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# International Style

## The rise and fall (and perhaps, rise again) of U.S. embassy architecture

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It's not too far in actual distance," said Stephen Kieran, about the location of the new American embassy in London that his firm has been designing, "but some would say a considerable distance from Mayfair." That's how he put it at a recent conference on the subject of design and diplomacy, held at the Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture at the Cooper Union in New York City. The KieranTimberlake project—a decidedly not-in-Kansas-anymore 11-story glass cube, with soap-bubble-like ETFE plastic sunshades and a general lack of stone colonnades and escutcheons—isn't what immediately springs to mind when you think "embassy." Instead of the usual walls and fences, the ground level is secured by a 100-foot perimeter setback and a tactical topography of berms and ponds. Kieran was acknowledging those innovations, and also noting the social distinction between the embassy's former address in London's Mayfair neighborhood and its new one on the Thames's southern embankment between Vauxhall and Battersea—something like moving from Park Avenue, Manhattan, to Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn.

But the distance that the architectural idea of the American Embassy has traveled between the 1960 structure by midcentury modern master Eero Saarinen on Mayfair's Grosvenor Square and its shiny new replacement is considerably greater. It's a journey that, in its dramatic ups and downs over the last half century, traces not only the evolution of a particular building type, but also a larger story about what we build when what we build really matters. While embassies may seem like a distant and narrow specialty, they present extreme versions of the design dilemmas that all buildings must solve: how to both represent ambitious abstractions (like, say, democracy, liberty, and America) and address ruthlessly practical problems (like security, sustainability, and the humdrum operations of large offices); how to stand out and yet fit in, how to be both poetic and prosaic, open and closed, all at the same time.

The notion of the nation as a patron of construction, and even a client of design, is easily politicized into tired oppositions about public good versus private enterprise, Works Progress Administration versus American Small Businesses Association, and about who, exactly, builds what. But America has been building embassies, chanceries, consulates, and all manner of missions and posts directly and steadily over decades. Today there are some 70 million square feet of them worldwide, administered by the State Department's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO), with an annual budget of some \$1.2 billion for operations and new construction.

Their tale is a story told in three acts, which begins with very good buildings (although they may have been more showpieces than masterpieces), and then continues with very bad buildings (or at least buildings from which the idea of architecture, as architects generally understand it, was systematically removed). The story's conclusion—in which the vast bureaucracies to be found at the State Department are attempting an institutionalized definition of how excellence in design is recognized and achieved—is being written as we speak. At the same moment, attacks this September at American diplomatic facilities throughout the Middle East (and especially at Benghazi, Libya, which saw the death of the American ambassador and others) have reintroduced an acute concern about security—and reinforced the question, with us since September 11, 2001, of architecture's duties,

both practical and lyrical—in what still appears to be an age of terror.

The modern history of the American embassy can be dated to the 1949 construction of the United Nations headquarters in New York City—which wasn't directly an American government project, but shaped much that followed. Wallace Harrison, of the New York City firm Harrison & Abramovitz, distilled the International Style (and globally scaled egos) of Oscar Niemeyer, Le Corbusier, and others on the project's design committee into a composition of swooping sculptural reinforced concrete and pellucid glassy boxes—thereby establishing a long-standing association between such forms and materials and the ideals of democratic governance, all of them literally and figuratively expressive and transparent. Harrison & Abramovitz quickly reinforced that association with similar designs for the American embassies in Rio de Janeiro and Havana. In 1954, the International Style and international relations were institutionally married when Secretary of State John Dulles established an Architectural Advisory Committee (featuring such midcentury worthies as MIT School of Architecture dean Pietro Belluschi) to oversee an expanding overseas building stock. Public architecture, like so much in subsequent decades, became a tool of Cold War soft power. A 1953 feature in *Architectural Forum* contrasted a proposal by Eero Saarinen for an American embassy in Helsinki, “a colorful picture of a young, progressive, and modern-minded America,” with photos of its ponderously neoclassical Soviet counterpart, noting, “the lesson will not be lost upon those who may have received a different impression from Soviet propaganda.”

There followed something of a golden age, in which the era's best architects produced, if not their best buildings, then work that boldly embraced the dual challenge of projecting actual grandeur and seeming humility—to express something of American character and power but also, as Belluschi put it, “to understand and sympathize with local customs and people.” To that dual challenge, there was the further dual challenge of performing all this expression and sympathy not with a singular monument or world's fair pavilion, but with, basically, a complicated and highly functional office building.

