

*Papua New Guinea's New
Parliament House:
A Contested National Symbol*

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The new National Parliament is far more than just a building or even just a parliament. It is for Papua New Guinea, a symbol of political independence. . . . Its sweeping lines impress, while signifying essential aspects and parts of our nation.

THE HONORABLE TIMOTHY BONGA, SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

When Papua New Guinea (PNG) became a sovereign state on 16 September 1975, joyful celebrations erupted across the nation. A substantial number of new citizens, however, did not want independence from Australia.¹ In nation building, a vital concern of the PNG government has been to convince Papua New Guineans to support their new democracy and to feel pride in a new national culture and identity (Narokobi 1980).

To raise national consciousness, the state has instigated a far-reaching plan of civic education and cultural revitalization (Blacking 1984; Crawford 1977) and has created "key symbols" (Ortner 1973) to render, as Geertz has underscored, "the broad process of collective self-definition explicit" and "transform the symbolic framework through which people experience social reality" (1973, 252, 239). Although the national flag and crest are the most familiar and emotionally charged of these emblems for Papua New Guineans, the government has initiated an ambitious building program in the national capital to give dramatic embodiment to the legitimacy and ideals of nationhood. The centerpiece of this political and aesthetic locus, and the focus of this paper, is the new Parliament House.

Built at a cost of 23.4 million kina (US\$24.3 million), the Parliament House has been designed as a monumental manifestation of national identity to display national pride and progress to Papua New Guinea citizens and the international community. The task of constructing a symbol of national identity expressive of Papua New Guinea's highly pluralistic and modernizing society is, however, a complex challenge requiring the careful selection and manipulation of imagery. Although the Parliament House was the object of an extensive planning process, including two design competitions, the building has been the target of local and international criticism (*PC*, 11 May 1979, 6 Aug 1984, 7 Aug 1984, 10 Sept 1985; Saini 1988; Vale 1988). Critics have their own political and aesthetic agendas, leading them to question or even repudiate the Parliament House's national iconography.

In this article I describe the protracted procedure of selecting the Parliament House design and discuss the multivalent symbolism of the building. I address economic, social, and aesthetic arguments that challenge the Parliament House as a valid symbol of national identity. I argue that the significance of the Parliament House to Papua New Guineans is not confined to the relevance of its architecture (ie, the building as a formal object) but is linked dynamically to the actions of parliamentarians (ie, the political process occurring in its chambers). As Turner (1967), Wolf (1972), and others have shown, a basic feature of key symbols is their "multivocality" and ability to accrue or change meanings with time and context. Because of its condensed and multilayered symbolism, the Parliament House is both a model of and a model for society (Geertz 1973, 93-95).

DESIGNING A NEW PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Plans for Papua New Guinea's new Parliament House accompanied legislative developments toward self-government. The need for a new Parliament House was first raised by the Select Committee on Constitutional Development, which was appointed in 1969 by the Second House of Assembly to help prepare the country for national independence (PNG 1984). As membership in the Assembly grew, its facilities—a converted hospital in downtown Port Moresby—became increasingly crowded. In 1971, the Second House therefore accepted the Select Committee's recommendation to construct a new Parliament House at Arona, the geographical center of the country located in a remote area of the Eastern Highlands

(PNG 1984, 4). However, nothing was done to implement the recommendation until March 1975. With independence scheduled for September, Chief Minister Somare urged his Cabinet to move on the project, and they decided to locate the Parliament House at Waigani, a growing administrative center. A site was selected below Independence Hill and was marked officially by Prince Charles of England on Independence Day (PNG 1984).

To set guidelines for the building, Prime Minister Somare appointed a parliamentary design committee to prepare a brief for the Department of Transport, Works, and Supply (Briggs 1989).² Although many Third World nations had turned to “star” international architects to design their new parliaments (Vale 1988), the PNG government preferred to use local experts who would be sensitive to indigenous life-styles and values. Aware of the contradictions presented by grandiose capitals in new nations with impoverished populations, Papua New Guinea’s leaders wanted to justify the considerable cost of constructing the Parliament House by stipulating that the building contribute to the country’s economy by stimulating the development of new locally owned building enterprises (Newman 1984).

Charged with delineating the site, setting, and form of the proposed Parliament House, the design committee worked for several months, consulting with parliamentarians and concerned citizens to prepare its brief.³ The result was a very specific document indicating what was required to symbolize the national heritage and manifest political independence (Bonga 1984). Ignoring the inaccessible Highland site of Arona, the brief indicated that the Parliament House would be constructed at Waigani and be “the key building” in the new capitol complex that included Independence Hill, the National Museum and Art Gallery, the Supreme Court, and the National Library (PNG 1975). The brief emphasized that the Parliament House setting should be in keeping with the egalitarian life-style of Papua New Guineans and be conducive to pedestrians wishing to enjoy its gardens and recreational facilities.⁴

With regard to the design of the building, the brief was unequivocal: the Parliament House should be inspired by Papua New Guinea’s “worthy traditions of art and architecture” and, as far as possible, be developed “using solid local materials” so that “the substance of the Parliament will also be of the country” (PNG 1975). To help architects with this directive, the brief included photographs and sketches of traditional ritual and ceremonial houses indicating that the Parliament House design be “in the manner of a *Haus Man* (Men’s House) in a village society” (PNG 1975).⁵

DESIGN CONTROVERSIES: THE COMPETITION FIASCO

In December 1975 the design committee completed its work and Barry Holloway, the chairman, officially forwarded the design brief to the prime minister. The architect division of the Department of Public Works (DPW) (with a staff of about ninety expatriate architects and draftsmen) was assigned to work on a design concept following the brief's guidelines and within a construction budget of 6.4 million kina (US\$6.7 million) (Craig, pers comm). At that point, DPW Director Cecil Hogan had three options for undertaking the design process: call an international design competition; call a national competition open to all individual architects in Papua New Guinea, including those employed by the DPW; select a plan from designs submitted by staff and architects from within the DPW. After discussion among senior staff, the third option was chosen because it was felt the department had sufficient talent to execute the project. Overseas firms were seen as lacking the technical knowledge to achieve a cost-effective building and as having very little knowledge about Papua New Guinea or its cultural nuances (Simpson, pers comm).

From twelve designs submitted for government review (*PC*, 11 May 1979, 25) the plans of Cecil Hogan were selected for further development. The politicians were greatly impressed with Hogan's design because, in addition to submitting drawings, he had produced a finely executed scale model (Simpson, pers comm). For a year, however, nothing happened until Prime Minister Michael Somare decided to continue the project. Once this decision was known, reservations and criticisms about Hogan's design escalated within the DPW, and outside architects also began to protest sharply against the restricted nature of the official selection process (Briggs, pers comm). After sharp debate within the DPW, it was decided to hold an open competition. On 21 December 1977, the Speaker of the House announced that a new competition would be held with outside judges. After one or more judges stipulated that designs and architects must be anonymous, Cecil Hogan's plan was ruled ineligible because it was already familiar to some of the jury.

