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FACT SHEET

HISTORY OF UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS



United Nations Headquarters, 1960 © UN Photo

ADDRESS: United Nations, New York, NY 10017, USA

LAYOUT: Consists of four main buildings: The Secretariat, the General Assembly, Conference Area (including Council Chambers) and the Library.

SECRETARIAT BUILDING: The tallest of the group, consists of 39 stories above ground and three stories underground. The exterior facings of the 550-foot tall Secretariat Building are made exclusively of aluminum, glass and marble. Wide areas of green-tinted glass are unbroken by conventional setbacks. In contrast, the windowless north and south facades of the building are faced with 2,000 tons of Vermont marble.

DESIGNERS: Wallace K. Harrison of the United States (chief architect); Members: Nikolai G. Bassov (Soviet Union), Gaston Brunfaut (Belgium), Ernest Cormier (Canada), Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier (France), Liang Seu-Cheng (China), Sven Markelius (Sweden), Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil), Sir Howard Robertson (United Kingdom), G. A. Soilleux (Australia) and Julio Vilamajo (Uruguay).

CONSTRUCTION STARTED: 24 October 1949

COST: \$65 million

ADDRESS

Standing on the eastern shore of Manhattan Island, on the banks of New York City's East River, the 18-acre United Nations Headquarters remains both a symbol of peace and a beacon of hope.



New York, 1946 © UN Photo

UNITED NATIONS TERRITORY

The site of UN Headquarters is owned by the United Nations and has a special status within the United States. No federal, state or local officer or official of the United States, whether administrative, judicial, military or police, may enter UN Headquarters, except with the consent of and under conditions agreed to by the Secretary-General of the Organization.

However, the United Nations is bound by an agreement with the United States, its host country, to prevent its Headquarters from being used as a refuge for persons attempting to avoid arrest under the Federal, State or local laws of the United States. People being extradited by the United States Government are also denied use of United Nations Headquarters in attempts to avoid arrest. The UN has its own fire-fighting and security forces, and its own post office branch.

SELECTING NEW YORK

On 10 December 1945, the Congress of the United States unanimously resolved to invite the United Nations to establish its permanent home in that country. Thereafter, the decision to locate the United Nations near New York City was made by the General Assembly at its first session, held in London on 14 February 1946.

During the latter half of 1946, following selection of the United States as host country, a special United Nations site committee studied possible locations in such places as Philadelphia, Boston and San Francisco. While consideration was given at first to areas north of New York City, crowded Manhattan had not been seriously investigated. A last-minute offer of \$8.5 million by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., for the purchase of the present site was accepted by a large majority of the General Assembly on 14 December 1946. New York City completed the site parcel by additional gifts of property.

The site chosen by the United Nations was a run-down area of slaughterhouses, light industry and a railroad barge landing.

LAYOUT

It consists of four main buildings: The Secretariat, the General Assembly, Conference Area (including Council Chambers) and the Library.



SECRETARIAT



GENERAL ASSEMBLY



LIBRARY BUILDING



ECONOMIC & SOCIAL COUNCIL



TRUSTEESHIP COUNCIL



SECURITY COUNCIL

Photo credits: Secretariat © UN Photo/Rick Bajornas; General Assembly © UN Photo/Manuel Elias; Library Building © UN Photo; ECOSOC © UN Photo/Loey Felipe; Trusteeship Council © UN Photo/Rick Bajornas; Security Council © UN Photo/Manuel Elias

GENERAL ASSEMBLY BUILDING:

The General Assembly Building is a sloping structure with concave sides, is 380 feet long and 160 feet wide, topped with a shallow dome.

The north end, opening onto a landscaped plaza, is the main public entrance to the Headquarters complex. Beyond the lobby to the right is the small Meditation Room. Suspended from the ceiling above the stair landing connecting the lobby with the second-floor ceremonial entrance to the General Assembly Hall is a Foucault Pendulum.

