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Cover Image: © Eduardo Souto de Moura,
Luis Ferreira Alves



A view of the National Tax Headquarters, the face of finance in the modern Indian economy.

Rajaswa Bhawan: National Tax Headquarters

Nearly a quarter century after the state's last major architectural design competition, the Government of India issued a call for design entries for the 'Rajaswa Bhawan,' designated as the new National Tax Headquarters building. Siddharth Shirur of Vistaar Architects & Planners and their design partners have been awarded this prestigious project.

Text: Darpana Athale & Thomas Dietz

In 2009, the current Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee—along with Home Minister P. Chidambaram, Delhi CM Sheila Dikshit and Urban Development Minister Jaipal Reddy—laid the groundwork for the 'Rajaswa Bhawan,' a new National Tax Headquarters building to be built in New Delhi. A 5.65-acre plot located in a heritage area on the Kasturba Gandhi Marg in the national capital has been allotted for the purpose of erecting this structure. The building complex will house various offices for the Finance Minister, Minister of State and Department of Revenue. In addition to these offices, the Chairpersons, Directorates, Members, Staff and offices of CBDT and CBEC,

along with support facilities and the G.A.R Section, are to be housed in the same complex. The programmatic requirements dictate a provision for future expansion and flexibility in space planning. Five distinguished architects and four representatives of the Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance comprised the jury. The jury's expectation was for a building designed with an understanding of local climatic conditions, leading to an energy-efficient building. Ease of public access, design adaptability and flexibility, and sensitivity to site and heritage, were other factors considered when judging the proposed designs.

Context

The Lutyen's Bungalow Zone is considered a heritage precinct. The site for Rajaswa Bhawan is within the central hexagon, on an axis (called Kasturba Gandhi Marg) connecting India Gate with Connaught Place. This area was originally envisaged as a development for less important princely states in the pre-independent era of British rule in India, but apart from a few notable exceptions, none of the princely palaces were built. The existing site has numerous two-storey barrack-like masonry buildings in the process of being demolished, interspersed within a context of old growth trees far predating the surrounding structures. By default, the low-rise structures were built in deference to the trees, creating a compelling context and establishing a design precedent for new architects, working in this region of the city, to follow.

Following the rise of the British, the architecture of Delhi evolved into a new style characterised by the fusion of Eastern and Western influences: an Indo-Saracenic architecture that historically relied on stone as its primary building material. Subsequent post-independence designs for new architecture have drawn heavily from this style, in an attempt to complement the existing fabric. Consequently, the immovability and opacity of the Government apparatus has been metaphorically engrained into the stone façades of nearly all civic architecture, erected post-independence.

Approximately three decades ago, a philosophical shift toward a more modern style of architecture has gained momentum. Progressive acts like the RTI (Right to Information) Act of 2005, the Environment (Protection) act of 1986, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986, and the Right to Education Act of 2009 have moved the country, from a spirit of opaqueness to one of transparency, in governing affairs. Specifically, the rapid rationalisation of taxation policies over the past decade, coupled with advances in information technology, have moved government operations in a direction, more in keeping with the spirit of the age and the philosophy of transparency.

Design Strategy

Two key ideas drive the design: First, the context of the trees on the site; and, second, the metaphor of transparency used in tandem with the structural inversion of political hierarchies. These two ideas meshed perfectly with the ideals of the prospective clients, who sought to use such metaphors in redefining popular perceptions of government.

