

DIPLOMATIC ARCHITECTURE AS SOFT POWER: A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract— This paper examines embassy architecture as a form of soft power, revealing how built environments function as cultural and political instruments in diplomatic contexts. Through selected historical and contemporary case studies, the study explores how embassies embody national identity, project political values, and adapt to evolving diplomatic strategies. Moving beyond their administrative roles, embassies are analyzed as symbolic structures shaped by both cultural narratives and geopolitical shifts. The research highlights how architectural styles ranging from open and transparent to fortified and conservative reflect the diplomatic posture of nations across time and space. By bridging architectural history with international relations, the paper offers a cultural and historical perspective on how architecture participates in diplomacy, emphasizing the need for intentional collaboration between architects and state actors in designing meaningful, context-aware diplomatic spaces.

Index Terms— Cultural identity, Diplomatic architecture, International relations, Soft power.

I. INTRODUCTION

Architecture has long served as a medium through which political and cultural values are materialized, and nowhere is this more evident than in the design of embassy buildings. As spatial embodiments of national identity, embassies operate at the intersection of architecture, diplomacy, and international relations. In recent decades, their architectural expression has evolved to reflect not only administrative and security needs but also the symbolic aspirations of states engaged in global diplomacy. Embassies now serve as instruments of soft power projecting openness, strength, caution, or cultural pride through their spatial form. This paper investigates how diplomatic architecture communicates such messages through a culturally and historically grounded analysis. By examining embassy designs across different geopolitical contexts and time periods, the study highlights how architecture functions as a strategic tool of representation, influenced by shifting diplomatic goals and cultural narratives. The research aims to reveal the nuanced dialogue between architecture and diplomacy, and the importance of thoughtful collaboration between architects and foreign policy makers.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical basis of this research is rooted in (Joseph Nye's, 2004) concept of soft power, which emphasizes the importance of attraction, legitimacy, and cultural influence in international relations. Unlike hard power, which relies on economic pressure or military force, soft power depends on shaping perceptions through values and cultural resonance. This framework has been widely adopted in analyses of public diplomacy and global communication strategies[1].

When applied to the field of architecture, soft power suggests that buildings especially those representing the state can become mediums for symbolic projection. Embassies in particular carry a burden of representation, using form, materials, and spatial logic to construct narratives about the sending country (Sharp, 2005). For instance, a transparent façade may signal democratic openness, while a heavily fortified compound may suggest defensiveness or control[2].

This perspective aligns with broader architectural theories that treat the built environment as a form of language. (Jencks, 1987) notes that architecture operates on multiple semiotic levels, transmitting ideological messages beyond functional use[3]. Similarly, (Lefebvre, 1991) conceptualizes space as socially produced, shaped by historical, political, and institutional forces. Taken together, these theories allow us to analyze embassy buildings as artifacts of spatial diplomacy.

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III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach, suitable for analyzing the symbolic, political, and cultural dimensions of architecture (Yin, 2009) [5]. The research is structured around two complementary axes of analysis:

First, a historical framework is established to trace the evolution of diplomatic architecture from the 19th century to the present. This diachronic perspective identifies five key architectural periods imperial, modernist, Cold War, post-9/11 fortress, and contemporary hybrid each illustrated by representative embassy examples. This chronological overview provides essential context for understanding the shifting spatial expressions of diplomacy. Second, the study focuses on some case studies representing major geopolitical and cultural typologies. These buildings were selected for their symbolic resonance, diversity of architectural language, and the diplomatic ideologies they express.

A semiotic method is used to interpret architectural elements as signs that convey diplomatic messages (Eco, 1984), while (Lefebvre's, 1991) theory of spatial production informs the analysis of how these buildings embody political priorities and project soft power [4,6].

IV. ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION OF EMBASSIES: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The architectural form of embassies has evolved significantly over time in response to changing political ideologies, global power structures, and diplomatic priorities. This section outlines five key historical periods in diplomatic architecture, illustrating each with a real-world example.

A. The Imperial Period (19th – Early 20th Century):

During the height of colonial expansion, embassies were often designed in neoclassical or Beaux-Arts styles to assert the cultural and political superiority of imperial powers. These buildings embodied not only aesthetic refinement but also imperial dominance.

