

“Broken Chair”: the unsettling and dignified sculpture erected in the Place des Nations



“Broken Chair” is a monumental Douglas fir sculpture from Swiss artist Daniel Berset, based on a project by Paul Vermeulen, co-founder of Handicap International Switzerland and its Director at the time. Present in the Place des Nations since 1997 (except from March 2005 to February 2007), the artwork features a giant chair with one leg mutilated by an explosion.

“Broken Chair” was born of Handicap International’s will to mobilize diplomats and public opinion to put an end to the humanitarian crisis caused by landmines’ proliferation. *“It was impossible to expose the image of a person torn apart by the explosion of a landmine... the hardness of such an image causes a rejection of the message by the public. So we evaded the shock and horror, and looked for a symbolic force instead”.* It was with these few words that Paul Vermeulen would summarize at the time the project he had imagined.

Denouncing “the cowards’ war”!

It was in 1996, and NGOs had been rallying around ICBL – the International Campaign to Ban Landmines –, which Handicap International is one of the six founding organizations. Passions ran high against a weapon that indiscriminately decimated civilians and soldiers, children and adults, villagers and shepherds in a deafening indifference! *“With the proliferation of these weapons since the conflicts of the 70’s, each year more than 20,000 new victims add to the list of a genuine planned massacre!”* remembers Dr. Jean-Baptiste Richardier, co-founder of the NGO in France with his colleague Dr. Claude Simonnot. *“At the time, in response to our accusations, the military dared to call these accidents mere collateral damage; but for all of us, the use of these weapons – which are actually deliberately concealed traps designed to be set off by their victim – was a particularly vicious and heinous war practice. It deserved to be called a cowards’ war”.*

Under pressure from NGOs and the moral authorities that they alert and mobilize, States resolved to revise the Protocol II which, in principle, regulates the use of this kind of conventional weapons. Gathered in Vienna in 1995, then in Geneva in 1996 with the stated intention to respond to this crisis – *“in the name of the victims of a weapon of which they admitted they’d lost control”* says Paul Vermeulen – States recognized that they were powerless to agree on a text that would completely ban these weapons, even though they were indiscriminate by nature and therefore illegal under International Humanitarian Law. Worse still, the new text regulated their use and legalized the use of new, more sophisticated, so-called “smart” mines, supposedly self-disabling, but without bringing a credible response to the crisis caused by the millions of so-called “dumb” mines already polluting the soils of the former conflict zones in more than 80 countries, creating a deadly threat to the populations for decades. Paul Vermeulen concludes: *“This great tragedy invented by man could now keep spreading, multiplying the number of new victims while those in power remained indifferent”.*

Emergence of “the new diplomacy

Shocked by this failure, the Canadian delegation led by Lloyd Axworthy – Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – secretly discussed with a few other friendly countries and the ICBL NGOs. Dr. Philippe Chabasse, Handicap International’s spokesman within the ICBL Coordination Committee, remembers this improbable turn: *“Lloyd Axworthy then proposed to them what will be remembered as a diplomatic textbook case of political mystification: first, he invites in Ottawa in October 1996 the States that seem to be the most determined to find a solution and, breaking with disarmament practices, he invites NGOs too to participate in the usual closed debates; then, having acted the virtuous declarations of intent of the participants, he puts to good use the privilege of being the host country – that of closing the conference – by inviting the present countries to gather in Ottawa in December 1997, for the signature of a treaty to completely ban landmines!”.* The shock and anger of some delegations reflected their surprise... but the die was cast, and the “Ottawa Process” was underway! It lasted for

14 months, with intense negotiations and an impressive suspense – due to the pressures and position reversals, acceptance and rejections – under the scrutiny of some 1,200 NGOs from an international campaign increasingly organized and combative, mobilizing all of the moral authorities of the planet. *“This alliance composed of a few courageous and resolved diplomats, backed and informed by creative and determined NGO representatives, would be described as a model for the “new diplomacy” which has led to several other treaties since”* says Dr. Philippe Chabasse.

