

# **The United Nations in perspective : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 15-September 26, 1995**

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# **The United Nations in Perspective**

**The Museum of Modern Art, New York**

**June 15–September 26, 1995**



In February 1947, a group of architects from Europe, Asia, Australia, and North and South America gathered in New York to design the permanent headquarters of the newly formed United Nations Organization. In little more than four months, following a period of intense creative activity, this group, known as the International Board of Design, directed by New York architect Wallace K. Harrison, presented its proposal for a modern headquarters of startling clarity and efficiency to be built in New York City (cover). Their search for an appropriate architectural expression for the most important symbolic building to be constructed in the aftermath of World War II is reflected in the many perspective drawings, sketches, and alternative schemes in this exhibition. They both document the architects' collaborative design process and record their ideas. The vast majority of these appealing images were drawn by Hugh Ferriss, one of America's most talented architectural renderers.

The buildings we see today along the East River between 42nd and 48th Streets in Manhattan include the Secretariat (a thirty-nine-story glass skyscraper), the low-slung profile of the General Assembly, and the Conference Building overlooking the river. All are based on the master plan created by the Board of Design in 1947. The architects' conceptual perspectives are complemented in the exhibition by a selection of color photographs of the United Nations taken between 1989 and 1993 by Adam Bartos. These images go beyond mere architectural documentation to reveal a personal interpretation of and a particular fascination with the expression of postwar optimism in this mid-century modern landmark. Bartos's photographs also convey a sense of the passage of half a century, reminding us that the idea of world peace often remains an elusive dream tempered by political struggle.

The United Nations Headquarters is the architectural apotheosis of modern functionalism. Aesthetically, it attempted to supplant national traditions and prejudices with a universal, progressive design to suit the new organization, which was determined not to repeat the political and symbolic mistakes of its predecessor, the League of Nations. When the United Nations charter was signed on June 26, 1945, in San Francisco by fifty-one member

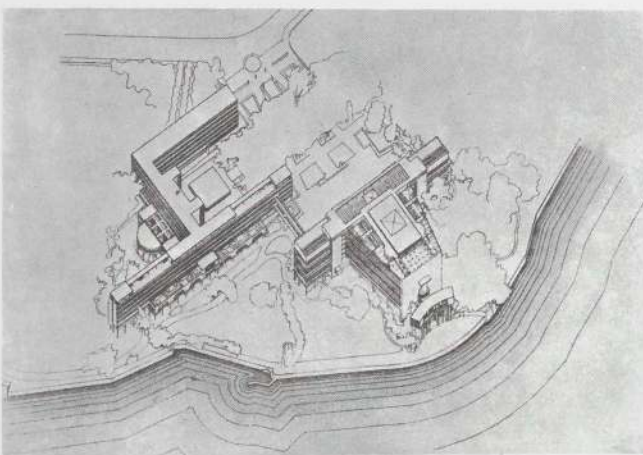
nations pledging to maintain international peace and to solve economic, social, and humanitarian problems, it was the second great effort at creating a deliberative world body, replacing the League of Nations, which had been established in 1919 in the aftermath of the First World War. If the League of Nations had been a political failure, its architecture and the circumstances surrounding its design were no less controversial. The notorious competition for the League of Nations building in 1926–27 became a battleground between academicism and modernism. Among the nine finalists selected from 377 entries by a jury of architects, the modern design by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret was the only proposal that adequately fulfilled all of the criteria outlined in the program (fig. 1). However, the matter was decided politically, and a diplomatic committee nominated the architects Henri Paul N  not (France) and Julien Fl  genheimer



2. N  not, Fl  genheimer, Broggi, Lefevre, and Vagot. League of Nations, Geneva. 1927–37. Photo: G. E. Kidder Smith, New York

(Switzerland) to head a team of architects to redesign their competition entry. The resulting compromise was a neoclassical palacelike complex in Geneva that required enormous expense and a decade to build (fig. 2). While some critics considered its historicizing classicism symbolic of the noble aspirations of the League of Nations, modernists considered it out of date and believed that the young institution should have had an altogether new architectural expression. With the memory of the fiasco surrounding the League still very fresh, the client and designers for the United Nations Headquarters in New York demanded an architecture that contrasted with that of the League of Nations in nearly every respect.

