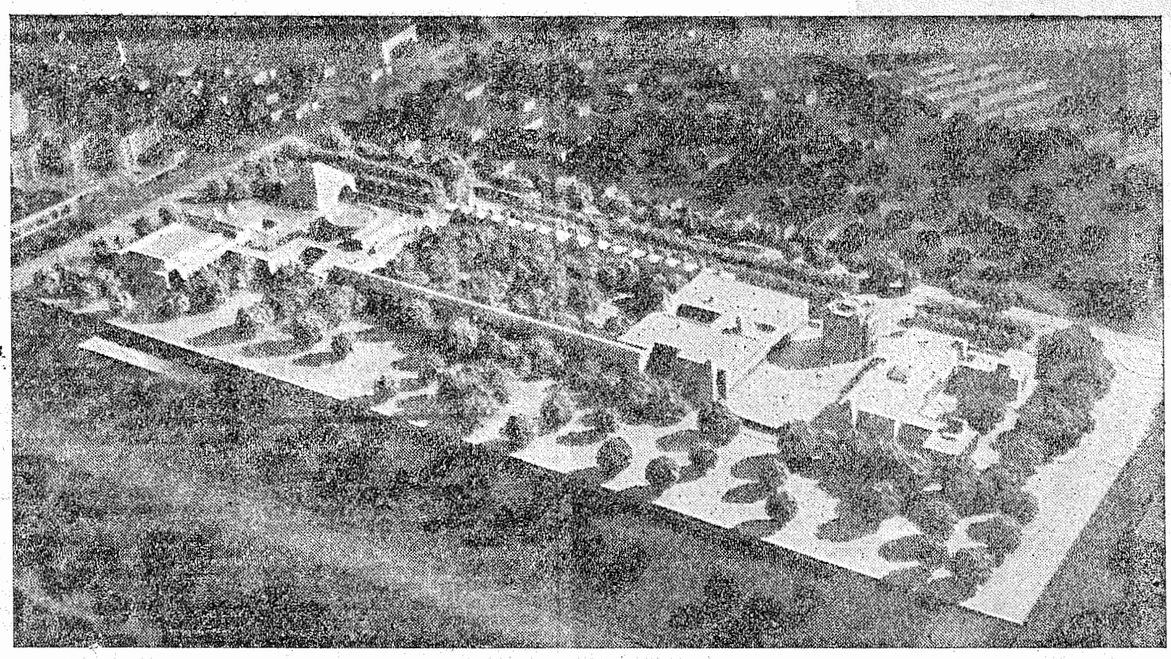
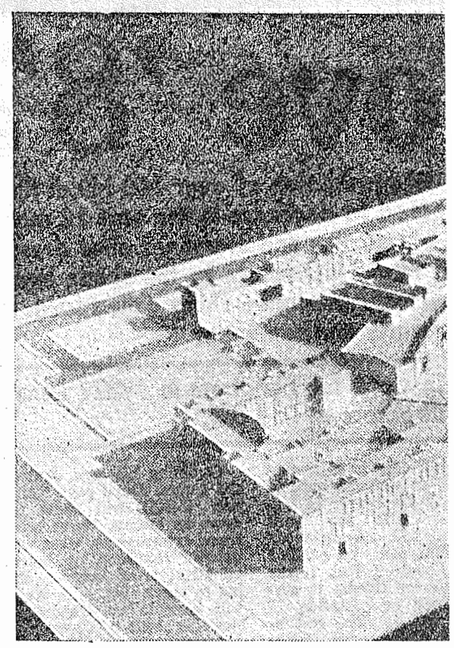


FIRST PRIZE: Ralph Lerner's work strongly emphasizes monumentality, axiality and large, heavily-planted spaces. It accepts, justifies and emulates Lutyens' colonial architecture.



SECOND PRIZE: Gautam Bhatia's architect and outdoor spaces

Designs Fair And Unfa

Does fairness and respect for the initial inspiration of a cultural centre not demand that the competition be declared null and void? Or are the organisers of the IGNCA going to take the shabby and easy way out of "requiring" Ralph Lerner to make "necessary adjustments" in his design?

P. K. Das on the prize-winning blueprints for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts.

THE Government of India organised an international competition to choose the best design for its prestigious Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA). However the way in which this competition has been conducted and the prizes awarded, has generated justifiable anger and dissatisfaction amongst a large section of the art and architecture community in the country.

