"Trump's petulant outburst distracts from what is undoubtedly a major project charged with the nuanced task of communicating a sense of modern American identity in conflicted times."

The New London Embassy by Catherine Slessor

Emblematic of increasingly contentious concepts of nationhood, embassies are a paradoxical and intensely niche building type. As enclaves of legally protected terrain implanted into their host countries, they are defined most emphatically by physical boundaries and tempered by protocol and reciprocity. The new United States embassy in London, designed by Philadelphia-based KieranTimberlake, opened in mid-January in Nine Elms on the south bank of the River Thames. At 518,050 square feet, this latest "Little America" replaces Eero Saarinen's elegant exercise in midcentury Modernism, for decades the urbane face of the U.S. in London.

Completed in 1960, Saarinen's building dominates Grosvenor Square in Mayfair, located on the site of the Georgian town house originally occupied by John Adams, the first U.S. ambassador, who would go on to be the country's second president. Though the Grosvenor Square location maintains a historical connection dating back more than two centuries, times have changed, as have the nature of embassy buildings and their relationship with the public realm.

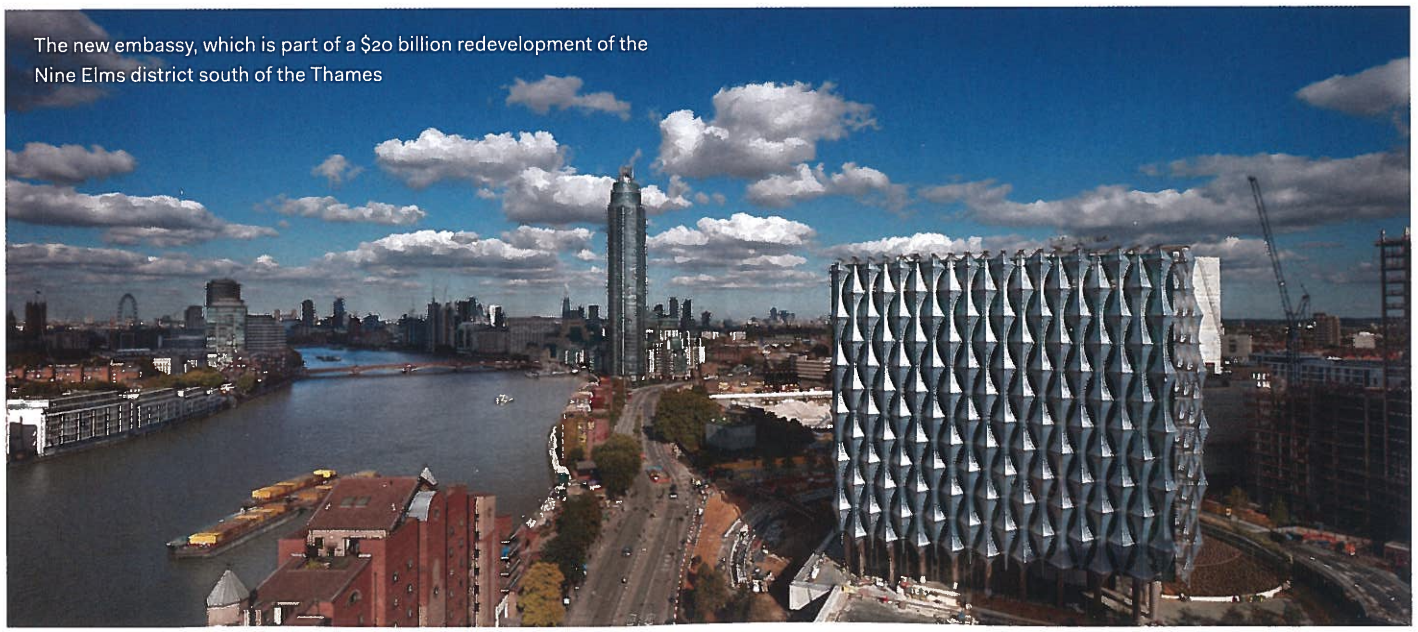
"I remember bounding up the stairs of Saarinen's building in 1976, passport in hand, and walking straight into the lobby without anyone checking my credentials," says James Timberlake, FAIA. "Now it's moved from unlimited access to being much more security-focused."

