

# Constructive Diplomacy: The US Department of State's Overseas Building Program

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**A**braham Lincoln appropriately described the role of official buildings in the national consciousness when, challenged about the cost of constructing the Capitol dome during the Civil War, he observed, "When the people see the dome rising, it will be a sign that we intend the union to go on." While the facilities constructed by the Department of State's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) are on foreign land, their role in announcing to the world that the United States is a presence of stability, reliability, and permanence is as valuable a symbol of our democracy as the many official buildings that fly the flag in the United States.

OBO traces its origins to the Foreign Service Building Commission, which was created in 1926 under the Porter Act as a result of public outrage over the state of American posts overseas. Several significant events have propelled periods of rapid change in OBO and its predecessor organizations. Following the attack on the US Embassy in Beirut in 1983, the Inman Commission charged the then Office of Foreign Buildings Operations with replacing embassies and consulates that failed to meet basic security standards. A lack of appropriate sites and funding resulted in the Department completing less than a quarter of the planned Inman projects.

Fifteen years later, following the tragic bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, the Secretary of State formed the Overseas Presence Advisory Panel to study America's profile abroad and the condition of the Department's facilities. The Panel's final report made both broad and specific recommendations for the future of the Department's building program.

In its review, the Panel reported on unsafe, overcrowded, deteriorating, and "shockingly shabby" conditions at a number of US embassies and consulates. Among the observations was a finding that over 85 percent of the diplomatic facilities abroad were vulnerable to future attacks. The panel's report led to the 1999 enactment of the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA), which codified security requirements such as 100 feet of setback between the building and street.

Among the actions taken by the Department was the elevation of the Office of Foreign Buildings Operations to the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations. The newly designated Bureau was tasked with replacing more than 180 aging embassies that did not meet all security standards, a project without precedent in Department history. To achieve the goal, the Department worked closely with the Office of Management and Budget and the Congress to ensure that a reliable funding commitment was put in place.

Since the 1999 enactment of SECCA, OBO has completed 77 new diplomatic facilities, with another 34 under design or construction. We have moved more than 23,000 people into safer, more secure, and more functional facilities, a major accomplishment. At the same time, we continue to address the important question of how to balance an aggressive, security-driven building program with the need for diplomatic facilities that represent American values and are culturally and contextually appropriate.

To this end, and in response to very useful input from the American Institute of Architects, key congressional interlocutors, and others, OBO rolled out a Design Excellence program in April 2011 that builds upon the success of our existing program while more holistically approaching the design and construction of diplomatic facilities. (The Guiding Principles of Design Excellence can be found on pages 27-29.) Design Excellence will deliver facilities that represent the best of American architecture, engineering, technology, art, and culture while providing the best long-term value to the American taxpayer. Designs will be more responsive to their local context, to include the site, its surroundings, and the local culture and climate. As an example, where feasible OBO has acquired and is considering acquisition of sites in or closer to city centers, rather than defaulting to large sites in suburban areas where required security setback is easier to obtain. Buildings will make greater use of contextually appropriate and durable materials. We must have diplomatic facilities that are respected but also respectful of their environments. On her first day at the Department of State in January 2009, Secretary Clinton told employees, “This is going to be a challenging time and it will require 21<sup>st</sup> century tools and solutions to meet our problems and seize our opportunities.” OBO has adopted Design Excellence to serve as both a tool and a solution to advance a new generation of secure and sustainable facilities that support the Department’s mission worldwide.

In the vanguard of Design Excellence is the design concept for our planned new embassy in London. The architectural firm Kieran Timberlake, which won the design competition for London, has put forth a design that provides a street-level experience that respects the urban texture of the existing landscape and contributes to the development of the public realm. At the same time, the design will minimize the impact of security measures on the surrounding streets and will actually create new public spaces. The new London embassy will demonstrate exceptional environmental leadership that is at or beyond the current leading edge practice. Kieran Timberlake and OBO’s shared goal is to provide a facility that is carbon neutral, with photovoltaic panels built into the scrim and a self-sufficient water system. These features will allow OBO to apply for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) Platinum certification with the US Green Building Council and BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) Outstanding certification, the UK counterpart to LEED®.