In the northwest part of the building's lobby, next to the Meditation Room entrance, is a 15-by-12-foot stained-glass panel by Russian-born artist Marc Chagall, symbolic of man's struggle for peace. The panel is dedicated to the memory of the late Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, and 15 others who died with him in a plane crash in the Congo in 1961. The panel was paid for by contributions from United Nations staff members. Next to the Chagall window is a bronze sculpture by United

States sculptor and medal artist, Robert Cronbach, and plaques commemorating "military observers and members of the Secretariat who died in the line of duty while serving the United Nations on its missions of observation, mediation and conciliation". Nearby hangs the UN Flag retrieved from the site of the bombing at the Canal Hotel, UN Headquarters, Baghdad, Iraq, on 19 August 2003.

The blue, green and gold General Assembly Hall—165 feet long by 115 feet wide, with a 75-foot ceiling—occupies the second, third and fourth floors. Representatives of Member States sit behind tables facing a raised speaker's rostrum and podium. From the viewer's left to right sit the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the President of the General Assembly, and the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management.

The Assembly Hall accommodates 193 delegations. Each delegation has six seats—three at the tables for full delegates and three behind them for their alternates.

All 1,908 seats are equipped with earphones, allowing the listener to “tune-in” either to the language being spoken on the floor or to interpretations into any of the Assembly’s six official languages—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The interpreters sit in glass-walled booths overlooking the Hall. Television and film cameramen, broadcasters and other information personnel, and official verbatim reporters occupy similar booths.

Above and behind the speaker’s rostrum are large panels listing the Member States of the Organization, with the corresponding results of votes also displayed. Delegates signal their country’s vote for or against a resolution, or their decision to abstain from a vote, by pressing green, red or yellow buttons on the tables in front of them.

The General Assembly first met in this Hall at the opening of its seventh regular annual session, on 14 October 1952.

On two lower levels of the building are a large conference room and four smaller conference rooms, radio and television studios, sound-recording facilities and a master communications control room. There is also a public area for visitors with various amenities.

CONFERENCE BUILDING:

The Conference Building, which connects the General Assembly and Secretariat Buildings, extends along the waterfront for 400 feet over the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive. More than half a mile of teak railing from Burma runs along three sides of an outside terrace. On the second and third floors are the three Council Chambers.

SECURITY COUNCIL

The Security Council Chamber was furnished by Norway and designed by leading Norwegian architect, Arnstein Rynning Arneberg, and it’s easily identified by its central horse-shoe-shaped table. A large mural by Norwegian artist, Per Lasson Krohg, symbolizing the promise of future peace and individual freedom, dominates the east wall.

TRUSTEESHIP COUNCIL

The Trusteeship Council Chamber, next door, was furnished by Denmark and designed by Danish architect, Finn Juhl. Against one wall is a nine-foot statue of a woman with arms upraised, carved from teak by sculptor/painter, Henrik Starcke, also of Denmark.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

The Economic and Social Council Chamber was designed by Swedish modernist architect and designer Sven Gottfried Markelius. The Economic and Social Council Chamber is a gift from Sweden.

On the second floor, a large delegates’ lounge occupies the north end, next to the Economic and Social Council Chamber. The glass north wall of the lounge overlooks the lawn, Japanese cherry trees and rose gardens.

Beneath the Council Chambers are three large conference rooms.

LIBRARY BUILDING:

At the southwest corner of the United Nations grounds, linked to the Secretariat Building, is the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, dedicated on 16 November 1961 in honour of the late Secretary-General. The building was erected to meet the Organization’s growing demands for library services and its construction was made possible by a gift of \$6.6 million from the Ford Foundation. It was designed by the firm of Harrison, Abramovitz and Harris, architectural consultants to the United Nations. Constructed in white marble, glass and aluminum, the structure consists of six stories—three above ground and three below.

The Library houses approximately 400,000 volumes in its general collection and, in addition, has several million United Nations documents. Its map section contains more than 80,000 maps and 1,500 atlases. The periodicals library offers over 10,000 official government publications and more than 4,000 non-official periodicals.

GROUNDS AND FURNISHING



Sculpture "Let Us Beat Swords into Ploughshares" at NY Headquarters
© UN Photo

The flags of the 193 United Nations Member States provide a colourful, 500-foot wide curved approach to the Headquarters, along United Nations Plaza. The circular pool in front of the Secretariat Building, with a fountain in its centre, was built with a \$50,000 gift from the children of the United States. The wavy pattern on the floor of the pool is formed by alternating bands of crushed white marble and black pebbles. The black stones were gathered from the beaches of Rhodes by the women and children of that Greek island and donated to the United Nations. A bronze sculpture in memory of the late Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, was set at the edge of the pool in 1964. The abstract sculpture, entitled "Single Form", is the work of the English modernist sculptor and artist, Barbara Hepworth, and was donated by Jacob Blaustein, a former United States delegate to the United Nations.

