

THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

Is there a new, distinctive approach to the design of office-buildings in the developing world, which will avoid the purely Western models of glass boxes or banal concrete towers? Various value-systems have been applied to determining the form of skyscrapers since the Chicago School of architects (Sullivan, Jenny, Burnham) experimented a hundred years ago with the then new building-type: 'form-follows-function', or corporate-identity expressed through unusual cladding or structural gymnastics are commonplace approaches. These explain the chaotic, the uninspiring and even irritating images of high-rises in most cities worldwide. What are the solutions that are being proposed for this rigidly prescribed type of building?

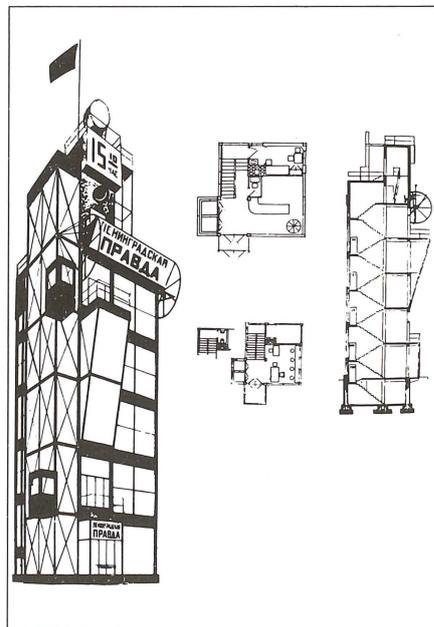
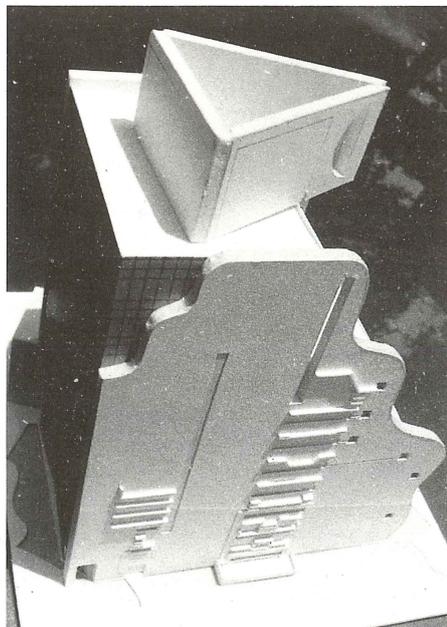
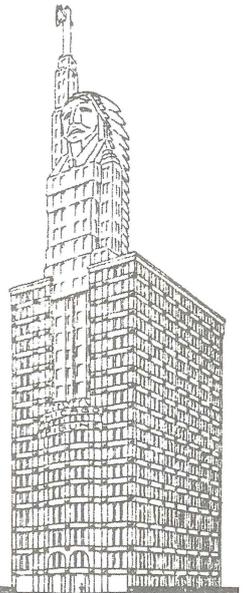
Two trends may be detected which deserve mention and ought to be watched. One seeks sources of imagery outside the realm of architecture itself, in painting, anthropology, communications industries; the other is trying to adapt the tall office building to climate and local context, primarily by accommodating ground level, outdoor activities to a greater degree than before.

Two of the three new high-rises presented here are future head-offices for large-circulation, national level, daily newspapers; both, by coincidence, called *The Nation*: one in Bangkok, Thailand, the other in Nairobi, Kenya. The third example, Dharmala Sakti corporate offices, is in Jakarta, Indonesia. All three were designed by internationally renowned architects, but only the third, Paul Rudolph, felt constrained (or motivated) to make passing reference to local

traditional buildings (which are not high-rise) in Indonesia; architects Sumet Jumsai and Henning Larsen, for their respective newspaper buildings, call upon imagery completely foreign to their environmental context, using expressive devices intended to convey to an observer the communication functions housed within.

For the design of high-rise newspaper offices, there is a rich source of imagery found in the landmark competition of 1922 for the Chicago *Tribune* headquarters in the U.S.A. where *avant-garde* and establishment architects the world over participated and the results subsequently published in a book. Viennese architect Adolf Loos, pursuing American Louis Sullivan's logic that a skyscraper should be designed like a classical column with a base, a uniformly-treated, central position, and a terminating 'capital' of some sort, sent in an entry which was shaped precisely like that: a round, multi-storeyed, fluted column. (Are we to interpret the Nairobi building as doing Loos one better, with double, truncated (or nascent) columns?)

