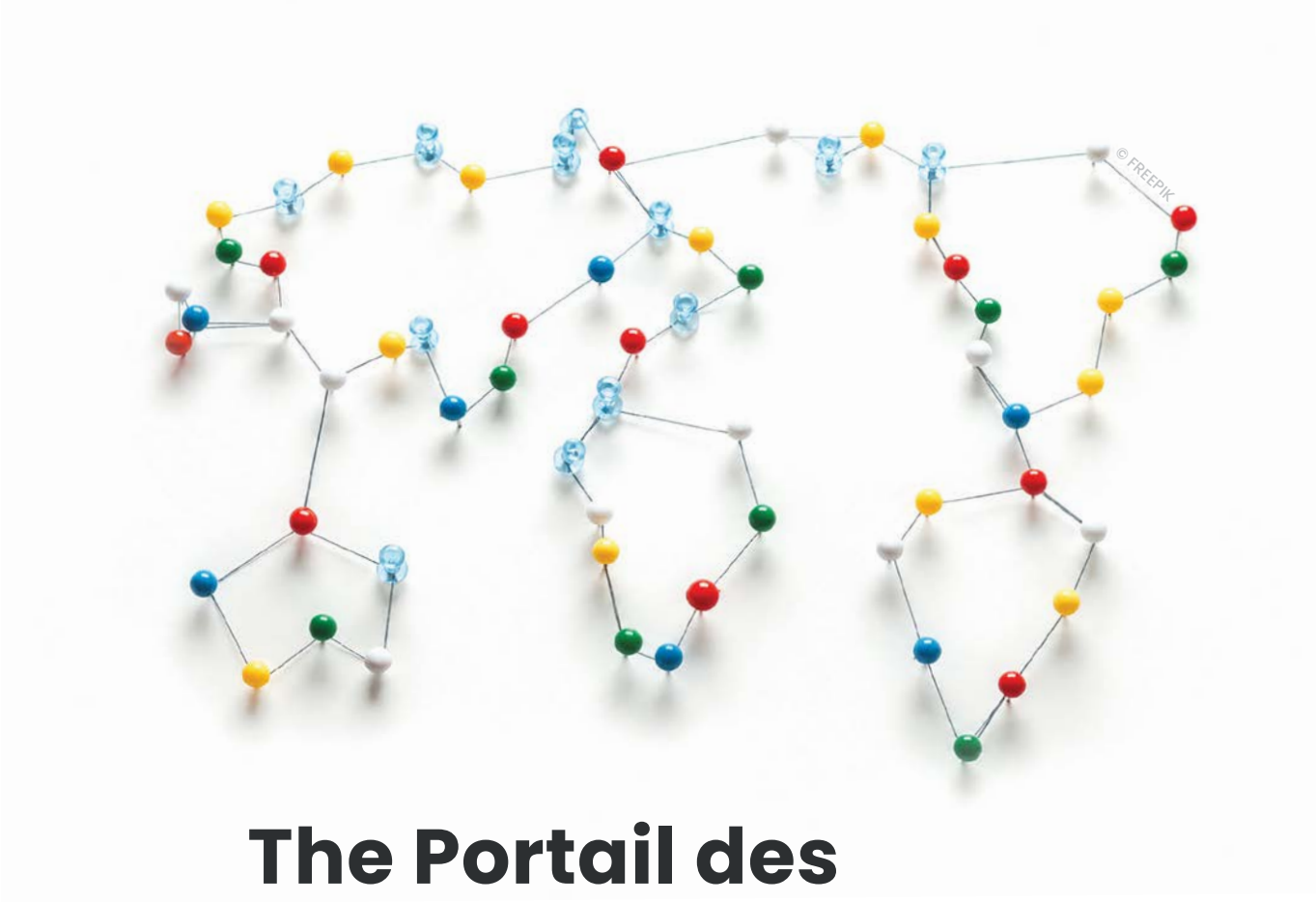

The Portail des Nations: a gateway between worlds

The Portail des Nations opens a new gateway between Geneva and the UN, making multilateralism tangible, human and accessible to all

TATJANA **DARANI** *

You arrive facing the Broken Chair, its splintered leg pointing skyward like a question mark aimed at the century. The Nations Gate draws you in: a threshold at once serene and startlingly modern, set at the crossroads of the currents running through this restless, multilateral city. Before you cross it, Hans Erni's ceramic mural *Ta Panta Rhei*, "everything flows," stops you in your tracks, its dove suspended mid-flight above a procession of human figures.

