

# The Public Face of Modern Architecture and Urban Space

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## LOOKING THROUGH MID-CENTURY CIVIC ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM TO THE PRESENT

In the tradition of architecture with a civic function, this paper examines the phenomenon of the political face of a building through a series of examples of public buildings and adjoining urban public spaces. These examples generate questions about how and whether architectural design and its arrangement of public space accommodate discursive and demonstrative civic life. The examples range from the modern canon such as the Civil Government Edifice in Tarragona, Spain by Alejandro de la Sota, to a theoretical proposition made in 1965 by Cedric Price for a Pop-up Parliament for London. The architectural scale ranges from the urbanity of an intimate Georgian, scale as exemplified by the American Embassy on Grosvenor Square in London, designed in 1955-61, by Eero Saarinen, to buildings designed as icons on a planetary scale, such as the United Nations building in Manhattan or Breuer's UNESCO in Paris. In contrast with the modern past, lately models for building with a public, political vocation seem to derive from the bastion. Recent architectural reporting describes American embassy buildings, for example the new 'Standard Embassy Design' prototype, as regularized fortresses with 9 foot high anti-ram perimeter walls, and protective devices such as car-chewing metal teeth which emerge from the ground.<sup>1</sup>

If Cedric Price's Pop-up Parliament project of 1965 can be identified as the ultimate proposal for a transparent, accessible, mass public political architecture, it is because of its intention to accommodate the greatest numbers of participants in the democratic process. His Pop-up Parliament for London was conceived as a polemical project, published in the weekly journal *New Society*. In the project, a series of temporary and

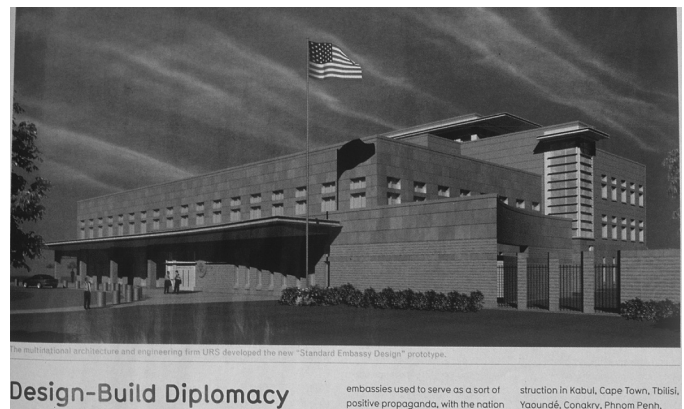


Fig. 2. "Standard Embassy Design" prototype, designed by URS Architecture and Engineering Firm, illustrating Bradford McKee's report, 'Design-Build Diplomacy', *Architecture* Jan. 2003 vol. 92, no. 1, p 45-6

permanent spaces of indoor and outdoor assembly proposed drastic change, replacing the existing Parliament Buildings with an vast public forum, electronically serviced. The proposal was defined with a great public square allowing thousands to assemble. Moving sidewalks, heliports, flexible spaces, elements such as debating platforms, would permit a constantly flowing and adapting architectural and urban environment. In contrast, or perhaps in fundamental continuity with Price's radical thinking, much of the innovation in terms of furthering political discussion has taken place on the virtual front in the last decade with grass-roots and official organizing fostered by internet connecting. An accompanying phenomenon was the web-organized political demonstration. The large-scale mass demonstration, as exemplified by the confrontational protests in Seattle, Quebec City, and Genoa, Italy in the last few years has surged and waned, and the political usefulness of the phenomenon is still subject of debate. In the aftermath of 9-11, and in the context of issues

raised in the discourse of globalization, in contemporary western society there is a functional need for prototypical public space and buildings with a degree of openness and intimacy, where expression of political opinion can take place in a spontaneous way. In the western democracies it is likely that the kinds of control exercised in allowing political demonstrations will affect numbers, if only from a practical perspective. The smaller, carefully organized, issue-oriented pacifist demonstrations would seem to present a more effective strategy than mass large scale demonstrations with potentially unforeseen consequences. For this reason, more intimately scaled examples could provide useful precedents.