The results of the second competition were announced in May 1978, when Bill Phillips, a senior architect at the DPW, was declared the winner and awarded the 7,000 kina prize (US\$7,300). Unlike Hogan's plan, which had conformed quite explicitly to directives for a traditional men's house, Phillips' structure was more contemporary in its dramatic, but unmistak-

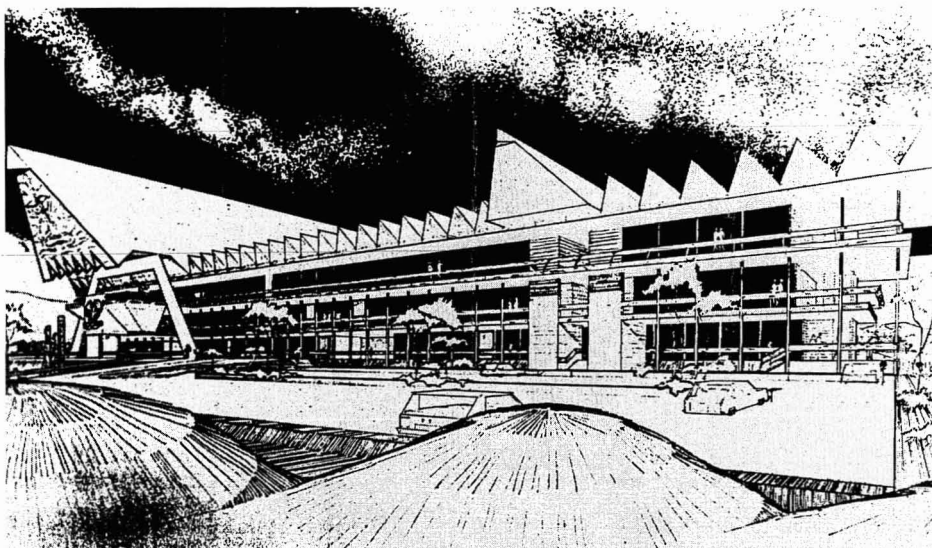


PHOTO 1. Bill Phillips' award-winning design. (Courtesy of Michael D. Simpson)

able, Papua New Guinea theme. His plans called for a series of open tropical-landscaped courtyards interspersed among enclosed areas (Photo 1). According to one of the judges, these plans were excellent because they “met the real spirit of PNG” (Saini, pers comm, 1988). Phillips’ design was also considered structurally easy to build and would have met the construction budget. It was widely accepted among resident architects that the judges had made the right decision. After the competition, Prime Minister Somare, who had been on the jury, expressed his approval, the politicians appeared happy, and Bill Phillips left the DPW to start his own firm to design the new Parliament House. Three months later, the Cabinet decided to revert to Hogan’s design. Phillips took legal action and, in June 1979, accepted a settlement of 25,000 kina (US\$26,000) (*PC*, 6 Aug 1984, 12).

The reasons for this turnabout are ambiguous. Government sources state that at the time of its acceptance Phillips’ design was outdated because it did not comply with the most recent functional requirements for the building specified by politicians and government officials. Also, concerns existed that the extensive employment of “bush” materials in the construction was impractical (Briggs, pers comm). However, these official explanations are, in part, contradicted by information from other sources. According to one of the judges in the competition, Phillips’ building did

not call for extensive use of traditional materials but was a sophisticated, reinforced concrete structure (Saini, pers comm). It is likely that the Cabinet and other parliamentarians preferred Hogan's design because it had been undertaken in direct consultation with them, and because they feared prolonged delays in implementing Phillips' design.⁶

In August 1978, the National Executive Council finally ratified Hogan's plan and steps were undertaken to implement its construction. First, the Australian management firm of Peddle, Thorp & Harvey, headed by Ron Burgess, was engaged to supervise the project. Second, Tom Craig, the director of the new National Arts School, was asked to locate a designer who could set up a workshop at the school to execute an extensive program of architectural embellishment to elaborate on the national theme of the Parliament House. Craig immediately recommended the Scottish artist and craftsman, Archie Brennan, who had recently come to teach at the National Arts School after setting up the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne in 1975. According to Ellen Dissanayake (1983), another National Arts School staff member, Craig felt that Brennan's extensive experience working with and organizing other craftsmen; his sensitivity to translating the designs of others; his appreciation of the complex temper of life in Papua New Guinea, with its striking mix of the ultramodern and the traditional; and his own creative vision would make him a valuable and responsible coordinator. This early collaboration between Hogan and Brennan, although sometimes buffeted by different ideas (Brennan, pers comm), resulted in a decorative scheme that was an integral aspect of the architectural design both in aesthetic impact and symbolic meaning.

THE NEW PARLIAMENT HOUSE: A MODERN *HAUS MAN*

Rising from a reflecting pool whose waters symbolize that Papua New Guinea is an island nation (Somare 1984), the Parliament House is an explicit transformation of the architectural traditions of Melanesian spirit and meeting houses (Photo 2). However, unlike those perishable village structures, the new building is intended "to last" (Somare 1984). Replacing bush materials, it has been constructed from local concrete, mosaic tiles made at the National Arts School, and glue-laminate timber beams processed by a factory built for the project by the commercial division of the Papua New Guinea Office of Forests (PNG 1984).

The Parliament House is an imposing monument. Although the build-

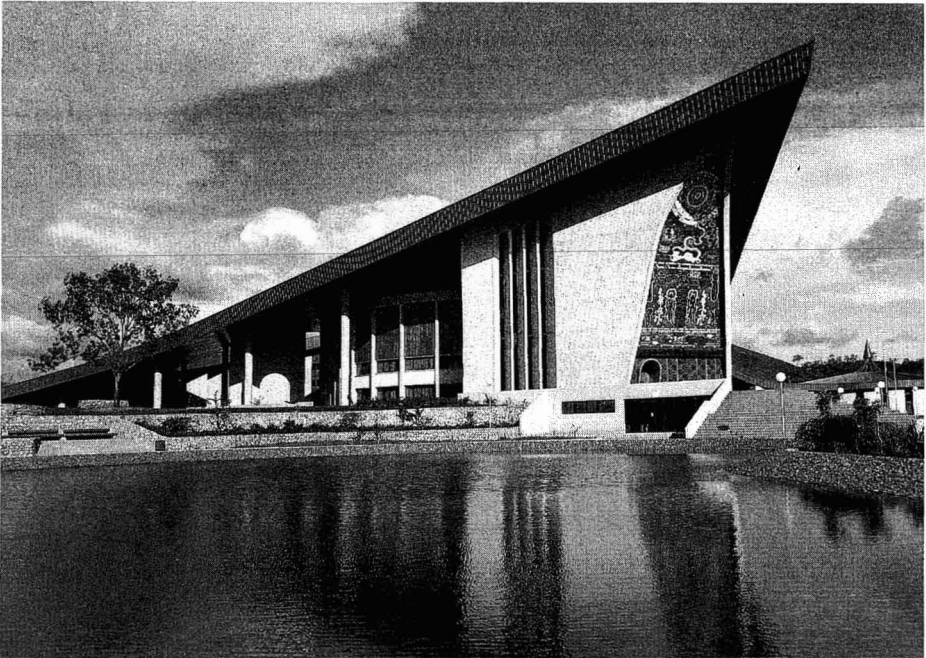


PHOTO 2. The new Papua New Guinea Parliament House designed by Cecil Hogan: "A Modern *Haus Man*."

ing gives the appearance of a single structure, it is a complex of three architectural units (A, B, and C) linked together by covered walkways and spanned by a single roof. As Prime Minister Somare informed Papua New Guineans in his first radio address from the new Parliament House, this roof is more than a functional covering, for it is shaped as a traveling spearhead to symbolize the nation's strength and commitment to progress and development (Somare 1984; Photo 3).

Block A, the largest and most visible unit, contains the grand entrance hall, the debating chamber, and the suites of the prime minister and the Speaker. According to an official description of the Parliament House (PNG 1984), it has been designed as a *haus tambaran*, a spirit house associated traditionally with an ancestral cult practiced by many societies of the Sepik River region (Tuzin 1980). Recognized internationally, the peoples of this area produce some of the finest art in the tribal world (Bowden 1983; Gathercole, Kaeppler, and Newton 1979), and the villages around Maprik, in particular, are noted for the towering painted façades of their spirit houses (Forge 1973). In making the sweeping curve of the Maprik

