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Architecture as Political Expression/ the Expression of national identity in embassy buildings; Berlin experience

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Abstract

We should never leave behind the fact that after the “Wall” went down in Berlin, it became a location with various judgments and possibilities in the sphere of design and architecture, especially in the architecture of diplomacy which had and still has a chance to clearly symbolize the particular nation. What could be noticed in this particular work is the fact of a group of nations being able to adapt to openness and contemporary concepts, concretely, what the world/ earth needs for the moment and the way others try to show their power by building fortresses (this might not even be considered power, but the way to be protected from others). It seems to be unfortunate that architecture will always be in the dilemma of what can be done and what should be done.

As a result, the analysis of the study object shows the representation of a State, Country or Region in an architectural context, however, it can be noticed that they all go in different directions or better say, try to express different understanding of how should they be represented in this particular environment and what is for them (the Nation) of a greater importance.

Keywords: *contemporary fortifications, openness to the public, unconventional building, deconstructive architecture, representation of the region, identity crisis, collective identity, care for the environment.*

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Introduction

The Architecture of Embassy buildings is or should definitely be the architecture that pronounces a nation's identity to the world and should not in any way be misunderstood. On the other side this raises the issue if embassies are to be fortresses, cultural landmarks or simply offices.

In this context, it should be very important to have in mind the fact that these structures should be significant in both cases, considered as symbols on one side and functional for people who work in them, on the other one.

A part of the design is to understand the background showing the respect for the culture representing the particular nation never leaving behind the local building tradition, cooperation with local culture and architecture. At their best, Embassies should set the tone for smooth engagement of two cultures.

Architecture like every other art serves to express and keep world's development in motion, taking care of the identity of the structure to be built.

Identity as an issue has various approaches, but it is very important to try and find it in architecture and its structures as well. Identity in general could be defined as: individuality and something that distinguishes a person, a building or an object, having a "detail" as a fragment. When all these details are put together, compositions are created thus easily identifying somebody or something.

Identified structures within this particular analysis have their own characteristics; they represent the identity of each nation in this contemporary world, each of them every day leads more towards globalization¹. There are great possibilities that very soon diplomatic buildings might remain the only possibility were nations will have to represent themselves though architecture and design.

¹ Bernard Tschumi, Irene Cheng, *The State of Architecture at the beginning of the 21st Century*, Columbia Books of Architecture 2003, page.77.

Even though identity as a notion fits into different spheres, from my point of view within this type of architecture (diplomacy) and with this analysis in particular the following “identities” will be in focus: national identity, collective identity and a kind of regional identity, if it can be called so, will be present as well.

In order to find a balance of what Embassy buildings should represent, the following words stated by Jonathan Glancey² a known author/ columnist in the field of architecture and design, taken from an article by the Guardian on architectural diplomacy, he says:

“An embassy building is an ambassador for the country it represents. Ideally, it should be gracious, well mannered and welcoming. It should offer something of the culture of its home country while nodding appreciatively to that of its host. It does not need either to be old-fashioned, nor should it attempt to be "cool". Passing fads are just that”.³

Berlin (**Fig. 1**), known as a divided city during a certain period of time and the capital of a re-united country since 1990, went through an “additional layer” of design and construction. Playing the role of the “capital city”, it has strongly shaped the city's recent development, the new government and the embassy district with the federal government buildings, new and refurbished embassy buildings, and the representative buildings of the federal states, institutions and organizations. It can easily be said that this is the city of social and architectural experimentation, especially after the “Wall” came down.

² Jonathan Glancey is architecture and design editor of the Guardian. He is the Author of few books, such as: *New British Architecture* (1988) and *New Moderns* (1994) and he as well appears regularly on national television and radio.

³ Jonathan Glancey, “The Architecture of Diplomacy”, *The Guardian* 09/01/20019.



A vast number of new embassy buildings and other representative buildings have been added to Berlin's urban contest in recent years, a kind of competition within contemporary architecture with its many different personal styles and identities. New Embassy buildings display a various range of styles, in particular regional elements of style and building materials play a strong role in their architecture.

