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Features of using national symbols, geometric forms, decorative elements, and color schemes to reflect state identity in the architectural composition of diplomatic missions

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Abstract. The visual identification of diplomatic missions has gained particular importance in the context of globalization and intercultural interaction. Embassy architecture represents functional structures and a powerful means of expressing national identity. However, professional practice still lacks a consistent system of criteria for selecting architectural and symbolic elements that reflect the unique characteristics of the sending state. The focus of this study is on identifying architectural approaches to integrating national symbolism into the design of modern embassies.

The methodological foundation of this study is a qualitative and quantitative approach that includes the selection of case studies, comparative architectural analysis, and expert surveys. The research identifies stable categories of symbolism: official (flag, coat of arms) and secondary (historical style, color schemes, geography). An analysis of diplomatic missions in various countries has revealed that architects typically employ three main strategies: the use of dominant structural forms, the incorporation of traditional decorative elements, and the symbolic integration into the local context.

The results confirm the importance of national color schemes and geographical metaphors in creating a recognizable image. The conclusions emphasize the need to find a balance between national identity and contextual appropriateness, as well as respect for the architectural traditions of the host country. The study highlights the architectural tools of soft power and proposes a systematic approach to designing diplomatic missions as spaces for representing statehood.

Keywords: national identity, architectural design, flag, coat of arms, national symbols, decorative elements

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, embassy buildings serve representative functions, play a key role in international relations, and occupy prominent locations in the capitals of host countries. The construction of embassies as architectural structures specifically designed for this purpose, unlike other public buildings, began relatively recently. In the past, countries would send ambassadors *ad hoc*, and permanent diplomatic missions (embassies) were rare. Initially, there was no established design scheme for diplomatic missions; they were usually housed in existing buildings that met certain requirements [1].

The model of a modern diplomatic mission or embassy functions primarily as a center of information on economics, culture, and consular services [2, 3]. As a representative of the sending country, the diplomatic building is closely linked to visual identification and, consequently, the expression of national identity in the architecture of diplomatic missions. These buildings act as platforms for showcasing the nation to the world [4, 5], while simultaneously meeting essential security requirements [6]. Every country possesses official symbols that affirm its statehood and sovereignty. The clarity of interpretation and artistic reimagining of national symbolism have become key tools in the hands of 21st-century architects and designers of diplomatic missions [7, 8].

In most cases, embassy buildings are located in the capitals of host countries. Therefore, a critical aspect in conveying national identity through the architecture of such buildings is the accuracy of visual and identifying assumptions, along with their concise and distinct presentation. Equally important is respect for local building traditions, cooperation with the local culture [9], and integration into the architectural environment of the host country's capital city [10].

Although embassies are intended to visually represent the sending state, architectural practice still lacks consistent principles for selecting and applying national symbols. This gives rise to a key issue: Which architectural elements should be considered primary (stable, essential for identification) and which are secondary (optional, complementary)? Moreover, by what criteria should these elements be integrated into the architectural image of diplomatic missions, especially in the cultural context of the host country?

To better understand the necessary architectural solutions, it is important to clarify the functional significance of embassies within a state's political agenda. Every country relies on national symbols for self-identification. These symbols become part of its international image and brand, reflecting its political values [11].

An embassy is the highest-ranking diplomatic mission through which a state conducts its official activities abroad [12, 13]. Typically situated within the urban fabric of a capital city, the embassy symbolically represents its home country at the heart of another nation [14]. In architecture and art history, embassies are primarily viewed as representative objects [15]. Scholars claim that in today's world, there is a growing need to create and preserve architectural objects through their relationship with the unique surrounding environment [16, 17]. This connection is expressed through architectural planning, compositional, and urban design solutions [18, 19], as well as through symbolic forms rooted in historical and national archetypes [20], which is an essential consideration in the design of embassy buildings. Scholars also emphasize that urban conditions in capital cities are highly diverse and often densely built. For this reason, when addressing the expression of national identity in embassy architecture, particular attention must be paid to the accuracy of symbol transmission, the artistic expressiveness of these symbols, and the proportionality of their use [21].

