Villa Otium is one of the best examples of Norwegian Art Nouveau, or Jugendstil, in Oslo. The plot was in one of the best neighbourhoods of Oslo at the turn of the twentieth century, when the street was renamed Nobel’s Gate in honour of Alfred Nobel, the Swedish industrialist who created the Nobel Prizes. Probably by chance, Nobel’s niece, Ester Wilhelmina, and her husband, the businessman Hans Andreas Nicolai Olsen, bought the property in 1909. Soon after acquiring the land, Olsen announced an architectural competition for the design of their home. It was somewhat unusual for private homeowners to have such competitions, but Olsen would only settle for the best. The tender was carried by Henrik Bull (1864–1953), who was already well known for important public projects, among which were the Government Building (1896–1906) and the Historical Museum (1897–1902). Bull had studied architecture at the Norwegian National Academy of Craft and Art Industry and also at the Royal Technical College in Berlin. In 1888, he set up his own firm.

Between all the projects presented for the competition for Villa Otium, the proposal of Bull was the one that most corresponded to Olsen’s wishes and ambitions, and the success of which brought him the commission to the United States Delegation in Oslo.
This present-day view of the south façade clearly shows how the original project (opposite page) evolved under a heavy Jugendstil influence during the three years of construction:

La façana sud avui en dia es pot apreciar com el projecte inicial (a la pàgina esquerra) va evolucionar en els tres anys de construcció, sota una forta influència del Jugendstil.

This project was the closest to Olsen’s wishes and ambitions, though it still required adjustment. The house was to be placed on a rise on the large property, offering maximum sunlight and a good view: the building was to be understood in connection with its gardens to give a complete interplay between architecture and nature. Bull made the house, gardens, rooflines, and trees blend into a unified whole.

Among all the projects submitted to the competition for Villa Otium, Bull’s proposal was the closest to Olsen’s wishes and ambitions, though it still required adjustment. The project was radically modern, somewhat compact in form and with touches of Neo-Baroque style. In the design and construction process which was to last until 1912, Bull made numerous simplifications, including giving more emphasis to the main body of the building.

The south façade of the villa with its gardens, in the 1909 project by Henrik Bull. Pencil, pen and watercolour on paper.

La façana sud de la vil·la amb els jardins, segons el projecte de 1909 de Henrik Bull. Llapis, ploma i aquarel·la sobre paper.

The south façade of the villa with its gardens, in the 1909 project by Henrik Bull. Pencil, pen and watercolour on paper.
El 1924, Olsen i la seva esposa es van traslladar a Estocolm i van vendre la propietat al govern dels Estats Units. Des d’aleshores la casa ha estat la residència de l’embajador nord-americà a Noruega, i pràcticament tots els elements de l’interior i l’exterior s’han conservat intactes i en bon estat.