# A Theoretical Framework for the Analysis of the Work of an Architect

## —A Portrait of a Sri Lankan Architect.

By

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This paper is primarily an attempt at formulating a new approach to the analysis of the work of an architect. It may also be viewed as an acknowledgement of the contribution made by a Sri Lankan architect to the profession in Sri Lanka and as a thinly disguised attempt, by the local School of Architecture, to claim credit for the contribution it has made to his development.

LAKSHMAN ALWIS, the Head of the Sri Lankan School of Architecture, at the University of of Moratuwa, and a leading practitioner, won the recently held competition for the Head Quarters Building for the Sri Lankan Institute of Architects. At an interview with the author, "LA", who describes himself, very moderstly, as "a student of architecture" attributed a fair share of his success to his involvement with the local School (both as a student and a teacher). In this paper we attempt to view his accomplishments from an alternative stand point and, if possible, share with him a little of what he has given others.

Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van der Rohe were God figures for several generations of architects. In recent times Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, James Stiriling (and others) either replaced them or joined the Pantheon. Such succession, however, has not been made with ease nor conceded universally. Indeed, the claims of the original Gods themselves, to that status, has been questioned and many convincing studies repudiating such claims are in existance today.[1, 2]

This critical trend and its consequences are of considerable significance to the architectural profession especially to its academics. This special concern arises from the prevelance of the educational practice of, using Master Architects and their work to inspire and set standards to aspiring architects. Those who value this practice fear that the devaluation of the Master Breed will usher in an era of architectural mediocrity, levelling off, at the best, at a high average, but devoid, certainly, of the soul stirring high points. Others argue that indescriminate and injudicious elevation to Master/God status of those with considerably clayey feet has done, and will do, untold damage to the profession. This damage, it is claimed, occurs through the blind adulation such God/Master status induces in their impressionable followers and the consequent deification of the weaknesses of the God/Master.

The second school of thought thus favours the total abolition of the God/Master breed in opposition to the first school which advocates, and indeed continues with gay abandon to elevate new additions to the Pantheon (only to have them brought down by those of the second school).

The result is a scenario where the academic giants of the profession are locking horns in a life or death struggle, trampling those down below, AND leaving the bone of contention well alone. The real danger lies in the purposeless "free for all" this kind of dialogue can develop into and the disinte gration of the order that sustains the profession ad the sense of committment that nurtures intellectual integrity. The profession, at a time it s fighting for survival cannot afford lapses in its discipline or a dilution of its intellectual vigour. The answer lies not in ignoring or mindlessly fuelling this conflict, but in organising and chanelling its intellectual energy along constructive avenues, towards meaningful goals.

This paper is a modest attempt at such an endeavour. It argues for the middle ground accetping need for inspirational leadership within the profession as well as the need for concensus before such nomintation. The answer lies in the formulation of a basis, explicitly stated and thus open to examination and debate which could be used to analyse the work of an architect. The argument is that analyses with explicit bases induce discussion and therefore the possibility of concensus and is preferable to the existing ritual of a mute raised hand. Concensus, it is further argued, could lead to the re establishment of an accepted Pantheon with the critical vigour thus utilised in the reconstruction of the fabric of the profession rather than in its destruction.

The goal one should aim at is therefore, a rating of architects, accomplished conciously, based on an accepted framework which registers the merits of individuals regardless of irrelevencies such as influence and oppertunity.

This paper however does not claim to be attempting to evolve such a comprehensive framework for rating architects. On the contrary, it takes pains to point out that only one part of the problem of rating architects is considered here, namely, an examination of the attitude leading to the conception of Form (and not the Shaping of it). While conceding that good intentions and correct attitudes do not add up to good or correct architecture, it is argued that conception of Form is the more vital aspect of the Design Process and therefore an eminently suitable base to derive a framework for analysing the work of an architect. Indeed, the argument of the author is that both the attitude to Form making (intellect and imagination) as well as the ability to give it Shape (richness of vocabulary and subtlety of grammer) need to be considered equally in a comprehensive attempt at rating architects. This paper proposes to employ only the first aspect (attitude to Form making) to derive its framework.

