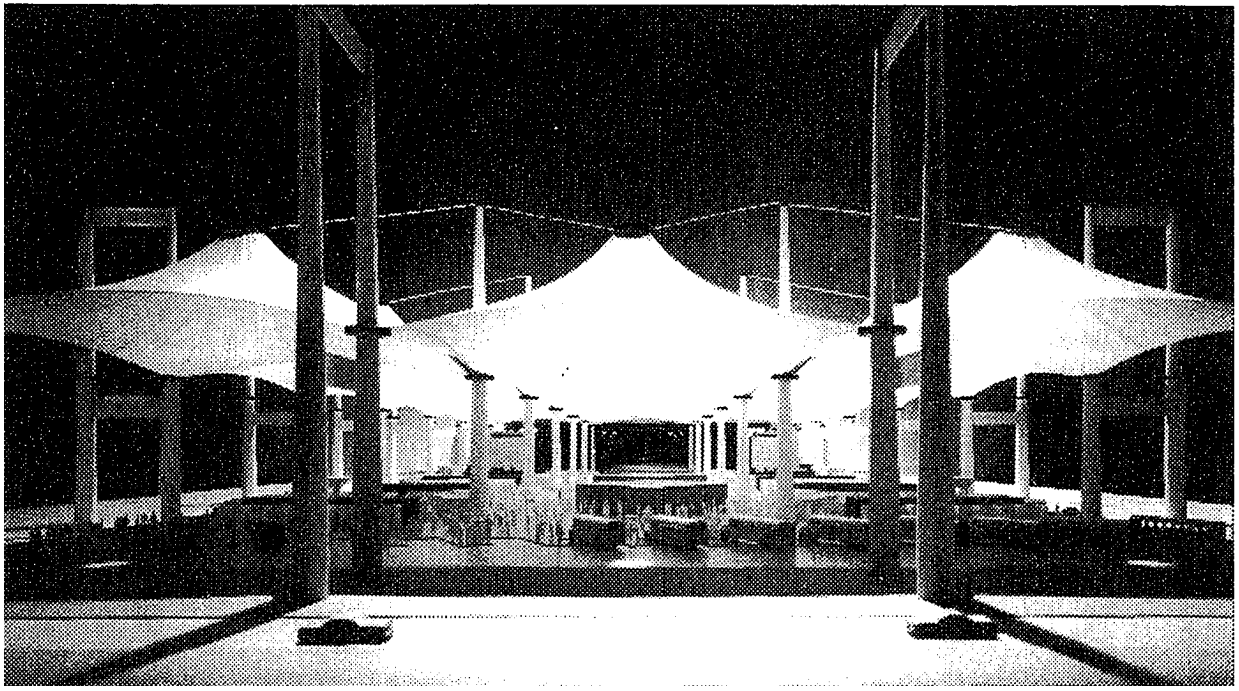
ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

When Americans Design Abroad



Model of the King Abdul Aziz International Airport

I have a profound mistrust of pictures of impressive construction in distant cities of the world. This stems from a visit to Caracas in the 1950's, and coincides with my first published opinion in this paper — a letter to the editor — while I was still a freelance writer. The letter was inspired by a favorable review of an exhibition of photographs of new architecture in Venezuela; the buildings shown were a series of dramatic, high-rise towers of the most stylish modern design, dramatized even more by bold patterns of sun and shadow that highlighted the sophisticated slabs on a handsome Caracas hillside. This was new public housing, and it was meant to be the answer to the *favelas*, those shanties of cardboard and corrugated iron that housed the poor on another Caracas hillside.

The buildings, which I had just seen in the flesh — or more accurately, in the concrete and full, livid color (the pictures were black and white) — were appalling travesties of modern architecture and conspicuous failures as housing. The transplanted agricultural poor who occupied them did so with a combination of fear and loathing and domestic inventiveness. I think the apocryphal stories of goats and crops in the bathtubs may have started there. My letter went on at some length about the shame of such architecture and the irony of its image. Its theme was a warning against the seductiveness of the architectural photographer's flattering abstractions, and their betrayal of reality, particularly in places as distant as Caracas, where the reality was not easy to check first hand.

I am still extremely wary of impressive presentations of new architecture in far-off places; I bring along this reflex set of concerns about image, suitability and style, and the skills of propaganda. Therefore I approached the exhibition at the Urban Center (457 Madison Avenue) called "America's Architecture for Export: New York's Contribution," with caution. Presented by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which shares the north wing of the Villard Houses with the Municipal Art Society, the Architectural League and the Parks Council, the show consists of about 20 examples of work done by New York offices for those new architectural frontiers — the Middle and Far East and the Third World. It can be seen through July 15.

The firms have prepared their own panels of illustrations and text, and two of them, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and Warner, Burns, Toan, Lunde, get the Huxtable broken compass award for type too small to read. The latter firm also gets the crooked T-square award for its absurd rationalization of the relationship of the new Rameses Hilton in Cairo (I am not making up the name) — a kind of offset tower of reincarnated brutalism — to the ancient monuments of Egypt. We are told that it uses "the 'wall' as the overriding device." True, most buildings have walls. And we can use a lot less of this kind of pretentious nonsense about "architectural recall" in the design of new buildings in old places so dear to the hearts of architects doing their own thing. Just a small ink spot goes to Liebman, Williams, Ellis for too many "hierarchicals" and similar buzz words for a generally thoughtful and sensitive housing and neighborhood development plan for Teheran.

