

Constructing a National Architecture: The History of U.S. Embassy Building and its Implications in Accra

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To build is to construct a historical narrative. Though the history of every country is far from the linear structure often found in history textbooks, people continue to write these simplified histories because they are easier to accept and help to frame a cohesive national identity. Nations like the United States rely upon these constructions of nationalism because they help people imagine their existence as a part of a nation.¹ This allows nations to become stronger and appear as homogenous entities. However, the reality, especially in post-colonial states like Ghana, is that there cannot be one concrete national identity. Instead, citizens construct many different versions of nationalism based on a variety of cultural, political, and social factors. Despite these competing national identities, national architecture attempts to actively forget pre-colonial differences by forging a new identity that can be shared within the nation and projected abroad.

The best example of national architecture is embassy architecture. An embassy is a nationalist building found in a foreign country, which conducts official diplomatic business between the government and citizens of the two nations. This building must marry nationalist forms with functionality. Embassies are key examples of nationalist projections through architecture. As the American Institute of Architects argues, “Diplomatic facilities abroad are more than just offices, residences, and places of assembly and refuge. They are the physical presence of the United States beyond its borders. United States embassies are symbols of the values and aspiration of the American people.”² Throughout United States history, embassy construction has played a key role in both establishing and reaffirming America’s image abroad. Embassies must make nationalist statements while still serving the needs of the over 60,000 United States government employees that work in them.³

However, American embassy construction has changed over the past fifty years. This becomes clear when examining the United States embassies built in Accra, Ghana in 1959⁴ and 2007⁵ as case studies. These embassies highlight the key shifts in architectural styles, priorities, and projections of nationalism that have occurred in United States national architecture abroad and illustrate how national architecture abroad enables the United States to cultivate and project a sense of nationalism and identity.

Nationalism is a complex idea to project as it is not a static or concrete concept. Rather, it constantly adjusts to a country’s perceived and actual power as an “imagined community.”⁶ Nationalism is especially difficult to construct in post-colonial nation-states like Ghana. As Czech philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner writes, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”⁷ Thus, forging a national identity requires creating a new identity based in the construction of a collective history and cultural traditions through architecture, education, and various other means.

In 1957, the West African nation of Ghana gained its independence from Britain. With this new independence came the pressure to construct a sense of post-colonial nationalism. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first Prime Minister and later first President, attempted to use architecture as a tool to forge a new national identity as Ghanaians. His attempts mirror Hannah La Roux’s belief that, “Architecture played a role in forming symbols of progress around the time of independence.”⁸ In her study of post-colonial architecture in the former British colonies of Ghana and Nigeria, she found that the new governments sought to construct new architectural symbols to both visually illustrate their modernity and separate themselves from their colonial oppressors.⁹ In creating these symbols, they set lofty goals for both the present and

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¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

² Barbara A. Nadel and Marvin J. Malecha, “Design for Diplomacy: New Embassies for the 21st Century,” *The American Institute of Architects*, July 1, 2009, 7.

³ “President’s Budget - Excerpt on Capital Security Cost-Sharing Program,” accessed March 13, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/obo/c30690.htm>.

⁴ The first U.S. embassy in Accra was constructed between 1956 and 1959. Jane Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), figs. 58-60.

⁵ Charles Williams, “New Facilities,” *The Bugle* (Fall 2007).

⁶ Anderson.

⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (1964), 168.

⁸ Hannah Le Roux, “Modern Architecture in Post-Colonial Ghana and Nigeria,” *Architectural History* 47 (2004): 361-392, 369.

⁹ *Ibid.*

future of architecture in the country. In turn, they hope these goals will lead to progress, development, and nationalism.

Nkrumah commissioned foreign tropical architects like Max Bond, Maxwell Fry, and Jane Drew to construct new national structures throughout Ghana.¹⁰ He hoped that doing so would help to curb local ethnic identities and languages like Akan/Twi, Ga, and Ewe and allow a new Ghanaian identity to emerge and unify the nation. However, these architects focused so much of their attention on constructing climatically contextual designs that they often neglected to factor local cultures and traditions into their buildings.¹¹ Because of this, over fifty years later, Nkrumah's failure to construct a single national architecture becomes apparent when walking around Accra, or for that matter, any part of Ghana. Yet, Nkrumah's policies and architectural projects still helped Ghanaians find new ways to identify themselves and bolstered their sense of national pride.

