

No one really expects every inch of a public building to be open to the public. It is understood that tourists cannot ramble through judges' chambers in a courthouse, storerooms in a museum, or private offices in a government building. But when the public has almost no access to interiors of public buildings such as U.S. embassies, something seems amiss—especially when such buildings were once celebrated as symbols of America's democratic openness.

In Ottawa, for example, David Childs and his colleagues at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designed the newest U.S. embassy (1999) around a four-story interior atrium that Childs believes is the building's "most spectacular" feature. To underscore U.S. respect for Canada (and its maple leaf symbol), he sheathed the atrium's walls in maple paneling and specified maple for the finely crafted handrails that rim the open corridors on either side. A ceremonial stair leads from the diplomatic entrance to a domed rotunda lined with stainless-steel filigree and backlit with blue light. Sculptures and paintings by noted American artists heighten the atrium's visual drama, and Knoll furnishings add distinction to the offices. Ambassador Gordon Giffin, who works in the building and runs it, calls the whole embassy a "work of art," but he laments that its interior is something that few will ever see.

The situation was far different in the 1950s, when there was so much less to hide. Terrorists had not yet forced the U.S. into the defensive stance that now puts embassies off limits to nearly all but invited guests. Architects like Gordon Bunshaft, Ralph Rapson, Edward Durell Stone, and Harry Weese liberally used glass boxes to express political openness. Directed by State Department policy, they designed buildings to welcome, impress, and delight what was expected to be a constant stream of foreign visitors.

But now, even where risk is considered to be comparatively low,

as at Ottawa, planners are being challenged to incorporate security into every aspect of embassy design. According to standards outlined in 1985, after bombs destroyed U.S. facilities in Beirut, the optimal design solution includes a 15-acre site with a 100-foot setback from vehicles and augmented at the perimeter by a combination of steel-reinforced bollards, fences, and walls. The same standards recommend exteriors with no more than a 15 percent window-to-wall ratio and interiors that incorporate various internal barriers designed to thwart and delay intruders.

It is easy to see how these design constraints, coupled with electronics ranging from locks to surveillance cameras, scanners, alarms, and access-control devices, could produce dreary, prison-like environments, hardly fit for diplomats. As a symbol and a decent, secure workplace, an American embassy has dual roles that are increasingly out of synch.

At Ottawa, fortunately for those who advocate accessibility and a positive American presence, the State Department waived the setback requirement, opting to retain the structure's prominent downtown site, bordered on two sides by busy streets. Fortunately, too, the architect was able to integrate the necessary defenses without creating what looked like a bunker. For security reasons, Childs had to scrap his plan for a glass-walled atrium, turning the building inward instead and inserting a concrete blast wall with punched windows behind the glass façade. The result is added protection for offices that still enjoy ample daylight and superb views.

Embassy employees give the Ottawa interiors high marks for comfort and quality. Employees take pride, too, in the building's newly acquired collection of modern art, including Tony King's splendid 1999 painting of Niagara Falls, which hangs in the ambassador's office. Where staff morale is a strategic consideration, user satisfaction matters greatly, but it is harder than ever to argue for amenities when high-security buildings like this one cost \$40 million, far more than conventional construction. No one better understands the need for security than Ambassador Giffin, who is responsible for the lives of 225 people. Yet he is frustrated, he says, by security regulations that make it hard for him to use his new building to its best advantage.

