JANE C LOEFFLER

BUILDING ABROAD/BORROWING IDENTITY

Architects may criss-cross international borders in today's global workplace, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the early postwar years, architecture was largely a local pursuit. In their travels, architects have always tried to identify the uniqueness of place, sometimes using that knowledge to design buildings linked to the past and sometimes simply to add novelty to their work. As travel and business merged and architects found themselves working more frequently in foreign countries, they confronted the challenge of how to combine widely disparate building traditions and design motifs while pleasing an array of users and on-lookers, including varied clients, foreign hosts, local critics and, not to be overlooked, critics back home. This was precisely the challenge faced by architects who designed embassies for the US State Department in the years following the Second World War when the United States expanded its international role and the State Department's Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO) embarked upon a much broadened building programme.

For its foreign buildings, the State Department adopted a design policy calling for embassy architectures that would 'fit in', respecting local sensibilities, reflecting local history and tradition, and adapting to the vagaries of local climate and site. The design policy was first announced in 1953 by Nelson Kenworthy, acting FBO director, and later more fully explained by architect Pietro Belluschi, spokesman for the FBO's first Architectural Advisory Committee. Its purpose was to counter harsh congressional criticism that threatened to derail a programme of cultural and strategic significance, criticism directed at some of the earliest postwar work, notably consulates in Germany by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), embassies in Stockholm and Copenhagen by Ralph Rapson and John van der Meulen, and embassies in Havana and Rio de Janeiro by Harrison & Abramovitz.

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What was so wrong with these projects that the State Department feared for the future of its building programme? Critics faulted them for failing to fit in with historic surroundings, for ignoring cultural sensitivities, and for being simply too conspicuous. In the immediate postwar period, the Americans had taken the bold step of using modern architecture to convey their message of openness and optimism. As part of the US effort to rebuild war-torn Germany, for example, the FBO had retained SOM principal Gordon Bunshaft to oversee the design of an array of consulates, staff apartments and information centres in 1952. SOM was hired because it was one of the only American firms then capable of setting up a satellite office overseas and quickly beginning work on a collection of projects. Bunshaft's designs echoed Bauhaus precedents. All were glass-walled boxes raised

US Embassy, Helsinki, Finland (1936). Architect Harrie Lindeberg designed this embassy after a Virginia plantation house.

above the ground on stilts, known as *pilotis*. The architect may have used a minimalist approach but his intention was to use custom-fabricated parts and fine materials throughout his buildings. It is no accident that this sort of architecture had been dubbed 'international style' because its proponents argued that it was equally appropriate anywhere in the world. The appropriateness of this intentionally placeless architecture was not recognised by everyone. City fathers in Munich were among those offended by the notion that any such design complemented the rich architectural history for which Bavaria was famous.

Members of Congress were especially anxious to avoid the 'ugly American' syndrome and strongly objected to what seemed to be lavishly appointed buildings that looked out of place or carried 'commercial' connotations. They faulted the 12-storey embassy in Rio because it called too much attention to itself and seemed to shun its surroundings. Unfortunately, it also reminded some of corporate headquarters buildings on Madison Avenue. In truth, there was no ready precedent for a modern embassy office building; earlier projects had been modelled after palatial residences. Still, the comparison with the new corporate style troubled many who equated more traditional expression with high public purpose. After all, prior to the Second World War, most US-built embassies had mirrored American landmarks such as Westover, the 18th-century plantation house that served as Harrie T Lindeberg's inspiration for the embassy in Helsinki (1936).

Trying to please such critics and hoping to buffer itself from interference in what it considered to be 'apolitical' design matters, the FBO adopted its new design policy in 1954. As acting head of the FBO, Kenworthy drafted a statement advising architects that 'emphasis should be placed on the creation of goodwill in the respective countries'.[1] Belluschi added the recommendation that new architecture should also exhibit 'a distinguishable American flavour', but he reiterated Kenworthy's plea for architects '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'.[2] Naturally this two-pronged policy posed a dilemma for architects because it was not at all clear how a building could be both uniquely local and distinctly American.

