

## Essay

**Architectural Gestures in International Relations***Pradeep A. Dhillon*

**Abstract:** *Somaesthetics helps us think about how buildings gesture. Analysis and interpretation of three embassies – the Belgian and U.S. embassies in New Delhi, India and the Finnish Embassy in Canberra, Australia, offer insight into the nature of architectural gestures. Methodologically, attention to soma serves to reconcile the normative sweep of Kant’s political thought with the attention to granularity demanded by Wittgenstein.*

This essay concerns a question that rightly belongs in international ethics but often remains unasked. Namely, how do buildings as sites for international diplomacy- cooperation, and competition-mean (Goodman 1985; Whyte 2006)? Somaesthetics, by way of Kant’s idea of political friendship and Wittgenstein’s examination of the role of gestures in communication, provides an analytic lens that helps address the question. An embassy building is the material site of international interaction; the body is its locus. In these buildings, bodies of visitors and personnel seek and receive hospitality, conduct commercial negotiations, and promote cultural exchange and understanding, among other necessary activities, all conducted within international legal and deliberative frameworks. These interactions tied to the ideals of international cooperation, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution raise the question of their material expression in the buildings, landscapes, and urban contexts that provide the stage for their realization. Further, under what conditions, we may ask, would placing ethical limits on these interactions be legitimate, and whether buildings can help support, even advance, these concerns? Motivated by demands on individual states to further their interests and well-being, limits-achieved through diplomacy- support peaceful engagement with others within the international sphere. The alternative is war.

Analysis and interpretation of three embassies – the Belgian and U.S. embassies in New Delhi, India, and the Finnish Embassy in Canberra, Australia, offer insight into the nature of architectural gestures. Furthermore, it clarifies the role architecture can and does play in international relations. Relying on somaesthetics as an analytic tool, I propose that the debates around architectural meaning, largely dependent on contested views regarding the relationship between language and architecture, can find resolution through attention to the soma. The strong thesis among these views argues that architecture is a language with its lexicon and distinct

syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic structures. On the other hand, the weak thesis suggests that the relationship between architecture and language is analogical or metaphorical. Following Wittgenstein and Shusterman, it could be argued that a gesture— hence, architectural gesture—is better approached as embodied, material communication. This exploration should contribute more broadly to the emerging theoretical position that brings Kantian transcendental idealism and Wittgensteinian contextualism and pragmatism into accord. Thus, in *Le Differend*, Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests the need for such a *détente* ((Lyotard, 1989). The challenge is to account for the particularity of experience without abandoning overarching directive ideals within an ever more densely engaged world. While much of Stanley Cavell’s philosophical writings reflect extensively on Wittgenstein, Kantian thought is pervasive. In other words, Cavell gestures towards Kant’s norms even though he does not undertake systematic engagement with him (Teufel, 2020). That such thinking offers democratic thought and practice as a way of life is noted and extended nationally and internationally by Shusterman (1997). His somaesthetic approach offers a cross-disciplinary analytic approach across both the humanistic and scientific domains of research. Also, James Risser, relating Kant to Baumgarten’s aesthetics, makes a strong case for the place of sensible knowing in Kantian thought. For Baumgarten, Risser claims much of the sensible, rich in its granularity, is inevitably lost in attempts to posit something universal.

*“... he (Kant) recognizes along with Baumgarten that aesthetics belongs to human life as the way of travelling from “night to noon.” He too sees the need for understanding the connection among things in a way that pure reason cannot itself produce (Risser 2015, 426).”*

This movement from the particular to broader claims is not linear. In the Kantian view, the dialectic of reason constantly moves between the empirical and the universal but is responsibly mediated by transcendental critique. This mediation protects reason from its tendencies toward dogmatism and scepticism (Dwyer, 2004). The somaesthetic approach supports this theoretical development. Significantly, a focus on the soma directs our attention to the embodied nature of all thought. In turn, it deepens our engagement with some philosophers and reorients our interpretation of others (Shusterman, 2012). Similar arguments for the dialectic of thought and experience are also found in other disciplines, as in the debates between Sartre and Levi-Strauss in anthropology (Dhillon, 2011).

Diplomacy is an institutionalized form of friendship between states. It can be seen as extending Aristotle’s discussion on the necessity of friendship in human affairs by recognizing the value of friendship in the international realm. “Friendship,” according to Aristotle (2014), is “a bond that holds communities together, and lawgivers seem to attach more importance to it than to justice; because concord seems to be something like friendship, and concord is their primary object—that and eliminating faction, which is enmity.” However, Aristotle is also supposed to have said, “O my friends; there is no friend.” Derrida (1988), in reflection on this quote, writes at length about the politics of friendship— any friendship. Besides Derrida, Montaigne, Kant, and Nietzsche, in their writings on friendship, all ascribe this quote to Aristotle. More recently, this ascription has been doubted (Agamben, 2009). Regardless, we have here recognition of the importance of the virtue of international friendship along with pragmatic demands placed on states with interests—convergent and divergent— that lie at the heart of diplomatic relations.

