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Cities (and regions) within a city: subnational representations and the creation of European imaginaries in Brussels

Carola Hein*

TU Delft, Delft, NL

This article explores how sub-national institutions – representations from cities and regions – help create a European imaginary in Brussels. Political scientists and other scholars have noted the importance of these city and regional institutions, but have paid little attention to their physical form. Through a select set of case studies, this article analyses the vast impact that small-scale interventions in the use and re-imagination of select buildings occupied by the subnational institutions have on Brussels' urban form and function. Focusing on representations from German states, notably the city-states of Hamburg and Bremen, and including select other city and regional offices, the present article offers some first ideas of how the physical presence of these small entities transforms European Brussels. It asks how the selection, construction, reuse and restoration of buildings for the subnational institutions reshape the urban patterns of Brussels, how their architecture and external decoration contribute to the creation of a European narrative within the city, and how the institutional actors use Brussels' buildings in their print marketing and web presences constructing entangled European and regional identities.

Keywords: subnational representations; capital of Europe; capital cities; Brussels; city and regional offices; European Union

1. Introduction

As the EU grew to be a major political force on the European continent and in the world, Brussels effectively became its capital. Each of the EU's three major institutions – the Commission, the Council and the Parliament – has its headquarters in that city, as do other European institutions, notably the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of Regions (CoR). Many of these EU institutions use existing buildings or structures erected by investors for speculative purposes, that fulfil functional, but not iconic purposes. Even the EU Parliament building started out as a speculative project when an association of political and business figures suggested a privately funded project for an International Conference Center (ICC) with 750 seats – a parliamentary hemicycle in disguise in 1987 – near the established European institutions (Figure 1). Absent a genuine democratic procedure for making decisions about its conception and realization, the building, despite its extensive decoration with flags, represents yet another missed opportunity to create a strong positive symbol for Europe. Today, after a half century of existence, the EU thus has little power, funding, or standing to create symbolic buildings or urban structures and it is only starting to claim a strategy for planning the European district and to establish social practices to create a political identity (Hein, 2004; Hein, 2014).

*Email: c.m.hein@tudelft.nl

Figure 1.   The European Parliament as seen from the Place du Luxembourg (Photo: Carola Hein)

In Brussels' European district, through deliberate policy as well as concurrent inadvertent action, new 'urban imaginaries' are emerging of a capital that is 'European,' rather than 'national' (Huyssen, 2008; Cinar & Bender, 2007). With the rise of electronic media, the Internet has become another domain in which the EU can represent itself, placing key buildings in new contexts and selectively depicting the physical environment in photographs and abstract drawings. Many of the actual buildings of the EU institutions in Brussels are anonymous corporate structures, but they have nonetheless helped make Brussels European. Through its demand in regard to location, size and function and sometimes through concrete architectural requirements each institution has co-shaped its own urban footprint, and each building they occupy tells important stories: about an institution's role in designing 'Europe'; about each institution's particular history, its evolving institutional form, its expanding territory; and about its perception of the importance of visual representation in the city. Numerous other functions have come to the European district or its vicinity because of the presence of the European institutions. Hotels, restaurants and shops cater to the EU employees, their visitors and tourists and co-create the European character of the city that is visible in many details from flags, to signs, from international journals to the type of trinkets sold in kiosks.

The presence of the EU has also attracted delegations from special interest groups and from cities and regions to learn about European activities and events, to gather materials to take home and to lobby European decision-makers. Their presence reflects a transforming Europe, one in which the nation state loses some of its power. Given their small scale, but also their political and economic independence, these subnational institutions have a different and generally less destructive impact on Brussels' built environment compared to the larger institutions. Their architectural choices are often driven by strong local identities, reflected in an appreciation of architectural design, iconic spaces and other symbols. Many of these offices are clustering in the vicinity of the European district.[1] The combined architectural presence and location of the regional delegations reshape Brussels' urban form and architectural debate and reflect the understanding that each of these entities has about its home politics, its financial status and its experience with iconic buildings. As a result, a composite image of a capital is emerging that draws on bits and pieces from cities and regions throughout Europe.

