

The OSCE's future noble residence

BY PATRICIA N. SUTTER

A rambling but unpretentious-looking early nineteenth-century *palais* in the heart of Vienna is set to become the permanent quarters of the OSCE.

Developments have been progressing smoothly since December 2001, when Federal Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel met then-OSCE Secretary General Ján Kubiš to discuss the conditions under which Austria would provide the Organization with its own dedicated premises.

By February 2005, Austrian Federal President Heinz Fischer was ready to announce details of the €26.1 million-project. "As the host country, Austria remains committed to ensuring that the OSCE is strong and effective," he told OSCE parliamentarians at the Hofburg.

"If you take a walk towards the city centre, you will see, just a few hundred metres from here, clear evidence of our efforts: Renovation work is under way to create a new headquarters for the OSCE in the historic Palais Pálffy at Wallnerstrasse No. 6. I am confident that the Organization's identity and visibility will be enhanced by the new accommodations."

Members of OSCE delegations and senior managers in the Secretariat have been among the first visitors to the site. The seemingly unhurried pace of construction — of artisans carefully restoring some of the original décor, for example — can be deceiving: the completion date at the end of 2007 is on target.

When the OSCE Secretariat's more than 300 staff members move from a commercial complex on the Ringstrasse into a State-owned cultural jewel, it will have been some 14 years since the CSCE/OSCE Secretariat was relocated from Prague to Vienna, starting with a handful of personnel.

The five storeys of the Wallnerstrasse building cover a total floor area of 9,180 square metres, almost double that of currently rented OSCE space. This will enable the offices of the Representative on Freedom of the Media to be under the same roof as the Secretariat.

"The challenge faced by the architects was converting the rooms into modern offices while preserving and restoring the historic character of the nearly 200-year-old building," says the Secretariat's Director for Management and Finance, Joe Hili, who is serving as director of the project.

"The working environment will be completely different because offices will revolve around an open-plan style. The aim is to make the best possible use of available space and natural light."

New features will include double-flooring, flexible partition walls, meeting rooms and a common staff area on every floor, three elevators, a drive-up reception for high-level visitors and delegates, and upgraded security arrangements.

Palais Pálffy on Wallnerstrasse — not to be confused with another Palais Pálffy on Josefsplatz — traces its origins to the fifteenth century. After it was destroyed by a fire, Hungarian nobleman Johann Count Pálffy von Erdöd commissioned French architect Pierre-Charles de Moreau to build a residence in its place.

Constructed between 1809 and 1813, the *palais* is considered a rare example of classical French villa architecture in Vienna. The Empire style of the interiors, designed by Raphael von Rigel, contrasts with the façade's almost stark simplicity. An original marble-decorated staircase, a grand banquet hall and three inner court yards evoke the life and times of the aristocracy of two centuries ago.

Time and again, participating States have expressed appreciation to the Government of Austria for its exceptional generosity as host country, not only in endowing the OSCE with a prestigious address that reflects its status as the world's largest regional security organization, but also in bearing most of the costs of refurbishment.

To ensure that the closing down of the old offices and the move to the new premises proceed smoothly, the Secretary General has created a Steering Committee comprising departmental representatives under the coordination of Philip Hatton, Deputy Director for Management and Finance.



Wallnerstrasse No. 6 is getting a massive facelift.