

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# The image of a nation at stake

The design competition for a new U.S. embassy in London opens a door on how America sees itself and how to show it.

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The two stories that have dominated the architectural press over the last few weeks — the unveiling of a winning design for a new American embassy in London, and the death, in a downtown Los Angeles traffic accident, of the 76-year-old Austrian architect Raimund Abraham — have more in common than just a spot on the calendar.

Both are directly connected to the same set of questions: How should an architect approach the task of designing a building to represent his home country abroad? What happens if the result — implicitly or explicitly — is critical of that country's past, politics or most cherished values?

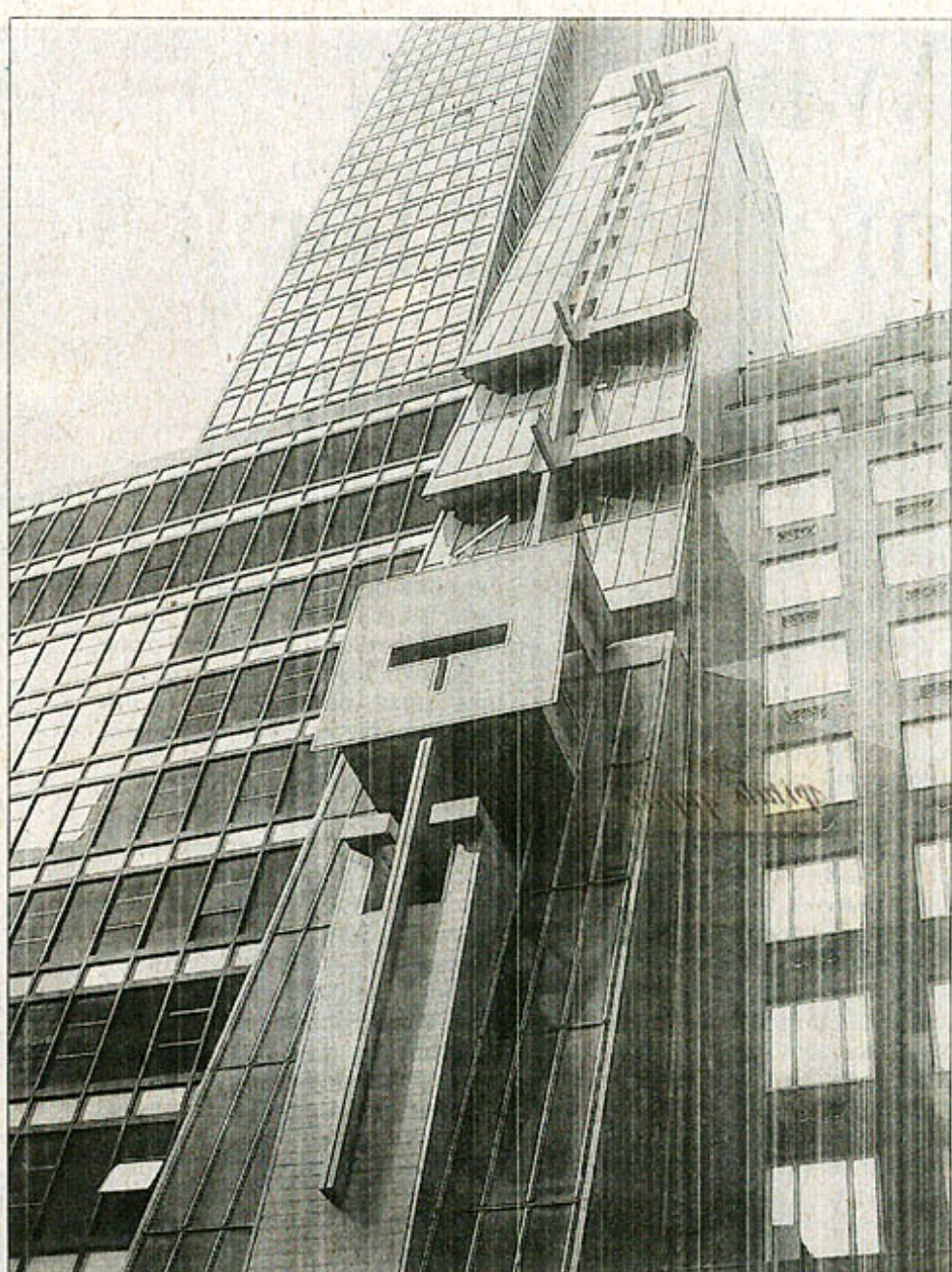
Thanks to the punishingly high standards he set for himself — not to mention a less-than-sunny way with potential clients — Abraham, who was born in Austria and moved permanently to the United States in the mid-1960s, completed few buildings in his long career. He was far better known as a teacher and the creator of primitive, hauntingly powerful architectural drawings.

