

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Architecture as Diplomatic Instrument? The Multi-Layered Meaning of the Belgian Embassy in New Delhi (1947–83)

Bram De Maeyer, Fredie Floré and Anne-Françoise Morel

In recent decades, the topic of embassy architecture has increasingly drawn the attention of architectural historians. Whereas scholars have already shed light on the building policy of the United States, Great Britain and France, the architectural approach of small state actors such as Belgium has largely remained untouched. The Belgian purpose-built embassy (1980–83) in New Delhi was designed by the Indian artist-architect Satish Gujral. While the unusual design, with its references to indigenous Indian architecture, is often mentioned in the literature on Chanakyapuri, New Delhi's diplomatic neighbourhood, scholars have not addressed the Belgian rationale for constructing an embassy whose architecture paid more tribute to India than to Belgium. Examining the architectural and political meaning of this project in the context of both the receiving and the sending states, this article asks to what extent Belgium approached this diplomatic building project as an opportunity to cement its bilateral relationship with India. This embassy design was the result of not so much a well-considered building policy of Belgium but rather Gujral's personal stand with regard to the postmodernist debate in India's architecture scene at the time. In doing so, we make the case that purpose-built embassies – even the most expressive ones architecturally – are often more complex projects than closely monitored designs upon which governments project ideological and national visions.

Introduction

In a 1984 interview in the Indian periodical *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, the artist and self-taught architect Satish Gujral (1925–2020) explains that, as in the creation of his paintings and sculptures, he likes to stimulate 'associations and memories' by integrating both Muslim and Hindu references, such as 'minarets, domes, lingams and artifacts' (Gujral and Khosla 1984: 51). Against the backdrop of the growing political and religious tensions in India in the mid-1980s, Gujral's inclusive statement about the different religious groups in his home nation is noteworthy. It is even more striking as Gujral made this comment to describe his architectural design of the newly built Belgian embassy in New Delhi. Completed in November 1983, this diplomatic complex was the first purpose-built Belgian embassy on Indian soil.

Traditionally perceived as the architectural embodiment of state actors abroad, purpose-built embassies have been framed as a tool in the legitimation and identity construction of the sending state on the territory of the receiving state. Architectural historians Jane Loeffler (2011) and Fabien Bellat (2020) have convincingly demonstrated how sending states such as the USA and France

have closely monitored the construction of their embassies by making considerable investments in embassy architecture that convey national and ideological messages abroad, similar to pavilion architecture at world exhibitions. Belgium, however, in its role as sending state followed a very different approach in commissioning its embassy buildings. Rather than being the outcome of a conscious policy of architectural representation, the design of the Belgian embassy in New Delhi was the result of a decentralised approach which left much room for incidental and less expected decisions that shaped the relationship between architecture and national representation (**Figure 1**).

In architectural terms, an embassy refers to the building(s) in which the highest diplomatic mission of the sending state to the receiving state is housed. It generally consists of two parts: a chancery, accommodating the offices of diplomats, and an ambassadorial residence, serving as the living quarters of the ambassador and their family and associates. In the case of the Belgian embassy, the chancery and the residence are in the same compound as the residence of the chancellor and quarters for servants (**Figure 2**). The compound is located in Chanakyapuri, the embassy district of New Delhi, which was first developed by the Indian government in the 1950s. In this district, India has strategically promoted the construction of purpose-built embassies by allocating building plots to



Figure 1: Main entrance of the Belgian ambassadorial residence in New Delhi with its exposed brickwork and lingam-shaped volumes, 1985 (© Massachusetts Institute of Technology, courtesy of Peter Serenyi).

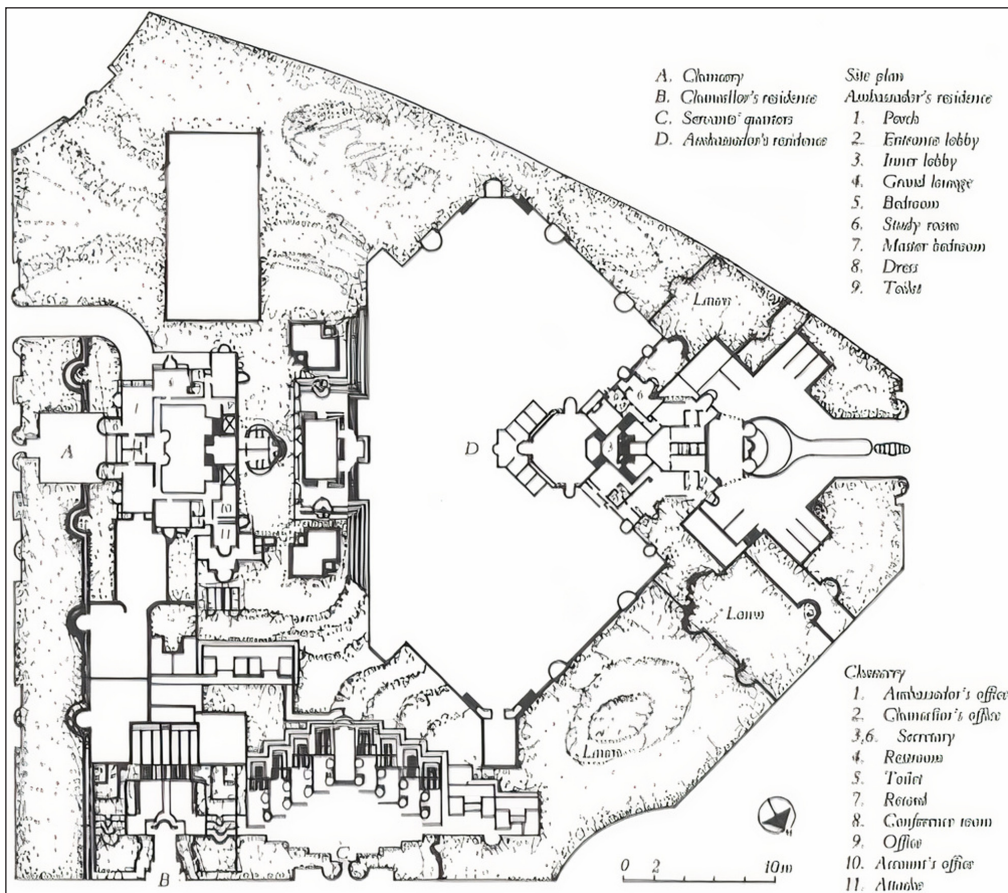


Figure 2: Ground plan of the Belgian compound. A. Chancery, B. Chancellor's residence, C. Servants' quarters, D. Ambassador's residence.
 Site plan. [D.] Ambassador's residence: 1. Porch, 2. Entrance lobby, 3. Inner lobby, 4. Grand lounge, 5. Bedroom, 6. Study room, 7. Master bedroom, 8. Dress, 9. Toilet.
 [A.] Chancery: 1. Ambassador's office, 2. Chancellor's office, 3. Secretary, 4. Restroom, 5. Toilet, 6. Secretary, 7. Record, 8. Conference room, 9. Office, 10. Account's office, 11. Attache. Reproduced from Gujral (1984: 12).

sending states (similar to diplomatic quarters in capitals such as Abuja, Brasilia, Canberra, Islamabad and Riyadh). Belgium was among the first states to acquire a building site in Chanakyapuri, in 1954, but construction only began in 1980.

In addition to this long span of time between acquiring a site and the beginning of construction, another noteworthy element of this case study involves the profile of the Indian architect Satish Gujral, commissioned to design the Belgian embassy. Although collaborating with local architects was not that uncommon for sending states in New Delhi, the choice of Gujral is significant because he lacked a professional qualification in architecture. Gujral was above all known as one of India's most prominent painters and sculptors.

