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No Europe without Brussels

The Berlaymont Building and the Development of the Léopold Area

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MAURO CASALBONI

CONTRAST AND HARMONY

A photographic exploration of the
European District of Brussels

NO EUROPE WITHOUT BRUSSELS. THE BERLAYMONT BUILDING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LÉOPOLD AREA

Dennis Pohl and Sven Sterken

Within just 20 years after WWII, Brussels evolved from a relatively modest national capital into an international political centre. This became most evident in the Léopold area, which transformed from a prestigious residential neighbourhood into the main location of the European institutions. This article illustrates how this phenomenon was in fact instigated by the Belgian State: anxious to keep the various European seats in Brussels yet without obfuscating the other member states, it facilitated their concentration in the Léopold area with investments and legislation. The Berlaymont building embodies this architectural diplomacy at its best: modelled after Belgian bureaucratic standards as a safety net in case the European Commission would move elsewhere, the latter reluctantly moved in for lack of a better alternative. This “Catch-22” position, we state, set the tone for the relationship between Brussels and the EU administrations: while never clearly outspoken, their mutual entanglement today has become an undeniable fact.

Europe and Brussels had a mutual dependency from the founding of the European Communities. This article explores the historic relation between local urban and the transnational development of post-war Europe. It ultimately raises the question to what extent there exists a dialogue between various actors involved to actively design and build the image of Europe in Brussels¹.

Birth and Transformation of the Léopold District

In the space of merely 20 years after WWII, Brussels evolved from a relatively modest national capital to an international political and economic centre. The development of suitable and easily accessible office space became the primary concern of politicians and private developers, resulting in a total offer of no less than 6,275,000 m² (a quarter of the city's built area!) towards the end of the century. Most of it was located in specific areas, namely the North district, along the Avenue Louise and in the Léopold area. In all cases, this evolution profoundly changed the function and character of the area. Whereas the Léopold area counted approximately 120,000 m² of office space in 1958, no less than 3,000,000 m² was added in the following decades.

Originally, the Léopold area was a kind of no man's land between Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and Etterbeek. Shortly after the creation of Belgium in 1830, the private *Société civile pour l'agrandissement et l'embellissement de Bruxelles* [Civil Society for the extension and the beautification of Brussels] developed it into a prestigious residential neighbourhood close to the administrative and financial epicentre of the young and prosperous nation. Its gridded plan followed the geometry of the adjacent Park, guaranteeing a quick execution and optimal profitability. The neighbourhood was indeed very successful and became home to the national elite. In 1853, it already counted over 3,000 inhabitants, a number that doubled towards the turn of the century. During the Interwar period, by contrast, the area lost its lustre: the great mansions came out of fashion and proved costly to maintain, whereas the increased means of transportation (car, tramway) made allowed the well-to-do to settle in the green suburbs south of the capital.

Gradually, the old mansions became occupied by ministries, businesses and embassies, who appreciated the area's strategic situation close to the Parc. After the Second World War, insurance companies began to invest heavily in the neighbourhood, for the predicted boom in office real estate proved a lucrative way to maximize their financial reserves. Along the process, the orthogonal mesh of the quarter greatly

facilitated the assembly of contiguous cadastral parcels and the replacement of prestigious mansions by more functional office buildings. This spontaneous and rapid agglutination process became so endemic that the well-read architectural magazine *La Technique des Travaux* devoted a theme issue to it in 1963, illustrating the advent of a new type of 'neutral' office building, maximizing to the fullest the allowed height and depth of construction in the search for optimal rentability.

The Arrival of the European Institutions

The single most dominant force in the post-war transformation of the Léopold area was the formation of the European Union – even if the statute of Brussels as European capital remained uncertain for a very long time. The delicate nature of assigning the seat of a particular European institution to a particular country, region or city came first to the fore with the creation of the European Community of Coal and Steel (ECSC) in 1951. The founding states (Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) agreed to jointly designate a seat for the institutions, rather than determining a single capital city. This postponement induced an indecisiveness with far-reaching consequences. A year later, for example, at the Paris summit of 1951, the issue occupied the European leaders to such an extent that the actual item on the agenda – namely the further political unity of Europe – remained almost untouched. Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European project, imagined the seat to be located in a 'European territory' (a sort of federal district like Washington D.C.) in the Saarbrücken region between France and Germany. Conflicting opinions between both nations about the territorial integrity of this coal-rich region led to Luxembourg's Foreign Minister Joseph Bech to propose the Grand Duchy as the temporary seat of the European Commission, with Strasbourg as the seat of the future European Parliament as a compromise. The issue further took an unforeseen turn after a referendum amongst the Saarlanders in 1955, in which they rejected a 'neutral' status and thus explicitly pronounced themselves in favour of (re)annexation to Germany. This resulted in Saarland becoming the 10th state of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957. As a European capital on German territory was unthinkable for the majority of the member states so shortly after WWII, Saarbrücken as the main seat of a European institution was no longer an option.

