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Our Federal Parliament Building (I)

National monument and seat of government

The Federal Parliament is often talked of but badly known. It is a symbol in stone of Switzerland's identity. It shelters the two Houses of Parliament and the offices of the Federal Council and senior officials. It also contains many relics of our past. This is the first of three articles on the famous building.

Switzerland as it exists today was born nearly 150 years ago. On September 22, 1848, the Central Diet of the Old Confederation was dissolved, and on November 8 the United Federal Assembly of the new federal state met in Berne.

The Federal Council Building

The new Parliament began by designating Berne as the "federal city", and the first building to belong entirely to the federal government, the Federal Council Building – now the west wing – was commissioned.

Martin Fröhlich

In 1850 a great architectural competition took place with Ferdinand Stadler of Zurich and Felix Kubly of St. Gall as winners. But the new building was finally designed by a Bernese, Friedrich Studer, since the new federal state made Berne pay. To commemorate the high cost for a city which was not rich, the Berna Fountain was erected in the courtyard, with the figure of the city's patron goddess by the Nidwald sculptor, Raphael Christen. In May 1857 the first officials of the new state – just 90 – moved into the building, and ownership was transferred from Berne to the Federal Council on June 6, 1857.

A tour through the west wing

The Federal Council Building was carefully laid out. Its two sides contained the National Council and the Council of States, while the central block overlooking the River Aare housed the administration. The Federal Council still meets

on the first floor, but the council chambers have gone, and we do not even have photos. The central block is kept in good repair.

In 1979 the east wing was built to house the federal post office – with its 3003 postal code. It was decorated with parts of the windows of the old Council of States which had previously stood in its place. In 1989 the Audience Chamber of the Federal Council and the office of the President of the Confederation were restored to their pristine state; they had not been used by the Federal

Council since 1896. Until that year the President had always been the head of the Foreign Affairs Department; but when Wilhelm Hertenstein of Zurich took over as President from Numa Droz of Neuchâtel, he did not want to take Foreign Affairs because his French was not good enough. So the two men kept their original portfolios, and the great presidential office was no longer used.

Republican architecture

The corridors and halls of the building are painted in a style seldom seen today, distilled from Moorish and Renaissance art. These forms and colours were thought suited to the dignity of the state, and they were known far beyond Berne as "republican" – since the style was that of the city-republic of Florence. Apart from these huge murals the Federal Council Building possessed very little decoration, mainly because the years after its completion were marked by austerity. From the first day, however, the building was gaslit, and it was at this time that the first city gas-works was built on the banks of the Aare below the Federal Terrace – which meant that the pipeline needed to furnish gas to the new building was relatively short. ■

The south facade of the Federal Parliament in the 19th century. From left to right the «Bernherhof», the west wing – then the Federal Council Building, the old Insel Hospital and the Münster (before completion of the tower spire). (Photo: Archive)