Figure 2.   The long-rejected architecture of the building inspired the new logo of the Commission, featured here on the building itself (Photo: Carola Hein)

Neither Brussels nor the other cities that are headquarters of the EU offer a strong and distinctive urban imaginary. The EU still largely depends on national decisions, which often clash with EU goals, on the design of political spaces and identity building. More-over, many EU buildings transmit a negative image of the institution, for example, in the background of critical news reports; politicians, scholars and citizens criticize the EU headquarters buildings, particularly in Brussels, for their unimaginative character, bland architectural design, invasiveness in the urban tissue and disrespect of local citizens. Only in 2012, more than 40 years after the opening of the Commission headquarters building in 1968 (the Berlaymont building in Brussels) and after ample discussion about demolishing it, did the Commission identify itself with the architecture of its headquarters in a new logo, the first institution to clearly connect itself with a tangible built form (Figure 2).[2]

2.   EU headquarters and European imaginaries

The contingent nature of the European headquarters and the role of architecture in the cre-ation of a European identity did not receive much attention beyond the host cities for many years. Then, in the late 1980s, more in tune with European traditions regarding the cre-ation of iconic built forms, the EU started to consider its own identity, initiating multiple programmes of political and cultural integration. To spread the idea of a shared connection to the idea of Europe, the EU also decentralized its headquarters by siting select functions in a number of cities. And it highlighted 'European' culture and history through the Euro-pean Capital of Culture Program (ECoC), which names one or more cities every year as a culture capital and charges it with programming public celebrations accordingly. While the EU is decentralizing some activities, building ties between the EU's capital, Brussels, and cities throughout Europe, city and regional entities are sending representatives to the area in Eastern Brussels, where a European district has emerged.

Along with EU institutions and foreign embassies, many nations and organizations affil-iated with the EU or interested in being close to it have also established offices in Brussels and often near the European district. The construction of offices at the heart of a foreign

capital, paired with a strong desire for architectural validation, is nothing new. The architecture of embassies is usually carefully chosen. Nations often select leading architects of their home country to create the design of a building that will showcase a nation abroad, and serve as a reflection of a country's identity, its financial solidity, its attention to architecture and urban form and hence to its citizens (Asendorf, Bartezko, Kusch, & Ischinger, 2002; Bertram, 2011; Loeffler, 2011). The construction of an embassy is generally associated with a nation state; however, in tune with increased regionalization in the 1980s, cities and regions – subnational entities – started to send their own delegations to Brussels.

Location is a key to the success of these subnational institutions, but architectural design and urban presence have become more important in recent years. Symbols are central to building a new political identity. In researching the EU (Bruter, 2005), political scientist Michael Bruter distinguishes between civic identity, related to a political system, and cultural identity, related to a human condition. His research shows that 'consistent exposure to symbols of Europe and the EU (flag, maps, euro banknotes, etc.) makes people feel more European over time and confirms that symbols have a strong and dominant effect on the cultural component of citizens' European identity' (Bruter, 2009). By the same token, the presence of regional and city offices in Brussels, the restoration of historic buildings or the construction of new ones in the name of foreign regional entities and the display of regional or local flags and emblems in and around the EU district reflect the diversity of Europe within Brussels, showcase the political and economic impact of the EU on its regions and demonstrate how Brussels is effectively becoming the capital of Europe.

As public representatives of smaller entities, subnational offices are at times more attentive to questions of identity and representation; while they are small in size, their impact on urban form can be vast, as they make novel contributions to Brussels as capital of Europe, both physically and virtually on the web. They confirm the city's function as the seat of EU power while inserting their own concepts of historic preservation and of urban representation into Brussels and creating new interpretations of the capital's role. Their websites and use of social media further expand and reinforce the subnational entities' impact on urban form as they help make Brussels' built environment visible on a European scale.

