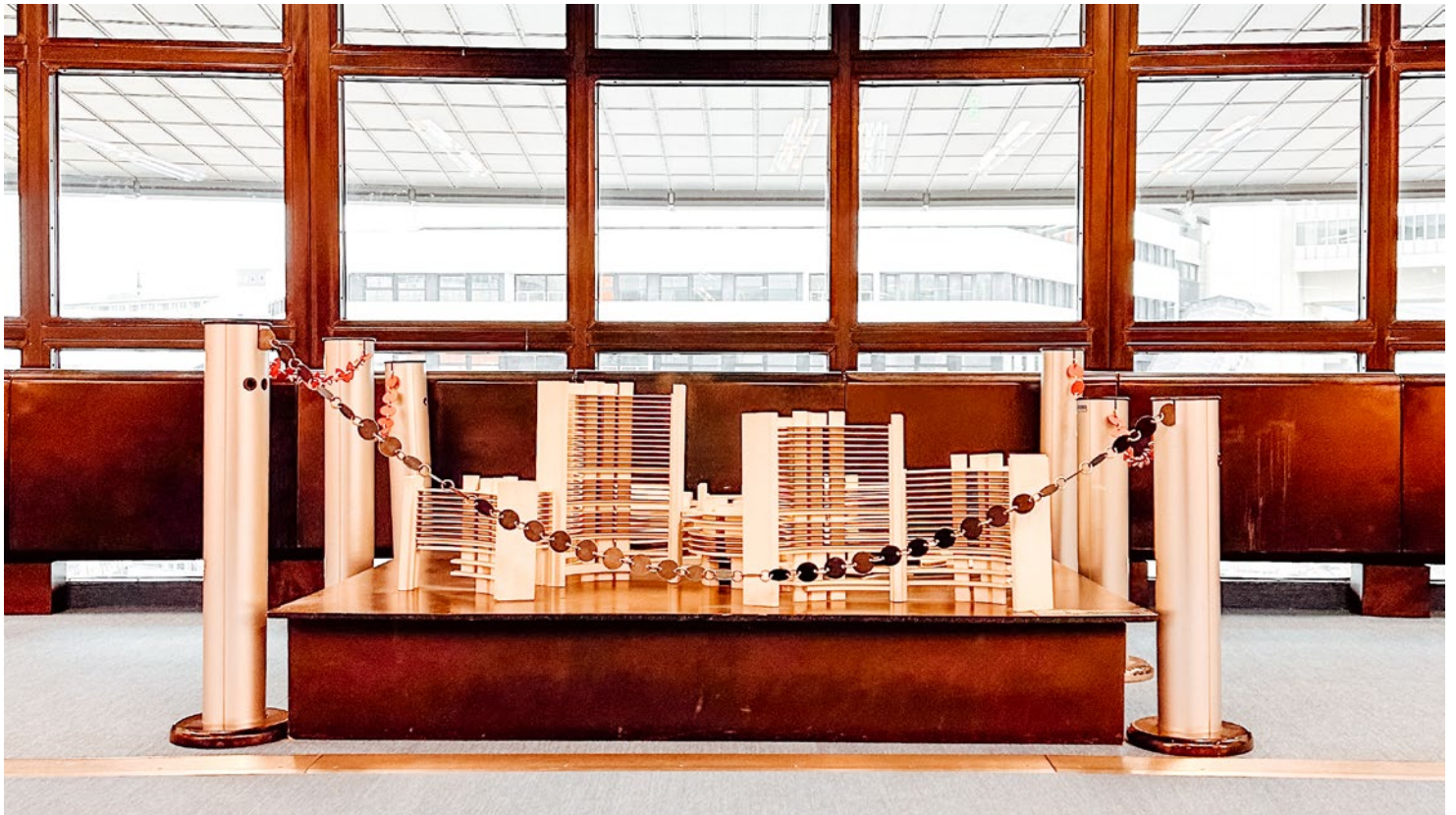# UN CITIES

UN CITIES explores the architecture and visual language of the United Nations—not as a series of monuments, but as a functional infrastructure and interconnected network. A kaleidoscope of internationalism—an ever-shifting landscape of negotiation, where architecture becomes an organic threshold between openness and control, the global and the local, idealism and bureaucracy.

UN CITIES

"Everything will be all right - you know when?
When people, just people, stop thinking of the United Nations
as a weird Picasso abstraction and see it as
a drawing they made themselves."

Dag Hammarskjöl (UN Secretary-General, 1953-1961)

Concept

UN CITIES brings together the architecture and vision of the United Nations across the globe, turning its many sites into a network of spaces where global ideals take form. UN CITIES stands for cities within cities, the whole world in many places at once.

According to official terminology, the UN headquarters are not located within their respective host countries, but are merely surrounded by them. Beyond its headquarters in New York, the United Nations operates regional offices in Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi, along with numerous other UN sites across the globe. These places tell stories of crises and solutions, of negotiations and progress, of the search for cohesion in a world full of differences. They stand for cooperation, diversity and a common desire for understanding and embody internationality at its core.

Although this vision is almost 80 years old, its aspirations are more relevant than ever. How can these initial ideas be revitalized in a time that needs them more urgently than ever before?

