

## 'European Commission without its headquarters' from El País (6 May 1991)

**Caption:** Published on 6 May 1991 in the Spanish daily newspaper El País, this article announces the start of renovation work on the European Commission's Berlaymont Building in Brussels.

**Source:** El País. 06.05.1991. Madrid. "La Comisión europea se queda sin sede", auteur:Monteira, Félix.

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## European Commission without its headquarters

### Everything ready for evacuation of the Berlaymont Building

Félix Monteiro, Brussels

The days of the Berlaymont Building — the Brussels seat of the European Commission, where the Eurocrat elite that governs the EC has been ensconced since 1968 — are numbered. The Commissioners are preparing to move out so that the present headquarters can be renovated or a new one built. The cement, steel and glass edifice that symbolises Europe's joint executive has not stood up to the passage of time, and the birth of the single market in 1993 will see Europe without a headquarters.

The Commissioners and the staff of 3 000 who work in the Berlaymont Building will have to be relocated temporarily in other premises in the city. Most senior administrators have in mind a building currently shared by Community bureaucrats and the Belgian secret service. Two outcomes are possible: either the Commission will remain in a building that will have to be demolished anyway at the earliest opportunity, or the principle of European integration will be carried to its logical conclusion. Neither outcome is certain, since security, health and efficiency must all be taken into account.

The El Escorial monastery — the administrative headquarters of a Spanish empire on which the sun never set — has 1 111 external and 1 562 internal windows. The Berlaymont Building has 3 444, all looking out onto the street, but to prevent suicides they cannot be opened. The figure of 3 444 is a multiple both of the 12 current Member States and of the six founder members.

The principle of democracy at the workplace which dictates that each employee shall have a window led to a distinctive architectural design — an X-shaped building with wings of unequal length, marking the four points of the compass to which Europe is opening up. Daylight for all was secured at the cost of a huge waste of space. Only 25 % of the Berlaymont Building's 200 000 square metres of floor space is occupied by offices, whereas the utilisation rate in a modern building is 60 %.

Window allocation also serves to indicate status: one window for technicians, the lowest grade in the hierarchy, rising to four for a Director-General or Commissioner. The thickness of the fitted carpet also denotes differences of rank from the first floor to the 13th, which is occupied, in defiance of superstition, by President Jacques Delors and the other Commissioners.

### Security

Security is also a problem, but not as serious a problem as asbestos. The use of asbestos as an insulating material has been banned since 1980 pursuant to an EC Directive, since it can cause lung cancer. And technical inspections have shown that the Berlaymont air-conditioning system is helping to spread the risk, which is a constant complaint of the staff trade unions.

Brussels is a provisional seat of the EC, and the European Commission is merely the tenant of a building belonging to the Belgian State, which is the majority shareholder, and a number of private banks. The Commission pays an annual rent equivalent to 1.4 billion pesetas. Renovating the Berlaymont Building would cost 18 billion, according to an architect's initial estimate.

Antonio Cardoso, the Commissioner who proposed evacuating the Berlaymont Building, favours demolition and the construction of a new building, which he says 'would be cheaper in the long run.'

The plan is to erect a huge building to accommodate between 9 000 and 12 000 of the 15 000 Commission staff dispersed over 32 sites in the Belgian capital, only one of which — a building occupied by the Agriculture Directorate — is owned by the EC.

The future European Community will have more powers, so it will need more Eurocrats and more facilities.

The unspoken aim behind the Commission's plan is to force the Belgian State to assume its responsibilities as proprietor or be seen as an unsuitable host for the Community institutions. There is now talk of putting the design of Europe's future seat out to tender. But whether the solution is renovation or demolition, the present lease expires at the end of 1992, when the Eurocrats and Commissioners will have to pack their bags to make way for the workmen.

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