

The Rows on Embassy Rows

New U.S. Embassies from Berlin to Beijing stir controversy—but critics miss the point.

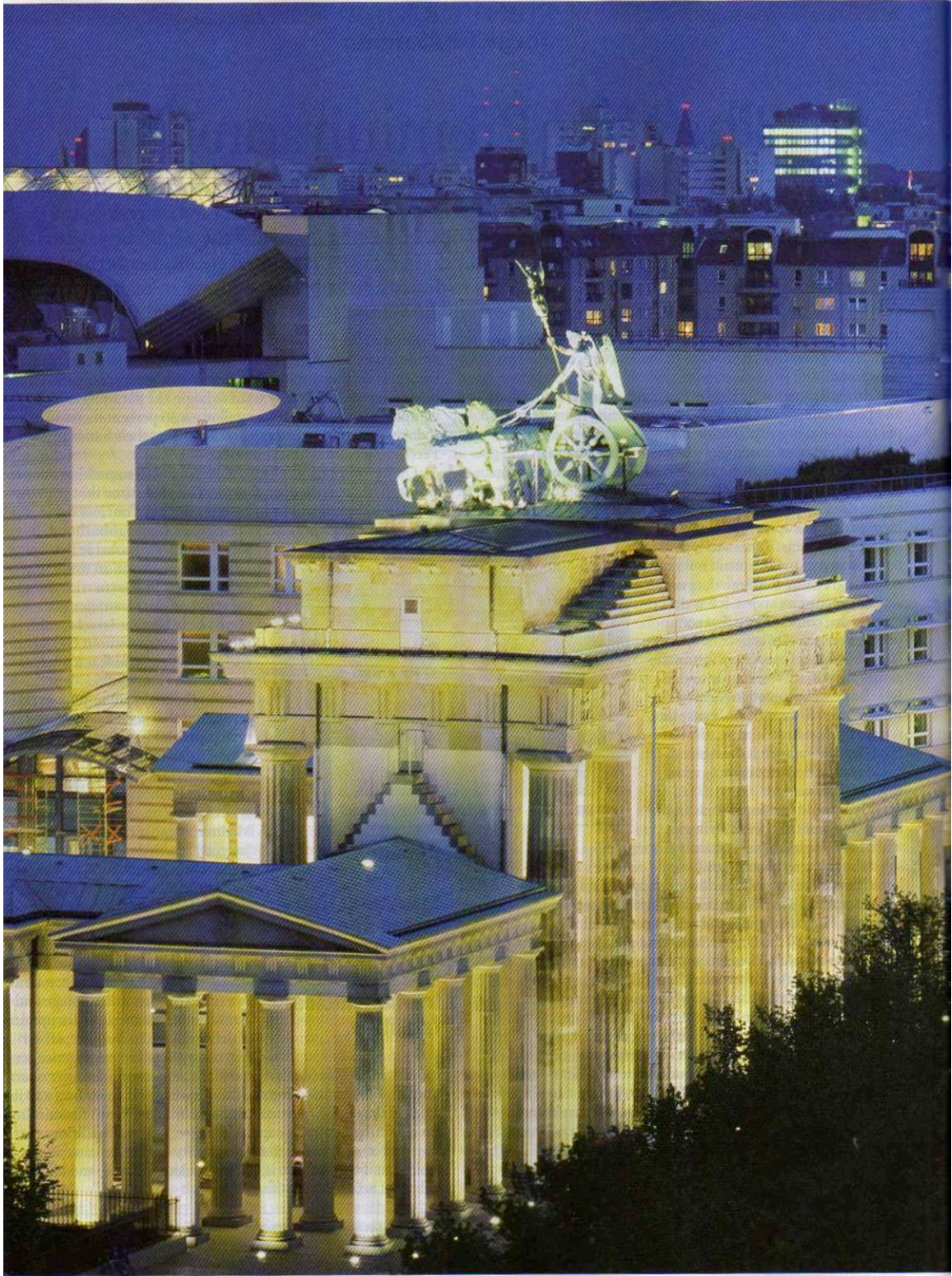
By JANE LOEFFLER

PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE IS inherently political, and all the more so for embassies. So it comes as little surprise that German architecture critics have given intense scrutiny to the new U.S. Embassy in Berlin, scheduled to open July 4, U.S. Independence Day, at Pariser Platz, Berlin's premier public place and the site of America's pre-World War II embassy. Yet while the 15,000-square-meter building is a handsome addition to the historic cityscape, German critics and the public at large have greeted it with scorn, comparing it to Fort Knox and deriding it as "banal" and even "monstrous." It is seen as little more than a memento from the despised George W. Bush administration.

The Berlin embassy is just one of dozens of U.S. government buildings abroad that have been built or renovated over the past decade. Strangely, it is bearing the brunt of the criticism, taking the heat for anti-American feelings and widespread antipathy toward the Bush administration. Some perspective is in order. This building is neither the forbidding fortress that some see, nor is it the cheap suburban-style warehouse imagined by others. It is thoroughly Berlin-specific, with color, scale and textural elements chosen to maintain the character of the historic location. In fact, the Berlin embassy marks a sharp departure from traditional U.S. Embassy designs, which tend to be far less sophisticated, and it is one of the few postwar projects deemed so important by the State Department that it sponsored a competition to select a design.

