

'First arrivals at renovated Berlaymont on 20 September' from the Bulletin Quotidien Europe (7 September 2004)

Caption: In its 7 September 2004 issue, the Bulletin Quotidien Europe looks at the forthcoming arrival of EU officials at the Berlaymont Building in Brussels, which has been renovated and had asbestos removed from its structure. The article emphasises the advantages of the new structure as well as the cost of the project.

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First arrivals at renovated Berlaymont on 20 September

Brussels, 06/09/2004 (Agence Europe) – Following ten years of work (getting rid of the asbestos at first, renovation afterwards), the historic Berlaymont building which was occupied by the European Commission from 1967-1991, will be occupied again from 20 September. The first officials will enter the cross-shaped building which had been built (on the site of the "*Pensionnat de Berlaymont*" of the Canonesses of the Order of Saint Augustin at the beginning of the 1960s following the move of the European institutions from Luxembourg to Brussels. Commissioner Barroso is expected to hold his first meeting there on Wednesday 3 November in the room on the thirteenth floor, decorated with designs of steamers and space ships with a long view down on the Schuman Roundabout and 35 seats around the table. The 24 European Commissioners will join up with president Barroso there and will be based between the ninth and eleventh floors (the College president by Romano Prodi and members of the Commission were scattered throughout several buildings and their respective Directorates General. When the move is completed, according to a note from the Commission, the Berlaymont will be able to accommodate up to 2020: Commissioners and their cabinets, services directly accountable to president Barroso - Secretariat General, legal Service, Spokesperson's service. Protocol and Political Advisers - as well as around 200 interpreters will be accommodated there. A new small building annexed to the main building will be reserved for the press with a press room for 294 (70% larger than the current room in the Breydel) equipped with 21 interpreting booths and control room (in the Commission's meeting room there are only five interpreting cabins): for the three working languages, French, English and German, and for the other languages according to the occasion. The press zone will be separate due to security reasons, explained Commission officials.

Over the years the familiar silhouette of the Berlaymont wrapped up in white for the renovation irresistibly conjured up images of the work of Christo. On 1 September around 200 accredited Brussels journalists were able to see the lighter and more "ecological" building, not only because they have got rid of around 1,500 tonnes of asbestos covering but also because electricity consumption is expected to be reduced by around 1.5%. The officials who showed the journalists around at the Berlaymont were keen to point out the benefits of the new facade consisting of laminated glass, which moves according to the sunlight (based on a technique that has up until now only been applied at the Sony building in Berlin at the Postdamer Platz). This "living and white" facade, notes a prospectus for the Berlaymont in 2002, will, according to the experts be one of the highest performing buildings from an energy and facilities point of view: in cold weather it will see its white covering reducing heat loss. This covering will act as an effective "sun screen". It also benefits from an effective sound barrier.

The cost of all this? According to the Belgian Senator Alain Destexhe (who requested an investigation into inefficient renovation practices), EUR 1.5 bn – if the costs of the work getting rid of the asbestos begun in 1995 and finished in 1999 are added to those for the renovation that should have been finished on 31 March 2004, the fines for delays of EUR 221,000 for every month since last April and also around EUR 450 million that the Belgian state had to pay for renting the buildings accommodating for European Commissioners over the last fourteen years. Purchasing conditions for the Berlaymont by the Commission include the payment of 27 instalments. One of the first instalments of EUR 31 891 235 is due in 2005, explains a Commission note, which also points out that this corresponds to "net added value of the Berlaymont's building land of EUR 552 879 207.