Aristotle admits to friendships of many kinds. Diplomacy is a political form of friendship. In this view, the politics of international friendship that ensues is not one where a collective organized as a state exists in recognition of an existential enemy. Instead, this diplomatic

ideal organizes around principles of rationality and autonomy. In sum, ideal diplomacy in the international sphere—at least in its contemporary incarnation- is fueled by a Kantian worldview rather than the more bounded anarchical and conflict-predicting views of Carl Schmitt and Samuel Huntington. Andrew Hurrell (1990), reflecting on Kant's continuing significance in international relations, notes that global anarchy would be unacceptable to Kant even as any efforts at global governance that ignore local loyalties and cultural affiliations would quickly degenerate into “universal oppression.” In Hurrell's words (1990, p.204), “Any solution between the two would have to be based on a tenuous and problematic balance between the reality of state sovereignty and the need to provide a firmer basis for those institutions and obligations that work to curb the excesses of that sovereignty.” As noted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights preamble, it is the work of diplomacy (and education)-and, by extension, embassies- to negotiate such a balance. Furthermore, embassies work towards limiting the pursuit of raw power by certain states and the conflicts-sometimes armed-that arise.

Several additional concerns shape the nature of the friendship between states. The ideal of friendship in international relations is aspirational as relationships between states play out in the murkier realms of human affairs. In the “Doctrine of Virtues,” Kant held that friendship is the coming together of two persons in equality and mutual respect, both necessary in normative commitment and struggled for in practice. Through extension, states are obliged to friendship with others in the international sphere even as they pursue their respective interests. Keeping both in view, through diplomacy, they navigate the shifting intentions and interests of all the other states with rights and obligations to do the same. Thus, it could be argued and historically demonstrated that asymmetrical positions held by various states within the international system undermine the balance between affinity, benevolence, and respect that ideal friendship requires. For example, historical ties of cultural affinities can and often lead to unconditional commitments to another state. These, in turn, could lead to the weakening of respect between them- a necessary component of friendship. Benevolence expressed over long periods due to asymmetrical economic relations could, and often does, lead to a decrease in respect and the arousal of resentment among beneficiary states. Even if these states maintain diplomatic relations, the quality of the relations is not maintained in friendship and eventually wears thin. Most importantly, even if states can effectively establish and maintain a balanced friendship, there are limits to the degree of openness they must extend to each other. These limits serve to facilitate the realization of their legitimate interests.

In other words, while openness is valued-pursued and encouraged- in international cooperation, it would be naïve to expect complete transparency for pragmatic reasons. Ideally, in the Kantian view, prudent protection of one's privacy is vital to maintaining self-respect, even under circumstances of great affinity.

With these preliminary remarks on diplomacy as the politics of friendship in the international sphere, let us now consider whether and how states express this friendship in embassy architecture. Aurorarosa Alison (2012), in her discussion of the role of both science and poetry in Gaston Bachelard, too draws out the dialectical movement from the minutia of everyday life to the broader themes that motivate us. She does so by focusing on the body and the spaces it inhabits and moves through. The guiding thought here is that soma is present in the design and use of even the most functional buildings. Hence, it is unsurprising that architects, philosophers, and historians are interested in the messages signalled by buildings. The communicative aspect of a building somatically designed by its creators and ‘read’ by its users is what Wittgenstein, Richard Shusterman, and others call architectural expression. In

his essay, ‘Somaesthetics and Architecture,’ Shusterman (2012, p.225)) says that “Despite its non-discursive materiality (which suggests mute dumbness),” he says, “architecture, as artistic design, is expressive.” As he notes this observation, he notes, this is nothing new. We can find references to architecture as an expression from Vitruvius to Venturi. In 1745 Germain Boffrand (Whyte 2007, 155), for example, held that “An edifice, by its composition, expresses as on a stage that the scene is pastoral or tragic, that it is a temple, or a palace, a public building destined for a specific use, or a private house. These different edifices, through their disposition, their structure, and how they are decorated, should announce their purpose to the spectator.” Boffrand goes on to suggest that “the profiles of moldings and other parts which compose a building are to architecture what words are to speech.”

Interpretations of architecture often rely on theories of language. However, as William Whyte points out, there is no single correct understanding on offer. He argues that different theories of language yield different architectural meanings. Furthermore, the meaning of a building can change over time. He says architecture is not “an artifact that can simply be described, but a multifaceted construct capable of multiple interpretations” (Whyte 2021, 177).” Inspired by Bakhtin, Whyte provides a rich account for thinking about the complexity of how architecture conveys meanings-not meaning, as he is quick to point out. Despite his impatience with various linguistic approaches brought to the interpretation of architecture, he reluctantly submits that architectural analyses and interpretations must remain within linguistic, discursive confines. However, architecture is not linguistic, and yet it bears meaning. Shusterman’s essay “Somaesthetics and Architecture” indicates a possible way out of this impasse. “The soma’s non-discursive expressivity,” he tells us, “through *gesture* provides a central model for architecture (Shusterman, 2012, p. 225, emphasis mine).”

