A Diplomatic Gap in Havana

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The thesis is a challenge, but contrary to popular belief it is not done alone in a cave shunned by the world. At this moment of reflection, I want to thank all the people that made this a journey of joy. Without them I don’t know where I would be.

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This thesis examines the territorial, spatial, and political Gaps inherent in the Embassy as program and type. Located in Havana, the project transforms such Gaps into an architectural strategy for the Embassy of the 21st century.

An Embassy serves a practical and symbolic purpose. It administrates Visa applications, at the same time representing a country’s culture and projecting its political power. In an Embassy one country’s sovereign territory is embedded in the physical territory of another, making the Embassy the spatial embodiment of a political boundary.

The exterior is charged with the politics of the boundary while the space inside is a neutral limbo – a territorial and political Gap.

The Embassy is sited in Havana. A politically isolated country, Cuba provides a fertile ground to explore the changing Cuban-American relations. There is now the political possibility for diplomatic interaction, but without an American Embassy in Cuba, there is no physical space for this exchange. An Embassy is needed to facilitate Cuban immigration while at the same time engaging a new diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The time is ripe for a new Embassy.

Abstract: A Diplomatic Mission
the Embassy
Gaps in the Embassy

Territorial Gap
An Embassy is a Diplomatic Agency that separates and connects. An Embassy is one country’s sovereign territory embedded in the physical territory of another; making the Embassy the spatial embodiment of a political boundary; a political boundary that acts as a Territorial Gap.

Programmatic Gaps
The Embassy also has programmatic Gaps. Its organization separates peoples and publics into three main programmatic zones: External Public, Internal Public, and Internal Private. These Zones are adjacent, but territorially and programmatically separate. The Embassy as a program is able to bridge that Gap by actively connecting people. The Program of the Embassy has traditionally been about the compartmentalization of space, defined by four user groups: applicants, administrators, diplomats with their entourage, and the foreign or local guests which include foreign diplomatic envoys. These user groups negotiate architectural thresholds and interfaces.

The interaction of users is dependent on thresholds and boundaries that parallel the territorial Gap of the Embassy and the scale of the program.
An Embassy serves both practical and symbolic purposes. As an administrative body, it provides Visa applications and other services. As a symbolic entity, it represents a country’s culture and projects its political power. The architectural articulation of the Embassy communicates this diplomatic monumentality. The emblematic ornamentation on the facade of the American Embassy in London, for example, is a national symbol with a strong presence.

In an Embassy, there is a schism between the “visible” public and the “serviced” public. This condition is typified by an emblematic exterior that has no interaction with its interior — the public-private relationship is static. This schism is epitomized in the waiting room: a space, typically known for its direness and long wait. Not only is it isolated from the exterior, but also deprived of complex spatial or social experience. The hermetic nature of the waiting room needs to be re-configured.

There is an inherent paradox. While the Embassy needs to become more open to foster cultural exchange, it is becoming more isolated because of increased security. The Embassy of the 21st century will have two main drivers — a radical increase in security and public space to foster cultural exchange. Architecturally these drivers are antithetical to each other. An Embassy needs to represent its country of origin physically within another country’s borders — a requirement that places it in a defensive position. This position is at odds with the administrative nature of the program and its need to be extremely visible and engaging to a public that is not necessarily the one it is serving.

We need more security because of events such as the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi. We also need spaces of cultural exchange to foster stronger diplomatic relations and promote personal interaction: as a way to engage with the root causes of these types of aggression. But recent architectural approaches do not confront this paradox.

The Embassy’s Paradoxical Status


The isolated waiting room.

The paradox: while the Embassy needs to become more open to foster cultural exchange, it is becoming more isolated because of increased security.
Evolution of the Institutional Format of the Embassy

Since its origin in the 16th century, the Embassy has transitioned through a few different institutional formats that, for the purposes of this study, could be classified as follows: the Salon, the Monument, the Façade and the Fortress, the most recent and prevalent model characterized by its inaccessibility and its preoccupation with security.

The Salon — A casual domestic room that allowed for a personal relationship between ambassadors and the representatives of the king.

The Monument — The sense of nationalism instilled throughout the world wars necessitates the Embassy to become a national monument: a display of the power and importance of its country.

The Facade — The standardization of the plan of the Embassy, imposed by government regulations, limits the architectural design of the Embassy to the facade. What results is a model characterized by ornamental exteriors, completely lobotomized from its hidden bureaucratic space.¹

The Fortress — Post-Vietnam and Benghazi Embassies became preoccupied with security. Security continues to be a major concern in the design of an Embassy, as regulated by the US General Services Administration (GSA).

¹ On June 1, 1962 a report “GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR FEDERAL ARCHITECTURE” was given to the President by the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space. It defined ideals on Monumentality, Architectural design versus official style, and site.
Four Architectural Models

Most embassies do not fall clean into a single category: many of them are hybrids of both the Monument and the Fortress, the Fortress and the Facade, etc. The architectural dimension, present within the physicality and very tactility of buildings, adds complexity and nuance into simple agenda-laden diagram of the Salon, the Monument, the Facade or the Fortress. A focused attention on the architecture of the Embassy is key in negotiating the conflicting interests of the Embassy into a working whole.