“Broken Chair” had to be an ephemeral artwork

It was in this uncertain context – where “international Geneva” was full of rumors about the Canadian initiative's failure – that Paul Vermeulen convinced Handicap International to commit to building a monumental but ephemeral piece of art, to be exposed for three months in front of the Palace of Nations.

“The chair symbol seemed particularly appropriate to me; indeed, a chair follows the body curves, evokes a presence even when it is empty, its legs support life... by mutilating it, it is life itself that one hurts” remembers Paul Vermeulen. *“The idea was to collaborate with an artist to draw the public’s attention to Handicap international's battles, by creating a powerful quality message that could not be rejected by Genevan authorities. I knew from watching those pictures that seeing the hardness of mutilation by explosives causes the rejection of the message; to mention such a crude subject, we needed a symbol”.*

Paul Vermeulen trusted a sculptor friend, Daniel Berset, known for his artistic work on chairs that are common in his artwork with the production of the sculpture. The Place des Nations, unoccupied at the time, had already been used by artists for temporary installations and was available in 1996; obviously this was the place to occupy with such a monumental artwork in order to address the international community member States’ delegations. Paul Vermeulen secured the authorization from Alain Vaissade, mayor of Geneva at the time, to temporarily establish “Broken Chair” in the Place des Nations, and gathered the necessary funds – notably from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Geneva city canton, and the Liechtenstein. Then Daniel Berset, with the complicity of carpenter Louis Genève and engineer Thomas Büchi, started a race against the clock to produce this gigantic and unique piece of art. Explaining why its fourth leg is torn apart instead of sculpted: *“I really could not sculpt pain”* the artist soberly answers.

On August 18th 1997, “Broken Chair” is finally erected in the Place des Nations, less than four months away from the signature of the Ottawa Treaty. For Genevans, tourists and representatives of States and international organizations, the message of this unusual presence in the Place des Nations is clear and spectacular: *“To symbolically represent the mutilation of the victims of landmines and to embody, in the public opinion as well as in all of the United Nations members’ minds, the civil society’s demand that these weapons be banned from war practices”* summarizes Jean-Baptiste Richardier.

Today the outcome of the Ottawa Process is known: On December 2nd 1997, the Mine Ban Treaty – first ever ban treaty of a conventional weapon – was signed by 122 States. And on December 10th 1997, the NGOs of ICBL and their coordinator, Jody Williams, collectively received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo. *“It is probably the most precise and binding treaty in the history of disarmament”* says Petra Schroeter, Director of Handicap International Switzerland. *“Today the Ottawa Treaty is backed by the commitment of 166 States, determined to see a “mine-free world”. This was the NGOs’ desire and, of course, that of the civil populations condemned to live threatened by these waste of war”.*

A path full of suspense...

On August 18th 1997, on the day of its installation, the image and meaning of “Broken Chair” were revealed throughout the world by the journalists of the Palace of Nations, without organizing a press conference or a communication campaign. The artwork’s quality, its unique meaning, the success of the Ottawa Treaty signature and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to NGOs of the international campaign allowed “Broken Chair” not to be dismantled by the end of 1997, as it was initially planned. With the successive adjournments of the Place des Nation renovation project, Handicap International obtained that the artwork would stay in place well beyond, putting this providential presence in the service of vigilance with regard to the implementation of the Ottawa treaty. Several events have indeed taken place around “Broken Chair” – reminding States about their commitments – like explosives experts simulating its amputation with a spectacular explosion.

The bad news finally came in 2004: “Broken Chair” had to be dismantled to clear the Place des Nations, whose renovation had finally been approved. *“As part of the redevelopment of one of international Geneva’s major places, “Broken Chair” had to either disappear or be moved; according to the architects, the artwork found its place in their visual conception of the redevelopment project, but pressures for its removal were coming from certain international spheres”* Paul Vermeulen recalls.