For many, the United Nations will remain an abstract figure in 2026. What once began with optimism and a grand vision has lost some of its brilliance over the decades. The architecture of these places is symbolic: intended as a sign of openness and dialog, they often appear hermetically enclosed. Their secure structures - high fences, guard posts, concrete barriers - reflect the fragility of the vision. This contradiction raises questions: How can an open dialog be made possible under such conditions? How visible and approachable is the idea of the international community?

What role does architecture play in the perception of global institutions? And how could a reorientation of architecture convey the right message?

This is where the UN CITIES project comes in. It explores the architecture of UN buildings as the visual language of an international community. It addresses the question of how architecture itself can be a form of international dialog and cultural synthesis. Although these buildings undeniably carry a touch of retro-futurism, they embody an idea that goes far beyond international style.

What makes these places so special? Is it the architecture itself that makes us think with its monumentality? Or is it the invisible narrative inherent in these buildings - the hopes associated with them, the forces that shake them? How can a place reflect the dynamics of world politics? And what role does its architecture play in the way we perceive these institutions? How does a building reflect a collective mindset? What is the true value of a place in the global age?
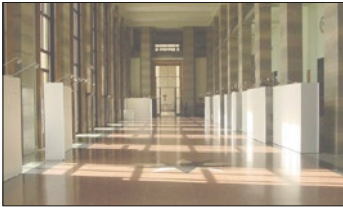
UN CITIES makes the architecture of the UN tangible in a new way: In a multi-channel video installation, the UN headquarters are deconstructed and merged into a visual and conceptual synthesis. The montage of fragmented views creates a new, hybrid structure - an image in motion. The composition resembles a mosaic that consists of many individual parts, but only comes together as a whole through the viewer's perception: Each individual constructs their own image of the UN and relates their own perspective to the big questions of our time.

1958   UNESCO House
        Paris, France
Headquarters of UNESCO.
Designed by Marcel Breuer and others.

1952   UN Headquarters
        New York, USA
New York City was selected as the site for the United Nations headquarters. Completed in 1952, the building became a landmark of the emerging International Style in architecture. The design team included renowned architects such as Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier.

1966   UN Office at Geneva
        Geneva, Switzerland
Originally League of Nations (1936); became a UN office in 1946

1966   UN ECLAC
        Santiago, Chile

1974   UN Economic Commission
        for Africa (UNECA)
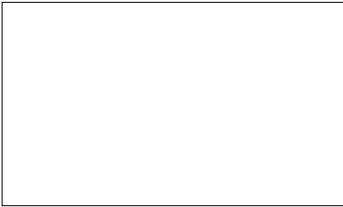   Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

1981   UN Office at Vienna
        Vienna, Austria

The Vienna International Centre, home of the United Nations, is commonly known as UNO-City in Vienna.
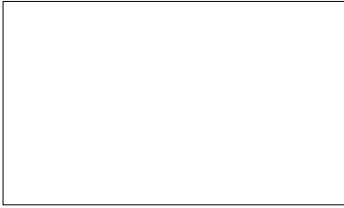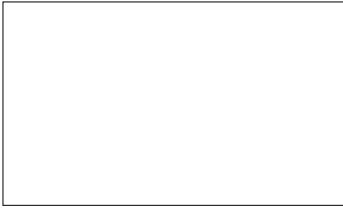

1976   UN ESCAP
        Bangkok, Thailand

1996   UN Office at Nairobi (UNON)
        Nairobi, Kenya
        HQ of UNEP and UN-Habitat;
        only UN HQ in the Global South

2004   UN House, Brasilia
        Brasilia, Brazil

1996   UN House, Beirut
        Beirut, Lebanon

2015   UN House, Abuja
        Abuja, Nigeria

UN CITIES is a reflection on the role of architecture as a carrier of ideologies, as a projection surface for hopes and as a silent witness to a changing world order. It is an attempt to make the invisible DNA of these places visible and to understand them as dynamic, living entities. The United Nations is not a static construct, but an ongoing movement, an organic network of visions, ideas and actions.

At a time when global challenges are more urgent than ever, UN CITIES calls for the architecture of the United Nations to be seen not as untouchable symbolism, but as a space that affects us all - and in which we can all participate. The project is not a nostalgic look back, but a plea for a renewed vision. It invites us to see the UN not as a distant institution, but as a shared project - a visual reflection on a world in transition and an idea that can grow with it.