While Ghanaian leaders like Nkrumah attempted to forge a new national identity, United States leaders determined they would construct an embassy in Accra that would both illustrate their connection to Ghana and project a sense of American modernity. America wanted to portray itself as a, "young, vigorous, and forward looking nation."¹² Thus, in 1956, the Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO) commissioned Chicago architect Harry Weese to design an embassy in Accra that would attempt to merge elements of Ghanaian traditions with American modernism.

Weese's usage of modernist architecture design style helped to create a building that blended design with utility. French architect Le Corbusier, one of the founding fathers of modernist architecture, defined modernism as "a machine for living," meaning that truly great architecture perfectly marries form and function.¹³ Modernism aims to change the lives of the individuals by using innovative architectural forms, which maximize the building's utility.¹⁴ Through utility, architecture gains beauty. As German architect Bruno Taut argues, "The aim of architecture is the creation of the perfect, and therefore also beautiful, efficiency."¹⁵ This focus on social change, beautification, and efficiency through architectural design made modernism an attractive option for many leaders of newly independent nations like Ghana. Nkrumah saw modernism as a way for Africans to build a new, independent Africa. Thus, it was only fitting for Weese to adapt the international style of modernism to the Ghanaian context when designing the United States embassy there.

Weese was a successful modernist architect from Chicago.¹⁶ He started his career with Skidmore Owing & Merrill and eventually began his own architectural firm which designed nearly a thousand buildings, including the Metro in Washington D.C. Architect Jack Hartray, who worked with Weese for many years, said, "Harry was a [modernist] architect who was doing very interesting buildings, but they weren't like anyone else's."¹⁷ He continued, "Harry built to adorn human activity rather than to mold or direct it."¹⁸ These comments reveal Weese's commitment to and respect for the people whom his buildings served. He viewed architecture as a way to enhance rather than restrict people's interactions with other people and cultures. Weese's architectural philosophy and style made him an optimal choice to be the architect of the Accra embassy. After being hired, he immediately began examining traditional Ghanaian architecture.

Through Weese's study of local architectural styles, he was able to construct a building that seamlessly merged elements of Ghanaian tradition with American projections of modernity. His embassy design was inspired by the nineteenth century mud-and-stick Wa-Na palace.¹⁸ Weese literally flipped the building upside down so that the top of the palace became the base of the embassy. This raised the floor, which made it better suited for the climate of Ghana. African architecture scholar Labelle Prussin notes that raised floors and rectangular forms of building have traditionally been used in West Africa for centuries.¹⁹ Thus, Weese's design was not an isolated example of this architectural style in Ghana. However, the fact that a foreign architect incorporated local techniques into his design to make the best of humid climates and address social issues is unique and mirrors the modernist philosophy of architecture.

Weese's utilization of local techniques in the construction of his modernist building illustrates an incorporation of the local into the global. Some of the techniques used by Weese include: stilts, open plan, treated varnished mahogany to rebel termites, covered walkways, shutters, screen openings, designed vaults, covered walkways and tapered concrete piers that he believed resembled African spears.²⁰ Though Weese misinterpreted the original Wa-Na palace and at times

¹⁰ Janet Hess, "Imagining Architecture: The Structure of Nationalism in Accra, Ghana," *Africa Today* 47 (Spring 2000): 35-58.

¹¹ Le Roux.

¹² Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, 168.

¹³ M. Dodson, "The High Modernism of the Early to Mid-Twentieth Century," Week 5 PowerPoint slide #3, History W300.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Bruno Taut, *Modern Architecture* (1929), 9.

¹⁶ Robert Sharoff, "On the Life and Work of Chicago Architect Harry Weese," *Chicago Mag*, July 2010, accessed April 3, 2011. <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/July-2010/On-the-Life-and-Work-of-Chicago-Architect-Harry-Weese/>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Blair Kamin, *Why Architecture Matters* (2001), 136.

¹⁹ The Wa-Na palace was built for the chief of Wa, the capital and largest city in the Upper West region of Ghana. Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*, Ashgate, 2003, 148-9.

²⁰ Labelle Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 33 (Oct., 1974): 182-205.

his designs were too fanciful for optimum function, his desire to base his design in a local context illustrates a uniquely modernist point of view. The glass he used serves as a primary example of this struggle between form and function, as it was used to give the building a more contemporary feel, but did not mesh well with the humid climate of Ghana. These modernist touches situate the embassy in both the present and historical context.²¹ They also illustrate Weese's attention to the climate and history of the country in which he was working as well as his desire to situate his design into the framework of American national architecture.

