

The U.S. State Department's American Spaces Programs

Livia Pontes Fialho

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"We have all around the world these American spaces. Sometimes they're just a corner in a library or in an embassy. Sometimes they're a binational center. Sometimes they're a stand-alone facility. We seem in this country to know so little about them. Do you know in the world today, how many American spaces there are? Over 800. Over 800 places of engagement, interaction, and outreach. So I'd like to look at them all. How are they doing? What are they doing? Where are they headed? What do they need? What do they have in common?"

Tara Sonenshine, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, 2012¹

What Are American Spaces? Overview, Mission and Structure

American Spaces are programs designed by the State Department to provide foreign citizens with a window into American culture and values. For nearly a century, they have been a staple of American public diplomacy efforts. For instance, the first Bi-national Center was established in Argentina in 1927.²

The programs can take many forms, from small libraries to high-tech cultural centers.³ Their presence should represent "an enduring symbol of U.S. commitment to a long-term relationship with a host country, and to the American ideal of freedom of information."⁴

- As of January 2013, there were 849 American Spaces in 169 countries. In 2012, they received a total of 16,425,481 visits.⁵

The number of spaces in a particular country can vary based on embassy operations, local partnerships and the Department's ability to support the properties.⁶



Livia Pontes Fialho is a policy researcher at the American Security Project and Master's Candidate at American University



American Spaces allow for **engagement with foreign audiences and provide them with insight into American life, policies and culture through a variety of mediums.**

By exposing audiences to U.S. values, American Spaces contribute to public diplomacy efforts, thus helping to enhance national security.⁷ At the spaces, people can:⁸

- Learn English
- Meet and interact with American experts and speakers
- View American exhibits and multimedia installations
- Stay informed through media resources
- In some countries, access the internet where internet access is otherwise limited or restricted



A public presentation with Czech Celebrity Chef Ondrej Slanina (left) about American food, at the American Center in Prague.

In order to reach diverse publics, the State Department has created several American Spaces programs tailored to different audiences so U.S. values, policies and culture can be better communicated:

- **American Centers** provide the general public with books, videos, lectures and other events outside U.S. embassies.
- **Information Resource Centers** target foreign public opinion leaders and policymakers giving them access to information on policy and other databases.
- **American Corners** are designed for younger audiences to access multimedia resources.
- **Bi-national Centers** are primarily Latin America-based autonomous institutions that provide English training while promoting understanding of American culture.⁹

The Office of American Spaces gives guidance and support to all programs. It is part of the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), in the office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R/PPR). Some educational resources are also provided in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA).

To ensure an overarching brand is associated with all the different venues, new standards on programming, management, and overall quality have been established to allow proper evaluation of American Spaces. As such, all spaces must provide resources in the following areas:¹⁰

- English language learning
- Exchange program alumni activities
- Information about the United States, American Culture and study opportunities in the U.S.

American Centers:

American Centers target the general public and are located at sites other than U.S. embassies or consulates. They are staffed by embassy employees, under the direction of the local mission's public affairs officer.¹¹

In the centers, authoritative information is available on a range of U.S.-related topics. Visitors can participate in lectures that vary from American food to U.S. history. These facilities can bring together American and local intellectuals to host events, and encourage discussion on current U.S. news. They may also promote documentary or movie exhibits.¹²

Most recently, the high-tech American Center in a Jakarta mall has afforded visitors an advanced multimedia interaction with aspects of American culture.¹³



@america, the high-tech American Center in Jakarta hosts a viewing party for the XLVII Superbowl.

American Corners:

American Corners usually attract a younger audience and are located outside major cities, therefore reaching those that have little contact with American culture.¹⁴ Corners are partnerships between the public affairs department of U.S. embassies or consulates and host institutions.¹⁵

They are not staffed by U.S. citizens, but rather by locals fluent in English employed by partner institutions.



A patron at an American Corner in Kazakhstan enjoys the 2012 Presidential Election display.

Funding for the program can be provided through special partnerships, post or mission's budgets, regional bureaus or the office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.¹⁶

The corner's host institution and the U.S. embassy or consulate formalize their partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The State Department provides "materials, training, technology and program support."¹⁷ Partners "are responsible for costs related to the physical space, staff, administration, and overhead."¹⁸

Visitors have access to e-Library USA, with online databases such as Harvard Business Review and interactive children's e-books, as well as movies. Some corners and spaces have a series of online speaker programs¹⁹ led by U.S. citizens, or face-to-face lectures about different topics varying from politics to nature and exhibits of American art.

Bi-national Centers:

Bi-national Centers (BNCs)²⁰ have the same purpose of spreading knowledge about the United States, but

with a model²¹ mostly restricted to Latin America.²²

- The first BNC was established in Argentina in 1927.
- At one point these centers were funded by the United States Information Agency.²³
- Today, they function as independent institutions and partner with the State Department.

They provide English training, and might have an on-site Education USA office to supply visitors with information on study opportunities in the U.S. They may also provide courses on standardized tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and the GRE (Graduate Record Exam).



Nicaraguan Bi-national Center students attend a film screening.

Like other American corners and spaces, they are a venue for people to be introduced to or learn more about American culture, whether through events like exhibitions and lectures, or in the context of English classes.

Bi-national Centers are independent and not-for-profit organizations. Most of their funding stem from fees for English teaching courses. Under the same conditions as American Corners, their collaboration with the State Department is established through a Memorandum of Understanding.²⁴

Information Resource Centers:

Unlike other American Spaces programs which focus on culture and education, Information Resource Centers (IRCs) aim to advance understanding of U.S. policies. They are usually housed in the offices of U.S. diplomatic missions around the world as an integral part of their public affairs section.

At IRCs, reference services are made available – such as database systems and print collections – to select local contacts that play a role in shaping public opinion. Staff may also assist key individuals with policy information.

The target audience served by IRCs usually includes:²⁵

- Policymakers
- Media outlets
- Universities
- Think tanks
- Nongovernmental organizations
- Members of the host-country's government.



Students at an Information Resource Center in Uganda.

Funding:

For the past three years, funding for American Spaces has steadily grown.²⁶ In Fiscal Year 2013, the State Department requested an increase of \$15 million dollars to the program.²⁷

- In 2011, funding for Regional Coordination and American Spaces amounted to \$12,061,000.²⁸
- The following fiscal year, 2012, the total was \$25,201,000.²⁹
- Requested for fiscal year of 2013, was \$40,611,000.³⁰ This amount was requested in January of 2012, and as of February 2013, a budget has not been passed by Congress.

In their request, State describes the program as “critical to public diplomacy efforts,” since they can “represent the only access point for outreach” in certain communities, particularly with young people. The department seeks to implement a “fully worldwide vision” for the spaces so that they contain the most useful content and share a unified, tailored message.

The above funding, however, does not include construction and renovation expenses, which stem from funding for Embassy Security, Construction and Maintenance.³¹



As they expand, **American Spaces** constitute a place to engage with civil society, promote the English language and foster goodwill between locals and the United States, all the while championing the American brand overseas.

“If we leave messaging about the United States, our values, our history, our policies, and our culture to other people, we run the risk of misinformed or hostile voices misrepresenting our narrative. American Spaces are our information outposts around the world, engaging with youth, civil society, educators, journalists, politicians, and anyone interested in learning more about the United States. On a daily basis, American Spaces close the last three feet between foreign audiences and the United States of America.”

U.S. Department of State, February 13, 2013.³²

Livia Pontes Fialho is a policy researcher at the American Security Project. She is currently pursuing a Master’s in International Communication at American University’s School of International Service.

Endnotes

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Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



American Security Project

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