

CRITIQUE New designs of embassies and courthouses expose the politics of architecture. But, are architects political enough?

BY JANE C. LOEFFLER

Nonjoke: How many architects does it take to design a new federal building to meet emerging security standards? Answer: Zero.

Architects certainly can and have designed workable, safe, and good-looking embassies and courthouses, but key decisions are often clinched long before designers enter the picture. Absent from the policy-making arena, architects cede the decisions that shape their work. Once a client sets specifications for location, size, massing, setbacks, window/wall ratio, glazing, structural redundancy, and access control, how much is really left to the imagination?

Take the new U.S. embassy in Santiago, Chile, for example. Minneapolis architect Leonard Parker, FAIA, designed the building for the Department of State in the aftermath of terrorist bombings in Beirut, Lebanon. The architect found his design options seriously constrained: The multipurpose office building had to stand 100 feet back from a high perimeter wall, no more than 10 percent of its wall area could be windows, no hand-holds or openings could be within 15 feet of the ground. Parker regrets the constraints, but understands the need. He echoes colleagues when he describes Washington's prevailing outlook as "a fortress mentality."

Before we become totally trapped in a maze of bollards and barriers, it is important to ask

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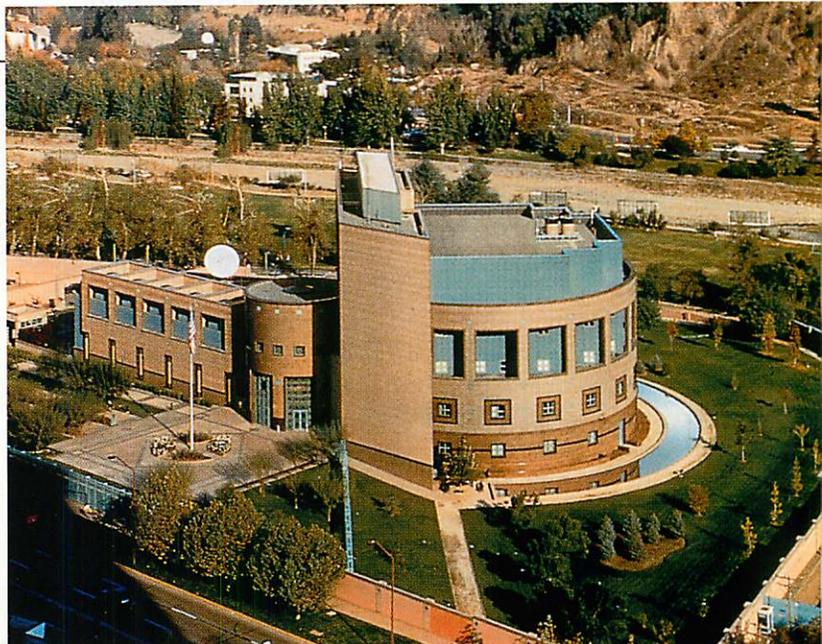
whether current security standards accomplish their goals and to what extent they may undermine the very purpose of the public and quasi-public buildings they are designed to protect. If embassies are so remote that diplomats are cut off from the people they are supposed to know and serve, or if courthouses are so fortified that judges and jurors are sequestered within their walls, then the ultimate cost of such security may outweigh its benefit. It's a matter of finding a balance. But with politicians and experts in ballistic and blast analysis, counterterrorism, crime prevention, and risk management making most decisions, there is real danger that architects and other design professionals will find themselves left out of the mix.

Public advocates

Who is speaking out on behalf of the public's buildings? No one has more eloquently identified such buildings as political symbols than Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), the former U.S. ambassador to India

TO WHAT EXTENT DO SECURITY STANDARDS UNDERMINE THE VERY PURPOSE OF THE PUBLIC BUILDINGS THEY PROTECT?

who authored President Kennedy's "Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture" nearly 40 years ago and continues to champion the cause of open architecture. Moynihan laments both the closing of Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House and the ominous proposal to exclude the public from the General Service Administration's newest Washington office structure,



The Leonard Parker Associates, Architects' design for the U.S. embassy in Santiago, Chile, complete with perimeter wall and moat.

the Ronald Reagan Building. He has called for "a national conversation" focused on reconciling our needs for security with the "openness and fearlessness" we must maintain. Moynihan's challenge prompts us to ponder the expression of democracy through design and to ask whether

attractive buildings and spaces can also be safe.

