

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Speaking of Places -- The New U.S. Embassy in Berlin

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7035q3kj>

### Journal

Places, 20(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Lyndon, Donlyn

### Publication Date

2008-09-15

Peer reviewed

# The New U.S. Embassy in Berlin

Donlyn Lyndon



On July 4, 2008, among fireworks and several thousand invited celebrants, the new American Embassy in Berlin was officially opened. The day was misty, the rhetoric congratulatory, and the music by the U.S. Air Force jazz band lively. How can a country properly announce completion of a

**Above:** The new U.S. Embassy in Berlin, seen from the northwest. Photo by Werner Huthmacher.

**Opposite:** The site of the embassy between Pariser Platz and the Tiergarten. Courtesy of Moore Ruble Yudell.

building that represents its presence in another land (and which, indeed, has special legal status as part of its own territorial domain)? And how does a host country properly acknowledge such a presence within its borders?

On this day, proclamations by former U.S. President George H.W. Bush, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and U.S. Ambassador William Temkin emphasized the historic importance of the embassy site. They noted its adjacency to the Brandenburg Gate and events that had taken place there, commented on

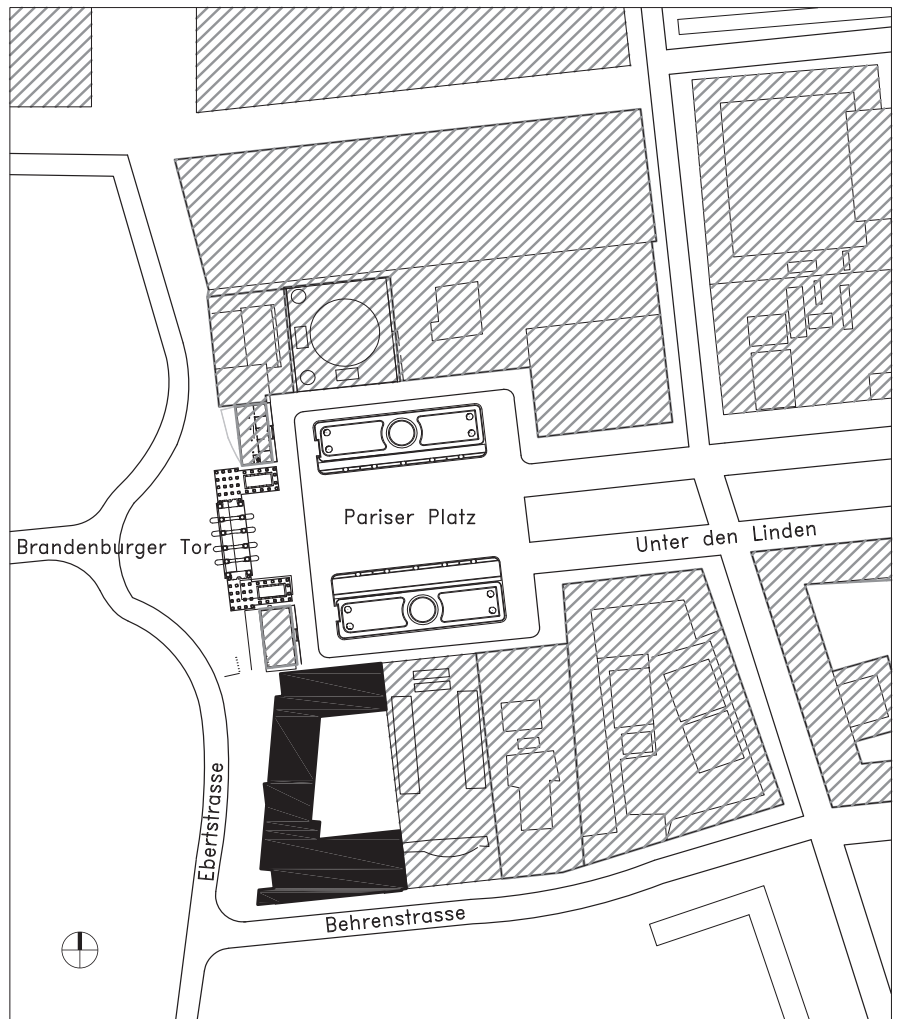
the dedication to freedom the Gate symbolized, and stressed the nature of the cooperation the embassy's presence there signaled. Giant video screens displayed John F. Kennedy proclaiming "*Ich bin ein Berliner*"; veterans of the Berlin Airlift were honored; and the video screens showed Ronald Reagan uttering his famous challenge: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate; Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

