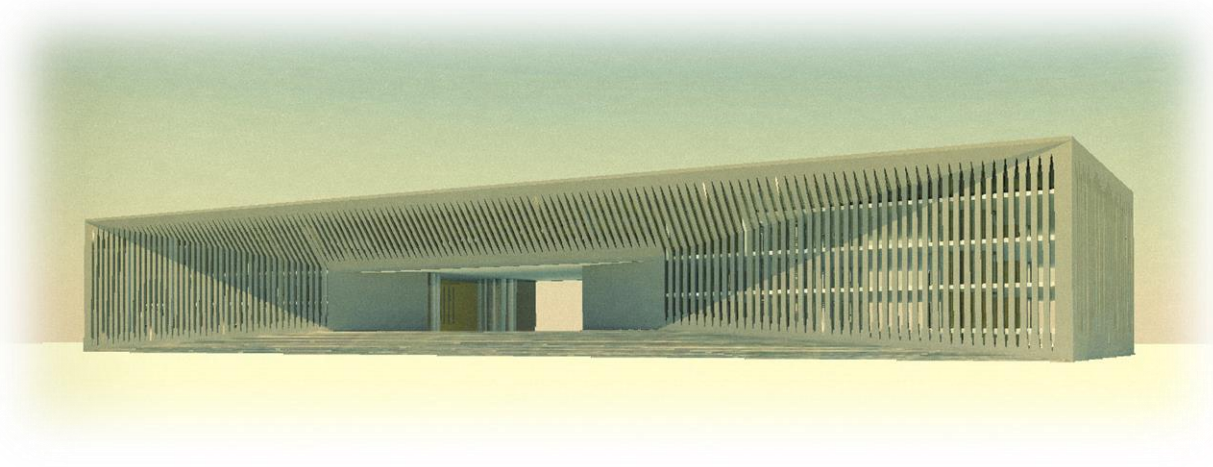


# In search of a modern monument for sustainability

A critical reflection on the design process



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# 1. Introduction

The task of SADD graduation studio is to design a building for the United Nations Environmental Council which locates next to the existing iconic UN headquarters complex. The building itself must perform sustainably and also be representational to the public as icon for the promised sustainable future. A monumental architecture related to sustainability would thus help to spread the sustainable values advertised by the UNEC and express authority and power of them that they have the ability to accomplish their promises. My research and design process is concentrating on how to express monumentality and sustainability in UNEC.

## 2. Research for sustainability and monumentality

### 2.1 What is sustainability?

Sustainability is the capacity to endure. The most quoted definition of the sustainable is that of the Bruntland commission from their report of 1987: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need." Or the diagram of three pillars that shows the relation among Society, Environment and Economy. Both of these definitions show that sustainability is reconciliation between humans and environment, civilization and nature. To develop sustainably is not to comprise the environment while to negotiate with them in order to achieve a harmonious and balanced development.

### 2.2 What is monumentality?

In *Nine Points on Monumentality*, historian Sigfried Giedion speaks that 'monuments are human landmarks which men has created as symbols for their ideals, for their actions. They are intended to outlive the period which originated them, and constitute a heritage for future generations.'<sup>1</sup> German art historian Alois Riegl, in his book *The Modern Cult of Monuments*, defines a monument as 'a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations. In every present, they 'recall a specific moment or complex of moments from the past', and thus make a claim to immortality, to an eternal present and an unceasing state of becoming.'<sup>2</sup> Monumentality has also defined by American architect Louis Kahn as a spiritual quality inherent in the structure which conveys the feeling of eternity in his 1944 text 'Monumentality'.<sup>3</sup> It could be seen that monuments carry simultaneously collective memories and intentions. All of the values that are placed on the monuments are indicated to the pursuing of eternity. Key points of creating monumentality lies in creating the feeling of eternity, timeless experience in architecture. The UNEC should be able to evoke the public memories about our golden past and carry the intention for a sustainable future. It needs to be design with a feeling of eternity to become monumental.

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<sup>1</sup> Giedion, Leger & Sert, "Nine", 29-30

<sup>2</sup> Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments. Its Character and Its Origin"(1902) in *Oppositions Journal* no. 25. (New York: Rizzoli, 1982.), 21-50

<sup>3</sup> Kahn, Louis I. "Monumentality" in *New Architecture and City Planning: A Symposium*, Paul Zucker (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 577-588

### **2.3 Ways to design monumentality**

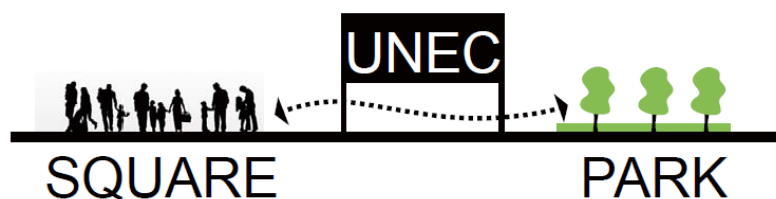
There are three approaches to build monumentality.

