HKW: Baghdad Case Study

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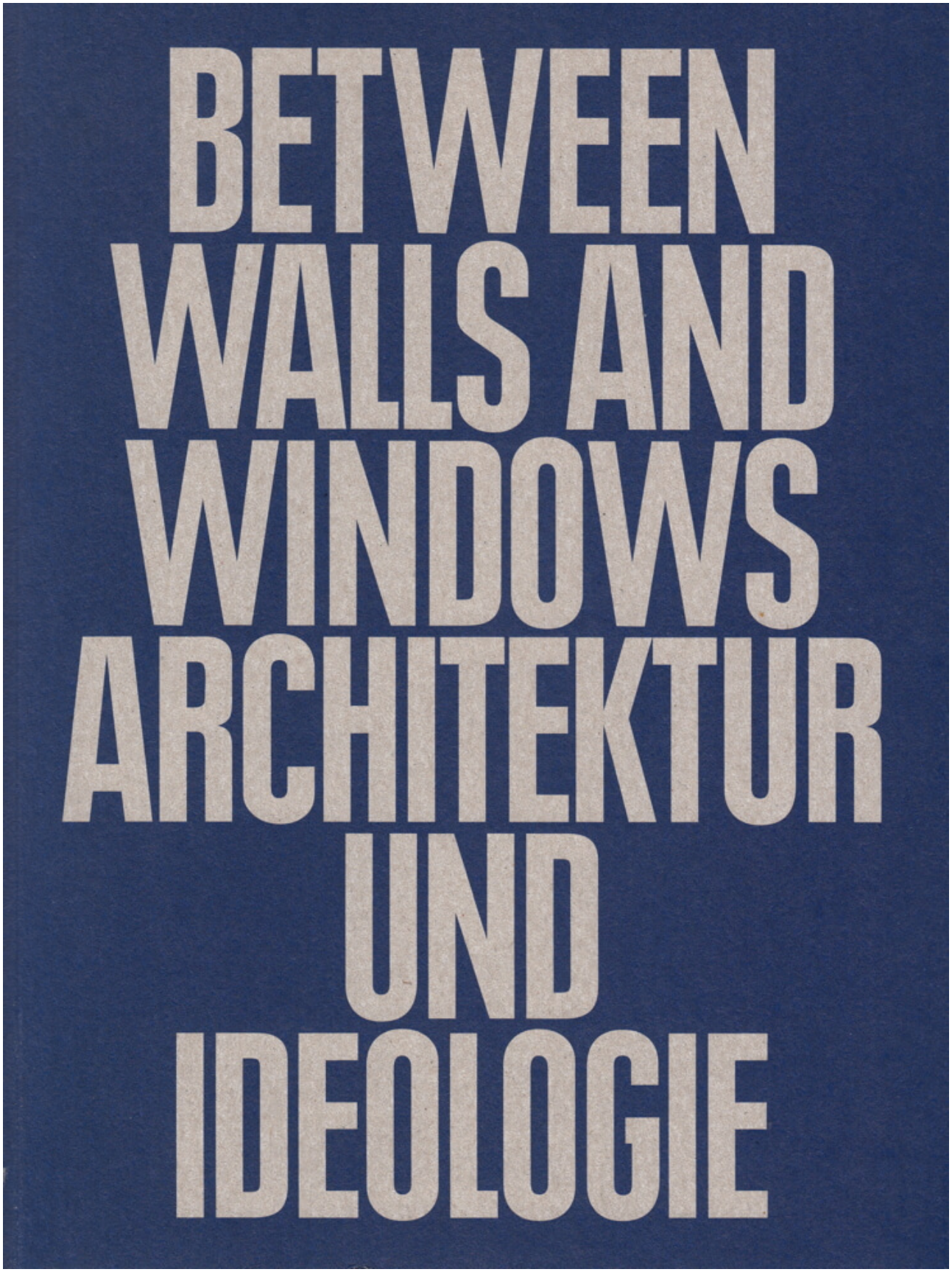
Terence Gower: *Baghdad Case Study*

Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, Germany, 2012

Related Project: Baghdad Case Study


BETWEEN
WALLS AND
WINDOWS
ARCHITEKTUR
UND
IDEOLOGIE

Baghdad Case Study
Terence Gower

Josep Lluís Sert, US Embassy, Baghdad, 1957

1

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

Things changed after World War II. When the US emerged as a superpower 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.

