

Disegno

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Soft Power Architecture

Words Anniina Koivu Photographs Milo Keller

Architecture is a powerful tool. Explicitly so, when designed for those in positions of power. Its language serves to project authority. Political leaders build to seduce, to impress, and to intimidate. Hence, rather than as an art form, “architecture must be understood as an expression of power and propaganda,” argues critic Deyan Sudjic, who coined the term “power architecture” in his 2005 book *The Edifice Complex* (2005).



The Residence of the Swiss Ambassador in Algiers (2024),
designed by Lütjens Padmanabhan Architectinnen.



The residence's garden was originally created by a director of Algiers' botanical garden, but has now been revitalised by landscape architect Florian Bischoff.



Power architecture manifests in different forms, ranging from totalitarian to democratic to nationalistic. Embassy buildings are a prime example of power architecture, as they express the political stance of a government. The tangible embodiment of a nation on foreign soil, they also house the ambassador – who, ideally, is a facilitator of international cooperation, fostering connections between nations. Within this context of international relations, the new Residence of the Swiss Ambassador in Algiers expresses the power it wields in an unusual way. Modest and unimposing, the residence is a one-storey pavilion, tucked away in a large, quiet garden in the Hydra district of the Algerian capital. “Among the different proposals of the architectural competition, ours was the sole single-storey building,” says Oliver Lütjens, co-founder of the Zurich-based studio Lütjens Padmanabhan Architekten, which designed the building. “Its unpretentious design ultimately became the key winning factor.”

In its relative modesty, the Residence of the Swiss Ambassador is historically atypical. The first permanent residential embassies were established by the mid-15th century, when the city-states of Milan and Venice set up representations at the French court of Louis XI, with the goal of overseeing political, economic, financial and legal affairs, despite being far from home. Today, the number of such structures has grown enormously: more than 240 nations currently carry out diplomatic tasks at more than 27,000 embassies worldwide. Individual embassy architecture varies, of course, according to factors such as geography, climate and the security level

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— Oliver Lütjens

of the host country. Nevertheless, a number of basic architectural features often recur. The first of these is impermeable fortification, reminiscent of medieval castles, which intimidates thanks to its sheer size. Neoclassical style is another commonly seen feature: it conveys an aura of law and order through symmetry, dramatic use of columns and grandeur. For a long time, it was the preferred architectural language of democrats and despots alike.

By the end of the Second World War, however, neoclassicism had become so widely associated with fascism and totalitarianism that Western democracies sought to distance themselves from it. Instead, and fittingly, they chose a new language for their newly built societies, one that expressed post-war aspirations towards openness and transparency. This was the

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international style, characterised by reinforced concrete, steel and glass, along with open layouts behind glass-curtain walls. Modernism seemed to express the physical attributes of democracy and progress, and there were plenty of architects whose work fit the bill: Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Eero Saarinen and Edward Durrell Stone. Author David B. Peterson, in his 2023 publication *US Embassies of the Cold War*, describes this architectural era as a stark departure from neoclassicism and depicts modern embassies as “the curtain wall vs the Iron Curtain”. He goes on to highlight their new role as “billboards of cultural diplomacy”. Deliberately open and accessible for visitors, the new post-war embassies looked a bit like corporate showrooms. They included libraries, exhibition spaces, cinemas, lecture halls and more – they functioned, indeed, as showrooms of the “Western way of life”.

This is not the context into which Lütjens Padmanabhan's pavilion has emerged, however. In recent years, political unrest and security concerns have prompted a further shift in design. Due to outdated safety standards, former embassies built in the international style have been shut down or repurposed as hotels. Meanwhile, new constructions have reverted to creating imposing fortifications with impenetrable security – and even, in the case of the new US embassy in London, a moat. Former US secretary of state John Kerry registered his concern about this trend years ago. “We are building some of the ugliest embassies I’ve ever seen,” he said at a 2009 Foreign Relations Committee hearing. “We are

¹ As reported in Philip Kennicott's 2009 article ‘U.S. Embassy Architecture: Breaking the Diplomatic Ties That Bind Design’.

building fortresses around the world. We're separating ourselves from people in these countries. I cringe when I see what we're doing." In the current era, the built representation of many countries' essence has moved from innovation, openness, and optimism towards a form of architecture dictated by suspicion and fear.

All of which is what makes the Residence of the Swiss Ambassador in Algiers an outlier, not least for

"We wanted to avoid this kind of penthouse-piano-nobile arrangement and bring everything to the same level." —Thomas Padmanabhan

its decision to turn away from enclosure, and instead towards an open pavilion structure. With a relatively small footprint of 650sqm, the building efficiently accommodates all of the essential functions of a representative public site, while at the same time enabling its inhabitants to enjoy family life. Organised around an interior garden, the building is divided into public and private areas, which can also be opened up into one continuous, open floor plan. In addition to a foyer, a salon and a dining room for official purposes, the house comprises three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a kitchen that leads onto an outdoor patio, and a service kitchen, as well as a spacious roof terrace. The structure's remarkable canopy roof comprises aluminium slabs, some of which are vertical while others are slanted.

