The Palais des Nations is at once an active conference centre, a key operational base and a compelling symbol of multilateralism itself. It encapsulates the origins and very purpose of the United Nations. This special section traces the origins of the Palais des Nations complex and outlines the current challenges in preserving this unique heritage of the entire international community.

The legacy of the League of Nations

The League of Nations (LON) was founded after the First World War "to develop cooperation among nations and to guarantee them peace and security". The establishment of the League was intended to mark a fundamental shift in international relations, with a focus on peaceful resolution of conflicts and institutionalized collaboration. Geneva was chosen as the League's headquarters in recognition of the city's particular tradition of international diplomacy and negotiation.
The League of Nations Secretariat was initially housed at Palais Wilson, while a new permanent headquarters was to be constructed on land donated by the City of Geneva. The design and layout of the building were to reflect the high hopes for a lasting new world order that the League embodied.

An international architectural competition was opened in 1926. Three hundred and seventy-seven projects were submitted, but the jury of architects was unable to reach a final decision. The League then commissioned the five architects behind the favourite proposals to work together on a joint project. Carlo Broggi of Italy, Julien Flegenheimer of Switzerland, Camille Lefèvre and Henri-Paul Nénot of France, and Joseph Vago of Hungary developed the plan that eventually became the basis for the original parts of the Palais des Nations. The foundation stone was laid on 7 September 1929. Beneath the stone lies a casket containing a list of the League of Nations Member States, a copy of the Covenant of the League and specimen coins of all the countries represented at its Tenth Assembly.
The main building, consisting of wings A, AB, AC, B, C, K and S, was completed between 1929 and 1937. The initial layout included four main areas: the Secretariat, the Council, the Assembly and the Library. The total floor area of this oldest part of the complex is 80,623 m² and is still in full use. The interiors were in large part donations from Member States. Similarly, artworks on display at the Palais des Nations have been donated by Member States since the time of the League of Nations, and the collections continue to grow with new generous gifts. The Library was founded on the basis of an endowment of US$ 2 million from John D. Rockefeller Jr.

By the time the League moved into the Palais des Nations in 1937, it was already clear that the organization would fail to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War.

After expelling the Soviet Union as its final act on 14 December 1939, the League of Nations practically ceased functioning. Certain powers were transferred to the Secretary-General of the League to allow the organization to continue to exist legally. The Palais des Nations remained unoccupied for nearly six years during the Second World War.

The final meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations was held in April 1946 with the aim of dissolving the organization and transferring to the United Nations its properties and assets, including the Palais des Nations itself, at an estimated value of SwF 47.6 million. The League officially ceased to exist on 20 April 1946, and on 1 August 1946 the United Nations formally took over the League assets and the European Office of the United Nations moved into the Palais des Nations. The office was renamed the United Nations Office at Geneva in 1966.

Regardless of its limitations, the League of Nations laid the foundation for extended international cooperation. Many entities within the United Nations system today, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), can trace their beginnings to the work of the League. The United Nations was built on both the positive and negative lessons of the League.
Adapting to the needs of the United Nations

The size and layout of the oldest parts of the building reflect the requirements of the League of Nations and the technology available when it was constructed.

At the time when its membership was at its largest, the League had 58 Member States. By comparison, the United Nations has grown to today's 192 Member States. Similarly, the scope and complexity of the Organization's activities have expanded significantly.

Since the handover to the United Nations, additions to the original buildings have been constructed to accommodate the Organization's ever-growing range of mandates and to respond to changing security needs. From 1950 to 1952, the K-building was extended by three floors and the D-building was built. This added another 4,405 m² to the floor area. The E-building – still often referred to as the “new building” – was constructed between 1968 and 1973, which added 1,100 offices and 10 conference rooms and increased the floor area by 68,440 m². Most recently, the new entrance area at the Pregny Gate – the F-building – and an external delivery area – the G-building – have been built.

Today, the Palais des Nations complex covers 157,348 m² (38 acres). This includes 34 conference rooms and 2,800 offices. Over 4,000 people work at the Palais des Nations complex every day. Almost 4,000 staff from
permanent missions and over 1,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have longer-term ground passes, while another 70,000 delegates (from capitals and NGOs, without permanent access) are registered for conferences on an annual basis. Over 200 correspondents are accredited to the United Nations in Geneva and work at the Palais. Around 100,000 visitors come to the Palais each year.

