

# **Havana Case Study**

**Terence Gower**



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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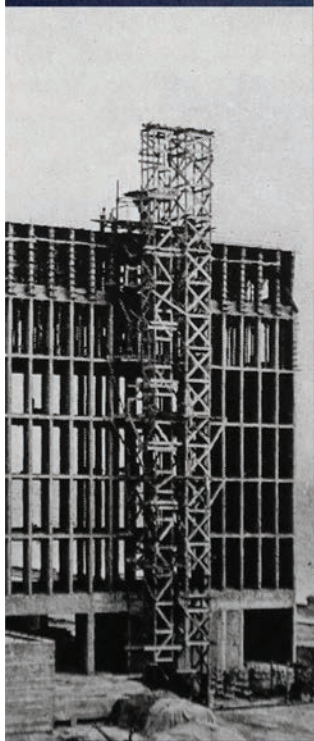
**Terence Gower**

LA HABANA, DOMINGO 10 DE MAYO DE 1960 / AÑO DEL SEGUNDO CENTENARIO / AÑO 46 / No. 121 / PREGIO 4



ORGANO OFICIAL DEL COMITÉ CENTRAL DEL PARTIDO REVOLUCIONARIO

# VIBRO LA PATRIA



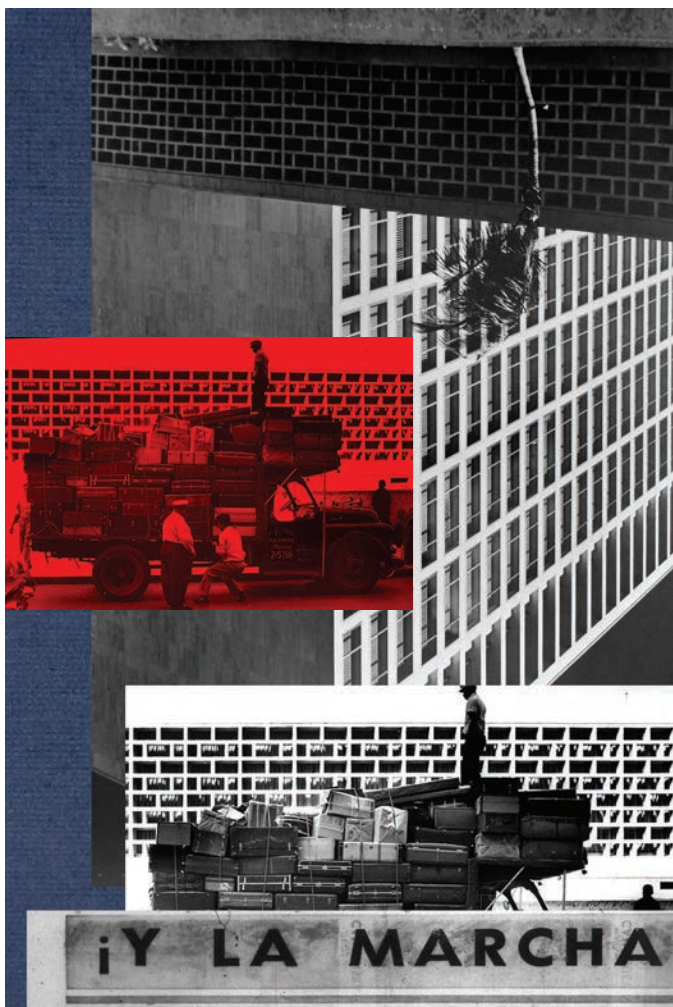
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#### Interiors and Furniture

Many of the new FBO projects were designed by Knoll Associates, Inc. for interior president, Hans Knoll, who designed the interior when he was traveling. Knoll's wife Florence took designs, the Parallel Bar conference room. An architectural rendering of the embassy's interiors and is reproduced far right: "Hans Knoll Associates. Sketch of a room. Interior design is a part of architecture." The lobby of the embassy with the general office of the visa conference room and was an office in the low corridor visible through the street take advantage of post-war time debt) and most part shipped to Cuba.





**¡Y LA MARCHA**



The US Embassy in Mexico City is a magnificent structure in the Gulf of Mexico. The building was not at street level. To suit the site, the main building was raised on concrete columns. The tower, which is also a concrete frame structure, has interior columns in the tower, ribbed from slabs spanning 20' 0" from wall to wall were installed. The slabs are supported on corrugated reinforced concrete girders 2' 0" in centers. The structure is fixed with imported Roman concrete, one of the many materials supplied by foreign governments. Windows are of laminated glass, except for windows behind the reception grill on the north facade of the low building. Windows of main building have operable sash for permit cleaning from the inside, and for ventilation when air-conditioning system is not in use. Property walls are of local limestone.

