

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

PEOPLE AND PLACES

HONG KONG: TOUCHES OF QUALITY IN THE CONCRETE JUNGLE

Special to The Star by David Wigan

FIRST there were the trees. Then came Hong Kong. Now, for the first time, the city and the scenery are learning to live together.

Hong Kong, is a renowned business centre, but as its residents become more sophisticated they are demanding a better and greener environment in which to live. The result has been a spray of green areas and urban parks emerging alongside the city's ranks of skyscrapers.

Several landscape planners are involved in the greening process, among them is EBC Hassell Limited, a landscape and architectural consultancy which seems to have a hand in every major project on the market. Included in EBC's portfolio are Ocean Park's Water World, Clearwater Bay Golf course and a number of urban parks in the industrial areas of the New Territories.

Company partner Geoff Rex, who studied landscape architecture at university and as a graduate of Harvard, welcomes the territory's new-found approval of urban greening. "It has taken a long time, but the North Lantau airport project, for example, is a perfect illustration of the government's change in attitude to large scale public works. There was a time fifteen years ago when politicians and civil engineers simply did not see the point of spending money on landscape. But the airport project will be absolutely stunning if it is built. The government now recognises that people expect more than pure concrete."

Rex's first duels with government engineers came during the building of the New Towns in the New Territories. The legislature set aside 12-15 hectares in each town for greening, but often only provided about a third of the average estimated cost. EBC had to, and still does, rely on the munificence of the Hong Kong Jockey Club to get the project built.

Rex notes: "When the Jockey Club gets involved, there certainly is more cash available."

However, with much cajoling, the legislature is changing its thinking and Rex believes the Hong Kong Town Planning Department is now one of the most ambitious and green-minded in the region.

"The landscaping trade crosses enormous boundaries and requires cooperation from architects, engineers, horticulturists and urban planners. There are still cases where the government will spend billions on reclaiming land and only three million on landscaping, but they are becoming fewer and further between," Rex notes.

Rex is a strong critic of Hong Kong's system of public walkways, and mourns the loss of the city's street life. But there is hope. Rex points out that "in Wan Chai the council

has introduced a street greening programme and Hong Kong Land has started their greening of open space in the urban area." Rex thinks Tokyo's effort to deurbanise the city centre is the way forward for Hong Kong, and finds consolation in the fact that the local Urban Area Development Council has started searching

for large parcels of land to rejuvenate. "The process is slow, but Hong Kong is definitely becoming a better designed and more pleasant place to live," says Rex.

Although EBC is principally a landscaping firm, a recent merger with Australian architectural giant Hassell has paved the way for a broader range of work in the future. "We merged with the EBC office in Australia some time ago and that proved a huge suc-

cess. The Hong Kong merger will give us the opportunity to take on bigger projects and give us greater access to resources," Rex notes.

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travel, but something about it really gives me a kick," he confesses.

However, Rex is quick to shoot down the perception that landscaping is just another word for gardening. "It is not a matter of putting a few plants down. We are working with bridges, water and construction, all of which require considerable technical and architectural expertise."

The EBC office in Hong Kong employs a group ranging from horticulturists to lawyers, testament to the increasing sophistication of the business. However, the industry is not

without its political sore points, with many a terse exchange flying between the group's Causeway Bay office and its clients in Central.

"The government, especially, is still keen on the idea of phasing. That type of thing plays havoc with us and is often a logistical nightmare," explains Rex. In the private sector Rex encounters a different sort of problem: "Planning gain is the by-work for developers. Unless they think a landscaping idea is 'worth it' in a literal sense they will hold back on constructing it. Fortunately the

Hong Kong public is increasingly educated, more acutely aware of the things going on in the United States and Europe, and demanding better amenities here."

EBC does not have any specific design philosophy, but aims to use local materials and colours. "In Hong Kong we use local granite, but it is difficult as everything is imported."

Rex is critical of the government's attitude toward the environment. Hong Kong is the fifth largest importer of rain forest timber in the world, with most of the wood ending up as barricades for building sites. Laments Rex, "It is easy

for Hong Kong to import forest wood from Malaysia, but nonetheless, our reorder is appalling. It's very sad."