The Belgian embassy is often depicted as one of the more remarkable diplomatic sets of buildings in New Delhi. The architecture critic Roger Connah speaks of 'the approximated-antique sculptural sign of the Belgian Embassy' (1989: 306). In *The Modern Architecture of New Delhi*, the engineer Rahul Khanna highlights the Belgian embassy as a 'striking and puzzling design' (2008: 106), while author Gladys Abankwa-Meier-Klodt labels it as 'an architectural show-piece and tourist magnet' (2013: 35). Over the past decades, several publications on this embassy have emerged in cooperation with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Stevens 2003: 138–147; Falisse 2004; Dauwe 2017). Within the existing body of literature, however, the Belgian rationale behind the remarkable timing, choice of architect and design of the embassy are barely touched upon.

This article addresses the related disparate and wide-ranging source material – diplomatic and private archives, plans, memoirs of and interviews with serving diplomats and the architect, magazine articles discussing the embassy's architecture – and questions whether and to what extent Belgium has consciously wielded embassy architecture as a representational instrument to express and even influence bilateral relations with India. The first part focuses on the historical trajectory of Belgian diplomatic housing in New Delhi since the independence of India in 1947 and the incentives that ultimately prompted Belgium to construct a new embassy in the early 1980s, more than three decades after acquiring the building plot. The second part focuses on Gujral, retracing how he appeared on the Belgian radar, and questions the role of the Belgian government in the project's initial reception. The final part is about how Gujral's design for the embassy is embedded in his personal vision of architecture and compares this particular design to two other European embassies constructed around the same time in Chanakyapuri, those of Poland and Finland. It sheds light on the various approaches of these countries as 'middle powers' – a term defined by political scientist Randall Schweller as 'responsible international citizens' who fully embrace a multilateral approach in international politics (2013: 5) – in building a new embassy.

Whereas canonical studies have addressed the guidelines shaping the embassy-building policies and practices

of world powers such as France, Great Britain and the United States (Bertram 2011; Loeffler 2011; Bellat 2020), research on embassy buildings of middle powers such as Belgium is still in its infancy. The main body of literature on Belgian embassy architecture comprises highly promotional publications by or in cooperation with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with exemplary titles such as *Belgium's Most Beautiful Embassies from around the World*. This article contributes to shifting the perspective from embassies commissioned by world powers to those of middle power states. How do these countries approach such a politically charged building project in a political arena that since 1945 has become increasingly complex? This case study serves as a stepping stone by which to uncover the guidelines shaping Belgium's building policy towards embassies in the 1980s. The article also aims to nuance the interpretation of the wider role of sending states in guiding such a diplomatic building project. Whereas the aforementioned studies reveal highly nationalistic and top-down architectural programmes put in place by sending states, this case looks at a small state actor and its different approach.

The Building Plot: From the Old British Days to Modern India

Before the Belgian government unveiled its plans to construct an embassy in New Delhi, it had been maintaining a consular mission in India for a long time. A Belgian consulate had been located in Mumbai since the end of the 19th century, when the Indian subcontinent was under British rule. When India gained independence on 15 August 1947, Belgium quickly adapted to the changing political circumstances, opening its first embassy in New Delhi, headed by Ambassador Prince Eugène de Ligne, just one month later. A room in the prestigious Maidens Hotel initially served as the residence (Murray 1913: 645). In 1956, the Belgian government bought a colonial bungalow on Tilak Marg, in the heart of New Delhi, to serve as the ambassadorial residence.

It remains unclear where the Belgian chancery was initially situated in the late 1940s. Beginning in 1950, the embassy offices were located in a rented building at Connaught Place, and in 1961 it moved to Jorbagh, then in 1964 to Golf Links (**Figure 3**). Maintaining embassy offices in residential neighbourhoods was common practice for sending states in the wake of Indian independence. As the number of diplomatic missions substantially increased, the Indian government, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, initiated the creation of a new diplomatic neighbourhood in the overcrowded capital of the early 1950s. The area was named Chanakyapuri, a reference to one of the founders of the ancient Maurya Empire (Abankwa-Meier-Klodt 2013: 15–19), and befriended states were allocated plots on which to erect embassies (**Table 1**). In the following decades, more sending states gained a plot there.

The development of Chanakyapuri was among the first post-war urban expansions of Edward Lutyens's New Delhi. It was also part of Nehru's agenda to escape the shackles

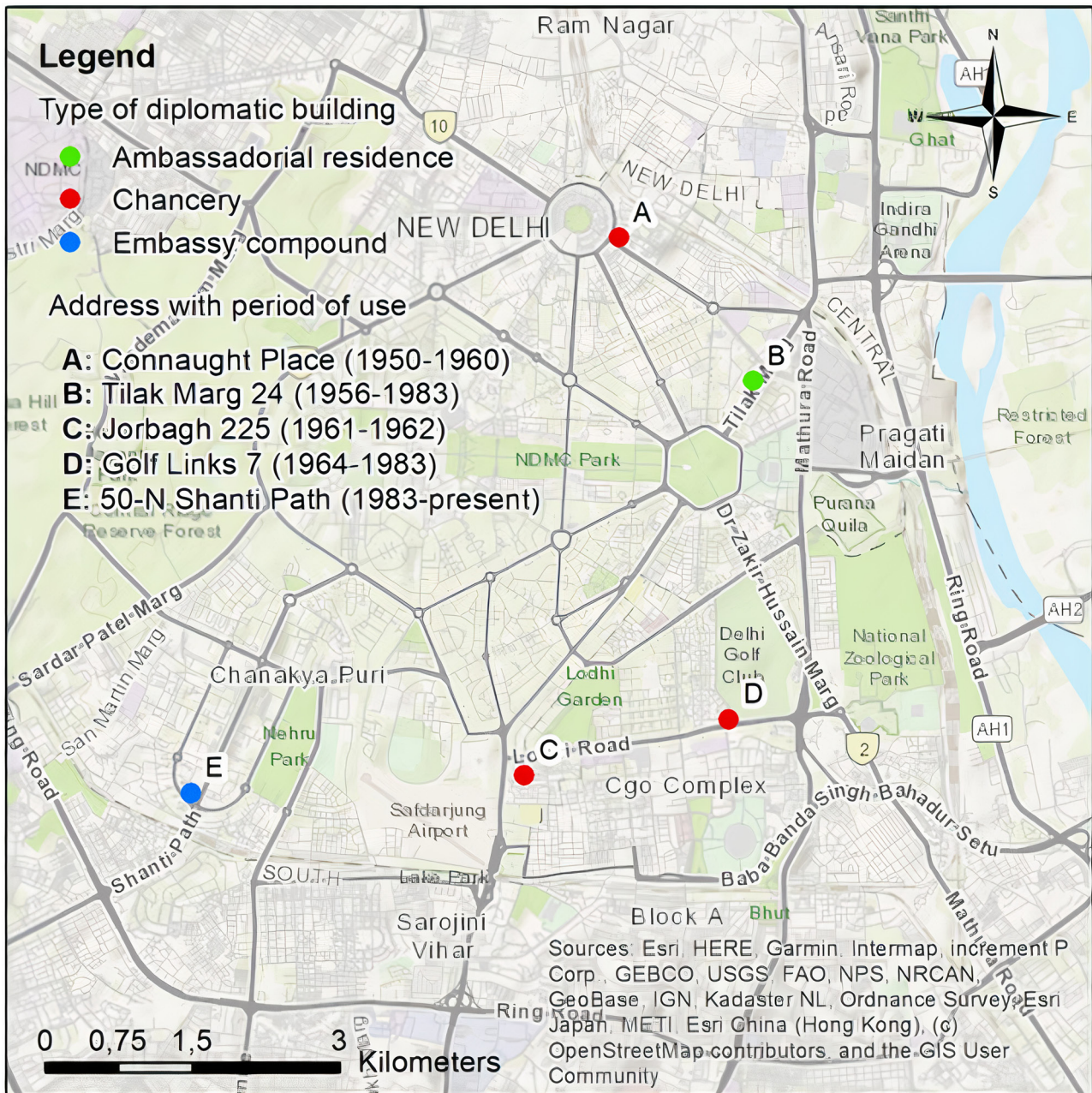


Figure 3: Historical evolution of Belgian diplomatic buildings in New Delhi. Map adapted by Christophe De Coster (HOST Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Brussel), based on data retrieved from <https://planet.openstreetmap.org/>, accessed April 23, 2020. Additional sources and contributors are referenced in the map.

of India’s colonial past. He invested in both architecture and urban planning to promote India as a sovereign and modern state (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006: 235), the best-known example being the urban project of Chandigarh, the new capital city for the northern state of Punjab, for whose design Le Corbusier was hired as supervisor of a team of architects and planners (Prakash 2002).