3.   History of major EU institutions and their constructions in Brussels

With the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and the consequent creation of the CoR in 1994, the EU aimed to connect directly with subnational entities and to increase the power of local and regional institutions. As a result, regional and city delegations came to Brussels to gather materials for their hometowns, gain insights into European processes, give voice to their diverse interests and create their own built emblems (Rowe, 2011). As their number expanded, they intentionally or unintentionally reinterpreted urban structures and changed the built form of Brussels through their locational choices, their decision to rent or own and their choice to construct new buildings or renovate historic buildings. These delegations are often small; many employ fewer than 10 people, some have only one person and only rarely do they reach double-digit numbers. But the overall number of delegations is impressive. Huysseune found 226 accredited institutions as of 2008 (Huysseune & Jans, 2008). As of 2014, more than 300 entities represent the economic, political, touristic and other interests of diverse cities and metropolitan regions in Brussels.[3]

German cities and regions sent some of the first and most influential subnational delegations to the EU.[4] Given their long activity in Brussels, this article focuses on the range of their architectural choices and other urban decisions, weaving in select examples from

other cities and regions for comparison. German regions, among them city-states, have a long, strong tradition of representation within their country, and they aimed for similar impact in Brussels. They first sent delegations to the EU in the 1980s, charting a path and becoming models for those who arrived in the 1990s and early 2000s.[5] Over time, these representations have grown, with more people working in Brussels occupying more office space. The article explores and evaluates the impact of subnational institutions on urban form and function in Brussels. While this is a change specific to that city, it demonstrates the potential power of subnational representation on urban transformation in general and in a capital city in particular. Through a set of select case studies, this article explores how city and regional representations transform Brussels' urban space when making locational and architectural choices, tying the broader theme of subnational presence to the selection, reuse and construction of select buildings. It further studies the ways in which this transformation is narrated by the agents involved and considers their use of architectural visuals on the web and the role the physical artefacts and printed and virtual representations play in the construction of new European narratives.

4. Urban clusters and historic preservation: Rue Palmerston

Among the first, if not the first, delegation to establish a presence in Brussels, is the city-state of Hamburg: a city in terms of many of its economic needs, but a state in terms of its political power. Together with its neighbour Schleswig-Holstein, the city has had an office in Brussels since 1985. The two states have joined together in what they have since aptly and consciously named the Hanse Office. The term is reminiscent of the traditional Hanse, an association of trading towns in Northern Germany and adjacent countries that established distinct trading settlements in foreign cities (e.g. in London, Novgorod and Bruegge), illustrating the long-range power of a city and its physical representation in a different city. In the fourteenth century, for example, Hanseatic traders established a distinct neighbourhood in Bergen (Norway). Similarly, city and regional offices in Brussels express the economic, cultural and other networks that have emerged with the growth of the EU.

Over time, the presence of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein has attracted several Nordic city and regional delegations that have since started to cluster in Brussels' Avenue Palmerston in around the Hanse Office and its chosen home (Figure 3). Their neighbouring buildings form an impressive and cohesive urban ensemble on the squares Marie-Louise and Ambiorix, an area that used to be typical of Brussels upper-class living of the nineteenth century. They stand only a few buildings away from the Hotel van Eetvelde, one of Brussels' most famous Art Nouveau structures by Victor Horta (located at Avenue Palmerston 4). The home of the Hanse Office, a wide bourgeois structure with a passageway for horses and carts and a suite of representative rooms designed by the Brussels architect Louis Derycker, first housed Elise and Charles Jaeschke, the latter a successful bank employee who made money, and then a retired couple from Nice as well as their servants (Heymans, 1998), illustrating the international character that the area has long held. The building's generous layout now accommodates the delegation's public functions and private offices. The main attraction of this location for the Northern German states was that it is close to the institutions of the EU. An effect of their choice was that they helped preserve traditional buildings, which until the 1970s had been under the threat of demolition.

The bourgeoisie, for whom the area had been originally built, moved to the suburbs starting in the interwar years, leaving behind generously designed buildings that were later divided into apartments. Some of these were torn down and replaced by new high-rise

Figure 3.   The Hanse Office, the Bremen Office, and the Baltic Sea House on Avenue Palmerston (Photo: Carola Hein)

housing in a flurry of urban development that was further spurred by the creation of the EU. As with the Hanse Office, in the 1990s several delegations renovated surviving historic residential buildings into office spaces, thereby preserving them. (These renovations did draw critique from local inhabitants, who organized in pressure groups; but as it became clear that the delegations would help preserve the buildings, whereas private citizens did not have the funding to provide for the necessary upkeep, the critics backed down.)