The attitudes of architects to Form making varies from a denial that it constitutes concious effort and that Form is of divine rather than human origin[3] to claims that it is the outcome of a scientifically logical process[4] and an additive one[5]. The combinations in between are as numerous as they are confusing. The confusion springs primarily from the failure of the profession to differentiate architecture from building in a manner related to attitudes to Form making. While some have attempted to distinguish architecture from building[6] such definitions have failed to benefit those like Rapoport who have tried to identify determinants of Form,[7] precisely because the connection between the two was not appreciated. Rapoports' failure to canvass, satisfactorily, the question whether, a structure if it has responded purely to climatic requirements, is Architecture (and therefore whether climate is indeed a determinant of architectural Form) is indicative of the importance of such a definition to any discussion on Architectural Form Making.

A re-definition of what Architecture is (as opposed to building) leads directly to the First Level of the theoretical framework of attitudes being developed in this paper.

LEVEL ONE — Each commission to build incorporates, at superficial verbalised levels or at deeper levels underlying the verbalised requirements, basically, two types of requirements, viz., Quantitative Requirements and Qualitative Requirements. The argument presented here is that while both types of requirements need to be met, it is only when the concern is predominantly with satisfying the Qualitative Requirements that Architecture ensues. Building, on the other hand, results when the designer's concern is predominantly with Quantitative Requirements.

The first level is thus defined as the attitude of being concerned predominantly with Qualitative Requirements. This attitude, as attitudes at other levels, may be discerned from the architects' own statements or what is indicated by the various decisions he has taken and as seen in his work.

*LEVEL TWO* — The second level of attitudes is defined as the manner through which the architect seeks to fulfil the Qualitative Requirements of the commission. Requirements are needs. Needs are answered. in architecture, through the supply of appropriate environmental qualities. The question then is, "where do the critical needs reside?". "Does the architect's search focuss on any particular aspect of the problem to the exclusion of others?". "Indeed,, does the search appear to occur within the boundaries of the Problem the commission has brought with it?". If the search, and therefore, the resultant architectural expression appear unrelated to the Problem the attitude is defined as a Self-Expressive one.

If the response is unrelated to the Probelm but appear to spring from the culture of the profession of the architect, the attutude is further defined as Self-Expressive (professional). Robert Goodman's description of 'architects' architecture' is a good fit.[1]

If, on the other hand, the relation is to a personal need, the attitude is defined as Self-Expresive (personal).[8] Architecture that are as distinctive as the architects' signature are good exampless of the outcome of this attitude.[9]

Problems of the Location, the Type of User concerned, the Type of Arctivity involved or the search for a Higher Purpose the building may serve. may be considered valid Problem Areas and rational sources to derive architectural expression. If the architect's search appears to focuss on such areas and is thus related to the Problem, that attitude is defined as a Rational one (as opposed to the Self-Expressive attitude.)

*LEVEL THREE* — The third level of attitudes are defined, partly, by those at Levels One and Two. At the third level the concern is with Qualitative Requirements and Problems that spring from it. The specific definition for this level is the manner the solutions appear to have been selected at the end of the search.

If the solution appears to be derived with reference to solutions known to be in existence, that attitude is defined as Imitative.

If, on the other hand, the solution does not appear to be predominantly influenced by solutions known to the architect, the attitude is defined as Creative. (Here, the generally accepted definition of a creative product as one that is relevent to the problem and one previously unkown - novel - to the person or to his immediate circle, has been accepted).[10]

The difficulty, for the researcher at this Level, is to distinguish between FORM and SHAPE and to appreciate that, a) SHAPE is invariably imitative, and (b) that FORM may not be but is generally so. The attitudes we are concerned here are those which influence Form Making.

*FOURTH AND FINAL LEVEL* — While an architect may have a very creative attitude to Form making and produces Creative Architecture consistently he/she may acquire this label by judiciously selecting the type of problem he responds to. The creative attitude may thus be Creative (Stereotyped) or Creative (Versatile).

As conceded earlier, correct attitudes do not by themselves lead to correct architecture. But the author agrees with those who describe Form Making as a "divine act" and with the sentiment that at the moment of conception of Form — of creation — the architect as a human being ceases to exist. The argument is that it is this "divine" imprint thus left in the product (however humanly Shaped) that makes a cretaive

product universally acceptable. The argument of the author is that, the imprint thus left in the product, is therefore, of what flows from the architect to the product, viz., his attitude at the time of conception, his attitude to Form Making. It is this imprint, this attribute of the product that edures, although the more immediate and compelling impact is of the Shaping — the grammer, the vocabulary, the aesthetics.