Scholars view embassy buildings through the lens of cultural geography [22], emphasizing that these structures should be seen as idealized creations representing the state [23] or as images expressed through architectural means and "translated" into a material form of expression within the spatial context of the host country's capital [24]. They are seen as compositions that can be perceived, read, and interpreted [25].

Summarizing the perspectives of researchers on architectural symbols of national identity in diplomatic missions, we identified three main approaches commonly used by architects to realize their design intentions:

1. Dominant structural forms and silhouettes

A key architectural symbol is the use of domes and arched structures. The dome has traditionally been associated with authority, the cosmos, and state legitimacy, from the imposing domes of mosques

and mausoleums to modernist interpretations in diplomatic architecture [26]. For instance, in the British Ambassador's residence in New Delhi, Edwin Lutyens incorporated a central dome that blends European and Indian architectural forms, reinforcing a visual image of colonial and national synthesis.

2. Traditional decorative elements (jali, chhatri, brise-soleil)

Many embassy façades are adorned with national motifs: Indian jali (delicately carved screens), chhatri (rooftop pavilions), and chajja (projecting eaves) are used to create a recognizable aesthetic while also serving functional purposes, such as providing sun protection [27]. These elements highlight cultural identity, particularly in Indian diplomatic architecture, but can also be adapted to harmonize with the stylistic context of the host country.

3. Symbolic integration of local context and color

Architects also incorporate local colors, materials, and forms, ranging from white colonnades to national coats of arms and flags, to emphasize the diplomatic function and cultural connection. At the U.S. Embassy, for example, the eagle and the Great Seal serve as powerful symbols of statehood. European and Scandinavian missions, such as those of Finland and Sweden, express national symbolism through simplicity of form, environmentally friendly materials, and minimalist cladding. These techniques demonstrate respect for the cultural context of the host country and convey soft power through architectural practices.

This study aims to identify the specific methods by which national symbols, geometric forms, decorative elements, and color schemes are used to reflect a state's identity in the architectural composition of diplomatic missions.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

To achieve the research objective, a qualitative and quantitative approach was selected.

In the first stage of the study, scientific sources were selected that consider the representation of national identity in the architectural composition of diplomatic missions. Research objects were also chosen based on specific criteria: they had to reflect dominant structural forms and silhouettes, contain traditional decorative elements, and demonstrate symbolic integration into the local context and color.

In the second stage, based on an analysis of existing architectural solutions used in embassy buildings across various countries, the study identified primary and secondary types of national symbols applied in the architecture of diplomatic missions. The selection criterion for architectural objects was the presence of elements that express distinctive features of a country's identity, allowing their visual identification. The objects were identified through a review of professional literature. The examples were analyzed in terms of composition and architecture. In addition, the authors' and experts' evaluations of how successfully the buildings reflect the identity of the sending country were considered.

In the third stage, the respondents were selected (architects and designers) and invited via email to participate in the research.

82 respondents took part in the survey. Each received an email outlining the study purpose and scope.

The questionnaire included the following questions:

1. In your opinion, which of the listed national symbols used in the architecture of diplomatic missions have the greatest impact on conveying the identity of the sending state within the architectural composition?



2. Please rate the proposed architectural objects (embassy buildings) on a 5-point scale in terms of how well they reflect the identity of the sending country.

To process the data collected, we used Microsoft Excel and Adobe Photoshop for working with visual materials.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



As a result of the study and comprehensive analysis, primary and secondary types of national symbols used in the architecture of diplomatic missions were identified (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Primary national symbols in the architecture of diplomatic missions (coat of arms, flag).