The British Embassy in Cairo “Fig1”, built during the British protectorate period, is a quintessential expression of imperial grandeur. With its imposing columns and ornate façades, the building symbolized British authority in Egypt and served as a monument of colonial presence (Crimson, 2003) [7].



Fig. 1. British Embassy in Cairo, [Google Images]

B. Interwar and Post-WWII Modernism (1920s–1950s)

Following World War I and into the post-WWII era, architectural modernism emerged as a reflection of functionalism, rationality, and a break from imperial motifs. Embassies adopted simpler forms to express democratic ideals and post-colonial values.

The U.S. Embassy in Oslo (1959) “Fig2”, designed by Eero Saarinen, reflects post-war modernist ideals. Its minimalist design with open glazing and clean lines communicated transparency, efficiency, and a commitment to modern democratic governance (Jencks, 1987) [3].



Fig. 2. U.S. Embassy in Oslo, [Google Images]

C. The Cold War Era (1950s–1980s):

During the Cold War, embassy design became deeply ideological. Soviet embassies adopted a monumental, closed form to assert dominance, while Western embassies favored openness and technological sophistication to embody liberal values.

The Soviet Embassy in Berlin (1952) “Fig3” is a classic example of Stalinist architecture. Situated on Unter den Linden, it features heavy columns, stone ornamentation, and expansive symmetry. The building projected Soviet power and ideological resolve during East Germany's formative years (Vale, 2011) [8].



Fig. 3. The Soviet Embassy in Berlin

D. The Security-Fortress Period (Post-9/11):

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, embassy architecture across many Western nations shifted dramatically toward maximum security. The emphasis on defense led to isolated, bunker-like compounds.

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad “Fig4”, inaugurated in 2009, is one of the largest and most fortified embassies in the world. Designed with layered setbacks, perimeter walls, and highly restricted access, it exemplifies the architecture of fear and precaution dominating post-9/11 diplomatic design (Sharp, 2005) [2].



Fig. 4. U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. [Google Images]

E. Contemporary Hybrid Diplomacy (2010s–Present)

Recent embassy designs reflect a desire to balance openness, sustainability, and cultural dialogue with modern security requirements. These embassies often incorporate public spaces, local materials, and symbolic features to enhance soft power.

The Norwegian Embassy in Berlin (2013) “Fig5” represents this hybrid model. Its environmentally conscious design integrates wood and glass with an open layout, encouraging transparency and accessibility while maintaining subtle security. It embodies Norway’s diplomatic image as open, eco-friendly, and dialogue-driven (Otmazgin, 2012) [9].

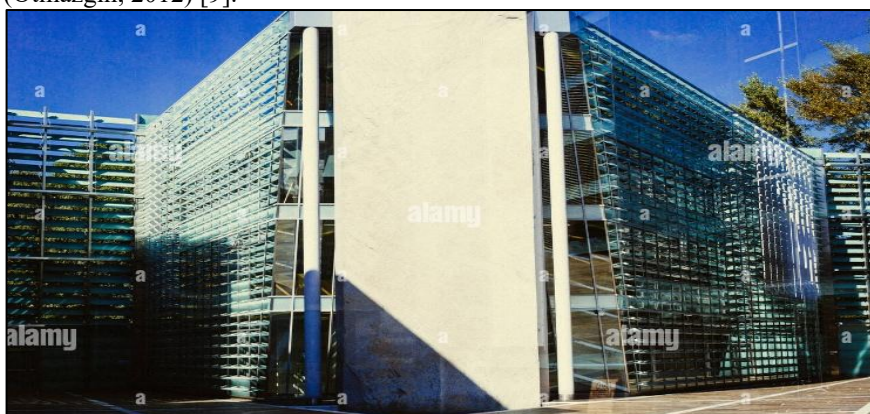


Fig. 5. Norwegian Embassy in Berlin, [Google Images]

V. CASE STUDIES

A. United States Embassy in London (2017):

The U.S. Embassy in London “Fig6”, designed by the American firm KieranTimberlake and inaugurated in 2017, represents a departure from the traditional fortified embassy compound. Its glass façade, open green spaces, and sustainable design reflect core democratic values such as transparency, innovation, and environmental responsibility. While security remains integral, it is discreetly integrated through a surrounding water feature and landscape design, rather than visible fencing or barriers (Vale, 2011,2005) [8,12].

