

# U.S. Embassy

The new Annex (right) connects to and complements the curving gestures of an existing 1915 Baroque building (left).



By Lydia Lee  
Photography by  
Werner Huthmacher

# Finland

**Coupled with a renovation, Moore Ruble Yudell  
crafts a new chancery as a beacon of light in Helsinki**



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Informal gathering spaces were created within the top-floor dormers of the 1915 Baroque building (opposite and bottom left), with a natural maple-slat ceiling wrapping the original pitched ceiling. A curved channel glass facade (below two) filters daylight and emits a glow at night while providing privacy. Modern office and lobby interiors (bottom right) feature pale finishes with beautiful views of the Gulf of Finland.

Any architects designing an important embassy building in Finland—homeland of design icons Eero Saarinen and Alvar Aalto—had better bring their A-game. Inspired by classic modernism as well as the country's dramatically icy landscape, architecture firm Moore Ruble Yudell brought a crisp, contemporary simplicity to the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki, with interior renovations of two existing structures and the addition of a new building.

"Finland is a wellspring of modernism; it's one of the original sources of modern design, and the country is really design-conscious," says John Ruble, the partner who led the design vision. "We were extremely interested in how the building could respond to its physical and cultural context."

The nearly 40-year-old firm, which has offices in Santa Monica, California, and Shanghai, has had eight other U.S. embassy or consulate project commissions to date. So the firm was well versed in the security and strict operational requirements of such projects for the client, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations. This particular embassy was more difficult, though, since the program needed to be spread across three buildings, each with a unique character. For years, the embassy has occupied two existing buildings

on a three-acre site along the Gulf of Finland waterfront: a 1915 Baroque building that was initially built as apartments, and the original U.S. Embassy Georgian-style brick building from 1939 (in the photo at below left, the 1939 building is obscured behind trees and the right side of the new building).

In this \$114 million chancery project, Moore Ruble Yudell was charged with upgrading those two existing buildings to current security and safety standards, as well as creating a new addition linking to the older building from 1915. The brick embassy from 1939 received relatively minor touches, but the design team had to completely gut and rebuild the interiors of the 26,000-square-foot 1915 office in order to modernize the workspace. In that oldest building, the topmost floor was rebuilt as an open multipurpose area, and dormers lent themselves well to informal gathering spaces. The renovated interior of the building from 1915 has been certified Platinum in LEED for existing buildings, the first U.S. embassy to receive this designation.

#### Creating dynamic effect by catching the sun

To defer to the historic 1915 structure, the design team left its electrical and mechanical services exposed in some areas. Accent walls were



#### U.S. Embassy Finland

Architect **Moore Ruble Yudell Architects & Planners**

Client **U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations**

Where **Helsinki**

What **A 29,000-square-foot new building, plus renovation of existing structures**

Cost **\$114 million**

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Interiors have a Finnish feel with Baltic birch-clad walls and Finnish soapstone floors (below and opposite, left). Birch groves provided inspiration for the granite patterns on the southwest elevation of the new building (opposite, right two).

finished with TexSton interior plaster for a less polished surface. On the top floor, a natural maple-slat ceiling from Rulon gives the traditional pitched ceiling and dormers a modern edge.

Occupying the small, irregular space between the two older buildings is the curved new building, referred to as the Annex, which connects to the older of the two buildings. The three-story, 29,000-square-foot new building is a striking modern counterpoint to the historic structures. The side that faces the neighborhood is clad in white brick, and was inspired by the curved wall of Alvar Aalto's own architecture studio dating from 1955, about five miles away. To make the facade more dynamic, the design team added white granite "fins" of small blocks of gray granite that catch the low rays of the sun as it moves across the horizon, creating a pattern that is reminiscent of Finland's ubiquitous silver birch trees. The facade that angles toward the gulf is clad almost entirely in channel glass, which allows filtered daylight through while maintaining privacy. A glass-walled lobby bridges the Annex with the original offices. Unusually large for an embassy lobby, it was designed as a flexible space that can be used for gatherings. According to Ruble, this semi-public space innovation has been successful.

The modern interiors of both new and old buildings are bright, with white or pale finishes. To underscore a sense of place, the walls feature Baltic birch, and floors are Finnish soapstone in both the new building and the connected structure. Workspaces, which are largely open-plan with a limited number of private offices, are furnished with Knoll AutoStrada workstations, Knoll task seating, and iconic Saarinen Executive chairs and Womb chairs. Healthy materials include Marmoleum flooring throughout in lieu of carpet, as well as Vesta ultra-low-emitting-formaldehyde particleboard.

To orchestrate a highly efficient and functional embassy across three buildings, Moore Ruble Yudell needed to be practical and sensitive to the project budget, while delivering within a fairly compressed time frame. "Embassy projects have a huge learning curve, but the work is extremely satisfying," says Ruble. "As architects of an embassy, we are faced with a variety of requirements, but that comes with the opportunity to make an important civic statement with a high-performance contemporary building." ■



### Key Design Highlights

The renovation of the building dating from 1915 is certified Platinum in LEED for existing buildings, with a modeled energy-use reduction of 38 percent from prior to the renovation.

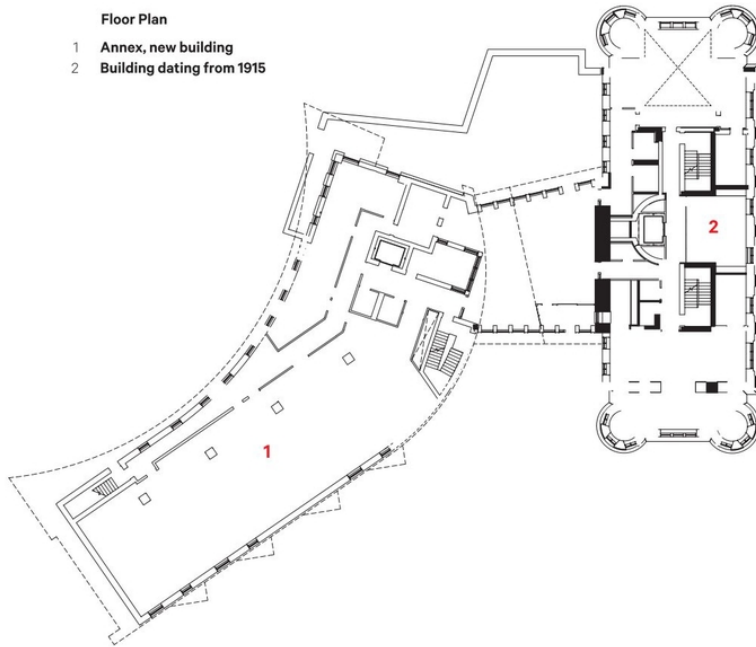
Local materials of Baltic birch and Finnish soapstone create a subtle sense of place.

A wood-slat ceiling system gives a fresh edge to vintage ceilings.

Exterior brickwork has thin fins that catch the light, and the patterning is a nod to the silver birch trees that surround the building.

### Floor Plan

- 1 Annex, new building
- 2 Building dating from 1915



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