The argument put forward in this paper is that architects (in this age when the gap between the two ends of the professional spectrum seems smaller than ever) before they are deified, should be subjected to an analysis of the above order and be found to at least reach the Fourth Level in the framework discussed above.

No theoretical framework is complete until its applicability is tested. The selection of an architect to illustrate the application of the Framework proposed in this study required careful consideration. Those with whom a close personal relationship exist were considered unsuitable. Equally important was the selection of an architect whose personality the author has had an opportunity to study and understand. Above all it was necessary to pick one whose work has been accepted as being significant. Lakshman Alwis, (LA), a leading Sri Lankan practitioner, and the Head of the School of Architecture at Moratuwa, who was awarded first prize at the open-competition for the design for the Head Quarters of the Sri Lankan Institute of Architects was selected as the most suitable candidate. His acceptance itself, to be a theoretical guinea-pig, is indicative of the self-confidence that marks his personality. The author knew LA (from a distance) as a senior student at the local School of Architecture, and the image that lingers is of a determined person with a purposeful stride, confident bearing and sober taste in attire and attitude. Indeed, many see a resembalnce between LA's physical appearance (broad forehead, up-tilted head, light brown bush shirt and trousers), his golden brown Renault Feugo and his early Salu Sala building (fig. 1). The Salu sala building, unusually dominant and assertive for a building housing a State Institution does not appear to derive its expression either from a need of the client organisation or from its busy, rather drab location. Indeed, contrary to what LA claims, the building seems to have contributed, both through its external colour scheme and its self-contained form, to the drabness of the location. The power, the unmistakable expression of masculinity the Salu Sala building exudes appears to have a closer relationship to the personality of the architect in his younger days — clearly a Self Expressive effort.

Experience has obviously mellowed LA and his later work show the overcoming of the Self Expressive attitude and the adoption of the conventional design attitude of creating Form primarily in response to the context. The Fern and Flower Shop at Horton Place, Colombo (fig. 2) is a good example of this attitude. That this building is a response to a legitimate problem — one of the location — (where the architect was required to design the shop in the front lawn of an existing building without undermining the importance of the latter — and therefore the tent-like Form of the Flower Shop) is clear. In fact that this response has been achieved at the expense of certain Quantitative Requirements as well as the essential commercial function of the building confirms the primacy given by the architect to the needs of the context. While this example confirms that LA's concern in design is predominantly with the Qualitative Requirements, it fails to qualify as an example of a Creative attitude as the resultant Form is by no means novel for such situations.

LA's later work, perhaps marking the emergence of a more pronounced intellectual and philosophical facet in his personality, show a deeper analysis of the Problem and more creative Form Making. Of particular significance are the Hospital Building at Ragama (fig. 3) and the Design for the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects Head Quarters building (fig. 4).

The Hospital building is a fine example of a response to the essential peculiarities of the sub-culture of the potential user and the derivation of an expression from this response. The hygienic, streamlined, almost sterile character of the more urban Sri Lankan hospitals has given way to a more humane, friendlier building, characterised by deep shadows cast by pavillions and verandahs at the periphery. In a part of the country where hospitalisation is an occasion for show of sympathy (in largest numbers possible) and a hospital more a place for visiting than for recuperating, medical and administrative requirements need to be

secondary to the cultural requirements of the community. (It would indeed be difficult to argue whether or not the deprivation of this cultural need may not have medical repercussions!). LA's contribution is in capturing this unique phenomenon and giving it expression while satisfatorily dealing with the requirements of the context (thus the tile roofs) and the activity pattern (with a system of three rings of corridors) at the same time. Indeed the ease with which the secondary requirements appear to have been dealt with through the solution to the major Qualitative Requirement indicates an attitude to Form Making that may justifiably be described as Creative.