Some well-known and eminent engineers, historians, artists and craftsmen have expressed dissatisfaction and questioned the relevance and Indianness, or rather non-Indianness, of the first prize-winning design. In fact, the Indian Institute of Architects has decided to investigate the matter and has referred it to the Union of International Architects.

The IGNCA must be a unique establishment in both range of activities and architectural embodiment. When built it is going to be the largest centre for the arts anywhere in the world. Rs. 200 crores has been sanctioned in the seventh five year plan for this project. As stated in the competition programme: "The IGNCA is visualised as a centre encompassing all arts, specially in their dimension of mutual interdependence, interrelationship with nature, function, daily life, societal structures, world view and cosmology. Through the diverse programmes of research, publication, drawing, creative activities and projection, it will place the arts within the context of the natural and human environment.

"The arts will comprehend the fields of creative and critical literature — heard and written: the visual arts ranging from architecture, sculpture, painting, graphics to film and photography; the performing arts of music, dance, theatre in their broadest connotation; and all else in fairs, festivals and lifestyle which has an artistic dimension. The tribal, the rural and urban arts will be included in their dimension of both antiquity and contemporaneity."

A total of 194 entries from all over the world were received, including 66 Indian entries. Astonishingly, in the first 23 designs shortlisted by the jury, only one Indian entry, that of Gautam Bhatia, figured. This implies that either the Indian architecture community is utterly inept or it is the jury that has for some reason (or reasons) been completely swayed by designs which are, not surprisingly, quite un-Indian in their ethos and inspiration.

It is, in fact, the jury which has failed to meet the test. This is for two fundamental reasons: first, there has been an absence of any kind of coherent and unifying approach and philosophy in their judgement and selection of prize-winning designs. There is also a profound contradiction between the philosophy and approach demanded from entrants in the competition programme which is profoundly Indian and the actual final selections, indeed in the shortlisting of the 23 entrants.

Secondly, the jury has shamefully excused the many technical violations in the first prize-winning entry by the American professor, Ralph Lerner of Princeton University.

IT is evident that each of the first five prize-winning designs have distinctly different approaches and philosophies. Lerner's work strongly emphasizes monumentality, axiality and large, heavily-planted spaces. It accepts, justifies and emulates Edwin Lutyens' colonial architecture, while Gautam Bhatia's second prize-winning design evokes a clearly identifiable Indian spirit.

As Bhatia has himself expressed it: "The architecture evokes symbols of a city besides a river through associations and allusions: buildings are viewed as a kind of a stage set awaiting a cultural scenario. A variety of partially sheltered indoor spaces, flow into semi-outdoor areas and then to completely outdoor places allowing for flexibility of use."

Different Ideas

The three entrants who shared the third prize have ideas and approaches that are radically different and opposing. However, none have any reference to the Indian context. As a matter of fact they could be designs for buildings anywhere in the world.

The very fact that such contrasting approaches should be chosen for the top three prizes indicates clearly that the jury did not evolve a unifying principle for assessment. It has not even bothered to respect the very assessment criteria that were announced in the competition programme! Central to these was the necessity that all entries try to reflect an Indian ethos. This was stressed in the initial competition brief.

To highlight this, the programme made it a condition to incorporate the Vadakkunathan Kuttampalam (Trichur) as the "Indian Hall" in the complex within all designs. This is a very powerful image and also has an imposing presence with its sloping and tiled roof, and height of 24 metres. Far from respecting this condition and drawing symbolic lessons from it, Ralph Lerner has, in fact, gone to the absurd extent of designing a skeleton roof in concrete to cover the entire Vadakkunathan Kuttampalam thus entirely changing the total image.

Moreover, his building has all the artificial grandeur and monumentality of any colonial edifice built to establish and reflect the "power and the glory" of foreign rulers, and at the same time awe its imperial "subject". What relevance does such architecture and such themes have to India which has been independent for almost 40 years and wanting to make its own unique cultural impress in the world comity of nations? Perhaps the fact that the jury was not entirely Indian partly explains why the influence of such colonial concepts of architecture could so affect the final selections.

Lutyens' New Delhi is not a city which is in any way expressive of the "essence" of Indian culture in the way that other cities are, be they Old Delhi, Jaisalmer, Jaipur, Varanasi or Hardwar or the temple cities of southern India like Madurai. Perhaps the "truest" (though certainly not the only) expression of Indian planning and architecture is to be found not so much in the grandeur of the Mughal palaces or even in temple constructions of India as in the structure and layout of those cities where the streets, the meandering gullies and bylanes provide that unity and diversity, those collective spaces and private ones, the multiplicity of images separate and somehow connected by a larger theme, that embody the real culture of India. It is this culture with its immense varieties of colours, of people, of occupations, of beliefs, of life itself, which it is the ultimate purpose of Indian art and architecture to highlight.

