Building as seen through the theoretical context

The use of architecture to construct nationalism

Australia’s Parliament House achieves this through a variety of means:

- By using the project in completion of the long running nationalist project for Canberra, namely the Griffin master plan.
- The use of direct symbolic references and narratives:
  - The building uses direct legible symbols of Australia including at the pinnacle of the building an oversized flag held by a high pyramidal flag mast.
  - The use of aborigine artwork on the public forecourt is significant, given the atrocities and discrimination against the native Aborigines. This is seen as a visible symbol of remolding collective memories.

By molding the landscape over the building and associating it to the natural landscape of Canberra, the building “strives for the fundamentals of civilization.” (Spence 1988a:53) The association with the primordial and natural legitimizes the political position of the institution it houses.

The role of the elite in the production of architecture that reinforces the political status quo.

This is illustrated in the project in the following ways:

- Firstly by the choice of site, that in completing Griffin’s parliamentary triangle reinforces the hierarchy of spatial conception in the city. This highlights the institutes of government above other city function, perpetuating elitist treatment of space and perceptions of governing structures.
- Although the building is exemplary in allowing ordinary people access to its landscaped roof and view in over parliament sessions, this is a merely a visual connection to the functioning of parliament.

Photos of the complex (Spence 1988b:36-60)
The postcolonial project that in attempting to differentiate itself from colonial legacies actually recoup these spatial and architectural methodologies.

Although this project is not conceived in the spirit of post colonialism or regime change, certain aspects of this discussion are relevant to this building.

In an earlier portion of this chapter, the various colonial architectural strategies used to ‘domesticate’ colonial subjects were discussed. These are:

- Using of a new and different architectural expression to highlight itself and prove supremacy over the existing context
- Using architecture to form and remold collective memories using processors that include neutralization, re-creation and reconstruction of site and landscape in contrast to existing values
- Using architecture as a symbol of hope

We see the complex complying to the above in the following ways:

- The architecture aims to both strongly contest the architectural context as well as strongly affirm the urban master plan. However in its architectural articulation the landscape building is unique in character, although the east and west wings are described as ‘classical’ (Tombesi 2003:140)
- The complete leveling of the site, reconstruction of the ‘hill’ and using landscape as a central form generator reaffirms the second point.
- Due to its prominent site being the result of six decades of urban work, the building is seen as the crowning piece in Canberra’s urban plan being a ‘completion’ of Griffin’s master plan. As such it becomes a citadel of hope.

The use of the building as an icon of economic development

The building is said to be one of three masterpieces of Australian architecture visible to the international community. The other two are the Sydney Opera House and Melbourne’s Federation Square. (Tombesi 2003:141)

As such we see it bringing attention to Canberra as a symbol of architectural and economic development.

Conclusion

From an urban scale, the project is seen as the crowning piece of Canberra being symbolic of the reinstatement of the Griffin master plan of 1912. The plan envisaged a large manmade lake, an urban plaza called the land axis that visually linked Capital hill to the war memorial and to the peak of Mount Ainslie, and the parliamentary triangle that linked the site to two other important government nodes. The site, although being the radiating point for road systems, is seen as a giant traffic island as
opposed to a site closely connected to the surrounding urban fabric. It is thus seen as a destination and landmark point separate to the daily lives of ordinary people.

At the scale of the building complex, the building is seen as exemplary in that it wraps the landscape over it allowing the public to walk on top of the parliament and view in on parliamentary sessions through skylights. The security is not achieved at the perimeter of the site but at the entrance to the building. The building complex portrays power through its response to the urban plan, monumental scale, by use of the urban axis of symmetry, and direct symbolism.

The building through the selective use of artworks articulating surfaces, use of landscape as a link to primordial history and the natural surroundings, and through the above mentioned methods is seen as a project in constructing Nationalism. The building also reinforces the political status quo, and follows in postcolonial tendencies to create a nationally and internationally visible and recognizable icon of architectural and economic development.

