

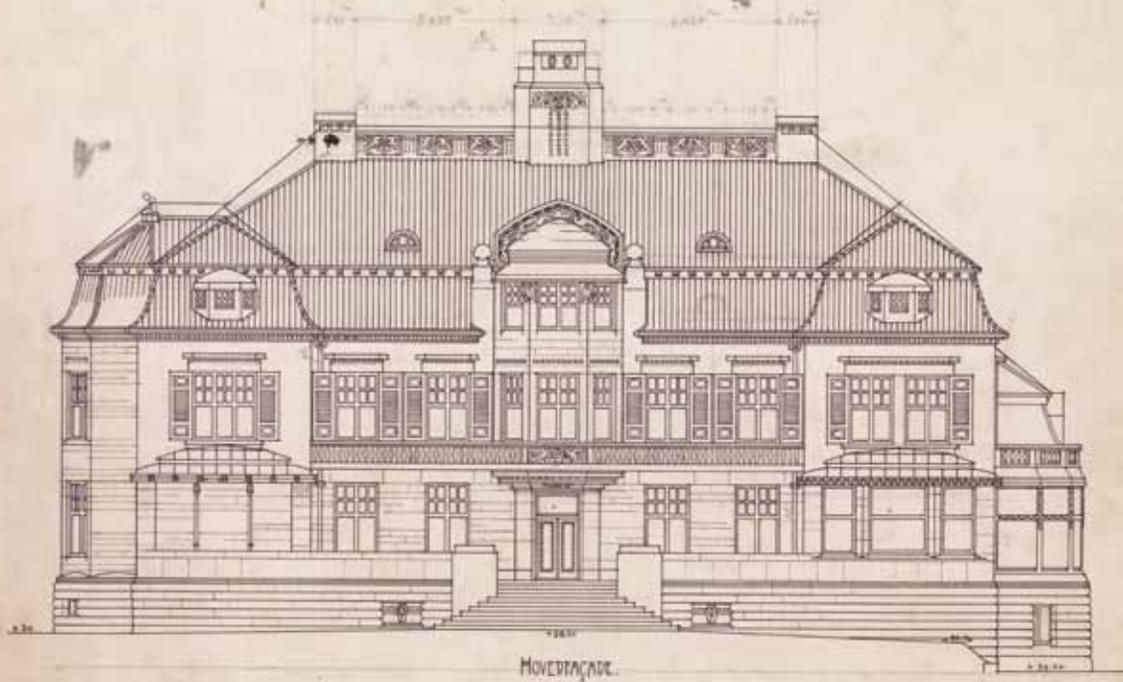


# *Villa Otium*

**A Diplomatic Home**

Published by the Embassy of the United States of America, Oslo

ÆNEBOLIG FOR MR. GENERALKONSUL M. OJEN.  
NOBELS GÅDE NR 28.

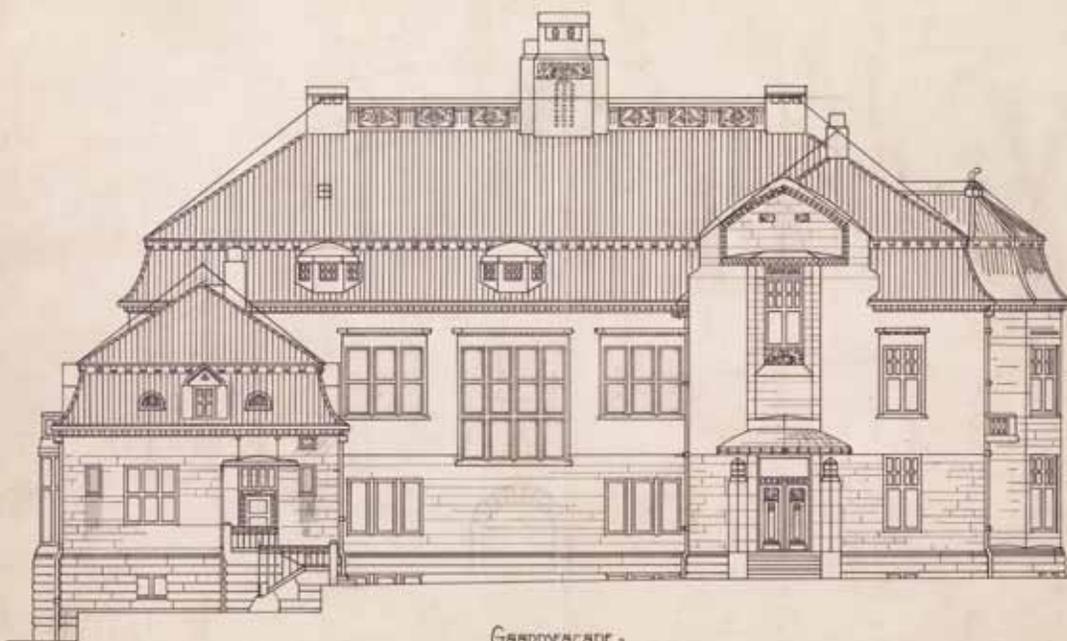


MOVEDTAGE

Scale bar and signature: *Johannes W. Jensen*  
NORDISKE ARKITEKTURBUREAU

The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design

ÆNDELIG FOR MR. GENERALKONSUL M. OJSEN.  
NOBELS GADE N<sup>o</sup> 28.



GARDENFACADE.



1888

1888

NORSK ARCHITECTURPAGSELSKAB

## Foreword

For most of its hundred-year history, Villa Otium has been one of the single most important meeting places for Norwegians and Americans. It has hosted thousands of receptions, many thousands of meals, and an unknowable number of small, informal meetings. It is a landmark in Oslo and a cultural icon as well, since it was designed by one of Norway's leading architects for one of Norway's leading industrialists of the early 1900s.

My wife Eleanor and I have appreciated the legacy of the building's history, and the responsibility for preserving this landmark, but we also have been able to enjoy Villa Otium as a family home. Our sons have visited, as have many other family members, friends, and official visitors from the United States. That the building succeeds at both functions so well, as a public showcase and as a place offering peace and privacy, is a testament to the building's design. As you will read, prominent Norwegian architect Henrik Bull and client Olsen did not always see eye-to-eye, but perhaps their "fruitful friction" contributed something essential to the success of the final design.