The Hanse Office is a hub of regional delegations, a concentration of North German groups interested in the development of the Baltic Sea area.[6] In conjunction with this collaboration, several other Northern European delegations moved into the building at 26 Avenue Palmerston, which has since become the so-called Baltic Sea House. Many of the cities that are represented here are also part of the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC, headquartered in Gdansk), which includes cities from 10 countries on the Northern Sea, including Russia; in the Avenue Palmerston in Brussels they can argue for their common, transnational interests. Rooms here are big enough for events. The Baltic Sea Group holds its reception in the Hanse Office during the EU's European Week of Regions and Cities.[7]

Websites illustrate the tiny steps that cities and regions are taking towards exchanges with the EU and the creation of new urban imaginaries. The Hanse Office features the building at Avenue Palmerston 20 prominently on its website, just beneath a slideshow of media-friendly images of Hamburg's iconic buildings and landscapes.[8] The distinctive flags of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein installed on their buildings also add a European flavour to the Brussels architecture.

In contrast, most of the other German delegations maintain no separate website, using those of their home institutions. For example, the depiction of Bremen in Brussels (again a flagged building, albeit only on the contact page) is on the homepage of Bremen in German, along with an image of the EuropaPunktBremen, the European information office in Bremen.[9] The Bremen office features another, very different example of the ways in which city and regional offices in Brussels can become the physical embodiments of diverse European

Figure 4.   The Stolperstein outside the Bremen office (Photo: Carola Hein)

pasts and networks. Outside the Bremen office, a metal plaque encased in concrete (the so-called Stolperstein, or stumbling stone) reminds passers-by of a man called Jean Sugg (deported for being a free mason and member of the resistance) (Figure 4). An exhibition hosted by the Hanse Office (first held in Hamburg) explained the concept of the Stolper-steine, a memorial practice that started in Germany to prevent forgetting about deportations in the Second World War (the horrors of which also brought about the EU) and has since spread through Europe.[10]

The attitude of the institutions located in the buildings on Avenue Palmerston towards their buildings is as diverse as the reasons for their presence in Brussels. While the availability of small building units near the EU, and the presence of other institutions, attracted some of these institutions, others have made buildings themselves part of their branding strategy. A good example is the delegation for the city of Prague, located in Prague House at Avenue Palmerston 16 (opened in 2002), an important Art Nouveau build-ing by Belgian architects M. Bosmans and Henry Van de Velde for the Van Stratum dentist family (Figure 5). Here, the Prague delegation hosts art and culture events. Clearly, the Prague delegation moved into this building quite mindfully, for its website (hosted by the City of Prague) lauds the 'common sense' that ultimately led Brussels to classify buildings, including the Prague House, as a historical monument.[11]

The extent to which a well-chosen location and an attractive physical environment can promote the functions of an institution is best showcased in the palatial headquarters of the Bavarian regional office. The office's website – part of the state's multi-language website – celebrates its various buildings. Under the heading 'The Free State. Bavaria in the Fed-eral Republic, in Europe and in the World', the site emphasizes the importance of physical representation, showcasing the historical building it occupies in Berlin near the Branden-burg gate and its preservation of the historic building of the Institut Pasteur in Brussels (Figure 6). That building, located in the Parc Leopold, at the back of the European Par-liament and very near to other key European institutions, housed the Institute from 1903 to 1987.

Figure 5.   The Prague House, on Avenue Palmerston 16 (Photo: Carola Hein)

Among the various parties interested in purchasing the property, the region chose to sell to the Free State as the one party that provided most guarantees for rehabilitation of the complex. The Free State purchased the building, after winning the support of all political parties in the Bavarian parliament, a demonstration of the strong local identity of the Bavarian state leaders and their conviction of the power of physical display, and spent

Figure 6.   The Bavarian Representation in the former Institut Pasteur located in the Parc Leopold next to the European Parliament, Rue Wiertz 77 (Photo: Carola Hein)

30 million Euros to restore it.[12] The state's website documents the extensive and careful historical renovation of the building and the creation of a 300-seat auditorium there, but only on a German-language web page.[13] Surprisingly, this important contribution to architectural and urban preservation in Brussels seems to have received little local recognition aimed at partnering with foreign institutions for the urban planning of Brussels. The delegation hosts a multitude of activities in the building and has become a major player in the backyard of the European parliament. These political, financial and social investments demonstrate both the opportunities for subnational offices in Brussels and the kind of impact that foreign delegations can have on architectural and urban debates in Brussels.

