Sharp Debate: What Should an Embassy Be?

It should look American, yet suit its foreign setting, which poses a delicate problem.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A NEW American embassy is about to open in London, graced—or disgraced, according to one of two prevailing points of view—by a gilded aluminum eagle with a thirty-five-foot wingspread. The London Times considers the eagle in extremely Bad Taste. In the House of Commons, a Labor Member has demanded that local authorities "give it the bird." The cries, heard clearly overseas, have been anguished and anti-eagle.

The bird has been no more controversial than the building. A huge, 287-foot-long, strikingly modern structure by the internationally known architect Eero Saarinen, the new embassy has been called everything from a "cigarette factory" with "Hollywood-Broadway influence," to a "wonderful mixture of elegance and guts."

These and other such arguments are making news around the world. For the London embassy is just one example of a unique State Department building program initiated six years ago, the results of which are now clearly visible abroad. This program has made modern architecture official American policy for all new embassies and consulates. Under the direction of the State Department's Office of Foreign Buildings, the twenty-seven completed new structures, twenty-two projects in progress and twenty-nine designs on the boards, in more than fifty countries, represent one of the most important, stimulating and controversial groups of buildings of our time.

AT home, however, the program hangs fire. Up for renewal in 1959 (funds were last voted in 1952), it was passed in the Senate but failed to get the approval of the authorizing body in the House, a Foreign Affairs subcommittee headed by Representative Wayne L. Hays (D., Ohio). A man of strong personal tastes, Representative Hays has been increasingly antagonistic to the new embassies' "extreme modernistic design," and to the Foreign Buildings Office's dynamic director, William P. Hughes. At the moment, it seems unlikely that any new project will get past his esthetic ire.

The debate abroad and the difficulties in Congress have focused attention sharply on the new buildings, and have also raised these two questions: First, what should an embassy be? And second, should the program be continued in its present form?

An embassy building must meet two basic requirements. It must have what the State Department calls "a distinguishable American flavor." At the same time, it must take its place graciously and harmoniously in its surroundings. In a world increasingly sensitive to American power and wealth, this calls for keen diplomacy.

Moreover, the practical needs of modern overseas government buildings are unprecedented. Today, filling out forms takes precedence over giving balls, and the modern embassy must be a business building of complete functional efficiency.

HAVE these objectives — national character, architectural tact and businesslike efficiency—been met in the new buildings?

There is no doubt that the State Department has attempted to make these considerations the crux of its program. Its architectural policy, its method of selecting designers, its specific recommendations and requirements all are aimed at the fulfillment of these needs. The Foreign Buildings Office has set up a revolving Architectural Advisory Panel, composed of eminent architects, critics and educators, and headed by a career Foreign Service officer. Commissions are open to all American architects, who need only submit a portfolio to the Foreign Buildings Office to be considered.

