

The Architecture of Diplomacy: Heyday of the United States Embassy-Building Program, 1954–1960

JANE C. LOEFFLER [The George Washington University]

In 1954 the United States Department of State embarked on a bold embassy-building program that gave American architects a chance to play a new role as representatives of their country. In a major departure from precedent, the State Department appointed an architectural advisory panel of prominent architects to review all building plans for the Foreign Buildings Office (FBO). Under new guidelines, architects were challenged to produce schemes that would harmonize with differing local conditions, respect local customs, and respond to the historical uniqueness of each locale. At the same time, they were asked to create structures with a “distinguishable American flavor.” To fit the local scene, but to be “American,” to harmonize with the past, yet to be both workable and new—these were the design dilemmas inherent in the FBO building program.

How architects approached these problems and how they managed to reconcile or not to reconcile the often conflicting demands of the program are the subject of this study. The design expressions reveal much about how the United States related to the world and how it viewed itself as well.

Embassies are unique architectural subjects. Perhaps no other public buildings are of such symbolic importance: much more than our domestic public buildings, their appearance establishes an image of the American government and people.¹

Daniel Patrick Moynihan
June 12, 1981

Nearly 10 years ago, Bates Lowry, founding director of the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., had the idea for an exhibition featuring U.S. embassy buildings. I had the privilege of working with him on the initial stages of that project, and it is out of that research that this article has grown. Although its exhibition plans never materialized, the Museum continued to compile data on the subject for some time. For the additional archival materials that were assembled, I am indebted to Judith Lanus and Anne Nissen; and for assistance in using those archives, I thank Susan Wilkerson. I acknowledge with gratitude the cooperation of the Department of State, and I thank William Z. Slany, its historian, for his singular support. I am grateful to Frederick Gutheim for directing me to this project and for his continued guidance and to Richard W. Longstreth for his advice and encouragement.

1. D. P. Moynihan letter to the National Endowment for the Arts, 12 June 1981, National Building Museum (NBM) archives, Embassy Exhibition file #40. Senator Moynihan served as U.S. Ambassador to India from 8 February 1973 to 7 January 1975. (As all documents from the NBM archives that are cited in this study are from the Embassy Exhibition files, that designation will be omitted from subsequent footnotes.)

DIPLOMATIC HISTORIAN Harold Nicholson wrote in 1939 that “the worst kind of diplomatists are missionaries, fanatics and lawyers.”² It is tempting to ask what Nicholson would have thought about architects. Given the chance to serve a diplomatic role, could architects establish a language of discourse through which American architecture might speak to the world of American hopes and American strength? Could they create a dialogue of mutual trust and respect with people of different cultures and sensibilities? Or would they simply make grand or empty gestures incomprehensible to all but their own peers in the United States and abroad—statements resented like the intrusions of missionaries, flamboyant like the work of fanatics, or dull like the timid efforts of legal experts whose ultimate aim is compromise?

Few scholars of diplomacy like Nicholson would think of architects as ambassadors, let alone as effective, even compelling, spokesmen for the United States in the forum of world affairs. The U.S. Department of State, however, initiated a new approach in 1954, prompted by criticism of prior work and the sudden need for a vast expansion of government-owned space. As a result, American architects were offered a diplomatic opportunity.³

2. Cited by J. Hoagland in “Warriors, Merchants,” *Washington Post*, 21 March 1989, A19.

3. The FBO building program inaugurated in 1954 was responsible for hundreds of buildings around the world, many of which are still being built, though under vastly changed circumstances. This paper focuses on the embassy office buildings that inaugurated the program in the 1950s and gave it its widely recognized reputation. Though several were not completed until well into the 1960s, I believe that all in this study were at least authorized and awaiting appropriations by 1961, when FBO Director William Hughes left and design directives changed under the leadership of his successor, James Johnstone.

Several definitions are in order. Strictly speaking, the embassy is the ambassador’s residence combined with the chancery, or embassy office building, the staff’s workplace. For the purposes of this paper, I am using *embassy* to refer to the office building (FBO refers to it as an EOB), built in a capital city. It handles all of the business of the foreign service post, often including military, agricultural, scientific, and various other missions, as well as consular sections and USIS. A *consulate*, or consular office building (COB), is a smaller version of an embassy and handles consular affairs such as visa applications. The *residence* is the home of the ambassador; it is generally a separate structure, though it is often integrated into an embassy complex and designed in conjunction with the embassy itself. Prior to 1926, nearly all U.S. embassies were com-

American embassy building before 1954

Between 1785 and about 1900, American diplomats paid their own way at foreign service posts. The government owned almost no properties, although it leased a few. In those days, a diplomat himself generally rented a flat or house, which served as both home and office for all official and unofficial functions.

The United States moved into the embassy-building business well after other nations, and only under intense pressure from interest groups, specifically American businessmen trying to conduct trade abroad. Rallying around cries for reform, the American Embassy Association (AEA) was established in New York in 1909. Its founders were bankers, lawyers, and businessmen who aimed "to promote and encourage the acquisition by the United States of permanent homes for its Ambassadors in foreign capitals."⁴ The AEA asserted that it was "undemocratic" for ambassadors to have to pay their own way, and they urged the government to intervene with adequate salaries and proper workplaces and residences. Yet one need not read far into the AEA's reform-sounding polemics to see that its main concern was to improve America's competitive position in foreign trade. "Better embassies mean better business," the AEA stated, and it backed up that claim with arguments like the following:

All men, rich and poor, cultivated or uncultivated, are impressed by appearances. Foreigners necessarily judge us by what they see of us in their own country. . . . We pride ourselves on being the richest people on earth and declare loudly that nothing is too good for us. And yet we are content to cheapen ourselves among the nations of the earth by the shabby showing we make among them in respect to our embassies. We feel ashamed at appearing poverty-stricken in the eyes of the inhabitants of other countries and of placing ourselves commercially below third or even fourth rate powers.⁵

In support of the AEA position, Captain F. M. Barber, a former naval attaché, called for a time when ". . . traveling Americans will no longer be mortified at the sight of the United States embassy or legation being located on a single floor in an apartment house or office building with a tin shield over the door, far inferior in appearance to that of many a butcher or baker in the vicinity."⁶ Barber's comments of 1909 are of particular interest because he may have been the first critic to suggest an appropriate new embassy design. The prevailing type

resembled a European palatial residence: a U-shaped building facing an open court, with ambassadorial residence and reception rooms in the center, offices in one wing, and servants' quarters and stables in the other. In contrast, Barber suggested separating business from social functions by buying an entire city block and using it in such a way that the offices faced one street and the residence faced another. For the corner, he proposed a tower topped by a flagpole from which the American flag could float prominently.⁷ The modern office block was playing a key role in the American cityscape, and Barber saw the embassy as a new type of building, which similarly would reflect current trends in design and technology.

With the support of such speakers as Samuel Gompers and William Jennings Bryan and the endorsement by President Taft in a speech to the National Board of Trade, the AEA lobbied for passage of the Loudon Act, which would empower the State Department to buy land and erect embassy buildings. The AEA also attempted to eliminate financial means as a prerequisite for foreign service. The bill passed in 1911, but only piecemeal progress followed.

While the AEA lobbied for reform measures, others, notably populist politicians, increasingly demanded an egalitarian approach to all matters connected with foreign service. Americans had always had the somewhat unusual notion that the ambassador was someone who could be directly approached in any foreign city. For many years, ambassadors had complained about the onerous social obligations involved in receiving American tourists, remarking that their colleagues from other countries faced no comparable task.⁸ There were deep philosophical roots for this attitude. A member of the House Committee on Appropriations, Representative Martin B. Madden, summed up the idea in 1923 when he said, "I do not want him [the ambassador] to live in such palatial quarters that I, as an humble, common, every-day American, if by any chance I should find myself in Paris, would not dare to call upon him because of the luxury with which he is surrounded. I want to find myself, when I approach an embassy of America in Paris or elsewhere, at least on equal terms with the man who occupies the place."⁹ If this perspective showed a striking naiveté about diplomatic practice, it nevertheless could be seen as representing the essence of the democratic ideal.

bined office/residences. While foreign missions in Washington often house their ambassadors apart from their chanceries, U.S. custom over the past 30 years has been to try to accommodate the ambassador near but not in the embassy office building.

4. *American Embassies Mean Better Foreign Business*, published by the American Embassy Association, 505 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., 1910, 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 23.

6. F. M. Barber, "Government Ownership of Diplomatic and Consular Buildings and Their Equipment," in "American Embassies Mean Better Foreign Business," reprinted from *North American Review*, September 1909, 163.

7. *Ibid.*, 165. This was an alternative, Barber said, to the current custom of having the flag "stuck out of a window like that of a ship in distress."

8. As Barber says in his informative and irreverent essay, "No person, for example, who has not been presented at the English court, would presume to besiege an English ambassador for social attentions, tickets to official functions, etc.; but there are a few citizens of our country (where it is easier to be presented to the president than it is to see a doctor, because it costs nothing) to whom the idea that an ambassador or his wife has any right to privacy is entirely wanting. Such people often think that they own the embassy. . . ." (*Ibid.*).

9. Quoted by A. Nissen in her research report, NBM #34, 8.

It is apparent that even at this point in the 1920s, before any significant building took place, the embassy client, broadly defined as the American public, was of two minds about representation abroad. If architects approached the early commissions in an uncertain way, it is no surprise.

Congress passed the Foreign Service Buildings Act in 1926. Known as the Porter Bill, after its chief sponsor, Representative Stephen Porter, it created the Foreign Service Buildings Office at the State Department and authorized appropriations of \$10 million for a major building program. For the first time, residences and chanceries were considered independent of one another and no longer had to share a roof or even a site. The bill also created the Foreign Service Buildings Commission to oversee the spending. Paris became the proving ground for the new program. In August 1928, officials purchased a site on the north side of the Place de la Concorde in Paris for \$200,000. Even today, the site at the corner of the place and rue Boissy d'Anglais is considered a prized diplomatic symbol in that country. In 1929, Chester Delano and William Aldrich were appointed architects for the project. Delano, a graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, had spent many years in France. He selected his former teacher from the Ecole, Victor Laloux, to serve as consulting architect.

The architects faced the problem of housing an array of offices, then located all over the city, in one structure that would harmonize with the auspiciously grand surroundings of the site. Between 1753 and 1755, Ange-Jacques Gabriel had designed buildings marking two corners of the place; one at the end of the rue de Rivoli, the Hotel Saint-Florentin, once Tallyrand's residence, and the other two flanking the rue Royale. A Parisian law of 1757 required all future buildings surrounding the Place de la Concorde to conform to Gabriel's established design scheme.¹⁰ Thus, Delano and Aldrich had little flexibility in choosing building bulk or height, or even the arrangement of the façade. They took their cue from the original plan of the place by Gabriel and created a classically styled steel and concrete Beaux-Arts building—solid, simple, and symmetrical—an instant image of permanence and self-importance (Fig. 1). Both American and French critics were quick to praise the building and to describe it as an asset to the city.¹¹

A very different project evolved in the Far East, however.

10. Col. T. Bentley Mott, "Our Homeless Diplomats," *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 October 1928, 26.

11. "The New U.S. Government Building in Paris," *Architecture* (New York), LXX, 1934, 135; "Les enrichissements de Paris, la nouvelle ambassade américaine," *L'Illustration*, supplement IX, 1933. Paris is an anomaly in U.S. embassy building, since the exterior of the building had to conform to preexisting design controls. Still, the response to the building shows that critics chose to see it as an "American" creation, and a success, at that. Reviews of the building reveal that the uniquely American interiors were of particular significance in this building.



Fig. 1. Delano and Aldrich, U. S. Embassy, Paris, France, 1928–1932. Entrance court and façade (Department of State).

The State Department authorized construction of an embassy in Tokyo to replace a structure destroyed in an earthquake in 1923. Together, Antonin Raymond and H. Van Buren Magonigle designed the new embassy in 1931 (Fig. 2).¹² The group of buildings, unified by scale and materials, drew on precedents in Moorish architecture, cubist painting, Beaux-Arts planning, and traditional Japanese design. The architects used white stucco over reinforced concrete for all the walls, which are topped by highly ornamented decorative bands of precast stucco.¹³ The bands, alternating solids and voids, are reminiscent of the ornamental work of Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom Raymond

12. A State Department report indicates that Magonigle, whose practice was based in New York, was the architect with the original commission, and he is credited in photo captions from numerous sources. See Foreign Service Buildings Commission, *Report of the Progress on the Purchase of Sites and Construction of Buildings for the Foreign Service of the United States*, transmitted to Congress on 28 January 1929, from the National Archives, in NBM #32. See also photos from the Avery Library in NBM #82. It is likely that Magonigle associated himself with Raymond, who by then had a practice in Tokyo.

In his autobiography, however, Raymond wrote that it was he who obtained the commission first, after learning from a friend at the Embassy in Tokyo that the U.S. intended to build a new embassy there. See *Antonin Raymond: An Autobiography*, Rutland, Vermont, 1973, 119.

In a 1969 memo to FBO, architect Joseph Passoneau credits the Tokyo embassy to Raymond, with no mention of Magonigle. Raymond, he says, was "an Austrian architect, who moved to the United States and then to Japan, and who was a moderately influential person in the early modern movement; he was a contemporary of and occasional collaborator of Frank Lloyd Wright and the firm of Raymond and Rado has probably done more building in Tokyo and in the Southeast Asia area than any other firm." Undated memo to FBO from inspection trips (pencil-dated "mid-1969"), NBM #82. Passoneau served on the FBO architectural advisory panel in the mid 1960s, and it was in that capacity that he would have traveled and reported on the posts.

13. Molds for the bands were made in the U.S. and shipped to Japan, where the stucco was precast. "Our Diplomatic and Consular Establishments in Tokyo," *Architecture* (New York), LXVI, 1932, 87.