When Reagan issued that challenge, some twenty years earlier from a stage in front of the Brandenburg

Gate, the gate's base was obscured by the Berlin Wall. This most famous entry to the city, completed in 1791, had been isolated in 1961 by construction of the wall, and captured within a vacant "death zone" created by East Germany to prevent its citizens from escaping to the West. The choice of location for the new embassy seemed intended to emphasize the U.S. role in dispelling this era of disunity, discord, and oppression.

What may be less well known about the embassy site is that it was home to a previous American Embassy—though briefly. In 1932 the U.S. purchased a grandiloquent nineteenth-century palace there to house it. It was entered from the corner of Pariser Platz, a strictly formed and ceremonially important plaza just inside the gate, to the east, but its flank faced west across Ebertstrasse, bordering the great, wooded Tiergarten park. The building burned shortly afterwards, however, and following rebuilding, was open for only two years before being closed again by the gathering storm of World War II. During that conflict, the embassy, like most neighboring structures, was destroyed by Allied bombing.

Following the end of the Cold War, as the reunified Federal Republic of Germany moved its capital back to Berlin, the United States purchased back the property, which had remained empty.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the German government set about building a new government center nearby, which now incorporates the long-abandoned, but historically important Reichstag building—transformed through the addition of a transparent dome.<sup>2</sup> Because the Brandenburg Gate is a celebrated emblem of reunification, the reconstruction of adjoining Pariser Platz became a priority for Berlin planners.



### Fitted to Place

The embassy's architects, Moore Ruble Yudell, with Gruen Associates, have designed the new building to suit the significance of the site, skillfully fitting key program elements into forms that would become part of the place. The building has two important roles in this regard: join with neighboring buildings to restore a strict geometry for Pariser Platz; and create a suitable urban boundary to the west and south for the Tiergarten and for the recently completed Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe.<sup>3</sup>

