

THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE AMERICAN EMBASSY



ARE EMBASSIES TO BE FORTRESSES, CULTURAL LANDMARKS OR SIMPLY OFFICES? THE ANSWER IS UP FOR GRABS.

By JANE C. LOEFFLER

It should come as no surprise to Foreign Service professionals that most Americans have no idea what embassies do or why they are important. Two examples illustrate this point: When architecture students were asked to plan the reception area for a U.S. embassy last fall, one young man presented drawings of an embassy lobby that included a fully-equipped bar complete with stools. His rationale was that “happy hour” was a time for embassy personnel and their guests to unwind and that the lobby area was ideal for this purpose. The students seemed baffled by the question of who would enter the embassy or what sort of business might occur there. Second, when a group of Midwesterners recently toured Italy’s soon-to-open embassy in Washington, they listened attentively but appeared clueless as to what the building was for. “Maybe treaties?” one man suggested.

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actually do.***

Buildings that proclaim a nation's identity to the world should not be so misunderstood. This is a problem for those who recognize their importance as symbols and also for those who work in them. With security shaping every aspect of embassy architecture, U.S. foreign buildings are undergoing a profound identity crisis. Once celebrated as emissaries of openness and optimism, they now convey a mixed message — pride coupled with apparent indifference, assertiveness fused with fear.

With every disaster there are calls for more draconian provisions aimed at averting another tragedy, like the bombings in East Africa on Aug. 7, 1998. But in the rush to provide needed security, there has been little time to assess how the threat of terrorism is affecting America's overseas identity or to examine the crucial question: Are openness and security mutually exclusive? When technical analysts, such as structural engineers and blast experts, take over key embassy planning decisions, there is less focus on the larger picture of presence, and also less focus on the quality of the workplace environment and those who use it.

Many factors combine to establish America's diplomatic presence, but none is more tangible than the size and prominence of embassy buildings — targets of anger and frustration precisely because they are such evident symbols of foreign presence and feared influence. A high-visibility post can be one that operates out of a splendid old palace in the midst of downtown, such as the former Schoenborn Palace in Prague (acquired by the United States government in 1925). It can also be one that operates out of a heavily fortified compound on the outskirts of town, such as the embassy in Sanaa, Yemen, constructed in the late 1980s in the aftermath of terrorist bombings in Beirut. Unfortunately, the same visual cues that convey the key democratic ideals of openness and accessibility can transmit vulnerability, while those that convey strength and impenetrability can transmit aloof-

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ness, anxiety, and an absence of goodwill. The lack of fit between an embassy's "personality" and its purpose as a quasi-public building means that the American presence becomes more schizophrenic as it becomes more defensive.

Before the 1960s, architects barely considered security as a design constraint. During the 1950s, in fact, the State Department's Office of Foreign Buildings Operations commissioned glass-walled buildings that were instantly identified with the openness of democracy. Like huge roadside billboards, consulates in Germany and chanceries in Stockholm and Copenhagen advertised America as a nation that was future-oriented and proud of its artistic achievement and technological know-how. Without realizing it, modernists Walter Gropius (Athens), Eero Saarinen (London), and John Johansen (Dublin) became practitioners of public diplomacy.

With sidewalk access to libraries and exhibition spaces, these buildings welcomed the public and declared a positive, if often flamboyant, presence. Likewise, historic properties in Rome, Prague, and Paris, purchased and carefully restored by the State Department, demonstrated U.S. commitment to the life of those cities. But in the 1960s and '70s, with the Vietnam War and continuing conflict in the Middle East, U.S. embassies and other facilities around the world increasingly came under attack.

By the 1980s, fences, electronic locks, surveillance equipment, high walls, and remote locations came to define U.S. embassies as zones of fear. The threat of terrorism drastically altered America's overseas identity. In the aftermath of terrorist bombings in Beirut in 1983, FBO adopted stringent new security rules. Those rules came to be known as the Inman standards, after Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, who headed the panel that authored the 1985 report calling for sweeping changes in embassy location and design. For new construction, standards mandated a security setback of 100 feet from streets or passing vehicles, sites of 15 acres or more, locations far from downtown (almost essential when 15 acres were required), and reduced use of glass (defined as a maximum window-to-wall ratio of 15 percent). Advocating complete U.S. control of its overseas properties, Inman recommended replacing or renovating

buildings at 126 posts within seven years.

Neither Congress nor the administration was prepared to pay for Inman's visionary scheme, nor was the State Department prepared to turn its back overnight on its history. The Inman proposal was flawed because it treated all posts the same, overlooking fundamental differences among them. It did not consider the ramifications of abandoning or ruinously modifying priceless properties worldwide or wholesale relocation of most key posts from prime locations to sites farther from the city centers where most government business is transacted. It was too grandiose to win sustained support. Moreover, terrorism quickly faded as a pressing public concern. FBO built imposing walled compounds in Sanaa, Nicosia, San Salvador, Santiago, Amman, Caracas, Kuwait, Lima, Bangkok, and Singapore. But no one was certain how to reconcile security with history in places with existing embassies, like London or Rome, or new capitals, like Berlin.