Fig. 2. Antonin Raymond and H. Van Buren Magonigle, U. S. Embassy Complex, office and residence, Tokyo, Japan, 1931, now serving as the ambassador's residence. Interior courtyard view across fountain. A new office tower, designed by Cesar Pelli and Gruen Associates, was completed in 1976 (Department of State).

formerly had been associated. Small mosaic tiles frame the windows with bands of color, graded from light blue below the bottom sills to dark blue at the top. Even a minor entrance to the Ambassador's residence has splendid bronze doors. Like the

opulent Paris project, the Tokyo embassy was expensive and highly crafted. Construction in the Far East, however, proved to be more costly and less predictable than in Europe: Raymond claimed that Magonigle's structural designs had to be redone,



Fig. 3. Harrie T. Lindeberg in association with the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, U.S. Embassy Office Building and Residence, Helsinki, Finland, 1936. View from the street (Department of State/Hede foto).

and he also asserted that the contractors were inexperienced, inefficient, and inadequately supervised.¹⁴ Congressional critics repeatedly referred to the new American Embassy in Tokyo as “Hoover’s Folly.”¹⁵

In early meetings, between 1926 and 1929, Foreign Service Buildings Commission members debated the embassy building program. There was great admiration for a southern colonial plan, and it was suggested that it be used, for example, in the Chinese city of Mukden. Representative Porter suggested at one meeting that all U.S. buildings in foreign lands be white, in keeping with government buildings in Washington,¹⁶ and the *Pittsburgh Press* interpreted Porter’s remark as a call for small replicas of the White House world-wide.¹⁷

No one in Washington was quite sure what an embassy building was supposed to look like. In 1929, the firm of Wyeth & Sullivan designed, for Tirana, Albania, an imposing residence with a modest chancery, or office building, attached to one wing. The overall complex, set on a hilltop with an expansive view to the rear, had all of the elements of a classically styled Italian country house. In contrast, in 1936, Harrie T. Lindeberg, with the Supervising Architect of the Treasury, designed an embassy complex for Helsinki, drawn directly from the 18th-century design of Virginia’s Westover plantation. This vignette of colonial America had little to do with vernacular architecture in Finland, but it made a clear, though restrained, statement of the American presence in that country (Fig. 3).

As the debate continued into the 1930s, the commissioners repeatedly pointed to the effectiveness of the Paris scheme, which most closely resembled the architecture familiar to Washington policy makers. Associated with the classical past, but presented in a modern context, it became the inspiration for much U.S. government architecture in Washington, D.C., and throughout the country, some distinguished and some banal. In the mind of the American public, this look became synonymous with government buildings—whether city halls, courthouses, libraries, office buildings, or related cultural institutions. Likewise, there was strong support of the “colonial” prototype, whether in red brick or white stucco.

Embassy building became a critical need right after World War II. The Foreign Service grew rapidly at that time, increasing in size and the range of its functions. In addition, high foreign currency assets enabled the U.S. to buy property abroad without spending American dollars. This situation prompted the Foreign Buildings Office to spend \$120 million between 1946 and 1954 on a building program. The most prominent

14. Raymond, *Autobiography*.

15. Passoneau memo and Raymond *Autobiography*, both cited above in n. 12.

16. “Foreign Service Buildings Commission Proceedings,” 30 June 1926, NBM #34.

17. L. R. Sack, “Many New Embassies,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 1 January 1928, NBM #28.



Fig. 4. Gordon Bunshaft for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, U.S. Consulate, Frankfurt, Federal Republic of Germany, 1952 (Department of State).

buildings commissioned during this time include a series of consulates in Germany, by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM), and embassies in Rio de Janeiro and Havana, by Harrison and Abramovitz. Those who favored more classic styles of architecture were in for something of a shock: these new embassy buildings were steel and glass boxes in the International Style.

Gordon Bunshaft was the SOM partner in charge of the projects in Frankfurt, Bremen, Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, and Munich. These structures share a common theme: they are sleek, highly refined, mechanistic, and elegant boxes set above recessed glazed lobbies. Long, low rectangles glide gracefully under taller rectangles raised on square columns, and thin metal mullions separate regularly arranged windows and spandrels. The U.S. Consulate in Frankfurt (Fig. 4) was built in 1952, the same year as Lever House in New York, also by Bunshaft, and the similarity of the two designs is obvious. Arriving as they did while Germany was amidst its reconstruction, the consulates must have been refreshing at least for their newness, but their functional anonymity posed a serious problem. Robert Harlan, who served as High Commission (later Embassy) Officer and liaison with FBO and SOM architects, described the lesson learned from these buildings: “the importance of paying attention to cultural sensitivities of local authorities.” He wrote: “In an appearance before a commission interested in maintaining the historic and monumental integrity of an area, it is not useful, in making a presentation concerning the new building to be put in that area, to claim that this would be a building so purely functional that it would work well in Alaska. That happened, and we spent another six months undoing the horror which this assertion created among commission members.”¹⁸

18. R. H. Harlan, personal letter to Judith H. Lanus, Curator, National Building Museum, 2 April 1982, NBM #175.



Fig. 5. Harrison and Abramovitz, U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1952, now serving as Consulate Office Building. The embassy moved to Brasilia when that city became the capital of Brazil. Overall view with library at base (Department of State).

The abundant use of glass made the consulates especially vulnerable to attack. During his tour as Consul General in Frankfurt, from 1971 to 1975, Harlan said hundreds of panels and windows were broken by hard objects thrown at night. It is ironic that these products of the modern movement, which had its origins in Europe, were embraced as corporate symbols in the United States but were less than effective as representatives of the United States abroad.

The embassy in Rio de Janeiro, built in 1952, is a 12-story tower clad in Italian travertine (Fig. 5). It has a squared-off look, and even the piers, nonstructural but arranged in a closely spaced line at the base, emphasize the planar quality of the building. A flat roof floats above the top floor and covers a high loggia; round cut-outs bely its roofing role. From the circles at the top to the emphasis on the masonry box, it looks not unlike a stark, unornamented version of Louis Sullivan's Guaranty Building in Buffalo. An amoebic-shaped structure appended to the base on the ground floor turns out to be a library. To some the embassy

looked like a bank or a corporate headquarters building. Overall, the building proclaims itself a work of modern architecture, but Rio had long been an intense center of architectural experimentation,¹⁹ and it is unlikely that Brazilians were surprised or even particularly impressed by this building. Certainly, it would be hard to describe it as a uniquely American expression, when the modern movement had already arrived in Rio and did not need an introduction there courtesy of the United States.

While working on the embassy in Rio, Harrison and Abramovitz also designed the Havana Embassy, completed in 1952. Overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, it was built of reinforced concrete clad in Italian travertine with green window glass, tinted to resist the sun. Its base was faced in coral. The Havana Embassy, eight stories high, was criticized as too conspicuous,²⁰ while the 12-story skyscraper in Rio seemed even worse. According to comments in Congressional testimony, the Rio building offended people. In particular, critics complained that it did not respond to its setting. Later, speaking before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee in 1959, FBO Director William Hughes admitted that embassies like the one in Rio brought criticism because "they were tall, shaftlike buildings patterned in some respects after the U.N. building in New York. They bore no particular relationship to their surroundings, nor did they take into account at all any aspect of the local culture or architectural scene."²¹

Trying to identify the fundamental flaw in these early modern embassies and consulates, critics kept coming back to their failure to respond to local conditions. Was it a concern with foreign acceptance of American architecture or with foreign acceptance of America? Were critics criticizing the buildings because they were mediocre, rather than splendid examples of the modern style, or were they troubled by the contemporary look itself? Did the confusion over the buildings represent a dissatisfaction with design or a more fundamental ambivalence about the diplomatic mission? These are questions to consider in examining the next phase of the FBO embassy-building program.

FBO establishes new design policy

State Department officials, faced with Congressional criticism and public concern, could well have retreated into academic

19. The modern movement, with its roots in Europe, had spread to Brazil by the 1930s. The influence of Le Corbusier was evident in Rio in the work of Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, Alfonso Reidy, Carlos Leao, and others. Costa, Niemeyer, *et al.* designed the Ministry of Education there in 1937. The *brise-soleils* on its north façade were the first ever executed and represented a bold move to create a building capable of responding to its climate and site. See Michael Rosenauer, *Modern Office Buildings*, London, 1955, 120.

20. T. A. Pope, "The Embassy of the United States' Dignity and Strength, Courtesy and Respect," *The Catholic University of America Bulletin*, April 1961, 5.

21. "House Subcommittee on Appropriations Hearings on Foreign Service Buildings Act Amendments," 29 July 1959, 235.

design solutions resembling the embassy in Paris, for instance, or that in Helsinki, the southern plantation house *cum* embassy. The remarkable fact is that they did just the opposite. They embarked, instead, on a radical building program with the stated aim of promoting American prestige abroad and the unstated aim of creating diplomatic monuments to American architectural talent.

Leland W. King was Director of FBO in 1953. It was King who, as chief architect since 1941, had been responsible for directing as much FBO work as possible to private firms. In 1953, as a result of mounting criticism of FBO, King was advised by Assistant Secretary of State Edward T. Wailes "to discontinue modern architecture in favor of Georgian."²² King reacted by defending the "modern" style and the practice of hiring private architects.²³ He proposed an outside panel to review design decisions and hired Nelson A. Kenworthy as an outside consultant to make recommendations to the Office about the reorganization of its overall program.²⁴ Instead of suggesting that FBO take all of its design work in-house to avoid the glare of public scrutiny and to maximize design control, Kenworthy urged FBO to confront its problems by setting up a design review panel. Such a panel, he said, would have to represent a cross section of professional *and* lay opinion, combining members of the American Institute of Architects, public figures, and top State Department representatives.²⁵

The first FBO panel brought together a variety of architectural perspectives. Its members were architects Henry Shepley, Ralph Walker, and Pietro Belluschi, with Colonel Harry A. McBride, a former Foreign Service Officer, serving as chairman. Somewhere along the way, the idea of lay participation had vanished from the program, unless the chairman was supposed to represent that point of view. The panel meetings turned into provocative peer reviews. Lacking the participation of non-architects, the discourse remained intraprofessional, and its broader critical value was to a large extent compromised.

In Kenworthy's opinion, the purpose of the panel was to recommend the most appropriate style of architecture for projects and to review and advise on the architectural quality and

fitness of the submitted designs.²⁶ He also outlined a proposed policy:

The policy shall be to provide requisite and adequate facilities in an architectural style and form which will create goodwill by intelligent appreciation, recognition and use of the architecture appropriate to the site and country. Major emphasis should be placed on the creation of goodwill in the respective countries by design of buildings of distinguished architectural quality rather than adherence to any given style of architecture. Designs shall adhere to established good practice and, to the extent practical, use construction techniques, materials and equipment of proven merit and reliability.²⁷

By the time of the first panel meeting, Kenworthy had added to the first sentence above the phrase "which are distinguished, will reflect credit on the United States." It was not enough to be friendly; the buildings had to be impressive as well. Kenworthy feared that the architects might balk at the requirement for adherence to proven techniques and materials, but he wanted to "prevent repetition of some of the recent design faux pas and to definitely establish that FBO is not an architectural research laboratory."²⁸

After the first panel meeting in January 1954, McBride asked Pietro Belluschi to jot down a general course of action.²⁹ Belluschi was a nationally known architect with a practice based in the Pacific Northwest. He was recognized even in the 1940s for his sensitivity to regional differences and local identity, so it is not hard to see why he was selected to draft a goodwill mission for the FBO program. He responded in a memorandum that endorsed Kenworthy's policy statement and included his own comments in which he recognized the importance of local history, encouraged the exploration of newness, and focused attention on the specifically "American" identity of the work. Seeing this as an opportunity to display high American cultural achievements abroad, he wrote:

To the sensitive and imaginative designer it will be an invitation to give serious study to *local conditions of climate and site*, to understand and sympathize with local customs and people, and to *grasp the historical meaning of the particular environment* in which the new building must be set. He will do so with a free mind without being dictated by obsolete or sterile formulae or clichés [sic], be they old or new; he will avoid being either bizarre or fashionable, yet he will not fear using *new techniques or new materials* should these constitute real advance in architectural thinking.

It is hoped that the selected architects will think of style not in its narrower meaning but as a quality to be imparted to the building, a quality reflecting deep understanding of conditions and people. His directness and freshness of approach will thus have a *distinguishable American flavor*.³⁰ [emphasis added]

22. L. W. King, "Notes for statement at conference on 9 July 1953 with Assistant Secretary of State, Mr. Wailes and Mr. Wilbur (Budget)," and Leland W. King, letter to Anne Nissen, National Building Museum, 27 May 1983, 1 NBM #180.

23. King letter cited in n. 22, 2.

24. Kenworthy served at that time as executive vice president of Todd Associates, a firm involved in engineering, consulting, and design and management of large-scale construction projects.

25. Memorandum from Kenworthy to Assistant Secretary for Administration, 26 October 1953, NBM #2. In a letter written to the author, 2 February 1981, Robert E. Alexander gives credit to King for the success of the overall FBO program and says that he hopes King gets the credit he deserves. It seems that the idea for the panel originated with King, though Kenworthy formally presented it to FBO.

26. Kenworthy memorandum, cited in n. 25.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. P. Belluschi letter to A. Bush-Brown, 6 July 1981, NBM #40.

30. Belluschi memorandum to Kenworthy, 27 January 1954, NBM #40.

This passage reveals the theoretical underpinning of the entire FBO building program. Individual architects referred to it in justifying particular schemes, and journalists used it in interpreting the resulting works. It became thoroughly associated with Belluschi's name, and not with a mere bureaucratic pronouncement from FBO. In appearing to capture the spirit of the time, it acquired an almost biblical authority and guided the building program through the first six years—which were its heyday.

By 1961, however, FBO policy showed a retreat from this stance, with a new emphasis on dignity, dependable construction methods and materials, and overall economy. A new key phrase appeared in the design policy: "Ostentation shall be particularly avoided."³¹ The change in emphasis gives a good clue as to how some policy-makers viewed the program. They were worried that the U.S. image might be affected adversely by buildings that seemed flamboyant to people in host countries. It is not clear that such fears accurately reflected foreign concerns as much as U.S. concerns about itself. In either case, the two are intertwined.

It would be unfair, however, to assess the FBO building program by criteria of the 1960s, when the world by then had already changed dramatically. It is with Belluschi's criteria of the 1950s that we will examine the program and twelve of the embassy and consulate office buildings designed between 1954 and 1959.³²

- Accra Embassy, by Harry Weese (1955–1958);
- Athens Embassy, by TAC, Walter Gropius (1956–1961);
- Baghdad Embassy, by Joseph Lluís Sert (1955–1961);
- Bangkok Embassy, by John Carl Warnecke (1956–1960, never built);
- Dublin Embassy, by John Johansen (1959–1964);
- The Hague Embassy, by Marcel Breuer (1956–1959);
- Karachi Embassy, by Richard J. Neutra and Robert E. Alexander (1955–1961, an embassy that later became a consulate when Pakistan's capital moved to Islamabad);

31. Memorandum labeled Appendix C, January 1961, NBM #2. This was when James R. Johnstone replaced Hughes as FBO Director. Hughes had replaced King as director after King was forced to resign as a result of a grievance proceeding initiated by a disgruntled staff architect whom King had fired for incompetence. Hughes, after sparring for some time with Rep. Wayne Hays over design criteria, was fired. Hays liked Johnstone and supported him as Hughes's replacement.