Landscape patio (right) in the low building is lit by light and reflecting geometry from a fountain. Five stories high, central entrance (American way)







*U.S. Interests Section during the march. Pineda and Garmón Mass from the National by Jumper Javier Sotomayor.*



*U.S. Interests Section officials watch the massive march from a balcony.*



*d King,  
Embassy model  
Kerrigan*





#### Planning and Constructi-

The aspect of Max Abram's this project that received system that allowed for cc penthouse and second-ty distributed load was them: itself carried by just four m continue up the end walls, photo shown here. Although provide a partial sun break has struggled with the frog. But another of the design handled this problem well: street facades of the build desired effect in helping le-most offices looking onto; clearly visible in the prelin building's top floor is note mechanical room as a cor conference room. Both m classically-proportioned p



## Havana Case Study

### Terence Gower

*Havana Case Study* is a research and exhibition project that I started in 2010 with a Guggenheim Fellowship to study the United States government's post-WW2 embassy building program. This is the second in an ongoing series of projects that use US embassy complexes as case studies on American international relations. But more importantly, these studies show how buildings are *used*—by both the US and the host countries where these embassies were built—to represent America's progressive aspirations, and conversely, to represent perceived American injustices abroad. The first project in the series studied the 1960 US embassy in Baghdad, designed by Jose Luis Sert. In 2007, the US built a new embassy in Baghdad (four years after the American invasion of Iraq), the largest, most expensive, and most fortified embassy in the world. The two embassies project contrasting American worldviews, between post-WW2 optimism and post-9/11 entrenchment, and in this way act as bookends to a narrative of diplomatic disintegration. The 1953 US embassy in Havana was never replaced, and thus stands as a rare example of a building that has had its meaning repeatedly reassigned since its conception. Conceived in the late 1940s as one of the first projects in a State Department program to build modern buildings representing a new era of post-war openness, dialogue, and progress, after 1961 the building acquired a new function as a convenient propaganda tool for the new revolutionary government of Cuba, which held it up as a symbol of American imperialism.

My exhibition project hinges on one aspect of the embassy building: a sculptural balcony that projects off the blank sea façade of the embassy's five-story tower. The balcony is perhaps the most elegant and expressive element of the building's design and was specifically requested by an outgoing ambassador. It has the placement and unmistakable appearance of an imperial tribune—it was criticized by

the State Department itself as “Mussolini-type”—but has remained in place overlooking the countless protests organized against the US by the Cuban government. I have used the balcony form as the template for a series of sculptures.

*Balcony* (2016) is a full-scale outline of the US ambassador’s balcony—that symbol of limbo caused by diplomatic stalemate and its accompanying political and economic fallout. The sculpture is in five parts, true to the embassy balcony’s five original modules. The balcony is rendered in rebar, one of the few building materials available under the US-led embargo, and as with many of my sculptural works, it is left to the viewer to decide if we are looking at an object under construction, ready to be hoisted triumphantly into place, or a rusting artifact, recently crashed to the ground. The first thing that strikes a foreign visitor to post-revolution Havana is the effect of the embargo on Cuban material culture. The most famous examples are the cars from the 1940s and '50s that give the sense of time having stopped. New construction has slowed to a few government projects and some recent international collaborations in poorly designed luxury housing and hotels. According to friends involved in construction on the island, these few building sites, using imported materials, are the source of the little construction material in circulation in the country. Rebar—a steel bar used to reinforce concrete, still produced in Cuba—is the construction material most in evidence, and it is put to impressive use: furniture, fences, security grilles, car parts, even fairground rides. A series of five smaller rebar sculptures titled *Modules* (2016) incorporate panels of woven rattan.

The second element at the center of the *Havana Case Study* installation is a large display of documentation laid out as if we are in 1958 and revolutionary troops have yet to march into Havana to declare a new form of government. Period photographs, plans, architectural models, and publications are displayed in vitrines modeled on those used in the 1953 exhibition *Architecture for the State Department* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—the first public presentation of the new



*Balcony*, 2016 (above) and *Political Services 1–6*, 2016  
Installation views, Simon Preston Gallery, New York

embassy construction program. This presentation takes us back to the last years of Fulgencio Batista's regime, a time of new zoning and new investment models that had a huge impact on Vedado, the neighborhood where the US had just built its new diplomatic headquarters. A subtle reference is made to these financing schemes, notorious for linking American organized crime with the Cuban leadership. This document display is nearly buried under another layer of documentation made up of newspapers, photographs, and printouts that show how the building was used by both the Cuban and US governments in a public relations battle that began in early 1961, when the State Department severed diplomatic relations with Cuba and sent home its embassy staff.

The layering of documents in the vitrines provides the template for a series of collages titled *Political Services*. The title is taken from an interview with the embassy's architect, Max Abramovitz, in a discussion of his long career straddling US military and government contracts on the one hand and work for private clients on the other. The collages are based on carefully cropped details from the table displays.

This essay gives an overview of the research behind *Havana Case Study*, including detailed references to some of the published and archival sources that have had particular relevance to the project.