We thought the 100th anniversary was worth noting, so we have asked several experts to contribute to this book covering their specialties. Architectural historian Jane C. Loeffler, author of *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, has written the basic history and described how the United States Government has used its diplomatic buildings to project the core American values of openness, generosity, and democracy. Director of the Norwegian Art Nouveau Center, Nils Anker, has written about the architect, and the cultural currents that are represented in the design of the

building. Hans Christian Erlandsen has written about the man who commissioned the building, a Norwegian businessman and diplomat who, together with his wife—the niece of Alfred Nobel—moved to Oslo after many years abroad and wanted a showplace. Landscape architect Kari Berge, of Østengen & Berge AS Landskapsarkitekter MNLA, has written about the villa's garden, a critical part of the original design.

A book like this requires a great deal of work, so we would like to thank the authors, the Public Affairs staff at the U.S. Embassy, led by Public Affairs Officer Tim Moore, and our Residence Manager at Villa Otium, Kristina Boraas. We would also like to thank all of those who have contributed by providing private pictures, sharing their memories, and looking through archives for us: Mette Margrethe Bjørum, May-Britt Ivarson, Lars Mjærum, the Swiss Embassy in Oslo, the British Embassy in Oslo, the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, the William J. Clinton Presidential Library, and former U.S. Ambassador to Norway, Robert D. Stuart, Jr.

We hope this book will entertain and inform, re-ignite memories, and start conversations, much as Villa Otium itself has done for these hundred years. Living in this magnificent home has been a rare privilege for my wife and me; it will be the centerpiece of our memories of our years in Oslo.

**Ambassador Barry B. and Eleanor G. White**

*Oslo, summer 2012*

## The American Ambassador's Residence in Oslo: A Short Diplomatic History

By Jane C. Loeffler, MCP, PhD

Known as Villa Otium, the American ambassador's residence in Oslo is among the most prized of U.S. properties overseas. It is remarkable not only as an architectural landmark, the most significant residential work by leading Norwegian architect Henrik

Bull (1911), but also as a diplomatic asset that has defined America's presence in Norway since its purchase by the U.S. government in 1923. The history of how that presence has evolved over the years mirrors efforts by the United States to establish and maintain representation in a rapidly chang-



Photo by Robert H. Loeffler (2011)

*Villa Otium, U.S. Ambassador's Residence, Oslo, south façade.*

ing global landscape. Thus the story of one Norwegian house turns out to provide fascinating insight in to a little-studied chapter in American diplomatic history.

### **U.S. Envoy establishes Legation in Oslo**

This story does not begin in 1908 when Norwegian Consul General Hans Olsen returned from St. Petersburg to create Villa Otium as a bucolic retreat for his family in the most fashionable part of Oslo (or Kristiania, as it was known until 1925). It begins before that in 1906, a year after Norway declared its independence from Sweden. It was then that Herbert H. D. Pierce presented his credentials to the Norwegian foreign minister and became America's first Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to take up residence in the Norwegian capital.

Pierce lived and worked in two furnished rooms at the Victoria Hotel until he rented a small house at Kronprinsens gate 17 and then the adjacent house at Kronprinsens gate 19. Records show that on March 27, 1909 he signed a one-year lease establishing the American Legation at that location.<sup>1</sup> The one-acre property consisted of two plastered brick houses (built c. 1880) and a modest garden. One house became his residence and the other provided office space for the tiny chancery. The biggest advantage to the site was its location directly opposite the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its proximity to other government offices and the Royal Palace. Another asset was its access to four streetcar lines. But the houses were small and ill suited for representational purposes. There was only one bathroom in the main house, for example, and both houses lacked modern amenities, including electric lighting, modern plumbing, and good central heating. Even the location was not optimal. The area was no longer residential, "the poorer part of the city" abutted the rear of the property in the direction of the harbor, and large office buildings almost entirely blocked its view of the fjord.<sup>2</sup> With a

landlord who refused to make needed improvements to the property, the premises quickly fell into disrepair.



*U.S. Embassy (Palazzo Corpi), Istanbul. Photo from Homes for Ambassadors, published by the American Embassy Association, 1910.*

For the next fourteen years, American envoys Laurits S. Swenson and Albert G. Schmedeman failed to secure the funds needed to improve the rental property, buy it, or move elsewhere. Instead, they managed only to extend a short-term lease with a reluctant landlord who eventually sold the entire property to a developer, who threatened the Legation with eviction. All the while, the local rental market evaporated and housing prices soared. As other nations purchased distinguished properties in more fashionable neighborhoods of the capital, the American Legation continued to operate out of a run-down rental property.

## Congress heeds call for better U.S. embassies

The situation in Oslo was not unique, but rather a symptom of a larger problem that Congress had not yet addressed—how the United States should be represented overseas and how to support that representation. The U.S. government provided little support for its representatives overseas at that time. Many envoys rented or purchased houses or apartments (including office space) at their own expense, and nearly all had to supplement meager allowances with funds of their own.

In 1909, for example, the United States owned only five properties overseas—in Tangier, Seoul, Tahiti, Peiping (Beijing), and Constantinople (Istanbul), all acquired under exceptional circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Of those, the only property owned in (or near) Europe was the Palazzo Corpi in Constantinople, acquired for \$125,331 in 1907. At that time, there was no policy guiding the acquisition of diplomatic properties and no program supporting it. Each acquisition or construction project was funded individually by a special congressional appropriation.

Decrying the inadequate wages paid to U.S. diplomats and the embarrassing and undignified quarters in which they were forced to live and work, U.S. businessmen and civic leaders joined forces in 1910 to form the American Embassy Association (AEA). They urged Congress to buy and own its foreign buildings as a way of bettering America's status among "the greatest of world powers." Writing in the AEA publication *Homes for Ambassadors*, James B. Townsend lamented: "With the exception of Constantinople, the United States does not own a single embassy or legation building nor a square inch of ground over which the Stars and Stripes can float as American soil anywhere in Europe." Townsend noted that all across Europe other nations, including Great Britain, first and foremost, but also France, Austria, Germany, Russia, Italy,

Spain, Belgium, China, Japan, and "even Norway, Holland and Mexico" had purchased the "largest, handsomest and best buildings obtainable, generally with surrounding gardens," and that the United States suffered by comparison as "the only nation which has almost entirely neglected the matter of even the proper housing of its diplomatic representatives in foreign countries."<sup>4</sup>



*Bryde House, Kristiania, drawing from Tidens Tegn, July 10, 1920.*

Within months of arriving in Oslo in 1905, for example, British Minister Sir Arthur Herbert had purchased a six-acre property known as Villa Froгнаes as a home for the British Legation. Built in 1859 for the banker Thomas Heftye, the villa was recognized as one of the finest private residences in the city. Although the British Foreign Office strongly recommended a rental property, Herbert argued that buying the villa would strengthen Great Britain's ties to Norway, and the British Treasury approved the purchase early in 1906.<sup>5</sup>

Heeding concerns raised by the AEA, in 1911 Congress passed the first legislation funding the government purchase of land and buildings for diplomatic purposes.