"The adjacent chancellery, already built on a neighbouring lot by Bakker & Blanc architectes in 2013, is designated solely for office use, which means that any public event – be it a dinner, lunch, discussion, reception or movie night – will be hosted in the residence," explains Thomas Padmanabhan, Lütjens's co-founder. Traditionally, diplomatic residences strictly separate private areas from public ones, typically placing the private quarters on the upper floor. "We wanted to avoid this kind of penthouse-piano-nobile arrangement, and bring everything to the same level," he explains. Taking their concept further, the architects designed the building with a single, open floor plan. Official areas seamlessly merge

with private spaces when not in use. "This allows the ambassador and their family to integrate the entire building into the family's everyday life. Children can freely play in the garden, and run around the house," adds Padmanabhan.

Strategically placed doors unite the different spaces. So do the chosen materials: Algerian marble flooring extends throughout, while the kitchen and bathroom feature the same tiling. Graphical elements – such as a bright-yellow striped wall à la Sol LeWitt and vivid green window frames – add to this sense of unity. The built-in cupboards and wardrobes, both modest and practical, are a thoughtful choice considering the typical relocation of ambassadors every three years. Indeed, the residence embodies this essence of embracing impermanence: a temporary residence that is pragmatic and discreet, capable of welcoming a diverse array of guests with different needs, and offering them a sense of home during their stay. A few pieces of furniture and lighting are part of the house's permanent fixtures. Some were carefully chosen, while others were custom-designed by Jörg Boner, a Zurich-based designer, for the two public areas of the house.

In the salon, a collection of Oyster leather chairs (Boner, Wittmann, 2014) and Servomuto side tables (Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Zanotta, 1974) are casually arranged around a large carpet by Swiss textile designer Christoph Hefti, evoking the tradition of *majlis* (an Arabic term meaning "sitting room"). Meanwhile, the dining room is fitted with a sm dining table, custom-designed by Boner, and Curv wooden chairs (Boner, Stettmann, 2021). "It exudes a touch of 1970s executive charm," jokes Boner, noting the intriguing contrast in his choice of finishing. "You might expect such classical elegance to be crafted

"It exudes a touch of 1970s executive charm." —Jörg Boner

from mahogany. However, the table in ash is simply stained in this red-brown hue you see throughout the Kasbah old town of Algiers, whether as a furniture finish, or as paint on houses and fences." Even the lighting solutions adhere to a flat hierarchy. "The starting idea was simple lightbulbs screwed into the ceiling," recalls Boner. "Already done by Corbusier





Jörg Boner curated and designed the furniture for the residence's main public areas. The dining room showcases a 5m-long wooden table paired with his wooden curv chairs and Enzo Mari's Bambù vases (Danese, 1968/2015).



and others, I proposed to add a reflective disc to a glass globe. This basic typology adapts itself throughout the entire property – both indoors and outdoors.” Ceiling fixtures, wall-mounted lights, floor lamps

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and garden posts – all part of the same lighting family, they also reflect these egalitarian principles.

Undermining the traditional monumentality of an embassy – and upending the symbolic power dynamics that come with it – the new residence is an oasis in a garden. It's a pavilion designed with its residents in mind, which elegantly blurs the line between the formal and the informal. The architects have been able to transmit a sense of freedom in their design. “A freedom within a securely enclosed compound,” adds Thomas Padmanabhan. “Had we had to give in to security perimeters, barriers and 20mm protective glass, this pavilion would not have been possible.” How, however, will the residents of the building react? Will they feel deprived of their status and prestige in this relatively informal space? Will they feel they lack privacy in the absence of classical distinctions between public and private? The new residence will need to be lived in and experienced to know. For now, one diplomat and jury member for the project signalled his appreciation, pointing out how well-suited it was to one important and often overlooked diplomatic event in particular: the children's birthday party. “Informality often makes it much easier to connect with people than any formal event can do.”

Diplomacy is also called soft power – the ability to influence others through attraction, persuasion and cultural influence rather than through coercion or force. When applied to architecture, a building that successfully facilitates diplomacy through subtlety and nuance might rightly be called “soft-power architecture.” **END**



In 1961, the first clandestine negotiations between the fledgling Algerian government and French representatives unfolded at the Hotel Schweizerhof in Lucerne, Switzerland. A diplomat penned a report to Bern's federal government, describing what looked like a promising possibility of reconciliation between the two governments with the words: “Bon début à Lucerne.” These same words are now immortalised on the foyer's grand mirror. Adjacent stands a table, halved and preserved from the original hotel, serving as a poignant reminder of the historic meeting held over 60 years ago in Lucerne.