

illustrator Rickard Frank

# BERLIN AMBITION

When the Wall came down in 1989 and Berlin was once again hailed as the German capital, the contractors pitched camp in force. Now the city's new embassies have shed their scaffolding to reveal an optimistic and singularly modern international spirit, writes **Jessica Cargill Thompson**

**F**or the past few years, Berlin has been the biggest building site in Europe; in 1999 it will emerge from behind the hoardings as one of the continent's most dynamic capitals. Nearly a decade after the momentous events of November 1989, the German Bundestag finally returns from its postwar sojourn in Bonn, and, this spring, Berlin once more becomes the official seat of government for a united Germany. At the same time, more than 60 of the 151 countries with diplomatic representations in Bonn will relocate to the new capital, some to existing palaces occupied before the overthrow of the Third Reich, others to prestigious new landmark buildings that express their optimism about the new status of the city.

Unlike some of the bland corporate architecture that has been commissioned by the city's other dominant new presence – multinational business – the new breed of embassies demonstrates flair and imagination, with many countries making their cultural mark by appointing the cream of their architectural talent. France has chosen the cerebral approach of Christian de Portzamparc (architect of Paris's Cité de la Musique); Austria, one of Europe's premier postmodernists, Hans

Hollein; the UK, inevitably, chose Michael Wilford (no stranger to designing important public buildings in Germany and one of the architects behind Stuttgart's celebrated Neue Staatsgalerie); and the Dutch have played their joker in the shape of Euro wunderkind Rem Koolhaas and his innovative practice OMA. Devices such as

*countries have made their mark with  
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inner courtyards, roof gardens, rotunda and louvred screens abound, and an international language is emerging among the individual expressions of nationality.

Some of the richest nations, and, correspondingly, the most impressive structures, will be concentrated in two reactivated diplomatic areas: the Diplomatenviertel (diplomatic quarter) along the southern edge of the Tiergarten, home to eighteen nations including Spain, Mexico,

Japan, the United Arab Emirates, India, Austria, Egypt and the Nordic countries; and Pariser Platz, in front of the Brandenburg Gate, around which will be gathered France, the US, the UK and, as this area was formerly just inside the eastern sector of the city, the existing Russian embassy. Other countries will be dotted around the central district of Mitte or housed out of the centre, in the districts of Pankow to the north and Zehlendorf to the south.

**T**he US was quick to reestablish itself in the prestigious spot on the northern edge of Pariser Platz. Designed by Moore Ruble Yudell with Gruen Associates, the relatively sober limestone-clad building is rimmed with copper in response to neighbouring structures, not least the Quadriga sculpture on top of the Brandenburg Gate. The embassy's entrance to Pariser Platz is marked by a gently curved glass canopy, drawing visitors into the entrance rotunda and

space. At the same time, a VIP room will cantilever out from the main facade and hang over this courtyard. A continuous path of stairs and ramps will flow up through the eight levels of the cube, appearing as a dramatic diagonal slash where it comes into contact with the otherwise smooth glazed walls.

Over in the diplomatic quarter along the southern edge of the Tiergarten, the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – have translated shared cultural characteristics into a communal embassy complex, with clarity and purity of form the overriding aesthetic. A masterplan by Austro-Finnish architects Alfred Berger and Tiina Parkkinen features a fifteen-metre-high louvred copper wall which flows round the perimeter of the site, uniting the five separate embassy buildings in a horseshoe shape.

At the entrance to the site, a sixth, communal building will be the public face of the complex, housing a joint consulate, events spaces,

**a communal building at the entrance to the site will be the public face of the complex: this 'house for all' is a slatted wooden box with a full-height atrium cut into the entrance facade**

the inner courtyard beyond. Much of the building's activity takes place at roof level with the copper and glass lantern of the State Room Pavilion, and rooftop parterre garden protruding above the main roofline.