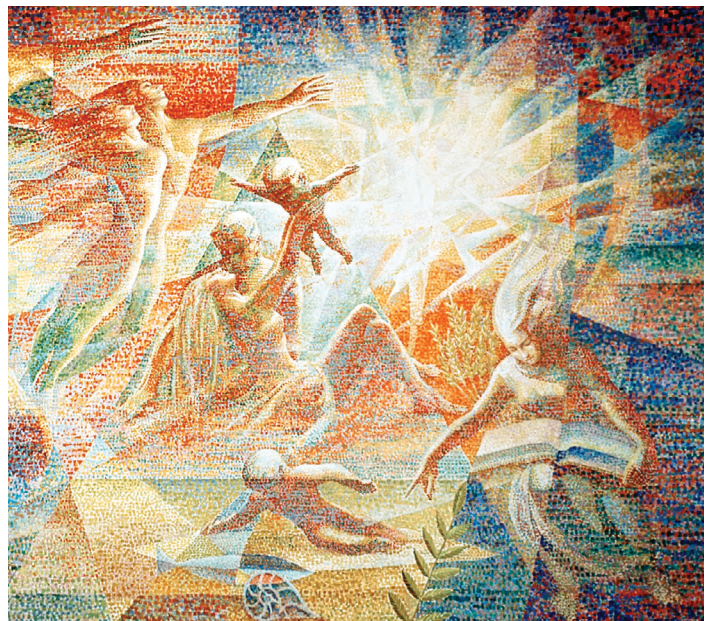
A bronze statue by English abstract sculptor and artist, Henry Moore, "Reclining Figure: Hand", is set north of the Secretariat Building.

A monumental staircase presented by the State of New York in memory of the late Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, leads from the plaza in front of the public entrance of the General Assembly Building to the United Nations gardens. A memorial to Eleanor

Roosevelt, as well as sculptures presented by Brazil, Germany, the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia, are located in the gardens overlooking the East River.

In keeping with the international character of the Organization, materials for the Headquarters were selected from many lands. Limestone for the facings of the Assembly and Conference Buildings came from the United Kingdom; marble from Italy; office furniture and shelving from France; chairs and fabrics from Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic) and Greece; carpets from England, France and Scotland. In addition, tables were purchased from Switzerland; and various woods for interior finishing came from Belgium, Canada, Cuba, Guatemala, the Philippines, Norway and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

The only artwork at United Nations Headquarters commissioned by the General Assembly is the painting entitled, "Titans", by the United States artist Lumen Martin Winter. The painting commemorates the 1970 World Youth Assembly, held at Headquarters. It was paid for by surplus voluntary funds donated for the Youth Assembly.



Detail of "Titans" mural at NY Headquarters © UN Photo/R Grunbaum



Consultant architects look over a model of the UN site, 1947. Left to right are members of Board of Design Consultants: C.A. Soilleux, Australia, board member; Gaston Brunfaut, Belgium, board member; John Antoniadis, Greece, Consultant to Mr. Harrison; Wallace K. Harrison, USA, Director of Planning; Ernest Cormier, Canada, board member; Julio Vilamajo, Uruguay, board member; Oscar Niemeyer, Brazil, board member; Josef Havlicek, Czechoslovakia, consultant to Mr. Harrison @ UN Photo

The exterior facings of the 550-foot tall Secretariat Building are made exclusively of aluminum, glass and marble. Wide areas of green-tinted glass are unbroken by conventional setbacks. In contrast, the windowless north and south facades of the building are faced with 2,000 tons of Vermont marble. In addition to the 39 stories above ground, there are three basement levels connecting with the three basements of the Conference Building. Facilities below street level include maintenance shops, a fire-fighting unit, receiving and loading platforms, a diplomatic mail pouch dispatch unit, security offices, storage space, a three-level garage, an automobile service station and a refrigeration plant for air-conditioning.

Inside the building, while some modern conveniences are provided for efficient functioning of the staff, there is nothing elaborate and offices are generally small, with no wasted space. The glass in the aluminum-framed windows lets in a maximum of light over the 20 acres of office space and is specially designed to help retain solar heat.

DESIGNERS

Once the site was agreed upon, the next task was to design the Headquarters for the world Organization. Rather than hold an international competition, delegates decided that the United Nations home should be the joint project of leading architects from many countries. Wallace K. Harrison of the United States was appointed chief architect with the title of Director of Planning. A ten-member Board of Design Consultants was selected to assist him, composed of architects nominated by Governments.

The members of the Board were Nikolai G. Bassov (Soviet Union); Gaston Brunfaut (Belgium); Ernest Cormier (Canada); Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier (France); Liang Seu-Cheng (China); Sven Markelius (Sweden); Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil); Sir Howard Robertson (United Kingdom); G. A. Soilleux (Australia); and Julio Vilamajo (Uruguay).

The Director and the Board began their work early in 1947 at an office in Rockefeller Center. Some 50 basic designs were created, criticized, analyzed and reworked. The planners took into account the structure of the United Nations with its General Assembly, three main Councils and permanent Secretariat.

They had to integrate the needs of delegation and Secretariat personnel.

Because the chosen site was relatively small, a tall building would be required to house offices. The planners determined that the presence of firm bedrock near the surface—the Manhattan schist on which most New York skyscrapers rest—would facilitate construction. (The bedrock dips to 60 or more feet below sea level between 46th and 47th Streets—an area which now lies beneath the broad lawn to the north of the General Assembly Building.)

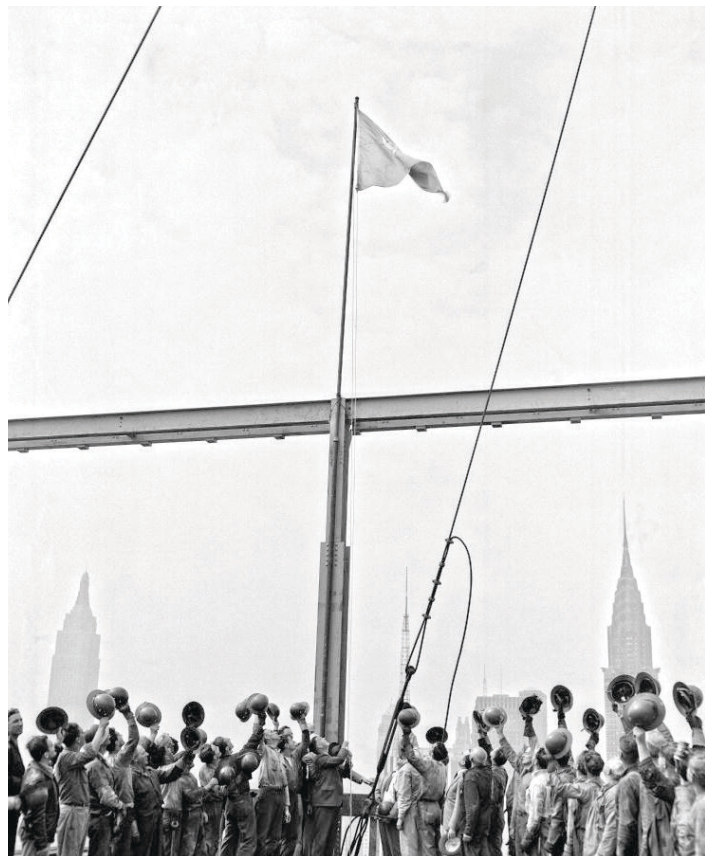
It was decided to locate the Secretariat Building at the south end of the site to facilitate access to and from public transport systems along 42nd Street, the primary artery of midtown Manhattan. The structure's north-south orientation was selected partly for reasons of appearance and partly because a tall building on an east-west axis would have thrown its shadow over much of the site.

The designers conceived of a park-like plateau, from First Avenue to the river's edge, from which the buildings would rise. To utilize the area right up to the river, they decided that the landscaped expanse and the Conference Building would be cantilevered over the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive.