Fig. 1. Cedric Price, *Pop Up Parliament*, project, published in *New Society*, July 1965.

What is the relation between architectural design of public space and civic life? While the buildings themselves accommodate planned activities, the role of adjacent urban space is more open. The types of civic events that urban public spaces typically accommodate are both planned and spontaneous public rallies and assemblies. In democratic societies, public demonstrations constitute one option in the public expression of

political will. Typically after marching in the street, groups assemble in front of carefully selected, representative public buildings to congregate. In January 2002, citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with monetary policy in Buenos Aires by banging on pots: *los cacerolas*. The demonstrations turned into riots, causing a succession of new presidents. In North America, disruptive demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 provoked a series of measures to separate and isolate demonstrators from political sites. During the 'Summit of the Americas', 'Free Trade' talks held in Quebec city in April 2001, the Canadian government and security forces erected a temporary wall to separate the demonstrators from the politicians in the urban public buildings where the meetings took place. The colonial fortress citadel of Quebec City developed a second, inner layer of chain link fence and concrete barrier. Small businesses covered their windows with plywood hoarding, and the city, its residents and visitors were bathed in tear gas for the weekend.

Whatever its character, the design of contemporary urban public space will reflect recent, stringent security measures often involving Jersey barriers and chain link fence. Urban public space and architecture that shapes those spaces must adapt to the challenge, accommodating security concerns and allowing some measure of public expression and critique. This paper takes the opportunity to examine a series of buildings, which provide prototypical examples of public space and form, serving the purpose of political expression. These include several modern mid-twentieth century buildings: the *Casa del Fascio* by Giuseppe Terragni, the Civil Government Edifice in Tarragona, Spain by Alejandro de la Sota, the Colegio de Arquitectos in Barcelona designed by Xavier Busquets in 1961, the American Embassy, London 1955-61, designed by Eero Saarinen; and an eighteenth century building, the Nova Scotia Legislature, Halifax, Nova Scotia designed by Richard Scott and built from 1811 to 1819. Lastly, the discussion is completed with mention of two canonic works of an international scope, UNESCO building by Marcel Breuer and the United Nations building by Wallace K. Harrison.

## PLACES OF FREE SPEECH

England's Speakers' Corner at the northeast edge of Hyde Park is a powerful symbol of the right to free speech and assembly. Nearby, across from Grosvenor Square, the American Embassy in London has been another popular site for public demonstration. This was where crowds gathered to express solidarity after the 9/11 attack.<sup>2</sup> The political context of the embassy in London makes it a symbol of American foreign policy.

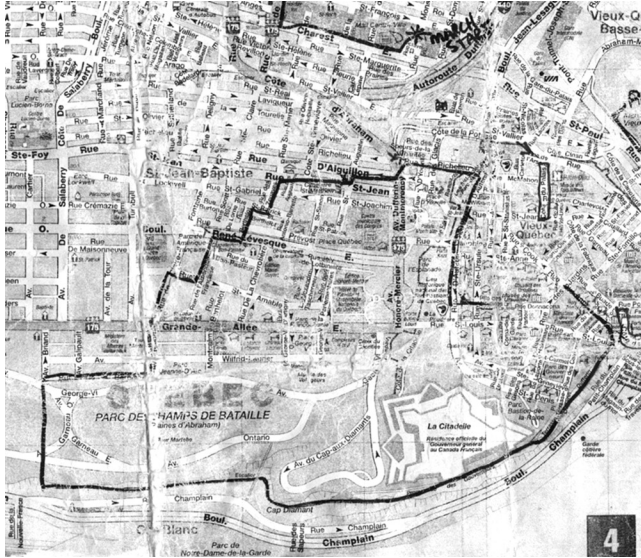


Fig. 3, 4. Plan drawn by citizen's group, and view of temporary fence of chain-link on concrete traffic barrier erected around the downtown conference meeting site during the Summit of the Americas, Quebec City, Canada, in April 2001.