Even if UN CITIES ultimately remains as abstract as a Picasso painting, it offers essential insights into the world of the United Nations. Like a kaleidoscope, it brings together fragments from various UN sites to form a constantly shifting visual composition – one that invites each viewer to construct their own interpretation. In the end, it's not the images that remain, but the idea on which they are based: the bigger picture.
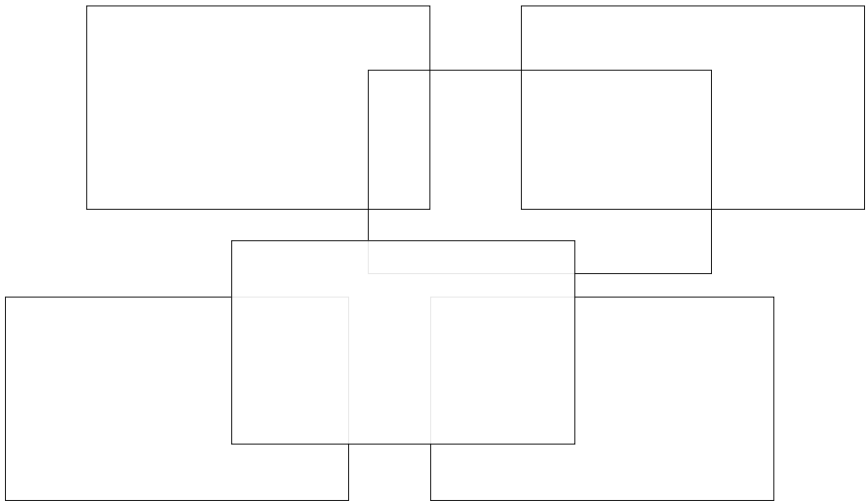
Multi-channel Moving Image Installation

UN CITIES explores the architecture and visual language of the United Nations—not as a series of monuments, but as a functional infrastructure and interconnected network.

A kaleidoscope of internationalism unfolds: an ever-shifting landscape of negotiation in which architecture becomes an organic threshold between openness and control, the global and the local, idealism and bureaucracy.

Combining images from major UN headquarters and offices worldwide, UN CITIES takes the form of a multi-channel moving-image installation.

Fragmented perspectives dissolve into a hybrid experience. Viewers become co-architects, assembling their own image of the UN through shifting layers of space, form, and narrative.

Through algorithmic composition, ever-shifting visual formations emerge—an image in motion, a continuously renewing structure that, like the United Nations itself, operates as a living organism.

Conceptual sketch: UN CITIES, Multi-Screen-Video-Installation

Exhibition draft: UN CITIES, 6 Screen Video-Installation, The Barracks, Lahore, Pakistan, 2026

Status Quo/Timeline

01–06/2025: Research and concept development
– Ongoing discussions and coordination with the UN Communications Department,
   the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other project participants
– Project planning with Anne Thomas, Laura Skocek, and Irene Hoeglinger (UN Information Service Vienna)
– Initial funding commitment from the BMWKMS – IV (Arts and Culture)
08–11/2025: Filming for the pioneering project "UNO CITY – Vienna International Centre"
11/2025: Video editing / test screening / UN feeback and approval
12/2025: Final version UNO CITY, 3 Screen-installation, 12:00 Min.

Production/Travel Plans 2026

02/2026: Securing financing and signing of legal agreements for filming in selected UN buildings
03/2026: Exhibition "UNO CITY – Vienna International Centre" in the Rotunda of the UN VIENNA

04–09/2026:
Filming for the UN CITIES art project at selected UN headquarters (worldwide)
– UN Office at Vienna (UNO City), Austria (including UNODC, UNIDO, IAEA)
– UN Headquarters, New York, USA (designed by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, among others)
– UN Office at Geneva, Switzerland (originally the Palace of Nations, 1936; UN headquarters since 1946)
– UN Office at Nairobi (UNON), Kenya (headquarters of UNEP and UN-Habitat)
– UNESCO House, Paris, France (UNESCO headquarters, designed by Marcel Breuer, among others)
– UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
– UN ESCAP, Bangkok, Thailand (originally ECAFE, since 1974 ESCAP)
– UN ECLAC, Santiago de Chile (originally ECLA, ECLAC since 1984)

Exhibtions/Presentations 2026

09/2026: Editing and post-production UN CITIES
11/2026: Exhibtion of UN CITIES at THE BARRACKS, Lahore, Pakistan
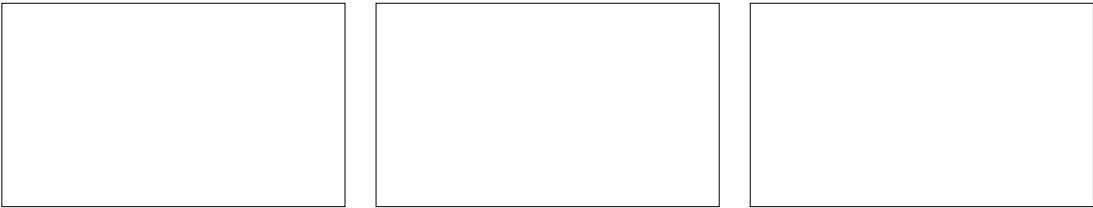12/2026: Screenings and exhibtion of UN CITIES in Vienna

Conceptual sketch: UN CITIES, Multi-Screen-Video-Installation

Architecture photography meets moving images – presented as a multi-screen installation. Fragmented perspectives dissolve into a hybrid experience. Viewers become co-architects, assembling their own image of the UN through shifting layers of space, form, and narrative.

UNO CITY – An Extraterritorial Landmark in an Interconnected World
3-Screen Video Installation, 2025

UNO CITY is the starting point of the broader UN CITIES project, focusing on a single site while keeping all others in view. It examines the Vienna International Centre – widely known to everyone as UNO-City.