Through hands-on experience, U.S. District Judge Douglas P. Woodlock of Boston has emerged as another articulate spokesman for public buildings. He chaired the committee overseeing the design and construction of Boston's new federal courthouse, centerpiece of the GSA's \$8 billion, 13-year plan to

build and renovate 160 courthouses. Speaking to elected officials, architects, neighbors, and even schoolchildren, Woodlock has taken a firm stance linking quality architecture with civic betterment. "Courthouses were the places where people engaged in the formative process of American democracy," he declared, and they should contribute to "our nation's architectural conversation." When Boston's new courthouse, designed by Henry Cobb, FAIA, opened last year, some critics faulted its "imperial" character, its somewhat remote location, and cost. But given Boston's topography, the size and scope of the court's program, its commitment to public purposes, and security issues, the brick structure is remarkably welcoming.

U.S. District Judge James M. Rosenbaum of Minneapolis, another

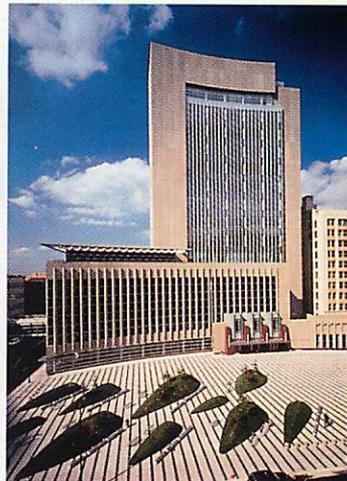
architectural watchdog, worked closely with the design team from New York's Kohn Pedersen Fox and Minneapolis' Architectural Alliance to ensure that his new 15-story federal courthouse satisfied the needs of its many users, incorporated the latest courtroom technology, and struck a balance between public access and security. The city's pedestrian skyway leads into the building's lobby, making it an easy all-weather destination, and grass-covered mounds on the exterior entrance plaza (designed by Cambridge, Mass., landscape architect Martha Schwartz) prevent cars or trucks from approaching the building's perimeter.

Bunker mentality

Joe Brown, president of landscape design firm EDAW, needs no convincing that "buildings and spaces can look beautiful and still be secure." He is trying to reconcile security and design on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol—scene of a bomb

explosion in 1983 and, last summer, an attack by a crazed gunman. As a landscape architect, Brown is committed to the concept of security as "an underlay that is seamlessly integrated, rather than imposed" on a site. He warns, however, of the tendency among bureaucrats to favor results that are "showy, ugly, and quick—the uglier the better, so people are sure to notice." Brown emphasizes that he can best integrate security when he joins a project at the very beginning, not after pivotal decisions have been made.

Embassies are no less prominent than courthouses as public symbols, but they are far more vulnerable to terrorist attack. As a result, they are being turned into bunkers, and not always with finesse. Part of the problem is their absence of life-tenured advocates, like federal judges. Ambassadors come and go, as do Foreign Service officers, and the buildings have no identifiable constituency at home. No one seems to notice when historic embassy proper-



Kohn Pedersen Fox's design of the U.S. Courthouse in Minneapolis balances public access with security.

ties are sold, neglected, abandoned, or brutally altered.

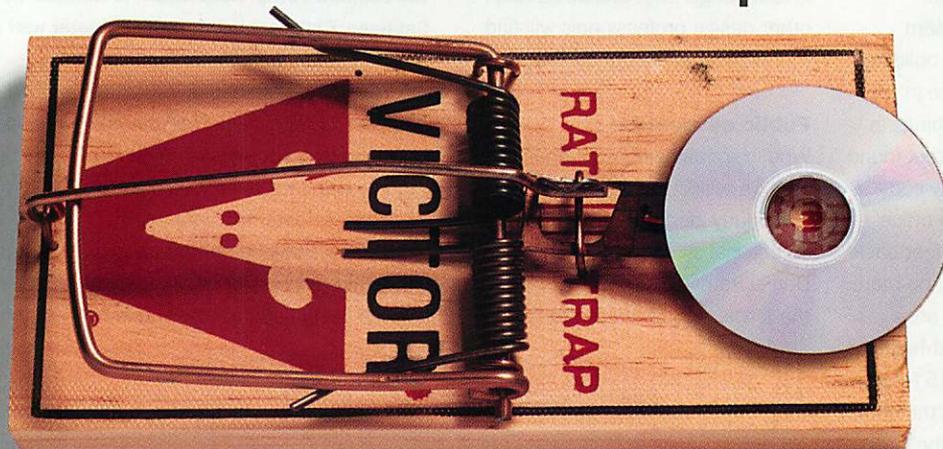
Sound design judgment is too often ignored. Officials did not heed the advice of Chicago architects A. Epstein & Sons, hired by the State Department to design the U.S. embassy in Nairobi nearly 30 years