5. Office buildings and clusters in the European district

If some regional delegations pursue transnational goals, adapt buildings or integrate into regional clusters, others state their identity in Brussels in other ways. Not all delegations are big enough or have the desire or wealth to undertake large projects. Some cluster with other regions to share resources and information (not necessarily as part of a common network). Cities and regions with similar interests or belonging to the same nation have also clustered together in other locations. Together with several city network delegations to the EU and multiple city and regional delegations, the four major cities of the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) have been located since 2003 in the House of Cities, Municipalities and Regions in Square de Meeûs 1 (Figure 7).[14] While united under one roof and with a partially common agenda on the role of cities in Europe, each organization maintains an individual web page, often administrated by their home municipality and with very different approaches to their presence in Brussels. Whereas Amsterdam and The Hague use images of the Brussels building on their website, Rotterdam sees its Brussels presence as a way to monitor regulations that could affect its port and economy.[15] Like Rotterdam, the City of London's goal in Brussels is not so much to obtain support from the EU but rather to restrict EU interventions that could impede London's

Figure 7.   The building hosting the Dutch Cities at Square de Meeûs 1 (Photo: Carola Hein)

economic freedom.[16] The City did not have a representative at the EU until 2008. This local entity is not the actual huge city but is responsible for the so-called 'Square Mile', the financial district. There it hosts global activities, promotes the larger city's economic interests, provides local services (policing, planning and heritage preservation), and supports the larger city and nation through its sponsorship of art and economic revitalization. The London City Office does not feature the building on its website, but has chosen a prime location. It is established on the Rond-Point Schuman in the vicinity of the British Embassy, across from the Berlaymont and next to the Council of Europe, a key spot in the European district.

As regional delegations grew and entered a second stage, some abandoned the small historical buildings they originally occupied so proudly. The delegation from the state of Hessen moved from a rented office to a traditional building on Rue de l'Yser, and then again in 2013 to the Multiple Regions House on Rue Montoyer 21, which had been built for this purpose after an architectural competition (Figure 8). It is a modern office building designed by a Belgian architect and featuring a roof terrace for events. Hessen shares the house with delegations from other regions (all of them fly their flags from the roof of the building). Other institutions from Hessen also have offices there, including the airport and the regional bank, both very interested in influencing EU policy.[17] Two regions from the former East Germany, Sachsen-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, have similarly gathered in the Centre of the Regions on Boulevard St. Michel, and share a building that was formerly owned by the East German State with other German and European offices (Figure 9).

Similarly, the first photogenic traditional residential building used by the delegation of Nordrhein-Westfalen – on Avenue Michel-Ange, owned by the regional bank – is still featured on the website, probably to indicate the longevity of the institution (established in 1986). Meeting local opposition to their proposed renovation of the historic structure,
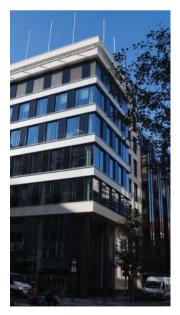

Figure 8.   The delegation of Hessen is located in the Multiple-Regions-House on Rue Montoyer 21 (Photo: Carola Hein)

Figure 9.   Representation of Sachsen-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern to the EU at the Center of Regions Boulevard Saint Michel 80 (Photo: Carola Hein)

the delegation moved in 2007 into a modern building at Rue Montoyer 47, where it shares rental space with other commercial users (Figure 10).

Even delegations who settled in contemporary buildings seek to feature their regions' strengths on building facades or websites – and interior design. We can track how the Baden-Württemberg delegation, one of the biggest and oldest German delegations (in Brussels since 1987), increased its branding over time. It built its identity in several stages, each associated with a different urban location and built space, each manifesting the institution's desire for visibility on the street and engagement with the urban environment. Starting out in a small anonymous rental office, the delegation was eager to have a distinguished street presence, so it moved to a historic residential building on Square Vergote.