Officially extraterritorial, yet unmistakably part of Vienna's urban fabric, the UNO-City functions as a "city within a city" and exists in a constant state of negotiation – an open dialogue – between inside and outside, sovereignty and cooperation, openness and restriction. Its position is ambivalent: physically embedded in the city yet politically apart from it; locally situated yet globally operative; public in purpose but private in access. Its form speaks without words, standing for something greater, while inside, the steady work of diplomacy unfolds: the careful choreography of governance, the subtle balance between neutrality and influence.

The architecture of the UN building in Vienna resists monumental gestures. It doesn't monumentalize unity or peace but instead translates these ambitions into spatial logic – through a radial layout, modular offices, and repetitive forms. This is architecture as system, not spectacle. The building's very form embodies the tension between universal ideals and localized implementation – a kind of translation machine positioned between the global and the immediate.

Like other UN headquarters around the world, UNO-City speaks the architectural language of internation-alism – characterized by abstraction, efficiency, and aesthetic neutrality. In Vienna, this global infrastructure is situated within a specific urban and cultural land-scape. Fenced, surveilled, and bureaucratically reg-ulated, the UNO-City is at once a tool for worldwide coordination and a stranger in its own neighborhood.

UNO CITY approaches this condition cinematically – not by documenting the building as a static object, but by activating it as a site of layered contradictions, navigating between ideals and constraints, access and denial, the visible and the hidden. The 3-screen-in-stallation fragments and reassembles the architecture and its surroundings, revealing how global values are choreographed through material and form.

How local can an international style truly become – especially through the eyes of those living alongside it? Can a building speak both the abstract language of diplomacy and the specific dialect of place? Might we see global institutions through the lens of local inter-nationalism — not as sealed, standalone structures dropped into cities, but as active parts of the commu-nities they inhabit? Can such architecture belong to both – everywhere and somewhere – at once?