Still the architectural and urban contexts play a vital role also. The containment and definition of the eighteenth century urban fabric of Grosvenor Square creates the specific sense of public space. Even with the addition of numerous concrete barriers to keep crowds at a distance, the architectural clarity of the Saarinen building is a decisive presence. The building fronts the square yet does not occupy the full extent of the western edge of the square, allowing the building to be perceived as a three-dimensional form. The sculptural cladding of Portland stone, shaped in repetitive heavy offset rectangular frames provides a strongly modeled texture to the elevation. Saarinen specifically selected the Portland stone for its tendency to weather into a dramatic, contrasting black and white. The frontality is completed with the addition of a central roofline element: the almost 'pop' symbolic placement of the figurative eagle sculpture in a contrasting material provides a focus to the evenly composed façade. In their *Guide to the Architecture of London*, Edward Jones and Christopher Woodward repeat a British-voiced criticism of the extent of the façade, insisting on an urban principle: that the footprint should reach to the limits of the square. It could be argued that the three dimensional quality of the envelope is more perceptible and the building a more tangible icon with its side elevations as well as the façade in view of the square. Jones and Woodward likened the Embassy design, "muddled and unsatisfactory" to "a department store more than an embassy". Given any blank department store elevation-type, the remark seems off-base, considering the handsome, imposing elevation composed by Saarinen. Still the embassy does look ambiguously like a distinguished, anonymous office headquarters. The eagle makes its representative status unmistakable. Saarinen is quoted

as wishing for a rather larger-scaled of the figural eagle sculpture, and mildly refuted the critique, "the building is much better than the English think — and not quite as good as I wished it to be".<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 5. American Embassy, Grosvenor Square, London, designed by Eero Saarinen, built 1955-61.

The Civil Government building in Tarragona by Alejandro de La Sota, designed under the Franco regime and built from 1956 to 1961, was a crucial modern work in the recent history of Spanish architecture. The modern ideals expressed in the building volume and massing could be said to have anticipated the current technological conditions of surveillance. The frontal quality of the building is legible as an expression of its massing and volume: the central four storey block, including residences, is poised forward of a two-storey base of administrative offices. The major, south facing face is articulated by a series of central balcony-like openings and loggia, each like a cyclopean eye viewing the city.

The Civil Government Edifice in Tarragona can be perceived as a building with a clearly defined public face. Architect José Llinás renovated the building in consultation with de la Sota in 1987. Llinás wrote of the building, in his report on the restoration project,

Is not the governor's balcony perhaps a bridge between the building and the square, a channel of communication between the authorities and the citizens with its three alternating spaces for the residential quarters: a symbol of the civil government; is it not architecture reduced to an obscure enigma, an amazing illustration of Kafkaesque descriptions?<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the precise sensibility and architectural prospects of the building, the urban site, located on a triangular plot and just off-axis from the major pedestrian street of the city of Tarragona, the *Rambla Nova*, cannot easily accommodate a public gathering. The busy traffic circle in front of the building is the major obstacle to any such civic use. A further impediment is the park-like arrangement of fountain, bridge and treed, grassed area in the centre of the traffic circle. The trees are tall and obscure the view of the Civil Government building from the opposite side of the intersection. The building siting could eventually take advantage of its location terminating a north—south axis from coastline, on the major axis of the town, the pedestrian street, the *Rambla Nova*. It continues uphill, beginning at the edge of the grand escarpment overlooking the railway and the extensive beachfront. Even after the careful restoration, a functional reality of daily operation is the impediment of a large metal-detecting system, and an ensuing line-up of some 40-50 citizens, typical of midday scene in the main entrance lobby of the building.

Province House, the seat of the Nova Scotia Legislature in Halifax, Canada is an eighteenth century example of a delicately scaled and efficiently sited neo-Georgian public building located in an equally fine-scaled urban downtown. Designed by architect Richard Scott and built between 1811-19, the building is a miniature in terms of its scale, yet functions within the small, steep blocks of downtown Halifax, itself a small city which boasts a series of well designed, historic urban public squares such as the Public Commons, The Public Gardens, and the exemplary Grand Parade, a long terrace located between City Hall and a Palladian wooden church on a cross axis with the town clock on the Citadel. The Grand Parade is used for ceremonies while Province House is the usual destination for political assemblies, marches, vigils, etc. Set in the core of the downtown, on a site sloping towards the harbour, the



