Buildings That Are Symbols, Too: Every age has created great ...
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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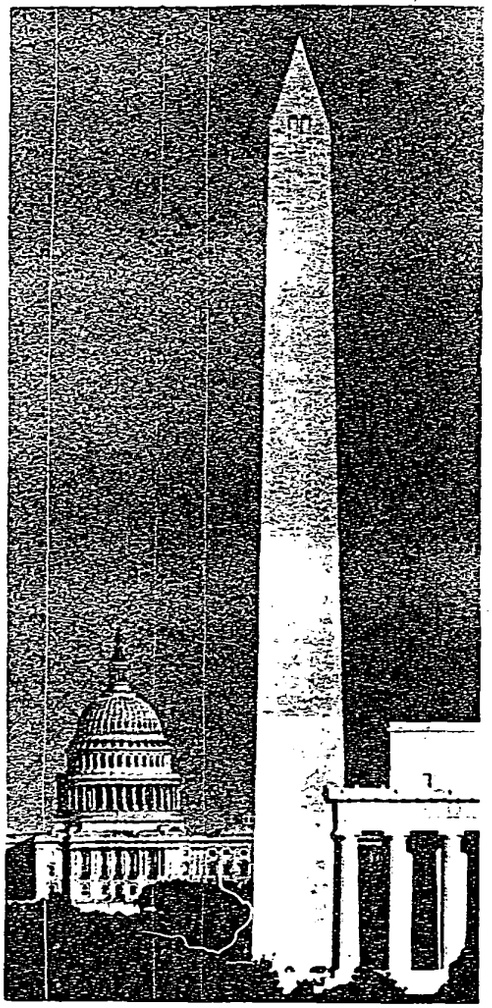
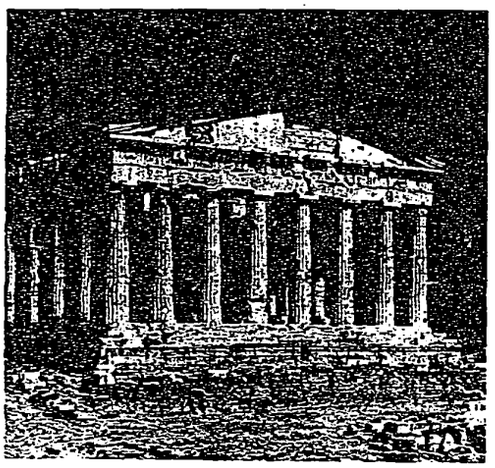
The Author Rates Some Symbols—

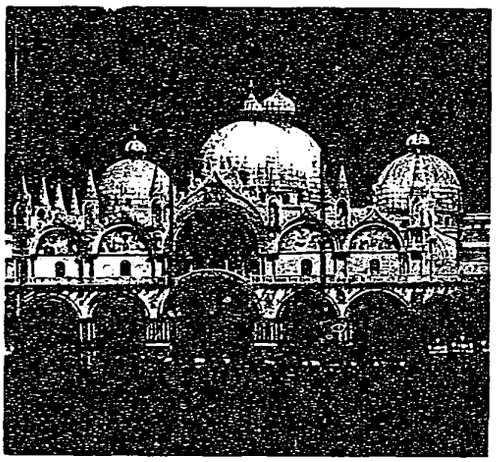
'PAST SUCCESSES'



THE CAPITOL AND WASHINGTON MONUMENT—"They give tangible expression to our beliefs and ideals."

