When tasked with the assignment to design a world headquarters for sustainability and sustainable development, I was perplexed by the ambiguity of the conceptual aspect, but at the same time restrained with a comprehensive list of pragmatic requirements. Firstly, the term ‘sustainability’ is one that is vexed with different definitions, perceptions and contradictions. It was thus necessary to define what a United Nations Ecological Council strives to achieve in humanistically, ecologically, and symbolically. Secondly, as part of the U.N., there lies a fine line between security of the building and the potential for public space, as well as the public perception of the building and what it stands for. Finally, situated in New York City and next to the existing U.N. headquarters designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier, a balance between old and new, modernism and a relatively new paradigm of sustainable building, and urban and natural, needs to be achieved in an approach that is sensitive, yet novel. The design must complement the history of the site and the UN, reflect the technology and knowledge of today and anticipate a very uncertain future. These aforementioned problems necessitate a holistic methodology that balances these contradictions in such a way that creates value for the site, the city and the world.

To address the first point of sustainability, I believe that the building should not be merely a ‘sustainable’ building -- that is, in terms of merely energy efficiency -- although that is desired and very much one of the major design goals. The UNEC should serve to be more than just a building, but a symbol of the U.N.’s commitment to sustainable development. Sustainability is often times regional, and one of the major endeavors in New York City’s plan is the promotion of local food production. As fuel prices increase and most food now travels hundreds or even thousands of kilometers, food security is a major concern not just for the UNEC but the UN as a whole. Therefore, I aspire to have food production and urban agriculture as one of the programs for the site, to foster community engagement and also to be a pedagogical tool that will educate the general public. I strive to design a building that is a part of the existing landscape, a visually light-weight building mass that almost ‘floating’ above it, yet expressing a formal similarity to the existing U.N. buildings. A need to balance sustainable solutions, both high and low-tech, needs to be achieved. Most importantly, my design needs to be one that serves to be a catalyst vis-à-vis sustainability and public understanding. Trees and natural features will be incorporated into the building as an allegorical of a symbiosis between man-made structures and the natural world, while also making for a healthier building and a more comfortable place to be.

The building and site must aspire to not only be a ‘sustainable’ building but also demonstrate the commitment of the UN to finding solutions to global issues: food security, greenhouse gas emissions, fossil fuel dependence, and provide an example for a future in which humans will work with nature rather than against it. The UN Headquarters of Sustainability will be designed to be part of the larger ecosystem in that it will, like other organisms, have a certain lifespan, will be able to grow and adapt and over its lifespan it will bring a positive net benefit to the city and the larger global community. The overall aim is to find and develop innovative techniques and schemes that mitigate local and regional issues that can be translated to larger global problems.

My departure point with regards to researching and understanding the site, city and objective involved looking at typology and morphology of the city, environmental aspects such as climate and geography, society, culture, philosophical and ideological discourse, and phenomenology. Being in the city and experiencing it first-hand was without a doubt the most valuable research that I engaged in. This research undertaken in the first part of the design process led me to question larger ideas surrounding sustainability.