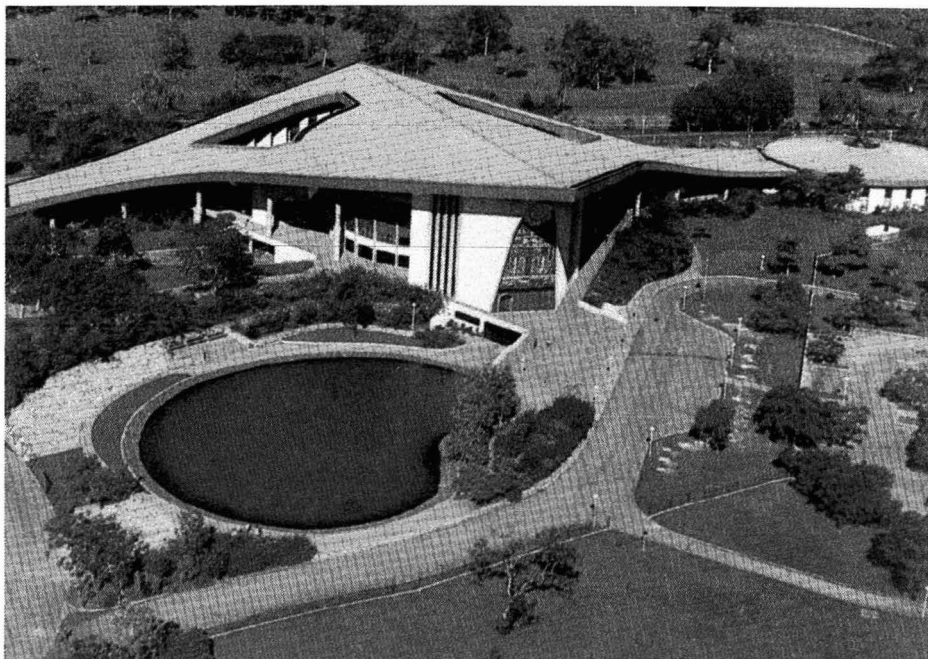


PHOTO 3. "A Travelling Spearhead"—symbolizing the nation's commitment to progress and development. (Courtesy Honourable D. C. Young, Speaker of the House, and Independent Books, Port Moresby)

haus tambaran the most arresting feature of his design (Dissanayake 1983), Hogan has not only chosen a form that is aesthetically powerful, but also one that the outer world associates with Papua New Guinea. These references to the Sepik also have a particular historical importance for national independence, because Michael Somare, the nation's first prime minister and leader of the Pangu Pati, was a member of Parliament for the East Sepik region (Downs 1980, 488).

The other two structural units are used for administrative purposes, entertainment, and ceremonial. Block B, which has six stories of offices, is situated immediately behind the debating chamber. At present, this structure has no symbolic significance apart from its interior embellishments. However, it has been proposed that the three units of the Parliament House be renamed for former politicians to commemorate their contributions to national life. If this occurs, Block B will assume particular historical associations.

Block C, which is joined to the great lefthand arc of the Parliament

House roof, is a round building with a small roof pinnacle. This circular form is characteristic of men's meeting houses in the Highlands, and the pinnacle is a feature typical of the Chimbu region (PNG 1984). Because Highlanders are noted for their elaborate feasts and extensive exchanges (Strathern 1971), it is appropriate that the members' dining rooms and other entertainment facilities are located in this Highland unit. But it is a misnomer to refer to this building merely as "the recreation block" (PNG 1984), because important ceremonial banquets are held in the state dining room as are official ceremonies for signing international treaties and agreements (Briggs 1989). Although the Block C round house (*haus raun*) does not have the imposing monumentality of Block A's spirit house (*haus tambaran*), important political activities are conducted there.

Hogan's design thus brings together two traditional structures having significance beyond the village level to represent major geographic regions of the country (ie, the highlands and the lowlands, the coast and the interior). By linking these two structures together under one roof, a metaphorical image is created of national unity and identity in the land.

To enrich the basic design plan, the Parliament House has been embellished with decorative elements that make explicit reference to the diverse artistic traditions of the nation's nineteen provinces and the rich resources of the country. Planning for this project began early in 1976 under the supervision of Archie Brennan and was carried out by artists and craftsmen brought to the National Arts School in Port Moresby from all over the nation (NAS 1984). Even though most of the design concepts were Brennan's, he drew extensively on traditional style elements as well as the imagery of contemporary village artists, who came to work at the Creative Arts Center (the forerunner of the National Arts School) in the early 1970s. From its start, the program was considered a communal enterprise for artists; students and staff of the National Arts School worked informally alongside one another daily in a convivial workshop atmosphere (Brennan, pers comm).

ARTWORK AND BUILDING EMBELLISHMENT: THE EXTERIOR MURALS

Visitors approaching the Parliament House confront striking embellishments on the building's exterior. Over the rear entrance to Block B is a very large concrete mural of recessed designs derived from woven cane



PHOTO 4. The mural over the rear entrance to Block B, “weaving as a model for nation-building.” (Courtesy Honourable D. C. Young, Speaker of the House, and Independent Books, Port Moresby)

walls, baskets, mats, and string bags (*bilums*), made principally by women (Brennan, pers comm; Photo 4). The mural’s theme is unity, suggested by the metaphor of weaving different strands together to make a larger whole—an apt processual model for nation building in a parliamentary setting (NAS 1984).⁷

In the front of the building, occupying the vast space of the *tambaran* façade traditionally (and in Hogan’s original design) filled with totemic and ancestral figures, a mosaic mural depicts the natural and developing resources of the nation (Photo 5). Accompanied by two quotations from the constitution chosen by Chief Justice Sir Buri Kidu, this pictorial façade projects a national theme intended to make Hogan’s specific *haus tambaran* reference “more vestigial”—that is, to make the Sepik form only a

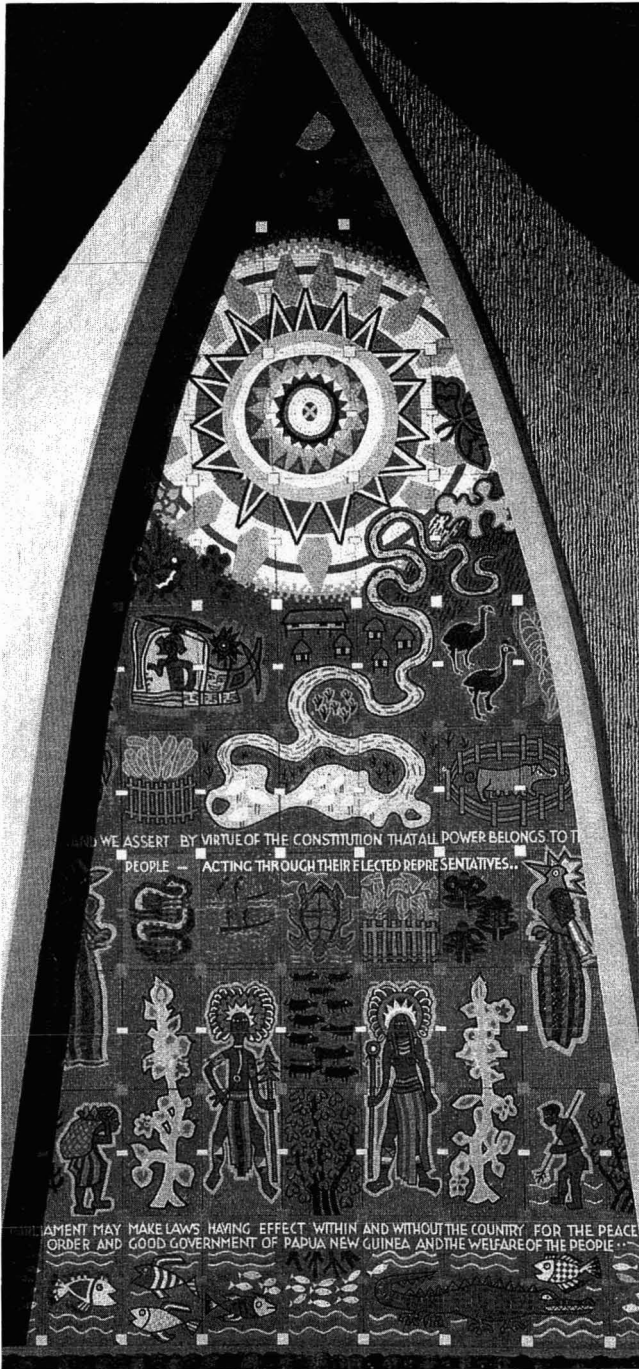


PHOTO 5. The front façade designed by Archie Brennan, “the resources of the land, sky, and waters.”
(*Courtesy Honourable D. C. Young, Speaker of the House, and Independent Books, Port Moresby*)

framework for displaying new Papua New Guinean symbolism (Brennan, pers comm).

