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The New Canadian Embassy in Berlin

Introduction

In 1937, John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir and Governor-General of Canada, traveled in the Canadian North by plane and, looking down on the Mackenzie Delta, had this to say:

[This is] the most sinister place I have ever seen. I saw it under mist and cold winds, but a bright sun would make no difference to it. It is one vast quagmire - muskeg on a colossal scale. Three main channels pierce it, and between them there is an infinity of what look like carefully engineered canals of a mathematical regularity. Between the canals are oily mud-holes and lawn-like stretches of an unwholesome green, into which whole armies could disappear. God help the man who gets lost in it! [...] It reminds me of nothing so much as the no-man's-land between the trenches in the War - but a colossal no-man's-land created in some campaign of demons - pitted and pocked with shell-holes from some infernal artillery. Looking down on it from the air at first glance one might be looking at suburban Surrey - broad tarmac highways, lines of newly planted fir trees, and behind them the smooth lawns of some suburban house-holder. It is only at the second look that one realizes that the highways are channels of yellow mud and that the green lawns are bottomless swamps.¹

This may be an odd citation with which to begin a paper on the new Canadian Embassy in Berlin, but it is apropos for a number of reasons. The first, most obvious one, is that the plans for the Embassy's roof - inaccessible to staff and guests but visible from the highrises in the neighbourhood - include a stylized version of the Mackenzie Delta designed by the landscape architect Cornelia Hahn-Oberlander which, subject to budgetary approval, will use "arctic grasses around a river shape of recycled glass stones ... which will be lit from below to give the image of water."² The

² This particular feature - which resembles the popular "virtual river" in the Canada Pavilion at Hannover's Expo 2000 - is both decorative and functional, thereby adding
second connection to my topic is the discrepancy between national symbol and material reality that, as he was looking down on a landscape “altogether beyond the human scale”, became apparent to Tweedsmuir, one of the chief promoters of the North as a unifying factor in Canadian culture. This is also a discrepancy that will present itself to anyone taking a closer look at the – by necessity – not always harmonious coexistence of image and function in diplomatic buildings. And finally, Tweedsmuir’s analogy (pronounced on the eve of WW II) between the river delta and a landscape ravaged by WW I trenches provides a link both to the historical

sustainability to the building’s uses of “nature”: “The islands in the delta will be used to hide the mechanical protrusions through the roof. The roof will be used to gather rain water for recycling” (Bruce Mackay, Project Manager, e-mail to the author, 21 October 2002).


events that shaped his thinking and perception, and to the complex topography of Berlin with which all public buildings designed after German re-unification must engage, whether they are brand-new or refurbishments of existing structures.

Embassies in Research

The meaning of embassies has been analysed in two recent studies, Jane Loeffler’s book The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America’s Embassies and Marie-Josée Thérrien’s doctoral dissertation Au-delà des frontières: l’architecture des chancelleries canadiennes 1930–1992, both apparently spawned, at least in part, by the realization that growing concerns about the security of public buildings require a thorough rethinking of the civic symbolism that is an essential component of such structures. The interest generated by these two authors’ research has gone well beyond its academic reception, and both scholars have been called upon to intervene in recent public discussions about the changing face and function of their nations’ embassy buildings. Thus, Loeffler reported on her findings in connection with a symposium entitled “Balancing Security and Openness” held by the American Foreign Service Association where she posed the question “Are embassies to be fortresses, cultural landmarks or simply offices?” while Thérrien sorted out the historically uneasy co-existence of aesthetics and politics for the readers of Canadian Architect when the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) appeared to disagree with the jury on the winning design of the Berlin Embassy. Loeffler is more preoccupied with the complications of public symbolism than Thérrien, a telling difference because it not only reflects on a divergence in their conceptual approaches but also on the (stereo-) typical assumptions that public opinion holds about the national contexts these two scholars have studied. Thus, Loeffler pays a great deal of attention to the accusations of cultural imperialism that have been leveled at

