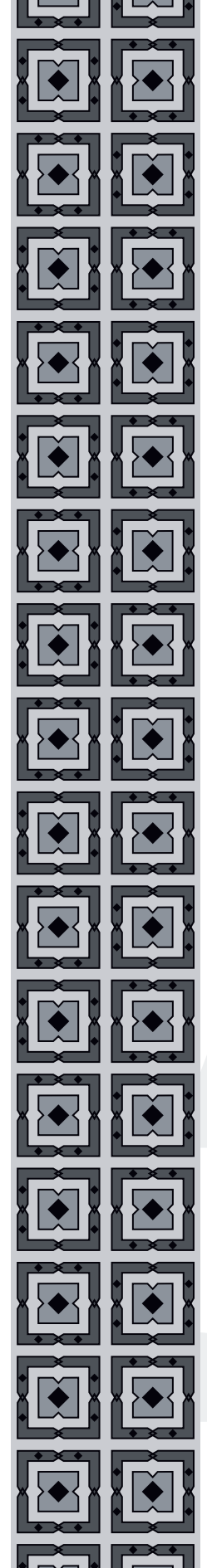


Centre William Rappard

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS



Politics Carved in Stone

The Centre William Rappard has a rich history. Born out of the Wilsonian dream to settle international disputes through negotiation and arbitration, it was the first building in Geneva designed to house an international organization. Built in 1926 by Swiss architect George Épitaux, it was intended to illustrate the core values of equality and unity promulgated by the International Labour Office (ILO). This chapter tells the story of the disputes and negotiations that took place during the initial years of construction and the subsequent phases of enlargement. It succinctly illustrates how the relationship between the international organizations in Geneva and their host city and country has evolved into one of compromise, agreement and interdependence.

"Something which never before existed has come into being", wrote Paul Budry in 1926 at the time of the inauguration of the ILO building, "a place where peoples may at last be united as brothers through the only action which renders them equal and fraternal: labour". The French-Swiss writer was not sparing in his praise: he saw the architectural work that had been unveiled to the public as the perfect representation of the great, albeit austere, mission of the 500 people who would be using it in the service of mankind at work.

The Centre William Rappard
just after completion in 1926. ◀

Decidedly administrative in nature, with cell-like offices lined up and standing to attention in a simple and accessible layout, the building's extreme economy clearly prevailed over any notion of extravagance. "If standardization is to give fresh impetus to labour, is it not up to the ILO to set the standard?" asked Budry. The architect, he added, had inscribed "political equality for all individuals, without which there can be no strong unity" in the very structure of the building – truly a quest set in stone. "No one will be able to contemplate the building and say: here stand the mighty, there go the weak. Everything blends into the mass; everything is on an equal footing. No architectural protrusions vie for attention. There is no sculptured ornamentation or entasis, no marks of arrogance or pomposity. The disciplined masses form a perfect spatial illustration of the idea of the single front, of action united by the selflessness of each and every individual..."¹

The inauguration took place on 6 June 1926 in a jubilant Geneva, in the presence of ministers and ambassadors from all over the world. Peace was not even ten years old. Whereas the League of Nations still lacked a home of its own, the International Labour Office, which was attached to it, was moving into its new abode. It owed this privilege to its Director, Albert Thomas. While the member states, seduced by the offer of Brussels, were wavering over the choice of location, the Frenchman had twisted a few arms in the ILO Governing Body and decided in favour of Geneva. He liked Geneva because it was outside the major powers without being too far removed, and Woodrow Wilson shared his preference. The Swiss Confederation had donated the site – a magnificent estate bordering Lake Geneva, with the Mont Blanc as a backdrop. On this land, the building was erected, stretching out lengthways, uniform and Protestant in style, soberly decorated with a cornice and crowned with a turret resembling a control tower.