Architectural objects	
	
A. Flag. The Croatian Embassy in Canberra.	B. Coat of arms. The Russian Embassy in Minsk.

As the analysis showed, primary national symbols in the architecture of diplomatic missions consistently serve as the core identifiers of the sending state.


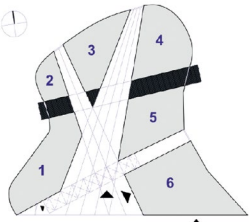

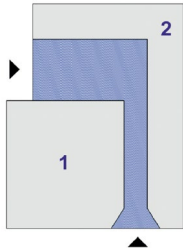
Table 2. Secondary national symbols in the architecture of diplomatic missions.

Architectural objects	Description
 <p>The Embassy of Iraq in Helsinki.</p>	<p>Structural forms: The building does not exhibit dominant silhouette features; the emphasis is placed on the façade composition.</p> <p>Decoration: Elements of traditional Arab architecture are used, including ornamentation, arched motifs, and possibly Islamic-style decorative carving.</p> <p>Integration: The building maintains a visually enclosed and austere appearance typical of Arab diplomatic architecture, yet is neutrally integrated into the urban landscape of Helsinki.</p>
 <p>The Embassy of the UAE in Berlin. Distinctive features: State symbols reflecting the country's ideology and political values.</p>	<p>Distinctive features: Historical architectural references are evident, including ornamental patterns and sculptural compositions.</p> <p>Structure: A modern structure with the façade wall extended forward from the glazed surface.</p> <p>Decoration: Perforated panels with Arab patterns (jali) are used, and the main entrance is accentuated by a decorated portal, which is a vivid example of incorporating traditional decorative elements into the façade design.</p> <p>Integration: The use of transparent and lightweight structures allows the building to resonate with Berlin's urban context, while still preserving its distinctly Arab identity.</p>

Continuation of Table 2

 <p>The Embassy of Egypt in Berlin.</p>	<p>Distinctive features: Symbolic decorations and motifs that emphasize national identity while aligning with the architectural traditions of the host country.</p> <p>Structure: A modern building with no pronounced volumes.</p> <p>Decoration: The façade is adorned with ornamental elements such as papyrus, lotus, and S-shaped wave motifs referring to the Nile River, which is a classical example of symbolic decoration (analogous to chhatra or brise-soleil in other architectural traditions).</p> <p>Integration: The ornamentation is embedded into the contemporary façade relief, reflecting ancient Egyptian identity through material and surface treatment, without disrupting the visual harmony of the Berlin streetscape.</p>
 <p>The Embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington, D.C.</p>	<p>Distinctive features: Expression of national character through the lens of the host country's architectural context.</p> <p>Structure: Rectangular volume with a prominent, formal entrance area.</p> <p>Decoration: In front of the building stands a sculpture of the Golden Warrior (a key national symbol of independence), serving as secondary symbolism outside the architectural structure.</p> <p>Integration: The architecture does not contrast with its surroundings and is designed in a neutral style, underscoring a soft and subtle approach to conveying national identity.</p>
 <p>The Embassy of South Africa in Addis Ababa.</p>	<p>Distinctive features: The building's decorative elements convey the natural and geographical character of the country within the broader African context.</p> <p>Structure: Rectangular in plan, the building lacks dominant structural features.</p> <p>Decoration: Rich use of African ornamentation, along with motifs from ethnic painting and sculpture, reinforces the cultural identity.</p> <p>Integration: The building serves as an expression of South African culture while fitting naturally into the urban fabric of Ethiopia's capital.</p>