The location of the headquarters was one of the first issues addressed by the General Assembly. Various sites around the world were proposed, and in early 1946 it was determined that the new organization's headquarters would be located in the United States. Temporary quarters were found at Lake Success and Flushing Meadow on Long Island, but a permanent site had to be selected by the end of the year. With much debate about whether the United Nations should be in a rural or urban setting and whether it should be a complete community or only official buildings, the Committee on Sites focused its attention on tracts of land varying in size from six to forty square miles in the regions around New York City,



1. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Project for the League of Nations, Geneva, 1927. Bird's-eye view of axonometric from lake. Print, 29 1/2 x 71". Institut f  r Geschichte und Theorie der Architektur, ETH, Zurich. Photo: The Museum of Modern Art



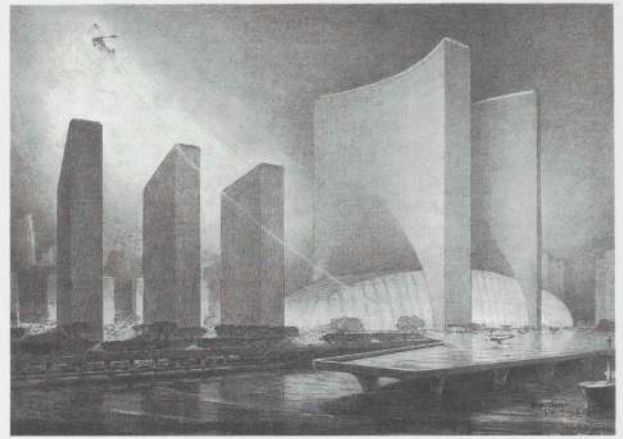
San Francisco, Philadelphia, Boston, and in Connecticut. Such large suburban and semirural sites suggested a somewhat isolated retreat for the new organization similar to that of a college campus or new capital cities such as Canberra or New Delhi. Removed from the vitality of urban life, there would be few distractions from international debate. The site committee included two architects who would later serve on the Board of Design: Nikolai Bassov from the Soviet Union and Le Corbusier, chosen by France. The latter explained that he was selected as a delegate to the commission "to defend modern architecture and town design in a problem of world importance."

Anxious for the economic advantages and prestige garnered by the international organization, several cities presented attractive proposals for the new headquarters. San Francisco architects Wurster, Bernardi, and Born had already developed a proposal by the time the charter was signed in 1945 for a spectacular site on San Francisco Bay, in Marin County. Although the United Nations had its eye on outlying sites in Westchester County, New York City officials promoted a permanent location in Flushing Meadow Park, site of the 1939 World's Fair. The 350-acre park on Long Island was ripe for further development. Robert Moses, the legendary New York planner, chaired a blue-ribbon committee that included Nelson A. Rockefeller and directed a team of architects and engineers that included Wallace K. Harrison, Louis Skidmore, and Gilmore D. Clarke. They envisioned a Beaux-Arts-inspired monumental complex with a domed assembly chamber, the seat of political power rising above the attendant office buildings. In the grand, axial composition rows of somber pylons and reflecting pools suggest this was not only a new world capitol but also a solemn war memorial. Although the fair's City Building had been converted to the temporary home of the General Assembly, representatives never warmed to the Flushing Meadow site.

In early December 1946, when it appeared that a Philadelphia site was favored, Nelson Rockefeller and other New Yorkers grew even more determined to exercise their political power to keep the international organization in New York. The Rockefellers offered several thousand acres of their Pocantico estate in



3. Site of the United Nations Headquarters, New York, looking north from 41st Street. December 12, 1946. Photo: United Nations



4. Wallace K. Harrison. X City presented as the United Nations Headquarters. December 12, 1946. Charcoal and crayon on paper, 24 x 34". Rendering by Hugh Ferriss. Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

Westchester County. At the same time, several delegates were approached and became interested in a small site in Manhattan. While the United Nations had been exploring vast suburban sites, the ambitious New York developer William Zeckendorf of Webb & Knapp was planning a visionary commercial, cultural, and residential development along the East River. The area was home to a morass of old livestock slaughterhouses and packing plants (fig. 3). Zeckendorf had commissioned Wallace Harrison, one of the architects for Rockefeller Center, to design a "city within the city" to rival the famous Fifth Avenue complex. Called X City, the mixed-use development boasted an opera and concert hall, convention hall, 30-story apartment houses, office towers, and a hotel, situated on an elevated platform (with underground parking) that also served as a riverside heliport and boat landing. The rational order and drama of this radiant city with its cruciform apartment towers and rows of prismatic highrise slabs, punctuated by two curving towers, seemed inspired by Le Corbusier's utopian urban designs of the 1920s. When Zeckendorf offered to sell the site to the United Nations, the architects quickly redrew X City's music halls, apartments, and offices as the general assembly, council chambers, missions, and secretariat offices to demonstrate the feasibility of the small 17½-acre site (fig. 4). With the year-end deadline a few days away, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., purchased the options on the site from Zeckendorf for \$8.5 million and donated it to the United Nations. Accepting the magnanimous offer on December 14, Trygve Lie, the first Secretary General of the United Nations, proclaimed that the gift brought the headquarters to the "crossroads of our world . . . at the turbulent center of Twentieth Century life." The search for a site was over although the comparatively tiny mid-Manhattan parcel fell short of the original scope of the program.