Another U.S. embassy is to be built rather too close to an urban center for comfort: in Berlin, near the Brandenburg Gate. Selected by the State Department in 1997, the competition-winning design by Moore Ruble Yudell and Gruen Associates pays homage to America's

ONCE DESIGNED AS SYMBOLS OF OPENNESS, EMBASSIES ARE TURNING THEIR BACKS ON THE PUBLIC.

by Jane C. Loeffler



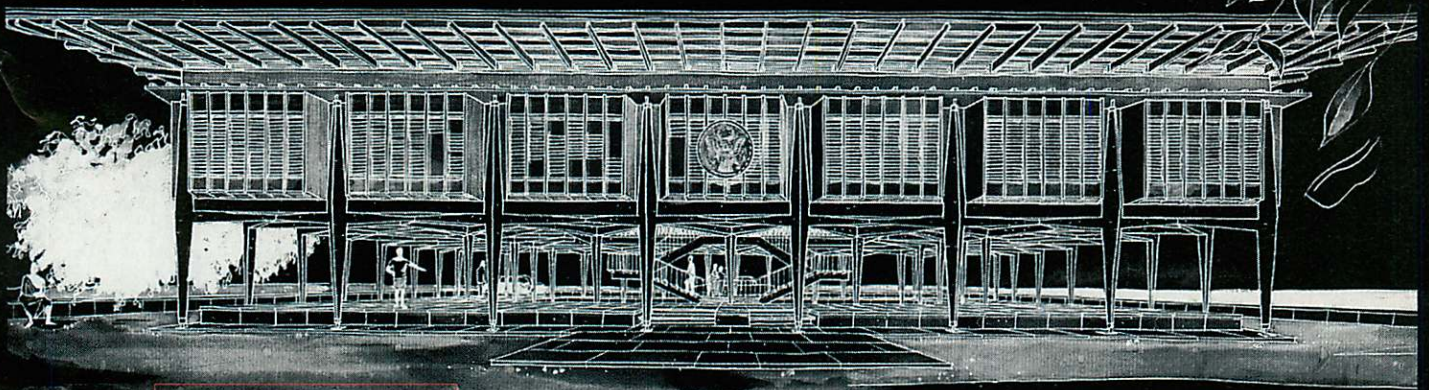
U.S. embassy in New Delhi,
India, by Edward Durrell Stone,
1954-59. photo: Courtesy U.S.
Department of State



U.S. consulate housing in Bremen,
Germany, by Gordon Bunshaft,
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1959
photo: Heidersberger



U.S. embassy in Dublin,
Ireland, by John Johansen,
1957-64. photo: Norman McGrath



A drawing of the former U.S. embassy
in Accra, Ghana, by Harry Weese and
Associates, 1956-59. photo: Courtesy
Harry Weese and Associates, Architects



U.S. embassy in Stockholm,
by Ralph Rapson and John van der
Meulen, 1951-54. photo: Courtesy
Ralph Rapson & Associates, Inc.

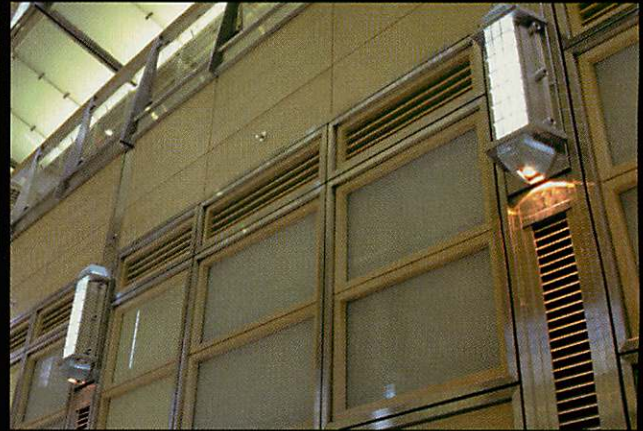


U.S. embassy in Sanaa, Yemen, by CRS-Sirrinc, Architects, 1986-90

Italian embassy in Washington, D.C., by Piero Sartogo Architetti, with Leo A. Daly, photo: Robert H. Loeffler



U.S. embassy in Ottawa, Canada, by David Childs et al., Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1999, photo: Raul Alferez/U. S. Department of State



The interior of the proposed Canadian embassy in Berlin, by Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg.



