

House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

January 23, 2008

**"Fortress America Abroad:
Effective Diplomacy and the Future of U.S. Embassies."**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Shays, for holding this hearing and inviting me to participate. I am not an architect, nor a diplomat; I am an historian who studies architecture and public policy. My observations are based on 25 years of research into America's embassy program and its impact on the international landscape.

I want to discuss three items here today and to raise questions for you to consider as we ponder the future of U.S. embassies. First, I want to underscore the importance of architecture as a political and cultural export. Second, I want to call attention to serious problems with our current embassy building program. Finally, I want to suggest that we find a better fit between inflexible infrastructure and the diverse and rapidly changing diplomatic challenges that we face.

People ask if architecture really matters when security is such a huge concern. There is no better illustration that it does matter than Congress's instinctively correct decision after 9/11 to maintain the Capitol as its place of business. You might have relocated to a lower profile, less accessible setting or retreated to home districts and chosen to communicate via teleconference, but you did not. You decided to conduct business here adding as much security as possible without impeding the business of government or public access to government.

During the Civil War, when he might well have stopped construction of the great Capitol dome, President Lincoln did not. "When the people see the dome rising," he declared, "it will be a sign that we intend the union to go on." Lincoln recognized the power of architecture. Congress has recognized it. When it comes to America's presence abroad, we must recognize it, too.

With globalization, when we face the world, we face ourselves. What we see matters.

Good design conveys good intentions. Well-designed buildings represent the best of modern technology, show our respect for countries that host us around the world, and proclaim our confidence in the future. Sadly, the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) program, with its cookie-cutter approach to production, conveys neither goodwill nor strength.¹

To the contrary, it is dotting the global landscape with embassies that resemble big box stores, only they are bigger, more isolated, and far more forbidding than any store designed to attract business or sell a product.

Pushed by Congress, OBO has transformed its building program in recent years producing dozens of new embassies and consulates that provide U.S. diplomats with sorely needed safe and functional workplaces. In so doing, however, it has adopted a "standard embassy design" (SED), an expedient solution that ignores the message it sends. More than that, as it is being implemented, the SED program puts short-term considerations far ahead of those that may affect a project over the term of its useful life. It also utilizes a design/build process that gives direct control to individual contractors, weakens the government's negotiating role, and minimizes the contribution of architects and other design professionals whose skills are needed now more than ever. Most of the time, OBO no longer even hires architects for individual projects—the exceptions are high profile projects such as Berlin and Beijing—and it abandoned its highly respected peer review panel in its 50th year (2004)

¹ For illustrations of new embassies, recently constructed and under construction, see www.state.gov/obo/projects/

eliminating the outside experts who reviewed plans and designs and provided up-to-date assessments of design and engineering options. Instead it created a panel of industry representatives who vied for OBO contracts and rubber-stamped the director's policies.

For these reasons and more, experts warn that soaring maintenance costs will plague our new embassies. Poor oversight, shoddy construction, and cut corners are bad news for those who have to live and work in such facilities and for those who maintain them. It might be okay if the buildings were to be replaced in ten or twenty years, like shopping malls here at home, but they are not.

Architectural sophistication and cultural expectation are also factors to be reckoned with in places such as Oslo or The Hague, both of which are slated to receive SEDs in the near future. I am not arguing for retention of existing embassy buildings in either capital. Both were designed by distinguished architects but neither meets even minimal security setback requirements. They need to be replaced. But these are not third world countries with undeveloped infrastructure, they are places where historic preservation and urban design are taken seriously and where an architectural message really matters.

We would not want a return to the architectural ego-trips of the 1950s, but we must ask if a big-box prototype will further our interests in Norway or The Netherlands? History has shown that misguided embassy plans have unfortunate political and diplomatic ramifications. An SED does not belong everywhere any more than a Wal-Mart belongs in Georgetown.