EBC has a policy of using environmentally friendly timber whenever possible. The company works largely in Hong Kong, with over 40 major local projects to their name to date, but is optimistic about expansion of the landscaping creed throughout Asia.

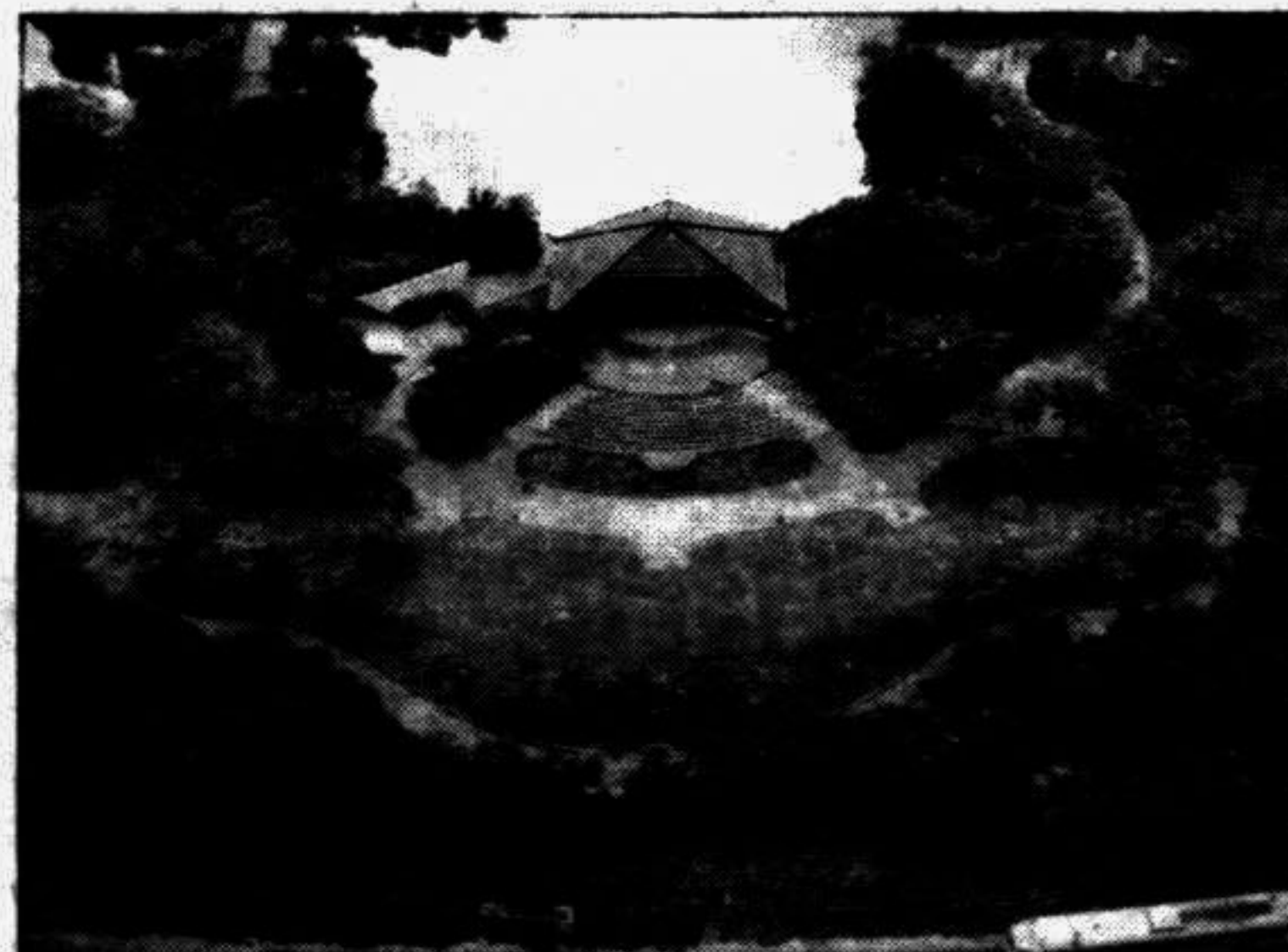
"There will be enormous opportunity throughout the region in the next decade," Rex believes, adding, "Some of the countries are only just getting started, but everyone is now at least acknowledging the demand."

