

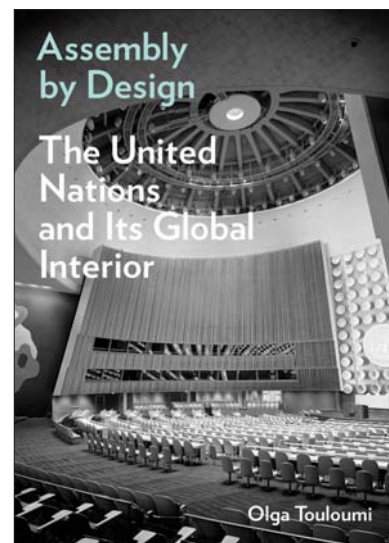
Assembly by Design: The United Nations and Its Global Interior

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Book Review / CRITICISM

***Assembly by Design.
The United Nations and Its Global Interior***

By Olga Touloumi
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Olga Touloumi's *Assembly by Design: The United Nations and Its Global Interior* is a compelling exploration of how architecture and interior design shape global governance's operations, identities, and ideologies. The headquarters of the United Nations (UN) was commissioned post-World War II, when architects, diplomats, and political leaders believed that the design of assembly spaces could foster a new model of international cooperation. *Assembly by Design* presents a nuanced critique of the UN's architecture as a physical space and a site of ideological, political, and cultural negotiation. In her absorbing and deeply researched book, Touloumi focuses on the interiors of the United Nations Headquarters in New York as physical spaces

that intersect with the abstract principles of diplomacy, cooperation, and global order. Touloumi introduces how “global interiors” are political sites of power with underexamined dual roles as both spaces of governance and communicative tools.

The UN aimed to communicate and reinforce a vision of cooperative and coordinated global order through its building design. Its interiors supported the mission and represented a world striving for unity amidst profound global trauma post-World War II. By framing the United Nations as a “global interior,” Touloumi interrogates the dual mandate to symbolize universality while simultaneously accommodating the complexities of cultural differences. This concept transforms the UN Headquarters from merely a functional site of international diplomacy into a symbolic structure laden with ideological significance. By framing the UN as a global interior she demonstrates how the interiors are powerful representations of international relations, functioning simultaneously as both the message and the medium of liberal internationalism.

Concentrating on the interiors of the UN underlines how these spaces are active in the construction of global governance and central in international and political relations rather than passive containers for diplomatic activity. In doing this, she reminds us to continue interrogating how interior spatial design shapes collective visions of global unity, governance, and democracy. Through this lens, the global interior becomes more than just a space for diplomacy; it also represents an idealized vision of a connected and cooperative world. In 1947, a board of design consultants comprising architects, planners, and engineers nominated by member governments took on the exciting challenge of designing spaces for a newly formed political entity: the United Nations. After the destruction of the Second World War, world powers sought to embed global order in liberal values that would shape institutional, military, and humanitarian interventions worldwide and the new headquarters were crucial for the new models of international diplomacy.

Locating the headquarters in Manhattan positioned the United States as central to these objectives. From the outset, the UN’s interiors were conceived, designed and carefully curated to encapsulate liberal and international ideals and shape public understanding of the role of international organizations and the plans for global governance post 1945. Over a period of nearly seven years, the group of architects attempted to reflect these values by reimagining the spaces, experimenting with layouts and media technologies, and the design elements for tribunals, assembly halls, and council chambers. The process was complex and involved prominent and opinionated architects such as Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Wallace Harrison, whose interests, involvement, debates, and compromises shaped the organization of the site and the building’s design. Touloumi situates the architecture and interiors of the UN within the

broader historical context of the mid-twentieth century when modernism ascended as both a design philosophy and a cultural ideology.

This period was also marked by shifting geopolitical dynamics and the more prominent position of the United States in global politics, meaning that modernism was able to assume a central role in defining the global interior. The push for the modernist esthetic, which came to define the building, reflected post-war aspirations toward progress and universality. However, it also mirrored the geopolitical tensions of the time, including debates over decolonization, the Cold War, and the representation of newly independent nations within this global forum. Touloumi argues that adopting modernism in the UN Headquarters was not merely an esthetic choice but a deliberate strategy to communicate neutrality, progress, and international unity.

