

Publifon payphone: a museum piece

138 years after it was first introduced, the Publifon has had its day. The last Swisscom public phone box has made its way from Baden to the Museum of Communication in Berne.

Pierre-Antoine Favez, Head of Hospitality and Payphone Services at Swisscom, spoke about the very special moment when he saw the phone box loaded on the transporter ready to set off: “It’s nice to be able to say goodbye to the last of its kind and find it a fitting home in the Museum of Communication.” Favez, who hails from Freiburg, took over his role in 2010. “By that time, we were already a long way from the heady days of 1990, when we had nearly 60,000 Publifon payphones in operation.” He explains one beneficial side-effect: “The cost of rectifying acts of vandalism has also shrunk to a fraction of what it once was – just CHF 50,000 or so.”

Over the last couple of years, Swisscom has been busy decommissioning the last 3,000-odd Publifon payphones. Around 650 have been given a new lease of life, with uses as diverse as vending machines for drinks or snacks, locations for defibrillators, mini-libraries or bars. A 2018 competition saw a panel and members of the general public select the most imaginative ideas, with their originators then given the phone box free of charge. Now the time has come: representing Swisscom, Pierre-Antoine Favez has presented the last Publifon payphone to the Museum of Communication.

Juri Jaquemet, curator at the Museum of Communication in Berne, was delighted to receive the gift. “For the Museum of Communication, the last public phone box is like an ‘index fossil’ for landline telephony. It bears witness to a time when telecommunication was not yet mobile.” This makes it a perfect fit for the collection, whose purpose is to document from a national perspective the transformation in communication – the history of media and how it relates to society. As Jaquemet emphasises, “The focus of our interest is not simply on technological artefacts, but on the cultural practices associated with them.”

The phone box from Baden will initially be taken to the depot in Mamishaus, where it will be cleaned, photographed and logged in the collection’s database. It will then be stored there in optimum



conditions for posterity. But Juri Jaquemet promises: “It will definitely be on display in an exhibition in future. This will ensure that even people born in 2019 will have a clear idea of what a ‘phone box’ actually looked like.”

Some 150 round glass cabins remain in place

Only Swisscom’s phone boxes have been decommissioned. Some 150 glass APG|SGA “Telecab 2000” cabins are still in place. Now operated by APG|SGA, these cabins allow free calls to Swiss landline and mobile networks (but not chargeable business numbers). A portion of the maintenance, cleaning and call costs are co-financed through posters. APG|SGA has managed advertising space on public phone boxes since 1930. The “Telecab 2000” cabins were conceived by APG|SGA in 1995 in close cooperation with Swisscom and the Institut für ganzheitliche Gestaltung (Institute for Integrated Design) as a replacement for public emergency telephones. They were designed to have a useful life of 35 years. The transparent cylinder with its sonorous spatial concept is still relevant from an urban development perspective, has won numerous design awards (e.g. DuPont Benedictus Award, Design Prize Switzerland) and will be included in the Museum of Communication’s collection.

What should you do if you still have a prepaid Taxcard?

Swisscom will redeem any still valid Taxcards up to the end of February 2020. They must be returned to Swisscom with a completed form. You can print this form out from the Internet or order it by phone on 0848 881 180, in which case it will be sent out to you by post. Swisscom Shop employees can help you complete the form, but they cannot redeem the card because the shops do not have the technology needed to check the balance.

The last word goes to the last Publifon payphone, before it embarks on its final journey.



The last Publifon payphone, on the eve of its voyage to the museum

“You don’t need to shed any tears for me. In recent years, fewer and fewer people have wanted anything at all from me – let alone used me to make calls. Now I can look forward to joining my ancestors, contemporaries and descendants, who await me at the Museum of Communication,” says the last Publifon payphone, located at Bruggerstrasse 164 in Baden. We give it the chance to take a look back at its varied past.

“Ah yes, those were the days, when queues used to form outside my door. It’s quite probable that a few couples launched headlong into their futures inside my walls. How many declarations of love and yearning sighs must have passed down my line? And how many increasingly garbled sentiments when the money or Taxcard credit was about to run out?

Many people just wanted to use me as a refuge – to warm up, smoke a cigarette out of the wind or canoodle in privacy. From the mid-1990s, I was increasingly used as a discreet spot for mobile phone calls. But of course this soon ceased to be necessary – public conversations on private matters have long since become the norm. As the decreasing number of users switched in their droves to card payment, I also stopped seeing the late-night visitors checking for any small change that might have been left behind. I was used and abused – a location for acts that respectable people still keep private even today. On my loneliest days, though, at least this meant regular visits from the cleaning staff. But my operator realised that my upkeep was costing much more than I was bringing in. And I’m getting older; spare parts are hard to come by. Times took a turn for the worse, and sadly they have stayed that way.

I was assembled here on this spot by PTT employees back in 1962. I belong to a generation of phone boxes that were considered very robust, and that must be true, because more than 57 years later I am still standing firmly on my foundations – rust-free. The machine inside was changed several times. There was always something new: new coins, Taxcards, credit cards, integrated ATMs... And of course



at some point I also got a red receiver. I was sad when the phone books disappeared and I no longer saw all the people who used to come just to find an address. You could still find numbers and addresses with the Teleguide, but neither my visitors nor I ever really took to it.

In my heyday I was part of a very respected and popular group. There were nearly 60,000 of us. That of course included many older models and also a few younger ones – I am curious to find out who I will be reunited with. Maybe you'll come and see me one day? Soon I'll take my place in the permanent exhibition at the Museum of Communication, cleaned up and beautified as a relic of a bygone era. You won't have to wait out in the cold anymore before you can visit me – and I'll finally be out of the cold too!"

Berne, 28 November 2019

www.swisscom.ch/publifon (German only)

www.swisscom.ch/taxcard (German, French and Italian only)

Publifon payphone infographic

<https://www.swisscom.ch/en/about/medien/news/adieu-to-the-phone-box.html>

www.apgsga.ch/en

Pictures

The last phone box starts its journey from Bruggerstrasse 164 in Baden to the Museum of Communication; it is bid farewell and handed over by Pierre-Antoine Favet, Head of Publifone Swisscom, to Juri Jaquemet, Curator of the Museum of Communication.

As of 2 p.m. the pictures will be available here: <https://www.picdrop.de/fototeam/9pgBrhcC24>