# The American Embassy: Design Excellence vs. Security?

## Commentary

**By Jane Loeffler**



"Where is Daniel Patrick Moynihan when we need him?" This is the lament of architects who wish the champion of public buildings would suddenly reappear to decry the standardized look of new embassies or denounce the fearful stance assumed by isolated walled compounds that represent the United States abroad. But wishing will not make it happen.

The global landscape has changed dramatically in recent years, and it bears little resemblance to the world the late Senator Moynihan knew when he served as U.S. ambassador to India in the early 1970s. The State Department's foreign building program, once celebrated by him as an apt expression of American democracy, can no longer equate its architecture with democratic openness, because embassies are no longer open and need not pretend to be. Not after Al Qaeda terrorists destroyed two U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998 by driving up to each and detonating suicide bombs that killed more than 220 and injured more than 4,000, most in adjacent structures. Not with the rising threat of more such attacks, including the narrow escape from disaster last November when terrorists determined that they could not penetrate America's new 26-acre hilltop compound in Istanbul (by Zimmer Gunsul Frasca, 2003)

*Jane C. Loeffler is the author of* The Architecture of Diplomacy *(1998) and teaches at the University of Maryland, College Park.*

**The U.S. Embassy in Copenhagen—accessible and available to the public.**

and blew up the more accessible British Consulate instead.

No, the design dilemma facing embassy architects today is no longer how to create welcoming buildings that proclaim U.S. identity through high-profile architecture, but how to add a noticeable design dimension to relatively low-profile design-build projects for which security is the top priority.

For many architects, this is a bitter pill to swallow, because for so long they headed the teams that dotted the globe with U.S. landmarks, including chanceries in Copenhagen (Ralph Rapson, 1954) and New Delhi (Edward Durell Stone, 1959). Between the end of World War II and the beginning of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the United States wanted to amplify its foreign presence to check Soviet expansion. The State Department's Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO) built dozens of new embassies, individualized statements with public spaces and programs that reflected the idealistic mood of that era. That was when prominent and soon-to-be prominent architects won prized commissions from the FBO and created signature structures that won them professional acclaim.

But that time has passed. America's foreign presence is undergoing a profound makeover. It no longer makes sense, if it ever did, for designers to start each project from scratch, nor is it reasonable for an embassy to take five years (or more) to complete. Several critical reports provide clues as to why architecture is playing a diminished role in the makeover. First, the 1985 Inman Report, compiled in the aftermath of suicide bombings of U.S. facilities in Beirut, called for a seven-year plan to replace 126 posts (out of 262) with walled compounds, and it proposed stringent new security standards, minimums for setbacks, maximums for windows, and other rules that constrained architectural choice. Second, the Crowe Report of 1999 reiterated the largely unheeded Inman recommendations 14 years later, after even more devastating terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, neither of which met Inman standards.

Why didn't the FBO implement more of the Inman recommendations during those 14 years? First, and foremost, because memories of Beirut faded quickly, and Congress not only reneged on promised

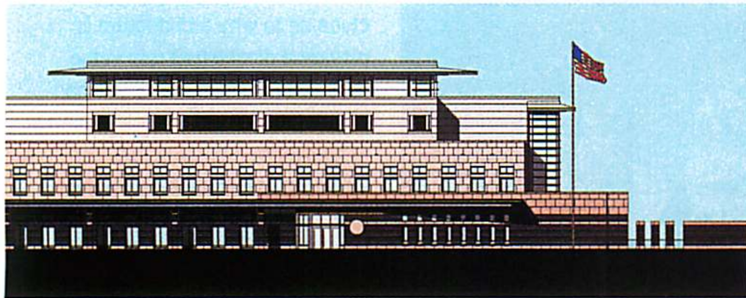
**The U.S. Consulate in Istanbul flanked by security walls and the Bosporus.**

funds, but even cut State Department appropriations. Also, because there was real ambivalence, even at the highest levels of the State Department, about applying universal standards to buildings everywhere, a reluctance to abandon landmark buildings and center-city locations, and some recognition of the added value that good design can bring to diplomacy. But the bombings in East Africa effectively erased those options.

The Crowe Report stressed that safety had to outweigh considerations of convenience, history, or symbolism. Architecture was not even mentioned as a consideration—possibly because architects were not asked to assist in the report's preparation.