“The European Parliament in a beginning of an era in France, Grads projects were once an expression of presidential egos, now such buildings are essential weapons as cities fight each other for employers and funding.” (Tisnalo in Welsh ed. 1998:18)

The design of the 220 000m2 European parliament in Strasbourg, France was not the result of city being awarded its hosting rights, rather the design resulted in Strasbourg being awarded the hosting rights. This is an instant in which putting the proverbial ‘cart before the horse’ paid off. In 1992 the cities of Luxembourg, Brussels and Strasbourg were nominated as the definite capital cities of the EU, a 50 year old continental body striving for continental unity of Europe. Strasbourg managed to sway votes in its favour by taking the initiative to identify a suitable site and run an architectural competition of the building to house the EP, despite a lack of consensus or direction from the member nations of the EU with regard to the permanent placement of this EU organ. It was also an attempt at France to “exonerate itself for the fact that it had withdrawn from NATO.”

The city took the further initiative of sourcing local partners to fund the construction outside of EU funding mechanisms that might have taken months if not years to resolve. The city then leased the building from its funding partners. This initiative as well as the pleasing architectural character of the winning entry managed to sway the European vote in favor of Strasbourg.

(after Hein 1999:52-59)
Site Analysis

The site is located on the bank of the Ills River, at the point where the river meets the channel that joins the Marne to the Rhine Rivers. (Hein 1999:54)

This is a significant point since the Marne joins the Siene River and links Paris to Strasbourg. The proximity to the Rhine is of equal importance. “The Rhine is one of Europe’s principal rivers. Rising in eastern Switzerland the Rhine flows for about 1320km in a general northwest direction through or adjoining Austria, Liechtenstein, France, Germany and the Netherlands...because of its huge volumes of freight and numbers of passengers carried on it, the Rhine is one of the most commercial inland waterways in the world.” (Encarta Encyclopedia Plus 2003)

Hence, we see this site is the most visible in terms of local, national and regional waterways in the city, and the ideal site for an iconic building.

Architectural Response: Form, function and the portrayal of power

The building is indeed iconic covering a total area of 220 000 m². The building has three main elements: the arc, dome and tower. The ‘arc’ follows the curve of the rivers edge and houses the conference, meeting rooms and the auditoria. It also contains the 14 story high elliptical ‘dome’ which houses the parliament chamber with 650 seats for parliamentarians and 650 balcony seats for the public. The ‘tower’ holds more than a thousand office suites, each with its own bathroom for parliamentary representatives. The center of the tower is elliptically hollowed out, a shape that mimics the ‘dome’. At the base of the tower, the resultant void forms a ‘public square’ 70m in diameter. The main circulation through the building is through the three internal ‘streets’ the longest of which is 200meters long and 25 meters high running in a north-south direction. Two shorter ‘streets’ cross this main street and links to the ‘dome’.

The entrance to the complex is in the north west of the tower and this line cuts through the building to link onto the footbridge that spans the Ills to connect to the European Commission building. This pedestrian drop off point is flanked by two ramps that lead to the complex’s parking facilities.
Security is at the entrance point to the drum ‘tower’ and visitors would proceed around the elliptical ‘public square’ to one on three connecting bridges that link to the ‘arc’ portion of the complex. These bridges link onto the main internal street from which all spaces can be accessed.

On elevation, the curve of the arc is at its apex point to the east, which reflects the height of the neighboring European Commission building. The roof slopes from this apex point to the north and west to a scale that relates to the surrounding residential landscape. The tower is 18 stories high, and office suites occupy the full height to the east dropping to 14 floors on the west. Vertical structural concrete fins that enable future expansion of the office suites articulate the drum. Horizontal concrete bands are in-turn attached to these fins, which shade the fully glazed tower at certain orientation.

The facade of the ‘arc’ is also fully glazed becoming clearer at the intersection of the streets and on the eastern curve to facilitate views of the timber clad ‘dome’ housing the parliamentary chamber.