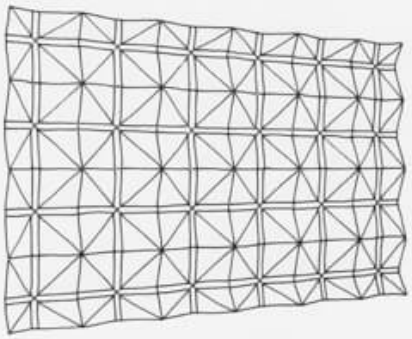
The FBO's postwar embassy-building campaign was largely financed by debt bartering: host countries repaid their wartime debts to the US with real estate, construction materials and labor. This kind of creative financing made the FBO relatively independent of Congress, which opened up the possibility 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 (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 postwar "Golden Age" of the embassy program, which ran 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 Josep Lluís 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.



Terence Gower, Study for Screen, 2012

2

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, a Catalan, was a leader in the prewar European modern movement in architecture and urbanism, but at the outbreak of World War II he went into exile in the United States. Though he held the position of Dean of the Department 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 postwar 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 Nôtre 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 caravanserai. 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 superseded 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.

US Embassy, Baghdad, 1957

3

The FBO was very active in Germany in the postwar years. They built embassies, consulates, and cultural centers in Frankfurt, Munich, Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, and Bremen. Gordon Bunshaft, working for Skidmore Owings and Merrill, received the commissions for most of these Germany-based projects. Fresh from the success of his Lever House design in New York, he created a series of functionalist complexes true to the prewar principals of design pioneers like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, both rectors of the Bauhaus in the 1920s and 30s.

Berlin was treated as a special case by the US State Department. It appointed the economist and diplomat Eleanor Lansing Dulles to run its Berlin Desk with a focus on postwar reconstruction. The city was so devastated by World War II that its postwar planners were mostly in favor of starting over from scratch with improved transportation and infrastructure. This meant abandoning the original street grid in favor of a modern urbanism of isolated towers and slabs surrounded by greenery and integrated superblocks. The Hansaviertel is one of the few inner city examples of this model, whereas elsewhere in the city while an updated Berlin plan was being debated, private landlords had started their own reconstruction along the existing street grid. This resulted in the restoration of most of the prewar infrastructure. Dulles supported building projects designed to repair Berlin's social infrastructure and stimulate the building trades. Projects such as Bikinihaus, the Freie Universität, and the Benjamin Franklin Clinic were followed by a plan to build a conference center on the edge of the Tiergarten, the building that now houses the Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

Postwar Berlin was a special case for another reason. The State Department saw it as a potential vitrine for Western values, strategically located at the border with America's Cold War enemies. The Kongresshalle, declared a gift of the American people to Berlin, was conceived as an instrument of Cold War propaganda. Hugh Stubbins, the building's architect called it "(...) an expression of absolute freedom—a powerful beacon shining its rays eastward." The Kongresshalle was in fact clearly visible from Berlin's Communist Eastern sector and was considered a display of the advanced building technologies of Western Capitalism. In 1980 the building's roof—long criticized as structurally unsound—collapsed, exposing the "just for show" character of the building. Its programmatic priorities were finally revealed for what they were: symbolic display over function.

Yet despite its ideologically-charged conception, the building did (and continues to) find a function. This was best expressed by Otto Suhr, the Berlin mayor at the time, who saw in the Kongresshalle "(...) an opportunity to meet and get to know people from the other side of the divide." Suhr's was an understanding of the significance of the Kongresshalle devoid of political posturing, in which the building was seen to offer a real site for dialogue, especially between West and East. The building, according to this reading, served a progressive practical function. It offered the necessary apparatus to facilitate dialogue and communication. Its meeting halls were easily accessible to West and East (before the Berlin Wall was built); it offered translators; it provided informal meeting areas such as cafés and bars (such as Café Global, the setting of my installation at HKW); and it included the infrastructure for a radio station to communicate with a larger public. In fact it was this practical program—rather than the ideological one—that evolved naturally into the project for the HKW, an institution devoted to international cultural exchange.

