The United Nations at 70: Restoration and Renewal

by ***Martti Ahtisaari*** *and* ***Carter Wiseman,*** *foreword by* ***Ban Ki-moon***
New York: Rizzoli International Publications, $55
204 pages, 144 illustrations (120 color)

"Only one building can claim its place on the list of international architectural landmarks as a symbol of the world's most enduring aspiration: peace"

In the essay that is the heart of this history, the fine architectural critic Carter Wiseman recounts how the United Nations complex, completed in 1952 on New York's East River, was in dire straights by the end of the century: "[T]he glass facades of the 39-story Secretariat Building. . .were leaking, as was the roof of the General Assembly." Concrete floor slabs had deteriorated, and heating and air-conditioning systems were obsolete. Asbestos, used in all the buildings, was recognized as "a deadly health hazard." Security was "an increasing concern." Demolishing the complex and starting over was considered, but the U.N. "decided to renew itself, a decision consequential both symbolically and financially."

Even when the complex was fresh and new and working like a charm, however, it was never the architectural masterpiece it might have been. Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer were on the design advisory board, and both masters contributed to the general forms of the buildings, but the first secretary-general, Trygve Lie, gave Wallace Harrison's Harrison & Abramovitz the key job of director of planning, with mixed results. Frank Lloyd Wright called the Secretariat "a deadpan box," while the *New Yorker*'s Lewis Mumford found the whole complex "a blending of the grandiose and the obvious." Le Corbusier himself referred to it as "Harrison's horror." Given that history, the recent renovation may have brought a new optimism and perhaps even a new resolve.

Le Corbusier—Pierre Jeanneret, Chandigarh, India

Paris: Galerie Patrick Seguin, distributed by Distributed Art Publishers, $190
432 pages, 459 illustrations (289 color)

The designer of the much-publicized nightclub-motel hybrids Surf Lodge and Ruschmeyer's in Montauk, New York, recently completed his first house, an oceanfront six-bedroom nearby. And he found that the contrast between the two types of work offered him crucial perspective. "With hospitality, the focus is on big beats, and many times an element of fantasy is brought into the mix. Whereas, with residential, nuance is very important," McKinley says. So is a sense of place, something he was reminded of when his firm's design director gave him a book on Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's construction of the capital city of the Indian state of Punjab—highlighting their use of native colors, textiles, and materials. Will "local color" mean pink-and-green at McKinley's current project, chef Geoffrey Zakarian's National restaurant in Greenwich, Connecticut? —**Nicholas Tamarin**

The Houses of Old Cuba

by ***Llilian Llanes***
New York: Thames & Hudson, $35
200 pages, 168 color illustrations

There are wooden cabins with thatched roofs. There are expansive country mansions and elegant city palaces and, between these extremes, all manner of house types. We see courtyards, gates, balconies, grilles, louvers, and jalousies. We see rooms, stairways, and doors. We see furniture as dated but well cared-for as the cars on the streets. We see finely crafted details in wood, stone, tile, and iron. We see colors! And in the presence of so many shading devices, we sense the heat of the sun.

The author of this captivating survey taught art history at the Universidad de La Habana and is the founding director and chief curator of Cuba's major art museum, the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wilfredo Lam. Jean-Luc de Laguarique contributed the book's characterful photography.

"The design for the typical Cuban house had reached its final form by the end of the 18th century"

What They're Reading...

Robert McKinley
Principal of
Studio Robert McKinley

BOTTOM RIGHT: NICOLE FRANZEN