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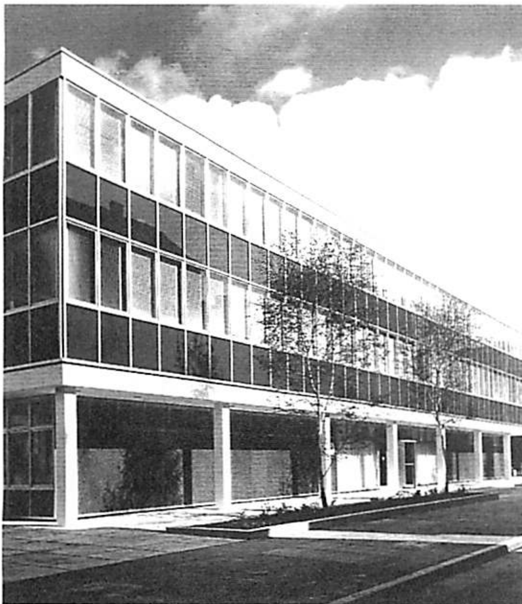
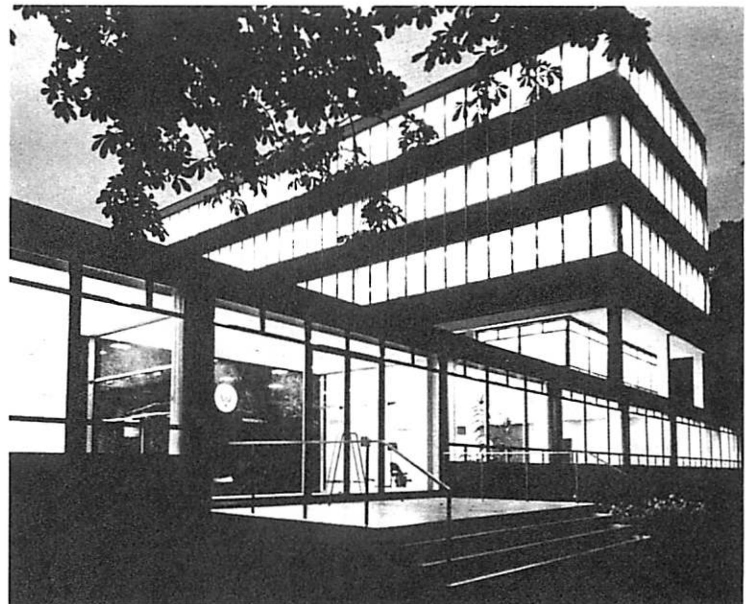
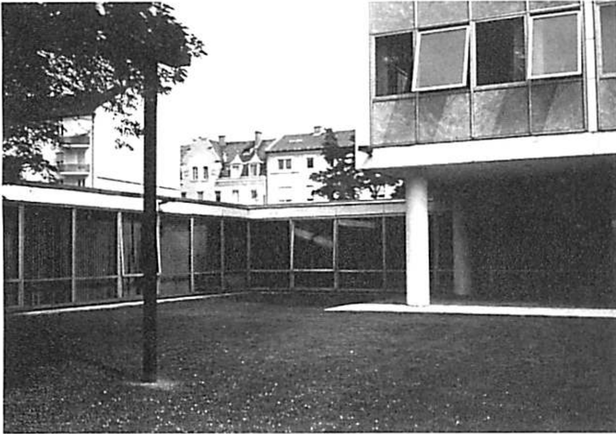
Politically speaking, the policy was an effort to downplay the manifestation of American power and a conscious effort to move in a direction opposite to the Soviets who built their postwar embassies in a ponderous and heavily ornamented classical style. It also represented an effort to reconcile the International Style with sites and situations in many different countries, with climates ranging from arctic to tropical. Practically speaking, it led architects to come up with explanations for how their buildings reflected the uniqueness of locale. In describing the



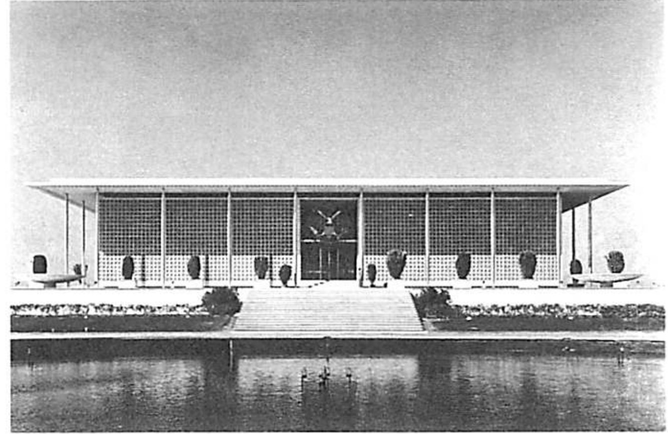
US Consulate, Stuttgart, Germany (1952). Gordon Bunshaft, principal at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, designed this early postwar project in collaboration with German architect Sep Ruf.