Of the company's current projects Rex says he is particularly proud of the Hong Kong Jockey Club sponsored University of Science and Technology campus. The landscaping will cover a 60 hectare coastal site overlooking Port Shelter in Sai Kung, and will include sports facilities, housing, and natural coastal hillsides.

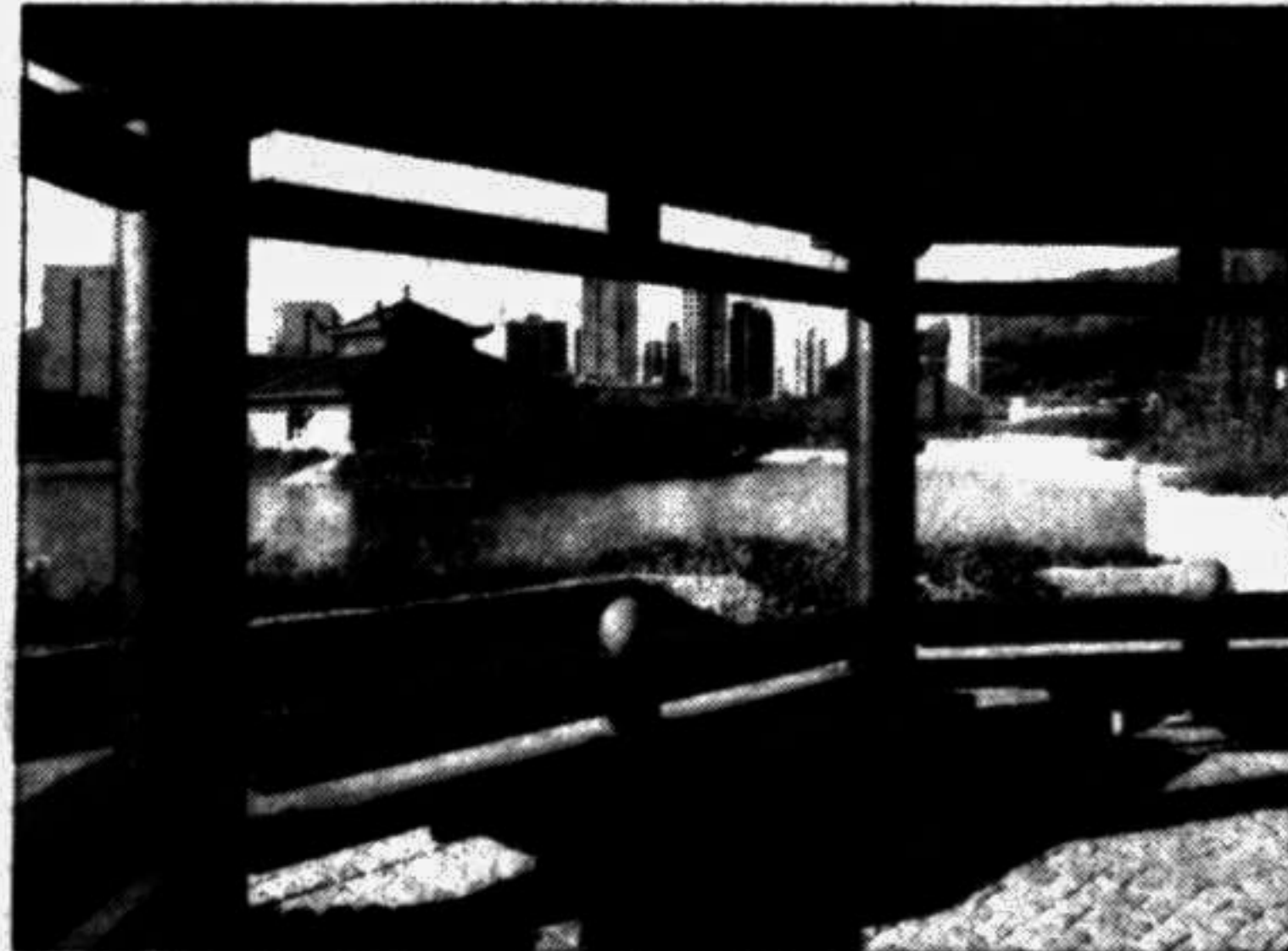
However, the apogee of Rex's career was the \$15 million transformation of Tuen Muen Town centre from a cluster of swimming pools to a public park.