No one would argue that security should be compromised for aesthetic purposes, but as GSA has demonstrated, security can be bettered by design excellence, which can also help to contain costs. A standardized approach can actually accomplish the opposite. For example, OBO buys all its windows from one vendor and they all meet the same specifications. That single window is engineered to withstand blast at 30 meters, the minimum setback requirement from all embassy perimeter walls, but it is being used everywhere—even at distances that far exceed 30 meters. Large embassy compounds regularly have many buildings, some situated far from perimeter walls. This means that a costly fixture is being installed where a less costly one would meet all necessary requirements. In addition, the windows are designed for use at sea level so when they are installed at high altitudes, there is no assurance that they will perform well. Failed windows would not only add further to costs, but would compromise security. My point is that standardization is not necessarily what it is advertised to be. It is inflexible, by definition; it tends to repeat its mistakes and cannot rapidly integrate technological innovation.

In dramatic contrast, the British are still designing new British embassies and high commission buildings as individual projects. In Yemen, Sri Lanka, Algeria, and Zimbabwe, British architects are participating in a building program that, as a matter of policy, aims to demonstrate "the best of British architecture." In Yemen, for example, where the old British embassy was bombed in 2000, the new British embassy meets all security requirements using a cleverly massed structure, setback, and sophisticated landscaping. It is also a model of sustainability in a desert climate.

A recent article quotes Mike Gifford, the British ambassador in Yemen, who says: "One of the most pleasing aspects of the new embassy is the way it combines a modern architectural style - which sends a message that the UK is home to some excellent design talent - with references to Yemen's rich architectural heritage; it's not simply about providing secure boxes."²

We can point to nothing comparable.

The recent Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) commission report argues that buildings themselves will play less of a role in furthering America's diplomatic goals in the future while outreach and access will grow increasingly important. If that is true, it calls for a serious re-thinking of how and what we build. More than that, it means that State needs a lot more money for programs (and people) to match or exceed expenditures for

² Dominic Bradbury, "With these embassies, you spoil us!" telegraph.co.uk/

infrastructure. It is far easier to spend money on security improvements to protect buildings than it is to devise and implement programs that might diminish the threat of attack and boost respect for America and what it stands for. After all, that should be our first priority. Unfortunately, it is easier to install more bollards or blast protection than it is to devise ways to make such barriers unnecessary.

Programs designed to decentralize services and reach more people, such as those outlined in the CSIS report, will pose logistical challenges unmet by conventional solutions. And it is worth asking whether the isolated fortress-like embassy prototype provides the security it is designed to provide if many diplomats must travel outside its confines to do their work and many embassy employees live beyond its walls.

The history of the embassy program is written in the transcripts of House and Senate hearings. Directly or indirectly, Congress determines our face abroad. The only reason that the building program expanded so dramatically in the 1950s was because it was funded through “frozen” counterpart funds, not new tax dollars. The only reason that it expanded so dramatically in the last decade was to avoid a repeat of the tragic bombings of our embassies in East Africa. That is reason enough to build better buildings, of course, but a country like ours can do better at what we are doing.

Anyone who has seen the American flag flying atop U.S. embassies in Prague or London knows what Lincoln meant when he compared the Capitol to a symbol of strength and a beacon of freedom.

Are isolated embassy enclaves really “platforms for diplomacy,” as some maintain, or just platforms for maintaining an overseas presence? Do such facilities support or undermine the expansion of public diplomacy — a key weapon in the war of ideas? Is a design formulated for Kampala really right for The Hague? These questions call for answers, and in seeking answers, we would do well to be guided by the same thinking as those who strive to maintain the openness of the Capitol-- a policy of risk avoidance, not one of risk elimination.

Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer recently spoke out on this subject because of his concern that we are allowing security experts to make too many of our decisions about public buildings. “We’ll end up with buildings that look like our embassy in Chile,” he said, deploring it as a “fortress.” It’s not just about money, he said, it’s about finding people who’ll listen, who understand that embassies make “a statement that the United States is a democracy and is not walling itself off from the world.”³

Former U.S. Ambassador to India, Daniel Patrick Moynihan addressed these issues in 1999. Senator Moynihan saw architecture as a national policy issue and called for an ongoing “conversation” on how to balance security and openness at home and abroad. That conversation has not yet occurred, but with your help it could begin now.

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³ Jane Loeffler, “The Importance of Openness in an Era of Security: A Conversation with Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer,” *Architectural Record*, Jan. 2006.