Known as the Lowden Act, after its key sponsor Rep. Frank O. Lowden, the bill authorized a maximum of \$500,000 to be spent annually and limited the amount that could be spent in any one place to \$150,000. The first appropriations under the act were in 1914 for acquisitions in Mexico City and Tokyo.

### **Legation searches for new quarters in Oslo**

In 1916, Minister Schmedeman learned that his landlord was willing to sell the leased Oslo Legation property to the U.S. government. When the State Department failed to respond to his alert, the landlord sold it to Norwegian shipping magnate A. F. Klaveness, who gave the Legation a year to vacate.

Schmedeman searched in vain for a place to rent or buy. "I am endeavoring to find another suitable locality, but it seems to be almost impossible at present," he wrote in 1917, "as there is not even a room vacant in this city." Reporting that the influx of war refugees had further strained an already tight real estate market, creating a shortage of some 4,000 houses in Oslo, he noted that it was no longer possible to rent without buying an interest in a property and that property values had more than tripled in two years.<sup>6</sup> Still, he suggested that for a sum between \$100,000 and \$150,000, the U.S. government might still find a decent home for its Legation.

As it turned out, wartime shortages provided the Legation with a reprieve. Klaveness could not obtain building materials for the concert hall and hotel that he sought to build on his property, and his plans were further thwarted when he learned of plans to build a municipal concert hall and theater that would imperil his own proposed development. So he extended the Legation's lease into 1920 and raised the rent. He made it clear, however, that he would refuse to sign another lease.

Pointing out that all accredited representatives to Norway, except for Cuba, Romania, Poland, Germany, and the United States, already owned their own legations in Oslo, Schmedeman continued to appeal to the Department for funds. He even suggested in 1919 that the Legation might be forced to turn to the Foreign Office for rent relief under a wartime measure designed to protect residential tenants from eviction.<sup>7</sup> Hoping to avoid that humiliating option, he wanted it understood that he could not continue to operate the Legation without a roof over his head.



*Bryde House at Kristinelundveien 22.*

### **Bryde offers "freakish" house as Legation**

Seeing an opportunity to unload a costly folly, Norwegian ship owner G. M. Bryde contacted the State Department in 1919 offering to sell his newly completed house in Oslo to the U.S. government.<sup>8</sup> Represented by American lawyers, Bryde began a hard-sell lobbying effort to interest the Department and key members of Congress in his property. Located at Kristinelundveien 22, the Bryde

house was directly across the street from the new Frogner Park in the city's finest residential neighborhood and boasted the most up-to-date amenities, including electric light and hot water and steam heat. Bryde offered to sell it for \$280,000.<sup>9</sup>

Notified by Bryde's lawyer of his plans to visit him in Washington, Wilbur J. Carr, Director of the Consular Service, asked diplomats Hugh Gibson and Robert Woods Bliss to examine photos and plans of the Oslo property and report back to him. Both were unimpressed. Gibson, who was then Minister to Poland, replied: "The builder of this house was evidently a man with a great deal of taste, most of it bad... If he gave it to us, I should be opposed to letting our flag from any such monstrosity as this." He went on to say, "I should think that one of the first things we ought to try to do is to at least give the impression of having some taste in choosing places for our representatives to live, and I would rather wait a little longer and get something worthwhile."<sup>10</sup> Bliss, chief of the Division of Western European Affairs, concurred, adding: "After looking at the photographs of Mr. Bryde's house, I can readily understand why he wants to sell it (even to such an easy mark as a foreign government) at a loss of nearly 50% and his furniture at a sacrifice of over 60%. I think that any minister who might be obliged to live under such a roof, surrounded by such examples of 'taste,' would soon become a dippy diplomat."<sup>11</sup>

As the State Department prepared to decline Bryde's offer, Oslo newspaper *Tidens Tegn* announced the sale as a *fait accompli*. Schmedeman denied the claim, blamed Bryde for the false rumor, and sent a letter to Washington with the clipping and a published drawing that depicted Bryde's house as a walled fortress—which it resembled. In



*Villa Otium garden c. 1912, when property extended south to Bygdøy allé.*

his letter, Schmedeman also noted that as a result of subsequent denials published in the newspapers other available properties had come to his attention. One such property was Hans Olsen's villa, which he described as "one of the most attractive homes in this city." Olsen, he said, was a very wealthy man who did not need to sell his house to anyone. "As it was built before the war," he added, "I believe the price to us would be very reasonable."<sup>12</sup>

On March 2, 1921, Congress passed an Act making appropriations for the Diplomatic and Consular Service and enabling the State Department to proceed with long-awaited purchases in cities including: Athens, Belgrade, Brussels, Bucharest, Budapest, Monrovia, Oslo, Prague, Rome, Vienna, and also Canton, Hankow, and Amoy. The Act reiterated a maximum of \$150,000 to be spent at any one post and created a Commission to oversee expenditures.<sup>13</sup> This was the green light Schmedeman had been waiting for. By that time, prices had fallen considerably in

Oslo, so it was actually a favorable time to buy. He submitted a list of five options for the new Commission's consideration, including the Olsen property at Nobels gate 28.<sup>14</sup>

### **Legation weighs its options, including Olsen villa**

On ten acres of wooded parkland, the Olsen villa was among the largest and most beautiful in Oslo. Built by Consul General Olsen in 1911 and first occupied in 1912, it was made of white plastered brick trimmed with granite and copper and topped with an impressive black tile roof.

