

Press release

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Palace of Peace and Reconciliation opens in Kazakhstan

The completion of Foster and Partners Palace of Peace and Reconciliation in Astana, Kazakhstan is marked today at an impressive ceremony. Opened by President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and accompanied by the Presidents of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in time for the triennial Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the project is a 62m high pyramid designed and realised in less than two years that will be a global centre for religious understanding, the renunciation of violence and the promotion of faith and human equality. Located on a prominent site in the capitals new administrative centre, the building occupies a significant place on the axial route from the Presidential Palace.

As a non-denominational contemporary building form, the pyramid is resonant of both a spiritual history that dates back to ancient Egypt as well as a symbol of amity for the future. It will accommodate a permanent venue for the Congress, and houses a 1,500- seat opera house, a university faculty, meeting spaces and a national spiritual centre. This programmatic diversity is unified within the pure form of a pyramid, 62 metres high with a 62 x 62-metre base.

Clad in a lattice of stainless steel with pale grey granite triangular inserts, the pyramid has an apex of stained glass by the artist Brian Clarke. Inside, it is organised around a soaring central atrium, which is animated with spectacular cast light patterns. The assembly chamber is elevated at the top, supported on four inclined pillars - the hands of peace. Lifts rise up along the incline of the walls to take delegates to a reception space lined with vegetation the hanging gardens of Astana - from where they ascend to the chamber via a winding ramp.

A broad glass lens set in the floor of the atrium casts light down into the auditorium of the opera house and creates a sense of vertical continuity from the lowest level of the building to the very top. The opera house is clad in a deep red wood which creates a dramatic contrast with the black stone finish in the entrance foyer and the wash of light from the pale grey granite of the floors above. Combined with the tinted light from the stained glass apex, the interior is an affecting fusion of colour.

The Astanian climate posed a significant challenge, with an annual range from 30°C in summer to -30°C in winter. The construction schedule has been extraordinarily rapid. Following an international competition, Foster and Partners was commissioned to design the venue for the Congress in December 2004. This led the design team to develop a structural solution that utilised prefabricated components, which could be manufactured off site during the winter months and erected during the summer. The entire process, from briefing to completion took just twenty-one months.

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