Continuation of Table 2

  <p>The Scandinavian Embassies Complex in Berlin. Left: Spatial layout of the complex with embassy designations: 1 – Denmark, 2 – Iceland, 3 – Norway, 4 –Sweden, 5 – Finland, 6 – Common building – Felleshus. Right: Exterior wall reflecting the Nordic landscape.</p>	<p>Distinctive features: Original spatial planning concept. Structure: A complex of buildings arranged in a spatial composition reflecting the geographic relationship of the Nordic countries. Decoration: Characterized by minimalism, the use of natural material textures, and subtle color gradients. Integration: The symbolic inclusion of water features and a shared façade, evoking Scandinavian nature, makes the complex a prime example of architectural diplomacy through “ecological empathy” and geosymbolism.</p>
  <p>The Embassy of Turkey in Berlin. Left: Conceptual sketch of the spatial design (1 – Palace, 2 – City). Right: Main façade with characteristic ornamentation.</p>	<p>Distinctive features: The architectural concept reflects the geographical location of Turkey in the context of the hosting country. Structure: A two-winged structure symbolically representing the two continents (Europe and Asia), connected by an inner courtyard that metaphorically refers to the Bosphorus Strait. Decoration: Islamic ornamental patterns (girih) and perforated motifs in the form of a crescent and star are used, which is a clear expression of the national religious-political code. Integration: The building’s metaphorical and decorative aspects are balanced by strict geometry and modern architectural forms, making it a harmonious part of Berlin’s urban landscape. In this case, the Turkish embassy serves as a good example of successful synthesis between national identity and architectural adaptation to the host environment.</p>

Based on the results of the expert survey, the most significant secondary national symbols for reflecting state identity were also identified (Table 3), (Figure 1).

Table 3. Expert assessment of the significance of national symbols in the architecture of diplomatic missions.

Secondary national symbols	Ranking	Impact
historical architectural style	4	0.14
state symbols reflecting the ideology and policy of the state	3	0.18
national color	1	0.36
features of geography	2	0.32

Note: Evaluation based on the expert survey.

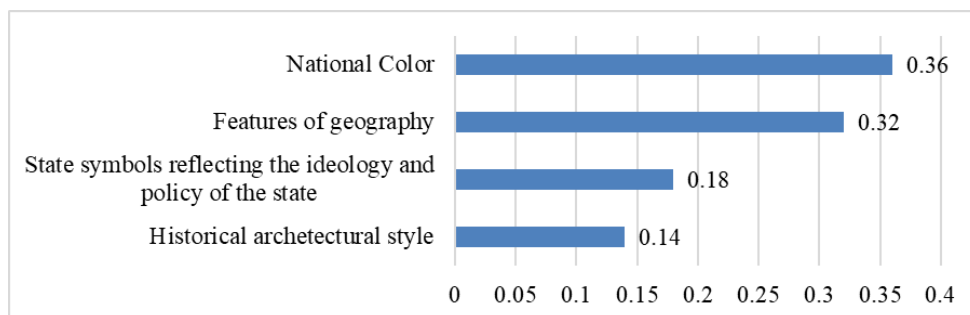


Fig. 1. Expert assessment of the significance of national symbols in the architecture of diplomatic missions.

Based on the ranking results, it is possible to develop recommendations that consider the importance of historical architectural style and national character.

In addition, the expert survey provided an expert assessment of how well embassy buildings are identified with their sending country (Fig. 2).

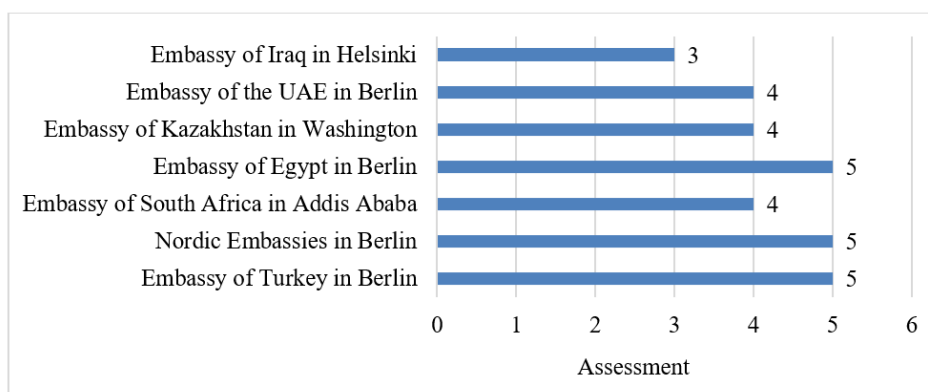


Fig. 2. Expert assessment of the identification of embassy buildings with their sending country. Note: Evaluation based on the expert survey.