Following a series of terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, Congress decreed that all embassy buildings should be set behind a 100-foot "seclusion zone." Conceived in more open and optimistic times, Saarinen's building proved difficult to retro-fortify. A security upgrade introduced blast walls, guard shacks, and traffic-blocking structures, creating the impression of a building—and a country—under siege. It was also unpopular with local residents. Ultimately, the growing tension between security and public accessibility, coupled with a need for more space, impelled the State Department to commission a new building in a more malleable milieu.

Finessing Fortress America

More than 40 sites were considered before officials settled on the industrial boondocks of Nine Elms in south London, a trajectory comparable with moving from Park Avenue to Hoboken. President Donald Trump referred to it as an "off location" in a recent barbed tweet, but he clearly is unaware that Nine Elms is now being ambitiously terraformed as one of Europe's largest regeneration projects, with a $20 billion capital investment. In this, the new embassy has been a crucial catalyst and anchor project, the eye in a hurricane of urban transformation. Despite being south of the Thames, the Nine Elms locale is reasonably proximate to central London and its landmarks, with Battersea Power Station as an upstream neighbor and the Tate Britain and the Houses of Parliament nearby on the other side of the river.

Following the American example, there is speculation that the Chinese and Dutch may also relocate their embassies here. But at present the area has the feel of a half-formed frontier settlement, steroidal towers fitfully emerging from site hoardings,



The new embassy, which is part of a $20 billion redevelopment of the Nine Elms district south of the Thames

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A plinth and moat-like water feature (not yet filled in the photo) help fortify the embassy

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RICHARD BRYANT/ARCAIDIMAGES

landscape still to take root. Whether Nine Elms will coalesce into a fully functioning neighborhood remains to be seen, as its housing element seems primarily aimed at overseas investors, suggesting it may be another inner London ghost town.