UNO CITY offers no fixed conclusion. It invites a way of viewing United Nations' visual identity through the International Style of architecture – not as a statement, but as a negotiation: ongoing, unfinished, and deeply grounded.
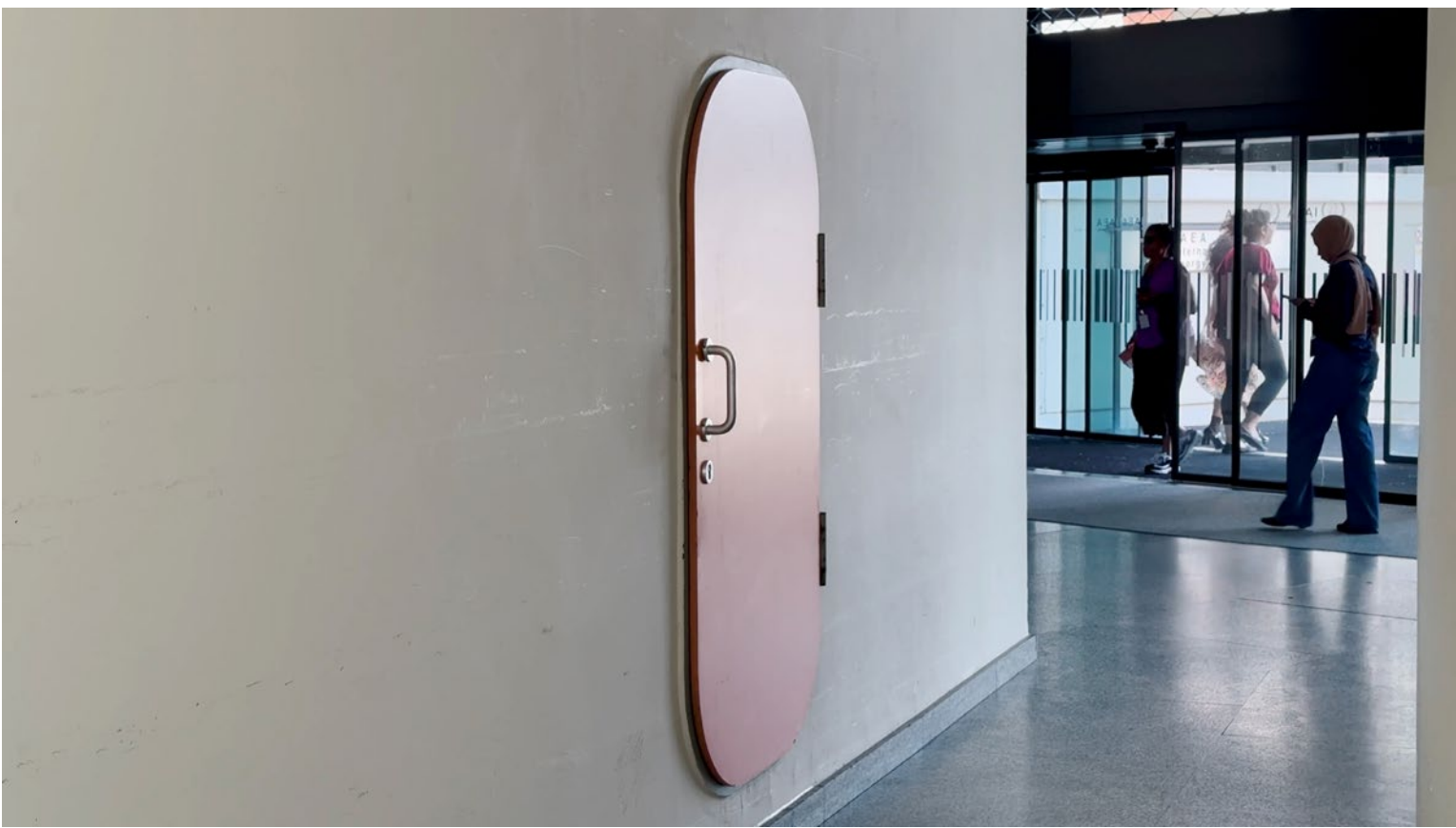
Exhibition draft: UNO CITY – 3 Screen installation, 12:00 Min., UN Vienna, Vienna International Center
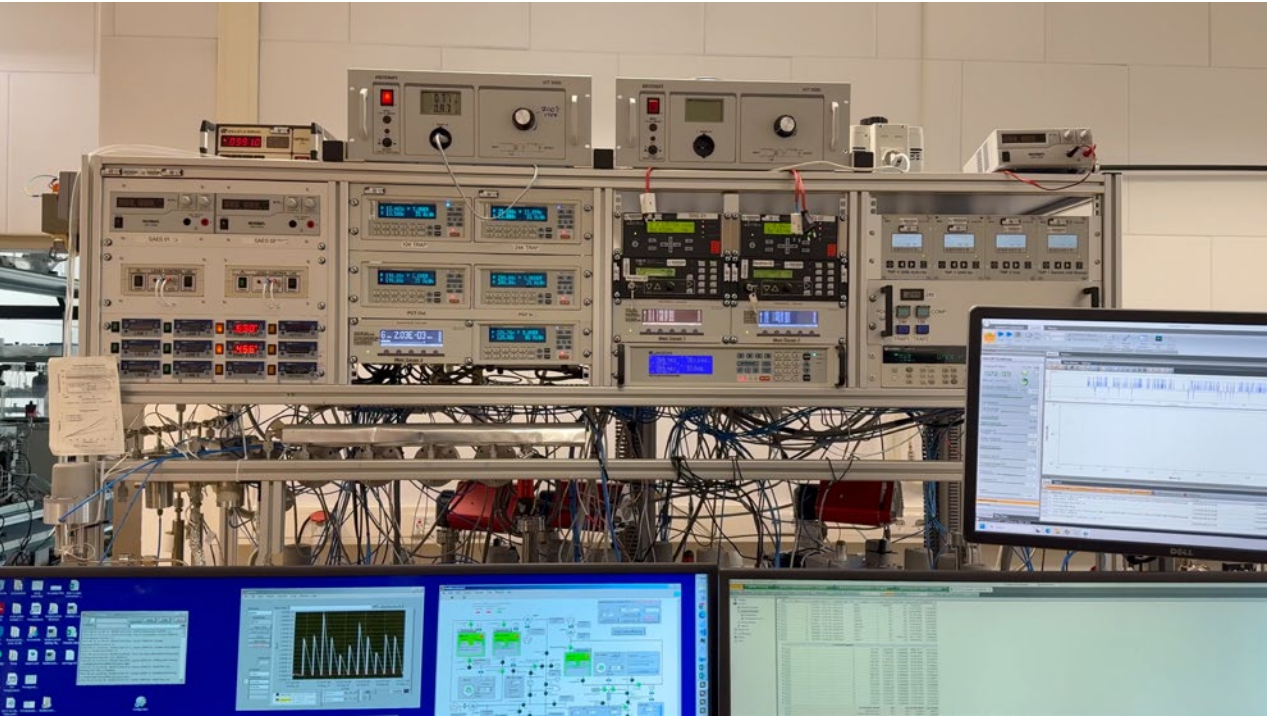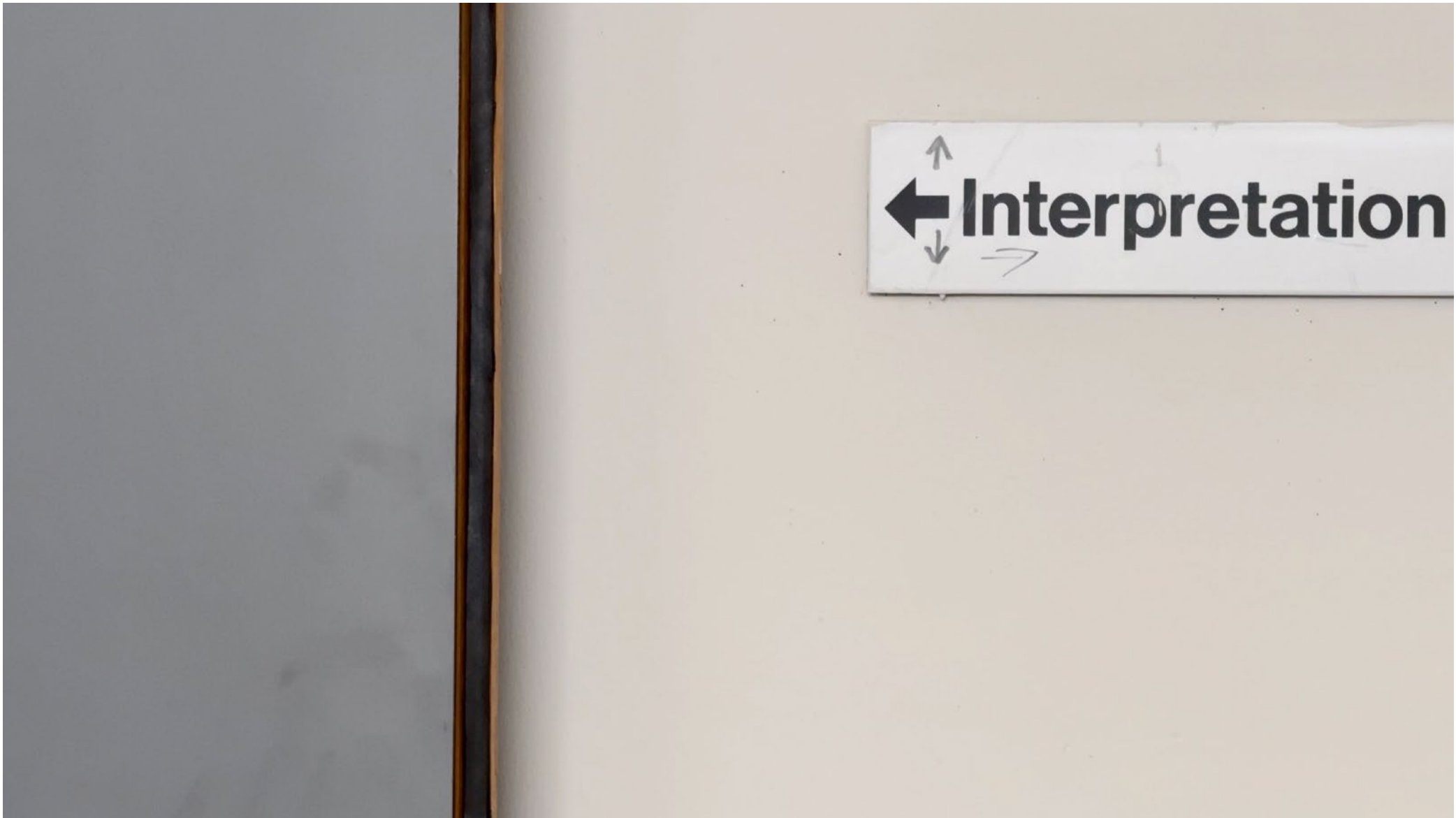
Video Stils

