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Richards, Kimberly

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Kimberly Richards

Sites of Representation

Since its conception, the United Nations (UN) has often convened in spaces that possess extraordinarily rich performance histories. Examples range from the signing of the UN Charter in the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House to the appropriation of former sites of World Fairs for meetings of the General Assembly and more recent ad hoc conventions held within performing arts centers. These theatres do more than solve the logistics of how to assemble a large number of bodies; these spaces perform and they create the conditions for performative action to occur. This photo essay collects a series of images from the UN Online News and Media Photo Archive which document the history of the organization and its work. The images I have selected recall the other performance histories that haunt the theatrical spaces so as to draw attention to the symbolic playing field that the UN acts upon. These images beckon us to contemplate the complex relationship between the physical and material reality of the theatrical spaces of the UN and the symbolic actions created by the use of theatrical structures—for it is no coincidence that the General Assembly would make its home the site of the 1939 World Fair, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” which included a model of “Democracy.” Democracy has always been located

Opposite: Figure1: UN Photo #549911.

in the theatre. The Greeks used theatres as democratic institutions and their dramatic texts were designed to promote democratic debate in public space. Unlike UN meetings which have taken place in corporate spaces, such as hotels and convention centers, and private spaces, such as resorts and chalets, the meetings in theatres retain the Greek connection to public space and connect the content of the meeting to the world outside. The theatre is thus a key site in which to investigate the cultural practices that go about building the world in a city.

This photo essay reveals that both the interior spaces of these theatres and images of them are central to the representational practice of the UN. These “transformative” phenomenon do cultural work for the UN in two primary regards: they produce an international setting for the production of images of global governance; and they create the conditions for inspiring utopian world-making ideas. Until the construction of the UN headquarters in New York in 1952, the UN’s meetings did not occur in extraterritorial space. The spatial and social organization of theatres was useful for diplomats who had to envision representing their nation in front of a world audience—a category so immense it is inconceivable to imagine. When on stage, under theatrical lighting, these political actors would see only dark, vague contours of bodies in the audience, but they would feel the energy of invisible bodies and sense being watched by a much larger audience. For spectators not in the room itself, the illusionary apparatuses of theatrical space disguise the UN’s situatedness within civic spaces, and mediate the tension between the world organization’s local performative action and its global reach. The city disappears in the theatre’s production of transcendental space, which renders it the technology par excellence for manufacturing an image of global governance, depicting the internationalism of the UN, and inspiring global imaginaries.

The theatre is useful, too, for spectators around the world who encounter news of these events in various media forms and must assess the sincerity of the performance of democracy. The visual presence of theatres, and overtly theatrical structures, in so many representations of UN conventions cultivates a particular attitude to the UN and its missions: the theatre sets the scene for dramatic, aspirational scenes of commitment to peace and collaboration at the same time as it self-referentially draws attention to how affect is being managed and performative utterances staged, thereby reminding spectators to temper the UN's idealistic visions of world peace and security with their own realistic expectations of development. The point is not that the theatrical form/forum undermines the UN's political performance, but rather that it is itself constitutive of the UN's world-making project. The UN employs the theatre because it calls upon the imaginative activity of the spectators, inviting us to suspend disbelief and engage our imaginations in alternative worldmaking projects. The theatre produces an aura that inspires the imagining of alternative, globally defined possibilities—even utopian futures. As feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan observes, the theatre is a place “to reinvest our energies in a different kind of future, one full of hope, and reanimated by a new, more radical humanism” (2); it is a place that makes us feel “charged, challenged, and reassured” (5). The theatre cultivates a secular affective milieu that facilitates the imaginative operations necessary for reimagining the world, both for the political actors directly involved in production and the transnational public, who spectates the performances enacted in these spaces and whose world and worldview is altered by them.

The ancient ritual of theatergoing is flourishing in the global era. The individuals who have speaking roles in the UN's drama are not simply waiting in the wings but have to travel vast distances to arrive at the sites of international assemblage, depicted in the images below,



Figure 2: UN photo #170579 by Greene.

all the while demonstrating their devotion to the ideal of international community. Their performance on these stages requires a journey—an urban pilgrimage that is the unifying thread amongst the “united” nations. These representatives are some of the most dedicated and internationally circulating theatregoers of our time, returning again and again to these global stages. The empty stage beckons them as it beckons us in its photographic portrayal. Waiting for action, it taunts the space of possibility.

