



Davis Brody Bond Architects and Planners

BEYOND THE **FORTRESS** EMBASSY

State's new "Design Excellence" initiative is intended to improve America's presence abroad by embracing all elements of embassy construction.

BY JANE C. LOEFFLER

During the past decade, as the State Department built look-alike embassy compounds that were compared to citadels and high-security prisons, diplomats complained of isolation and impaired diplomacy; critics in and out of government objected to the negative image being conveyed by placeless and undistinguished architecture; and host governments protested the dismissive attitude that emanated from such facilities. All the while, the one-size-fits-all Standard Embassy Design was touted as the only viable option. Few critics expected change, let alone a full-scale course correction.

But in a move that has surprised and pleased critics, including this author, the department's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations has recently announced a sweeping "Design Excel-



Photo courtesy of Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, U.S. Department of State

lence” initiative that embraces all elements of embassy construction—from location to architect selection, design, engineering and building technology, sustainability and long-term maintenance needs.

The new program sees innovation as an opportunity to enhance security, still the top priority. It is the State Department’s first major statement of design policy since 1954 when, at the height of the Cold War, it greatly expanded its building program and turned to modern architecture to convey the optimism and future orientation of democracy.

What happened to bring about this dramatic shift to improve America’s foreign presence? Could it have happened without the

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The design for the new Embassy Jakarta by Davis Brody Bond Architects and Planners, shown opposite, embodies many of the principles of the “Design Excellence” initiative. The project is expected to be completed in 2017. In contrast, Embassy Quito (Yost, Grube, Hall, 2008), above, is a Standard Embassy Design that features the prison-like look and high perimeter wall that is typical of SED structures.

SED, which seemed inevitable but proved so inadequate? What does the new program mean? Will more attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities undermine or add impetus to the program? And how is it linked to broader foreign policy issues?

To begin to answer these questions, one has to first understand the rationale for the “fortress” model—an expedient solution to an urgent problem, to be sure, but one that narrowly defined an embassy as a protected workplace and overlooked its larger representational role.

Attacks Lead to Stringent Security Standards

In the aftermath of the 1983 terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, a bipartisan commission chaired by retired Navy Admiral Bobby R. Inman was the first to call for major embassy improvements. Inman called for an array of new security standards to be applied regardless of location. These included the 100-foot setback, selection of 10-to-15-acre sites, blast-resistant construction, high perimeter walls, rigorous public access controls and (almost) windowless



Fethi Belaid, AFP/Getty Images

The April 1983 terrorist attack on Embassy Beirut, shown at right, and the bombing of U.S. Marine barracks there six months later prompted efforts to improve embassy security. Above, demonstrations at Embassy Tunis on Sept. 14, 2012, turned violent. Such protests put all U.S. facilities at risk.

designs. “Inman” projects included Sanaa (1986), Santiago (1987) and Lima (1996). But plans to build more than 75 new embassies were not realized because the department encountered difficulty acquiring suitable sites. With delay, the urgency dissipated.

A year after terrorists destroyed U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in August 1998, however, Congress rallied to fund a multiyear \$21-billion Capital Security Construction Program that supplied the means to build some 201 new embassies and consulates. Congress also enacted the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act that codified the 100-foot setback and a co-location requirement. Both these requirements contributed directly to the need for larger sites, which were often only attainable at remote locations.

Gen. Charles Williams, a protégé of former Secretary of State Colin Powell, took the helm at OBO in 2001 and launched a vastly expanded building program. To control costs, save time and meet congressional expectations, he turned to design-build production and adopted a rigid standard model. His aim was to put the same structure, with minimal modification, in Ougadougou and Oslo. Dismissive of design, he also abolished the architectural advisory panel that had reviewed embassy plans



Françoise De Mulder, Roger Viollet/Getty Images

since 1954 and relied instead on approval from construction industry experts.

Critics Fault “Fortress Embassies”

Pushback against the “fortress” embassy concept originated even before Williams embraced the Standard Embassy Design. Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, D-N.Y., a former U.S. ambassador to India, was among the first to call attention to the already growing tension between openness and security and the fearsome attitude expressed by heavily fortified embassies and other public buildings. Speaking at a symposium co-sponsored by the General Services Administration and State in 1999, Moynihan advocated the idea of “acceptable risk” for buildings meant to mirror American values.

The “fortress” model was an expedient solution to an urgent problem.

At the same venue, security specialist Gavin de Becker said that government’s responsibility is to provide reasonable security in response to “warranted fear.” But he added that there is no way to protect against unwarranted fear without imprisoning ourselves.

Barbara Bodine, then-U.S. ambassador to Yemen, echoed those concerns. She lamented that the isolated location of her new embassy in Sanaa prevented diplomats from building “essential relationships,” and observed that the resulting long drive to work actually made them more vulnerable to terrorists. She pointed to “technology and innovative design” as the means to move beyond the model of the embassy as an isolated outpost. “Embassies should be integrated with their surroundings and culture,” she said.

