

# bulletin



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# The Banque Centrale du Luxembourg

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**T**he Banque centrale du Luxembourg (BCL) currently occupies four buildings, all located in Luxembourg City and spread across two sites. The main headquarters consist of two buildings bridged together and located on the 'Berlaymont' site. It is hosting the Board of Directors and some 275 staff from several departments. A second building, located opposite the main site, underwent renovation works and opened in December 2015. The second site, 'Monterey', is hosting additional departments, a numismatics centre, an exhibition hall, an auditorium and a learning centre.

These various buildings all have very different architectural styles but share a number of surprising elements linking them to the history and the evolution of the Luxembourg society from the 19th century to present times.

## The architecture

### The Berlaymont buildings

The first building of the BCL headquarters was built in 1902 on the 'Berlaymont' site and is a perfect example of the revivalist architectural style that prevailed at the turn of the century. This expressive architecture pulls together neoclassical elements, allegories and ornaments drawing from the Greek mythology. Proportions according to the golden section confer to the building a well-balanced grandeur. The dominance of vertical lines is skilfully cut across by the horizontal lines of narrow corbelled balconies, which are purely ornamental. The mansard roof is reminiscent of the style of French provincial prefecture headquarters. It is heightened at its ends and in the middle of the build, slightly protruding from the principal line of the front of the building, and suggests in a discrete but visible manner the existence of towers, thereby conveying to the passer-by a castle-like appearance, symbol of strength and secure location. A monumental staircase lodged between columns of Doric style leads



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the visitor to the main hall that has managed to preserve its 'Art Nouveau' character throughout time and generations. This triumphant architecture aimed to impress and to symbolize the economic power of its owner. Hence, it comes as no surprise that this building was originally erected as the operational and administrative headquarters of an important commercial bank. It was purchased by the BCL in 1998.

The second building of the headquarters, adjacent to the first, was inaugurated in 1962 and was clad with a modern glass facade in 2001. It is a purely functional building with a cubical geometry that openly contrasts, albeit in a delicate manner, with its flamboyant 1902 neighbour. The building offers a splendid view of the European district of Kirchberg. BCL headquarters are strategically located on a straight axis connecting downtown Luxembourg City, an international finance and banking centre, and Kirchberg, an area that is host to major European institutions, both vital economic and political hubs for the Grand-Duchy. This building has been named 'Pierre Werner' as a tribute to the 'Founding father of the euro' as per decision of the Board of the Bank, of which Mr Werner was a member since the creation of the BCL in 1998.

### The Monterey building

The building of the 'Monterey' site is a recent construction dating back to 2005. It is an elegant and slender building with a sleek front wall, punctuated by glass panels and narrow strips of concrete, unadorned nor embellished, with a very discrete main entrance and without any visible window. The very small slant front facade suggests an arcade; indeed, the building stands as a transition between the urban landscape of the city centre and the green belt of the park, which shimmers like an optical extension on the building's prominent glass body.

## Historical sites and designations

### The Berlaymont buildings

The name of the location of the BCL's headquarters 'Berlaymont' is reminiscent of a place of historical importance of the old fortifications of the fortress of Luxembourg. This designation is very old and predates that of the headquarters of the European Commission in Brussels, its namesake, by several centuries. The Earl Florentin de Berlaymont (1550-1628) was Governor of the Duchy of Luxembourg from 1604 until his death in 1628, when Luxembourg was under Spanish rule. The Earl undertook considerable building works to reinforce the enclosure

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of the fortress, including a huge bastion named after its creator in 1638.

The 'Berlaymont' site carries additional elements of historical interest. In 1684, Louis XIV troops besieged the fortress of Luxembourg under the command of Marshalls Créqui and Vauban. The entry of French troops was made possible due to a breach opened in the 'Berlaymont' bastion. During the construction of the building, remains of this conquest (grenades) were unearthed. The reinforcement works undertaken by the Earl of Berlaymont were obviously insufficient to safeguard the fortress against French military savvy.

