Deconstructing the American Embassy

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Deconstructing the American Embassy

Thesis Prep Book
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abstract

deconstruct, verb.
1. analyze (a text or a linguistic or conceptual system) by deconstruction, typically in order to expose its hidden internal assumptions and contradictions and subvert its apparent significance or unity.
2. reduce (something) to its constituent parts in order to reinterpret it.

diplomacy, noun.
1. The management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of the diplomatist; skill or address in the conduct of international intercourse and negotiations.
2. Skill or address in the management of relations of any kind; artful management in dealing with others.

Deconstructing Diplomacy

The field condition between the city and the existing embassy structure is the space where cultures collide and where the architect must articulate the conditions of exchange. The buffer zone is the physical space that represents political negotiation. The retrofitted embassy in Paris has expanded its primary security perimeter far into the urban fabric. This public space has become semi-public, characterized by surveillance, Marine guards and restricted vehicle access. My thesis asserts that embassy function and symbolism can be manifest and characterized in this buffer. The perception of the embassy will be articulated by icon and iconography in this interstitial space between sovereign territories.

Effective diplomacy is only possible with mutual respect and recognition of sovereignty. Historically, the construction of embassies is a reciprocal endeavor that conveys a serious commitment to diplomacy. In times of political unrest, the evacuation of diplomatic personnel indicates that peaceful negotiation has failed. The situation is more complicated today. Diplomats are often kept abroad despite danger in order to maintain an illusion of diplomacy. Increasingly violent terrorist attacks that target embassies highlight the embassies’ symbolic significance and also their vulnerability. The pressure for an embassy to be both diplomatic and also extremely secure has precipitated a singular design approach: standardization.

The standard embassy design (SED) considers security the primary concern at the expense of diplomatic communication. These projects are removed from the city to suburban or rural neighborhoods. The system is a stark comparison to iconic embassies of the 1950’s by Saarinen, Breuer, Durrell-Stone, and others. The symbolism of the embassy has been reduced to the seal, the flag, AND the eagle-- albeit on the 10’ tall perimeter wall. I propose completely divorcing the symbolism from the structure. In effect, this removes the target from the building itself.

In Learning from Las Vegas, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown reconsider the iconic and the generic. Their investigation emphasizes the perception of the embassy in its context. The symbolism of the embassy as icon is not sustainable because of the impending terrorist threat. The proportion of the entrance to Saarinen’s project in London is only experienced after passing through the blockaded street on foot and moving through the exterior security checkpoint. This is the reality of designing secure diplomatic space today and the attention to this space has not yet been closely considered.

“There are those who find fault with architecture that conceals its purpose… but such criticism misses its mark when a building, like an embassy, has more than one purpose.”

(Loeffler) This quote is at the crux of my thesis. The embassy cannot be a symbol and an instrument for diplomacy. Security must be designed just as any other aspect of a building. The process should be site specific instead of standardized. The mediation of the different cultures and people occurs in the contested space between the embassy and the city.

Each function of the embassy must be isolated in order to be more effective. The visa application and passport services need not be beyond four security checkpoints when two is adequate. The local community services are likewise separated from the building. Other aspects relating to high security will not be burdened with maintaining an illusion of diplomacy.

Contemporary diplomatic functions have outgrown the typological embassy building. The barricaded sidewalks and streets are evidence that additional space is required to conduct business safely. Retrofitted embassies in London, Paris, and Berlin expand their security perimeter into the urban condition to maintain the architectural icon of diplomacy. New embassies should utilize the contested zone between the building and the city instead of relocating in rural neighborhoods. It is the purpose of this thesis to enable functional and symbolic diplomatic exchange at the location of intersecting sovereignty.
context

Architectural Lineage

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Theory & Discourse

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3 Eras in Embassy Design

The lineage of embassy design is three significant periods in history. The first is characterized by the recognition of sovereign states that begins with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This is the environment in which the United States first begins to design its foreign diplomatic outposts. The second era begins after World War II when the United States becomes the preeminent world power. The projects designed during this period are in the International Style. Projects are completed by architects such as Eero Saarinen, Marcel Breuer and Edward Durrel Stone. They are the icons of the architecture of diplomacy. The third, and current, era is one of ramped up security to address the real threat from radical terrorist organizations. These events precipitated the Stand Embassy Design (SED). It is time for a new approach to embassy design to foster a new era of diplomacy.
**E1 | sovereignty**

The treaty not only signalled the end of the destructive wars that had ravaged Europe, it also represented the triumph of national sovereignty over Habsburg Empire. The treaties’ regulations became integral to the constitutional law of the Holy Roman Empire, and stood as a precursor to later large international treaties and thereby the development of international law in general. This was the environment of the initial American embassies. The embassy in Paris fits into the historical lineage founded on the sovereignty of individual states.