The severity of the style set people talking. However Calvinistic it may be, Geneva is not averse to the occasional rounding off of angles. In the introductory brochure on the building, Budry swept aside the criticism: "The site, the park and its wooded surroundings, the lawn sloping down to the lake, opening out onto a distant and harmonious backdrop, this noble environment of tall trees and open spaces, of large areas of light and shade, might have charmed the architect-poet and



A ceremony for the laying
of three foundation stones of
the building, 21 October 1923.

conjured up thoughts of festivity and celebration. It might have been pleasant to see a palace in three sections, with pediments, balconies and statues, display its charms and its rhythms at the lakeside. I know that some will see this as a missed opportunity... But we are not here for the sake of enjoyment", the writer adds sternly. The lofty ideal of peace through respect and the dignity of work deserved more than the "dreamy nostalgia" of the lovers of Watteau-style parks. Here, the order of the day was rigour, restraint and economy of style. The people of Geneva had to be aware that the ruined nations that were paying for the construction of a labour building were not looking for splendour, but for sobriety and efficiency. For its first architectural experiment with an international administrative building, on the site of a charming manor house that had belonged to the La Rochefoucauld family, Geneva had something to ponder.

As an admirer of the completed work, Paul Budry set the official tone. Like a ballet lover who is aware of the suffering of the dancers but keeps silent, he saluted the architect who had overcome all the obstacles. Once a work had been completed, the pains of creation were part of history – though it was an interesting history for those who wished to understand the complicated web of relationships between Geneva, Switzerland and all the different countries that they were welcoming on that small plot of land.

How it all began

It all began in 1922 with the selection of a site in a city that was not used to building on a large scale. The Confederation was generous enough to make the land available, free of charge no less, though it reserved the right to take it back if it so happened that the League of Nations did not remain in Geneva. Straightaway, an architectural competition was launched. As time was short, it was ■■■





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ILO and Swiss dignitaries
inspecting the works, circa 1925. ►

■■■ limited to Swiss nationals or Swiss residents. Only the jury was international. The criteria were strict: the building must be able to accommodate 500 employees, at a cost not exceeding 2.5 million francs, and ensure “the dignity befitting an international institution”. Sixty-nine projects were submitted, and the winner was George Épitaux. The architect from the canton of Vaud had already built the Galeries Saint-François in Lausanne and other art deco buildings. He was well known and respected.

Once his plan had been accepted, the only remaining hurdle for the ILO Governing Body was to stay within the budget fixed at 3 million francs in October 1923. For three years, this figure of 3 million

would be an obsession for everyone involved – except perhaps for the State of Geneva which suddenly, in the summer of 1925, imposed on the ILO the construction of a drain to take the waste water to the main sewer on the Quai Wilson. That would be at a cost of 80,000 francs which had not been foreseen in the budget. There was consternation in the Governing Body. The Geneva authorities had previously agreed that sewage could be discharged into the lake once it had been sterilized in a septic tank that was in conformity with the public health regulations. Now, however, the Hygiene Committee of the Canton had decreed that the planned installations were not sufficient to protect the waters of the lake.

The issue was a sensitive one. Articles in the local press implied that the ILO would be running the risk of contaminating Geneva’s drinking water supply. The ILO objected, but the Council of State bowed to the opinion of the Hygiene Committee and denied the ILO permission to discharge its water into the lake. There followed an epic series of negotiations in which the internationals and the locals pitted against one another their cheque books, their vanity, and their determination to have the last word. The government had two sewage projects to choose from: one, estimated at 80,000 francs, dealt solely with the ILO waters; the other, a larger system, could handle the whole district, at a cost of 136,000 francs. As the government preferred the latter, it offered to contribute 56,000 francs, with the remaining 80,000 francs to be paid by the ILO. George Épitaux saw red: this was the first time that the authorities had charged an international organization for projects that they themselves had designed to serve other users as well. He challenged the method and protested against the estimates. To no avail. In the end, as it appeared impossible to prevent the sewage system from going ahead and as the larger of the two projects was the more appropriate, the ILO fell back on disputing the price ■■■

ILO Director Albert Thomas ▲
addressing the public during
the foundation stone ceremony at
the building, 21 October 1923.