In emphasizing the centrality of gesture in architecture, Shusterman opens possibilities for further research into what and how buildings mean. He could, however, develop his insight into the somatic dimension of Wittgenstein’s cryptic and cautionary remarks about architectural gestures. Reminiscent of Dewey’s remarks in his chapter on “The Live Creature,” in *Art as Experience*,” Shusterman quickly turns his attention to the relationship between architectural design and the environment:

*“The soma further provides a basic model for the relationship of architectural design to the environment. An architecturally successful building must both fit in and stand out as a distinctive achievement, just as a soma must do to survive and flourish, performing a balancing act of absorbing and relying on the wider natural and social environmental framing, so we cannot feel the body alone independent of its wider Umwelt (2012, p. 226).”*

Reading this passage in isolation, it might seem that Shusterman is setting up the body and architecture in an analogical relationship. Later in the essay, however, he relates the soma directly to architecture. Here he underscores the importance of appropriate points to the importance of a building’s appropriate relationship to the body, and its embeddedness within the built and natural environments while maintaining its unique identity. Any building that fails to embed itself within the “wider natural and social environmental framing” is unsuccessful. For example, Le Corbusier’s design of the city and government buildings of Chandigarh, India, has faced significant criticism on this point (Bharne, 2011). The buildings, it is charged, are not architecturally successful because Corbusier did not sufficiently consider the social and natural environments. (Dhillon, 2015, p.133). Their monumentality is itself an affront to a nation

emerging as a democracy out of a crippling colonial experience. Furthermore, given the arid conditions in the upper plains of Punjab, the buildings present significant physical challenges to the bodies that use them. Corbusier's buildings in France and Switzerland were very successful, leading to his appointment as the Chandigarh project's chief architect and urban planner. Culturally and historically, his modernist buildings fit the environment in Europe. However, his buildings in Chandigarh did not.

Let us now expand on architecture as a gesture and consider how suitability to the environment plays into purpose-built embassies. These are successful to the extent that they support the political friendships sending states and host countries and admit to the degrees entailed by the very idea of political friendships. David MacArthur opens his essay "Reflections on "Architecture is a Gesture" (Wittgenstein)," by noting the similarities between philosophical reflection and architecture (MacArthur, 2014, p.?). In this, he follows Wittgenstein, Umberto Eco, and others, including Shusterman, whose essay on the soma and architecture draws out the role of criticality in philosophy and architecture. MacArthur tells us that philosophy and architecture ask the Socratic question: "How should one live?" In addition, they both suffer "from an embarrassment of their status (MacArthur 2014, 89)." MacArthur tells us that, following Quine, the first is due to attempts to assimilate philosophy into *scientific* naturalism. Similarly, architecture is often assimilated to civil engineering. In MacArthur's view, Wittgenstein attempts to save architecture and philosophy from this status anxiety. For Wittgenstein, philosophy and architecture aim for the status of art and "attempt to capture the world sub *specie aeterni* (MacArthur 2014, 89)." Furthermore, MacArthur (2014, p.90) quotes Wittgensteinian as saying that architecture "immortalizes and glorifies something due to its relative permanence. Hence there can be no architecture where there is nothing to glorify [...] Architecture glorifies something (because it endures). It glorifies its purpose (MacArthur 2014, 90)."

In MacArthur's reading, gestures for Wittgenstein are distinct from other expressive movements. Unlike facial expressions and like a shrug or a salute, for example, "they must be produced for a suitable duration, to be readily identified as a gesture; that is, a legible movement or positioning of the body parts whose purpose is the communication of an idea or meaning (MacArthur 2014, 103)." By analogy, MacArthur argues (2014,104), buildings -immobile and not designed to express by way of movement- "intentionally expresses an idea or thought as akin to the intentional expression of a human body through the posture." Even though MacArthur takes us beyond the strictly linguistic and limiting analyses of architecture noted by Whyte and sets up a relationship between the body and architecture, he does so by analogy. Shusterman, on the other hand, places them in a direct relationship. Locating himself within the pragmatist tradition, Shusterman reminds us that "all action (artistic or political) requires the body, our tool of tools (2012, p.3)." It frees us from architectural history and criticism that is either subsumed under the philosophy of language or read by analogy through it. If intentionality is an essential aspect of gestures, buildings are certainly intentional, even if only built or used for specific functional reasons. To state the banal, bodies express intention, create, engage, evaluate, and use buildings. Second, if gestures are part of a comprehensive communicative system that expresses through verbal and non-verbal means, then architectural gestures are placed directly under the concept of gesture. They are not *like* bodily gestures but gestures in themselves, albeit of a different kind.