In the lowest section of the façade, the thatched designs evoke those of Trobriand yam houses (Brennan, pers comm). Above the door is a lintel of carved wooden heads. These ancestral masks are a stylistic feature of certain Sepik *haus tambarans* but, in this context, they represent the nineteen provinces of the nation (NAS 1984). Although individual motifs mark a regional or tribal identity, when incorporated into the overall iconographic program they are appropriated as symbols of a newly created (invented) national heritage enriched, according to official rhetoric, by its diversity (Somare 1979). This bringing together and sharing of disparate cultural expressions is now occurring in schools, festivals, mass media, and public arts throughout the country (PC, 1979).

Symbolizing an island nation, the façade divides the nation's resources into those belonging to the sea, the land, and the sky (NAS 1984). Represented pictorially by everyday items of wealth, these images are adapted from drawings made by contemporary Highland village artists (eg, Jakupa, Kauage, and John Mann) (Heermon 1979; Rosi 1987). In the sea, life abounds with fishes; however, a mango crocodile is also there to warn of hidden and unexpected dangers. On the land, wealth is signified by other familiar images: pigs, food gardens, and various birds, including the bird of paradise, the national symbol. The value of work is also represented. A woman carrying a heavy *bilum* represents traditional transportation, while a helicopter, a trademark of Kauage, signifies modern communication and development.

But amidst the bounty, a snake symbolizes imminent danger (PNG 1984). Acknowledging Papua New Guinea's existence within a dynamic political arena, the nation is not symbolized as an ideal paradise but confronts real threats to its development. Two warriors stand guard over the country's resources, their traditional adornment (*bilas*) symbolizing strength, pride, beauty, and assertiveness (Strathern and Strathern 1971). One of these warriors is a man; the other is a woman who holds a digging stick resembling a club.

In traditional life women were generally banned from, or from walking near, a *haus tambaran* (Bowden 1983; PNG 1984). Public leadership of society was effectively controlled by men. Under the new constitution, whose central propositions are blazoned on the parliamentary façade, the

new democratic order guarantees women the same rights as men, with one of the goals of the constitution being equal participation by women in all aspects of national life (Narokobi 1983, 120; Nakikus 1985, 32). In reality, however, PNG women must struggle to participate in development (King, Lee, and Warakai 1985). Despite the government rhetoric and the changing relationships now taking place between the sexes, women still find themselves unequal partners of men (Rosi and Zimmer 1988; Stratigos and Hughes 1987). The image of the proud female warrior standing on an equal footing with her male partner (but on his left side [Needham 1973]) represents a "model for" rather than a "model of" society (Geertz 1973).

Dominating the upper section of the façade, the sun, moon, rain, and the waters of rivers and lakes appear as natural vital elements in the nation's quest to harvest and increase the resources of the land (NAS 1984).

INTERIOR DESIGN AND EMBELLISHMENT: PROGRAMMING *BUNG WANTAIM*

Following the design brief that the building be made of the substance of the country, the interior has been sheathed with native rosewood and filled with a wide range of contemporary national art. This decorative program extends into all areas of the building, but the symbolism is focused on the grand entrance hall, the assembly chamber, and the state dining room.

Visitors entering the building to observe the business of the House approach the public galleries from the great entrance hall. This lofty space is "like a cathedral" (Bonga 1984) but resonates also to the soaring interiors of *daima* houses of the Gulf Coast (Specht and Fields 1984) or more spacious interiors of other Sepik area *tambarans*. This mingling of architectural traditions is echoed again in the major decorations of the great hall. As Archie Brennan has stated: "We worked very hard to design something which we felt belonged to this country yet of which one could not immediately say: yes, that is Sepik, that is West Highlands, that is Trobriands" (Newman 1984, 5).

Extending into the main assembly chamber and the two members' lobbies is a ceiling mural, inspired by the painted bark ceiling of the court

house at Ambunti in the Middle Sepik. The choice of the Ambunti motif was motivated by two considerations: the aesthetic power of traditional sago bark painting and the appropriateness of using the iconography of a shared traditional belief in “the power and guidance gained from ancestors and spirits overlooking events” (NAS 1984, 22). The preamble of the national constitution pledges to honor the wisdom of the *tambuna* ‘ancestors’ as the source of the nation’s strength and inspiration (Narokobi 1983, 18). This concept is now a regular component in government rhetoric about the collective past (Keesing 1989), but it is also a popular grass-roots sentiment drawn upon regularly by contemporary artists and writers (including schoolchildren) seeking to record or explore the meaning of traditional customs and values for national culture and identity (Beier 1980; Lasini nd; G. Powell 1987; K. Powell 1976; Taylor 1988).

Above the great staircase to the council chamber is a smaller mural, adapted from a drawing by Cecil King Wunge, a contemporary village artist from Madang Province. Depicting a debate between the nation’s leaders and traditionally valued creatures of the natural environment over whose images should appear on the national currency, this work exhibits certain traditional conventions of representing the world. Like the Parliament House, Wunge’s mural is a transitional image displaying features of the past and present.

The most dramatic embellishment of the grand entrance hall is an assemblage of carved wooden poles that rises fifteen meters toward the ceiling (Photo 6). Cut from the forests of the northern coast, these great logs of *kwila* wood were transported to the National Arts School and worked on collectively by the carvers of the production team to create a syncretic work of artistic traditions from all over the nation. This sculpture was entitled *Bung Wantaim*, a term made popular by politicians during the national election campaigns, signifying a “true coming together” (NAS 1984, 20). The meaning of this work lies not only in the visual impact of harmoniously integrating a mixture of styles, but also in the importance of the creative process whereby artists from diverse areas put aside their political differences to work cooperatively on a shared venture (Brennan, pers comm). Standing in the entrance hall to the chamber, the carved poles are a visual model for the necessary operation of the democratic parliamentary system, reminding politicians and other Papua New Guineans of the need for collaboration and mutual respect in the nation’s highly pluralistic society.

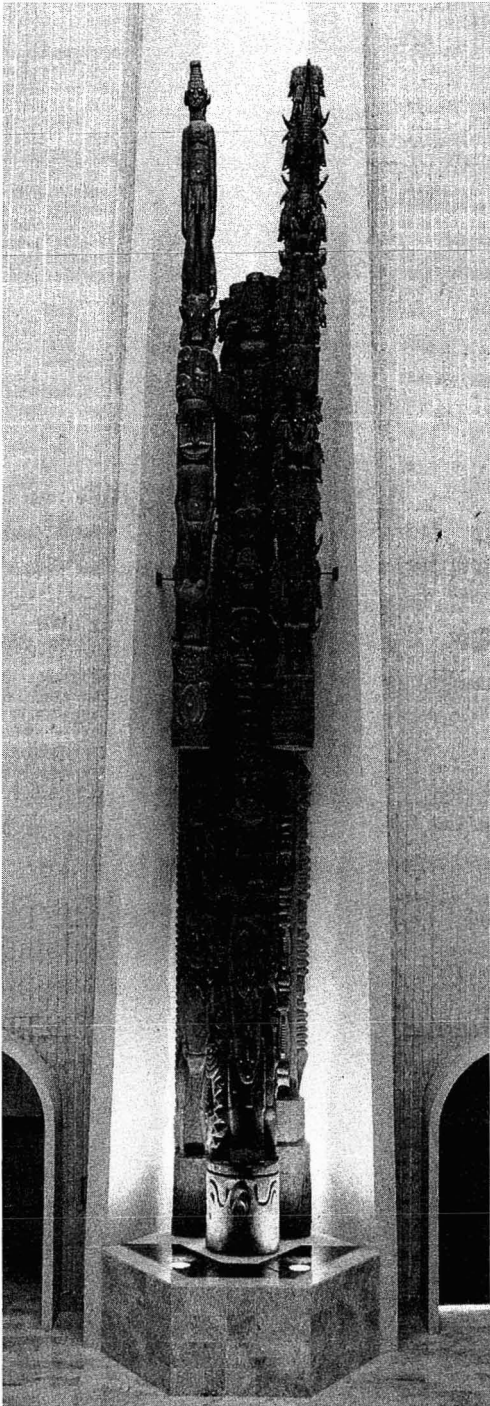


PHOTO 6. Assemblage of carved wooden poles in the grand entrance hall entitled *Bung Wantaim* 'coming together'. (Courtesy Archie Brennan)