The result was a bed of hothouse flowers, almost all blossoming around 1959. There was Saarinen at London in 1960, who topped a delicate stone facade that acknowledged adjacent historic domestic architecture with a gilded aluminum eagle that, decidedly, didn't. (The eagle, with a 35-foot wingspan, showed up in drawings midway through construction and required its very own committee hearing.) There was Marcel Breuer at The Hague in 1959, with a typically trapezoidal composition in sculptural masonry. There was Gropius at Athens in 1959, who produced, to mixed effect, a kind of Bauhaus Parthenon. There was Edward Durrell Stone at New Delhi in 1959, with a crisp but Raj-worthy gilt-and-marble-filigreed palace built around a tropical water garden courtyard. (An intricate sunscreen masked the fact that the building, for all its grandeur, was only two stories.) There was Louis Kahn in 1960–62, with an unbuilt scheme for Luanda, Angola, that presaged his later monumentally minimal work for the government complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh. There was John Johansen at Dublin in 1957–64, with a stridently undulating cylindrical tower, encircled with a dry moat and bridge. There was even, as late as 1980, Frank Gehry in Damascus, Syria, whose proposal went unbuilt following (according to an account by architectural historian Jane Loeffler in her definitive history, *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies*) a contentious meeting in which Gehry responded to a State Department official's worries about the aesthetic effect of chain-link fencing (a low-rent material Gehry had famously raised to high art) with the catchphrase of every icy artiste: “You don't know my work.”

Chain-link, with its associations of blunt economy and casual security, was to the point; that 1980 conversation coincided with the 1979–81 hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. In 1983, two attacks in Beirut, Lebanon, (April suicide bombings at the American Embassy that killed 63 diplomatic and military personnel, and an October attack killing almost 300 American and French servicepeople), led to a significant tightening (under an advisory panel headed by U.S. Navy admiral Bobby R. Inman) of security requirements for American buildings abroad. The Inman standards called for blast-proof walls and 100-foot setbacks from surrounding streets, and encouraged the consolidation and isolation of embassy structures into self-contained compounds, often at distant exurban sites among airports and malls. Those gorgeous glassy projects of the 1950s and 1960s,

with their prominent but intimate urban settings, were rendered, at least administratively, obsolete.

By 1986, almost a billion dollars had been appropriated to build 61 new structures around the world to approach the new standards. Some subsequent projects (like Arquitectonica's 1992–96 embassy on the site of a former polo field in suburban Lima, Peru, which applied Incan supergraphics to monumentally blank walls) sustained a degree of architectural ambition, but the midcentury design flourishes receded. The 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (which saw 220 embassy workers killed and thousands more injured), redoubled the dynamic. Plans were announced, and \$17.5 billion earmarked, to build some 150 new facilities (out of a then-total of 260 worldwide) to meet the Inman recommendations by 2018. The 1999 Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act turned those recommendations into mandates and instituted a collocation requirement that offices and residences for diplomatic staff be consolidated at single contiguous sites.

The result of these new demands and rapid timetables was the Standard Embassy Design (SED). The basic idea was that instead of dozens of new buildings, the State Department would construct one new building—dozens of times, in dozens of places, with subsequent savings in time and money. Already in development, the SED program appealed to Major General Charles E. Williams, a retired Army Corps of Engineers official appointed head of the OBO with the advent of the George W. Bush administration. The template for this one-size-fits-all approach was the 1999 Kampala, Uganda, embassy by RTKL Architects, a dour but straightforward structure with an H-shaped plan of two office blocks around a central atrium, which Williams had visited and admired in 2002. He hired the URS Corporation, a federal contractor for engineering and construction, to convert the Kampala design into a generic model. Some six dozen near-identical incarnations of the building, on standard ten-to-15 acre exurban sites, were built over the next seven years, a touch of Uganda from Bulgaria to Nigeria, from Turkey to Mali. The OBO's architectural advisers were disbanded and replaced by an Industry Advisory Panel of design-build engineering and construction industry figures.

“Oh, man, the general,” I overheard one attendee say at the Cooper Union conference. “He’s been gone for years, but people say his name like he just left the building.” A 2007 Washington Post feature on Williams, who resigned that year during a series of investigations into irregularities in the contracting and construction of the 104-acre American diplomatic compound in Baghdad, observed drily that he “is described by people who have worked with him as a complicated personality who demands absolute loyalty, insists that his staff and outsiders call him ‘General’ and prefers to ride elevators alone.” A subsequent New York Post story reported the September 2009 observation by Richard J. Shinnick, who replaced Williams as interim director of the OBO, that his predecessor’s tenure had been “the dark ages as far as the design culture was concerned.”