During the years that followed, government reports continued to cite security deficiencies and unacceptable working conditions at diplomatic facilities, described in one Government Accountability Office report as “shockingly shabby.” And the State Department continued to chronicle active attempts, sometimes two or three a day, to target U.S. personnel and facilities around the world, particularly in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. So as SEDs proliferated from Phnom Penh (2005) to Astana (2006), Bamako (2006) and Quito (2008), it was hard for critics to fault them. They moved many thousands of workers to far more secure and modern workplaces in record time.

But it was not long before a chorus of concerned critics coalesced. It included members of Congress, diplomats, senior



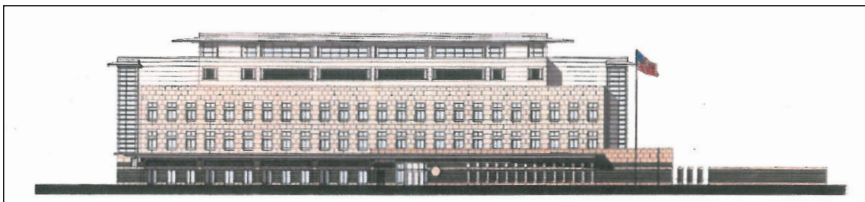
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Photos courtesy of Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, U.S. Department of State



Embassy Bamako, above, is a Standard Embassy Design facility built in 2006. The SED model, below, came in Small, Medium and Large and was meant to be completely standardized, with each embassy built to the same specifications.

State Department officials and Foreign Service professionals, architects, historians, journalists and security experts, and even a future president. Chairman of the House National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee John Tierney, D-Mass., held hearings on “Effective Diplomacy and the Future of U.S. Embassies” in 2008. “Some of us call them fortress embassies,” Tierney said, making his point of view clear as he introduced the proceedings.

Witnesses included Thomas Pickering and Marc Grossman, both former U.S. ambassadors who had served as under secretary of State for political affairs. The two cited the changing role of diplomacy, the negative impact of isolation and the added value of architecture that is site-specific and appropriately “symbolic.” In assessing security, Grossman—co-author of an influential report titled “The Embassy of the Future,” which the Center for Strategic and International Studies published in 2007—underscored the “need to shift from a culture of risk avoidance to risk management.”

Patrick Donovan, deputy assistant secretary for countermeasures at the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, reiterated that theme when he declared in 2009 that embassies “are not risk-free buildings.” Donovan explained the futility of trying to construct an embassy as a risk-free facility. He also criticized the OBO’s almost total commitment to design-build, which stifles innovation, he noted, by eliminating the competitive bidding that

encourages new ideas. He cited anti-ram barriers and blast-resistant cladding systems as components that could be more attractive and provide added security if better designed.

Architects hated the SED for the same reasons that they hated big-box stores. They were slow to take up the challenge of the security mandate (both here and abroad) and position themselves as professionals who could offer leadership and expertise in solving new and vexing design problems associated with security. And, of course, they lamented the loss of high-profile embassy commissions, once such “plums.” OBO did hire architects to design new embassies in Berlin and Beijing, but both were design-

bid-build jobs, and both were exceptions. What about London? Would that be an exception or another SED?

Criticism of the “fortress” model culminated when congressional critics joined diplomats and designers in condemning the mega-embassy compound in Baghdad for cost overruns, lateness, construction flaws and size. Even presidential candidate Barack Obama, campaigning in 2008, faulted the Baghdad project. To him, it signaled that the United States intended to be “a permanent occupier” and sent a mixed message about American intentions. The Baghdad fiasco led to the exit of Williams from OBO late in 2007.

OBO Shifts Direction

Williams was succeeded first by Richard Shinnick and then by Adam Namm, both career Foreign Service officers. Both quickly introduced a new openness at OBO and reached out to critics for input. The bureau also proclaimed its new direction in 2008 by announcing a competition to select an architect for a new London embassy to replace the Grosvenor Square chancery, which is functionally obsolete. The competition guidelines and the selection of KieranTimberlake’s dramatic winning design in 2010 revealed a new focus on innovation and civic engagement.

The American Institute of Architects responded to OBO’s outreach by forming a multidisciplinary task force to assess the 21st-century embassy. Its 2009 report recommended an initiative comparable to the Design Excellence program that the General Services Administration had launched in 1994 to improve the quality and civic value of domestic federal buildings. Lydia Muniz joined OBO in 2009 and took on the task of crafting a

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similar program tailored to the specific needs of embassies and other diplomatic facilities.

