

THE RESIDENCE OF THE
GERMAN AMBASSADOR
WASHINGTON, DC

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Introduction

Overlooking Washington from a hilltop on the Embassy grounds, the residence of the German Ambassador is a striking example of contemporary German architecture, remarkable for its synthesis of traditional and modern styles. Built in 1994, it is located in a primarily residential neighborhood near Washington's historic Georgetown district. The residence was designed to be functional yet symbolic, impressive but dignified and modest – visually stunning while at the same time blending naturally into its surroundings.

The renowned German architect O.M. Ungers (1926 - 2007) designed the residence as an elegant yet utilitarian space. The building serves not only as a private residence, but also for official purposes and as a symbolic representation of modern Germany. Ungers' design evokes history with its classically inspired columns and portico, while also asserting a new vision through the concept of the square as a continuous module.



View of Entrance



View of Terrace



Left: Entrance Hall, Right: Entrance Hall

The residence is a showcase of contemporary German architecture in the United States. A symbol of cultural exchange between both countries, the natural exterior stone reflects the architectural legacy of 19th century Washington and the Greek Revival Era. The residence's

essential clarity, proportional balance and careful precision down to the smallest detail – Ungers even designed the furniture and influenced the selection of silverware and china – represent modern German architecture.



Interior

The visitor enters the ambassador's residence through a set of large square doors beneath a high-ceilinged canopy on the building's north side, just off the holly-lined circular driveway which guides the visitor to the residence from Foxhall Road.

Upon stepping inside the entrance hall, the visitor is immediately confronted with the residence's architectural leitmotif: O.M. Ungers' design of "the square as a continuous module." This pattern repeats itself in a clear, symmetrical fashion throughout the complex, with the windows, doorway and artwork – even the furniture and fireplaces – all demonstrating this harmony of design.

In the entrance hall the visitor also immediately notices the residence's simple yet bold interior color schemes. Basic black-and-white prevails, but this classic scheme is accentuated by warm browns and cool marble grays throughout, while the deepest blues, greens and reds resonate in different rooms.

Left: Floor Lamp, Ladies' Sitting Room, Right: Reception Hall





Left: Fireplace in Reception Hall with Paintings by Markus Lüpertz, Right: Library



Gentlemen's Sitting Room and Library



Sofa, Ladies' Sitting Room

Art

The tone is set in the entrance hall, where two wall paintings by Gerhard Merz, in cobalt greens and deep-pigment blacks, set horizontally parallel against one another, complement the paneled walls and marble floors, completing the room.

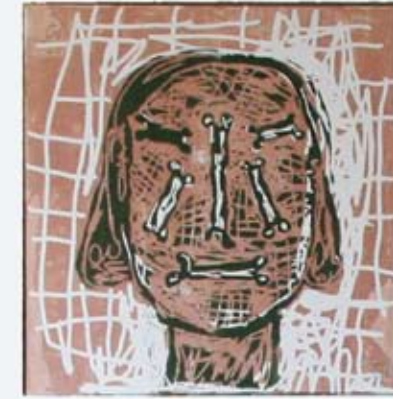


Painting by Gerhard Merz and Wall Detail, Entrance Hall

The visitor moves from the entrance hall into the main reception hall, the centerpiece of the building. The stark white walls and raised, gabled ceiling make the reception hall architecturally impressive, while the leather furniture and large marble fireplace give it an inviting warmth.

Twelve heads of Parsifal – color woodcuts on canvas from the “Men Without Women – Parsifal” series by the Düsseldorf-based artist Markus Lüpertz – overlook the hall, facing one another across the room from along the uppermost third of the two longest walls. A careful observer will notice symmetry at play here – the colorful portraits are set against imperfectly sketched grids, while the pieces themselves are arranged in a strict sequence. In this way, the artwork represents the residence’s architectural design and symbolizes its multiple functions as a formal meeting place and a private living space, but above all as an area for human interaction and cross-cultural exchange.