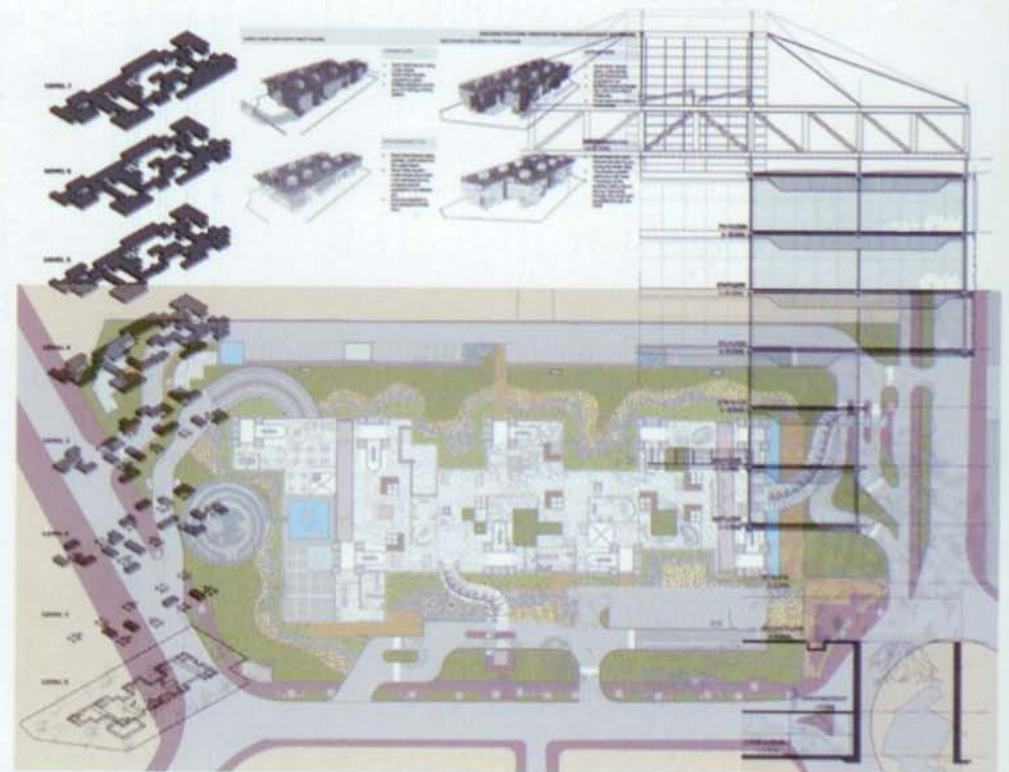
Respecting the surrounding trees, with the intent to build around them without destroying them, the design thus defers to their venerable age. Pragmatically, the building's form—in both elevation and plan—directly responds to the size and location of the trees on the site.

The structure is suspended from a roof truss system, in a manner similar to that of limestone stalactites, that grow downward from the roof of a cave. From this truss, the networks of inverted pods are designed to be denser toward the top of the structure, with all general staff and services being placed near

the supporting truss. The order of conventional spatial organisation is thus inverted, by placing the greater occupational density toward the top of the structure. The structure, thus de-materialises with the lower office pods, hanging between the canopies of the trees.

Employees and officers are housed in $7.5 \times 7.5 \times 4.0 \text{m}^3$, that are either contiguous at upper levels, or linked via a series of connecting pathways at the lower levels, symbolic of the bonds that tie together the diverse Indian nation. The first two floors above the ground plane, hold the offices defining the higher echelons of government. These floors remain visible from below, thereby visually and symbolically re-enforcing trust in government. The ground floor, is then restored to the populace as a public domain, a 'tabula rasa' left free of any office functions.

The 'Rajaswa Bhawan' is envisaged as an edifice epitomising India's changing attitudes. The use of glass, fosters a belief in the public's perception of government, as moving from a closed, opaque and stoic system to a more open and transparent one. The inversion of conventional hierarchies lays foundation to the strength, that common Indian's have in their resources, and encourages their use in a manner, that supports open and effective government. ■



SITE PLAN

FACT FILE:

Project	:	Rajaswa Bhawan, National Tax Headquarters
Location	:	New Delhi
Architects	:	Siddharth Shirur (VistaarArchitects and Planners), Cyrus Subawalla (CSA Partners Ltd), Gurdev Singh
Landscape Architect	:	Urmila Rajadhyaksha
Client	:	Ministry of Finance, Government of India
Team at Concept	:	Sunita Dalvi, Prachi Maindargi, Smruti Athalye, Gandhali Marathe, Aditi Nijasure, Trupti Kamat, Sharvari Deshmukh, Bijali Mukherjee, Uday Shirsat, Umesh Thamke, Sangwan Seo, Nate Johnson
Structural Consultant	:	S.N.Bhobe Associated Pvt Ltd. + Mahendra Raj
Environment Consultant	:	Hrushikesh Kolatkar