American architects’ efforts to echo certain host countries’ vernacular styles, while Thérien quotes several sources that underline “undenom- strativeness” as a chief Canadian characteristic.  Indeed, as a recent lavish and bi-lingual coffee-table book on Berlin’s official residences illustrates, the diplomatic buildings of Berlin provide a rich source for the study of tenacious national stereotype, with Costa Rica characterized by its “coffee aroma”, Great Britain by its “cosiness”, Japan by its “cherry blossoms”, and Canada by its “maple”. In the case of Slovenia, for which after half a century of membership in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia apparently no stereotype was readily available, the authors opt for “restrain” (an inappropriate translation of “Bescheidenheit” with its under- currents of “modesty” and “insignificance”).  Loeﬄer and Thérien are historians of architecture, but their observations often parallel those of literary critics in their attempts to pinpoint the specificity of their nations’ writing, an enterprise continually required to reinvent itself in response to changing demographics, interrelations with other cultures, and other factors. My own research on the subject stems from an interest of long standing in cultural semiotics in general and national stereotypes in particular, which – together with the study of foreign languages – are among the few subjects in literary research that have proven of some considerable (and not always salubrious) interest to state diplomacy. My work has included a look at Canada’s participation in international exhibitions, at Canadian travellers’ views of European and mid-Eastern cultures, at the clash of European and Asian cultural symbolisms in post-Expo 86 Vancouver, and the image of post-reunification Berlin in the North American and German press. Looking at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin has permitted me to bring together my training as a Germanist, a Comparatist, and a Canadianist to ask the question how a national symbolism fares in competition with others in a location made extraordinarily complex by its history. Thérien and Loeﬄer touch on the interaction of local and imported architectural styles in embassy buildings, but their emphasis is on the buildings as such rather than their interaction with the cities that surround them, and in a few cases their work was hindered by the lack of documentation available on the host countries’ vernacular styles. The unique situation of Berlin by contrast offers an embarrassment of riches, although it is important to bear in mind that, because the various “a.als” of city design are still in the process of linking up into an ensemble, any analyses like the following must by necessity be preliminary. Similarly, plans for the Canadian embassy remain subject to revision for a variety of reasons, and my conclusions are therefore to be understood as provisional.

Embassy and National Identity

Construction on the new Canadian Chancery in Berlin began in 2002 and is expected to take until 2004. Prime Minister Chrétien’s visit to Germany, in February 2002, with Team Canada was used as an opportunity for the ground-breaking ceremony and to “hand […] over a wooden time capsule designed by First Nation artist Calvin Hunt as a gift to Berlin and the new embassy”, containing “amongst other souvenirs, a Canadian flag […], a selection of compact discs with music from different Canadian regions and a traditional backpack made of seal skin from Nunavut.” Like the time-capsule, which, as of 2003, sits outside the Ambassador’s office in the Embassy’s temporary quarters on Friedrichstrasse awaiting its final location, the Embassy itself is designed as a compact encyclopedia of what – at least in the language of official Canada – is currently considered typically Canadian, both symbolically and economically speaking. The Canadian Stone Association, for example, kept a close eye on the design competition and responded favourably when the winning design (by Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects/Smith Carter Architects and Engineers/Architects Gagnon Letellier Cyr [KGS]) featured “stones extracted in Canada,” but the Association “denounce[d] the uses of

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7 See for example Thérien, Au-delà des frontières, 12.
9 See, for example, Eva-Marie Krölle, Canadian Travellers in Europe, 1881–1900 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1987); Eva-Marie Krölle, “Expo ’67: Canada’s Camelot?”, Canadian Literature 152–53 (Summer 1997), 36–51. For the link between foreign language study and central intelligence activities, see Margaret Talbot, “Other Woes: Multiculturalism’s triumph, tied to weak foreign-language skills, has deadened us to many of the world’s dangers”, The New York Times Magazine (18 Nov. 2001), 23–24.
11 Whenever such information was available to me at the time of writing, I have indicated changes to and revisions of the design.
foreign granite in the extension of the Montreal Convention Centre.” Indeed, the original design used “a rich palette of materials that reflects all the regions of Canada” and included Douglas fir from British Columbia, maple from Quebec, limestone from Manitoba, and, in a nod to the host country, zinc from Germany (the latter has since been changed to copper). The design also featured a “Timber Hall”, containing meeting rooms and galleries and described poetically by The Globe and Mail’s architecture critic as an “imagistically soft centre” and “void sheath.” The architects’ backgrounder indicates that “a large vertical North West Coast Native Sculpture, a ‘Welcome Figure’, [was] proposed to be sited dramatically emerging from the water and visible from the main reception lobby.” The ensemble resulted, according to The Globe and Mail, in “a little bounded wilderness”, and indeed the overall effect that emerges from the description is not unlike the natural environment stipulated by waterfalls, plants, and Native art greeting international travelers in Vancouver’s International Airport. In addition to locating Canada’s identity in its natural splendour, the design takes care to project, as architect Bruce Kuwabara explains, “a sense of openness and tolerance and transparency” in keeping with the country’s legacy of mediation and peace-keeping.