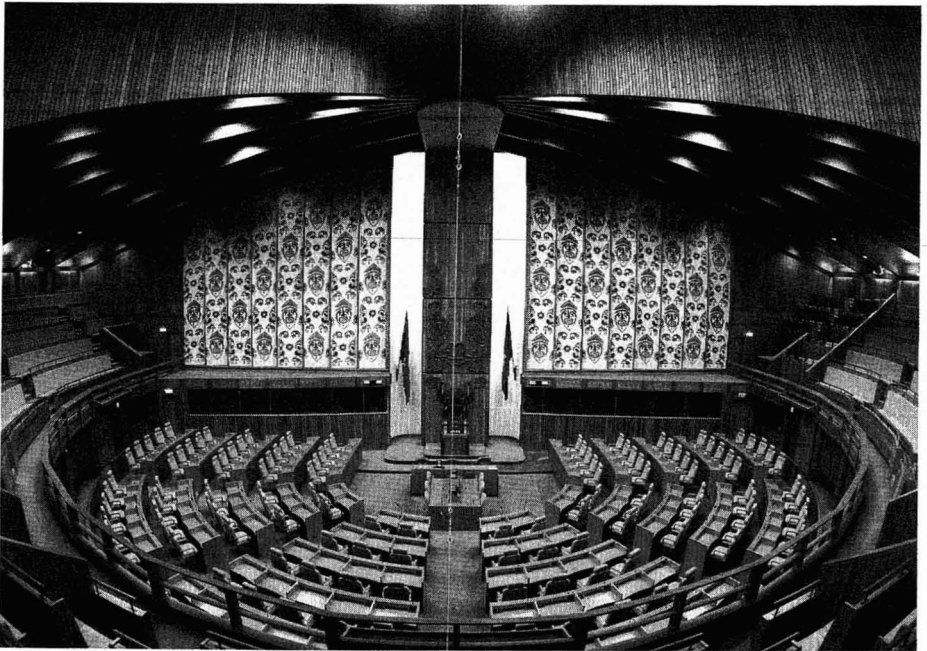


PHOTO 7. The council chamber, whose floor plan is based on the Westminster model. The mural behind the carved Speaker's chair is inspired by traditional masks from the Gulf and Western provinces. (Courtesy Honourable D. C. Young, Speaker of the House, and Independent Books, Port Moresby)

THE GREAT COUNCIL CHAMBER: A SYNTHESIS OF OLD AND NEW DEMOCRACY

Entered from the grand staircase, the oval council chamber is the symbolic center of the Parliament complex, signifying a union of the democratic political traditions of indigenous Melanesian society and those newly adopted from the parliamentary system of British Westminster (PNG 1984; Photo 7). Built on two levels so that a public gallery overlooks the assembly floor, the floor plan reflects the Westminster model. Facing members and visitors as they enter the chamber is the Speaker's column. This encompasses the Speaker's canopied chair and desk, overhead carved panels that flank the national emblem, and a display of national flags. This ceremonial structure forms the apex of the curving rows of members' desks, divided into two main sections. On the Speaker's right sit the prime

minister and members of his government; on the left are members and leaders of the opposition.

The form of the Speaker's chair is also borrowed from Westminster. However, the rich carvings of the chair, as well as those of the column and desk, are derived from indigenous motifs. The columns have been worked in styles coming from the Trobriand Islands and Milne Bay that were used traditionally to decorate ceremonial *kula* canoes; the desk and chair display patterns and markings found on orators' stools used in village ceremonies and traditional political debates throughout the Sepik (NAS 1984). To symbolize the power of authority, a *garamut* drum has been carved on the front panel of the Speaker's desk. Used traditionally by many coastal, inland, and island people to call assemblies together, the *garamut* is also used today in contemporary settings to mark continuity with the past.

Further references to old and new aesthetic traditions abound in the assembly chamber, including two large murals that decorate the front and back walls of the chamber. The first, directly behind the Speaker's column, is a large textile composition inspired by traditional masks of the Gulf and Western provinces. The second, on the wall facing the Speaker, is a mural intended to be tapa cloth, associated particularly with Oro Province. Due to the dimensions of the chamber, however, not to mention the perishability and fragility of tapa, a new medium of sawdust, stains, and glazes was substituted "to produce the character of tapa cloth on a bigger scale" (NAS 1984, 20).

The extensive woodwork in the chamber has been embellished in a less explicit mode with designs that "recall" indigenous motifs, but which cannot be identified with any particular group or region (Brennan, pers comm; NAS 1984). Created from this common artistic repertoire, these abstract embellishments once again reinforce and visually express the design program's essential theme of *bung wantaim*.

EXTENSIONS OF THE EMBELLISHMENT PROGRAM

The program of aesthetic embellishment continues throughout the building, adding further visual elaboration to the concept of the Parliament House as a symbol of national identity. The modern offices of the parliamentary ministers in Blocks A and B are supplied with locally manufactured white oak furniture. Many of these office pieces have been carved

with motifs similar to those found on the members' desks in the assembly chamber. In addition, special items have been made for the prime minister, including chairs carved in the Sepik River area and a large conference table shaped in the form of a Papuan canoe (*lakatoi*), incised with the design of a *kundu* drum and inlaid with ebony from Woodlark Island (PNG 1984). These intricate details make special what would otherwise be merely ordinary objects of modern daily life; they link the past to the present in a creative way that is not merely symbolic but functional for the nation's developing businesses.

The Parliament House also contains the largest display of contemporary art works in the country. They have been executed by Papua New Guinea's first generation of village artists as well as by more recent high school affiliates to the National Arts School. Although these works display a great variety of styles, they either depict images of Papua New Guinea's changing society or the myths and legends of traditional life (*taim bipo* in Tok Pisin). In the prime minister's reception room, two paintings hang on opposite walls. One, entitled *Diving for Turtle*, is by Joe Nalo from Manus. This shimmering, naturalistic underwater scene is a portrait of his deceased father, once renowned for his skills in spearing turtle (Nalo, pers comm). By contrast, the other colored image shows four stylized figures with elaborately decorated heads whose forms are created from intricate design elements. Executed by Jakupa Ako, one of Papua New Guinea's best known village artists, it is called *Air Niugini Pilots*. Because Jakupa flies home occasionally from Port Moresby to his village in the Highlands, he is recording in his own way the pilots whose skills and uniforms (designed at the NAS) he admires (Jakupa, pers comm).

Other images recording the historical development of Papua New Guinea society are found in the Highland *haus raun* building, where the state dining room has been decorated to signify its political importance and project patriotism. Under a display of flags at the head of the room, is the state dining table (Photo 8). Designed by the Trobriand artist Martin Morububuna, its front panel has been carved as a panorama of traditional village life from all regions of the nation. The walls of the dining room, lounges, and recreation areas are hung with large-scale reproductions of selected archival photographs. Made by Westerners to record native culture and events of colonial rule, these pictures have been infused with new meaning to recast history for nation building and the creation of PNG identity (Keesing 1989; Linnekin 1983). In their national setting, these dig-