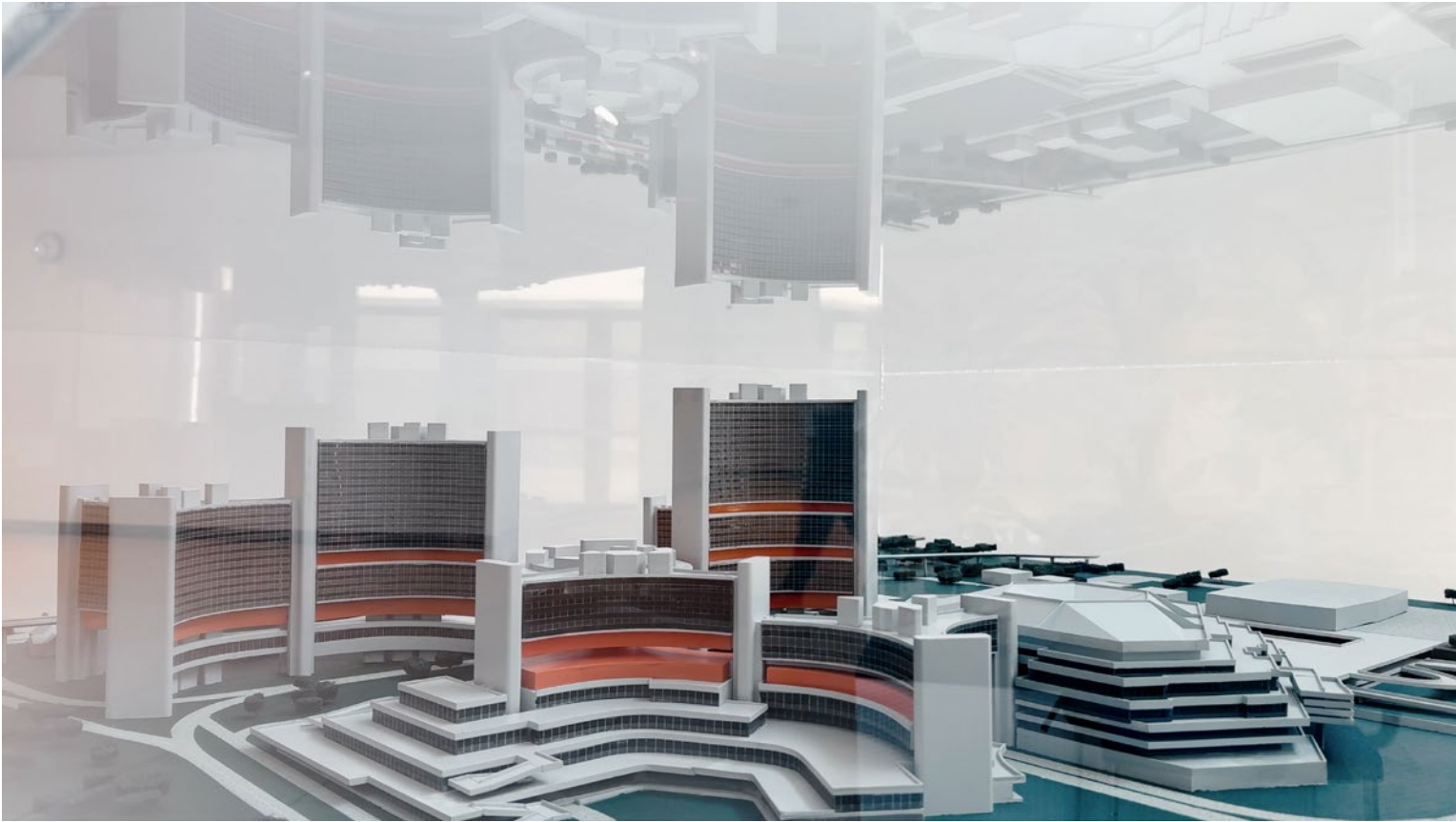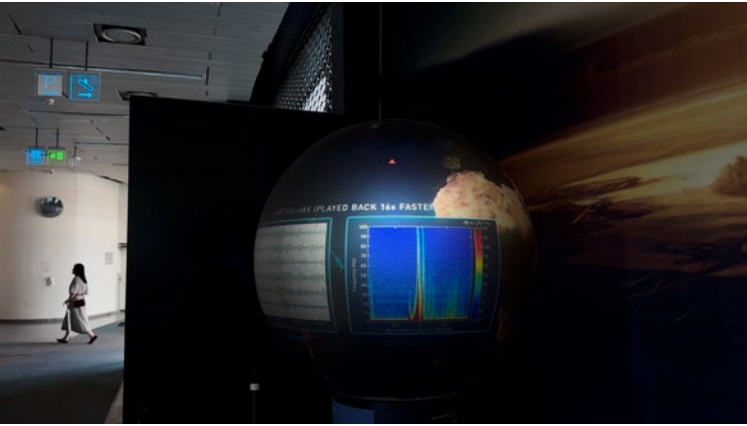UN CITIES, WOLFGANG LEHRNER, 2026

