

DANE CENTRE The Danish embassy boasts a foyer the full height of the building and a staircase which acts as a homage to Arne Jacobsen

018. mission link

When the Nordic states gather their design might, the results are bound to impress. No surprise then that their new shared embassy complex in Berlin is already an international force to be reckoned with – and the locals are pretty impressed too

FINNISH PRODUCT
The Finnish embassy, by Rauno Lehtinen, Pekka Mäki and Toni Pelota, is clad in wooden shutters. Inside, meeting rooms fan out from a central stairwell



WHO ELSE BUT ICELANDERS COULD HAVE COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF DISPLAYING VOLCANIC ROCKS ON ARTIFICIAL EMBERS?

Warring EU member states could learn a thing or two from the Nordic Council. Established in 1952, its five member states have enjoyed the sort of close ties and co-operation the EU can only dream of, and this communal spirit has now found expression in architecture; for the first time in their histories, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Finland have acquired a joint embassy compound in Berlin.

In a compound that echoes those semi-mythical Mafia ones in which extended families led separate lives secure in the knowledge that a strong community was within reach, each state has its own diplomatic representation set in communal grounds, a slatted copper façade providing a framework to the whole concept. The joint presence is meant to symbolise communality and Nordic spirit, yet still highlight the cultural differences between the individual states. Who else but Icelanders could have come up with the idea of displaying volcanic rocks on artificial embers in their atrium, while the Finnish have fitted their embassy with a sauna and a large, cosy room with a fireplace.

The competition for the wider architectural concept was won by Austrian-Finnish duo Alfred Berger and Tiina Parkkinen, who designed the communal building, the plaza and the water feature that laps against the embassy buildings, echoing the way the sea washes against the Nordic states.

Denmark

Hippest of the embassies is the Danes', where a foyer stretching the full height of the building is marked off with a wall of curved wooden slats on one side and a steep stairway on the other, designed by Copenhagen architects Nielsen, Nielsen, + Nielsen. The trio are

obviously Jacobsen fans; the staircase echoes his classic one at Århus Town Hall and is lit by Jacobsen lamps. In an organic space where none of the walls are straight, bridges carrying embassy staff from one office to another criss-cross the atrium.

Finland

Inside little Finland, designed by Rauno Lehtinen, Pekka Mäki and Toni Pelota, visitors get a lesson on how Finns combine claims for representation, artistic experimentation and comfort. Each room evokes a different mood: the 'meditative' room has a long narrow table made of basic wood and dignified Martela chairs that generate a serene environment for making difficult decisions, while the creative meeting room of wood and aluminium tells every employee anything is possible. In the middle of a wooden terrace on the top floor stands a mountain ash, the holy tree of the Finns, symbolising a hallowed grove.

Iceland

The volcanic rocks and artificial glowing lava in the Icelandic embassy are as kitsch and lighthearted as Björk in one of her more frivolous frocks, yet the concrete and wavy cement on the walls signal sobriety and steadfastness, while the fragrant maple in the parquet flooring and furniture adds a sense of warmth. Architect Pálmar Kristmundsson had the façade of the 14-metre high working unit covered with Icelandic stone known as red ryolithe, creating the effect of a massive wall with a crack opening the way into the building. As if aware that all this may be a bit outré, the furniture is coolly sedate, with simple grey chairs adorned by fish-skin covered cushions.

COURT OF THE AMBASSADORS
Clockwise from right, the cubes of the Norwegian (foreground) and Danish embassies, the dramatic spiral staircase which forms the centrepiece of the Swedish embassy, exteriors of the Danish (left) and Icelandic (right) embassies



Norway

Of the 20,000 or so visitors attending the embassy's open day, many came to see what had happened to the 20-tonne monolith that brought traffic to a standstill when it was transported across Berlin. Architects Snøhetta placed this relatively small piece of Norway at the southern tip of the foyer, creating the perfect backdrop for a photograph of the Norwegian king and queen. The embassy is unpretentious and has a calming atmosphere, a snugly concealed terrace on the first floor letting visitors get up close to the building's external copper banding.

Sweden

Presumably designed to reflect the openness of Swedish nature, Gothenburg-based architect Gert Wingårdh sited a large meeting room right next to the entrance to the Swedish embassy and put in an external glass wall to make the room totally transparent. Outsiders keen to see something different are rewarded with the sight of a swathe of concrete soaring upwards to nearly room-height; it could almost pass for a massive cliff face were it not for the clerestory glass section just below the ceiling. Attaché Stig Berglind calls the 2.5-tonne stone door leading into it 'the James Bond door' because it is opened by stepping on a circular section of the floor.

A judicious use of copper creates a cool metallic feel in the space: birch panels covering the walls and ceiling are fixed together by narrow copper bands; designer Mats Theselius chose copper for the frames of the leather chairs and even the large curtain in the meeting room has a copper sheen. Through a hollow space in the newel of the staircase visitors can look down from the top floor to the pond in the basement. Is there anything from IKEA in the building? 'Of course,' says Berglind, opening the door to reveal a TV standing on one of the company's painted beechwood stands.

Bridging the complex, a pan-Nordic communal building comprises an auditorium with interior walls covered in red leather panels. Thanks to the excellent acoustics, the Börsendorfer grand piano can be heard perfectly throughout. It's a good place for readings, concerts and presentations – rounded off with a *smörgåsbord* in the staff restaurant.

The whole complex is, without a doubt, the most exciting concept in Berlin's new diplomatic quarter, and a modern example of political entente. The locals seem to agree: when it was opened to the public, Berliners queued for up to two hours to get a glimpse of the communal embassy lifestyle. What's more, the bus stop in front of the complex was renamed Nordic Embassies – a sure sign it has been accepted as a Berlin landmark. *