

Image Building

A Study of Australia's Domestic and Foreign Policy in Relation to Embassy Architecture

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Abstract

The study of embassy architecture has predominately focused on the United States and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom. In particular this research has been conducted by Jane Loeffler as captured in her book The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies (2011) and by Ron Robin in Enclaves of America: The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad, 1900-1965 (1992). Both studies establish that embassy buildings can be utilised as historical references to establish a viewpoint into a nation's political and cultural history. This is no different in Australia, where Australian embassy buildings allow us insight into the directions taken in government policy, international relations, architecture and society. In order to begin to comprehend the complex nature of this building typology, archival research must initially be conducted into the government departments that were responsible for driving embassy design since the opening of Australia House in London in 1918. By correlating this research with domestic and foreign policies that were implemented as a response to changing world events, it becomes clear that a number of bureaucratic forces are behind the development of Australia's embassy buildings. This paper will focus on the influence these forces had on embassy design during the 1970's, when the Overseas Property Bureau was created and Australia developed several high profile embassies under the Whitlam Government.

The 1970s was a time of change both at home and abroad. The election of Gough Whitlam in 1972 and again in 1974 gave rise to a national fervour that saw the public embrace government policies which focused on changing an insular Australian society to a more multi-cultural focused people.¹ Fundamental to these policies was the abolishment of the White Australia Policy and the government's desire to develop a vigorous Australian national spirit.² With the withdrawal of the United States and the United Kingdom from the region in the late 1960s Australian defence strategy moved towards the idea of self-reliance.³ This in turn required Australian foreign policy to evolve from a traditional imperial approach to one of engagement and internationalism. This shift helped drive the creation of Australia's first overseas works programme and the construction of several embassies during this time. This paper will seek to identify the bureaucratic forces responsible for the development of these buildings and determine the influences that they had on the finished designs. Initially a brief survey of Australia's domestic and foreign policies under the Whitlam Government will be presented followed by a history of the development of the overseas works programme and an analysis of its role during the 1970s. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok Embassy projects.

Historical Context and the Whitlam Era

It has been argued by David Goldsworthy in his book *Facing North: A Century of Engagement with Asia* (2001) that Australia's direction in foreign and domestic policy has been based on a change in patterns and incentives that were fed by world changing events.⁴ One of the key events that altered foreign policy direction as well as transforming international society was the decolonisation of Asia after World War II. As former colonies became sovereign states and the influence of the European Empires dwindled, Australia's reliance on imperial protection under its strategy of forward defence was questioned.⁵ Australia engaged with these new nations by establishing embassies in existing premises and by encouraging the independence of other colonies such as Indonesia in 1953. However, the government remained cautious and continued to support British colonial rule in Singapore and Malay out of self-preservation. They were also wary to not upset America and readily supported the political and ideological position of the US during the early Cold War period. With the announcement of the withdrawal of British forces from Malaysia and Singapore in 1968 and President Nixon's endorsement of the Guam Doctrine in 1969,⁶ Australia effectively became responsible for its own affairs in the Asia Pacific region.⁷

In December 1972, Gough Whitlam inherited a country whose regional security policy was at odds with the policies of its major allies.⁸ He quickly set about establishing Australia as a key player in the region. Announcing his goal of:

An Australia which will be less militarily oriented and not open to suggestions of racism; an Australia which will enjoy a growing standing as a distinctive, tolerant, co-operative and well regarded nation not only in the Asian and Pacific region, but in the world at large.⁹

Whitlam promptly reassessed a number of domestic policies which had hampered Australia's relationship with the region. This included scrapping the White Australia Policy, opening Australia's markets by reducing tariffs and increasing aid funding. He also increased funding to the arts with the aim of establishing and expressing an Australian identity at home and abroad.¹⁰ Through his foreign policy development he sought to alter Australia's perception of the region by further engaging with Asia. He recognised China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and negotiated the Nippon–Australia Relations Agreement with Japan. He also secured Australian membership on the UN's Committee on Decolonisation, a popular move in the region, as well as negotiating a dialogue partnership with ASEAN.¹¹

By understanding the affects that both foreign and domestic policies had on Australia's standing in the region, it becomes clear that for Australia to successfully engage with its neighbours it needed to implement an overseas works programme that would acquire and construct property to meet Australia's representational needs.