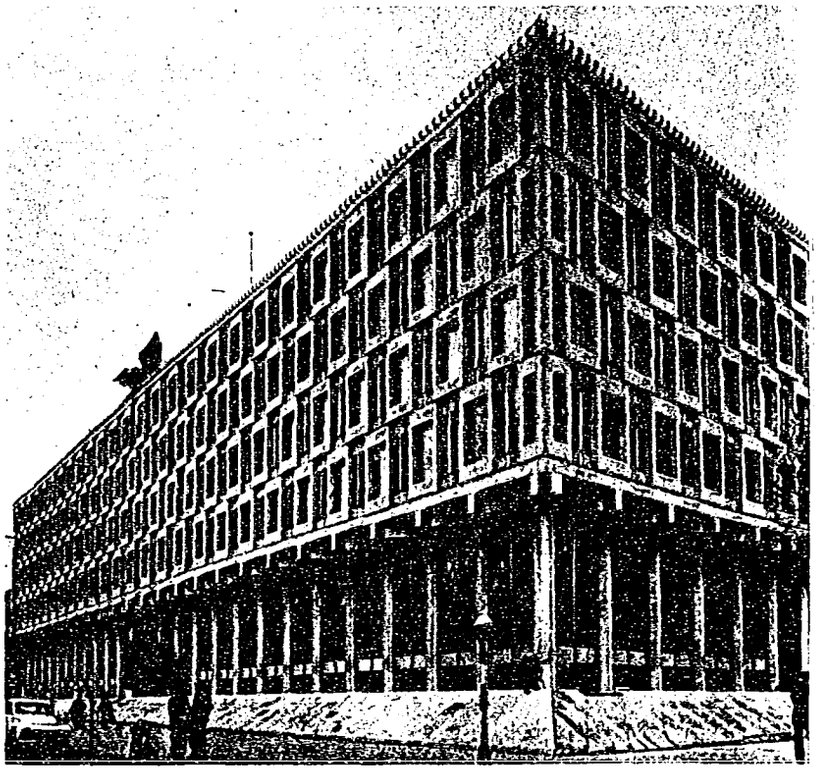
In official instructions the architect is urged "to give serious study to local conditions of climate and site, to understand and sympathize with local customs and people, and to grasp the historical meaning of the particular environment in which the new building must be seen." He is asked to work "with a free mind, without being dictated by obsolete or sterile formulae or clichés, be they old or new * * * to find solutions which are truly creative rather than uninspiredly conventional."

THE goals are clear and the policy is bold. What have been the results?

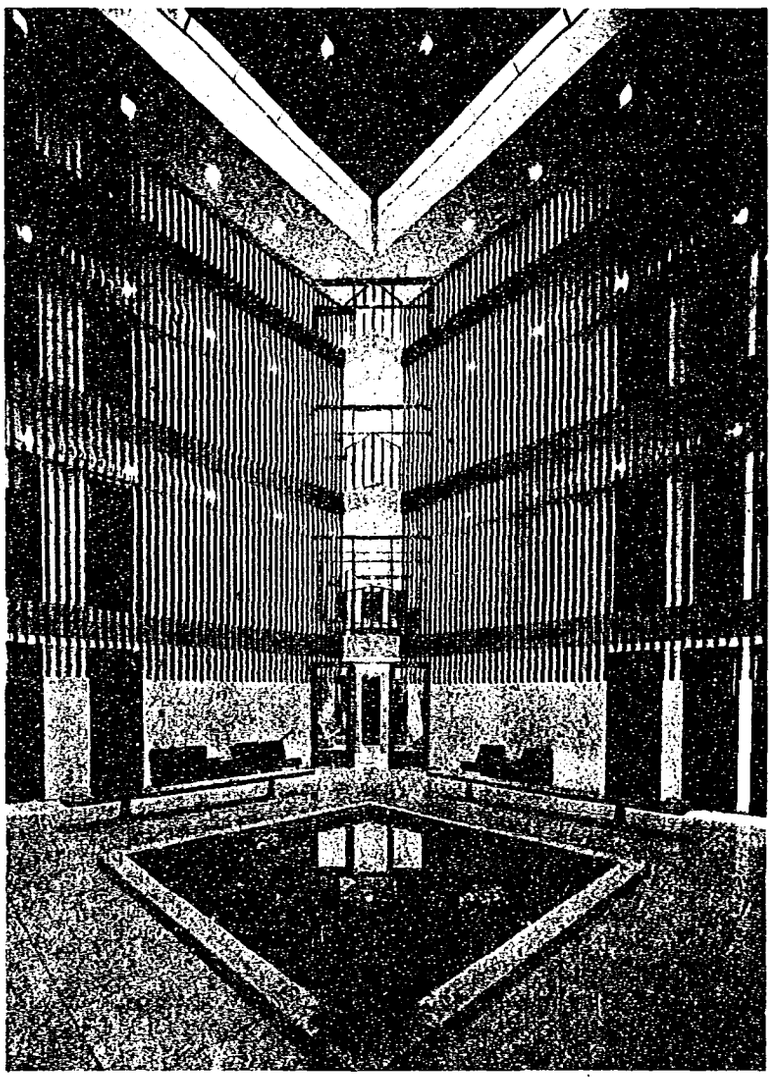
In London, most professional opinion of the new embassy has been favorable. But outside the profession there has been criticism of the structure's startling modernity in its neo-Georgian setting (actually, there is no genuine Georgian architecture in Grosvenor Square). Judged by British standards of well-bred—and often pallid—understatement, the building is gaudy and overdone.