But that was dismissing the popularity that the artwork had acquired over time, now part of Geneva’s visual identity and among the most photographed curiosities – after the Jet d’Eau – even integrated to the cover of Calvin’s city’s Monopoly board game. Postcards representing it break sales records and foreign televisions covering the U.N news or the demonstrations in front of the Palace of Nations often have it in the background. Indeed, as time went by, “Broken Chair” had become the symbolic agora for a variety of claims. Finally, it was also not taking into account some of the diplomats and international officials’ growing sympathy for this unusual work.

Broken Chair was dismantled in March 2005 for the renovation work to take place. It is made of two removable parts, which were lifted using a crane, and then transported by a special truck to a storage location, waiting for a decision to be made regarding its fate.

Handicap International acquires “Broken Chair” and gathers support for its return

In March 2005, the future of “Broken Chair”, now dismantled, is completely uncertain. Nevertheless a support campaign is organized for the return of an artwork that was supposed to make a short appearance in international Geneva, but who rapidly acquired an international reputation. In 2004, in order to step up its advocacy efforts Handicap International acquired the artwork from Daniel Berset. “Broken Chair” became Handicap International’s property.

Following the organization’s lead and with the artist’s support, many personalities and organizations mobilized so that “Broken Chair” could return to the Place des Nations. Among these, Jody Williams of course, in the name of the ICBL NGOs co-Nobel Peace Prize winner, but also Steffen Kongstad – Norwegian ambassador – brought their support for the return of the “mutilated chair”. Cornelio Sommaruga – then president of the International Center for Humanitarian Demining – as well as Patrimoine Suisse Genève (formerly known as Société d’Art Public) participated in a press conference to call for the artwork’s return. Meanwhile, the city Department of Cultural Affairs and the City Council of Geneva also worried about the future of “Broken Chair”. Finally, the Geneva international officials magazine gathered – by means of a poll – opinions largely in favor of maintaining the sculpture in the square.

A more and more vigorous debate



“A welcome touch of life”

- Arlette Ortis, architect, co-author of the Place des Nations project.

“From the start, my goal, accepting this project, was to give coherence to the square, but all the while keeping existing “life ingredients”, in an approach which was respectful of public space. So we adapted the central space, took out the dirt from the square and replaced it

with 84 water jets coming from the ground, which necessarily pushed the chair closer to the Palace of Nations.

Several locations for the chair were studied in the multiple projects. But, when we tried to place it outside the Place des Nations itself, it felt like its symbolic value was fading, like it was becoming a banal sculpture.

This chair is symbolic: it has a poetic value. I have observed that the public likes – particularly when it rains – to take shelter under the chair, or to put their belongings there. Consequently, in this monumental space, I believe that keeping the chair will bring a welcome touch of life.

The square without the chair is like moving your furniture around at home, and knowing that something's amiss...”.

“Keeping its unstable presence”.

- Françoise Archambault Barthassat, architect.

“Broken Chair” calls out to the civil society as a whole, with a message whose meaning is yet to discover. It has been freely placed in front of the U.N building’s forecourt. Its location, its dimensions, its materiality give it a monumental status and question us about the meaning of this proximity. A location that sheds light on the international context that it is supposed to tragically evoke: human suffering, war.

This public space combines functions of different nature: A gathering place, around the battles and causes of the U.N, and a daily place of public transport exchanges (transshipment, a crossing point, a waiting area). At a crossroads between major events and daily individual routes, this chair will keep a relevant and active symbolic impact, provided its message is updated and clearly disseminated, and that its installation remains precarious and limited in time. It serves a cause, it summons reality. This isn’t just about successfully integrating it in the new redevelopment, but rather keeping its presence unstable; and when the time comes that the cause is exhausted, arranging its disappearance.

What is at stake today in the Place des Nations project and construction site? It is unconceivable to design a public space which vocation is to rally people around causes and battles fought through the U.N, to collect their materialized expressions. This square’s role is essentially to gather, in the nations’ public space, the citizens of the world working for freedom and an ethical transformation of the world.”

“It is right that the chair should remain in the Place des Nations”

- Jakob Kellenberger, ICRC President.