The Inman standards were aimed primarily at protecting the lives of those within embassy buildings. It is hard even to suggest that any other factor should figure in planning the American presence overseas, but embassy workers are not always inside a given building, and like everything from medical procedures to military operations, diplomacy involves risk. Following the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam, Adm. William J. Crowe, Jr. chaired two accountability panels for the State Department. His report reaffirmed the value of

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the Inman standards, but noted that the standards themselves had been undermined by exceptions granted to existing properties and acquisitions. The Crowe report also stated that the United States must not allow terrorists to force it to retreat from its interests abroad. But Crowe himself, in an interview with the author, expressed dismay at the thought that the London

embassy might someday be forced to move from its prominent location. The fact that he served there as ambassador undoubtedly helps him to appreciate the significance of its Grosvenor Square site.

Clearly, it would be a mistake to overreact to fear and hastily abandon invaluable locations and landmarks long recognized as assets to U.S. diplomacy. Philip C. Wilcox, Jr., former coordinator for counterterrorism at the State Department, describes the Jerusalem consulate/residence as one such property. A mansion built in the Ottoman Turkish style in the 1870s, it is "an ornament" to the United States, Wilcox says, and a place that people love to visit. Also a member of Crowe's accountability board for Nairobi, Wilcox questions the notion of universal standards. "Some buildings of great historic value are treasures to be preserved," he says. "We can afford to make exceptions to the Inman standards where environmental factors combine to minimize risk and host governments and their law enforcement and intelligence services have a proven record against terrorism."

The Ottawa Exception

Such an exception made it possible to build the new embassy in Ottawa, where setback requirements were waived in order to use a site directly across from Canada's Houses of Parliament. Bordered on two sides by busy streets, the site did not provide a 100-foot setback, but it was a prize too good to pass up. With the Canadian embassy located at the foot of Capitol Hill in Washington, it seemed right to try to find a design that would permit use of the prominent site.

FBO hired David Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Childs designed an attractive and well-fortified building, proving that openness and security are not mutually exclusive. According to the architect, the central atrium of the embassy is its most "spectacular" feature, filled with bright light that bounces off walls paneled in



Jane C. Loeffler

Bohemian Beauty: Embassy Prague, purchased in 1925, is a carefully restored Baroque palace.

Canadian maple. Ambassador Gordon Giffin hosted President Clinton when they dedicated the building in November 1999, and he is proud of his new workplace. "You just feel good in the building," he says. "The appearance of a building is part of the means by which you relate to the host city, the host government, and the people of the host country. Security ought to be the primary consideration, but not the sole consideration."

Where security is the sole consideration, buildings are closed, absent of civic context, remote, and publicly inaccessible. Compared to other buildings, they require more materials and consume more energy. Their sealed windows admit little light and no fresh air, and their thick walls reduce interior space. Parking is limited and increased surveillance leads to diminished privacy. That may be fine for a penitentiary, but not for an embassy.

A Symposium Assesses Balance

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y., has always advocated the civic importance of public architecture. He speaks for many when he proclaims "openness" a cherished democratic ideal and decries its absence from public buildings, including embassies. Last November in Washington, hundreds gathered to hear Moynihan and architects, security experts, ambassadors, federal judges, and government officials address a symposium on "Balancing Security and Openness." Credit for the program goes to Under Secretary of State for Management Bonnie Cohen and Public Buildings Service Commissioner Robert Peck (General Services Administration) who recognize that government buildings at home and abroad share a common concern for security. Just bringing together the two giant landlords, State and GSA, was a major accomplishment. More than that, it was a beginning of a much needed dialogue on what architect Frances Halsband aptly described as the coming "collision between our values and our fears." That collision, she noted, is reflected in our public architecture. (Halsband is one of three distinguished architects who serve terms of varying length on FBO's Architectural Advisory Board, which reviews designs submitted to FBO by architects. FBO hires outside architects for major capital projects and also for renovations and upgrades, making an effort to select them from across the country.)

