



French Accent

The French Embassy in Singapore

Architects
Dubus-Richez (Paris) and
TSP Architects + Planners Pte Ltd (Singapore)

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Uncharacteristically nestled between a block of restored shophouses and an old 4-storey apartment block near the junction of Cluny Park Road and Bukit Timah Road, the new French Embassy building sits in such quiet repose that an unfamiliar visitor would surely miss it. The winning scheme of a competition held in 1993 by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the design of a new building to unite the French Embassy and Consulate offices—the building, according to Paris-based Dubus-Richez and their sister company in Kuala Lumpur ZD-R (Zaini Dubus-Riches Sdn Bhd), strives to be:

“...an embodiment in the midst of this city-state of a certain French spirit ...a spirit which is both affirmative and measured, like a qualified statement.”

The building designed in association with TSP Architects + Planners Pte Ltd, can be discerned as two unaligned rectilinear volumes, interlocked by a third

implied steel-framed volume capped by a sail-over flat canopy, demarcating the entrance. A small dormitory block is located at the rear, connected to the main building via corridors. The narrow frontage of the building is punctuated by a small guard house—a sculptured white volume of concrete and glass. Proceeding inside, an elongated flat slice of canopy, defying gravity, hints the way to the main entrance doors, which are cradled at the intersection of the two building masses. The entrance is slightly elevated from the ground, imparting a subtle sense of hierarchy to the entrance, also allowing for the basement to be slightly raised.

The atrium lobby, deliciously carved out of the two volumes, is bathed in a light and ambience that could only be described as Mediterranean. The clever use of small diameter timber rods, each about one metre in length, interspersed in a grid below the glass skylight, cuts out a warm and cheerful piece of blue sky as the centrepiece of the atrium space. The light from the improvised timber ‘chandelier’ bathes the vertical feature

1. The French Embassy building strives to be an embodiment of a certain French spirit.
2. The *tricolore* of France punctuates the entry volume.
3. A “field” of yellow precedes a broad flight of stairs leading to the entrance.
4. Two rectilinear forms, interlocking with a steel-framed volume capped by a sail-over flat canopy, demarcate the entrance.



of the steel and glass lift ensemble, compositionally an extension of the skylight, to transmit the light further down into the space. The smooth expanse of the polished limestone floor, imported from southern France (read Mediterranean) is punctuated in the centre of the space by a chef d'oeuvre by Xylos, a group of French designers who specialise in creating witty art pieces out of furniture and functional apparatus. This reception-desk installation is composed of vertical pole-like timber elements juxtaposed with a flat frosted glass sheet and does indeed serve its purpose as a conversation piece, but must have been too intimidating for a real receptionist to manage.

The honey-hued interior exudes warmth and showcases the palette of au naturel materials favoured by the architects. Walls and doors surrounding the space are clad in fine wood panelling of French sycamore,

while sensuous fawn-tinged Italian leather cushioned panels wrap up the wedge-shaped segmented mass which acts somewhat like a visual counterpoint to the other vertical steel and glass ensemble. The corridors or alleyways which fringe the space are rendered lightweight and insubstantial by the clever use of satin-finished steel edging, glass balustrades and tube-steel handrails. The effect is further dramatised by the use of wall-wash lighting at the edge which (un)defines the meeting of horizontal and vertical planes. Walls and doors are deliberately kept indistinct and flushed to continue the theme of clean lines and simple planes that define the central space.

This delightful spatial volume is animated intermittently by the movement of the sartorially elegant folks who move along the corridor from their offices and exchange friendly albeit subdued greetings with



colleagues from a different level—they lend an air of cordial informality that emanates through the space. High-ceilinged visa halls, conference rooms and public offices on the first storey are followed by more intimate administration offices on the second and third storeys, while the fourth storey, which is the Chancellery, is more formal and solemn. The typical office spaces here are a hybrid between fully partitioned private offices and visually segregated (but not acoustically segregated) half-partitioned open-plan offices. Instead, workspaces are defined by the use of glass partitions with pull-down venetian blinds. These immaterial partitions do not segregate but delineate workspaces and act like osmotic membranes which maintain a degree of acoustic privacy yet transmit the occasional smile and allow visual connectedness of the spaces. The soft-filtered light, which streams through the windows is moderated on the east façade by frit glass sun-shading, while metal-finned *bris-soleil*

5. In the central space, the theme of clean horizontal lines and simple planes contrasts with the vertical glass and steel elevator which animates the space. A strip of blue sky conveys "a dream of somewhere far away."
6. Walls and doors surrounding the internal atrium are clad in panels of French sycamore. Fawn-tinged Italian leather panels wrap-up a wedge-shaped segmented mass which acts as a visual counterpoint.



shade the windows on the side elevations. French elegance is again underlined by the beautifully designed contemporary French furniture of wood, leather and steel. The Ambassador's office is most impressive with its range of contemporary re-interpretations of traditional French crafted furniture, lovingly hand-made by French artisans.

If some spaces are defined by light, then the offices facing north, overlooking the expanse of the Botanic Gardens and the nearby NIE campus, must indeed be defined by the view. From the fourth storey window, the view skims over the canopies of vast rain-trees and appropriates the space beyond to extend the realm of the interior.

Through the use of simple volumes, elegant materials and space definition through the play of light, the architects seem to have captured the essence of things. The contain-

ment of clutter within the crisp defining planes and volumes allow the visitor to experience the delight of pure space and the exquisite materiality of form and textures. Yet, it would be too convenient to label this piece of architecture as minimalist, as the enjoyment of space is not merely on an abstract level, but at the level of the tactile and of a humane quality. The assemblage of light, space and materials does not intimidate but engage one's sense of participation in the space. The building does not exert its tectonic quality (the columns are embedded in partitions as far as possible) but ask to be appreciated as the space to be within. The visitor's memory of the building would surely be the initial promise, by the flat raised canopy roof at the entrance, of a bit of 'French sky' against the tropical glare and then just that strip of blue sky within, with a dream of somewhere far away. ■

Client

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Architects

ZD-R with Dubus-Richez (Paris) and TSP Architects + Planners

7. The sunlight which streams through the windows on the east facade is moderated by frit-glass sunshading.
8. A private garden on the south side of the embassy and the entrance to a private underground carpark.
9. Metal-finned *bris-soleil* shade the windows on the side elevations.