"That was my baby. I was with it from day one until the end, and was very happy with the way it came out," Rex exults. The future for EBC and new partner Hassell looks good, although EBC has had little success touting its services in China. Rex believes development in the PRC will come with time. Meanwhile, he is happy concentrating on the rest of Asia, and in particular helping Hong Kong get back to nature.

By arrangement with Executive, Hong Kong.



An oasis of green in a city burdened by too much building.



Blending ancient and modern architectural forms.

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Bold Strokes to Boost Chinese art

by Paul Lewis

SINCE opening his first art and antiques gallery ten years ago, Kander Lee has risen to become Taiwan's principal Chinese art dealer and collector. Dubbed by many 'King of the Chinese Brush Pen', the 35 year old art magnate has recently further extended his business empire into Hong Kong.

At the age of five, Lee was learning to master the art of calligraphy. Lee drew on his experience in the family-owned Chinese brush workshop, to study and refine brush design. Lee boosted sales of brushes by opening a calligraphy school, through which 40,000 students have passed. In addition to Kander's Art and Calligraphy Institute, Lee's business group encompasses Kander's Art Auction House, a private Chinese art museum, eight Taiwanese stores and three in Hong Kong, including two newly opened galleries in Alexandra House and Ocean Terminal.

Already a multi-millionaire and with a renowned reputation on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, Lee is not content to rest on his laurels. He has set himself some seemingly elusive tasks. Lee's primary objective is the restoration of Chinese art to the prominent world position it once held. Kander also views art as a medium by which to bring the Chinese people back together. "Chinese art is common to all Chinese people," says Kander.

In the 18th Century, works

by Wang Hui fetched a higher price than those of Van Gogh. The decline of China as an oriental power and 20th Century civil turmoil de-valued Chinese art to the extent it was eventually only worth 1% of Western paintings. Today though, Lee sees no reason why Chinese art should remain cheap relative to Western art. If the value of a notion's art is a reflection of its wealth and power, then the price of Chinese art should rise argues Lee, pointing out that he considers 'China' being not just the mainland but Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, each very wealthy in their own right.

As part of Lee's efforts to renew world interest in Chinese art and increase its value, he has opened three galleries in Hong Kong. Lee hopes that by choosing high profile tourist locations in Central and Tsim Sha Tsui, over the more traditional but less obvious location of Hollywood Road, he will attract greater international interest. Since opening, Lee reports: "the response has been excellent," with visitors from the USA, Europe and Japan expressing particular interest in Chinese porcelain, paintings and jade.

Another way of raising the stature of Chinese art according to Lee, is to break the dominance of the big Western auction houses, such as Christie's and Sotheby's. In an attempt to transcend this monopoly, Lee has established Kander's Art Auction House

with operations in Tokyo, Taipei and Hong Kong. This strategy has met with some success. Lee reports that he has the highest prices being fetched for Chinese art are now in Taipei and that Sotheby's and Christie's are using these as their benchmark. Ultimately, Lee would like to see his auction house become the Christie's or Sotheby's of the

Far East, dealing solely in Chinese art.

Raising the profile of Chinese art is made more difficult by a general Chinese ignorance of their own history and culture. "Ask any Chinese what was their culture 5,000 years ago and they would answer - I don't know," laments Lee, adding, "Under the Qing Dynasty everybody would answer - yes I know. It's really

a pity that Chinese people don't know their own roots, Chinese culture is so great, so graceful, it's really a pity."

Who is to blame for this? "Dr. Sun Yat Sen" answers Lee. "Dr. Sun did too much damage, he broke the roots to Chinese culture," states Lee, an opinion which he admits many Chinese will find offensive, but insists is the truth.