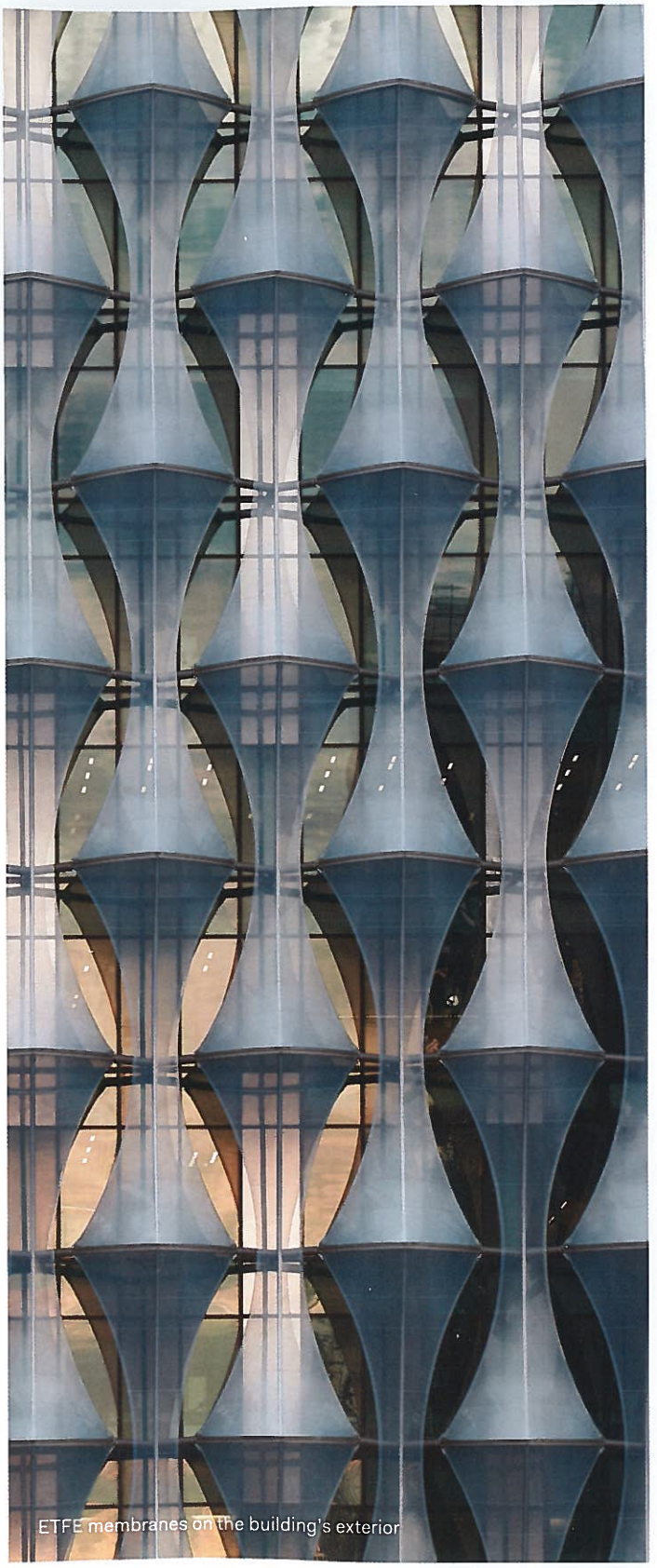
Prevailing in a quartet of finalists that included Morphosis, Richard Meier & Partners, and Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, KieranTimberlake won a design competition in 2010 with its proposal for a 12-story-high Euclidean cube set in a modern Arcadian idyll with a park and pond. Finessing the current imperative for Fortress America with more nebulous notions of transparency and openness, the architects conceived of the building as a free-floating object in landscape, apparently unencumbered by physical barriers or security apparatus.

In reality, the manicured Arcadia bristles with deterrents. The crescent-shaped pond is essentially a moat (though the architects dislike this term) and the cube a modern castle keep, its walls not stone, but three layers of high-performance glass calculated to withstand most kinds of assault, including rocket propelled grenades. On the north street frontage, steel and concrete bollards capable of stopping an 8-ton truck driven at 40 miles per hour are concealed behind a bucolic yew hedge. A version of an English ha-ha, traditionally a ditch employed to keep animals off country house lawns, secures the south side, along with concrete benches arranged to form a low-rise barrier. The building itself is elevated on a plinth, its defensive wall disguised by a cascade of water that disgorges into the moat/pond.

Oriented according to cardinal compass points, and soaring above its booby-trapped Arcadia, the embassy has a powerful object quality. "As pure geometry, the cube is an ancient signifier of solidity and strength," says Timberlake. "This building has to be about dignity. It can't be a goofy form."

Three sides of the Euclidean volume are shaded from glare and heat gain by an external layer of translucent ETFE membranes held in place by tubular outriggers, as if giant kites or origami frogs had become impaled on its façade. This is the building's most consciously elaborate formal gesture, the hectic array of meringue-peaked brise-soleil playing off the epigrammatic nature of the glass cube. It also forms part of an elaborate strategy of holistic environmental control, which includes initiatives such as photovoltaic and geothermal energy generation, rainwater capture, and responsibly sourced materials, all intended to secure a LEED Platinum rating.

Much has been made of the idea of the building as a "crystalline radiant beacon," as Timberlake calls it—



ETFE membranes on the building's exterior

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One of the sky gardens

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an obvious metaphor for physical and organizational transparency. Yet under London's leaden skies, the gray-green hue of the glass is more medicinal than ethereal. On the north side, unprotected by the membrane carapace, the bald skin of the glazing is fritted with a pattern of stars to avert bird strikes, so from the inside, London is filtered through an appropriately patriotic veil.