CONSTRUCTION

With the plans approved, action to carry them out moved ahead quickly. The 270 residential tenants were relocated at the Organization's expense, the meat packers and bargemen departed, and the existing buildings were demolished. The construction contract was awarded in January 1949 to a combination of four large New York building firms. Nineteen months later, on 21 August 1950, the Secretariat workers moved into their new offices.

The first Secretary-General, Trygve Lie of Norway, laid the cornerstone at a dedication ceremony on 24 October 1949 (UN Day), in the presence of President Harry S. Truman of the United States. The inscription on the cornerstone is "United Nations" in the five official languages used in 1949 (Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish) with the date in Roman numerals.



Steelworkers cheer as the UN flag is unfurled atop the completed steel framework for the 39-story Secretariat Building, 1949 © UN Photo

The cornerstone was prepared with a metal box containing a copy of the Charter and the Declaration of Human Rights, a copy of the schedule of meetings and documents such as the meeting records of the Headquarters Advisory Committee. The box was sealed by Secretary-General Trygve Lie and Director of Planning Wallace K. Harrison. The cornerstone is underground east of the Library Building on the southern boundary of the UN site.

The first major addition to the Headquarters complex was the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, completed in 1961.

EXPANSION

Over the years, the interiors of the buildings have been altered to accommodate the many States that have joined the Organization since its inception. In 1947 when construction plans were drawn up, there were 57 Member States, and provision was made for an increase in membership to 70. This anticipated increase had been exceeded by 1955. An expansion programme was completed in 1964 providing space for a membership of 126.

To accommodate the greatly expanded membership of the United Nations, the General Assembly in 1976 approved a set of major alterations to refurbish and enlarge the seating capacity of the General Assembly Hall and all the large conference rooms. Alterations were completed in 1980.

Since the growth of the staff could not be accommodated in the existing Secretariat Building, it has been necessary to rent office space in adjacent buildings. A large number of staff, including the personnel of the United Nations Development Corporation (UNDC), is located across First Avenue on 44th Street. The Corporation is a public-benefit, non-profit Organization created by New York State to provide facilities for the United Nations and related Organizations.

A third building was erected in early 1987 by the Corporation to house the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

RENOVATION

Another project was a 750-seat cafeteria for staff and delegates, located in a two-storey building at the south-east corner of the Secretariat Building overlooking the East River. This structure was finished in 1982. It is currently closed.

The most ambitious renovation to date was launched with a ground-breaking ceremony on 5 May 2008, marking the beginning of a five-year, \$1.9 billion overhaul of the UN landmark complex. It was completed in late 2014 with a final cost of \$2.15 billion.

COST

The buildings as originally planned were estimated to cost nearly \$85 million. Under the direction of Secretary-General Trygve Lie, however, the designers cut the cost by \$20 million, largely by reducing

the height of the Secretariat Building from 45 to 39 stories. They did this by reducing the size of the conference areas and by utilizing an existing building on the site for the United Nations Library. The \$65 million plan was approved by the General Assembly on 20 November 1947.

To finance construction, the United States Government made an interest-free loan of \$65 million to the United Nations. Of this amount, the last installment of \$1 million was paid in 1982.

The General Assembly Building

www.un.org/en/ga

Dag Hammarskjöld Library

www.un.org/sg/en/content/dag-hjalmar-agne-carl-hammarskjöld

<https://library.un.org>

The Security Council Chamber

www.un.org/en/sc

The Trusteeship Council Chamber

www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/trusteeship-council

The Economic and Social Council Chamber

www.un.org/ecosoc/en

Member States

<https://www.un.org/en/sections/member-states/growth-united-nations-membership-1945-present/index.html>

FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND IN-CLASS DISCUSSION:

- *The United Nations holds “special status” within its host country, the United States of America. What is the significance of this “special status” for the Organization? What does it protect against and what does it promote?*
- *The main public entrance to the General Assembly Building has both a Meditation Room and a Foucault Pendulum. What do you think is the significance of these incorporations to the entrance? What statement do they make about the Organization, if any?*
- *The UN has six official languages plus translators that work to translate and interpret many more. What statement does multilingualism make? How is it different than adopting one international language, for example?*
- *Why were architects appointed rather than selected through an international competition to construct the UN headquarters? What is significant about this decision? Does this make a statement about global affairs?*
- *Why do you think it is important for the United Nations to have a library at its headquarters?*