First is to build a civic centre. When talking about modern monuments, Giedion and his colleagues believed that there was a need for civic centre which can symbolize the idea of a modern community: "Only the imagination of real creator is suited to building the lacking civic centers, to instill once more in the public the old love for festivals..."<sup>4</sup>

Second and third is to employ a pure form and representational elements. In "The Monumentally Informal", James Stirling mentioned two characters of monumentality. One is "abstract" which is being the style related to the modern movement and the language derived from cubism, constructivism, De Stijl and all the isms of the new architecture. The other is "Representational" which is being related to the tradition, the vernacular, history, recognition of the familiar and generally the more timeless concerns of the architectural heritage. These two are also key points of making building a feeling of monumentality.

## **3. Design of monumentality and sustainability**

### **3.1 Build a civic centre**

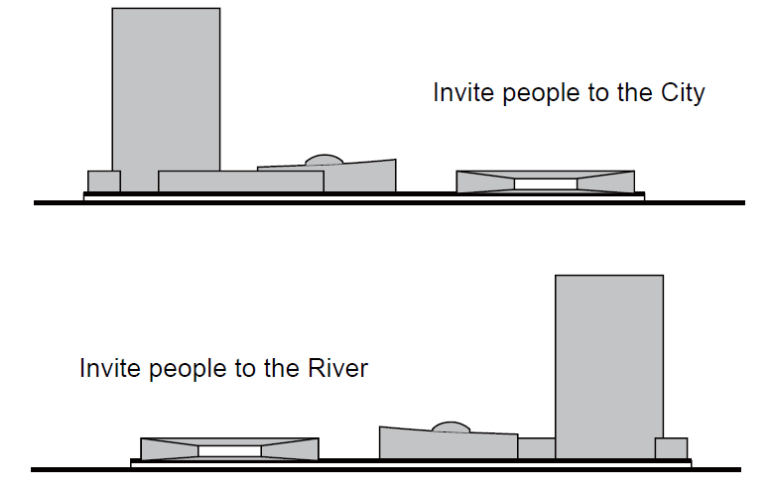


The UN plot is designed as a public square which could accommodate large gathering and ceremonial event. The area close to the river is designed as a leisure park where people could enjoy green and water. Together with the Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza(47th street), the square, the building and the park make a beautiful axis from the city to the water front with different public characters.

### **3.2 Abstract form**

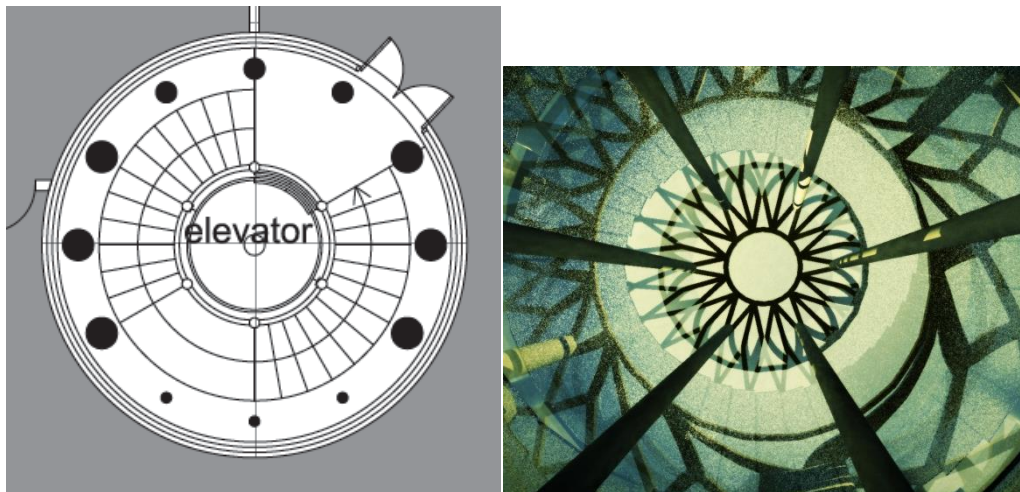
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<sup>4</sup> Giedion, Leger & Sert, "Nine", 29-30



The building itself stands on the common border of the square and the park as division while allows them to communicate through a void space. The building shapes a welcomed gesture inviting people to the water front nature in the meantime the opposite from the water front to the city. The monolithic façade and tremendous stairs finish the pure form of the building and enhance the monumentality of the building. The void space is the focal point of the building. It becomes also the center of the square and park. It could be used as a stage for different events and activities. Here is the place where nature and city meet.

### 3.3 Representational elements



The monumentality of this part is achieved by clustering columns in big tubes which refers to the ancient architecture and express the eternity of monumentality. It functions as the main supporting structure of the building. It also integrated with functions of vertical transport, ventilation ducts and toilets. It imports light for top into the building with patterned window refers also to the ancient architecture.

### References

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