Does it create an American image? "Too well," say the British. Its Americanism, according to The Observer, is clear in its "new, crisp and glamorous" design, obvious in the "aggressive, staccato modeling of the facade, the perpetual gilding, the costume jewelry that overbedecks it all." As for the eagle, it "is consistent with the architecture, which in its turn is consistent with the tragedy of Americanism."

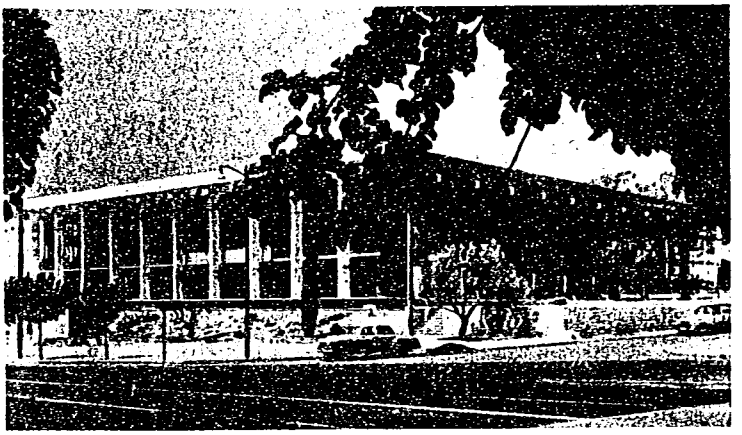
Does it fit into its surroundings? Many qualified critics believe that it does. Some *(Continued on Page 42)*



LONDON—The new American embassy, designed by Eero Saarinen, has been well received by most professional critics. But some say its modernity is ill-advised in the neo-Georgian setting of Grosvenor Square (above right, with a statue of F. D. R. in foreground) and decry its eagle crest.



ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE recently finished a Guggenheim Fellowship study of structural and design advances in the United States.



ATHENS—The new embassy, with its Pentelic marble and procession of pillars, suggests a modern temple. It was designed by Walter Gropius and the Architects Collaborative.

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newspapers in London have praised the well-proportioned formal unity that it gives to one side of Grosvenor Square. There is general appreciation of the architect's attempt to scale down the outside building by holding it to six stories and using a small window module in keeping with the surrounding structures, and of his facing it with London's traditional Portland stone.

The conservative Times is guardedly optimistic. "The stone will weather. London's climate always has that chastening and usually rewarding effect upon even the most spectacular effort of architects." Sir Basil Spence, past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, even defends the eagle: "If I were designing an embassy abroad I would give it a whacking great coat of arms to show the flag."

The new embassy in Oslo, also by Eero Saarinen, has been favorably received. There has been no noticeable controversy, either before or after its completion in 1959. Nine out of ten Oslo residents, questioned by an American publication, Architectural Forum, have praised the building.

THE 140-foot-long, unequivocally modern structure, its smooth, dark facade a faceted checkerboard of greenish-black Norwegian granite, takes its place comfortably among its Renaissance-style neighbors. At the same time, its precise and polished perfection is a representative example of the best creative design in United States today.

In the case of the embassy at The Hague, by Marcel Breuer, the diplomatic-architectural tightrope again seems to have been navigated successfully. A severely plain, massive limestone block, with unconventional, trapezoidal windows and polished granite trim, it is appraised as a "typically American building" of "strong and noble character," its contemporary design judged so harmonious with its traditional surroundings that it is held up as an example to Dutch builders.

