

Project Text: Vitrine Introductions

These texts, numbered from 1 to 10, were written as introductions to the ten vitrines that run through the Baghdad Case Study installation. Vitrine 1 is an introduction and guide to the other nine showcases.

Vitrine 1: Introduction

This installation has been created for the Café Global, one of the gathering places designed by Hugh Stubbins for the *Berlin Kongresshalle*. Café Global and the lounges of the *Kongresshalle* were the informal meeting sites that activated the building's architectural program. In this *Baghdad Case Study* installation, articles of original furniture from the 1957 *Kongresshalle* are arranged to evoke the seating areas in Stubbins original scheme. These meeting areas underline the place of dialogue in both Stubbins' program, and in the subject of this installation, the 1961 US embassy in Baghdad.

Sculpture

The 2.6 x 1.7 metre cedar-veneer screen at the centre of this installation is a scale reproduction of the roofing system designed by José Luis Sert for the 1961 US embassy in Baghdad. In this sculpture, the roof grid has been completed to create a full rectangle (Sert's original had a small courtyard cut into one side) then tilted and mounted vertically like a decorative screen or room divider. Cedar was the wood of choice for the decorative Islamic woodwork that inspired Sert's

embassy design.

Vitrine 1

Introduction and Vitrine Guide for *Baghdad Case Study*.

Vitrines 2 & 3

Site model of José Luis Sert's 1961 US embassy complex in Baghdad.

Vitrine 4

Archival and published material on the 1961 embassy.

Vitrines 5 & 6

A selection of photographs commissioned by the US State Department from photographer Louis Reens.

The four vitrines opposite this introduction treat the history of US-Iraq relations after the US broke diplomatic relations with Iraq in 1967, abandoning the 1961 embassy complex. The new US embassy in Baghdad, opened in 2007, concludes the installation and represents a diplomatic era that is the precise opposite of that of the 1961 embassy. The earlier embassy was designed to show, in the words of the State Department, that the US is an "open, dynamic and cooperative modern country." The 2007 embassy, by contrast, has been shrouded in secrecy, and in its size and cost has exceeded anything in the history of diplomatic architecture. It is a walled fortress completely cut off from the country it is designed to serve. Vitrines 7 to 10 plot the devolution of US-Iraq relations in the period book-ended by these two embassies, from diplomacy to invasion and occupation.

Vitrine 7

The three-part chart *Cause and Effect?* locates the 1961 US embassy in a continuum of embassy-building and conflict-generation from 1946 to the introduction of new embassy design directives in 1985. The chart compares three data groups: New embassy construction; US interventions abroad; and attacks on US foreign properties.

Vitrine 8

Key Documents on US-Iraq Relations uses a 1998 Act of US Congress known as the Iraq Liberation Act to structure the story of the long-in-the planning US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Vitrine 9

US-Iraq Relations: The Media shows how a single media outlet contributed to an erosion of diplomacy and an unjustified military assault on Iraq in March, 2003.

Vitrine 10

The New US Embassy displays critical press reports on the 2007 US embassy complex in Baghdad, the largest and costliest ever built.

Production Credits

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Vitrine 2

1961 US Embassy in Baghdad

In 1961, the Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO) completed construction on the new US Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq. The Baghdad complex is one of the finest products of the US State Department's post-war embassy construction program. Frederick Larkin, the first director of the FBO (director from 1946 to 1952) brought in architectural advisors on the cutting edge of the profession, and as a result many leading modern architects were offered embassy commissions.

Two FBO architectural advisors, Pietro Belluschi and Henry R. Shepley, submitted these typed reports (right) after visiting future US embassy sites in the Middle East. Both are very enthusiastic about the site chosen to build the new Baghdad embassy, but are less enthusiastic about levels of craftsmanship in the local building trades. With this in mind, building the embassy in cast concrete became a way to showcase American building technology.