“This chair with one broken leg, immense as the anti-personnel mines plague that it condemns, reminds us that the suffering caused by these weapons – which we might easily call blind – extends considerably beyond the moment of the wound: if they don’t kill on the spot, these weapons maim their victims for life. Like the splintered leg of the chair, their life is broken.

However, I also see that three legs remain intact; they keep the chair standing. In a symbolic way, these three legs or pillars could represent the law, political responsibility and public mobilization.

International humanitarian law, like other instruments of international public law, tries to alleviate at least and if possible to prevent the suffering caused by armed conflicts. I think of the Ottawa Treaty, and we must hope that it gets ratified and respected by all States. A recognized, widely ratified and respected law is the first of these pillars.

The chair is in the Place des Nations, facing the U.N building. This is right, for it is the States’ responsibility to strengthen and implement the legal instruments contributing to the protection of life and human dignity. Political commitment, determined and tenacious, to a “mine-free world” can constitute the second pillar.

As the road to the signature of the Ottawa Treaty revealed, it is the determination of the civil society and many non-governmental organizations, along with more official authorities, that caused the States to act. It must not stop. The Place des Nations, a public space, a place of demonstrations and debates, is thus a symbol of this third pillar of durable protection of life and human dignity, backed by the whole international community.

We can, we must hope that these three pillars, if they remain strong, will help prevent other legs from being broken and will stop, at last, the unspeakable suffering caused by anti-personnel mines.”

“The chair must remain in the Place des Nations”

- Cornelio Sommaruga, President of the International Center for Humanitarian Demining.

“The chair must remain in the Place des Nations for at least two reasons: Firstly, because the Convention’s action is entering the critical mine-clearing phase, strictly speaking. There is only ten years left to get there. Secondly because today it is not the landmines that kill, but the unexploded bombs, especially cluster bombs, striking indiscriminately.”

The beginning of the Place des Nation redevelopment work stirs up again the controversy.

Mobilization and expressions of support intensify. However, despite the mobilization, it is still very unclear whether or not “Broken Chair” will return to the Place des Nations. Christian Ferrazino, Administrative Councilor of the city of Geneva, leaves no doubt about it: *“After four years of the city and the canton consulting extensively with international circles and stakeholders, we cannot suddenly put everything back on the table again. It would be insulting those who followed the process.”* As for the possibility of moving the “Broken Chair” closer to the Palace of Nations, as wished by Paul Vermeulen, it seems impossible. *“Even more so that the U.N has formally asked that the chair be removed”*, reminds Nils de Dardel, director of the Department of Municipal Development. For him, the Place des Nations must be kept uncluttered and sober, like the Bundesplatz also decorated with water jets. *“This is the concept that was chosen. If we break with this simplicity, the whole concept collapses”*.

Handicap International officials then understood that the Director of the U.N in Geneva was opposed to the return of the chair, implying that Kofi Annan himself was against it: *“To him, it may symbolize the fragility and imbalance of the United Nations. Obviously it was delicate for the cantonal authorities to ignore this perception... even more so that Switzerland had only been a member of the U.N since March 2002, and did not want to displease the institution”* says Paul Vermeulen.

Accidentally, in January 2005, Mark Malloch Brown – an old acquaintance from the early days of Handicap International in the Cambodian refugee camps of Thailand – had just been appointed Secretary-General’s Chief of Staff... *“A simple email exchange with Mark Malloch Brown allowed us to have official confirmation that Kofi Annan not only was not opposed to the chair’s return, but also wanted to be informed of the project’s progress!”* remembers Jean-Baptiste Richardier.

Then, after Broken Chair was virtually forbidden to return, Handicap International obtained at the very last moment, but still temporarily, confirmation from the administrative Council of the city of Geneva – anxious to respect a large consensus – that “Broken Chair” would be integrated to the redeveloped square’s design. It was reinstalled in February 2007, slightly closer to the Palace of Nations, in front of the main entry lined with the member States’ flags, which is one of the symbolic dimensions of the artwork.

