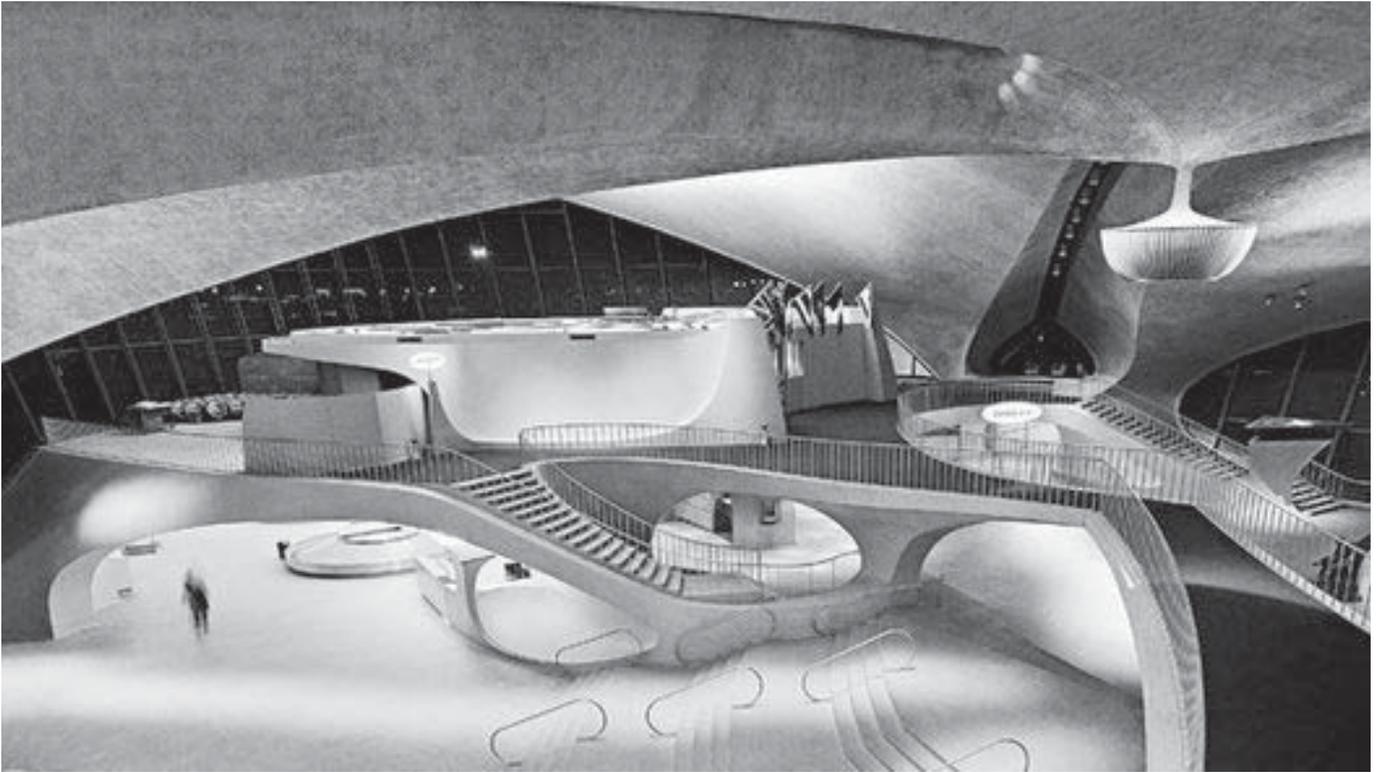


Recombinant Architecture: Designing the Future of Eero Saarinen's (former) US Embassy in London



The United States Embassy in London, designed by Eero Saarinen in 1956 and completed in 1961, post 9-11 is no longer viable for security reasons and thus has been decommissioned, sold, and is being renovated for contemporary use. The suffix *-novation*, as in *innovation* and *renovation*, already means to “make new,” to “renew,” so innovation and renovation are just ways to indicate a doubling of this revitalizing engagement. The studio will engage in a radical renewal of this Saarinen building, visiting the Saarinen archives at Yale University to see first hand the original drawings, models, and documents of the Embassy, and then travel to London the first week in October to tour the building.