Finnish embassy in Washington, D.C., by Mikko Heikkinen and Markku Komonen, 1994, photo: Jussi Tainen

democratic heritage by incorporating iconography associated with U.S. history, such as inscriptions from the Declaration of Independence and an American flag motif inside. Since bombs destroyed two U.S. embassies in Africa, however, the Berlin project languishes as the Department wrestles with how to proceed on a site that offers no street setback and practically abuts the famed Gate. The architects have meanwhile labored over details of ceremonial spaces and courtyard gardens that will go unseen if the project is inaccessible (or eventually abandoned).

The high visibility and lengthy design process of America's Berlin embassy is not the norm. Far more typical are compressed design/build sequences aimed at constructing or reconstructing embassies and consulates where the facilities are most deficient, while spending appropriated funds as they remain available. Currently, the State Department is moving ahead quickly with projects for Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Kampala, Zagreb, Tunis, and Istanbul.

Other nations, less often targeted by terrorists, are freer to reap the economic, political, and cultural benefits associated with embassy architecture of distinction. Canada's new showplace in Berlin, for example, will be a nine-story mixed-use building housing a pedestrian arcade, shops, and apartments, in addition to embassy offices. Bruce Kuwabara of KPMB Architects in Toronto sees the project as "an expression of national identity," and to him that means understatement, not flamboyance. Interiors will feature walls lined with Douglas fir from British Columbia and floors of Quebec maple.

The Finnish embassy on Washington's Embassy Row instantly established itself as a showplace for Finnish artistic and technological accomplishments when it opened in 1994. Heikkinen & Komonen designed a prism-like glass box with an interior that combines the coolness of stainless steel and softly tinted green glass with the warmth of maple and copper. Unlike the United States, Finland requires its government buildings to provide all workers with windows. This means that the only rooms lacking daylight are a secure conference room, a storage room, the archives—and the sauna. Visitors (and there are many) enter the embassy and descend a suspended staircase to reach a dazzling multipurpose space used almost constantly for concerts, meetings, and art exhibitions open to the public. If security concerns the Finns, they don't show it in their architecture.

Just south of the Finns, the Italians are completing construction of a new embassy sure to give Italy a high-profile identity in

Washington when it opens in June. Italian architect Piero Sartogo, working with Leo A. Daly of Washington, celebrates Italian architectural tradition in what seems like a surreal combination of traditional urban palazzo and country villa. Sartogo plays with perspective, designing faceted windows that add sculptural depth to the pink Italian marble façade, steps that narrow as they recede, and a soaring and sharply angled roof. Moreover, he bisects the square structure on the diagonal with a glorious glass-topped atrium. With walls of beige, bright yellow, and violet, and elevator enclosures finished in a terra-cotta encausto, the interior is a festival of geometry, texture, and light. It will also feature Italian art and modern Italian furniture.

Security is a key concern to the Italians, but they have made every effort to downplay its impact on design. Most visitors, for example, will not even notice the absence of a ceremonial staircase leading from the ground-level atrium to offices above, but open stairs have been eliminated for security reasons. Building access can be more closely controlled using elevators. Hundreds of guests will be able to gather in the atrium, while embassy officials work in offices on the three floors above. For security, too, there are many more emergency exit doors than there are entrances.

Not long ago Americans did their banking in elaborate downtown buildings recognized for their architectural solidity and acclaimed for their grand interiors. Now they visit much less imposing branch banks, sometimes in trailers—or they bank by computer. Maybe embassies, like banks, will evolve into smaller and less conspicuous structures. But current security standards are leading in the opposite direction, toward facilities that are ever more massive, uninviting, and isolated. If threats persist (as they surely will), there will be calls to close embassies altogether. The question of whether these places can or should welcome the public is linked to the larger question of how the United States wants to represent itself to the world. Glass boxes are no longer an option, nor are they necessary, but cold and forbidding embassies do not promote goodwill or strengthen confidence in U.S. leadership.

*Jane C. Loeffler, Ph.D., is the author of *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1998). An architectural historian who writes on design history and public policy, she lives in Washington, D.C.*

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