## **FBO**

What style of architecture best represents a country? This is the question that every government must ask itself when planning a new diplomatic post. In the case of the US, the answer was naturally the building typology that was at the heart of the country's early expansion and success: the plantation house. The formal vocabulary of this architecture, sometimes assembled into near copies of the White House, with a brief flirtation with "Jeffersonian" styles under President Roosevelt in the 1930s, was the model for US diplomatic architecture until the late 1940s. But already in the 1930s, the representational accuracy of the plantation house started to be questioned due to its association with the institution of slavery.

In 1946, the State Department created a new office called Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO) and appointed a design board headed by Ralph Walker. The new building directive, calling for architecture that represents “the US as an open, dynamic and cooperative modern country,” was a radical departure from earlier directives that stressed expressions of tradition, democracy, and “dignity” (a word that comes up a lot in criticism of post-war embassy buildings). The new focus was on modern architecture, and the FBO board was soon in touch with the leading contemporary architects of the day. Modern architecture was a building philosophy developed in the early twentieth century that began with the rejection of the academicism and historicism of Beaux-Arts practice, and proposed a new approach where the final form of a building is arrived at through the satisfaction of a set of technical and functional criteria. In Beaux-Arts practice, meaning was established by designing buildings that represented their function—a bank looked like a bank, a school like a school—and a codified aesthetic system of orders and composition determined the façade details. Modern buildings were not designed to represent or symbolize their functions. Instead, when they could be told apart, they directly expressed their functions through their form—a theater is recognizable by the form of the auditorium and fly-tower, a school by its blocks of classrooms, a factory by its workshops and chimneys.

But very quickly, modern architecture started to represent beyond its function. In my previous research on the pre-WW2 “Bauhaus Style” architecture of Tel Aviv, I found a utilitarian building form, modern architecture, that also very quickly came to stand for the new, progressive society under construction on Palestine’s Mediterranean coast in the 1930s. The architecture of the new apartment houses and municipal buildings of Tel Aviv was both a tool of expansion and progress and a “style” that represented the aspirations of a new society. In the same way, a building form that could stand for an “open, dynamic and cooperative modern country” could only be modern architecture. To me, the most compelling part of the 1940s State Department design directive was a call for transparency and



an architecture that would represent free speech and the free flow of ideas. Post-war building technology and the new representational and practicable style of “modernism” could satisfy this desire functionally and symbolically at the same time, with floor-to-ceiling glazing used as extensively as possible. This factor is also what piqued my interest in the post-war embassy construction program. Having visited US embassies designed or upgraded in recent decades, I recognized how the early design ideal described above stands in opposition to the current norm, in which embassies have become little more than glorified bunkers whose forms are determined by blast walls and setbacks.

After my general research on the FBO (the basis for pieces such as *Cause & Effect?*, 2012) I decided to narrow my focus to embassy buildings with complicated diplomatic histories, and to study the role architecture itself has played in those histories. As mentioned above, the first installation that came out of this research was *Baghdad Case Study*. The story of the Baghdad embassy complex—one of Sert’s largely unknown masterpieces—starts with all the best diplomatic intentions on the part of the State Department, but quickly devolves into a narrative of ideological conflict. Sert’s project is interesting as a manifestation of dialogue through design, the result of the FBO program funding architects’ travel and research into the host culture’s building traditions. The roof form of Sert’s ambassador’s residence, reminiscent of both multi-dome spanning systems of the bazaar as well as decorative Islamic woodwork, expressed this cultural dialogue most clearly. As the focal point of my installation, I created a scale reproduction of the thin-shell concrete roof form, translated into a virtuoso work of marquetry in fragrant cedar wood. Baghdad is of course rich territory for this kind of investigation, being the site of a (neoconservative) ideology-driven invasion and occupation by the US in 2003. Thus, the country that commissioned Sert’s masterpiece of enlightened, diplomatic design in 1960 somehow devolved into the sponsor of the “super-bunker” embassy that opened in Baghdad’s Green Zone in 2007.



*Baghdad Case Study*, 2012. Installation view, LABOR, Mexico City  
Photo: Ramiro Chávez

The firm Harrison Abramovitz, with Max Abramovitz in charge of design, was awarded the first two embassy commissions after the FBO was formed in 1946. In addition to his private practice with Wallace Harrison, Abramovitz had already been working as an official government and military architect, a position he first took up during the Second World War. His many international military design contracts, combined with the firm's coordination of the United Nations headquarters in New York, made Abramovitz a logical candidate for the new Rio de Janeiro and Havana embassy buildings. Interestingly, his next major commission following the embassies was also in the public sector: the "invisible" new CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

These embassies were the State Department's first forays into modernism and they seemingly took for granted that Abramovitz, with his international experience, could design for a tropical climate. The Rio embassy functioned well, if briefly, for Brasília was soon under construction as the new capital, requiring a new US embassy building. The Havana embassy design was much lauded in the press, but immediately faced a number of functional problems, described in detail by a State Department inspector soon after the building was opened.

