

Warsaw tact

The new British embassy in Poland's capital is the most elegant work of diplomatic architecture in decades. By Edwin Heathcote

Building an embassy is a complex act of diplomacy: like international relations themselves, such architecture demands "a negotiation between representation and security", as the architect Tony Fretton puts it, projecting a national image of sophistication and cultural engagement, and integration into local context, at the same time as ensuring the protection of those who work within and around it.

The bombing of the British consulate in Istanbul in 2003 radically altered the terms of reference for diplomatic buildings. Tony Fretton Architects had already been commissioned to build a new British embassy in Warsaw, not long before the events in Istanbul, but the original site in the centre of the city was abandoned as indefensible and a new site was chosen in a more conventional embassy quarter. The result is, I think, the most elegant work of diplomatic architecture in decades.

The building appears to the street as a kind of crystalline villa, a ghost of the villas that often housed foreign embassies in European capitals. It is set back significantly from the street, in line with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's guidelines, behind a tall fence that consists of individual verticals not linked together. The effect is intriguing: it appears transparent when viewed from in front but, as you move around, the verticals seem to meld into a continuous surface, as if the site were bounded by a solid wall.

Within the boundary, a stone portico provides a solid canopy at the entrance but the building itself melts into the sky. In its appropriation both of Mies van der Rohe's exquisite transparency and the corporate rationalism of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, the US firm that built New York's Lever House, it creates a language that is not quite new but blends the commercial with the avant-garde to create a building of dignity and presence.

Returning to Fretton's notion of a "negotiation between representation and security", I ask how he addressed the problems of "representation", how an architect might attempt to "portray" British diplomacy. He simply replied: "I think once we were chosen it was simply up to us to do our best building." Fretton compares the process to a fitting at a bespoke tailor. "You expect the tailor to listen, to be observant, but also to be able to read the client and the intention."

Indeed, the elegant restraint of the building reflects the Savile Row suit at every turn. It has a discreetly blast-resistant



Glassy An elegant solution to questions of security in Tony Fretton's embassy building

glass façade (composed of a double skin and a wall that allows ventilation and insulation), which is reflective and open yet functions as a sophisticated shield against the climate as well as against aggression. The rich black walnut veneers on the interior walls and doors act as a luxurious but restrained lining.

The building's form, with "shoulders" to either side of a raised central section, allows the creation of roof terraces; within, glazed shafts bring light into the heart of the various floors, with glimpses of vegetation and greenery. The huge reception space on the ground floor, with its touch of luxuriously veined marble and richly veneered walls, is neither flashy nor ostentatious. The large café allows diplomatic and local staff to mix and is surprisingly similar in feel to Fretton's Camden Arts Centre, which transposed this central European feel to north London. In Warsaw, the influences all seem to fall into place.

Fretton's talent is to take archetypal architectures (the villa, the smooth contemporary office) and to extract their essence to create something new yet deeply familiar. "Modernism just isn't new any more. It has been absorbed by everyday culture," he says. He is the opposite of his contemporaries, say Zaha Hadid or Rem Koolhaas, whom he calls "formal innovators". He declares himself more interested in forms that have already passed into the culture and "in how people understand and relate to buildings".

The FCO has a commendable recent record in diplomatic architecture, and Fretton's building, too, is exemplary: intelligent, sophisticated, dignified and ethereal.

www.tonyfretton.com

WARSAW RENAISSANCE

Out of the ashes

The terraces of the old national stadium in Warsaw were built on the spoils of the old city. When the Germans left in 1944, they razed the city to the ground and the rubble was heaped on to the other side of the Vistula River. Now a huge new football stadium is emerging from these architectural ashes, due to be completed in 2011: draped in the colours of the Polish flag, it could hardly be a better metaphor for the

extraordinary architectural renaissance of the city. The rebuilt city turned its back on the Vistula and has left a wilderness through its middle. That green artery is now being exploited as the setting for an ambitious new science museum, the Copernicus Centre (RAR-2 Architects), with a complex, jewel-like planetarium at its heart. A short distance away, work is continuing on the Chopin Institute (Boleslaw Stelmach), a purposefully

workmanlike and severe building emerging from a simulacrum of a historic building below. Inside, its rough concrete walls seem hewn from the earth, a dramatic contrast to the finesse of the rebuilt Chopin museum opposite.