The allocation of Belgium’s plot in Chanakyapuri in May 1954 was preceded only by those of Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Sri Lanka and the United States, in 1953, and, earlier in 1954, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Holy See. Belgium received a plot as part of a lease of 99 years, for which it paid one symbolic rupee per year (BMFA: New Delhi). The presence of Belgium in this select group of recently decolonised Asian countries and (religious) world powers

clearly stands out. Abankwa-Meier-Klodt attributes this early allocation of land to the special relationship between Belgium and India (2013: 35, 234–36). But what was it that actually made this relationship so special? These favourable diplomatic relations may be due to the role of Ambassador de Ligne, who had earned Nehru’s respect as a mediator during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1947–48 (De Messemaeker 2013: 197). Furthermore, de Ligne was able to forge a personal connection with Nehru through informal activities (**Figure 4**).

Within the horseshoe-shaped diplomatic enclave, Belgium was allocated a plot of 5.4 acres on the central avenue of Shanti Path (Hindu for road of peace) (**Figure 5**), along with the embassies of contemporary world powers, including the United States, Britain, China, France and the

Table 1: Dates of initial allocation of embassy plots along the central avenue of Shanti Path in Chanakyapuri and the initiation of embassy construction. Compiled from Abankwa-Meier-Klodt (2013: 232–36) and correspondence with embassies.

Country	Allocation of building plot	Inauguration of the embassy	Years from allocation to inauguration
Afghanistan	1953	1960	7
Australia	1953	1960	7
Belgium	1954	1983	29
Canada	1958	1972	14
France	1978	1985	7
West Germany	1955	1962	7
Norway	1954	1960	6
Poland	1973	1978	5
Soviet Union	1956	1959	3
United Kingdom	1955	1959	4
United States	1953	1959	6



Figure 4: From left: British Viceroy Louis Mountbatten, Mme de Ligne, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Lady Mountbatten and Ambassador Eugène de Ligne, attending the play *Discovery of India*, based on a book by Nehru. Reproduced from De Ligne (1959: 33).

Soviet Union. The Belgian plot was, however, located at the far end of this avenue.

Several sources indicate that the Indian government tried to persuade Belgium to immediately construct an embassy in the diplomatic enclave, but the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not take swift action. Instead, successive Belgian governments decided to purchase or lease building units elsewhere in New Delhi to accommodate diplomatic staff. As such, the Belgian plot remained a barren landscape for almost three decades, in stark contrast to the building frenzy in the rest of Chanakyapuri (see **Table 1**).

Two factors may explain the disinterest of the Belgian state in developing its existing building plot. The first is related to the economic unimportance of India for Belgian entrepreneurs at the time. As Belgian foreign policy centred mainly on supporting the country’s export-oriented economy, Nehru’s economic agenda of protectionism and import restrictions made India less appealing for policy-makers in Brussels. In the 1950s, the Belgian government was primarily preoccupied with its economic integration within Europe and its colonial possessions in Central Africa (De Vylder 2013: 57; Coolsaet 2001: 424–46). A second factor in Belgium’s lack of interest in building its embassy

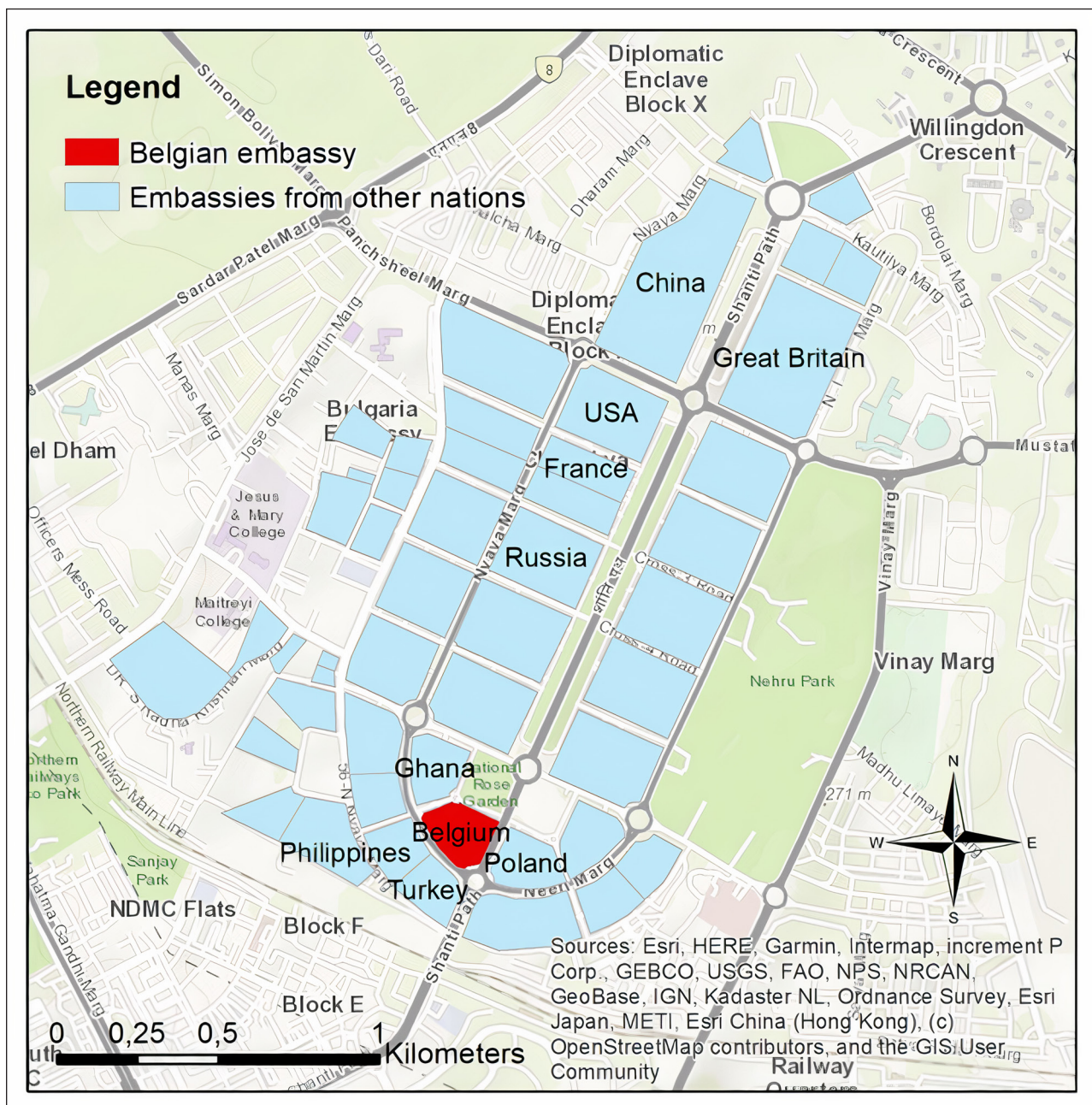


Figure 5: Map of Chanakyapuri's diplomatic quarter. Map altered by Christophe De Coster (HOST Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Brussel), based on data retrieved from <https://planet.openstreetmap.org/>, accessed April 23, 2020. Additional sources and contributors are referenced in the map.