All of the five short-listed designs located Canadian identity in the two areas of nature and mediation. By presenting a “series of gardens representing the four elements of nature – Water, Rock, Plain and Tree,” Sauier + Perrotte/Dunlop Farrow Architects, for instance, sought to project “an oasis of space and volume within Berlin’s urban grid, using light as the expression of communication and connection to the people of Berlin and the world”, while Diamond, Schmitt and Company included an “all-weather court covered by a glass roof that is supported by a canoe-shaped metal structure”, using open access as an indication of respect for “local architectural traditions” and “as an indication of Canada’s transparent democracy.” The canoe reappears in the Moriya & Teshima design, which among the shortlisted designs strove for probably the most extensive expression of Canadian national symbolism:

This scheme places the Embassy’s main entrance on Ebertstrasse, slicing through the façade in a bold stroke meant to evoke the breadth of the Canadian horizon. The public heart of the building is the Canadian Courtyard, conceived as a lively urban park designed as a representative journey through Canada. Tree forms refer to Canada’s forests, angular volumes recall the Rocky Mountains, paving stones are patterned to resemble the patchwork of prairie wheat fields, a cascading waterfall evokes Niagara Falls, and curves throughout the courtyard are inspired by the quintessentially Canadian canoe.

In their insistence on the twin concepts of openness and nature, using a simulated cross-country tour and art-forms alluding to readily identifiable natural regions of Canada, these designs enforced a tradition in embassy design that Thérien relates to developments in Canadian cultural diplomacy under Pierre Trudeau. Following the 1971 imposition of a 10% tax on all goods imported into the United States by Richard Nixon’s government, Canada strengthened links with Europe, Asia, and South America as alternative trade partners to the United States. In this enterprise, culture and tourism became not-so-secret weapons, the more so since Trudeau’s initiatives coincided with a spectacular blossoming of the Canadian arts in the wake of the country’s Centennial celebrations. At the same time, the pronounced federalism of such endeavours was meant to counteract the efforts of independent-minded provinces, especially Quebec, to create their own international networks. Aided by auditoriums, libraries, and galleries that were a conspicuous part of their design, embassies functioned as visible demonstrations to the world at large of the sorts of accomplishments that could be expected of Canadian federalism and internationalism. Thus, E.J. Gaboury’s celebrated Canadian Chancery

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14 KGS Architects, “Backgrounder”, Rather than a Pacific North West “Welcome Figure,” an Inukshuk or “way finder” has also been in discussion.
15 Dault, “Canada gets a home”.
16 See Trevor Boddy, “The Airport Terminal as Rain-Forest Theme Park”, The Globe and Mail (9 Nov. 1996), C7: “At the terminal’s far end, escalators lead arriving international passengers down two levels to the customs hall. The focal point, at the intermediate level, is Coast Salish artist Susan A. Point’s Spindle Whorl, a five-metre-wide red-cedar carving that marks the ceremonial meeting spot of the Musqueam band, which has an active land claim on the terminal’s site. The carving sits at the head of a grand staircase flanked by escalators. Between the escalators and the stairs are stage-set salmon-stream beds, complete with rocks and running water.”
17 Quoted in Dault, “Canada gets a home”.
22 See Thérien, Au-delà des frontières, 182ff.
in Mexico City features a marble floor with textures “pour évoquer les prairies”, 
23 silk banners by Takeo Tanabe resplendent in Eastern Canadian autumn colours, 
and a totem pole by Tony Hunt. The symbolism of buildings such as this was 
all the more effective for creating, by association, the impression that 
federalism and internationalism were Canada’s “natural” way.

It should be noted, however, that recent promotional material regarding 
the Embassy in Berlin places “business” at the top of the connections 
it seeks to foster with Germany, followed by “culture” and “diplomatic 
interests”, 23 and that details regarding the artwork are not specific but 
merely state that the building will “feature integrated Canadian art”. 26 In 
devoting itself to too many of its references to Native art or the Canadian 
natural environment, the building would probably risk losing its recognition 
factor for a German public besotted with Northern wilderness (and the 
tourism and business opportunities that come with it), but the glossy 
high-tech environment of the new Berlin may elicit certain adjustments to 
the ways in which Canada presents itself in this Embassy. That the natural 
can be combined with the pragmatic to stunning effect, is illustrated in 
Frank Gehry’s DG Bank on Pariser Platz, but a bank does not come with 
the same semiotic complications as a diplomatic building. 27