◀ Office of the ILO Director in 1926.

■■■ tag: it would pay 50,000 francs and the State 80,000. The State made a counter-offer of 60,000/76,000 francs. The ILO refused: not a cent more than 50,000, and it stuck to that figure until December. Just before Christmas, agreement was reached: 55,000 francs for the ILO.

In the meantime the architect had had other worries: one of the cornices was poised to fall off because the building company had not done its work properly. It had to be replaced. The company refused. The issue was brought before the courts, which played for time. Épitaux insisted; he would not risk an accident. The cornice was redone, and the bill remained in the hands of lawyers and judges for years. There was also the matter of the widening of the Rue de Lausanne, which required the construction of a new wall and a new gateway. Who should pay? There were discussions, there was haggling, and deals were reached.

Masonry and trees

Such episodes were par for the course on construction sites, but this case involved something entirely new for Geneva: the decision pitted two very different public bodies against each other, each one accountable to an assembly that clung jealously to its rights: on one side, the Geneva Parliament and, on the other, the Assembly of the League of Nations. They had to learn to understand one another and to show restraint. At a time of general scarcity, the question of money enabled the parties to feel their way hesitantly as they sought to put what was inevitably an uncomfortable relationship on a lasting footing. George Épitaux paved the way for all those who would have to match the logic of local needs with international requirements and incorporate into a familiar setting that was loved by one set of people buildings that catered to the needs of another set of people, international this time, but extremely difficult to define.

Trees played a very special role in this saga from the outset. The competition specifications stipulated that the siting of the building



◀ Aerial view after the construction of the north and south-west wings in 1937.



“should, where possible, spare the main trees already there, in particular along the lakeshore”. The wording used was not binding, but a concern had been expressed, a concern that followed logically from the deed of transfer by the Confederation, which wanted to ensure public access to the park. Épitaux followed the recommendation to the letter. “That meant”, Budry wrote, “that the architect would have to forego some of the impact of his façade, the use of perspective, and the much awaited lake-front theatrical presentation. The trees along the lake would stay and the drama would, so to speak, be played out behind closed doors”. Natural greenery or gilded scenery? In this botanic city, the city of Rousseau and Calvin, the choice to be made had the self-evidence of a gospel. Eighty-three years later, when it came to enlarging and renovating the building once again, the sacrifice of a few clusters of trees was to give rise to opposition and a municipal referendum. I shall come back to that later.

The two enlargements of the central building, in 1937 and 1938, did not stir up any strong feelings on the Geneva side; the immense Palais des Nations had just been inaugurated and the times did not lend themselves to such trivial matters. The enlargement in 1951 was the occasion of an act of generosity on the part of the parliament of the Canton which voted a loan of 2.25 million francs at 3 per cent over 20 years, together with a gift of 500,000 francs. The next enlargement

would have horrified the people of Geneva if, at the last moment, the authorities had not prudently shelved it. With the creation of the International Institute for Labour Studies in 1960, the ILO found itself cramped within its walls. It was 200 offices short, it needed more spacious meeting rooms, and so on. Plans for the extension were drawn up by an architect, who produced a proposal to attach three new buildings to the noble part of the existing building – one of them 13 stories high, with the option of adding four more floors if necessary. The project encroached on the lake front with a vast marina designed to house the Committee and Governing Body meeting rooms. ■■■

“The trees along the lake would stay and the drama would, so to speak, be played out behind closed doors.”

Paul Budry

▼ Albert Thomas (front row, centre) with ILO, League of Nations and Swiss dignitaries during a visit of the building.





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Visit of Geneva Mayor Frédéric Rochat during the inauguration of the public lake-side promenade, 1 November 1966. ▼



Council Room, now Room Wyndham White (or Room W), in 1926. ►



■■■ The cantonal and municipal authorities did not reject the proposal out of hand, but the plot on which the extension was to be built belonged to the City of Geneva. The land itself was a park graced by a small botanical museum. Securing approval from this rather difficult owner would be no easy task. Attempts were made, but in vain. On 12 October 1964, the ILO Director-General was informed that the chances of the project ever being accepted were nil. The municipal authorities were unlikely to give their approval and even if they did, a referendum would undoubtedly ensue. So the project was shelved.