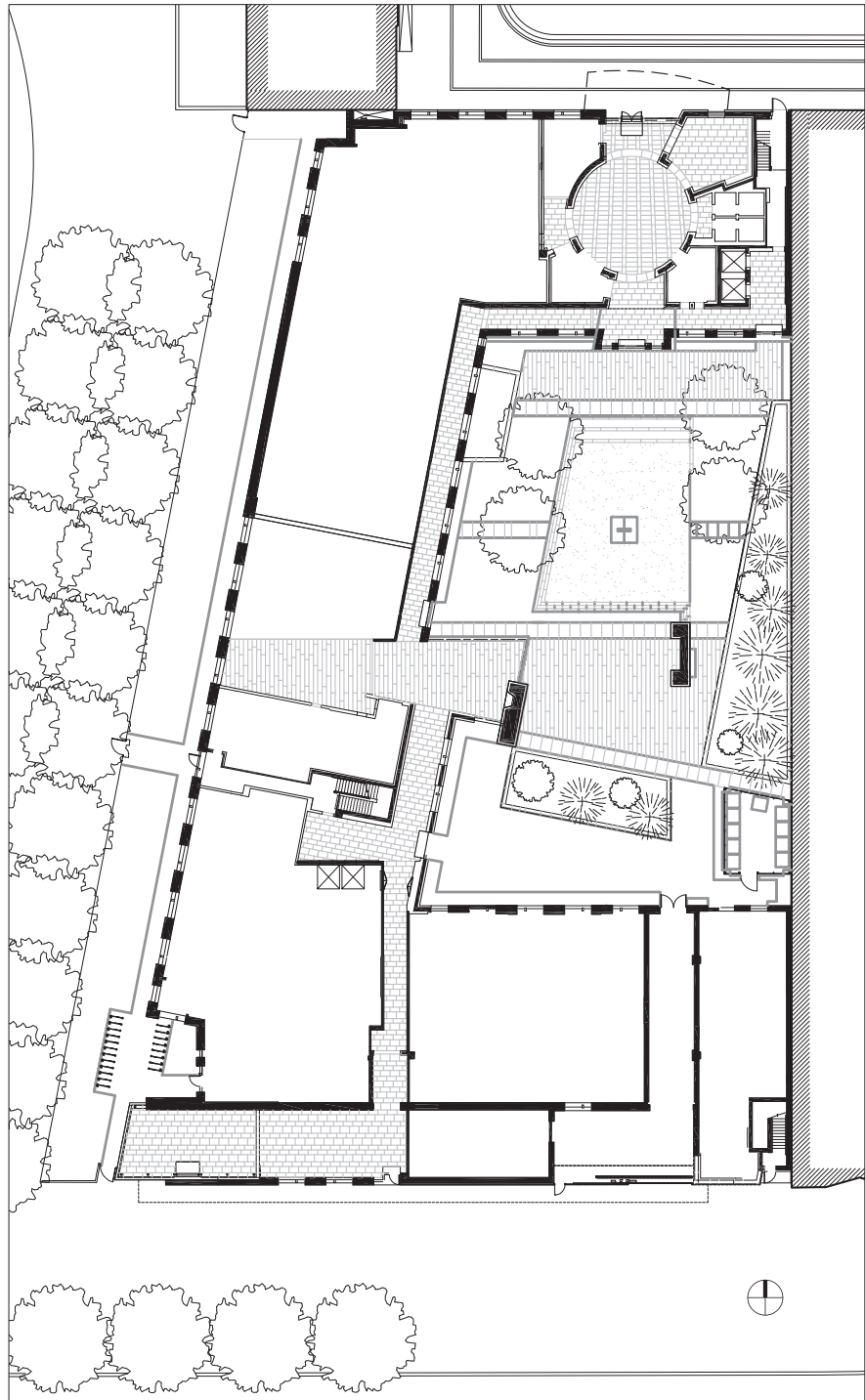
Becoming an active and enlivening participant in achieving these larger urban goals was taken by the architects and the U.S. government to be of greater consequence than manifesting an independent formal identity.<sup>4</sup> In this spirit, the U.S. can be seen as continuing a stance first established under the postwar Marshall Plan: to foster revival and reconstruction of Germany's economy and urban structure.

Such goals were implicit within the program for a 1995 competition to select the building's architect.<sup>5</sup> They were also evident in the

winning team's response, which proposed to make "careful connections to the proportions and geometries of surrounding landmarks and urban fabric while establishing new landmark elements which are harmonious parts of a new urban focus." Within the boundaries of the site, the architects have set out to create distinct spaces that clarify and give identity to various aspects of the place: ceremonial entry, formal diplomatic meeting space, a large internal garden, and an inviting informal entry for employees and consular functions.

Achieving these goals, however, proved more complicated than first imagined. The interpretation of planning guidelines for Pariser Platz was contentious, pitching noted German architects and planners into heated debate. There also was little precedent for a building whose entry would be enveloped within a formal civic space but visually isolated from its more prominent public sides. As both representation of a country and a secured, enjoyable place of work, an embassy's design is in any case demanding, and its funding subject to political pressures. Most daunting of all, however, was the imposition during design of new and more stringent security requirements following the 1998 bombing of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (reinforced by the attacks of 9/11). The new security requirements at first threatened the whole project with relocation to a suburban site. Then, when U.S. officials attempted to negotiate a realignment of Ebertstrasse into the Tiergarten to increase its distance from the building, they strained relations with local authorities.

In light of these newly increased security demands, the final project remains a remarkably intact embodiment of proposal that originally won



the 1995 competition, especially with respect to its ability to elegantly complete an interior corner within Pariser Platz. Where it differs most may be along the Tiergarten promenade, where its face no longer aligns with its neighbors, but is set back behind a securely fenced garden.

### Entering from the Square

Along Pariser Platz the embassy completes an urban figure formed by other buildings built earlier. It provides a stately (yes, stately) contribution to this whole, closing the southwest corner with a limestone wall textured with striations and subtle color change. The regular pace of window openings is interrupted just once, by a canopy that emerges from a full-height recess. The canopy is arced, with a spirited twist at its end—a form that suggests both conventional shelter and something special behind. Indeed, beyond the facade is a cylinder carved from the building and open to the sky, which lights a rotunda, covered by the glass panes of the canopy as they extend into the building. The cylinder also molds the sunlight as it passes through the break in wall to create a shifting shaft of light in the dominant shade along the south edge of Pariser Platz.