For a deeper analysis of the architectural solutions of diplomatic missions, the technical characteristics of the studied buildings were collected based on professional architectural publications [44-52], as well as official websites of embassies and architectural bureaus. The data include parameters that allow the assessment of the scale of the buildings, the materials used, and decorative solutions (Table 4).

Table 4. Architectural and Technical Characteristics of the Analyzed Embassies.

Embassy Building	Year of Construction/ Reconstruction	Total Area (m ²)	Number of Floors	Building Type	Facade Materials	Dominant Color Palette	Presence of Decorative Elements	Presence of Geographical Motifs
Embassy of Iraq in Helsinki	1979-1980	2,800	2-3	Detached building	Brick, traditional finish	Terracotta-beige	Yes (arched motifs, Arabic ornament, carving)	No
Embassy of the UAE in Berlin	2000–2004	n/a	3-4	Detached building, Embassy Row	Perforated steel panels, glass	Light beige, metallic	Yes (jali – Arabic pattern, decorated portal)	No
Embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington	1888 (historic building)	n/a	3-4	Detached building, Embassy Row	Brick (Richardsonian style)	Red-brown	No (in the building itself); sculpture of the Golden Man outside	Yes (symbolic sculpture)
Embassy of Egypt in Berlin	2000-2001	n/a	4-5	Detached building, Embassy Row	Brown marble with pharaonic inscriptions	Brown-beige	Yes (papyrus, lotus, Nile wave patterns)	Yes (Nile, flora)
Embassy of South Africa in Addis Ababa	2008	5,265	2-3	Detached building + residences	Pink granite (local), tuff stone, black Zimbabwean granite, stainless steel	Pink-silver	Yes (San rock art on a metal 'veil')	Yes (African ornamentation, natural motifs)
Complex of Nordic Embassies in Berlin	1999	n/a (complex)	2-3	Complex of buildings (6 units)	Copper (226 m ribbon), wood, glass, natural materials	Copper-green, natural tones	Minimalist (copper ribbon with 3,850 lamellas)	Yes (water bodies symbolize seas; layout reflects geography; Scandinavian landscape)
Embassy of Turkey in Berlin	2010-2012	3,900 (building); 10,000 (total area)	2-3	Complex of two blocks with an atrium	Sandstone with Girih pattern, copper, glass	Beige-copper	Yes (Islamic Girih pattern, crescent and star)	Yes (concept of 'Bosphorus' – atrium as a bridge between Asia and Europe)

Notes: Source: compiled by the authors based on [44-52].

For historical buildings (Kazakhstan), the year of initial construction is indicated.

Analysis of the technical characteristics reveals several regularities:

Temporal aspect. Most of the analyzed buildings were constructed between 1999 and 2012, reflecting the increased activity in building new diplomatic missions after the reunification of Germany and the relocation of the capital to Berlin. Exceptions include the Embassy of Iraq in Helsinki (1979–1980) and the historical building of the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington (1888).

Materials and decor. All buildings with a high identification rating (4-5 points) actively use nationally colored decorative elements: Arabic ornaments and patterns (Iraq, UAE, Turkey), Egyptian plant motifs (papyrus, lotus), and African rock art (South Africa). Modern materials (perforated steel, glass, copper) are combined with traditional ones (granite, marble, wood).