Berlin Embassies

The Canadian Embassy will be located on Leipziger Platz, a prestigious 
site, but – with the exception of a mansion designed by Friedrich Hitzig 
on Leipziger Platz 12 that was occupied by the British Legation during 
1859–1878 and by the Turkish Embassy until 1896 when the building was 
demolished 28 – not one traditionally associated with foreign legations. 
The most powerful among these occupy choice locations on or near Pa-
riser Platz and Wilhelmstrasse, in the former Diplomatenviertel south of 
Tiergarten, and – in the sole but significant case of the Swiss Embassy – in 
what was once the tomy Alsenviertel before Speer had most of it razed in 
preparation for the construction of “Germania”, the Nazis’ grandiose 
new Berlin to be built along a triumphal north-south axis. 29 The former 
site of the Alsenviertel is now part of the new government quarter near 
the Reichstag, which in its east-west orientation (the “Bundesspange” or 
“Band des Bundes”, awkwardly translated in the Anglophone media as 
“federal strip”) 30 pointedly avoids an echo of Speer’s design. Less affluent 
nations, such as Mongolia or Eritrea, have moved into relatively inexpensive 
quarters in Pankow that formerly housed the GDR embassies. 31 Most of 
of the older and powerful nations continued to own sites in Berlin 
even while they opened embassies in Bonn, and several of them have 
already moved, or are about to move, into buildings they vacated after WW 
II. Some of these buildings provide illuminating studies in the complica-
tions of Berlin history and in its restless ghosts, 32 and it is particularly 
instructive to research their backgrounds on the web where information 
about them appears in sometimes unexpected configurations. The Italian, 
Japanese, and Spanish embassies south of Tiergarten, for example, feature 
the monumental architecture that was considered their due as allies of fasci-

cist Germany, and they were designed by architects favoured by its regime

23 Thérien, Au-delà des frontières, 208.
24 See Thérien, Au-delà des frontières, 182ff.
25 Also see Jean Christien, “Remarks made at official ground-breaking of Canada’s new emba-
spotlight-en.asp>; Klaus Wowerfeit, “Remarks made at official ground-breaking of 
canadaeurope/germany/spotlight-en.asp>.
26 “Botschaft von Kanada/Canadian Embassy/Ambassade du Canada”, Flyer. Department 
of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (2002).
27 The role of Native art in diplomatic buildings as well as the apparent equation between 
Native art and natural environment deserve to be examined in a separate study.

28 See Louis Back, Laurence Dernys, Der Leipziger Platz: Gestern und Morgen (Berlin: 
Braun, 2002), 46.
29 See for example Hans J. Reichardt, Wolfgang Schäbe, Von Berlin nach Germania: 
Über die Zerstörungen der “Reichshauptstadt” durch Albert Speer Neugestaltungspla-
Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape (Chicago: University of Chicago 
Press, 1997), 134ff.
30 Max Welsh Guerra, “Hauptsatzungsplan als Vereinigungspolitik” in Werner Stiss, Ralf 
Rydykiewski (eds.), Berlin. Die Hauptsatzung: Vergangenheit und Zukunft einer eu-
ropäischen Metropole (Berlin: Nicolai, 1999), 610–62, 623; Martin Fuller, “Berlin: The Lost 
Muschimp, “Once again, a City Rewards the Walker”, New York Times (11 April 1999), 
Section 2, 34–35: 39.
32 See Gerhard Ullmann, “Offerte an die Gegenwart: Eine Berliner Ausstellung über Bot-
2000/10/0010701.htm>.
such as Ludwig Moshamer and Friedrich Hertzelt. The web offers information on the Japanese Embassy under “espionage”, with reference to surveillance equipment located by allied soldiers in the bombed ruins, while both the Italian and Japanese embassies appear in links to the Holocaust. In other cases, however, the surviving embassy buildings have been read as steadfast beacons of western democracy amidst the devastation surrounding them. In her book on the Swiss Embassy, Claudia Schwartz goes so far as to assign even to the controversial modern extension of the nineteenth-century palazzo the role of a watch-tower over Germany’s brand-new government quarter and the democracy represented by it:

Ab und zu scheint es, als würde sich der Betonkubus ruhig, aber bestimmt etwas vor den betagten Weggefährten stellen und Unmut bekunden, wenn rundherum zu viel Neugierde herrscht oder wenn die Nachbarn im Spreebogen gar zu mächtig auftrommeln. [At times it appears as if the concrete cube quietly but determinedly placed itself in front of its aged companion and showed its displeasure when all around them there is a display of too much curiosity or when the neighbours on Spreebogen are a little too full of themselves. My translation].

