One Prototypical Solution

Following this search for form and identity, the American architects Ralph Rapson (1914-2008) and John H. van der Meulen (1913-94), who received commissions at that time for four European embassies, declared in 1951 that there were "virtually no programs, no set budgets, no precedents... and little overall supervision" on such buildings [8]. A general solution for this issue was developed in cases such as the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden (1951-53), where Rapson and van der Meulen proposed two contrasting *partis*: one main orthogonal box, often elevated from the ground by *pilotis*, used generally for offices and other compartmented spaces; and another one-story pavilion, often distinguished in form and structural technology, and used for special, wide-span programs, such as assembly halls or warehouses.

Despite claiming authorship for such prototypical architectural building, the overall *parti* proposed by them was very similar to Le Corbusier's composition for the *Palais de la Société des Nations* (League of Nations headquarters, SdN) in Geneva, Switzerland (1927), designed in partnership with Pierre Jeanneret, which generates some controversy about the invention of this contrasting organization. In fact, the SdN was not designed with a vaulted auditorium, which appeared as early as the Ministry of Education in Rio (1936–42) by Costa and the team, itself a reference to Corbusier's scheme. Rapson's design for the U.S. embassy in Stockholm also met disapproval with the leading force of Sven Markelius, the master urban planner of the city. Markelius edited many details of Rapson's design, which did not meet his personal taste—including the barrel vaults due to the fact that these forms had no special precedence in the Swedish architectural vocabulary (Markelius himself proposed a similar scheme, with a dome instead, for the United Nations Headquarters in New York in 1947 (Figs. 2 and 3) [1, p.34].

In any event, this contraposition of *partis* between an

orthogonal box and a vaulted, large space soon became a prototypical solution to solve the program of diplomatic buildings. Thin-shells, also seen previously in cases such as the Frontón Recoletos in Madrid (1935) by the Spanish structural engineer Eduardo Torroja, served as signs that became symbolic of special situations. Light, thin, and planar —qualities that perfectly describe modern attributes—define an atmosphere and exemplify adjective characterization strategies. According to the architectural historian Jane C. Loeffler, structures such as "barrel vaults appealed to architects because they added a vaguely exotic air to new buildings and also because new concrete technology permitted variously configure rooflines" [2, p.73].

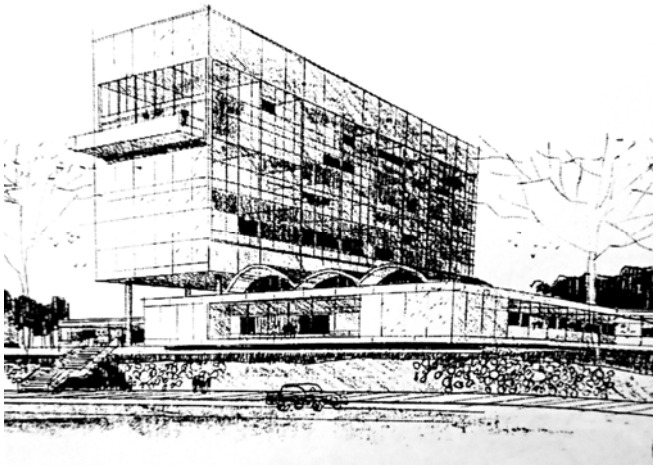

Fig. 2 Proposal for the U.S. Embassy in Stockholm, by Rapson & van der Meulen, 1951 [9]

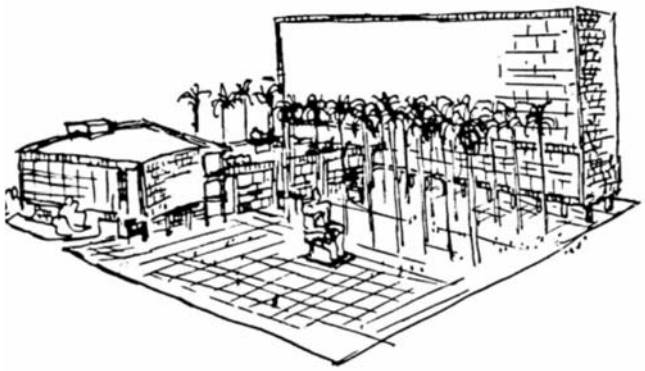

Fig. 3 Ministry of Education and Health, [*Ministério da Educação e Saúde Pública*], early sketch the Brazilian team and Le Corbusier, Rio de Janeiro, 1936 [10]

