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A courtly home. Münzhof, UBS's head office

Christian Leitz

Introduction

Known as Münzhof (the aptly named Court of Coins or Mint – an allusion to a mint that used to be located in nearby Augustine's Church), UBS's head office on Bahnhofstrasse 45, Zurich, is undergoing the most comprehensive renovation in its history. In fact, the middle of the three-year refurbishment, begun in October 2015, will mark Münzhof's centenary. It was, after all, in 1917 that the then Union Bank of Switzerland (Union Bank) first took up residency there.

And the building retained its importance after Union Bank merged with Swiss Bank Corporation (SBC) in 1998 into today's UBS, the largest world-class wealth manager and the leading universal bank in Switzerland, complemented by a strong and focused investment bank and institutional asset manager.

Infancy

When the Münzhof opened, Union Bank was itself only five years old. The bank was established in 1912 through a merger of the Bank in Winterthur, originally founded precisely fifty years earlier in 1862, and the Toggenburger Bank, founded just one year later. The new bank clearly intended to establish itself in the burgeoning city of Zurich with an imposing physical presence.

Bank in Winterthur first gained a foothold in Zurich in 1906 by taking over a branch of the Bank in Baden, located at Bahnhofstrasse 44, adjacent to the site destined to house Münzhof ten years later. The location provided easy access to Zurich's stock exchange, which, after its foundation in 1880, became the most important in Switzerland during the first half of the 20th century and contributed to Zurich becoming the financial and economic center of Switzerland.

Moreover, the acquisition was of vital business relevance because it meant membership for the Winterthur-based bank among the Cartel of Swiss Banks (established in 1897) – and thus participation of the bank in the issuing of bonds by the Cartel. In architectural



Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich, about 1910, Villa zum Grabengarten (left-hand side). © UBS.

terms, the Bank in Winterthur left a lasting legacy on Bahnhofstrasse 44 building by adding its (current) ground floor aspect in 1910. Toggenburger Bank, on the other hand, remained fully focused on Eastern Switzerland, without any presence in Zurich at all prior to the 1912 merger with Bank in Winterthur.

During the First World War Zurich's role as an international financial center increased substantially with, as the authors of the 1962 Union Bank anniversary book put it, foreign exchange transactions flourishing on an unprecedented scale. In fact, responding to this development, Union Bank itself created a separate foreign exchange department in Zurich.

Location

Looking at Bahnhofstrasse today with its grand buildings, it's difficult to imagine that in the mid-19th century it was still dominated by family houses and gardens. One of these was the villa and gardens of the patrician's family Schinz. And it faced not Bahnhofstrasse, which came into existence in the 1860s, but Fröschengraben (Frogs' Ditch), a literal reference to the ditch that had, since the 13th century, run from there the (short) distance to

Lake Zurich. The name of the Schinz's home, Villa zum Grabengarten (Villa By The Ditch Garden) was therefore very apt. In the 1860s the Fröschengraben was canalized and covered over, the construction of the new Zurich train station commenced – and the street leading to and from the city's main train station came into proper shape.

Construction

The first official step towards the construction of Münzhof – and the demolition of Villa zum Grabengarten – came in February 1913 when a 'Genossenschaft Münzhof' was registered in Zurich for the explicit purpose of purchasing and building over the site Bahnhofstrasse 43/45. This was followed by Union Bank of Switzerland tasking a renowned bureau of architects, Pflughard & Haefeli, to plan and construct the building.

Both born in 1869, Otto Pflughard and Max Haefeli met as students at the ETH Zurich. In 1897 Pflughard took over an established firm of architects in Zurich and, a year later, Haefeli joined him as partner in the firm. By the time they were contracted by Union Bank of Switzerland they had already firmly established themselves as leading architects,

