

LODEWIJK WOLTJER, ESO Director General, 1975–1987

Reflecting on my thirteen years as Director General, what gives me most satisfaction are the following:

The enlargement of ESO membership with Italy and Switzerland, which put it on track to be a pan-European organization – now still more fully realized with the admission of Portugal and the UK.

The realization of the NTT which showed that ESO had developed the capability of technological innovation and the organizational structure for handling larger projects.

The idea of the VLT and the completion of its planning phase and approval, as well as the discovery and acquisition of Paranal as the best site world-wide for optical astronomy.

The extension of ESO's mandate to include the ST-ECF in cooperation with ESA, and SEST in cooperation with Sweden. Some discussion was needed in Council about the fact that HST would also look at the southern sky and that, after all, radio photons were not fundamentally different from optical ones. So both projects could be fitted in by appropriate interpretation of the ESO Convention. And following SEST, ESO's participation in ALMA appears now entirely natural.

The immediate future of ESO is clear: Adaptive optics at the VLT and the VLT interferometer, the ECF/NGST +Astrovirtel, ALMA. But what comes thereafter? A Very Very Large Telescope? A very large interferometer? And what is very large, in metres and in euros? Since ultimately all euros come from the same sources, what other European projects have to be financed? As one example, many European radio astronomers would wish to participate not only in ALMA, but also in another world-wide project, SKA – the square kilometre array. So it is not clear that budgets for optical facilities can be increased much further. And finally, will optical astronomy have a long-term future on the ground or will most innovative instrumentation move into space some two



ESO Headquarters in Garching.

or three decades from now? Answers to such questions are far from obvious, but perhaps they should receive more attention in a broader circle than they have until now.

Also through its closer collaboration with ESA, ESO is now more than ever at the centre of European Astronomy. Its future looks very bright, indeed.



The ESO Council in session on December 8, 1987, when the VLT project was approved.