



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

## The Human Rights Building, seat of the ECHR

The European Court of Human Rights is today readily identified around the world by its logo, which echoes the outline of the Human Rights Building in Strasbourg in which it is based. Before moving into this remarkable building, designed specifically for it in the city's European district, the Court was housed in two other buildings.

Following its creation in 1959, the Court was initially based in the "House of Europe", home to the Council of Europe. All of the Council's entities and departments were lodged in this building, including the Court and the European Commission of Human Rights, the body which filtered applications.

It was soon decided that the human-rights bodies should have their own building, separate from the House of Europe.

In 1965 the two institutions moved across the road, into a building in the style of Le Corbusier, designed by the French architect Bertrand Monnet. This first Human Rights Building was a two-floor square construction built around a courtyard; made of concrete, it is embellished with stone and exotic woods.

As the years passed the human-rights protection mechanism introduced by the Convention grew considerably, so that by the 1980s it had become clear that, in the long term, the space restrictions would prevent the Court and the Commission from carrying out their tasks properly.

For this reason, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided in 1987 to construct a new Human Rights Building.

The new building was to be erected on a plot of land made available by the City of Strasbourg on the other side of the Ill River, directly opposite the original Human Rights Building.

The project submitted by François Georges Sauer, the City of Strasbourg's architect, which had been initially approved, was dropped after a change of majority in the 1989 municipal elections, in the face of opposition from local architects who had reservations about the complexity of the selected project.

Following a targeted consultation process, projects by the French architect Dominique Perrault and the German Oswald Mathias Ungers were rejected and the contract was awarded to the British architect Richard Rogers.

This architect, who co-designed the Centre Pompidou in Paris, submitted a plan for a building which corresponded perfectly to the site, following the curve of the river rather like a steamship moored to the banks, its symbolic shape illustrating and representing justice.

Ivan Harbour, now an associate in the *Rogers, Stirk and Harbour + Partners* practice, was responsible for the project.

Francois Mitterrand, President of the French Republic, laid the foundation stone of the building on 4 May 1992, and a few days later Queen Elizabeth II of Britain visited the building site and symbolically planted a tree in the future garden of the new Human Rights Building.

Once work had begun, however, the fall of the Berlin Wall forced the architects to amend and adapt the project. The former Soviet Bloc States applied to join the Council of Europe, and it was clear that the building's capacity as originally envisaged would be unable to keep pace with the influx of applications from those new member States. The building plans were modified accordingly: in particular, a 5th and 6th floor were added and the wings of the building were extended.

The Human Rights Building was inaugurated in 1995, in the presence of Vaclav Havel (President of the Czech Republic), Jacques Toubon (French Minister of Justice), Catherine Trautmann (Mayor of Strasbourg) and international figures.

Constructed from aluminium-coated metal, glass and concrete, the building rises majestically beside the water. The choice of materials was itself highly symbolic: the armour-like aluminium is a guarantee of independence and neutrality; the glass represents transparency and the accessibility of justice; and the concrete indicates that nothing here is superfluous – in these premises, one must get to the point.

Viewed from the front, the building represents the scales of justice: its two hearing rooms are two immense cylinders, seemingly suspended in mid-air. These cylindrical shapes are easily spotted, and identifiable, in the European district.

The building as a whole seems to be composed of a head, formed by the hearing rooms, then a neck which houses the deliberations rooms, and, lastly, the two wings of offices curving along the riverbank and embracing its contours.

In profile, the building unveils its long wings of offices, culminating in terraces and rounded off by staircases.

The forecourt is made of Vosges sandstone, a regionally-sourced material, and leads to the entrance; the same stone has been used in the entrance hall. This is one of the few public areas in the building: it is vast, full of light and partly dominated by the imposing hearing rooms, which are half inside and half outside the hall.

This area bears the architect's signature style: the steel pipes in blue, white and red bring to mind the flag of France – the Court's host country - or the colours of the Union Jack, the flag of his own country.

Even more surprisingly, the suspended glass staircase seems to float as it rises towards the main hearing room.

The impressive hearing rooms, directly opposite one other, are accessed from a concrete disc which is also suspended. The original plans provided for one small hearing room with a panoramic view, for the Commission, and a large hearing room for the Court. Since the two entities were merged in 1998 the Court has occupied all of the building.

The main hearing room, where the Court holds its public hearings, is striking and commands the visitor's respect. It was designed in such a way that the public can hear what the President

is saying, but noise from the room does not reach the horseshoe platform on which the judges sit. The roof resembles a giant wave.

Walkways link this area to those parts of the building which are closed to the public and form the working area of the judges and the Registry. The hearing rooms are near the deliberations rooms, which in turn lead to the office corridors. The partitions dividing the offices can be moved, allowing for flexibility in line with the Court's changing needs.

The elegant and majestic Human Rights Building is surrounded, on one side, by a branch of the Ill and, on the other, by a garden containing objects which are also symbolic. Thus, the area around the Human Rights Building contains four slabs from the Berlin Wall, a gift from Germany to the Council of Europe in 1990. At one stage Richard Rogers thought of integrating them into the building's interior. These panels are emblematic of the reconciliation of Western Europe and Eastern Europe.

The garden also houses Carl Bucher's sculpture "The Petrified Seven", which expresses the traumatic experience of physical and psychological violence. A gift from Switzerland to the Council of Europe, it symbolises the Organisation's values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

A strong and iconic architectural work, the Human Rights Building is today known and recognised around the world. In 2015 the building was awarded the "Remarkable Contemporary Architecture" Label. In 2007 Lord Richard Rogers won the Pritzker Architecture Prize, regarded as the Nobel Prize of architecture.