LA's philosophical bent in recent years as well as his versatality in responding to problems of various types is best illustrated in his design submission for the SLIA Head Quarters building. His response, on this occassion indicates a keen analysis of the problem facing the Sri Lankan Institute of Architects, and an uncanny ability to get to the essence of the problem in quick time. His preliminary image of the building as "a HOME for the Institute rather than an OFFICE for it" evokes pictures of a building that is familiar to the public and with-the-context rather than of one that is alien and exhibitionist. Architects and their profession, in Sri Lanka, have alienated themselves from the community and have created an elitist rather alien and impractical ("out of this world") image in the minds of the community. A sophisticated, alien, "out of this world" building would certainly confirm this image which the Institute is trying to live down. LA has responded to this need as well as to the reality that too humble an image evokes no respect and therefore his explanation that the HOME of the Institute must reflect the Man, his intellect, his importance and, above all that it is the collective home for many such individuals. The domestic, with-the-context quality is thus qualified. LA has thus sought to give expression to a higher purpose the building may serve, a deeper need it may fulfil. The expression thus, has meaning, the building, a message - valid, decodable and effective.

Once again, secondary requirements such as climate (wide eaves, verandahs), and context (low development amid proposed high-rise developments in order to acquire prominance with a small floor area), appear to be automatically answered, thus indicating a highly Creative attitude.

As emphasised earlier, the system proposed in this paper does not claim to be a comprehensive framework for rating architects. Nor does it claim to be a system with which architectural products may be comprehensively evaluated. As indicated in its application to the work of Lakshman Alwis, architect what it may clearly do, is analyse the work of an architect from the standpoint of his attitude to concieving, Form and rate him on a scale ranging from Self-Expressive to Creative (Versatile).

The test of the proposed framework lies in its applicability over a period of time and its ability to endure modification. Indications so far[11], of its applicability, provide cause for encouragement that the proposed framework could indeed, be of use.