in India was that its colonial policy in Central Africa was jeopardising bilateral relations with India. Nehru, one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement and its fight against (neo-)colonialism, frequently criticised Belgium for its ill-prepared decolonisation of the Belgian Congo in 1960 and its involvement in the assassination of the first Congolese prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961 (De Messemaeker 2013: 208; De Witte 2020). On 14 February 1961, diplomatic relations between Belgium and India hit rock bottom. Outraged by the death of Lumumba, a group of African exchange students raided the Belgian chancery in Jorbagh, breaking several windows, destroying communications equipment and smashing the state portrait of King Baudouin of Belgium. While informing Brussels of the damage, the Belgian ambassador, Francis-Léo Goffart,

took the opportunity to complain about the chancery's poor accommodation, stating that 'probably much to the surprise of the demonstrators the chancery resembled an African hut'¹ (DAB 1961: 13.935). Whether the ministry was receptive to Goffart's complaint is unclear, but three years later, the chancery moved to the residential neighbourhood of Golf Links.

It was several more years before representational imperatives finally prompted Brussels to look into constructing a new embassy in Chanakyapuri. In 1973, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent an inspector, Georges Puttevels, to New Delhi to thoroughly examine the activities of the Belgian embassy. He reported that the rented chancery building at Golf Links had become too cramped. The ambassadorial residence at Tilak Marg was also no

longer adequate to meet the representational requirements: constructed without proper building foundations, its walls were damp, and poor drainage resulted both in occasional flooding of the garden and an unbearable smell. In addition, the residence was located near a busy intersection and was affected by noise pollution from New Delhi's increasing traffic. Puttevils first made the case for building a new chancery on the premises of the residence at Tilak Marg, even though he believed that such plans would be rejected by the Indian government in an effort to relocate diplomatic missions to Chanakyapuri. In his final inspection report, Puttevils put forward the idea of developing the building plot in Chanakyapuri by building a new residence and chancery. In addition to pragmatic arguments (i.e. already owning a plot there), Puttevils accentuated to Brussels that Chanakyapuri had become New Delhi's diplomatic hotspot, where several sending states had constructed 'beautiful embassy buildings' (DAB 1973: 18.960/24). By the end of the 1970s, approximately 50 purpose-built embassies had been constructed in the diplomatic enclave (Abankwa-Meier-Klodt 2013: 232–36).

Puttevils admitted that constructing a new embassy might be too costly for the ministry to bear. Still recovering from the oil crisis and its adverse effects on the Belgian state's finances, the ministry experienced annual budget cuts of 7%, beginning in 1976 (Coolsaet, Dujardin and Roosens 2014: 379). A rent increase in 1978 for the chancery at Golf Links became the factor that finally motivated Belgium to begin the process of building a new embassy in Chanakyapuri (Falisse 2018). The ministry generated additional funds by selling the ambassadorial residence at Tilak Marg. However, such decisions often involve differences in value judgement. In contrast to Puttevils's mention of a run-down residence, the Belgian ambassador, Jan Hollants Van Loocke, recalled that he was 'leaving a charming colonial house in Tilak Marg to move, in some way, from British old days to modern India' (quoted by Falisse 2004: 11), underlining the symbolic meaning of leaving the city centre and moving to the new diplomatic epicentre.

Satish Gujral, an Artist Venturing into Architecture

With the decision taken to construct a new embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was in need of an architect. Unfortunately, its archives do not contain any records regarding the selection of Gujral for the job. A combination of memoirs of and interviews with Gujral and former staff members of the embassy therefore helps to unravel how Gujral appeared on the Belgian radar.

Born in 1925 in the province of Punjab in British India, Gujral is known principally as one of the most prominent Indian artists, making his mark as a sculptor, painter and muralist. Beginning in 1939, he studied art at the Mayo School of Arts in Punjab, followed by enrolment at the Bombay JJ School of Arts in 1944. In 1952, Gujral was awarded a scholarship to study at the Palacio Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. There he took on work as an apprentice of the renowned muralist Diego Rivera, and he began to explore this art form himself. During his stay,

Gujral came into contact with such influential artists and architects as Frida Kahlo and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Wright had a profound interest in pre-Columbian architecture and frequently visited Mexico, which is probably when he met Gujral (Levine 1996: 137–140). Gujral remembers asking Wright why he never had murals on his buildings, to which Wright allegedly replied, 'Well, an architect needs an artist to resurrect a dead wall, but I never design dead walls'. As Gujral vividly recalls in his memoirs, these words took root in his mind:

Murals and sculpture can be used in architecture as ornamental additions, but they cannot help in strengthening a building's spatial or utilitarian aspect. After this realization, I began to look at Mexican murals from another perspective. Whatever their plastic or aesthetic merit, in most cases they made no contribution to the buildings that they adorned. This disillusionment was shattering, but it helped me in making a more objective assessment of Mexican art and the true value and function of murals. (1997: 135)

Following his return to India in 1955, Gujral faced growing frustration about the local architectural scene that ultimately came to shift his interests. Gujral put his newly acquired skills into practice when he was commissioned to design murals for the Punjab University (1963) in Chandigarh and the Oberoi Sheraton Hotel (1973), but he recalls that 'the buildings I was asked to paint murals on were essentially not suitable for them. Each time I was working on one it crossed my mind that I would have done a better job designing the building itself' (1997: 216). Echoing Wright, Gujral indicated that architecture that depends on another creative discipline such as muralism to enhance 'its own validity only admits its inherent weakness' (1997: 135).

As Gujral lacked an architectural degree and had only recently started to design buildings – he first ventured into architecture in the mid-1970s, when he designed a house for the Indian entrepreneur B. K. Modi and a hotel for Ajit Haksar – it is surprising that he ended up designing the Belgian embassy.² It was likely a combination of Gujral's prominent position in Indian society and his personal ties that brought him into contact with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Gujrals were a well-respected family, traditionally affiliated with the Congress Party of Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi, who served as prime minister twice (1966–77 and 1980–84). In the late 1970s, Gujral's older brother, Inder Kumar Gujral, served as India's ambassador to the USSR and would go on to become foreign minister in the late 1980s and eventually prime minister at the end of the 1990s.

Perhaps even more importantly, Satish Gujral had befriended Roland Burny, who served as chancellor at the Belgian embassy. According to Gujral's memoirs, Burny 'told me of the proposal to build a new embassy in Chanakyapuri. He offered me to have me included in the shortlist of architects whose plans would be submitted to a committee for selection' (1997: 221). Burny himself

did not leave any relevant documents behind, but cultural attaché Philippe Falisse (2018) verifies that Burny had indeed reached out to Gujral.

Since there was no official plan of action for awarding architectural commissions for embassies at the time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was quite free to organise the selection process however it liked. The social network of its diplomats often played a pivotal role in selecting an architect for embassies. Somewhat reflecting its status as a state within a state, the ministry was and still is solely responsible for monitoring the construction of its embassies, thus bypassing the Belgian Buildings Agency, which has supervised the construction of government buildings since its foundation in 1971.

Despite the invitation, Gujral said that '[my] initial response was not enthusiastic. I submitted my plan more to please Burny than in any hope of getting the assignment' (1997: 221). Nevertheless, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs selected his design. There is no record of the motivation behind this choice, and since no press coverage of the architectural competition has been found, it seems that the ministry did not intend to use the occasion to put its approach to embassy architecture in the spotlight.