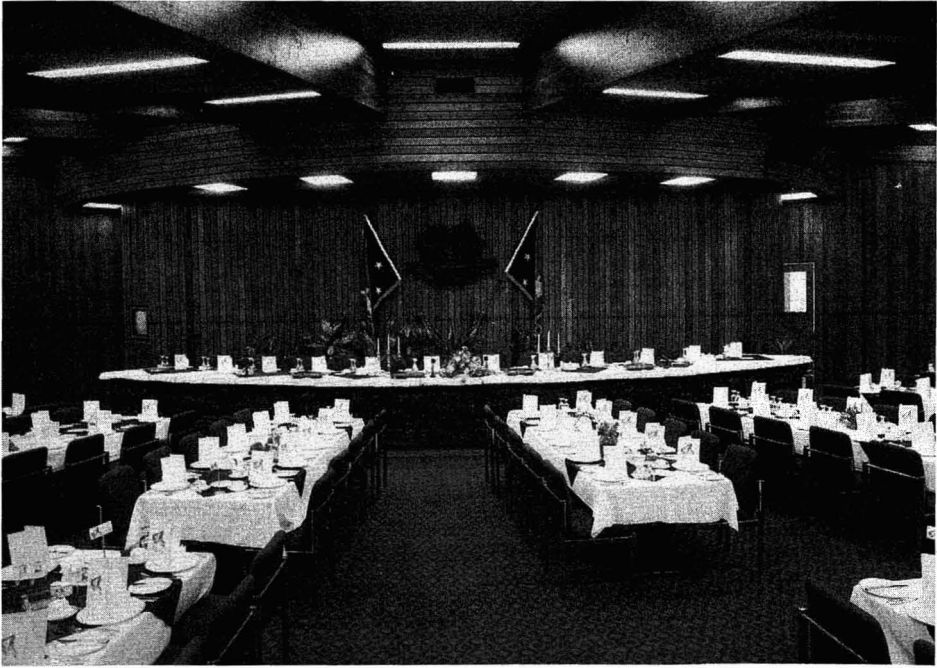


PHOTO 8. State dining room with detail from the front panel of the state dining table designed by Martin Morububuna. (Courtesy Honourable D. C. Young, Speaker of the House, and Independent Books, Port Moresby)

nified representations pay respect to a traditional past and give Papua New Guineans a sense of accomplishment in having overcome Western political domination to gain membership in the community of sovereign states. There is no reference to civic discord or to the tears shed at the departure of the Australians (O'Rourke 1975). Created nine years after

independence, the symbolism evokes solidarity and confidence and directs attention to Papua New Guinea's new role as a sovereign democracy in the South Pacific.

CRITICISMS OF THE PARLIAMENT HOUSE

The major function of a "key" symbol is to elaborate or synthesize a complex of ideas and to "stand for them all at once" (Ortner 1973, 1340). The Parliament House is empowered as a representation of national pride and identity because of the interplay of meanings created by its architectural design, choice of construction materials and technology, and the layered multivocal associations of its embellishment program devoted to celebrating the concept of *bung wantaim*. Nevertheless, despite explicit efforts to link the past and present and construct an image of unity in diversity to embody the nation—a rallying theme also employed by other new national governments in the Pacific (Feinberg 1990)—the Parliament House has been the butt of criticism both in Papua New Guinea and abroad. Some of these criticisms reflect social and economic conflicts present in Papua New Guinea's rapidly modernizing society. Others, however, are related to artistic and scholarly concerns about "authentic" regionalism in the architecture of Third World pluralistic societies, and what role art should play in the architecture of Papua New Guinea (Milani and Manandhar 1988; Saini 1988; Vale 1988).

DOMESTIC CRITICISMS OF THE PARLIAMENT HOUSE

When the design committee wrote its brief for the new Parliament House, it was aware that the proposed building could draw public criticism and so needed justification and judicious planning. The brief directed that the architectural plan should reflect the traditions of its constituents and contribute to the development of local industries. There have been public demonstrations and protests in the national press against the building's excessive cost and against what one politician described as "a monument to our blind dependence on outside know-how" (*PC*, 10 Sept 1985, 3).

The problem of cost was aggravated by inflation and missed deadlines.⁸ In 1976, when Cecil Hogan became the winner of the first design competition, his plan was priced at around 7 million kina (US\$7.3 million). In 1979, his reinstated design cost 11 million kina (US\$11.4 million). At the

start of construction in 1980, this figure had risen to 12.9 million kina (US\$13.4 million). Four years later, the building was completed at a final cost of 23.4 million kina (US\$24.3 million) (*PC*, 11 May 1979, 6 Aug 1984).

Although most Papua New Guineans appear to support the view of the Speaker of the House that “a suitably impressive building was needed to support the (democratic) system” (Bonga 1984), others strongly disagreed. One letter to the *Post Courier* from a Port Moresby architect stated that with limited funds available the government should have secured professional insurance and selected a design that could have been constructed in stages (*PC*, 11 May 1979). Other Papua New Guineans protested publicly: on 7 August 1984, when Prince Charles officially opened the new building, a group of university students organized a demonstration to disrupt the ceremonies. According to the president of the National Union of Students, the Parliament House was a “useless monument only for the privileged few” and was “an unnecessary expense” considering that the country still had to build roads and solve the problems of urban drift and widespread violence (*PC*, 7 Aug 1984, 3).

The difficult issues raised by these students—resource allocation and manifestations of privilege—are not problems that can be dismissed by the government, given the current politics of sharp budget cutting, continuing official corruption, and increasing class differentiation among Papua New Guineans (Levine and Levine 1979; Good 1986). The danger remains that if the administration fails to provide avenues for participation by the people in decisions that affect their lives and economic well-being, the Parliament House will become associated with the politicians that occupy it rather than with the people and cultures they represent. Because the Parliament House is a modern building equipped with the latest facilities, it is important that the building's significance as a national symbol of progress not be corrupted by associations of luxury. For example, *Paradise*, Air Niugini's magazine, frequently runs an advertisement by POSH, a luxury service for VIPs. This shows a limousine parked in front of the Parliament House's grand front stairway with the caption, “When you need to arrive in style . . .” Criticisms of privilege directed against the Parliament reflect current social and political strains present in contemporary PNG society as it struggles to maintain a grass-roots democracy (Lipset 1989; Samana 1988).

The criticism that the Parliament House is a “monument to blind dependence on outside know-how” was printed in the special tenth-year

independence edition of the *Post Courier* (10 Sept 1985, 3), and reflects the frustrations of many elite Papua New Guineans that the government is not moving rapidly enough to lessen the nation's reliance on foreign expertise. Although the writer of this commentary acknowledged that the Parliament House is a "beautiful monument to independence," he also saw the building as manifesting official policies that "train" PNG architects, surveyors, and artisans to become employees of expatriate firms instead of managers of their own businesses. He charged that the government must encourage "joint ventures" in the construction field so that "real" Papua New Guinean firms can begin to tender for large projects, such as the new Parliament House. These blunt criticisms accurately reflect the construction business in Papua New Guinea, which is controlled by expatriate firms knowledgeable in business administration and project management (Vale 1988). Through current policies of indigenization, however, the government is continually and successfully training Papua New Guineans to fill the posts of expatriates. Moreover, as seen in the design and embellishments of the Parliament House, the government has employed expatriate designers who are knowledgeable about the artistic traditions of Papua New Guinea and sensitive to the climate of its modernizing society. Recently, however, the architectural design and artistic program of the Parliament House have also been criticized by outside scholars who claim that the building "trivializes the culture it wishes to represent" and, at its very worst, is an example of "cultural rape" or "abortion" (Saini 1988, 5; Vale 1988, 172, 175, 324).

WHAT IS AUTHENTIC REGIONALISM?

Since the end of World War Two, growing numbers of governments in Third World states have commissioned the building of new parliament buildings and capital cities to commemorate political independence and symbolize national identity. To draw world attention to these projects, internationally recognized architects have often been engaged to design them, thereby stimulating considerable scholarly commentary about their styles and settings (see Vale 1988 for extensive bibliography). Despite its regional importance and cost, the PNG Parliament House has not been reviewed in a major architectural journal. However, as part of a comparative study that analyzes the problems of "designing national identity" in the capitals and capitols of the postcolonial world, Vale has critically dis-

cussed "PNG's Concrete Haus Tambaran" (1988). In addition, at the 1988 Waigani seminar on "The State of the Arts in the Pacific," sponsored by the University of Papua New Guinea, Balwant Saini (one of the judges of the second parliamentary design competition) commented on the Parliament House design, asserting that it fails in a significant way to capture the heritage it wishes to portray.

