

EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF URBAN PLANNING PRACTICES OF EMBASSY BUILDINGS ONTO PUBLIC SPACES

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Abstract. *Past urban planning practices for embassy buildings have largely been indifferent to environments and the context of cities, oftentimes causing negative effects on the urban matrix. Implementing a more open, transparent building process for its diplomatic outposts overseas, Japan has managed to contribute to overall city development, quality of its public spaces and the image it holds in host countries. These processes will be examined and findings elaborated for the new Japanese embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, how utilizing such methodology presents an improvement, in engineering and urban planning terms, as well as a new method of cultural sustainability.*

Key words: *construction practice, embassy, Japan, city development, urban planning, cultural sustainability*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will highlight the importance of re-conceptualizing outmoded methodologies in urban planning practice for embassy buildings, focusing on new ways of envisioning sustainable, safe, smart cities of the future. Typologies recognized for their unquestionable potential in generating drastic changes within urban environments are found in diplomatic-consular outposts. Implementation of new approaches will be suggested, ensuring quality of urban environment during and after the construction processes of embassy buildings.

Any typology that is considered high-risk (including embassies) can have a detrimental effect on the urban tissue, its continuity and morphology. This fragility warrants the city spaces to be approached with the utmost care by architects and planning professionals, both with ethical and moral responsibilities and considerations.

When it comes to innovative practices of state-sponsored overseas development (e.g. diplomatic and consular outposts) Japan is shifting the paradigm on how the construction

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process ought to be handled, from its inception, management stages, to produced effects in public spaces.

Although comparatively rarely constructed, the aforementioned typologies have potential of producing the most severe effects onto cities, so re-thinking processes in place must be considered. Furthermore, by definition, these buildings are exempt from any planning laws and regulations, due to their extraterritorial privileges. Not to be mistaken for an architectural *carte blanche*, these facts ought to serve as an invitation for opening an active dialogue between architects and urban planners.

Case study of the new Japanese embassy building in Belgrade, Serbia (completed in 2015) will be examined, with experiences and lessons learned from this process studied, presenting how they should be considered a new developmental model. The primary author of this text was employed as an architect – assistant coordinator for the duration of the construction process, so any gained insight has derived from first-hand experiences. This writing aims to combine theoretical background with a report on the building process of the new Japanese embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, thusly drawing importance to the change in methodology that Japan is now spearheading.

2. EMBASSY TYPOLOGY AND ITS EFFECTS ONTO THE URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

2.1. Architectural design process as a communicative tool

“The link between architecture and ideology is situated in an attempt to identify the extent to which social values and practices can be negotiated through architectural space: its concept, materialization and representation.” (Vasiljevic Tomic et al 2013, p. 114).

Diplomacy efforts and tactics take various forms, both tangible and intangible, but are most pronounced in areas that use architecture and urbanism as a negotiating tool i.e. embassy buildings and urban planning practices serving as a facilitator for their integration. These typologies can communicate values the sending country wants to project, but can also have negative impact on relations and perception between various actors.

If we try to establish a framework of reference for architectural research for embassy/consular buildings typology, it becomes evident that it is not solely based in architectural design and urban planning. This typology in particular is subjected to influence of a wide array of disciplines including, but not limited to international relations, politics, economy, sociology, psychology and others. The full extent of impact of embassy buildings on the city matrix must be researched in-depth. As previously observed, these typologies inadvertently devastate the city matrix, producing hyper-private spaces of secrecy. As stipulated, the most important facet that architects take into consideration whilst designing these buildings is the notion of safety.

Argument of providing safety/security is a valid one, non-negotiable in the sense of protection of human life, but the emphasis here is shifting to awareness of effects it causes, both on the built environment and on the bilateral relations. If policy makers are aware of these outcomes, they can employ more subtle strategies to avoid loss of soft power and beneficial perception in host countries. Several suggestions can be made to rectify the situation, from educating the general public on necessity of certain typology, to implementing various activities (predominantly cultural) encouraging citizens' participation.

Great responsibility also lies in the hands of architectural professional, who need to negotiate their design between stringent guidelines given by the Government and moral and ethical obligations of the profession and end users. This notion is not limited only to

functionality of the building, but also includes thoughts on city dwellers living in the proximity of the newly planned consular outpost. Involvement of the community is crucial, even if the utmost secrecy is required – it will provide beneficial input and establish connection and respect between the actors, as neighbors and hosts.

