

# UN-Secretariat matters: UN-Secretariat matters - 41

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Dag Hammarskjöld's saml.

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Meditation Room

24 April

Text of a statement made by the Sec. Gen.

"A Room of Stillness"

L 779:98

# 'A ROOM OF STILLNESS'

## THE MEDITATION ROOM AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

*The following is the text of a statement made by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld at a luncheon gathering at United Nations Headquarters on April 24. At this luncheon a committee known as Friends of the United Nations Meditation Room presented a check for \$12,600 from private contributors, the first to be received as a result of a project by the committee to provide \$15,000 in private contributions to supplement United Nations funds and other donations for remodeling the Meditation Room. Warren R. Austin, former Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations, is honorary chairman of the committee. The presentation was made by Wallace C. Speers on the committee's behalf. Moorhead Wright, President of the Laymen's Movement for a Christian World, presided at the luncheon.*

*The Meditation Room, remodeled and enlarged, was reopened last February for the use of delegates and visitors to the United Nations, although further remodeling is still to be completed. The project to remodel the room was approved and has been supervised personally by the Secretary-General.*

IT is a very great gift indeed that you have just given to us, a very great gift not only in substance but also in spirit. It is a sign of your trust in the spirit in which we are trying to work, it is an encouraging sign also of your confidence in our work for the purposes we are trying to serve.

The Meditation Room is a kind of stepchild of the architects of this house; it was brought into being, as you have said, as an experiment, but now I am happy to confirm that it is a permanent part of the building and I am sure it will be of increasing importance. However, because of its origin, a very small space was reserved for the room and the problem was how to arrange that small space in such a dignified way that it would not give people the feeling that it was something that had just happened as an experiment, but that it was a thing of essential importance.

Perhaps in thanking very warmly all who have contributed to this gift I might say a few words about how Mr. Wallace Harrison, the architect, and I have looked at the problem and how we look at the future.

We had, as I said, a very small space within which we sought to achieve a room of stillness. This house must have one room, one place which is dedicated to silence, dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense. Besides the smallness of the space, we had another difficulty. In a room of this kind in a house of this character we could not use any of the

symbols with which man has been used to link his meditation; we had to work on the basis of symbols common to all.

In a sense, what I think we had at the back of our minds was something which is said, I believe, in an ancient Chinese script, that the significance of the vessel is not in its shell but in the void. The significance of a room is not the walls but in what is framed by the walls; that is to say, we had to create a room of stillness, a room of stillness where nothing intrudes on those who want to find stillness. In a way that was a help, because it meant that we could perhaps virtually do without symbols if on the other hand we achieved purity. Finally we felt that if within the framework we could achieve an absolute purity of line and color we could realize all we wanted, a room of stillness with perhaps one very simple symbol—light, striking on stone. It is for that reason that in the centre of the room there is this block of iron ore, shimmering like ice in a shaft of light from above. That is the only symbol in the room—a meeting of the light of the sky and the earth.

However, in a certain sense the symbolism goes one step further. I do not know whether there is anything elsewhere quite like the arrangement of this room with a big block of stone in its centre. The origin of the idea was one which I think you will all recognize; you will find it in many great religions; it is the altar. In this

case it is an empty "altar," empty not because there is no God, but empty because God is worshipped in so many forms. The stone in the centre symbolizes an altar to the God of all.

At the same time, at least to Mr. Harrison and myself, the block of iron ore had strong associations with the cornerstone, the firm element in a world of movement and turmoil. In this house, with its dynamic modern architecture, there are very few things that give you the feeling of weight, solidity and permanence. In this case we wanted this massive "altar" to give the impression of something more than temporary.

We had also another idea which comes down to what, after all, we are trying to do here in this house—we are trying to turn swords into ploughshares, and we thought we could bless by our thoughts the very material out of which arms are made. For that reason we felt it was appropriate that the material to represent the earth on which we stand, as seen by the light of the sky, should be iron ore, the material out of which swords have been made and a material out of which homes for man are also built. It is a material which represents the very paradox of human life; the basic materials offered by God to us may be used either for construction or for destruction. This leads our thoughts to the necessity of choice between the two alternatives.

