

# Foreign Architecture in Brasilia

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**S**urprisingly, Brasilia has a major assortment of foreign architecture, due to the diplomatic complexes it houses in the so-called South and North Embassy Sectors. From an urban point of view, such sectors were envisioned as a great international fair of buildings by renowned professionals. These buildings display a variety of solutions, in which it is always possible to distinguish typical features of the country of origin. In many of them the intention to reflect the modernity of Brasilia prevails; in others, the main objective was to enhance the country's traditional architecture; and finally there are those in which both alternatives have been harmonized.

By Sylvia Ficher and Paulo Roberto Alves dos Santos

**F**EW remember or even realize it, but thanks to its status as Federal Capital, Brasilia has a major assortment of foreign architecture, almost all of it diplomatic complexes located in the so-called South and North Embassies Sectors. In addition to national representations, these two sectors house international institutions. As the Pan American Health Organization (1971), by the eminent Uruguayan architect Román Fresnedo Siri, also author of Washington headquarters (1965). Besides the architectural interest, these buildings house significant works of art collections, thus incorporated into the assets of Brasilia.

From an urban point of view, such sectors were envisioned as a great international fair of buildings conceived by renowned professionals, and a meeting point of the world's architectural thought. The list of buildings and their authors is extensive, which explains the wide variety of solutions adopted, in which it is always possible to distinguish typical features of the original country. But there are also different emphasis degrees. In many of the embassies the intention to reflect the modernity of Brasilia and the country itself prevails; in some of them, however, the objective was to enhance their traditional architecture; and finally there are those in which both alternatives have been harmonized or live side by side.

Examining this architectural collection, beginning with those obvious examples of modern character, not surprisingly the most significant projects are those of European and Latin American countries.

Among the former, a chief example is the German embassy (1964–71), by one of the great masters of modern architecture, Hans Scharoun. This is his only work outside Germany and was designed precisely at the same time as two of his most highly praised accomplishments—the Philharmonic Orchestra Concert Hall (1956–1963) and one of the buildings of the National Library (1964–

1978), both in Berlin. The embassy, which is composed of the foreign bureau, the official residence and several houses for the diplomatic corps, exemplifies to perfection his exuberant and unorthodox architecture, enhanced by the Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx gardens. For its qualities, it integrates the historical and artistic Germany heritage.

The Embassy of France (1972–74) has a curious history, as the opportunity for a work by Le Corbusier to be built in Brazilian soil was lost. His preliminary 1963 study was abandoned because, in disagreement with local urban regulations, it included a building with seven floors, and because it failed to meet the needs of the French government. With the demise of the Franco-Swiss master in 1965, his associate, the Chilean Guillermo Julián La Fuente, was invited to complete the task. However, he refused to change the original proposal and drafted a new project after the Venice Hospital (Le Corbusier and La Fuente, 1964–65). There are four main buildings: the chancery, an exhibition hall with an auditorium, the official residence, and a block of houses for the diplomatic corps. A striking element in the whole system is the articulation of volumes (mat-buildings) and the consequent use of courtyards, so that the interior spaces are integrated into beautiful gardens. Anyway, the presence of Le Corbusier has been preserved, with one of his tapestries gracing the ambassador house.

For understandable historical reasons, the Portuguese embassy (1972–78) is the one closest to the Monumental Axis, adjacent to Portugal Square, both designed by architect Raul Chorão Ramalho. An example of the Brutalist architecture of the 1970s, contained in a single regular volume with exposed concrete blinds to protect the upper floor, the building is integrated into gardens on all sides.

Even the dashing Studio Nervi made its mark in Brasilia, thanks to the Italian embassy (1973–76). As might be expected, the adopted solution, by Pier Luigi Nervi himself, is strongly determined by the structural conception. The building is organized into a single and large block, elevated on a series of sturdy pillars, each one opening



Germany Embassy, **Hans Scharoun**, 1964-1971



Italy Embassy, **Pier Luigi Nervi**, 1973-1976



Korea Embassy, **Chang Sik Han**, 1973



France Embassy, **Guillermo Julián La Fuente**, 1972-1974



Denmark Embassy



Turkey Embassy, **İlhami and Cetin Ural**, 1977



Mexico Embassy, **Teodoro González de León, Abraham Zabludovsky and José Francisco Serrano**, 1973-1976



Portugal Embassy, **Raul Chorão Ramalho**, 1972-1978

into four-pronged brackets, allowing ample inner gardens, designed by landscape architect Ney Ururahy Dutra. In a gesture of friendliness, the embassy houses four large paintings by Brazilian artist Candido Portinari.

