Original drawing of garden façade by architect Henrik Bull, 1910.
or most of its hundred-year history, Villa Otium has been one of the single most important meeting places for Norwegians and Americans. It has hosted thousands of receptions, many thousands of meals, and an unknowable number of small, informal meetings. It is a landmark in Oslo and a cultural icon as well, since it was designed by one of Norway's leading industrialists of the early 1900s.

My wife Eleanor and I have appreciated the legacy of the building's history, and the responsibility for preserving this landmark, but we also have been able to enjoy Villa Otium as a family home. Our sons have visited, as have many other family members, friends, and official visitors from the United States. That the building succeeds at both functions so well, as a public showcase and as a place offering peace and privacy, is a testament to the building's design.

As you will read, prominent Norwegian architect Henrik Bull and client Olsen did not always see eye-to-eye, but that the building functions so well, since it was designed by one of Norway's leading architects for one of Norway's leading industrialists of the early 1900s.

We thought the 100th anniversary was worth noting, so we have asked several experts to contribute to this book covering their specialties. Architectural historian Jane C. Loeffler, author of The Architecture of Diplomacy, has written about the villa's garden, a critical part of the original design. A book like this requires a great deal of work, so we would like to thank the authors, Public Affairs Officer Tim Moore and the Public Affairs staff at the U.S. Embassy, and our Residence Manager at Villa Otium, Kristina Boraas. We would also like to thank all of those who have contributed by providing private pictures, sharing their memories, and looking through archives for us. Mette Margrethe Bjørum, May-Britt Iverson, Lars Mjærum, the Swiss Embassy in Oslo, the British Embassy in Oslo, the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, the William J. Clinton Presidential Library, and former U.S. Ambassador to Norway, Robert D. Stuart, Jr.

We hope this book will entertain and inform, re-kindle memories, and start conversations, much as Villa Otium itself has done for these hundred years. Living in this magnificent home has been a rare privilege for my wife and me; it will be the centerpiece of our memories of our years in Oslo.

Ambassador Barry B. and Eleanor G. White
Oslo, summer 2012

For ord

or de mest av sin hundre år lange historie har Villa Otium vært av de viktigste møtestedene for nordmenn og amerikanere i Norge. Det har vært verte for hundrevis av motkongresser og måltider og et ukjent antall mindre, uformelle møter. Huset er et landemerk i Oslo og også et kulturlig ikon, ettersom det ble tegnet av en av Norges ledende arkitekter for en av Norges ledende industrialister tidlig på 1900-tallet.

Min kone Eleanor og jeg har vurdert bygningens historie og ansvaret for å ivareta dette landemerket, men vi har også satt pris på Villa Otium som vårt hjem. Våre sønner har besøkt oss her, det har også mange andre familiemedlemmer, i tillegg til offisielt bevisket fra USA. At bygget fungerer så godt ved både offisielle og private arrangementer, som et utstillingsvindu ved offisielle anledninger og også som et sted som gir fred og privatliv, er et testament til bygget's utforming. Som du kan lese i denne publikasjonen, var ikke den prominente norske arkitekten Henrik Bull og byggheren Hans Olsen alltid enige om ting, men kanske bidra deira 'fruktbare frikkjønset' med noe essensiel for den endelige utformingssuccess.


Ambassadør Barry B. og Eleanor G. White
Oslo, sommer 2012
nown as Villa Otium, the American ambassa-
dor’s residence in Oslo is among the most prized of U.S. properties overseas. It is remarkable not only as an architectural landmark, the most significant residential work by leading Norwegian architect Henrik Bull (1911), but also as a diplomatic asset that has defined America’s presence in Norway since its purchase by the U.S. government in 1923. The history of how that presence has evolved over the years mirrors efforts by the United States to establish and maintain representation in a rapidly chang-
ing global landscape. Thus the story of one Norwegian house turns out to provide fascinating insight into a little-studied chapter in American diplomatic history.

U.S. Envoy establishes Legation in Oslo

This story does not begin in 1908 when Norwegian Consul General Hans Olsen returned from St. Petersburg to create Villa Otium as a bucolic retreat for his family in the most fashionable part of Oslo (or Kristiania, as it was known until 1925). It begins before that in 1906, a year after Norway declared its independence from Sweden. It was then that Herbert H. D. Pierce presented his credentials to the Norwegian foreign minister and became America’s first Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to take up residence in the Norwegian capital.

Pierce lived and worked in two furnished rooms at the Victoria Hotel until he rented a small house at Kronprinsens gate 17 and then the adjacent house at Kronprinsens gate 19. Records show that on March 27, 1909 he signed a one-year lease establishing the American Legation at that location.1 The one-acre property consisted of two plastered brick houses (built c. 1880) and a modest garden. One house became his residence and the other provided office space for the tiny chancery. The biggest advantage to the site was its location directly opposite the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its proximity to other government offices and the Royal Palace. Another asset was its access to four streetcar lines. But the houses were small and ill suited for representational purposes. There was only one bathroom in the main house, for example, and both houses lacked modern amenities, including electric lighting, modern plumbing, and good central heating. Even the location was not optimal. The area was no longer residential, “the poorer part of the city” abutted the rear of the property in the direction of the harbor, and large office buildings almost entirely blocked its view of the fjord.2 With a landlord who refused to make needed improvements to the property, the premises quickly fell into disrepair.

For the next fourteen years, American envoys Laurits S. Swenson and Albert G. Schmedeman failed to secure the funds needed to improve the rental property, buy it, or move elsewhere. Instead, they managed only to extend a short-term lease with a reluctant landlord who eventually sold the entire property to a developer, who threatened the Legation with eviction. All the while, the local rental market evaporated and housing prices soared. As other nations purchased distinguished properties in more fashionable neighborhoods of the capital, the American Legation continued to operate out of a run-down rental property.


Villa Otium, U.S. Ambassador’s Residence, Oslo, south façade.
Congress heeds call for better U.S. embassies

The situation in Oslo was not unique, but rather a symptom of a larger problem that Congress had not yet addressed—how the United States should be represented overseas and how to support that representation. The U.S. government provided little support for its representatives overseas at that time. Many envoys rented or purchased houses or apartments (including office space) at their own expense, and nearly all had to supplement meager allowances with funds of their own.

In 1909, for example, the United States owned only five properties overseas—in Tangier, Seoul, Tahiti, Peiping and Mexico City and Tokyo. The situation in Oslo was not unique, but rather a symptom of a larger problem that Congress had not yet addressed.

Within months of arriving in Oslo in 1905, for example, British Minister Sir Arthur Herbert had purchased a six-acre property known as Villa Frognaes as a home for the British Legation. Built in 1859 for the banker Thomas Hefe, the villa was recognized as one of the finest private residences in the city. Although the British Foreign Office strongly recommended a rental property, Herbert argued that buying the villa would strengthen Great Britain’s ties to Norway and the British Treasury approved the purchase early in 1906.

Heeding concerns raised by the AEA, in 1911 Congress passed the first legislation funding the government purchase of land and buildings for diplomatic purposes. Known as the Lowden Act, after its key sponsor Rep. Frank O. Lowden, the bill authorized a maximum of $500,000 to be spent annually and limited the amount that could be spent in any one place to $150,000. The first appropriations under the act were in 1914 for acquisitions in Mexico City and Tokyo.

Legation searches for new quarters in Oslo

In 1916, Minister Schmedeman learned that his landlord was willing to sell the leased Oslo Legation property to the U.S. government. When the State Department failed to respond to his alert, the landlord sold it to Norwegian shipping magnate A. F. Klaussen, who gave the Legation a year to vacate.

Schmedeman searched in vain for a place to rent or buy. “I am endeavouring to find another suitable locality, but it seems to be almost impossible at present,” he wrote in 1917, “as there is not even a room vacant in this city.” Reporting that the influx of war refugees had further strained an already tight real estate market, creating a shortage of some 4,000 houses in Oslo, he noted that it was no longer possible to rent without buying an interest in a property and that property values had more than tripled in two years. Still, he suggested that for a sum between $100,000 and $150,000, the U.S. government might still find a decent home for its Legation.

