

# Quietly confident

The new Italian embassy in Washington DC proclaims its country's identity with art inside and out, reviving the genre of embassy architecture. By Jane C Loeffler.

## washington embassy

**With their new chancery in Washington, the Italians are** making a bold gesture as artistically exciting as it is diplomatically pragmatic. At a time when security plays such a key role in the design of public buildings and embassies are retreating to suburban walled compounds where they are seen by few, it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that embassy architecture really matters. Obviously, to the Italians, it does. And that is what makes this project so significant. It is art on a grand scale designed to proclaim Italian identity and augment Italy's international presence.

When they needed a new facility to replace one that was distinguished but obsolete, the Italians might have taken the conservative route and erected a nondescript office building to meet functional needs. They might have followed the example of Austria, Egypt, or Ethiopia and leased a parcel at the new International Chancery Center, a diplomatic enclave created by the US State Department to cut costs and red tape and facilitate the construction of new chanceries in the capital. Instead, the Italian foreign ministry chose to go solo, selecting a prominent site at the edge of Rock Creek Park along Massachusetts Avenue (Washington's 'Embassy Row'), and sponsored a competition for top Italian architects who were asked to imagine how such a building might convey the spirit of Italy, how it might complement its setting, and how it could pay homage to the ties that link Italy to the US. The winning design by Piero Sartogo Architeti ably met those challenges.

Inaugurating the building in June, Italian foreign minister Lamberto Dini was obviously pleased and proud. He praised it for combining classic and modern, comparing it to a Tuscan villa and declaring it to be a projection of 'the image of today's Italy'.

Like a painting by De Chirico, the chancery explores illusion, but it is not Disneyland-like fantasy architecture, nor is it fragmented into some sort of exploding anti-edifice. In the tradition of the Italian Renaissance palazzo, it follows classical precedent in its elevation and it is definitely anchored to the ground – not a bad idea for a building intended to convey serious public purpose. Sartogo thinks of the building as a monumental site sculpture, or 'a cube in the woods'.

The building is composed on a square diagonally sliced by a passageway that virtually bisects the structure and connects it to the larger landscape beyond. It features a soaring cantilevered copper roof, intricately crafted pink marble walls (comprising 42,000 pieces of colour-matched marble from Asiago, installed by Italian masons), optically challenging windows designed to emphasise wall mass, and a circular glass-roofed atrium visible from the street. Nothing about the design is regular or static. Windows that are set progressively closer together, walls that meet at acute angles, and stone staircases that narrow as they recede all

**1** View from Rock Creek Park. The cube of the building is diagonally sliced by a passageway to Whitehaven Street

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAN KARCHNER

**1** Atrium seen from the first level. The auditorium, cafeteria and conference rooms are reached from this courtyard

**2** Ceremonial entry: the design in copper and glass is an enlarged pattern of the piazza in front

**Design architect**

Piero Sartogo Architeti (Roma)

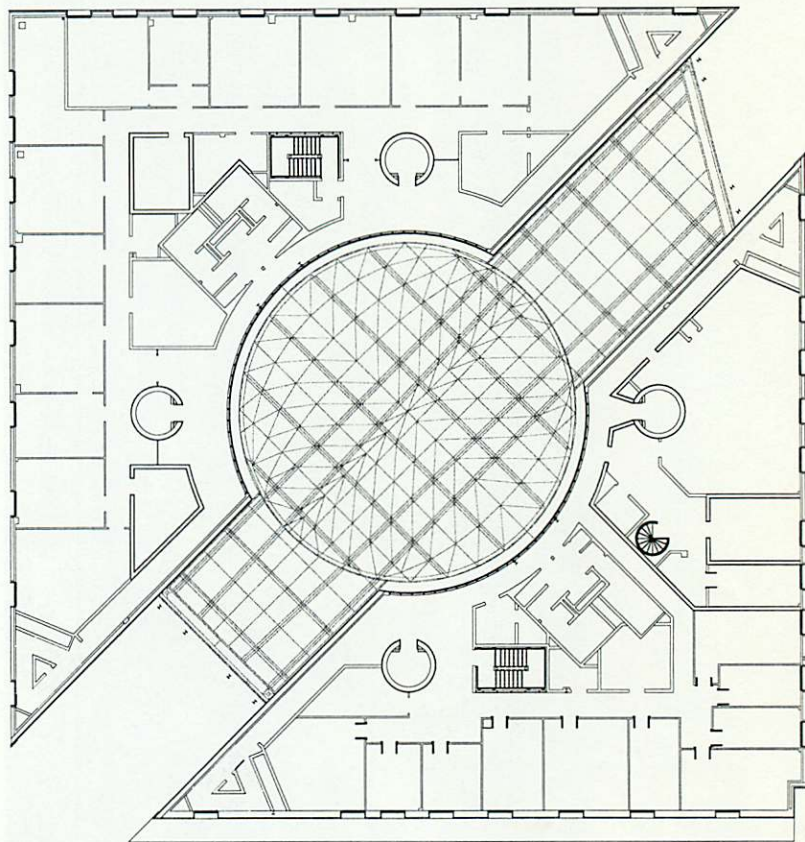
**Design team**

Piero Sartogo, Nathalie Grenon, Susanna Nobili

**Architect and engineer of record**

Leo A Daly (Washington DC)

Skylight plan



provide the visual dynamics that give the chancery its Futurist flair.

Yet the exterior is staid compared with the dazzling interior, a vast sunlit space with walls of yellow and blue and striking red elevator enclosures. The atrium is criss-crossed by glass walkways and ringed by meeting rooms all furnished with a collection of new and classic Italian furnishings to rival the Museum of Modern Art. Sartogo and his partner Nathalie Grenon designed many of the pieces, from exquisitely crafted cabinets to area rugs, each different and each a work of art. Other pieces include brightly coloured (including white) couches by Antonio Citterio and Vico Magistretti, tables and lamps by Achille Castiglioni, and chairs by Mario Bellini, Gaetano Pesce and Archizoom.

Sartogo describes himself as 'an intellectual architect'. He is surely a man with big ideas, one who sees his site plan as the extension of L'Enfant's original plan for the city of Washington. He is also a man with microscopic focus, a perfectionist satisfied with nothing less than flawless materials and workmanship. Fortunately, his client shared his vision. The result is a rare unity of art and utility. Not since Finland opened its chancery nearby has Washington seen a new embassy which so effectively packages a nation's personality without trivialising it. The architecture makes a powerful statement about Italy's world outlook. These days it is good to see a public building that conveys such optimism. After all, pessimists don't buy white couches. **wa**

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