3. SECURITY-OBSSESSED URBANISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

3.1. “Fortress urbanism” and the concept of “defensible spaces”

This section will examine extreme urban forms driven by providing safety and discuss how this approach has had detrimental effects on the city’s matrix. Such extreme forms are also utilized for providing safe and secure spaces for the typologies in question, so it is necessary to re-conceptualize their form, in architectural and urban planning terms.

During the 1970s Belfast became a laboratory for radical experiments of “fortress urbanism”. One of the most historically explicit examples of such measures were seen in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s and 1980s where ‘fortress architecture’ and principles of ‘defensible space’ were used, by the security forces, to territorially control designated areas. This was most notably around the central shopping area in Belfast where access to the centre was barred, first by concrete blockers and barbed wire, and then later by a series of high metal gates which became known as ‘the ring of steel’. (Coaffe, 2004)

Urban structure research topic often mentioned in the 1990s, especially focused on Los Angeles, where a correlation has been made with the urban model implemented in Belfast. Whilst envisioning the future of LA, Mike Davis noted that in crime-infested future, car-bomb will become the main weapon of crime and terror, and suggested for the city authorities to prevent this situation and apply “steel ring fortress” model. (Davis 1992) This would ideally prevent future terrorist attacks. Although the concept “Fortress LA” became the vision of future city in 1990s, it is important to understand there are many ways to interpret urban planning of Los Angeles. Davis’ critics, for example, argue that his ‘prophecies’ were likely fear-motivated, rather than emergence of real criminal activities (Friedman, 1998). Similar thoughts on ‘fortress urbanism’ were common after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

9/11 terrorist attacks were unique in the sense of applied tactics - simultaneous airplane hijacking and targeting of iconic buildings - as well as for the damages incurred during these attacks. These events have also sparked concerns about different types of ‘postmodern’ or ‘catastrophic’ terrorism (Laqueur 1996) and society based on terrorism dangers infused life (Ewald 1993).

After terrorist attacks of 9/11 and after re-conceptualization of the risks that attacks cause, new, dramatic changes in urban structure take place, as a reaction to terrorism threats; ‘fortification’ methods used in Belfast and Los Angeles are applied, as well as usage of sophisticated military technology. September 2002 issue of “International Journal of Urban and Regional Research”, section “Debates and Achievements” underlines how the events of 9/11 influenced technological and physical infrastructure of affected cities so much that “urban flows can be examined through military perspective, so that imminent weakness that they produce could be significantly decreased”. (Graham 2002, p. 589)

Presented findings underline the changing nature of urban planning approaches in contemporary practice. Furthermore, they highlight that, when introduced to a potentially

disruptive variable, urban planning will revert to its most basic form, overlooking far-reaching spatial consequences in favor of providing quick solutions.

3.2. Safety considerations and its effects in urban environments

Every age in history has its trepidations; nowadays we live in a day and age of constant vigilance due to potential terrorist threats in cities. This trend is not new, but it gained significant expansion after 9/11. Aside from the media that constantly inform on the dangers of everyday living, politics have great influence on the usage of fear, as it was proven that fear has best controlling potential in political discourse (Danilovic Hristic, 2013.)

Nonetheless, the issue of safety in cities is not new: it represents an ever-evolving process that is characteristic to all urban areas. These processes are inadvertently the same: communities (especially marginalized ones) and its people who do not know each other will seek safety in their own houses. If there are additional outside ideological stimuli of racism and xenophobia, a city or its parts will become vulnerable. This vulnerability is reflected in the feeling of neglect of the city or its part, which then gives way to potential negative occurrence in those areas. (ibid.)

Researching the “ecology of fear” Mike Davis also examined the changes in the urban form that have occurred in the face of fear of urban violence, as well as the change in social relations and citizens’ behavior. Examining the examples of Los Angeles, CA and Orlando, FL, it is determined that different social milieus are capable of developing individual strategies and mechanisms, mainly in the form of isolating themselves from other social groups, especially the ones they perceive as a threat. This is the birthplace of “gated communities” and security gains more significance in the process of designing urban spaces. Cities are divided into enclaves (portion of territory within or surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct) in which the inhabitants live without personal contact. In the world of informatics age when the world is interconnected by the means of the Internet, in which seemly all boundaries, differences and spatial obstacles have been conquered, this occurrence becomes absurd. (ibid.)