UN CITIES, WOLFGANG LEHRNER, 2026

Mindmap – Work in progress

UN as an aggregation of sites of operations, exchanges, translations, and representations

But how was communication as a function and institutional requirement to become architecture, and how was the building itself, the Headquarters, to produce that new organization?

UN posited the nation-state as the organizing unit for global diplomacy and political representation.

how architecture globalized new systems of management and organization.

architectures, reflecting shifts in foreign policy and diplomatic agendas, moved away from purportedly open configurations in space to embrace highly controlled and closed space typologies. But multilateral institutions require a move beyond questions of national representation, especially if one is to address the political and aesthetic challenge of internationalism within a broadening multimodal world, where nations constituted only the modular parts of a larger system of diplomacy.

Communication was the metaphorical and concrete architecture on which the UN's multilateralism depended and that allowed the organization to function as an organism.

Own imaginary constructions of governmental structures, internationalist significations, and representations of universality that ultimately found their way into the form of the building.

Which architectural language?
Symbols opened the door for historical forms to enter the architectural body, a threat that the architects pushed against, proclaiming to the press that symbolism was unnecessary, tradition was dead, and symbols "old.

Communication Tool

to think of the space of global governance in terms of communications

Creating a universal system for the storage and circulation of information. use of design as a universal language
Otto Neurath, Paul Otlet, Patrick Geddes

There was no other medium as impactful as architecture itself. the most effective way to illustrate the work of the UN was to visit the Headquarters and experience firsthand

"Radiance," remarked Markelius, would come "from inside," confirming the functionalist imperative at play in designing the Headquarters from the inside out.

development of a global communications systems and the production of the world citizen as "remotely present" and "globally mobile."
Lisa Parks

Critics

- American corporate architecture
- Disoriented symbol
- unorginal
- Bureaucracy on a global scale,
- impersonal, abstract
- A stage and platform for a world elite internationalism on the level of government rather than people

Not trying to produce an architectural masterpiece, but a tool to do a job."

Buildings

The choice of location a political and geographical matter

Originality vs. origin „new" in all terms

Originality was never part of the vocabulary essential to the building and the organization

Year	UN Building / Headquarters	City & Country	Notes
1952	UN Headquarters	New York, USA	Designed by an international team (Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer,..)
1958	UNESCO House	Paris, France	Headquarters of UNESCO. Designed by Marcel Breuer and others.
1966	UN Office at Geneva	Geneva, Switzerland	Originally League of Nations (1936); became a UN office in 1946
1966	UN ECLAC	Santiago, Chile	Originally ECLA; renamed ECLAC in 1984
1974	UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	
1976	UN ESCAP	Bangkok, Thailand	Originally ECAFE; renamed ESCAP in 1974
1981	UN Office at Vienna (UNO City)	Vienna, Austria	UNODC, UNIDO, etc.
1996	UN Office at Nairobi (UNON)	Nairobi, Kenya	HQ of UNEP and UN-Habitat; only UN HQ in the Global South
1996	UN House, Beirut	Beirut, Lebanon	Hosts UN ESCWA
2004	UN House, Brasilia	Brasilia, Brazil	
2015	UN House, Abuja	Abuja, Nigeria	

Function

speak - listen - act

An instrument / effective machine

Translation machine

Nerve center

Workshops for the world

Collective mind

World co-operation

Metropoles vs. peripheries

building networks
building relations
building infrastructure

Celebration of openness and flexibility

Art

Board of Art Advisers

no narrative symbolism

modernist / abstract art

the materiality of the room becomes the ornament

boring on purpose

The birth of the international style

Boring is good – no national reference!

