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Out of Place: Diplomacy, Space, and the Breakdown of Representational Codes.

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Diplomatic architecture has long served as a means of communication in diplomacy, meant to speak to an audience and convey a message. Yet buildings do not always say what their makers and designers intended: sometimes they are misunderstood, or they say the wrong thing. The German embassy in Istanbul, built in the historicist style then fashionable in Berlin and towering over the surrounding housing, was dismissed by contemporaries as resembling military barracks, an instrument of cultural domination rather than a diplomatic presence (Schwantes 1997; Hort 2014). Half a century later, the newly built Japanese embassy in Bonn, designed in the international modernist style to signal Japan's place among Western nations, disappointed local audiences who had expected the traditional architecture they associated with Japanese representation at world fairs and in the illustrated press (Kratz 2020). Belgian diplomatic premises became targets of violent protest during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and again following the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961, as demonstrators turned the physical symbols of a foreign state into arenas of political contestation (Rottiers and De Maeyer 2022). In each case, buildings intended to project a carefully chosen identity instead provoked confusion, offence, or outright rejection in those they were meant to address.

These failures in architectural communication point to a structural tension within the material culture of diplomacy and the changing role of architecture and interiors therein. Architectural design has allowed state representations to conform to a standard of prestige and decorum largely developed and exported by Western great powers since the nineteenth century (Loeffler 1998; Bertram 2011; Hort 2014). Buildings also constitute sites of contestation through which smaller states, subaltern actors, and local communities can challenge Eurocentric and dominant material cultures (Gigliotti 2024). Analysing these breakdowns reveals how architecture functions as a situated practice, exposing the system's assumptions, hierarchies, and cultural foundations precisely by testing their limits.

Understanding why these breakdowns occur, however, requires grappling with a conceptual problem that runs across disciplinary boundaries. In diplomatic history and IR, space has tended to mean little more than the physical setting of an encounter, while place has served as a marker of geographical or cultural situatedness (Neumann 2013; Shimazu 2012). In architectural and

social theory, these meanings are almost reversed: following Lefebvre, space encompasses the socially produced, representationally charged dimensions of the built environment — bringing it closer to how the notion of place functioned in IR and diplomatic history — while place in the phenomenological tradition of architecture carries a thick cultural and experiential meaning that has itself been challenged as prone to essentialising cultural identities, ill-suited to analysing intercultural encounters such as those of diplomatic architecture. As McConnell (2019) observed in Diplomatica's inaugural issue, space and place both matter to diplomacy, yet the analytical work of distinguishing them across disciplinary frameworks remains largely undone. Recent work has begun this task from the side of practice theory: Franz (2026) proposes site drawing on Schatzki's site ontology as a third term, distinct from both space and place, that foregrounds the mutual entanglement of diplomatic practice and the embassies in which it unfolds. This special issue does not seek to adjudicate between disciplinary traditions, but rather aims to provide a shared vocabulary and theoretical framework around these keywords to facilitate future transdisciplinary scholarship on the built environment as a site of diplomatic practice and material representation.

This special issue centres on built environments — including their spatial configurations, materiality, infrastructures, and the architectural language and interior decoration employed — as an integral means of communication in diplomatic practice (Floré and McAtee 2017; Rottiers, Morel and Floré 2023; MacDonald and Riordan 2024; Touloumi 2024; De Maeyer 2025; Gigliotti 2025; Reynolds 2025). A key objective is to connect scholars of diplomatic history, international relations, architectural history, and design studies to advance a transdisciplinary debate on the role of space and place in diplomacy, and to critically reflect on the vocabularies needed to do so.

Papers are invited that analyse specific cases — embassies, legations, consulates, residences, chancelleries, cultural institutes, or temporary diplomatic settings — that generated controversy, offence, confusion, or diplomatic friction. Contributions may address: in whose perception and by whose parameters did a building fail? How did states deploy the built environment as a diplomatic setting, and what happened when those spatial strategies were misinterpreted? How did architectural and design traditions specific to particular cultural contexts translate — or fail to translate — into culturally different settings? What impact did architectural miscommunication have on bilateral relations, and how did reactions differ between diplomatic elites, local civilian populations, and domestic audiences in the sending state? With the rise of mass media in the twentieth century, how did public reception of diplomatic architecture diverge from the spatial logic intended by the sending state? The issue particularly welcomes studies examining how small powers, newly independent states, non-Western actors, or those of the Non-Aligned Movement challenged Western-dominated codes of diplomatic spatial expression. Contributions with a longer temporal scope are equally welcome, tracing how spatial settings that initially succeeded later became contentious, or how standards of diplomatic appropriateness shift across changing geopolitical contexts.

We welcome submissions from scholars of diplomatic history, international relations, architectural history, design studies, and related fields interested in contributing to this debate on "place" and "space." Abstracts of 300 words, accompanied by a short biographical note, should be submitted by 15 January 2027. An in-person workshop with accepted authors might be scheduled in Summer 2027 in Geneva, Switzerland. Authors are invited to indicate their interest and availability in participating in their applications. Full articles of 8,000 words (including footnotes) are due by

September 2027 for peer review. Publication of selected papers is foreseen in Diplomatica: A Journal of Diplomacy and Society, fall 2028. Enquiries and submissions may be directed to charlotte.rottiers@kuleuven.be.

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