32. The FBO initiated 23 major office building projects between 1954 and 1959. Of that number, four were never built or were postponed and revised. The twelve selected here, of which one was not built, were those most widely publicized. There was no effort to give these buildings a low profile at that time. Architectural magazines featured them prominently, as did major newspapers and news magazines. For example, the Bangkok embassy project by Warnecke, although never built, was featured in a six-page illustrated article in *Architectural Record*, October 1958, and in a five-page spread in *AIA Journal*, November 1958. Each of the twelve serves to illustrate some specific aspect of the design program outlined by Belluschi in 1954.

- London Embassy, by Eero Saarinen (1956–1960, competition winner);
- New Delhi Embassy, by Edward Durell Stone (1954–1958);
- Oslo Embassy, by Eero Saarinen (1957–1959);
- Tabriz Consulate, by Edward Larrabee Barnes (1958–1968);
- Tangier Consulate, by Hugh Stubbins (1954–1958).

Based on Belluschi's original premise that "good design invariably springs from gifted men,"³³ the advisory panel set about compiling a list of prospective architects well suited to the commissions at hand. Belluschi was confident that quality and not politics would determine the choices, and from all evidence it appears that the selection of architects was free from outside intervention. The politics that dominated the selection process were, of course, the politics of the architectural profession itself.³⁴

Several additional points about the panel are worth noting. Its membership rotated, with members serving two-year terms.³⁵ The panel did more than just review plans; it actually played a role in shaping them—as seen at Tabriz, where Barnes was told to remove unsightly cars from around the embassy base, or at Tangier, where Stubbins was asked to come up with a totally new scheme. In recommending architects, the panel focused on leaders of the profession, but it also identified younger men whose work was not yet widely known.³⁶

Considering "local conditions of climate and site"

A building relates to its climate and site through a consideration of its relationship to the sun, or the extent to which the sun's impact is mitigated by air-conditioning and shading de-

33. Belluschi letter, cited in n. 29.

34. For example, for the first major commission, at New Delhi, the panel recommended Edward Durell Stone. Stone had met Walker while a student at the Boston Architectural Center. There, also, he met Shepley, who took an interest in his work, invited him to join his New York office as a draftsman and encouraged him greatly. Stone was thus politically well situated, if also well suited, to receive the New Delhi commission.

35. When Hughes became Director in 1957, the panelists changed; the new members were Richard M. Bennett, Edgar I. Williams, and Eero Saarinen, who had just completed two major FBO commissions, the only architect so honored. Originally the chairman was to be a former Foreign Service Officer, serving for a set term, but by 1957, the chairman became a top career diplomat on temporary assignment in Washington. By the 1970s, it seems that the chairman's role was taken over by the Director himself. In 1964, records show that panel members included Edward Larrabee Barnes FAIA, Lawrence B. Anderson, Dean of the School of Architecture at MIT, and Joseph R. Passoneau, Dean of the School of Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis, with Thomas A. Pope as Supervising Architect for FBO.

36. The panel even made an effort to pair architects with later projects on the basis of ethnic ties: George T. Rockrise with Fukuoka (Japan), Minoru Yamasaki with Kobe (Japan), Eduardo Catalano with Buenos Aires (Argentina), and, more recently, I. M. Pei with Beijing (China). Pei had done an earlier design for Montevideo.



Fig. 6. Harry Weese & Associates Architects, U.S. Embassy, Accra, Ghana, 1955–1958 (Harry Weese & Associates Architects).

VICES; its ventilation, whether natural or artificial; and its attention to peculiarities of the local landscape, such as weather, insects, or even earthquake activity. Even a cursory glance at the embassies built in the 1950s reveals a thorough preoccupation with sun control—mahogany jalousies in Accra (Fig. 6),

concrete screens in Tangier (Fig. 7), perforated glazed tile screens in Athens (Fig. 8), white ceramic tile screens and painted teak shutters in Baghdad (Fig. 9), and concrete and marble aggregate grilles in New Delhi (Figs. 10 and 11), where even the open courtyard is covered with an aluminum mesh screen. In a sense

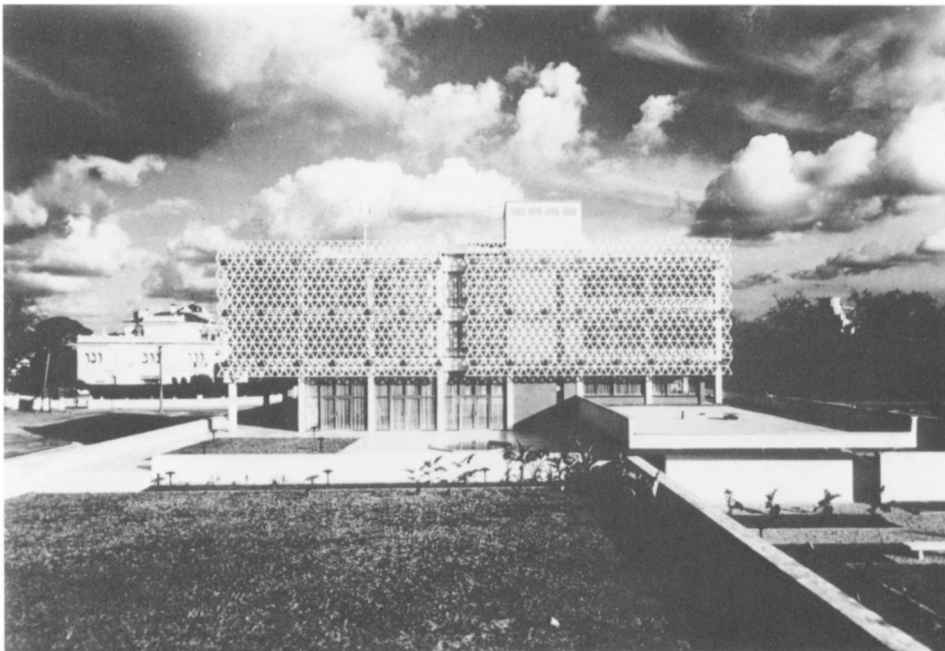


Fig. 7. Hugh Stubbins and Associates, Architects, U.S. Consulate General Office Building and Residence, Tangier, Morocco, 1954–1958. View across plaza from west (Hugh Stubbins and Associates, Architects).



Fig. 8. Walter Gropius, The Architects Collaborative, U.S. Embassy, Athens, Greece, 1956–1961. See perforated tile screens at lower right (Department of State).

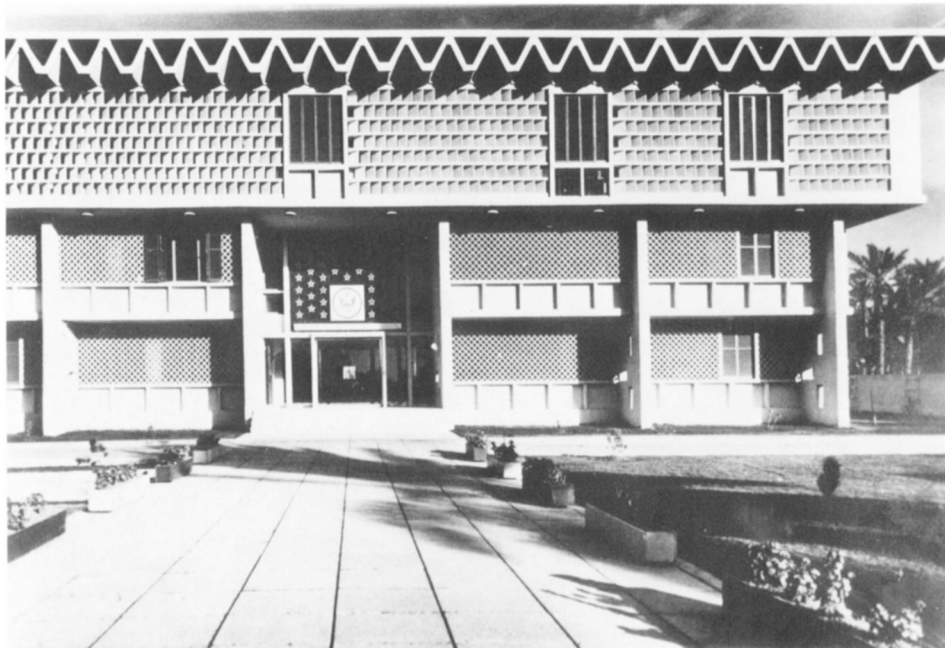


Fig. 9. Joseph Lluis Sert, U.S. Embassy, Baghdad, Iraq, 1955–1961, no longer functioning in the hands of the U.S. Government. Entrance showing sun protection details: screen, overhang, and wooden shutters (Department of State).

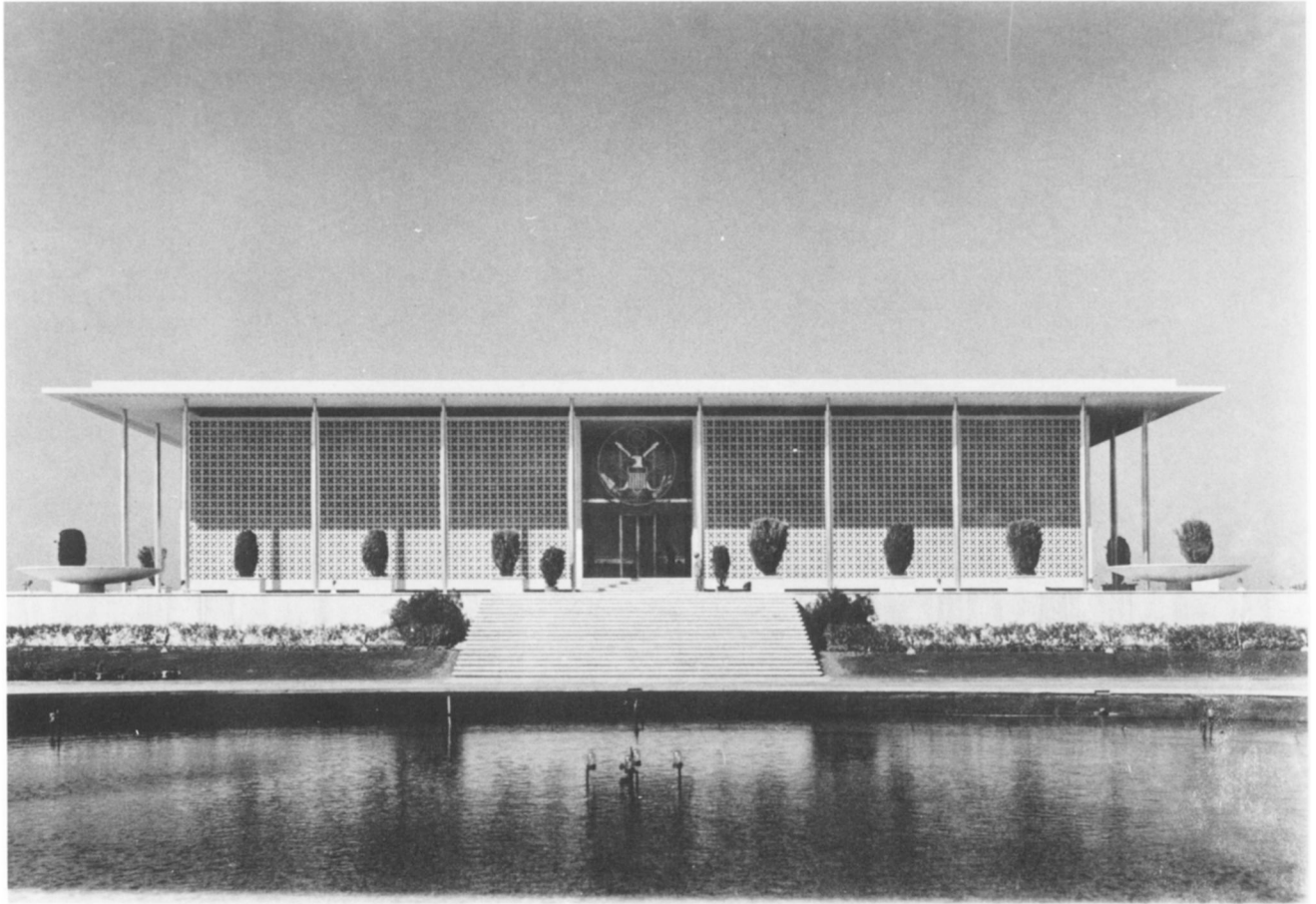


Fig. 10. Edward Durell Stone, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, India, 1954–1958. Entrance façade across fountain (Department of State).

this emphasis was inevitable. Architects had embraced the glass curtain wall as an expression of the modern age and were forced to deal with the problems to which it gave rise—not so much of daylight modulation or privacy, but of heat gain in both air-conditioned and non-air-conditioned buildings. As a result of problems such as these, architects looked to sun screens to moderate the effects of climate while at the same time providing surface texture and ornamental interest across the large expanses of glass. Le Corbusier and his followers had experimented with sun control devices in early efforts to allow buildings to respond to the sun. They used them not as screens, however, but as sculptural elements, emphasizing a building's plasticity and creating complex and changing patterns of dark and light across the façades. If anything, the screens at Tangier and New Delhi flatten the façades. At Baghdad, however, Sert steps out the two upper floors so that each shades the floor beneath, and applies the screens in layers. The effect there is one of visual diversity, and the façade is far more animated than in the others of this group of embassies—even more so when one considers the effect of the colored shutters, painted green and blue on the west side of the building, and orange and red on the east.

At Karachi (Fig. 12), the architects specified metal louvered screens to cover the fashionable ribbon windows on the east side; and they provided overhangs for the windows on the west. But FBO decided to economize, and the louvers, viewed as needless decoration, were eliminated. During the first year, Harlan wrote, “those poor souls with offices on the east side of the building, sweltered.”³⁷ Only when the screens were installed as originally planned did those offices become “bearably comfortable.” The screens there clearly served more than an aesthetic purpose.³⁸

Useful though they may have been, the screens created problems. They proved to be a haven for birds building nests, they cast distracting shadows on all interior surfaces, and they obscured views. But architects at the time were committed to what

37. Harlan letter to Lanius, cited above, n. 18.

38. The screens also served another purpose: security. While FBO is retrofitting almost all embassies with security grilles and walls today, even in 1957 *Architectural Record* observed that the perforated tile screens at Athens provided protection from the sun and also from intruders (*Architectural Record*, CXXII, 1957, 162).



Fig. 11. Stone, New Delhi Embassy. Detail of entrance with decorative grilles (Department of State/I. D. Beri).