Also during the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Rome (1958), fundamental to the later development of the EU, no final decision on the future capital of Europe was taken. Yet, the discussion now took a more technical turn, as pragmatic criteria

and assets (rather than symbolic values such as reconciliation and cooperation as had been the case with Saarbrücken) were increasingly put forward. This became clear in the 1957 competition for candidate cities: Brussels seemed the most promising one for the Belgian capital had modernized its infrastructure in the uprun to the first post-war World Fair (1958), while the country's former Prime Minister Henri Spaak had played a major role on the European forum during the previous decade.

In early May 1958, all three bodies Euratom, EEC and ECSC expressed their preference for Brussels, a choice that became approved a month later by vote in the Assembly in Strasbourg. Surprisingly however, in March 1959, the Foreign Ministers of the member states decided to postpone the capital issue for another three years. Yet, it was informally agreed that the main European bodies would remain in Brussels for at least another two years, in order to give their staff some stability. Leaving Luxembourg and Strasbourg as temporary seats, this extra time incited the Belgian government to appoint a specialist committee with the task of identifying where in Brussels a large European campus could be built. The initiative was to remain secret, however, as an overly manifest positioning in the headquarters issue by the Belgian authorities may potentially undermine its chances. Eight locations were listed, the preferred one being the so-called Plaine des Manoeuvres in Etterbeek (today the site of the Free University of Brussels) because of the available surface area, the expansion possibilities and the accessibility of the site. Immediately after Brussels was selected as one of the temporary seats of the European institutions, the Belgian Minister of Public Works Omer Van Audenhove was given the task to develop the legal framework for what was to become the first law on urban planning and land use in Belgium, and to supervise the construction of a *Centre Administratif Europe* on the site of the former Berlaymont Institute (cf. further). The simultaneity of both projects raises the question to what extent the first initiative (resulting in the so-called 'Organic Law on Urbanism' of 1962) was in fact to ease the second. Meant to stimulate private investment as a flywheel for urban regeneration, Article 25 of the new act gave land owners, who possessed more than 50% of the lots in a building block, the right to expropriate all other owners and to unite all lots into one larger unit, on the condition that their project was considered to be of 'public interest' by the authorities. This mechanism was meant to engender the swift transformation of the lot distribution in investment areas, which otherwise would have required a long administrative process. Moreover, in case building permits were not accepted by the city planning office, Article 50 gave contracting companies the right to file a revision on points of law at a lower court instance at the commune level, instead of a higher court

instance as in common juridical practice. At this instance more than 50% of the appeals were approved.

In fact, the Belgian government not only greatly facilitated private initiative through the 1962 law, it also actively stimulated it for, as the construction of a European District would take several years to complete, it simultaneously and systematically took options on large office buildings under construction in the Léopold area, as a transitory measure. There, real estate speculation quickly boomed for European institutions all rented their office space from the private market. Euratom, for example, was housed in the Rue Belliard 51-55, an enormous office building designed by Jean Hendrickx-Van Bosch, that occupied almost an entire city block. The European Commission, in turn, moved into an office complex that was developed in several stages (1957-1963) in the city block between Avenue de la Joyeuse Entrée, the Avenue de Cortenbergh and Rue de la Loi, designed by the architects C. and J.P. Housiaux. Quite tellingly, not representation but maximum profit was what inspired the design of these buildings; in the latter case, the developer even seriously collided with the planning administration about the allowed height of his building (limited to ten stories so as not to obstruct the view of the Triumphal Arch in the adjacent Cinquantenaire Parc).

The Politics of the Berlaymont

The European administrations grew at an extremely quick pace. Since the institutions themselves could not purchase buildings without political consensus on the seat issue however, the Belgian government acted as their tenant. That is, it concluded long-term leases with building promoters and sub-letted the buildings to the European institutions at a (very) advantageous rate – a principle that was not only unsustainable but also undemocratic, for it drained tax money directly into the pockets of a select party of private developers. Hence the decision by the Belgian government to construct a large and prestigious administrative centre, centralizing all the European administrations in one single building. This, it was hoped, would rationalize their presence in Brussels and consolidate its own chances of becoming the single seat of government. The cautious admission by then Commission President Walter Hallstein that he was positively inclined towards this principle, sufficed for the Belgian government to put through its plans and build, on its own initiative and at its own expense, a *Centre Administratif Europe* [European Administrative Centre].

Again, this ambition could not be manifested too overtly, which explains that no design competition was held. Instead, the commission was given to the architect Lucien De Vestel, assisted by Jean and André Polak, and Jean Gilson (a member of Groupe Alpha) – all architects that were very well connected within the Brussels establishment and the political world (Gilson's brother was a Defense Minister from 1958, and member of the Christian Social Party PSC-CVP, for example). Further, as the whole project remained a gamble, the Belgian government had every interest in pleasing the future tenant. To this effect, representatives of the European institutions were invited to follow up the design process, but after only three common workshops in the course of 1959, the Belgian Ministry of Public Works decided that its architects could now proceed alone. What the location was concerned, the government officials displayed a similar stubbornness, ignoring the arguments put forward by the city of Brussels in favour of the Heysel area (the site of the World Fair) and the preference of its own Urbanism Administration for the Etterbeek site. Based on the reasoning that the European authorities would more easily go along with a strategy of regrouping than a complete relocation, a site in the Léopold District was sought instead, close to the seat of the Belgian government and its ministries. This was a pragmatic decision, for it allowed to recuperate the building for its own use in case the European administration would turn it down.