Later in 1999, the Overseas Presence Advisory Panel's (OPAP) scathing overview of conditions at U.S. posts also contributed to the eclipse of the architectural agenda. OPAP panelists—again, no architects—called for a reduced U.S. presence and questioned the State Department's capacity to handle the enormous task of upgrading or replacing its embassies and managing its vast real estate holdings. Instead of calling on Congress to commit funds to needed programs, it recommended abolishing the FBO and urged the president to create a federally chartered government corporation to replace it. The State Department was not interested in that sort of makeover. Desperate to rebuild confidence in its operations, Secretary of State Colin Powell named a former military man, retired Major General Charles Williams, to head the FBO, approved a change in the name of the office to Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO), and elevated its status within the Department, effectively abolishing the former office and signaling a new agenda.

Williams promptly adopted a business model, turned to design-build production, and created an Industry Advisory Panel that mostly represents the corporate side of the construction industry. In doing so, he bypassed the existing Architectural Advisory Board, created back in 1954 to buffer the Department from unwanted outside criticism—when Modern architecture, not terrorism, was provoking alarm. Also, with 89 percent of all primary facilities failing to meet the 100-foot setback requirement, only two of the 25 replacement projects funded after the 1998 bombings completed, a total of 160 replacement facilities to build, and an estimated budget requirement of $16 billion, he turned to URS Corporation for a standard embassy design (SED). Based on the recent RTKL scheme for Kampala, the prototype comes in three sizes (S, M, L), all consisting of two parallel building blocks separated by an atrium. With a core preapproved for security, new projects have a 24-month timetable, start to finish.



**Rendering of the standardized embassy design by URS Corporation as mandated by the Overseas Buildings Operations.**

RENDERING: COURTESY OVERSEAS BUILDINGS OPERATIONS



Even architects not interested in "decorating the shed" are competing for these commissions because of the work they represent. None are yet complete, but many are under way. HOK and J.A. Jones Construction are producing SEDs in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and in Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia, for example. And INTEGRUS Architecture and Caddell Construction have SEDs in production in the West African towns of Conakry, Bamako, and Freetown—all varying in size, but based on the "medium" model. According to Jerry Winkler, designer for all three, architects can still add distinction to such projects through site planning, landscape treatment, choice of cladding materials, and facade organization, including window spacing and size. As Winkler ruefully notes, "This is no time to be unique. The people who are paying the bills are driving the process."

Winkler's point is significant because it correctly suggests that the client for embassy construction is not OBO, or even the State Department, but members of Congress who authorize and appropriate the money, and by extension those of us who elect them. What Congress likes about Williams (and it is finding a lot to like), many architects find troubling. They object strenuously to the notion of "a cookie-cutter embassy" that is symbolized by a logo and sells sameness much as Marriott or McDonald's does. But if, as one aide to the House International Relations Committee puts it, Congress's only concern is "to keep embassies from being blown up," it is unlikely that anyone will prod OBO to make "design excellence" a higher priority.

These are particularly vexing issues for architects, I think, because Modernism is fundamentally a quest for openness. To deny the opportunity for openness is to challenge an idea that is inextricably woven into design education and into the outlook of the profession. For that reason, architects designed embassies as glass boxes in the '50s even when they had to wrap those boxes with louvers, screens, and fins to protect them from the sun. But there are other ways to imagine architecture, and better ways to provide shelter—when that is the challenge.

Some point to the success story at GSA and the design quality of its recent courthouses, for example, but OBO and GSA are not really comparable. According to former Public Buildings Service commissioner Bob Peck, "They face very different challenges," because U.S. embassies depend on host governments for protection. Where there is antipathy to the U.S. presence, protection is unreliable, at best.

When Senator Moynihan, Peck's former boss, addressed these issues in 1999, he called for an ongoing "conversation" on how to balance security and openness at home and abroad. If that conversation has occurred at all, it has excluded many who can provide useful input, and it has not yet addressed big questions, such as how the makeover of the U.S. presence supports or undermines the long-term goal to expand public diplomacy—a key weapon in a war of ideas. Admiral Crowe has said our embassies are "already closed to the public, so it does not matter if they look open or not." That may be so, but we still need to prevent the security mandate from devouring a significant public program and turning our foreign buildings into bastions that are all but useless as diplomatic workplaces, let alone as symbols of democracy. And we need to apply the lessons learned overseas to a domestic landscape now ominously proliferating with bollards, fences, and jersey barriers. It's time to widen that conversation. The home scene is beginning to look a lot like the embassies in the '80s—and look at them now. ■