Fig. 6. Civil Government building, Tarragona, Spain, designed by architect Alejandro de la Sota, built 1956-1961.

centrally planned, symmetrical classical elevations have an entrance on the upper and lower elevations of the site, and a small public space at either end of the building. This creates a public front for each elevation and allows for a potential public use of each face of the building. Inside the symmetry remains in the décor, but the plan is actually asymmetrical to allow the tiny Legislative Assembly Hall on the north wing, and a large reception room on the south, with a double height Legislative Library in the central block. Recently the now ubiquitous security issues have led to the primary use lower, south-facing facade, however the potential remains for a variety of assembly points on the grounds of the building.

Giuseppe Terragni's design for a headquarters for the Fascist Party in Como, *Casa del Fascio*, built from 1932-6, has been read by Peter Eisenman's early research primarily as an exquisite exercise in form. However its architecture readily expresses in its crisp geometric intersections a proposal for a renewed, highly ordered society proposed by Italian fascism of the early twentieth century. This message is deciphered by in the asymmetrical lattice structure brought forward to the surface plane of the building façade, as well as to its gridded roof terrace, silhouetted against the sky when seen from the ground. Its role as a mechanism of

control is also suggested in its relation to the adjacent public space. The pure geometry of its volume stands off from the public space that swirls around it, facing the square, and the dense cubic building encloses an intensely controlled place of public assembly within the courtyard. The building's current use as a headquarters for the Guardia Civil seems like a most appropriate match of programme to the refined and regulated architecture of the *Casa del Fascio*.

The *Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña* in Barcelona, a competition-winning design by Xavier Busquets, built in 1961, is set in medieval texture of the *Barrio Gótico*. The building demonstrates how architectural form can lead the building to an involvement in urban civic life and affairs. It delivers on its promise of an active role taken by architects in the civic life of the city. The low slab is recessed, positioned above and behind a base that features an exhibition space thrust into a public square and sunken a half level below the street, allowing a clear open view of the exhibits, events, and openings continually taking place, especially during the early evening. The exterior envelope of exhibition hall is defined by a tall concrete parapet in which is cast a frieze, derived from a line drawing by Picasso. The painter Joan Miró painted a lengthy temporary mural along the length of the grade-level fenestration in 1969, echoing the form of the frieze above, and demonstrating the quality of public event housed in the architecture.<sup>5</sup> The design and configuration of the *Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña* building and its relation to public space as a whole makes a tangible contribution to the public presence of architectural design in the city. Another more recent and similarly promising edifice is also located in southeastern Spain. Rafael Moneo recently completed a municipal building in Murcia, which adroitly completes the town square within the idiom of the intimate scale of the local context, by facing sensitively onto the wedge-shaped public plaza opposite the town cathedral. The tall opening set asymmetrically in the frontal façade over the plaza references the precedent of de la Sota's Edifice in Tarragona. Its open irregular colonnaded elements suggest Terragni's *Casa del Fascio*. The grace of the volume and proportion and the materiality of the building's honey-coloured *lumaquela* sandstone evoke a gentle, harmonious tradition of governance.<sup>6</sup>

A literal example of a political face of a building can be found in Havana, where the face of Ernesto Che Guevara looms over the expanse of the *Plaza Cívica*. His features are outlined at colossal scale in metal attached to the stone of the Office of the Comptroller building of 1953, now the Ministry of the Interior Building. Described by Eduardo Luis Lopez as one of the finest



Fig. 8. Municipal Building, Murcia, Spain, architect Rafael Moneo.

structures of the Plaza, designed by Aquiles Capablanca, it almost frames the vast space of the *Plaza Cívica*, site of numerous formal political rallies and assemblies.<sup>7</sup> In Havana, there has been a modern tradition of large-scale organized public rallies in vast open spaces. Here the political function of public space is linked to the public discourse by large public gathering assembled outdoors, the expression of political opinion appears something like a sporting event, symbolic and ritualized, rather far than spontaneous.