Marcel Breuer called “open architecture”³⁹ and likewise to glass. They associated the glass curtain wall with openness, even if the curtain wall had to be obscured by a tight mesh of concrete or metal.

At New Delhi, Athens, and Tangier, where the intense sun penetrates so deeply and where glare is a major factor, the glass curtain wall-with-screen was a poor choice. Nonetheless, architects, explaining how their schemes responded to local climate, and journals and newspapers reporting on these assertions, nearly always described the grilles as sun control devices even if they failed to function in that way.

Critics, however, soon attacked the grilles. Vincent Scully, writing in 1961, condemned the screen wall as “superficial decoration.”⁴⁰ John Jacobus in 1966 ridiculed the “notorious” screen devices of Stone and others as “quaint and even foolish” and said that they were trite and lacked dignity.⁴¹ Jacobus linked

the grille with the idea of a commercial style and went so far as to read into Stone’s design the smug display of an affluent society imposing itself on a preindustrial society, an inappropriate choice for embassy design. But Jacobus may have been a bit too self-conscious in his assessment, reflecting perhaps the same difficulty that caused Representative Madden to want his embassy to feel like a common man’s home or office, and he was writing nearly a decade after the building was designed. The popular press, however, had a different vision of Stone’s New Delhi Embassy. When it viewed the crisp white grilles hung under a thin slab roof, supported by narrow golden columns, all atop a pedestal base, it saw a romantic little palace, evocative of the Mogul past. Stone’s vision made a tremendously positive impression on the Indian public and the American public as well. After it opened, the embassy quickly became a major tourist attraction. Today, the building still is widely admired in India; despite its detractors, it is probably the best-known American building abroad.

At Accra, Weese provided varnished mahogany jalousied shutters for ventilation and light control, although the deep overhang of the roof protects the façade from much of the direct sun (see Fig. 6).⁴² Since power for air-conditioning was considered unreliable in Ghana, Weese also designed a back-up ventilation system that allowed the plenum to draw breezes through the structure. He compared the scheme to that of Victorian-era houses with shaded verandas and said that he elevated the building on concrete posts to catch breezes (Fig. 13).⁴³ Another rationale for the elevated base is the fact that termites eat all kinds of wood in Accra; in order to use the native mahogany (even saturated with chemicals), Weese had to raise the building off the ground.

Heat control concerned all the architects designing for tropical climates: For Athens, Gropius designed a roof that acts like a double-layered tent to promote cross-ventilation (see Fig. 8). Warnecke tried to create a central air well at the Bangkok embassy, to draw breezes into the court and up and out through the building. Sert recognized the even hotter and drier climate of Baghdad by creating an insulated roof capable of mitigating the temperatures, which range from 32° to 120°F, and also incorporated an irrigation system into the complex, which abuts the Tigris River. The circulated water helped counteract the desert-like dryness, he said.

42. The jalousies do not work particularly well, and someone has to crank each one in order to adjust them. At a panel meeting on 6 May 1980, Weese, who was making a presentation of a design for Tokyo housing, commented on the superior appearance of wooden louvers compared to precast concrete screens. He described concrete as “unfriendly” when left unpainted and said that it should always be painted. When asked by FBO Director William Slayton exactly who was supposed to crank the louvers or jalousies to open and close them, Weese replied that that was not his concern. Personal notes of the author.

43. *Architectural Forum*, CXI, 1959, 135.

39. M. Breuer, *Marcel Breuer: Sun and Shadow*, London, 1956, 117.

40. V. Scully, *Modern Architecture*, New York, 1961, 36.

41. J. Jacobus, *Twentieth Century Architecture: The Middle Years, 1940–65*, New York, 1966, 152.

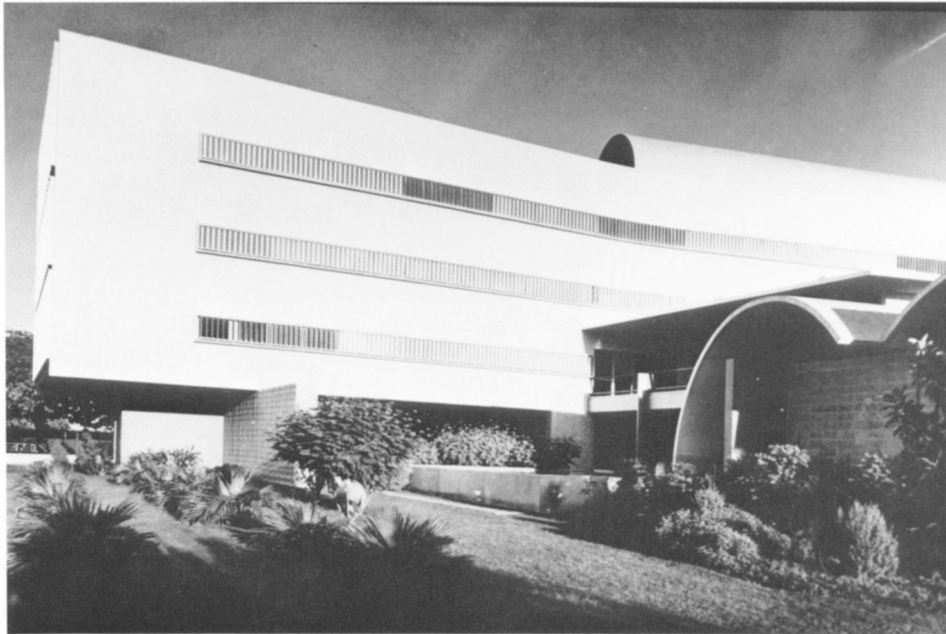


Fig. 12. Richard J. Neutra and Robert E. Alexander, U.S. Embassy, Karachi, Pakistan, 1955–1961. Consulate General Office Building since 1961, when capital moved to Islamabad. Detail with protective sun screens on ribbon windows (Department of State).

The architects also exhibited a common interest in raised structures. The embassies at Karachi and Athens, the consulate at Tangier, and the building proposed for Bangkok are all raised on pilotis like those at Accra. Just as the interest in screened façades grew out of the interest in the glass curtain wall, so, too, did the interest in raised structures emerge out of the modern fascination with interpenetrating space, transparency, and essentially weightless architecture. From Le Corbusier's early work to his *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles (1946–1952) and SOM's *Lever House* (1952), the building on stilts was a preoccupation of prominent architects.⁴⁴ Architects followed this trend by extending plazas or pavilions under and through the embassy buildings and providing open reception areas, separate from the offices above.⁴⁵ At Bangkok, Warnecke planned to place his building on piles because of the low bearing value of the soil. In an article in *AIA Journal*, he commented on the fortuitous coincidence of Thai building traditions and modern design concepts of the West.⁴⁶

Architects faced earthquake risks at many of the sites as well. At Athens, Gropius hung the office floors of the embassy from the steel and reinforced concrete frame to allow the structure

44. At the time the embassies were being built, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson were designing the *Seagram Building* in New York, for example.

45. These stilts now present security problems at various sites, and there is also an interest in enclosing and using some of the "wasted" ground-floor space.

46. J. C. Warnecke, "The United States Embassy in Bangkok," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, XXX, 1958, 39.

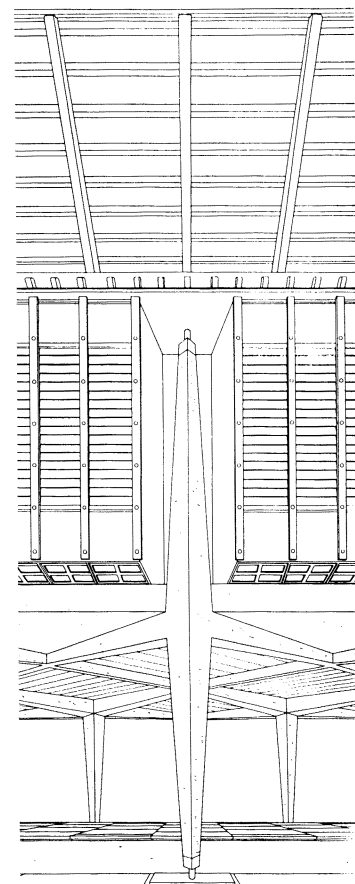


Fig. 13. Weese, embassy, Accra. Detail of concrete column design with wooden jalousies and overhanging roof (Harry Weese & Associates Architects).

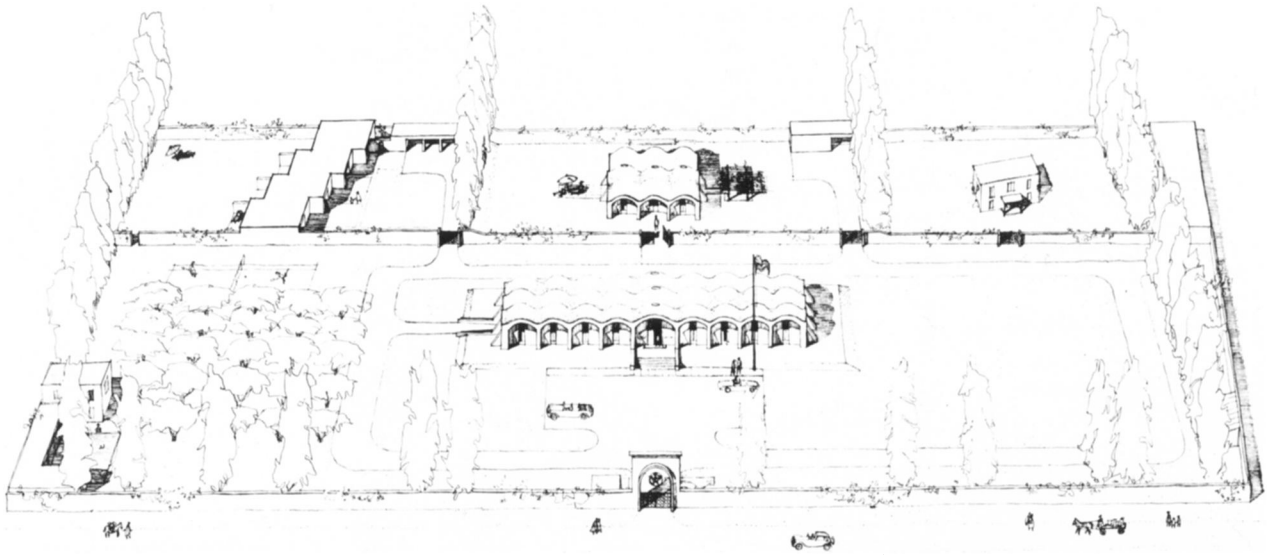


Fig. 14. Edward Larrabee Barnes, U.S. Consulate, Tabriz, Iran, 1958–1968, no longer in use by the U.S. Government. Drawing of walled compound for office building and residence (Edward Larrabee Barnes, Architect).

to move gently, like a baby's cradle, if necessary. Barnes poured a concrete ring designed to support the one-story structure at Tabriz in the event of seismic activity.⁴⁷

47. Alexander reports that the FBO refused to permit him and his partner, Neutra, to provide construction services because of the added costs and that the concrete at Karachi failed to meet their seismic standards. During construction, he says, they received concrete test reports showing test cylinders well below required strength, but the FBO responded by sending an Army engineer to do load tests. Alexander explained that that could only weaken the structure and that, in an active

One conspicuous failure to assess climate properly was at Tabriz (Fig. 14), where, according to Harlan, the architect apparently thought he was building in an extremely sunny, desert climate and designed windows as long narrow slits. Most

earthquake zone, load tests are inadequate to measure dynamic lateral forces. He and Neutra went "on record" and could do no more about it. They attributed the concrete problem to black market sales of skimmed or diluted concrete by the construction crew. Alexander letter cited above, n. 25.

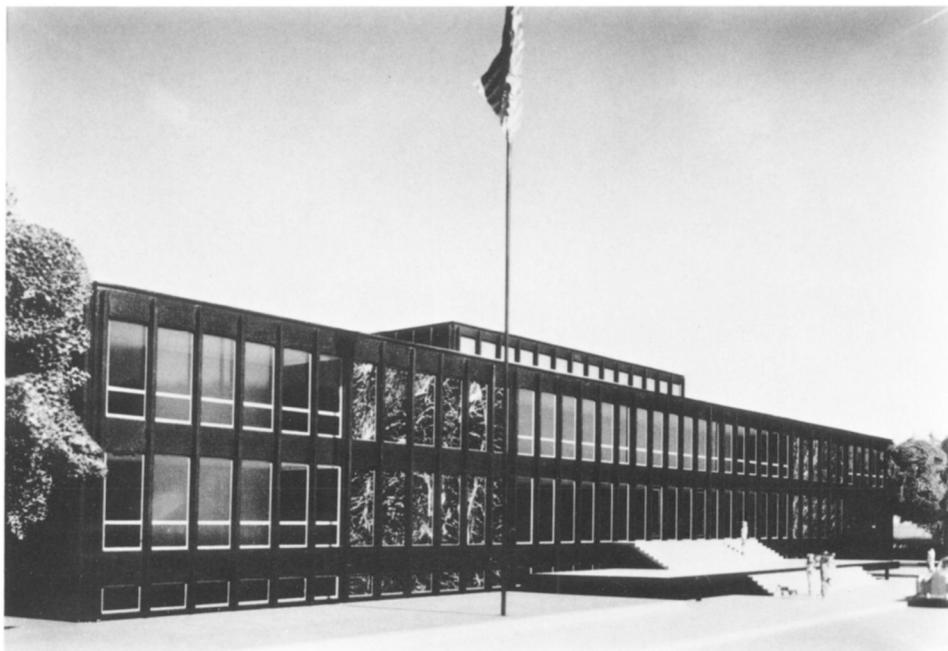


Fig. 15. Mies van der Rohe, U.S. Consulate, São Paulo, Brazil, 1957, never built. Architect's model of proposed building (Department of State/Bill Engdahl, Hedrich-Blessing).

of Iran is sunny and dry, Harlan says, but Tabriz is cloudy, humid, and gray. The consulate was very dark as a result.⁴⁸

It is instructive to compare any one of these built schemes with Mies van der Rohe's 1957 proposal for a consulate in São Paulo—a totally symmetrical, glass and metal rectangle, the same on all sides, with no exterior sun control and absolutely no relationship to its location (Fig. 15). Mies's proposal uses nothing from America, except high technology, and takes nothing from Brazil. Such an anonymous building offers little and satisfies few of Belluschi's criteria. It was never built. The degree to which the embassies succeeded in adapting to local climate and site is a subject for further inquiry, but it is evident that nearly all of their architects did make an effort to take local conditions into account, as directed.