In 1955, José Luis Sert was given the commission to design the embassy. Sert, who immigrated to the US from Europe in the 1940s was heading a young design practice while running the school of architecture at Harvard. It showed the FBO's uncompromising focus on good contemporary design to hire such a recent immigrant to the US to design such a symbolic public project.

Architectural Record covered the FBO's embassy program closely starting in the 1950s. The two articles shown here as facsimiles were written while the embassy was under construction (January, 1958) and after completion (May, 1962). Comparing the two articles shows how fewer free-standing staff housing units were finally built, leaving more terrain open for gardens, pools, and tennis courts. The smaller lines radiating out from the canal that cuts through the property are irrigation ditches, modified slightly in the final scheme. Sert's original plan was used to create the massing model in Vitrines 2 and 3.

Sert's Baghdad masterpiece is little known outside specialized architectural circles, yet any Sert monograph will have a few pages devoted to this project. The *Electa* monograph shown here (upper right) gives the viewer a sense of the other structures making up the complex. Sert wrote this long description (bottom right) of the embassy project when construction was completed. The architect describes the State Department's policy of sending architects on research trips to future embassy sites, and then goes on to describe one the central features of his scheme; the canal that runs the length of the complex. Sert planned this canal for irrigation as well as "supplying the pools and terrace ponds which, in the tradition of Middle East countries, enrich the architectural setting by their contrast to the surrounding arid desert landscape."

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Document List

Architectural Record (facsimile). New York, NY, January, 1958

Architectural Record (excerpt, facsimile). New York, NY, May, 1962

José Luis Sert. Electa, Milano, 2000

Report from FBO Middle East Trip, Henry R. Shepley. National Building Museum Archives, Washington, DC

Report from FBO Middle East Trip, Pietro Belluschi. National Building Museum Archives, Washington, DC

Baghdad Embassy Project Description, José Luis Sert. Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University (Sert Collection)

Vitrines 3 & 4

Baghdad Embassy Site Model

This model is based on José Luis Sert's original scheme for the US embassy complex in Baghdad. The unifying element of Sert's scheme is water. A small pump-house on the bank of the Tigris River brings water into a canal that runs the length of the terrain, shown here by the long cut in model's wooden base. The canal feeds a number of pools and smaller irrigation canals and runs under the site's principal buildings, represented here by clear cubes.

Vitrines 5 & 6

Photography

Vitrines 5 and 6 display photographs scanned and printed from originals in the Sert Collection at the Harvard Graduate School of Design Library. The US embassy in Baghdad was occupied by the US government for a mere six years. Because of this brief functional life, the building lives in its photographic documentation. And similar to a work of temporary architecture like an exhibition pavilion, the photographic object seems to have replaced the building it documents. A temporary pavilion becomes off-limits due to its being dismantled as the endpoint to its functional program, whereas the Baghdad embassy became off-limits due to the ideological differences between its host country and the foreign government that commissioned it.

Partly because of its short functional life, the embassy complex has ended up among the lesser-known works of its architect, José Luis Sert. However, journals like *Architectural Record*

enthusiastically published the project when it was first completed, making use of a series of photographs Sert's office commissioned from architectural photographer Louis Reens. The photographs show the Baghdad complex in its pristine just-completed state. Unlike architectural works that are revisited by photographers for later publication, the photographs commissioned in 1962 have remained the standard representation, included in recent publications like the 2005 Fundació Miro monograph displayed at right. The book is open to a reprint of the essay *Faith in a Better Future* by Sandy Isenstadt, which focuses on the progressive aspects of Sert's project. Isenstadt's work was essential to the development of this installation.

Louis Reens 8 x 10 photographs were delivered to Sert's office in 1962, then began their life as official documentation. When Sert sent them to publishing houses they were returned with all sorts of cropping specifications and captioning information noted on their reverse sides. These scans of the photographs' backs (below) are like chronicles of the lives of these objects, which after 1967 came to replace the real object they documented.