The first competition was for London, in 1956, when jurors picked Eero Saarinen to design a high-profile embassy on

FITS RIGHT IN: *The new U.S. Embassy in Berlin (left) has been called 'banal' and 'monstrous'*





Grosvenor Square. This was at the height of the postwar building program when noted architects, including Edward Durrell Stone (New Delhi), Josep Lluís Sert (Baghdad), Richard Neutra (Karachi) and Marcel Breuer (The Hague) enjoyed State Department patronage. Saarinen's prize-winning design for London utilized an unusual "diagrid" structural system and a Portland stone façade punctuated by large windows and highlighted by gold-colored anodized aluminum trim. The raised lobby level had gallery space for exhibitions and a spacious library accessible to the public.

But critics were unimpressed. With hindsight it is obvious that much of the criticism was a soft attack on the United States and its widening world role at that time. Saarinen's vocabulary was modern, but his design was clearly intended as a complement to nearby Georgian buildings. Critics lambasted it for being too showy and also too timid. They ridiculed the golden eagle over the entrance as a symbol of "xenophobia" and "the tragedy of Americanism." Their sweeping statements reflected political as much as architectural discontent.

By the late 1960s, U.S. embassies had become targets of anti-Americanism, and designs began to reflect the need for added security, particularly public-access control. After the 1983 bombing of U.S. facilities in Beirut, it was clear that the foreign building program needed an overhaul. Few embassies were adequately set back from vehicular traffic, and no structures were designed to withstand a blast. After a series of high-profile debacles, including the bugging of the new Moscow embassy, cost and security became the paramount concerns, and in the wake of the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa the State Department standardized its designs, adopting an isolated walled compound as a model.

To speed production, it established a two-year timetable and rushed to produce scores of cookie-cutter buildings in capitals like Belmopan, Belize, and Bamako, Mali. More of these faceless—and yes, banal—buildings will soon replace existing embassies in some European capitals, including Oslo and The Hague. The newest opened in June in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

N View a slide show of U.S. embassies around the world at xtra.Newsweek.com

But the largest and costliest among them has already been built in Baghdad, where the United States spent \$736 million to build a 42-hectare walled compound that contains some 21 buildings, including offices, residences and support facilities.

The Baghdad compound is controversial because of its size and cost—and allegations of mismanagement, now under investigation—as well as what it represents in terms of a long-term American presence. And such is the animosity toward it that German critics have compared the Berlin embassy to Baghdad's. But that critique misses the point. The Baghdad embassy is a fortress that few will actually see. Its stance suggests little or no confidence in the host government. It is located in a restricted zone, and is therefore more akin to the defensively designed new U.S.



LOOKING UP: The United States will open its new Berlin embassy (left) on July 4, and dedicate its Beijing embassy (above) later this summer

embassies built far from city centers.

By contrast, the Berlin embassy, first proposed by the Clinton administration in 1997, was meant to be an example of design excellence that would illustrate America's commitment to the newly reunified Germany and its re-established capital. It expresses optimism and trust, and while it would have been easy to abandon the project in 1998, or turn the building into yet another boxy emblem of America's well-justified security concerns, the government moved ahead with the project precisely because of its symbolic significance and the confidence that Germany could protect it.

Rather than backing away from their design, the architects integrated the security component as seamlessly as possible into the building while making every effort to avoid competing with landmarks like the Brandenburg Gate and the nearby Reichstag. Instead of walling off the building, or drawing unwanted attention to it by surrounding it with concrete barriers—as the

United States has done in London and at its embassy in Ottawa—they included security elements while incorporating civic gestures to engage the public, including a skylit rotunda that opens onto Pariser Platz, a glassy lantern tower that glows toward the Tiergarten at night and a street-corner pavilion that gives passersby a glimpse of a colorful Sol LeWitt mural commissioned for the south lobby. The building is neither loud nor ego-driven, as many U.S. embassies were in the '50s, when these buildings were gathering places and civic centers. "It is a quiet building, and meant to be so out of respect for its surroundings," says John Ruble, a partner at Moore Ruble Yudell, the California firm that designed the building.

Sadly, German critics have chosen to ridicule the security mandate, and have misread the building as a reflection of current U.S. foreign policy when it stands for the very opposite—an affirmative expression of the trust and mutual respect that makes diplomacy possible. Worse still is that if the negative criticism is misunderstood, the State Department will lose any incentive to push for fresh new designs that are linked symbolically and architecturally to their host communities.

Soon, architecture critics will have an opportunity to assess yet another new U.S. embassy. At the opening of the Olympic Games this summer, the U.S. State Department will dedicate its new embassy in Beijing. Unlike the embassy in central Berlin, it will consist of a four-hectare compound set apart from the city center in a diplomatic district in the Liang Ma He neighborhood. Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill of San Francisco, it is strikingly modern, with a fusion of Eastern and Western themes within a high-tech idiom. Its size allows for gardens and open courtyards and other landscape features that draw on Chinese traditions and enliven the tightly planned parcel.

The Beijing embassy is being built in tandem with a monumental new Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C., and, like Berlin, it is the most visible symbol of America's official presence abroad. One hopes that as critics have time to reflect, they will appreciate the positive diplomatic statements behind these new façades.

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