The return of “Broken Chair” dedicated to a new battle: banning cluster munitions

In November 2003 in The Hague, made stronger by their success against landmines, 80 NGOs had created another international campaign, the Coalition against cluster munitions (CMC). *“From the blind bombings on Laos of the 70’s to the war in Afghanistan, the ordeal inflicted more recently upon several Iraqi cities or the massive use of the weapon at the very end of the war in South Lebanon, our objective was to tell about its horrible consequences on civilian populations, and to mobilize international opinion to succeed, again, in banning them”* remembers Anne Héry, Advocacy Director for the Handicap International Federation.

Dropped from the air or fired with an RPG, howitzer or mortar, cluster bombs open before reaching the ground, disseminating a shower of bomblets. About the size of a big lighter or a can – for the smallest ones – these sub-munitions are often equipped with a small parachute in order to initiate the spin that will set them off. In the military language, their function is: “to saturate” the largest possible zone; in other words: to bring death and devastation without giving the slightest chance to the soldiers or civilians of the targeted zone. But these weapons are also notoriously unreliable, and have a high malfunction rate: 5 to 30% of the cluster munitions dropped get caught in the trees or reach the ground unexploded, turning into *de facto* landmines. “*With one major difference*” says Bill Howell, then head of Handicap International’s clearing operations: “*these sub-munitions are particularly unstable and far more deadly. If one survives the explosion, it is at the price of terrible wounds all over the body, most often followed by an excruciating agony. Like our mine-clearing experts say in the field: it is best not to survive the explosion of cluster munitions...*”»

At the very time “Broken Chair” was actually returned to the Place des Nations, on February 26th 2007, Handicap International was participating in the conference launching the cluster munitions ban process in Oslo, initiated by Norway. Ambassador Steffen Kongstadt – who had worked relentlessly to commit his country to this new process – offered Handicap International to address the delegations in plenary session: “*I am pleased to announce that “Broken Chair” is back on the Place des Nations! Handicap International offers you the strength of this symbol in support of the difficult process that you're initiating today*” announced Jean-Baptiste Richardier, closing his address. The spontaneous rounds of applause that followed this announcement illustrate the paradoxical affection of diplomats for a symbol that calls out to them.



March 2007, inauguration of the Place des Nations by Micheline Calmy-Rey

“*In the Place des Nations, the return of a symbol of barbarism*” headlines the Genevan daily newspaper Le Temps. “*It is not easy to get rid of symbols. For a few days, The Place des*

Nations was restless. Trucks and cranes were busy for the triumphant return of "Broken Chair", the maimed chair that symbolizes the battle against landmines and cluster munitions. Its return had stirred heated debates within international organizations. But a great deal of support made Daniel Berset's artwork an icon of the battle against landmines and cluster munitions, as well as a place of expression for all injustices."

Beyond the debate over its future, Daniel Berset's work also found its original place because of a genuine love story with people that surprised everyone, even the artist: *"The artwork is completely beyond me"* says Daniel Berset. *"I would never have imagined that it would gain such an international renown."*

During the inauguration ceremony organized next to "Broken Chair", Micheline Calmy-Rey, President of the Confederation, gave a speech which illustrated her attachment to the messages that the Place des Nations now conveys:

"At the beginning of the last century, there were merely about fifty countries in the world. This number has not ceased to grow: there were 100 after World War II, 130 by the 1990's and almost 200 today. And so the Place des Nations has never been so well named. History makes geography. It is the expression of the peoples' freedom and autonomy desire. Nations are diverse by their histories, their identities, and their cultures. But nations are also interdependent; they must find together the solutions to humanity's problems. I want to say that today the Place des Nations in Geneva is the place where nations cooperate, the place where all citizens of the world meet. This place embodies universality.

Geneva is a privileged gathering place for those who, thanks to their reflections and propositions, slowly shape global governance. In a tolerance climate, Geneva offers a forum to groups, associations, personalities of all backgrounds and origins. The Place des Nations in Geneva is the symbol of freedom of speech, the symbol of primacy of law over force, the symbol of the dialogue between States, between civilizations and religions.