According to Schmedeman's reckoning, it featured two halls and two salons, reception room and sitting room, dining room, library, office, fifteen bedrooms, three bathrooms, servants' quarters, a modern kitchen and pantry, laundry, and storage space. An adjacent annex, built of the same materials, had space for two cars on the first floor and six small rooms and a bathroom above—suitable for chancery offices plus a small apartment. The property also featured a splendid garden, a wooded park, and three hot houses. Adjacent to the Bryde house and Frogner Park, the Olsen estate was also somewhat removed from the



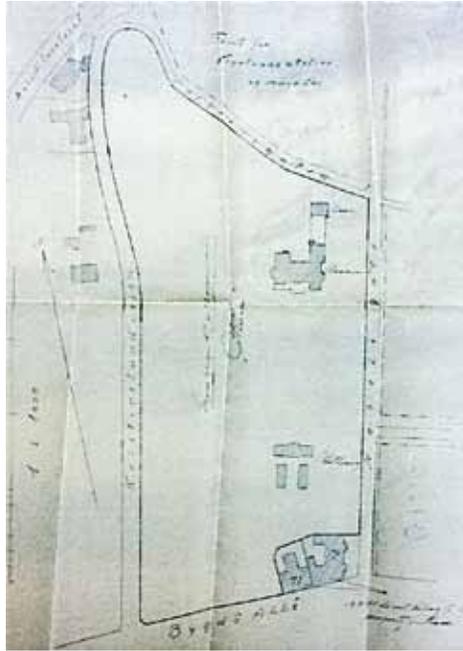
NARA, RG 59, File 124,571/31

*Tidemand property, Kristiania, 1921.*

city center but only a short ride away by streetcar. While Schmedeman said it would provide the United States with the “finest and best Legation property of any foreign government” in Oslo, he worried that upkeep of the expansive grounds might prove expensive. This was a concern to him and to his successor, Laurits Swenson, who feared paying out of pocket to maintain the extensive grounds. It is most likely the main reason why both were initially so cautious about the property. Also, the original asking price for the entire property was approximately \$180,000, well above the budget allowance.

Another option was the Mathiesen house at Parkveien 43, across from the official residence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Palace Park. The house was built in 1896 (but modernized to include central heating) and included a half-acre of grounds and a garage. Its asking price, at \$80,000, was reasonable, but it was not well configured for use as a legation—the minister would have to live on the upper two floors above a first floor chancery. A third option was the Rustad residence, home to the King’s Chamberlain who entertained there on a grand scale. Located at Wergelandsveien 25 opposite the Palace Park, the house and its annex were built around 1890 on a half-acre lot. The asking price was \$145,000, but the property needed significant improvements, including a new heating system and repairs to walls cracked from subway construction. Given the estimated cost of repairs, the Legation figured that it might be purchased at around \$115,000.

The existing Legation on Kronprinsensgaten was another choice. Its pros and cons were already well known, but its



*Plan of Olsen property, Kristiania, 1921.*

NARA, RG 59, File 124571/31

disadvantages had mounted in the years since it was first rented. The asking price was around \$86,000, which the Legation considered to be excessive given the cost of needed repairs. Furthermore, its urban milieu was no longer the asset that it had once been with smoke and dust already cited as a nuisance.<sup>15</sup> And although he objected to its design that reminded him of a ship, Schmedeman also included the Bryde house at the reduced price of \$130,000, a fraction of the \$450,000 Bryde claimed it had cost to build and furnish two years earlier.<sup>16</sup>

Before the Commission could act on these recommendations, Laurits Swenson took over as the American Minister in Oslo. Swenson had served in that position between 1911 and 1913 and returned in November 1921 to replace Schmedeman. Swenson quickly deemed his living situation “embarrassing” and decried the uncertainty of having no permanent accommodations. As his predecessor had noted, only the landlord’s personal goodwill had forestalled an eviction.<sup>17</sup>

To the list of possible options, Swenson added the home of Otto Tidemand, a prominent businessman who had built his house in 1919 only to find that it was already too large for his needs. Located across from Olsen’s at Hafsrjordgata and Bygdøy allé, it was built of stone and plastered brick and had been praised by the city build-

ing inspector as the “best constructed residence in Christiania.” It boasted nine large rooms, a spacious hall, an art glass window by Vigeland, and solid mahogany woodwork throughout. The house was accompanied by a small walled garden. The owner wanted about \$90,000 for the house plus \$8,000 for the furnishings. Swenson suspected that he would take less.

Oddly enough, Swenson ranked the Bryde property as his first choice. He acknowledged initial doubts about the architecture, which his predecessor had described as “freakish,” but said that “practicalities” had persuaded him to select that house because the owner was offering to make necessary modifications and also because he figured that the cost of upkeep of the tiny yard would not place undue demands upon him as Minister. Moreover, in worse financial straits and ever more anxious to sell, Bryde had again reduced his asking price to something around \$115,000, including all the furniture.<sup>18</sup> Swenson also added yet another option, ship owner Ivar An. Christensen’s “French chateau” at Frederik Stangsgate 22.

As the State Department evaluated each of the numerous options, more than a year passed. During that time, Swenson finally dropped the Bryde house from consideration after learning of leaks and other structural problems from its unhappy tenant, the Brazilian Minister; he also dropped the Tidemand after deciding that it could not accommodate a chancery. By early in 1922, he was convinced that the Olsen offer was the best of all.

At that time, the Olsen property consisted of an entire city block bounded by Bygdøy allé, Nobels gate, Solheimgata and Kristinelundveien, with no internal cross streets. Although Olsen balked at subdividing his property, he subsequently agreed to offer a parcel consisting of the house and about a third of the grounds (11,280 sq. m) for the reduced price of approximately \$129,000. That still

left the house with what Swenson described as plenty of wooded grounds and views of the fjord to the south and the highland country to the north. Swenson reported that Olsen had assured him that the remaining portion of the property would eventually be sold only for “high class residences.”<sup>19</sup> Olsen informed him, too, that other buyers (including the French Government) were interested, although he much preferred to sell to the United States.

### **Legation buys Olsen villa in 1923**

At its 1923 meeting, the Commission finally approved purchase of a Legation property (unspecified) in Oslo and asked Robert Woods Bliss to inspect the options.<sup>20</sup> En route to Stockholm to become Minister to Sweden, Bliss stopped in Oslo. After seeing all of the houses with Swenson, he declared the Olsen property the only one worth owning. “From what I learned,” he wrote, “I believe that if the house and grounds could be purchased for \$125,000 the Government would obtain a bargain.”<sup>21</sup> He sent his message by telegram rather than by despatch to speed up action because Olsen had announced plans to leave for an extended vacation in Algiers and it was urgent to act prior to his departure. Replying two days later, the Department authorized Swenson to offer a contract. After securing legal approval from the Norwegian Government and from his own legal advisors, Swenson executed the purchase contract on September 20, 1923 to buy the Olsen house and a 13,854 sq. m. portion of the grounds (about 3.5 acres, slightly more than earlier proposed) for the sum of \$125,000.<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Olsen, the legal owner, retained the rest of the property for lots to be sold later. Swenson also entered into a supplementary agreement with Mrs. Olsen concerning the eventual opening of city streets within the parcel. That agreement, accompanied by a map showing new roadways at Eckersbergs gate and Hafrsfjordgata, stipulated that the U.S. Government would not have to pay costs associated with the opening of those streets.<sup>23</sup>