Weese's design reflects Le Corbusier's principals of utility and social progress through architecture.²² Weese's attention to Ghana's tropical climate allows the building to not only fit in its environment, but also to improve upon it. As the 1957 *Time* article on Weese's new embassy stated, "What he has created is original without being bizarre, dignified without being conventional, functional without being depressing, and it should fit into the landscape as if it were homegrown."²³ Weese's attention to the local context reflects the modernist architectural philosophy of using context to link the local to the global and improve the lives of those who use the buildings.

By basing architectural design on social and climatic improvement, Weese allowed the community to utilize their buildings to their full potential, and also adapt it to their needs. Weese's design served a wide range of usage, since it was both a place for Americans and Ghanaians. As such, it had to serve many different peoples' needs and facilitate official United States State Department work. The inclusiveness of Weese's design illustrates both an awareness of and a concern for the utility and context of their buildings. Though each had a different purpose and function, collectively they demonstrate a desire for cross cultural collaboration and unity.

Weese's attempt to merge Ghanaian traditions and an American sense of modernity in his architectural design led to a truly unique, yet impractical embassy. His embassy was essentially an "African Stilt House,"²⁴ a glass box on stilts that looked like African spears.²⁵ The response to Weese's design varied greatly. Some hailed it as the perfect union between the local and global. Others believed that the lack of attention to practical conditions made it a failure. Former United States Ambassador to Ghana Shirley Temple Black best captures the American and Ghanaian publics' mixed feeling on the embassy by stating it was "a beautiful building to work in," but it was a "fire trap."²⁶

The building's lack of utility and shifting design paradigms limited its architectural impact.²⁸ In this way, the strengths of Weese's design were also its greatest weakness. As United States embassy scholar Jane Loeffler writes, "Weese's work stands out for its whimsical interpretation of the vernacular scene, but, hovering on slender stilts it connotes a lack of permanence."²⁹ The embassy's individuality and focus on the local context allowed it to go where other buildings had not and serve as a powerful symbol of what American national architecture could be. It proved that American embassies could be both sensitive to and based in the local context in which they exist. Yet, by exploring new creative venues, Weese lost a lot of the building's functionality and doomed his design to failure.

The motifs and philosophies behind Weese's embassy in Ghana reflect the prominent United States embassy construction themes of the 1950s, outlined by Pietro Belluschi, an architect whose work focused on incorporating local flavors into modern designs.³⁰ Architects designed twelve new United States embassies in accordance to this philosophy between 1954 and 1959.³¹ However, after the Belluschi era, architects abandoned the idea of incorporating the local context into embassy designs, and in its place came progressively more closed, simple, and universal designs to the point where contemporary embassies became essentially "one-size-fits-all bunkers."³²

The FBO drastically changed the ways they constructed embassies based on the looming threat of terrorism and the United States increased power.³³ As the United States became a more powerful nation, it began to build embassies that

²¹ Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, 169, 175, 181.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ola Uduku, "Bolgatanga Library: Adaptive Modernism in Ghana 40 Years on," In *The Challenge of Change: Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement*, ed. Dirk van den Heuvel, Maarten Mesman, Wido Quist, and Bert Lemmens, 265-272, IOS Press, 2008

²⁴ "Model for a New U.S. Embassy in West Africa's Gold Coast," *Time*, March 1, 1957, 74.

²⁵ "America's World Abroad," *Life*, December 23, 1957.

²⁶ Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, 169.

²⁷ Jane Loeffler, "The Architecture of Diplomacy: Heyday of the United States Embassy-Building Program 1954-1960," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 49 (Sep. 1990), 273.

²⁸ Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, 243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

³² Christopher Hawthorne, "A New Direction for Embassy Building?" *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2009, accessed March 13, 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/07/the-most-recent-generation-of-us-embassies-hasnt-exactly-provided-a-sterling-symbol-of-american-values-in-baghdadfor-exam.html>.

³³ *Ibid.*

reflected this shift in solid buildings focused on security rather than, “accessible public buildings to be seen, used, visited, and admired by American citizens and their foreign hosts.”³⁴ Now, instead of blending in with the local culture, United States embassies sought to differentiate themselves and depict a sense of American nationalism.

The attacks on the United States embassy in Beirut in 1983 and in Dar es Salaam in 1998 both factored into this design shift. These events changed American embassy construction policies forever because they illustrated the embassies’, and thus America’s, vulnerability, which led the State Department to adopt new standards and goals for construction abroad. Security became the primary concern, and the government created Capital Security Construction Program (CSCP) and the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA) of 1999 with the goal of “providing more secure, safer, more functional, and properly maintained facilities.”³⁵ This new organization sought to examine existing embassy structures. They assigned the Bureau of Diplomatic Security the task of constructing a yearly “Vulnerability List” to outline embassies in need of security changes. Through these changes, they hoped to prevent future acts of violence against United States buildings both domestically and abroad.