The San Francisco War Memorial Opera House hosted the famous San Francisco Convention (April 25 -June 26, 1945) where 50 allied nations reviewed and rewrote the Dumbarton Oaks agreements and created the United Nations Charter. Not only was the San Francisco



Figure 3: UN photo #1324.

Convention one of the most important international gatherings, it was one of the largest—the 3,146 seat auditorium accommodated the more than 850 delegates, plus their advisors and staff as well as the conference secretariat and news representatives. A grand example of the American Renaissance style, with some Art Deco interior features, the Opera House is one of the most important public buildings in San Francisco. Designed as a war memorial for San Francisco's war dead by prominent American architect Arthur Brown Jr., it opened in 1932 when opera was at the height of fashion in San Francisco (Figure 1).

San Francisco was selected by Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius as an appropriate and inspirational setting for the Convention because it was not ruined in the war, nor was it already devoted to world

peace like The Hague and Geneva, but offered the international flavors of a cosmopolitan city. During the Convention, a range of performances were scheduled to entertain the delegates. On May 30, underground recordings of great French poets and leaders, made before and during the liberation of France, were played. The Opera House continues to be used as a venue for opera, ballet, theatre, recitals, lectures, receptions, film screenings, and galas (Figure 2).

The actual signing of the United Nations Charter occurred on the stage of the Herbst Theater, a symbolic playing field in which representatives of each signatory nation could take center stage and performatively present their commitment to the emergent international community. Adorned with flags and the UN insignia, the Herbst Theater enabled a staging of a new internationalist commitment—one that was to exceed the interests of each member state and work towards a common wealth. In this photo taken on June 26, 1945, Wilhelm Munthe Morgenstjerne, Ambassador of Norway to the United States and Chairman of the delegation, signs the UN Charter (Figure 3).

Central Hall in Westminster, London, was the venue of the first session of the General Assembly in 1946. Built on the site of the Royal Aquarium, Music Hall and Imperial Theater, a late 19th century entertainment complex, it was rebuilt in 1912 to serve as the headquarters of the Methodist Church of Great Britain. Keeping with Methodist architectural design philosophy, the Viennese Baroque building does not explicitly resemble a church and has subsequently been repurposed for a variety of uses, including a conference center, art gallery, site for political rallies (including speeches by Mohandas Ghandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Winston Churchill), and performance venue (including the first performance of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1968). In return for the use of the hall, the Assembly voted to fund the repainting of the walls of the

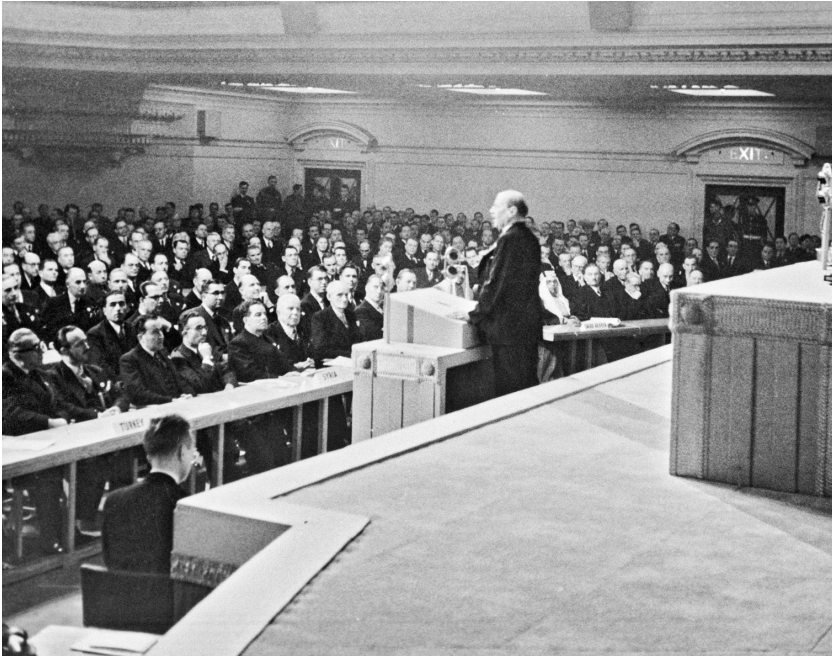


Figure 4: UN photo #71052.

church in a light blue, which became the color of the UN flag in 1947. The paint is still there (Figure 4).