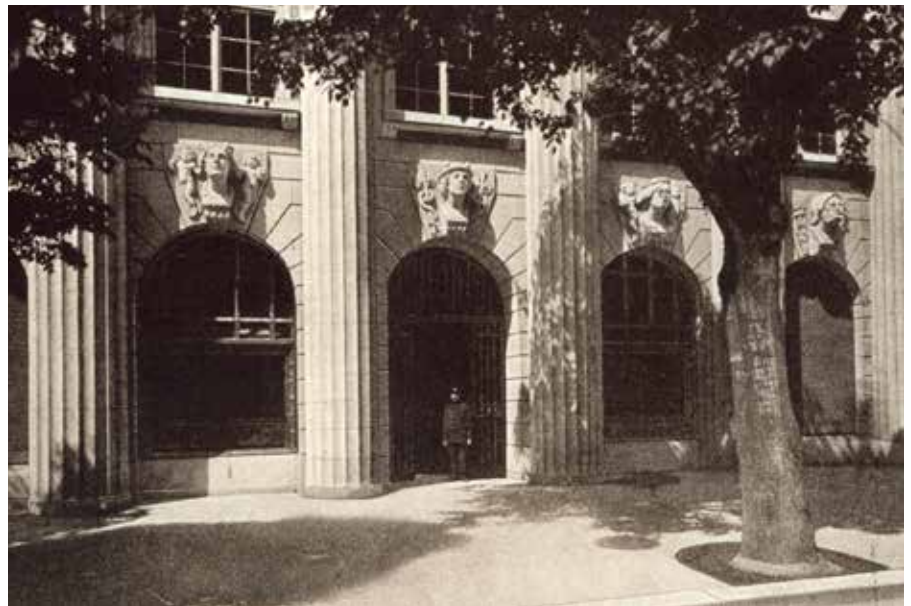
notably through buildings in both Zurich and St. Gallen. Jointly, they would in fact construct about 200 buildings.

Pfleghard & Haefeli had clearly been instructed to plan big and compete in size with other banks' buildings in Zurich, not least the nearby head office of Credit Suisse, built in the 1870s on the corner of Paradeplatz and Bahnhofstrasse. Neoclassicism was the chosen style and the building was to include six massive, three-story-high Doric columns before the front facade of the building. If solidity and imperturbability were to be the hallmarks of the new construction (and the bank it was to host), then this was clearly achieved, including also by the dressed rusticated ashlar and ornate ironwork on the windows and doors. The entire façade was done in St. Margrethen sandstone, including also the five allegorical heads it prominently features. Created by Jakob Brüllmann, a famous Swiss-born sculptor (though then long resident of Stuttgart), they represent Industry (hammer, pliers, fire), Agriculture (fruits and children), Trade (cap, wings and rod), Science (owl), and Military (sword and arrows in quiver).

Expansion

On 2 June 1917 Union Bank moved into its new Münzhof building. While Winterthur (from the former Bank in Winterthur) and St. Gallen (from the former Toggenburger Bank) remained the head offices of the bank, Zurich rapidly gained in importance. Already in 1918 the bank's Central Accounting Department was moved from Winterthur to Zurich. And, significantly, the Board of Directors completely abandoned its previous schedule of meetings in Winterthur and St. Gallen, to meet in Münzhof only.

It was not, however, until 1945 that Union Bank moved its head office to Zurich. It was a year of substantial expansion for the bank with the absorption of a large but troubled competitor, Eidgenössische Bank (EIBA, Federal Bank, founded in 1863) taking its total assets to 1.5 billion Swiss francs. At the very same Extraordinary General Meeting that the decision was taken to take over EIBA, Union Bank also decided on the move of its head office to Zurich (and its Münzhof building). This reflected the city's establishment as Switzerland's leading financial center and the resulting shift of Union Bank's major business activities.



Entry, Münzhof, Bahnhofstrasse 45, about 1917. © UBS.



Union Bank of Switzerland head office, Bahnhofstrasse 45, Zurich, mid-1950s. © UBS.



Corner of Bahnhofstrasse and Pelikanstrasse, Zurich, 1957. © UBS.

In 1962, Union Bank had good reason to celebrate its 100th anniversary (and also the 50th anniversary of the Bank in Winterthur / Toggenburger Bank merger) in style – and with a much enlarged head office. An enormous expansion project commenced in the mid-1950s had come to its conclusion in time for the anniversary year. The project, split into two expansion phases, was led by renowned architects Ernst Witschi and son Bruno, though – following Ernst Witschi's death in 1959 – the second phase was completed by G. Landtwing and H. Walter.