Assembly by Design is structured thematically, moving through key aspects of the design, construction, and political implications of the UN's headquarters. Touloumi positions the UN and its associated forums not just as physical structures, but as integral components of the world community as envisioned by the UN, manifesting the aspirations of internationalism and global governance. Each chapter focuses on a specific dimension, creating a comprehensive narrative that interweaves architecture, diplomacy, media, and ideology. The introduction outlines her central argument: the UN Headquarters' interiors are not just physical structures, but global interiors deployed as a medium of global governance, diplomacy, and communication.

The first chapter, "Staging the World," introduces the United Nations as a symbolic construct as much as a functional organization. Touloumi situates the emergence of global interiors within the broader theoretical context of a world community and the symbolic and ideological roles these spaces play in representing a global polity. Touloumi examines the ideological and theoretical foundations that guided the UN's creation, emphasizing how the architects and planners were tasked with materializing abstract concepts like peace, equality, and universal cooperation. She frames the UN as representing the possibility of a unified global order. Still, she critiques the inherent paradox of designing for universality while grappling with the realities of geopolitical tensions and cultural differences. By situating the UN in the broader context of post-World War II liberal internationalism, this chapter establishes the organization as a site where ideals were translated into governance through spatial and interior design.

Chapter Two, "Cultures of Assembly," focuses on the formative period following the signing of the United Nations Charter when competing visions of global governance shaped the physical and symbolic structures of the UN Headquarters. Touloumi frames the debates over the UN's location and design as reflective of broader struggles between democratic ideals and geopolitical realities. She examines how architects, diplomats, and planners

tried to balance efficiency, inclusivity, and symbolic resonance in spaces that would serve as functional centers of diplomacy and representations of a new world order. The General Assembly Hall encapsulates the contradictions. The hall was designed to physically embody the ideals of equality and inclusivity and included a circular seating arrangement that visually and spatially reinforces participation and reduces hierarchies. Although the spatial arrangement and modernist esthetic reflect aspirations toward egalitarianism, Touloumi reveals how political pressures, power dynamics, esthetic trends, and logistical constraints profoundly shaped these ostensibly neutral design elements. Once understood through this lens, the hall becomes a microcosm of the United Nations: an arena striving for universality but continually negotiated through a prism of power, culture, and practicality.

In the third chapter, "The Voice of the World," Touloumi explores how media technologies were integral to the UN Headquarters and made it a global interior capable of reaching audiences worldwide. The UN's various forums are the public face of a complex and expansive bureaucratic organization that remains largely inaccessible to most people. However, their most iconic spaces, including the General Assembly, reach global audiences through media, shaping perceptions of international relations. She argues that because of this, the global interiors are more than spaces; they are also representational media. The interiors were instrumental in constructing and disseminating specific forms of social organization that aligned with the operational logic of the UN. The emphasis on technology and media infrastructure positioned the headquarters as a future-facing entity where architecture and technology converge to mediate international relations. Mass media also played a pivotal role in connecting the UN to the world, though its presence sparked debates about public access, representation, and the potential for distortion.

Touloumi's detailed analysis finds how sound technologies such as microphones, public address systems, and simultaneous interpretation were integral in structuring global diplomatic interactions. She points out that these new and multimodal environments created a public forum that was a "modulated and modulating space."¹ The design of the UN's public and private spaces, from council chambers to communication corridors, shaped its institutional identity and the practices of multilateral diplomacy. At the same time, the practical and technical demands of communicating both within the interiors and out to the world influenced and shaped the esthetics. The requirement to carefully manage optics and sound led to innovations like soundproofing plans and specialized communication technologies. Touloumi examines how the integration of broadcast infrastructure, acoustic design, and visual symbolism came together, arguing that these elements were functional and central to the UN's identity. Yet, the discussions of the technical barriers and workarounds are a reminder that the global interior is as much a product of compromise and pragmatism as it is of ideals.

