



## THE GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY

BOMBAY 4:30 p.m. ...

Imagine a large, dimly lit room replete with heavy darkwood desks, the kind that high school teachers used in the nineteen-fifties. The desks are touching end to end, occasionally interrupted by aisles. They are loosely arranged in several rows, marching into the distance. Upon each desk are piles of different sized ledgers, yellow with age and covered with dust. Some of the desks are so top-heavy that it appears everything will topple as a precarious pile of ledgers teeters and leans on an adjoining pile. Each hardcover ledger is neatly bound with twine. A low turbulence is sustained by the presence of hundreds of fans, slowly swooping the air with broad blade strokes. While the tied ledgers remain stably closed, loose papers struggle to fight free of their paper weights, their corners fluttering in the still air making droning helicopter sounds. A dirty yellow light filters through large window panes along one side of the room, giving people the appearance of silhouettes lit from behind.

Along the other side of the room is an infinite series of identical wooden doors. Upon each door is fastened a small brass coloured name plate. The closed doors, forming a single loaded corridor, generate a rhythm along the eastern wall of the room, disappearing into the diffused light. After waiting for more than an hour outside the door of the Indian station-master we were sent to see, in order to validate our train passes from Bombay to Delhi, my eyes begin to focus on the details of this dream-like landscape of desks and volumes. Dusty shelves laden with files fill every corner of occupiable space, adding to the musty, humid smell of the Indian summer. It becomes difficult to breathe the entrapped air.

From behind each desk, littered with discarded cigarette butts and tea cups, peers a clerk; some male, others female. A veritable sea of Indian eyes slowly pans across the room as the clerks fan themselves in a slow gradual sweeping motion, not unlike the hovering blades of the electric fans overhead. This collective motion gives the enormous room an air of action taking place in arrested motion. When detected being watched, in order to avoid looking idle, each clerk performs some nervous jerky action, such as moving a file or opening a drawer, although these very actions betray their bureaucratic fate.



Precisely at this point, the presence of a camera sends the entire room into a state of undulating panic. Beginning as whispers rippling along each aisle, the panic crescendos with one of the more nervously confident employees asking in an aggressive tone whether we have a permit to take photographs within the head administrative offices of 'the western railway'. I respond in a muffled tone that we have the authorization of the gentleman on the second floor whom we have been waiting to see, (but who in fact we never managed to meet, *if indeed he exists at all*). Due to the spokesman's insistence and to the fact that by then the room had been documented; at least in my mind; we apologized and hurriedly departed.

The image of this room continues to embody the very essence of Indian administration. As the fans continued rotating ever so slowly over the dusty landscape of ledgers below, we left this place with indelible Kafkaesque impressions: one's name and train reservation certainly exists, waiting to be validated, somewhere within the multitude of forms and ledgers, filed within some pile upon some shelf. But in what sector, on what date, under what letter or cross reference, only K. could begin to come to terms with. The secrets held within the enormous room will remain undiscovered long after the dust-bound ledgers are replaced by computers and the steam locomotives of the great western railway cease to exist.

*terrance galvin is an adjunct professor of architecture at McGill University. This impression was recorded in the summer of 1992 while conducting CIDA research en route from Bombay to Calcutta.*

