Deconstructing the American Embassy

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Thesis Prep Book
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11.23.2012
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.” (Loffler) 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.

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context

Architectural Lineage

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

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.

6 Peace of Westphalia . Iwo Jima . Sanaa, Yemen . Refer to Figure Credits
Terrorist Attacks on US Diplomatic Missions

Ankara, Turkey: Jan 27, 1958
Phnom Penh, Cambodia: 1 Dead, Sep 26, 1971
Manila, Philippines: Aug 12, 1972
Nicosia, Cyprus: 2 Dead, Aug 19, 1974
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Aug 4, 1975
Islamabad, Pakistan: 2 Dead, Nov 21, 1979
Tripoli, Libya: Dec 2, 1979
Beirut, Lebanon: 63 Dead, Apr 18, 1983
Kuwait City, Kuwait: 6 Dead, Dec 12, 1983
Beirut, Lebanon: 24 Dead, Sep 20, 1984
Bogota, Colombia: 1 Dead, Nov 3, 1984
Lisbon, Portugal: Feb 12, 1986
Jakarta, Indonesia: May 14, 1986
Rome, Italy: June 9, 1987
Bogota, Colombia: Sep 17, 1989
Lima, Peru: Jul 27, 1993
 Moscow, Russia: Sep 13, 1995
Beirut, Lebanon: Jun 21, 1998
Calcutta, India: 5 Dead, Jan 22, 2002
Karachi, Pakistan: 12 Dead, Jun 14, 2002
Denpasar, Indonesia: Oct 12, 2002
Islamabad, Pakistan: 2 Dead, Feb 28, 2003
Tashkent, Uzbekistan: 2 Dead, Jun 30, 2004
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: 9 Dead, Dec 6, 2004
Karachi, Pakistan: 2 Dead, Mar 2, 2006
Damascus, Syria: 4 Dead, Sept 2, 2006
Athens, Greece: Jan 12, 2007
Sana’a, Yemen: 2 Dead, Mar 18, 2008
Istanbul, Turkey: 6 Dead, July 9, 2008
Sana’a, Yemen: 16 Dead, Sept 17, 2008
Peshawar, Pakistan: 8 Dead, Apr 5, 2010
Benghazi, Libya: 4 Dead, 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
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.
Place de la Concorde. Paris, France
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.
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. Author
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.
Location: Cairo, Egypt
Date: 1985
Architect: Metcalf & Associates
Size: TBA

Lesson: Fortress

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.
Location: London, England  
Date: 2010  
Architect: Kieran Timberlake  
Size: TBA  

Lesson: Sustainable Image  

The design by Kieran Timberlake emphasizes sustainability and landscape.  
The structure is embedded in an undulating garden with a large reflecting pool (moat).
methodology 4

secure typologies
methodology 5

security systems
appendix
Divorce symbolism and function

Symbolic Diplomacy

Functional Diplomacy

Divorce Symbol and Function, Author
Beirut, Lebanon 1983

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania 1998

Nairobi, Kenya 1998

Yemen, 2012
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/newembassy.html
5g http://france.usembassy.gov/
5h http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix_-_La_libert%C3%A9_guidant_le_peuple.jpg
5i http://www.mamak.bel.tr/galeri/fotografilar/ataaturk.aspx
5j http://archweb.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/otherr/des/123085.htm
8c http://www.politiken.dk/udland/ECE1270584/sikkerhedskilde-bin-laden-skulle-likvideres/

19 Paris Collage

23a http://www.flickr.com/photos/jessicahtilich/478845843/lightbox/
23b Breuer
23d SAFE AIA Design for Diplomacy

29 PariserPlatz

37 New Delhi Collage

52a http://www.pictopix.com/510/camaras-en-vivo/http%3C%7Cwww.*maparaistopma.com%7Cimages%7Cmapa01*gt/
52c http://www.securitygroup.com/2012/10/23/vehicle-anti-ram-electric-bollard/
52d http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/marine_security_guards
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.

Information on Breuer’s project in the Hague.

Information on several of Venturi’s projects including the embassy in Berlin.

Journal article that discusses the new embassy competition in London 2010.


Information on the Place de la Concorde on its history and development.