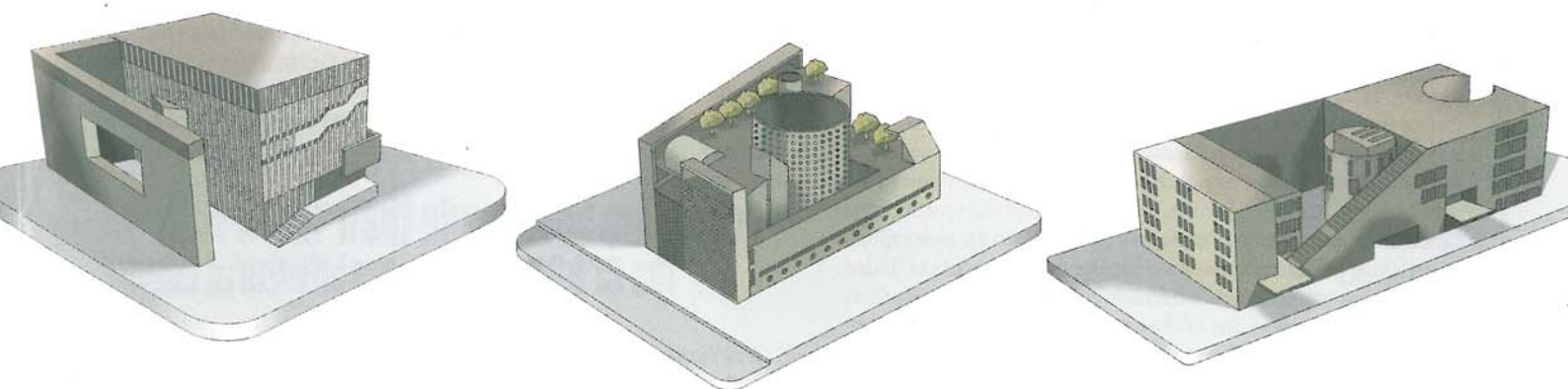
Just off Pariser Platz, tucked behind the grand Hotel Adlon, is Michael Wilford and Partners's British embassy, designed as a series of heavy geometric elements – a tall cylindrical lift tower protrudes from the rear of the building, a circular conference room and a trapezium on stilts hangs like a canopy over the long ceremonial staircase. These are largely concealed behind a flat facade block that follows the line of the street, although a letterbox-like slot affords glimpses at this abstract collage of forms. Inside, activity centres around the raised *piano nobile*, home to an impressive winter garden, lit from above by vast roof lights and surrounded on its upper levels by walkways linking offices.

Further east in the Mitte area, overlooking the Spree, a 27-metre freestanding glass cube, due for completion in 2001, will reflect the Dutch spirit of openness and allude to the idea of an embassy as a grand villa. The structure will be partly shielded by perimeter walls which link it back to adjacent blocks and create a semi-enclosed public

restaurant and apartments. Kicking off something of a theme that runs through the other buildings on the site, the 'Felleshus' (or 'house for all'), as it will be called, is a slatted wooden box, almost completely closed save for a full-height atrium cut into the entrance facade.

