



Face to face

# Golden child

**David Childs is architect of the US embassy in Ottawa, the first new US embassy since the recent bombings. He speaks to Jane Loeffler about designing these symbolic, but threatened, buildings.**

**A** work of art. That's how US Ambassador Gordon Giffin describes his new embassy office building, dedicated last autumn in Ottawa by President Clinton. Giffin's evident pride is good news for the State Department and its Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO), which had been planning the US\$40 million project for 20 years. And it is affirmation, too, for David Childs, CEO of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, whose design underscores the US's commitment to its northern neighbour.

The hillside site – on the edge of Parliament Hill, opposite Ottawa's government buildings on the west, facing shops and residences of the Byward Market district on the east, and sandwiched between two busy streets – posed unusual problems. Childs also had to grapple with the ever-changing constraints of diplomatic security. It was no easy task. No wonder the

handsome new embassy is being celebrated among those who equate accessibility and visual openness with democratic values.

Given the security-consciousness that has surrounded US embassies since the bombings, there was no reason to expect an outcome of such urbanistic or symbolic rightness. Firstly, the site was nearly abandoned in favour of a far-away and presumably more secure locale. According to Childs, it was Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan who pushed to keep the embassy downtown. Secondly, as Childs points out, "The Canadians expected something forbidding and overpowering. They feared a monstrosity from the Americans." In presentations to the Canadian National Capital Commission (NCC) and others, he had to prove that his design would not offend. He went further – winning plaudits from the Canadians and boosting morale among the 225 embassy employees previously scattered across 10 sites.



Bruce Byers



**Above:** West facade of the new American embassy in Ottawa. Architect David Childs headed the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill design team

Childs earned the FBO commission not only for his design expertise and his firm's depth, but also because of his highly regarded political sense, initially honed in Washington. He started his career, in fact, assisting Moynihan on the redevelopment of Pennsylvania Avenue, and Moynihan remains, he says, his "hero". He later chaired the National Capital Planning Commission, Washington's equivalent of Ottawa's NCC. There he endorsed Arthur Erickson's design for the Canadian Embassy (1989), on Pennsylvania Avenue at the foot of Capitol Hill.

So Childs was not unprepared when he visited Ottawa for the first time to assess the embassy project. "I could not believe how similar Ottawa and Washington were in philosophy as well as in site details," he says. "Both facing major ceremonial streets, both across from national art galleries, and both with dual identities – small and local on one side, grand and federal

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on the other." Working with the site's limitations, Childs designed a boat-shaped building with a dramatic central atrium accessible (at two different levels) from the diplomatic entrance facing west and the consular entrance facing east. The west facade features a "grillage" of glass and stainless steel (concealing a concrete blast wall with punched windows), while the east features a wall of granite and limestone with windows that complement nearby structures.

The result is solid-looking but, even with the high fence and steel-reinforced bollards, not overwhelming. "It was supposed to be a background building," Childs says, describing it as "quieter" than its neighbours. Maple-panelled walls and a general absence of colour adds to the sense of quiet within. Light-filled offices and stairwells and open corridors please a staff representing the State Department and 15 other US government agencies.

To Childs, the embassy's finest feature is the atrium, "so full of light that it's dazzling". Its cone-shaped dome glitters with a silver lining and diamond openings back-lit in blue. It is certainly a magical interior focal point, but its exterior profile is ponderous. A really "quiet" building would not be topped with such visual dissonance. To their credit, however, Childs and his SOM colleagues had to win design approval in the wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (on the day Childs presented his design to officials in Canada), which rewrote the rules on security. The 30-metre security setback that had been waived for the project could not be reinstated, but the architect did move the glass-walled atrium to the interior. Even Childs agrees that the compromise bettered the building. It is a blow to the architect, but more so to the enthusiastic ambassador, that security makes it nearly impossible to allow the public into the embassy.

Balancing security and openness is of ever-growing concern to architects. Childs was among the experts who addressed that issue at a recent Washington forum, using Ottawa as an example. "Architects have to deal with all sorts of constraints," he says. His advice: "Stop whining, and start designing."

Childs is currently involved with three "dream" projects, all near his New York office: a new home for the New York Stock Exchange; a mixed-use development for Columbus Circle; and the new Pennsylvania Station, the restored railroad terminus likely to be renamed someday for its champion, none other than Senator Moynihan.

Childs is delighted to be reconnected with Moynihan. As he puts it: "I started out working with him and I've come back. It's a nice feeling." It's no surprise the two men are close: although one's politician and the other a designer, when it comes to architecture both are diplomats.

Jane C Loeffler PhD is an architectural historian and author of *The Architecture of Diplomacy, Building America's Embassies*.