Heritage at risk

This extensive and diverse use, coupled with the age of the buildings, presents UNOG with a range of urgent maintenance challenges to the upkeep of the Palais des Nations. While superficially the main building and its annexes appear structurally sound, they are slowly but surely losing their functionality. The deterioration is at a point where it is likely to start accelerating and could result in irreversible damage, if left unaddressed. The building itself and the unique heritage that it represents are at stake.

Most of the electrical installations, wiring, pipes, sanitation and windows in the old building have passed their lifespan. Many of the materials used are not durable and are disintegrating. In the short to middle term, this can present safety and security hazards, lead to excessive fuel and electricity consumption with serious financial and environmental implications, and cause suboptimal working conditions affecting the efficiency of the services provided.

Wiring and electrical installations: Around 100 km of electric cabling in the old building need to be replaced to conform to modern standards. There is a need to install automatic switches to reduce electricity consumption.

Pipes and sanitation: There are 200 km of pipes throughout the buildings. At least 40 km of water pipes are rusting and need to be replaced. The rust increases the risk of leaks and subsequent flooding. The UNOG Library has been flooded several times, which has damaged archives, books and other material and put irreplaceable institutional memory at risk. Rusting and damaged pipes are also a cause of dampness and mould, which further undermine the structure of the building.

Lifts: Twenty-one lifts are more than 30 years old and suffer frequent breakdowns.

Windows: The old building has insufficient insulation and energy-inefficient windows, which causes a significant loss of heat during winter and excessive heat in the building during summer. In total, 1,680 windows (in the old building alone) need to be replaced.

Structural damage: The concrete has cracked in a large number of places, including the façade of the building. There is significant damage to the roof. There is also damage to the floor areas and to internal walls in several places due to structural movements.

Dilapidated meeting rooms: A large number of meeting rooms are in a dilapidated state and function with outdated and insufficient technical equipment, which can have a negative impact on the efficiency of meetings. Likewise, old wiring and furniture affect services and, in some places, present potential safety hazards.
Inadequate and insufficient storage space: The storage conditions for the UNOG Library and archive materials do not conform to international standards. The Library, which maintains the critical institutional memory of both the United Nations and the League of Nations, stores 11 linear kilometres of archives and 45 linear kilometres of United Nations documents and publications. The average yearly increase is one linear kilometre (500 linear metres for archives and 500 linear metres for United Nations documents, publications and periodicals). An estimated additional 25 linear kilometres are required for the next 20 years, for which there is no further space at the Palais des Nations.

External sewage pipes: The external sewage network is partially damaged and in need of replacement to conform to modern standards. The current lack of capacity has caused major flooding in critical storage areas. For environmental reasons, the rain-water pipes and the waste-water pipes should be separated.

A Strategic Heritage Plan for the Palais des Nations

The upgrading and renovation of a number of individual meeting rooms by Member States have helped to address the dilapidated state of the conference facilities. These individual contributions have been valuable additions to the ongoing maintenance efforts of UNOG.

However, the current state of the building undermines the ability of UNOG to service Member States and other users in an adequate, safe and cost-effective manner. While the building has been maintained well with the resources available, it is clear that ad hoc solutions, within the current budgetary allocations, are not sustainable in the longer term given the scale of the challenges. The scope and complexity of the structural problems necessitate a complete renovation and refurbishment. Such an initial investment would pay long-term dividends in savings on maintenance and running costs, and it is essential to safeguarding the heritage of the Palais des Nations.

Against this background, the Director-General has made the development of a Strategic Heritage Plan for the Palais des Nations a key priority and is working closely with Member States and relevant parts of the Secretariat in this regard. A group of Member States has stepped forward, as a Group of Friends of the Palais des Nations, to provide guidance and support for a Strategic Heritage Plan. The Group is open to all interested Member States. The support of the entire membership of the Organization is critical.

The Palais des Nations serves not only as a vital practical platform for the United Nations' daily work but also as a constant reminder of how multilateral cooperation is not once powerful and precious. Like our multilateral institutions themselves, this building must be continuously maintained, updated and safeguarded if it is to continue to serve its purpose and fulfill its potential. The Palais des Nations represents a common cultural and architectural heritage of the human family, which is in trust with the United Nations. It is our collective responsibility to preserve it.