"The new headquarters should take the form of a ship traversing the oceans."

Institution of a world community

Open and in touch with the global polity the organization hoped to address.

The networked structure of institutional internationalism

A space to present diplomacy as grounded and democratic

Work

Who counts as architect? interdisciplinary nature of the enterprise: Apart from designers, the architects of the UN include engineers, diplomats, midlevel bureaucrats, administrative assistants, librarians, and manufacturers.

The World Team of the United Nations laying down the plans of a world architecture, world and not international...

local - global
inside – outside

Tensions between the ideal of global connectivity and its local implementation, particularly concerning institutional independence and sovereignty

Although a public space in its constitution, the United Nations Headquarters purported to make a "home" for this new global polity.

Debate between centralized and decentralized institutional structures, where centralization stood for efficiency and decentralization for democracy.

Meaningful representations of international relations

Vision

Transparency and equity on a global scale

Anti-colonial visions of self-determination and global society

Form

A monument or a symbol of peace
vs.
No monument
Focus on functions and requrements

A building designed from the inside out

Process

Headquarters as an imperfect variant of modern architecture, declaring it a work-inprogress

UN architects sought to install an infrastructural aesthetic that presented the UN as a communications organism and diplomatic labor as collaborative work in progress.

Quotes

Architects were not to design palaces, but rather infrastructures for a new communications organism built to grow and manage theaters of operations globally.
Le Corbusier

It's time for a new architecture, one that allows for a democratic organization of society to center on the majority.

Keep thinking, building, and expanding how we come together, how we assemble.
Olga Touloumi

Organic unity, open for re-arrangements

"Democracy is something you do; not something you talk about. It is more than a form of government, or an attitude, or an opinion. It is participation."
George de Huszar,

A democratic "world interior" is an oxymoron, since the world constitutes a "non-assemblable entity" that cannot gather in one place. Therefore, democratic governance can only be organized in parts, as a system of subordinate structures. "
Peter Sloterdijk

The Network Society "Communication space" for global diplomacy, where "a new, common language could emerge. Manuel Castells

Mediascapes, enable "global cultural flows. These global interiors deliver a "structuring structure" for world order and for political representation Arjun Appadurai

International life in a material world must diffuse itself from an international centre where, without disturbance from national elements, it is permitted to breathe the international atmosphere.
Philip Noel-Baker

...The world to-day, Gentlemen, has not one centre any more, except that moral centre to be built up by the common purpose and combined efforts of the United Nations.
Luis Padilla Nervo

UN a "utopian fragment"
Rem Koolhaas

Inter-Nationalism

Institutional Internationalism:
If the completion of the UN Headquarters delivered a model, then the UNESCO House started turning the model into a type. For a plan to become a type that then iteratively circulates as directives for future buildings with similar functions, there needs to be a sustained demand that mobilizes (and produces) it.

Internationalism is a process and an organizational principle, not a form.

To understand the headquarters as a site of liberal internationalism is to examine the practices that structured it, but also the ones it aspired to shape.

Shift of focus from symbols to systems, and from centralized to networked models of organization.

Site

"Sites" as a hermeneutic tool that opens architectural inquiry to the social structures and cultural forms intertwined with the making of those spaces.
Unlike buildings, sites can be closed or open, feature buildings or appear empty, be enveloped by architectural form or encounter it.

Unity, could only emerge from a collective process, where "strife and turmoil and discussion" would eventually lead to a "new center of a world organization" that synthesized the many historical, regional, or cultural references into one coherent physical arrangement for all.
Mumford

World capital / Headquarters

The spaces of global assembly

The World Center of Communication proposed a city, where a global community of scholars, scientists, and artists would take on world peace.
Hendrik Christian Andersen and Ernest Hébrard , 1912

The creation of a Cité mondiale proposed an informational infrastructure for knowledge storage and circulation in the form of a global city.
Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine

Roosevelt insisted on avoiding a fixed center, proposing a peripatetic assembly and the dispatch of less critical components of the organization to regional centers to counteract the centralization of power.

Wolfgang Lehrner / Bio

The observation and visualization of local determined characteristics of cities, the spaces between them, and the resulting global transformability run through Wolfgang Lehrner's works. Cosmopolitan in his investigations, the artist responds to the change and the importance of seemingly insignificant similarities, as well as the opposition of urban areas, cities and their networking in the cultural, socio-economic, historical and metaphysical sense.

In his way of working Lehrner consciously uses coincidence to determine the direction of aimless drifting, headed by the respective routes, squares, streets and places. The resulting cinematic portraits of everyday urban life are essentially results of the search for the particular.

www.wolfganglehrner.com