

50-Year Watch

United Nations Headquarters

By Fred Bernstein

The United Nations should begin giving tours of its upper floors. Otherwise, preservationists may imagine them to be something they're not. By now, it's well known that the United Nations is planning two major construction projects. First, the United Nations Development Corporation (UNDC), the agency chartered by the city and state to provide the international body with office space, will build a 900,000-square-foot tower immediately south of its existing complex. (The site, at First Avenue and 42nd Street, holds a neglected playground and a Queens-Midtown Tunnel air vent). Once that building is complete, the U.N. will empty and renovate its 50-year-old headquarters: the 39-story Secretariat, the scoop-roofed General Assembly, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, and a conference building overlooking the East River. Lovers of mid-century Modernism are already worried. After all, the U.N. – designed by a team that included Wallace Harrison and such superstars as Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer – is an icon of the International Style. It is also New York's answer to the Hilton hotels that lent glamour to cities like Istanbul and Athens in the 1950s. The formula: A sleek tower bracketed by low-rise buildings, served by a circular driveway with a fountain in its center. But unlike the hotels, which have had to upgrade to stay in business, the U.N. has left things pretty much alone. Richard Meier, who (along with Kevin Roche, Fumihiko Maki, and Norman Foster) is competing to design the new U.N. tower, toured the complex recently, and remarked that he was amazed to see it was "a perfectly preserved period piece." That same sense of wonder pervaded Todd Eberle's photos of the building's mid-century details, published in *Vanity Fair* this year. But to some of the U.N.'s employees, the *Vanity Fair* spread was more a source of puzzlement than of pride. To them, the building is disastrously outmoded, and nostalgia could stand in the way of needed renovations. Roofs leak, there's no adequate sprinkler system, and the air conditioning strains. With asbestos everywhere, minor renovations have been postponed, leaving spaces drab and poorly configured. The 32nd floor is typical – offices feel jerry-rigged, and the center hallway, though hundreds of feet above Manhattan, resembles a hospital basement. By contrast, the tower's exterior, with its white marble ends and green glass sides, is still a stunner. It's possible to imagine someone like Toshiko Mori – who appreciates the achievements of her Modernist forebears but has the self-assurance to envision a 21st-century architecture – rethinking the interiors in a way that realizes the building's promise. She, or someone of her stature, ought to have that chance. The public spaces are another story. With their Chagall windows, Leger murals, and Norman Rockwell mosaic, the ground floor rooms have become so familiar over 50 years that they deserve to be preserved for history, if not architecture's sake. If the past is any guide, the United Nations will make its plans in secret. The U.N. and the UNDC have refused to



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comment on the current competition. But that secrecy may work against the U.N. Preservationists who haven't been beyond the building's lobby may cry desecration when the office floors are gutted. And though the U.N. answers to no one – least of all local preservation groups – it ought to get New Yorkers who care about architecture behind it. It could start by giving tours of the 32nd floor.

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The United Nations Secretariat (top) A George Nelson floorlamp doesn't enliven a makeshift workspace (bottom)



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