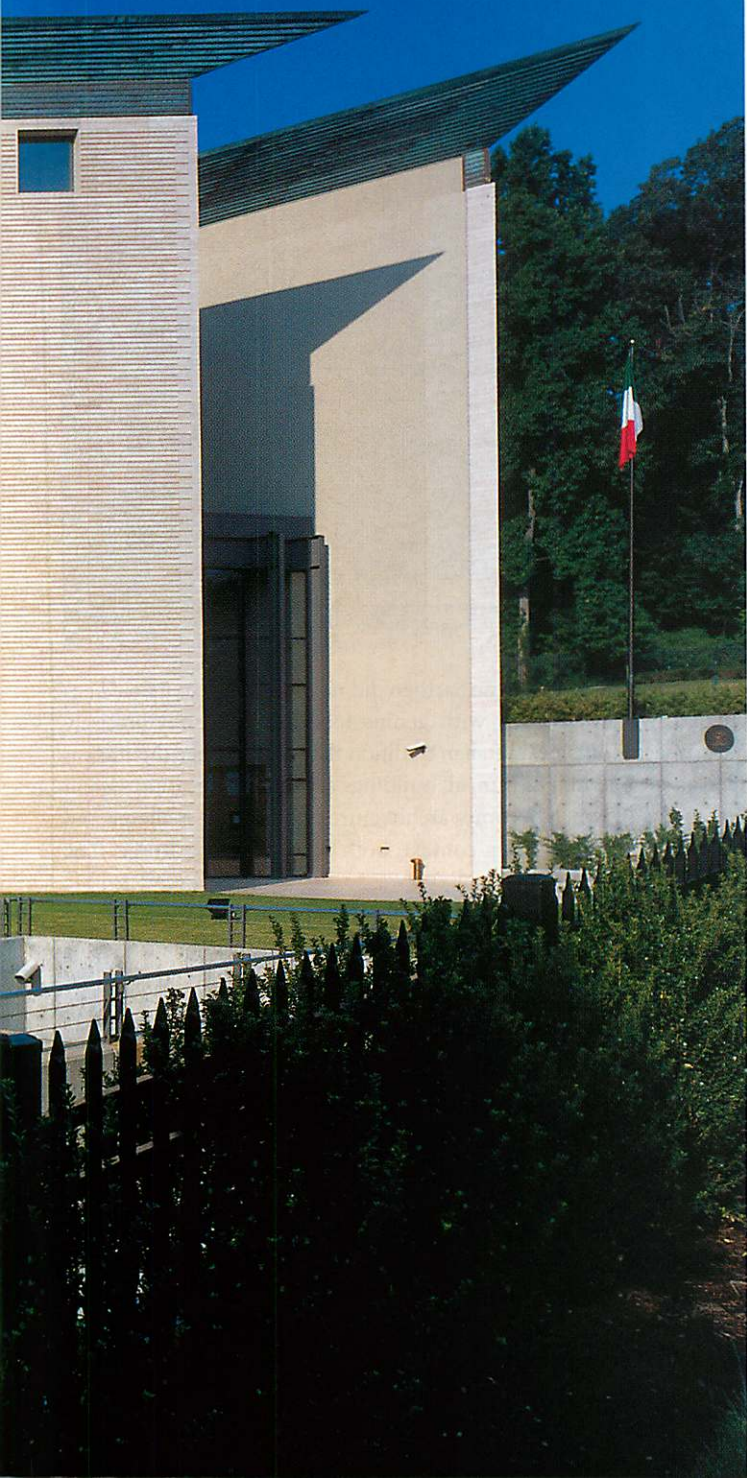


FORTIFIED BEAUTY Piero **Sartogo** brings a sense of craft to a muscular design for the **ITALIAN CHANCERY** in Washington, D.C.



While the building is set back considerably from the street, its formal and monumental facade and entrance give it a strong Embassy Row presence. The 10-inch-thick masonry block is covered with 3-inch-thick "bricks" of *pietra rosa di aslago*, a pinkish stone specially cut and beveled in Italy.



PHOTOGRAPHY: © ALAN KARCHMER

By Cynthia Davidson

Food was not on my mind when I visited the Italian Chancery in Washington, D.C., designed by the Italian architect Piero Sartogo. But ever since Talking Heads released its album *More Songs about Buildings and Food* in 1978, I have felt there was no more satisfactory pairing—not only in their rudimentary forms as shelter and sustenance but also as the discrete but complementary marks of civilization. As if sensing my personal, hidden conviction, Leo Daly, Sartogo's associate architect on the chancery, suggested that, following our tour of the building, we have lunch at Galileo, a highly rated Italian restaurant a short ride away.