Paintings by Markus Lüpertz, Reception Hall





Ladies' Sitting Room

The ladies' and gentlemen's sitting rooms are located off the western side of the reception hall. The robust colors – olive green and brown – of the carpet designed by Rosemarie Trockel greet visitors to the ladies' sitting room. Trockel's corresponding ceiling painting of an olive green oval set against white also defines the intimate gathering space.

Next door, paintings by Christa Näher depicting the four elements – air, water, earth and fire – embellish the gentlemen's sitting room. In the small adjacent library, Ungers' wood paneling design, leather furniture and marble fireplace, together with the view of evergreen firs from a bank of square windows, lend this room a welcoming warmth.



Gentlemen's Sitting Room

A spacious dining room connects to the eastern side of the main reception hall. Here, Ungers' square paneling design is chest-high, with the rest of the wall spaces brought to life by the colorful paintings of Bernhard Schultze (1915 - 2005).

The L-shaped dining area can be subdivided by Simon Ungers' (1957 - 2006) red lacquered partition. Its height corresponds to the doors and windows, its width to the grid in the floor, and its overall design reflects the square motif of the building itself.



Dining Room, Paintings by Bernhard Schultze



Folding Screen by Simon Ungers (extended), Dining Room

Grounds

Another striking aspect of the main reception hall is its focal point, the massive glass wall facing the southern terrace. Large glass doors invite the visitor outside onto the terrace. There, a magnificent, sweeping view unfolds from the highest point of the Embassy grounds. At the visitor's feet is a four-tiered landscaped hill. This part of

the garden is accessible by staircases at each end of the terrace, which lead to a rectangular reflecting pool at the base of the hill. Then, interspersed by footpaths, the landscaped hill blends seamlessly into the original topography and natural vegetation.



View of Reflecting Pool



Cherry Tree in Bloom on the Residence Grounds



Left: Garden, Right: Pond

Beyond the Embassy's grounds lie the charming colonial brick houses of residential Washington. This leafy neighborhood known as The Palisades, located near Washington's historic Georgetown district, dips out of sight towards the banks of the Potomac River and gives way to the skyline of Rosslyn, Virginia, rising up from across the river. To the southeast, the tree-tops of the Embassy grounds frame the Washington Monument, located in the heart of the city's government district.

After this panoramic vista, the most impressive aspect visitors to the terrace will notice is how green the Washington area is – at least during the summer months, when the dense vegetation obscures much of the view. Of course with the change of seasons, the summer greens give way to the radiant reds, oranges and yellows of the fall foliage, before the winter months render the treetops bare, revealing even more details along the skyline through the leafless branches.



Architect's Commentary

The residence of the German ambassador to Washington, D.C., should not only serve a functional purpose, although functionality is not to be underestimated; it is also a cultural institution and an example of national architecture and artistic qualities. It is a visual testimony of a nation's technological standards and artistic achievements. The exterior appearance and interior design are a calling card with which a country presents itself to its host country.

The search for an appropriate image led to a combination of the traditional and the modern that corresponds with a country, which lives in the presence of its history, yet also is dedicated to a new, progressive spirit.

This building should exemplify that general forms and typologies from architectural history can easily be combined in a rational, modern way adequate to its time and function. To achieve this, traditional building forms and elements are alluded to, though not in a



Left: View of Portico, Right: View from Reflecting Pool

motivistic sense or as citations and copies of historical models, but rather via an essential architectural language reduced to elementary forms. In this way one does not only fuse together old and new elements to form a complex whole. It is rather a merging and joining of individual building parts and architectural parts such as walls, arcades, stairs, facades and rooms. The result is not the impression of a free-standing house, a single villa, but of a synthesis of volumes and masses which resembles more of a compact building complex.

The residence is not only a representational building, just as it is not only a functional building for everyday use. Looked at this way, one may find a visual image for an ambassadorial building that reaches beyond pure functionality to define an expression representative of its country of origin. In this sense, the aim was to find an architectonic expression for the residence of the German ambassador that would be associative of the characteristics of the country to be represented.

– O.M. Ungers

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