Embassy architecture is a gesture of international political friendship. Not surprisingly, these buildings, their interior design, and landscaping all reflect the normative values of a state. Through its material presence, a sending state signals its values and the quality of the interaction-the level of friendship -they can or wish to extend towards the host country. Embassies are often,

but not always, purpose-built by sending states on land acquired from the host nation either by purchase, lease or as a gift. Typically, an embassy consists of a chancellery -the offices conducting the business between the two states and other member states of the international system - and the Ambassador's residence. The buildings facilitate the interaction between those in high office and ordinary citizens of the host country and embassy personnel. However, not all embassies are purpose-built. Immediately following independence from British colonial rule in 1947, for example, Prime Minister Nehru sought to establish diplomatic relations with other nations of the world. He invested heavily in architecture to declare India a sovereign, modern nation on the world stage. His most well-known project was the development of Chandigarh -its urban layout and its government buildings- by a team of Indian architects under the leadership of the Swiss modernist architect Le Corbusier. In New Delhi, a large tract of land near the presidential and parliament complex- established in 1911 by the British-Imperial Delhi- under the leadership of the architect of Edward Luytens- was set aside for a diplomatic enclave named Chanakyapuri (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). Parcels of land were leased or sold to sending states for purpose-built embassies. Some within the international community, like the United States and the United Kingdom, purchased the land and initiated and completed purpose-built embassies quite quickly. Others were insufficiently politically or economically motivated or unable to undertake such costly architectural projects.

Belgium, for example, leased land in New Delhi's diplomatic enclave at the nominal rate of one rupee as early as 1954 but did not build on it. However, it finally initiated and built an embassy between 1979 and 1983 (De Maeyer, Flore, and Morel, 2021). In the meantime, its offices and the Ambassador's residence were housed in rented buildings in residential neighbourhoods within Luytens's Delhi, which, to a large extent, still is one of the most prestigious neighbourhoods of Delhi. As the architectural historians De Maeyer et al. (2021) tell us, the buildings rented by the Belgian government bore a brass plaque with the Belgian coat of arms at the gate. They flew the Belgian flag distinguishing them from the other residential buildings in the neighbourhood. These buildings were functional in support of Indo-Belgian relations but, at that time, showed no sign of committed long-term diplomatic relations. Contrary to the idea that a purely functional building is not architecture because it does not gesture through artistic design, these rented buildings did gesture the tenuousness of Indo-Belgian relations through their emphasis on functionality. However, in Wittgenstein's view, they still needed to meet additional criteria for buildings to qualify as architecture. These rented buildings were not permanent, purpose-built structures and did not glorify Indo-Belgian friendship. The lack of permanent Embassy buildings gestures towards political and cultural changes internal to Belgium and shifting political, cultural, and economic relations with India. These changes played a role in the degree and nature of engagement-the political friendship- between Belgium and India. The decolonization of Belgian-held territories in Africa by 1962 and the ensuing restructuring of Belgium's economy and cultural identifications brought changes to its presence in India. As Belgium restructured internally and its relations with India intensified, its Embassy moved to ever more prestigious locations within Luytens's Delhi until it finally moved to its new home in 1983. The lack of permanence gestures changes internal to Belgium and its changing political, cultural, and economic relations with India. These changes played a role in the degree and nature of engagement-the political friendship- between Belgium and India. As relations between the two countries strengthened, Belgium initiated the building of its Embassy and completed in 1983. The Belgian Ambassador, on moving from a rented home in Luytens' Delhi to the new purpose-built Embassy, nostalgically said he was "leaving a charming colonial house in Tilak Marg to move, in some way, from British old days to modern India (De Maeyer et al., 2021)

As already discussed, the transition from rented to permanent Embassy buildings gestures shifts in Indo-Belgian relations and Belgium's relationship with its colonizing past. In other words, the new Embassy gestured towards the increasingly strong Indo-Belgian relations as the Embassy moved from rented buildings to inhabiting the embassy complex in Chanakyapuri. The Belgian government and diplomatic staff were aware of the political implications of building its Embassy with insufficient historical insensitivity by an erstwhile colonizing country in one that had recently emerged from its experience of suffering colonialism. By the late 1970s, cultural sensitivities around colonialism were still high on both sides. An Indian artist, Satish Gujral, was selected to design this new Embassy. Having made his mark as a sculptor, painter and muralist, Gujral was awarded a scholarship to Palacio Nacional de Artes Mexico City, in 1952. Here he met Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Under their influence, especially Wright's, whose interest in pre-Columbian architecture often brought him to Mexico, Gujral's interest shifted towards architecture. Frustrated with art, he often said he would have done better as an architect. He was well-known in Delhi's elite circles and was invited to design a house and a hotel in the city. Despite this limited experience, and given his lack of credentials, it is surprising that he was appointed the architect for the new Embassy. In the view of De Maeyer et al. (2021, p.7), "It was likely a combination of Gujral's prominent position in Indian society and his ties that brought him into contact with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs." The Gujral family was affiliated with the Congress Party of India. Satish Gujral was on social terms with Roland Bunny, who then served as the chancellor of the Belgian Embassy.