At its most basic, the embassy is essentially an office block, with stacked floors of efficient, open-plan workspaces for its 800 staff. Experiential variety is

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provided by a series of double-height sky gardens cut into the sides of the cube. Intended as meeting spaces, each is set-dressed to conjure a different American ecology, from the arid Southwest to the rainy Pacific Northwest. While the fracturing of the cube might alleviate spatial monotony, these topographic tableaux have the stilted feel of midrange hotel lobbies.

Office interiors were conceived by Gensler, in corporate neutrals of white and gray, with metal acoustic ceilings. In elevator lobbies, there are occasional tantalizing reminders of Grosvenor Square, with artful Saarinen-themed wallpaper featuring close-ups of the old embassy with its famous gilded-aluminum bald eagle by sculptor Theodore Roszak. The eagle is, in fact, due to move to Nine Elms.

For those visiting the embassy for a visa or passport, the first point of contact will be the chaste and voluminous public concourse on the building's west side, dominated by a monumental "flat pack" cast of a typical American suburban house by British artist Rachel Whiteread. Art punctuates the interior and additional works by Sean Scully, Mark Bradford, and Jenny Holzer will follow. After security screening, visitors proceed to Consular Services on the third floor, a bright, hygienic enclave lined with white booths and furniture, like a futuristic dentist's waiting room. VIPs are received at the ceremonial entrance concourse on the east side with its mammoth bas relief of a United States seal and the historic roll call of ambassadors chiseled in limestone, from John Adams onwards.

The lobby

Open-plan workspaces for employees

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Not a "Bad Deal" At All

Presenting his credentials to King George III in 1785, Adams expressed a desire to help with the restoration of "the old good nature and the old good humor between our peoples." Of late, this "good nature and good humor" has been sorely tested by the current incumbent of the White House. In a classically bewildering salvo, Donald Trump tweeted that the new embassy was a "bad deal" and that he no intention of coming to London for its dedication. "Wanted me to cut ribbon—NO!"

Trump's petulant outburst distracts from what is undoubtedly a major project charged with the nuanced task of communicating a sense of modern American identity in conflicted times. It has had a 10-year gestation, a proscriptive brief that ran to 1,000 pages, and a tabula rasa site with no real context

to play off. Yet the shadow Trump has cast over the project has been toxically pervasive. At the press viewing for the new embassy last December, no one wanted to discuss the architecture. Instead, the line of questioning focused on whether the president would be in London to open the building and how he would be received if he did.

At the time, Woody Johnson, scion of Johnson & Johnson, owner of the New York Jets, and Trump's pick to represent American diplomatic interests at the Court of St. James's, seemed sanguine. "We hope he will come," Johnson said. "It depends on his schedule; he's a busy president." Of possible public protests he commented blandly: "The great thing about being in London and in the U.S. is the ability to express your point of view. So that's something we live with every day, and it's an important part of who we are."

Now that Trump has made his feelings clear on the ribbon-cutting, everyone on the British side seems palpably relieved. Though public protests would be nothing new. Over time, the U.S. diplomatic presence

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in London has been a focus for dissent, from anti-Vietnam War protests in the 1960s to more recent umbrage from local residents, disgruntled by the disruption caused by security measures.

Happily, their pearl-clutching prayers have been answered, as the Saarinen building has been sold to developers Qatari Diar Real Estate Co. for conversion into a luxury hotel, to be facilitated by David Chipperfield, HON. FAIA. The $1 billion raised by the sale effectively paid for the new embassy, so U.S. taxpayers did not have to stump up, thanks to Mayfair's stratospheric property prices. William Moser, acting director of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations, confirms that the new building "was entirely funded from the proceeds of real estate sales." So much for Trump's "bad deal." He won't be missed at the dedication.

Catherine Slessor, a London-based critic, is the former editor of The Architectural Review.