4. JAPANESE PLANNING MODEL AS A PARADIGMATIC SHIFT

4.1. Construction practices as a tool of public diplomacy

“The fearful stance assumed by isolated, walled compounds that represent the United States abroad is cause for concern. At a time when administration officials [...] are touting the urgent need for better public diplomacy, the State Department is building embassies that do not reflect that agenda. In fact, the inaccessibility of these buildings, coupled with the new standardized design, may be harming efforts to portray America as an open society.” (Loeffler 2005, p. 44)

This segment will underline the importance of architecture and urban planning as a public diplomacy tool, recognized and utilized by Japan. By engaging in an open dialogue, respecting its hosts, during the embassy construction process, goals of securing cooperation were ensured.

Nicholas J. Cull, a scholar on international relations, makes several interesting observations: public diplomacy efforts (albeit used under different pretenses) are not new and the cornerstone of this type of communication was primarily cultural exchange. Furthermore, public diplomacy ought to be viewed as an element of foreign policy – having this in mind, and always going back to official policies of the Government, we can make meaningful conjectures. By extension,

one can view construction process as a form of foreign policy, which was the case for the new embassy building in Belgrade, Serbia.

Furthermore, Cull addresses the notions of ‘propaganda’ and ‘public diplomacy’: both are dealing in the sphere of ‘influence’, but unlike propaganda, public diplomacy is not a one-way street to the intended audience:

“At its best, public diplomacy is a two-way street: a process of mutual influence whereby a state (or other international player) facilitates engagement between publics or tunes its own policies to the map of foreign public opinion. In the ideal case, public diplomacy treats the foreign public as an active participant – not just as a flock of sheep waiting to be ideologically shorn.”

(Cull, 2009)

By examining previously collected data, conclusion can be drawn that the Japanese government, using a transparent construction procedure and open dialogue for its new embassy building, has engaged in a mode of public diplomacy, embodied in a transparent construction procedure. The results of such approach, in architectural and urban planning terms, will be examined in the following section.

4.2. Construction process of the new Japanese embassy in Belgrade, Serbia

In recent years, Japan has started to expand its foreign policy presence in the form of constructing new diplomatic-consular headquarters. For example, during the fiscal 2015, then Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida and Finance Minister Taro Aso had agreed to open six new embassies and two consulates under the fiscal 2015 budget. The main motivation can be found in the statement that: “...Japan is trying to enhance its diplomatic influence and better communicate ITS views overseas...in the year [2015] that marks 70 years since the end of World War II.” (the Japan Times online, January 12, 2015) It is important to note that the Foreign Ministry [of Japan] originally requested nine new embassies and six new consulates. This is telling of the status and importance of embassy building construction and promotion of Japan’s interests overseas.

Be it out of desire to show respect to its host country of Serbia, desire to increase their already impressive soft power credit or due to long-term geopolitical strategy, Japan elected to implement a transparent construction procedure for its new diplomatic headquarters/embassy, located in Block 11a of New Belgrade.

The plot itself was acquired by the Japanese government in the nineties, but owing to the volatile situation at the time in the Balkans, the construction was postponed indefinitely. The entirety of Block 11a was, in its early, conceptual stages, designed to house various diplomatic missions and their corresponding residences and diplomats’ accommodation. Due to speculative urbanism and land-use machinations, this particular place lost its original purpose, with the exception of the Chinese embassy, that occupied the plot opposite the street, until it was damaged and abandoned during NATO intervention in FR Yugoslavia in 1999.