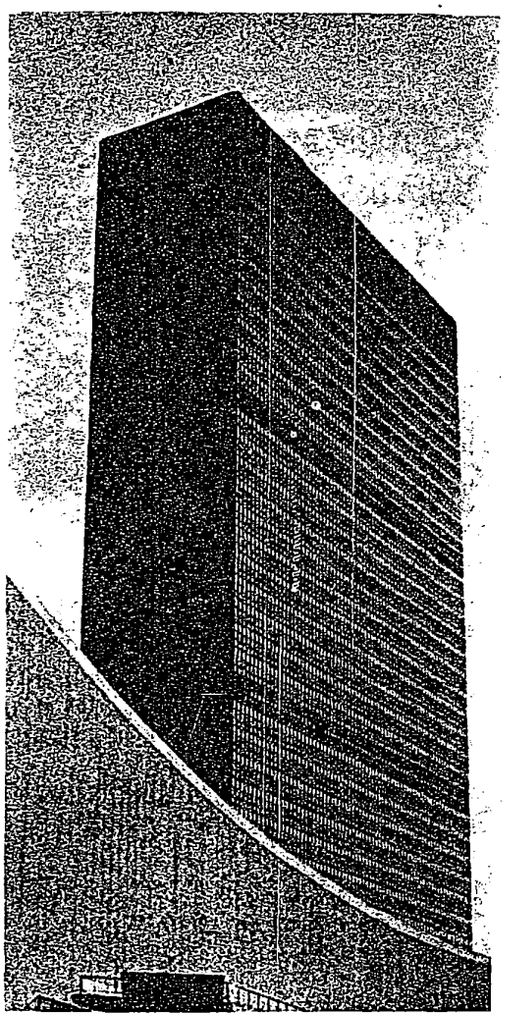


THE PARTHENON—"After 2,400 years, it still provides a large, vicarious measure of the glory that was Greece."



ST. MARK'S CATHEDRAL—"The impact of Byzantine-Venetian wealth and culture strikes us through its splendor."

'PRESENT FAILURES'



THE U. N.—"Here was a great opportunity to create a true symbol. Instead we have a glorified office building."

Buildings That Are Symbols, Too

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE controversial remodeling of the east front of the Capitol is now proceeding without incident, which is something few would have dared prophesy a year ago. At that time, when it was first announced, the project aroused a public storm so violent as to give a willfully determined Congress temporary pause. People were reacting to the Capitol as a symbol of the nation, and they did not want that symbol changed.

Although the public clamor has since died down, its echoes linger, raising the question of what, after all, makes a symbolic building. Essentially, it is one that has a direct emotional appeal for a great many people. We may respond to such a building because of its sheer architectural force. Or because we sense, somehow, that it is right; it has a quality of form which speaks eloquently for its function. Or simply because—as in the case of Boston's Faneuil Hall, which was originally designed as a produce market—time and events have endowed the building with certain values that we believe in, admire and respect. The strongest symbol, of course, gives us both a sense of history and a sense of beauty.

Symbolism of this kind always has been, and continues to be, a spiritual and emotional necessity. Those buildings that are a real and enduring expression of the human spirit are often our finest buildings, and our most valuable heritage.

We recognize this fact in spending close to a billion travel dollars a year on tourist pilgrimages to the architectural monuments of the world, an experience that is as rewarding as it is expensive and exhausting. The Parthenon and the Forum still provide a large, vicarious measure of the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome; the impact of Byzantine-Venetian wealth and culture strikes us forcefully through the shimmering splendor of St. Mark's; the triumphant logic and measured elegance of the Renaissance ideal live on in a Bramante chapel; the sophisticated power of baroque Rome overwhelms us in St. Peter's Square.

These magnificent works are all successful symbols. Each contains the spirit of an age or a people, and has the ability to communicate this spirit—to instruct and to move us. In viewing them, we share a sense of the national greatness, the spiritual values, or the material or cultural achievements of the builders; in every case we are personally enriched because we have responded to the "idea" of the building and the ideals of its era above and beyond its utilitarian purposes. Each building speaks clearly, and symbolically, for its own time.

NOR do we have to seek so far from home to find symbolic buildings. The Capitol, the White House, the Washington Monument, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, City Hall in New York, Faneuil Hall and the Bunker Hill Monument in Boston—all of these are highly successful symbols, giving tangible expression to our beliefs and ideals. Such monuments as the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials may be considered stereotypes by the architecturally informed (no less an authority than Frank Lloyd Wright has disdained the latter, referring to it in his usual outspoken manner as a public comfort station, from an outworn classic mold). But no one can deny that these buildings are completely satisfactory symbols to most Americans, who find in them a sense of dignity and serenity, and impressive tribute to the country's great men.

But what of unsuccessful symbols? What about the buildings that have been designed to function as symbols, but have failed to do so—that were meant to evoke a sympathetic response, and instead have evoked a monumental indifference?

A striking example is the huge Victor Emmanuel Monument that figures so prominently in the skyline of Rome. Built from 1885 to 1911 to commemorate the unification of Italy, it is referred to with a noticeable lack of respect, even by Romans, as "the wedding cake." For all its size and gleaming

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE, a contributing editor of Progressive Architecture, won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1958 for a study of structural and design advances in the U. S.

