

Jorge Melnick Retires from ESO

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One of the strongest features of ESO is its organisational framework. This allows it to undertake the long-term planning and implementation of resource-intensive projects. Another is its ability to attract and retain highly qualified staff from all corners of the world; people who are not simply among the best within their respective fields, but who are often able to think outside the box. It is not unreasonable to say that this applies to Jorge Melnick, who retired from ESO on 1 September 2014. Some might even say that Jorge is someone who would only fit into his own, very special box.

Born on 6 August 1946, he studied physics at the University of Chile, before moving on to Caltech, where he was awarded a PhD in 1976. His scientific interests have included general relativity, the astrophysics of starbursts and clusters of galaxies. He has published more than 120 papers in refereed journals.

Jorge joined ESO in 1977 as an ESO Fellow and he was a member of the science group that had just been established at the initiative of ESO's third Director General, Lodewijk Woltjer. "It was a fantastic atmosphere," he recalled. "It was a small group. Everyday, Woltjer would go from office to office to pick us up for lunch!" This was still at a time when the photographic plate was the main detector, and as part of his assignment, Jorge became responsible for the "measuring machines", the Optronics and the PDS photodensitometers located at the ESO offices in Geneva. In 1980, he returned to Chile, only to come back to ESO in 1984, first as an associate and, from 1988, as Head of the Astronomy Department, and member of the La Silla management team. Six years later, he became Director of the observatory. This was the heyday of La Silla, with its full complement of telescopes, including the 3.5-metre New Technology Telescope (NTT) and the 15-metre Swedish ESO Submillimetre Telescope (SEST), in full use. In those days, La Silla was Europe's Southern Observatory.

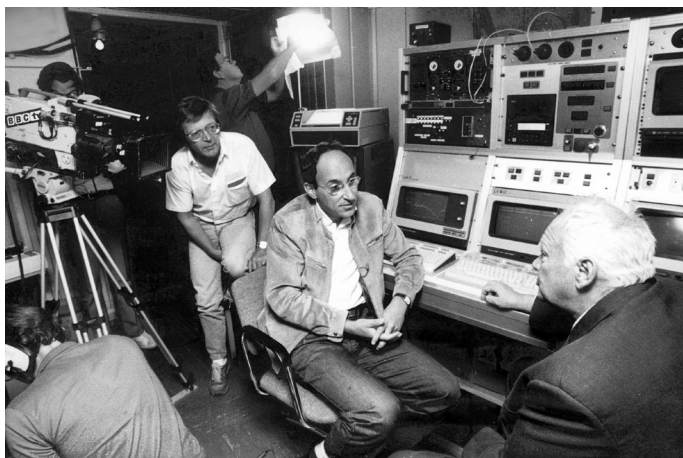


Figure 1. Jorge Melnick (left) being interviewed by Patrick Moore for the BBC Television series *The Sky at Night* in the control room of the ESO Coudé Auxiliary Telescope (CAT) in 1989.



Figure 2. Jorge Melnick among colleagues during a farewell meal at La Silla in October 2014.

But rather than resting on his laurels, Jorge began a rigorous campaign to streamline and improve operations, comprising a reorganisation of the observatory, refurbishment of the telescope park and improving staff relations. If anything, the proof of these efforts was in the pudding: in 1998, the year of the first light for the VLT, La Silla had the largest science output of any observatory in the world. That year was also the beginning of the second, challenging phase of Jorge's directorship: managing the future of an observatory that would no longer be at the centre of attention and growth, as this enviable position moved to the Paranal Observatory. This change meant coping with shrinking budgets and staff reductions, while keeping up staff morale and the efficient running of the facility. Among the initiatives he took was to create the La Silla University, to allow for the fast training of new staff (many of whom would move elsewhere) and in general to

create an inspiring and creative atmosphere to motivate people. Another initiative was to achieve ISO 9001 certification for the observatory; probably the only time that an observatory has done this anywhere.

Jorge's ability to think outside the box was convincingly put to good use and, thus, it was, with a clearly ticked "job done" box, that he ended his directorship in 2004, as La Silla and Paranal merged to become one observatory. Jorge moved on to become VLT Programme Scientist, while also playing an important role in the installation of the APEX antenna on Llano de Chajnantor. He continues at ESO as an astronomer emeritus and is also a Visiting Scientist at the Observatorio Nacional in Rio de Janeiro. We look forward to his continued contributions to our science and, as a great emeritus ambassador for our organisation.