According to Ed Feiner, the architect who created GSA's much-celebrated program, the goal of Design Excellence was to build not just high-performance workplaces, but distinguished civic landmarks of "lasting and inspirational" value. He calls these buildings "keepers." In 2012, when Namm left to become U.S. ambassador to Ecuador and Muniz succeeded him as OBO director, she was already committed to finding ways to build embassies that could also be called "keepers."

Muniz came to OBO from New York University, where she had a key role in management of an extensive real estate program that included branch campuses abroad. Before that, her

experience in international and public affairs included positions on Capitol Hill, with the Office of Management and Budget, and with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Beyond her management experience, she brought with her what she describes as "a strong belief in public architecture." "This has always been important to me," she says, "and it is one reason why I was brought in to OBO in the first place."

What Muniz encountered on arrival, however, was a Standard Embassy Design that came in three sizes (small, medium and large)—"like T-shirts at The Gap," as she puts it. There was little emphasis on design, she says, and even that was "antithetical to what architecture should be." In her view, architecture should be tailored to context. Good design is not about "prettifying" or



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At Embassy Beijing, left, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP integrated American hi-tech design with Chinese landscape tradition. The 10-acre walled compound, completed in 2008, features a 15-story office tower. Art in Embassies has installed Jeff Koons' sculpture, "Tulips," in the water garden. The embassy reflects precepts of the "Design Excellence" program, as does U.S. Consulate Guangzhou, also by SOM and shown, below, in the rendering of a view from the street. The consulate is due for completion in 2013.

SOM | ©Timothy Hursley

ornamenting a standard box; rather, it is about quality work at every level so that new buildings are engineered and constructed "for easy and economical maintenance over generations," Muniz says. Architecture should harness the best in American talent and know-how, she continues, "because it conveys who we are."

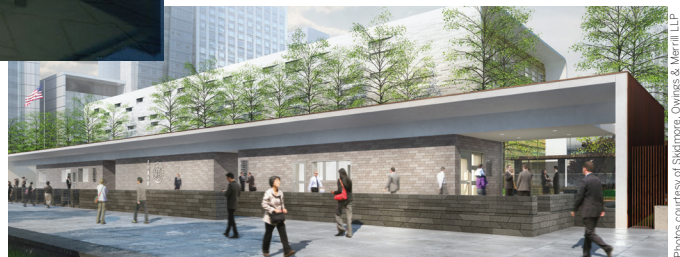
Muniz is quick to point out that her views have also been shaped by the opinions of many who questioned "the look of fortress America"—some on the Hill, some within the State Department and many on her own staff. Senators John Kerry, D-Mass., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind., are among those she singles out in that regard.

And she was particularly influenced by the example of the new U.S. embassy in Beijing (2008). "If [Embassy] Beijing could work so well and look so good," she asked, "why couldn't we do the same elsewhere?" She ascertained that DS was more than willing to encourage innovative solutions by setting security requirements based on performance criteria, then moved to develop guiding principles for the new program.

Guiding Principles Define Design Excellence

Those guiding principles include: construction of embassies and consulates that are maximally safe, secure, functional and attractive; acquisition of (smaller) sites in urban areas, where possible, to enhance symbolism and accessibility; selection of designs that are cost-effective, contextual, flexible and enduring; use of the latest engineering techniques to maximize sustainability and energy-efficiency and to minimize long-term costs and maintenance issues; the hiring of the best designers and contractors; integration of art (local and American) to showcase cultural exchange and enhance buildings and grounds; and care and preservation of historic properties and other cultural assets.

In describing the new Design Excellence program, Muniz makes it clear that its overall purpose is to further diplomacy, as



Photos courtesy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP

broadly defined by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. Although projects now underway—such as London, Jakarta and Guangzhou—will incorporate many of the same principles, the embassy compound in Mexico City will be the first fully completed under the new program. Its architects, just selected, will be Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects/Davis Brody Bond Architects; the project will go out for bid in 2015 and is scheduled for completion by 2019.

Mixing design-bid-build with design-build projects, Muniz hopes to reinstate architects and landscape architects as key OBO partners to stimulate innovation. With architect Casey Jones, her director of Design Excellence, she is making presentations to groups of architects in cities across the country. Asked why she is trying so hard to introduce a program to architects who already have such a vested interest in it, Muniz replies: "Many talented architects won't bother with OBO work for fear of its complexity, and they are reluctant to be sidelined in the overall process."

Muniz wants them "on board," and she wants them to see OBO as a "good client." OBO is also thinking about modifying the Industry Advisory Panel to create more opportunities for peer review.

Building a Constituency

If the Design Excellence initiative is to succeed and future embassies are to function effectively in a rapidly changing diplomatic landscape, OBO will have to build a constituency that extends far beyond architects. That is a daunting challenge.