Analysis/ Study objects

Through this study or analysis, there are four formulated issues/ questions to deal with, related to the diversity in some approaches (different from one another) for the same task, which is the design and construction of the Embassy in Berlin, involving a certain kind of identity:

- The identity crisis through the United States Embassy Building,
- Collective identity through the Dutch Embassy building,
- The Identity representing a region (so called regional identity) through complex Nordic Embassies, and
- Caring for the environment (both natural and human) through the Canadian Embassy building.

United States Embassy

After going through the so called identity crisis of overseas American Embassies, in which the security case shaped almost every aspect of their architecture, the US Embassy building in Berlin continued with the same tradition, trying to show “Washington’s power”⁴ (Fig. 2) on the site of a former Berlin Wall. After the scaffolding was removed from the façade, there were elements presented for a strong architectural debate. One of the reasons was, getting back in time according to the prolonged and upsetting negotiations Berliners had over the shield or safeguard zone and traffic circulation (Fig. 3).



(2)



(3)

The building, designed by the Californian firm, Moore Ruble Yudell (won in 1996) got complicated, especially after a number of attacks on overseas US Embassies and by the decision of the

⁴ Power; in the sense of exercising global economic, political and military influence.

government to strengthen the security rules⁵. In order to meet all aspects: the architectural site, security and program requirements (Fig. 4), architects had to work closely not only with the State Department but with the Spatial Planning authorities of Berlin, as well. The new building closes the last frontage on the historic Pariser Platz⁶, with its exterior stone walls, regular window's grid and larger sculptural forms on each side of it. The entrance itself looks light and glassy (Fig. 5) Compared to the rest of the building, trying to welcome visitors. While inside the pavilion, the courtyard looks like a formal garden (Fig. 6) and further on a vestibule with works of art by the American artist Sol Lewitt⁷ (Fig. 7), could be evident.



(4)

⁵ Security rules known as Inman standards, in place since 1985. Barbara A. Nadel, "Global Diplomacy and Design: Security at U.S. Embassies", <http://www.buildings.com/article-details/articleid/5784/title/global-diplomacy-and-design-security-at-u-s-embassies.aspx>.

⁶ Michael Imhof Verlag, *Berlin – New Architecture – A guide to new buildings from 1989 to today*, 8th updated edition, Taschen, 2008, page.42.

⁷ Sol LeWitt was an American artist, both conceptualist and minimalist, who became famous in 1960s with his wall drawings and sculptures (he used to call them structures). His work of art in this case can be considered as monumental outdoor piece (without a title); <http://www.solle Wittprints.org/biography>



(5)

After all, the intention of the winning architectural firm was to complement the architecture of the square, as well as to incorporate architectural and artistic elements that can transform it into “uniquely” American⁸. There is a quotation from the Constitution inscribed on the stone walls of the entrance rotunda. The so called dome (in some cases it has been identified as the Lantern) on the top floor (**Fig. 8**) Which is not as expressive as the Reichstag Dome, but anyway, it is meant to be a symbol of the US Government's presence on foreign land.



(6)

⁸ America as a nation: future - oriented, proud of its artistic and technological achievements, as well identified with the openness of democracy. Before 1960s security was not even considered as a design constraint: glass - walled diplomacy buildings, sidewalk access to libraries and exhibition areas (in Rome, Prague, Paris).



(7)

Even though the design and the completion process went through different debates and arguments, the US Ambassador Coats tried to finalize the entire process with the welcoming words;

“An embassy is a symbol of a nation's foreign presence, identity, and diplomatic intentions. It is more than a collection of government offices. We want our embassies to send a message of openness and optimism, projecting the values of democracy and freedom that guide our diplomacy. We felt strongly that building on a more remote site would send the wrong message. We plan to construct a beautiful building here on Pariser Platz, which will be fitting with the architecture of this very historic place, but will also reflect America. I believe that the architects have been successful in giving the building expression to the ideals of "diversity," "openness," and "equality," While at the same time meeting all security concerns”.⁹ (Fig. 9) (Fig. 10).