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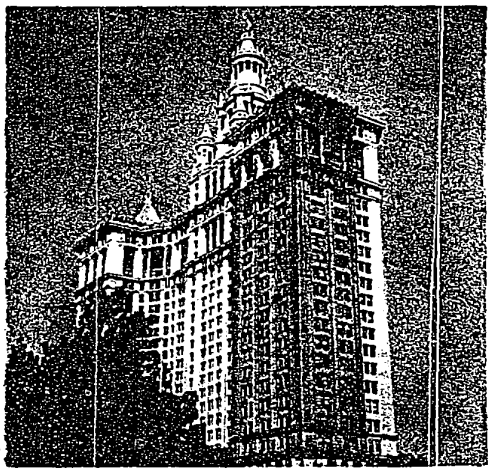
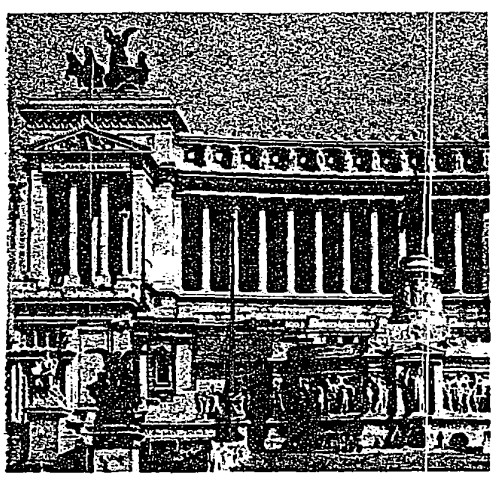
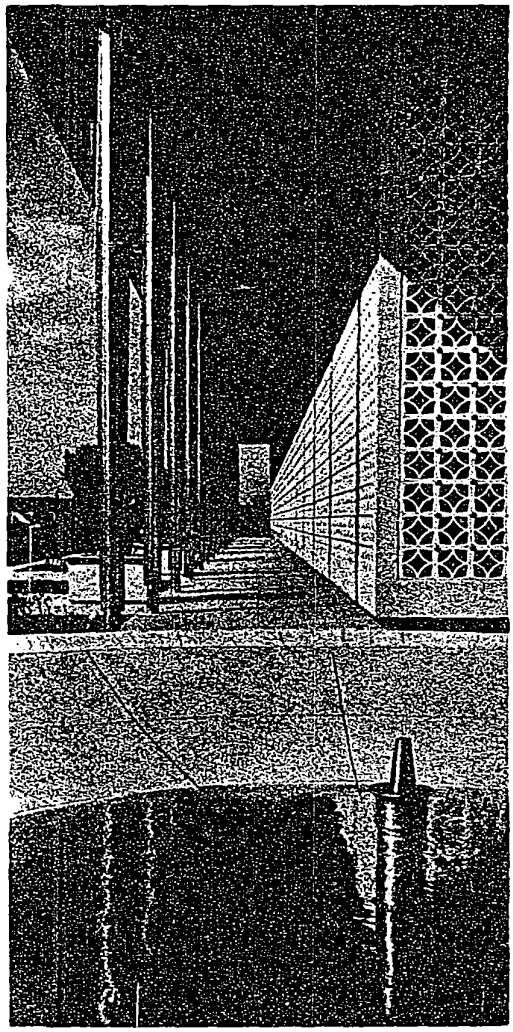


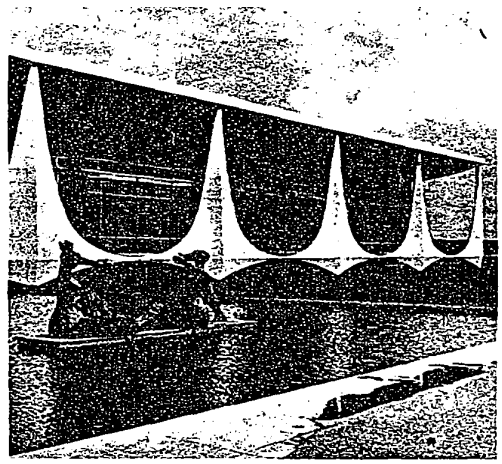
NEW YORK'S MUNICIPAL BUILDING—"It is a large edifice adorned with dull pretensions."



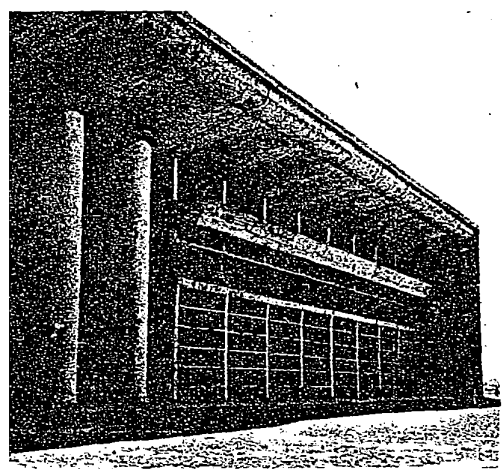
ROME'S VICTOR EMMANUEL MONUMENT—"For all its size, it fails to convey a grand idea."