As it turned out, wartime shortages provided the Legation with a reprieve. Klaussen could not obtain building materials for the concert hall and hotel that he sought to build on his property, and his plans were further thwarted when he learned of plans to build a municipal concert hall and theater that would impel his own proposed development. So he extended the Legation’s lease into 1920 and raised the rent. He made it clear, however, that he would refuse to sign another lease.

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The house was directly across the street from the new Frogner Park in the city’s finest residential neighborhood and boasted the most up-to-date amenities, including electric light and hot water and steam heat. Bryde offered to sell it for $280,000.

Notified by Bryde’s lawyer of his plans to visit him in Washington, Wilbur J. Carr, Director of the Consular Service, asked diplomats Hugh Gibson and Robert Woods Bliss to examine photos and plans of the Oslo property and report back to him. Both were unimpressed. Gibson, who was then Minister to Poland, replied: “The builder of this house was evidently a man with a great deal of taste, most of it bad… If he gave it to us, I should be opposed to letting our flag fly from any such monstrosity as this.” He went on to say, “I should think that one of the first things we ought to try to do is at least give the impression of having some taste in choosing places for our representatives to live, and I would rather wait a little longer and get something worthwhile.” Bliss, chief of the Division of Western European Affairs, concurred, adding: “After looking at the photographs of Mr. Bryde’s house, I can readily understand why he wants to sell it (even to such an easy mark as a foreign government) at a loss of nearly 50% and his furniture at a sacrifice of over 60%. I think that any minister who might be obliged to live under such a roof, surrounded by such examples of ‘taste’, would soon become a dippy diplomat.”

As the State Department prepared to decline Bryde’s offer, Oslo newspaper Tidens Tegn announced the sale as a fait accompli. Schmedeman denied the claim, blamed Bryde for the false rumor, and sent a letter to Washington with the clipping and a published drawing that depicted Bryde’s house as a walled fortress—which it resembled. In his letter, Schmedeman also noted that as a result of subsequent denials published in the newspapers other available properties had come to his attention. One such property was Hans Olsen’s villa, which he described as “one of the most attractive homes in this city.” Olsen, he said, was a very wealthy man who did not need to sell his house to anyone. “As it was built before the war,” he added, “I believe the price to us would be very reasonable.”

On March 2, 1921, Congress passed an Act making appropriations for the Diplomatic and Consular Service and enabling the State Department to proceed with long-awaited purchases in cities including: Athens, Belgrade, Brussels, Bucharest, Budapest, Monmouva, Oslo, Prague, Rome, Vienna, and also Canton, Hankow, and Amoy. The Act reiterated a maximum of $150,000 to be spent at any one post and created a Commission to oversee expenditures. This was the green light Schmedeman had been waiting for. By that time, prices had fallen considerably in Oslo, so it was actually a favorable time to buy. He submitted a list of five options for the new Commission’s consideration, including the Olsen property at Nobels gate 28.

Legation weighs its options, including Olsen villa

On ten acres of wooded parkland, the Olsen villa was among the largest and most beautiful in Oslo. Built by Consul General Olsen in 1911 and first occupied in 1912, it was made of white plastered brick trimmed with granite and copper and topped with an impressive black tile roof.
city center but only a short ride away by streetcar. While Schmedeman said it would provide the United States with the “finest and best Legation property of any foreign government” in Oslo, he worried that upkeep of the expansive grounds might prove expensive. This was a concern to him and to his successor, Laurits Swenson, who feared paying too much out of pocket to maintain the extensive grounds. It is most likely the main reason why both were initially so cautious about the property. Also, the original asking price for the entire property was approximately $180,000, well above the budget allowance.

Another option was the Mathiesen house at Parkveien 43, across from the official residence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Palace Park. The house was built in 1896 (but modernized to include central heating) and included a half-acre of grounds and a garage. Its asking price, at $80,000, was reasonable, but it was not well configured for use as a legation—the minister would have had to live on the upper two floors above a first floor chancery. A third option was the Rådet residence, home to the King’s Chamberlain who entertained there on a grand scale. Located opposite the Palace Park, it had cost to build and further disadvantages had mounted in the years since it was first rented. The asking price was around $96,000, which the Legation considered to be excessive given the cost of needed repairs. Furthermore, its urban milieu was no longer the asset that it had once been with smoke and dust already cited as a nuisance. And although he objected to its design that reminded him of a ship, Schmedeman also included the Bryde house at the reduced price of $130,000, a fraction of the $450,000 Bryde claimed it had to cost to build and furnish two years earlier.

Before the Commission could act on these recommendations, Laurits Swenson took over as the American Minister in Oslo. Schmedeman had served in that position between 1911 and 1913 and returned in November 1921 to replace Schmedeman. Swenson quickly deemed his living situation “embarrassing” and decried the uncertainty of his personal straits and ever more anxious to sell, Bryde had again reduced his asking price to something around $115,000, including all the furniture. Swenson also added yet another option, ship owner Ivar An. Christensen’s “French chateau” at Frederik Stangsgate 22. As the State Department evaluated each of the numerous options, more than a year passed. During that time, Swenson finally dropped the Bryde house from consideration after learning of leaks and other structural problems from its unhappy tenant, the Brazilian Minister; he also dropped the Tidemand property after deciding that it could not accommodate a chancery. By early in 1922, he was convinced that the Olsen offer was the best of all.

At that time, the Olsen property consisted of an entire city block bounded by Bygda alley, Nobels gate, Solheimgata and Kristinelundveien, with no internal cross streets. Although Olsen balked at subdividing his property, he subsequently agreed to offer a parcel consisting of the house and about a third of the grounds (11,280 sq. m) for the reduced price of approximately $125,000. That still left the house with what Swenson described as plenty of wooded grounds and views of the fjord to the south and the highland country to the north. Swenson reported that Olsen had assured him that the remaining portion of the property would eventually be sold only for “high class residences.” Olsen informed him, too, that other buyers (including the French Government) were interested, although he much preferred to sell to the United States.

Legation buys Olsen villa in 1923

At its 1923 meeting, the Commission finally approved purchase of a Legation property (unspecified) in Oslo and asked Robert Woods Bliss to inspect the options. En route to Stockholm to become Minister to Sweden, Bliss stopped in Oslo. After seeing all of the houses with Swenson, he declared the Olsen property the only one worth owning. “From what I learned,” he wrote, “I believe that if the house and grounds could be purchased for $125,000 the Government would obtain a bargain.” He sent his message by telegram rather than by despatch to speed up action because Olsen had announced plans to lease for an extended vacation in Algiers and it was urgent to act prior to his departure. Replying two days later, the Department authorized Swenson to offer a contract.