But his modest output did include one truly remarkable building: the Austrian Cultural Forum, a knife-thin, 24-story tower that opened in 2002 in midtown Manhattan as an outpost for exhibitions and discussions about Austrian culture and politics. Abraham's design for the Forum prevailed in a competition that drew entries from 226 Austrian firms — essentially "every born Austrian architect who could walk," as Abraham put it at the time. It called for a tough, unforgiving piece of architecture: a 280-foot-tall, 25-foot-wide building squeezed between taller neighbors on East 52nd Street. Abraham famously compared its sharp-edged facade to the falling blade of a guillotine.

What, then, does the building say about Austria? It conjures a combination of severity and visionary thinking in that nation's culture and suggests a range of influences miles away from "The Sound of Music": the work of Sigmund Freud; the angular, brooding paintings of Egon Schiele; and the stripped-down architecture of Adolf Loos, to name three. It also seems to hint at the far darker precedents of Hitler and the Holocaust.

It would be easy to caricature the building as a bitter expatriate's attempt to express frustration with his home country — and, indeed, Abraham, dismayed by the rise of the late right-wing politician Joerg Haider, among other developments, renounced his Austrian citizenship just weeks before the Forum was completed.

But if the design is plagued by doubt about Austria's political history and its place in the world, it is precisely that doubt that gives the building its honesty and forthrightness and therefore its power. Whether that same level of honest self-examination is even possible in a contemporary American embassy is debatable, of course. The Austrian Cultural Forum had many urban and architectural constraints to deal with, given its almost comically narrow site, but it is also a cultural rather than diplomatic outpost and thus capable of pursuing architectural innovation,



JASON KURIAN

**AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM:** Expatriate Raimund Abraham's severe design revealed his bitter feelings about his onetime homeland.

even radicalism.

Abraham's building also gains much of its energy from its engagement with the wider city, particularly in the slightly menacing way it looms out over the sidewalk. We now build American embassies, by contrast, deep within concentric circles of blast protection.

Still, the competition for the London embassy has stirred up many of the same questions that surrounded Abraham's proposal. And they have grown only louder since the winning design, by the Philadelphia firm KieranTimberlake, was announced Feb. 23.

The following day it was revealed that the two British members of the jury for the embassy competition, architect Richard Rogers and developer-art collector Peter Palumbo, had disagreed strongly with their colleagues' decision — and had sent a letter to the State Department arguing that the KieranTimberlake entry, which calls for an elegant and energy-efficient if rather unassuming glass cube, was simply not ambitious enough. Rogers and Palumbo wrote that another design, by Thom Mayne and his Santa Monica firm, Morphosis, was, as a report in the *Guardian* newspaper put it, "touched by genius" and should have prevailed.

## Second thoughts

At first, the dissent from Rogers and Palumbo appeared mostly symbolic: a joint complaint from two influential players used to getting their way in the London architecture world. The Morphosis design they praised, after all, calls for a sagging embassy that is practically collapsing in on itself. For all its boldness and unsettled power, it seems to symbolize a wounded America struggling to hide from a growing number of antagonists behind a series of jagged concrete walls.

There's no way the American government would ever actually build that design, is there? Perhaps not: Like many influential but losing competition entries in architectural history, the Morphosis proposal may simply be a vehicle for advancing certain ideas that students and fellow architects will study in years ahead.

Still, the controversy over the Morphosis design has had the secondary effect of redefining the KieranTimberlake entry as generic and unimaginative. And this is, if not entirely unfair, then at least based on a limited definition of architecture and architectural symbolism.

The profession is now emerging from a frenzied decade in which architects, critics and clients alike disappeared down the rabbit hole of formalism, convincing ourselves that architecture's highest achievement is to produce stunning shapes that mean nearly as much to somebody seeing a building in a magazine spread or online as walking through it. One direct result of this obsession was the false

sense that the only way for an architect to pursue an idea or a theme was through shape-making or at least through some combination of form, scale and material palette.

There are, of course, many other ways for buildings to express values and priorities. The KieranTimberlake embassy design is restrained in a formal sense, yes: Its glass cube, wrapped in a flexible, translucent material called ETFE (and rises behind a water feature that bears an unfortunate resemblance to a moat), may either look crisply elegant or like a typical office block, depending on how it's executed.

But that restraint, coupled with the building's deep interest in energy-efficiency and in using landscape design to reach out to the surrounding neighborhood, make it in many ways as chastened a piece of architecture as Abraham's building in New York. Rather subtly — too subtly for Rogers and Palumbo, clearly — it makes the argument that the best way for the U.S. to change its image abroad is by toning down its rhetoric and acknowledging that its days standing astride over the world, and madly draining its energy reserves, are over.

If you look at the embassy competition from that point of view, the Morphosis design represents an odd approach to self-examination. If Mayne means it as an apology for the brash, self-aggrandizing way the U.S. has behaved in the world in the last decade or so — and I believe he does — his proposal is itself brash and self-aggrandizing from top to bottom.