As for the Latin American representations, a Brutalist expression predominates. Due to its reinforced concrete structure, formed by wide pilasters and canted fins, the Embassy of Peru (1973–74), by Jacques Crousse and Jorge Paez, has an intriguing volume. The Embassy of Chile (1974–77), by the prominent architects Juan Echenique Guzmán and José Cruz Covarrubias, is deployed in two independent blocks, whose internal areas are connected to ample winter gardens. The elegant architecture of the Embassy of Uruguay (1978–80), a fine representative of the works of its author, Mario Paysse Reyes, is another example of the extensive use of exposed reinforced concrete.

Indisputably, the Mexican embassy (1973–76), by Teodoro González de León, Abraham Zabludovisky and José Francisco Serrano, is one of the most imposing in the sector. The complex consists of three large buildings (chancellery, official residence and eight row houses) and is positioned in such a way that landscape elements partially hide all buildings. This applies to the chancellery, where large pre-stressed concrete beams, supported by graded surfaces covered with grass, give shape to porticos, underlining the building access. This is the only embassy that, leaving aside security concerns, is opened to the fore public space, a perfect opportunity to “*fomentar la amistad mexico-brasileña*” (fostering Mexican–Brazilian friendship).

Less tied to the Modern Movement, some embassies have as a main characteristic the reference to the traditional culture of their countries. That was the clear intention in the case of the Turkish embassy (1977). Its design, by İlhami and Cetin Ural, was selected in an open competition, whose edict expressly recommended the use of representative traces of the country’s vernacular architecture.

The Embassy of the Republic of Korea (1973), by Chang Sik Han, is another instance of indigenous architecture, especially displayed in its imposing entrance gate. Likewise, the Embassy of Morocco (1981), by Mustafa Zeghari, showing in its forms, materials and colors, a clear reference to the culture of northwest Africa.

#### References

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A last group, particularly interesting, is that of embassies seeking in its architectural expression to combine a modern aesthetic to the native tradition of their country—often making buildings coexist with distinct languages. This is the case of the Japanese embassy. From 1970 to 1972 the foreign offices were built in a vernacular character pavilion, by architect Yoshimi Ohashi; in 1976, it was expanded with the building of the chancery and ambassador’s residence, both in modern lines, designed by the prolific and renowned architect Fumihiko Maki.

The Embassy of Spain (1972–76) is one of the most distinctive buildings among foreign representations, and the apex of the research developed by its author, the acclaimed architect Rafael Leoz. Composed by a group of modules of similar hexagonal plan and different heights, despite its clear and evident modernist expression, its spatial organization, particularly the inner courtyards with their fountains finished in decorated tiles in the Moorish style, brings to mind Spanish traditional architecture.

In the Canadian embassy (1970–78), by Thompson, Berwick, Pratt and Partners, the emphasis is on the various buildings dynamic plastic composition, all connected by light wooden walkways. Clearly the concern is in environmental control, as shown with the extensive use of wooden lattice panels, and indoor and outdoor gardens and pools. The landscaping is Ururahy Ney Dutra’s.

An exceptional presence in this group is that of the Nordic countries, whose embassies are closely clustered. They are the Swedish embassy (1974), by Helge Zimdal; the Danish embassy (1971–76), by Jorgen Bo; the Norse embassy, by John Engh and Jon Seip (1974) and the Finnish embassy (1974), by Jonas Cedercreutz—where a mural by Alvar Aalto can be appreciated. All following the same pattern: each one is organized in several buildings, always using a single constructive solution and the same architectural language, only differing in their dimensions. Another common trait is the careful landscaping.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the embassies sectors are not complete yet. Many countries still have vacant lots; others are awaiting the donation of land. And some have their works in progress, as is the case of the Argentine embassy, by the important architecture office, Studio MSGSSS, composed by architects Flora Manteolo, Javier Sánchez Gómez, Josefa Santos, Justo Solsona and Carlos Sallaberry.

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Embassy photos by Joana França