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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

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A HOME FOR U.N.O.: MUST WE REPEAT THE GENEVA FIASCO?

THE COMPETITION FAILED
THE BUILDING FAILED
THE LEAGUE FAILED

---these ominous words sum up the fiasco of the architectural competition (1926-27) for the League of Nations building which, as an "illustrated statement" or small exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will present in a series of wall panels in the main hall Wednesday, February 6. Under the general title A Home for U.N.O.: Must We Repeat the Geneva Fiasco? the statement includes a photographic enlargement of the Palace of the League of Nations as it was finally completed in 1938, photographs and photostats of the nine architectural renderings and plans which won prizes in the competition, and a text describing the competition, its peculiar political maneuvering and its sad results. It features the unexecuted project of LeCorbusier and Jeanneret, the rightful winners of the Geneva competition.

It also includes original drawings of a hypothetical scheme for a United Nations Center at San Francisco designed by William Wilson Wurster and Theodore Bernardi with Ernest Born. This project is shown because it throws light on many of the problems which the actual center will have to face in its own way. It does not pretend to be a solution, for a solution must come by a competition based on an actual site and a carefully developed program.

The Story of a Palace

In 1926 the League of Nations appointed nine prominent architects of as many countries to write the program for an international competition and to judge the results. The competition was open to citizens of member states and those of Germany. This jury consisted of four academicians: Sir John Burnet of London, Carlos Gato of Madrid, Charles Lemareshquier of Paris, Attilio Muggia of Bologna; three famous progressives: H. P. Berlage of The Hague, Karl Moser of Zurich, Josef Hoffmann of Vienna; and two men of less certain disposition: Ivar Tengbom of Stockholm and Victor Horta of Brussels.

The building requirements as outlined in the program fell into three main parts: an efficient office building or secretariat, a library and a great assembly hall. The chosen site was a beautiful wooded park by the Lake of Geneva, but limited in size and falling quite steeply to the water. Funds also were limited, as the program set a maximum cost of 13,000,000 Swiss francs (approximately \$2,500,000).

Predominant among the 377 submitted projects were ostentatious classical buildings in the conventional international style of officialdom. But these were unable to meet the requirements. Offices opened on gloomy courts or peered through triumphant colonnades; assembly halls were classically correct in proportion but acoustically impossible; corridors were labyrinthian; automobile access was not considered; the splendid site was smothered with artificial terraces. All this at costs far in excess of the stipulated sum.

Only the modern architects, intent on giving each problem its direct and appropriate solution, were able to fill the requirements, and even welcomed the difficult conditions as a basis for creation. Of these, the project of LeCorbusier & Jeanneret of Paris was obviously outstanding. The modern-minded jurors united in its favor but could get no absolute majority, for the academicians would not be party to their heresy, although they could not agree among themselves upon any one project. After months of debate the jury evaded its responsibility and awarded nine equal first prizes, in spite of the fact that the only one of them to meet the cost requirement was that of LeCorbusier & Jeanneret. All the other "first-prize winners" exceeded the cost requirement by anywhere from four to thirty-seven million francs.

The task of final selection was passed on to a committee of five diplomats. Urged on by political pressure, undeterred by ethics or by the shocked outcry of enlightened groups all over the world, this committee proceeded to recommend an expansion of the building appropriation and award of the commission jointly to the authors of the four most orthodox of the academic prize-winners (the fifth, Labro, was excluded only because of his scandalously close professional connection with one of the jurors), on condition that they produce a totally new scheme which would avoid the patent errors of their competition entries.

The members of this hodgepodge firm fought among themselves, aped many features of the LeCorbusier & Jeanneret scheme, and ten years later, on a new site, their Palace was opened to an unimpressed public. The antique glories were diluted but preserved. The League itself was already dead.

Yet the Museum believes that we can learn from Geneva and select an international jury of honest men, sensitive to the modern spirit in architecture, strong in their convictions. Then a competition would surely be the best, most fitting way to attain buildings which will not be meaningless shells, but vital parts of that **living** organism which the U.N.O. must be.

The "illustrated statement" which closes March 3, has been designed by Rudolf Mock, a Swiss architect who practices in Princeton, N. J.