Widening the pool of designers and builders willing and able to compete for this work is a good thing, but it overlooks the value of experience. Moreover, getting buy-in from leaders across the political spectrum is quite another matter. The same is true for users, ranging from State Department diplomats, who may want to be more accessible, to detailed employees from an array of government agencies, who may not.

Susan Johnson, president of the American Foreign Service Association, represents many users and personally applauds the new program. A career diplomat who has served in such challenging security environments such as Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mauritius and Russia, she agrees that fortress embassies have “impaired the conduct of diplomacy” in many places.

An embassy is often the first and only contact with America, Johnson notes, so its message carries particular impact. While there are locales where any traces of U.S. presence become “targets for ire,” she adds, no amount of security is adequate “where

the host government cannot or will not protect us.”

Despite the constancy of threats, Johnson suggests the need for more “diplomatic discretion,” now often severely constrained by security regulations, and recognition of “acceptable risk,” understood by diplomats but hard for the public to tolerate. No one suggests confining all city police officers to walled compounds, she says, but the risk of dying in the line of duty for a Foreign Service officer is roughly equal to the risk facing a D.C. police officer. “Are we ready to accept that?” she asks.

In the location and design of its embassies, the State Department aspires not just to build diplomatic workplaces, but to introduce America to a curious and eager, but often hostile audience. Public diplomacy programs aspire to do the very same thing by speaking directly to citizens around the world, not indirectly through high- or low-profile architecture. It might be useful to establish a dialogue between PD initiatives and the Design Excellence program, bearing in mind the fact that inno-



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Recent attacks on U.S. facilities in Sanaa (shown above), Cairo and Benghazi raise questions about overall security and diplomatic discretion.

To what extent are we willing to acknowledge that diplomacy is not risk-free?

bombs, not mob attacks. It is certainly possible to add to local guard forces, provide them with better equipment and training, augment military coverage for diplomatic posts, and increase security upgrades. But Congress is not really interested in paying for such measures, judging by how it has cut the State Department budget over the past two years, and calls from key leaders for further reductions.

Twenty-five years ago, it made good sense to introduce some standardization because embassies share so many features and complex

variations in technology also affect diplomatic practice.

If the Internet has made the world more interconnected and given us new ways to communicate, for example, it is also likely to have an impact on embassy design. Some federal agencies may no longer need to operate out of embassies abroad if what they do can be handled from Washington via the Internet. So there are many ways in which planning for the future of these facilities hinges on planning that spans the State Department.

There is also a need to strengthen ties between users and builders. A small step toward bridging that gap would be to add a representative of the Foreign Service to the OBO advisory panel, as in its original 1954 incarnation.

The Limits of Physical Security

Recent attacks on U.S. facilities in Cairo, Sanaa and Benghazi prompt questions about overall security and diplomatic discretion. But instead of leading to calls for more physical security, they suggest a need for more intelligence and other sorts of security that cannot be built of brick or stone. Those attacks should not impede the new program. Rather they underscore the importance of “being there,” and the value of design flexibility to match changing circumstances.

They also argue for more focus on rehabilitation of older structures at all locations. Existing buildings rarely meet new standards, yet it is impossible to replace them all. And these latest incidents remind us that blast-resistant construction and setback requirements are designed to minimize damage from

systems, but the one-size-fits-all fortress approach was not appropriate for symbolically significant facilities that needed to be right-sized to locale and purpose. Moreover, suggestions that workplaces could be made “secure” by the application of robust construction standards fail to acknowledge the reality that diplomats, like Ambassador Chris Stevens, killed in the Sept. 11 attack in Benghazi, have to travel about to do their jobs well, embassy personnel have to shop and eat and sleep outside of most embassy confines—and host governments vary widely in their willingness and ability to protect foreign missions from attack.

To what extent will our foreign policy maintain its commitment to diplomacy as a way of furthering America’s global interests? To what extent are we willing to acknowledge that diplomacy is not risk-free? Answers to these questions will shape our embassy architecture.

As Nicholas Burns, former U.S. ambassador and under secretary of State for political affairs, points out: “While security is critical, we cannot let it rule everything we do or else we might as well just close up shop in many parts of the world.” Pulling out of danger zones may be a real option to many, but it is unacceptable to most. Instead, seeking a “rational balance” should be our goal, Burns says.

For the Design Excellence program to realize its potential, there will have to be a shared commitment to enhancing America’s foreign presence, maintaining engagement—and finding that balance. ■

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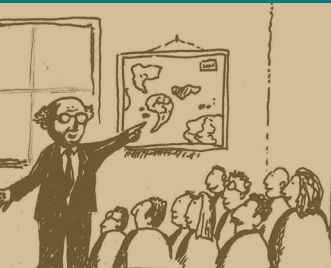
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NITIN KUNDU: A SUCCESS STORY