Figure 10.   The delegation of Nordrhein-Westfalen at Rue Montoyer 47 shares space with various other institutions from the area including TÜV Rheinland, NRW.Bank, and ThyssenKrupp

Figure 11.   The delegation of Baden-Württemberg and the adjacent Goethe Institut, one of the last remnants of the historical Leopold Quarter, Rue Belliard 60-62 (Photo: Carola Hein)

The state bank bought the building, as the state itself was not able to own foreign property. Over time, the building became too small and the delegation needed to be closer to the parliament. For 20 million Euros, the state purchased and renovated a modern building on Rue Belliard, one of the key arteries of the European district, and adjacent to the Goethe Institute (Figure 11).[18] The building itself is in tune with the other office buildings in the street, but a number of elements make it a statement of regional power in Brussels: its ownership, the flag, the internal organization geared towards receptions and events on the first floor and the now-glass covered courtyard, and interior decoration that references regional specialties (Dagger & Schroder, 2005). The delegation sometimes engages directly with the street during year-end or summer festivities. The state is already planning to refine the delegation's housing and identity yet again, having purchased the Goethe House next door from the Belgian federal government. The plan is to connect the buildings internally while maintaining the historical façade and the urban imagery that goes with it.

Despite the major presence of Baden-Württemberg in Brussels, one of its key metropolitan regions, with the city of Stuttgart as its centre, has its own representation in Brussels. Known worldwide as headquarters of the automaker Daimler, Stuttgart together with 179 towns and municipalities has established an elected regional government in 1994 – a unique European model. It has its own office in Brussels located in a traditional residential building on Boulevard Clovis. The region highlights the importance of the physical and built presence of the institution in Brussels by featuring the façade on the website and emphasizing the role of the built form in shaping conversations: 'International networks and high-tech under stucco ceilings, seminars and European talks at the fireside characterize the working atmosphere in the 'maison de maître', one of Brussels' typical town-houses.'[19]

Regional and local delegations are as diverse as the European regions and cities in their political, economic, social, and cultural goals and strategies and in their levels of dependence on their respective nations. Some regional delegations remain in a national frame, their allegiance sometimes audible in their names: the East Poland House housed representatives from several Polish regions after the Podlaskie Voivodeship (province) failed to establish itself individually. This diversity is visible in their architectural and urban choices

as well as in their web presences. Their diversity is a true mirror of the citizens of Europe. It balances the centralizing power of the EU and offers the possibility that many voices will create new and diverse symbols and stories of the EU and of Europe itself.

6. Conclusion

Through the choice of representative offices in Brussels – their location, architectural design, icons such as flags, and web presence – delegations from cities and regions to the EU shape the form and function of the city and construct a new narrative about its role as the effective capital of Europe. This article's partial examination of city and regional representation (albeit often tiny) and their impact on the built environment in Brussels showcases the power of cities and regions beyond their local boundaries to transform urban spaces and debates on architectural form and heritage, on capital design and European mindscapes.

The political, economic and physical manifestations of cities and regions suggest that these European city and regional institutions have power beyond their physical space. Their presence effectively changes Brussels and creates urban symbols for the growth, power and authority of subnational entities. Their locational choices underscore Göran Therborn's claim that physical location and the places where people live and work still matter, even as research focuses on global cities (Therborn, 2011). The presence of these institutions in Brussels, and their investments into the city, underscore the power of Brussels as a capital city and demonstrates how far Europe has come politically and economically. The preservation or use of a traditional Belgian building or the construction of mindful contemporary ones showcases the user's proximity to citizens and respect of local identities (built and unbuilt). Brussels administrators could use the city and regional delegations as a partner in their attempt to reshape urban structures, fight to preserve historical buildings, and to brand the city as the capital of European citizens and not just the European institutions that are often perceived as non-democratic.[20] Engaging European citizens and institutions beyond the EU institutions with Brussels planning and design may be a way to create a positive symbol and urban imaginary for a unified Europe. A new narrative of the physical form of Brussels as the EU capital remains to be written, one that both values the historical heritage of the city and contributes to the construction of a new European capital identity.

Notes

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