Loeffler, whose canonical book records those dark ages in its final pages, is more measured in her assessment. “Williams wasn’t keen on architecture as a discipline,” she told me. “And he wasn’t in a position to appreciate it. He was under the gun from Congress: fast, economical, secure. That was the SED. He was an engineer, and he had the mind-set of, ‘What do you need an architect for when the specs are set?’ There was an argument that everything should be privatized, so in response State said, ‘No, no, no, we can run it like a business.’ And that’s what General Williams tried to do.” But, as Loeffler notes, even some of the general’s seemingly simple economies may have been false: “The SEDs were supposed to have all the same windows, as a cost saving, but you don’t need the same windows on the south side as the east, or the same windows in Dublin as in Riyadh.”

One way of looking at the SED is that it radically prioritized part of the embassy’s design assignment, projecting power and ensuring security, at the expense of the more mysterious mission of perpetuating American values through architectural effects. Or that it established an artificial zero-sum between security and community, between the mundane and the sublime in any design assignment. What, one wonders, could a Gropius, a Breuer, a Saarinen have done with the stringent requirements and deadlines of the recent past? “It’s not mutually exclusive,” Loeffler observes. “Good design might be inherently more secure, more enduring. A terrible thing

could happen tomorrow and all this could go out the window, but meanwhile we can try not to imprison ourselves.” In an era when half of the world’s population lives in cities, the design assignment of an embassy is not merely national, but also urban and urbane—something the SED ignored. “We weren’t participating in cities,” says OBO’s current director, Lydia Muniz. “It was sending the wrong message at so many levels.”

When I asked Muniz about Williams’s legacy, she was appropriately diplomatic for a State Department official: “We wouldn’t be in this position without that track record of ability to execute a process.” Arriving with the Obama administration in 2009, Muniz has advanced a Design Excellence program at the OBO, modeled on the similar long-standing program at the General Services Administration (GSA), which, through rigorous selection standards, peer review, and open competitions, has brought high design, on time and on budget, to domestic federal buildings (and, not incidentally, given Thom Mayne a career). With the participation of current GSA Design Excellence program director Casey Jones, Muniz is progressively implementing new standards and processes for design and construction. Stephen Kieran and James Timberlake’s London embassy, due in 2017, is a transitional project, “a great test case, a template for the program,” as Muniz puts it—along with new embassies in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Beijing, and a consulate in Guangzhou, China. The first planned products of State’s Design Excellence program are the recently announced embassy for Mexico City by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects with Davis Brody Bond, and a residential annex to the Paris embassy whose short list of prospective designers features Michael Maltzan, Mack Scogin, and Allied Works.

Architecture is always a matter of diplomacy, a haphazard and sometimes hazardous wrangling among stakeholders, from clients to designers to builders and back, that reconciles competing interests and results in new facts on the ground.

In this way, it may be that the OBO’s current Design Excellence program informs and formalizes the diplomacy of architecture as much as the architecture of diplomacy. “Diplomats negotiate,” Jones says. “They understand an iterative design process in a way that other clients don’t.” He describes the Design Excellence approach as “building to the same requirements as ever, [but] rearticulating the whole process, investing early in design and getting it established on the front end, to inform the life of the project.”

That act of articulation continues the magnificent American tradition of implementing seemingly ineffable rights and truths by the simple act of putting them into words. The published Guide to Design Excellence for the OBO contains sublimely straightforward statements in the “Guiding Principles” section like these: “OBO will seek to hire leading American architects and engineers to produce the best designs. Their selection will be based on the quality of their design achievements; and the selection methodology will be open, competitive, and transparent.” “Construction professionals are partners [and] will be engaged throughout the process...” “Designs will be based on life cycle analysis of options that will take into account long-term operations and maintenance concerns. Design intent and features will be maintained throughout the life of the facility, using the best stewardship practices.” In such language we see not bureaucratized boilerplate, but a severely clear articulation of all that should be self-evident in the social contract between any client and any designer, but over which architects, especially, are often inclined to impose a kind of silence, lest their spells be broken.

“Architecture is inescapably a political art, and it reports faithfully for ages to come what the political values of a particular age were.” That observation by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1999 serves as the epigraph to those published “Guiding Principles.” Architecture’s truest believers trust that it doesn’t just wordlessly communicate those values, but intimately shapes the actions with which those values are lived. And belief that the deepest politics of architecture are as much in its intensely collaborative conception as its subsequent inhabitation. “It was an 18-month dialogue,” says James Timberlake about the journey of his design from competition winner to its current design development, with input from everyone from conservationists to the London Metropolitan Police. “It’s a lively conversation, a frank conversation. Ultimately, like all of government,” he says, “everything is negotiated.”

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