Furthermore, whereas the collaboration with Gujral is nowadays portrayed in government publications as a straightforward Belgian decision (Stevens 2003: 141–43), there are indications that Belgian ministry officials initially had doubts. Gujral himself claims that the bureaucracy raised concerns upon discovering the identity of the winning architect, who lacked an architectural degree: 'As soon as the name and nationality of the winning entry was revealed, there was an uproar in the circles that mattered' (1997: 221). However, such comments are typical in Gujral's memoirs. He frames the early stages of his architectural career as an uphill battle because of his artistic background and lack of specialist education. This also becomes apparent when Gujral recalls how the Indian architectural scene reacted to the news that he was awarded the embassy commission. He remembers facing criticism from fellow architects: 'Prior to my forays into architecture, I had more friends among architects than I had in the artists' fraternity. After the Belgian embassy was assigned to me they began to cold-shoulder me' (1997: 222). Despite facing criticism, Burny persuaded his superiors in Brussels to proceed with Gujral's design.

Upon completion of the project in 1983, the response to the design was equally diverse. The popular English-language magazine *India Today* labelled the Belgian embassy as a 'controversial project' not only because of Gujral's training, but also, and especially, because of its unusual sculptural appearance, which according to the journalist Suni Sethi resembled 'a grouping of red-brick ant-hills'. The Indian architect Satish Grover was quoted as saying that he 'had no objection that a painter or sculptor takes to architecture. But the building he produces must not be based only on personal expression. I think a building is successful if it says what it is. I haven't been inside the Belgian Embassy, but from the outside it doesn't look like an embassy' (Sethi 1983). Echoing the beaux-arts principle of *architecture parlante*, Grover argued that the

exterior of a building should provide a clear indication of its function. Gujral's approach to architecture, however, clearly differed. He was not so much interested in expressing the purpose or character of the composing parts of a building but rather in creating enjoyable environments for people to live and work in, as he conveyed in an interview in 1984:

While conceiving an idea I try to relate form not to the technical functions of the building but to the people's function. That is, a factory design may aim at enriching the act of working for those who function in it, rather than exposing and representing the character of structural or mechanical parts of the building. (Gujral and Khosla 1984: 40)

The architect Romesh Khosla, whose opinion was the opposite of Grover's, was also quoted by *India Today*. Khosla had recently presented Gujral's embassy project at a symposium sponsored by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture Committee and was soon to conduct the above-mentioned interview with Gujral. Khosla described Gujral's project as one of the first world-class buildings in India since Le Corbusier had left the country. Khosla particularly praised the 'scale' and 'grandeur' of the embassy as well as its 'sensual exploration of spaces' (Sethi 1983). Khosla's take on architecture was heavily influenced by Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), whose critique of modernist architecture Khosla shared, calling for a design approach that reflects 'the cultural complexity of society' (1984: 11). His own architectural work showcased a tendency to hark back to primordial archetypes from India's earliest architectural traditions, such as cave temples (Scriver and Srivastava 2015: 294).

The international architectural magazine *Mimar*, which at the time had been recently established and was one of the very few journals focusing on architecture in the Global South, covered the project as well, in a straightforward documentary style, by primarily voicing Gujral's own point of view. In a richly illustrated article titled 'Building as Image: Gujral's Sculptural Belgian Embassy in New Delhi', the self-made architect particularly emphasised what Gujral called the 'organic' qualities of his work: the use of exposed building materials, the relative independence of the building's parts and the 'natural' or harmonious relationship of these parts with one another and with the building site (1984: 11).

Many international architectural periodicals clearly praised Gujral's design. In 1986, an article in *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* stated that the Belgian embassy 'showcases itself as an open, welcome place accessible for everyone' (Trois 1986: 55).³ Most notably, the American architect and design critic Sylvia Gottwald wrote a richly illustrated article in *Architecture USA* in which she admired how the design combined seemingly opposing qualities. She saw it setting an example for Indian architecture:

The recently completed Belgian Embassy complex in New Delhi by the Indian artist and architect Satish Gujral is what one feels contemporary Indian

architecture should be. One feels it should impress with layers of historical evidence, yet be inventive rather than imitative. It should be full of strong sculptural forms and colours, sensual and mysterious on the outside, yet full of surprises, airy, and light on the inside. It should feel very old, pragmatic and wise, yet very new, vibrant, and creative – all at once. (1984: 117)

The embassy generated far less attention back in Belgium in the years following its completion. One of the very few references can be found in the Belgian magazine *A+ Architectuur* from 1987, which published a translated and shortened version of the interview with the architect (Gujral and Khosla 1984), preceded by a brief article by Eddy Pennewaert with the telling title ‘Only Belgium Remains Silent’. Pennewaert joined the international magazines in applauding Gujral’s conspicuous design. He suggested that the ministry, in light of the previously discussed adverse financial climate, intentionally gave the embassy, with its price tag of 120 million Belgian francs, as little exposure as possible (Pennewaert 1987: 18) (**Figure 6**).

Although the lack of press coverage in Belgium seems to validate Pennewaert’s claim, the ministry did showcase its newly built embassy as a forum by which economic relations with India could be strengthened. In 1981, during the embassy’s construction, a new Belgian coalition government of Christian Democrats and Liberals took office. Confronted with an unfavourable economic situation

and budget deficits, the government feverishly sought to improve the national economy by boosting the country’s export capabilities. The minister of foreign affairs, the Christian Democrat Leo Tindemans, called upon the country’s diplomatic resources to support the government in its aspirations to reduce the trade deficit. In a newspaper interview, Tindemans unveiled his plans to use the country’s network of diplomatic missions to reinforce bilateral economic ties (Castrel 1983: 9). In the same year, Tindemans organised an economic mission to India, which included a visit to the construction site in Chanakyapuri (KADOC, ‘Bouw van nieuwe ambassade in New Delhi’ [Construction of the new embassy in New Delhi], January 1983). The alleged economic value of the embassy project was further emphasised during its opening ceremony in November 1983, when the new ambassadorial residence was used as a venue for a second Belgian economic mission of entrepreneurs to India, spearheaded by Crown Prince Albert II. During this ceremony, he awarded Gujral the Order of the Crown, one of Belgium’s highest national honorary orders of knighthood. In a follow-up report, the ministry labelled 1983 as a fruitful year for Belgian–Indian economic relations (Ministerie 1984: 107).

Since the turn of the century, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, becoming increasingly aware of the complex’s international reputation, has changed its attitude. In this timeframe, several European ministries of foreign affairs, such as that of the Netherlands, were already undertaking initiatives to showcase their diplomatic patrimony abroad



Figure 6: The sculptural facade of the Belgian ambassadorial residence in New Delhi as seen from the garden, 1985. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology, courtesy of Peter Serenyi.

by means of publications (Koolhaas and Patteuw 2004). Belgium also began to showcase its purpose-built embassy for its architectural merit through a series of publications and documentaries, framing the New Delhi embassy as a prime example of the open-minded view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs towards architecture (Stevens 2003; Falisse 2004). But was this truly the case? It is telling that the alleged initial hesitance to collaborate with Gujral and the importance of his personal network in obtaining the assignment remains untouched in such accounts.