You see, therefore, that in the seeming void of the room there is something we want to say. We want to bring back in this room the stillness which we have lost in our streets and in our conference rooms, and to bring it back in a setting in which no noise would impinge upon our imagination. In that setting we want to bring back our thoughts to great and simple truths, to the way in which the light of the skies gives life to the earth on which we stand—a symbol to many of us of what the light of the spirit gives to man. We want to bring back the idea of worship, devotion to something which is greater and higher than ourselves. We want to do that by the form of our "altar" in such a way as to bring to everybody's mind the fact that every single one of us is faced, in his handling of the heritage of the riches of this earth, with the choice between the ploughshare and the sword.

Those were our ideas; we are not, I would say, even half way to realizing them. The basic elements are there, but we have not yet arrived at the final balance and beauty which we do believe we can give it in the end. When we come to that point I hope we shall be able to meet again and I hope that by that time you will feel that we have made the best possible use of your gift and have given to this house a centre of stillness, a room

where, in the meaning of the sentence I quoted from Chinese philosophy, the sense of the vessel is not in its shell but in its void. After all, when we come to our deepest feelings and urgings we have to be alone, we have to feel the sky and the earth and hear the voice that speaks from within us. We were trying to create a Meditation Room where men of all kinds and from all regions of the world would have a place where each could find his God.

### *The Problems*

May I turn from this explanation of what we tried and are still trying to do, and hope one day to achieve, to one or two peculiar problems which are connected with it. One is a very special problem indeed. The Meditation Room is not on the route of the guided tours of the building; it is not, and should not be, one of the "sights" of the house. On the other hand, we have some four or five thousand tourists who turn up here each day, and even though we do not ask them to go there, they are looking around and are of course welcome to enter. The result is that a very large number of people go into the room. Most do not go in there to meditate, they go to have a look, and that is what creates a prob-

lem to which I think you might give some thought. How may we give to the room its spiritual content, how be able to find quiet and stillness in it without being disturbed by the very many who, although they are quite welcome, go there for an entirely different purpose? We have exchanged a few words about it here today, and one formula which would not hurt anyone's feelings would be to reserve it for a certain number of hours a day for meditation. There may be other ways, but I do hope the day will come when it really will be a room used for meditation, undisturbed by people who go there for other purposes—or who, if they go there for other purposes, will be welcome to stay for the right one.

That is another thing which we have to render better and more perfect, and I hope that we shall find a solution to that also, so that one day the room will really and truly be a thing of beauty in which people may find stillness, a place which will be a kind of spiritual centre not only for those who work here but also for the very many who support our work with their warm thoughts, good wishes and prayers. In that hope I renew my thanks to all of you and all of our friends who have so generously contributed to this cause. Thank you.

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*United Nations, New York*

# A ROOM OF QUIET

THE UNITED NATIONS MEDITATION ROOM

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*This is a room devoted to peace  
and those who are giving their  
lives for peace. It is a room of quiet  
where only thoughts should speak.*

**WE** ALL HAVE within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence.

This house, dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace, should have one room dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense.

It has been the aim to create in this small room a place where the doors may be open to the infinite lands of thought and prayer.

People of many faiths will meet here, and for that reason none of the symbols to which we are accustomed in our meditation could be used.

However, there are simple things which speak to us all with the same language. We have sought for such things and we believe that we have found them in the shaft of light striking the shimmering surface of solid rock.

So, in the middle of the room we see a symbol of how, daily, the light of the skies

gives life to the earth on which we stand, a symbol to many of us of how the light of the spirit gives life to matter.

But the stone in the middle of the room has more to tell us. We may see it as an altar, empty not because there is no God, not because it is an altar to an unknown god, but because it is dedicated to the God whom man worships under many names and in many forms.