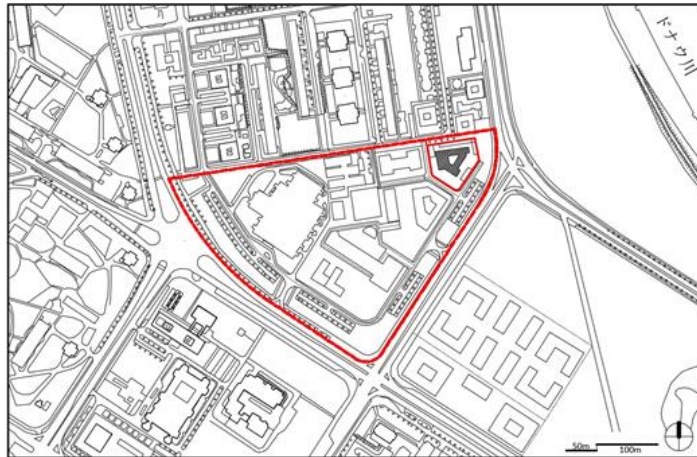


Fig. 1 Wider urban tissue of New Belgrade neighborhood, with Block 11a in focus

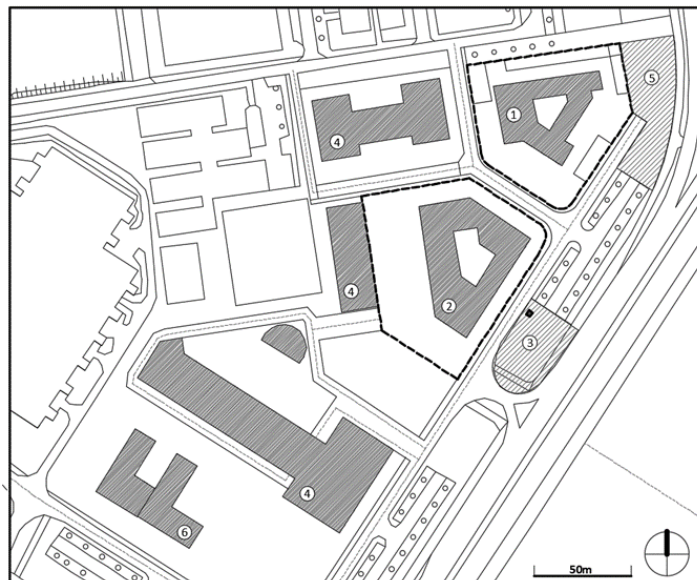


Fig. 2 Block 11a and its new building developments: 1. Embassy of Japan; 2. Chinese cultural center (under construction), previously the site of the Chinese embassy; 3. Square of Chinese-Serbian friendship; 4. Mix-used, high-end residential building; 5. Square of Japanese-Serbian friendship and Japanese garden (planned); 6. Falkensteiner hotel

After an extensive preparation period, the Japanese government green lighted the new development, starting in May, 2013. The construction procedure implemented was that of transparency, or to be more precise, the idea of implementing transparent construction process. Design plans were re-worked to fit Serbian regulations (handled by “Arhi.pro

LLC” in its inception stages), as Japanese construction regulations (expectedly) differ from Serbian. This was particularly obvious for fire protection design, part of the design documentation that was notoriously under heavy scrutiny to follow the stringent Serbian regulations to the letter.

Ultimately, through its many trials and tribulations, the new embassy building was completed and moved into in March 2015. Interestingly, the response from the general public was negative, having predominantly commented on the aesthetic characteristics of the building (high perimeter fence, lack of openings, lack of aesthetic appeal and the sense of Japan-ness), linking these failings with feelings and/or relationship that the Japanese have in lieu of their perception of Serbia and its people. As a consequence, one of the most dominant questions arising was that of authority over “handing over” a “prime piece of real estate” for such an “architectural atrocity” (“Politika” daily newspaper printed article “Urban planning failure” [Serbian: “Urbanistički promašaj”] by Mr. Branislav Jovin, engineer, dated March 3, 2015 [in Serbian]).

What was failed to be realized it that, although built within a high-density urban environment, the new building did not produce any negative effects in said environment, otherwise typical for embassy typology. These effects will be examined in the following section.

5. EXAMINATION OF PROJECTED IMPACT ONTO THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

5.1. Factors and indicators of successful embassy construction process

These sections will overview the findings of examination of the impact of urban environment. Several key factors will be examined and discussed how urban planning practice can benefit or suffer from the (in)correct usage of said factors. These factors were chosen as a direct consequence of the author’s experience and subsequent academic research on the topic. It is important to underline that the approach taken by the Government of Japan is not commonplace.