If Chinese art is to come once more to the forefront of

pieces of neolithic pottery, 200 pieces of imperial porcelain and over 2,000 pieces of Qing Dynasty embroidery, Tang Dynasty Sancai figures, ancient ceramic pottery and figures, which are on display in his own museum in Taipei and at international exhibitions. Last year, parts of Kander Lee's collection were displayed at the Palace Museum in Beijing. To celebrate the opening of two new galleries in Hong Kong, Lee exhibited a selection of Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD) pottery.

To encourage fresh talent, Lee recently launched a new biennial award for the three most talented Chinese artists in painting, calligraphy and architecture. Lee's Chinese Art Award is open to Chinese from Beijing, Taipei and Hong Kong, the work needs to reflect Chinese heritage, and not abstract displays of Campbell soup cans. In addition, Lee two years ago sponsored eight mainland students to study in Taiwan, offering he says, "an opportunity for cultural communication."

Testament to Lee's success in popularising Chinese art are a series of pictures Lee proudly displays of prominent customers including one of former French President Giscard d'Estaing, who told Lee he was particularly interested in learning about Chinese culture.

By arrangement with Executive, Hong Kong.

Tang Dynasty Dragon Head.

world art, Lee argues the Chinese people must become re-acquainted with their own culture. "If the Chinese people don't know, how can we expect Westerners to know?", asks Lee.

To help promote Chinese art within the Chinese community Lee has put together a collection of over 2,000 significant Chinese paintings, 400

principle of accountability within it. When I hear of factionalism and the pressure felt by teachers to belong to this or that party in order to advance their prospects I am depressed and feel momentarily that perhaps the Vice Chancellor should be chosen without election. Yes, the method of election excludes certain type of man of intellect and ability who does not have a flair for vote catching. That is surely a loss. Of course, a consensus choice would have been ideal, provided we could find a form which would not turn out to be another form of election. It however does help to remember that there was never a time at Dhaka University during my more than three decades in it when factionalism was not there in some form or other. The only difference is that before 1973 the factions used to centre round powerful individuals and were sycophantic and now they centre round parties. Clearly, however a return to the old autocracy is to be ruled out. The 1973 Dhaka University Order is perhaps the only symbol of our liberation which has remained intact and none should tamper with it lightly. Which makes me urge the University Grants Commission from this forum to tell those concerned in plain terms that to oblige the Universities to seek the governments prior sanction for the creation of posts would be a retrograde step and that the UGC would be no party to it. The latter is a coordinating, not a superior, body, but is must be strengthened in all possible ways, so that it can effectively mediate between the government and the universities in this and other matters.

There are new tensions within our Universities calling for sensible and timely resolution. The competitive aspira-

tions of the administrative and subordinate staff, whose number has swollen as a consequence of our rapid physical expansion and 'bhadraok' culture, should be accommodated reasonably without undue delay. The teachers of the University might wish to reconsider the ethics and efficacy of strikes as a means of realizing their demands for the improvement of their service conditions. The weapon hurts students who have lost hundreds of days of academic work and squandered valuable years in pursuit of a university degree which still eludes them as well as the teachers whose only asset is the value of their work and their pride in it. The tension between the university community and the people surrounding them which erupted into violence, undoubtedly a function of the contrast between relative affluence and a sea of deprivation around, needs to be understood and imaginatively handled.

Our universities need to direct their look inward to identify their weaknesses and deficiencies and to remedy them as far as it lies within their power. Frankly, a lot can be done which does not depend on money for instance, self-criticism, evaluation and renewal. Serious thought should be given to the eradication of session Jam - a catastrophe blighting careers - by running parallel courses in the afternoons with appropriate inducement to teachers at least in the arts and social science faculties. For an interim challenge of the greatest importance for the Vice Chancellor is to enable his scholars to leave the university while they are still young and might be useful to themselves and society.