Other cases that employed similar partis include the U.S. Legation in Tangier, Morocco (1954-58), by Hugh Stubbins (1912-2006); the U.S. Embassy in Amman, Jordan (1954-56), by Paul Rudolph (1918-97); the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad (1955-59), by Josep Luis Sert; and the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia (1953-58), by Antonin Raymond (1888-1976) and Ladislav L. Rado (1909-93).

II. Une Maison – Un Palais

Une Maison – Un Palais was Le Corbusier's last book of the 1920s, a coda to the three L'Esprit Nouveau, and an exposition of his architectural ideas ranging from the private house to the public building. Looking for an alternative that could contrast with domestic architecture, Le Corbusier argued that the true and honest meaning of representing "splendor" was through the reinterpretation of the *palace,* a new equation of relationships, movement, and human sensitivity. He opposed the idea that public buildings should represent pretension, vanity, or waste. The modern palace should embody the spirit of our age, instead of the outworn routine methods of traditional architects, historical pastiche, or other academicism. The wild hut, the primitive temple, and the house of the peasant were the primary templates of organisms that represented authenticity—*son economy, sa pureté, son intensité* (its economy, its purity, its intensity), who, under "one day of sun and clairvoyance," have become palaces [11].

Une Maison – Un Palais was a theoretical bridge between Le Corbusier's purist, white houses of the 1920s, and the larger buildings that he built in the following decades. The relatively anonymous and orthogonal geometries of buildings such as the *Ville Contemporaine* (1922) contrasted with the unique and curvaceous projects like the North African city of Algiers, developed between 1930 and 1933. The central argument in this transition was the metaphor of the *Maison* (the modular, industrial house, the shelter, the domestic) and the *Palace* (the urban-monumental public building). At that time, Le Corbusier was working on the widely published project for the League of Nations (SdN) headquarters in Geneva. The SdN was their first design for a large public structure and was both "the climax and the crisis point of Le Corbusier's early career" [12]. However, Le Corbusier's view of architecture was challenged by figures such as the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer (1889-1954) and the Czech critic Karel Teige (1900-1951). They claimed that: "all things in the world are a product of the formula, *function times economics*, so none of these things (*maisons, palaces,* or Le Corbusier's plans for the Mundaneum in Stavba in 1929) are works of art; all art is composition and hence to a particular end. All life is function and therefore not artistic" [13]. Such an objective approach, reinforced by the realities of building costs, led to the formulation of the so-called *Existenzminimum* standards in contrast to Le Corbusier's idealistic appeal for an "existence-maximum" [14]. Le Corbusier replied to their critique in an essay titled "In Defense of Architecture" (1929), stating that the removal of art from the equation of building was the death of the phenomenon of creation, and therefore the death of architecture itself [15]. For Le Corbusier, in a world where mechanization brings extensive production, architecture should lead to the discovery of a certain magnificence, which, he believed, to be found in a balance between archeological inspiration and a well-stated response to the architectural program.