The Belgian Embassy and Its Symbolic Meaning: An Indian Nest for Belgian Birds

In the case of New Delhi embassy, Belgium's liberal and ad hoc approach towards commissioning embassies resulted in a design with references to the various local cultures of the vast Indian subcontinent. To interpret Gujral's design, it is essential to further expand on his personal aversion towards modernist architecture. The urban design of Chandigarh, completed in 1960, was a particular thorn in his eye. Gujral was very critical of Le Corbusier's approach, which was based on functionalist zoning principles and included the introduction of vast open spaces and isolated architectural objects (Prakash 2002: 9). Gujral believed this urban project was unsuitable for India, arguing that the buildings of the Swiss-French architect 'exhibit a marked indifference towards local cultures around which communities have traditionally created their habitats, in the way birds construct their nests according to the shapes of their own bodies. Architecture that ignores this time-tested rule becomes artificial' (1997: 96). Gujral's personal reading of the Chandigarh project is of course limited: in fact, the local conditions in Punjab had been taken into account by Le Corbusier and his team. For instance, Le Corbusier scaled the Capitol Complex in proportion to the neighbouring Himalayas and employed brise-soleils extensively to deal with the climatological conditions of India (D'Alfonso 2016: 130–63). Most buildings in Chandigarh, however, did not feature straightforward references to local building traditions or materials, two aspects Gujral aspired to introduce in his own projects, including the Belgian embassy.

Gujral's criticism of Chandigarh needs to be seen against the background of fundamental shifts affecting India's architectural scene from the late 1970s onwards. As architectural historians Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava indicate, Indian architects trained overseas witnessed how the modernist project and its universalist claims increasingly drew the criticism of the postmodern avant-garde in the West (2015: 242, 274). However, confronted with the technological constraints of India's underdeveloped building industry and its subsequent housing crisis, renouncing modernist architecture was a luxury they initially could not afford. Instead, it was the political transformations that deeply affected contemporary architectural thinking in India. In 1977, growing criticism about Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's extensive use of the state of emergency and the apparent failure to effectively fight corruption and poverty resulted in a new coalition government, including Hindu right-wing

parties, which made this political movement socially acceptable in Indian politics. Believing that Gandhi's socialist agenda lost touch with the local identity, these factions expressed their desire to give Hindu culture a more prominent place in India's society. This changing ethos was also reflected in architecture. Supported by the rising influence of the private sector in commissioning buildings, architectural thinking accentuated the importance of culture, place and identity. For instance, from the 1980s, the Indian architect Charles Correa opted to incorporate historically charged features such as the dome and the stupa – a mound-like structure used as a venue for meditation in Buddhism – in several of his designs, such as the Vidhan Bhavan State Assembly in Bhopal (1980–96). Furthermore, Correa prominently displayed typical local building materials in his projects, including white marble from Makrana, black Kadapa limestone and Agra Red sandstone (Frampton 1996: 193–98).

Meanwhile, the architect Balkrishna Doshi increasingly opted to include locally embedded symbols and associations in his designs. Initially working as an apprentice for Le Corbusier in the late 1940s, Doshi's oeuvre in the 1980s also featured stupas, as well as references to 17th-century Mughal architecture (Steele 1998: 133). Both Correa's and Doshi's takes on architecture showed direct affinities with ideas expressed by Khosla in an article on 'iconography and images in architecture', published in the same issue of the *Journal of Arts & Ideas* as the interview with Gujral. Khosla reflected on his own design office's search for an architecture that relates to both the historical and the contemporary at the same time, which he imagined as two 'planes':

The historical plane is vertical or *diachronic*, a path in time, which has along it, the history of Indian architecture and which is primarily the repository of our associations and images of architecture. ... The other plane, the contemporary one, is the horizontal or *synchronic* plane. This is the plane along which parallel phenomena are occurring simultaneously. As architects, we are working on housing for the landless below the poverty line, Government housing, private middle class bungalows, factories, research institutes and five star hotels. (1984: 5)

It was against the backdrop of this growing historical and cultural awareness in Indian architectural thinking that Gujral took on the task to design the new Belgian embassy. It would, however, be short-sighted to simply categorise his embassy design as just another example of the changing postmodernist architectural climate in India. In line with the work of Correa and Doshi, Gujral's design tried to find a balance between traditional and modern references, but at the same time it showcased a much more crafty and experimental approach to architecture, combined with an explicit interest in the overall formal expression of the building. As such the project is as much an example of contemporary Indian architecture as it is an anomaly within it (Khanna 2008: 106).

In addition, Gujral pointed out in interviews that metaphorical, historical and symbolical associations heavily influenced his design. As mentioned above, the Belgian embassy complex consists of several building units: residences for the ambassador and the chancellor, a chancery and servants' quarters (**Figure 2**). Gujral opted to position the different building units at the edges of the triangular plot, to serve as what he called 'the check-posts in a fortress' (Gujral and Khosla 1984: 46). To reinforce this fortress-like appearance – a metaphor also used by Louis Kahn in his architectural work on the Indian subcontinent – the edges of the premises were heightened by means of an earthen rampart (Goldhagen 2001: 169; Curtis 2012: 235–52). Intended to enhance the privacy of the ambassador within the compound garden, Gujral compared it to 'an enormous inner court similar to an amphitheatre for the Ambassador' (Gujral and Khosla 1984: 46). This garden also comprised recreational facilities, such as a tennis court and swimming pool. In addition to serving as entertainment for ambassadors, these facilities proved to be a useful tool for informal diplomacy. Ambassador Christian Fellens recalls how the Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, the son and successor of Indira Gandhi, proposed to come for a visit and play a game of tennis with the American ambassador John Gunter Dean on the Belgian tennis court (Falisse 2004: 27).

Gujral's interest in historical and cultural references also influenced the choice of materials for the embassy buildings. He envisaged the combined use of locally quarried grey stone and red brick as a way to strengthen the associations with the Indian subcontinent (**Figure 7**). He explained that the presence of the grey stone would help 'to link the building to the geological character of the

land it embraces' and that brick is a material 'that in India is still made the way it was made a thousand years ago' (Gujral and Khosla 1984: 42).

It is interesting to notice how Belgian ambassadors provided their own reading on the use of brick. To Jan Hollants Van Loocke, the first to reside in the new embassy, the red bricks reminded him of the northern Belgian region of Flanders; Guy Trouveroy described how 'the exposed brick speaks to Belgians' (Falisse 2004: 9, 45). As the saying goes, Belgians are born with a brick in their stomach, illustrating their desire to build their own house. In 1968, the Belgian modernist architect Renaat Braem commented, in his essay 'The Ugliest Country in the World', that bricks dominate the architectural landscape of Belgium and ironically remarked that it seems as if his fellow architects were not aware of the existence of any other building materials (Braem and Strauven 2010: 20, 68).

Although Gujral used the exposed brickwork to refer to India instead of Belgium, the interpretations of serving ambassadors illustrate that meaning depends on the contingencies of the actors involved (Whyte 2006: 168–69). Gujral used bricks not only to cover the concrete exterior but also to mould a variety of geometric forms in the facade, such as 'arches, domes and window openings of varied sizes that let in natural sunlight' (Khanna 2008: 106–09). In an abstracted way, the bricks were also used to allude to religious artefacts of Hinduism. The entrance of the chancery, for instance, is strategically flanked by unusual bulbous shapes, reminiscent of lingams, small religious objects referring to the Hindu god Shiva and that first appeared during the Harappan civilisation (3300–1300 BCE). In the Belgian embassy, the formal features of the lingam are rescaled to architectural volumes.

