January 2015 was a momentous time for the IUPAC Secretariat—at the end of the month it moved from 104 T.W. Alexander Drive, Building 19, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina 27709 after 17 years in what was actually a spacious, but nevertheless temporary, wooden building. Some referred to it as a trailer, Europeans would probably call it a large porta-cabin. Most volunteers will have had dealings with the Secretariat, but few actually enjoyed a visit.

This was the time of former Executive Directors John Jost and Terry Renner, a time of stories of spiders and snakes and the need to reinforce the floor given the huge weight of books stored there. An audit conducted just before the move showed a stock of about 7400 IUPAC publications. We are currently finding good homes for these, while old records will be archived at the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

I had always understood that the great advantage of Building 19 was that we paid a ‘peppercorn’ rent of $1 a year. This was indeed the case, but the full occupation costs for the building were actually much higher—close to $20,000 in 1997 and rising to approximately $45,000 in 2014. In this regard the accommodation was sub-standard, with poor safety and security; poor heating, cooling and plumbing; a leaking roof; and 1990s IT infrastructure.

Last year it became clear that the time was up for Building 19. A lease renewal was not an option, as the building stood in the way of a new development. Without the books to hold it up I don’t expect that demolition will be too tricky!

Our new home is 79 T.W. Alexander Drive, Research Commons Building 4201, Suite 260, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709. This is class ‘A’ office accommodation offering modern standards of safety and security, as well as services including state of the art broadband IT.

Located in the building will be Executive Director Dr. Lynn Soby, Accounting Manager Linda Tapp, and Administrative Assistant Enid Weatherwax. Associate Director Dr. Fabienne Meyers continues to be based remotely at Boston University.

So what does the Secretariat actually do?

The Secretariat’s primary roles are to:
• assist the officers in the administration of the Union
• facilitate the work of the many hundreds of volunteers within the divisions, committees and projects working on behalf of the Union
• communicate our activities through our journals and the website

To do this, the Secretariat prepares and manages against the biennial budget recommended by the Treasurer and approved by the Council. It has to achieve a balance as money comes in and goes out, given the difficulty of managing the timing of these cash flows. Income arises primarily from National Adhering Organisation (NAO) subscriptions, from publishing, and from our investments. This is why the timing of subscription payments is so critical; the later they are left the more difficult things become for the Union. Expenses include the running of the office and approximately 1000 expense claims from volunteers checked and settled, totaling some $900,000 in 2014. We can be expected to settle these claims in up to 50 different currencies, reflecting our international membership of over 60 countries.

The Secretariat maintains the books and accounts to provide management information for the Officers and Finance Committee and ensures the information required for statutory U.S. accounting of payroll and taxes is provided. It also stores data on all the categories of...
membership, contacts, and customers of IUPAC, both in current and historical records. Much of the membership data is displayed on our website. The information on the website must be kept up to date and relevant.

The Secretariat is responsible for the administration of both the IUPAC project system and the endorsement or support given to IUPAC conferences. It administers General Assemblies and the associated elections, Bureau and Executive Committee meetings, edits Chemistry International, and facilitates the content of Pure and Applied Chemistry. It also manages the day-to-day business relationship with De Gruyter for publishing and distribution of the journals.

I undertook a review of our processes and systems early in 2014, including consideration of those we should handle ourselves and those we might better outsource. We had already outsourced publishing to De Gruyter and were learning how to manage that relationship and the fit with their processes and deadlines.

The process of change really accelerated with the appointment of Dr. Soby as our Executive Director in July 2014. The Secretariat payroll is now outsourced. We have reconstructed our financial accounting systems to make them compliant with General Accounting Practices and Principles (GAPP) and moved to Cost Accounting methods which will improve budgeting, financial management and enable handling and tracking with multiple currencies. Management financial information will be available to the officers in a more timely manner to help with decision making. Our investment portfolio is now actively managed by BB&T Scott & Stringfellow with the objective of improving returns.

A major source of frustration has been the structure of our databases, the accuracy of the stored information, and persistent difficulties with the link between the databases and the website. Many of you contributed to the web task group survey. One of the top five recommendations for a new website was improving the ease of uploading, updating, and editing content. There was also a recommendation that we move from the current platform, TYPO3, to one that is easier to use and for which support will be more readily available. We are on course to demonstrate new web capabilities at the upcoming General Assembly. At the same time, our databases are under review to improve accuracy and ease of access. Watch this space—we need to get it right this time. Our approach will be to outsource IT services rather than to employ a web manager, given the diversity of skills needed today.

Many of you will have responded to the survey on Chemistry International. We are seeking to better understand member needs in terms of content and delivery and the possible future for IUPAC.org as our web presence and communication channel.

All in all, as an officer, I can say that these are exciting times, but for the Secretariat it is really hard work that we should all recognize and appreciate. At least this work will be undertaken in more appropriate office surroundings.