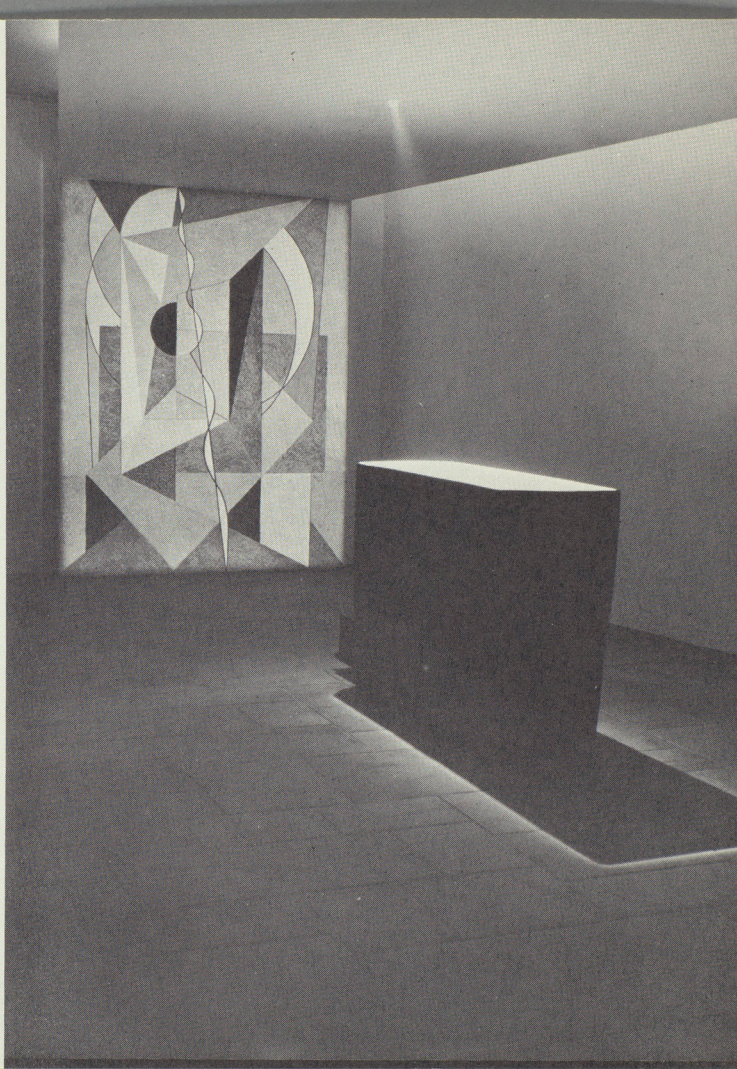
The stone in the middle of the room reminds us also of the firm and permanent in a world of movement and change. The block of iron ore has the weight and solidity of the everlasting. It is a reminder of that cornerstone of endurance and faith on which all human endeavour must be based.

The material of the stone leads our thoughts to the necessity for choice between destruction and construction, between war and peace. Of iron man has

forged his swords, of iron he has also made his ploughshares. Of iron he has constructed tanks, but of iron he has likewise built homes for man. The block of iron ore is part of the wealth we have inherited on this earth of ours. How are we to use it?

The shaft of light strikes the stone in a room of utter simplicity. There are no other symbols, there is nothing to distract our attention or to break in on the stillness within ourselves. When our eyes travel from these symbols to the front wall, they meet a simple pattern opening up the room to the harmony, freedom and balance of space.

There is an ancient saying that the sense of a vessel is not in its shell but in the void. So it is with this room. It is for those who come here to fill the void with what they find in their center of stillness.



*The decoration of this room was made possible by  
gifts from friends of the Meditation Room.*

*The fresco is a gift of the Marshall Field family,  
in his memory. It is by the Swedish artist, Bo Beskow.*