Simultaneously, these indicators will be applied for a concrete case, the new Japanese embassy in Belgrade, to showcase the extent of its successful application.

1. Preparatory process– indicating the level of willingness for collaboration between professional vis-à-vis urban planning and architectural laws and regulations. Given feedback will be utilized during the design stages, in order to fit the new structure to the particular context in which it will be built. The new Japanese embassy, prior to its design, obtained necessary guidelines for construction in the New Belgrade area. Additionally, the plot was visited by designers, in order to fully understand the built environment and implement specific findings into their design. With such obtained data, combined with the requirements of the Government, the preparatory process was thorough and gave a good starting point for the building construction.

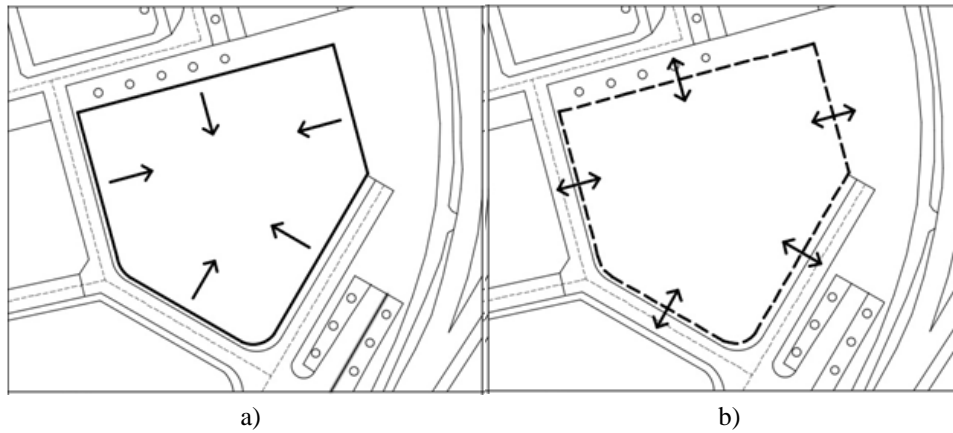


Fig. 3 Preparatory process. a) Inward-looking, ignoring the existing urban matrix, solid boundary. b) Preparatory process. Consulting with local professional, contextual design, permeable boundary.

2. Contextualized design – indicating how the specific morphological aspects of the built environment were observed and implemented into the final design. In order to ensure a visual and aesthetic continuity of an ambient whole of the built environment, this is an imperative for any new development. This can include the overall built aspect ratio, floor height, materials, style ... etc. For the case study, the new embassy building has followed all the given criteria; built aspect ratio was adjusted for the built environment/density of New Belgrade, floor height similarly reflected the height of the neighboring buildings and architectural style and materials were the same as the ones utilized in the inception phase of the urban environment.

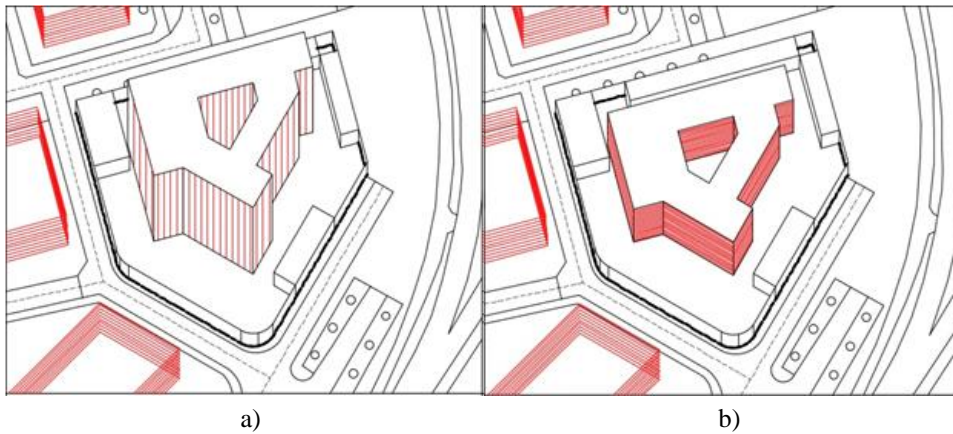


Fig. 4 Contextual design. a) Disregarding the urban context (height, building aspect ratio, materials...) b) Implementing the existing context into the a harmonized design.