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In Washington, where Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House is closed to traffic as a security precaution, there is legitimate concern about "security overkill." The November symposium succeeded best as a forum to air that concern. It represented a strong repudiation of what Moynihan called the "fortress society," and was

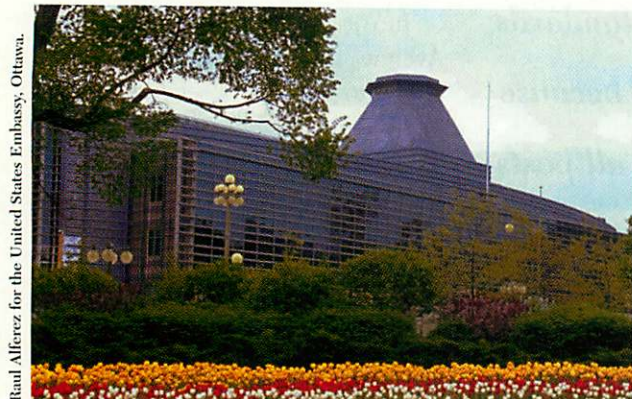
the first serious effort since the mid-1950s to examine the link between design and diplomatic goodwill.

Ambassador Barbara Bodine expressed mixed feelings about the fortress-embassy in Sanaa where she lives and works, a compound located a half-hour's drive from town and distant from all other embassies. Its isolation was intended to provide a security advantage, but two recent kidnapping attempts, she said, are evidence that embassy employees face added risk when they make long trips to and from work. And imprisoning them within the compound, she warned, produces "lousy diplomats."

Speakers at the symposium differed in their tolerance for risk and differed, too, on definitions of openness. In his remarks, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security David Carpenter said, "Our embassies should express the values of the United States. We want effective security, and we want openness." He called on the design community to help reconcile these apparent opposites. Architects responded with examples. David Childs, for one, explained how the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 forced him to revise his plans for a glass-walled atrium at Ottawa. He moved the atrium to the interior but retained the "openness" of the exterior by retaining the exterior wall of glass and inserting behind it a concrete blast wall punctuated by regular-size windows. Designers like Childs equate openness with transparency.

Others define openness as functionality — equating it, for example, with accessibility and efficient service. Under Secretary Cohen underscored this point when she expressed dismay over the fact that people who wait in long lines to enter embassies, such as in the Dominican Republic, frequently assume that the wait is "an expression of America's foreign policy," a calculated effort to keep borders closed. She emphasized the department's determination to make posts more user-friendly through improved design and better management.

The symposium was an affirming experience for many and the start of a useful exchange among architects and



Raul Allerez for the United States Embassy, Ottawa.

An attractive glass front on the new U.S. embassy in Ottawa actually conceals a concrete blast wall.

their government clients. But it was unsettling to some Foreign Service officers who faulted architects for being unfamiliar with embassy operations, and also to representatives from businesses that benefit from public anxiety. At least one security equipment manufacturer, for example, heard the call for openness as a rationale for less security.

But the preponderance of architects did not prompt discussion of the peripheral role that architects actually play in public policy-making. When Adm. Crowe says, "The last person you should let tell you how to design a secure building is an architect," as he did in a recent interview, he points to a profound suspicion of a profession that has done a poor job of advocating its expertise.

Delays Cause Confusion

Moreover, Crowe's doubt points to long-standing mistrust of FBO, the office that has to design and build costly, long-term projects, barely knowing from year to year how risk will be measured, if urgently needed projects will be funded, or how politics or crises may cause priorities to shift. For example, plans for a new embassy in Tunis have been in the works for 14 years. At last, with a green light to go ahead, FBO has retained American architect Tai Soo Kim, who is designing the project in association with Tunisian architect Weissem Ben Mahmoud. The job will go out

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for bid by September. Changes in the Bulgarian government interrupted site approval in Sofia and delayed a project that FBO has been trying to build since 1987.

Berlin is another project plagued by uncertainty. FBO held a much-publicized design competition for the new Berlin embassy (selecting the winning design by Moore Ruble Yudell) in 1997, but security concerns have stalled the project, which also languished for lack of ready funds. The superb site, practically adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate, does not meet current specifications for setback. The architects are now "re-scoping" the project, incorporating added security into the design in light of the 1998 bombings in East Africa.

The laborious congressional appropriations process has also become more convoluted. Even after appropriations are made, new legislation now requires FBO to return to Capitol Hill once again to win approval for each project. As one FBO official puts it, "This gives Congress veto power over individual embassy projects

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Embassy Athens has gotten a major facelift, thanks to a U.S. ambassador's efforts.

and creates added bureaucracy." Changes and delays add to cost, and funding uncertainty makes accurate planning or scheduling difficult, if not impossible. FBO takes the blame for the associated inefficiencies, but it has less control of its agenda than most critics suppose.

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A Light Shines in Athens

Making use of existing funds and even private contributions, Embassy Athens provides an example of a post that has worked on its own to increase apparent openness and make itself more welcoming without adding exposure. Things as simple as cleaning the exterior marble, painting the stucco, replacing a jungle of inappropriate hedges and vines with drought-resistant local plants, and turning on a fountain that had been off for years boosted the dignity of the downtown chancery. Despite the throng of anxious visa seekers at the entrance checkpoint, the compound looks surprisingly better than it did less than a year ago.