Twenty years after Weese designed his legendary embassy in Accra, the State Department abandoned the embassy due to the FBO’s new security guidelines.³⁶ The FBO decided that Weese’s design was not secure due to its “stilts, the open plan, and the central stairway.”³⁷ At first, Weese attempted to salvage the building by making a few changes to the structure, but in the end, he gave up after realizing the renovations would require far more time and energy than the government cared to pay for. As a result, the State Department moved out of the Weese embassy and into to a non-descript building until a new permanent structure could be constructed.³⁸

With increased fear of terrorism, the FBO decided to construct a new United States embassy in Accra. This embassy was to be completed by 2007 to correspond with Ghana’s celebration of 50 years of independence and to serve as a visual symbol of the strong diplomatic bond between Ghana and the United States.³⁹ B.L. Harbert designed the building, and Skidmore Owing & Merrill LLP, a Chicago based architecture firm that recently designed the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, constructed it.⁴⁰ In only thirty months, the new embassy was finished. With the end of its construction came a new message to Ghana citizens and the world, one of 120,000 square feet of space of dominance void of the Ghanaian context found in Weese’s previous design.⁴¹

Rather than attempting to mesh with the local environment and traditions like Weese’s design, this new structure visually perpetuates Americanness as distinctly out of touch with the reality of life in Ghana. The compound is composed of many different buildings, which house different elements of the embassy.⁴² A huge wall stands around the confines of the structure with signs that explains taking pictures of the compound is illegal. There are also guards stationed around the embassy on constant lookout for possible security threats. The buildings themselves are very gray and the windows have been blacked out, so they cannot be seen in. However, this aloof exterior gives way to a comfortable and welcoming interior. Entering the embassy is like stepping into the United States, in that it serves as one of the only places in Ghana where someone can find high-speed internet, a library, and air conditioning. These amenities and the fort like nature of the structure mirror the dislocated transplantation that can be historically observed in colonial states.⁴³ This transplantation involves moving distinctly Western structures to non-Western settings where they are utterly divorced from their location’s culture and climate.

These buildings illustrate no concern for their context. Rather, they garner power through their difference and depict themselves as a closed off superior nation that is not interested in collaboration. In constructing a new embassy, the State Department attempts to prove to those who view the building the United States advancement and power as a nation. There is a divorce between form and function; this disconnect highlights the weakness of the relationship between the United States and Ghana as equals and reflects the ways in which Ghanaians perceive Americans and Americans interact with Ghanaians.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Adam E. Namm, “Message from the Director,” accessed March 13, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/obo/c9283.htm>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 242-3, fig. 125.

³⁷ Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*, 243.

³⁸ Osu is a section of Accra where most foreign embassies are located and also where most ex-pats live.

³⁹ “Veep opens multi-million-dollar US Embassy in Accra,” *Ghana Web*, May 24, 2011, accessed March 11, 2011. <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=124603>.

⁴⁰ Charles Williams, “New Facilities,” *The Bugle* (Fall 2007).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Due to the security measures taken by the U.S. State Department to keep any pictures or maps of U.S. embassies private, I have not been able to locate any accurate pictures or descriptions of the actual design of the embassy in Accra. Therefore, I have relied upon what I saw during my visits to the U.S. Embassy between December 2009 and May 2010.

⁴³ M. Dodson, “The Classical Paradigms of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century,” Week 3 PowerPoint presentation, History W300.

The new United States embassy serves as a visual symbol of American relationship with Ghana. However, the ways that Ghanaians and Americans perceive this symbolism differs greatly. Former United States Ambassador Pamela Bridgewater captured the American diplomatic goals of constructing the embassy in her speech at the compound's ribbon-cutting ceremony. There she stated, "Nothing will bear greater witness to our ties to the country and people of Ghana than this safe, secure, modern, beautiful facility. It is a visible symbol of the friendship we enjoy and our commitment to Ghana's future."⁴⁴ Bridgewater's remarks focus on the fact that the new embassy is safe, secure, modern, and beautiful. Her mention of each of these traits illustrates their perceived value to the United States. She clearly asserts that the new embassy serves as a symbol of Ghana and the United States present and future friendship, but this purpose is not mirrored at all in the design of the structure.

