

Typology: Parliament

The spatial configuration of parliament buildings exerts a subtle influence on a range of democratic processes, writes *Sophia Psarra*

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After a devastating fire in 1834, the UK's Houses of Parliament in Westminster had to be rebuilt. Controversy soon raged around the design, specifically which architectural style – Tudor or gothic – better expressed the political identity of the centuries-old democracy. The winning designs by Charles Barry and Augustus Welby Pugin combined elements of both, expressing the idea that 'British democratic institutions were descended from a strangely idealised noble and free society of medieval yeomen and aristocrats', as Peter Davey once wrote (AR November 2004). About a hundred years on, after the destruction wrought by the Blitz, the reconstruction of the House of Commons in 1941 presented another choice: should the new chamber preserve the rectangular layout of the former house – with two sides, government and opposition, facing each other across a despatch box – or change it to the semi-circular arrangement that had become customary in other democracies around Europe and beyond? It was then, as he introduced the debate, that Winston Churchill famously stated: 'We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us.' The committee reviewing the proposals argued that the dimensions and intimacy of the old chamber should be preserved, as the 'traditional style of discussion was firmly fixed and established in the customs and affections of the nation'. Twice in its recent history, this political institution opted for continuity rather than change.

Parliament buildings are powerful and very recognisable symbols of a country's past, national identity and commitment to representative democracy. In practice, they house a multiplicity of parliamentary functions, as well as workspaces for thousands of people. They have developed out of classical, medieval and early modern practices of assembly, residual elements of which persist in contemporary parliamentary rhetoric and ritual. The theatre-like structure of the Pnyx – the official site of the democratic assembly in classical Athens – provides an ancient semi-circular precedent. Before 1789, the primary model for parliamentary layouts in Europe featured a rectangular room, with the monarch at one end and the clergy and nobility on benches along the sides. After the French Revolution, the prevalent design in most western democracies shifted to a semi-circular arrangement, marking a significant departure from the old tradition of political legitimisation. Another less common but nonetheless distinctive schema is the fling, or 'thing', a form of assembly originating in Viking Scandinavia. Held outdoors at a thingstead – typically an easily accessible hill or stone circle – remains of such assemblies can be found all over northern Europe, including at the Isle of Man's Tynwald Hill. The type also lives on in language; although the parliament buildings in modern nation states such as Denmark, Norway and Iceland adhere to conventional semi-circular layouts, they are called the Folketing (folk thing), Storting (big thing) and Al.ingi (all thing) respectively.

There is a widespread argument that opposing benches foster opposition while semi-circular layouts promote co-operation. This may oversimplify the matter. In a recent study of the dynamics of visibility in the House of Commons that I co-authored with Gustavo Maldonado in the 2023 anthology *Parliament Buildings: The Architecture of Politics in Europe*, we found that placing the unequal categories of government and opposition face-to-face in a closely spaced chamber of equal levels of visibility for all parties can in fact subtly redress imbalances in power. A nuanced reading of the different ways in which opposing benches and semi-circular parliaments function symbolically is offered by Philip Manow in his 2010 book, *In the King's Shadow: The Political Anatomy of Democratic Representation*. Manow suggests that the different layouts arise from a need for the chamber to embody different types of fictional political unity. In the UK Commons and Commonwealth parliaments, this unity is bestowed by the British monarch, while in France the semi-circle came to fill the vacuum of the abstracted imagery of the body politic after the execution of the king.

However, parliaments have never adhered to a universal, uniform model or typology. Comparing plenary chambers across the world reveals significant differences regarding the arrangement of the government, chair, rostrum, political parties and MPs in terms of seating, visibility dynamics and procedural rules. In all Commonwealth member countries, as well as in Ireland and in the former British protectorate of Kuwait, MPs speak from their place. In countries that use the semi-circular layout, MPs speak at the rostrum (with the rare exceptions of the US Senate, Italy and partly France). The architectural layout of these spaces shapes relations of authority and control through a complex – and not very well-understood – network of spaces, rituals, laws, statutes, discourses and people. They should be understood in the context of the specific histories that gave rise to them. The historiography of how the architecture of parliament buildings has been understood has not always heeded this, as seen in Nikolaus Pevsner's classifications of architectural styles in *A History of Building Types* (1976). Once we begin to discuss types, basic categories of activities become conflated with particular geometrical forms. *Parliament*, a 2016 publication and website by Dutch architecture practice XML, for example, identifies five typologies of seating geometries in the plenary halls of the 193 UN member states: opposing benches, semi-circle, horseshoe, circle and classroom. Although interesting, architectural styles and seating layouts tell us little about the embedded history that brought parliament buildings into being, or the ways in which socio-political purposes are translated into spatial form.

In modern times, Europe's parliaments have come to represent a range of electoral systems and a variety of constitutional and governance models. As Naomi Gibson and colleagues write in *Parliament Buildings*, of the 27 parliaments of the European Union, just over half are unicameral (housing one chamber only), while the rest are bicameral (with an upper and a lower house). The majority of EU nations have undergone dramatic constitutional change since the 1950s, gaining independence, reuniting, subdividing or shifting from military and communist republics to western liberal democracies. Some of these parliaments are now housed in buildings that served authoritarian regimes in eastern Europe, such as Slovenia, Latvia and Lithuania. Similar adaptations have taken place in formerly colonised nations. South Africa's Houses of Parliament in Cape Town, for instance, have been housed in a colonial building since 1884. It suffered a

devastating fire in 2022, prompting questions of how – and where – the parliament should be rebuilt to best express the republic's 21st-century identity. Other nations opted to build not only new legislatures, but entire capitol complexes, following independence. In the second half of the 20th century, modernist architectural styles were employed in capitol complexes to evoke a sense of progress and independence: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh and Brasília, designed by Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Joaquim Cardozo, are examples that clearly signposted an active distancing from colonial building styles and their attendant legislatures. In many cases, the plenary chambers themselves also depart from older precedents. The horseshoe form, a hybrid of opposing benches and the semi-circle, has been much more widely adopted on the African continent and in other former British colonies, such as Ireland, Malta, Australia, New Zealand and Bangladesh.

