

Schoenborn Palace Prague, The Czech Republic

The U.S. Embassy in the Schoenborn Palace in Prague has a long and complex history of adaptations to accommodate a wide range of royal, noble, and governmental owners. Today the dominant image dates to 1718, when the Colloredo family renovated the building to the design of the expatriate Italian architect Giovanni Santini.

Five medieval residences and a malthouse had been combined by various owners in the early decades of the seventeenth century. The building's Renaissance past is preserved in the courtyard stair tower, the geometric stucco ceilings, and the entrance portal with its rough stone set in a diamond "bossage" pattern.

In 1643 Rudolph, Count of Colloredo-Wallsee, purchased the property from Emperor Ferdinand. He carried out a remodeling project that unified the street facade with classical elements, created airy apartment wings behind, and transformed the vineyards on the slope of the hill into a geometrical terrace garden. The garden pavilion, called the Glorietta, was converted from a winepress into an open-air belvedere with majestic views of the city.

Following ownership and renovation by the Colloredos, the Schoenborn family inherited the property in 1794. The elegant and romantic English garden is basically unchanged from the first decade of the nineteenth century. During the year before the Republic of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed in 1918, Franz Kafka occupied two rooms "high and beautiful, red and gold, almost like Versailles" in the Schoenborn Palace.

Carl Johann Schoenborn sold the property to Chicago plumbing millionaire Richard Crane, Czechoslovakia's first U.S. diplomat. Crane, whose father had introduced Tomas Masaryk—the first president and founder of Czechoslovakia—to President Woodrow Wilson, bought Schoenborn Palace with the aid of the Czechoslovak Government. In 1924, the United States Government purchased the property from Crane for use as an American Legation, paying him the minimal price of \$117,000.

The view to the Schoenborn Palace gardens from the Prague Castle has been an important part of the city character for generations. It has been said that the illuminated American flag, flying atop the Glorietta, provided a beacon of inspiration during times of limited political freedom.





Villa Petschek Prague, The Czech Republic

The Neo-Baroque residence of the United States Ambassador in Prague was designed and built between 1924 and 1929 by Otto Petschek, a wealthy banker and industrialist. Petschek, the ultimate armchair architect whose design books are still in the building's library, gathered inspiration from many visits to Versailles. He died in 1934, four years after moving into the Villa.

In 1938 his family escaped the Nazis and settled outside Europe. For most of World War II the house was occupied by General Toussaint, the German military governor of Prague, then by Soviet and Czechoslovakian forces. It was first leased for use by the U.S. Ambassador and thereafter acquired by Ambassador Laurence Steinhardt as part of a war reparations settlement on July 20, 1948.

The Villa's floor plan is a sweeping crescent embracing a large formal terrace stepping out to a manicured lawn and flower garden. Parisian salons, particularly the Musée Carnavalet, heavily influenced Petschek and his prominent Czech architect Max Spielman. The scagliola plaster by Italian artisans imitates luxuriant marbles.

The Villa's significant modern technology includes electrically-operated glass terrace walls that float into the basement, zinc storage rooms for fur coats, and an airy, open cage elevator. The residence includes guest quarters, two separate apartments, a separate residence, and a staff building on the grounds. Among the notable ambassadors living here was Shirley Temple Black. After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the Villa was the setting of presidential meetings that led to expanding NATO membership. The building is similar to two others in Prague, also built by the Petschek family, now the Chinese Embassy and part of the Russian embassy.

During the Cold War the residence was a refuge for dissidents and considered a symbol of American support for the anti-communist movement. Writers, poets, and playwrights were invited to dinners, receptions, and concerts. The sanctuary ended at the gate, however—Vaclav Havel, a leader of the "Velvet Revolution" and later President of the new Czech Republic, was arrested two blocks from the Villa Petschek returning home from one of these events.