After securing legal approval from the Norwegian Government and from his own legal advisors, Swenson executed the purchase contract on September 20, 1923 to buy the Olsen house and a 13,854 sq. m portion of the grounds (about 3.5 acres, slightly more than earlier proposed) for the sum of $125,000. Mrs. Olsen, the legal owner, retained the rest of the property for lots to be sold later. Swenson also entered into a supplementary agreement with Mrs. Olsen concerning the eventual opening of city streets within the parcel. That agreement, accompanied by a map showing new roadways at Eckersbergs gate and Hafrsfjordgata, stipulated that the U.S. Government would not have to pay costs associated with the opening of those streets.
Local newspapers celebrated the purchase, and Swenson proudly reported to Washington:

We have acquired the finest place in Christiania at a very reasonable figure. I have received many compliments from our having been fortunate enough to secure so suitable and handsome a Legation home. It will give us added prestige in Norway. The press, which has given prominent space to our financial difficulties, speaks of it as a special courtesy to the United States.24

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At Bliss’s suggestion, he contacted Geoffrey Dodge, of the Paris firm of Jacques Bodart, Inc., for estimates. Dodge had recently furnished the Stockholm Legation and Bliss was pleased with the results. Swenson estimated that it would cost about $25,000 to provide the new legation with all its needs, about $15,000 to make it “presentable.”25

Citing the very high prices in Norway, Swenson was urged to or-

fer furniture, fixtures, china, silverware, linen, and other necessi-

ties.26 Citing the very high prices in Norway, Swenson was urged to or-

ferrish relations subsisting between the two countries.24

Local newspapers celebrated the purchase, and Swenson praised the wood panel for its “beautiful lines” and its other assets, including an orchard, a lily pond with fountain, and good tennis courts. He was keen to retain the open land, which he had appar-

ently been renting personally from Olsen.26

Nearly two years passed, and with building activity already proceeding to the south, Swenson requested $75,000 to buy the adjoining property to the west. A new street to the west would pass within twenty-four feet of the house, he warned, and the proposed new buildings might “cheapen our property.” He indicated, too, that the only reason he had not bought all of the Olsen estate in 1923 was because the asking price for the entire property had exceeded the legal limit of $150,000 set by Congress.

Keith Merrill, Executive Secretary of the newly created Foreign Service Buildings Commission, denied Swenson’s initial request saying that Oslo “cannot be said to be such an important post as to demand further immediate at-
tention.” Merrill’s reasons were more practical than po-
litical. “Oslo is not an unhealthful past with snow for nine

months of the year and cool summers,” he wrote, “there are not the problems of dust and noise from the traffic

which in hot countries necessitate a fairly large holding of land on every side of our buildings in order that the

windows may be kept open throughout the year for the

comfort of our officers.”28

When Mrs. Olsen died in May 1929, her heirs notified the Legation of their intention to dispose of the remaining land immediately. Swenson again appealed for funds. But the Foreign Service Buildings Commission refused to spend more for purchases in Western Europe, arguing that its priorities were to provide first for “the more

Among the finest and most impressive of the purchases under the Appropriations Act of 1921, the Olsen villa represented a landmark in terms of America’s efforts to better the living and working conditions for its diplomats overseas. The Government did own other important properties at that time, but most were acquired as gifts, including Paris (1917), Bangkok (1920), and London (1921). The Legation in Oslo and the Legation in Prague (the former Schoenborn Palace, purchased in 1925) were among the few distinguished buildings purchased outright under the first enabling legislation.

The Foreign Service Buildings Commission’s first major projects were in Tokyo, Paris, and Ottawa and all shared three notable attributes: all were designed by American architects and purpose-built for use by American diplomats; each significantly raised the profile of America’s presence in a major capital; and each introduced a new building type—the chancery as a designated office building entirely separate from the residence. This was a significant departure from past practice because most diplomatic activity until that time had centered on residences.

In 1931, President Roosevelt introduced a plan for government reorganization that moved the Foreign Service Buildings Commission and its operations to the State Department. Frederick “Fritz” Larkin was named to head the small Foreign Service Buildings Office, and the Commission became his advisory body. In 1937, Leland W. King moved over from the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury to become Larkin’s field construction supervisor.
ist and social reformer Florence Jaffray “Daisy” Harriman as Minister to Norway in 1937. Mrs. Harriman’s memoir of her stay in Oslo describes her pleasure with the Legation as Minister to Norway.

Those renovations were not to be enjoyed for some time, however, because Mrs. Harriman hastily departed Oslo on April 22, 1940 and escaped to Sweden as the Nazis invaded and occupied Norway. The Norwegian Government had departed two weeks earlier—eventually setting up temporary operations in London. The American Legation did the same, closing its property in Oslo on July 15, 1940 and re-opening in London a month later. Mrs. Harriman returned to Washington. In 1941, Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, Jr. took over once again as the American Minister to Norway, based in London. A year later, he was succeeded in 1944 by Lithgow Osborne, who moved back to Oslo on May 31, 1945 after the war ended. But a palatial residence with a tiny office annex no longer met the needs of the Embassy. In his very first outline of post-war priorities, Larkin recommended a new embassy office building for Oslo.33

The post-war embassy boom

After WWII, America’s need for overseas office space soared because of its expanded world role. Not just the State Department, but many other government offices and departments sought space in embassies abroad. As the list of clients grew, so, too, did the need for quasi-public spaces devoted to libraries, auditoriums, and galleries—all designed to further embassy outreach in foreign countries. Under the aegis of the Department’s newly reorganized Office of Foreign Buildings Operations (FBO), the building program widened its scope and focused on the design and construction of government-owned office buildings. At the same time, those buildings grew in size and complexity. As chief architect and later as director of FBO, King was largely responsible for the new architectural outlook that embraced modern architecture and its openness as an apt metaphor for democracy at the height of the cold war.

The first postwar projects included embassy office buildings in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, Rio de Janeiro, and Havana. King hired young American architects Ralph Rapson and John van der Meulen to design the three Scandinavian projects in 1951. They designed a six-story transparent glass cube raised on pilotis (stilts) for the embassy office building downtown. Saarinen to design the embassy office building in Oslo. Instead of a newed design directive, commissioned celebrated modernist Eero Saarinen to design the embassy office building in Oslo. Instead of a cube, Saarinen chose to design a four-story triangular-shaped building that mirrored the sharply angled site. He chose a green-black granite chip aggregate for the exteriors and called attention to the main entrance with a projecting marquee. With two additional corner entrances that led to consular offices on one side and the United States Information Service offices and library on the other, the conveniently accessible chancery welcomed the public and gave the United States a prominent presence when it opened in 1959. The historic Olsen villa, only ten minutes to the west, remained the residence of the Ambassador—a traditional complement to the modern office building downtown. Security becomes top priority

When Saarinen designed the Oslo Embassy, security was not a major design constraint. The only real threats to U.S. embassies at that time were fire, theft, and espionage. But the situation changed rapidly as angry mobs targeted embassies in the late 1960s and 1970s. FBO responded to the growing need for security by adding perimeter planters, bollards, and fences to existing embassies and by finding ways to delay and curtail access to vulnerable buildings. In Oslo, side entrances were closed and all visitors passed through screening at the main entrance. It was difficult to retrofit the building for security, however, because it was bounded on three sides by busy streets and sidewalks. Terrorist attacks on U.S. facilities in Beirut in 1983 prompted an overhaul of FBO design policy and the introduction of the “Inman standards” for embassy architecture. Not only did new embassies have to avoid the stilts, wide expanses of glass, and screens that served as a metaphor for democracy at the height of the cold war.

Embassies in Stockholm and Copenhagen were well underway, but plans for Oslo were halted when King lost his job over political and design differences in 1953. A year later FBO, with a renewed design directive, commissioned celebrated modernist Eero Saarinen to design the embassy office building in Oslo. Instead of a cube, Saarinen chose to design a four-story triangular-shaped building that mirrored the sharply angled site. He chose a green-black granite chip aggregate for the exteriors and called attention to the main entrance with a projecting marquee. With two additional corner entrances that led to consular offices on one side and the United States Information Service offices and library on the other, the conveniently accessible chancery welcomed the public and gave the United States a prominent presence when it opened in 1959. The historic Olsen villa, only ten minutes to the west, remained the residence of the Ambassador—a traditional complement to the modern office building downtown. Security becomes top priority

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typhied earlier designs, but all were also supposed to provide a 100-foot setback from vehicular traffic, high perim-
eter walls, and far fewer windows. For new projects, this led to the acquisition of much larger sites often located much farther from city centers. It also meant that most existing embassies could no longer meet security requirements.