Cities of the world and in particular big squares stand out for the beauty or the boldness of their architecture; Geneva is blessed to have a beautiful square where the architecture of the world is being shaped".

Since then, "Broken Chair" faces the Palace of the United Nations, relentlessly reminding international Geneva the commitments made by the signatories to the Ottawa and Oslo treaties, and the compelling obligation to honor them.

The Handicap International Foundation associates the image of "Broken Chair" to its identity

In September 2009, the 8 associations of the Handicap International network (France, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxemburg, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United

States) decided to regroup in a global organization by creating the Handicap International Federation. For all members of the network to be able to identify with the artwork's message, Handicap International Switzerland transferred the sculpture's ownership to the Federation in 2010. Because of the artwork's presence in a public space, the Swiss association was entrusted with handling the relations with the authorities, its maintenance, and the organization of communication operations, in line with the Federation.

Later on, the Federation decided to establish a new body in Geneva: The Handicap International Foundation. The "curtain raiser" for this new actor took place on April 7th 2016, at the Opéra des Nations, with international Geneva officials.

The idea of associating the chair's image to the Handicap International Foundation project is owed to Bernard Poupon, President of Handicap International Switzerland. *"We hadn't mobilized for the chair's return in the Place des Nations so it would slowly become a mainly decorative artwork; "Broken Chair" is fascinating and elegant, and as such thousands of tourists from all over the world love to snap away at it, but who remembers its history and message? Handicap International must do everything so it can remain the symbol of a resolved commitment to a fairer world"* he says.

In his address, Jacques Tassi, President of the Foundation, specifies its links with the federal network and its objectives: *"The Foundation's mission is to watch over the intervention contexts' evolution, and to provide input for ethical and political positioning reflections, factors of discernment and alert in the implementation of our social mission"*.

Jean-Baptiste Richardier, then Executive Director of the Foundation, justifies the Federation's choice to associate the image of "Broken Chair" to the identity of this new actor in international Geneva: *"The Handicap International Foundation wishes to contribute to "Broken Chair" becoming a permanent invitation to reflection – about the populations' distress, about the responsibility to protect and about the respect of International Humanitarian Law's principles. "Broken Chair" must help the community of actors to overcome "the humanity powerlessness" that lurks ahead, after the "brotherhood powerlessness" that is becoming the rule"*, he says.

And when the time comes to thank the officials of the Opéra des Nations for their hospitality, he adds: *"We could not have dreamt of a better place for the "curtain raiser" of our Foundation, so close to "Broken Chair", to our office and to the Palace of Nations! I noticed that this splendid theater is made out of the same wood as "Broken Chair"; and so allow me to see in it, maliciously, a tribute to the human comedy, which is too often the beginning of great tragedies; they compel us all to mobilize our reflection and our actions."*

A universal message

Early in 2016, Handicap International Switzerland, the Federation and the Handicap International Foundation agreed to a roadmap to tell the new message of "Broken Chair".

Faithful to the original meaning of the monument – erected against landmines then cluster munitions and in their victims' names – the Handicap International federal network agreed that "Broken Chair" should now be known as a symbol of:

- The desperate cry of the populations slaughtered by military violence, including the use of explosive ordnance in inhabited areas, of which the Syrian crisis gives us a terrifying and never-ending example;
- Dignity – in the face of brutal adversity – of the victims, of their families and communities, that humbles us all;
- The States' obligation to protect civil populations, and to rescue the multiplying victims of conflicts.
- The fierce ambition – which must mobilize diplomats and citizens on an international level – to durably accompany the wounded people and families, weakened or destabilized by conflicts, to allow them to find again the autonomy to which they have a right.
- The vigilance of the citizens and civil society organizations to ensure that States take responsibility and stand by their commitments.

In June 2016, Handicap International organizes the "Broken Days", a series of publicized events aiming to mark the renovation of "Broken Chair" embellished by night lighting, in the service of its new universal message.