Local newspapers celebrated the purchase, and Swenson proudly reported to Washington:

*We have acquired the finest place in Christiania at a very reasonable figure. I have received many compliments on our having been fortunate enough to secure so suitable and handsome a Legation home. It will give us added prestige in Norway. The press, which has given prominent space to the purchase, speaks of it as a special courtesy towards Norway, stressing the view that it is evidence of the importance which the United States attaches to this mission and of its sincere desire to cultivate and preserve the friendly relations subsisting between the two countries.<sup>24</sup>*

When the Legation moved to its new home on January 29, 1924, the house became Swenson's residence—except for one room on the first floor that was used as his official office. Offices for the chancery were established in the rooms over the adjacent garage. Already, the Legation was hard at work trying to furnish the nearly empty house with furniture, fixtures, china, silverware, linen, and other necessities.<sup>25</sup> Citing the very high prices in Norway, Swenson was urged to order supplies from Paris or London. At Bliss's suggestion, he contacted Geoffrey Dodge, of the Paris firm of Jacques Bodart, Inc. for estimates. Dodge had recently furnished the Stockholm Legation and Bliss was pleased with the results. Swenson estimated that it would cost about \$25,000 to provide the new Legation with all its needs, about \$15,000 to make it "presentable."

For the large salon, alone, the list of items included: a large sofa and a small one, four arm chairs, four bergeres (upholstered chairs), eight additional chairs, one large table, two chests of drawers, and four tables. For the dining room, the list included a dining table and chairs for thirty-six.

With the Department's approval, the Legation entered into a contract for \$15,753 with the Bodart firm. An additional contract for approximately \$3,000 covered the cost of draperies and sash curtains (for thirty-six windows) and carpeting cut to measure. Items began arriving at the Legation by mid-spring of 1924. Even with a delay caused by the need to return some items that were deemed inferior and the wait for replacements, some of the new furniture was in place by September 1924. The job was complete when draperies were hung, carpets laid, china and



Photos by Robert H. Loeffler (2011)

*Left: Villa Otium, Annex and Garage, formerly used also for chancery offices. Right: Southern façade of U.S. Ambassador's Residence looking west towards apartments added after purchase.*

glassware unpacked, and new kitchen appliances finally installed in May 1926. The total amount spent on furnishings amounted to \$22,734.38.

Although the Legation had hoped that maintenance of the property would not require a large staff, upkeep of the house and grounds did pose problems for the Minister. First, Swenson requested funds for an additional gardener. Then after informing the Department that he was paying wages for the entire household staff out of his own pocket, he asked for funding for an additional janitor/custodian, doorman, housekeeper, and laborer. The Government, he said, "should contribute something towards the daily attention required by the large halls, reception rooms, terraces, the numerous windows, and the considerable spaces that are not occupied as living rooms."<sup>26</sup> The Department approved additional funds for upkeep and repairs.

But the Department was less cooperative when the Legation learned of alarming plans to open streets delineated on the deed and proceed with apartment construction on the adjacent property. Olsen, who still owned the land that had been part of his estate, proposed to open the street lying south of the house and running east to west (Eckersbergs gate) and to sell lots for apartment buildings—not the "high-class residences" that he had earlier mentioned.<sup>27</sup> What concerned the Legation even more was the prospect that he would open Hafrsfjordgata, the proposed street to the west of the residence, and permit the construction of apartment buildings on lots there.

Foreign Service Inspector Matthew Hanna visited the Legation in 1927 and described the prospect of nearby apartment development as a "really serious menace."<sup>28</sup> "We have been very fortunate in acquiring here at a very reasonable price a property fitting the wealth and greatness of the United States, and in keeping with the properties owned by other nations represented here," he wrote. To

protect the value of that property and to forestall plans that would "mar the neighborhood," he urged the Department to purchase the portion to the west.<sup>28</sup> Writing in support of Hanna's proposal, Swenson praised the wooded parcel for its "beautiful trees" and listed other assets, including an orchard, a lily pond with fountain, and good tennis courts. He was keen to retain the open land, which he had apparently been renting personally from Olsen.<sup>29</sup>

Nearly two years passed, and with building activity already proceeding to the south, Swenson requested \$75,000 to buy the adjoining property to the west. A new street to the west would pass within twenty-four feet of the house, he warned, and the proposed new buildings might "cheapen our property." He indicated, too, that the only reason he had not bought all of the Olsen estate in 1923 was because the asking price for the entire property had exceeded the legal limit of \$150,000 set by Congress.

Keith Merrill, Executive Secretary of the newly created Foreign Service Buildings Commission, denied Swenson's initial request saying that Oslo "cannot be said to be such an important post as to demand further immediate attention." Merrill's reasons were more practical than political. "Oslo is not an unhealthy post with snow for nine months of the year and cool summers," he wrote, "there are not the problems of dust and noise from the traffic which in hot countries necessitate a fairly large holding of land on every side of our buildings in order that the windows may be kept open throughout the year for the comfort of our officers."<sup>30</sup>

When Mrs. Olsen died in May 1929, her heirs notified the Legation of their intention to dispose of the remaining land immediately. Swenson again appealed for funds. But the Foreign Service Buildings Commission refused to spend more for purchases in Western Europe, arguing again that its priorities were to provide first for "the more



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*U.S. Embassy (Chancery), Paris, by Delano & Aldrich, 1929-32. One of first U.S.-built embassies.*

unhealthy posts in the tropics and the Far East.<sup>31</sup> So the Legation property did not expand in size...but fortunately neither did the eventual construction of apartments "cheapen" the neighborhood, nor did it decrease the long-term value of America's investment.

Among the finest and most impressive of the purchases under the Appropriations Act of 1921, the Olsen villa represented a landmark in terms of America's efforts to better the living and working conditions for its diplomats overseas. The Government did own other important properties at that time, but most were acquired as gifts, including Paris (1917), Bangkok (1920), and London (1921). The Legation in Oslo and the Legation in Prague (the former Schoenborn

Palace, purchased in 1925) were among the few distinguished buildings purchased outright under the first enabling legislation.