U. S. EMBASSY, NEW DELHI—"Edward Stone's building has beauty and a dignity that bespeaks its function."



BRASILIA—"Neimeyer's Presidential palace in Brazil's new capital city is rich in the language of sculpture."



CHANDIGARH—"Le Corbusier's High Court in the capital of the East Punjab, in India, has monumental scale."

Every age has created great architectural monuments after its own image, for its own needs. What buildings of this sort can we expect from modern architecture?

white marble, its endless progression of columns and stairs, its most remarkable accomplishment is a complete failure to convey much of anything at all. Here, the tried and true formula of monumental classicism reached a height of academic sterility as cold as, or colder than, the vast open spaces of the most pedestrian modern effort. Nobody, least of all a Latin, loves an iceberg.

NEW YORK'S Municipal Building—to come, again, closer to home—constructed in the age of skyscrapers to supplement the charming but too small City Hall, is a large, important edifice adorned with a good many conventional trappings and topped by a gilded classical figure of obviously unimpeachable civic virtue. Nevertheless, New Yorkers have never accepted it as a symbol of civic government, despite the fact that it overpowers and eclipses the original City Hall. For the spectator senses that this is no more than a routine office building of rather dull pretensions.

Another notable example of stillborn symbolism is the National Masonic Memorial to Washington in Alexandria, Va., begun in the early Nineteen Hundreds. The number of appropriations for the completion of the monument—raised at periodic intervals—seemed to coincide with the number of historical styles on record in architectural textbooks, and the designer used them all. The result was not, as he evidently expected, a testimonial to the father of our country and the architectural riches of the past, but a meaningless hotch-potch that fails to recall the spirit of Washington in any way whatever.

But perhaps the prime example of failure in the effort to produce architectural symbols is the United Nations headquarters, generally acknowledged to be something less than a smashing success. Here was one of the great opportunities for modern architecture to create a true symbol. Instead, we have a Secretariat which, according to many critics, is no more than a glorified office building, and a General Assembly which, through the forced limitations of a "frozen" preliminary scheme, extensive budget cuts and acute architectural indecision, is so confused in concept that it forestalls any possibility of a unified, powerful design. Some may argue that no design could have succeeded because the U. N. itself lacks symbolic strength. But the fact remains that the buildings themselves have neither the architectural force nor the distinction appropriate to the expression of an important ideal.

BUT let us look beyond the failures. Since our needs for symbolic architecture are timeless, it is pertinent to ask whether we are producing such symbols anywhere today. The answer, so far as we can presume to give it without the hindsight of history, seems to be that we are not.

True, we are creating very effective symbols—of a very different sort—in our modern office buildings. Often the sleek, stripped-down forms of modern architecture are reduced to a machine-made mediocrity that contains the germ of a remarkable new urban disease—monotony-by-the-mile. But sometimes they are raised to extreme elegance by master designers. The superior quality of the handsome General Motors Research Center in Detroit, as an architectural and technological landmark, for example, is reflected in the aristocratic connotations of its popular name, "the Versailles of industry." Impressive corporate headquarters such as Lever House and the Seagram Building in New York prove that this contemporary style can be a great one in capable and conscientious hands. Such buildings are as typical of our age as the airplane and the atom, but they hardly can be called symbols in the traditional sense.

Why, then, are we producing no first-rate public symbols? Obviously, part of the answer lies in the fact that all the construction of the past has lessened our need for public buildings. But to meet what limited demand still exists we build undistinguished structures clothed in cliché forms, tiresomely alike and worthy of no more than the apathy that greets them.

It is quite clear that the basis of our failure is in the area of emotional appeal—an *(Continued on Page 103)*

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(Continued from Page 19)
area in which the modern architect tends to be uncomfortable and unsure. He has become so involved in the vast technological complexities of modern engineering and construction that he has largely overlooked the spirit and art of architecture. His creed is primarily utilitarian: form follows function, and if he solves a problem functionally he will create, inevitably, a beautiful form. We have been promised automatic beauty for an automatic age.

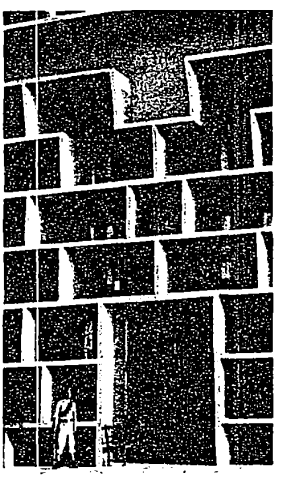
Unfortunately, it doesn't work out that way—as many architects have already discovered. As long as they continue, by taste or training, to relegate the emotional impact of their designs to a place of secondary or negligible importance, we will have fine, functional buildings that score zero with the human heart. The designer of talent and sensibility (who never loses touch with the soul of architecture in any age) provides the exception to the rule; but since talent is rare and sensibility is neglected the exceptional public building—and the successful public symbol—is increasingly hard to find.

