

July 27, 2003

The World: About Face; Glass Walls to Bunkers: The New Look of U.S. Embassies

By **MICHAEL J. LEWIS**

THE new American Embassy in Kenya, which opened this spring, strives mightily not to be a bunker. It is surrounded by a four-story metal lattice, a kind of abstract trellis that masks its bulk even as it filters the East African sun. The building is a taut white carton, with razor-sharp details and dark windows so flush with the wall that they might have been painted on.

The pert canopy that juts out above the entrance sounds a note of geometric elegance. But a bunker with a trellis and a canopy is still a bunker. Beneath this jaunty canopy is a reinforced steel door, like a bank vault's, and it can slam shut just as fast.

The embassy's designers learned the lessons of its predecessor, which was destroyed in 1998 when a truck bomb was driven boldly to its rear entrance and detonated. As the Kenya bomber later told his F.B.I. interrogator, "It was an easy target."

That structure had fronted on a fashionable boulevard in downtown Nairobi, but its successor sits in a distant suburb. As new American regulations require, it is not within 100 feet of a public road. It is said to have six-foot-thick concrete walls, though the architects are prohibited from discussing security provisions. This suburban citadel, aloof and guarded, represents the state of the art of American embassies today.

Of course an embassy is just an office building, an unglamorous workplace in which visas are processed and lost passports replaced. But it is also a physical manifestation of America, its tangible walls, windows and roof representing those great intangibles of national identity, character and aspiration. It embodies the United States -- as those who attacked the American Embassy in Liberia last week clearly understood.

An embassy can speak to the world of America's freedom and openness, its confidence and prosperity or, as with the Kenya Embassy, its fear. As these buildings change, so will the public face that America presents to the world.

In the postwar era, America's embassy buildings achieved an apogee of architectural transparency. Two mighty ideas -- modern architecture and the cold war -- aligned, with dazzling results.

Modern architecture hit its high-water mark during the 1950's, exalting clarity of form, flowing space and rational construction. Its essential element was the glass curtain wall, which enclosed space without closing it off.

The cold war was also at a peak in the 50's, and the struggle was as much cultural as diplomatic. In the cold war embassy, politics and architecture combined to give the curtain wall geopolitical significance. Its openness and transparency made it an ideal metaphor for America, especially in opposition to the drab and bulky public buildings of Communism. On embassy rows around the world, the glass curtain confronted the Iron Curtain, rebuking its totalitarian opacity.

To create these architectural cold warriors, the State Department enlisted virtually all of the nation's most celebrated architects, like Edward Durrell Stone for New Delhi, Wallace K. Harrison and Max Abramowitz for Rio de Janeiro and Eero Saarinen for the plum assignment of London. The Greek Embassy, for example, was by Walter Gropius, former head of the Bauhaus school, whose design updated and democratized the Parthenon. He placed a colonnade of slender marble piers around a glass-walled inner shell, conflating the Greek colonnade and the American curtain wall, the two architectural images of democracy.

During the cold war, these embassies came to stand for America's sins, and particularly during the Vietnam War became the targets of anti-American violence. Built when the principal danger was espionage, the embassies were secure against spy cameras or hidden bugs, but defenseless against mobs or truck bombs.

Washington was stunned by the seizure of its embassy in Tehran in 1979, and the bombing of the Lebanon Embassy in 1983 (resulting in 63 deaths). In 1985, the State Department set up a commission to establish guidelines for building new embassies.

The glass curtain wall was the first casualty. Window space was limited to 15 percent of the wall surface. Even more decisive were two other rules: buildings must be set back 100 feet from the street and set on at least 15 acres. The former rule severed a building's relationship to the street -- a vital element considering its key purpose is to present America to a foreign culture.

This rule also made it too expensive to buy downtown locations. In moving to the suburban compound, the embassy's traditional role as a civic building was discarded. As Jane C. Loeffler, the author of "The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies," said, "You can only make civic architecture in a civic situation."

But even the new guidelines could not prevent the 1998 bombings, which almost simultaneously destroyed the embassies in both Kenya and Tanzania. Since then, American embassies have been buttoning down, literally steeling themselves for the worst. From Uganda to Chile to Lithuania, embassies are being retrofitted with "blast design" features, which ensure they can survive a truck bombing and remain standing.

IT is not easy to make buildings that are extroverted and transparent, and also physically secure. Washington tried to for new embassies in Canada and Germany, but with mixed results.

In Ottawa, the architect David M. Childs of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill has designed an embassy with a fine glass curtain wall, an echo of the glittering past structures. But directly behind it, veiled from sight, is a concrete wall that offers the requisite shield against bomb blasts. It is an elegant building but its image of openness is an architectural fiction -- a mask of benign hospitality pasted over a suit of armor.

In Berlin, such a cringing posture is not possible, for the embassy is on the Pariser Platz, near the Brandenburg Gate, the epicenter of the cold war. On this ideologically supercharged terrain, so recently

liberated from its concrete wall, no drab bunker could be erected. Recognizing this, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell waived some of the security guidelines, producing a building that respects the stately classicism of central Berlin. Designed by Moore, Ruble, Yudell, it is akin to an urban palazzo, with a boldly projecting cornice, a formal facade and a central courtyard. Both its tempo and its scale derive from the neoclassical Brandenburg Gate. But, as in Ottawa, fear cannot be imagined away. If security is not built into the walls, it must stand sentinel in front of them -- with concrete bollards, closed streets and a strong police presence. The embassy can have every aspect of a public building except the public.

Americans have accepted these changes in part because they take place abroad. It may be different when they affect the central buildings of American political life at home. The Capitol's eastern plaza is now being removed to build an immense subterranean complex, whose centerpiece will be a glass-roofed great hall, serving as visitors' center and entrance. A similar underground visitors' center has been planned for the Washington Monument. You would enter through a sort of skylighted trough.

These buildings will survive these changes. The spatial freedom that was the essence of the Washington Mall will not.

A human being communicates both consciously and unconsciously, through the conscious rhetoric of speech but also through the unconscious eloquence of body language. So it is with buildings. They can relax in an open stance of welcome, or huddle in a protective crouch. This is the message communicated by fortified embassies abroad and skylighted trenches at home.

How different that is from New York, which is planning a bold tower for the site of the Sept. 11 attacks. But while the buildings of New York gird once more to strut and swagger, important structures overseas and in Washington have just flinched.

Michael J. Lewis, the chairman of the art department at Williams College, is the author of "Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind."