

U.N. headquarters: Where the snow falls up and the pipes are running down

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UNITED NATIONS (AP) – Stopping by U.N. headquarters on a winter’s day, visitors may witness something as puzzling as the vagaries of nuclear nonproliferation: snow falling up.

The skyscraper leaks so much heat in winter that an updraft of warm air cocoons its 39 stories and pushes snowflakes back up towards the sky.

And this is one of many reasons why the home of the United Nations needs renovating - and fast. Its belching heating fans, rusty pipes and leaky vents were installed back when Harry Truman was U.S. president in the late 1940s.

“We are one of Con Edison’s largest customers,” Peter Wendeborn, an architect helping with plans to renovate the building. “They love us. Why wouldn’t they?”

As the recent Nicole Kidman-Sean Penn movie “The Interpreter” revealed, the U.N. Secretariat’s showpiece rooms are architectural marvels. The green marble of the General Assembly hall glitters, the Secretary Council chamber’s horseshoe table shines, and the maroon carpets soothe.

Yet behind the veneer, the guts of the thin, domino-shaped Secretariat building are rotting, as Wendeborn demonstrated to a reporter in a tour that is part shock therapy and all public relations – essentially an attempt to shame U.N. member nations and the state of New York into backing a refurbishment.

A visit to the 28th floor, one of the three given over entirely to machinery that keeps the tower going, shows just how bad things are. In this dimly lit hallway crisscrossed with rusted and crumbling pipes, large fans chug and wheeze as they pump fresh air down massive ducts.

The panels of dials that track the fans’ output are so old that their maker, Johnson Controls Inc., wants them for the company museum.

Behind a door with a faded red sign that reads “Danger – High Voltage” sits an electrical transformer that emits a low buzz. The door is locked, and Con Edison has the only key. Stenciled on the door is an emergency phone number – “Murray Hill 2-4477” – that dates back to the days when telephone operators connected phone calls.

No one is allowed to work on the floors above or below the transformer because of the electromagnetic field. “We’re not quite sure what effect it has on people, but it does affect the computers,” Wendeborn said.

More obvious hazards lurk elsewhere.

There is no sprinkler system for fires, and asbestos lines the walls, floor tiles, pipes and ceiling panels. The only reason the domino-thin building hasn’t been shut down for violating New York City safety codes, Wendeborn said, is that it sits on its own little slice of international territory, immune from prosecution.

The building’s 3,400 staff and hundreds of diplomats who pass through each day “have a lower chance of survival during a fire, consume more energy at higher cost and face greater obstacles to accessibility and productivity than they would at comparable modern buildings in New York City or other major cities in the world,” said a June 2000 report by Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Yet adversity breeds ingenuity. That’s obvious in the audio/visual room in the Secretariat basement, where two technicians monitor a giant board sprouting patch cables.

Like telephone switchboard operators of old, they can connect any U.N. mission in the field to a Security Council meeting.

From an antiquated metal speaker drones a soothing voice straight from the Security Council: “...with a political dialogue with a view to national reconciliation, in observance of human rights...”

A technician rotates a plastic dial. A TV screen flickers to life, revealing the speaker to be Brazil’s U.N. ambassador, Ronaldo Mota Sardenberg.

Some of these ancient devices were made by companies that went out of business long ago, leaving no spare parts.

“We have to actually fabricate the parts down in the basement,” Wendeborn said. He compared it to Cuba’s skill at keeping vintage cars on the road.

The U.N.’s hopes of renovating the building starting in 2007 need member states’ approval, and some are irked that the United States has offered a loan with interest - a break with tradition.

U.N. planners had hoped to build another skyscraper next door and camp there during the five-year renovation, but anti-U.N. Republicans have let opposition to

the idea in the New York State Legislature, which must approve the plan. Republicans control the Senate.

One of them is Sen. Maltese, who represents Queens, just across the East River from the U.N. complex. He opposes the plan in part because several Security Council members opposed the Iraq war.

“I think they’re anti-Semitic and anti-American, I think they’re anti-Democratic and they’ve been against the war and against our troops,” Maltese said. “I’m going to vote ‘no,’ no matter what happens.”