As far as hardliners were concerned, modern architecture should by no means deviate from the regularity of trabeated structures, commonly called "pancakes on pins" structural *partis* [16]. Le Corbusier himself exemplified the rule in the case of the *Dom-Ino* House (1914). The Monol Houses (1919), developed

by Le Corbusier after World War I, was a direct alternative to the "Dom-Ino," another solution for mass-produced serial houses that included Catalonian vaults, smoothly undulating roofs implying internal subdivisions. Le Corbusier also referred to these two types of architecture as "masculine" (e.g., post-and-lintel *parti* of Dom-Ino) and "feminine" (e.g., the curves of Monol), in an allusion to the classic human proportions of the Greek Doric and Ionic orders [17]. Years later, the dichotomy expressed in *Une Maison – Un Palais* brought new contraposition of character that moved beyond the notions of building types and structural *partis*. Willing to solve the separation between the engineer's aesthetic and architecture, Le Corbusier searched for ideal structural templates that could combine the suitable honorific character of public buildings with the utilitarian overtones of engineering feats.

The exploration of character implicit in *Une Maison – Un Palais* served as an alternative to the academic classicist monumentality, predominant in both totalitarian and democratic regimes until the 1940s. The persistence of Stalinist Socialist Realism after 1945 also contributed to the promotion of modern architecture in the West as the architecture of democracy, and the Cold War generated anxieties about cultural singularity and autonomy in peripheral nations aligned with the Western bloc [18]. Conflicts about its look and feel were no longer downplayed, for they implied free speech and conveyed "free world" values. In this scenario, Le Corbusier's *palais* was embodied, metaphorically, in the very notion of civic representation and later directly applied into the design of the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York (1947), designed by a team of twenty architects, including Le Corbusier. More than a public and utilitarian building, the UN was meant to replace the social aspirations for peace, left by the now extinguished SdN.

The typology of diplomatic buildings arguably has its common genesis in the genius loci of city council chambers. In these civic enclosures, hierarchy is embodied in architecture with a sense of "superiorness," "wiseness," and unquestioned authority. The scale of theaters and the like is at times equal to that of national parliamentary buildings; the access to the chambers tends to be centralized and controlled; prominence is given to officials who sit on raised platforms or privileged seats, while common citizens sit behind imposing barriers, at a less-privileged level—and architecture tends to invoke the past as a subtle reinforcement and glorification of the present order [19].

III. The U.S. Embassy in Karachi

A. Modern Monumentality & Civic Architecture

Monumentality (from Latin, *monere,* "to remind," "to warn") in architecture is a quality which does not necessarily have to do with size but includes, for instance, the intensity of expression or implies a temporal labyrinth by the way that it reacts upon memory. Since Aloïs Riegl's *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin* [20], the term monument in modern historiographies expanded its original etymological concepts of being age-value, historical landmarks, or mortuary buildings. For many, monuments can serve as allegories, security devices to counteract periods of uncertainty and social unrest.[1] Challenging entropy, the dissolving action that time exerts on all-natural and artificial things, monuments attempt to combat the anguish of death and annihilation by evoking the grandeur of past civilizations [21].

After WWII, there was still a problem that no clear language existed to distinguish, in terms of character, physiognomy, or physiology, one civic function from another. The search for symbolic forms partially fulfilled the role of architectural representation (as opposed to pure abstraction), including the recovery of "templates of cognition," flashes of empathy with the abstracts constructs of the mind itself [22]. Alternatively, automatic recipes for good monumentality came from the heart of the modern movement itself. The arrangement, for example, of elephantine concrete forms, surrounded by wildernesses of plazas, was conceived as one of the most common civic iconographies for new democratic institutions.

Harshly criticized by scholars such as the American critic Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) [23], the theory of modern monumentality was embraced by the Bohemian-born Swiss critic Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968) and others [24], resulting in the whole movement toward a new monumentality in the United States. For Sigfried Giedion, modern monumentality was the third step of modern architecture: the first was the "single-cell" (individual houses, low-cost dwelling, greatest economy of means); the second was the solution of the city (urban planning); and the third would be "the reconquest of the monumental expression," the most dangerous and most difficult step [25].

In 1948, during the symposium "In Search of a New Monumentality," an event organized by the *Architectural Review* magazine, the Brazilian architect Lucio Costa revisited Le Corbusier's *Une Maison – Un Palais*. Costa argued that the program of public buildings makes functional works to respond to higher purposes, lyrically animating and expressing them in appropriate ways that they will acquire a dignified grace [20]. Cases such as the SdN, the *Palais des Soviets* (Palace of the Soviets, 1931, unbuilt), and the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio were constantly published in architectural journals and magazines at the time, including *Built-in USA: 1932–1944*, edited by Elizabeth Mock [27].