Laying a coloured filter over a black and white image was a common presentation strategy in postwar architectural publications. It was a way of bringing colour into a layout in the era before four-colour photographic reproductions. A designer could make layouts more dynamic by introducing a new hue into a photograph (like the red in the photographs of the ambassador's residence displayed here) but could still retain the bold tonality of the original document.

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Document List

US Embassy, Baghdad, Photographs. Photographs of the ambassador's residence from Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University (Sert Collection)

Sert, 1928 – 1979 Obra Completa. Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, 2005

Vitrine 7

Cause and Effect?

Jose Luis Sert designed the US Embassy complex in Baghdad as part of a post-war campaign to establish a greater US diplomatic presence around the globe. The first post-war embassy design directives instructed architects to express "the notion that the US is an open, dynamic and cooperative modern country" and specifically to avoid a "fortress" feel.

But soon, the covert operations of other branches of the US government began to undermine the State Department's program of dialogue and openness. Even Eleanor Dulles, the commissioner of the *Berlin Kongresshalle* (now *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*) complained half-jokingly that her brother Allen, as director of the CIA, was undermining her efforts at public good will in postwar West Berlin (her other brother, John, was head of the State Department).

When (largely CIA-sponsored) US propaganda, counter-insurgency training, arms supply, and "regime change" operations around the world came to light, it seemed inevitable that US foreign properties—embassies, cultural centers, official residences—became targets of retaliation.

This chronological chart compares three data groups

1. New US embassy construction
2. US interventions on foreign territory
3. Attacks on US foreign properties

This chart begins after the Second World War, when the US State Department hired Frederick Larkin to create the Office of Foreign Buildings Operations and Larkin launched his embassy design program, hiring the best contemporary architects to design embassies that expressed the diplomatic ideals of dialogue, transparency, and the free flow of information. The chart ends in 1985, when new design directives were introduced by the State Department. Security and fortification became the overwhelming priorities and all other design considerations were pushed to the background.

The information in this chart was gathered from many different sources, primary among them the archives of the Central Intelligence Agency, the US State Department and *The Architecture of Diplomacy* (Jane Loeffler, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1998).

Vitrine 8

Key Documents on US-Iraq Relations

The documents presented here, reformatted or in facsimile form, use the *Iraq Liberation Act* as a structural frame on which to hang a decade of US planning and policy, from the 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance* to the 2002 *Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution*. The highlighted text fragments in this reproduction of the *Iraq Liberation Act* are discussed in the surrounding commentary, supplemented by news articles and government documents.

In 1967 Iraq severed diplomatic relations with the US in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War. In 1979, Iraq's neighbour Iran overthrew the regime of the Shah, who was heavily supported by the US. In one of the worst Cold War diplomatic crises, Iranian revolutionaries stormed the US embassy and took 88 employees hostage. When soon after, Iran declared war against Iraq, the US made friendly overtures to Saddam Hussein in an effort to establish an "enemy of my enemy" relationship. Diplomatic relations were reestablished with Iraq in 1984. The photograph at right shows Donald Rumsfeld, sent as a special envoy by President Reagan, greeting Saddam Hussein in 1985 (Rumsfeld was one of the principal architects of the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq.) Diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed again when Iraq invaded Kuwait in January, 1991. The US and its allies promptly took military action against Iraq in a bombing maneuver known as *Operation Desert Storm*.

A number of hypotheses circulate about the motives behind the change in US policy towards Iraq starting in the early 1990s. Was it the beginning of a father and son revenge cycle (the first bombing of Baghdad was ordered by George Bush Senior and the second by George Bush Junior). Was there a feeling of unfinished business after *Desert Storm*? Did it have something to do with Iraq's huge oil reserves? Was this an expensive experiment to test a new unilateralism? The documents and articles reproduced here seem to answer *all of the above*. They also indicate that the invasion of Iraq was long in the planning, and that the *Iraq Liberation Act* of 1998 was the document that started the ball rolling legally on a campaign to "remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power".