In another famous case but for different reasons, the Italian Embassy on Hiroshima-Strasse, sealed during the post-war years although it had survived the WW II air-raids almost intact, became an allegory of sorts, offering a warning display of the hubris not only of fascism, but of all of western civilization. Incorporating doors and other items from the fifteenth-century Palazzo Ducale in Gubbio, Fiertze’s building features an interior design so devoted to showy representation that even at the time of its construction it became apparent that there would not be enough space for the working functions of an embassy. Ransacked repeatedly and falling into disrepair during the forty-odd years when it stood empty, the building is now being restored by Italian specialists, including the fascist insignia that appear in virtually every room, although care is taken that these are concealed. Indeed, in the coverage on the Italian Embassy, there has been a somewhat disconcerting tendency to celebrate “den Reiz des Verfalls” (the charm of decomposition) as an aesthetic factor that apparently exists apart from the ethics of the situation. By contrast to these diplomatic buildings that all but collapse under the weight of the accumulated history upon them, Canada’s Embassy on Leipziger Platz is the first it has ever had in Berlin (although there was a Consulate), and Frank Townson, director of the Berlin Chancery Project, makes its thoroughly contemporary connotations clear when he says: “This is a significant move for Canada because we are entering the last of the G8 capitals [...] We’re in London, Washington, Tokyo … all of them, but we’ve never had Embassy representation in Berlin”.

Leipziger Platz and History

In order to underscore the Embassy’s integration into the host culture, however, there must also be a historical link. Like all such undertakings in Berlin, the challenge is to locate a period relatively unsullied by unwelcome associations. Added to the assertion that a Canadian Embassy in Berlin “is a significant move,” we find the explanation that “Leipziger Platz is an area of historical significance to Berlin, one of the historical gateways to the medieval city”. Leipziger Platz and Schinkel’s Potsdam Gates are baroque and neo-classicist respectively, not medieval, but the error is inspired and much in keeping with some of the challenges posed by the city’s history. Setting aside the fact that Leipziger Platz, together with Potsdamer Platz, was one of the most important hubs of modern Berlin during the first third of the twentieth century, the reference—deliberately or not—echoes some of the favourite ideas of Berlin’s Senatsbaurat, Hans Stimmann, whose “Innenstadtkonzept” proposes that Berlin’s lay-out return to its pre-Communist, pre-Nazi, and pre-Wilhelminian design and who locates the missing heart of the city at the southern tip of Museuminsel where, under SED rule, a whole medieval quarter had to yield to an Expressway. Initially referred to as the “octagon”, Leipziger Platz was, together with the rectangular Pariser Platz to the north and the circular Belle-Alliance-Platz (now Mehring-Platz) to the south, part of the early eighteenth-century westward expansion of the city under an increasingly assertive Prussia. The baroque design of this new part of Berlin, now barely discernible on a map of the densely popu-


33 Quoted in Wagner, “Karada Passage Excites Berlin”.

lated contemporary city, conveys an unequivocal impression of Friedrich Wilhelm I’s claim to power. The design appears in a 1734 map of Berlin used by KGS Architects as a cover for the folder in which they present the documents for the Embassy Project. The impression created by the design is one of newness and order, and of extensive areas waiting to be built upon, and KGS refer to the site of Leipziger Platz as a “simplified park-like setting.” It is understandably important for an embassy to be situated in a location relatively untainted by troublesome historical associations, but – considering that originally all three “Plätze” were chiefly meant for military drill even before they were named in commemoration of major battles in the Napoleonic Wars – the effort remains as unavoidably fraught as the costly attempts to “clean up” the names of Berlin’s streets after reunification. Reports on the ground-breaking ceremony cited Berlin Mayor Wowereit as praising Canada’s contribution to healing the “wounds from the post-war period,” but one has to go to the impressive documentation in Back and Demp’s Der Leipziger Platz: Gestern und Morgen and Schult and Visscher’s Der Leipziger Platz / Leipziger Platz Carré / Lennédreieck to obtain a sense of what is at stake in the square’s reconstruction. The square which once rivaled the Paris Place Vendôme in gracious elegance virtually disappeared when the remaining ruins, including Schinkel’s Gate, were razed in preparation for the building of the Berlin Wall. Together with the adjacent area formerly occupied by Potsdamer Platz, it became an infamous no-man’s land, with only the remnants of pavement outlining the shape of the octagon and few except old Berliners aware of its existence. And yet this desolate area was one of the chief points at which East and West remained in contact even during the time of the Wall, perhaps most spectacularly through the rock concerts that took place on Potsdamer Platz during the eighties, drawing listeners on the East side of the wall as close to the event as they dared to approach it. The much-publicized reconstruction of Potsdamer Platz was premeditated over by the “Info-Box” located on Leipziger Platz between 1995 and 2001, and Leipziger Strasse rapidly became one of the busiest thoroughfares re-connecting East and West. In the media, the buildings going up around Leipziger

