Havana Case Study

Softcover, 44 pages

Terence Gower

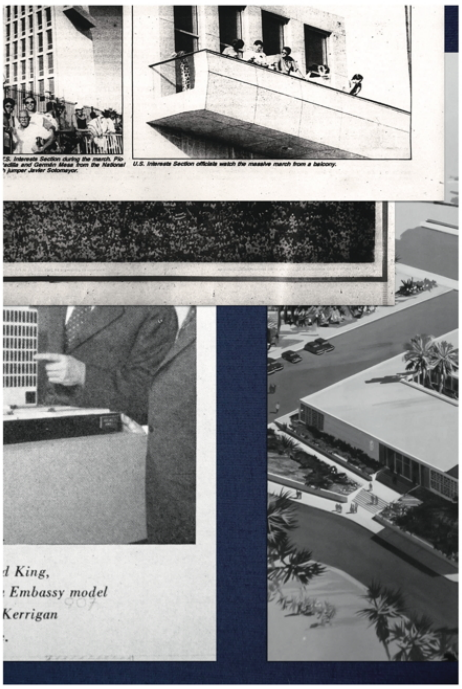
Neubauer Collegium

University of Chicago

ISBN 978-0-9993724-0-1

Havana Case Study

Terence Gower


U.S. Interests Section officials watch the massive march from a balcony.
d King,
Embassy model
Kerrigan

Planning and Constructi

suggest the mere suspension of this dream—where the potential exists for the 'Mussolini' balcony to regain its original function: as the pulpit from which Cuba's future American rulers will once again address their subjects. Or perhaps there was no imperialist intention to begin with, and that outgoing ambassador just wanted a little perch on which to escape the office, drink a cup of excellent Cuban coffee and gaze lazily out to sea, toward Florida.

Another characteristic of the new embassy program was an emphasis on transparency. The FBO in the 1950s believed embassy buildings should have an air of openness and permeability. Glass facades were favored to represent both honesty—nothing to hide—and accessibility, with the embassy's many cultural functions clearly on display. The Havana embassy, as it was originally designed, was remarkably transparent (on the public, ground floor), with a main lobby furnished with Barcelona chairs visible through floor to ceiling glass windows and doors, and an interior courtyard visible beyond the lobby, through a second glass wall. Because of all this glass, a visitor could peer all the way into the heart of the building as they entered, before moving on to the public library, auditorium, gallery, or offices. This directive for transparency sounds utopian compared to the new design directives issued in the early 1980s and the modifications that followed. After the 1990s renovation at the Havana embassy, a visitor to the diplomatic offices now encounters a security kiosk with metal detector set into a ten-foot fence, followed by a heavy gate, then steps up to the outer glass façade (replaced with one-inch blastproof glass). A second security booth in the lobby is set into a solid concrete wall that now completely blocks the view into the interior courtyard.

Urban Context

In 1949, the State Department bought a parcel of land on the recently extended *malecón* (seawall) of the Vedado neighborhood of Havana. El Vedado received its name in the seventeenth century as a zone where habitation, agriculture, and woodcutting were forbidden in

US embassy, Havana, 1953. Image: Architectural Forum

Closing of the US embassy, Havana, January, 1961
Photo: Mario Rizzo

gave the building very positive reviews and called out details such as the clean separation of functions into distinct vertical and horizontal volumes, the column-free interiors, and technical details like the building's deep-water cooling system. The two interior "tropical" patios were celebrated as a nod to a local building form, but the State Department didn't recognize the hygienic advantage of the extra light and fresh air and immediately roofed over the patio in the visa section. The US embassy's main façade was also used as the backdrop for a 1954 Hudson automobile advertisement, a display of cutting edge architectural modernity as a backdrop to the very latest in automotive technology. And finally, in 1953, New York's Museum of Modern Art featured the new Havana embassy prominently in its exhibition *Architecture for the State Department*.

After the Cuban Revolution

In 1960, it became evident from statements by Cuba's new leaders that the revolution was turning out to be a communist revolution and American property-holders and companies were going to have their assets seized by the revolutionary government. The US and Cuba severed diplomatic relations on January 3, 1961, and the embassy staff was recalled to the US. Photojournalists documented the US flag and seal being taken down and stored, as well as trucks piled high with the possessions of American employees as they prepare to leave the island by ferry to Florida. A small maintenance staff was left in place to safeguard the building, which entered a peculiar state of limbo. It did not regain its diplomatic function until President Carter opened the US Interests Section on September 1, 1977.[4]

The simple functional meaning of the building, along with the progressive ideas the architects were trying to express in its design, were soon buried by a number of new associations the building acquired after the Cuban revolution. The building and its surrounding urban sites were the platform for an incredibly inventive media battle that started in the 1960s and climaxed during the US interventions in the Middle East during the 2000s.