Considering "the historical meaning of the particular environment"

FBO sent each architect to the site of his proposed embassy, so that he could attempt to grasp the historical meaning of the place. Panel members themselves often traveled to the proposed sites even before architects were selected, in order to come to some understanding of their visual and cultural identities. The most obvious place to discover historical reference was in neighboring buildings—their age, materials, scale, style. But some places have no significant built environment, or none capable of generating the inspiration for a modern office building. In such places, architects examined the colors, shapes, and textures of vernacular architecture and looked at other elements of the landscape for clues to the uniqueness of place. Even if they were designing similar forms in the U.S., they tried to explain their choices, and FBO wanted them to do so, in terms of local customs.

Nearly all of the embassies of the 1950s are centered around interior courtyards (Fig. 16). Interestingly, almost every architect explained his courtyard in terms of a local building tradition. Stone said that his open court water garden at New Delhi was inspired by Indian tradition. Although he provided air-conditioning for individual offices, the court remained open to the elements and was covered only by a decorative metal grille. Reporting on the opening of the building in 1959, the *New York Times* remarked on how well Stone "adopted the traditional Indian idea of building around a courtyard."⁴⁹ Stone's fascination with garden courts went back to his first visit to the Pan American Union Building in 1920, a visit, he later said, that convinced him to become an architect.⁵⁰ That was in Washington, D.C.,

48. Harlan letter cited above, n. 18. The post is of no further interest to the U.S. at this time; hence its deficiencies or assets, like those of Baghdad, are of only academic interest.

49. E. Abel, "New U.S. Embassy Praised by Nehru," *New York Times*, 4 January 1959, 24: 4.

50. E. D. Stone, *The Evolution of an Architect*, New York, 1962, 21. Stone was 18 at the time.

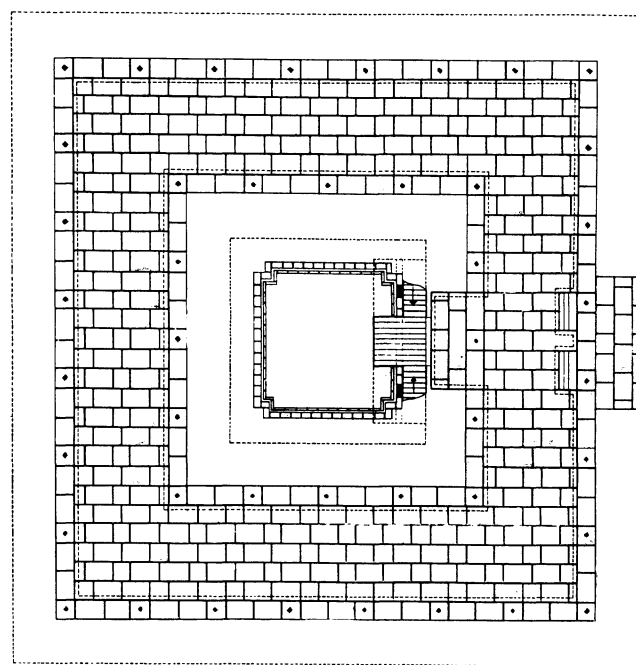
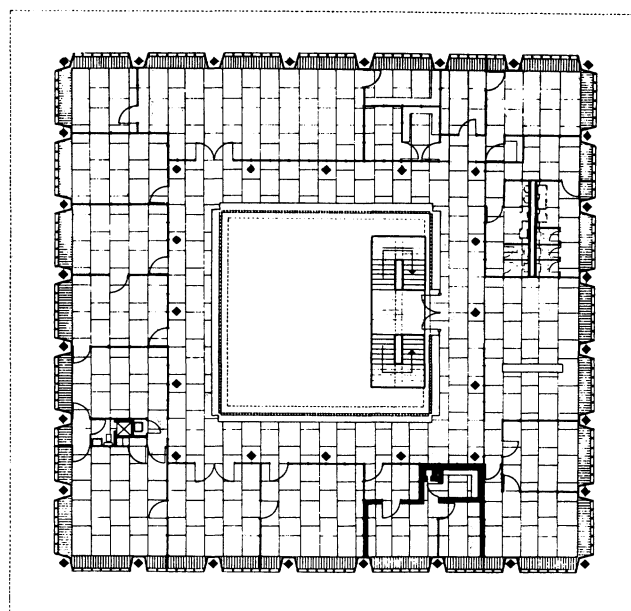


Fig. 16. Weese, embassy, Accra, plan showing interior courtyard typical of embassy designs (Harry Weese & Associates Architects).

not New Delhi. Still, for New Delhi, he managed to develop an overall design, centered on a courtyard, that he compared to a Mogul palace, a Hindu temple, and the best-known Indian monument, the Taj Mahal. Even if his inspiration came from a courtyard in Washington, he was able to create a building that *seemed* to draw on Indian traditions and elements of the local vernacular.

In much the same way, Gropius's embassy in Athens has been compared to the Parthenon and to other local architecture for

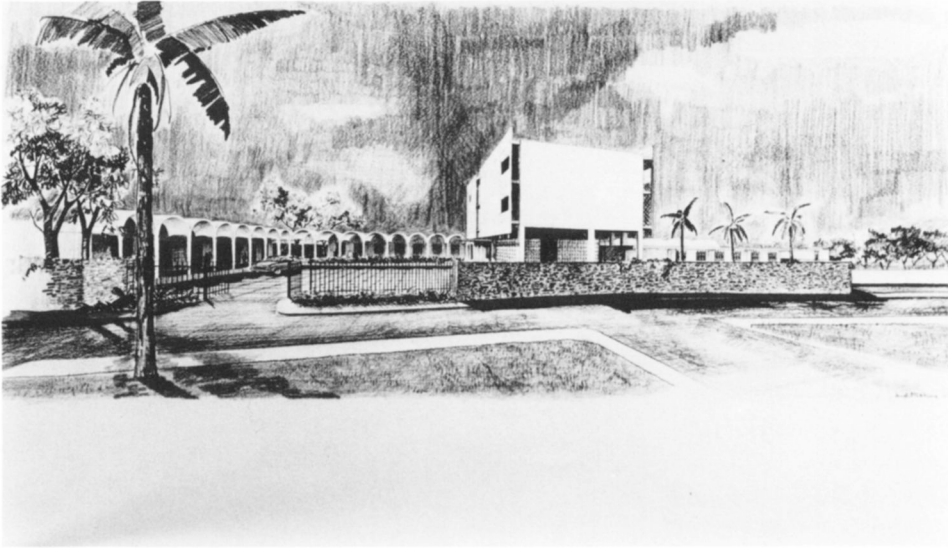


Fig. 17. Stubbins, Tangier Consulate General. Drawing by Hugh Stubbins of proposed scheme, dated October 15, 1954 (Hugh Stubbins and Associates, Architects).

the grandeur of its 30-ft.-high columns, its use of local marble, its raised podium, its quadrilateral plan, and its open interior patio. An earlier plan for Athens, by Ralph Rapson and John Vandermeulen (1953), had virtually none of these elements. It was simply an unadorned glass cube, and the design was rejected. By contrast, even critics unhappy with the Gropius building

commended its “neo-classic elegance,”⁵¹ and former FBO Director William Slayton has described it as “very indigenous.”

Other embassies make even more overt references to local history and tradition, though the traditions may be somewhat

51. *Architect's Journal*, CXXXII, 1960, 885.



Fig. 18. Neutra and Alexander, Karachi Embassy. Overall view with city beyond (Department of State).

unusual. Concerning Niamey, capital of the Republic of the Niger, architect Robert Beatty remarked that he could not very well adopt the style of a grass or mud hut for an embassy design. But that is precisely what Harry Weese did at Accra. Weese says he was inspired by a native chieftain's hut, by tapered spears, and by towering African stalagmite anthills. His attempt to relate to a local building tradition was real, if somewhat strained.⁵² In Baghdad, Sert overlooked the ziggurat, ancient Babylonia's best-known contribution to architectural history, but he said that Middle Eastern customs, particularly those pertaining to irrigation systems, did influence his design. His use of color and lacy patterned screens brings to mind Islamic art. (The previous U.S. Embassy there had been a replica of the White House.) At Tangier, Karachi, and Tabriz, the architects used a series of barrel vaults to evoke the vaulted roofline typical of Muslim architecture and associated with the Middle East (Figs. 17–19).

Perhaps the most spectacular effort at working with historical allusion was Warnecke's embassy at Bangkok. He made a careful and documented study of vernacular architecture, from elegant Japanese-style palaces to highly decorated Thai temples. His prototype was an old hospital, raised above moisture on stilts, shaded by deep balconies, and ornamented with delicate grillwork. He combined that image with that of a pristine, white temple, floating gracefully above a small lake, to arrive at the embassy design. He even declared that the lake, so much a part of the local landscape, would be shaped like the traditional lotus petal (Fig. 20).⁵³

Like Warnecke, architects of the embassies in London, Dublin, and The Hague all faced the challenge of blending their buildings with the local environment—in these cases introducing major buildings into an urban fabric while maintaining the scale and quality of an old city square.

They achieved this with varying degrees of success. Breuer's building in The Hague (Fig. 21) really can claim little relationship to the historical meaning of the place. It says little or nothing about Dutch vernacular architecture or the 18th-century palace just a block away; nor does it make reference to *de Stijl* or any other elements of modern art associated with that region. Probably for this reason—the very absence of association—critics objected to the design even before it was built. About the only defense offered for the massive, blocky building with its trapezoidal windows cut deep into the surface (Fig. 22) was that other large buildings would follow in the general area and they would fit no better with the local scene.

If the embassy in The Hague had no particular rationale

52. *Time* quoted Weese as saying: "If there is no native architectural tradition, you have to start one." "Model of New U.S. Embassy in West Africa's Gold Coast," *Time*, 4 March 1957, 74.

53. J. C. Warnecke, "The United States Embassy in Bangkok—The Story of Its Design," *AIA Journal*, XXX, 1985, 36–40; see also "U.S. Embassy, Bangkok, Thailand," *Architectural Record*, CXXIV, 1958, 159–164.

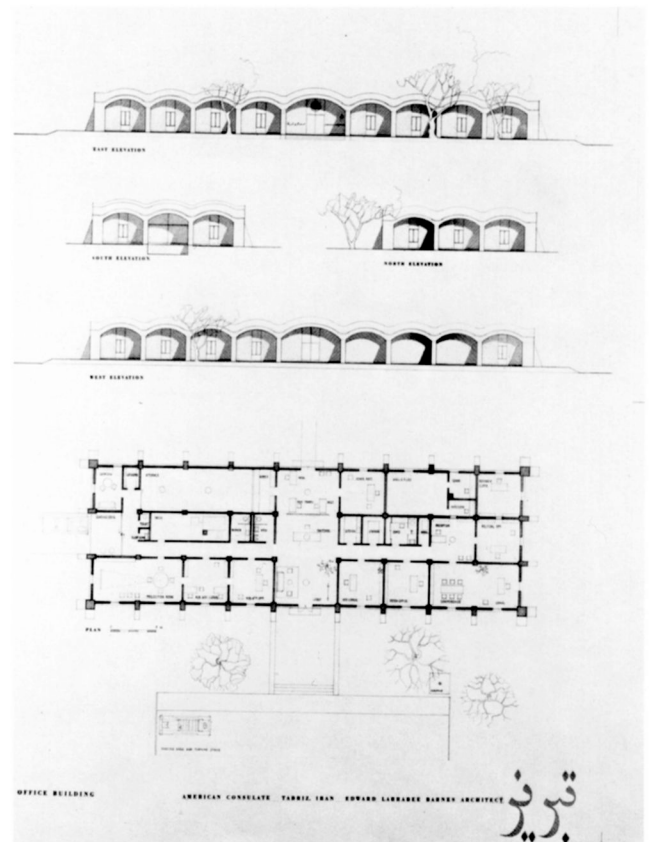


Fig. 19. Barnes, Tabriz Consulate. Plan and elevations (Edward Larabee Barnes, Architect).

relating it to its site, the embassies in London and Dublin did. Ralph Walker had urged that both buildings respond to local architectural heritage through proportion, scale, and a harmonious choice of materials. Johansen's first *parti* for the Dublin site, an odd-shaped intersection, was a square, glass curtain-walled structure with a small, open central court. The design did not provide adequate office space on the first floor, circulation was poor, and members of the architectural advisory panel expressed concern about the heaviness of the scale and the amount of wasted space.⁵⁴ Johansen returned with a second solution, nothing like the first, which was accepted. This building was round, made of precast concrete modules, and surrounded by a moat (Fig. 23). Clearly, Johansen had become interested in expressing the sculptural possibilities of concrete—the three-dimensional effect of the building is striking. The large windows read no longer as flat surfaces but as undulating curves formed by the changing angles of the concrete as it winds around the circle. Lit from within at night, the concrete seems a thin membrane or paper cut-out wrapped around a glowing cylinder (Fig. 24). Johansen claimed that the building draws on the local historical tradition of 17th-century circular plans and also on