THE New Delhi embassy, by Edward Durrell Stone, provoked some worried comment during construction because of its unusual appearance. Although it has been called a "modern Taj Mahal," the low, screen-walled pavilion is unmistakably Western and contemporary; at the same time, it pays delicate tribute, in its pierced, patterned walls, to traditional Indian architecture.

On the occasion of its official opening, in January, 1959, Nehru pronounced it "enchanting," and the press voiced unanimous delight. As the first completed embassy of the program, it has since become a symbol of the United States in more ways than one. First, it is recognized internationally as a uniquely beautiful modern building, well-suited to its official role. Secondly, it has become a prime example of a distinguished new kind of American architecture.

In this new architecture, frankly ornamental structure and detail are used to soften and transform the austerity of earlier modern work. Unlike the monotonous, commercial curtain

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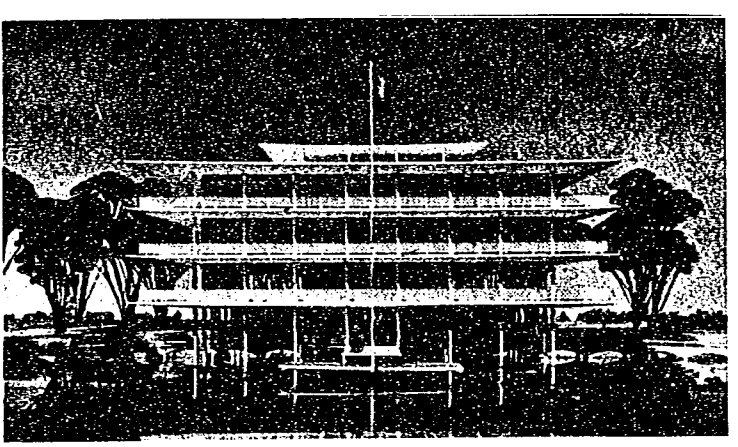

BANGKOK—The Thai tradition of a balcony pavilion rising from water has been subtly interpreted in this scale model of the projected embassy designed by John C. Warnecke.

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wall, the new style seeks rich and varied effects.

The American mark is clearly apparent in the new consulate in Nagoya, Japan, by Cochran, Stephenson & Wing (called a laudable design direction for the future by local critics); the Kobe consulate by American architect Minoru Yamasaki (awarded a gold medal by the Japanese on completion), and the nearly finished Athens embassy by Walter Gropius and the Architects Collaborative (a modern temple in Pentelic marble).

AS a group, the new State Department embassies and consulates have received substantial critical acclaim. They have been praised internationally by architects and the professional press as a "creative, contemporary approach" to governmental architecture. The Oslo embassy is pictured on the cover of the city guide; New Delhi keeps Sunday hours to accommodate visiting crowds; the Ghana Government is negotiating to buy the brand-new embassy building at Accra. Allowing for some errors—for no experimental program of this scope can be completely free of them—the buildings show every sign of becoming excellent architectural ambassadors.

Like all unprecedented undertakings, however, they have attracted extravagant attention and abuse. London's debate has merely been the liveliest. In the popular mind, most of the new embassies have two strikes against them: they are big, and they are different. In some countries these massive structures symbolize what we have, in power and plenty, as opposed to what they have not.

If, stylistically, the buildings had followed the time-tested formula of government classicism, there might have been less disgruntled public comment; protests would then have come only from the architects, critics and other professionals who believe that sham stone columns on modern steel and concrete skeletons are a meaningless mask.

THE most vociferous nonprofessional objections of all have come from Representative Hays' Congressional subcommittee. Presented with a list of the new embassies and consulates and asked for comment, Mr. Hays was not familiar with most of them. Nor, apparently, has he visited the Foreign Building Office with its complete exhibition of models and drawings.