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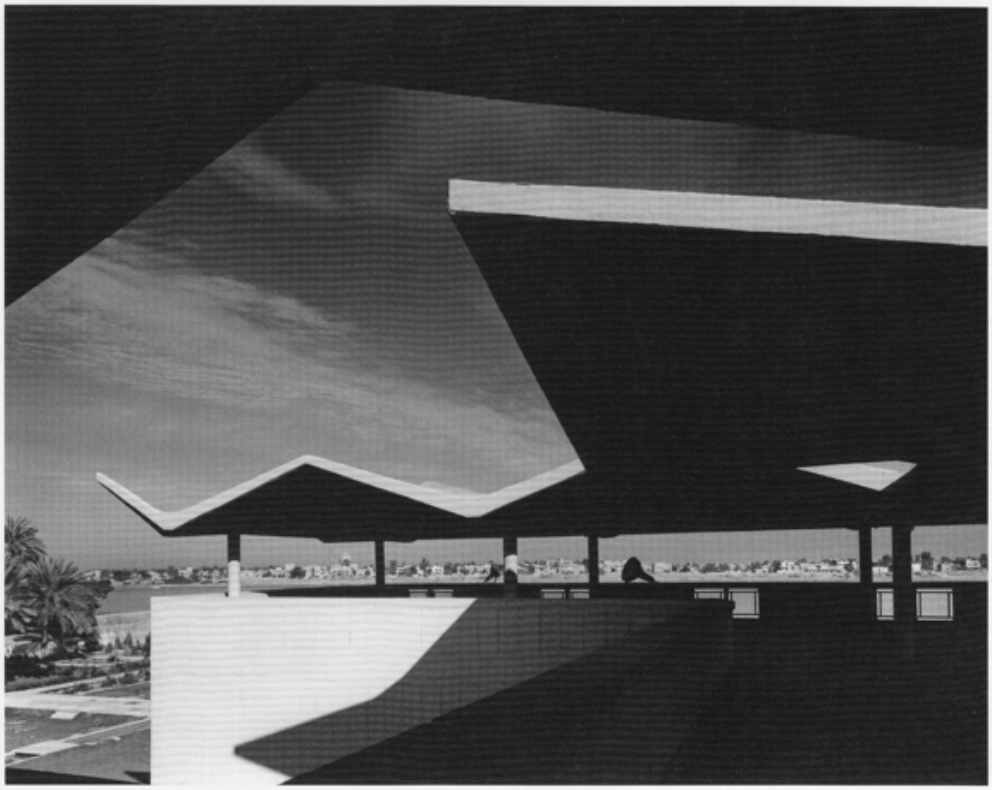
The difference between the FBO's early embassy projects and the Kongresshalle was in degrees of functionality and display. The FBO endeavored to build embassies in dialogue with their host cultures, with real functional programs based on respectful cultural exchange. These early intentions were often undermined by other activities at the embassy, and the dialogue sometimes broke down, as was the case in Iraq. Eleanor Dulles also had constructive intentions for Berlin, but she was operating much closer to the center of power—one brother was Head of State and the other directed the CIA (whom she accused of undermining her good intentions in Berlin). She was expected to follow the Truman Doctrine, a proposal to wage a new ideological war, with Germany as its cultural battleground. Despite its aesthetic and later functional merits, the Kongresshalle in its conception was like a wobbly ideological Trojan horse, wheeled up to the gates of the enemy East. Yet abstract architectural symbols tend to accumulate new meanings through later association, and Stubbins's hubristic "shining beacon" gradually began to display signs of *faith in a better future*.

This essay and installation are based on two bodies of research. The first was funded by a 2010 fellowship from the John S. Guggenheim Foundation. My project was to research the postwar US embassy-building program as an ideological bellwether of the period. The 1955–1961 US embassy in Baghdad gradually became the focus of my investigation for reasons described in this essay. My second body of research started with an invitation from Valerie Smith, curator of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, to visit the site in 2008. The US embassy in Baghdad and the former Berlin Kongresshalle (currently HKW) are examples of a postwar modernism in which sculptural plasticity is a tool for new symbolic expression. Both are also part of a vast US foreign building campaign, though they were designed according to differing ideological programs.



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