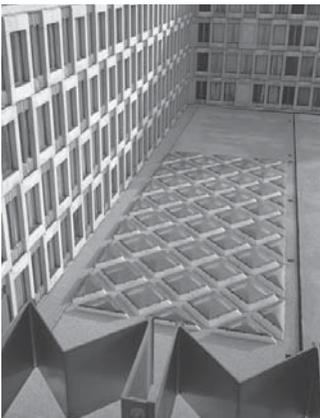
That we are adaptively reusing and renewing this architect’s work is in keeping with Saarinen himself, who was restless in constantly renewing his own architecture, creating widely diverse and divergent experiments in form, program, material, and structure, from the elaborated Neo-Miesian IBM Center in Minnesota and John Deere Headquarters in Illinois, to the structural expressionism of the Dulles Airport and Ingals Hockey Rink at Yale, to the Purism of the Jefferson Memorial Arch in St. Louis and the CBS tower (the “Black Rock”) in Manhattan’s midtown to the biomorphic TWA Terminal at JFK airport. In the same manner, the firm had one of the most active Research and Development branches, experimenting in new thin-shell and tensile structural systems, innovative molding and casting construction techniques, and in inventive material properties, developing such diverse products such as Cor-Ten steel and glazing systems, setting the stage for later R&D offshoots of principal firms along the lines of Gehry Technologies.



TWA Flight Center, JFK International Airport, New York City

Thus, as Reinhold Martin has written, it is necessary “to emphasize the enigmatic character” of Saarinen’s work “not only with respect to relations of materiality to image, but also concerning the relation of the modern to the postmodern, since Saarinen’s case is also kind of a hybrid, in which such polarities as modern versus postmodern and material versus image intermingle and overlap.”

The London Embassy is certainly an enigmatic hybrid: a U-shaped diagrid structure whose facades are composed of iterative enlarged precast concrete fixed window frames faced in the front elevation with Portland stone alternated (in what the Architectural Forum called a “jazz rhythm”) with gilded operable aluminum windows. Its hybrid combination generated equally diverse and divergent criticism: for being too Modern and not contextual sensitive to its Mayfair neighborhood and for being too contextual acquiescent and not Modern enough, for being too monumentally formal as an Embassy and for being too much like an American office building, for being too over-scaled and too under-scaled in its ornamentation.



US Embassy, London



US Embassy, London

The task of the Studio will be to propose alternative uses for the Saarinen Embassy that consider the multitude of issues that it exposes: the evolving role of diplomatic presence, issues of security and surveillance, the projection of values that an architectural artifact embodies. The building has been purchased by the State of Qatar, and we will plan for an expansion of the building by fifty percent. What is the new recombinant role of this building in the civic life of multi-cultural London? One related to the post-war history of the progressive English social politics—a Public Library as the new Civic Center, a National Health Service Center, an Arab Institute to address new local and global relations?

In considering what program will best convert the former US Embassy in London into a center for another purpose, it is important to note that in 1961, when the Embassy first opened, it had a strong cultural component for the public; Library, Film Screening Room, Reception Area and Exhibition Hall were all part of its original planning and mission for the benefit of the citizens of London and to serve as an ambassador of American culture and values to the England. The departure of ambassadorial and legation functions from the London Embassy presents a new quandary for architects and preservationists alike; what is the best and most appropriate use for this symbolic projection of American diplomacy circa 1961, by one of America's preeminent architects, given its forthcoming ownership by a new significant global power.



From left: Gateway Arch, St.Louis | Black Rock, New York City | Ingalls Rink, Yale University, New Haven | John Deere World HQ, Moline

Semester Sequence:

In preparation of your own individual introduction of new revitalizing design modes into the building, we will begin with a series of experiments in hybrid recombinant logics. From this near and far distance of 65 years, from our contemporary moment looking back toward the future, as a way to understand and represent the organizational logics and illogics of this particular building we will begin by exploring, through modeling and dynamic forms of visualization, what might result through recombinant techniques of exaggerating and mutating the diverse forms of organizational logics already in the building or suggested in its earlier design studies. And then develop a series of explorations with recombinant fusions of early Saarinen with later Saarinen, of the Miesian Saarinen with the biomorphic Saarinen, or the more closely developed in style and time and program, his U.S. Embassy in Oslo complete in 1959? Or the Saarinen's initial competition scheme for the Embassy with the other competition schemes: the diaphanous tracery of the Minoru Yamasaki scheme, the internalized court and extensive rooftop of the Edward Durrell Stone scheme, the programmed volumetric interplay of the Jose Luis Sert scheme, the raised glazed modernist masses of the Hugh Stubbins scheme?

At the start of the semester we will have lectures from Saarinen scholars and from Jane Loeffler, author of *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010). So by the time we depart for London you'll be deep into the genetics and morphology of the building, already starting to propose your own revitalizing addition and renovation. Our week in London will provide first-hand feedback to your initial investigations and proposals as you prepare your project for the midterm November 9, and further to the final December 11. In London, in addition to being given a guided tour of the building, we will visit some of the crucial post-war and contemporary buildings (as well as other older enigmatic hybrids like John Soane's House) that set the stage for innovative engagements in architecture and preservation in London, to which your crucial designs will contribute their own renewed staging of these issues.