3. Accessibility – examining whether the new development fits into the established movement patterns of the built environment. Closely related to indicators 4 and 5. The building in question utilized the available access paths, without closing or compromising parts of the streets.

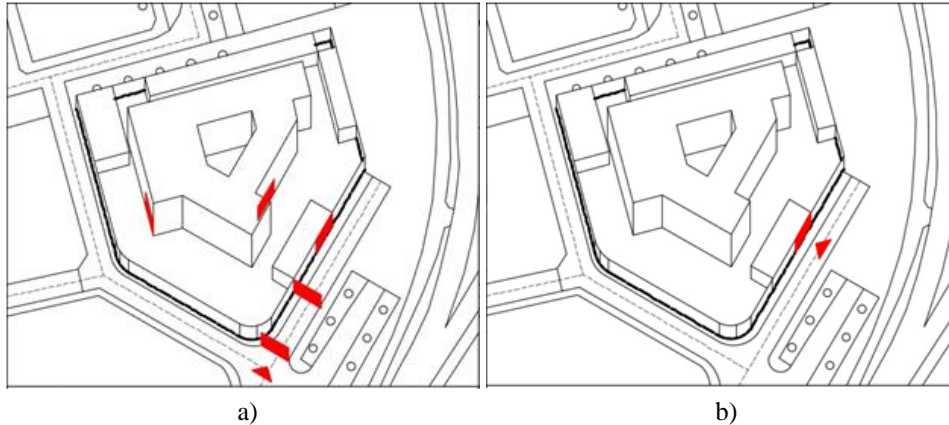


Fig. 5 Accessibility. a) Multiple access/checkpoints oftentimes usurpin the public space. b) Secure checkpoint utilizing the existing access roads and points.

4. Security – as consular headquarters are protected under international law and the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic relations, the host country is obligated to provide assistance when required and the newly built structure will be considered high-risk. New Japanese embassy has not made any interventions in the existing urban environment to increase its level of protection (CCTV cameras, conspicuous security, boulders ... etc.) Additionally, it has coordinated with relevant authorities to prepare for a case of an emergency.



Fig. 6 Security. a) Security perimeter extending beyond the plot, CCTV cameras in public spaces. b) Security perimeter within the boundaries, checkpoint CCTV surveillance.

5. Disruption of established urban patterns – signifying limitation of freedom for users of public spaces e.g. controlled movement (pedestrian and vehicular), claiming adjoining

pieces of public space for official usage, imposing a ban on taking photography ... etc. New Japanese embassy building did not impose any restrictions onto the surrounding urban environment, it remains one of the rare examples of typology that people can freely access, walk around and view from all sides.

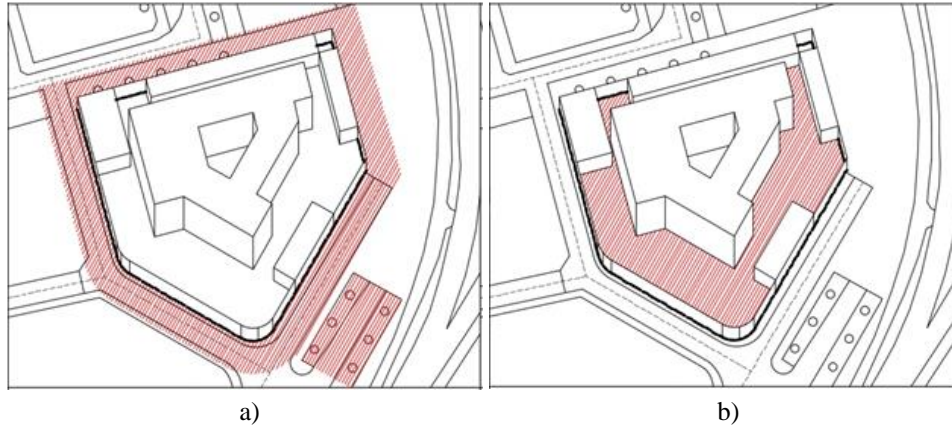


Fig. 7 Disrupting of established urban patterns. a) Prohibited pedestrian and vehicular movement, prohibited parking. b) No special security requirements, limited within the embassy compound.