Vitrine 9

US-Iraq Relations: The Media

Once the necessary Acts of Congress were signed and military strategy approved, the stage was set for the US to wage a "war of liberation" on Iraq. War is the product of a complete breakdown (intentional or not) of diplomacy.

In the days before the US attack on Iraq on March 20, 2003, the American media promoted a rush to war and a disdain for diplomatic alternatives. This pro-war shift of public opinion was finessed by the press outlets of media baron, Rupert Murdoch. The covers of Murdoch's New York Post newspaper leading up to and during the initial assault on Baghdad read like a fictional narrative. Though an attack on Iraq had been in planning for over ten years, the Bush administration was able to exploit public fears and confusion over a September 11, 2001 attack against the US by associating Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, with the "9/11" attackers and by claiming Hussein was

plotting a new attack on the US with chemical and nuclear weapons.

Both the weapons and "9/11" links were provided by Rupert Murdoch's newspapers, radio, and television stations in a narrative that started with sketchy proof of a terrible weapons cache (*Proof*, February 6th). This called for the formation of a righteous coalition with Britain (*War Pact*, February 1st) in opposition to other, skeptical governments (*Axis of Weasel*, January 24th). Hussein was given a diplomatic "last chance" to hand over the non-existent weapons (*War in Days*, March 17th) during a ridiculous countdown to war (*48 Hours*, March 18th). Seven days into the US and British invasion, the Post published the second and most important proof to justify the 3 trillion dollar cost and 100,000 deaths (most conservative estimates) caused by the invasion and occupation of Iraq (*Saddam's 9/11 Shrine*, March 27th).

Finally, eight months later, Saddam Hussein was found (*The Capture of Saddam*, December 15th) and "regime change" was finally completed. The issue of the New York Post displayed far right is in the US tradition of trial-by-media. Media images like this added to the dubious legal proceedings against Saddam Hussein, who was executed on April 9th, 2003. In a 2007 Reuters interview, Ted Turner, the founder of the Cable News Network (CNN) called the US invasion of Iraq "Murdoch's War".

The New US Embassy

The 2007 US Embassy in Baghdad, designed by the Kansas City firm Berger Devine Yaeger, is the product of twenty years of security-based design directives. This project for the largest and most expensive embassy compound ever built was shrouded in secrecy until 2007, when its architectural firm posted renderings on the internet. This vitrine displays some of the press responses to the State Department's new diplomatic headquarters in Iraq. The satellite photograph at right shows the location of both the 1961 and 2007 embassies and gives a sense of the vast scale of the new embassy compound.

Jane Loeffler is the preeminent historian of US embassy architecture and was one of the principal advisors on this installation. In her article for *Foreign Policy* (upper left) she critiques the new US embassy building and describes how low the embassy program has fallen since the idealistic post-war years. Those early years were the main subject of her best-known book, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*.

A more inflammatory article appeared (upper right) in a much larger circulation magazine just after Loeffler's. William Langewiesche, writing for *Vanity Fair* expresses some of the gathering outrage at the scale of the embassy project. The mastermind of the Baghdad project, Charles E. Williams (head of Overseas Building Operations since early 2001), resigned a month after this article appeared in a storm of outrage from the press, the public, and US Congress.

The final price tag for the Baghdad embassy was \$750 million. But the largest embassy in the world, dreamed up at the height of the US occupation, was quickly declared too large for a declining US presence and the military withdrawal orchestrated by the Obama administration. This article (far right) from the *New York Times*, published in early 2012, hints at a possible future not unlike what befell the 1961 embassy, which now sits empty and abandoned.

Document List

Fortress America by Jane C. Loeffler. Foreign Policy, No. 162, September/October, 2007

The Mega-Bunker of Baghdad by William Langewiesche. Vanity Fair, November, 2007

US Plans to Cut Its Staff by Half at Iraq Embassy by Tim Arango. The New York Times, February 8th, 2012

Baghdad Satellite Photograph by Google Maps