The Overseas Property Bureau

Prior to 1971 each government department requiring overseas representation was responsible for its own acquisition and management of property. The need to centralise the control of Australia's overseas property portfolio can be traced back to parliamentary debates in the 1960's, where concern was expressed by the Public Service Board (PSB) and other members of Parliament about the working conditions that diplomats were exposed to in several embassies.¹² Phillip Stokes, the Member for Maribyrnong, demanded in his speech to Parliament in 1960 that the Government acquire suitable accommodation for its officers abroad. He cited the chancery in New Delhi as "a positive disgrace", because staff were required to work in water up to their knees if there was a down pour.¹³ Questions were raised as to why the government was willing to lease substandard properties when the more financially viable option would be to purchase or build new embassies that met the representational requirements of Australia.¹⁴ With the release of the Auditor General's report of 1967-68 condemning the failed redevelopment of a property in Paris, it was soon realised that procedures were needed to coordinate Australia's overseas property management.¹⁵ With this in mind, the Department of External Affairs, the Department of Works and the Treasury re-established an interdepartmental committee known as the Programming of Overseas Works Committee (OWC) in early 1968.¹⁶ The Committee was tasked with reviewing all construction projects overseas and was responsible for formulating a programme of construction for the future. However this was short lived with the 105th report of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts (1969) being released a year later; proposing the PSB undertake a tour of overseas property in order to make recommendations for new administrative arrangements.¹⁷

With the anticipated increase in spending on overseas representation due to the emergence of new nations in the region, as well as the PSB report condemning the lack of drive in the management of overseas property, it was decided that a single independent agency was needed.¹⁸ The Overseas Property Bureau (OPB) was established as a specialist agency in April 1971 and was placed under the management of the Vice President of the Executive Council before it was transferred to the Department of the Environment, Aborigines and Art in May of that year.¹⁹ The interim team consisted of six members and was "charged with a functional responsibility for the provision, management and maintenance of overseas land and property for Commonwealth purposes".²⁰ To avert another Paris fiasco, Prime Minister McMahon announced the formation of the Overseas Property Committee (OPC), to advise the OPB on the various client needs associated with overseas representation. This Committee, like the OWC, was an advisory body with no executive or enforcement authority. It was made up of senior representatives of the departments with interests in overseas property and operated as a forum for client consultation.²¹

By 1972 questions were being raised as to the operational capacity of the OPB. The department was transferred under Administrative Arrangements Order to the Department of Services and Property.²² At this stage Australia owned 116 buildings in 86 locations throughout the world and leased 1223 diplomatic sites. The need to adopt a more professional approach in dealing with overseas property was tasked to Fred Daly the then Minister for Services and Property. He promptly increased staffing levels to meet the predicted demands of the new government's foreign policy objectives.²³ A press release in September 1973 from Gough Whitlam announced the commissioning of six Australian architectural firms to design and supervise the building of new embassies and high commissions in Saigon, Suva, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Paris. The architects that were selected were leaders in the field and were chosen to demonstrate the qualities and skills of Australia's architects, in

turn reinforcing Whitlam's policy on arts funding.²⁴ The firms that were engaged are listed below along with an estimated completion date of the projects:

Post	Project	Architects	Estimated Completion
Saigon	Chancery	Leighton Contractors of Sydney	November 1974
Suva	Ambassador's Residence	Daryl Jackson Evan Walker of Melbourne	June 1975
Singapore	Chancery	Godfrey and Spowers Pty. Ltd. of Melbourne	June 1976
Kuala Lumpur	Chancery	Joyce Nankivell Associates Pty. Ltd. of Melbourne	September 1976
Bangkok	Chancery and Ambassador's residence	Ancher, Mortlock, Murray & Woolley Pty. Ltd. of Sydney	September 1976
Paris	Chancery and Ambassador's residence	Harry Seidler & Associates of Sydney	June 1977

Table1. Australian architects chosen for new embassy buildings.
Department of Foreign Affairs, "Australian Architects Chosen for New Embassy Buildings," *News release*, September 19, 1973.