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98 See Back, Demp’s, Der Leipziger Platz, 13; and Ladd, The Ghosts of Berlin, 49 for reproductions of the original map.
99 KGS Architects, Background.
100 Toome, “Canada’s Embassy.”
101 Back, Demp’s, Der Leipziger Platz; Tanja Schult, Jochen Visscher, Der Leipziger Platz / Leipziger Platz Carré / Lennédreieck (Berlin: Javis, 2002).
Canadian Embassy and Urban Scene

In addition to praising Canada for its contribution to restoring Leipziger Platz, the Berlin media were impressed with the building’s accessibility, providing, as Ambassador Marie Bernard-Meunier put it, “an open place where Germans can meet Canadians and be part of the dynamic life in Berlin”. The proposed building not only features an interior courtyard which “will be open to the skies” but also “a passageway through its centre” which will “save pedestrians a lengthy trek around the Embassy” on their way from the S-Bahn station at Leipziger Platz to Ebertstrasse. “Many countries might be alarmed at allowing so many people unhindered access to their Embassy”, but not the Canadians, commentators noted enthusiastically. The German media found ways to link the Canada Passage and its Quebec granite floor not only to pedestrians purposefully marching through on their way to work, but also to the leisurely flâneur, a creature with such renewed currency in post-unification Berlin that there have been reprints galore of the classical flâneur literature of Benjamin, Hessel, Krakauer, and Kerr, to mention only a few. After all, in addition to a lounge area, the main Embassy reception area and an information centre, the plans for the ground floor also feature shops and a café where pedestrians can relax in an “urban oasis”: From K.G.S.’s backgrounder: “a water garden maximizes ambient and reflected natural light [...] The reflections of light dancing on the ceiling surface creates a soothing environment as part of the Embassy entrance sequence.”

The obliging integration of the Canadian Embassy into the existing infrastructure of the city seemed a welcome change from the bristling security characterizing the Japanese or French Embassies or the difficulties encountered in accommodating buildings such as the U.S. Chancery. The construction of the latter on a prime location near the Brandenburg Gate was stalled for years over security requirements introduced by the Inman Commission following 1983 bombings in Beirut which stipulate a

100-metre distance between building and street. Unpopular U.S. proposals to deal with the situation have included the relocation of two adjacent streets, one of which had just undergone a costly update, and a switch with the neighbouring site of the hotly debated Holocaust monument, before more recently settling for the inclusion of an additional interior safety zone separating the embassy offices from the outside wall. Canada, by contrast, “is not a country that builds walls around itself”, “[i]t’s the Canadian way [...] we don’t turn people away”.

Ebertstraße, Design: K.G.S. Photo: bünck + felse.

It should, however, be pointed out that several of the features that are cited as quintessentially “Canadian” by both Canadians and Berliners are in fact stipulated by the Berlin Senate Planning Bureau and caused the K.G.S team (and undoubtedly all of the other short-listed teams) to groan “it’s an impossible site” and “the Germans will make you comply whether

44 Quoted in Torne, “Canada’s Embassy”.
47 K.G.S Architects, “Backgrounder”.
48 See Loeffler, Architecture, 258; Loeffler, “The Identity Crisis”.
49 Townson quoted in Wagner, “Canada Passage Excites Berlin”.
you like it or not.” Thus, cladding on Leipziger Platz buildings “must be a light buff limestone or sandstone (no reflecting glass, for example). There has to be a courtyard. There has to be an underground pedestrian walkway, connecting to the subway, over which the building must be cantilevered” and so on. Moreover, this openness which “allow[s] so many people unhindered access to [the] Embassy” turns out to be rather more of a problem than meets the eye, at a number of levels.