The building conveys a narrative of openness and modernity, aligning with the U.S. image of global leadership through technology and environmental awareness. In architectural terms, it embodies the use of soft power by signaling trust and progressive diplomacy through form and material[13].



Fig. 6. U.S. Embassy in London. [13]

B. Japanese Embassy in Paris (1997):

Completed in 1997, the Japanese Embassy in Paris “Fig7” showcases a minimalist and refined design approach that fuses contemporary architecture with traditional Japanese spatial philosophy. The use of clean lines, natural materials, and subtle interior courtyards evokes values such as harmony, balance, and modesty hallmarks of Japanese aesthetics and diplomacy (Otmazgin, 2012) [9].

In contrast to overt symbolism, the Japanese embassy conveys a quiet form of soft power. It reflects cultural sophistication and respect for context, promoting a diplomatic identity grounded in subtlety and elegance rather than grandeur[9].



Fig. 7. Japanese Embassy in Paris. [Google Images]

C. Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington, D.C. (1994):

The Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington D.C. “Fig8”, inaugurated in 1994, provides a striking

example of how contemporary diplomatic architecture integrates national identity with international sophistication. The design incorporates traditional Islamic features such as pointed arches, intricate geometric patterns, and limestone cladding while employing modern construction techniques to meet American urban standards[10]. According to (Guenova,2012), the UAE Embassy deliberately balances cultural symbolism and functional modernism, projecting an image of a country rooted in tradition yet open to global engagement. The architectural language emphasizes a blend of exclusivity and openness: the embassy's monumental entrance and formal symmetry express dignity and sovereignty, while the relatively transparent façade suggests accessibility and dialogue[10].



Fig. 8. Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington. [10]

D. Scandinavian Embassies Complex in Berlin(1999):

The Nordic Embassies Complex in Berlin “Fig9”, is a groundbreaking architectural project that houses the embassies of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, along with a shared cultural center. Rather than designing separate, isolated buildings, the Nordic countries collaborated on a unified diplomatic campus that visually and symbolically expresses shared values such as openness, transparency, and regional solidarity[11].

According to (Khu, Dipl. and Serendipit,2015), the design of the complex emphasizes connectivity without erasing national distinctions. Each embassy maintains its individuality through distinct interior designs, while the entire complex is enveloped by a continuous green copper façade, symbolizing unity in diversity[11].

The five embassies buildings are combined with the Common Links Building architecturally through a keyhole design concept surrounded by a large height metal fence.

This design concept expresses the extent of the strength and connection of the five countries politically, culturally and geographically at all levels, as the keyhole needs one key. This means that the five countries have a great connection that gives them great power in front of global public opinion. Architecturally, it stands as a powerful model for regional soft power strategies and the spatial manifestation of multilateral diplomacy[11].



Fig. 9. Nordic Embassies Complex in Berlin. [11]

VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of the selected embassies reveals the strategic use of architectural language to project diplomatic identity and values. Architecture, in the diplomatic context, functions not merely as aesthetic form, but as a carefully curated narrative tool that embodies national ideologies, soft power strategies, and geopolitical aspirations.

Table 1: Summarizes the evolution of embassy architecture across key historical periods, linking architectural style with diplomatic strategies.

Historical Period / Contemporary Case	Embassy Example	Architectural Style	Symbolic Message	Diplomatic Strategy
Imperial Period (19th – early 20th century)	British Embassy in Cairo	Neoclassical Imperial	Authority, colonial prestige	Projection of imperial dominance
Interwar and Post-WWII Modernism (1920s–1950s)	U.S. Embassy in Oslo	Modernist Minimalism	Transparency, progressiveness	Democratic liberal diplomacy
Cold War Era (1950s–1980s)	Soviet Embassy in Berlin	Stalinist Monumentalism	Power, ideological rigidity	Authoritarian projection
Security-Fortress Period (Post-9/11)	U.S. Embassy in Baghdad	Fortified Defensive Modernism	Security, control	Defensive diplomatic posture
Contemporary Hybrid Diplomacy (2010s–present)	Nordic Embassies Complex, Berlin	Minimalist Regional Collaboration	Unity in diversity, sustainability	Multilateral regional soft power
Contemporary Hybrid Diplomacy (2010s–present)	UAE Embassy in Washington, D.C.	Islamic Modernism	Tradition fused with modernity	Cultural pride and soft engagement
Contemporary Hybrid Diplomacy (2010s–present)	U.S. Embassy in London	Modern, Transparent	Innovation, openness	Liberal soft power
Cold War Era (1950s–1980s)	Russian Embassy in Berlin	Stalinist Monumentalism	Sovereignty, ideological strength	Authoritarian projection
Contemporary Hybrid Diplomacy (2010s–present)	Japanese Embassy in Paris	Minimalist, Contextual	Harmony, cultural subtlety	Quiet cultural diplomacy