Visitors entering the glass doors below the canopy pass through an airlock under a vigorous, three-dimensional eagle ensconced in the national seal. Made of segments of stainless steel and assembled with brio, this emblem seems nearly playful (though, associations being variable, some might call it “bristling”). Visitors then move easily into a side foyer, where bags are checked and security screening takes place, before entering the rotunda. This brightly lit and powerfully shaped space is faced with the same limestone



as the Pariser Platz facade, but turned inward to form a ceremonial entry handsomely inscribed with the preamble to the constitution.

Referring to the focal rotundas of government buildings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the architects imagined this space as continuing the important Enlightenment traditions of clear shape and classical reference. These ideals, they argue, informed both the U.S. Founding Fathers and the Kingdom of Prussia, to which the U.S. sent John Quincy Adams as its first ambassador.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not visitors engage that full load of significance, this ample foyer does a great job of diverting attention from security-screening apparatus, which so frequently disfigures the entry to state buildings.

### Urban Borders

If the embassy’s design is clearly successful as it faces and completes the Pariser Platz, its effect along the Ebertstrasse, facing the Tiergarten,

is harder to evaluate, because it will be supplemented by a canopy of trees along the public promenade and a parterre garden behind the bordering fence, neither of which has matured. Its lower floors here feature uneventfully spaced windows, and a line of frequently spaced high light fixtures adjoining the fence recalls, subtly, the originally intended building line.

The security fence here is presently dominant. It rises much higher than head height and bears the full weight of State Department anxiety. Made of thick metal stakes, rendered with patina and subtly twisted in a quietly varying pattern, it forms an undemanding green veil when seen from a distance. But seen in parallel, along the promenade, it is visually obtrusive and opaque, not unfairly

**Opposite:** Ground-level plan of the embassy.

Courtesy of Moore Ruble Yudell.

**Above:** Embassy entrance on Pariser Platz. Photo by Donlyn Lyndon.



seen as hostile, even though there are many fenced compounds elsewhere in the city.

Functionally, the embassy's south facade, along the Behrenstrasse, must provide a service entrance and sally port, as well as a secondary entrance for consular services and employees. On this side it fronts the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a large, predominantly bleak, but intellectually provocative composition of dark slabs, which it faces impassively.

These extended public facades were conditioned by stringent rules regarding areas of glass. According to the architects, German daylighting requirements called for a minimum of 30 percent of walls to be glazed, while

**Left:** The embassy's State Room has a broad view over Tiergarten park to the glass dome of the Reichstag and the government center, and is on eye level with the Quadriga sculpture atop the Brandenburg Gate.

**Right:** Mural by Sol LeWitt in the embassy's consular lobby. Photos by Werner Huthmacher.



State Department security guidelines allowed a maximum of 30 percent and specified the largest allowable panes. The pattern eventually arrived at is an asymmetrical arrangement of panes within larger openings: the openings strike a beat of regularity while the panes provide a more detailed syn-copation. Where they face south and west the windows are shaded by metal trellises, creating which create shifting stripes of shadow during the day.

### Organizing Landmarks

At its upper levels, the west facade is more distinctive, notched to give greater play to the building's most prominent feature, a cylinder clad in grey-blue zinc that houses the embassy's principal conference room. This form, rising from a roof garden, is nearly the inverse of the hollow rotunda marking the entry. Similarly, it is meant to serve an iconic and ceremonial purpose. Within the more loosely arranged bureaucratic spaces of the building this conference room

creates a landmark, and from outside on the west it registers this status well. Rising above the building's roofline, it quietly echoes the color of the great Quadriga sculpture that caps the Brandenburg Gate at a similar level.