54. Notes of FBO panel meeting, 13 May 1957, NBM #48.

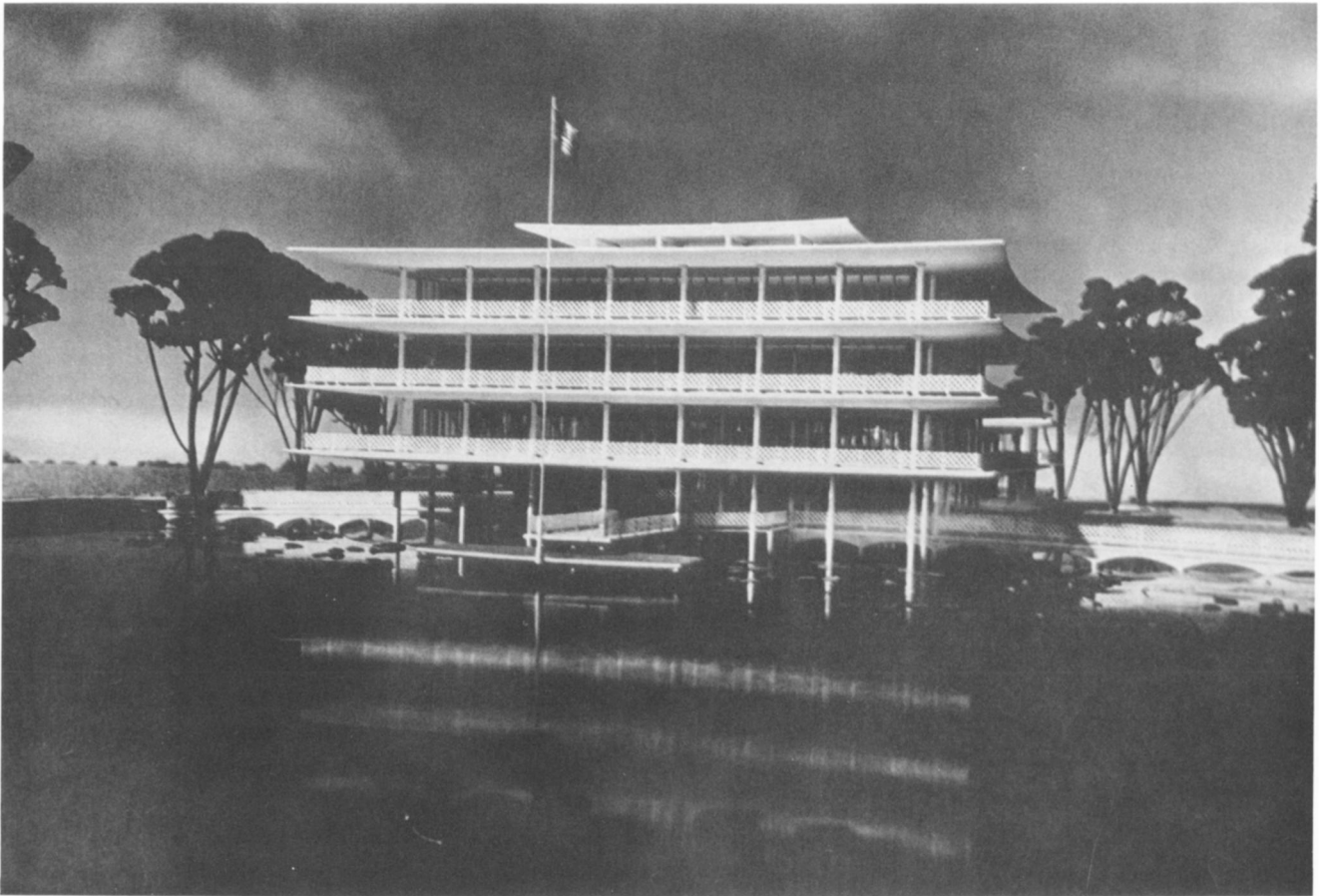


Fig. 20. John Carl Warnecke & Associates. Architect's model for U.S. Embassy, Bangkok, Thailand, 1956, project never built (J. C. Warnecke FAIA).

Celtic monuments and crafts dating back to the 5th century.⁵⁵ Whatever his precedents, he succeeded in creating a sharp visual image, loved by some and detested by others. The exterior moat brings daylight into the floor of offices that is below grade and affords them privacy as well. Consular offices and reception spaces fill the first floor, with access restricted above.

As for London, probably nothing would have pleased everyone in that very precious location on Grosvenor Square (Fig. 25). U.S. Ambassador Winthrop W. Aldrich had recommended that the building should not be of glass and steel and should not be a skyscraper, and he had also urged the panel to limit consideration to designs in the late 18th-century style of architects like Nash.⁵⁶ Members of the panel, who set up a limited

competition for the selection of a design, agreed with Aldrich regarding the materials and height of the building, but they would not further constrain the choices open to entrants, urging them only to respect the scale and dignity of the setting.

According to Eero Saarinen, whose design won the competition, his building works in complete harmony with its Grosvenor Square location. The façade is of Portland stone, the material used on some neighboring façades, and one that blends itself into the cityscape over time. The window modules are rectangular and fit together to form a tightly arranged grid, alternating in depth. There is a classic symmetry to the whole. To brighten the look of the stone and glass, Saarinen added anodized gold-colored (he calls it "straw-colored") trim to the windows and the cornice line. He mounted a tremendous eagle at the center of the front façade, high over the entrance (Fig. 26). This makes the building look like an embassy, he wrote, and not like just another building.⁵⁷ While other competition entries made specific references to the London architectural tra-

55. "Embassy of the U.S.A., Fact Sheet on Dublin, Ireland," NBM #48. While it is possible that Johansen thought of the circle as a symbol of strength and unity, as suggested in a State Department fact sheet, it seems unlikely that he used the circle to express the arrangement of the 13 stars on the first American flag—another suggestion in the same publication.

56. "Minutes of the Foreign Buildings Architectural Advisory Committee," 5 August 1955, NBM #62.

57. "Controversial Building in London," *Architectural Forum*, CXIV, 1961, 85.

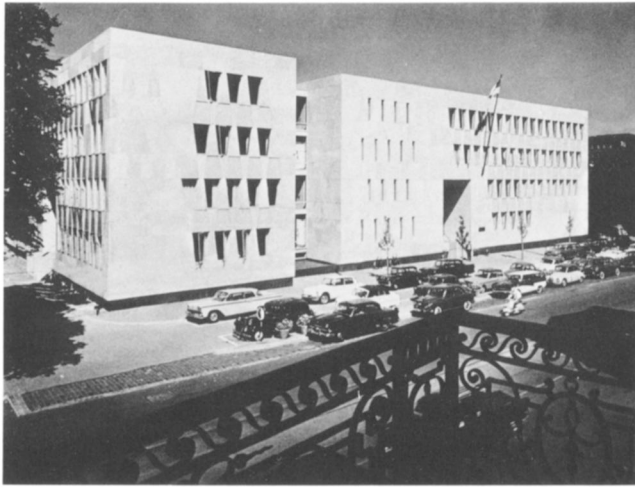


Fig. 21. Marcel Breuer, U.S. Embassy, The Hague, Netherlands, 1956–1959. View of embassy facing the Lange Voorhout (foto jan versnel).

dition (Minoru Yamasaki's was mock-gothic [Fig. 27]), Saarinen's makes little direct response to the history of the place. Nevertheless, its form does relate well to the square in front. It is an impressive building whose façade has aged well. By raising the structure onto a sloped pedestal base and creating a moat, Saarinen gave the building added presence, placed its entrance just above the hedgerow border of the park across the street, brought light into the lower level offices, and probably inadvertently increased building security. Some critics complained that, by not filling the entire block from side to side, Saarinen emphasized the autonomy of his building and diminished the enclosure that defines the historic square; but had he widened the building to fill the block, he would have ruined its overall proportions.

Considering "new techniques and new materials"

In his policy statement, Belluschi urged architects working on FBO contracts not to fear new techniques and new materials and, in effect, encouraged them to experiment with new building ideas wherever appropriate. Architects responded in varied ways. Some, like Gropius or Stubbins, used up-to-date structural methods to hang glass curtain walls from steel frames or steel-supported infrastructures, while others, like Barnes and Saarinen, used load-bearing walls—brick in Tabriz, and concrete in London. Some made extensive use of local materials—marble in Athens, mahogany in Accra—while others found it necessary to import nearly all supplies from the United States. Construction technology also varied widely; some countries had advanced capabilities, while others had few, if any, skilled craftsmen and no tradition of large-scale building. Thus, even when architects wanted to use modern methods or materials, they had to take into consideration local resources and the added costs of importing labor and materials from afar.

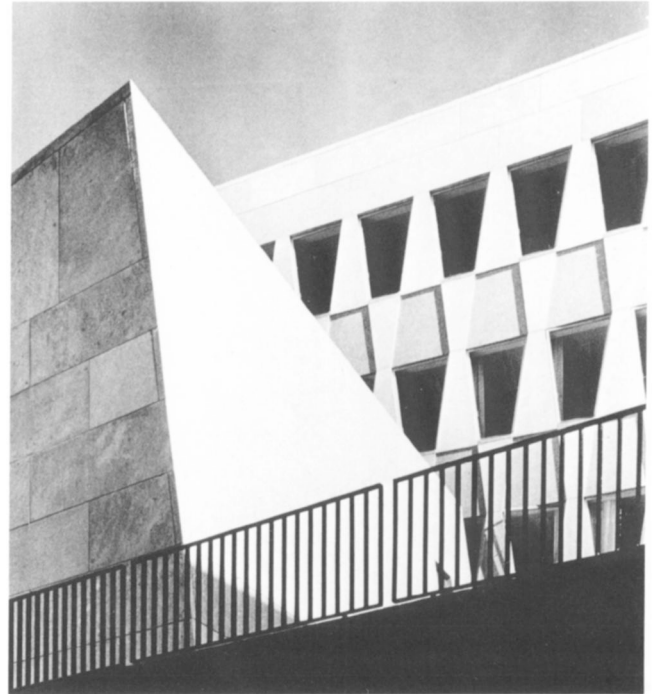


Fig. 22. Breuer, The Hague Embassy. Detail of trapezoidal windows accented by slabs of polished granite (Department of State/foto jan versnel).

Tabriz is a striking example of a return to old techniques: Barnes designed rows of low barrel vaults built completely of local reddish-brown, mud-covered brick that was then stuccoed over in white (Fig. 28). Saarinen used load-bearing exterior columns and walls at London and Oslo. Although the architect Peter Smithson, among others, has criticized Saarinen for using



Fig. 23. John Johansen, U.S. Embassy, Dublin, Ireland, 1959–1964. Aerial view showing entrance with moat (Department of State/Pat Mohaghan, Fotoprint).



Fig. 24. Johansen, Dublin Embassy. The embassy illuminated at night (Norman McGrath).

19th-century building methods in London,⁵⁸ such an approach seems perfectly sensible for a six-story building, especially one that expresses a classical order. The Portland stone panels there serve as both window frames and structural elements. In Oslo (Fig. 29), walls of precast concrete create a triangular building free of exterior or interior columns. The exterior is sheathed in green-black, granite chip terrazzo, a mix that also includes crushed labradorite, with contrasting white-painted teak window frames. The façade material, produced locally, generated a whole new industry for the production of artificial stone in Norway.⁵⁹ It was thought that the highly polished building would have a visual life even when there is little sun, but the exterior is no longer highly polished. Rather, it is now a dull black and seems a curious choice for a northern nation like Norway. On the interior, however, Saarinen used natural teak and exposed brick, warm and comforting materials, to enclose the small but handsome central hall, recognized for its fine acoustics (Fig. 30).

Gropius made Athens into a showplace for local Greek marbles: white marble from Mt. Pentali; black marble, called Saint Peter's; gray marble from Marathon for the basement; Santa Maria marble for stairs, corridors and bathrooms; and a variety of marble aggregates for floors and plazas. If references to clas-

58. *Ibid.*, 81.

59. G. E. Kidder Smith, *The New Architecture of Europe*, New York, 1961, 203.



Fig. 25. Eero Saarinen, U.S. Embassy, London, England, 1956–1960. Façade from Grosvenor Square in 1963. Saarinen won the FBO design competition with a slightly different version of this building, which lacked the eagle over the entrance (Department of State/Balthazar Korab).



Fig. 26. Saarinen, London Embassy. Detail with eagle, raised base, wall articulation, and cornice decoration, seen from Grosvenor Square. Sash is operable. Cornice trim, window sash, railings, and the eagle are of straw-colored anodized aluminum (Balthazar Korab).

sical Greece are not readily apparent from the motif of column and entablature, then the materials underscore the allusion. Even the furniture for the embassy was made in Greece.

If Congress did not always understand problems of cost con-

trol on distant construction sites, architects themselves were frustrated by inadequate local support and lack of technological know-how in the host countries. In notes of his trip to Baghdad in 1955, Shepley commented that “There are no good local

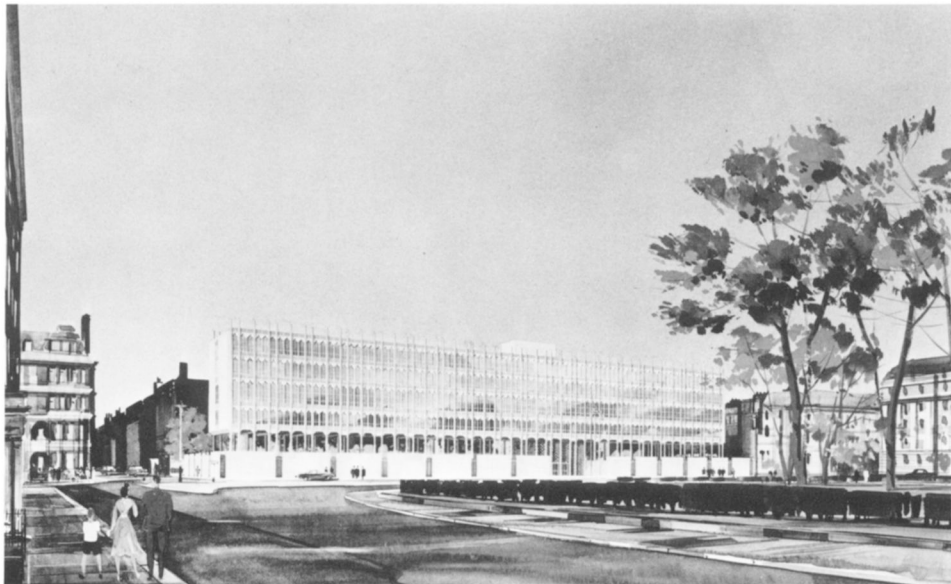


Fig. 27. Minoru Yamasaki, proposed U.S. Embassy for London, England. Submitted to Foreign Buildings Office competition for embassy design, 1956, but not selected by the jury (Department of State).