New assembly buildings constructed for postcolonial contexts, devolved parliaments or stateless nations underscore the challenges of inventing new architectural languages for parliamentary democracy. When it was completed in 2004, Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue's vision for the devolved Scottish Parliament at Holyrood looked like an audacious bid to 're-envisage the Scots as progressive, free-spirited romantics', as Catherine Slessor wrote (AR November 2004), with EMBT's jostling forms seemingly erupting from within the landscape and 'rekindling a sophisticated national consciousness'. Symbolic expression, then, remains a key feature of any parliament building. The story of the Iraqi Parliament in Baghdad made architectural headlines when the international jury's decision of a winner was overruled. The competition's winning team, led by Assemblage, had proposed three low-rise structures rather than a single landmark, that were to be connected by streets and plazas, and integrated in their surroundings. The brief had called for 'a symbol that tells the history of the great Iraq' and 'its distinctive role in human civilisation', and the project that had come third, by none other than Zaha Hadid Architects, was chosen by the client instead – but never built.

Today, the UK Houses of Parliament are again at a crossroads, facing serious risks from fire and ageing infrastructure. Initially, in 2018, it was agreed that parliamentarians would temporarily relocate to facilitate a comprehensive refurbishment, under what became known as the Restoration and Renewal Programme (R&R). Architects Allford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM) were commissioned to design an exact replica of the House of Commons, including division lobbies, ancillary accommodation and improvements to accessibility, as a temporary chamber on the northern edge of the parliamentary estate. However, the decision to relocate has since been reversed and AHMM's plans put on hold, with MPs advocating ongoing repairs while they continue to convene in the Commons Chamber. Scholars Cherry Miller and Alexandra Meakin have suggested that this could extend works until the end of the century, transforming Westminster into a perpetual construction site.

The R&R Programme is an opportunity to ask how the spaces of a renovated House of Parliament can enhance parliamentary democracy in an inclusive society. There are many factors that need to be taken into consideration, lest the opportunity to create a public, culturally diverse and gender sensitive parliament is missed. The history of parliamentary architecture shows that the physical layout of such buildings is an important factor in shaping the spatial practices of constitutional democracies. It also makes clear that new, expanded and renovated parliamentary buildings need to be intimately connected to historical realities, traditions and local contexts. As Lords member David Anderson recently remarked, other nations have a written constitution; the UK has its parliament building.

Case Studies

Parliament of India

New Delhi, India

HCP Design Planning and Management

India's new parliament is located opposite the older, colonial-era parliament building, the Samvidhan Sadan, designed by Herbert Baker and Edwin Lutyens in 1927. Sitting side by side on the Central Vista, the primary axis in New Delhi's governmental district, the two buildings are in complex dialogue. The triangular configuration of HCP's new building stands in direct contrast to Baker and Lutyens' opulent circular edifice. However, it shares a certain spatial logic with its predecessor. Like the Samvidhan Sadan, the new parliament has a space for the public, Constitutional Hall, which is at the centre of the layout and features a tripartite arrangement consisting of two houses – the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, seating 768 and 396 respectively – and a gallery. It is surrounded by offices and has three ceremonial entrances – one for each of the two houses and one for the public. Ultimately, however, HCP's design appears to endorse a complete separation of parliamentarians and staff from the public, as the routes for the two groups never intersect – a significant departure from its predecessor. The decorative scheme favours Hindu motifs, in line with the current government's nationalist agenda.

Interim House

The Hague, the Netherlands

Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven

While the Binnenhof, the Netherlands' parliament complex, is undergoing comprehensive renovations, the Dutch Upper House and Council

of State have relocated to Huis Huguetaan, a listed 18th-century mansion, and a 1980s extension to the former Supreme Court building at the rear of Huis Huguetaan. To negotiate the contrast between the two buildings, architects Happel Cornelisse Verhoeven were brought on board to design the interiors for the interim buildings' public and ceremonial functions, as well as committee rooms and a chamber. The rectangular layout of the latter recalls the historical chamber of the Binnenhof, but at 70 per cent of the scale. The seating arrangement is the same: senators' benches are arranged symmetrically around the ministers' and the chairperson's

tables. Once the renovation of the Binnenhof is complete, it is hoped that the newly refurbished spaces within the Huis Huguetaan and former Supreme Court extension will continue to operate as meeting spaces for The Hague's various ministries.

Benin National Assembly Porto-Novo, Benin Kéré Architecture

Kéré Architecture's design for the Benin National Assembly, which will replace the republic's colonial-era parliament building, takes the palaver tree as its chief inspiration. The West African tradition of assembling in the shade of a tree to debate and reach consensus on community decisions provides the building with a motif that the firm says 'embodies and expresses the democratic values and identity of the people of Benin'. The top-heavy concrete edifice reaches out across what will be a public plaza, mimicking branches. Meanwhile, a courtyard with a spiral staircase is meant to evoke a central hollow trunk. The courtyard provides the offices above with natural ventilation and indirect light. The plenary chamber, at the back of the building, is semi-circular in layout, with sweeping exposed beams extending the tree motif into the hall. Kéré Architecture's new National Assembly, due to be completed in early 2025, is orientated towards the old parliament building, from which Benin declared its independence from France in 1960.