

Year of Swiss Architecture, Design and Engineering in India 2013-14
50th anniversary celebration of Swiss Embassy building, 10.11.2013
Speech by Ambassador of Switzerland Dr. Linus von Castelmur

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,
dear partners and sponsors,
dear friends,

A very warm welcome to all of you to the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Swiss embassy building in New Delhi. This building was inaugurated in July 1963, in presence of the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Our Embassy building takes account of its local context, Nehru's course of modernization and also the extreme climatic conditions of Northern India. The architecture of Hans Hofmann and Walter Rüegg does not fall into the temptation of packing the embassy into trite associations with Swiss formal language in order to achieve an all too easy identification with Switzerland. In India's capital, Swiss architects created an impressive, but nevertheless unpretentious Embassy. Its functionality is still convincing today, and – staying in the inner courtyard around the water fountain I am sure you will agree with me – its aura continues to make itself felt even fifty years after it first opened.

Despite its massive outward size of roughly 90 by 40 meters, the edifice is a perfect example of understatement and *trompe-l'oeil*. Many visitors are surprised to find that it was designed in the 1950s and built in the early 1960s. The usual guess is 'early 1980s'. The building's ability to conceal its true age so well is also due to good maintenance – as you can see, Switzerland makes regular investments in maintenance and provides for excellent technical services.

Another often-heard remark caught my attention: the building's architecture was not very Swiss, or not Swiss at all, some people hinted at – the edifice was so imposing, so angular, so rational and minimalistic... As with most generalizations about national identity, comments like these contain a grain of truth along with a great deal of superficial knowledge and preconception. It has never been possible to reduce Swiss architecture to stylistic elements. Haven't characteristics such as functionality, rationality and scrupulous attention to detail been the trademarks of the Swiss architectural tradition since the 1920s? Didn't Le Corbusier – another leading Swiss architect and planner (who incidentally left a major architectural legacy in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad) – didn't Le Corbusier also argue from the 1920s onwards for an uncompromisingly modern and functional form of architecture? Didn't Pandit Nehru, with his confidently modern attitudes, set the course for a new district of the capital of independent India? The embassies of the USA, Sweden and Germany (to mention only these examples), which were built shortly beforehand in the immediate neighbourhood, certainly show a similar handwriting. Could a Swiss architect have escaped the effects of this powerful force field?

The Swiss embassy building blends into its surroundings and is engaged in a dialogue with nature. Seen at a greater distance from the park side it looks shallow and squat, like a crouching wild cat. Viewed from the side, it is more massive and bulky, despite its delicately articulated façade, like a tower lying on its side. In the inner courtyard it creates a tall, airy impression and the slim, tall pillars and the central staircase leading into the residence suggest almost a cathedral. The building is simultaneously open and closed; it protects from the outside, but also provides views of its surroundings. It's only after a certain time that you notice how surprisingly polyvalent such a strictly geometric and at first sight austere concrete construction can be!

To commemorate the 50 years of this edifice, a series of events around architecture, design and engineering are being organized in India. These are disciplines in which Switzerland excels; they are also strongly emerging fields of study and practice in India. Planned from July 2013 to April 2014 in the framework of the *Year of Swiss Architecture, Design and Engineering in India* these events aim at initiating and enhancing collaborations between India and Switzerland by reaching out to architects, urban planners, designers, engineers, builders, artists, scholars, students as well as the general audience.

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight, I am happy to introduce you to two cooperation projects. On what normally is our parking lot, you can see the fabulous exhibition “Architecture as an open process – recent works of Bijoy Jain/Studio Mumbai.” Bijoy Jain is much more than an architect - he is an architect *cum* philosopher *cum* craftsman *cum* sociologist *cum* urban planner *cum* conservationist... But it is true that he is mainly known as architect, indeed he has been acknowledged as India’s rising star architect, attracting admiration and praise from all over India and even more from abroad.

When visiting for the first time Studio Mumbai in Alibagh several months ago, I was immediately reminded of the medieval building *syndicates* that built the temples in India and the cathedrals in Europe. Architects and engineers working closely with brick-layers, carpenters, slaters, sculptors and plumbers – almost everything is designed and constructed on the building site itself, built tailor-made. This makes Studio Mumbai so unique, and this is why so many Swiss architecture *aficionados* fall in love with Studio Mumbai. In fact, Studio Mumbai is a multi-disciplinary experimental building shop delivering highest quality architectural solutions through slow tech procedures, using models, mock-ups and often resorting to recycled building materials.

In 2012 Bijoy Jain was awarded the prestigious BSI Swiss Architectural Award. Many exhibitions presented photographs and plans of their buildings, mock-up models and installations and decoded their construction philosophy, mainly in the UK, France, Switzerland and Italy. I am personally very happy that Bijoy's connection to Switzerland will be further strengthened through his teaching at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio in spring 2014. And I am even more thrilled by the perspective of Studio Mumbai hopefully building in Switzerland very soon!

The Swiss Embassy in New Delhi is delighted to showcase the first ever exhibition of Studio Mumbai in Northern India! After Delhi, this fabulous show will travel to NID in Ahmedabad and to Studio X in Mumbai.

Ladies and gentlemen, another remarkable project has been realized by Mischa Schaub and a team from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland in Basel. The project brought together Swiss teachers and students of design with teachers and students from India. The Swiss team travelling from Bangalore to Mumbai and thereon to Delhi has been exploring the design potential of bamboo. The cooperation project has been documented by Swiss-Indian filmmaker Kamal Musale who is also present tonight. Thank you, Mischa Schaub and Kamal Musale, for a remarkable partnership. Mischa Schaub will take the floor later on and explain the objectives and achievements of their quest.

To conclude, let me say that realizing such an ambitious programme in several Indian cities would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and the support from many quarters. We have received tremendous help - our heartfelt gratitude goes to the 28 partners, sponsors and supporters for their very generous support. It was really heartening to see to which degree Swiss enterprises in India were supportive and aligning themselves with this project. I am indeed happy and proud to be able to count on such extraordinary partners!

Organizing YSADE was also a big challenge for the embassy. It has mobilized huge quantities of energy, time and *feu sacré* of the Embassy staff. Warm thanks first and foremost to Cultural councilor Sarah Bernasconi who was the project leader, Madhura Phatak, Sarah Baettig, Aastha Chauhan and Stephanie Mumenthaler from the cultural section, Anuradha Shahani and Patricia Jeanneret from protocol and secretariate, technical director Jürg Roth and the technical team, the residence staff and all the others for their great commitment and enthusiasm! Last but not least, let me acknowledge the essential role played by my wife Françoise Gardies, as always a precious advisor and mentor.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, without further ado, I declare the Studio Mumbai exhibition open. Thank you and enjoy the exhibition!