### **Buildings herald expanded U.S. presence abroad**

America's overseas presence changed significantly in 1926 when Congress enacted the Foreign Service Buildings Act, known as the Porter Act after its chief sponsor Rep. Stephen G. Porter. The new act authorized the sizable sum of \$10 million for the purchase, alteration, and—for the first time—construction of diplomatic and consular buildings overseas. It limited the expenditure of funds to not more than \$2 million in one year, an amount that far exceeded any prior limit. It also established a Foreign Service Buildings Commission to oversee expenditures and an office to supervise and assist the work of the new Commission. This did not just expand an existing program—it created a program for

the first time, because as Rep. Porter noted, all currently owned properties "were acquired piecemeal and not as a part of a broad, general policy to provide the Government with Government-owned buildings wherever our officials abroad are located."<sup>32</sup>

The Foreign Service Buildings Commission's first major projects were in Tokyo, Paris, and Ottawa and all shared three notable attributes: all were designed by American architects and purpose-built for use by American diplomats; each significantly raised the profile of America's presence in a major capital; and each introduced a new building type—the chancery as a designated office building entirely separate from the residence. This was a sig-

nificant departure from past practice because most diplomatic activity until that time had centered on residences.

In 1931, President Roosevelt introduced a plan for government reorganization that moved the Foreign Service Buildings Commission and its operations to the State Department. Frederick "Fritz" Larkin was named to head the small Foreign Service Buildings Office, and the Commission became his advisory body. In 1937, Leland W. King moved over from the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury to become Larkin's field construction supervisor.

By that year, projects funded under the Foreign Service Buildings Act (1926) included: the purchase of residences in Buenos Aires, Ottawa, Paris, and Rome, and residence/office properties in Penang, Nagasaki, and Tangier; major remodeling of properties in London, Ottawa, and Paris; purchase of land and construction of new office buildings in Ottawa and Paris; and purchase of land and construction of new residences and offices in Tirana and Yokohama.

In part because of Norway's leading role in granting voting rights to women, President Roosevelt appointed suffrag-



*Aerial view of new embassy site in Oslo.*



*New American Embassy, Oslo, arrival court (2010).*



*New American Embassy, Oslo, entry pavilion (2010).*

ist and social reformer Florence Jaffray “Daisy” Harriman as Minister to Norway in 1937. Mrs. Harriman’s memoir of her stay in Oslo describes her pleasure with the Legation house and also some of its problems, including a heating system that often left her without hot water. She was relieved when the State Department sent Leland King, on one of his first overseas assignments, to supervise major renovations and remodeling at the Legation.<sup>33</sup>

Those renovations were not to be enjoyed for some time, however, because Mrs. Harriman hastily departed Oslo on April 22, 1940 and escaped to Sweden as the Nazis invaded and occupied Norway. The Norwegian Government had departed two weeks earlier—eventually setting up temporary operations in London. The American Legation did the same, closing its property in Oslo on July 15, 1940 and re-opening in London a month later. Mrs. Harriman returned to Washington. In 1941, Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, Jr. took over once again as the American Minister to Norway, based in London. A year later, he was reappointed as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary when the mission to Norway was elevated from the status of Legation to Embassy. He left London in 1943 and was succeeded in 1944 by Lithgow Osborne, who moved back to Oslo on May 31, 1945 after the war ended. But a palatial residence with a tiny office annex no longer met the needs of the Embassy. In his very first outline of post-war priorities, Larkin recommended a new embassy office building for Oslo.<sup>34</sup>

### The post-war embassy boom

After WWII, America’s need for overseas office space soared because of its expanded world role. Not just the State Department, but many other government offices and departments sought space in embassies abroad. As the list of tenants grew, so, too, did the need for quasi-public spaces devoted to libraries, auditoriums, and galleries—all

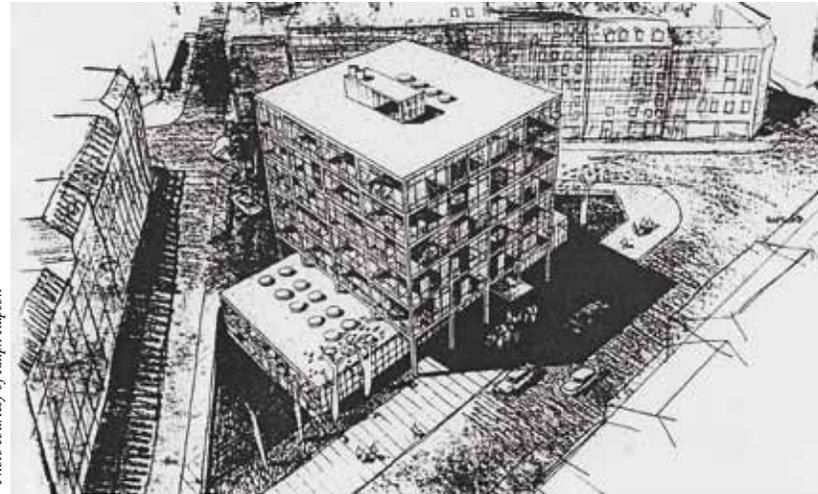


Photo courtesy of Ralph Rapson

*Design for Oslo embassy by Ralph Rapson and John van der Meulen, 1951 (never built).*

designed to further embassy outreach in foreign countries. Under the aegis of the Department’s newly reorganized Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO), the building program widened its scope and focused on the design and construction of government-owned office buildings. At the same time, those buildings grew in size and complexity. As chief architect and later as director of FBO, King was largely responsible for the new architectural outlook that embraced modern architecture and its openness as an apt metaphor for democracy at the height of the cold war.

The first postwar projects included embassy office buildings in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, Rio de Janeiro, and Havana. King hired young American architects Ralph Rapson and John van der Meulen to design the three Scandinavian projects in 1951. They designed a six-story transparent glass cube raised on pilotis (stilts) for the prominently located Oslo site at Drammensveien 18 (since designated Henrik Ibsens gate 48). Not only was the site near key government buildings and directly across from

the gardens of the royal palace, but also it was just a block from the site of the first American Legation.

Embassies in Stockholm and Copenhagen were well underway, but initial plans for Oslo were tabled when King lost his job over political and design differences in 1953. A year later FBO, with a renewed design directive, commissioned celebrated modernist Eero Saarinen to design the embassy office building in Oslo. Instead of a cube, Saarinen chose to design a four-story triangular-shaped building that mirrored the sharply angled site. He chose a green-black granite chip aggregate for the exteriors and called attention to the main entrance with a projecting marquee. With two additional corner entrances that led to consular offices on one side and the USIS offices and library on the other, the conveniently accessible chancery welcomed the public and gave the United States a prominent presence when it opened in 1959. The historic Olsen villa, only ten minutes to the west, remained the residence of the Ambassador—a traditional complement to the modern office building downtown.