It is fundamentally necessary for modern, post-independence Indian architecture to avoid colonial images and structures. This is all the more important for a cultural centre, which must make a statement decisively breaking from such architectural expressions and not seek to merge with Lutyens' concept of New Delhi. The jury by selecting Lerner's design has shown itself to be suffering either from severe colonial hang-ups or an exaggerated reverence for westernised concepts. But this might well be in keeping with the general values of the rising, highly westernised (in the worst sense of the term) Indian elite.

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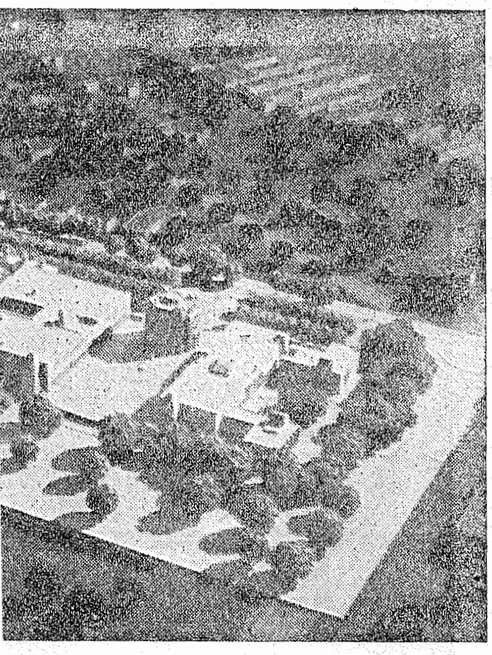

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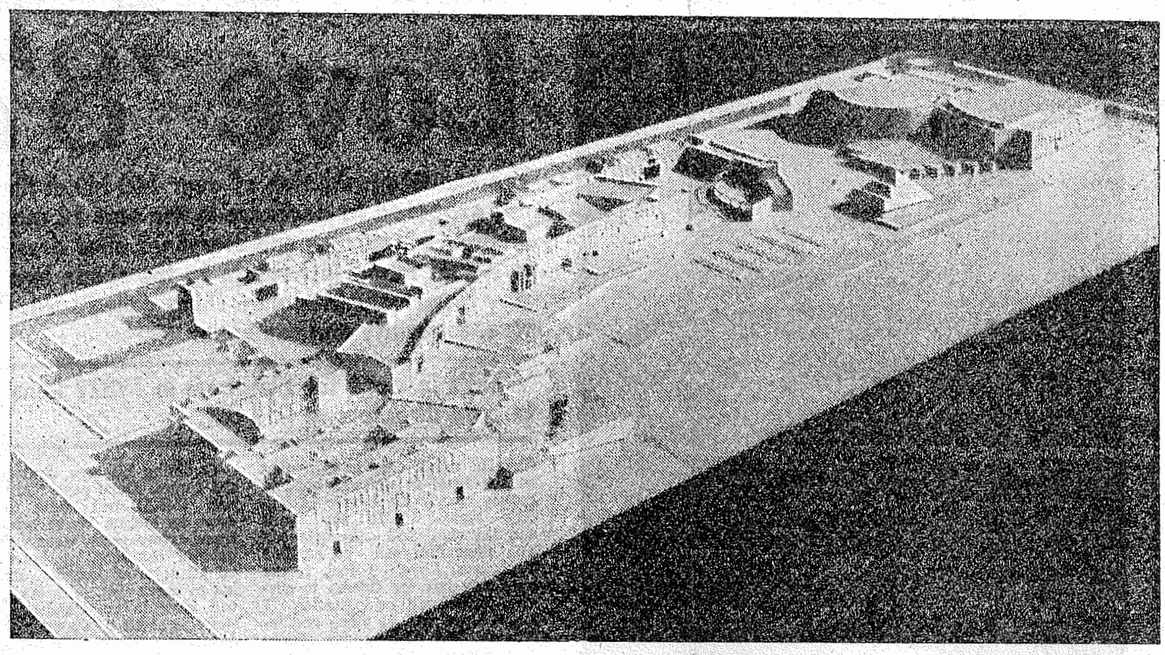

SECOND PRIZE: Gautam Bhatia's architecture evokes an identifiable Indian spirit—a variety of indoor, semi-outdoor and outdoor spaces flow into each other, allowing for flexibility of use.

