



Dag Hammarskjöld
Foundation



Dag Hammarskjöld and the UN Meditation Room



The Meditation Room at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York was initially envisioned as a tiny space dedicated to silence and reflection. It would serve as a venue for people of all faiths and religions and therefore would not contain any symbols with religious connotations.

Dag Hammarskjöld realised the importance of such a space, and personally approved and oversaw the creation of the Meditation Room down to the very details. He was supported by 'Friends of the UN Meditation Room', consisting of people representing various religions, united in their wish for a space of stillness, prayer and contemplation.

The Meditation Room is located in the public area of the UN Secretariat building and is open to all UN staff and missions, but also for visitors. The room is V-shaped, with light walls and a fresco in the narrow end. It was painted by Hammarskjöld's good friend and artist Bo Beskow on the

theme 'infinity' and is an abstract composition of geometrical patterns. There are no chairs in the room, only small benches. In the center of the room there is a rectangular block of iron ore, a gift from the King of Sweden and a Swedish mining company. It bears the resemblance of an altar, the only symbol in the room. A single light is focused on it, said to represent the meeting of the light in the sky with the Earth. *'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 on our imagination'*, Hammarskjöld explained.

It is clear that the Meditation Room was personally very important for Hammarskjöld. When it was reopened in 1957, Hammarskjöld was *'so happy, the happiest I have ever seen him'*, a friend recalls.

Dag Hammarskjöld wrote the following text to be distributed to the visitors of the room:

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.



This fresco on the Foundation's wall (left) is an original study of the painting in the Meditation Room by Bo Beskou, and the small sketch (right) is his depiction of the Meditation Room. Both are acquisitions from Bo Beskou's wife Greta Beskou.



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