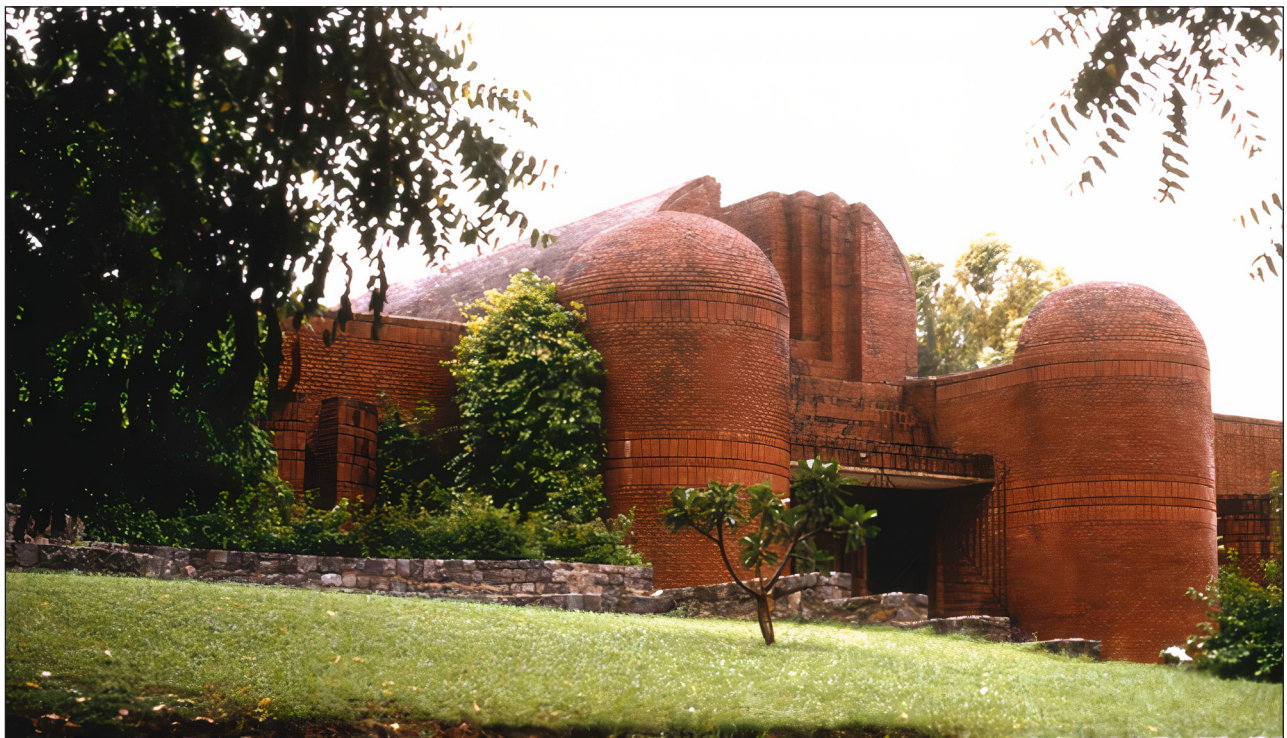


Figure 7: Lingam-shaped volumes flanking the entrance of the chancery in the early 1990s. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P&O archives, file New Delhi.

The architectural centrepiece of the embassy complex is the residence, whose floor plan, a series of spaces clustered around a polygonal shaped main hall, brings to mind some of the slightly earlier works of Kahn, such as the spatial layout of the National Assembly Complex in Dhaka (Goldhagen 2001: 192). Serving both as the ambassador's living quarters and the venue for well-attended receptions and dinner parties, the residence is the representational flagship of the Belgian embassy. Reflecting its importance, Gujral invested considerably in the architecture of the residence. Not only is its sculptural exterior characterised by references to Hindu culture, such as the lingam-like shape that is the focal point of the design (Figure 7), but it includes two characteristic trademarks of the Islamic architecture of the Mughal rulers: double-arched porches and a dome structure (Asher 1992: 45).

The residence's interior illustrates how Gujral employs domes and tower-like structures to create ceremonial spaces. Once guests are dropped off by car at the roundabout, they enter the residence through a narrow corridor that leads them to a platform strategically located beneath an octagonal dome with integrated arc-shaped windows and flanked by two Belgian-made chandeliers. From this platform, often used as a stage from which the serving ambassador gives a speech, one slowly descends to the residence's lounge by a double staircase covered with Indian white marble, which according to Gujral was intended to 'reinforce the drama of the interior space. As one descends to the lounge, the space explodes on

all sides as in a firework' (Gujral and Khosla 1984: 46). It is not until visitors reach the lounge's ground floor that the residence really opens out to the garden's panoramic view. The lounge is flanked on either side by a private and a public wing, accentuating the residence's hybrid character, where the professional and family life are intertwined with one another. Whereas the southern wing accommodates the ambassador's private dining room, living room and study, the northern wing comprises the large dining room used for special occasions (Figure 8).

Because of its explicit references to indigenous architecture and Hindu religion, Abankwa-Meier-Klodt labels the Belgian embassy as among those of New Delhi's diplomatic missions that 'have chosen to blend into their local surroundings, assimilating the foreignness of their host country into their embassy designs' (2013: 18). Characterising the Belgian embassy as a design that 'blends in' might seem too far-fetched for such an unusual sculptural building, but with its clear tendency to first and foremost relate to the Indian context, it does stand out in comparison to purpose-built embassies of other middle powers that were constructed around the same time.

The Polish embassy, for instance, differs significantly from its Belgian neighbour across the road. In 1972, the Polish government, led by First Secretary Edward Gierek, launched an architectural competition for its new embassy in New Delhi. This competition coincided with Gierek's spectacular programme, known



Figure 8: The residence's lounge with the marble staircase. Notice the private (left) and public (right) wing. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P&O archives, file New Delhi.

as 'Second Poland', which aimed to stimulate rapid industrialisation, grand urban projects and modernisation to improve both the country's standard of living and its international prestige (Lukowski and Zawadzki 2006: 270–80). The entry of the Polish architects Witold Cęckiewicz and Stanislaw Denko came out on top. Commissioned in 1978 in collaboration with the Indian architectural firm Kothari & Associates, the new embassy reflected Gierek's agenda of promoting Poland as a modern communist state. Its architecture is characterised by several elements of the International Style, including an articulated volumetric conception, the use of pilotis and large glass facades (Figure 9). Connah ironically labels the design as an expression of 'the oil-rig modernism of the Poles' (1989: 306). Cęckiewicz and Denko, however, did seek to adapt their design to local conditions. To counter Delhi's tropical climate, brise-soleils with a grid-like appearance are used extensively, and the courtyard is equipped with large rectangular bodies of water for cooling.

In 1983 – the same year the Belgian embassy was completed – construction for the new Finnish embassy compound in Chanakyapuri began. In a similar fashion to the Poles, it was the result of an architectural competition in which the Finnish government called for an 'architectural expression that would represent Finland' (Connah 1989: 302). It selected the entry of renowned Finnish architects

Reima Pietilä and Raili Pietilä, entitled 'Snow Peaks on the Mountains', which makes a reference to the snow-covered landscapes of Finland and perhaps also the Himalayas in northern India, showcasing the architects' organic approach to architecture (Figure 10). Completed in 1986, the embassy's design shares with its Belgian counterpart a clear interest in symbolism and metaphors but, unlike the Belgian embassy that only pays tribute to the culture of the host country, uses such elements to establish a visual common ground between Finland and India.

In their own ways, both the Polish and the Finnish embassies reflect the developments within the contemporary architectural scene of their respective homeland. This was definitely not the case with the design of the Belgian embassy. One could argue that from the outside the national flag and coat of arms are the only unambiguous indications of its purpose of representing Belgium on Indian soil. In addition to reflecting Belgium's rather special take on embassy architecture at the time, the conspicuous embassy design also illustrates the variety of Chanakyapuri in terms of architecture. Whereas *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* labels Gujral's architectural brainchild as an example of the 'incoherent voisinage' along Shanti Path (Trois 1986: 55), Connah goes so far as to say that this sculptural and antique-looking building fits perfectly in 'the Delhi ghetto of carnival embassy architecture' (1989: 306).