Throughout the year, architects had called on the United Nations to sponsor an international competition for the design, a position supported by The Museum of Modern Art's 1946 exhibition *A Home for the UNO—Must We Repeat the Geneva Fiasco?* The United Nations had no desire to repeat the mistakes of the League of Nations, and no competition was held. The decision to embark on a collaborative design



process reflects the sanguine postwar spirit of cooperation indicative of the international organization. In early January 1947, Wallace Harrison was appointed Director of Planning for the new headquarters, a position for which he was well suited. Diplomatic, knowledgeable about New York City, already familiar with the site, he was also a respected architect who completed his work in a timely fashion. With Trygve Lie, he selected a team of ten architects from United Nations member countries to form the Board of Design: Le Corbusier (France), Howard Robertson (United Kingdom), Sven Markelius (Sweden), Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil), Liang Ssu-ch'eng (China), Nikolai D. Bassov (U.S.S.R.), Gyle Soilleux (Australia), Gustave Brunfaut (Belgium), Ernest Cormier (Canada), and Julio Vilamajo (Uruguay) (fig. 5). Le Corbusier's participation was apparently a foregone conclusion. Not only had he lost the opportunity to design the League of Nations, but he was also one of the most creative architects alive. Four of the architects (Le Corbusier, Markelius, Niemeyer, and Robertson) had built pavilions for their respective countries at the 1939 World's Fair and were thus acquainted with Harrison, whose landmark Trylon and Perisphere became the symbol of the fair. Niemeyer, the youngest of the group, was a gifted designer and disciple of Le Corbusier. He was largely responsible for the Ministry of Education Building in Rio de Janeiro (1936-43), an important forerunner of the Secretariat, and one for which Le Corbusier was a consultant. Other members of the board were well established and respected architects with expertise in designing large public and institutional buildings.

To aid the Board of Design, Harrison also assembled a group of associate architects from New York, engineers, specialists, and a cadre of draftsmen and modelmakers. Hugh Ferriss was commissioned to portray the various schemes under discussion, and his spectacular perspectives provided a stylistic consistency. His pencil and charcoal renderings are among the few remaining drawings that document the architectural design process. Harrison wasted no time convening his team of designers. They first met on February 17, 1947, even though the entire group could not assemble so promptly. Their mandate was to

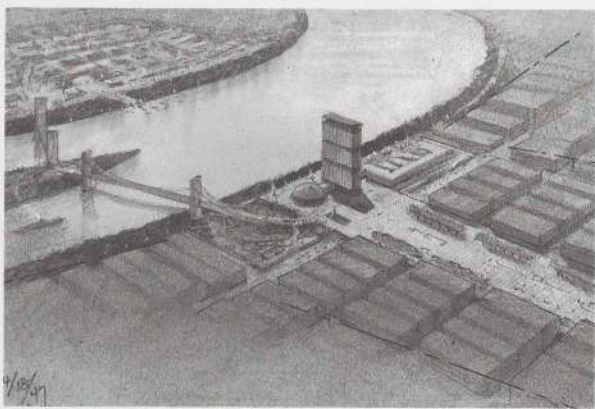


5. Members of the United Nations Headquarters Board of Design and consultants. From Left: Sven Markelius (Sweden), Le Corbusier (France), Vladimir Bodiansky (France), Liang Ssu-ch'eng (China), Wallace K. Harrison (United States), Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil), Gyle Soilleux (Australia), Nikolai Bassov (U.S.S.R.), Max Abramowitz (United States), Ernest Weissmann (Yugoslavia), Ernest Cormier (Canada), Jean Antoniadis (Greece), Matthew Nowicki (Poland). April 18, 1947. Photo: United Nations



design a final plan and publish a report by July 1. The forty-five meetings of the Board of Design that took place between February and June are chronicled with extraordinary detail and vividness in George A. Dudley's recent publication, *A Workshop for Peace* (see suggested readings below).