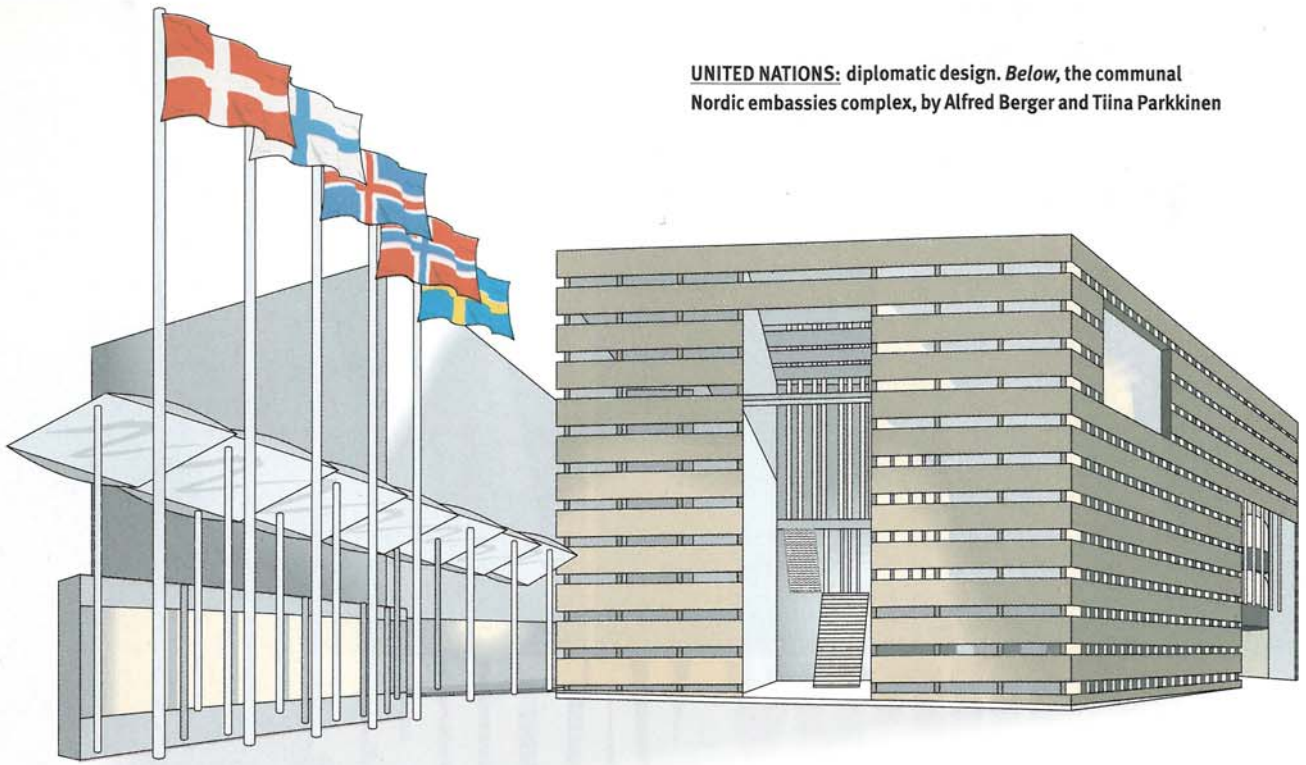
**W**ithin Berger + Parkkinen's masterplan, each country has room to express its own identity with buildings by their choice of architect: Nielsen, Nielsen + Nielsen for Denmark; Viva Arkkitehtuuri Oy Lehtinen + Mäki + Peltola for Finland; Pålmar Kristmundsson for Iceland; Snøhetta for Norway; and Wingårdh Arkitektkontor for Sweden.

The Finnish Embassy by Rauno Lehtinen, Pekka Mäki and Toni Peltola is essentially a glass box entirely enclosed within a slatted wooden skin of Finnish aspen, making the building at once transparent and private. Shutters in the wooden skin can be opened outwards, animating the facade. When closed, the louvred panels act as Venetian blinds, filtering daylight and providing a modicum of privacy for the offices inside. The main features will be the central metal staircase



**WORLD IN MOTION: consular surfaces.** From left to right, Rem Koolhaas's Dutch embassy. Mexican embassy, by González de León and J. Francisco Serrano. India's embassy, by Léonwohlhage Architekten, is one of eighteen situated in the Tiergarten. Previous page, US embassy, by Moore Ruble Yudell with Gruen Associates

UNITED NATIONS: diplomatic design. *Below, the communal Nordic embassies complex, by Alfred Berger and Tiina Parkkinen*



and the plywood-clad conference centre suspended over the main hall. The Norwegian entry draws heavily on the country's traditional materials, importing granite and larch for the facades. The dark stone