Instead, the ILO was given the option of moving lock, stock and barrel to a much bigger site where construction could begin fairly rapidly. Without a referendum? Not so sure.

Passing the baton

These were complicated times for relations between the international organizations, which were steadily growing and proliferating; for Geneva, which lacked space; and for the Confederation, faced with increasing demands in an overheated economy. At the ILO, Turin's offer to accommodate not only the International Institute for Labour Studies, but the entire organization, and free of charge to boot, aroused a certain amount of interest. The Governing Body openly announced that "although at this stage, it is not seriously suggested that the Organization leave the city of Geneva, to which it is deeply attached... it is hoped that the local authorities will do whatever is necessary as a matter of urgency". The pressure was on.

In Bern, the federal government gauged the challenges facing a city that represented the centrepiece of its foreign policy. Together, in 1964, they set up the Building Foundation for International Organizations (FIPOI), a private-law foundation that was to act as an interface between all the authorities involved in the development ■■■







◀ The Correspondents Room,
now the bar area in the
Salle des Pas-Perdus, circa 1938.

■■■ of Geneva as an international hub. Advocates of a small Geneva launched a referendum, but in the end FIPOI was accepted and began to ease the strained relations between the partners. In 1965, the Federal Council set up a “Swiss mission” to the international organizations – a sign of how times had changed. But with other cities aspiring to take over Geneva’s role, a sense of urgency prevailed.

A larger home was built for the ILO, which moved out in 1975. Three new tenants hastened to occupy the original Épitaux building and its subsequent additions: the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) moved into the main part of the premises; the High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR) occupied the offices; and the library of the Graduate Institute for International Studies (IHEID) took over the basement. The GATT renamed the building the “Centre William Rappard”² and set out to remove all traces of the building’s labour background, which the Director-General considered unsuitable for its new occupants. FIPOI refused, however, to remove the fresco by Maurice Denis, donated in 1931 by the Christian trade unions: “The Dignity of Labour” would have to share the main staircase with trade representatives. And they all settled into this forced cohabitation while awaiting something better.

The creation of the World Trade Organization in 1995 and Geneva’s successful bid to host it marked a significant moment in relations between Bern, Geneva and the international organizations. The merciless battle led by Switzerland against other candidate cities showed just how tough the competition for hosting organizations had become. Bonn was a clear favourite. The former West German capital on the banks of the Rhine had been out of work since German reunification and the choice of Berlin as home to the Federal Republic’s institutions. It had buildings, housing, working conditions and a tax system that were difficult to beat. And yet Geneva had one



thing Bonn did not: the professional environment, the accumulated know-how, the dense network of international cooperation activities that attracted what it needed. Switzerland was well aware of this fact, and accepted what were now the going rates in order to maintain and develop that advantage.

The Headquarters Agreement concluded with the WTO reveals the extent of the obligations that Switzerland was assuming, obligations which would inevitably soon be demanded by other organizations. It includes, in particular, an Infrastructure Contract under which the WTO acquired a 99-year surface right to the Centre William Rappard, ■■■

▲ ILO Registry area used to receive, classify
and register correspondence, 1938.



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On 27 September 2009, after a spirited debate, the voters of Geneva supported the construction of a new annexe for the Centre William Rappard. "By accepting this project, the people of Geneva showed their commitment to the international city and to multiculturalism" declared Sandrine Salerno of the Socialist Party.³

the renewal of which was the responsibility of the Confederation. The State of Geneva undertook to build, by 1998, and at its own expense, a car park with 400 spaces, while FIPOI was entrusted with the construction of a large conference room by 1997. The choice went to Ugo Brunoni's Greek-style amphitheatre, which was inaugurated in 1998. Future enlargements were evoked in article G, worded in the enigmatic style favoured by lawyers: the WTO "expects" the Confederation to find solutions, while the Federal Council "takes note of this expectation" and will respond to it in accordance with "Switzerland's policy as a host country".