US Consulate General, Frankfurt, Germany (1952). Gordon Bunshaft, principal at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, designed this early postwar project, assisted by German architect Sep Ruf. Bunshaft's original design was significantly modified.



US Consulate, Munich, Germany (1952). Gordon Bunshaft, principal at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill provided the design which was revised by German architect Sep Ruf.



US Embassy, New Delhi, India (1954). Edward Durell Stone, architect.

design rationale for the embassy in Accra (1956), for example, Harry Weese said that he took his inspiration from tribal spears, a native chieftain's hut, and towering anthills. Alfred Aydelott compared his sunscreen for the embassy in Manila (1956) to the laced bamboo curtains used in the Philippines to protect grass huts from the sun. In numerous journal articles, John Carl Warnecke claimed that his design for the embassy in Bangkok (unbuilt, 1957) drew upon age-old designs of Thai temples and the more recent design of a local hospital with deep balconies and richly ornamented grillwork. Walter Gropius simply compared his design for the embassy in Athens (1956) to that of the Parthenon. In the most widely publicised comparision, Edward Durell Stone claimed as his inspiration for the embassy in New Delhi (1954) nothing less than India's best-known monument, the Taj Mahal. Searching for a way of linking his design to Indian tradition, Stone was not bothered by the fact that he was designing a modern office building nor by the fact that the Taj Mahal was a tomb. What mattered was the local connection, exemplified by the pierced concrete sunscreen that shielded the embassy's glass walls from the blazing sun.

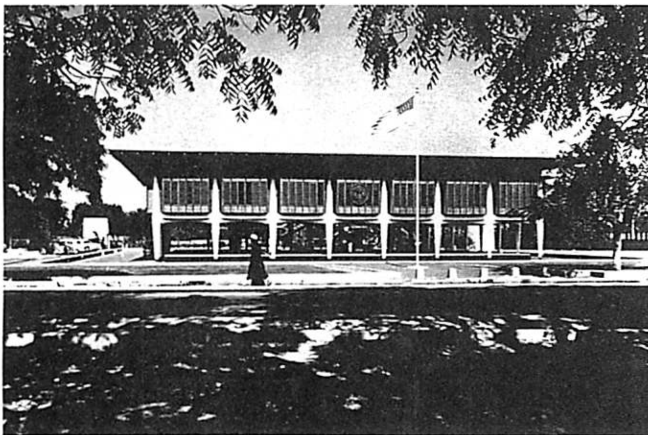
Not only was Stone widely praised for linking his design to the Indian past, but also the other American architects were similarly lauded in American design journals and magazines for making the effort to understand and capture local flavour – despite the fact that vernacular traditions offered few precedents applicable to large-scale office buildings. While it is not clear that this effort created the expected goodwill in all host countries and while many of the architects' explanations are further implausible, the idea of making dramatically modern structures fit in by thematic association became a major component of the US foreign building programme. For instance, Hugh Stubbins featured barrel vaults in his first design for the Tangier legation (1954) and Richard Neutra focused on the same motif at Karachi (1955). Then many architects incorporated the themes into later work at home. Stubbins wrapped the Loeb Drama Centre at Harvard in a screen almost identical to the one he designed for Tangier (1956). Stone built an entire career recycling his New Delhi design.

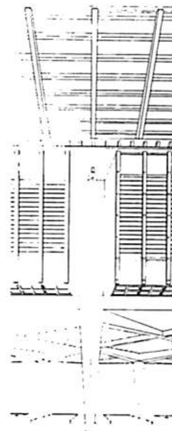
If the 1954 design policy represented a political response to what seemed to be an 'apolitical' design problem, it is worth noting that other FBO policies similarly evolved in response to political matters. Two examples include the hiring preference for American architects over foreign (or in this case, local) architects and the preference for newly built and government-owned properties over those that were purchased or leased. Both policies were new in the 1950s.

During the 1920s and 1930s when the State Department wanted to build American outposts in the Far East and elsewhere, American architects were dispatched to handle the work and processed the work through the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury. Immediately after the war, however, when postwar foreign credits were utilised to pay overseas bills, the department hired local architects who could be paid in available foreign currencies. Using war credits to pay the architects was far easier and less expensive than paying them in US dollars, but Congress expressed its preference for American architects (even if many of the Americans were recent immigrants including Walter Gropius, Richard Neutra and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe). The department heeded that preference.