The fourth chapter, “The Headquarters and the Field,” examines how the headquarters in New York used design strategies to facilitate direct engagement with UN platforms in the field. To do this, the UN employed design as a tool to promote international cooperation and development, and to create networks by “exporting the physical and metaphorical structures of the UN’s ‘global interior’ created inside its headquarters.”² To extend their reach to the field, the United Nations transformed its concept of forums into mobile platforms that operated across diverse global contexts. The organization used seminars and exhibitions in countries they wished to influence as spaces to model inclusive governance and the UN’s vision for a rationalized, connected global order.

The exhibitions disseminated the organization’s practices and embedded the frameworks of liberal internationalism into the local and regional areas around the world. Touloumi discusses a 1954 seminar and exhibition in New Delhi, directed by Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, as an innovative example of this strategy. This ambitious exhibition used life-sized models of village centers to demonstrate how modernist design principles could blend with local architecture to transform rural life, support self-sufficiency, and foster international networks. These kinds of global exhibitions created platforms that symbolized and represented the UN’s aspirations for a cohesive global society and aimed to reinforce its identity as a facilitator of international development.

The epilogue, titled “Itinerant Platforms,” reflects on the legacy of UN Headquarters as a prototype for global institutional interiors that sprang up elsewhere. Touloumi critiques the contradictions embedded in the UN and how the use of certain materials, the selection of artists and designers, and the decisions around which cultural symbols were included or excluded, ultimately reveal how colonial legacies and geopolitical hierarchies persisted within the ostensibly neutral framework of modernist design. She also underscores the limitations of global interiors, noting that mediated spaces can encourage performativity and exclude broader public participation, leaving most of the world’s population as mere spectators. However, she argues that despite these issues, global interiors shaped institutional relationships in an emergent multimodal and global environment. Touloumi believes it is necessary to critically reassess global interiors and emphasizes the need to understand and address their historical biases and power imbalances. Other global interiors informed by the original approaches taken by the UN continue to shape how international institutions imagine and organize public engagement. They mediate power dynamics, frame diplomatic interactions, and project visions of a unified world even as they face new challenges in an increasingly multipolar world. Touloumi concludes with a call for architecture and design to contribute to more equitable and inclusive forms of global governance.

A key strength of this book is the consistently detailed examination of many lesser-known aspects of the UN's architectural and design history. Drawing from extensive sources and previously inaccessible institutional and family archives, Touloumi's comprehensive research and ideas are compelling on both historical and theoretical levels. She documents the negotiations, conflicts, and compromises that shaped the design outcomes, including member states' input and prominent architects' influence, and reveals the logistical challenges of creating a functional yet symbolic headquarters. Touloumi moves well beyond describing the iconic imagery of the UN building to uncover the layers of meaning in its interiors. The fascinating historical documents, architectural plans, photographs, and media stills included further illustrate her insights into how interiors can function as both a reflection and a producer of political, cultural, and global narratives.

Although the subject is primarily historical, *Assembly by Design* contributes to contemporary discourse on the role of interiors and architectural space in addressing global challenges. Touloumi draws connections between the mid-twentieth-century design of the UN and current discussions about sustainability, inclusivity, and technological adaptation. This forward-looking dimension adds to the book's relevance, encouraging readers to think critically about how the built environment can facilitate more equitable and effective forms of global governance. For architecture, interior design, international relations, and cultural studies scholars and enthusiasts, *Assembly by Design* is an essential read. It provides an accessible but richly detailed historical account of the UN's headquarters and a compelling argument for considering how design, particularly interior design, shapes our collective experiences, both now and through their relationship with the past. *Assembly by Design: The United Nations and Its Global Interior* meaningfully contributes to understanding the dynamics between space and power, challenging us to envision new possibilities for spaces where global futures are negotiated and realized.

Notes

1. Olga Touloumi, *Assembly by Design: The United Nations and Its Global Interior* (Minneapolis MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 167.
2. Ibid., 183.

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