### **Security becomes top priority**

When Saarinen designed the Oslo Embassy, security was not a major design constraint. The only real threats to U.S. embassies at that time were fire, theft, and espionage. But the situation changed rapidly as angry mobs targeted embassies in the late 1960s and 1970s. FBO responded to the growing need for security by adding perimeter planters, bollards, and fences to existing embassies and by finding ways to delay and curtail access to vulnerable buildings. In Oslo, side entrances were closed and all visitors passed through screening at the main entrance. It was difficult to retrofit the building for security, however, because it was bounded on three sides by busy streets and sidewalks.

Terrorist attacks on U.S. facilities in Beirut in 1983 prompted an overhaul of FBO design policy and the introduction of the “Inman standards” for embassy architecture. Not only did new embassies have to avoid the stilts, wide expanses of glass, and screens that typified earlier designs, but all were also supposed to provide a



Photo by Jane Loeffler (1989)



FBO

*Top, U.S. Embassy, Oslo and bottom, interior courtyard designed by Eero Saarinen, 1955-59.*

100-foot setback from vehicular traffic, high perimeter walls, and far fewer windows. For new projects, this led to the acquisition of much larger sites often located much farther from city centers. It also meant that most existing embassies could no longer meet security requirements.

In the aftermath of terrorist bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, Congress earmarked \$17.5 billion for the construction of 150 new embassy compounds by 2018. Responding to a congressional mandate that ranked security above all other priorities, the State Department again reorganized its building program in 2001, created the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO), and embraced standardization as a way to control costs and speed production of urgently needed facilities. The new Standard Embassy Design (SED) prototype allowed OBO to produce scores of sprawling new embassy compounds in less than ten years. In capitals from Antananarivo, Bamako, and Conakry, to Ouagadougou, Panama City, and Yaoundé, the Department was able to move more than 20,000 people into safe and more secure workplaces, a huge accomplishment by any reckoning. But the downside of the SED was its imposing presence and remote location. Diplomats found it increasingly difficult to conduct business when isolated in fortified facilities. Critics also questioned the look-alike designs and argued that standardization did not always save money nor did it necessarily project a good image for the United States—particularly in places where design excellence is demanded—such as Oslo.

### **New Oslo embassy reflects focus on “design excellence”**

Fortunately, OBO had begun to transform the SED into something better adapted to locale soon after plans were announced to replace the obsolete and insecure embassy office building in Oslo. In 2008, under new leadership,

OBO took the first step in that direction by announcing a design competition for a new embassy in London to be built on a five-acre urban site. The second step was choosing a winning design by KieranTimberlake that is open, visually accessible, sustainable and energy-efficient.



OBO

*U.S. Embassy, Bamako, Mali by Integrus, Architects (2006). This is example of Standard Embassy Design (SED) developed in aftermath of terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in 1998.*

Encouraged by the London process and prodded by a report from outside experts who called for better embassy architecture, OBO announced a new Design Excellence Program in April 2010.<sup>35</sup> The initiative aims to improve America’s overseas presence and promote goodwill through designs that are not only secure, but also thoughtful, attractive, and environmentally responsible. The goal is to locate embassies in urban areas, where possible, and to select materials and equipment for easy maintenance and long-term dependability. Sustainability is also now a top priority, as is preservation.

As it turns out, the new embassy compound in Oslo is among the first designed to meet new Design Excellence goals. Unlike the standard SEDs that were design/build

projects that minimized architectural input, the new American embassy (NAE) in Oslo features the work of prominent American architects—Einhorn Yaffee Prescott Architecture and Engineering (EYP) and Carol R. Johnson Associates, landscape architects. The design team also includes local Oslo architects, Spor Arkitekter. And unlike so many recent projects, this one is well located in Huseby not far from central Oslo.

Under the leadership of Ambassador Barry B. White, both the Embassy and the architects have worked closely with local planners to insure a smooth transition. The primary goals have been to maintain the park-like setting of the site and to tailor the architecture to its context. The program calls for construction of a chancery office building, a Marine Guard residence building, three entry pavilions, and an underground support annex covered with a green roof complete with trees. The low-profile buildings will utilize local building materials, including slate fieldstone, white granite, and copper, and they will occupy only 14% of a ten-acre site that features a meadow, stream, rocks and trees—most of which will be retained and even enhanced. To further the “green” initiative, architects will restore the seasonal stream and use it for storm water management. New plants will require no irrigation once established. And more than forty deep wells will supply renewable energy to meet more than 45% of the heating needs of the Embassy. Together these features, including access to public transportation, will meet Norway’s strict standards for energy efficiency and make this a LEED Gold project. The state-of-the-art facility is scheduled to open in 2015.

### **Villa Otium still plays key role**

Ironically, as security has increasingly prevented the existing embassy office building from hosting events that bring Americans together with Norwegians, the ambas-



Photo by Robert H. Loeffler (2011)

*Ambassador's Residence, Oslo, entrance façade and parking courtyard with recently improved landscaping and resurfacing.*



OBC

*Ambassador's Residence, Oslo, entrance façade and parking courtyard prior to recent renovations.*

sador's residence, like other residences worldwide, has become even more active as a venue for the exchange of ideas and information. With a steady array of political discussions, diplomatic meetings, and cultural programs, the residence has taken on added importance in recent years. To make the house and its grounds more accessible and attractive to visitors, the Embassy commissioned a study of its historic landscape in 2007.

With support from former Ambassador Benson K. Whitney, local landscape architects Østengen & Bergo surveyed the property and devised a master plan for restoration and preservation of the grounds. The resulting plan also recommended innovations aimed at improving the use and appearance of the property. As a result of the new plan, the asphalt expanse in front of the house already has been reduced and groups of trees have been added—a small modification that greatly improves the courtyard, complements the historic villa, and makes the approach to the house more welcoming. The goals of the landscape

plan dovetail nicely with the sustainability and preservation guidelines of the Design Excellence Program. Over time, as funds become available, more of its recommendations will be implemented.

Not only is the Villa Otium an important landmark to Norwegians, but as this history reveals, it is also a prized diplomatic property to Americans. For that reason it was named to the recently created Secretary of State's Register of Culturally Significant Property, an honor bestowed on only twenty out of more than 3,500 U.S. properties worldwide. America's overseas presence has changed in ways that could never have been anticipated when it was acquired in 1923. The Bryde house, with its fortified stance and menacing façade, is a more apt metaphor for contemporary embassy architecture. Fortunately, our diplomats chose the Olsen house instead—in a gesture of good taste and goodwill that still underscores the close relationship between the United States and Norway in 2012 as the historic house celebrates its centennial.