The first course was a single, elegant grilled shrimp set upright on a curled tail and served on a pool of white-bean puree drizzled with bright green virgin olive oil. The dish offered an interesting counterpoint to the building I had just seen: where the food was a serious reappraisal of ingredients that surpassed the tradition of Italian cooking to become something surprisingly new, the embassy draws on the history of Italian architecture to become something problematic.

The long stretch of Embassy Row that has grown up along the northwestern end of Massachusetts Avenue is an array of periods and styles, from Beaux-Arts and neoclassical mansions to the dark glass box of the Brazilian Embassy, which sits across from the Italian building, and the new brick-and-timber Turkish Embassy up the street. When the Italians decided to move their embassy from an Italianate mansion in a

A CLEVERLY SITED SQUARE BUILDING IS BIASECTED DIAGONALLY AND AGGRESSIVELY PUNCHED OPEN FOR AN INTERIOR PIAZZA.

declining Washington neighborhood to property the Italian government owned just off Massachusetts Avenue, the ambassador asked the Washington office of Leo A Daly to organize an invited competition for Italian architects to design a new building. The mandate of the competition brief, beyond program and security, was that the building must convey the notion, or essence, of Italy (as if such a thing were possible in a single building).

Piero Sartogo, a Roman whom some might remember for his high Modern design in the original Bulgari shop on Fifth Avenue in New York City, won the competition over such well-known luminaries as Aldo Rossi, Renzo Piano, and Gae Aulenti. He did so by proposing a cleverly sited square-shaped building bisected on the diagonal and then aggressively punched open with a glazed, flat-domed atrium.

The chancery was completed this year. On visiting the building, I felt something naggingly familiar yet frustratingly unidentifiable about it. Handsome and strange at the same time, the building does not seem of

Cynthia Davidson is the editor of Any magazine and two book series, Writing Architecture and the ten Any books published with MIT Press.

Project: *The Chancery of the Embassy of Italy in Washington, D.C.*

Designer: *Sartogo Architetti Associati, Rome—Piero Sartogo, principal architect; Nathalie Grenon, associate architect; Susanna Nobili, collaborative architect; Sergio Micheli, project manager*

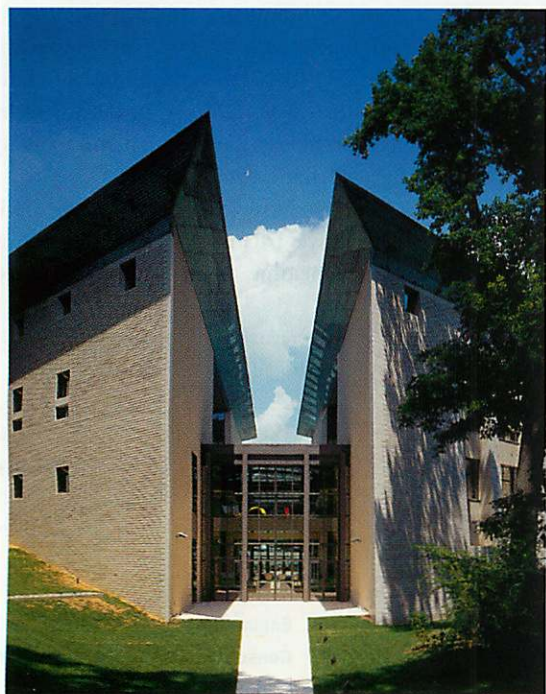
Executive Architect: *Leo A Daly,*

Washington, D.C.—Charles D. Dalluge, principal-in-charge; Ellis C. Whitby, project manager; Darren Zehner, project architect; Rod Mercer, zoning and planning; James P. Barone, landscape architect.

Engineer: *Leo A Daly*

Consultants: *Andrew Diem Architects*

General contractor: *Beacon/Dioguardi*



its time and place; not because Sartogo did not consider the site —“I am an Italian, we always start with *genius loci*,” he said—but precisely because it seems outside an Italian tradition that, Sartogo, like the chefs at Galileo, is steeped in. For him, all buildings are “an organization system (the archetype), which becomes architecture only when it is altered and distorted by setting it into a context, both physical and cultural.” The degree of distortion is the key.

The physical and cultural contexts for the embassy presented real constraints. The steeply sloped site is essentially triangular, with its long side facing onto Whitehaven Street, a dead-end residential road that

HANDSOME AND STRANGE, THE BUILDING DOES NOT SEEM OF ITS TIME AND PLACE; IT IS FAMILIAR, YET UNIDENTIFIABLE.

crosses Massachusetts Avenue on the diagonal. The two short sides are bordered by the woods of Rock Creek Park, to which the neighbors wanted access, even if only a visual one. The problem for the building was that the political and cultural staff of the embassy would be joined with an Italian military staff that had previously occupied space in a Washington office building. Their respective programs and identities needed to be kept separate.

The main public entrance to the embassy is in the glazed void between the two triangles (opposite). The rear of the building shows a battered wall that heightens the sense of monumentality (below).