Nevertheless, he is adamant that "someone should ride closer herd on F. B. O. We look ridiculous abroad. I'm not of the school of thought that we should have crummy little buildings. But they have gone almost entirely to the modernistic approach, and it's not a panacea to be used world-wide. There has to be some arrangement whereby

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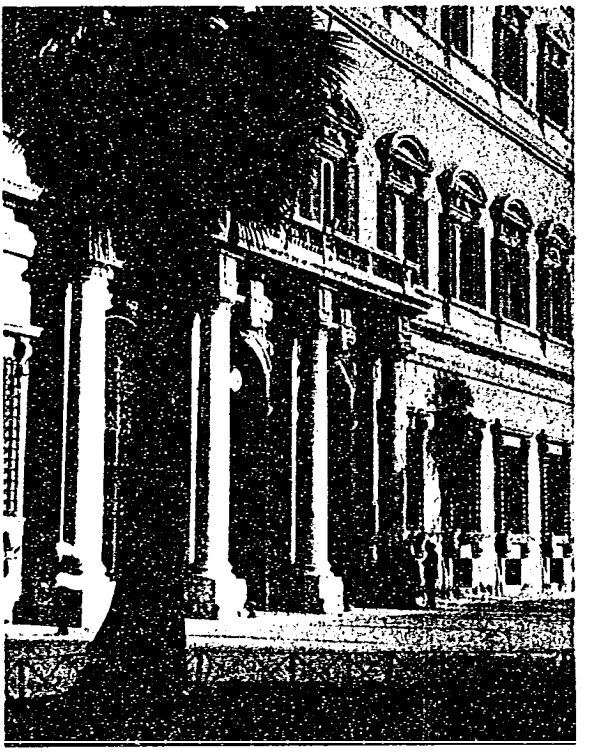

ROME—The embassy is housed on the Via Veneto in a palace recalling the days when giving balls took precedence over filling out forms.

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they submit to some advice."

Congressional authorization of a program does not traditionally mean Congressional control of its specific details; but Mr. Hays is determined to review and approve all new designs, reversing, if necessary, the opinions of the State Department and its architectural advisers as to what kind of embassies should be built. "Do you think as a matter of taste that an architect knows more than you or I do?"

His objections to the proposed Dublin embassy on the grounds that its nonconforming, circular design would disrupt its traditional surroundings, have already forced that project into abeyance, at a cost of $35,000 to cover architectural fees. "That thing is an architectural monstrosity—it looks like a modernistic mausoleum in a modernistic cemetery," observes Mr. Hays.

The Dublin building is, in fact, the most extreme design in the program, and the subject of mixed opinion in many quarters. But if Representative Hays were to insist on extending his normal legislative authority, an avowed "architectural amateur" would have final jurisdiction on the design of all buildings in the program.

AT the moment, a stalemate exists. Those projects that were under construction before Mr. Hays' subcommittee withheld the authorization of new funds will be completed; but many others, which had been scheduled to get under way in the current fiscal year, are at a standstill. Unless there is some compromise the stalemate could go on indefinitely —or at least until somebody else succeeds to the chairmanship of Mr. Hays' subcommittee.

Whatever the future of the program may be, however, another question arises: in the face of such criticism as it has met, should it be allowed to continue in its present progressive form?

Senator J. William Fulbright, who has seen the exhibit at the Foreign Buildings Office, calls the results "excellent," and believes that the State Department should be authorized to proceed with its pending projects. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which he heads, has voted for continuance. Nor does he feel that a Congressional committee should function as the program's esthetic arbiter.

"A large part of Congress considers art a wicked, corrupt excrescence of civilization," he notes in tones of detached disapproval. "I think that it is a great mistake for Congress to have the last word on any artistic matter. Nobody could be less well-qualified."

"They call me a farmer from Ohio," Mr. Hays replies, "but there was a farmer from Virginia who had excellent taste —Thomas Jefferson."

MR. HUGHES still places his faith in his architectural experts. "My only problem is to know when I hear good advice."

"If we act timidly, solely in hope of avoiding any and all criticism from whatever quarters," says the F. B. O. Architectural Advisory Panel, "we shall surely end up in dull compromise."

Neither dull nor lacking in criticism, the embassy program awaits official word. The next Congress may decide the future of a notable experiment in architectural diplomacy.