Although the program was not defined in detail, the principal components of the United Nations were the Secretariat, Conference Building, a large meeting hall for the General Assembly, a library, and possibly offices for specialized agencies and delegations. From the beginning, several issues were immediately apparent to the architects that would have an impact on the design: the small site necessitated one or more tall buildings for the Secretariat, delegations, and specialized agencies, already demonstrated in the X City drawing; a view toward the East River should be



6. Sven Markelius. Aerial perspective looking southeast toward the United Nations Headquarters, Welfare (Roosevelt) Island, and Queens. April 18, 1947. Pencil and white highlight on board, 7 x 10". Rendering by Hugh Ferriss. Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

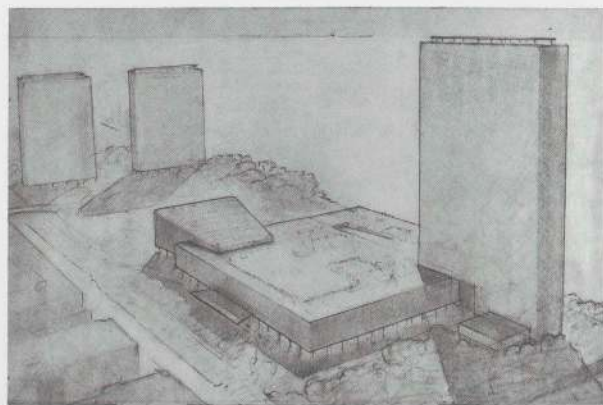
taken advantage of, thus suggesting a north-south orientation for the Secretariat, thereby minimizing shadows cast by the tall building; some open space should be preserved to set off the new buildings; and the solution should be functional and beautiful. The architects were asked to present their ideas and interpretations of the program by focusing on the articulation of the principal elements and their arrangement on the site. Over the next three months, more than eighty schemes were presented for discussion. Some of these are attributed to a single author, but most became the product of collaboration and evolution.

Many of the architects attempted to distinguish the new world headquarters from its immediate surroundings. For example, Ralph Walker, a consultant to the Board of Design, aligned the complex along a true north-south axis, thereby dramatically shifting its grid by 23 degrees from that of the Manhattan street system and other New York buildings. Howard Robertson's proposals for a colonnade surrounding the open space defined a separate territory and environment not unlike a traditional court of honor or college quadrangle. Perhaps the most far-reaching scheme was put forth by Sven Markelius, the noted city planner and architect from Stockholm (fig. 6). As a planner, Markelius's concern with individual buildings and their context was paramount. He believed

that the General Assembly, the most symbolically charged component of the headquarters complex, required an appropriately dignified approach. He proposed widening 47th street from Park Avenue to First Avenue thereby creating a wide parklike boulevard on axis with a domed assembly building. In fact, a vestige of this idea was realized in a single block of 47th Street widened between Second and First Avenues, later named for Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. Markelius also cast his glance much farther and imagined a ribbon of park land along both banks of the East River and on Welfare (Roosevelt) Island. Criticizing the industrial buildings in Queens as eyesores, he proposed greening the edges to create a more pleasant environment, suitable for delegate housing, recreation, and cultural institutions. Markelius conceived this scheme as a long-range plan for New York and believed that if future growth in the surrounding area were not controlled, the new headquarters could potentially become an insignificant detail in the skyline.

Among his colleagues, not surprisingly, Le Corbusier quickly emerged as a dominant force. A facsimile of his pocket sketchbook, on exhibit, reveals notes and sketches jotted down throughout this period. His principal scheme depicts several important concepts that had an impact on the final design (fig. 7). The towering Secretariat is located at the southern part of the site. The wedge-shaped General Assembly, projected from a large low platform containing council chambers, lounges, and other facilities, extends into the central courtyard and dominates the center of the site. Twin slab towers for delegations and specialized agencies mark the northern border. Not all members of the board were convinced that amassing so many functions into the low platform was desirable.