The negative views of these two scholars toward the building are a result of two fundamental criticisms: first, that the purported national symbolism of the Parliament House is distorted by the "subnational and international biases" of the government, causing the building to be "Sepik centric" (Vale 1988, 129–134, 159–163, 172); second, that the use of traditional forms in the design disregards the ritual contexts, ownership, and sacred meanings of the motifs (Vale 1988, 172–173, 323). Thus, although the building is visually dramatic, it is only a "superficial" parody of the past and is little more than a "compromised and enervated" architectural pastiche (Vale 1988, 323). According to Saini, this "tagging on of symbols" is a "questionable exercise" because transporting symbols without understanding their real significance is "an example of cultural abortion" (Saini 1988, 5).

These criticisms distort the iconography of the Parliament House by failing to recognize or accept the dynamic artistic contexts in which Papua New Guineans are using traditional arts for new respected purposes. What appears as "cultural rape and abortion" to outsiders may not necessarily be thought so by the majority of Papua New Guineans.

"SEPIK CENTRISM"

Vale argued that postcolonial capitals and capitol complexes are a "continuation of politics by other means": that the concept of national identity they embody is distorted by "subnational" and "supranational" interests to maintain the hegemony of the government in power (1988, vi). He claimed that the PNG Parliament House exhibits an inescapable "Sepik centrism," pointing to the dominating *haus tambaran* design, the Ambunti ceiling, the Sepik orator's stool, the Sepik-area work that "seems dominant" in the *bung wantaim* assemblage, and what he misidentified as the great Sepik River on the front façade to support his case. He argued that politics motivate this "inescapable" imagery (1988, 163): first, that Prime Minister Somare was the East Sepik representative; second, that regional rivalry

between Highland and coastal groups influenced the parliamentary selection of architectural motifs; and third, that the national government wished to create a palatable image to attract economic investment and tourism.

This particular Haus Tambaran is . . . by no means a representative piece of architecture for Papua New Guinea as a whole. . . . (T)his choice of source material for the parliament building is almost completely alien to the village architecture of the Highland Provinces, where many tribes did not develop even the institution of the Haus Tambaran. While there is an explicit reference to one type of Highlands "raun haus" this is relegated to the recreation block, a clearly secondary aspect of the total composition. . . . This lack of relevance to the building traditions of the Highlands must be seen in the context of a long rivalry between coastal zones to the north and south. . . . And yet behind the rhetoric of nationalism lurk the realities of internationalism. . . . The choice of the Maprik-area Haus Tambaran form for the parliament entrance is not merely a distinctive and memorable shape or the personal favorite of a Sepik-based Prime Minister; it is also the indigenous architectural form most widely known to foreigners. For the outsider, contemplating the investment of either tourist dollars or . . . development capital, it is an instantly recognized image. . . . In the international competition for development funding . . . it provides a simplified and catchy visual image without a hint of factional discord. (Vale 1988, 162–163)

There are distinct problems with Vale's political reading of the meaning of the Parliament House's iconographic program and with his insistence that its national imagery is distorted. No specific evidence is offered to support his assertion that the smaller dimensions of Block C are the result of political factionalism between Highland and coastal people. Somare's independence government was a coalition that included important Highland leaders who gave their approval to the design. Furthermore, Barry Holloway, chairman of the design brief committee and Speaker of the House, was a member for the Eastern Highlands (Downs 1980, 488). As noted earlier, although the *haus raun* lacks the monumentality of the council chamber, it is a building with significant political functions and meaning.

With regard to the Sepik motifs of the program, Vale dismissed not only the careful manner in which they have been juxtaposed with designs from other areas, but also how often embellishments throughout the complex

are created from abstract forms having no specific traditional affiliation. The major theme of the *tambaran* façade, the sculptural relief of weaving over the entrance to Block B, and the great assemblage of carved poles in the grand entrance hall each portray a strong national message. The latter monumental work also embodies the concept that art is not only an object but a dynamic collaborative endeavor vital to the democratic process (NAS 1984, 20).

Another difficulty with Vale's analysis is his view that when subnational (ie, personal or ethnic) or supranational (international) references appear in Parliament building constructions of national identity, they distort their national framework and compromise their meaning. As a result, "what is passed off as a quest for 'national identity' is in reality a product of the search for subnational, personal and supranational identity" (Vale 1988, 128). This argument overlooks the Parliament House as a key symbol whose diverse meanings exist on different but complementary levels of explanation. Furthermore, as Graburn (1976, 26–30) has discussed, symbols of national identity both relate inward to members of the in-group who wish to "get together," and also project outward to show differentiation and pride to outsiders. The Maprik *haus tambaran* can recall both the important historical identity of the nation's first prime minister as leader of independence, and the international artistic importance of one of Papua New Guinea's most striking forms of traditional architecture. Since independence, Papua New Guineans are learning to feel pride in the diversity of their cultures and to consider them as part of a shared national heritage being incorporated into new forms of artistic expression. For example, modern artists in their exhibitions are depicting traditional figures or symbolic themes from all over the country. Similarly, contemporary writers switch easily between English, Tok Pisin, and *tok ples* (local language) in their poems and plays to emphasize alternate social identities (Powell 1976; Lasisi nd). In contemporary music analogous blendings occur. At the National Arts School, students take it for granted that they can compose for combinations of *garamut* drums and electric synthesizer to generate a quintessential sound of modern Papua New Guinea (Dissanayake 1983). Colorful associations between old and new education also appear at graduation ceremonies when students in academic gowns wear traditional headdresses to assert pride in the past even as they embrace a modern future (Gough 1983). Rather than being a structure whose form

reflects political rivalry and economic opportunism, the Parliament House is a very explicit attempt at integrating levels and aspects of diversity in an unthreatening way.

“ENERVATED LITERALISM” AND “CULTURAL RAPE”

As new parliaments and capital cities symbolizing images of national identity proliferate in the Third World, architects have begun to debate how to relate modern and vernacular forms and to define “an authentic regionalism” (Curtis 1986, 24–31). According to Curtis, contemporary Third World architecture should seek continuity with past local traditions but not in a glib or superficial way:

At its best regionalism penetrates to the generating principles and symbolic substructures of the past then transforms these into forms that are right for the changing social order of the present. It is a matter of sensing beneath the surface the memories, myths and aspirations that give a society coherence and energy, and then providing these with an authentic expression in architectural arrangement. The hope is to produce buildings of a certain timeless quality. . . . Regionalism looks for sustaining spiritual forces and refuses to accept that a tradition is a fixed set of devices and images. . . . At its worst it may degenerate into a skin-deep instant history in which ersatz images of the vernacular are combined with pastiches of national cultural stereotypes. (1988, 24)

When Vale and Saini referred to the PNG Parliament House as an example of “enervated literalism” and “cultural rape” or “abortion,” they supported a viewpoint, also expressed by Curtis, that a “genuine Pacific architecture” (Saini 1988, 5) depends on generating authentic principles to reconstitute the past rather than the transposition and use of traditional forms in new contexts. According to Vale, simply lifting traditional forms from their original ritual contexts effectively amounts to cultural rape because customs of traditional ownership have been violated; in their new locations, these forms are only decorations without significant meaning. These observations fail to recognize that traditional ownership was not inalienable. Most Papua New Guineans want to find ways to preserve their artistic traditions. The use of traditional forms in new contexts is not necessarily “a decorative shell” with no associative meanings.

The result of colonial domination and modernization has been the

abandonment or destruction of many traditional PNG customs and skills. Since independence, however, the government has made concerted efforts to valorize and reify what remains for the promotion of a nationalist ideology (Babadzan 1988; Keesing 1989). In what Keesing has termed "the fetishization of culture" (1989, 31), cultural centers have been established, cultural revivals attempted, and national and local festivals organized to display traditional dance, dress, and music (Crawford 1977). Learning about traditional culture also goes on in schools, particularly primary grades, where skilled community members come in to teach traditional arts. Ideas of traditional ownership still exist but, as formerly, ownership can be transferred to others provided that due compensation is made and that knowledge is reproduced correctly. Even at tertiary institutions, such as the National Arts School, students are taken to remote villages in order to observe and record art forms and traditional ways of life. This respect for *kastom* (as traditional institutions, values, and beliefs are loosely referred to in Tok Pisin) has been led by former Chief Minister Somare, who is astutely aware of the force of symbols in nation-building. In 1973, he returned to his village in order to complete his traditional rituals of male initiation and to be inducted as a clan leader.