"For writers like John Carter and John Britton, writing in the 1780s and 1810s, the architectural style was presumed to be indicative of social and intellectual development. It was also strongly linked to national culture (quoted in Whyte, p.160)." Gujral, of a generation that fought for freedom from British rule and with other intellectuals of his time, sought to find a design vocabulary that was distinctively Indian yet modern (Dhillon, 2013). It is important to stress that the use of local architectural vocabulary in modern architecture has long been in practice, even though it was only in the 1980's that the term "critical regionalism" was coined (Bagha & Raheja, 2018). For the [Belgian Embassy](#) in New Delhi, Gujral chose brick as the primary building material, as is traditional in much of South Asia. For example, brick was used significantly by Louis Kahn in the public buildings he designed in South Asia. Furthermore, brick directly contrasts with the concrete used in Le Corbusier's modernist Chandigarh project. Furthermore, seeking to decolonize architectural aesthetics, Gujral also turned to classical Indian forms borrowed from Hindu temples, Mughal palaces and forts, and the ancient Indian sites of Harappa and Mohenjodaro in his design.

In so doing, Gujral signalled his nationalism and celebrated the diversity of Indian culture at a time when northern India was in considerable political upheaval around issues of religion. This turn to regional architectural forms ensured the legibility of the building for the host country's population and fed into its pride in its hard-won position within the international system of independence from colonial rule. Gujral's design fully articulated the building within the context of India's built environment. Its Embassy signalled the quality and degree of political friendship it sought to establish with India. The building is often referred to as "an Indian nest for Belgian birds" by embassy personnel. It is one of the most visited embassies by Indians for aesthetic and other non-functional reasons (De Maeyer et al., 2021). These shifts in architectural gestures from simple functionality to full-blown respect for the sending or the host country admit to degrees in political friendships and changes in global politics. Suzanna Harris-Brandts and David Sichinava (2021) offer a telling example of this dynamic in their case study on the

shifting cultural policy in Tbilisi, Georgia, after the end of the cold war. Furthermore, Macarthur reminds us that the success of a gesture, in Wittgenstein's view, is not a response to the building in words, even if one can articulate it.

*“Remember the impression made by good architecture, that it expresses a thought. One would like to respond to it too with a gesture.”*

To Indian visitors, this building continues to offer such a non-verbal, embodied gesture of appreciation.

Most embassies are built for functionality, to express friendship towards the host country, and also to declare the sending country's cultural achievements. However, there was nothing particularly *Belgian* about the Belgian Embassy in New Delhi. Hence, it remains an anomaly within embassy architecture. Deeply appreciated though it is, it would only be considered partially successful. In Shusterman's words:

*“An architectural building must both fit in and stand out, just as a soma must do, to survive and flourish, performing a balancing act of absorbing and relying on the wider natural and social resources of its environment but at the same time asserting its distinctive individuality (2021, 226).”*

Embassy buildings need to be functional, a gesture of friendship towards the host country and also display the cultural accomplishments of the sending country. The Belgian Embassy was not able to materially signal its own cultural identity. Interestingly, until the publication of De Maeyer et al.'s article in 2021, the Embassy was relatively ignored by architectural historians and critics in Belgium. Arguably, the building signalled aspects of Belgian identity—its openness and respect for other cultures—by the very absence of material representation of its own culture. However, given Belgium's colonial policies and the controversial choice of Gujral as the architect for the project, this aspect warrants further research. Regardless, it did not find the balance demanded of political friendship that a successful Embassy building needs to achieve.

Let us turn to a building that explicitly sought to achieve such a balance: the Embassy of the United States in Chanakyapuri, Delhi. An architectural historian, Jane C. Loeffler (2011), placed embassy architecture at the heart of diplomacy in her book *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building American Embassies*. In an earlier article, she quotes the diplomatic historian Harold Nicholson as saying, “the worst kind of diplomatists (sic) are missionaries, fanatics, and lawyers.” Loeffler (1990, p.251) then asks:

*“Given the chance to serve a diplomatic role, could architects establish a language of discourse through which American architecture might speak to the world of American hopes and American strength? Could they create a dialogue of mutual trust and respect with people of different cultures and sensibilities? Or would they simply make grand or empty gestures incomprehensible to all but their peers in the United States and abroad—statements resented like the intrusions of missionaries, flamboyant like the work of fanatics, or dull like the timid efforts of legal experts whose ultimate aim is compromise?”*

For the United States, India's non-alignment foreign policy during the cold war spurred interest in building an embassy in Delhi to counter the presence of the Soviet Union. Despite considerable resistance to establishing robust relations with any country that was not overtly



anti-communist, President Truman initiated an aid program to India in 1949, and official American presence became substantial in New Delhi. Chester Bowles was appointed Ambassador responsible for developing and consolidating American regional interests in South Asia. Bowles, a businessman and a liberal, encouraged the Americans in India to travel around the country to know it better and urged his staff to learn Hindi. Back home in America, he put his efforts into acquainting Americans with India and its economic and strategic importance. With other voices, including those of the economist John Kenneth Galbraith and first lady Jacqueline Kennedy joining in these efforts, there was a growing awareness of the importance of India. Despite some resistance in the U.S. State Department, it was decided to build an “embassy in India that would be worthwhile, a credit to us, and a credit to India. (Loeffler, 2011, p. 185)