In the aftermath of terrorist bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, Congress earmarked $17.5 billion for the construction of 150 new embassy compounds by 2018. Responding to a congressional mandate that ranked security above all other priorities, the State Department again reorganized its building program in 2001, created the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO), and embraced standardization as a way to control costs and speed production of urgently needed facilities. The new Standard Embassy Design (SED) prototype allowed OBO to produce scores of sprawling new em-
bassy compounds in less than ten years. In capitals from Antananarivo, Bamako, and Conakry, to Ouagadougou, Panama City, and Yaoundé, the Department was able to move more than 20,000 people into safe and more secure workplaces, a huge accomplishment by any reckoning. But the downside of the SED was its imposing presence and remote location. Diplomats found it increasingly dif-
ficult to conduct business when isolated in fortified fa-
ter walls, and far fewer windows. For new projects, this led

Encouraged by the London process and prodded by a report from outside experts who called for better embassy architecture, OBO announced a new Design Excellence Program in April 2010.35 The initiative aims to improve America’s overseas presence and promote good-
will through designs that are not only secure, but also thoughtful, attractive, and environmentally responsible. The goal is to locate embassies in urban areas, where access to public transportation, will meet Norway’s strict

Villa Otium still plays key role

Ironically, as security has increasingly prevented the ex-
sisting embassy office building from hosting events that bring Americans together with Norwegians, the ambas-
sy office building in Oslo. In 2008, under new leadership, OBO took the first step in that direction by announcing a design competition for a new embassy in London to be built on a five-acre urban site. The second step was choos-
ing a winning design by KieranTimberlake that is open, visually accessible, sustainable and energy-efficient.

As it turns out, the new embassy compound in Oslo is among the first designed to meet new Design Excellence goals. Unlike the standard SEDs that were design-build projects that minimized architectural input, the new American embassy (NAE) in Oslo features the work of prominent American architects—Einhorn Yaffee Prescott Architecture and Engineering (EYP) and Carol R. Johnson Associates, landscape architects. The design team also in-
cludes local Oslo architects, Spor Arkitekter. And unlike so many recent projects, this one is well located in Huseby not far from central Oslo.

Under the leadership of Ambassador Barry B. White, both the Embassy and the architects have worked closely with local planners to ensure a smooth transition. The primary goals have been to maintain the park-like setting of the site and to tailor the architecture to its context. The pro-
gram calls for construction of a chancery office building, a Marine Guard residence building, three entry pavilions, and an underground support annex covered with a green roof complete with trees. The low-profile buildings will utilize local building materials, including slate fieldstone, white granite, and copper, and they will occupy only 14% of a ten-acre site that features a meadow, stream, rocks and trees—most of which will be retained and even en-
hanced. To further the ‘green’ initiative, architects will enhance. To further the ‘green’ initiative, architects will

To further the ‘green’ initiative, architects will

New Oslo embassy reflects focus on “design excellence”

Fortunately, OBO had begun to transform the SED into something better adapted to locale soon after plans were announced to replace the obsolete and insecure em-

Ambassador’s Residence, Oslo, entrance façade and parking courtyard with recently improved landscaping and resurfacing.

U.S. Embassy, Bamako, Mali by Integrus, Architects (2006). This is an example of Standard Embassy Design (SED) developed in aftermath of terrorist attacks on U.S. embassies in 1998.

Ambassador’s Residence, Oslo, entrance façade and parking courtyard
Not only is the Villa Otum an important landmark to Norwegians, but as this history reveals, it is also a prized diplomatic property to Americans. For that reason it was named to the recently created Secretary of State, Register of Culturally Significant Property, an honor bestowed on only twenty out of more than 3,500 U.S. properties worldwide. America’s overseas presence has changed in ways that could never have been anticipated when it was acquired in 1923. The Bryde house, with its fortified stance and menacing façade, is a more apt metaphor for contemporary embassy architecture. Fortunately, our diplomats chose the Olsen house instead—in a gesture of good taste and goodwill that still underscores the close relationship between the United States and Norway in 1923 as the historic house celebrates its centennial.
The street name Nobels gate is linked to the noted Nobel family industrial dynasty. The street was called Frognergate until it was renamed in 1901 to honor of Alfred Nobel (1833-1896), the Swedish industrialist who created the Nobel Prizes. Probably by chance, Nobel’s niece Ester Wilhelmina Nobel and her husband Hans Olsen bought the property at Nobels gate 28 and built a stately villa there a few years later. Location must have been important: the lot was in one of Oslo’s best neighborhoods and extended to the area’s main street, Bygdøy allé. The property was called Otium, after an old summer house built when it was still a rural area.

The homeowner

Hans Andreas Nikolai Olsen (1859-1951) bought the property and announced an architectural competition in 1909. It was unusual for a private person to call such a competition for the design of his own home, something that underscores his level of ambition. He wanted a variety of proposals to choose from to assure that the villa would be one worthy of his position and stature. Olsen was a businessman whose background included being Vice President in charge of Russian/Azerbaijan operations of one of the world’s largest oil companies in the early 20th century.

Villa Otium, Art Nouveau, and Architect Henrik Bull

By Nils Anker, Director of the Norwegian Art Nouveau Center

The homeowner Hans Andreas Nikolai Olsen (1859-1951) bought the property and announced an architectural competition in 1909. It was unusual for a private person to call such a competition for the design of his own home, something that underscores his level of ambition. He wanted a variety of proposals to choose from to assure that the villa would be one worthy of his position and stature. Olsen was a businessman whose background included being Vice President in charge of Russian/Azerbaijan operations of one of the world’s largest oil companies in the early 20th century.


Henrik Bull, first prize draft for Villa Otium villa, Oslo, 1909.

Photo courtesy of The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design

Photo by Robert H. Loeffler
1900s. The oil company, Naftaproduktions AB Bredrema Nobel, was owned by the Nobel family, and Olsen later married Ester Wilhelmina (Mina) Nobel (1873–1929), who was Alfred Nobel's niece. Olsen was also named Norway’s Consul General in St. Petersburg, in 1906. After a number of years in Russia, he became concerned about growing civil unrest, with strikes and terrorism, and returned home to Norway and Kristiania, later called Oslo. (This text uses the name Oslo even though the change was not official until 1925). Olsen and his wife sold off their interests in the family businesses in Russia, so they had ample means for a grand building project. Olsen quickly assumed new duties in Norway and the capital. He briefly served on the Oslo city council, but his business-related posts on the boards of the Norwegian industrial group Norsk Hydro and in the Swedish Wallenberg sphere were probably of greater importance.

The location of the property was decisive. Oslo’s Frogner area. Olsen bought the country retreat Otium, and downtown Vika neighborhood and a ferry to the Hengeviken area. Olsen developed the neighborhood quickly, with intense construction of apartment buildings and villas, a trolley to the neighborhood was developing quickly, with intense construction of apartment buildings and villas, a trolley to the neighborhood and a park.

Nobels gate 28 has great historical significance in Norwegian terms, and it is important for cultural heritage and as an example of the Art Nouveau, or ”Jugendstil” in Norway.

Early 20th century architecture

The Art Nouveau style arose as a reaction to Historicism, which had dominated the second half of the 19th century. The foundation of the new style was laid by the Arts and Crafts Movement of the 1870-80s, led, among others, by William Morris in England, who wanted to fill people’s daily lives with quality products made by craftsmen as a way of preventing mass-produced, industrialized products from taking over completely and wiping out esthetic values.

The Art Nouveau style spread quickly through Europe and the rest of the world, taking on regional character. It originated largely in Nancy and Paris in France and in Brussels in Belgium. Architect Victor Horta’s ”Maison Tassel,” completed in Brussels in 1891, with its organic forms, is regarded as the first true Art Nouveau building. The style had many names, such as Jugendstil in Germany and the Nordic countries, after the German periodical Jugend (Youth) which was established in 1894. In the United States, architects Louis Henry Sullivan (1856-1924) and designer and glass artist Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) are among the best known exponents of the style.