The third regular session of the United Nations General Assembly, held in Paris in 1948, also took place in a theatrical space, the Palais de Chaillot, which was previously the site of the Palais du Trocadero, the 1878 World's Fair, and was again the site of the 1937 fair. Paris' Exposition Universelle commemorated the centennial anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, and the start of the French Revolution from which the ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality were articulated. It was here, within the "grande sale" of the Palais Chaillot that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. Today the Théâtre National de Chaillot is one of France's five national theaters, whose mission is defined by the



Figure 5: UN photo #113909.

state, but is considered the “people’s national theater.” (Figure 5).

Similarly, the site of the 1939 World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows, New York, became the first “home” of the UN General Assembly in 1946. After the UN was ratified in 1945, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago placed bids to host the organization. New York won because of its proximity to Europe, significance in international business, and the patronage of the Rockefeller family. It was decided the UN would use the same space that, in 1939, had symbolically been the site for “Building the World of Tomorrow” until the new building was completed in 1951. The New York World Fair marked a shift from the fair’s traditional role of featuring technological advancements to representing and enabling cultural exchange between nations. Following the fair, this site was used



Figure 6: UN photo #172523.

as a recreation center that housed a roller rink and ice rink. The rinks were simply covered over between 1946 and 1950 and were reopened when the UN moved to its permanent location. Flushing Meadows was again the site of the World Fair in 1964-65, which was themed “Peace through Understanding.” This photo, outside the building, captures the raising of the flags of Yemen and Pakistan during the ceremony of admittance of the new nations in 1947 (Figure 6).

A giant azimuthal equidistant map of the world served as the backdrop for meetings of the General Assembly. The world is oriented from an aerial, abstract, and northern perspective. The UN actors are remaking the world in front of its image (Figure 7).

Since New York became the site of the UN’s permanent headquarters,



Figure 7: UN photo #170170.

delegates, when meeting in other cities, have often held their meetings in performing arts centers. Such was the case with HABITAT: the UN Conference on Human Settlements in 1976, when delegates convened on the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver, Canada to discuss the problems of rapid, unplanned urban growth. One of the largest proscenium theatres in Canada, the Queen Elizabeth typically hosts opera performances, Broadway productions, and popular music concerts (Figure 8).

This general view of the plenary chamber of Africa Hall demonstrates that the form of spatial organization produced by Western theatres were replicated in the blueprints of buildings around the world designed for the UN. Africa Hall in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the political capital of



Figure 8: UN photo #186519 by Yutaka Nagata.

Africa, was completed in 1961 and is the site for the founding of the Organization of the African Unity which became the African Union in 2002. The groundwork for African unity was conceived within a theatre of the round (Figure 9).

This picture, of the renovations of one of the conference rooms in the UN headquarters in 1964, conjures images of ruined Greek theatres. The existing structures of democracy are deeply seated in those imagined and built by the Greeks. Even when physical features broke down, their ruin would retain symbolic power (Figure 10).

These 1954 photos illustrate how the General Assembly Hall at the UN Headquarters in New York moves seamlessly from a political theatre to a performance space. It is at all times both of these things.



Figure 9: UN photo #379484.



Figure 10: UN photo #76198.



Figure 11: UN photo #70477.



Figure 12: UN photo #337048 by Marvin Bolotsky.



Figure 13: UN photo #102866 by Milton Grant.

Capable of accommodating more than 1,800 people, this space—designed by American architect Wallace Harrison and his international Board of Design Consultants—allows for all the representatives of Member States to gather to discuss the most pressing problems of the day and convene convivially come evening. (Figure 11-12).

The hallowed space of the UN has become a site of pilgrimage not only for its representatives, but also for tourists and students. From the vantage of the President's seat of the Security Council chamber, we see a guided tour taking place in the upper right corner of the visitors' gallery (Figure 13).

Illuminated with stage lighting and prepared to deliver a monologue, former Secretary General Kofi Annan addresses the 58th session of the General Assembly. Towards the back of the theatre we can only make out the vague silhouettes of viewers (Figure 14).



Figure 14: UN photo #27312 by Sophia Paris.



Figure 15: UN photo #1919 by Milton Grant.

The brightly-lit and glistening rotunda with the emblazoned UN seal, and the podium below it, set the stage for Annan to address his staff in the General Assembly Hall, which is simultaneously broadcast to UN staff in Geneva and Vienna. The man is magnified to gigantic proportion and projected for a global spectatorship (Figure 15).

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Opposite: Elsworth Skyes Partnership, Central YMCA, London, 1977. Photograph by Sarah Ramsey.