**E2 | hegemony**

The post-WWII era saw an incredible expansion to American diplomatic missions. The international style represented democracy, freedom, independence.

**E3 | vulnerability**

The modern embassies of the 1950’s and 1960’s proved to be seriously vulnerable to attacks from radical islamic groups around the world. Attacks in Beirut in 1983 highlights the increasing mortality and frequency of terrorist acts directed at diplomatic buildings that continues to this day.
Terrorist Attacks on US Diplomatic Missions

Ankara, Turkey
Jan 27, 1958

Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Sept 26, 1971

Manila, Philippines
Aug 12, 1972

Nicosia, Cyprus
Aug 19, 1974

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Aug 4, 1975

Islamabad, Pakistan
Nov 21, 1979

Tripoli, Libya
Dec 2, 1979

Beirut, Lebanon
April 18, 1983

Kuwait City, Kuwait
Dec 12, 1983

Beirut, Lebanon
Sept 20, 1984

Bogota, Colombia
Nov 3, 1984

Lisbon, Portugal
Feb 12, 1986

Jakarta, Indonesia
May 14, 1986

Rome, Italy
June 9, 1987

Bogota, Colombia
Sept 17, 1989

Lima, Peru
July 27, 1993

Moscow, Russia
Sept 13, 1995

Beirut, Lebanon
June 21, 1998

Nairobi, Kenya & Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
Aug 7, 1998

Calcutta, India
Jan 22, 2002

Karachi, Pakistan
June 14, 2002

Denpasar, Indonesia
Oct 12, 2002

Islamabad, Pakistan
Feb 28, 2003

Tashkent, Uzbekistan
June 30, 2004

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Dec 6, 2004

Karachi, Pakistan
Mar 2, 2006

Damascus, Syria
Sept 2, 2006

Athens, Greece
Jan 12, 2007

Sana’a, Yemen
Mar 18, 2008

Istanbul, Turkey
July 8, 2008

Sana’a, Yemen
Sept 17, 2008

Peshawar, Pakistan
April 5, 2010

Benghazi, Libya
Sept 11, 2012

* Attacks on US Embassies, Author
8 Enemies of the State, US State Department

National media coverage of World Trade Center Attacks

Osama bin Laden advocating jihad in propaganda video
“Complex programs and settings require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.”

- Robert Venturi

methodology 1

site | paris
Commericialism is to Venturi

On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day’s bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from the highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars. The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road.

Diplomacy is to Me

Along the Champs Elysees the bulletproof embassy windows contain no people. There may be signs declaring the existence of the US Embassy, but they are to be read by American pedestrians passing through the security perimeter. The building itself is set back from the road and half hidden, as are most diplomatic posts, by bollards, trees, security guards, surveillance cameras and defensible walls. The courtyard is in front, not in the middle, because it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is palace-like designed in the style of its neighboring buildings because French law requires the maintenance of Gabriel’s plan for the Place de la Concorde, and the palazzo typology is historically indicative of political buildings; its architecture is neutral because it is disguised in its context.
Embassy Program

300,000 sf project

Visitor Services

Main Entrance
Consular Entrance
Service Entrance

Resource Center 5000sf

Employee Services

Living Quarters 20,000sf
Offices 10,000sf

Office Support 5,000sf

Exterior

Public Plaza
Consular Plaza
Promenade
Garden
National Library of France
Paris, 1989

Plans of the various levels
methodology 3

precedents
Location: London, England
Date: 1956
Architect: Eero Saarinen
Size: TBA
Lesson: Retrofitted security expansion

The modernist Saarinen embassy was deemed unsafe until it could expand its security perimeter into its urban context.

The redefinition of diplomatic exchange is formally the space in between the embassy and the city.

The icon of diplomacy is compromised so the space of its function and symbolism must be adjusted.
Location: Berlin, Germany
Date: 1995
Architect: Venturi Scott Brown
Size: TBA

Lesson: Signage and Symbol in the Embassy


The embassy has been highly criticized for its appearance on the public square.
Location: Benghazi, Libya
Date: 2005
Architect: Unknown
Size: TBA

Lesson: Failure of Rural Sites

The attack on September 11, 2012 highlights the failure of contemporary embassy design. The perception of safety in the rural community has proven to be just an illusion.

