

AT HOME *at the* LITHUANIAN EMBASSY

Refreshed and modern for a millennial birthday

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett
Special to *The Examiner*

Lithuania was mentioned for the first time in written sources in 1009, and this year the country celebrates its millennial anniversary. It's one of several celebrations for the country, including its fifth anniversary as a member of NATO and the 100th year of a structure that has been home to the Lithuanian Embassy in the U.S. for 85 years.

Built in 1909, this five-story building, a grand Italian mansion, underwent a complete renovation, including a five-story addition that doubled the embassy's size to nearly 26,000 square feet.

So ornate is the original limestone tower that passers-by on 16th Street NW might miss the newer, more modern construction peeking out from the left side.

"We've brought new life to an old building," said Audrius Bruzga, ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania to the U.S. and Mexico.

Nelson Mejia, project manager for TPG Architecture LLP, the New York firm hired to design the new space, worked with Saul Gecas, a designer of Lithuanian descent.

"I think Saul's main concern was to make a clean break from the old, while minimizing the impact on the original building," Mejia said.

Providing continuity between the past and present is symbolic of how the embassy remained open throughout 50 years of occupation by the Soviet Union. Although both the 100-year-old building and the new space have limestone exteriors, the new portion features clean lines and boldly hints at the transformation waiting inside.

The arched entrance features a 1,000-pound wrought iron door that had to be rehung to meet D.C. code requirements. The main receiving area, just outside the ambassador's office, features a two-story atrium with wavelike plastered panels from floor to ceiling. The panels create a sense of movement and are reminiscent of large sand dunes common along the Lithuanian coast.

Incorporated in the interior are



PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER



elements of modernistic Bauhaus design. Sycamore wood-paneled walls, doors and desks are employed throughout the new areas, providing a stunning contrast to the deep walnut floors. "Wood is important to our country," Bruzga said. "Throughout homes in Lithuania you will see mostly wood flooring. We don't use wall-to-wall carpet."

On the ground level is an empty 1,600-square-foot room with large

glass and stainless steel doors that open to a patio covered by trellises made of stainless steel and ipé, an environmentally friendly wood that resists decay, rot and mold. Bruzga said eventually the embassy would like to grow grapevines or some other creeping plants to offer more shade. This space is used for entertaining or exhibits.

The formal areas of the mansion combine stately charm with inviting

elegance. Three rooms, a parlor or reception area, dining room and living room, could be the living room of any affluent family in the Washington, D.C., area. In fact, much the furniture, from local retailer Danker Furniture, was purchased right off the floor. The armless Henredon chairs with bold gold and black stripes flank a luxurious deep golden sofa with large plush pillows. Satin draperies in bold gold stripes flow to the floor, framing the windows but not covering the extensive crown molding. A red rug with gold circle designs covers nearly all of the oak flooring.

Crystalsconcesshimmerthroughout the formal dining room. A wall of restored white, built-in china cabinets cover one end of the dining room. Deteriorating wooden shelves were replaced with glass in those cabinets to brilliantly display fine Lithuanian porcelain. In the middle of the cabinets is a built-in marble buffet. At the center of the dining room, a newly restored three-tiered crystal chandelier hangs over a long formal dining table suitable for hosting heads of state.

The renovation took two years. Monarc Construction Inc., the general contractor on the project, has

become something of an embassy renovation specialist, having worked on 40 such jobs. "We like to say we've worked in 40 countries and never left D.C.," said Byron Kassing, vice president at Monarc. "Each building comes with its own challenges, and each embassy is unique."

Embassy officials also hired Antiques & Furniture Restoration Inc. of Sterling, Va. to preserve some of the original furnishings including an ornate gold-gilded mirror that sits above one of the many grand fireplaces in the building.

The main parlor in the older building includes oak paneled pocket doors and a hard-pine staircase that were restored to their original splendor. Casement windows were custom made by Megrame, a Lithuanian window manufacturer, which sells its products in the U.S. "At times there were up to 100 people working in here on the project," said Kassing.

Bruzga is just happy to finally be back in the building after two years of renting office space in Arlington. "I'm happy that we're done with our new-old home in Washington," Bruzga said. "I think we will stay for a long time."