Elsewhere the city's rich seam of postwar modernism is being revisited. Beside the Palace of Arts and Culture, a Soviet-built skyscraper, Swiss architect Christian Kerez is about to start work on

the city's new modern art gallery. The only reminder of recession is the sinister bulk of Polish-born Daniel Libeskind's abandoned tower, a shadowy mass of frozen concrete. Warsaw's revival can be seen at the *Open: Poland* season at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London, until November 25

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A culture reborn through traces of memory

Britain celebrates Poland's rich cultural heritage with a year-long programme of art, music and drama. By Richard Calvocoressi

It began on May 2 in Canterbury Cathedral, with a performance of Krzysztof Penderecki's magnificent *St Luke's Passion*, conducted by the composer. It finishes on the South Bank next May with a weekend of Polish jazz, folk and classical music directed by the violinist Nigel Kennedy, who lives for much of the year in Krakow, arguably southern Poland's most beautiful city.

In between, a remarkable programme of more than 200 exhibitions, concerts – including the world premiere of Gorecki's Fourth Symphony and a Chopin bicentenary recital by the pianist Krystian Zimerman – film screenings and other events celebrating Polish culture has been organised in venues across Britain under the banner "Polska! Year".

While a few of the art exhibitions are devoted to historical movements, such as the intriguing glimpse we had last spring of Polish symbolism at Tate Britain, the main focus of "Polska! Year" is on contemporary art. It

features a number of postwar Poland's most illustrious artists: Jozef Robakowski, Robert Kusmirowski, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Artur Zmijewski, Pawel Aithamer, Miroslav Balka, Monika Sosnowska and Goshka Macuga. Group shows of contemporary Polish art have taken place or are yet to happen in Belfast, Norwich, Dundee, London, Edinburgh and Nottingham. One of the first exhibitions to open (at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich) was dedicated to the role of visual art – particularly a kind of abject, eastern European *arte povera* – in the theatre of Tadeusz Kantor, who died in 1990, shortly after the collapse of the communist regime. I shall never forget seeing Kantor's *The Dead Class* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1976 – like eavesdropping on the exchanges between inmates in an asylum.

The second world war, the Holocaust and 40 years of communist oppression cast long shadows over contemporary Polish culture, nowhere more so than in the work of Poland's

visual artists. Two powerful sculptural installations currently on view in London, Balka's "How It Is" at Tate Modern and Kusmirowski's "Bunker" at the Barbican, adopt very different approaches to this collective experience or memory. Balka's enormous, disorientating black void contrasts strikingly with Kusmirowski's claustrophobic basement filled with real objects: decaying industrial equipment, obsolete control panels, dusty



'Our Class' at the National Theatre

offices and primitive sleeping quarters, reminiscent of a disused nuclear shelter or evoking something even more sinister.

A Jewish theme runs throughout "Polska! Year", evidence that Polish-Jewish relations are taken very seriously by its organisers, the government-funded Adam Mickiewicz Institute, the Polish Embassy and the Polish Cultural Institute. The sensitive subject of Polish anti-Semitism was aired in the play *Our Class* by Tadeusz Slobodzianek, which premiered at London's National Theatre in September. Slobodzianek's text was inspired by the massacre of 340 Jews at Jedwabne in eastern Poland in 1941, under Nazi supervision but without Nazi participation. Until the recent political row between David Milliband and William Hague over the Conservatives' new alliance with a grouping of hard-right parties in the European parliament, led by the Polish MEP Michal Kaminski – who is accused of opposing the Polish presi-

dent's apology for the massacre in 2001 – it is doubtful whether many people in this country would have heard of Jedwabne.

One of the most impressive publications during "Polska! Year" is *Rediscovering Traces of Memory: The Jewish Heritage of Polish Galicia* by social anthropologist Jonathan Webber, illustrated with photographs by the late Chris Schwarz. A British photojournalist, Schwarz founded the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow in 2004, where his haunting photographs of synagogues, cemeteries and religious schools – most in ruins – as well as death camps and memorials, are on display. The purpose of both book and exhibition is to document and encourage preservation of the remnants of the centuries-old Jewish civilisation in Galicia, southern Poland, which was destroyed by the Holocaust.

The Galicia Jewish Museum played host this summer to a range of events in the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow. Founded in 1988, the festival

takes place in Kazimierz, Krakow's former Jewish quarter. This year, in Krakow on the last day of the festival, I was invited to an electrifying rock-cum-klezmer concert in Szeroka street, where thousands danced late into the warm July night. The mission of the organiser of the festival, Janusz Makuch, Webber observes in *Traces of Memory*, is "to bring Jewish artists to perform in a country which is the world's largest Jewish graveyard, as a way of both honouring the dead and demonstrating Jewish survival".

Taken together, festivals such as "Polska! Year" in the UK and the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow play a valuable role in raising awareness of the diverse influences that shape a nation's cultural heritage.

Richard Calvocoressi is director of the Henry Moore Foundation, which has supported exhibitions of contemporary Polish art in "Polska! Year"; www.polskayear.pl

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