6. Change in urban structure – similar to 5, but signifies removal of existing buildings/paths/urban furniture for the sake of new development. The examined case study has not damaged the built environment, however, it had intervened on its plot (which is within its purview and only mentioned as a curiosity) and removed significant green fundus (evergreen and deciduous trees). Due to the proximity of the neighboring residential building, there were some altercations, as the tenants have mentally mapped the greenery as their own. However, legally speaking, this was not the case, and the Japanese government has reimbursed the city of Belgrade via the greenery cutting/removal fee.

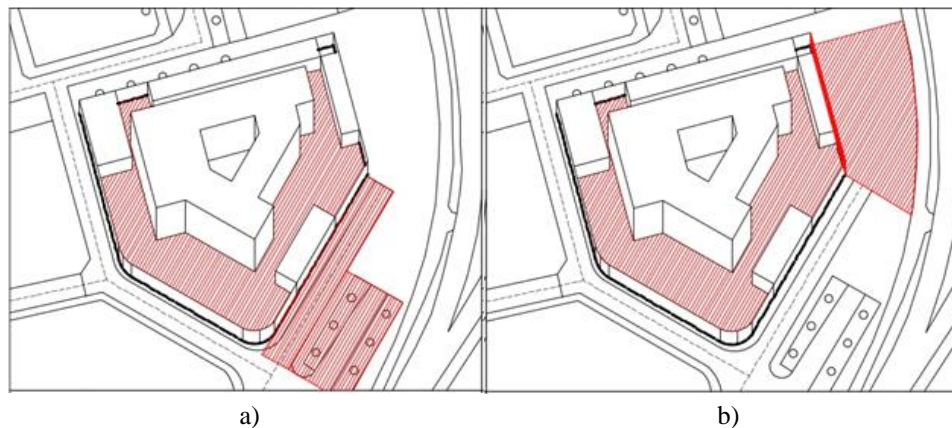


Fig. 8 Change in urban structure. a) Usurping public spaces for security purposes, disruption of movements. b) Extension of activities (e.g. Japanese garden) with clear boundaries.

7. Long-term development potential– refers to the new development being introduced into the existing urban tissue in such a way that it will allow for a natural progression of the city development. This means following the urban planning strategies in place and not disturbing them. The examined case study, by its placement and previous construction processes has enabled this urban development progression to take its course naturally, and will not pose any obstacle for its expansion.

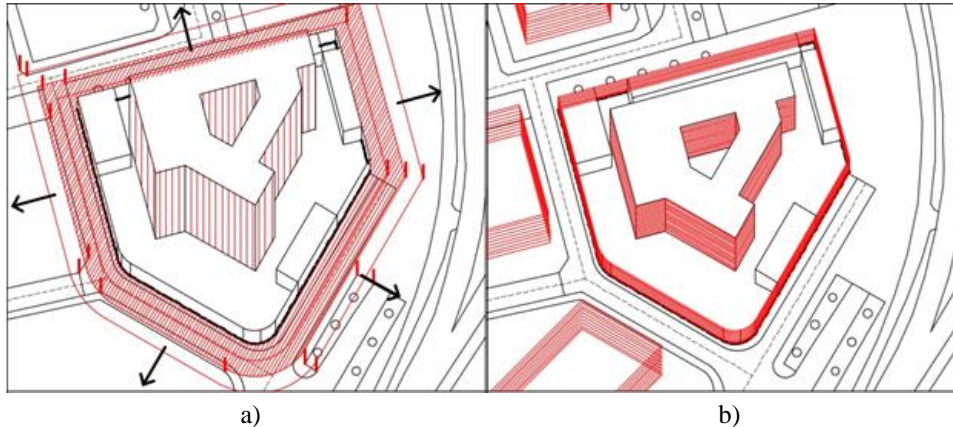


Fig. 9 Long-term development process. a) Disruption of normal development, pushing away any possible interventions. b) Designing within the boundaries, allowing for unhindered development.