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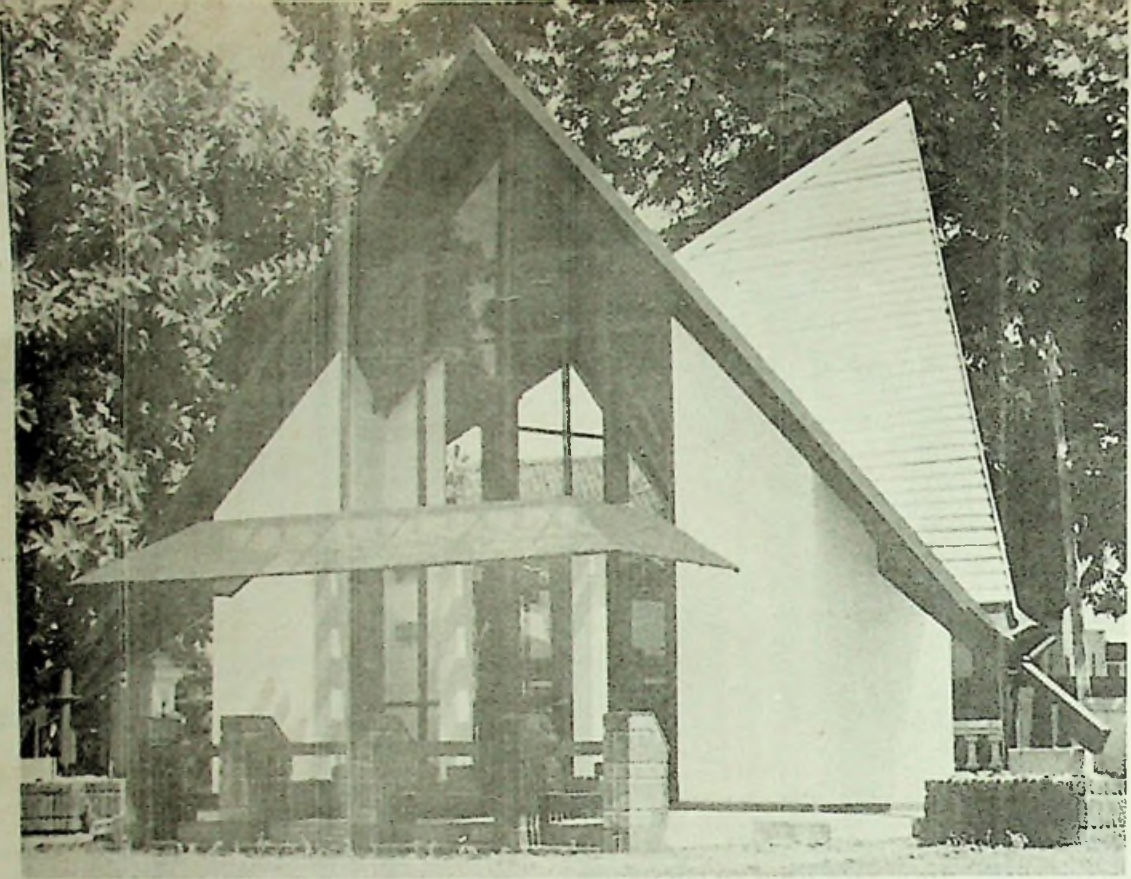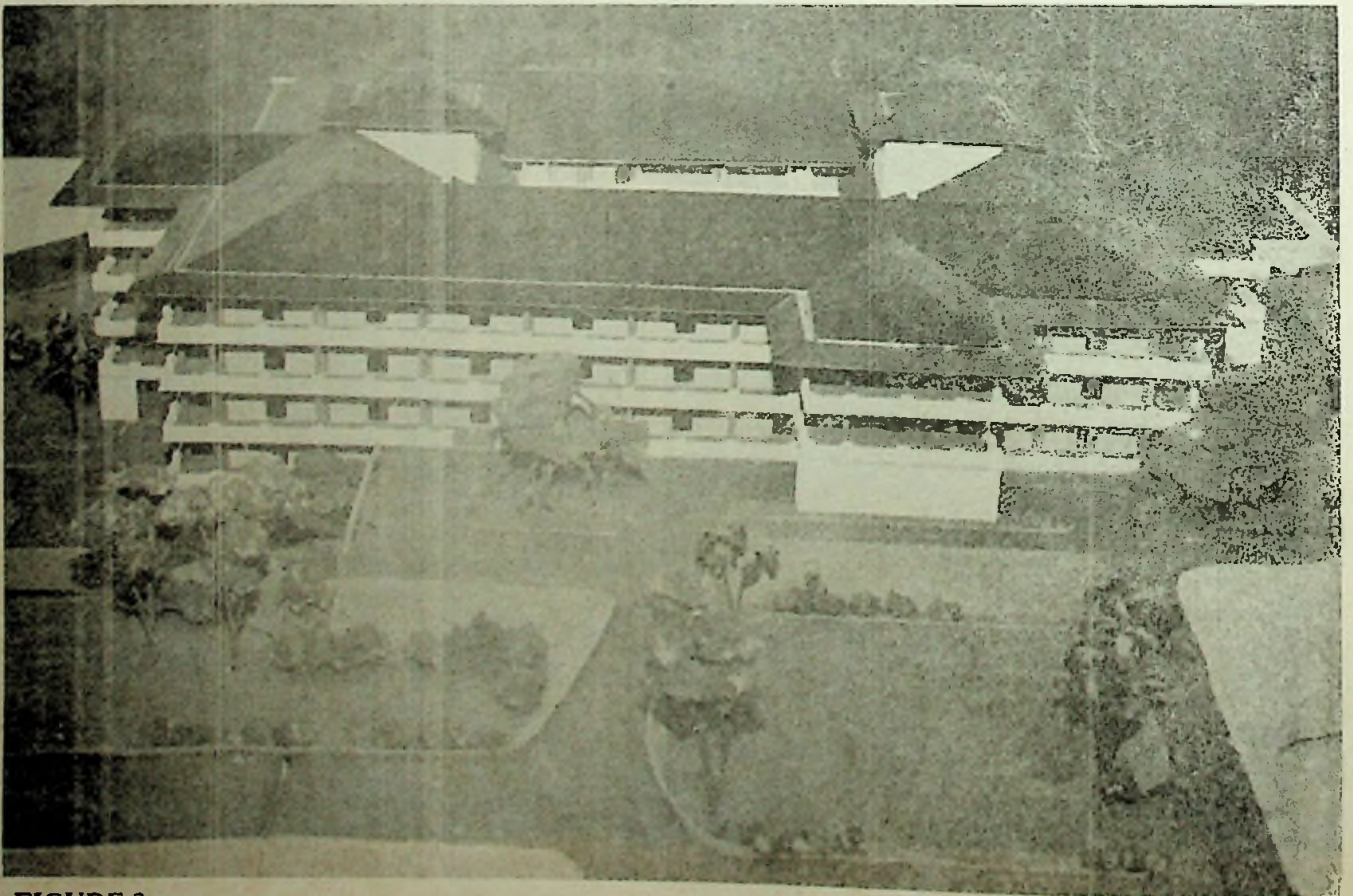