## **Construction**

An early, bird's-eye-view watercolor rendering of the new US embassy shows the building's strong geometric massing made up of a vertical slab spanning the two legs of an irregular "A" lying flat to form a horizontal slab. These two forms in turn represent the two principal functions of the building: the vertical slab houses the diplomatic offices, requiring more privacy, and the horizontal slab houses the visa and cultural functions of the embassy, open to the public. The gridded façade is also an expression of the building's structure: its thick mullions are in fact perimeter columns supporting a full-span floor slab at each level.



Preliminary rendering for US embassy, Havana  
Image: Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University



US embassy, Havana, 1953. Photo: J. Alex Langley  
Image: Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

There was a clever funding structure built into the FBO's construction project, conceived by its director, Frederick Larkin: the post-war projects were designed to be mostly funded and supplied through foreign credit swaps, the repayment of wartime debt to the US. This meant a minimal requisition of funds from Congress, little congressional oversight, and therefore much more operational and design freedom. But it also meant that the many components of each building were imported from a large number of indebted nations. In Havana, the marble cladding came from Italy, the structural steel from Belgium, all interior partitions from England, the furniture from France, and the air conditioning system and aluminum window frames from the US. Unfortunately, the last two items on this list posed problems when the building opened.

The building is distinguished on both principal façades by the stone-clad structural grid mentioned above. This system of perimeter structural support (the same system used in the World Trade Center towers in New York) left the floor slabs column-free. But a miscalculation of the ratio of glazing to solid structural framing led to a greenhouse effect inside the building—standing in direct tropical sun all day—that couldn't be overcome by the air conditioning system. The tower slab of the building was oriented north-south, with the east façade exposed to the morning sun and the west to the afternoon sun. But the central air conditioning had just a single control for the whole building, meaning that half the staff was either too hot or too cold for half of each day. The system, discreetly housed behind the top-floor conference room, was gradually upgraded, then replaced entirely in the 1990s, entailing the addition of a full new mechanical floor on top of the building. The new system completely altered the original lines of the building and closed in its elegant top-floor peristyle.

Coordinating the assembly of so many parts imported from different sources was an enormous task, and unfortunately the aluminum windows, as originally designed, didn't quite fit, leaving huge gaps open to Havana's tropical downpours. Improvements were gradually

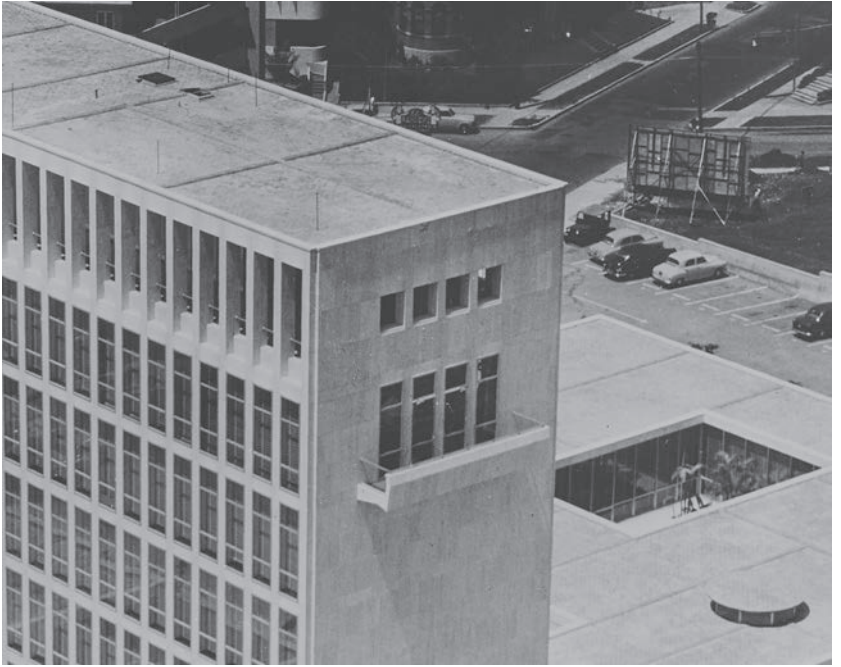
made to both the windows and air conditioning, but a third element of the design that had been heavily criticized by State Department inspectors was never addressed: the balcony off the ambassador's office. Here is the report from the State Department inspector:

Purely from an aesthetic standpoint it is unfortunate that the 'Mussolini-type balcony' was permitted to deface the North façade of the building. It completely destroys the lines and architectural simplicity of the building which is its charm. This is particularly unfortunate since the balcony serves no useful purpose and in all probability will never be used. It is understood that FBO seriously objected to the addition of this architectural monstrosity but was overruled. The balcony was demanded by a former Ambassador.<sup>1</sup>

Jane Loeffler, the authority on post-war embassy design, has also hinted that there were concerns within the State Department that the balcony posed a security risk for pinpointing the whereabouts of the ambassador.<sup>2</sup>

The inspector's report accurately evokes the idea of the balcony as a tribune, installed at an impressive height from which the ambassador may address the Cuban masses, gathered meekly along the seawall. Masses did eventually assemble below the balcony, but for the very opposite reason, as is made clear by press photographs of massive anti-US demonstrations organized by the Cuban government over the ensuing decades. Despite the early complaints of the State Department, the ambassador's balcony remained in place, like an abstract symbol of the state of limbo that has characterized the material culture of post-revolutionary Cuba.