The project was born from a meeting, not a brief. Ivan Pictet, its main donor and initiator, and Michael Møller, then Director General of UN Geneva, shared a simple ambition: to give the Palais des Nations a space worthy of welcoming the public. Ivan Pictet and I have created the answer to a question Geneva rarely asks itself: where do its many worlds actually meet?

A village of pavilions

Between 80,000 and 100,000 people work each day in this ecosystem, orbiting an idea first drafted in San Francisco in 1945. Rather than another monument, architects Charles Pictet and Baptiste Broillet

> THE UN'S DUTY IS NOT ONLY TO REPORT WHAT IS WRONG, BUT TO SHOW WHAT WORKS

imagined a village of pavilions folded into the park. Against the Palais's pale stone and solemn architecture, the Portail offers a softer counterpoint: warm timber, human scale and structures that seem to emerge from the landscape rather than impose themselves upon it. The result is a place designed to feel open and welcoming, as though every visitor had been expected.

Geneva's diplomatic lineage runs from Calvin's city of refuge through Henry Dunant's horror at Solferino and the Geneva Convention he helped found with Moynier, Dufour, Maunoir and Appia. But the same halls once carried Carl Vogt's racial theories, a reminder that the capital of humanitarianism was never immune to the worst ideas of its century.

Inside, the full story unfolds across three pavilions. One explores the shared language of rights that makes cooperation possible, through fifteen testimonies. Another traces the machinery of shared knowledge through the Montreal Protocol. The third becomes a negotiation simulation, where visitors argue, amend and vote, discovering that cooperation means finding ways to decide together even when agreement does not come easily.

At the heart of the visit, the open-air Agora holds a bronze plaque bearing the Charter's opening words in six languages: We the Peoples. The phrase itself was revised under Virginia Gildersleeve's pen, yet it has never quite been reconciled with a Charter that is truthfully signed by governments rather than peoples. The Agora is built to hold that tension: shared tables and benches where strangers might actually talk once the experience is over.

The Portail's pavilions carry more than one ghost. Gustave Revilliod, whose Ariana estate would one day cradle the League of Nations, hoped that his life's work would serve the education of generations to come. Bertha von Suttner and Eleanor Roosevelt belong to this lineage too, as does Dag Hammarskjöld, who called the UN: 'a fragile fence against hell' and died proving it near Ndola. So does Kofi Annan, whose Nobel medal now rests in the Portail's gift shop. And so does Sergio Vieira de Mello, who spoke with the Khmer Rouge to save the living and perished in Baghdad still believing that dialogue could outlast hatred.

Visitors pass through security at the Porte des Nations, gather beneath the

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Inside the Portail des Nations interactive exhibition room

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The interactive exhibitions bring information to life

installation "Geneva works for the world," then move through the hour-long 'Together' experience, offered in eight languages, before returning to the café and shop. Funding brought together Ivan Pictet's initial idea: from the Fondation Hans Wilsdorf, the Loterie Romande and Dona Bertarelli Philanthropy, as well as federal, cantonal and municipal support through 2027. From 2028, the site becomes the UN's own Visitor Centre, the starting point for tours of the Palais des Nations.

This article was written in collaboration with the Diplomatic Club of Geneva.

A handshake, not an org chart

At the inauguration, officials circled the same idea from different angles. Ignazio Cassis framed it as a choice in favour of multilateralism and dialogue in an increasingly uncertain world. Tatiana Valovaya called it an invitation to draw closer to the United Nations. Melissa Fleming put it more bluntly: the UN's duty is not only to report what is wrong, but to show what works. Dona Bertarelli spoke of shared challenges such as biodiversity loss demanding greater cooperation, while Christina Kitsos saw above all an educational opportunity for the youth of today.

It is tied together most plainly: countless quiet harmonizations already ease daily life, and the Portail's ambition is to make that invisible work visible.

Today, amid the budget storms battering WHO, UNHCR, IOM, OHCHR and ILO, the Portail insists on something almost unfashionable: that multilateralism is a handshake, not an org chart. As Secretary-General Guterres put it, the hope is that visitors leave seeing the UN as "a portal to peace, a gateway to justice and opportunity, a passageway to a livable planet."

Around 200,000 people a year, many of them young, are expected to walk through this gate, learning, like the delegates of fictional nations in the experience's final act, the simple art of working together.

It may be the only argument Geneva has ever really needed to make. ■

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