As Head of the Government, I believed it was particularly important that I should not separate myself from my people. It was important that I establish my identity at home and receive the wisdom and strength that my elders were willing to pass on from my forefathers. It was after this ceremony that I was installed the Chief of my Clan. . . . The installation ceremony meant . . . I had again struck roots at home. . . . The wisdom of Sana, my grandfather, had been passed on to me. . . . Sana was the great peacemaker who sat down to eat with enemies before agreeing to fight them. He could not have passed on to me a better wisdom to guide me in this difficult task of looking after the affairs of three and a half million Papua New Guineans. (Somare 1979, 2)

This explicit acknowledgment of the importance of tradition was not seen by Papua New Guineans as an empty gesture. It provided official support for traditionalists among the Telefomin of the West Sepik to prevent the demolition of their sacred men's house, the *Telefolip*, by other village Christians (Jorgensen 1990). But even when these traditional structures fall into disuse, their once sacred embellishments can be manufactured for new contexts considered powerful and legitimate.

For example, although Brennan obtained permission to copy the Ambunti men's house ceiling, he photographed images from the court house instead because at the time of his arrival the *haus tambaran* had already been dismantled (for transfer to an important foreign museum, as unconfirmed rumor had it). When Papua New Guineans use traditionally sacred forms in new locations, their former contexts are generally no longer operative and new official sanctions encourage linking representations of the past and the present to create assertions about cultural continuity and pride in a living heritage (Babadzan 1988). This is occurring everywhere with church architecture. A particularly striking example is the Roman Catholic Church of Arisili near Maprik, which has been praised by some as "the most beautiful church . . . in Papua New Guinea" (Beier 1975, v). Its design emulates the form of a sacred men's house because its parish priest considered that "the church and *haus tambaran* were in essence the same—a spirit house" (Aerts 1984; Plocki nd, 24). It is, therefore, inappropriate to consider the Parliament House an example of cultural rape. After a century of assault upon their traditional culture, Papua New Guineans are not yet ready to relinquish their traditional designs and architectural forms because in national myth-making these have now come to represent "a primordial ideological stake liable to condition the success of independence itself" (Babadzan 1988, 212).

Local architects may be getting weary of new buildings inspired only by the heritage of the *haus tambaran*. As Milani and Manandhar (1988) pointed out, "National architects should be inspired by all the varied architectural traditions of the country to insure that PNG's art and architecture not become 'over-simplified'—not only by visitors, but also by Papua New Guineans themselves." These writers were also concerned that the nation's heritage of art be preserved explicitly by having the government legislate that 1 percent of the total construction cost of every new building be allocated to the use of traditional art in architecture: "In this way, the future buildings of Papua New Guinea will gradually evolve a unique Papua New Guinea style, representative of the heritage from which they spring. Knowledge of Papua New Guinea art and architecture will stay alive and young people will be encouraged to carry on the traditions and skills of their forefathers, to create beautiful and functional buildings built on their tradition. This will help to ensure 'Papua New Guinean ways' " (Milani and Manandhar 1988, 29).

CONCLUSIONS

Filled with numerous artistic expressions of the skills and traditions that Papua New Guineans can recognize and admire, the Parliament House embodies the fifth national goal of the constitution to “achieve development through Papua New Guinean forms” (Narokobi 1983, 121). With its great entrance hall and chamber filled daily with activity—including occasional public protests on the outside steps—the building is far from being enervated or compromised. Resonating to a past reified to command respect, the Parliament House is clearly a modern structure representing the technology and education that grass-roots Papua New Guineans hope will be the heritage of their children.

As a key symbol, the Parliament House's dominant metaphor is *bung wantaim*. This suggests two rather different meanings: unity—a completed state; or, coming together—a processual concept of continuous activity. In the dense iconographic program of the building, these ideas are played out in diverse themes: linking the architectural components to geographical regions of the country; blending traditional and modern technologies; forming the Parliament House from the diverse resources of the land; and synthesizing the nation's variety of artistic expressions and skills to create an image of nationhood. The visual models that articulate national identity are weaving strands together or assembling design elements as a mosaic. Public recognition is thus given to the importance of smaller units in composing a greater whole.

In the nationalist ideology of the Parliament House's iconographic program, Papua New Guinea is imaged as a land of great natural resources whose potential for national development depends on hard work, public vigilance, and a willingness to cooperate. Standing in the great entrance hall, the imposing sculptural assemblage of carved poles speaks to the significance of art not only as a meaningful aesthetic object, but as a creative collaborative process. As Archie Brennan has stated, the building is, above all, about commitment. “It represents the hopes, hesitations, anguish, and cooperation of national and expatriate alike who poured into it such prodigious energy” (Brennan, pers comm).

Deriving its power from multiple symbols, the Parliament House is not to be judged simply as a genuine or spurious expression of tradition or as having passed or failed as a representation of national identity. To do this

misses the building's significance as a dynamic construct whose value derives from the constant interplay of politics and history (Handler and Linnekin 1984). Given the youthfulness of this old culture, it is remarkable that such a Parliament House was built at all and that the democratic system it represents is working despite the ongoing civil crisis in Bougainville and other deep social and economic problems. The national ideology expressed in the architecture and embellishments of the Parliament House is not empty rhetoric; rather it engages the power of art to raise national consciousness and pride in Papua New Guineans. Viewed in this manner, the Parliament House is more than a model *of* society. As a model *for* society, it functions to make visible new national values and cultural concerns in the continuous process of shaping and reshaping conceptions of national identity.

* * *

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Notes

1 Highlanders feared that the precipitous departure of the Australians would give political advantage to more educated coastal peoples. Separatists in Bougainville and Papua demanded local autonomy because they considered the government's development policies to be discriminatory (Downs 1980; May 1982; Woolford 1976).

2 The design committee included Barry Holloway (chairman), Naipuri Maina, Martin Tovadek, N. Quarry, Cecil Hogan, Tom Craig, Stalin Jawa, A. F. Elly, Mark Yere, and Martin Fowler.

3 Mentioned in the design brief were Bernard Narokobi, Papua New Guinea's most prominent constitutional lawyer; Tamo Diro (wife of the Chief of Defence Forces), who recommended that the Parliament House be in the style of a Highland round house; and Father Ignatius Kilage, chief ombudsman.

4 While expense and seasonal aridity have hindered the development of a lush parklike setting, visitors and numerous school groups congregate daily at the site and, when the House is in session, listen to the colorful parliamentary debates. In 1986, students from the National Arts School were taken to the Parliament House to view its design and to observe the proceedings. Such field trips further the school's educational objective not only to train artists but to make concerned citizens.

5 In traditional epistemologies, belief in the efficacy of substance was pervasive in architectural constructions of social identity (Forge 1966; Jorgensen 1990; Tuzin 1980). Some members of the design committee urged that the Parliament House be constructed from local materials to extend this indigenous meaning. They hoped it would prevent the construction of a "high tech" building and create incentives to set up local industries (Tom Craig, pers comm).

6 According to Ron Burgess, although Hogan's design was in many ways inferior to subsequent design submissions, "the politicians wanted a monument first, and a workable building was really secondary in their minds." Hogan's design incorporated recognizable features and, most important, it made a strong statement of unity.

7 The importance of weaving as a symbol of ni-Vanuatu identity has been discussed by Janet Keller (1988). As she pointed out, plaited products may be elaborated in local detail and yet, as shared technology with common features, also represent collected identity.

8 The numerous problems of controlling the building costs of the Parliament House are discussed in the final project report of the Department of Transport, Works, and Supply management team in association with Peddle, Thorp, and Harvey (Burgess 1984).

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