The continued existence of the balcony can suggest several things. Does it represent the defeat of the American imperialist dream, recently upstaged by Fidel Castro's work of ideological guerrilla urbanism, the Plaza of Anti-Imperialism? Or does the balcony's remaining in place



US embassy, Havana, 1953. Photo: J. Alex Langley  
Image: Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University



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

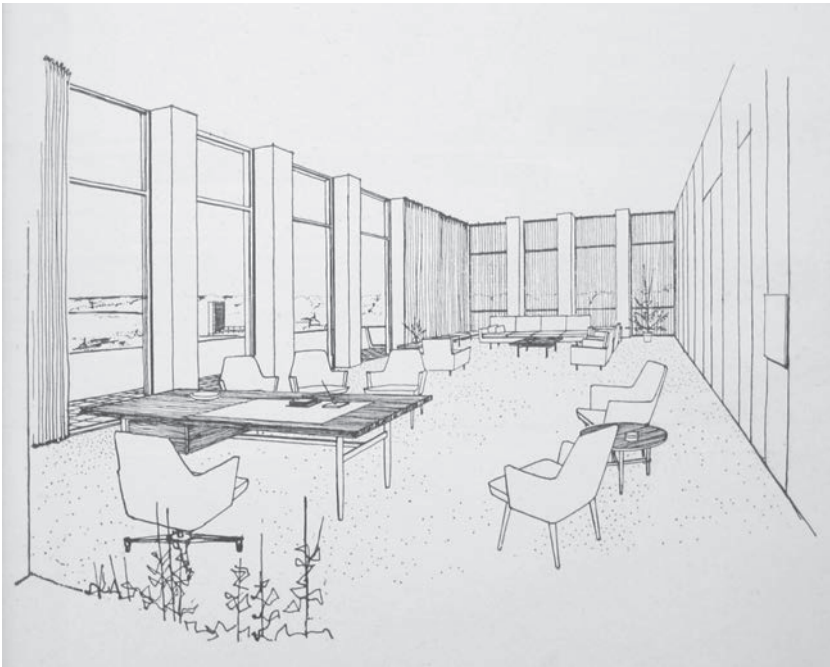
Another characteristic of the new embassy program was an emphasis on transparency. The FBO in the 1950s believed embassy buildings should have an air of openness and permeability. Glass façades were favored to represent both honesty—nothing to hide—and accessibility, with the embassy’s many cultural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

## **Urban Context**

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



US embassy, Havana, 1953. Photo: J. Alex Langley  
Image: Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University



Knoll Associates rendering for ambassador's office, US embassy, Havana  
Image: Architectural Forum

to leave a dense forest, strategically planted with spiny plants, as a natural defense against pirates entering the city from the west. By the nineteenth century, the area was dotted with country villas, and by the 1940s it was a densely settled and fashionable residential neighborhood. New zoning laws and building technology introduced in the 1950s were responsible for a flurry of high-rise and hotel construction in the area, including the *Edificio Focsa*, declared the second-largest poured-concrete building in the world when it was completed in 1956.

Vedado is also located halfway between the downtown financial and government sector—where the embassy had been renting space—and the traditional diplomatic neighborhoods further west, where the ambassador’s 1930s residence stands. President Batista made it a priority to develop the hotel and casino trade in the area. The most notorious product of this collaboration between private foreign investors and government was the Riviera Hotel and Casino, backed by the American gangster Meyer Lansky. This was also the era of the new Havana Master Plan, Jose Luis Sert’s unexecuted redesign of the city center, including a new business core running through the historical center, a new island for leisure activities, and an enormous new presidential compound across from the old city. If it had been built, Batista’s presidential palace would have been visible from the US ambassador’s new office.

## **Reception**

In the first week of June 1953, the embassy staff moved into their new building on the *malecón*. In the following weeks, the State Department sent an employee to Cuba to prepare an inspection report on the new embassy. This report gives a detailed list of problems relating to the air conditioning and aluminum window mullions. But equally interesting are the aesthetic judgments made on the new building and its furnishings. In addition to the criticism of the famous “Mussolini” balcony, the report included a scathing critique of the “modernistic”

furnishings provided by Knoll: “The new furniture purchased in France especially for the new building is lacking in aesthetic beauty, efficient usefulness and dignity of appearance which is normally expected in American Embassies.”