The analysis reveals a distinct shift in diplomatic architectural strategies: from the grandeur of imperial dominance to the minimalism of liberal democracies, through the monumental fortifications of Cold War rivalries, and finally toward contemporary designs that balance cultural symbolism with global engagement.

As Lefebvre (1991) emphasized, space is a social product. Embassies thus act as spatial texts of diplomacy, articulating how nations seek to position themselves within an ever-changing international system.

The following chart “Fig10” complements the analytical table by visualizing the spatial positioning of embassy designs along the axes of modernity and openness, highlighting the architectural and diplomatic strategies summarized earlier.

This two-dimensional scatter plot visualizes the architectural positioning of selected embassy buildings along two interpretive axes:

Modern to Traditional (horizontal) and Open to Fortified (vertical).

Each point represents an embassy case study, positioned according to its dominant architectural language and spatial openness or security strategy.

The distribution reflects how different nations utilize embassy design to project national identity, respond to geopolitical contexts, and articulate their diplomatic values through spatial expression

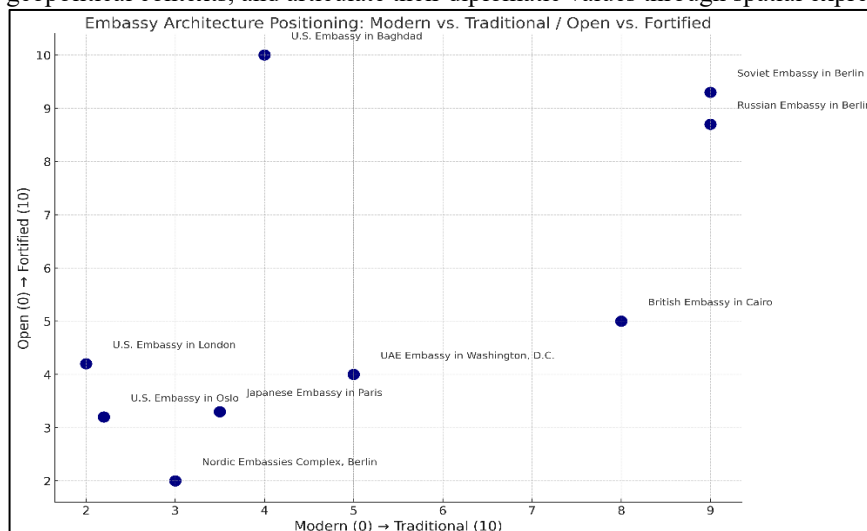


Fig. 10. Chart Embassy Architecture Positioning (Modernity vs. Security)

A comparative overview of selected embassy buildings based on their visual identity and security expression. It highlights how architectural elements such as façade design, openness, monumentality, and perimeter treatment are employed to convey symbolic messages aligned with diplomatic strategies.

The contrast between transparent modernism and fortified monumentalism reflects deeper geopolitical narratives, from liberal openness to authoritarian assertion. The integration of aesthetic choices with security considerations illustrates how embassies serve not only as functional institutions but also as spatial representations of foreign policy. Table 2 illustrates this.

