

Embassy Architecture: Time to Stop, Review and Rethink

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The physical face of the United States overseas is often the embassy building. While technically, it may be the ambassador, he/she usually changes every three years, and most citizens of the host country do not meet the Chief of Mission but they do see the embassy. It is there for decades. Buildings make a statement about who we are and what we stand for. Architecture matters. Design is important.

After the tragic bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania followed by the attack on the World Trade Center, new requirements were imposed on embassy and consulate constructions. Diplomatic security became involved in the design process. The requirement of a 100 foot setback on all four sides of an embassy makes it impossible in many cases to build an embassy in the central part of most capital cities.

Consequently, new American embassies are now located away from the downtown or historic part of a city as evidenced by our embassies in Zagreb, Croatia; Tunis, Tunisia; and most recently in London where a new embassy is proposed for an isolated site in a light industry zone south of the Thames partially enclosed by a moat. Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle do not have moats for protection or aesthetics. I should acknowledge that the Department of State did appoint a commission to study designs for the proposed new London embassy, although the commission members were not unanimous in their vote on the final design. However, design commissions should be used worldwide, and incumbent ambassadors should feel free to weigh in on the design when it is so obviously unattractive and projects an image of America in fear.

These embassy designs invariably connote a fortress (or even a prison) with narrow windows. Often, these buildings are just plain ugly and stick out like sore thumbs. The cost of these new structures is incredibly high. American taxpayers will spend over \$1 billion (yes, one billion) in London for the new embassy. In Krakow, a new consulate (if built)—where only ten American employees would work—will exceed \$80 million, and \$600,000 has already been spent in site surveys, trips and appraisals over the past 12 years with nothing to show for the effort to date. If Poland reaches visa waiver status, the number of Americans working in Krakow will decrease, reducing the need for a new consulate. It would be interesting to know the total cost to date for the proposed Krakow facility. I suspect it is staggering for such a small post with so little security risk.

Why does this continue? How can it be changed?

First, I agree that some countries, due to a high-risk threat, require these fortress-like facilities (regrettable but true). But this is not the case in every nation. We need not build in Iceland, New Zealand, Slovenia or Poland the kind of embassy we would need in Pakistan, Lebanon or Iraq. The law needs to be changed to allow flexibility by the State Department to construct embassies consistent with the security threat in a given nation.

The one-size-fits-all formula results in high cost and inferior architecture. The price tag for the current system would—and should—shock the American taxpayer.

Second, for this situation to change, it will take a bipartisan consensus to review the law eight years after its enactment and to determine if revisions are warranted from both a security and an architectural standpoint. The impetus for this review must come from not only the seventh floor of the State Department but also from Congressional leadership. It is my hope that Secretary Clinton (who inherited this problem) will consider naming a task force of professionals from the fields of architecture, security, diplomacy (both career and non-career ambassadors) and former members of the House and Senate to review this process and make recommendations.

Another institution available to the Secretary of State that can play a helpful role is the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE). FAPE, through its successful Art in Embassies program, assists with enhancing embassy residence interiors through the installation of American art. The Art in Embassies program should be expanded to include art for the embassy (chancery), particularly for the consular section where American art would be seen by host country nationals who come to apply for visas. Secretary Clinton has a unique opportunity to turn the tide in a better direction than what she inherited.

Occasionally, host governments have exerted sufficient concern as to produce design changes. Our new embassy in Berlin does not meet the 100 foot setback requirement because the German government wanted the American embassy to be located in the central part of Berlin. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell granted a waiver. In Phnom Penh, the window design was substantially altered when the Cambodian government reflecting the views of Buddhist monks in the temple across the street from the then new embassy protested the walls and narrow windows facing Buddha (a perceived insult). The monks prevailed.

When I arrived in Poland as a new ambassador in July 2004, I inherited a seven year old effort to construct a new consulate in Krakow, the ancient capital of Poland. The current consulate, which has been there for 36 years, is one block off the main square in the city center. Countless teams from the State Department have visited Krakow, but they have been unable to make a definitive decision on the new consulate owing to escalating costs and the inability to find a site anywhere close to center city which meets the 100 foot setback requirement. One option seriously considered on my watch was a site 13 miles from the city center with no public transportation to it. Only my direct intervention and opposition caused State's Bureau of Overseas Building Operations (OBO) to reconsider.

When I discovered \$80 million had been programmed for this new facility where only ten Americans would work, I informed OBO that this was excessive spending, and American taxpayers if they ever discovered it would be outraged. Members of Congress would be upset as well. By the time I left my ambassadorial post in September 2009, I had persuaded State to lower the priority for this project from the top 20 to the bottom 20. However, since my departure, OBO has apparently revisited the project and sent still

another team to look for sites in Krakow. In my view, after five years as ambassador to Poland, a new consulate in Krakow is wasteful, unnecessary and should be shelved. The last mission statement on my tenure reflected this view.

However, action is needed soon to reverse this trend worldwide. OBO is in the business of building new embassies as long as Congress will vote the money. Once a new embassy is built we are saddled with it for decades if not centuries. OBO loves its projects and will only slow down if directed by Congress or the seventh floor of the State Department.

In my former life, I was Mayor of Knoxville, Tennessee where I was fortunate to attend the City Design Institute founded by Charleston Mayor Joe Riley (recent 2009 National Medal of Arts recipient from President Obama) where Mayors, even if they are not architects, are taught to pay close attention to the design of all city buildings. Mayors generally are not architects by background. The only qualification to be a Mayor is winning more votes than your opponent plus age and residency. The Design Institute teaches these new urban leaders to be the chief architect of the public buildings in their cities during their terms in office. This is an important responsibility which I took seriously as Knoxville built a new airport, several fire halls and a convention center on my watch. Our public utility even moved into an historic building, thus saving it from demolition.

The leaders of the State Department can serve as the chief architects of American embassies across the globe. They should not leave this responsibility to OBO alone. These leaders can truly make a positive difference in the structural image of America by asking the hard questions and insisting on change where appropriate. Members of Congress can do the same, as they too are currently blamed for the fortress-like buildings we are seeing worldwide. I am not convinced this blaming is accurate or fair, but it is what I am told repeatedly.

The approach of emphasizing security over design also causes American personnel difficulty in interacting with citizens of the host nation. Citizens do not enjoy coming to the embassy where they are searched numerous times and must cross the concrete barriers which surround the embassy. Some of this security infrastructure may be essential, but efforts must be made to humanize it.

American embassies should reflect the best of America. Our best architects should be involved. The buildings should be user friendly and reflect an openness and the spirit of freedom where possible. They should reflect America's highest hopes and aspirations. Those are the attributes which have brought people to our shores. Fortress-like buildings reflect fear and worry. They do not invite people to visit or meet Americans. Public diplomacy is harmed today by our overseas building program. Embassy buildings will last over a century. Our public diplomacy changes with each administration. We can do better. We must do better. The Council of American Ambassadors can lead the way.