ago. Those who visited the site argued that it was too small (with a setback of only 12 feet), and even then, unprotectable. Pressure from the Kenyan government, they said, led the department to build on the ill-fated site, where, last August, terrorists' bombs killed 213 people and injured 4,000 others. It is noteworthy that the five-story reinforced concrete embassy did not collapse; most fatalities within the building occurred because glass flew and people, who should have taken cover, rushed to the windows when they heard the first grenade explode. Layers of mylar film on the windows were worthless when the aluminum frames failed.

Expanses of glass have been identified with political openness since the post-World War II era when American Modernists and transplanted Europeans equated historicism with oppression and adopted the glass box as an expression of democracy. Despite the obvious problems of adapting glass

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Don't fall into the trap.

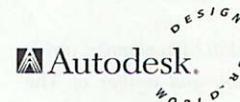


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walls to regional differences, Edward Durell Stone (New Delhi), Ralph Rapson (Stockholm), Walter Gropius (Athens), and Harry Weese (Accra) were among those who designed embassies with glass walls. Hailed as

dows can compromise structural integrity. No building is 100 percent blast-proof, but new federal buildings will have to be blast-aware.

Hillier Group principal Gus Ardura points out that there are

BUREAUCRATS WANT RESULTS THAT ARE "SHOWY, UGLY, AND QUICK— THE UGLIER THE BETTER, SO PEOPLE NOTICE."

evidence of America's open society, such buildings also featured sidewalk access and an array of programs and services to attract the public.

Transparent problems

Times have changed. Admittedly, the Bauhaus model may have never been right for American public buildings. Extensive use of glass is still an option, but protective glazing is one of the many emerging technologies that architects need to understand. Designers should know what applied films can and cannot achieve, how laminates need to be secured, and how the added load of stronger win-

ways to convey openness without glass. "Democratic values don't necessarily reside in the expression of a building's edge," he says. His concern is finding new and different ways "to symbolize the collective values of our society." And he'll likely have the chance soon enough. The State Department recently prequalified his firm, along with 19 others, to design new embassies—as long as Congress provides the money.

A new American embassy is desperately needed in Beijing. A vicious mob nearly overran the embassy in May, but even before that, a State Department report rated the

Beijing property as the worst among many poor U.S. facilities in China. The price tag for a new embassy in Beijing is \$200 million (less than the overall cost of the Boston courthouse) and the time frame is seven to eight years, but the 2000 Federal budget doesn't include funds for this important project, which still lacks a site.

Sadly, there is no real political commitment to decent public buildings abroad. Admiral William J. Crowe Jr., former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former ambassador to Great Britain, is the only public voice calling for real investment in embassy renovation and new construction. Crowe headed the State Department's accountability review boards on the bombings in Africa. Architects did not contribute to that team effort any more than they did to the similar assessments of 1985 following the twin bombings in Beirut. True, the reports were not intended as design manifestos, but they certainly made recommendations with

architectural and engineering implications. Crowe is not interested in fortresses, nor in allowing terrorists to set the design agenda, but he is rightly interested in saving lives.

Without architectural input, buildings designed solely to meet blast criteria will be neither dignified nor diplomatic. George Hartman, FAIA—chair of the State Department's architectural advisory board for nine years—compares some recent embassies to "maximum security prisons."

Architects might consider becoming more politically engaged. By tradition or by temperament, they tend to avoid the political fray, but they may have to change their quiet ways if they want to be heard. The Hillier Group's Ardura decries the profession's lack of political strength: "Architects are used to working with the challenges presented to them, but if we could get in front of the challenge, maybe we could affect it at a more global level!" Good idea. ■

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