## the Nordic countries have pooled cultural characteristics in a communal complex

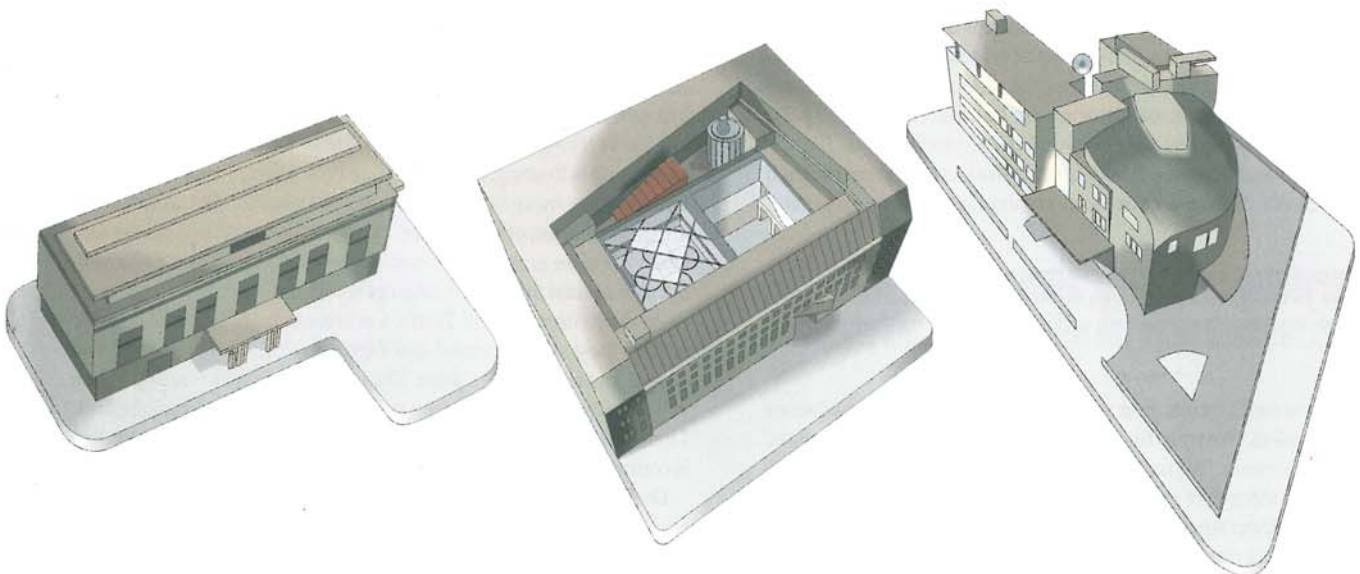
and grey of the weathered wood will combine with sheer vertical facades to evoke Norway's most famous attribute – fjords.

Nearby, González de León and J. Francisco Serrano's Mexican embassy continues the louvred theme, a dramatic facade of tilted planes that appears to fold in on itself, and makes one of the most architecturally exciting additions to the diplomatic quarter. Structural white concrete columns line the main and side facades, providing a giant vertical

screen for the glazed embassy offices behind. Inside, the building is dominated by an eighteen-metre-high cylinder which is suspended above a terraced garden and houses the principal reception area.

Hans Hollein breaks the Austrian embassy down into three blocks: consular department, embassy offices and the ambassador's residence. The rectilinear blocks of the latter, faced in stucco and stone, focus attention on the copper-clad organic curves of the embassy, which pushes its way between them like an ocean liner ploughing through an ice floe. At the centre of the building is a dramatic, full-height, elliptical atrium, topped with a glass skylight, that creates a series of exciting internal spaces and views across the Tiergarten.

Along with Norman Foster's reworked Reichstag, many of the new embassies – including the Nordic countries, the UK, and the US – will be deployed this year. As the diplomats once more colonise a city previously better known as a melting pot for Europe's young and anarchic, 1989 suddenly seems a very long time ago. ✱



**MASTER PLAN:** mission statements. *From left to right, French embassy, by Christian de Portzamparc. Geometric elements dominate the British embassy, by Michael Wilford and Partners. Hans Hollein's Austrian embassy separates the consular department, offices and ambassador's residence into three distinct blocks*