The style’s regional character differed sharply between southern and northern Europe. The northern European style was distinguishable by a more geometric expression, while southern European version was better known for its organic, free forms and a greater use of symbolism. Despite differences, common traits are discernible.

For norsk designere og arkitekter var stilen en konvensjon eller en trend som de kastet seg over. For andre var det et klart ønske om å formidle skjønnhet og troen på at våre hverdagsværelser, legender og myter, folkekunst og nasjonal/regional og organisationer kan påvirke menneskets sinn, kunsten og arkitekturen skulle gi livskvalitet til menneskene ut fra ideen om at vakre omsynen kunne skape harmoniske mennesker.


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Many designers and architects immediately embraced the style, seeing it as a clear expression of a wish to create architecture could enhance people's quality of life. They believed that the human mind is influenced by nature: Animals and plants served as inspiration, often linked to historical motifs, myths and legends, folk art and national or regional architecture. Light was another key component that created translucency based on the era's latest technological breakthroughs. Windows featured small panes and the widespread use of stained glass with both ornamental and figurative themes.

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Henrik Bull (1864-1953) is regarded as one of Norway's most significant architects. He was from an upper middle class family of senior government officials. His paternal grandfather and great-grandfather were both pharmacists in the west coast city of Bergen, while his father was the respected architect Georg Andreas Bull (1829-1917) and his uncle was the world-famous violinist Ole Bull. His mother's family included Supreme Court justices and was part of the capital's upper class. He grew up in comfortable circumstances, with a father who had a prominent architectural office.

Bull is known for a long list of public projects, such as the National Government Building (1898-1906) and the Historical Museum (1897-1902), both in Oslo. Both buildings had to be fully conversant with all materials, such as stone or textiles, metal or wood. The style's most distinctive examples are characterized by a unified approach to volume, space creation and function, combined with traditional and new materials often used in experimen- 

tal ways through new building techniques. The organic expression is seen in the curved lines of the exterior façades and interiors. The decorative ornamentation techniques were likely to consist of shapes derived from nature: Animals and plants served as inspiration, often linked to historical motifs, myths and legends, folk art and national or regional architecture. Light was another key component that created translucency based on the era's latest technological breakthroughs. Windows featured small panes and the widespread use of stained glass with both ornamental and figurative themes.

One characteristic of the style was that the architects themselves shaped the entire building, including its in- terior and décor elements. This is called Gesamtkunstwerk or Total Work of Art in the history of design and architecture. Everything about the building—from interior design, furniture, lighting fixtures, down to the smallest interior detail—creates a whole. Architects also had to be fully conversant with all materials, such as stone or textiles, metal or wood. The style's most distinctive examples are characterized by a unified approach to volume, space creation and function, combined with traditional and new materials often used in experimen- 
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Norway as it was gaining independence from Sweden, which was a hot topic at the time. Facades and interiors were decorated with references to Norwegian history, often combined with more abstract, organic shapes. Bull first studied at the Christiania Tekniske Skole, a technical college in Oslo, and then studied architecture at the National Academy of Craft and Art Industry. After completing his studies in Norway, he went on to study at the Royal Technical College in Berlin (1884-1887). A year before he returned home, he won the design contest for the Paulus Church, which was completed in 1892 in the Grünerløkka neighborhood of Oslo. In 1888, he set up his own office in the Norwegian capital and quickly gained a reputation for his ability to combine the new, modern trends with the strict simple forms of classical architecture, something clearly seen at Villa Olium. He was inspired by a building's function, and was happy to 'steal' elements of that function for its decoration. At the Historical Museum, for example, he borrowed ornamentation and decoration from ancient and medieval times, reinterpreted them, and used them to decorate the museum. He was eager to show off the treasure chest Norwegian cultural heritage offered for building up the young nation's identity after the union with Sweden was dissolved in 1905. Around the turn of the century, Bull participated in a variety of competitions, won numerous large, important projects, and designed everything from grave memorials to coins. He even designed the candy bar Lohengrin, still on sale in Norway today. He also designed a number of stately homes for wealthy families in the Oslo area. He participated in designing Norway's 1914 Jubilee Exhibition in Oslo, which marked the 100th anniversary of the end of the Norwegian-Danish union. The exhibition may have been as important to building Norwegian identity and self-confidence as the polar expeditions of national heroes Roald Amundsen and Fridtjof Nansen.

Arkitektkonkurranser


Eksteriøret

Architect competition

Olsen invited the city’s leading architects to enter a design competition for his new house. Bull’s proposal was probably closest to Olsen’s wishes and ambitions, but still required adjustment. Bull’s draft was the most modern of the proposals, somewhat compact in form and with touches of Neo-Baroque style.

The building was to be placed on a rise on the large property, offering maximum sunlight, a good view, axial placing and terraces extending to Bygdøy allé. Bull wanted the building to be understood in connection with its gardens, to give a complete interplay between architecture and nature. He blended the house, gardens, rooflines, and trees into a unified whole. In the design process, Bull made numerous simplifications, including giving more emphasis to the main body of the building.

The exterior

The building’s southern exterior is characterized by its symmetry with the garden. It is split up by bay windows, balconies and a loggia. Each wing has covered terraces, a practical solution that can also be seen as a nod to nature. The northern façade is much simpler and stricter in design, with big windows.

The main façade uses the asymmetry associated with the Art Nouveau style to make the design more alive and varied. The shallow bay windows and protrusions from the façade underscore the closed shape of the body of the building. The front door is placed asymmetrically, framed by granite columns and covered by a beautifully shaped glass canopy, creating a gracious entrance.

The roof is exceptionally beautiful, with gently curved shapes and flat, glazed black roofing tiles. It is two stories high, which is typical for a mansard, sometimes called a French Roof, with a narrower roof surface on top and a broader angle on the lower section to allow greater use of the loft area. The roof type was named after the French architect François Mansard (1598-1666).

Three chimneys rise from the roof, which is topped with an ornately decorated copper roof ridge cap. This is a continuation of 19th century wrought iron ornamentation, but in Art Nouveau style. As decoration, pairs of buck goats face off against each other to test their strength. Goats are a traditional symbol of fertility and wealth.
In this case, it might be tempting to interpret them as a symbol of strength and courage when looking at the owner’s future projects. Goats are also used in decoration for not squandering one’s allotted time on debauchery and frivolity.

The residence has been in the best of hands since, and with its current owner, it is ready for another hundred years. The 100-year-old is in good shape, and, with its current American owner, it is ready for another hundred years. The owner, it is ready for another hundred years.

The window design is also typical of the period. In the facade facing the garden, the windows have small panes at the top and large rectangular panes at the bottom. The windows facing north have a more vertical character, and the top and large, rectangular panes at the bottom. The window design is also typical of the period. In the facade facing the garden, the windows have small panes at the top and large rectangular panes at the bottom. The windows facing north have a more vertical character, and the top and large, rectangular panes at the bottom.

The interior

The interior is a story in itself, reflecting Bull’s wide and diverse experience as an architect. The main hall is the focus of the building. In a draft design painted as a watercolor, Bull showed the hall as a high-ceilinged room with a large fireplace, wainscot panel walls and delightful Art Nouveau details. Bull was an award-winning furniture designer, but the interior featured not only pieces that he designed but also Baroque pieces that Olsen and his wife may have brought home from Russia to use in their new home. The hall was intended as a welcoming area, and possibly a smoking lounge. The initial design was subsequently revised. The final design gave the room a more severe character, without the clear Art Nouveau expression of the earlier drafts. The entire ground floor of VillaOtium was primarily devoted to entertaining, with dining room, salons, men’s lounges and a library. The second floor was designed with bedrooms and private areas, as was the norm for great houses of the time.

According to the late Norwegian Art Nouveau specialist Stephan Tschudi-Madsen (1923-2007), who once interviewed Bull, the architect designed features of the interior decor. The ceiling in the main salon has organic patterns associated with the Art Nouveau, while the dining room ceiling has a much more geometrical pattern. Despite variations within, the building represents a complete Art Nouveau work, with evident international roots linked to the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland and the German and Austrian Jugendstil.