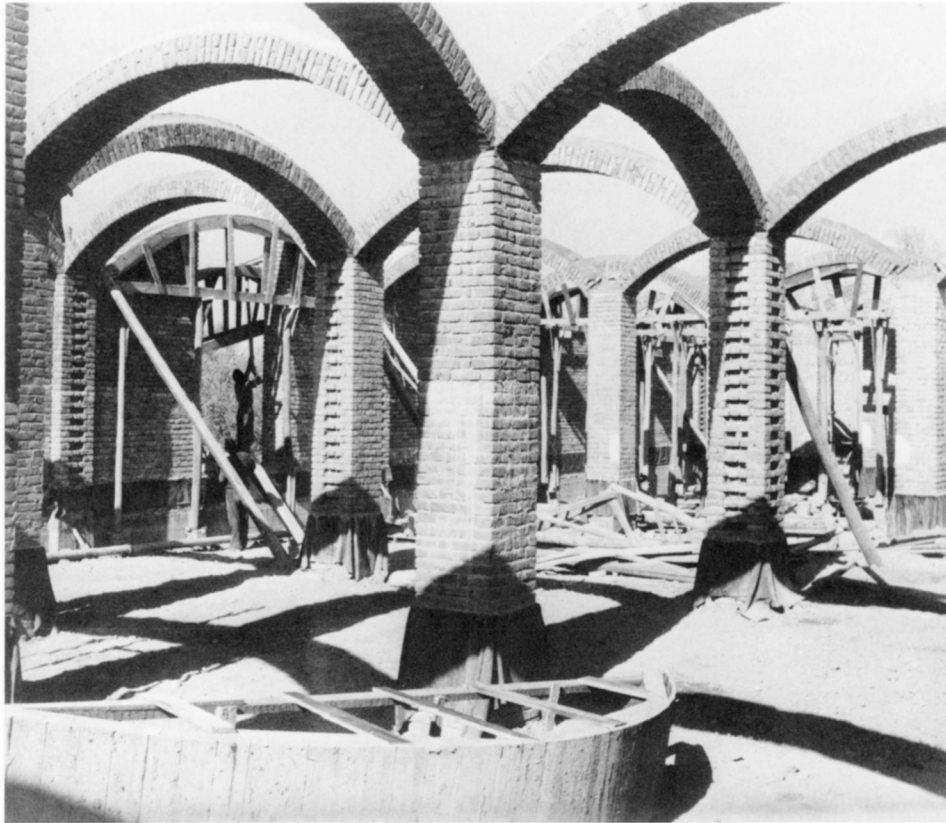


Fig. 28. Barnes, Tabriz Consulate. Vault construction (Edward Larrabee Barnes, Architect).

craftsmen or mechanics left since the Jews left. Any good construction workmen have to be imported.”⁶⁰ Belluschi’s notes from the same trip reiterate the facts: “The construction of this project will present real technical difficulties since there are no craftsmen, no builders, no standards, only cheap construction, lack of know-how on the part of all local architects and builders.”⁶¹ Subsequently, Sert designed the embassy to be built of precast concrete and used standard elements as much as possible for on-site fabrication. In Lebanon, by contrast, building skills were good, but the United States was forced to abandon its partially completed embassy building in Beirut in the early 1970s due to local political upheaval.

When New Delhi cost figures startled Congressmen reviewing the FBO budget, Director Hughes had to remind them about conditions there. There were over 1400 employees on the job, many living with their families on the site, but only two pieces of mechanical equipment—a small air compressor and a cement storage tank. “Everything else in that building was done almost entirely by hand,”⁶² he told them, adding that

60. FBO notes on Middle East trip by Shepley, April/May 1955, NBM #66.

61. FBO notes on Middle East trip by Belluschi, April/May, 1955, NBM #66.

62. “House Subcommittee Hearings,” 24 February 1959, NBM #66.

low daily wage rates do not automatically lead to low overall labor costs.

In some cities, conditions were even worse. Robert Beatty reports that when he first visited Naimey, he found it to be a totally inaccessible desert village with one paved road—the only one in the country—running past the embassy site. The only significant local architecture consisted of grass huts. With resources so limited and materials so scarce, Beatty’s solution was to design an embassy of pink Georgia marble and bring in absolutely everything from the United States.

In trying to achieve a “fresh approach,” American architects had to rely on the appearance of their embassy designs and not on the use of new technology or new materials. The difficulty of simply building in some foreign places was great. If the buildings in this group are structurally straightforward and fairly conservative in the choice of materials, it is no surprise.

Embassies are also workaday quarters

In his policy statement for FBO, Belluschi makes no mention of the overriding functional requirement of the embassy-building program—the construction of efficient workplaces that support the diplomatic mission of each post. This significant oversight may have signalled architects to overlook or compromise function in favor of art. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, former U.S.

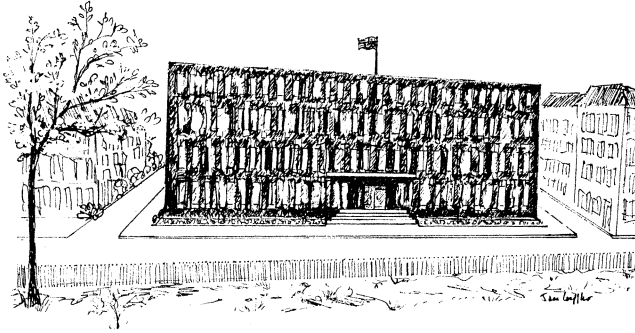


Fig. 29. Eero Saarinen, U.S. Embassy, Oslo, Norway, 1957–1959. Building is triangular, with sharply angled corners. It sits on triangular site bounded on three sides by streets, and its entrance faces the grounds of the royal palace (Drawing by author).

Ambassador to India, says that the chancery and residence in New Delhi were far more highly acclaimed by architectural critics than by those who lived and worked in them.⁶³ The same could be said of most embassy buildings from that time.

Beyond the overall need for massive peripheral and internal security, which was less paramount in the 1950s than now, the primary difference between an ordinary office building and an embassy office building lies in the complexity of the embassy program requirements—reception rooms that can accommodate large groups; consular sections capable of handling a steady stream of visa applicants; administrative, cultural, and information offices accessible to the public (at that time); economic, political, and possibly agricultural offices more limited in access; and military, communications, and security offices, with totally restricted access, built of secure materials. Into this array of offices, which varies from post to post depending on the program and site, add also the ambassador’s office, special entrance and exit arrangements for the ambassador (which can necessitate extra elevators or stairs, for example), and a variety of support facilities, such as cafeteria, meeting rooms, libraries, and storage.

According to Shirley Temple Black, former U.S. Ambassador to Ghana, the ideal embassy is a place that supports the morale of the officers and the country team and provides an efficient place to work.⁶⁴ She describes the Accra embassy as a “beautiful building to work in,” but a “fire trap.” In the event of a fire, she says, she would have been trapped in her office by the immovable mahogany shutters, although the office was equipped with a fire ax with which she was expected to knock out the sturdy shutters. With regard to security, she says, the building was a “nightmare” even when first built, because it had only one entrance, giving all visitors access to all parts of the building. This feature also afforded her little privacy, since there was but



Fig. 30. Saarinen, Oslo Embassy. Interior courtyard with teak screens (Department of State).

one way in and out for her, too. Nor did the embassy at New Delhi ever function well as an office building, as noted by Moynihan and by others. Harlan points out that, at both New Delhi and Tabriz, the ambassador’s privacy was compromised by the use of screen walls where solid walls were warranted. In addition, according to Harlan, the “mosque-like” ceilings at Tabriz reflected sound in such a way as to compromise all conversations held in the public rooms.⁶⁵

In the 1950s, fewer people worked in given spaces, and heat-generating equipment was largely absent from the workplace, but ventilation and cooling posed problems from the start. Without air-conditioning, many, if not most, of the posts relied almost exclusively on window coverings to control summer heat. Many of the architectural solutions were inadequate, and at least some exacerbated the problem. Although Gropius was advised by Shepley to design deep balconies to control the glare of Athens, he offered instead a suspended glass wall, shaded only from the inside by vertical blinds, which did little to control

63. Moynihan letter to NEA, cited above, n. 1.

64. Telephone interview with Shirley Temple Black, 16 March 1982, NBM Archives, #175.

65. Harlan letter cited above, n. 18.

heat.⁶⁶ Even in Oslo, the sun can be a problem. There, Saarinen used black mini-blinds to cover his window walls, but this only added to the building's heat gain in summer.

With the understandable preference among architects for socially oriented spaces over those rarely seen by the public or rarely photographed, the functional needs of these buildings often suffered, and the ceremonial needs received disproportionate attention in design and decor. While FBO was the actual client for these projects, the Foreign Service personnel themselves had little *direct* contact with the design process and little influence on it. Rather, the architect's principal critics were the members of the architectural advisory panel, who, as noted earlier, were his colleagues and professional peers.

In the early 1950s, morale among Foreign Service staff at the State Department was low. According to reports in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, it was a time when security risks were discovered everywhere, often on embassy staffs. Diplomats criticized State Department leadership in 1955 and urged changes that would raise morale. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles received a report indicating that Foreign Service officers with inadequate allowances were being forced to pay out of their own funds to entertain visiting U.S. officials, for example. James Reston wrote several harshly critical pieces condemning the fact that 50% of Foreign Service officers could not speak the language of the country in which they served. In 1955, Representative Patrick Hillings called the U.S. Embassy in Moscow a "pig pen" and complained that the ambassador there was driving his own "battered" auto around town.⁶⁷ Dulles responded that, if Hillings thought Moscow was bad, "he should see other places."⁶⁸ There were calls for better representation particularly in the Far East. Building security was also a concern: a mob stormed the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem in 1956 to protest the Baghdad Pact, and in the same year, a mob attacked the U.S. Embassy in Taipei. The State Department hoped that the building program would help alleviate at least some of these problems of morale by improving the conditions of service, as well as the service itself.

The old Delano and Aldrich embassy in Paris was designed with a partition-wall system to facilitate rearrangement of interior functions, but within a short time the rearrangements had become so difficult that the building's utility was affected. Its symbolic strength, however, was thought to outweigh its functional inadequacy. Users commonly complained and still complain about the functional inadequacy of embassy buildings. At that time, however, functional value was viewed by many as secondary to symbolic value. John Kenneth Galbraith, econo-

mist and former U.S. Ambassador to India, had this to say about the functional deficiencies of the New Delhi embassy and its residence: "Both were marvelously non-functional but so is the Taj Mahal. And to be non-functional is greatly appropriate for an embassy, for so are many of its functions. We cannot in our overseas buildings celebrate our industrial eminence such as it is. But we can try to show our excellence in the arts."⁶⁹

Designing with a "distinguishable American flavor"

How can architects, charged with a mission of goodwill and sensitivity to regional differences, create buildings that are distinctly American? They can approach this problem in several ways. They might use images associated with American architectural history, like the idea of miniature White Houses; but putting likenesses of the White House in faraway places would show little sympathy for regional differences. A second way to approach the problem is to use themes from American design. The skyscraper was an American creation, but everyone thought it was an inappropriate form for an embassy, even where space needs might have suggested such a structure. One reason that critics found the skyscraper objectionable was that it had "commercial" overtones.⁷⁰ Many later came to see the embodiment of American democracy and the frontier spirit in the Prairie Style. Indeed, any of Frank Lloyd Wright's large house plans might have suited an embassy. A scaled-down version of Midway Gardens would have made a fine embassy, and the Barnsdall House, often likened to a Mayan monument, would have served particularly well in Central America, where it would have carried American allusions while simultaneously evoking local themes and providing unusually good perimeter security. As to matters of security, no architectural motif could be better suited to embassy design than the impenetrable masses of Henry Hobson Richardson. Furthermore, recognized as an "American" creation and emulated for the confidence and monumentality of its look, the Richardson style could have produced an embassy of distinction, perhaps in the Middle East, where its Byzantine allusions would have taken on special meaning. This approach did not appeal to most architects in the 1950s, captivated as they were with the more ephemeral elements associated with the International Style. Another approach would have been to create a very ordinary office block as the ultimate American embassy. That is the most understated approach, but one that is unimaginative and produces buildings that are likely to be forgettable.

A fourth approach to solving the dilemma is simply to declare the building "American," which it is, and at the same time list

66. Memorandum of Shepley trip, dated 29 September 1955, NBM #42.

67. *New York Times*, 30 August 1955, 14: 5.

68. *New York Times*, 31 August 1955, 27: 1.

69. J. K. Galbraith, personal letter to Anne Nissen, 7 December 1981, NBM #175. Galbraith served as U. S. Ambassador to India from 29 March 1961 to 12 July 1963.

70. The U.N. Secretariat was criticized for its resemblance to a skyscraper. A. Temko, "Lifting the Federal Facade," *Horizon*, II, 1960, 27.

various local conditions and themes to which the building responds. This solution thus involves public relations, but architects are well acquainted with image-making.

Stone's embassy in New Delhi benefited from tremendous public relations, which contributed to its popularity at the time of construction and its continued popularity today. Chief Justice Earl Warren laid the cornerstone at the site, an event widely reported in the United States, and Prime Minister Nehru attended the dedication and declared himself "enchanted by the building"⁷¹—"enchanted," he said, not pleased or impressed. Enchantment is precisely what Stone was aiming for and what was picked up in the many news reports about the embassy. Two high-profile ambassadors were posted there, John Kenneth Galbraith (29 March 1961–12 July 1963) and later Daniel Patrick Moynihan (8 February 1973–7 January 1975), both of whom generated news themselves. A key event in the embassy's early history was the March 1962 visit of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, shown with Ambassador Galbraith stepping across the embassy water garden pond in a photograph widely reproduced in the United States. That added to the building's glamour, an intangible quality, part of its fairy-tale mystique. It looked like nothing that had come before, except perhaps a backdrop for a movie such as *Shangri-La*. No other embassy received the press attention accorded that at New Delhi. Writing in 1960, Ada Louise Huxtable called it "a uniquely beautiful modern building well-suited to its official role . . . a prime example of a distinguished new kind of American architecture."⁷² She described it as unmistakably Western and contemporary and also comparable to the Taj Mahal in feeling.

Warnecke, too, exploited the "Hollywood" connection in creating a true fantasy world in Bangkok. It may be worth noting that in 1956, when Warnecke began his project, Yul Brynner won the Best Actor Award for portraying the King of Siam (Thailand) in *The King and I*, a hugely popular success. Also that year, the Best Film of the Year Award went to *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The American public was indeed dreaming about exotic faraway places as American architects were creating these unusual buildings. Weese managed to make an evocative architectural statement out of the most eccentric set of references in Accra, Gropius conveyed an image of grandeur and a sense of ancient splendor at Athens, and Saarinen added sparkle to London with his gold accents. In 1961 in his guide to new architecture in Europe, G. E. Kidder Smith called the building program "the most brilliant series of official buildings" constructed anywhere in the world,⁷³ and he meant "brilliant" in the sense of shining, sparkling, and clever, rather than in the sense of academically intelligent.

71. Abel, cited above, n. 49.

72. A. L. Huxtable, "Sharp Debate: What Should an Embassy Be?" *New York Times Magazine*, 18 September 1960, 42.

73. Kidder Smith, 152, cited above, n. 59.

The Hague, however, did not fare well in the publicity it received. Huxtable had cooler comments, saying that "it is appraised as a 'typically American building.'" By whom? By its architect, no doubt, and possibly by Dutch critics, struggling to explain this "severely plain, massive limestone block" [Huxtable's words] that had appeared in their midst.

Of all the embassies, the one that suffered the most at the hands (or typewriters) of foreign critics was that in London. Peter Smithson abhorred it and announced that all American architecture looks alike because it emerges from the same thought process.⁷⁴ It seems that the decorative touches, intended as a means of humanizing the block, giving a certain liveliness and maybe even a slightly theatrical effect, were what most offended architects like Smithson. He had hoped for something "revolutionary," and he was disappointed. He could not understand how Saarinen could use such pompous forms to represent a democracy. But British architectural critics like Smithson or R. Furneaux Jordan did not see the building as fundamentally non-American;⁷⁵ rather, they saw it as loud, gaudy, and tasteless—like the prototypical American tourist, despised for his appearance and behavior and adored for his riches.

