Portal to the Past

Partnership revitalizes former chancery

By Martin K. Thomen IV, vice consul, U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul

If form follows function in architecture, then as diplomacy changes over time, its buildings, too, transition from the places for private, closed-door meetings to places able to host multi channel conversations involving social media, intense press coverage and diverse public services.

Thus, Palazzo Corpi, the former chancery of the U.S. Embassy in Istanbul and later the site of the consulate general here, has undergone major physical changes but remains a tangible link to U.S. diplomatic history. Currently, the property is being converted into a luxury hotel complex in a public-private partnership with a local developer, a move that will preserve an historic structure but make it useful for new purposes. The complex is slated to open early this year.

Palazzo Corpi is an Italianate villa constructed in the 1870s in the historic Beyoğlu district of what was then the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople. The U.S. government leased the villa as a legation facility and residence and then purchased it from the Corpi family in 1906 for use as the embassy and official residence of the U.S. ambassador. With the move of the embassy to the new capital city, Ankara, in 1937, the villa became the U.S. Consulate General until its relocation to a new facility in 2003.

Tall tales surround Palazzo Corpi, which is said to have been built for a mistress of Ignazio Corpi, a Genoese shipowner, and to be haunted; its purchase by former U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire John G.A. Leishman may have been arranged during a poker game. Rumors aside, the building itself is impressive, a place of

A photo of Palazzo Corpi shows the chancery circa 1915. *State Department photo*

A restoration team member repairs gold-leaf crown modeling. *Photo by Scott Kilner*

A digital rendering of the project as it may appear upon completion. *Photo by Bilgi Holding*

beautiful woodwork, etched glass windows, a grand marble staircase and wall paintings of mythological scenes.

As one of the first real estate purchases by the U.S. government to house a diplomatic mission, the building is unquestionably imbued with history. That is why in 2004 the U.S. Congress required the government to maintain ownership of the property even after relocation of the consulate general. The site symbolizes the U.S.-Turkey relationship, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire and founding of the new republic to Turkey's accession to NATO.

But the building changed with modern-day demands for more consular services and space, security upgrades and new infrastructure requirements. Ornamental wall paintings and decorations were plastered over, and crown molding was cut to accommodate electrical lines. Working conditions in the building deteriorated over time, with employees squeezed into cramped quarters with poor infrastructure. To cope with the facility's space constraints, the processing of immigrant visas moved to the U.S. Embassy in Ankara in 1998, but the structure continued its decline.

The facility lacked setback from the street and thus failed to meet security standards. That problem was tragically underlined in the 2003 terrorist attack on the neighboring British Consulate, in which several of that consulate's employees were killed.

The preservation of the palazzo presented planners from the State Department's Office of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO) with a challenge and an opportunity. Responding to the congressional mandate, OBO signed a 51-year lease with a development company in 2008 to restore and expand the complex as a luxury hotel. Once completed, the project will include more than 160,000 square feet of internal space and house a hotel with 84 rooms, conference facilities, a club bar and two restaurants. Recognizing the key role Senator Ernest F. Hollings played in ensuring the facility's preservation, the complex will also include office space for the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.

In its work, the development company preserved historic details of the palazzo, which is protected under Turkish historic preservation laws. Experts worked for months to restore and renew such unique characteristics as the hand-painted scenes on its ceilings and walls, and its intricate plaster moldings and woodwork.

Two other historic structures on the site, the former chancery and annex, are also being repurposed. The annex was built as an apartment building during the same era and was later the home of the "Constantinople Club" until it was purchased by the U.S. in 1949 as consulate office space. It will now house the hotel's suites and a café.

The chancery, an extension of the palazzo built in 1910, was designed by a Washington, D.C., architect who also designed the Washington, D.C., mansion that became the Turkish Embassy in 1932. It is now the residence of the Turkish ambassador.

The developers worked closely with OBO's Architectural Design branch and the Cultural Heritage Program and Consulate General Istanbul, coordination that has allowed the CG Istanbul management team and front office to follow the work closely. CG Istanbul Management Officer Jonathan Mennuti said the Department had taken the time to find a developer "who shared the State Department's vision of making the space useful and available in a reasonable and economical way."

Department employees who worked in the palazzo remember it fondly. Former Consul General Scott Kilner, whose first and last postings were in Istanbul, recently led a small group on a tour of the building. Several Locally Employed Staff members accompanying Kilmer photographed their old offices, now being converted into high-end hotel rooms, and reminisced.

As Consular LE Staff member Nuray Oktaybaş said, "The best part of working in the building was its location. You were close to everything, including schools, shopping and other foreign missions. Working in the building, you felt tied to history."

Because the lease allows the U.S. government to use the renovated complex for certain official functions, Palazzo Corpi will be given new life in the history of U.S. diplomacy, continuing to play a role in Mission Turkey's engagement with Turkish audiences. ■

From left, Istanbul Management Officer Jonathan Mennuti, OBO Cultural Heritage Program Manager James Wenzel and local project manager Mehmet Çelik admire Palazzo Corpi's main foyer from the marble staircase.

Photo by Aydan Yurdakul