

# A Building that Speaks to Us All

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I WAS NINE YEARS OLD IN 1957 when I first encountered the architectural fusion of monumental clarity and modernist glamour that is the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The General Assembly building's light-filled lobby, tiers of parabolic balconies, curved ramp, and stately Foucault's Pendulum circling with the earth's rotation: this was grandeur without constraint. The assembly hall itself felt awesome in purpose but also exuberant, with its bold colors, warm wood, and abstract motifs. I embraced these buildings' globalist promise with enthusiasm. If my school had offered the international language Esperanto, I would have signed up for it right away.

Though Esperanto never caught on, the U.N. has grown from 51 to the 193 members it now has. Over the years it has faced endless challenges—both the organization, and its New York premises. When I finally visited again, the lobby walls were water-stained, the Naugahyde bench cushions frayed. But not for long: the U.N. Headquarters is getting a total makeover.

a new building at the entrance to the campus, the integrity of that exhilarating space will be restored. Meanwhile everything within is being completely refurbished—Naugahyde and all.

Even as a child I somehow recognized the humanistic aesthetic then emanating from Scandinavia. But I didn't know that Nordic countries had donated many of the U.N.'s interiors. Norwegian architect Arnstein Arneberg planned the Security Council Chamber. The Swede Sven Markelius did the Economic and Social Council Chamber—its ceiling left deliberately unfinished because the work of that body can never be done. Now, having been stripped for the installation of new systems—ventilation, communication—those rooms will be replicated by the two countries. Dane Finn Juhl did the hall and furniture for the Trusteeship Council—a body that suspended operations in 1994 with the independence of the last remaining United Nations trust territory; but its space will be once again furnished by Denmark, to new designs by Kasper Salto and Thomas Sigsgaard, who won a competition for the privilege.



Simply redesigning and replacing the building “was seriously debated and rejected,” says architect Michael Alderstein, the assistant secretary general directing the project. The original design language “is still valid and widely understood. The architecture of the complex symbolizes the belief of the founders of the U.N. that through goodwill, exchange of ideas, and compromise mankind would be able to solve its problems.” He adds: “The buildings are structurally sound and tearing them down would have been a colossal waste.” Instead, outmoded systems and materials are being replaced, and some spaces reconfigured to reflect changed needs. But the public areas and overall appearance of this icon of optimism, whose designers included mid-century titans Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier, will regain their original finishes and appearance.

In our brave new world of suicide activism, the U.N. visitor experience has been necessarily compromised by dispiriting airport-like checkpoints, located in a makeshift structure blocking the approach to the General Assembly building and within its lobby. But once security processing is consolidated in

The tall wafer-thin Secretariat building was the first skyscraper ever built with free-hanging glass curtain walls—an experiment, like the U.N. itself, but somewhat less successful. The uninsulated glass leaked air and water, and allowed heat gain that made the interior insufferable. It was later coated with reflective film of various wrong tints that wrinkled and peeled. The facades have been replaced with high-efficiency contemporary glazing that reproduces their original look in transparent blue-green. The floor plans of the Secretariat's originally warren-like office levels were redrawn in the spirit of today's open workplaces. While the building's lobby has been restored, upstairs only the elevator foyers and mail chutes have been retained.

Ah, mail chutes. Things moved slower then, and seemed safer, at least to a child. These buildings, even beautifully refreshed, are familiar still. Their scale seems rather modest, their dramatic impact if not their symbolism historical. No matter. Let drama galore ensue—verbally, politically—in their delegates' lounges and meeting halls. And not in the streets and fields of the world.