The atrium serves not only as a programmatic joint but also as public exhibition and gathering space, dramatically changing the usually private program of an embassy. On both levels, furniture from top Italian designers is clustered in sitting areas. The public spaces are roofed with an asymmetrically glazed and flattened "dome," braced with steel.



Observations on security in the design of the Italian chancery

The prime location and dramatic profile of the chancery—both of which contribute to its identity as a distinguished public building—are not to be taken for granted these days. U.S. embassy planners would no doubt say that both features compromise its security. But the chancery challenges us to wonder whether a conspicuous and carefully crafted building is intrinsically stronger than one that adopts a reclusive or defensive stance. Like every other nation, Italy considers the security of its foreign missions a top priority (even in Washington, where missions are better protected than in many other places). But the Italian Foreign Ministry did not want an embassy office building that advertised its apprehension. Design architect Piero Sartogo takes particular delight in contrasting the apparently austere exterior with the dazzling skylighted interior space.

The blocks of pink marble give the exterior walls a sense of weight and strength, and deeply recessed windows add to the impression of mass. But, from another angle, the building becomes totally transparent. Passersby on the street can look right through glass walls to the glass-covered atrium and out the other side to the woods beyond. The building may be a box, but it is a box sliced open by light.

Architects have always been drawn to the sheer drama and openness that glass conveys, and it is no longer the fragile product it once was. Engineered not to shatter and securely anchored to a matrix of steel, glass can rival masonry in strength. If anything, the chancery's atrium dome is overdesigned—in part to support the workers and equipment needed to clean the glass. Diplomatic visitors and guests enter through one main entrance and pass through a security checkpoint and two sets of glass

doors before arriving in the light-filled central atrium. Consular visitors come in through a separate door, sparing further delays at the main entrance.

The ambassador has his own entrance on the building's east facade, where his car can drop him. Others will also be able to arrive at the main entrance by car. As an added (and unusual) convenience and a gesture of goodwill to the quiet, but car-filled, neighborhood, parking for visitors is provided in an underground garage.

The only obvious security measure in the interior is the lack of public access beyond the ground floor—no open stairs, for example, lead to offices above. Elevators control access to the upper levels, and they, in turn, are centrally controlled. This means that the embassy can host large public events and protect the privacy of its offices at the same time. The absence of a loading dock is either a security innovation or a curious planning oversight. Yes, there are strategically placed cameras and, yes, some of the glass is bulletproof and/or blast-resistant, but such features are typical at new government office buildings everywhere.

Highly visible, assertive architecture conveys confidence, and that confidence translates into trust and goodwill, the goals of public diplomacy. Well-designed embassies can further those goals. At a time when U.S. embassies are fleeing downtowns, retreating to remote suburban sites, and when they are being designed as walled compounds in the manner of low-profile, high-security prisons, it is good to see an embassy like Italy's use design to draw attention to itself in a way that proclaims cultural pride and national identity. The result is architecture that makes a positive political statement rather than one that resonates with fear.

—Jane C. Loeffler



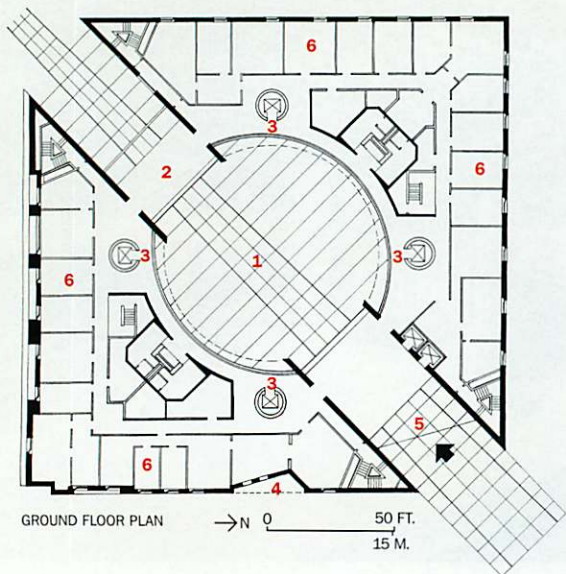
Sartogo solved the site and programmatic issues with a split square, a concept that, he says, derives from the original square plan of Washington and the diagonal cut through it by the Potomac River. The embassy is thus a square within the square, a theme that continues in the building's detailing. The plan appears to derive from a building Sartogo often cites, the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, built for two brothers whose separate dwellings frame a central courtyard. Sartogo distorts this *parti* for the Washington site and program by asymmetrically splitting the square on the diagonal, in essence creating a modern binuclear building. The ambassadorial staff occupies the slightly smaller triangle, and the visa offices and military staff, the slightly larger triangle. The difference in the size of the two pieces is masked by the “courtyard” space created between them, which becomes, as in many office buildings today, a double-height atrium. The atrium serves both as a programmatic joint and as a public exhibition space, dramatically changing the usually private program of an embassy. It is roofed with an asymmetrical, glazed, and flattened “dome,” which is reminiscent, Sartogo says, of the view of the

THE HEAVY STEEL BEAMS NECESSARY TO SUPPORT THE GLASS INTRODUCE AN OVERSCALED MONUMENTALITY.

cosmos on the ceiling of Michelangelo's Laurentian Library. Physically, however, the heavy steel beams needed to support the glass introduce a problematically scaled monumentality.