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My Days as a Vice-Chancellor: Challenges and Lessons

by Khan Sarwar Murshid

THE challenges, that is the problems, Vice Chancellors face in the late 80's - these have been identified and well rehearsed - are of a very different order of intensity and complexity from those of the early 70's. In those days at Rajshahi the Vice Chancellor's problem was not, for instance, lack of autonomy but almost unlimited freedom of action for some time when there was an University Act or ordinance in operation. He had no guide other than his own judgement and conscience in responding to administrative and human problems in the aftermath of liberation. The one instance of interference from above in the discharge of my academic duties that I can recall was in the shape of a young man who one day came to my office armed with a letter from a Minister, who must remain unnamed, alleged to have been written with a verbal endorsement from the then Prime Minister, asking me to give him an Associate Professorship in the Department of Mathematics at once on an ad hoc basis. I read the letter and quietly tore it and put it into the waste basket in his presence. I never saw the young man again, nor heard from any Ministers in this connection. The Prime Minister, of course, knew nothing about the matter. At the onset of mass cheating at examinations in the country Rajshahi teachers succeeded in maintaining the integrity of examinations by prompt, firm, and unpopular action without untoward consequences. Of the two ghazas I was subjected to, I remember I won one because of the Vice Chancellor's superior capacity for physical en-

durance and the students' inability to sustain faith in the soundness of their, now I forget what, silly demands. Of violence I can remember a case of gunshots in the vicinity of the women students' hostel by the outsider in pursuit of an affair of the heart. The vogue for systematic and routine use of arms and ammunition had not yet started at Rajshahi. Those were relatively innocent days when a mixture of goodwill firmness an understanding saw the Vice Chancellor through most things.

Today the Vice Chancellor presides over at most a dysfunctional institution. The image of darkness at noon comes to ones mind. It is a young country - things need not have been so dark. As far as the university is concerned, the reality however is that it is an embattled and threatened institution. It is embattled because ruling circles first try to control it through devious means and then defame it, barely concealing their stake in lowering it in the public eye. Witness, for instance, the phenomenon of an angry Chancellor publicly denouncing the university as 'a state within a state' in willful ignorance of the nature and status of the institution in law. The university is threatened also from inside because students' indiscipline, endemic pattern and unrepentant violence, interruptions owing to Government action, and

strikes resorted to by students, teachers, and employees, drastically cut back on academic time and work which make nonsense of its ration d'etre which is cultivation of the mind, training of intelligence, preparing young men and women for the tasks of life and upholding standards of excellence. Add to these whatever academic deficiencies you can spot, the contribution of negative domestic politics which is some times seen as excluding quality, and the willingness to sacrifice standards owing to the pressure of numbers, you have an utterly comfortless picture of higher education in the country.

It is not for me as a Vice Chancellor from, as it were, another age, to pontificate and prescribe remedies, but since the university is too great an inheritance to be lost, may I call upon the government and politicians to face up to the brutal reality of violence among political groups affiliated to them in the campus and accept their share of the responsibility to stamp it out. It cannot be repeated too often that the basic cause of the unrest and conflict among students is political disenfranchisement and leadership default. Having said this, we must ask Government leaders and leaders of the political parties to stop being hypocritical about this business since they

know what kind and degree of violence their affiliates practise in the campus. The Government is best placed to know who possesses or supplies guns and explosives, while political leaders are ca-

procure the release of two of their activists arrested for offences committed outside the campus.

Questions such as legitimacy, tyranny, disenfranchisement, attacks on freedom

Witness to History

In this new series, prominent personalities will look at events of the past which shaped their lives, often learning behind experiences, grim or pleasant, to learn from.

pal' of a fair guess as to what their followers are up to in the campus. A university cannot allow its premises to be used as a sanctuary for the manufacturers of bombs and miscellaneous criminals and remain a university. It is unquestionably the cynicism and cowardice of powerful people in the government and political parties that has helped the continuance and escalation of violence in the campus. Recently, one group of students succeeded through physical intimidation in obtaining the services of a terrified Vice Chancellor, held to ransom in his own house, to

of thought and expression have been the traditional preoccupation of the campus community including students. If this means politics - so be it. But, surely, externally sponsored armed political groups are another matter and have no place in an institution for the cultivation of the mind, since by using the university as an instrument and arena of struggle for power they destroy the very basis of its prestige, integrity and usefulness. All political leaders across the spectrum should recognize what they have done to the university by their practice of using