Geographical metaphors. Four out of seven buildings (57%) directly use geographical or natural motifs to express national identity: water and landscape in Scandinavian embassies, the Nile in Egypt's décor, the Bosphorus concept in Turkey, and African nature in South Africa.

Scale and typology. Most are detached, mid-rise buildings (2-4 floors), ensuring the necessary representativeness while maintaining contextual relevance within urban development.

According to the experts, the analyzed buildings reflect, through their architecture, the distinctive characteristics of the countries they represent, thereby demonstrating a high level of identification with the sending state. The use of architectural means to express the unique features of the sending country within the host country significantly enhances the image of the host capital. Moreover, these buildings often become landmark points within the city in which they are located.

Our empirical research indicates that the functional model of a modern embassy is that of an information center for economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation, as well as consular assistance. The visual identity of a diplomatic mission building is essentially linked to its architectural image and symbolic content, which should create a background that evokes respect for the culture and represents the unique features of the nation [28]. A comparative analysis of the architectural solutions of diplomatic missions showed that the expression of national identity in architecture is achieved through a stable triad: compositional and spatial structure, traditional decorative elements, and symbolic engagement with the local context [29]. At the same time, each country selects a strategy for visual identification, ranging from literal quotations of historical and cultural codes (Egypt, Turkey, UAE) to a more abstract approach based on metaphor, minimalism, and associations with nature (Scandinavian countries, Kazakhstan) [30].

The results allow us to draw both theoretical and practical conclusions.

Our results align with previous studies indicating that official national (state) symbols (flag and coat of arms) are used for the visual identification of representative buildings within the urban environment. State symbols always reflect a certain state ideology understood as a system of political [31], legal, philosophical [32, 33], religious, and other views, ideas, and values [34] that express specific state interests and are materialized in the state's emblematic symbols. A symbol contains more information than any other unit of equivalent size [35, 36].

We determined that the placement of state symbols (flag and coat of arms) within the spatial composition of an embassy depends on its location within the urban fabric:

- In individual buildings and complexes, state symbols are typically presented as separate blocks within the embassy grounds, nearby, or as part of the main entrance, positioned at prominent viewing points and close to pedestrian and transportation routes;
- In inserted buildings, extensions, or superstructures, they are usually located on the main façade or integrated into the composition of the entrance group.

In addition to the primary official national symbols, unofficial yet widely recognized national symbols are also used in embassy architecture. Although these symbols are generally not legally codified, they fully complement the unique image of the country and nation, reflecting the distinctiveness of its nature, culture, religion, history, traditions, politics, ideology, and social structure [37].

Vivid examples of unofficial national symbols in the design and artistic-aesthetic decoration of diplomatic missions are the embassies of Iraq in Helsinki and the UAE in Berlin, where symbols of traditional Arab architecture and ornamentation are employed (Table 2). At the UAE Embassy in Berlin, steel perforated panels featuring Arabic patterns form the outer cladding layer of a wall set

apart from the building's glass façade by structural spacers. The main entrance is also highlighted by a richly decorated portal.

In front of the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington, D.C., there is a reduced-scale replica of the Golden Man monument, i.e., a symbol of Kazakhstan's independence.

In the next two analyzed examples, the symbolic architecture of the embassies is visible only in the finishing materials and architectural details. The façade of the Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt in Berlin is decorated with relief ornaments depicting scenes from Ancient Egypt. These include motifs of growing papyrus and lotus flowers and S-shaped patterns symbolizing the Nile. The façade ornamentation alludes to Egypt's rich traditions, culture, and history. The Embassy of the Republic of South Africa in Addis Ababa also showcases symbols of national culture and art.

Among the embassies examined, some consist of groups of buildings where the architects chose to directly relate the spatial arrangement of the structures to the geographical location of the sending country.