The WTO moved into the offices vacated by the HCR. At the first signs of overcrowding, the Confederation took action: FIPOI would build an annexe 800 metres away, a 'WTO II', that would house a number of services. This dispersion, which the heads of the International Labour Office had feared and fought against tooth and nail since the 1930s, now appeared inevitable. Left-wing Geneva's lack

Architect's projection of the new annexe under construction to the south of the main building.

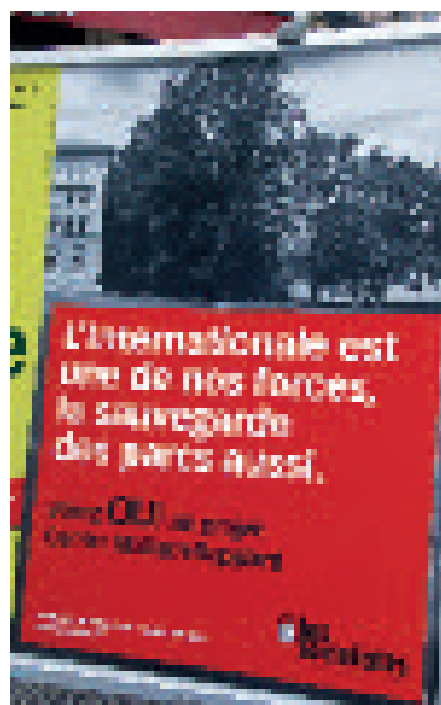
of sympathy for the WTO further sapped the Director-General's power to do anything about it: in 1999, the cantonal parliament expressed its distrust of the WTO in a number of announcements published in the international press. That same year, an anti-globalization demonstration was disrupted by rioters.