The exploration of a distinctive character for diplomatic buildings was further fueled by the whole context of the Cold War when modern American architecture came to represent "the architecture of democracy," in contrast to the Stalinist Socialist Realism that was being developed in the Soviet Union [12, p.222]. Modern architecture turned into a diplomatic tool, a vehicle of cultural leadership, and ultimately into opposition to the monumental, lavish traditionalist forms of the Soviet Union. The consolidation of this cultural collision happened with the Soviet exhibition in New York, 1959, displaying a set of advanced technologies, machinery,

[1] Since its origins from post-medieval Italy, monuments were seen through the alliance between the humanist (i.e., literate), who argued toward social grandeur; and the artifice (i.e., builder), who knew how to recognize the quality and shape of ancient sculptures, buildings, and materials [21].

and scientific discoveries, from computers to televisions. In Moscow, also in 1959, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) was also exhibiting a variety of technological advancements, including the representation of buildings themselves, which included a golden dome (by Buckminster Fuller), folded plates, and inverted plastic umbrellas.

In the 1960s, more conservative members of the Subcommittee on State Department Organization and Foreign Operation fond the high-fashion embassies difficult to accept as the image of federal architecture abroad. Their criticism took a crucial form by influencing the FBO to limit authorizations and review preliminary designs. Despite committee complaints that a small group controlled the program and received all the commissions, in the period from 1954 to 1959, 58 projects were awarded to 55 different architectural offices [1, p.443]. Among these projects, there was the U.S. Embassy in Karachi, Pakistan (1955-59), considered to be a "monument to Pakistan-American friendship" [28] designed by the Austrian-American architect Richard Neutra (1892-1970) and by the American architect Robert Alexander (1907-92) (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Construction of the US Embassy in Karachi. c. 1959. Photo: Lucien Herve [29]

B. The Box and The Pavilion

The U.S. Embassy in Karachi took more than three years to be built, providing offices for 78 Americans and 232 Pakistani employees of the State Department, the United States Information, and the United States Department of Agriculture [2, p.42]. The project followed the orthogonal box/one-story pavilion configuration: the first volume, called "Office Building" (also called "locomotive" or "Ambassadorial Wing"), is a long four-story, 90,000-square-foot, white box; and second, the "Warehouse," is a pavilion roofed by nine almost identical thin-shell barrel vaults (Figs. 5 and 6) [30].

The volumes of the Embassy evoke formal contrast, but they also differ in genre and character. The Office Building, pure in geometry, rigid in straight lines, and skeletal in essence, shows unlimited reproducibility and replicability—attributes that are essential to a prototype. But the extensive warehousing building, planar rather than volumetric, slender in curvilinear lines, and self-supporting in reinforced concrete, is also replicable. Exactly the same metal formwork was used for each shell and for the penthouse on the top of the main building.

Both the Office Building and the Warehouse are similar in nature, modern in the use of structural technology; modern by features such as cast windows that are protected by movable metal louvers against sun radiation; modern by having its own filling station, maintenance shops, energy generators, elevators, etc. After all, progress was part of the etiquette that the Department of State and the FBO were willing to employ [2, pp.60-81]. Both the Office Building and the Warehouse provide the novelty that contrast with the classicist buildings nearby the site, such as the 19th-century Prime Minister's House. Both evoke the metaphor of the machine that Le Corbusier was arguing—*cette machine pouvait être un palaís* (that a machine can be a palace), that each organ of the building, by the quality of its arrangement in the whole, could enter into such moving relationships that can reveal the grandeur and nobility of an intention [11]. One of the differences between the *Maison* and the *Palais* is the monumental treatment.