American architectural critics, however, applauded the London embassy and those in Dublin, New Delhi, and elsewhere and saw in them "a ringing declaration of an American presence and an assertion of American values."⁷⁶ They were seen from the United States as indicators of the national mission to play an active role in world affairs. Depicted in that way, they took on that identity.

"We need not fear criticism"⁷⁷—some pros and cons

The FBO embassy program was launched in 1954 to wide acclaim. Those who admired the program at the outset were exuberant about it. The *New York Times* declared the New Delhi Embassy "probably the most elegant in the world."⁷⁸ Architectural critics lavished praise on Saarinen's work in London and Oslo, and even a European guidebook described the Athens Embassy as a landmark not to be missed, a work at once "serene, peaceful, and inviting."⁷⁹ Newspapers and journals in Europe praised the program. French critics saw it as an indication of America's progressive spirit. *Time* remarked on the success of the program, singling out Weese's work at Accra, and said: "What he has created is original without being bizarre, dignified without being conventional, functional without being depress-

74. P. Smithson, "Controversial Building in London," *Architectural Forum*, CXIV, 1961, 82.

75. *Ibid.*, 84.

76. B. F. Gordon, "America Turns a Fresh Face Overseas," *Architectural Record*, CLXVII, 1980, 97.

77. Belluschi memorandum, cited above, n. 30.

78. Abel, cited above, n. 49.

79. Kidder Smith, cited above, n. 59, 152.

ing, and it should fit into the landscape as if it were home-grown.”⁸⁰

One important person, however, was displeased with the FBO program: Wayne Hays, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, which had oversight of the budget of the Office of Foreign Buildings. Some architectural critics may have been discomfited by aspects of Stone’s screen façade in New Delhi, or Saarinen’s use of anodized metal mullions, or Breuer’s trapezoidal windows at The Hague, but they were criticizing the movement from within, seeing the work as merely mediocre rather than great. Their fundamental commitment to the modern movement was unequivocal. Hays, however, had no such commitment. He did not like modern architecture—or at least did not like the idea of imposing it on cities already defined by architectural traditions—and he was in a strategic position to make his views felt. This is a typical exchange between Hays and FBO director Hughes in 1959:

Mr. HUGHES. A circular building in Dublin is not unusual. Some of their oldest buildings are circular buildings. He [Mr. Johansen] found also that the Celtic Tower, a round tower, is very deeply woven into the Irish history and culture. . . .

The design for this building has been carefully studied, looked at and reviewed by everyone in Dublin from the lord mayor on down. The planning commission, the city fathers, and everyone else, and you will find, I think, a rather high degree of enthusiasm on the part of the Irish people and particularly the officialdom in Dublin for this approach to this building as part of the U.S. Government in Dublin.

Mr. HAYS. Let me say a few words about that. I am aware a little bit about the history of Ireland and the Celtic Tower and that thing looks about as much like a Celtic Tower as I do a jet airplane. That looks like a modernistic mausoleum in a modernistic cemetery and nobody can deny that is what it looks like.

If you build that building there, you are going to build it over my most violent objections. . . .⁸¹

Hays’s words for London were no kinder. “The more it nears completion,” he said, “the more of a monstrosity it appears to be.”⁸² Dublin, though, was the focus of his scorn because London was already under construction. He was in a position to delay, if not stop, plans for Dublin, and he did.

There are several key aspects to Hays’s point of view. First, his concern for American foreign relations and prestige was sincere, and it was evident to him that a building that needs to be explained to those who see it has serious flaws as a diplomatic device. Second, he sensed, rightly, that it was the “architects’ association,” as he called it, that most strongly supported the scheme, not the Foreign Service or State Department personnel. He said he was prepared for objections from the architectural profession, but he felt that somebody “has got to sort of stand up and expose themselves to stop this kind of thing.”⁸³ The

80. “Model for New U.S. Embassy,” 74.

81. “House Subcommittee Hearings,” cited above, n. 21, 235-236.

82. *Ibid.*, 141.

83. *Ibid.*, 237.

architects had almost unquestioned authority over design, although they worked closely with FBO staff architects and met program requirements established for them by FBO. With no “outsiders” on the advisory panel, however, there was no one to tell the emperor, if needed, that he was wearing no clothes.

Third, Hays was bothered by architectural jargon, by the language used by architects to give meaning to their work and by critics to assess it. It was not that he saw the language as elitist, though he probably did, but rather that he saw it being used in such a way as to exclude “ordinary” people from the debate. Perhaps facetiously, he revealed his antipathy in this exchange:

Mr. HAYS. How did you pick him [Johansen]?

Mr. HUGHES. We picked him on the advice and recommendation of the panel because he is recognized as one of the country’s outstanding architects. He is from Connecticut and is accustomed to designing buildings in that area of the country. He is a recognized expert in medium-sized monumental buildings and we felt that he had a reputation for being a very sensitive designer and one who would appreciate the real problem you have in designing a building in Dublin.

Mr. HAYS. I am glad you used the word ‘monumental.’ That ties in with what I said yesterday. It looks to me like a modernistic mausoleum.⁸⁴

Fourth, in asking questions about taste—good taste, public taste, official taste—Hays was raising points that needed to be addressed continually by individuals whose responsibility is to serve the public, whether as congressmen or as diplomats. Just as politicians sell themselves to the public, art and architecture is sold, but since artists and architects disdain the notion of commerce, or at least feign such sentiment, the selling is far more subtle. Someone has to pay for a building. That someone is the client, who has to want it. In order to want it, he has to understand it or at least feel good about it.

Hays was not alone in his concerns. Other members of his Subcommittee were confused by the Dublin building, though less certain than Hays about matters of taste. Saying that, when he first saw the proposed design, it looked to him like a pile of flapjacks with a pat of butter on top, Congressman Clement Zablocki added: “But who am I to criticize? I do not classify myself as a qualified critic of either modern art or modern architecture.”⁸⁵ In the same debate, Hays asked his colleagues: “Do you think as a matter of good taste that an architect knows more than you do or I do? I don’t buy that.” Congressman Dalip Saund replied that, even in military matters, the advice of experts must be suspect. “You just can’t leave it only to the experts,” he said, and then he asked rhetorically: “What are we here for?”

What, indeed? If Congress has to pay for a project, then it has either to understand the project enough to believe in it and

84. *Ibid.*, 254.

85. *Ibid.*, 236.

want it, based on all of the available facts, or, understanding or not, to rely on the judgment of persuasive “experts.” In the case of the FBO building program, which made such an impact in the 1950s, a change occurred. By 1961, the buildings did not seem to be explaining themselves to the increasingly image-conscious public. The architectural experts were inadequately persuasive, speaking as they were mainly to one another. And Congressmen found that they could win some votes and lose none by criticizing American buildings in faraway places. As a result, Congress moved to tighten control of the program by withholding funds and mandating staff changes at FBO.

The architecture of democracy: the diplomatic mission

The AIA and the Architectural League of New York sponsored an exhibition of U.S. embassy buildings in 1957, titled “Good Architecture is Good Government.”⁸⁶ That was the premise of the entire FBO building program in the 1950s. Its reverse, however, does not necessarily follow: good government (and we think of democracy as good government) does not automatically produce good architecture.

There are two sides to the idea of democratic architecture: one has to do with process, the way the design evolves, and the other has to do with image, the way it looks when built. Architecture produced by a democratic process can be called “democratic architecture,” but it is, by definition, architecture of compromise. Many of the works of art and architecture which we now admire as the greatest would not exist today if they had been products of a design process based on consensus or the vote of the majority. Even universally admired works, such as the Taj Mahal, the Parthenon, or the great cathedrals of France, represent the artistic visions of individuals, both designers and clients, although the names of many may be lost to us today. True, many great monuments were built through communal effort over long periods of time, and such projects required a popular commitment to the rightness of the work, but that commitment came not so much from the craftsmen and laborers as from those who paid the bills from personal fortunes or assessed themselves with taxes—an elite, the patrons and the more privileged members of the society.

A single architect or group of architects can design a building for the general populace, and the building can represent democratic intentions and ideals. Through his individual vision, expressed in a building as a work of art, an architect can convey the spirit of democracy, and such a building can also be called a work of “democratic architecture.” Frank Lloyd Wright was as much a tyrant to his clients as any well-known architect, but he showed an unusual openness in his architecture, in his approach to building with nature and using natural materials, and in his keen awareness of the emotional content of art. When

architectural critic Bruno Zevi praises Wright and condemns the architecture of Mies and Bunshaft as “fundamentally undemocratic,”⁸⁷ he is not referring to the process by which the architecture was created but rather to how it looks and feels.

In the 1950s, the American embassies were extolled as works of democratic architecture because in most instances they looked and felt new and exciting; they seemed to symbolize the spirit of adventure and freedom. The U.S. Government was able to take greater risks with buildings abroad than at home, where they would have received far more scrutiny and criticism. Bureaucratic building in the U.S. was marked by a timid academic bent, as seen in General Services Administration projects of the same period. Allan Temko, for instance, cites the “monstrous addition” to the main State Department building in Washington as an example of banal bureaucratic design.⁸⁸ The Rayburn Office Building of the U.S. House of Representatives is a well-known example of public architecture recognized for its “mausoleum effect”; it is often compared to the ponderous and oppressive civic architecture associated with fascist regimes.

Although FBO’s program aimed to impress the foreign audience, its fate rested in the hands of public opinion in the United States more than public opinion in Karachi, New Delhi, or Tabriz. In 1979, the mob that burned down the recently completed U.S. embassy compound in Islamabad (by Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham) took no note of its fine concrete work or the arrangement of its sculptural masses. Writing in the *Washington Star* in 1980, Peter Blake observed that the new U.S. embassies were of little real interest to people in capitals around the world, but he conceded that in many of these places the “artistic and intellectual upper crusts are highly appreciative.”⁸⁹ Even intellectual radicals in such places, he said, people who are no friends of the United States in outlook, are pleased by the new architecture and find themselves somewhat more favorably disposed to the United States as a result.

If that is true at all, the price for these buildings, no matter how high, compares favorably with that of far greater military expenditures aimed at precisely the same goal, maintaining peace and furthering the national interest. Writing in 1952, diplomatic historian Graham H. Stuart observed that the ratio of expenses for arms versus diplomacy was then 50 to 1 in favor of arms. He noted also that “diplomacy, with its taboos of secrecy, its social trappings, and caste organization, is still regarded with skepticism or suspicion by the man in the street.”⁹⁰

In 1924, before construction of any of the major embassies,

87. A. Oppenheimer Dean, *Bruno Zevi on Modern Architecture*, New York, 1983, 19.

88. Temko, cited above, n. 70, 120.

89. P. Blake, “Raising Standards Along with U.S. Embassy Buildings,” *Washington Star*, 13 March 1980, C3.

90. G. H. Stuart, “The American Government Establishment in Paris,” *American Diplomatic and Consular Practice*, New York, 1952, 417.

86. Other sponsors included *Life* magazine and *Architectural Forum*.

Paul Scott Mowrer made this comment: "Not merely our own, but practically all other modern democracies have exhibited suspicion of diplomacy and diplomatists—terms which to them have seemed to smack unpleasantly of spendthrift aristocracy and of imperial intrigues. The defects of a tradition have obscured the permanent necessity of the function."⁹¹ This peculiarly democratic mistrust of diplomats and their role was coupled with a populist-based notion that diplomats should represent the common man, that they should work in regular offices, and that their affairs should be conducted openly. Architects of the 1950s responded to this naive notion by creating embassies that represented the self-confidence that the United States felt at that time. They produced showpieces of America's positive self-image and advertised the United States as a prosperous place.

The modern look of the architecture spoke to the world of American hope for the future, but because of stylistic preferences popular in the 1950s, most of the embassies, with their emphasis on surface, fell short as symbols of strength and determination. In this group, only the embassies by Saarinen and Breuer and the little consulate by Barnes sit squarely on a solid base or on the ground. Weese's work stands out for its whimsical interpretation of the vernacular scene, but, hovering on slender stilts, it connotes a lack of permanence typical of many of the other embassy buildings.

But the effort to capture a popular spirit was constrained by the fact that architects are not, by tradition, populists at heart. More often they resemble aristocrats in disposition and attitude. Their own comments on the embassy buildings show a surprising disregard for the needs of the Foreign Service and an exaggerated regard for pomp and ceremony. While they aimed to capture the openness of the populist idea in the 1950s, their efforts show a conspicuous inaccessibility; it is even hard to locate the main entrances at Karachi, Baghdad, and Tangier. Monument-building was on their minds.

Writing in 1955, before any of the buildings in this group were completed, Ralph Walker had warned his fellow advisory

91. P. S. Mowrer, *Our Foreign Affairs*, New York, 1924, 193.

panel members to avoid "stunt" designs: "I realized, recently, the main reason why F. L. W., Corbu, and Mies all have their vogue—it is largely because of their underlying vulgarity. Every one of them will punish their tenants physically and spiritually because of the notoriety to be gained in being proclaimed a genius—in having an advertising stunt acclaimed as having lasting merit."⁹²

Buildings that had expressed openness, adventure, and hope for the future in the 1950s seemed arrogant and ostentatious to later critics, both outside and inside the profession. When the country began to question its self-image and its role in world affairs and to think in terms of a lesser role, or one that showed a lower profile, attitudes toward architecture shifted. Not only congressmen objected to the theatrics of the 1950s; wider public sentiment shifted as well. By 1963, moviegoers were lining up to see Marlon Brando in *The Ugly American*, and the United States had started on that tortuous course of self-doubt that culminated in opposition to the Vietnam War.

Like the Americans who traveled abroad in Henry James's novels, the embassies of the 1950s were expressions of innocence coupled with a certain shallowness and lack of refinement. Buildings such as those in New Delhi, Tangier, and Karachi will draw new admirers as scholars assess the early post-war years from the vantage point of history. Although today some of the embassies of the 1950s are abandoned or used by new tenants in unanticipated ways, the works produced by this single government building program offer an unprecedented diversity of individual expression. Without their eagles and coats-of-arms, few of them would ever be identified as embassies; yet they conveyed a timely message to the world. They stand as evidence that the U.S. Government can build remarkable, witty, and sensitive structures. The nation has never gone to war over a terrible design, and it may have made some friends through its architecture of diplomacy.

92. R. Walker memo to McBride, Shepley, and Belluschi at FBO, 11 April 1955, NBM #48.