Although Knoll is an American company, the FBO encouraged it to fabricate the pieces the embassy would be purchasing in France in order to take advantage of the foreign credit swap system used for most of the construction materials in the embassy. Knoll was (and still is) the furniture company preferred by many architects due to the fact that it commissions furniture from the best international designers. The exquisite renderings supplied by Knoll for each of its interior design projects show how well its furniture integrates with the modern architecture of its clients. Nevertheless, in the early 1950s a member of Congress—unable to fathom that the highly suspicious secret understanding between designer and provider was based on the quality and beauty of its products—raised the specter of a “racket” between FBO architects and Knoll, as if there might be kickbacks involved. As with the modern architecture of the new embassy construction program, the underlying conflict here was between two symbolic ideals: how should this young, progressive country (represented by modern architecture and furniture) express itself according to the traditional protocol of diplomacy?

Here are the inspector’s notes on the beautiful Florence Knoll desk and chair in the Ambassador’s office (the rest of the ambassador’s furnishings were more traditional, carried over from the old embassy office): “The Ambassador’s office is excellent, well designed and furnished in quiet, dignified taste except for the desk and a settee. The desk appears crude, entirely out of harmony with the rest of the room and without the dignity properly expected in the office of a senior representative of the United States Government.”

In contrast to the criticism coming from the State Department and Congress, the new Havana embassy was well received by the contemporary architectural community and press.<sup>3</sup> Trade journalists



US embassy, Havana, 1953. Image: Architectural Forum



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

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

### **After the Cuban Revolution**

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

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



Since the US broke ties with Cuba in 1961, the Cuban government has used the former US embassy building as a destination and backdrop for carefully choreographed mass protests. A young Cuban filmmaker described the organization of these events to me: soon after the 1980 Mariel crisis, his entire school was given the afternoon off, bussed to an assembly point on the *malecón*, formed into a vast column of marchers who filed past the former US embassy, collected further down the *malecón*, and bussed back to their school. These marches were photographed by the official press from the air and from neighboring buildings, later to appear on the cover of the following day's journals with headlines such as "Que vibra la patria entera!" (The whole country vibrates!) or "Y la marcha fué!" (And the protest happened!) These are spectacles performed for the camera in the tradition of the "mass ornaments" of twentieth-century dictatorships, yet the main actor in each performance was always the same building, the former US embassy. The embassy building, always at the center of a demonstration, was so often the subject of Cuban photojournalists that we are offered a clear document of the life of this building during the years it was out of commission. For example, an image of a 1980 anti-blockade protest that I photographed at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana shows workers on hanging platforms, recladding the building's façade.

Each time a new confrontation with the US has occurred, a new protest has been organized, and after the restaffing of the former embassy as the US Interests Section in 1977, official news photographs sometimes show employees enjoying the view of the spectacle from the former ambassador's fifth-floor balcony. One of the grandest protests on the *malecón*, for the return of Elián González in April 2000, coincided with the opening of the José Martí Anti-Imperialist Tribune, a stage built on axis with the embassy building. This work of protest urbanism eventually incorporated a large audience area defined by a row of arching gantries, a forest of flagpoles, and—perfectly on axis with and at the extreme tip of the whole complex—a bronze statue of José Martí. Martí cradles an infant with one hand and points accusingly at



Protest on the *malecón*, Havana, May, 1980  
Image: Museum of the Revolution, Havana

the embassy building with the other. Many residents of Havana, with their sophisticated sense of irony, insist he is saying, “La salida es par allá” (The exit is that way).

The year 2000 marked the beginning of a colorful public relations battle between the US and Cuba, with the embassy building as its focal point. The Anti-Imperialist Tribune was refined and added to during George W. Bush’s time in office, and at the moment of the US invasion of Iraq, a series of temporary billboards were erected across the street, blocking the view of the sea from the lower floors of the embassy building. The first was a caricature of Bush with “*Asesino*” (Assassin) scrawled across it, soon to be joined by blow-ups of Abu Ghraib torture victims and a two-meter-high swastika. The billboards formed a cyclorama of American atrocities, arranged around some optimum viewpoint inside the embassy building.