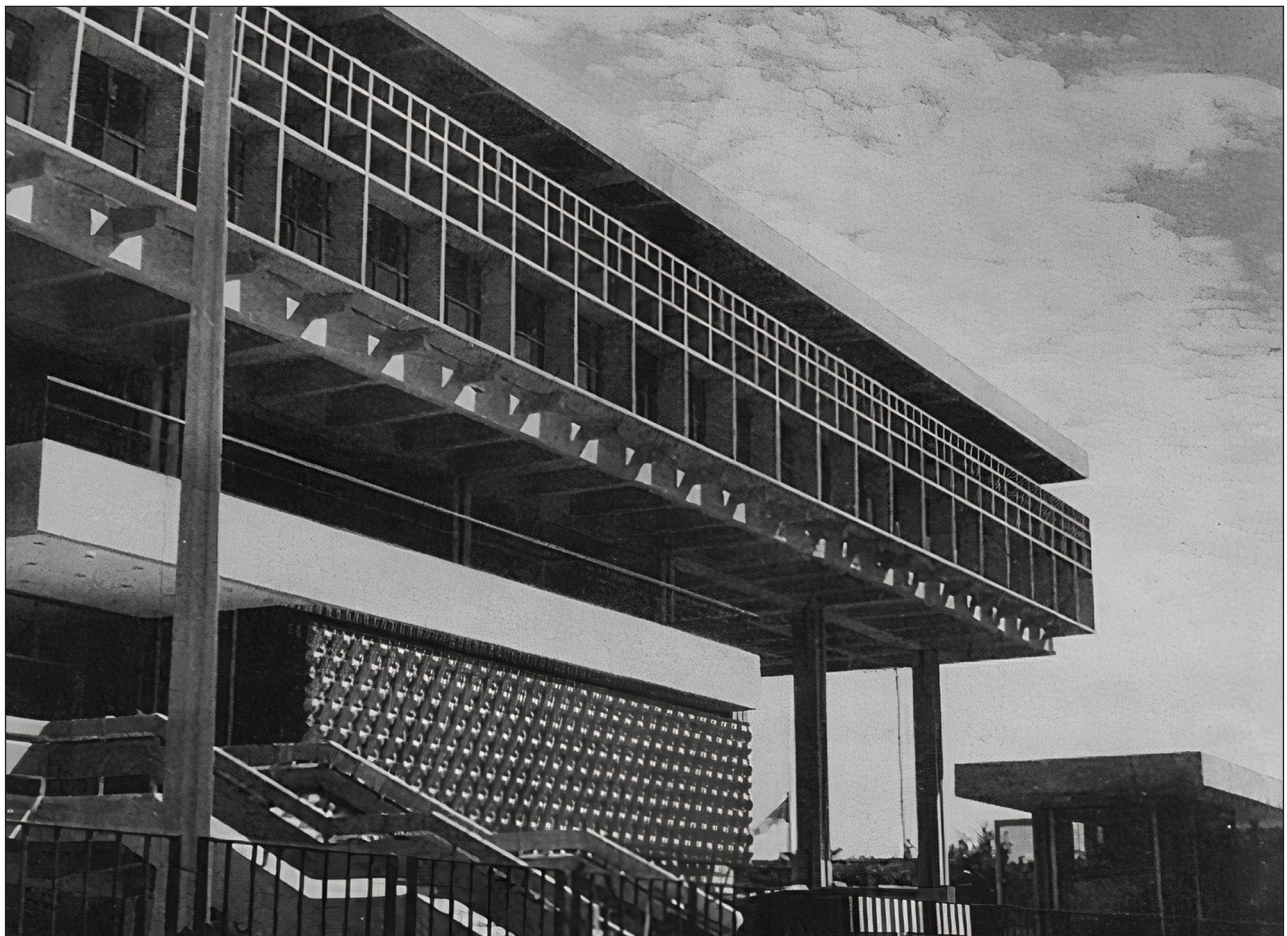


Figure 9: The International Style appearance of the Polish chancery designed by Witold Cęckiewicz and Stanislaw Denko, 1978. © Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich.



Figure 10: The sculptural rooftop of the Finnish embassy in Chanakyapuri, resembling an ice landscape, 2018.
© Randhir Singh, Architectural Photography.

Conclusion

In diplomatic history, the phenomenon of ‘localitis’ refers to the experience of diplomats stationed abroad eventually losing touch with the home front and feeling more attached to the receiving state (Berridge 2010: 107). A similar phenomenon can also be seen in embassy architecture, with the Belgian embassy compound in New Delhi serving as a textbook example. At first glance, one would indeed assume that the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs approached the construction of the embassy as an opportunity – a moment of architectural ‘localitis’ – to pay tribute to the host country. The design of the Belgian embassy is anything but an architectural expression of Belgian identity on Indian soil. Designed by an Indian artist-architect and shaped by abstract architectural references to the local culture and indigenous building techniques, the architecture of the Belgian embassy is a far cry from the designs of its neighbouring Polish and Finnish embassies that reflect contemporary architectural developments occurring on their respective domestic scenes.

It would, however, be too reductive to say that Belgium consciously opted to cement bilateral ties with India through architecture. At the time, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not have a coherent vision of how Belgium should represent itself abroad by means of embassy architecture. Moreover, Brussels was for a long

time uninterested in constructing a new embassy complex in New Delhi: notwithstanding that a plot of land had already been acquired in 1954, plans to build the embassy were only drafted at the end of the 1970s.

Against the backdrop of this aversion to commissioning a new embassy, on the one hand, and the decentralised and ad hoc approach building policy on the other, the ministry gave its diplomats posted in New Delhi considerable leeway with the project. A Belgian diplomat could simply include a befriended architect in the design competition and personally vouch for Gujral, even though the ministry raised doubts about hiring him. Furthermore, Gujral was also given significant creative freedom in designing the embassy. As a result, Gujral’s design was highly expressive, primarily shaped by his personal interest in culturally embedded references and craft-related features. His sculptural design, with its exposed brickwork, was an architectural anomaly not only in the diplomatic enclave of Chanakyapuri but also in the contemporary Indian architectural scene. Although Indian architects increasingly opted for subtle historical references in their designs against the backdrop of the postmodernist debate, Gujral’s experimental design was more extraordinary, as he made references to both Hindu and Mughal culture, exemplified by the shapes of lingams and domes. Instead of being an expression of the national identity of the sending state, the design of the Belgian embassy was more a personal

statement of Gujral, a way to take into account the multi-layered history of the Indian subcontinent.

In retrospect, the decision to collaborate with Gujral certainly did not backfire on Belgium. The design of its embassy received much acclaim in international and Indian architectural magazines and has been labelled an architectural landmark of New Delhi's diplomatic neighbourhood. This stood in stark contrast to the situation in Belgium, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave little exposure to the conspicuous design in the 1980s, the decade in which it was built. Only recently has its attitude towards its diplomatic heritage in New Delhi begun to change.

By discussing the rationale, design and reception of the Belgian embassy, this case study has illustrated how this conspicuous embassy was made possible. Gujral's design continues to be a diplomatic instrument that has significantly boosted the image of Belgium, well received by both the Indian elite and Belgian diplomats. Rather than the result of a well-considered top-down architectural programme, it was through the merits of Gujral that Belgian diplomacy in India is housed in one of the most talked-about and praised embassies New Delhi has to offer. Purpose-built embassies thus cannot always be assumed to have been closely monitored and carefully guided building projects specifically designed to express and influence bilateral ties with the receiving state in question.

Notes

- ¹ 'La modération des assaillants peut s'expliquer par leur surprise de se trouver dans une chancellerie d'ambassade si pareille à une case africaine'.
- ² Gujral did have a prior artistic connection with Belgium, though. He exhibited two sculptures at the 13th Biennale of the Antwerp Middelheim Museum in 1975, one of these, *Ganesh*, becoming part of its collection (Pas and Meewis 2010: 191).
- ³ 'La Belgique se présente comme un lieu ouvert accessible à tous'.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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