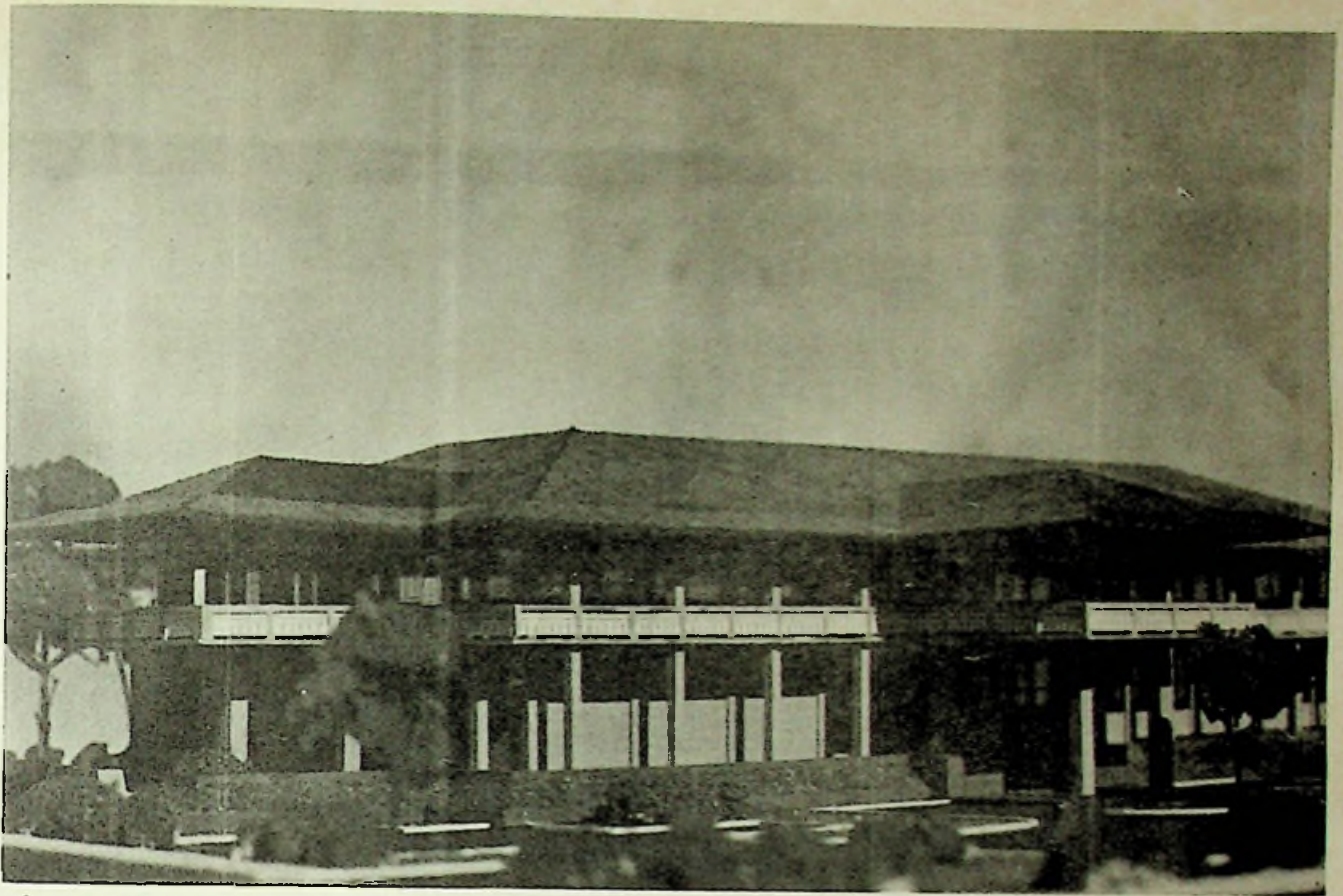
**FIGURE 1**

FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

FIGURE 4



FIGURE 4