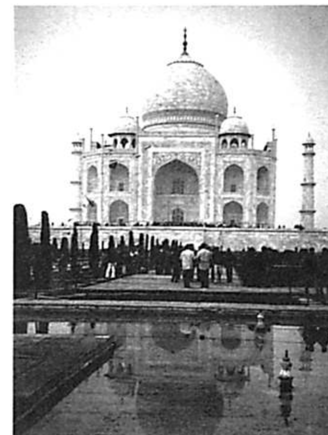
The 1954 directive to borrow indigenous traditions and expand upon local themes allowed American architects to create dozens of memorable, sometimes flamboyant, signature pieces around the world

Congress also recommended construction of consolidated new facilities to replace older ones which were sometimes scattered at several sites within the same city. The rationale for larger, more imposing embassy office buildings was based upon the premise that such facilities were more efficient, more economical, and more secure, at a time when security threats included fire, theft and espionage. The department similarly followed this direc-





US Embassy. Accra, Ghana (1956). Harry Weese, architect.
LEFT: Detail of tapered concrete pier.



Taj Mahal, Agra, India.
Designed by Persian architect, Istad Usa and built in 1631 by Mogul emperor Shah Jahan.

tive although it was apparent to many that the new comprehensive facilities were eventually going to cost more to maintain, not less.

The 1954 directive to borrow indigenous traditions and expand upon local themes allowed American architects to create dozens of memorable, sometimes flamboyant, signature pieces around the world. Little interested in history, and even less in ornament, these Modernists were intent on innovation, and they mined indigenous style as a way to sample new and unusual motifs.

Prominent postwar embassies were identifiably American because they were technologically up-to-date and visibly modern, not because they created an American presence or drew upon American history

Like theme pavilions at world's fairs, embassies of the 1950s welcomed visitors and explained the United States through easily accessible libraries and public programmes. The openness that was the hallmark of that era has since been lost, but the design policy has had a lasting impact. Even in Kuwait, where no applicable precedent existed for a modern office buildings and any hi-tech motif would have worked well, architects at RTKL made every effort to link their 1992 embassy design to vernacular tradition using the metaphor of the souk and the crossroads of the marketplace for the walled compound that few Kuwaitis or Americans will ever see or visit.

Until security really began to constrain design options in the 1970s, architects were far more interested in sampling the exotic than in exporting what could be identified as American. They did not try very hard to heed Belluschi's call for 'disguishable American' landmarks. Prominent postwar embassies were identifiably American because they were technologically up-to-date and visibly modern, not because they created an American presence or drew upon American history (architectural or otherwise) to establish a distinct American identity. In fact, American themes were noticeably absent from embassy designs. Not until Moore Ruble Yudell won the 1997 competition to design a new US embassy in Berlin did anyone make an overt attempt to incorporate American historial themes into embassy design. The winning scheme for Berlin was not a replica of the White House (or a log cabin), but it did feature a dome (described by the architects as an American trademark), references to 'the American house' and the diversity of the American landscape, and inscriptions from the Declaration of Independence and other carved references to America's democratic heritage.

A departure from earlier embassy work and designs that came close to trivialising the foreignness of faraway places, the Berlin design also recognises the significance of its historic site on the Pariser Platz adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate, a site owned by the United States prior to the Second World War and one to which it has a symbolic commitment. The building fits in while declaring its American identity. Regrettably, plans for Berlin remain shelved as Congress refuses to fund the much-needed embassy. At the same time, the State Department is also reassessing the project, sorting out the lessons learned from the recent terrorist bombings of US embassies in Africa and re-examining the site which fails to provide the recommended 100-foot security setback.

Embassy architects can no longer enjoy the luxury of borrowing foreign themes as a way of expressing goodwill. They now face the challenge of finding ways to couple the demands of diplomatic representation with adequate defence. Facilities have grown exponentially in size and there is ever more reason to build consolidated and better fortified facilities. Ironically such structures are even more conspicuous (as terrorist targets) and less accessible and hardly likely to promote the goodwill that remains the goal of diplomacy. Meanwhile, we look at newly fortified strongholds and frown. No wonder the whimsical designs of the 1950s made us smile.

1 Nelson Kenworthy to Assistant Secretary for Administration, memorandum, 26 October 1953.
2 Pietro Belluschi to Kenworthy, memorandum, 27 January 1954.

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