With mutual awareness proliferating in both India and the United States, and despite Nehru’s non-alignment policy perceived as unstable and vacillating by Washington, New Delhi gained top priority for the Department of Foreign Building Operations (FBO). Thirteen acres of land, later expanded to twenty-eight, was acquired in Chanakyapuri. Edward Durrell Stone, whose career as an architect was controversial, Loeffler tells us, seemed to have hit a rough patch. Despite this, he was selected as the architect to design the chancery of the Embassy. The director of the FBO, Nelson Kenworthy, knew Stone from past projects and did not feel he was suitable. He turned the final decision over to the newly appointed American Architectural Committee. Stone, who had friends on that committee, was selected.

Loeffler tells us that Stone had visited the Pan American Union Building in Washington D.C. when he was eighteen. Taken by its garden court, “lush with tropical vegetation, birds, fountains and brilliant coloured tile,” he decided to become an architect (Loeffler, 202, p. 226). The Mughal palaces Stone visited in northern India resonated strongly with this early encounter. Their slim colonnades running along the sides of rigorously geometrical buildings, with rooms hidden behind them, were often arranged around a central courtyard. The meticulously carved stone screens, *jaalis*, of sandstone or marble, provided privacy and shade, allowing breezes to blow through the buildings. Rectangular pools with lotus plants, and open pavilions with channels of water running through them, moved him to design a building that incorporated these Indian architectural design elements. His earlier experience in Panama City, when working on the *El Panama Hotel* project, had also made him sensitive to the value of these elements in an environment where heat and glare provided considerable challenges.

Stone submitted a design inspired by the Taj Mahal. It was a low rectangular white building with deep overhangs held up by slim columns running along all the sides reminiscent of Mughal columns and overhangs. It is interesting to note that even though modern architecture was European in origin, by the 1950s, mainly through the work of architects like Mies Van de Rohe in Chicago, it came to be associated with American architecture. Despite being influenced by Mughal architectural forms, the Embassy was a modern American building. Behind the slender columns supporting a portico that ran along the perimeter of the structure, the entire building, wrapped in glass curtain walls, gestured towards the material and style of American architecture *par excellence*. The walls clad, in turn, in traditional marble and concrete *jaalis* gave the building an airy look, incorporating American and Indian architectural styles. The main entrance to the building was at the short end of the rectangle facing the chief avenue, *Shantipath*, that ran through Chanakyapuri. On entering the gates from Shantipath, a serene pool ran the width of the building, behind which were shallow steps that led to the recessed entry with the Great Seal of the United States set above the door. The elevation was modern and American, with glass, clean low lines, slim columns, *jaalis*, and the pool, yet reminiscent of the India-Mughal-garden pavilions.

