

PROMONTORIO

EMBASSY OF EGYPT
LISBON, PORTUGAL
2017–2010

Holistic simplicity in the architecture
and interiors of a modern-day Arab embassy

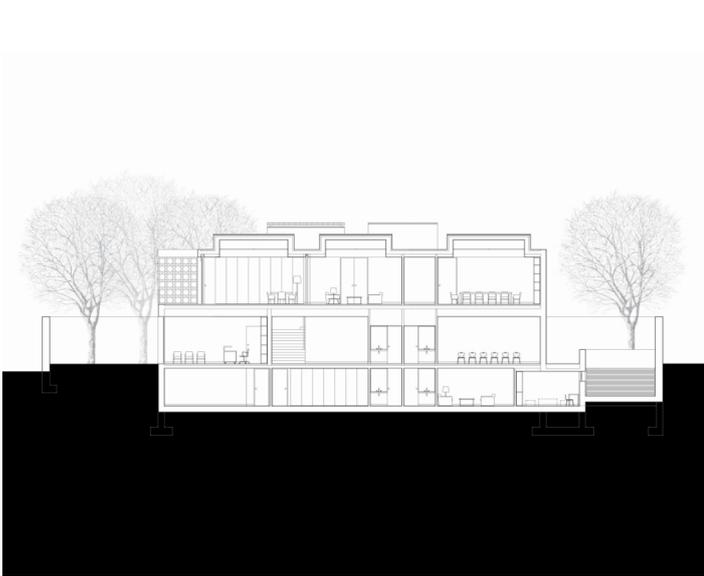
Located in the affluent Lisbon district of Restelo, the new Embassy of Egypt stands on a plot in Avenida Vasco da Gama, which is typologically characterised by a series of large freestanding villas from the 1940s and 1950s, many of which have been gradually converted to house diplomatic services.

An embassy building is just as much a harbour and a safe-haven for its citizens as it is a nation state's foremost foreign representation. It combines the idea of shelter and safety with the symbolic values of the country's history and culture. In this case, the compactness dictated by the plot's regulatory constraints ultimately served as a design metaphor, borrowing from the ancient Egyptian tradition of monumental stereotomics that emphasises a certain idea of solemnity—an atmosphere essential in embassy protocol.

Derived from this, the building is essentially a monolith composed by three thick slabs combined with an interwoven mass of patterned walls with bas-reliefs discreetly evocative of Egyptian geometric motifs. Following the classical post-and-lintel system, the walls are interrupted at specific points to form windows, while on the upper floor each corner recedes and revolves, from one angle to the next, to form a balcony. The façade is executed in precast-concrete panels with a dark anthracite pigment that underscores the monumental gravitas of the ensemble, at the same time contrasting with the lightness of the window frames, which are handcrafted in delicate bronze-coated stainless-steel profiles.

At the heart of the design lies a clarity between public and private circulation and full visibility in the visitor access area, both of them critical security issues. The building is positioned in the centre of the plot, reminiscent of a large 19th-century villa, and surrounded by a narrow garden on its flanking sides, with car access provided via a gently sloping ramp leading from Avenida Vasco da Gama. On the opposite side, a security gateway surveys and filters pedestrian public access to the embassy and to the consulate.

Inside, care has been taken to choose materials that wear gently and acquire patina over time, rather than becoming abraded and requiring replacement. With this idea in mind, the public areas are executed using large white-stone slabs with wainscots and panelling in painted wood. Lastly, the centrepiece of the public area is an atrium with a somewhat Babelesque stairway, clad, like an Appian stage, in a veiled solid-wood railing that migrates to the walls to become an all-encompassing panel. This central atrium is crowned by a skylight coffer, with the light filtered by an Islamic-patterned louver that generates a kaleidoscopic illumination, casting a revolving shadow throughout the day.



Location: Avenida Vasco da Gama, Lisbon, Portugal

Client: Egyptian Building Fund Authority (EBFA)

Scope of services: Architecture
and landscape architecture

Project brief: Embassy offices
and consulate services

Plot area: 1,360 sq. m

Gross floor area: 1,510 sq. m

Construction cost: EUR 1,300.00 per sq. m

Project status: 2010 (shortlist competition, 1st prize) – 2017 (built)

Photography: João Morgado