Though United States public officials seemed to have very positive opinions of the new embassy, many Ghanaians view the new embassy as a symbol of American imperialism in Ghana. In an article entitled "Veep opens multi-million-dollar US Embassy in Accra," on *Ghana Web*, a popular Ghanaian news source, many Ghanaians left angry comments in response to the \$100 million spent on the embassy. They perceived the new building as a symbol of imperialism and exploitation, rather than the marker of friendship and cooperation that Bridgewater suggested. Thus, many view the embassy with resentment and disdain. They see the fortress like structure surrounded with security and their responses to it include comments like, "In whose interest was this building built and how long did it take to build it? The US and the UK and others are taking too much space in my country!" and "It is very sad that today USA is using our scanty money to build huge mansions."⁴⁵ These comments reveal the economic and social tension that is lost in the formal briefings on the new embassy and illustrate the complexity of American projections of nationalism through architecture.

The 2007 American embassy in Accra represents a complete departure from the 1959 embassy constructed by Weese. It depicts a disconnect from the local context in which it has been placed. Now, it sticks out from its surroundings and highlights the stark cultural and socio-economical differences between the United States and Ghana. It does not attempt to create a design that adheres to the cultural or climatical conditions of Accra. Instead, it serves as a constant visual reminder for Ghanaians of the unattainable.

This new style of embassy building is not unique to Ghana. Rather, it reflects a shifting paradigm in United States embassies and foreign policy.⁴⁵ The United States is no longer attempting to make friends with countries around the world. They are confident with their place in the global system and project this confidence in their embassies' designs. As Embassy Historian Jane Loeffler writes about the new United States embassy in Baghdad, "The United States has designed an embassy that conveys no confidence in Iraqis and little hope for their future."⁴⁶ This architectural sense of confidence in America and lack of interest in other countries' cultures and futures symbolically isolates America from the rest of the world. It demonstrates a lack of hope and moreover an apathy to the plight of other countries. By building structures in this manner, America projects an image of separatism that leads one to call to question why they continue to bother to build embassies.

A country's architecture can say a lot about how a culture perceives itself and others. If United States embassies are indicators of American self-perceptions, America clearly perceives itself as the major world power. Gone are the days of Weese and other architects who built embassies to construct new ties with other countries and focus on the two country's similarities, rather than differences. A new generation of embassies has been constructed in an architectural style that says exactly the opposite.⁴⁸ In this period of vast globalization, America has decided to share its face with the world with cookie cutter embassies. These constructions present America as a fortress like country that few should dare to even dream of entering. They demand that those who view them to step back and reflect on their difference and inferiority to the American way of life. This casting of difference over the attempt at fusion present in Weese's design situates America as a nation firmly set as a global power with no need for the local cultures present in the areas of their embassy's location.

United States embassies boldly intrude and demand respect. Each building is an attempt to illustrate United States power and portray a sense of American nationalism.⁴⁹ They are meant to forge a new national identity and history. However, in these displays of power the absence of certain traits speak volumes. The absence of local influences or uniqueness tells those who view the structures that the United States is not as powerful as it wants to let on. This vulnerability is most clearly illustrated through the intense security measures taken to protect the embassies. These

⁴⁴ U.S. Embassy in Accra, "New Embassy Compound Ribbon-Cutting," May 24, 2007, accessed March 11, 2011, <http://ghana.U.S.embassy.gov/speech20070524.html>.

⁴⁵ "Veep opens multi-million-dollar U.S. Embassy in Accra."

⁴⁶ Jane Loeffler, "Fortress America," *Foreign Policy* 163 (Sep. – Oct., 2007), 54-57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁸ Loeffler, *The Architecture of Diplomacy*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

security measures suggest a sense of fear and uncertainty in a post-September 11th world.

Building embassies abroad allows the United States the unique opportunity to develop a clear sense of international purpose and identity. Embassies could be utilized like Weese's was as a symbol of American commitment to local interests, while remaining first and foremost an American building. This could be a great investment in improving America's image abroad. However, if America continues to build these homogenous compounds with a focus on maximum security over international communication and collaboration they will continued to be viewed as out of touch with the rest of the world. This image will only divide them further from these countries and be the basis on even more resentment.

America must take embassy building seriously. By doing so, they can work to improve rather than fracture their relations with the rest of the world. The United States needs to reconstruct their image abroad and design a truly national architecture. This process requires that they both utilize their strengths and also appear a bit more vulnerable in their architectural designs. These architectural changes will help to merge America's nationalist past with its global future and help it regain the international respect it once had.