

in review

permanent ambassadors

*The first comprehensive history of American embassy design
reads more like a political thriller.*

by Philip Nobel The first publication of Jane C. Loeffler's research into the design of American embassies, a September 1990 article in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, was greeted with considerable excitement in that circle. The postwar embassy building program—with its precocious embrace of Modern architecture as a symbol of democracy, its scenic entanglement in Cold War machinations, and its value as a case study of government patronage—was widely understood to be a complex, fascinating, and under-examined episode in the larger story of the institutionalization of Modern architecture in the United States. Many of the individual buildings were well known (some, like Edward Durrell Stone's 1957 embassy in New Delhi, were overexposed from the first sketch), but until Loeffler's 1990 article, no one had tried to paint the bigger picture.

Now, with the publication of *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, that picture is complete. The book gives an account of American embassy building from its ad hoc beginnings (the Sultan of Morocco gave the young nation a building in Tangier in 1821) to its deliberate, fortified present. The heart of the book, though, is a study of the political processes behind America's post-World War II explosion of foreign building. This

Loeffler's research relies heavily on interviews and internal memoranda. The result is a close-grained, sometimes anecdotal history that highlights the personalities behind the elaborate political process. Two of the best characters are Nelson Kenworthy, an interim head of the Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO), who suspected that Hans Knoll, a frequent supplier of furniture for embassy projects, was "really tied up with the CIA," and Frederick Larkin, the first chief of the FBO, who emerges as a kind of bureaucrat-hero with a grand vision for the foreign service. During his reign from 1946 to 1952, Larkin crossed the globe to snap up prime sites and historic properties for future use, and exploited his powerful connections in Congress to more than quintuple the number of American diplomatic buildings abroad. If Loeffler's own politics enter the book anywhere, it is in early attacks on congressional myopia, which she contrasts with Larkin's swashbuckling purchases, such as the former Rothschild mansion in Paris—at the time a hard-fought victory against penny-pinching congressmen, and now one of the United States' most valuable diplomatic assets.

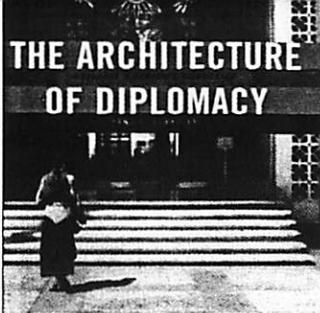
In addition to these political and institutional vectors, architects themselves frequently acted to complicate the embassy building program. Particularly



The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies
Jane C. Loeffler
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book will of course be a treasure to the historians—both architectural and political—who have awaited it so eagerly, but it should also appeal to those less tickled by its copious notes and appendices. To Loeffler's credit, *The Architecture of Diplomacy* reads like a Washington political thriller—architects clash with congressmen, diplomats carry on hushed intrigues in distant capitals. There is even a veiled moral to the story: Architecture exists as the product of an elaborate and contested process, or it does not exist at all.

Loeffler seems to have infiltrated the State Department at every level to find the political, social, stylistic, and financial forces that shaped each embassy building. All buildings come into being at the behest of such influences, but here the situation is extreme: architects and the politicians who directed them had to balance programmatic, symbolic, functional, budgetary, and public opinion concerns for multiple audiences in the United States and each host country. What, for instance, does one do when Sukarno, Indonesia's first president-for-life, personally objects to—and then redesigns—the plans for a new embassy in Jakarta, as he did when architects Antonin Raymond and Ladislav Rado proposed a too-modest scheme in 1953? At any one point, several noisy groups—from the State Department to congressional committees to embassy workers and the American electorate—considered themselves to be the principal clients for embassy buildings, adding layers of confusion to the process and grist for Loeffler's narrative. Financially, the situation was equally complex. In many cases, credits in foreign currencies were used to buy property and support capital projects abroad, with the result that foreign materials, and even designers, were sometimes favored, to the chagrin of America-firsters at the American Institute of Architects and elsewhere. Loeffler navigates this potentially byzantine topic with confidence and good humor, explaining how credits in five currencies, as well as imported Italian travertine, supported the construction of Harrison & Abramovitz's 1948 embassy in Rio de Janeiro. The story of a diplomatic post purchased with a shipload of Army PX beer illustrates the frugal practice of expanding America's overseas outposts through trade in surplus goods.



during what Loeffler calls the “heyday” of the program (1954–60), the young, experimental architects favored by the advisory committee (including Paul Rudolph, Eero Saarinen, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and Harry Weese) were somewhat prone to run amok with new materials and construction techniques, regardless of their fitness for a given context. Perhaps because she has little patience for architects who condemned diplomats to glass boxes in the tropics, Loeffler devotes many pages to an interesting discussion of the screening devices that were so omnipresent on

embassy and other buildings designed in the mid-1950s. The use of inexperienced and exuberant architects combined with financial woes and uncertainty about the embassy program—a new set of spatial requirements that was always in flux and sometimes not well communicated by Washington—to create many controversial buildings and aborted campaigns. These in turn brought increased criticism of the program as a whole from politicians. From this perspective, the most troubled building of this period was John Johansen's cylindrical Dublin embassy (1957–64), to which Loeffler devotes an entire chapter: “Deadlock Over Dublin.” Johansen, challenged by his first nonresidential structure, was sent back to the drawing board five times—as political tension mounted—before his allies contrived for President Kennedy to sign a letter in support of a design that critics called “poetic but confused.”

The Architecture of Diplomacy offers many cautionary lessons for practicing architects, reinforced by the author's occasional critical forays. Loeffler's admirable position, which she articulates here and there throughout the book, calls for dignified compromise in the face of a complex process. She blasts prima donna architects—Michael Hare, who refused to incorporate a picture window into his ambassador's residence in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, is quietly vilified—while she praises those who are not too proud to bend—Raymond & Rado's eventual concessions to Sukarno, for example, earn serious plaudits. Clearly, in the heavily mediated world of embassy building, always a few shades more complex than civilian construction, an architect's sober self-assessment is a rare and wonderful thing.