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It must be realised that construction of any major public building influences a whole generation of architects in the country. The eminent painter-architect, Satish Gujral, had said this about the competition: "God forbid that the winner of the competition should be a noted architect and a foreigner — then like Chandigarh there will be more copying for a whole generation of Indian architects." We have still not got over the miserable failures of Chandigarh and the most irrelevant planning ideologies that the well-known French architect, Le Corbusier established. Ralph Lerner's design, if built, will certainly be a disgrace to independent India's planning concepts, architectural expressions and cultural identity.

The jury's post-selection report displayed during the exhibition is inadequate and more a bureaucratic and statistical report which the technical committee or the organisers of the competition could have brought out without involving the jury itself. It does not explain the basis of assessment, nor does it highlight any underlying philosophy and principles relevant to the project.

EXTREMELY stringent conditions were laid out for the competition after much querying and discussion of possible alternative conditions. All entrants had been warned of disqualification for any violation. It is shocking and shameful that Ralph Lerner's entry which committed so many fundamental violations was not disqualified; it was actually given the first prize!

The technical violations by the winning entry were pointed out by many commentators in the national dailies and Sunday papers. A.P. Kanvinde responded to these reports on behalf of the jury in the Sunday Observer (December 14, 1986). His reply was utterly inadequate and only embarrassed his standing as a senior member of the profession in the country, and as a supposedly responsible member of the jury. He simply brushed aside without explanation the allegations made by architect, Ravi Sikri, as reported by Usha Rai in The Times of India (Dec. 13, '86) as the reaction of "the disgruntled element who could not make it in the competition". Kanvinde must accept that the rules and regulations once formed must be followed by all entrants, otherwise what is the point of having a competition governed by proper rules? Moreover, the jury had themselves accepted the validity of these norms. If Kanvinde had any differences, then he should have expressed them much earlier, before agreeing to be a member of the jury.

Principle Of Justice

His astonishing rationalisations of the clear injustice done to all entrants who endeavoured to strictly abide by the rules of the competition will not do. Any subsequent concession or liberalisation of set norms must be applied to all entrants as an elementary principle of justice and fair play. So other entrants could have also had the freedom to be as flexible as Lerner has been in interpreting the programme to suit himself.

What is more, Kanvinde and the other members of the jury found these violations "marginal" (not surprisingly, how else could they have excused themselves?) and considered the ideas, concepts and planning approaches to be more important. Then why didn't they call for a two stage competition in which the conceptualisation could have been separated and evaluated independently of the second stage of execution of the model according to the technical conditions laid down?

Are we to understand that the members of the jury were either not informed or did not bother to familiarise themselves with the conditions of the programme before accepting their responsibilities as judges of the most important competition of its kind ever in history? It was also open to them to suggest any alterations or changes in the conditions of the competition or in its manner of organisation in the three months between the release of the competition programme and the last date for submission of entries. Considering the amount of work put in by entrants, what kind of justice could have been done to their efforts by a jury which took a mere five days to scrutinise and assess 194 entries?

Further Ranjit Sabiki, professional adviser to the IGNCA, has in his letter dated December 13 to Dr. (Mrs.) Kapila Vatsyayan has written: "A competition jury has full freedom to adopt any procedure it deems fit and its decisions are not open to question". Mr. Sabiki and others must realise (or are they conveniently forgetting?) that the jury while adopting any procedure has a moral responsibility towards its fellow professionals and towards the society at large. Whatever changes they make must be openly substantiated and justified. The IGNCA is a Government of India project and is of public interest.

The organisers, while deciding on designs for the prestigious IGNCA whose fundamental approach in all its work will be "interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary", did not even care to constitute an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary jury involving artists, engineers, environmentalists etc. This is certainly an affront to all professionals and to artists and painters in particular in the country.

Should the Government of India then go ahead with such an ambitious project in its present site and location? Does fairness and respect for the initial inspiration for the project — the construction of a cultural centre reflecting a truly Indian spirit and ethos — not demand that this competition be declared null and void? Or are this government and the organisers of the IGNCA going to take the shabby and easy way out of "requiring" Lerner to make "necessary adjustments" in his design?

Photographs by Madan Mehta