None of these are modest projects; and except for those in Iran, which were aborted by the revolution, the majority are complete or under construction. The most ambitious are master plans for new cities and communities, such as Conklin and Rossant's National Capital Center at Dodoma in Tanzania, which is to be the country's new capital, 350 miles inland from the old one on the seacoast at Dar es Salaam. The city is projected as a series of stepped, earth terraces, with staged construction of ministries, offices, shops and a hotel.

Construction for the United States Government is a traditional category of overseas work. Consulate staff housing in Hong Kong by Davis, Brody Associates suggests a handsome group of buildings on a steep slope facing the China Sea, and the new American Embassy complex in Moscow by Gruzen and Partners and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill is a 10-acre, walled American Kremlin with an eight-story, red-brick embassy office building that bears a strong family resemblance to the Gruzen firm's New York City Police Headquarters. This centerpiece is surrounded by row housing for staff, and served by an American underworld of below-grade cafeteria, shops, health facilities and parking. Work began on this new, high-security community in 1979 and is scheduled for completion in 1984, at a cost of $100-million.

The range of housing is broad, from the traditional efforts to develop economical and easily constructed housing systems for underdeveloped countries to standardized workers' blocks for the oil companies. What is new is the size and ambitiousness of housing developments that utilize the conspicuous new resources of the Moslem world.

It is the commercial construction, however, that is the most spectacular, with the palm surely going to Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill for his 27-story, triangular tower for the National Commercial Bank, which will soar over the flat landscape of Jiddah in Saudi Arabia. This extraordinary building has its facade broken only by large vertical openings for three interior courtyards hung within the building's frame, an inward-turning scheme meant to protect the offices from heat and glare. The offices

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themselves, in the strictly opulent S.O.M. style, have their elegant seating arranged in the traditional Middle Eastern pattern of couches grouped around tables. The use of multiple small tables instead of one large table is the only noticeable departure from the ritual American corporate style.

The exterior of the bank tower is a powerful, sheer shaft faced in travertine. This amazing design is now being attacked and defended — as unsuitable in size, shape and scale for the flat, desert-city landscape, or as a brilliant adaptation of technology and art to a harsh climate and modern international business needs. There can be no debate about its inescapable monumentality.

The same firm, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, has developed a fascinating airport for Jiddah. The King Abdul Aziz International Airport is covered by a series of huge, semi-conical, Teflon-coated Fiberglas fabric roofs. These lightweight, umbrella-like structures will protect an expected 950,000 airborne Arab pilgrims to nearby Mecca from the sun and heat. Nothing could speak more eloquently of change.

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There are a few outstanding foreign projects missing from the show — notably the prize-winning Parliament buildings for the Australian capital of Canberra by Mitchell-Giurgola (but this project was exhibited earlier), and the ambitious redesign for the center of Teheran planned for the Shah by a Llewelyn Davies team headed by Jaquelin Robertson.

What strikes one most are the extremes of this work. At one end is a slender, teardrop-shaped, gold glass office tower with intricate reverse curves, designed for a development in Singapore called the Golden Mile, that is the epitome of suave, luxurious, high-tech commercial construction. At the other pole are 750 units of concrete block housing costing $7.50 a square foot, erected in record time for the government of Cyprus to serve refugees from the 1974 Turkish invasion. The first is the work of Robert Sobel/Emery Roth and Sons, and the second is the Strovolos Community Low Cost Housing Development by David and Dikaios.

The change from earlier years of export building is the change from an emphasis on this kind of low-cost housing, which was meant to adapt the simplest industrial tools or native processes to local needs, to the most advanced and stylistically sophisticated symbols of economic development. The difference is a response to the changing economics and politics of the Islamic countries and the Third World, including the inevitable desire for symbols of progress. Invariably, these building forms, styles and technologies are borrowed from the industrialized and business-oriented countries of the West. We are clearly still in the business of exporting architectural images.

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Style has always been transported from one country to another. The British brought European classicism to India with the Empire; pre-fabricated 19th-century iron gingerbread was shipped around the Horn. Some very strange buildings have been dropped into some very exotic places, with varying degrees of adaptive success.

I had a spooky feeling of familiarity with the Eggers Group's housing in Damman, Saudi Arabia — eight rigidly clustered groups of 17-story towers on podiums containing parking and shopping that looked like an update of Queens, for which 12,000 tons of precast elements were shipped to Damman weekly for 60 weeks. That's exporting an image and a technology with a vengeance. The disembodied and discredited clichés keep right on rolling along.

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Planners continue to try to sort out tidy samples of the populations of developing countries according to some magical set of demographic statistics, to be served by the right number of schools, playgrounds and regional shopping centers. And progress is still seen as steel and glass skyscrapers, no matter how inappropriate to culture, climate or site. As Jaquelin Robertson commented after his stint in Iran, "The export model we have been sending out is not working very well, and most of the world has a bad case of cultural indigestion."

The client countries are, as usual, getting our best and our worst. If anything consistently marks this kind of export architecture, it is a failure of communication about means and needs. There is uncertainty and ambiguity on both sides. Beware of the pictures; they always look good. ■