After all, like all other works of art and architecture do, this one as well gives a possibility for further comments, expressions, and analytical thoughts, especially having in mind that this structure is located in the area of the city which had a long history and because of that it will continue to be visited frequently.

⁹The Speech by Ambassador Coats, Press Conference U.S. Embassy Berlin, May 5, 2004. <http://germany.usembassy.gov/germany/sp20040506.html>

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(8)



(9)



(10)

From all the elements mentioned above It is clear enough that the United States are definitely going through an identity crisis (meaning about their diplomatic representation in this particular case), as a result of a number of attacks on their embassy buildings around the world, representing themselves as contemporary fortifications in comparison to what they used to represent before (the openness of democracy). When stated before, it means the time before the 1960s, when these buildings were gathering places and civic centers.

Finally, it could be concluded that the US Embassy in Berlin is a building that struggled a lot until it reached its final shape, which managed to find a sort of balance or compromise between architecture and reinforced security measures, at the same time taking care of the

exiting environment close to the monument where Berlin is known about.

The Dutch/Netherlands Embassy

Differing from what the US Embassy achieved to look like or better say leave the impression behind, the Embassy building of the Netherlands shows openness, transparency and can easily be considered as noticeable. Since, the Netherlands had already sold its former Embassy building; the new location had to be found in the most suitable place along the river Spree¹⁰. The first impression that the site could give was the characteristic Dutch canal-side, ready to put a building along it (**Fig. 11**) (**Fig. 12**).



(11)



(12)

¹⁰ In 1994 the new location was found, even though it was still unclear whether the Ownership does not have any disputes from the 2nd World War or even from the former DDR. However, at the end it resulted in using the site without problems.

It was designed by one of the most famous architects Rem Koolhaas (Office for Metropolitan Architecture/ OMA)¹¹, who won the Berlin Architecture prize for this structure in 2003. It would be very interesting to mention that Koolhaas was exactly the one who disagreed with Berlin's redevelopment plans, considering them very traditional, but on the other side awarded a project, having the chance to finally leave his mark in this city after almost ten years.

In this case the only element that shows in a certain way the Dutch identity is the location chosen for the building (already mentioned above), but on the other hand it shows more the identity of the architect himself, simply by the fact he finally showed to Berlin the real meaning of not being "traditional" what in fact he meant ten years before.

Being a fragment of deconstructive architecture, his design represents the free standing steel (**Fig. 13**) and glass cube with equal sides, reception courtyard with a distance on all sides from neighboring buildings, the distance that allows a panoramic view on the river. The building itself is a combination of cool exterior and warm interior details/ accents. The only problem this building issued (if it can be considered a problem) or argument related to it, comparing with the US Embassy building, was the "headache" for German construction companies hired for the project, since being so unconventional (**Fig. 14**). First, it was designed without interior doors, but being an embassy building and having its specifics, the doors had to be added, with a special design by Koolhaas. There were four hundred in total.

One very interesting detail that shows a tendency towards "deconstruction" during the design is the concept of a trajectory projected from the back of the Tower (through the cube) to the river, the main intention of which was the building to be as transparent as possible.

¹¹ Michael Fazio, Marian Moffet, Lawrence Wodehouse, *A World History of Architecture*, Second Edition, London, Laurence King Publishing 2008, page.532.



(13)



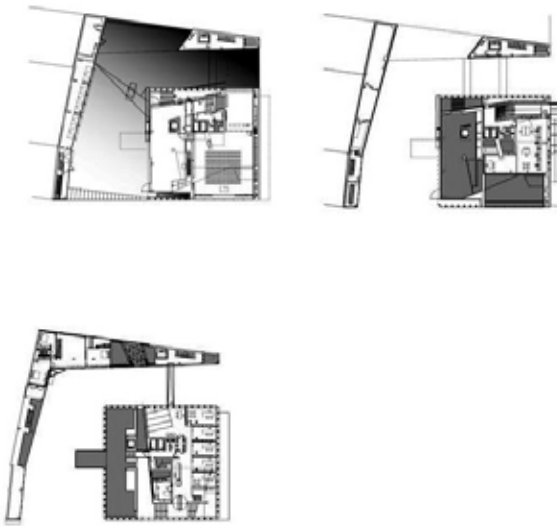
(14)