The Plinth and Slab

The Citadel

The Palazzo

The Villa

Former American Embassy in Cuba, Harrison & Abramovitz, 1950

French Embassy in Brasilia (unbuilt), Le Corbusier, 1963

The American Embassy in France, Delano & Aldrich, 1931

Australian Embassy in Tokyo, Denton Corker Marshall, 1990
The Plinth and Slab

The Plinth and Slab provides a buffered experience of the private and public. It divides two types of public experiences based on the two masses the plinth or slab. This creates a simplified, direct relationship between the two distinct programmatic requirements. The plinth negotiates the public plane and the site by creating buffers, thresholds, walls, and elevated spaces. The slab is able to accommodate the bureaucratic space of the Embassy by keeping it separate from the rest of the building. The Plinth and the Slab model is a clear diagram of the layered procession from the public realm into the more private spaces in the Embassy.

The plinth takes on an open floor plan. It is further elevated by a series of terraces that act as a buffer from the street. The plinth is defined by open courtyards and blocks of enclosed administrative program.
The Citadel

The Citadel is organized into three parts: the exterior wall, the open interior bureaucratic space, and the interaction between the two. The architecturalization of this is manifested in the overlap: where the exterior perimeter is “corroded” by the bureaucratic block. This condition destabilizes the center-perimeter divide, allowing for visibility, and connection.

Embassy is organized around a circular pivot point. It has a central space, around which all other secondary spaces radiates. This space is rectangular and off-center. The shifted center creates lines that allow for secondary rectangular spaces instead of wedges.
The Palazzo

The Palazzo is structured by an interior courtyard and an entry courtyard. The organization is defensive, but spatial. The interior courtyard provides an experience of the outdoor space without having to engage with the exterior. The separation between the private and the public is clear, but unlike the case of the Plinth and the Slab, this division is not made legible in the external facade.

The American Embassy in France, Delano & Aldrich, 1931

The interior courtyard is separated from the main circulation of the building, which is a double loaded corridor.
The Villa

The Villa banks on the clarity of symmetry and linear procession. The hierarchy of access translates directly into the plan: the most accessible spaces are in the center, the least the farthest away. The stretched-out “W” shaped plan maximizes the perimeter-to-floor area ratio, producing a consistent cross-sectional condition, always providing the interior occupant an oblique view out into the exterior.

The formal organization of this Embassy is progressional. It follows a series of gates into a Foyer, at which point the organization branches symmetrically. The classical organization of the two linear corridors structures the occupants’ sequence of movement.
The Problem of the Moat

The Fortress type, the prevalent model today, has not been thoroughly examined as an architectural problem. Most of them simply borrow the architectural form of the older institutional formats to create what is essentially a moat.

The Kieran Timberlake’s London Embassy, for example, is fundamentally a Fortress that takes on the form of the Plinth and Slab. The plinth is recast into a defensive moat, protecting the ornamental and translucent slab. This building relies on the modernist’s neutral architectural sensibility to dissimulate its increasing isolation from the city and culture in which it sits. This moat creates distance insidiously, disguising the means by which it does it. While effective, this strategy actively disengages the Embassy with its surroundings.
The Hard Salon: A Hybrid of the Fortress and the Salon

The future Embassy must recover certain aspects of the salon, in particular the possibility for informal exchange and multilateral diplomacy, at the same time accommodating the needs for hyper-security. The Fortress and the Salon are the two institutional formats that exemplify the two polarities of this desire. The model needs to be a hybrid of the Fortress and the Salon: the Hard Salon.
Cuba
Cuba’s Isolation

The Cuban Embargo enforced an inequality of exchange — culturally, politically and economically. It suffused the narrow band of waters, a neutral medium that normally warrant access, with political and economically motivated biases that augments the distance between the two countries. A condition of physical proximity has flipped into a condition of relative distance through the imposition of total patrol.

Inequality of Exchange of People, and Wealth
1. People: Cuban Immigration to the U.S.
2. Visiting Cuban Expatriates
3. Financial Support from Cuban “Exiles”
4. Failed Cuban Immigration
Lack of Cultural Exchange

Cuba and the U.S. have a long history of one-sided cultural interaction. First, the Pre-Embargo Cuba was and remains the playground of the US. When the Communist regime took over, there was a growing appreciation and commodification of the Cuban aesthetic and culture environment — the country’s decay became a profitable patina. This is not entirely unfortunate given the income tourism generates. But it has yet to impact the lives of those portrayed in the postcards of Cuba — they have not benefited in any way from the sale of their own image.