Niemeyer's proposal offered a significant alternative that effectively loosened up Le Corbusier's composition. In one of the most elegant and artistically sophisticated designs, Niemeyer's vast plaza provided an open setting, emphasizing the simple abstract forms of the clearly articulated buildings (fig. 8). The Conference Building, reduced to a thin strip cantilevered over the river bank, offered contemplative riparian views from within. A narrow hallway connected this block to the isolated General Assembly, promi-

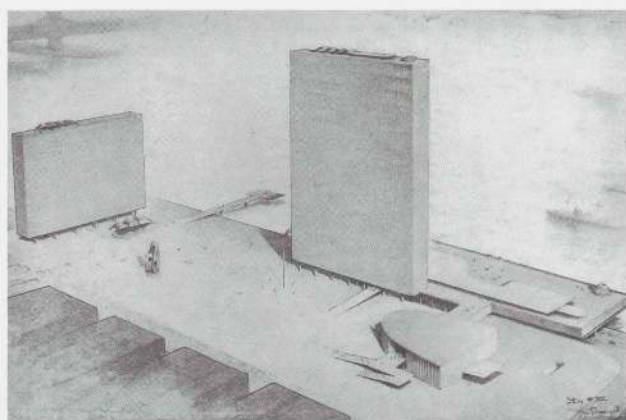


7. Le Corbusier. Aerial perspective of the United Nations Headquarters from the southwest. 1947. Pencil and color pencil on paper, 7 1/2 x 11 1/2". Rendering by Hugh Ferriss. Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University



nently placed near the southern entrance. His aim, inscribed on another drawing in the exhibition, was to provide "an expression of technical and contemporary art." The striking proposal captivated many other members of the board.

As the committee worked toward a resolution and final proposal, attention was focused on Le Corbusier's and Niemeyer's schemes, which were developed further in the final meetings and, in a sense, conflated. The final proposal depicts the Conference Building aligned along the river, the Secretariat tower to the south, a clear articulation of the General Assembly placed near the center of the site, and a spatial division creating two principal courtyards (see cover). Upon presenting the final report to the United Nations, Harrison described the board's impressive accomplishment in rather pragmatic terms: "The world hopes for a symbol of peace; we have given



8. Oscar Niemeyer. Aerial perspective of the United Nations Headquarters from the southwest. May 6, 1947. Pencil and crayon on paper, 17 1/2 x 24". Rendering by Hugh Ferriss. Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

them a workshop for peace."

When the United Nations approved this conceptual plan, the task of developing the scheme further with necessary modifications and details, and building the new headquarters fell to Harrison and his partner Max Abramowitz (fig. 9). Construction documents were quickly prepared. The Secretariat, an elegantly detailed glass-and-aluminum curtain-wall skyscraper, was completed in 1950. The bold prismatic form against a backdrop of New York's prewar skyscrapers with their idiosyncratic setbacks and towers, became the first of many glass-sheathed office buildings and the dominant architectural vocabulary of postwar corporate culture. The Conference Building followed in 1951, and Markelius returned to New York to design the interior of one of the three council chambers, a gift from Sweden. His Scandinavian colleagues, Finn Juhl and Arnstein Arneborg, from Denmark and Norway respectively, completed the other two. The General Assembly opened in 1952, and the library was added several years later.

The clean lines of the saddle-backed General Assembly were inflected with an awkwardly proportioned dome over the assembly chamber. The unfortunate addition had been requested earlier by Senator Warren Austin, the American Representative to the United Nations. He believed this traditional architectural element was a necessary (and recognizable) symbol for



9. United Nations Headquarters, New York. Photo: United Nations/M. Bordyg

a new world capitol in order to obtain funding from his congressional colleagues. Indeed, this anecdote points directly at the issue of symbolism and the ability of modern, abstract forms to communicate, in this instance, universal aspirations. Nevertheless, the General Assembly with its diminutive dome is altogether dwarfed by the towering Secretariat which dominates the site, and hence by sheer size of its pure shape and dignified white marble end walls is perhaps unavoidably the most symbolic element in the overall composition. Harrison hoped that the "workshop for peace"—an economical, functional, and efficient modern design—would symbolize the rational ideals of the member nations. Perhaps, too, he recognized that architecture acquires symbolic meaning over time and reflects the successes and failures of the work taking place within.

Peter Reed

Associate Curator

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Suggested Readings: George A. Dudley, *A Workshop for Peace: Designing the United Nations Headquarters*. New York: Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994. Adam Bartos and Christopher Hitchens, *International Territory: The United Nations 1945-95*. London and New York: Verso, 1994. Victoria Newhouse, *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect*. New York: Rizzoli, 1989.

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Cover: United Nations Headquarters Board of Design. Aerial perspective of the United Nations Headquarters from the southwest. 1947. Charcoal and charcoal pencil with white highlights on paper, 21 1/2 x 31". Rendering by Hugh Ferriss. Jean Ferriss Leich Collection