The first example is the Scandinavian Embassies Complex in Berlin. This design features a unified form and reflects the long-standing cooperation among the sending countries, which chose to jointly represent themselves. The spatial arrangement of the embassies of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland corresponds to their geographical positions. Furthermore, shallow artificial ponds were incorporated into the site to symbolize the waters separating the sending countries (equivalents of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea). The buildings within the complex are connected by a shared exterior façade, whose shape and color create a smooth transition from the surrounding parkland to the built environment, reflecting the natural landscape of Scandinavia. The project also includes a publicly accessible building with shared spaces for all the missions, i.e., the Community House (Felleshus), symbolizing their unity.

The second example is the Embassy of Turkey in Berlin, whose plan resembles a rectangle with a slightly protruding representative section. The spatial composition of the building consists of two wings: the eastern wing symbolizes Asia, representing Turkey's cultural values, pride, and hospitality; the western wing represents Europe, openness to the Western world, and Kemalism as the foundational pillars of modern Turkey. Both wings are connected by an inner courtyard, allegorically interpreted and symbolically named the Bosphorus. The unified pathways linking the two wings correspond to the bridges spanning the Bosphorus Strait. Moreover, the exterior façades feature decoration based on Islamic ornamentation, specifically, the girih pattern, i.e., a geometric motif in the Middle Eastern Islamic art composed of polygonal shapes. Complementing this design is an illuminated perforation in the shape of a crescent and star incorporated in the upper part of the building's main façade.

In our opinion, the design of diplomatic mission buildings requires a dual approach [38]. On the one hand, there is the vision and design of the country's representation, i.e., which aspects should be highlighted and presented, thereby formulating ideas about the state and the goals adopted by the country, and expressed through architecture. On the other hand, there is the architect's position [39, 40] who must embody all these goals in the building's architecture, materials, and environment [41] so that the structure is truly perceived as intended [24, 42]. It is important to emphasize that successful examples demonstrate the flexibility of architectural language capable of adapting to the context of the host country without losing the national image. Embassies with a high degree of identification simultaneously perform representative and integrative functions, becoming cultural mediators articulated through material and space. Embassy design can also draw inspiration from the dominant architectural styles of the host country. Such acceptance is a gesture of cultural assimilation that can be used to strengthen relations between the interacting countries [15].

Thus, national symbolism embedded in the architectural fabric becomes a crucial tool of diplomacy, operating on the levels of visual rhetoric and semantic expression. Serving as frequent points of contact between two countries, embassies are interfaces. Their visual identity must be accepted and understood by both sides, implying a harmonious unity between the two nations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Today, diplomatic missions and embassies primarily serve as centers for the exchange of cultural and economic information. Their main goal is to develop a coherent concept that combines representative, educational, and public functions, while maintaining the necessary security standards of the host country. Over time, the functional and spatial roles of embassies have evolved in response to changes in the global and social landscape. The economic and administrative roles of embassies are gradually giving way to public diplomacy functions, which increases the importance of using national symbols, geometric forms, decorative elements, and color schemes to reflect a state's identity in the architectural composition of diplomatic missions.

In the design of modern embassies, alongside their core diplomatic and representational roles, the identifying function of architecture becomes increasingly apparent. The way elements are presented (intended as symbolic representations of the country) is essential in conveying a distinct image of the sending state within the host nation. Architects and designers seek solutions that give embassy buildings features that associate them with their home country, expressing national identity through form, materials, and finishes.

Our analysis of the spatial composition and artistic-aesthetic design of embassy buildings revealed the diversity of methods and approaches used to achieve the integration and symbolic interpretation of national identity through architecture. This diversity highlights how national symbols can serve as meaningful elements in expressing a state's identity.

From the perspective of visual identification with the sending country, strategies such as constructing a new building, expanding or purchasing an existing one, and undertaking modernization offer significant potential for creating a purpose-built embassy headquarters. In contrast, reflecting national identity becomes more challenging when embassies lease office spaces (such as those used for diplomatic consulates). These premises provide limited opportunity for architects and designers to implement symbolic and identity-driven design concepts.

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