Münzhof was no longer confined to the building opened in 1917, but consisted of an entire complex encompassing parts of Pelikanstrasse and Nüscherstrasse. By 1987, the estimated land size of Union Bank's head office amounted to 10,000 m² (with a then estimated value of CHF 400 million).

And there was plenty of work for the many employees working in the Münzhof complex – as indeed was the case for other Swiss banks, including SBC. The Basel-headquartered bank had opened its first building in Zurich in 1899 (one year after it had



Counter hall of UBS head office, Bahnhofstrasse 45, Zurich, 2012. © UBS.

become the first Swiss bank to open a branch in London, the then leading financial center of the world). In the 1950s, it had this building demolished to make way for a new office building, unveiled in 1960. As it is located on Paradeplatz, the square eponymously denoted as Zurich's financial center, the building is today sometimes erroneously referred to as UBS's head office.

In 1946, the Swiss branch network of the Grossbanken, including Union Bank, amounted to only 20 percent of the overall amount of Swiss bank branches, but this was to grow to 40 percent within less than 25 years. Union Bank was (like SBC) busy acquiring a number of smaller Swiss banks and opening new branches. It increased its total number of branches and agencies in Switzerland to 159 by the end of 1970, including, in October 1970, Switzerland's first below-the-ground bank agency, located in Zurich main train station's new underground shopping complex, and thus only ten minutes' walk or one tram stop away from Münzhof. The latter provided the central 'hub' for all these branches and agencies – and for an international expansion, which would give the bank representation across all continents.

Not surprisingly, employee numbers swelled markedly in the years following Union Bank's 100th anniversary celebrations. The payroll increased from just under

4,000 employees in 1960 to almost 10,000 in 1970 (of which almost half were younger than 25). This development led the bank to introduce new working arrangements. In 1962, the Union Bank of Switzerland introduced the uninterrupted workday, the 45-minute lunch break – and its first staff restaurant, on Nüscherstrasse in direct vicinity to its head office and now firmly integrated in the entire building complex that originated in Münzhof.

Today's full aspect of the building complex (encompassing Bahnhofstrasse 45 and 47, Pelikanstrasse 9 and 11 and Nüscherstrasse 10, jointly under protection order by Zurich City) was completed in the 1990s. Two years before the merger that joined together Union Bank and SBC, the former had further expanded the complex.

Transition

During the current renovation of Bahnhofstrasse 45, the branch normally located there has been relocated around the corner to Pelikanstrasse. Of particular interest is the digital artwork 'Ways to Fortune' by artist Daniel Boschung. The installation offers a very special client experience and a new form of client communication by letting visitors to the Pelikanstrasse branch create their very own individual artwork.

As clients travel along the 'Ways to Fortune' from the lobby to the upper floor,

they create an individual pattern in various colors and shapes based on how they walk. This image is projected in real time on the large screens in the lobby. As a memento, UBS clients are given a personalized card with the image they created, which also tells them about how they can invest in children's wellbeing and future through the UBS Optimus Foundation.

Future

The renovation will include comprehensive technological and security upgrades, and will enhance the building's role in the urban environment. Furthermore, plans are in place to revitalize Münzhof with a café on Bahnhofstrasse. Attractive commercial space will be created on the ground floor along Bahnhofstrasse and Pelikanstrasse. In addition, UBS plans to ensure long-term flexibility of use through the various independent entry points to the bank and the stores. The project is led by Zurich-based architects EM2N.

UBS has a comprehensive environmental strategy and is committed to securing LEED Platinum certification for the renovated building – the highest level according to the international standard for environmentally friendly, resource-efficient and sustainable building. UBS is therefore improving the shell and technology of the listed building from an energy standpoint to significantly reduce future energy consumption. Care will also be taken to use mainly environmentally friendly and low-pollutant construction materials.

Bahnhofstrasse 45 will remain closed throughout the entire renovation, which is planned to be completed in the second half of 2018. The main hall of the building, recognized as a 'cultural history monument of the first order' in a 1995 curator of monuments' assessment, will be carefully renovated and brought in line with the latest advisory and design concept. UBS has largely implemented this already in all of its approximately 300 branches in Switzerland. ●

Literature & Sources

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