Many architects and a handful of critics have complained that the embassy competition proved a disappointment — not just the winning design but the finalists as a group, which also included entries from the firm Pei Cobb Freed and from Richard Meier and his L.A.-based partner Michael Palladino.

But just as disappointing has been the narrowness of the terms we've set in the last couple of weeks for talking about the four finalists — particularly the KieranTimberlake proposal, which precisely for its stillness and formal efficiency has been wrongly pigeonholed as empty of ideas.

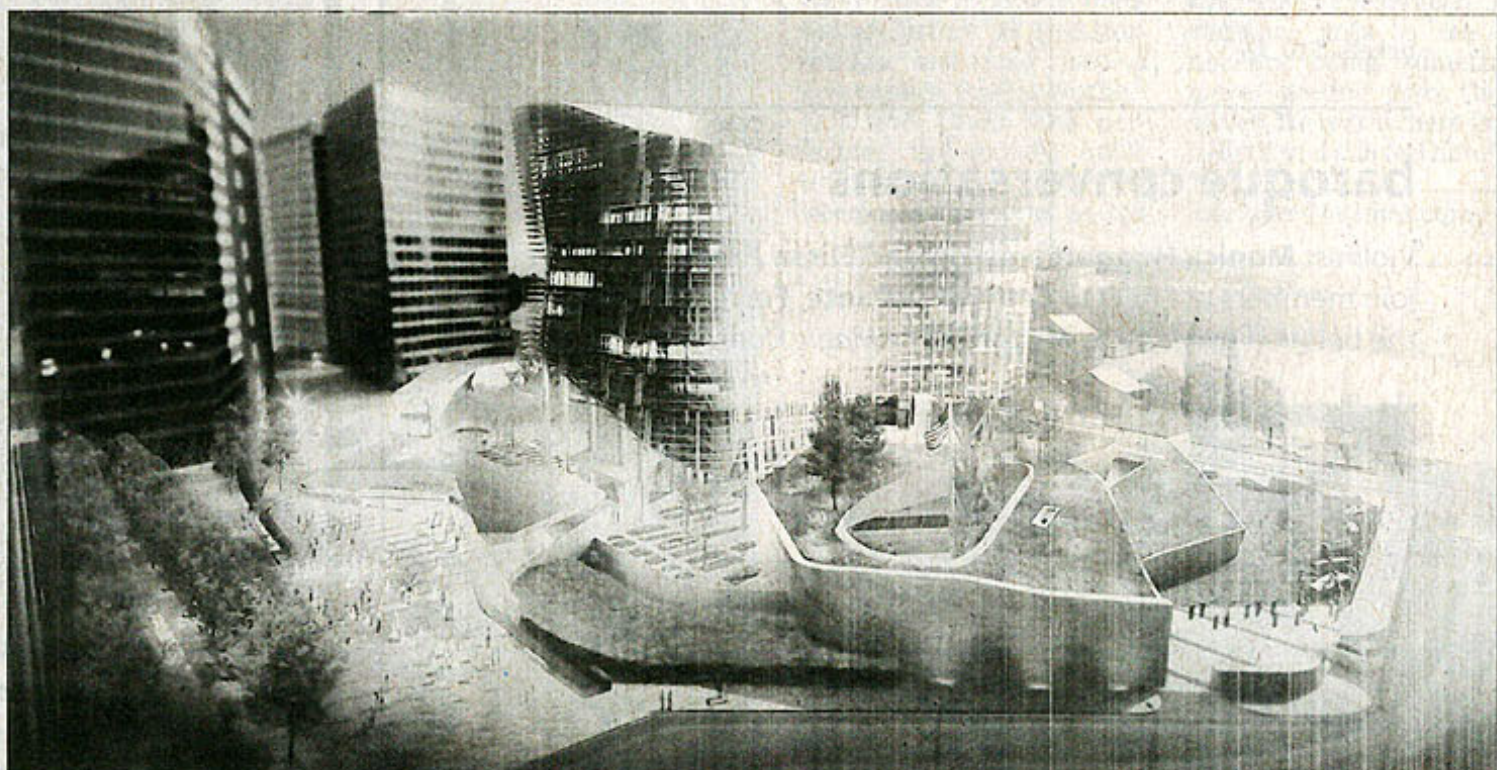
A building that really wanted to suggest a new tack for American diplomacy, or productively rethink the symbolic language of American architecture abroad, would rely on anything but noisily aggressive forms, wouldn't it?

That in the end suggests the key difference between Abraham's building and the Morphosis embassy proposal. The first design ruthlessly and efficiently takes a blade to nationalistic fervor. The second goes for explosive, hard-edged spectacle in the guise of self-analysis.

If it's a portal to a national subconscious we're looking for, I'll take door No. 1.

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U.S. State Department / Office of Overseas Building Operations

**WOUNDED AMERICA?** A rendering of the nonwinning Morphosis design for a U.S. embassy in London.