

Project Text: Baghdad Case Study

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Nowhere is political ideology more wrapped up with architecture than in embassy design. Before the 1950s, architects designed government buildings—including embassies—in classical styles. The idea was that classical motifs would evoke ancient Greece, considered the cradle of democracy. Thus classical architecture was used to signify that the US was a democratic nation.

Things changed after the Second World War. When the US emerged as a super-power in the late 1940s, the US State Department's recently created Office of Foreign Building Operations (FBO) started building embassies around the world with the directive to create buildings that conveyed "the notion that the US is an open, dynamic and cooperative modern country." Elegant glass-fronted embassies and consulates were erected in downtown Copenhagen, Havana, Stockholm, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, New Delhi, and many German cities.

The FBO's postwar embassy-building campaign was largely financed by debt bartering: host countries repaid their wartime debts to the US with real estate, construction materials and labor. This kind of creative financing made the FBO relatively independent of Congress, which opened up the possibility to break with the tradition of conservative diplomatic architecture and build something genuinely new. This system was the brainchild of Frederick Larkin, the first director of the FBO (director from 1946 to 1952). Larkin and his immediate successors brought in advisors on the cutting edge of the profession, for instance practicing architects like Pietro Belluschi, Eero Saarinen, and William Wurster.

In this post-war "golden age" of the embassy program, running roughly from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, many leading modern architects were offered embassy commissions. Some, like Ralph Rapson (Stockholm, Copenhagen) were just starting out in their careers, while other firms,

like Edward Durrell Stone (New Delhi) or Harrison Abramovich (Havana) were well-established. Other architects were relatively recent immigrants, like Marcel Breuer (the Hague), Walther Gropius (Athens) and José Luis Sert (Baghdad). The FBO sent each architect a set of design directives that called for openness, transparency and specifically discouraged a "fortress-like" feel. A US embassy design directive from the early 1950s clearly envisions this kind of cultural exchange in the service of quality design (and vice-versa): "These facilities should create good will because of their excellent architectural design and their appropriateness to the site and country."

Embassy buildings in this period were designed to welcome visitors with libraries and cultural programs in a demonstration of the free flow of information. The FBO used modern architecture and new construction technology to tell the story of the US as a progressive country. Large panes of glass were recommended over and over as symbols of openness and transparency. In this way the abstract vocabulary of modern architecture became a communicator of abstract ideas, sometimes inserted into the architect's design program and sometimes attributed after construction.

The irony behind these well-intentioned gestures of openness and dialogue was the existence of covert operations in embassies during the Cold War. Embassies are like mini-governments, with multiple departments each pursuing their own agenda. For instance an attaché may be serving tea at the embassy's US Information Center, while in the basement a CIA cell is plotting the overthrow of the host government. As these operations came to light, embassies became the targets of retaliation. The glass-fronted embassies from the 1950s were soon clad in screens and blast walls, and embassy design directives shifted toward the fortress-like compounds one now sees in capital cities around the world.

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The story of the US diplomatic presence in Iraq from the 1950s to the present shows how embassy designs express distinct political eras. Iraq in the 1950s was a strategic site for the US for a number of reasons. The country's vast oil reserves were in the process of aggressive exploration and the country's proximity to the Soviet Union was another reason to establish a strong US presence there.

Josep Lluís Sert, as he was called in his native Catalan, was a leader in the prewar European modern movement in architecture and urbanism, but at the outbreak of the Second World War he went into exile in the United States. Though he held the position of Dean of Architecture at Harvard, his practice in Cambridge was only a few years old when he was hired by the FBO in 1955. It showed a certain daring on their part to hire such a recent immigrant to design a US embassy building. This progressive post-war period of embassy design was shaped by the FBO's policy of paying commissioned architects to take a several-week research trip to the site before starting the design. It was a step towards dialogue with the host site and a move away from universalist design solutions.

Sert's US embassy complex in Baghdad has some of the exuberant plastic expression typical of the best work of the period. Le Corbusier led the way with his evolution from prewar functionalism to his highly sculptural postwar work such as the *Notre Dame du Haut* chapel at Ronchamps. The Baghdad embassy is made up of a main embassy office building, staff housing and ambassador's residence lining a narrow canal that traverses the large property. The boldest form in Sert's scheme is the ambassador's residence, crowned with a spectacular undulating concrete canopy. This roof is described in texts written about the embassy buildings as "Islamic" in its design. But when seen from ground level, the floating canopy bears no relation to the forms of traditional Islamic architecture. The crinkled roofline brings to mind the pleated tent-like roof forms of 1950s leisure structures—the light, whimsical "festival modern" developed at the 1951 Festival of Britain.

But seen from above, the roof canopy is composed of small pyramidal domes reminiscent of the traditional spanning systems of bazaars and caravansareh. If the roof is observed from directly overhead, its composition evokes the geometric patterning of wood inlay, ceramic tiles, and architectural screens. Geometric patterns are the primary compositional elements of an Islamic art that eschews pictorial representation. In this way Sert's roof design is full of meaning: It is a sophisticated abstract form that neatly represents the aspirations of the FBO in this period. This building renders homage to the host culture, while displaying in its construction the technical abilities of the US (Sert's undulating roof was cast in concrete, unusual for Iraq where brick was the standard). Sert's stated goal in designing the Baghdad embassy complex was that it should represent "faith in a better future". Sert's design represents a contemporary ideal of engagement, respect and dialogue at the FBO, one small progressive organ of the state department. An FBO design directive from the early 1950s clearly envisions this kind of cultural exchange in the service of quality design (and vice-versa): "These facilities should create good will because of their excellent architectural design and their appropriateness to the site and country."

Sert's US embassy complex was given up by the US when diplomatic relations between the two countries were downgraded in 1967. The encounters between the two countries over the past two decades have of course been well documented. A glance back at early FBO projects like the Baghdad embassy highlights the ideological drift of late-twentieth century America. The decade-long preparation for the 2003 attack, invasion and occupation of Iraq seems degenerate next to this earlier ideal of diplomatic and cultural overture. The optimistic postwar rhetoric of "faith in a better future" was superceded by its rhetorical opposite in the US occupation's bungled attempt to found a neo-conservative utopia. The 2007 US embassy complex—described in the press as a "super-bunker"—is the product of this most recent ideological project. In the meantime Sert's complex sits empty on the edge of the Green Zone, awaiting a tenant.

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