The complications begin with the design competition which, as Thérrien argued in an issue of Canadian Architect devoted to the new Embassy, “has never been an open public process [for major public buildings]” and “illustrates eloquently how political and bureaucratic agendas have forced the compromise of professional issues specific to architecture.” Although it should be added in all fairness that – as Loeffler has eloquently illustrated – architects’ insouciance in addressing concerns related to security and plain pragmatism has sometimes also been remarkable. The Berlin competition created something of a fracas which was a smaller version of the one unleashed by the earlier competition to design the Canadian Chancery in Washington, D.C. On that occasion, Trudeau overruled the jury’s recommendation in favour of Arthur Erickson. In the case of the Berlin Embassy, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, in particular Lloyd Axworthy, appears to have favoured the KGS concept over the jury’s choice, a design by Saucier + Perrotte Architects. The reasons for this decision have been a subject of speculation. Designers of the new Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Woodsworth College at the University of Toronto, and city halls in Kitchener, Ontario, and Richmond, B.C., and recipients of half a dozen Governor General’s Awards for architecture, KPMB were joined by Gagnon Letellier Cyr; and Smith Carter, all of whom had ambitiously distinguished themselves in the design of public-sector buildings. However, KGS also presented a lower estimate than their competitors, although at $36,456,000 as compared to $37,193,200 the savings were at no more than 2%. Moreover, several KGS members had experience in embassy design, including Smith Carter Architects and Engineers who worked on London’s Canada House, as did Vogel Architects, consulting architects, who were involved in the design of the Washington and Beijing Chanceries, as well as the

Canadian Embassy in Seoul, Korea. In a statement that was instantly seized upon by the press but vigorously challenged by former Ambassador Gaetan Lavertu,54 Kuwabara himself suspects that the decision was furthermore influenced by the view from the Ambassador’s office, which, unlike the competing designs, takes “advantage of a dramatic view of Sir Norman Foster’s Reichstag to the north” (adjustments have since been necessary to the location of the office, to take into account the lively building activity in the vicinity which would sooner or later have partially blocked this view). Or possibly, it is surmised, the “classical and representative character” of the KGS concept as opposed to the bolder, more abstract design of the jury’s choice, swayed “an audience of non-architects.” None of these speculations, however, specifically alludes to the security concerns that embassies must address, no matter what their national image, and both designs were found to be flawed in this area. Thus, DFAIT’s technical reports (concerned with issues of “cost, security and technology”),55 found that the KGS scheme with its “extensive mix of commercial and chancery functions on ground and first floor[s] [the site very difficult and costly to secure]” while the Saucier + Perrotte scheme posed similar difficulties “due to fragmented approach.” The design of the ground floor has since been adjusted to respond to some of these concerns.

While the press coverage of the Berlin Embassy tends to dwell on its projection of national image, technical reports like these provide illuminating details on the ways in which façade and functionality do not (and, even the purpose of the building, cannot) always mesh. How, as the headlines describing a symposium on diplomatic buildings held by the U.S. Foreign Service put it, do chancery designs address the question: “Are embassies to be fortresses, cultural landmarks or simply offices?” Thus, while the press on the Berlin Embassy stipulates “openness” as a quintessential Canadian characteristic, the former Bonn Embassy on closer inspection turns out to be a Cold-War fortress – to the surprise of a casual visitor like myself who, it must be admitted, perceived it as a wel-

54 See Weder, “Report”, 24-26 and passim.
55 Weder claims that “DFAIT refused to release these technical reports to the media, the public, or the competing architects, with the explanation that they were confidential. But the documents were leaked and within a few days of being refused official access, this writer had a full copy of the technical reports in hand”. Weder, “Report”, 27. According to documented evidence at DFAIT, however, the information was readily available.
56 Loeffer, “The Identity Crisis”.
coming place in a leafy and quiet street. Using documents deposited (either in error or because the information contained in them had become obsolete), in the Public Archives of Canada and therefore providing a rare insight into the Bonn Embassy’s high-security space, Thérrien describes the location of offices containing “les équipements de cryptographie” and “les bureaux des préposés aux archives secrètes”, all heavily protected against unauthorized access and screened against outside viewing. The building impresses her as “un îlot protégé par un jardin en contrebas, lequel évoque les douves de châteaux forts”, and she finds that the access walkway evokes “les ponts de ces anciennes constructions fortifiées.”

The discrepancy of this description with my own recollection of the building as one where a visitor was invariably greeted with open arms illustrates the nature of embassy buildings as “une anomalie: une immeuble-pays à l’intérieur d’un autre pays”\(^{38}\),\(^{38}\) requiring them to function as a “forteresse amicale”\(^{39}\) or “friendly intrusion”. Among the most matter-of-fact summaries of the questions involved are the instructions issued by Hanscomb International Construction Consultants on embassies, with special reference to Berlin. Because these instructions are one of the few documents in which the complex interplay of representation and function is openly discussed, excerpts deserve to be quoted at some length:

There are [...] contradictory needs for [an embassy] to be open and inviting to the public, yet secure and secretive for diplomatic purposes. [...] The following are politically based influences on cost:

There may be requirements for award of the construction contract to a home country contractor.