The estimated cost of the construction of these projects was more than \$32 million over a three year period which was a considerable amount of the Whitlam's government's budget.²⁵ However, this was justified with a saving of over \$7 million in rent per year and the need to develop "a more independent Australian stance in international affairs".²⁶

As of April 1st, 1974, the OPB had assumed responsibility for all property holdings overseas resulting in an increase in staffing to 35. By September 1974 it was decided to move the OPB under the departmental control of Foreign Affairs (formerly the Department of External Affairs) as this department was the primary user of the OPB's function. The Bureau was re-organised into specialised sections including an operational area to cover four geographical regions, as well as a policy and planning area and a technical area.²⁷ The OPB was tasked with developing a programme of construction for the next four to five years which saw staffing levels increase by 60% to 56%. The Bureau was now being compared by Fred Daly to the Foreign Building Office in the United States.²⁸ With the building programme it was responsible for being described by Whitlam as a "programme of major proportions".²⁹ By November 1974 more projects had been added to the list including an extension to the Washington Chancery, construction of a new chancery in Port Moresby, as well as chancery and Head of Mission (HOM) residence in Wellington, an extension and development of staff accommodation in Tokyo and a planned extension to the current embassy in Djakarta, which had been completed in 1967 by the Department of Works.³⁰ This would be the highest point in the history of the OPB.

Changing Bureaucratic Forces

With the Whitlam government's 'supply bills' failing to be passed in the Senate; even after the May 1974 election, concern was growing as to the "opulent demands of international diplomacy".³¹ Senator Poyser stated he was horrified at the \$86 million spent annually overseas by the Department of Foreign Affairs.³² He further questioned why "a small country such as Australia should out-Jones the Joneses and compete with great overseas countries in the construction of embassies..."³³ Whitlam was asked in August 1975 to submit a list of overseas building projects for examination by the House of Representatives. The buildings under construction in 1975 are listed below:

Post	Description	Cost \$
Accra	Alterations to HOM residence	168,000
Bangkok	Construction of Chancery and HOM residence	5,800,000
Islamabad	Construction of Interim Chancery	669,000
Jakarta	Alterations to HOM residence	174,200
Lagos	Construction of HOM Residence, site development and recreational facilities	1,026,000
London	Renovation of Official residence	78,000
	Australia House – External renovations and electrical works	477,400
Manila	Construction of HOM residence	330,250
Noumea	Construction of Chancery	208,350
Paris	Construction of Chancery and staff accommodation	18,500,000
Port Moresby	Construction of Chancery	1,972,000
	HOM residence	215,000
	Renovations to Port Road residence	32,000
Rangoon	Construction of recreation complex	170,600
Singapore	Construction of Chancery	4,390,000
Stockholm	Renovations to Chancery	26,500
Vienna	Residential complex	534,000
Washington	Extensions to Chancery	4,642,000
Wellington	Construction of HOM residence	460,000

Table 2. Overseas building projects under construction as of 1975. Commonwealth of Australia, "Parliamentary Debates: Answers to Questions Upon Notice Overseas Building Projects (Question No. 2718) Question", In *House of Representatives Official Hansard* No 34, August 21, 1975.

The following table lists important projects that were to begin construction in 1975-76. It was noted that these projects were dependent on funding and priorities.

