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Design Report

**HOW TO USE THE LATEST TRENDS
FROM THE WORLD'S BIGGEST
DESIGN AND WATCH FAIRS**

**RATAN TATA ON PRITZKER
PRIZE WINNER SHIGERU BAN**

**JAIME HAYON'S FIRST
PROJECT IN INDIA**

FOUNDATION STONE

The front and forecourt of Roosevelt House. The canopied pathway leads to the iron grille front door of the house. Indian stone such as Kota and Agra have been lavishly used in the forecourt.



HOMELAND

Nancy Powell, the former American Ambassador to India, granted AD an exclusive look inside Roosevelt House, her residence for the last two years

WRITER ANJALI PURI • PHOTOGRAPHER ASHISH SAHI



WATER BODIES

Famously, in the 1960s, one American ambassador's wife had a notice put up at the YMCA inviting ordinary Americans in Delhi to make use of the pool-located behind the residence—upon which, in the words of a former staffer, a number of “hippies” wearing lungis turned up, and jumped into the pool.

ROOM FOR MORE

Ambassadors have dealt with the challenge of decorating the vast reception room in different ways; one even used it as a grand salon. Nancy Powell, instead, chose to create intimate spaces where groups of people could sit together and chat. The furniture is taken out for large receptions. Powell is a textile enthusiast and on the wall are antique Kashmiri shawls from her own collection.



(Clockwise from top left)

AMERICAN COLOURS

The spiral staircase is one of the most distinctive features of the reception hall. The large dining room has a huge oil-on-canvas titled *Water Painting II* by American artist Joseph Raffael; this dining table can comfortably seat 20. Behind Powell is an artwork titled *Lilydale*, by American artist Charles Clough. In the smaller dining room, the artwork, titled *Young General George*, is by American artist Roy De Forest.





(Clockwise from this picture)

HIGH COMMAND
American President Barack Obama at Roosevelt House in November, 2010. Former American president Bill Clinton on his visit to India in March, 2000. The first prime minister of India, the late Jawaharlal Nehru at the opening of Roosevelt House. Former American president George W. Bush on his visit to India in March, 2006. Former American secretary of state, Hillary Clinton at Roosevelt House in May, 2012.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES, INDIA.

Entering Roosevelt House after negotiating the security drill at the American Embassy complex is one of diplomatic Delhi's more liberating experiences. It feels rather like stepping out of a cramped elevator and finding yourself in a ballroom. The building's iron grille front door lets the visitor look all the way to the back of a majestic, yet breezily informal home that seems to have nothing to hide. Enter and find yourself in a reception room straight out of Brobdingnag, Jonathan Swift's fictional abode of giants. Soaring walls of geometrically patterned concrete—call it lattice, grille or jaali—meet a two-storey high ceiling. At the end of a 64-foot-long expanse of gleaming white terrazzo floor are tall French windows. Beyond them lies a white-and-gold stretch of covered verandah and the enticing greens and blues of lawn and trees, sky and swimming pool.

In a layout so simple a child could have drawn it, the reception room runs like a great river from the front to the back of the house. Stacked on either side of it are more modest rooms: dining rooms and a kitchen on one side, a small sitting room, library and study on the other. Wrapped around three sides of the house is that deep, seductive verandah that every room opens on to.

BRIDGE BUILDING

"You look at this house, and you *know* it is in New Delhi," smiles Nancy Powell, a career diplomat with the American state department and an old south Asia hand. "It is an icon of the America-India relationship." Powell affectionately points out the things that speak to her of India in this mid-20th century American home. "The jaalis, the openness of an old bungalow, the high ceilings, the garden laid out with Indian design elements..."

Roosevelt House is special for Powell because it belongs to an era when America erected diplomatic buildings that reflected the ethos of the countries in which they were located. Today, security concerns have led to the use of what she humorously calls "cookie-cutter" design. "We have a brand new consulate in Mumbai that works beautifully and is safe," she says, "But it looks like the embassy I came from in Kathmandu."

No one could accuse Edward Durell Stone, who designed both Roosevelt House and the adjoining chancery, of routinized replication. A modernist who wove decorative elements into his work, he was disparaged by purists for his embellishments.

However, in an Indian setting, "a note of Oriental opulence", as he called it, went down very well indeed. Visitors to Roosevelt House, completed in late-1962, were entranced by its Mughal-style jaali walls, canopied roof supported by delicate golden pillars, and the liberal use of white Dholpur, light red Agra and pale blue-grey Kota stone.

ACCORDING TO PLAN

Integral to the lore of Roosevelt House is that Stone only visited at the start of construction. He provided drawings so detailed that the Indian contractors were able to follow them perfectly. Terrazzo, metalwork and woodwork were all fabricated on-site, with some 450 workers making the place their home for 20 months. In zestful old photographs, you can see them dancing the bhangra with Roosevelt House's first and most famous occupant, Harvard economist and John F Kennedy associate, John Kenneth

Galbraith, who moved here in the middle of the India-China border war.

Fifty-odd years later, a visitor to this home sees not just a monument to American design and Indian craftsmanship, but also a place that evokes the hope and glamour of the early 1960s in American life. Stone's glittering crystal chandeliers, great brass planters and dramatic spiral staircase set against a stark white backdrop could, if you took an imaginative leap or two, remind you of Jacqueline Kennedy's distinctive pairing of severely elegant dresses and strings of large, lustrous pearls.

The connection is not entirely fanciful. Visiting the adjoining chancery in March 1962, Kennedy is said to have been so taken with it that she encouraged Stone to design the Kennedy Center in Washington along the same lines.

Iconic buildings are, of course, not necessarily easy to live in, a fact that Galbraith alludes to several times in his delightful *Ambassador's Journal*, a diary of his time as Kennedy's envoy to India. He famously found being in Roosevelt House, where he entertained the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, "a little like living on a balcony overlooking the main concourse of Grand Central Station."

In order to understand the allusion, you need to ascend the spiral staircase in the grand reception room, to the living quarters on the floor above. You will find yourself in an open corridor, christened 'The Bridge', with the ambassador's suite of rooms on one side, and four additional bedrooms on the other. Now imagine an ambassador stepping out of his room in his pyjamas, visible to staff and visitors in the great hall below, as he crosses the Bridge to check on a child. Conversely, imagine that child leaving her room in search of something or the other, and having to traverse the Bridge with her parents hosting a reception for hundreds of guests below her feet.

Perhaps understandably, one American ambassador, Chester Bowles, refused to live in Roosevelt House, finding it too grand for his taste, and repaired instead to a comfortable old bungalow near Lodhi Gardens.

Powell laughs when reminded of his intransigence, murmuring diplomatically that having herself lived near Lodhi Gardens, she has some sympathy for Bowles' preference. "Sometimes, you can be overwhelmed," she says of her home for two years, but adds, "Once you live here, you do find your spaces." Our little group bursts out laughing when Powell, a single woman, surveys her vast living room with a droll look, and says, "I don't sit here all alone."

The place where she, interestingly enough, chooses to read her morning papers or a good book is actually... the Bridge. One of her predecessors had the bright idea of placing a low sofa on it; and Powell became, quickly, "very fond" of that space. Surveying the world from her sofa, you can see why. Turn one way, and you gaze upon Stone's magnificent latticed walls and the luxurious expanse of the great hall below. Turn the other, and, through the iron grille entrance to the house, you see trees, roundabouts, fluttering flags and trundling auto-rickshaws. What a marvellously idiosyncratic memory of an Indian sojourn to take back to America. ❖

Nancy Powell retired this summer after about two years as America's ambassador to India. Ambassador Kathleen Stephens assumed office soon after.