Today, the BCL headquarters stand precisely on the location of the bastion 'Berlaymont'. This location, lodged on a promontory dominating the valley of the Alzette river (an emblem of the Luxembourg national anthem) was much sought after at the end of the 19th century and various projects were contemplated at the time – including the construction of a national library, a memorial for national hero John the Blind and a paintings gallery - albeit none materialised in the end.

### **The Monterey building**

The designation of the second building of the BCL, the 'Monterey' building, also has deep historical roots. Under the command of Earl Don Juan Domingo de Zuniga and Fonseca, Earl of Monterey and Fuentes, general Governor of the Netherlands, the fortifications of Luxembourg were reinforced from 1671 to 1673. By decree of 12 December 1673, a street in Luxembourg was named after the Earl of Monterey, which was then extended to the outskirts of the fortress after its dismantling in the 1870s and in which the second BCL building is now located.

### **Historical details about the two locations: a mirror of the social and economic history of Luxembourg**

The two BCL buildings ('Berlaymont' and 'Monterey') became part of the urban landscape after the city opened itself following the dismantling of the fortress walls in the 1870s. This dismantling was a condition included in the 1867 Treaty of London by the Great Powers who, at the same time, declared the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg to be perpetually neutral and independent and placed the country under their special protection.

The demolition of the fortifications and the filling of the moats from 1870 onwards gave rise to new plots of land that the Government reserved itself the right to sell under strict conditions, which were laid out in construction regulations designed to confer a style of Parisian boulevard to the main arteries of the new areas. At the same time, the tight control of the Government over the plots of land located in the fortress area contributed to avoid, more or less successfully, unwelcome real-estate speculation. Asking prices negotiated between the Government and the future owners were set at such a level that only affluent members of the upper class were able to purchase them. Indeed, notaries, lawyers, businessmen, industrials and prominent politicians were living in the villas built in those new housing estates. That is how a cordon of wealthy residential neighbourhoods came to form a transition between the core of the old fortress and the parks spread out on the free plots of land beyond the former fortifications. Both sites of the BCL are to be found within this cordon.

### **Berlaymont**

The first owner of the 'Berlaymont' estate was a rich widow, a direct descendant of a dynasty of steel barons. In her large villa, she lived with her extended family spanning several generations and domestic servants that befitted her lifestyle. The villa was prestigious enough to house later on the French Embassy for a couple of years until it was acquired by a renowned commercial bank. The same bank built in 1902 the aforementioned building that now serves as the headquarters of the BCL. The villa was demolished in 1962 and subsequently replaced by the so-called 'Pierre Werner' building. In 1998, the BCL purchased this estate to use it as its headquarters, after undertaking major refurbishments to make the buildings compliant with central banks' high security standards and IT requirements.

### **Monterey**

The list of early owners of the 'Monterey' building is similar to those who had purchased the 'Berlaymont' estate. The first building on the 'Monterey' site was a resolutely upper middle class villa and was constructed in the 1870s by the widow of a former minister of the Luxembourg Government. The following owner (from 1897) was a



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member of parliament, son of a minister and nephew of the national poet. He installed the first phone in the house and rented out part of it to the Chamber of Commerce. The villa was later acquired by an insurance company, which sold it in 1936 to the National Bank of Belgium (NBB), when the latter established a branch in Luxembourg in the framework of the Belgo-Luxembourg Monetary Association. The NBB transformed the building into a fully-operational office and a residence. When both Luxembourg and Belgium adopted the euro, the monetary association ended. Concomitantly, the NBB branch closed down and the BCL took over the building.

The succession of various owners of the sites that today belong to the BCL illustrates very well the transition from the steel industry and political elite towards a services-oriented economy, thereby symbolising in broad lines the transformation of the Luxembourg economy over the past 150 years. ●