*Ambassador Barry B.  
White with Norway  
Cup participants  
from Norway, USA  
and Afghanistan,  
summer 2011.*



*Photo by U.S. Embassy Oslo*

1. Memorandum of Agreement of March 27, 1909 (Despatch no. 1604) enclosed in Schmedeman to Secretary of State, March 24, 1920, File 124.571/23. This and all State Department records to follow are from RG 59, Department of State Central Files, National Archives, unless otherwise noted. Also, all of Schmedeman's correspondence is with the Secretary of State, unless otherwise noted.
2. Schmedeman, June 3, 1916, File 124.571/5. For additional information on the diplomatic ties between the United States and Norway, see Wayne S. Cole, *Norway and the United States, 1905-1955*, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989.
3. The Legation in Tangier was a gift from the Sultan of Morocco in 1821. Lucius Foote purchased his own quarters in Seoul in 1884, and Congress appropriated funds enabling the Government to purchase the Seoul residence from him in 1887. Under a special appropriation, the United States built a legation in Peiping (Peking) in 1905. Property in Tahiti was received as a gift from the Queen of the Society Islands in 1896, and the U.S. Consul built himself a house there at his own expense. When it was destroyed by a cyclone, the Government paid for its reconstruction in 1907. Also in 1907, a special appropriation of Congress paid for the acquisition of the Palazzo Corpi in Constantinople (Istanbul).
4. James B. Townsend, "The Condition of American Embassies and Legations in Europe" in *Homes for Ambassadors* (New York: American Embassy Association, 1910), 22.
5. Mark Bertram, *Room for Diplomacy*, (London: Spire Books, 2011) 142. See also "The History of the British Ambassador's Residence in Oslo" @ <http://ukinnorway.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/our-embassy/our-ambassador/residencehist>. With the new Norwegian king, Haakon VII, married to a British princess, Herbert said, it was all the more imperative for Britain to establish a first-class legation there.
6. Schmedeman, June 3, 1916, Oct. 25, 1916, March 26, 1917, May 28, 1917, Dec. 23, 1918, and May 29, 1919, Files 124.571/5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 13.
7. Schmedeman, Nov. 6, 1919, File 124.571/16.
8. George Gordon Battle to Hon. Breckenridge Long, April 30, 1919, File 124.571/10. See also Battle to Hon. Frank Polk, May 29, 1919, File 124.571/12. Bryde's attorneys at that time were O'Gorman, Battle & Vandiver of New York City. His Oslo house was started in 1915 and completed in 1919.
9. Schmedeman, Jan. 19, 1920, File 124.571/18.
10. Hugh Gibson to Wilbur J. Carr, undated, probably July 19, 1920, File 124.571/24. Bryde's attorney at that time was Alfred F. Britton of Brooklyn, NY.
11. Robert Woods Bliss to Carr, July 19, 1920, File 124.571/24.
12. Gibson to Alfred F. Britton, July 22, 1920, File 124.571/24; and Schmedeman, July 13, 1920, File 124.571/25 pertaining to article that appeared on July 10, 1920 in Tidens Tegn.
13. The Act of March 2, 1921 established a commission composed of the chairman and ranking minority member of the Committee of Foreign Relations of the Senate, the chairman and ranking minority member of the committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of the Treasury.
14. Schmedeman, June 17, 1921, File 124.571/31.
15. Swenson, Jan 30, 1923, File 124.571/39.
16. Bryde telegram to State Department (Phillips), Sept. 29, 1923, File 124.571/48. Bryde lowered the price again to \$100,000 on Sept 29, 1923, owing to his "personal circumstances" but that letter was received after the Olsen purchase was made.
17. Schmedeman, July 13, 1920, File 124.571/25.
18. Britton to Bliss, Sept. 19, 1921 and Oct. 24, 1921, File 124.571/33-34. See also Swenson, Jan. 4, 1922, File 124.571.35.
19. Swenson, Jan 23, 1922, File 124.571/35.
20. Bliss to Secretary of State (Confidential for Phillips), Sept 12, 1923, File 124.571/45. Robert J. Phillips was First Assistant Secretary of State.
21. See additional correspondence in File 124.571/45 Bliss report to Secretary of State, Sept. 12, 1923, File 124.571/47.
22. Mrs. Ester Wilhelmina (Mina) Olsen was the daughter of Ludwig Nobel and niece of his younger brother, Alfred Nobel. Ludwig Nobel was founder of St. Petersburg-based Branobel, one of the world's largest oil companies in the late 19th century. Pursuant to a marriage settlement of September 29, 1914 with her husband Hans Olsen, Mrs. Olsen owned the Oslo villa and its grounds. Thus, she sold the property to the U.S. Government and signed the contract herself. The agreed upon price (less than 800,000 kr.) was less than Olsen had previously agreed to (900,000 kr.).
23. See deed documents included in File 124. 571/55.
24. Swenson, Oct. 10, 1923, File 124.571//49.
25. 124.571/49 Nov. 28, 1923 Swenson was not sure if the appropriation that funded the purchase of the house (up to \$150,000) could also be used to purchase furnishings. Although the Act under which the new Legation was purchased did not provide for such expenditures, the State Department determined that the Lowden Act of 1911 did provide for the furnishing of buildings so acquired.
26. Swenson, April 25, 1928, Files 124.571/76.
27. Swenson, Jan. 24, 1928, File 124.571/81.
28. Matthew E. Hanna report of July 1927 cited in Swenson, Feb. 25, 1928, File 124.571/72.
29. Merrill to Stephen G. Porter, March 13, 1929, File 124.571/82.
30. Merrill to Porter, March 13, 1929, 82.
31. Aug. 6, 1929 W H Castle, Jr. to Swenson, Aug 6, 1929, 85
32. Porter in Report to accompany HR 10166, 2/2/28. Robert J. Phillips was named Acting Chief of the Foreign Buildings Office in 1926. For a more detailed history of all aspects of America's overseas building program from its earliest years to the present, see Jane C. Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011.
33. King and his family actually lived in the house with Mrs. Harriman during their stay in Oslo. See Harriman, Mission to the North, NYC: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1941, 50-1. See also Sheryl Neely to Loeffler, correspondence pertaining to King's work in Oslo. Neely is King's daughter and custodian of his papers.
34. Frederick Larkin letter, March 3, 1945, Records of the Foreign Service Buildings Office, Records Regarding Appropriations for Foreign Service Buildings, 1900-48, Entry 408, Box. No. 9, RG 59, Department of State Central Files, National Archives.
35. American Institute of Architects, "Design for Diplomacy: New Embassies for the 21st Century," 2009.