After its completion, being designed by one of the most famous architects, the building became so popular that the foyer of which became permanently open to visitors having at their disposal special tour guides explaining the most interesting architectural details (**Fig. 15**) and when put together, it clearly represented the identity of an architect/ designing team (in this particular case Rem Koolhaas and OMA). This can be seen as a collective identity through which the architect/ designer completes a part of his personal identity¹². It is clear that the Netherlands wanted an autonomous, singular, and clearly understandable building with the possibility to become an event.¹³

¹² Christoph Weller, *Collective Identities in World Society Some Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations*, World Society Research Group, June 1997, page.34.

¹³ Rem Koolhaas, Frangois Chaslin, *The Dutch Embassy in Berlin by OMA/ Rem Koolhaas*, Rotterdam NAI Publishers, 2004, page.28.

From this prospective, they managed to design a structure that shows transparency; not only in the sense of shape and its geometrical description, but also in the sense of manifesting modernity and openness which is supposed to characterize the Netherlands¹⁴. This came out of the fact that until the end of the 20th Century, the Netherlands did not really have a remarkable tradition in the design and construction of buildings abroad. Meanwhile, this represents the start of a totally new chapter on the recognition in the international scene and the contribution of Rem Koolhaas (OMA) to express this concernment as much as possible, pointing out in this way his personal architectural identity.



(15)

The complex of Nordic Countries Embassies

Nordic Countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland) have decided to build their Embassies within one complex (**Fig. 16**).

¹⁴ Ibid., page.131.

They all have their own buildings except the common reception area and the information centre known as “Felleshuset” or “House for All” (Fig. 17). The design comes from the Austrian – Finish partnership of Alfred Berger and Tiina Parkkinen; and looking at the geometry of the complex from above, it looks like buildings have been carved from a single block. Another detail which gives a Scandinavian/ Nordic impression and water connection between these countries, is low pools touching on all five embassies (Fig. 18), while the unifying element of the entire complex is the characteristic wall as a copper strip made of louvers (Fig. 19).



(16)



(17)

It is important to mention that all materials used for construction, are typical of the Nordic region, also having in mind that the ideal bind for natural stone, wood and glass are stainless steel which is mainly used for joints, mounting and framing on different facades. This combination gives a very calm and friendly atmosphere in the entire complex.



(18)



(19)

From what is said above, it is clear that the main scope of the design is to express the Nordic spirit through both exterior and interior shapes as well as construction materials used. The so called “*Bright and Light, Scandinavian style*” (Fig. 20) is characterized by clear compositions, blue-green glass effect, exposed gray concrete, warm wood tones, shimmering stainless steel and interior plain and simple furniture and fittings. What in fact they try to show within this complex (expressed through architecture), are the environment and nature conservation as very important characteristics of the Nordic Countries.¹⁵

¹⁵ Duane Phillips, Alexandra Geyer, *Berlin – A guide to recent architecture*, London, Anova books Company, 2003, page.94.



Canadian Embassy

In this context the new Canadian Embassy (**Fig. 21**) designed by various architectural teams from Toronto, Quebec City and Winnipeg managed to show a growing interest in sustainable developments (the design that has a minor negative impact on the environment, ideally with no impact at all. It is strongly against the environmental degradation)¹⁶. Based on Berlin's Planning regulations which intend to minimize energy costs and air pollution, designers came up with the idea of having a "green" roof. This area designed by one of the best Canadian landscape architects, Cornelia Oberlander, covers around 60% of the entire roof area decreasing in this way the urban

¹⁶ Michael Fazio, Marian Moffet, Lawrence Wodehouse, *A World History of Architecture*, Second Edition, London, Laurence King Publishing 2008, page.560.

heat and absorbing the rainwater, and allowing it to condense slowly into the atmosphere.