Post	Description	Cost \$
Dacca	Recreation complex	150,000
Hanoi	Construction of Chancery and residential accommodation	450,000
Islamabad	Construction of residential complex	1,500,000
Kuala Lumpur	Construction of Chancery	4,200,000
London	Computer Centre	1,800,000
	Redevelopment Australia House	100,000
Suva	Construction of HOM residence	534,000
Wellington	Construction of Chancery	4,030,000
Vientiane	Construction of recreational complex	150,000

Table 3. Proposed overseas building projects for 1975-76. Commonwealth of Australia, "Parliamentary Debates: Answers to Questions Upon Notice Overseas Building Projects (Question No. 2718) Question", In *House of Representatives Official Hansard* No 34, August 21, 1975.

An article published in the *Australian* on August 27th, 1975, titled “Don’t blame us for the \$53m embassies” aptly summed up Whitlam’s sentiment, blaming the McMahon Government for approving “all the expensive ones, all the big ones”.³⁴ With the dismissal of the Whitlam Government on November 11th, 1975, the care taker Fraser Government supported the foreign policy direction developed under Whitlam, however immediately set about cutting costs.

A report was commissioned to investigate the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), which when published in 1977 concluded that there was a need for a more effective system of control over Australia’s representation overseas.³⁵ Posts in Bombay, Calcutta and Salonika were closed,³⁶ as well as in Rio de Janeiro, Karachi, the Port-of-Spain and Christchurch.³⁷ The OPB was abolished and its administrative role was merged into the Property and Survey Division as part of the Department of Services and Property in December 1976. The department was overseen by the Director of Commonwealth Property, who was already responsible for the Commonwealth domestic property portfolio.³⁸ The overseas property function was divided into the Overseas Operations Branch (operations) and the Planning and Review Branch (policy development and projects). A press release by the Minister for Administrative Services, the Honourable R.G. Withers, confirmed that the government had completed a review of major expenditure, announcing that spending on proposed overseas works would be cut from \$56.2 million to \$42.5 million in the 1976-77 budget.³⁹ This meant that only projects under construction would be funded while new projects listed in Table 3 would be deferred. By 1978 the staffing numbers had fallen to 48.⁴⁰

The cuts in funding for overseas property as well as the change in administrative arrangements adversely impacted both the maintenance schedule and the construction timeline of several projects. This was analysed in the 172nd report of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts (1978) where it was noted that the current administrative arrangements regarding overseas property were creating unnecessary complications, as even minor matters needed to be referred to the Public Service Board, Department of Finance, Department of Services and Property as well as interdepartmental committees such as the Overseas Property Committee.⁴¹ The report concluded that the Fraser Government’s cuts and the administrative changes to the overseas property programme were detrimental to Australia’s representational needs. The Committee called for the OPB to be “reconstituted in similar form to that operating prior to December 1976”.⁴² However, this would not occur until 1981 when the Overseas Property Office was created.

Effects: Kuala Lumpur

The architects Joyce Nankivell Associates were commissioned to design the Kuala Lumpur High Commission (Figure 1).in 1973, however, construction of the building did not commence until 1975 after lengthy administrative delays. It was noted in *Architecture Australia* that the architects were required to deal with a number of “client bodies”.⁴³ Joyce Nankivell was quoted as saying that the “most challenging aspect of the commission was the process of identifying and attempting to solve client and user needs which were often conflicting”.⁴⁴ An example of this was the brief, which called for the building to be open and accessible to the public to attend exhibitions and receptions, while at the same time needing to be secure and controlled.⁴⁵

The finished chancery however was well received. The building presented a strong visual imagery that was seen to represent a contemporary Australia and yet would blend into the future surrounding environment (believed at that stage to be large scale commercial developments).⁴⁶ Constructed primarily of reinforced concrete due to the low cost and accessibility of the material in Malaysia, Joyce Nankivell developed a structural system that dominated the main façade; a technique that they had employed a few years earlier at the Perak Turf Club Grandstand development, also in Kuala Lumpur. The architects highlighted the rhythm of the façade by employing a local sun shading technique; be it at a larger scale to help control heat loading. The success of the building was in the architect’s resolution of function and form; a recurring challenge in embassy design. The internal space

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addressed the functional brief providing office accommodation, exhibition spaces, and a reception area, however the architects elevated the potentially mundane by employing a full height atrium space to visual connect the five floors of the building. The use of space and light emphasized the prestige nature of the building without overpowering the user who could retreat to more intimately scaled spaces. The building is still utilised as Australia's High Commission to Malaysia and according to architectural photographer Azrul Abdullah "is probably one of the best examples of Brutalist non-commercial office spaces in Kuala Lumpur".⁴⁷



Figure 1. Completed High Commission of Kuala Lumpur. "High Commission Kuala Lumpur". *Constructional Review* 52, no. 1 (Feb, 1979), 21.