It is equally likely that many of the workers will be from the home country, particularly for construction of secure areas.

Supervision and security for the construction site will require special arrangements.

Many materials may be purchased from the home country and shipped (in secure containers) to the site.

Reciprocal agreements may exist between countries regarding duty free importation of construction materials.

Conclusion

Because it has special currency in Berlin, I would like to return briefly to the question of openness. The Canadian Chancelleries in Washington and Mexico City, for example, also feature symbolic representations of “openness” by incorporating open or glass-covered atrium spaces, and indeed the connection between transparency and democracy is a feature within embassies and consulates. For example, Loeffler refers to the “glass-walled buildings” commissioned by the U.S. State Department during the 1950s (including Walter Gropius’ Embassy in Athens, Eero Saarinen’s in London, John Johansen’s in Dublin), as “huge roadside billboards [...] advertising America as a nation that was future-oriented and proud of the openness of its democracy”,\(^{62}\) a connection that survived even into an era when American embassies are more likely to resemble walled fortresses than inviting sidewalk facilities. The Oklahoma bombing in 1995, for instance, required David Childs to rethink the glass-walled atrium for the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa, but he resisted the idea of eliminating it altogether: “He moved the atrium to the interior but retained the openness of the exterior by retaining the exterior wall of glass and inserting behind it a concrete blast wall punctuated by regular-size windows”.\(^{63}\) The new U.S. Embassy by Moore Ruble Yudell on Pariser Platz also features an interior glass atrium. However, in addition to these increasingly complicated efforts to equate “openness with transparency” under conditions that seriously impede such efforts, the

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35 Thérrien, Au-delà des frontières, 131, 132.
36 Gaboury quoted in Thérrien, Au-delà des frontières, 225.
37 Thérrien, Au-delà des frontières, 5.
38 Alan Y. Taniguchi quoted in Loeffler, Architecture, 261.
39 Loeffler, “The Identity Crisis”.
40 Loeffler, “The Identity Crisis”.
62 Loeffler, “The Identity Crisis”.
63 Loeffler, “The Identity Crisis”.
concept of transparency in Berlin comes with a fraught history of its own. Writing about Norman Foster’s steel-and-glass dome for the Reichstag, for example, the New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp analyzes “the meaning of glass”, suggesting that the dome resembles “an ecleptical cupola for a haunted building in a town of many specters”, and he commends the design for acknowledging, by virtue of its appearance, that the building is a ghost. Muschamp rejects idealistic readings of glass as signifying “a democratic utopia of transparency, freedom and social responsibility”, because as he illustrates with reference to Mendelsohn’s Colosseum House, it is as possible to perpetrate acts of oppression behind glass façades as it is to do so behind solid walls. He is particularly scathing about the 1914 motto of the Werkbund, “Colored glass destroys hatred. Glass opens up a new age.” Muschamp cannot accept any attempts to romanticize or aestheticize the new Reichstag, because virtually any style and material can be proven to be “haunted” by some undesirable historical association. A critical writing about an exhibition on Berlin embassies comes to a similar conclusion when he refers to the assumption that dictatorship and democracy can be told apart by looking at the buildings they inhabit, as “ein frommer Wunsch” (wishful thinking) and he coins the remarkable oxymoron “repressive Toleranz” to describe the ambiance inside an embassy.

In KGS’s Embassy, the waiting area directly outside the Ambassador’s office, “while open to the sky, is enclosed by glass walls to extend the view from the interior reception area” and thus affords, like the ambassador’s office, a view of the Reichstag with its transparent cupola in the distance. As is expected of it, KGS’s backrounder uses conciliatory language to describe the relationship: “A strong Canadian presence at the historical juncture of Leipziger Platz and Potsdamer Platz fully engages Berlin’s history and future, and the city’s vitality and richness is the spirit and the vision of the design concept,” but as I have hoped to show, Canada’s Embassy and Berlin speak to each other in ways that go well beyond this official statement. Painting and sculpture displayed within the Embassy will also have a significant role to play in this process and, once

its selection has been finalized, the artwork will deserve as much attention as the architectural design. One hopes that the paintings and sculptures will have an easier time of it than Anna Kahane’s early seventies carving for the Canadian Embassy in Islamabad, the history of which confirms that embassies have histories and requirements all of their own: difficult to store, the large item disrupted the artist’s household while installation was significantly delayed by civil war in Pakistan.

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64 Muschamp, “Once again, a City Rewards the Walker”.


66 Ullmann, “Offerte an die Gegenwart”.

67 KGS Architects, “Backrounder”.