On January 16, 2006, the US Interests Section, under orders from the Bush administration, finally retaliated in like manner, switching on a huge electronic billboard that occupied the windows of the entire fifth floor of the embassy building. In this way, the structural grid of the façade acquired a new function, operating like a huge sheet of gridded paper on which appeared the US government’s messages. The practice of attempting to turn Cubans against their government by broadcasting American propaganda has been a well-funded strategy of the US government since the early 1980s, with the launch of Radio Martí (and later Televisión Martí). In the same vein, the new electronic billboard displayed a steady stream of messages directed at the residents of Havana, visible from anywhere on the *malecón* as far as Habana Vieja. The messages were quotes from American comedians, human rights activists, and pro-democracy supporters (one news photograph shows the simple phrase DEMOCRACIA EN CUBA.)<sup>5</sup>

The efficacy and legality of Radio and Televisión Martí have been debated since their inception, especially in light of the rumors of corruption in management and the half-billion-dollar price tag of the



Electronic billboard, US Interests Section, Havana, 2005



The Mountain of Flags masking the façade of the US embassy, Havana  
Photo: Francis Alijs

service. By contrast, the electronic billboard was turned off after just three and a half years, followed by this deadpan statement by State Department spokesman Ian Kelly: “We believe that the billboard was really not effective as a means of delivering information to the Cuban people.”

The same spokesman went on to state, “It was evident that the Cuban people weren’t even able to read the billboard because of some obstructions that were put in front of it.” Kelly is referring to the Cuban response to the electronic billboard, the Mountain of Flags. Rumored to have been erected under direct order from Fidel Castro, this new obstruction consists of over a hundred flagpoles originally flying black flags printed with a single white star (said to represent victims of CIA-backed terrorism in Cuba).<sup>6</sup> A February 2006 inscription at the base of the flagpoles reads:

This mount of flags serves as a response from the people of Cuba to the clumsy arrogance of the U.S. government: 138 Cuban flags will wave with dignity in front of the eyes of the empire, to remind it, starting today, of every year that the Cuban people have struggled, since our founding fathers gave the cry for independence in 1868. Like then, before the bright shadow of this great mount of flags, we continue fighting as free men and women.

These days, the black flags are never flown. On important national holidays, workers appear on the plaza to hoist 138 Cuban flags. A diplomat at the embassy told me he went out to the plaza soon after Secretary of State John Kerry had been to Havana to raise the American flag at the embassy. He arrived just as a government worker began the task of once again attaching Cuban flags to each pole. The worker stared in disbelief when he suggested alternating Cuban and American flags, at which point it dawned on the diplomat that the orders really were coming from the very top and this was likely one of Fidel’s personal projects.

This is the semantic journey Max Abramovitz's building has traveled since 1950, when it was conceived in the spirit of American post-war idealism. But that new idealism was quickly eroded by the realities of the Cold War, which contributed their own set of associations. The meaning of this building, with its simple horizontal and vertical slabs, recently underwent another transformation in the Cuban collective imagination as barriers to diplomacy were slowly and systematically removed under the administrations of Barack Obama and Raúl Castro. Since Donald Trump's election in November 2016, the fate of Obama's Cuba project looks impossible to predict. During his presidential campaign, Trump vowed to "cancel" all the initiatives of the outgoing president, which would supposedly reset US-Cuba relations to Cold War levels. The death of Fidel Castro provoked a short, childishly gleeful statement from the president-elect, followed by a series of statements that sounded like voices from the past. This was the old mantra, going back decades, that any dialogue with Cuba must be predicated on changes in internal Cuban policy. This mantra, repeated by each incoming president, was finally broken when Obama rolled out his experiment in person-to-person contact in 2014. Diplomats I spoke to at the US embassy in 2016 seemed confident that Hillary Clinton would be elected, leading to a major increase in embassy staff and the probable design of a new embassy building. That prediction was a product of a political paradigm that now feels as remote as some faraway galaxy.

Every day brings a change of course and new uncertainty. And reports from contacts and journalists in Cuba indicate that events there may be mirroring those in the US: there are rumors of new activity from the military and secret police, actions that appear to be in opposition to the recent political and economic opening. I am hearing new reports of censorship, militarization, restrictions on commercial activity, as well as more stories of emigration to the US despite a new, more restrictive visa system.

Those visas are of course granted in the US embassy building, which will take on a new set of associations in the new political reality of the coming years. A friend in Havana is a trained nurse who is now working in the booming tourism sector, cleaning the apartments of American tourists for what I have calculated to be about a twenty-fold increase in pay. Although the money is welcome, this is not the career she had pictured for herself. She feels her options in Cuba are limited to this kind of work if she wants to simply rise above subsistence level. She has decided to use her money to emigrate to the US, and spends hours standing in a queue outside the US embassy, returning repeatedly to provide more documentation. She complains bitterly and despairingly about the heartlessness of the officers in the embassy's visa section, viewing them as representatives of a cold, forbidding, northern culture. Yet she has come to believe such a visa is her only hope for a better future.

These private dramas are played out every day in the US embassy. They mirror the aspirations and failures of the building itself, caught in a political drama that has continually reset its meaning over its sixty-four years of existence. The Cuban political succession programmed for 2018 and the volatility of the current US administration indicate that the building's function and signification will continue to fluctuate well into the future.