In 1923, Olsen and his wife sold the property to the United States government and in 1924 they moved to Stockholm. In 1923, Olsen and his wife sold the property to the United States government and in 1924 they moved to Stockholm. The interior featured not only pieces that he designed but also Baroque pieces that Olsen and his wife may have brought home from Russia to use in their new home. The hall was intended as a welcoming area, and possibly a smoking lounge. The initial design was subsequently revised. The final design gave the room a more severe character, without the clear Art Nouveau expression of the earlier drafts. The entire ground floor of Villa Otium was primarily devoted to entertaining, with dining room, salons, men’s lounges and a library. The second floor was designed with bedrooms and private areas, as was the norm for great houses of the time.


In 1923 solgte Olsen og hans kone eiendommen til den amerikanske regjeringen og i 1924 flyttet de til Stockholm. Eiendommen har vært i de beste hender siden, og innenfor utvalgt av et velkommen og mulig rått. Den endelige løsningen var hallen en langt strengere karakter, uten det klare jugendstilsytet som utkastet viser. Hele Villa Otiums første etasje var i hovedsak tilrettelagt for representasjonsformål og spisestue, sørger, hemmets og biblioteket. I annen etasje ble det tilrettelagt med soverommer og private rom, på mange måter slik konvensjonene var for de gamle hensynsråd og slott.


Top of the stairway railing, in the private quarters on 3rd floor.

Petit salon.

Detail over door in the 2nd floor private quarters.

Main entrance glass canopy, view from below.

Facade detail.

Facade detail.
Dentil molding under roof (from terrace).

Detail of roof with attic window.

View of northern windows. Main entrance to the right, kitchen entrance to the left.

Photo by Phillip Slattery (2012)

Love story

Love story

Love story

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Love story

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Love story
companies often fielded delegations of 30 to 40. Emanuel this time, Hans Olsen bargained alone while the other In the extensive negotiations over oil sales to Europe at Diplomat for Norway

Hans Olsen did not support Norwegian independence from Sweden, but the two countries dissolved their union in 1905. The next year he was called on to be Norway’s Consul General in St. Petersburg. He hesitated, believing that he had neither time nor energy for the position. But eventually he gave in and accepted the prestigious, unpaid posting.

In Kristiania

They hired a cargo vessel, the Aegir, to carry their household goods between the two capitals. The most basic items were delivered straight to Drammensveien 49, where the family was to stay at first. The rest went to the newly purchased Otium property on Nobels gate. At Otium stood a group of turn-of-the-century structures—a one-and-a-half-story man house and two outbuildings. To the north was Solheimgata, with Nobels gate to the east, Bygdøy allé to the south and Kristinelundveien to the west. Old photos show the lot being used for vegetable production.

One daring idea Hans Olsen had was to merge Nobel Oil with Standard Oil. In 1903 he took the initiative and opened talks, and a valuation of the Russian company followed. Payment was to be made in Standard Oil shares in the event of a deal. But the talks came undone when the appraisal showed the Kexholm would end up owning too much of the American company.

All the work and travel wore Hans Olsen out, in part because he suffered from insomnia. The solution as he saw it was to step back and wind down. In the summer of 1908 he moved from St. Petersburg to Kristiania with Mina and their three children: Alf, Edla and Leif.

To Kristiania

The wedding took place in 1897. Hans Olsen and Mina were close from the start. Hans Olsen even before he became involved in the family business. In 1896 he wrote a letter to her mother, Edla, and explained his feelings—which had been plain enough to all—and wondered if he might ask for Mina’s hand in marriage. Edla wrote quickly back: Come and pick up your answer! The wedding took place in 1897.

Diplomat for Norway


Otiumdiplomat


Han et brev til Minas mor Edla, der han fortalte om sine følelser (alle visste om forholdet) og om han kunne be om Minas hånd? Edla skrev kjært tilbake: Kom og hun svarte! Bryllupet sto i 1897.

Diplomat for Norge


Olje diplomat


Til Kristiania

Hans Olsen deeply enjoyed being away from the Nobel company’s daily operations, but he was no idler. In addition to managing his own family’s money he looked after the Nobel family’s interests in foreign companies.

Living in Kristiania was more expensive than in St. Petersburg. In Russia everything was tax free. In Norway the Olsen family paid the tax collector a gooey sum—40,000 Norwegian kroner those first years. Hans Olsen claimed later that if he had known what it would cost to live in Norway he would have never left Russia. The family quickly became part of the capital’s “Upper Ten,” as he called the elite. While preparing for the move during a visit to Kristiania in 1906, he was invited to talks with Prime Minister Christian Michelsen and Foreign Minister Jørgen Løvland. On September 26, 1906, King Haakon VII received Olsen at the Royal Palace.

Enrollment in the “Upper Ten” came with obligations. The young nation needed money for just about everything. Often it was raised by way of subscriptions, with the most prosperous citizens contributing large sums. Hans Olsen sat on the collection committee for the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, so there was no avoiding a subscription. He was invited to talks with Prime Minister Christian Michelsen and Foreign Minister Jørgen Løvland. On September 26, 1906, King Haakon VII received Olsen at the Royal Palace.

The budget was shattered, too—850,000 Norwegian kroner was more than the Olsen’s intended to spend, though that price included a park with a water-lily pond and tennis court. According to the National Registry, the family moved in on April 29, 1912.

Did Villa Otium echo with laughter as Hans Olsen frolicked with the children? Did he play soccer with his sons in the vast yard? According to Edla, his daughter, that’s not the way it was. In 1980 she recalled that the father did play with her when she was small. But as she and her brothers grew, Hans Olsen considered it his duty to be strict. No play, no expressions of loving care. Walking home from school, Edla would go out of her way to avoid streets where she might meet him, since she didn’t fancy his interrogations about her day at school.

Otium rising

“It was a big work apron. The Otium project cost a great deal of frustration and hard work,” Hans Olsen said later. It caused him to fall out with the architect, Henrik Bull.

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Mina Nobel

It was the children’s mother, for the most part, who took care of them. Mina Nobel Olsen was an active woman with wide-ranging enthusiasm.

In the summer of 1912, right after the move, she arranged gardening courses for children, hers included. Every afternoon but Saturday, young friends of the family and other children from the city’s public and private schools were welcome to tend their own “good-sized” patches of earth at Villa Otium with skilled guidance. The children dug and fertilized, planted and weeded. All they had to bring was a big work apron.

Oselottet ble videre sprengt, 850 000 kroner var mer enn ekteparet hadde tenkt seg. Selv om summen inkluderte parkanlegget, med liljedam og tennisbane. Familien flyt- tet inn 29. april, 1912.


Mina Nobel

Then came the harvest. As newspaper Aftenposten reported in September 1912: “It is during these days that the children return home loaded with a rich harvest of delightful flowers, large cabbage heads and vegetables of all kinds.”

The major flower show at Frogner in the summer of 1914 featured only two private exhibitors. There was the stately Skaugum farm, later a royal estate, and there was Mina Olsen. She showed off “beautiful collections of cut Georgines and perennialsc.” In addition to the gardening, the autumn, at Sangerhallen, he drew praise for “well developed” chrysanthemums. In addition to the gardening, the autumn, at Sangerhallen, he drew praise for “well-developed” chrysanthemums. In addition to the gardening, the autumn, at Sangerhallen, he drew praise for “well-developed” chrysanthemums.