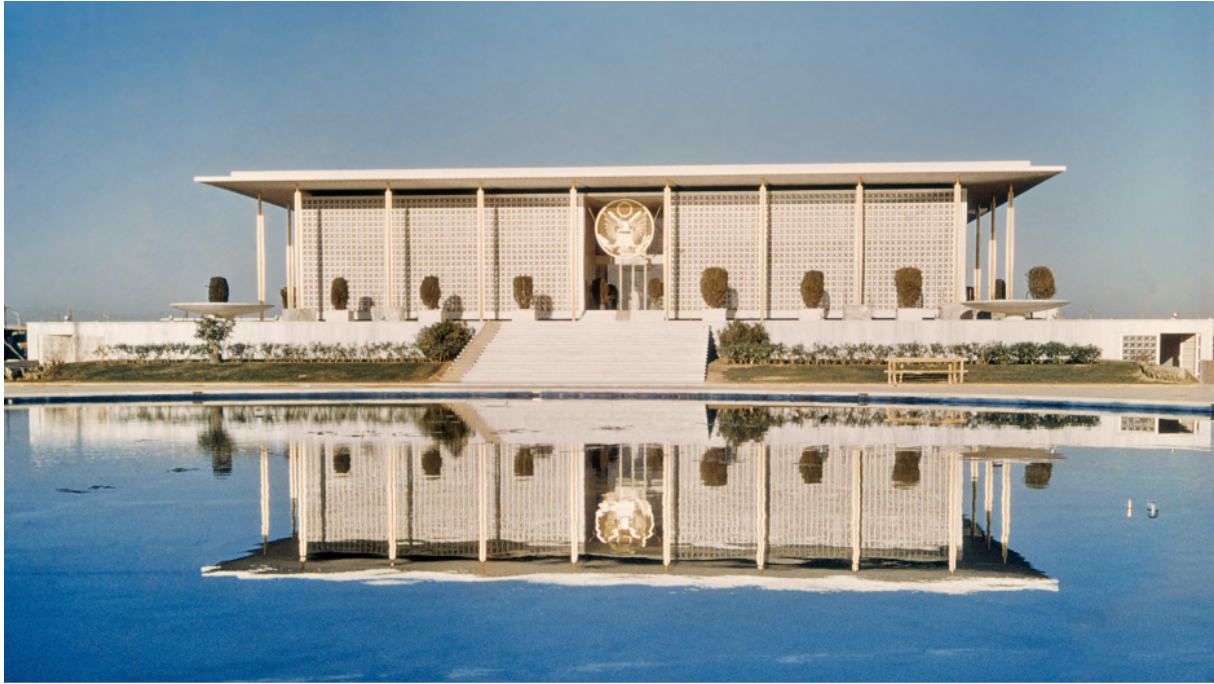


Figure 1 U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, 1954

An inner court had two umbrella roofs to reduce heat gain and promote air circulation. Shaded by an aluminium screen, they were to deflect the sun and direct rainwater to the pool. (Loeffler, 2021, pp. 183-191). The screen, running the entire length and breadth of the inner court, created an ample, airy space, awash in filtered light and further softened by lotuses and other tropical plantings in the pool. The offices arranged around this inner court were air-conditioned. However, the court was not. The contrast in temperature, particularly in the hot summer months, caused significant discomfort to the personnel and visitors to the Embassy.

On its dedication on 3 January 1959, the building met with an enthusiastic reception in the United States and India. Frank Lloyd Wright hailed it as the most beautiful building in the last 100 years. Loeffler (2021, p.189) reports:

*“The New York Times informed its readers that the new embassy was “probably the most elegant in the world,” and that Prime Minister Nehru hailed the building and its American architect. “I was enchanted by the building,” Nehru reportedly said. “I think it is a very beautiful structure and a very attractive combination of typically India motifs and [the] latest modern technology.”*

Stone was widely praised for his skilful blending of Mughal and contemporary American architecture. The State Department was applauded for its “enlightened new design policy, which recognized how important it was for American buildings overseas “to be in harmony with the cultural, architectural and climatic conditions.” (Loeffler, 2021, p.189).” When Jacqueline Kennedy visited India in 1962, she was so taken with the Embassy that she selected Stone to design the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. As a communicative act, the chancery of the U.S. embassy in New Delhi was legible to both Indians and Americans. The gesture was reciprocated by appreciation expressed by all who visited the Embassy and those driving by on Shantipath.

Stone's chancery was an architectural gesture of Kantian political friendship based on equality and mutual respect even as the two countries pursued their interests. It was a glorious gesture towards a refusal of the East/West divide settling around the globe. In passing, it is interesting to note that philosophy, too, sought to resist such settling. John Dewey (1951) explicitly questions this settling by calling for a global extension of pragmatism. The architect and philosopher were diplomats. The building meets Shusterman's criterion "of absorbing and relying on the wider natural and social resources of its environmental framing but at the same time asserting its distinctive individuality (2012, p.226)." It failed, however, because the building did not meet Shusterman's criteria of somaesthetic functionality. Built without sufficient attention to the natural environment, an essential element in the balance required for successful architecture, the building failed. While lovely, the inner courtyard becomes a sauna in Delhi's relentless summer. A somaesthetic approach brings this failing into focus. It compels us to rethink Wittgenstein's aphoristic claim, often uncritically quoted, that architectural gestures are more than the functionality of a building. The Embassy building meets Shusterman's first criterion for successful architecture; it fits in and stands out, "performing a balancing act of absorbing and relying on wider natural and social resources of its environmental framing." However, it does not meet Shusterman's somatic criterion of seamless articulation between the body and architecture-its "wider *Umwelt* (2012, p. 226)." The bodies using this enduringly beautiful building are under stress to thrive and flourish. Many personnel, for example, said they fell ill from constantly moving between their air-conditioned offices and the steaming courtyard. The building, for all the received accolades, is flawed from a somaesthetic perspective.

Moreover, the U.S. embassy gestured democratic values through its use of Indian and American architectural materials but was not fully democratic in conception. Given that the promotion of democracy in the region was the prime motivation behind the political friendship extended towards India, the turn to the royal Mughal mausoleum- the Taj Mahal- is surprising. The Embassy reflects an ambivalence between the need to establish a democratic international friendship and a commitment to gesturing towards the power of the United States by choosing decidedly un-democratic Indian architectural motifs. This ambivalence dogged the American program of building embassies around the globe from the very inception of the American Embassy Association (AEA) in 1909. The association torn between demonstrating democratic principles and the desire to showcase its growing importance on the international stage led to fierce debates during meetings for establishing building policies. Arguments in favour of signifying power won the day. For example, an article published by the AEA in 1910 lays out the position for signifying power:

*"All men, rich or poor, cultivated or uncultivated, are impressed by appearances. Foreigners necessarily judge us by what they see of us in their own country... We pride ourselves on being the richest people on earth and declare loudly that nothing is too good for us. And yet we are content to cheapen ourselves among the nations of the earth by the shabby showing we make among them in respect to our embassies. We feel ashamed at appearing poverty-stricken in the eyes of the inhabitants of other countries and of placing ourselves below the third or even fourth-rate powers (Loeffler 2011, 252)."*