## NOTES

1. A two-day search (with the assistance of archive staff) for the papers of the FBO at the National Archives in Maryland finally turned up a single document, a Request for Authority to Dispose of Records, specifying the procedure for Correspondence with Posts—FBO Central File: “Destroy when 14 years old.” But an exhaustive search through all State Department correspondence with foreign posts from 1945 through 1953 turned up a number of Havana embassy treasures, including the inspector’s report cited here and elsewhere in this essay [Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, 1788–ca. 1991, Textual Reference Archives II]. Security at this point in the Cold War referred almost exclusively to anti-espionage measures (this is before a wave of violent attacks on US foreign properties began in the early 1960s), and a State Department security report from this time deals almost exclusively with the protection of information generated by the embassy, down to details like keeping the door to the switchboard operator’s room closed. In the wake of the Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt spying revelations, homosexuality suddenly acquired the menace of an added security risk, so the denouncement of a flamboyant Cuban office boy as an “*efeminado*” by a visiting contractor occasioned a surprising flurry of correspondence between the Cuban embassy, still in its rented quarters in Habana Vieja and the State Department in Washington, DC.

2. Loeffler’s book *The Architecture of Diplomacy* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1998) is the standard reference for anyone interested in US embassy design. My interview with Loeffler at her Washington, DC, home was the starting point for my research.

3. *Progressive Architecture* featured an early progress report in October 1951 and a six-page feature in February 1955. In March 1953, *Architectural Forum* included extensive coverage of the new embassy in its *US Architecture Abroad* survey, including a photograph of FBO director Leland King with a model of the building, and *Architectural Record* published a short article in April 1955, including details of the embassy tower’s peripheral column load system.

4. Although President Carter managed to engineer a moderate diplomatic opening to Cuba with the establishment of the US Interests Section in 1977, two years later, facing pressure from Congress and as a concession to his famously hawkish National Security Advisor, Carter signed a much stricter directive on Cuban “containment,” Presidential Directive 52. This is typical of how the relationship between the US and Cuba since the revolution has been beholden to internal politics in each country. Fidel Castro may have been willing to negotiate with the US for the removal of the embargo at many points in the last 55 years. But he also needed to appease the more hawkish members of his government by acting tough—this is one of the ways the Castro brothers have remained in power. In addition to internal power dynamics, until the late 1980s, Cuban foreign policy had to answer to the USSR and China, two world powers with opposing agendas. Meanwhile, in the US, starting in the early 1960s, political election campaigns have traditionally featured a good dose of anti-

Castro saber-rattling, a display for the benefit of the Cuba lobby, considered gatekeepers to the Florida vote. For this reason, seemingly progressive US presidents have signed some of the most draconian laws against Cuba. Bill Clinton also attempted an opening to Cuba during his presidency, but ended up signing the Helms-Burton law—perhaps the most destructive component of the embargo—under pressure from the Florida Cuba lobby after exile planes were shot down for violating Cuban airspace. The best account of the constant, labyrinthine negotiations between the US and Cuba, and a prime reference for my project, is William LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh’s *Back Channel to Cuba* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

5. The official line of the US government, since pulling out of Cuba in 1961, is that it will not negotiate unless the Cuban government makes a number of changes to its domestic and international policy—hold free elections and give up interventionism, and more explicitly during the Cold War: stop practicing and preaching communism. These US-imposed preconditions to dialogue have been normalized and have come to seem acceptable to Americans over the last 50 years. Yet it’s difficult to imagine China or the Soviet Union insisting the US change its internal political system and foreign policy as a precondition for Richard Nixon’s visits in 1972. Mikhail Gorbachev set the record straight during a visit to Cuba in the late 1980s—implicating both the Soviet Union and the US—when he stated, “We have no right to dictate to Fidel Castro how he should manage the affairs of his country.”

6. This brings up the relationship between the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. According to William Langewiesche in his article “The Mega-Bunker of Baghdad” (*Vanity Fair*, October 29, 2007), “U.S. Embassies are not pristine diplomatic oases, but full-blown governmental hives, heavy with C.I.A. operatives, and representative of a country that however much it is admired is also despised.” The activities of the CIA abroad were often in direct opposition to the diplomatic aims of the State Department. In Cuba, the CIA has caused untold havoc with a well-documented campaign of state-sponsored terrorism—hotel and airplane bombings, crop destruction, and so on—often countering the State Department’s efforts at diplomacy. Until the Vietnam War, the largest CIA office in the world was in Miami. Each time that diplomatic negotiations—always carried out in secret—between the two countries bore fruit in the form of concessions from the government of Cuba, the CIA interpreted this as a sign of weakness, and by extension, as evidence that its covert campaign of attacks and intimidation was sapping the strength of its enemy. To the directors at the CIA, this was proof of their effectiveness and a sign to step up their campaign. The Castro brothers have been obliged to wait for a US president who could put an end to this feedback loop, and it was, amazingly, the *eleventh* president to hold power since the Cuban revolution, Barack Obama, who finally attempted to put an end to this cycle.



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