The diplomatic sacrifice of locating the embassy outside the city must be changed.
Separate from the city.
Location: New Delhi, India
Date: 1956
Architect: Edward Durrel Stone
Size: TBA

Lesson: Quintessential Modernism

The embassy in New Delhi is one of the preeminent examples of international style diplomatic structures. Additionally, it’s still being used today.

The brise-soleil, slender columns and carefully considered materials and proportions exemplify the iconic diplomatic embassy of the 1950’s.
Symbolism | Delamination, Deconstruction

38 Delamination | Author
The embassy in Cairo is devoid of overt symbolism. It is also devoid of anything diplomatic. The brutalist building is imposing and separated from its urban context. The barbed wire and thick concrete block wall conveys the american presence in Egypt.
Glass Facade System

The literal transparency implies a figurative transparency and with understanding comes trust.

Barbed Wire Security Barrier

This aggressive approach to security only breeds contempt.

Security Barrier w/ Architectural Mask

Although it is disingenuous it is the answer to the problem.
The Morphosis proposal is compelling because it internalizes the American architectural symbolism. Instead of the screaming eagle, the image of the nation is protected within the embassy’s office block.
The design by Kieran Timberlake emphasizes sustainability and landscape. The structure is embedded in an undulating garden with a large reflecting pool (moat).
48 America Sheds, Author
methodology 4

secure typologies
methodology 5

security systems
appendix
Divorce symbolism and function

Symbolic Diplomacy

Functional Diplomacy
Nairobi, Kenya 1998

Beirut, Lebanon 1983

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 1998

Nairobi, Kenya 1998

Yemen, 2012
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STANDARD EMBASSY DESIGN: SMALL*</th>
<th>STANDARD EMBASSY DESIGN: MEDIUM*</th>
<th>STANDARD EMBASSY DESIGN: LARGE*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimated construction cost</td>
<td>Estimated construction cost</td>
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<td>20 months</td>
<td>38 months</td>
<td>42 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: Joseph W. Truscott, managing director, Project
Figure Credits

1 Collage Image: AIA Adapting Standard Embassy Design to Specific Sites
3c Protests in Sanaa, Yemen http://www.thepressproject.gr/article/27841/pagoreusi-tis-prosbasis-sto-YouTube-sto-fganistan
5a US Cultural Sites
5b Delano and Aldrich
5c Saarinen
5d http://www.huffingtonpost.com/j-michael-welton/edward-durell-stone_b_1195116.html
5f http://london.usembassy.gov/new_embassy.html
5g http://france.usembassy.gov/
5h http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Edmond_%C3%A9mile_Delacroix_-_La_libert%C3%A9_guidant_le_peuple.jpg
5i http://www.mamak.bel.tr/galeri/fotograflari-ataturk.aspx
5j http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/action/ExternalIdSearch?id=520748
5k http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/40/Beirutembassy.jpg
5l state department publication 1998
5m state department publication 1998
6c Protests in Sanaa, Yemen http://www.thepressproject.gr/article/27841/pagoreusi-tis-prosbasis-sto-YouTube-sto-fganistan
8a http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm
8c http://politiken.dk/udland/ECE1270584/sikkerhedskilde-bin-laden-skulle-likvideres/
19 Paris Collage
23a http://www.flickr.com/photos/jessicahitch/4788945843/lightbox/
23b Breuer
23d SAFE AIA Design for Diplomacy
29 PariserPlatz
37 New Delhi Collage
52b http://icisp.com/watch/john-macdonald/2012/august_07.html
52c http://2securitygroup.com/2012/10/23/vehicle-anti-ram-electric-bollard/
52d http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/safe/securityguards
Annotated Bibliography


This is the foundation of my architectural theory that investigations symbolism, signage in the communicative properties of architecture in their urban contexts.


This articulates the methods of designing the space between the city and the embassy


This text informs the understanding of the power of architectural space and the state.


Information on embassy precedents not for the USA


This is my primary informational text on the history of embassy design and how it has changed from 1931 until today. It follows the bureaucratic processes and the influence of the architects


This book also illustrates American embassies over the course of history. This book also goes into more detail on the influence of these projects in their sites abroad and the foreign policy implications and intentions.


Text produced by the AIA for architects designing new US embassies


Coverage of Saarinen’s project in London as well as his influence in other diplomatic projects


This is the handbook for everything that architects can do to design secure buildings from materials and surveillance components and security systems to the articulation of entrances


Additional information on Saarinen’s embassy in London