

# Can an Embassy Be Open and Secure?

By Jane C. Loeffler

**A**S the curator of the National Building Museum in Washington, I attended two meetings in 1980 with State Department officials and the architect Frank Gehry, who presented proposals for a United States embassy in Damascus, Syria. His design was architecturally impressive: a stark, white building behind an open courtyard.

State Department officials were more practical. For instance, they pointed out, visitors and workers would cross an open plaza to enter and leave the building, making them possible terrorist targets. Cars, including the ambassador's, had no secure place to park. There was no separate, safe entry for the ambassador.

Mr. Gehry — whose design was meant to be open and welcoming — did not deal with these practical problems, and, for many reasons, an embassy in Syria was never built.

The objections to Mr. Gehry's design were not unusual. Embassies are asked to do two contradictory things. They have to be prominent and accessible, a symbol of the American commitment to democracy. Yet they also have to protect the many people who visit and work there.

Designing such buildings is not easy, but it becomes an impossible task when funds are scarce and when there are no clear, realistic guidelines to follow. Congress doesn't appropriate nearly enough money to make the sites secure, and the State Department has developed a set of safety and architectural guidelines for embassies that are impractical and, in some cases, contradictory.

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Those two deficiencies have become shockingly apparent after the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Indeed, in the months before the embassy in Nairobi was bombed last week, the American Ambassador, Prudence Bushnell, twice asked for a new, safer building, only to have her request rejected for budgetary reasons.

How could the State Department have been so wrong? These decisions are easy to criticize in hindsight, but part of the problem may have been that the department doesn't have a coherent way of deciding which embassies are at risk and should be given priority.

Much has been made of the "In-

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## The State Department has contradictory standards.

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man standards," named after retired Adm. Bobby R. Inman, who led a State Department commission on overseas security in 1985. The guidelines his commission drew up, after the bombing of the American embassy in Beirut in 1983, called for moving embassies to remote locations where as walled compounds they could be built to blast-proof specifications. They were to be at least 100 feet from nearby roads or buildings and have as few windows as possible. Architects who followed these standards were forced to design stockade-like structures that varied in little more than surface decoration.

These standards were completely impractical. They did not take into account that different countries call for different types of American embassies. If the panel's recommenda-

tions had been fully carried out, embassies in London and Paris, for example, would have been forced to move from their prime locations.

State Department officials privately complained about "Inman architecture" and circumvented the proposals by granting security exemptions to existing buildings, leasing property and renovating old buildings.

**T**here were economic and political considerations as well. Making embassies secure is an expensive proposition — and Congress was willing to appropriate enough money only for the most pressing needs. The State Department had to curtail its plans to buy and design new embassies, concentrating on piecemeal improvement. It issued security waivers for new embassies in Ottawa, which is currently under construction, and for the proposed embassy soon to be built in Berlin.

A new State Department directive has made the process more confusing. In March, the department announced that it would mandate the acquisition and use, where possible, of "historically significant properties" in downtown areas for use as embassies.

The order, issued by Patsy L. Thomasson, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, seeks to make embassies a part of a country's urban renewal effort. While the program may be admired by architectural historians, it adds yet another hurdle to efforts to provide security at posts abroad.

No one knows whether Ambassador Bushnell's calls for a more secure building would have been heeded if the Government had had a clearer set of policies, let alone more money. But the bombings in Africa should force the State Department to revamp its guidelines and pressure Congress to pay the added costs. □