Furthermore, in the wake of attacks on U.S. embassies in many parts of the world, a great wall was built around the U.S. embassy. The building is no longer visible to the people walking or driving down Shantipath. Once open to view, the Embassy building has become an enigma to

the local population. Understandably, the need for security now plays a crucial role in developing and implementing plans for the design of new embassies or the renovation or extension of existing ones. As relations between India and the U.S. strengthen, a prolonged expansion and renovation of the more than sixty-year-old compound are underway. An open and transparent competition selected the firm Weiss/Manfredi of New York for the project. Their architectural philosophy is to design by taking the entire environment-built and natural-into consideration. In their words,

*“A new tree-lined central green offers shade connects functional zones across the campus and introduces reciprocal relationships between the buildings and gardens. Inspired by India’s enduring tradition of weaving together architecture and landscape, a series of cast stone screens, canopies, and garden walls introduce a resilient, integrated design language that brings the campus into the twenty-first century. Nearly sixty years after the opening of the Edward Durrell Stone-designed Embassy, the rejuvenated embassy compound expresses the symbolic values of American diplomacy through environmental stewardship and gives measure to America’s democratic presence in India (Weissman/Fredi, 2022).”*

The expansion will take ten years to complete. Through its use of walled gardens, pavilions, and architectural elements borrowed from the Mughal period’s elite architecture—forts and palaces, the building will once again be legible to Indians. Evaluation of its success has to wait.

If, following Wittgenstein, we claim that “architecture immortalizes, and glorifies something,” then for an embassy that gestures democracy, let us turn to the Finnish Embassy in Canberra, Australia. Built in 2002, the Embassy was designed by Finnish architect Vesa Huttunen of the firm Hirvonen and Huttunen (2022), who won the commission in an open competition in 1997. Given the increasing significance of transparency in democratic thinking, the selection of the architect for the project stands in contrast to the selection of Satish Gujral and Edward Stone. The new building is an annexe to the existing Finnish Embassy and now houses the chancery and a residence for the counsellor. The old building now serves as the residence of the Ambassador. The Embassy is often lauded as a “courageous” building because it boldly and transparently affirms Finland’s democratic commitments despite its delicate geography and relatively small size. It is named Ilmarinen in commemoration of the Finnish flagship that fired several times on an airfield in the Soviet Union but ultimately sank during World War II. The ship itself was named after Ilmarinen, the blacksmith and inventor-hero of the Finnish mythological epic, Kalevala, capable of creating anything. The name refers directly to Finland’s cultural heritage of creativity and its steely resistance, first to the values of the Soviet Union and now to expansionist Russia.<sup>1</sup>

The Embassy gestures this transparency of affiliation to a set of political values. Furthermore, its architectural design expresses transparency as a critical political and democratic value. One aspect of the façade of this modernist building is glass which allows you to see right into the offices from the outside. A different aspect, a curved wall of concrete, and the interior of the building invoke the atmosphere of a ship, a gesture to the *Ilmarinen* and hence to Finland’s culture and history of innovation and brave independence. The offices lined along the outside walls like cabins have a walkway that runs along them. From the walkway, the atrium and the beams supporting the higher levels of the building render a significant part of the interior visible.

<sup>1</sup> [https://media3.architecturemedia.net/site\\_media/media/cache/6d/74/6d744362b91e72e5b45e6b8e1704378b.jpg](https://media3.architecturemedia.net/site_media/media/cache/6d/74/6d744362b91e72e5b45e6b8e1704378b.jpg)

The overhang is of eucalyptus, and its outside decks and stair treads of reclaimed *jarrah*; are both timbers native to the Australian landscape. Moreover, the jarrah was sourced from old sheep stations. Thus, the building gestures towards the natural and cultural resources of the host and sending countries.

Furthermore, the partitions between the offices are open at the top and bottom to allow aural access to ongoing conversations and negotiations. However, it is worth noting that despite the building being so open, some mechanisms allow for security from the broad to the subtle. These mechanisms place material limits- albeit subtle-on a building. Thus, even though the walls between offices are aurally permeable, some mechanisms allow dampening or elimination of sound when needed. While the building is boldly transparent, it has provisions that enable privacy and security. Architecturally, it “glorifies” democracy and exemplifies a relatively high level of *political* friendship. It could safely be said that the Finnish Embassy at Canberra “expresses a thought” and “glorifies something...It glorifies its purpose.” Wittgenstein would have appreciated it, and Kant too. It will be years before we have enough data and information to comment on its functionality.

This essay focuses on exploring the ideas of embassy architecture as a gesture of political friendship from a somaesthetic perspective. Methodologically, I sought to diminish, if not erase, the distinction between theory and experience. Somatic attention places verbal and non-verbal communication, linguistic and non-linguistic forms of representation, on a continuum rather than in opposition. Finally, Shusterman’s somaesthetic approach reconciles the broad normative sweep of Kant’s political thought with the attention to granularity demanded by Wittgenstein.

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