Effects: Bangkok

The Bangkok Chancery and residence (Figure 2) was completed in 1980 after the initial design of the chancery was altered by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1973 to incorporate staff accommodation into the chancery building.⁴⁸



Figure 2. 1975 model of the embassy building showing the additional floor requested by DFA. From the collection of the National Archives of Australia, Model of Bangkok Embassy 1975
NAA: B6295, 4136D

Ancher, Mortlock, Murray & Woolley, the architects that were commissioned, added an additional floor to the design to accommodate this request; freeing up much needed space on the site.⁴⁹ The design utilised traditional Thai architectural techniques to inform a modern functional building without engaging in the clichéd. The local tradition of water landscaping was employed to cover large parts of the site to overcome any problems of flooding in the future. The architects exploited the landscaped elements by controlling access to the chancery via a bridge which met a key functional requirement of the brief (Figure 3). Several islands were utilised to retain existing trees and to provide an internal courtyard space in the centre of the building. The rectangular hollow shaped building is accessed via this courtyard with stairs leading to the first of three levels. All spaces open out onto the central courtyard allowing for cross ventilation to reduce running costs. Public functions are located on the first floor and offices above, with the staff apartments on the third floor. On the 9th of November 1977 two years after construction commenced the Department of Foreign Affairs realised that the flats that were being constructed were above offices that contained sensitive material. DFA requested that the Overseas Operations Branch (formerly the OPB) cease construction of the floor. By the end of November, it was decided that construction should continue and that DFA would resolve any security issues in the future. In 2009 budget approval was given to relocate and construct a new Bangkok Chancery as the current building did not meet the new physical security requirements established after the 2004 Jakarta embassy bombing.⁵⁰ Even though the building is still deemed to meet the functional requirements of a chancery, the influence of security is now a potent force in the government decision making process. The building is expected to be sold at the completion of the new project.⁵¹



Figure 3. Entrance to the building showing the bridge and water landscaping. "Bangkok Embassy". *Constructional Review* 54, no. 4 (Nov 1981), 22.

Conclusion

The methodology applied in researching this paper has primarily focused on historical resources that discuss Australia's changing foreign and domestic policy position. The approach undertaken is in line with other studies that have been conducted by historians such as Jane Loeffler, where the use of government documents is key in developing an understanding of the United States embassy building programme.⁵²

The evidence presented here strongly suggests that Australia's first overseas works programme, administered by the OPB, developed because of the cultural, political and economic independence established under the Whitlam government. Prior to this, consecutive governments had failed to manage the purchasing and maintenance of overseas properties due to financial and administrative

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constraints. Changing world events stimulated the Whitlam government to develop a policy framework that focused on national regeneration to protect and promote Australia's interests in the region. This political emphasis influenced the location and provided the funding to engage high quality architects to design new buildings. Subsequent political pressures saw the Fraser government cut funding to the works programme and restructure the OPB in order to meet economic targets. These influences were at odds with Australia's representational needs and resulted in administrative confusion and delays in the development of some embassy buildings as seen in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok.

Endnotes

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- ²⁰ Minister of State Bill 1971 Second Reading Speech, April 29, 1971, in *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates: House of Representatives Official Hansard, No. 17*.
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- ³² Question: Proposed Joint Standing Committee on the New and Permanent Parliament House Speech, June 5, 1975, In *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates: Senate Official Hansard*, No. 23.
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- ⁴⁴ Joyce Nankivell Associates, "Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur", 42.
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