The year 1914 was supposed to be celebratory for Norway, marking a century since the signing of the constitution and the tenth year as an independent nation. A jubilee on the banks of Frogner Creek, just north of the Villa Otium gate, reminded Norwegians of what their country was all about. The grand exhibition symbolized the optimism then prevalent, and the eagerness to take on new ideas. Norway’s economy was beginning to take off after difficult years of stagnation and crisis. World war and negotiations

Alas, World War I soon arrived. In 1915, Foreign Minister Nils Claus Ihlen asked Hans Olsen to negotiate a supply agreement with the British government for the import of strategic industrial goods to Norway. By then, the Norwegian kroner, the “delightful garden on Nobels gate” had been expanded to 20. One money-raising effort was a garden party at Villa Otium. For four weeks in advance, Mrs. Olsen answered the door between 10 a.m. and noon to sell tickets. And other refreshments were served to orchestra music. Interessente kunne i

For weeks in advance, Mrs. Olsen answered the door between 10 a.m. and noon to sell tickets. Mrs. Olsen also chaired the board of a “children’s creche” on Fosseveien, east of the Aker River. It had room for 12 infants, but in 1913 the board worked to expand its capacity to 20. One mone- tary-raising effort was a garden party at Villa Otium. For four Norwegian kroner, the “delightful garden on Nobels gate” could be visited from 5 to 7 p.m. on Saturday, May 31. Tea and other refreshments were served to orchestra music. For weeks in advance, Mrs. Olsen answered the door between 10 a.m. and noon to sell tickets.

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The legendary Oslo Mayor Rolf Stranger had once
in a blazing stove: “Now he gets your letter,” said Hans Olsen.

Tidens Tegn wrote: On his 60th birthday, the newspaper Tidens Tegn wrote:
On his 60th birthday, the newspaper Tidens Tegn wrote: when he died in March 1951.

Aftenposten aften, Aug. 9, 1912.
Aftenposten aften, Sept. 9, 1914.
Aftenposten aften, Sept. 3, 1914.

märite Olsen väggers, ingen avstånd. Selvkapet blev överfört
till Angela Persil, som hade funnet olje i Iran och trengt
ett distributivningsseelskap. Hans Olsen mente sig grundigt
kurt av ledelsen i Angela Persil, som overfor hem hovedet
att kunna hjälpa till att få av avtalet. Slik fikk dette selvkapet tå-
gang till BPs 530 utgångsställe, 535 jernbanevagnar, 1 102
kjøretøy, fire lektere og 650 hester.

Salg og flytting
Høsten 1923 inngikk familien en avtale med Den ame-
rikanske legasjon om å selge Otium. Mina Nobel Olsen
var den formelle eieren og den som solgte. Barna hadde
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The garden around Villa Otium was designed to link the building with nature, to provide a tasteful, integrated background for the building's architecture. The overall aim was to create a property evoking the ancient otium, or ‘park meant for pleasure’.

The garden from 1911-1924

Villa Otium was built in 1911 by Hans Andreas Olsen, a Norwegian Consul General in St. Petersburg, and his wife Ester, the niece of Alfred Nobel. Due to Olsen’s business success and marriage, the family was able to settle down in one of the nicest neighborhoods of the city. They invited the city’s leading architects to take part in an architectural competition for a new residence. Henrik Bull won the 1st prize and was commissioned to design the house and the garden around it, with instructions to meld them into one unit. Together, the house and garden were a majestic sight, each strengthening the other.

The original site was much larger than what you see today. The formal garden was almost double the current size, and in addition, there was an English-style landscaped park to the west. The garden was botanically rich, with many exotic plants visiting the formal garden from the greenhouse. The formal garden was terraced, and close to the house there was a beautiful curved wall and slope as a major feature in the design. The square centerpiece in the lawn, as shown on the plan, was never built, however.

No proper detailed plan of the original garden has been found, but early photos show us the greenhouse, a well-maintained garden with exotic plants and a well-developed system of pathways. The whole park measured 38,479 m².

The garden from 1924-1941

In 1923, the Olsen family sold the property to the United States government. In order to lower the asking price, the Department of State acquired only a portion of the entire park area. The garden was thus reduced to 13,854 m², the same size as it is today. The Olsens later sold the remaining parkland for apartment development.

Historically, the garden was a counterpoise to the wilder landscape surrounding it, but today the building and the formal garden lack an English park for contrast. The greenhouse, located where the apartment buildings in Eckersbergs gate stand today, used to be the focal point of the formal garden. Cutting it off removed the focal point and diminished the artistic effect of the garden. In addition, several of the pathways turned into blind alleys, removing a logical reason to walk along them and also reducing the artistic impact.

The garden today

The plan from 1941 shows the brutal way Eckersbergs street cut off the original design. Some pathways end up at a fence and much of the garden’s botanical richness had disappeared, with the removal of the greenhouse. The beautiful but simple curved wall from Bull’s design was included in the plan.
changed into a dull, more rectangular terrace wall in 1970, and the driveway in front of the house was expanded at some point to make room for more and larger cars.

Even though several of the original and most significant design elements have disappeared from the garden, the basic outline of Henrik Bull’s landscape can be seen today. Villa Otium is a distinguished and majestic residence surrounded by mature trees and spacious garden areas, unusual in a dense urban area like Oslo, eminently worth preserving.

The garden today

Throughout the year, U.S. ambassadors host many events to bring Norwegians and Americans together. Everyone who visits the residence gets a good view of the garden from the house. When the weather is good the door to the terrace that leads out to the formal garden is open and the important connection between the house and garden becomes obvious to the visitor. It is difficult not to be impressed by the place as a whole.

Today the garden’s main event is usually the annual Independence Day celebration, to mark the 4th of July. More than a thousand people attend this event each year, filling the terrace and the formal garden with tents, food stands, conversations and warm feelings. This is the moment when the garden proves its worth, and repays all the care that has gone into it.

The garden in the future

A new master plan for the site was created in 2008. The plan assessed the existing vegetation and measured it against the land use projected for the future. It called for extensive restoration and more functional land use, and it introduced an updated design for the formal garden, to make it more attractive again.

This plan is sensitive to the original landscape, but seeks to maximize the garden’s functionality. It restores plants and paths where possible and incorporates new elements to reflect the new shape of the property and its use as the American ambassador’s residence. The plan suggests that the formal garden could culminate in a green sculptural element—a pergola— with various subtly lit climbing plants, and sculptures and vistas to both sides. The plan makes the central axis appear more subtle and elegant. Restoring the garden will bring an interesting change to the area at the rear. There the intention is to give the garden a new focal point and better possibilities for circulation, so that the garden will be more attractive and interesting for visitors.

Ambassador Benson K. Whitney and his wife Mary initiated the project in 2007 and the plan was designed by the Norwegian landscape architects Østengen & Bergo AS in 2008.

In 2009, the Courtyard in the front was restored in accordance with the master plan, marking an important step towards a modernized and carefully restored property. Trees have been planted on the property for Arbor Day since 2008, also in accordance with the plan, and the Embassy is committed to following the plan as funds allow and nature requires.

The landscape architects who drew up the new master plan determined that the garden needed a central feature with strong aesthetic character, that could act as a focal point for those experiencing the garden. By creating new, connected walking paths, removing barriers and introducing surprising elements, the garden’s intensity could be reinforced, partially taking over the function of the rural park that surrounded the property earlier.

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Garden path.

Villa Otium garden before improvements.
Ambassador David B. Hermelin invited then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, President Bill Clinton and Yasir Arafat over for kosher hot dogs. They were all in Oslo for a commemoration ceremony of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in 1999.

Photo courtesy William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

Ambassador Benson K. Whitney and Mrs. Mary Whitney with three of their four children, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the residence in 2007.

Photo by U.S. Embassy Oslo.

Former Vice President Al Gore, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate 2007, at a luncheon at the Ambassador’s residence honoring the Nobel Peace Prize winners.

Photo by U.S. Embassy Oslo.
Then Vice President and Mrs. Bush hosted a dinner at the residence in June 1983. Here Vice President Bush with then Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the late Svenn Stray.