The architecture expressing an ambition for governance at a planetary scale, precursors whose mandate paralleled or transcended Price's pop-up parliament are the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, built in 1959 and designed by the office of Marcel Breuer, and the United Nations Secretariat of 1950 in New York, designed by Wallace K. Harrison in association with Max Abramovitz, with consulting architects Le Corbusier, Oscar



Fig. 7. *Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña in Barcelona, Spain, architect Xavier Busquets, built 1961.*

Neimeyer, and Sven Markelius after a collaborative design workshop in which key formal proposals were elaborated by an international selection of architects. Masterworks of the mid-century, they can also be perceived impregnable, bureaucratic fortresses. The United Nations building presides at the river's edge, overlooking the Manhattan waterfront and providing a modern microcosmic landscape, complete with its distinctive 38 storey slab tower. It presents a riverfront face to the city, viewed from across the East River, it embodies the sophistication of its global mission. Breuer's UNESCO building, while similarly sculptural, occupies a complete block and is perceptible as an object in the round. It is the more bureaucratic looking, and its entrance is somewhat inscrutable. As symbolic headquarters, both structures are deteriorating. Their architecture and urban insertion, as well as the institutions themselves, are currently in dire need of refurbishment. At the time of their completion, they were examples of an architectural vocabulary aspiring to the universal by means of symbolic, pure geometries, functioning at the global scale with expressive architectural

form, but with more attention paid to the rites and ceremonies of world governance, and little to street-oriented expression of political will.



Fig. 9. *UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France, designed by office of Marcel Breuer, 1959.*

The architectural design and arrangement of public space can facilitate a discursive, demonstrative civic life. Whatever the character of urban public space, stringent new security measures will probably restructure and inflict tectonic features on the spatial expression of high-level international political meetings, and citizen public demonstrations that may also take place in proximity. The design of urban public space and architecture, adapting to strict security must still recognize some measure of spontaneous public expression and critique. The scale and clarity of these modern examples provide some clear, positive precedents. Through this series of modern examples of public buildings and adjoining urban public spaces, the expression of political, public, civic function of public architecture is appraised in view of the contemporary trends to dissimulate, close down, mask, or impose protective layers over the civic face of architecture.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bradford McKee, 'Design-Build Diplomacy', *Architecture* Jan. 2003 vol. 92, no. 1, p 45-6.

<sup>2</sup> 'Here in London, the emphasis was on British-American solidarity. A tattered British flag recovered from Ground Zero in New York was presented by New York Police Lt. Frank Dwyer to British Home Secretary David Blunkett this morning at a ceremony at Grosvenor Square, next to the U.S. Embassy. Dwyer also appeared at the St. Paul's service, lighting a candle at exactly 1:46 p.m. London time, corresponding to the instant the first airliner hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center a year ago. A moment of silence followed. [...] Outside the cathedral, hundreds gathered from a variety of countries. "I just came in solidarity," said Estelle Lobban, who hails from Port Elizabeth, South Africa. "We South Africans have learned to live with fear and uncertainty, though nothing like what America went through on September 11th." Across Globe, a Sharing of Sympathy, by Glenn Frankel, *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Thursday, September 12, 2002; Page A28, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Eero Saarinen, quoted in Rupert Spade, *Eero Saarinen*, photographs by Yukio Futagawa, London: Thames & Hudson 1971 p 17.

<sup>4</sup> Octavio Mestre, Alejandro de la Sota, '*Edificio per il Gobierno Civil*, Tarragona, 1964-87/Civil Government Edifice in Tarragona, Spain by Alexandro de la Sota' *Domus* 63 *Luglio/Agosto* 1988 p 61.

<sup>5</sup> Caption to fig. 233-248 of the exhibition catalogue, "Details of the windows in the Architectural Association of Catalonia, with a background of paintings in colour done by the organizers of the '*Miró, otro*' exhibition; on this background Miró painted the strokes in black as a kind of giant poster going round the windows on the outside and advertising the exhibition in the exhibition." *Joan Miró*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Carla Bertolucci, City Hall, Murcia, Spain. *Architectural Review* vol. CCVI No. 1229, July 1999 pp 67-75.

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo Luis Lopez, *The Havana Guide, modern architecture 1925-65* NY: Princeton Architectural Press 2000.

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