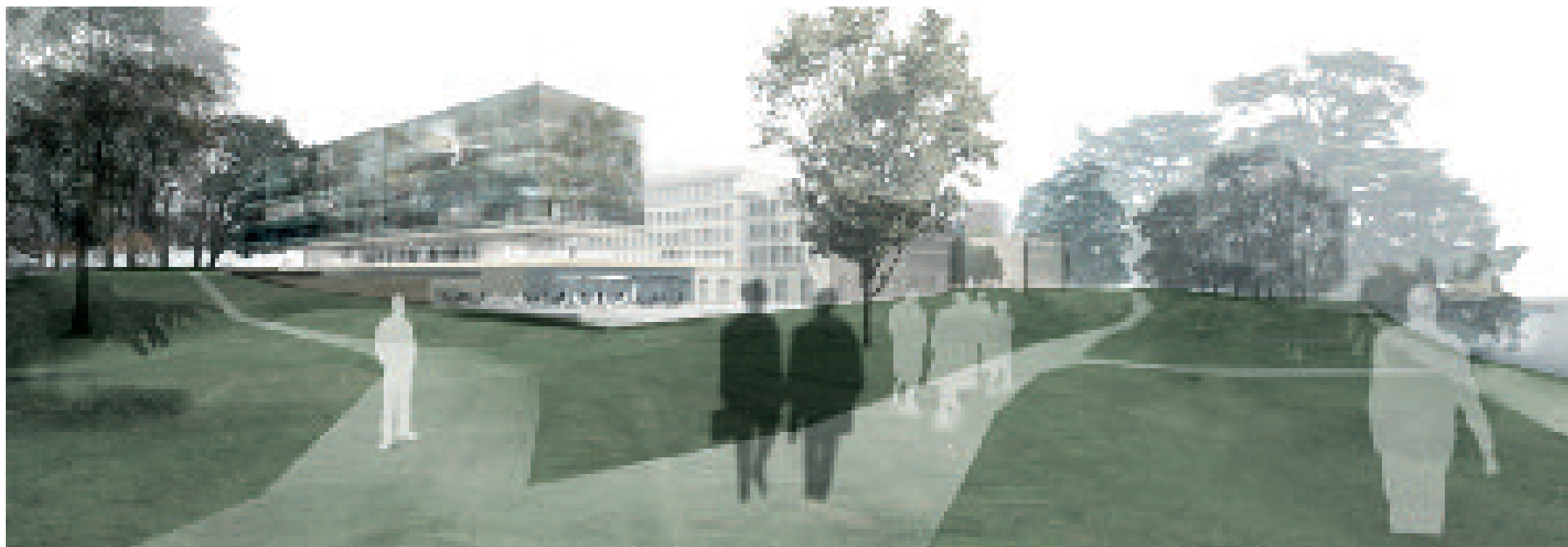
A new look

In 2005, with the plans for the annexe almost ready and the construction work set to begin, a new Director-General, Pascal Lamy, was appointed. The WTO II project was not to his liking: he wanted a single building. He pointed out the time that would be wasted by splitting up the Organization. While he did not go as far as to say that the WTO could look elsewhere, everyone suspected that this was what he was thinking.

The Confederation, Geneva and FIPOI sprang into action. With someone from Geneva heading the Foreign Affairs Department in Bern, communication was easier, just as it had been in 1920 when Geneva-born Gustave Ador successfully explained to his Federal Council peers that it would be in Switzerland's best interest to host the League of Nations in Geneva, and even to join. Personal relations played a role: without the affinity between William Rappard and Woodrow Wilson, Geneva might well be nothing more than a cantonal capital.

Ease of communication between Geneva, Bern and Rue de Lausanne led to the 2006 decision to extend the Centre William Rappard. Care was taken not to repeat the mistakes of the 1964 project: neither the lake nor the trees would be touched. This time, an international architectural competition was held, and the winner was an architect who was somewhat more subtle than his 1960s counterparts, German national Jens Wittfoht, who had clearly fallen in love with the site. A building permit was requested, the green light was given. Well,





almost. A far-left party of Geneva's Municipal Council claimed that the project jeopardized public access to the park along the lake and launched a referendum. It added to its recriminations the loss of half a dozen commonplace trees, which it described as valuable. Ultimately, it was the legitimacy of the WTO that was at stake; its right to encroach upon the hallowed territory of Geneva Sundays. The vote took place in September 2009. The WTO extension was approved.

When asked for their opinion, as they were in 1953 regarding CERN and in 1965 on the financing of FIPOI, the people of Geneva has always said yes to the international organizations, yes to the intellectual industry of cooperation which has settled in their city over the past century and which accounts for their prestige and their economic health.

The rest of Switzerland as well. The past decade alone would have been enough to convince the waverers: in the world of post-Cold War global governance, rules are of growing importance. Geneva, as the main platform for the development and negotiation of such rules, has seen its status grow. And Switzerland, which is uncomfortable with the Security Council part of the United Nations, too inegalitarian for its liking, is on the contrary very much at ease with this United

Nations, which has embraced all forms of cooperation, in all areas of human activity. A Confederation built through negotiation, for which compromise and agreement are foremost among its political values, cannot fail to identify with the city of Geneva, which spends day after day negotiating the terms of global coexistence.

The current heads of the WTO not only believe that trade is at home in surroundings formerly dedicated to labour, they are also proud to display labour's history. The fake walls concealing numerous works of art were finally removed to reveal the Delft panel by Albert Hahn Jr. (a reproduction in four languages of the preamble of the ILO Constitution); the painted murals by Gustave-Louis Jaulmes ("In Universal Joy", "Work in Abundance" and "The Benefits of Leisure"); the murals by Dean Cornwell, donated by the American Federation of Labor, which portray various professions in an optimistic and dignified light; and Spanish artist Eduardo Chicharro y Agüera's "Pygmalion".

Though they may not be masterpieces, all of these works stand as testimony to a particular programme; they bear witness to shared aspirations in forms specific to their times. It is fitting that the first building in Geneva dedicated to the realization of the Wilsonian utopia should have a Pygmalion to bring it to life. ■