The model of the Renaissance palazzo becomes more ambiguous in the articulation of the exterior. The public entrance to the embassy is in the glazed void between the triangles, facing Whitehaven Street. The formal facade and entrance are parallel to Massachusetts Avenue, which gives the building an Embassy Row presence, even though it is set back from the road. The oversized portal typical of the palazzo is both shifted off center and canted obliquely into the thickness of the wall. The massive copper portal is punched with square windows and at its center masks a discreet sliding door for the ambassador. Two rows of three-dimensional windows (Rossi-esque squares-within-squares) appear to punch into the depth of the wall, with the larger openings on the third floor, at what would be the *piano nobile*. Diagonally and to the upper left of the door, Sartogo cuts an inset into the wall that frames four windows, a gesture that plays tricks with the visual scale of the otherwise massive wall and reemphasizes the wall's thickness.

This thickness is due in part to the chancery's structure. With the



- 1. Atrium ground floor
- 2. Bridge level 1
- 3. Elevators
- 4. Ambassador's entrance
- 5. Main entrance
- 6. Offices and reception areas



exception of four, cylindrical, freestanding elevator cores, the structural columns are buried in the walls. Ten-inch masonry block is hung with insulation and then with 42,000 three-inch thick “bricks” of *pietra rosa di asiago*, a beautiful pinkish stone specially cut and beveled in Italy. The front elevation adjoins a battered wall that mimics in profile the steep drop in the land to Rock Creek Park, only some 20 feet away. The resulting thickness at the corner gives the impression of an urban fortification reminiscent of 15th-century Italianate projects.

The building’s two triangular segments are topped with a deep, abstracted copper cornice intended to add shadow depth on the flat facade. Sartogo cites the cornice overhanging the courtyard in Rossellino’s Palazzo Piccolomini in Pienza as his inspiration, but, in fact, it is much

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more akin to the hull-like roof of Le Corbusier’s chapel at Ronchamp.

By identifying elements of the building, one can begin to focus on the problem of its overall unidentifiable familiarity. Sartogo has incorporated myriad precedents, which he re-presents in a collage of Italian traditions, both historic and contemporary, but which are never clarified in an idea of the whole. Rather, he breaks the palazzo archetype apart with the strong diagonal and heavy skylight. The courtyard-as-atrium beneath it is a programmatic success, but the eye is distracted from the perspectival game of the flattened dome by the vivid colors used on the elevator towers and periphery walls. The function rooms that rim the atrium are innocuous, and the square-within-a-square theme introduced in the fenestration is repeated so often it becomes overworked, especially in the custom carpets. Like a chef who has used too many ingredients, Sartogo has created such an array of antipasti that the anticipated main course is almost lost.

The embassy is a good neighbor—quiet, introverted with the siting diminishing the building’s institutional mass—and the exterior stone gives it a warm, pinkish aura. By all accounts, it is one of the best new embassies in Washington. So why is it also frustratingly unidentifiable?

I love to visit Italy, to eat there, and to visit its palazzi, villas, and churches. But contemporary Italian architecture today seems to wander in the long shadows cast by the late Aldo Rossi. Is this why I am uncomfortable with the new Italian Embassy? Is the jarring juxtaposition of the beautifully detailed pale pink exterior with the heavy steel skylight and vivid palette on the interior the sign of a problem with Rossi’s urban archetypes? Is the distortion of the archetype so extreme as to be no longer part of it? While I appreciate Sartogo’s intelligence and his desire to alter the archetype of the palazzo, I do not understand the spatial and material choices that make these manifest. It is within such choices that the difficulty—and the beauty—of architecture will always lie. ■

Sources

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Structural steel: S.A. Halac, Inc.
Mechanical, electrical & fire protection: Hess Mechanical Corporation, Wingate Electric, Livingston Fire Protection
Security systems: Electron Italia
Stone and marble: R. Bratti Assoc.
Glass and glazing: Galaxy Glass &

Aluminum, Inc.

Interior finishes: C.J. Coakley, Chamberlin-Washington, D.C., W Contracting, Dupont Flooring Systems

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Drawing and dining rooms line the perimeter of the ground floor of the atrium (opposite top and bottom); the double-height atrium asymmetrically splits the square building on the diagonal, accommodating its political/cultural staff on one side and military staff on the other.