Table 2: Visual Identity and Security Expression in Embassy Architecture

Embassy Example	Visual Identity	Security Expression	Architectural Message	Diplomatic Strategy
British Embassy in Cairo	Classical grandeur	Subtle boundary walls	Authority, colonial legacy	Imperial representation
U.S. Embassy in Oslo	Transparent modernism	Minimal, integrated	Openness, democratic values	Soft liberal diplomacy
Soviet Embassy in Berlin	Monumental, closed	Heavy, fortress-like	Power, ideological rigidity	Authoritarian deterrence
U.S. Embassy in Baghdad	Bunker-like, defensive	Extreme, multilayered	Fear, control	Defensive diplomacy
Nordic Embassies Complex, Berlin	Clean, open, regional identity	Integrated soft perimeter	Unity, environmental care	Collaborative regional diplomacy
UAE Embassy in Washington, D.C.	Cultural-modern hybrid	Balanced, landscaped buffer	Tradition with openness	Cultural engagement diplomacy
Japanese Embassy in Paris	Subtle, minimalist	Low-profile, discreet	Harmony, restraint	Quiet cultural diplomacy
Russian Embassy in Berlin	Grand, imposing	Heavily guarded	Sovereignty, state control	Authoritarian projection
U.S. Embassy in London	High-tech transparency	Visible yet aesthetic	Innovation and security balance	Technological soft power

Table 2 provides a comparative overview of embassy buildings, focusing on how visual identity and security features communicate symbolic messages and diplomatic strategies.

The following chart “Fig11” complements Table 2 by visualizing the positioning of embassy buildings in terms of their exterior identity and security expression, offering a comparative perspective on how architectural form reflects diplomatic priorities.

This diagram visualizes the data summarized in Table 2 by mapping embassy buildings across two interpretive axes: visual identity and security expression. The chart highlights how varying combinations of openness, monumentality, and fortification reflect different diplomatic messages and strategic postures. This visual representation enhances the comparative analysis by clarifying architectural contrasts between embassies.

This spatial representation highlights how embassies negotiate between architectural openness and defensive design, reflecting broader diplomatic intentions.

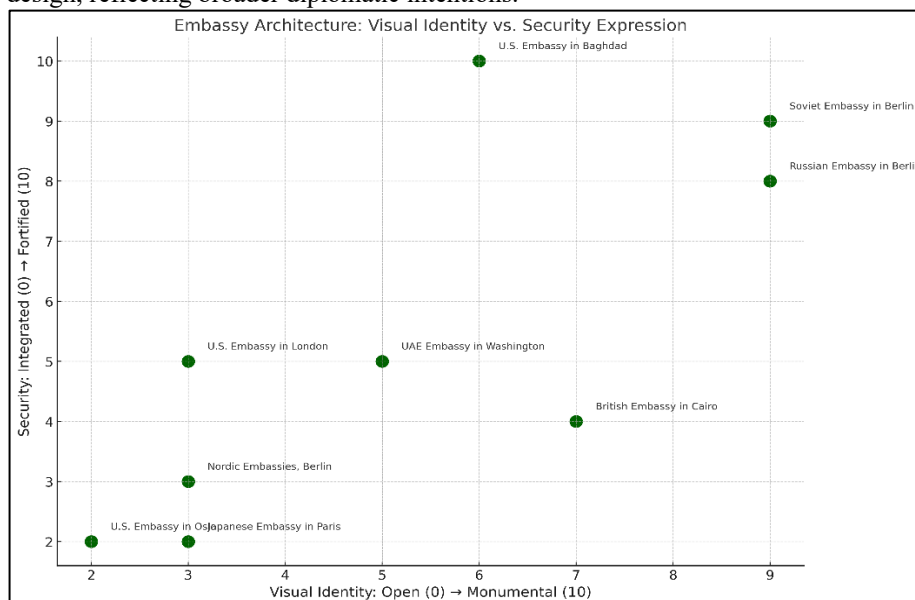


Fig. 11. Chart Embassy Architecture Mapped by Visual Identity and Security Expression

VII. CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that embassy architecture functions as more than a utilitarian space; it is a strategic instrument of soft power. Through selected case studies, we have observed how architectural forms reflect not only cultural values but also political ideologies and diplomatic objectives.

Architectural design in diplomacy is not merely symbolic it shapes the perception of nations abroad. Embassies that embrace openness often signal liberal, participatory identities, while those designed as fortified spaces may express caution, sovereignty, or geopolitical defensiveness.

There is a growing need for architects and diplomats to collaborate in producing embassy buildings that balance cultural identity, security needs, and diplomatic symbolism.

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