One of the examples that must be noted is the development of the new American embassy in Belgrade, which did not follow almost any of the indicators, especially 4, 5 and 6. The overall General Urban [developmental] Plan (GUP 2021) was amended to facilitate the requirements of the American government. These alterations of the urban matrix have had a severe impact on its continuity and uniform development, and, although working within the lawful framework, these negative effects could have been mitigated or avoided altogether.

6. CONCLUSION

Primarily, it is essential to stress the significance of the public interest Japan (and any other country implementing this methodological approach) can achieve. By implementing a transparent construction procedure and having an open conversation with architects and urban planning professional from, one can only increase its soft power potential abroad and ensure achieving its geopolitical goals more effectively.

It is necessary for the urban planning profession to be aware on the potential severity of impact of certain typologies deemed high-risk (including, but not limited to embassy and diplomatic-consular headquarters typologies), proceeding with research and development stages accordingly. One option is to conceptualize a diplomatic typology cluster of sorts and although this concept has some drawbacks, like any other, they can be managed relatively simply, with involvement of other groups and professionals.

When dealing with typologies within dense urban environments, there should exist a clear overview of spatial disposition and usage, and then identify triggers of discontinuity of the urban tissues. Focusing on the wider context, then zeroing on the specific space, with its own set of problems, will greatly help in providing solutions that will be viable for the long run, giving back the right to the city to its users. By having a subtler approach in dealing with these issues, images of a defensible city/spaces and rings of steel can be avoided: e.g. using heavy urban furniture that limits vehicular movement only highlights existing issues and can be re-conceptualized if properly handled.

One of the suggested tools that can be used, during the inception phase, is behavior modeling software: computer generated data can be instrumental in determining e.g. pedestrian flows and if/how imposing movement limitations affects the quality of spatial usage. This software modeling is normally utilized to examine and amend public space designs, such as squares and plazas. Main focus generally lies in identifying possible places of [pedestrian] congestions and bottlenecks, but in the case of an embassy building the methodology in place would be somewhat different. If the new embassy building requires certain security interventions within the public space [limitation of pedestrian movement, prohibition of parking... etc.] a virtual simulation can be made to examine how such interventions in the public environment affect the everyday life of spatial users. By extension, any noted negative effects can be mitigated with careful intervention within the built environment.

In a similar vein, additional layer can be overlapped with users' experience, layer of security. This layer can include routes to be utilized in cases of emergency (fire, medical, riots, evacuation... etc.) as well as possible extremes and subsequent damages to the urban environment (terrorist attacks, car bombs, gun violence... etc.). Having possession of a number of most likely and/or extreme scenarios, professionals, with obligatory public review and input, can elect the best course of action when building these typologies or mitigating possible negative effects in already built environments. The necessary number of scenarios of spatial usage is to be determined either by observing the extremes or most probable ones, keeping in mind that their number is not finite and not all contingencies can be foreseen.

Future challenges and recommendations that can be extricated from the previously presented material are mainly focused on empowering architecture and urban planning professionals in host countries. The intent is not to uproot or unconstructively question the diplomatic laws and conventions, but rather to draw attention to the notion of accountability for typologies under its jurisdiction. Embassy buildings will inherently have the power to change urban spatial usage dynamics, and as such, must be put under closer scrutiny by professionals and the general public, that ought to be educated on this pertinent topic.

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ISPITIVANJE EFEKATA URBANISTIČKE PRAKSE PLANIRANJA ZGRADA AMBASADA U JAVNOM PROSTORU

Dosadašnja urbana praksa, planiranja kompleksa zgrada ambasada uglavnom pokazuje ravnodušnost prema okruženju i kontekstu gradova, često proizvedeći negativan uticaj na urbanu matricu. Time što je sprovodio otvoreniji, transparentniji proces izgradnje svojih diplomatskih ispostava u inostranstvu, Japan je uspeo da doprinese celokupnom razvoju gradova, kvalitetu njihovih javnih prostora i imidžu koji ima u zemljama domaćinima. Ti procesi koji se tiču nove japanske ambasade u Beogradu, Srbiji, će biti proučeni i zaključci kako korišćenje takve metodologije predstavlja poboljšanje u inženjerskom i urbanističkom smislu će biti elaborirani, kao i nova metoda kulturne održivosti.

Ključne reči: *urbana praksa, ambasada, Japan, razvoj grada, urbanizam, kulturna održivost*