Creation of this grand room was motivated by the wish to have an especially fine place for diplomatic lunches and negotiations, and it presents an aura of certainty. To the northwest, tall horizontally banded windows offer a broad view toward the Brandenburg Gate and the transparent dome of the Reichstag. The room is also capped by a circular lantern with rings of small lights, centered on an elegantly designed round table bearing an inscribed compass. It is given a sense of ease and comfort by the rich, planar cherry-wood walls that complete the chamber. Officially labeled the State Room, it has become known informally as the Quadriga Room for its stunning eye-level view of the sculpture atop the Brandenburg Gate. There is no doubt where you are.

The building carries on the fenestration pattern of its west facade here, set back from the bounding street, but with a few major openings. At the Southwest corner of the site at street level, the tall, glass-walled consular lobby is vigorously enlivened by two Sol LeWitt murals—striking optical star patterns that fill the back walls, prominently visible from across the street. This high, clear room, third in the series of figurative spaces within the building, is outside the most stringent security boundary and sometimes used for public receptions.

The fourth focal point of the building's composition is a large internal courtyard, with landscaping designed, like the roof garden and side garden parterres, by Olin Partnership. In many ways most important to the organization and daily life of the complex, this element provides outlook and light for most of its public passages and many of its offices. It is distinguished by two large Colorado stone wall masses, loci for seating and barbecues, while the space between is covered by a soaring steel trellis awaiting the growth of vines.

The center of the courtyard is a simple lawn, edged with seating areas. Clusters of trees planted next to the tall blank party wall of the adjoining bank building are species that can be found in the U.S., part of a general strategy for making this courtyard reminiscent of domestic American landscapes. It might seem a rather noble Midwestern back yard, but for two elements that mark its place and purpose: a graffiti-encrusted segment of the Berlin Wall tucked to one side and a central shimmering steel stele by the artist Ellsworth Kelly. The latter, like the LeWitt murals in the consular lobby, was commissioned by FAPE, the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies, the group also

responsible for the many fine prints, drawings, and paintings displayed in the building.

### Scope, Scale, and Site

Responding, as it does, to differing aspects of its site and vesting meaning in important internal points of interaction, this embassy offers neither universals, nor pyrotechnics. Rather, it posits an architecture that sets human measure to place.

The design parses the ways its differing parts may accommodate those who encounter them: a general public in some areas, visitors with focused purpose in others, regular inhabitants and visitors of state in others. Its walls form a respectful and spirited corner for Pariser Platz; they provide a quiet, measured edge where the city meets the green of the Tiergarten; and they offer a consistent background where the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe tenders its message of painful remembrance.

There have been controversies surrounding this embassy project since its inception. Many were enthusiastic about the competition scheme, but some were not happy that it would take such a prominent position; others were concerned about the role it might play in Pariser Platz. Others have been ready to pounce on characteristics that might be forged into a critique of the U.S. itself.

There have also been those who would enter it into an arbitrary line-up of buildings by star architects—finding it wanting as a “strong statement.” Certainly, the architect's role is to bring to the city a special form of imagining, furnishing its streets with works of interest. But it doesn't follow that those works should vie with each other, devoid of concern for how they take their place. In an urban setting like that of the

Berlin embassy, there should always be concern for what a building contributes to its immediate context and how it aligns with traditions, plans and agreements that have been drawn up, teased out, or sometimes imposed by public officials.

Strength of will is a necessary attribute in getting a large building constructed with any integrity of thought. But this strength should be measured not only in eccentricity, bravado, or disavowal of responsibility for all but also architectural authority. Restraint can also be a measure of will, especially when informed, as here, by respect and imaginative support for the embodied thoughts and plans already in place.

Moore Ruble Yudell's design for the Berlin Embassy is a vigorous statement of engagement with a place, the complexities of its development, and a heritage of investment in the public realm. The building presents the U.S. as a spirited good neighbor, caring for its own interests, yet supporting the civic intentions of its host country.

### Notes

1. Berlin had been the capital of the Kingdom of Prussia, Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich.
2. This new symbol of open government, designed by Norman Foster, reveals visitors spiraling up to an outlook directly over the national Chamber of Deputies.
3. Designed by Peter Eisenman.
4. The official client for the building is the Office of Foreign Building Operations of the U.S. Department of State.
5. The embassy was also to offer “a statement to passers-by and visitors on the spirit of the United States.”
6. Adams reportedly also took up residence in Pariser Platz.