WHICH brings us to the great debate currently going on between the traditionalists (who, confusing cause with effect, believe that a set of classic columns will guarantee the dignity of man) and the defenders of the contemporary style (who too often will defend anything, so long as it is new): *can* modern architecture produce successful symbols for our own time?

Professional lovers of the old order, joined by a large segment of the public, do not believe that it can. They point to the fact that we have already enjoyed (they, obviously, have not) more than a half-century of advanced contemporary design, and are hard pressed to cite a symbolic structure of national importance in the modern style. Where are the Parthenons, the Campidoglios, the great government palaces of the modern movement that can command respect, loyalty and pride?

MOST conscientious architects, who realize where their troubles lie, have this answer: They argue that the Lever Houses and Seagram Buildings express, after all, but one of the many potential forms that the new technology will permit; that the frequent misuse of this particular form cannot, by any reasonable judgment, constitute a blanket condemnation of modern architecture; that it can grow—and, indeed, is growing—in other directions that will foster the creation of public buildings with dignity and heart. They are still searching, still experimenting with the immense possibilities of contemporary structure and style. Give us more than fifty-odd years, they say, if you would hold up our work against the masterpieces of twenty-five centuries; give today's architecture a chance to evolve into greatness.

Now, perhaps the evolution is quickening. New approaches, new solutions are enriching the plain, puritanical vocabulary of modern design. Freed from the rococo excesses and classical clichés of the Victorian era, twentieth-century architecture is developing some extraordinary flourishes of its own. For, in addition to the steel skeleton that has become the frame of the familiar glass box, contemporary technology provides the architect with a far more malleable and expressive material — reinforced concrete.



CIVIC SYMBOL—A detail shows the powerful facade of the High Court building in Chandigarh, India.

If the slick-surfaced steel cage is the prose of today's building, the unconventional shapes and decorative detail that can be achieved in concrete offer the prospect of poetry. Limited only by the calculations of the engineer and the imagination of the architect, such designs hold particular promise for the construction of public buildings with greater emotional impact than modern architecture has shown up to now.

Significantly, these dramatic possibilities are being enthusiastically explored by some of today's leading contemporary architects. Equally significantly, in the past few years several public building programs of prime importance—unparalleled in our age—have been entrusted to these architects.

These programs, two of which call for complete cities including seats of government, presidential palaces, high court buildings and a variety of other impressive structures, are all currently in construction: Brasilia, the new capital city of Brazil, with buildings by the brilliant South American designer, Oscar Niemeyer; Chandigarh, the new capital of the East Punjab in India, by the great French innovator, Le Corbusier; and the current State Department program for United States embassies, which, although of uneven quality, includes a number of excellent buildings.

BRASILIA and Chandigarh offer opportunities for monumental symbolism on a scale undreamed of since L'Enfant's plan for Washington. All three programs are unique, as different from one another as the men who designed them and as far removed from the standardized anonymity of current commercial architecture as possible. Niemeyer's design for the recently completed presidential palace in Brasilia, with its powerfully sculpturesque forms and airy glass walls, affords unusual excitement to the eye and mind. Le Corbusier's Chandigarh—entirely of reinforced concrete, which has responded to his wishes like a sculptor's material — has remarkable strength and undeniable grandeur. The more imaginative of our new State Department buildings, such as Edward Stone's New Delhi Embassy with its decorative, patterned screen walls, are solutions of beauty, quality and individuality.

Just what chance do these buildings have of becoming accepted as symbols? In architectural terms, quite a favorable one. None of them can be called impersonal or characterless; all have dignity, scale and monumentality, and are capable of evoking positive emotional responses. Their forms befit their official and special functions, and their architectural force is great enough to establish their meanings. Because the esthetic and technical solutions involved are distinctly of the twentieth century, the buildings are valid expressions of our own culture and our own time—transferable to no other time or place.

NO one, however, can guarantee their success as symbols. Time and events endow buildings with specific values, and it is these values that ultimately determine their popular role and their symbolic stature. These new projects have the potential for greatness. But the passage of years, alone, will prove them great, as the significant associations, traditions and sentiments that create our finest symbols accumulate.

The pattern of history indicates that every age produces successful and lasting symbols in its own image, for its own needs. Perhaps, in these buildings, we are about to do so.

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