Or, there was the strange entry by Mossdorf Hahn and Busch for a skyscraper which terminated on the top with the head and shoulders of an American Indian, feathered head dress and all. Admittedly, this choice of symbolism — depiction of a human being, almost in the same pose as the Statue of Liberty, on the summit of a building — was a bit extreme; but how different, really, is the fundamental impulse behind this Indian head and Sumet's Robot building (See MIMAR 23), or his latest edifice (see sketches) with an imagined newspaper



Far left: Photo of project for the *Nation* newspaper building, Bangkok. Imagery initially evolved from likeness of an editor hunched over his word-processor.

Photograph courtesy of Sum Jumsai Associates.

Left: Drawing by the Vesni brothers, Soviet Constructivist architects in 1920's, for a *Pravda* newspaper building Leningrad.

Above: Drawing of the entry by Mossdorf, Hahn, and Busch to the Chicago *Tribune* newspaper building competition in 1922. (Unbuilt)

editor on a stool in front of his typewriter, abstractly suggested nonetheless?

The starting point for his design, says Sumet, was the newsman at work — as a kind of ‘cousin’ to the Robot — but in an effort to get a way entirely from architectural precedents he consciously sought stimulus in the world of painting. Cubist painting in Europe as a source of imagery seems rather tenuous, whereas the communications’ gadgetry on the exterior definitely does bring to mind Russian Constructivist projects for *Pravda* and *Izvestia* newspapers in the 1920s. If the architect had claimed Surrealism as an antecedent for his anthropoid *Nation* headquarters, it might have indeed pointed in a direction potentially rich in humor, irony and iconographical references of a local nature.

Larsen’s *Nation* building in Kenya has apparently relied upon a well-known and accepted language of forms: cylinders, pyramids, arches, colonnades, and masts. Even the alternating black and white stripes are not totally original: Loos (again!) did a villa project in Paris for the black American entertainer Joséphine Baker with similar stripes. What is perplexing, yet stimulating, in both this and the Bangkok *Nation*, is the ambiguity of different possible interpretations. You look at the proposed buildings and a variety of associations might come to mind, some historical, some contemporary; some purely decorative, others with meaningful symbolism.

Whether all this symbolism will be perceptible by the man-in-the-street, who may read the black and white bands as zebra stripes, or as typography on a white page, or the whole as a warrior’s mask

with horns will only become evident when the building is actually up. In all likelihood, such talk of explicit or not-so-explicit references will remain the pastime of architects and historians. Interpretations will remain highly personal; nicknames for those with the strongest imagery will undoubtedly prevail ... But can they still be beautiful?

The other trend in skyscraper conception, not particularly new to some developing countries, tries to take the often harsh, prevailing climate into account, and hence certain vernacular forms appear, regardless of the materials and technology that brought them into being. The Jakarta office building, with its sloping roofs and disengaged columns of concrete may indeed pay homage to the vernacular building of Indonesia’s tropical, water-based culture, if not to its traditional social and economic structures. The openness of planted courtyards, passageways and pedestrian spaces at the lower levels are especially appropriate for out-of-doors activities in this climate. However, the basic conception of interior office spaces offers little innovation; and so one is left with praise essentially of the urban space around the foot of the building — rather than the building itself and/or the symbolism it contains.

‘What’s the message?’ one asks, after all the pictorial and literary playfulness is discarded? Are the new skyscrapers going to be read like signboards? Will the messages they communicate have some link with local cultures, their traditions and aspirations, or will tallness, glassiness and geometric contortions like the latest buildings in Hong Kong be the only messages to be read?

Far left, below: View of the Bond Centre, new higher-rise complex in Hong Kong by Paul Rudolph, architect of the Dharmala Sakti offices shown on the following pages.

Left, below: View of downtown Hong Kong from The Peak, illustrating the banality of most skyscraper design. Building under construction is the Bank of China Headquarters by I.M. Pei.