Pre-Embargo: A Playground

Romanticism: An Economy

Touristic Neo-colonial Gaze

Left: Constantino Arias “Ugly American”
Center: Cover of Buena Vista Social Club Album
Right: Lonely Planet Cover Man: Havana, Cuba, Alex Fradkin
Shifting Political Space

Cuba is a country that is at the cusp of change economically and politically. The need for a new model is made imminent by the prospect of renewed diplomatic ties between the U.S and Cuba. The time is ripe to reconsider the status-quo of the Embassy — the territorial and cultural gaps it implicates.
A New Tomorrow

There has not been a proper American Embassy in Cuba for the last 50 years. This lack of facility corresponds to the low volume of Visa applications — an indication of the low number of eligible applicants. The application process an America Visa had always been a complicated, two-fold process, involving the acquisition of both the American Visa and the Cuban White Card. In 2013, however, these two legal requirements were made less stringent, making the American Visa accessible to a greater population. It is speculated thus that there will be a significant increase in the number of Visa applicants: an upward change of 300,000 applicants every year. There is an urgent need for an Embassy in Cuba today.

1 in 20 people in Cuba Apply
1 in 200 people win a Visa
2013
Gap Space: Clean Contamination

Gap space is a specific type of spatial disruption — a crack, or a lapse which introduces productive ambiguity in a bounded condition that is otherwise too easily perceived as definite. Gaps provides the capacity for a more nuanced spatial organization without compromising the clarity of an edge condition: a potential to cross-contaminate spaces while maintaining their distinct programmatic and territorial identity.
The Gap, the Void and the Interstice

The Gap operates through the constant interplay of the figure and the field — a dual reading that oscillate between the foreground and the background.

The Gap is best defined as an intermediate, if not unstable condition between the void and the interstice. Whilst the void privileges space as the primary figure, the interstice renders space as the residual component. The void reads as a figural subtraction, whereas the interstice reads as the resulting coincidence between two or more dominant figures. The Gap, on the other hand, perpetuates tension between the void and the interstitial space, allowing the figure-ground status of a space to remain unresolved.

Interstitial Space — the In-between space defined by two architectural elements.2

Void Space — a figural subtraction.

Gap Space — a disruption to an architectural figure or field.3

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3 “Since they are voids - they do not have to be "built" [they] can be shaped strictly according to their own logic: independent of each other, of the external envelope, of the usual difficulties of architecture, even gravity.” Renn Koolhaas. Strategy of the Void. S,M,L, XL. The Monacelli Press: New York. 1995 p. 320
the Agency
A New Diplomatic Program

Public Space versus Security
The program for the new Embassy must necessarily accommodate more public spaces. The typical program of the contemporary Embassy tends to privilege the residential portion of the building. This compromises the building’s capacity to engage and impact the urban public. The residential portion is reduced to allow the doubling of event spaces and the inclusion of new cultural programs. Security related areas are kept to the minimum with the aid of digital technology.

Programmatic Organization
The program is organized along two axes: Accessibility (layers of security check points) and Public/Private (number of user groups permitted entry). What results is a gradient of program zones: from the most accessible/public to the most private/inaccessible. The most obvious planimetric solution to this is to keep the private/inaccessible space towards the center, and vice versa. The project aims to subvert this typical organization.

The obvious: a gradient
The project occupies an entire urban block in the civic district of Vedado, in close proximity to other embassies, theaters, hospitals, government buildings, and schools. The site is nestled in a neighborhood within an urban grid: a site without a dominant edge or front. The experience of the site casually extends past the block, inviting one to approach the building along the oblique. The block that has been chosen is a perfect square with the dimensions of 330 ft by 330 ft.
1. waiting room
2. bureaucratic offices
3. security
4. cafe
5. ballroom
6. circulation core
7. residential support
1. residential apartments
2. ambassadors’ suit
3. security/ core
4. diplomatic offices
5. gym
1. security office/ holding room
2. parking
3. core
4. mechanical (residential)
5. mechanical (ambassadors’)
6. recreation storage and mechanical
7. mechanical (administrative)
The project and history of the embassy demands a strong perimeter wall. This perimeter is extended into the center of the building that houses the cultural exhibit. This deformed boundary is an urban and territorial gap – the Cuban territory extended into the center of the Embassy. It places the main entrance, the most public part of the Embassy, right in the center of the building. This urban move also provides ample space and time for security procedures – as people transition into internal sanctum of the embassy, they have already been scanned.

The Deformation of the Perimeter

The Front Door

Monumental Entrance
The Embassy is scaled to the context of the neighborhood.
The project creates a new type of frontality: one of depth. As the exterior retracts from the perimeter, the facade becomes interior and transparent. The exterior is charged with the politics of the boundary while the space inside is a neutral limbo – a territorial and political gap.
The waiting room doubles as a gallery for the exhibition of Cuban culture.
The project embeds within a public space conditions of territoriality that blurs the inside and outside.
Separate spaces, visually one.
Suspended above a garden: the cafe, recreation, gym, and ballroom – a whole other internal world.
Conclusion

The project developed an architecture of the Gap by exploring the territorial, spatial and political. The project negotiates between the diplomatic agenda of the Embassy and the fascination with an architectural technique – always capitalizing on one to advance the other. The spatial manifestation of the Gap unites the programmatic, the architectural and political.

The absence Gaps create connects people. To disrupt the spatial organization of the Embassy is to re-question its agency: empowering it as the Agent of the Gap that spatializes the tension of the border, creating new types of territoriality and an extended urban condition. The embassy embodies the tension of the Gap.
Bibliography


