

Borders, Boundaries, and Exchanges between People and Things: The (former) United States Embassy in Mexico



There was a time in the postwar period when United States Embassies, instead of projecting defensiveness and even offensiveness at their borders and toward their host countries, sought to project a sense of openness through cultural exchange, inviting the public into the Embassy with open access to libraries, exhibitions, film screenings. As the US Ambassador to Mexico, Robert C. Hill, said in 1958: “We hope that Mexicans will consider the new embassy building as theirs, a Mexican building, one which will mean welcome to them. It is being constructed with the interests of Mexicans in mind—especially in regards to the visa section and the Benjamin Franklin Library.”

While these exchanges had their own ideological agendas, the design of these buildings by a number of modernist architects put into play the social and spatial boundaries of politics and culture, local and global, public and private. Sixty years later these embassies are surrounded by layers and layers of security barriers and fencing. Indeed, many have now been decommissioned, precisely because of their non-defensive openness are deemed a security risk. We will travel to Mexico to engage the re-opening of the soon-to-be decommissioned US Embassy in Mexico City, designed in 1957 by R. Max Brooks and Llewellyn Pitts of Southwestern Architects, proposing an addition of 50,000 sf (4,645 m²) to foster new programs that address the politics of culture in Mexico, exploring both their local and global exchanges.





The questions of boundaries extends from people to things in the design of the original building, which was nicknamed the “Floating Embassy,” its arched ground level, which leads to the open-air courtyard, is a structurally negotiating exchange between the site’s instable subsoil and its gridded upper construction. The grid appears to serrate the surface into suspended marble panels that also seem to float, emphasized by its open corners. Visitors passed through the arches and were brought up to the second level, which housed the cultural activities of the embassy, circulating along a continuous balcony surrounding the inside of the open court.

The studio will engage in a radical renewal of this modernist building, proposing alternative uses for the Embassy that consider the multitude of issues and exchanges it political origins exposes, pushing the boundaries of an adaptive reuse of the values that an architectural artifact always enacts.





Temple of the Feathered Serpent, Teotihuacan



O'Gorman, Saavedra, Martínez de Velasco | UNAM Library

Following a series of background lectures, office visits, research, and transformative exercises on the formal and political context of the building, we will travel to Mexico City the first week of October to tour the building along with a number of other project and practices engaging in these exchanges of inside and outside, public and private: the conjoined house/studios of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, the constructed domestic landscapes of Luis Barragán, of the modernist campus of UNAM (with its own provocative of exchanges between ornament and tectonics), the porous spatiality of the Museum of Anthropology, the early administrative complex of the pre-Columbian city of Teotihuacan, and visits to contemporary works and offices like GSAPP's own Tatiana Bilbao.



Bilbao | Ventura House



O'Gorman | House/Studio of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera



Ramírez Vázquez, Campuzano, Mijares Alcérreca | National Museum of Anthropology

Architecture | Historic Preservation | Joint Studio Schedule Fall 2018

Week 1

Wednesday Sept. 5 Lottery Selection
Thursday Sept. 6 Lecture on Modern and Contemporary Latin American Architecture

Week 2

Monday Sept. 10 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Sept. 13 Design Desk Crits

Week 3

Monday Sept. 17 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Sept. 20 Design Desk Crits

Week 4

Monday Sept. 17 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Sept. 20 Office visit to Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, designers of the new US Embassy

Week 4

Monday Sept. 24 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Sept. 27 Design Desk Crits

Week 5

Travel Week | Mexico City

Week 6

Monday Oct. 8 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Oct. 11 Design Desk Crits

Week 7

Monday Oct. 15 Midterm Review Rehearsal Pinup
Thursday Oct. 18 Design Desk Crits

Week 8

Monday Oct. 22 Midterm Review
Thursday Oct. 25 Design Desk Crits

Week 9

Monday Oct. 29 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Nov. 1 Design Desk Crits

Week 10

Monday Nov. 5 No Class | Election Day Holiday
Thursday Nov. 8 Design Desk Crits

Week 11

Monday Nov. 12 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Nov. 15 Design Desk Crits

Week 12

Monday Nov. 19 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Nov. 22 No Class | Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 13

Monday Nov. 26 Design Desk Crits
Thursday Nov. 29 Design Desk Crits

Week 14

Monday Dec. 3 Final Review Rehearsal Pin up
Thursday Dec. 6 Design Desk Crits

Week 15

Monday Dec. 10 Final Review