*Rendering by Kieran Timberlake*

While sustainability is a component of our Design Excellence program, it's not a new idea at OBO. We have actively embraced sustainable design and construction for the last decade, including innovations at existing buildings. Photovoltaic installations in Geneva, constructed wetlands in Nairobi, and the world's first large-tonnage, air-cooled, magnetic-levitation-bearing (MagLev) chiller installed in Tokyo are just a few of the sustainable building features we've implemented at embassy sites around the world. Additionally, OBO has mandated that all new construction projects will be designed to achieve LEED® Silver certification at a minimum.

In full appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between a building's design and its art collection, OBO's Office of Art in Embassies plays a vital role in our nation's public diplomacy by providing world-class art installations at our embassies and consulates. Each exhibit emphasizes the confluences between US and local cultures. Art in Embassies curators collaborate with American and host nation artists, in particular identifying US artists who have been inspired by the culture of the host country.

As OBO continues to evolve as an organization, a vital link with private-sector counterparts is the Bureau's Industry Advisory Panel (IAP). The bi-annual IAP meetings provide a forum for OBO senior management to discuss current ideas, concepts, and best practices. The meetings are open to the public and welcome more than 100 registered participants.

All of us at OBO—real estate professionals, architects, engineers, construction and facility managers, security professionals, and other team members—are committed to meeting the challenges that lay before us. We are proud of our history and past accomplishments, but are eager to continue to improve on our successes. Our primary purpose is designing, constructing, furnishing, and maintaining facilities around the world that function effectively while properly representing the United States. Within this overall mission, we must continue to exert the vigilance and forethought necessary to ensure the safety of all personnel associated with diplomatic facilities, and do so without sacrificing the aesthetic and cultural aspects of our mission.

Senator John Kerry recently stated that our diplomatic posts “should reflect the best of US design, architecture, sustainability, and technology while maintaining security as the top priority. Our embassies and consulates are the frontlines of US diplomacy and often are the first contact people in the foreign countries have with the United States. As the Honorable Daniel Patrick Moynihan strongly affirmed, they should reflect ‘the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American National Government.’” Our buildings abroad symbolize the values and aspirations of the American people. At OBO, we are proud of the leading role we play in constructive diplomacy.

## Annex

# Guiding Principles of Design Excellence in Diplomatic Facilities

Concerned that the caliber of federal construction was declining, in 1962, President Kennedy convened an Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Architecture to ensure that such architecture continued to represent American ideals—from dignity, stability and vigor to embodying the finest architecture of its time.

That Ad Hoc Committee, chaired by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, set forth Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture. Those guiding principles are just as relevant today as they were nearly 50 years ago—although today they would very likely be expanded to include the importance of security, sustainability and flexibility in our resource constrained and rapidly changing world.

The Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO)—following in the footsteps of the General Services Administration (GSA) and the Design Excellence Program it developed nearly 15 years ago—is renewing its commitment to Design Excellence and developing a Design Excellence Program for US Embassy and Consulate Facilities.

The Guiding Principles of a new Department of State program, based on the 1962 Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture, are articulated below. These Principles will serve as the foundation of a comprehensive effort that will include, in the coming months, the development of a Strategic Plan which, in turn, will be the basis for OBO Design Excellence Policies and Procedures.

### Guiding Principles

Delivering Design Excellence is a comprehensive process that seeks to utilize the best methods, technologies and staff abilities. Each office, person and action in OBO will contribute to the realization of this goal. If the guiding principles below are applied, OBO will produce facilities that are outstanding in all respects. OBO project teams are challenged to apply all of these principles, coordinate their efforts and deliver built embassy complexes that represent the best of American architecture, engineering, technology, art and culture.