Former President Jimmy Carter with then Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik and then Norwegian Ambassador to the United States Knut Vollebæk at a reception in 2003.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton with Ambassador Barry R. White and Mrs. Eleanor G. White, at the residence on June 1, 2012.
Then Prince Harald honored by a group of Native Americans at Villa Ottem in 1963.

Ambassador Louis A. Lerner (left) with actor Richard Kiel in the Villa Ottem garden, approx. 1978.

Ambassador Mark Evans Austad with Sammy Davis Jr. (hugging a fan), 1962.

George Marshall at Villa Ottem in 1953, when in Norway to accept the Nobel Peace Prize.
The annual Independence Day garden party at Villa Otium gathers the U.S. Embassy’s contacts and friends for an afternoon of barbecue and socializing, here from 2011.

Jack Waitz receiving the first annual Ambassador’s Award from Ambassador Barry B. White at the Independence Day celebration in 2011 on behalf of Jack and Grete Waitz (the noted marathoner who passed away in April of 2011). The Ambassador’s Award is given to people whose work promotes closer bonds between Norway and the United States.

Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg having a hamburger with Ambassador Benson K. Whitney at the Independence Day party in 2006.

The annual Independence Day celebration fills the garden. The Marine Corps presenting the colors in 2012.
The Ambassador’s Award 2012 went to Norwegian businessman Kjell Inge Røkke, who went to the U.S. as a young man and credits that experience with setting him on the path to success.

Mrs. Eleanor G. White speaking to the guests attending the 2012 Independence Day celebration at Villa Ottem.

Director General Merete Fjeld Brattested, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Secretary General Bente Angel-Hansen, (MFA), Ambassador Barry B. White, Minister of Defense Espen Barth Eide, and Deputy Director General Unni Kløvstad, (MFA), at the Independence Day celebration, 2012.


Young Ferdinand eyeing the popcorn, Independence Day 2012.
Photo by U.S. Embassy Oslo

Norway Cup participants from Norway, Afghanistan and USA, summer 2011.

Minister of Environment Erik Solheim talking to students at an event honoring the Will Steger Foundation, 2008.

Culinary professional Scott Givot cooking with students as part of the Embassy’s Language for Leaders program in the Villa Ottun kitchen, 2010

Astronaut Buzz Aldrin talking to students at Villa Ottun in 2007.
Residents of Villa Otium

1912 – 1924  Hans Andreas Olsen

1924 – 1930  Laurits Selmer Swenson
A native of Minnesota. Professor and son of Norwegian immigrants. He served as the U.S. Minister to Norway twice. He was first appointed by President Taft, serving from 1911 to 1913. He served a second term from 1924-1930 after being appointed by President Calvin Coolidge. First U.S. Ambassador to reside at Villa Otium.

1930 – 1935  Hoffman Philip
A New York native and career Foreign Service Officer. Appointed by President Herbert Hoover to serve as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Norway. He also served this same role in Colombia, Uruguay and Iran. Following his time in Norway he served as Ambassador to Chile.

1935 – 1937  Anthony J.D. Biddle, Jr.
A native of Pennsylvania. Appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935 to serve as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Norway. He remained in Norway until 1937, when he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Poland. He escaped Poland after the German invasion and made his way to London where he served as the U.S. Ambassador to several European governments in exile, including Norway.

1937 – 1940  Florence Jaffray Harriman
A native of New York. Suffragist and social reformer. Known throughout her life as "Daisy." Appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937 to serve as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Norway. Credited with arranging the escape of numerous Americans and several members of the Norwegian royal family after the Germans invaded Norway.

1945 – 1946  Lithgow Osborne
A native of New York and career Foreign Service Officer. Appointed Ambassador in 1944 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Resident first in London near the Norwegian government in exile. When the government of Norway returned to Oslo, Osborne transferred the Embassy to Oslo in May 1945.

1946 – 1953  Charles Ulrick Bay
A resident of New York. Founded Bay Petroleum in the 1930s before becoming a high-ranking intelligence official in the Office of Strategic Services. He was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Norway by President Harry Truman.

1953 – 1957  Lester Corrin Strong
Native of Washington, D.C. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Dwight Eisenhower. Served as president of the National Cultural Center, forerunner to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

1957 – 1961  Frances Elizabeth Willis
A native of California and career Foreign Service Officer. She was the third woman to enter the U.S. Foreign Service and was appointed by President Dwight Eisenhower to serve as Ambassador to Norway. She also served as Ambassador to Switzerland and Sri Lanka.

1961 – 1964  Clifton Reginald Wharton, Sr.
A native of Maryland and career Foreign Service Officer. First African-American diplomat to become an ambassador by rising through the ranks of the Foreign Service rather than by political appointment. When appointed as Ambassador to Norway by President Kennedy, he also became the first African-American Foreign Service Officer to become chief of a diplomatic mission.
Residents of Villa Otium

1964 - 1969  Margaret Joy Tibbetts
A native of Maine and a career Foreign Service Officer. Appointed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson to serve as U.S. Ambassador to Norway. In 1964 she hosted Martin Luther King's visit to Norway when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

1969 – 1973  Philip Kingsland Crowe
A native of Maryland. Former newspaper reporter. Appointed by President Richard M. Nixon to serve as Ambassador to Norway. He also served as Ambassador to Sri Lanka, South Africa and Denmark.

1973 – 1976  Thomas Ryan Byrne
A native of Pennsylvania and career Foreign Service Officer. Appointed U.S. Ambassador to Norway by President Nixon. Later served as U.S. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

A resident of Virginia. Former U.S. Air Force officer, NASA Astronaut, businessman and engineer. He is, along with his two Apollo 8 crewmates, one of the first three persons to have left Earth's orbit and traveled to the Moon. Appointed U.S. Ambassador to Norway by President Gerald Ford.

1977 – 1980  Louis Abraham Lerner

1980 – 1981  Sidney Anders Rand
A native of Minnesota. Ordained Lutheran minister and President of St. Olaf College. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Jimmy Carter.

1982 – 1984  Mark Evans Austad


1989 – 1993  Loret Miller Ruppe
A native of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Volunteer and civic leader, who was the longest-serving Director of the Peace Corps. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President George H.W. Bush.

1993 – 1997  Thomas A. Loftus
A native of Wisconsin. Politician, consultant on developing democracies and professor. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Bill Clinton.
Residents of Villa Otium

1998 – 2000  David B. Hermelin
A native of Michigan. Philanthropist and entrepreneur. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Bill Clinton.

A New York native. Journalist, stock broker, women’s health advocate and co-founder of the United States-Japan Foundation. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Bill Clinton.

2002 – 2005  John D. Ong
A native of Ohio and business leader. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President George W. Bush.

2006 – 2009  Benson K. Whitney

2009 - 2012  Barry B. White
A native of Massachusetts. Jurist, businessman and active in community organizations. Appointed Ambassador to Norway by President Barack Obama.

This floor plan from 1909 is a draft copy, titled “Suggestion number one”. There is no record of how many versions were considered during the design process, but this plan is very close to the final arrangement. The simplicity and artistry of the plan suggest that it was intended to convey the aesthetics of the house, rather than serve as an actual blueprint, although what would become the final design has incorporated nearly all of the elements shown here. Certain interior walls have been displaced by a few feet, doorways added or hallways lengthened, but the dimensions and the overall layout appear to be nearly identical. This floor plan also reflects Norwegian society in the early 1900s. Not only was spelling different in 1911 (e.g., Bull used the French “ç” where modern Norwegian would call for an “s”, and words like “tjener” and “gjest” here are spelled with an “i” rather than the modern “j”), but so were the names and functions of the rooms. The main entry, as it is known today, was literally then the “wind catcher”. And Bull included in the design scheme both a men’s retiring room and an entire room exclusively at guests’ disposal. Even the Art Nouveau style associated with this time period is reflected in the writing on this plan.

Kristina Boraas, Residence Manager, Oslo, 2012

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