(21)



(22)

In addition to the roof other energy saving features is integrated within the building, such as: interior design which maximizes the access to natural light and minimum use of artificial light, natural ventilation through the windows that open manually, light sensors that automatically switch artificial lights when a required natural light level is reached, etc. All these sustainable features are incorporated within the existing environment (**Fig. 22**).

What really shows Canada's identity and its geography is the usage of a range of materials from different Canadian regions: Tyndall limestone from Manitoba used for the front façade while black granite and maple from Quebec as well as Eramosa marble from Ontario when they are put together create an impressive internal space. All materials and mechanical systems were chosen upon the criteria of life expectancy. The use of materials, particularly brought from the native country should be part of the identity representation in one hand and

the incorporation into the existing environment on the other, which is very much obvious in the case of Canada.

Another very important fact related to the new Canadian Embassy is the “Northwest passage” (Fig. 23) for pedestrians within the building, which allows not only clients, but other people as well to daily cross from the old east to the west part of Berlin and the opposite. This passage at the same time offers a “window” into Canada through the integrated works of art (based on themes of Canadian landscape and created from natural Canadian - built products) (Fig. 24).¹⁷



(23)



(24)

¹⁷ “The River as thread, the Canoe as needle”, the work of art designed by John McEwen, one of the leading Canadian artists. The Canoe has a map of major Canadian waterways engraved. http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/germany-allemagne/offices-bureaux/embassy_art_ambassade.aspx?lang=eng

The following welcoming words from the Canadian Ambassador Paul Dubois try to definitely give the maximum openness to the public:

“Our new office building houses a whole range of Government of Canada services for clients abroad, including consular and visa services. The new Embassy offers public areas with multimedia facilities presenting Canadians’ achievements in building a diverse society where business, science and technology and the arts can all thrive (**Fig. 25**) (**Fig. 26**¹⁸). Kanada Haus is your house in the capital of the biggest country in the European Union. I invite you to click your way through its many features and themes of the Canada-Germany relationship and to visit us when you are next in Berlin”.

It is clear that Canadians more than every other nation, being part of this work, try to fit into the existing environment and culture as much as possible, by allowing primarily residents to get to know nation’s most important elements of identity, even during their daily functions while using the passage. Main details (works of art within the building) when compiled together clearly represent the nation oriented towards a sustainable environment and a friendly architecture also without neglecting the maximum respect for the local building tradition or better to say the design regulations.

¹⁸ “River - Riviere - Fluss”, the work of art designed by Barbara Steinman artist awarded with Governor General Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2002. Shows map of water depths and suggest an overlay of sites: Canada within Berlin (Germany), each known for its many waterways and rivers; http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/germany-allemagne/offices-bureaux/embassy_art_ambassade.aspx?lang=eng



(25)



(26)

Conclusion

As elaborated above, all these structures without any doubt represent a State, Country or Region in an architectural context, but it can clearly be noticed that they all go into various directions or better say they try to express different understanding of how should they be represented in this particular environment and what is for them (the Nation) of a greater importance. Four formulated issues / questions above resulted as the following:

- Identity crisis; which resulted in the use of elements of maximum security and the idea to create a kind of contemporary or present - day fortification or fortress
- Collective identity; almost a transparent structure that serves not only as the Embassy but also as a museum/ building to be guided through, just for the sake of this structure it has been designed by a famous architect/ team

- The identity of a Region; complexes when looked from above, they try to symbolize the region on the map without leaving behind the most important materials and style used "back home"
- Carefulness for the Environment; the most important element of our era is the so called sustainable design and ecological architecture, the design for maximum energy saving always takes care of the existing environment (natural and humans)

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(Fig. 2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10) – Moore Ruble Yudell Architects with Gruen Associates (Fig. 11-12-13-14-15) - [//en.wikiarquitectura.com](http://en.wikiarquitectura.com)

(Fig. 16-17-18-20) - Berger + Parkkinen architekten: [//arcspace.com](http://arcspace.com)

(Fig. 19) - Christian Richters: [//arcspace.com](http://arcspace.com)

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