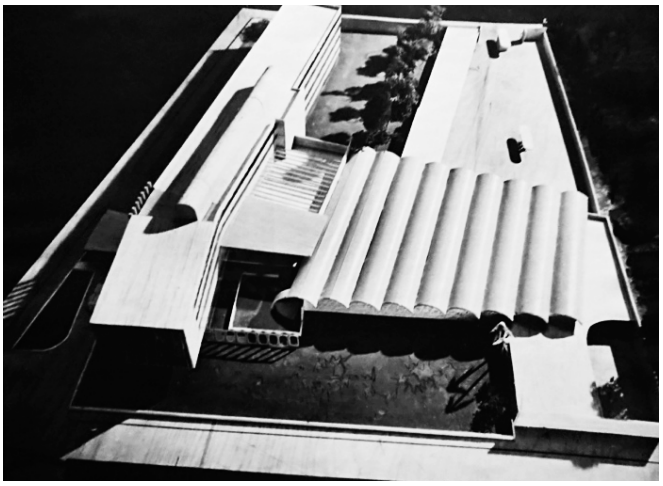

Fig. 5 Model of the U.S. Embassy in Karachi, c. 1956. © Neutra Family [29]

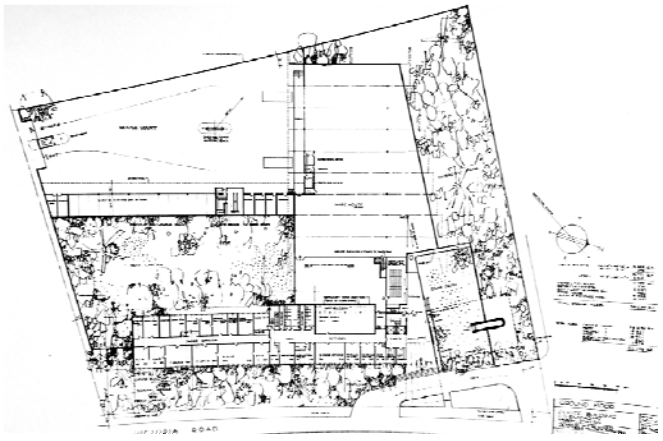

Fig. 6 The US Embassy in Karachi, ground floor, c.1956. © Neutra Family [29]

The reinforced concrete shells of the Warehouse-pavilion are spanning over a long span instead of the typical and shorter

transversal section. The barrel vaults in Karachi echoes Auguste Perret's forms at the Wallut Docks in Casablanca (1914–17). Different from Perret, the Embassy emphasizes a more lyric structural meaning, reducing the number of supports to a minimum of four, highlighting lightness and delicacy (calculations provided by the firm Parker, Zehnder, and Associates) (Figs. 7 and 8).

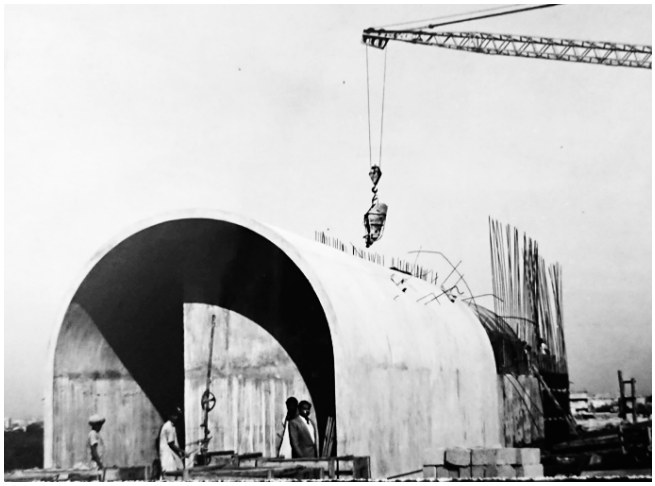

Fig. 7 The penthouse thin-shell on top of the US Embassy in Karachi, c. 1959. Photographer: © Rondal Partridge [29]

Such structural performance is justified by the search for monumental treatment, implicit in the program itself. According to the architectural historian Barbara Lamprecht, parsimony and "shabbiness" in its diplomatic outfit was avoided since it could possibly harm American relations abroad [8]. While a simpler character, such as Le Corbusier's *maison,* assimilates the ordinary, the common, the anonymous artifact; the monumental building is a machine for remembrance, and, in order to remember the purpose that it was meant to convey, one of the essential attributes of the modern monument is its relative singularity of existence in time and space [31]. But the novelty and uniqueness of a machine, and the prototype itself, are, in principle, momentary. They persist in time as long as they become obsolete artifacts. Vulgarized and inserted in an environment that surpassed its attributes, the machine for remembrance ceases to be a monument.

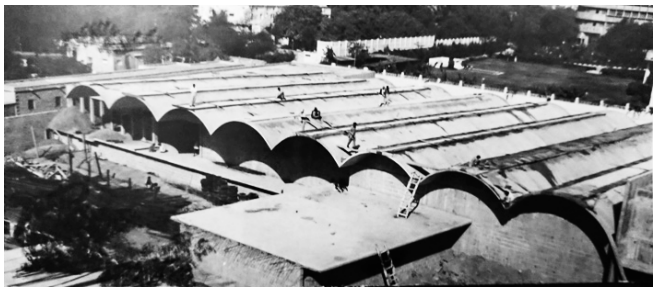

Fig. 8 U.S. Embassy in Karachi under construction, c. 1959. © Neutra Family [29]

Aluminum louvers in Karachi were painted in "gold" as a way to express luxury and grandeur, reminding details of the great Muslim shrines, palaces, and mosques. Terrazzo, a composite material that includes pieces of marble, was used on the floors, evoking the monumentality of the Miesian pavilion, as well as the consistency of the ancient Greek temples. These somewhat referential architectural features were used side by side with Mediterranean vernacular materials, such as the *mashrabiya* (in northern India, *jharokha,* or *jharoka*), a typical window that allows passive ventilation while providing shade and privacy. Vernacular is synonymous of domestic or native, but not inferior in terms of quality. The perforated window *mashrabiya*, placed underneath each vaulted roof in the Warehouse, exposes the vulnerability and slenderness of the thin shell. Elegance can be achievable through the refinement of the construction, which ultimately represents a high degree of social development.

IV. Conclusion

This paper aimed to reconstruct part of the theoretical framework on modern monumentality that was concerned with public representation in mid-century diplomatic buildings in the United States. Proposing a parallel between the notions of *maison* and *palace* developed by Le Corbusier and the rise of modern embassies and consulates, this research highlighted a spatial configuration, defined by the contrast between an *orthogonal box* and an *arcuated pavilion.* Both evoke formal contrast and differ in genre and character. Both schemes are based on distinct structural systems yet evoke unlimited reproducibility and replicability, attributes that are essential to a prototype. The very notion of modernity, based on information and novelty, unfolded particularly on buildings that were meant to communicate ideas of social progress and cultural leadership.

In essence, the techniques of the machine are universal, necessary to the articulation of a borderless architecture. But it is indispensable that the industrialized character of these techniques does not overlap the purpose that specific buildings were meant to convey. The lyricism of the *palais* is the harmonious quality of the monument—*simplement à un certain état de lyrisme* (simply to a certain state of lyricism) [11, p.219]. Its nature comes from something other than the simple response to a well-posed problem of *utilitas*. The beauty of the modern monument that relies only on mechanization ends up perishing. It eventually becomes obsolete, and therefore insufficient as a source of eternal satisfaction for the spirit. In Karachi, the U.S. Embassy was embraced in the context and the modernization of the young nation.

Currently, issues of architectural representation in the diplomatic building have again been revisited, especially after such typology became a target of social protest or a place that defines cultural resistance zones. This research is a contribution to understanding the impact of these artifacts upon collective memory and hopefully can be suggestive in ways that contribute to designing contemporary civic buildings.

Acknowledgment

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