- ◆ **Purpose and Function:** Embassies and consulates have two essential purposes: to be safe and functional and inspiring places for the conduct of diplomacy and to physically represent the US government to the host nation. A facility that represents the best of American architecture, design, engineering and construction will be an appropriate workspace, and will also be contextually appropriate and become a respected landmark—representing the best of American government, enterprise and culture—in the host nation.

- ◆ **Site:** The site and location of an embassy has practical as well as symbolic implications. OBO will develop sites that best represent the US government and its goals, and enhance the conduct of diplomacy. Whenever possible, sites will be selected in urban areas allowing US embassies and consulates to contribute to the civic and urban fabric of host cities. Special attention will be paid to the general ensemble of surrounding buildings, streets and public spaces of which embassies and consulates will form a part.
- ◆ **Design:** The design of buildings and sites is a comprehensive process of understanding and balancing requirements and incorporating them into a thoughtfully conceived cohesive and coherent whole. OBO will evaluate designs on the basis of their success in skillfully balancing requirements and on how well the design represents the United States to the host nation. Designs are to be functionally simple and spatially flexible to meet changing needs and be enduring over time.

An official embassy style will be avoided. Buildings are to be welcoming while representing dignity, stability, innovation, humanity and openness. Ostentation is not appropriate. Designs will be cost effective, employing an economy of means and methods.

The design will be responsive to its context, to include the site, its surroundings, and the local culture and climate. The design will make use of contextually appropriate and durable materials.

The grounds and landscaping will be as important as the architecture and together are to be conceived as an integrated whole. The grounds will be viewed as functional and representational space, and will be sustainable, include indigenous plantings and incorporate existing site resources, such as mature trees.

- ◆ **Engineering:** The engineering of facilities will incorporate the most advanced methods, systems, technologies and materials appropriate to the facility and local conditions, including the site, climate, natural hazards and the practical reality of construction, operations and maintenance in the host nation.
- ◆ **Safety and Security:** The safety and security of staff and visitors is paramount. Designs and construction will meet or exceed all security and safety standards and specifications. Architects and engineers will be challenged to design and develop ever improving methods, materials and solutions and to thoughtfully integrate these into overall designs.
- ◆ **Sustainability:** Buildings and grounds will incorporate sustainable design and energy efficiency, and these features will be integrated into their design. Construction, maintenance and operations practices will be sustainable. Particular attention will be given to the climate, context and site conditions.

- ◆ **Architectural and Engineering Professional Services:** OBO will seek to hire the highest quality of American architects and engineers to produce the best designs. Their selection will be based on the quality of their design achievements and portfolio of work; and the selection methodology will be open, competitive and transparent.
- ◆ **Construction:** Construction professionals are partners in Design Excellence and will be engaged throughout the process to ensure the best possible design and implementation. OBO is committed to using the best construction practices and craftsmanship possible and every effort will be made to utilize the most qualified building contractors with a record of delivering high quality projects.
- ◆ **Operations and Maintenance:** Operations and Maintenance professionals are also partners in Design Excellence and will be engaged throughout the process. Buildings and sites will be economical to operate and maintain and will utilize equipment and materials that are durable, dependable and suitable. Designs will be based on life-cycle analysis of options that take into account long-term operations and maintenance concerns. Design intent and features will be maintained throughout the life of the facility, using the best stewardship practices.
- ◆ **Art:** Embassy buildings and grounds are an opportunity to showcase the best of American and host nation art and culture. OBO is committed to integrating such art into its facilities such that each property will be both an individual expression of design excellence and part of a larger body of work representing the best that America's designers and artists can leave to later generations.
- ◆ **Historically, architecturally or culturally significant properties and collections:** OBO is committed to preserving the Department's historical, cultural and architectural legacy. The Secretary of State's Register of Culturally Significant Property is the official listing of important diplomatic overseas architecture and property that figure prominently in our country's international heritage. OBO is also committed to the development of a world class stewardship program, dedicated to the proper conservation and maintenance of the Department's culturally significant historical properties and assets.