

United Nations in Geneva Presents Miquel Barcelo's Dome at the Palace of Nations



Secretary General Ban Kimoon unveils the artistic new ceiling of a conference room of the United Nations Human Rights Council. UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferre.

GENEVA.

Tuesday morning (Nov. 18) the Spanish government officially presented to the UN the dome Miquel Barceló (Felanitx, Majorca, 1957) painted in the organization's Palace of Nations. A multinational group of over 600 diplomats, politicians, members of the art world and journalists filled the Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Chamber for the event. Guests of honor included King Juan Carlos, Queen Sofía, President José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero, and Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos, representing Spain; as well as Secretary General Ban KiMoon; President of the Swiss Confederation, Micheline Calmy-Rey; and Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In the minutes leading up to the ceremony, the distinguished crowd milled about the circular conference room craning their necks toward the multicolored stalactites perilously clinging to the dome overhead. Some—aware that the dome's appearance changes depending on one's perspective—walked around the hall observing this effect. Another group, in the central part of the chamber, inundated the amiable Barceló with handshakes and congratulations.

Once the crowd was seated, the guests of honor, accompanied by their entourage of bodyguards,

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filed through the chamber to take their places at a long table flanked by two huge monitors at the front of the room. President Calmy-Rey delivered the first and most eloquent of the six speeches, demonstrating his grasp of European history and a capacity for interpretation of art. Barceló delivered his characteristically concise speech in French, Catalan and Castilian. More poetic than discursive, his address made reference to the two primary sources of inspiration for the appearance of the dome: a cave and the sea. Representing both at once, the monumental work is an “absolute union of opposites.”

None of the speakers made reference to the controversy that has erupted in Spain over the financing of the dome—a welcome respite. The publication of the nearly €20 million (US\$25.4 million) price tag of the Human Rights Chamber renovation (which included the cost of Barceló’s dome) enraged the Spanish right. In the past weeks, Spain’s right leaning newspapers, *El Mundo* and *ABC*, have been ablaze with accusations of extravagance directed at the socialist PSOE government. Unfortunately, the ordeal dominated the press leading up to the inauguration of the Majorcan artist’s project.

Nevertheless, on Tuesday, all attention was focused on Barceló’s work. The 4,600 square-foot dome, too big to be grasped in its entirety by the human eye, serves as a metaphor for the world. The spectator can only appreciate the work as a whole by focusing on one section at a time and synthesizing the resulting impressions.

Furthermore, Barceló and his team applied gray paint from one side and multicolored paints from the other to the three dimensional forms of the dome. This unique treatment—which Barceló has employed in paintings for nearly twenty years—causes the dome to change colors as one moves, reinforcing the metaphor of a complex world. The work cannot be properly understood from any one perspective.

However, as President Calmy-Rey fittingly pointed out in his speech: despite its diversity of appearances, the dome presents many pictorial similarities from any angle. Similarly, although the people of the world differ in color and perspective, we share some universal values.

The symbolism fits the function of the Chamber. The Alliance of Civilizations—the brainchild of President Zapatero and Prime Minister Erdogan—seeks to solve human rights issues, among others, with an open-minded, multilateral approach.