As Ambassador Nicholas Burns says, "The result is a complete and dramatic change for the better. The building actually gleams once again as it must have when first constructed." When Burns arrived in 1997, he made it his business to improve the look of the property as a way of garnering respect and signaling U.S. respect for Greece. With private funds, he also established a permanent exhibit for the chancery on the U.S.-Greek relationship and commissioned a sculpture of George C. Marshall for the once-again-visible embassy garden.

Upgrading security at a modern glass-walled building like Athens poses special problems. Window film, designed to limit damage from flying glass, will provide added safety. Laminated glass would help more, but it is heavy (and much more expensive). To support it, the building might require a new structural system. Burns and his colleagues in Athens and Washington continue to assess the options, recognizing, as he says, that "this is a question we will face with greater frequency and intensity in the years ahead." In the meantime, American athletes and tourists will be proud to see the U.S. flag waving over the refurbished embassy in downtown Athens when they gather there for the summer Olympics in 2004.

Where embassies are sited within walled compounds on the outskirts of town, visitors will be far less likely to spot the American flag. Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum is designing embassies for Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam to replace buildings destroyed by terrorist bombs, and RTKL is designing one for Kampala, where existing conditions are described as "pathetic." Both firms are devel-

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oping the sites as garden compounds, using landscaping to soften the impact of high-security architecture. For speed and efficiency, these are design/build projects which pair architects with builders and provide FBO with a fixed overall construction price. (The more common practice is to hire the architect and then to solicit construction bids, but until those bids come in, FBO can only guess at what the job will cost.)

Fearing that builders might try to eliminate expensive blast-resistant windows altogether to keep costs within the pre-agreed budget, FBO has stipulated a 20 percent minimum window-to-wall ratio for its new East African embassies, not a maximum as before. Staff and visitors will park more than 100 feet away, outside the perimeter wall at each site. They will enter through a checkpoint, one by one. Ironically, few will see the snappy new signs designed to direct them to various offices because the real problem is most likely to be getting in, not getting lost inside the compound. Despite shaded courtyards inside, visitors are still likely to do most of their waiting on the sidewalk.

Anything that eliminates what one FSO called "the unbelievable human chaos" that surrounds busy checkpoints and consular operations is good for America's overseas presence. Service innovations that convey America's openness include visa applicant appointment systems, the visa waiver program, special user-fee telephone lines for appointments, and courier delivery services that save return visits. Allowing Americans in China to register with the Beijing embassy via the Internet is another way in which an embassy makes itself more accessible. The State Department's Website, in fact, is a point of access that is sure to grow in popularity and usefulness.

Newly established "American presence posts" in France are also designed to provide added access, but not access for everyone. Their primary purpose is to boost commerce. Useful though they may be, they are no substitute for consulates that offered a far wider range of services but have been closed for lack of funding. One- or two-person posts may work in France, but not elsewhere. And while it is assumed that terrorists are only interested in targeting high-profile embassies, that can't be known.

Whether we want to admit it, or not, closed consulates and even long lines do reflect America's reduced commitment to foreign affairs. It is hard to imagine how anyone can reconcile the nation's wealth and its global role with foreign buildings that are so shamefully shabby and insecure. That is not to say that we should build high-profile bastions as replacements: Bombastic design can convey a powerful message, one that obliterates public diplomacy. Security is about more than building stronger or more formidable buildings — it is about providing decent workplaces and residences for diplomats as part of an overall commitment to America's overseas presence. The purpose of that presence is subject to debate, but the absence of commitment produces neglected outposts like the embassy besieged last year by a mob in Beijing.

Because America's foreign buildings are so poorly documented and little known, they are further misunderstood. It is a Catch-22 for the State Department that calling attention to its properties and creating support for them may publicize their vulnerability, along with their

history and architectural distinction. But without public support and understanding and a more vocal constituency, only disasters will fuel the building program.

In its recent report, the secretary of State's Overseas Presence Advisory Panel affirmed the need for "a universal, on-the-ground overseas presence ... more critical than ever to the nation's well-being." "Just when our diplomacy needs to project confidently the values of democracy and open markets," the 1999 report says, "our embassies should not be forced into a more defensive position." The call for openness, in its many dimensions, is not a rationale for vulnerability. To the contrary, it is aimed at understanding how architecture expresses confidence and how America's foreign buildings, in particular, represent political ideals.

Ever more massive and costly U.S. installations are part of a trend that will be hard to reverse. Architecture, like art, reflects the moment. The problem is that buildings are not momentary. They are with us for a long time, and one way or another, they do define our presence. ■

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