In the densely built-up Léopold Quarter, there was no place left for such a large program by the end of the 1950s. The large garden of the *Institut des Dames de Berlaymont* in the Rue de la Loi was the only remaining open space of significance. It was one of the oldest and most prestigious boarding schools in Brussels, founded in 1625 with the aim of providing education for girls from noble families. Having settled at the (then) end of the Rue de la Loi in 1863, their (vast) buildings had by now become too small and dilapidated and the maintenance costs were starting to put the congregation in debt. In the meantime, the Rue de la Loi had become one of the main traffic arteries in the city, which raised concerns about the safety and health of the pupils. While initially turning down the many proposals made to them by property developers, and despite their vows of poverty, the congregation cleverly played the Belgian government and the developers off against each other: the former finally made it with a lower bid but in return made a former state domain in Argenteuil (Waterloo) available to the sisters, where they build a new boarding school according to the design of Groupe Structures in 1962.

Although the Berlaymont site occupied a complete building block (enclosed by the Rue de la Loi, Rue Archimède, Boulevard Charlemagne and Rue Stevin), it was too small to accommodate 5,000 civil servants, as the maximum building height was restricted to 50 meters (again, to not obstruct the view on the Triumphal Arch). Further, the densely built-up area made it difficult to offset the building as a highly visible symbol of European unification. Although no statements remain by the architects concerning their design intentions, they seem to have deduced the form and expression of the building from functional and structural considerations. The UNESCO Headquarter building in Paris designed by the architects Marcel Breuer and Bernard Zehrfuss, together with the structural engineer Pier Luigi Nervi, might have served as an inspiration for the modernist approach to international institutions. Indeed, a group of EEC officials went to visit the UNESCO Building in 1961 to study the latest developments in administrative architecture. The Berlaymont's star-shaped plan derived from a concern to organize the vertical circulation within one single, central core; the need to provide ceremonial space around the building became solved by suspending the 12 office floors from large concrete beams, cantilevering over the asymmetrical arms extending from the central core. This left the ground floor entirely open and avoided the oppressing effect of the enormous building mass. The suspension principle required special measures with regards to fire resistance; for this reason (and also to save weight), the suspending cables and the floors were made out of steel and wrapped, as was the custom at the time, in asbestos – an unhappy choice that would require the evacuation and dismantling of the complex barely twenty years later.

Although the structural concept (relying on heavy prefabrication) allowed for a theoretical construction time of 24 months, the project finally took more than eight years (1962-1970) to complete. This resulted partly from the pragmatism behind the building's *raison d'être*, for the choice for landscape offices, as was custom in the Belgian administration, was contested by European officials who preferred individual offices. Also, the large underground auditoriums turned out to not correspond with the discussion culture within the European institutions. It also quickly became clear that the original premise, namely to group all EU administrations in one single building, was no longer feasible. In 1965, before moving into the Berlaymont, the EEC alone already employed 3,200 officials dispersed in eight locations – a number that was only to increase with the imminent merger of the ECSC, EEC, and Euratom on July 1, 1967. To address the resulting need of additional office space, and no longer prepared to provide it by itself, the Belgian government now explicitly turned towards the private sector and

concluded a 'lease promise' with a group of real estate developers planning to build two identical office buildings next to the Berlaymont. Although eventually, only one of them was built (the Charlemagne I, designed by Jacques Cuisinier), it was very successful with the EU administration, for its promoters had studied in detail its wishes and developed the building accordingly.

The Léopold Quarter today

With the construction of the Berlaymont, the Léopold District became trapped into an irreversible spiral of speculation: most of the 19th century building stock disappeared overnight and the Rue de la Loi and the Rue de Belliard became congested and polluted urban motorways. The residential dimension of the area disappeared almost entirely and it became an almost purely monofunctional enclave. With the legislation concerning urban planning favoring the initiative of the private sector through the infamous 1962 Urbanism Act (cf. supra), both the national government and city administration had little power (but also showed little interest, it must be said) to counteract this evolution; also the European institutions themselves ignored their responsibility in this urban and social disaster, neglecting the possibility to use the symbolic capacity of architecture to give a tangible identity to their mission. It is only in the 1970s, with the creation of the Brussels Agglomeration as an intermediate policy level, and through a new urban planning framework enabling stakeholder participation, that residents and local actors gained a say in the future development of the area. This could not prevent the scenario sketched above to repeat itself in the late 1980s with the European Parliament building: that, too, was developed 'in secret' (this time by a private consortium of banks and insurance companies) and leased to the Parliament for 27 years.

It was not before the 1990s, however, after the creation of the Brussels Capital Region (the successor of the Agglomeration) as an autonomous political entity, that a real reflection started about the European presence in the Léopold area and beyond. For example, in the year 2000, a task force 'Brussels-Europe' was created, with the mission to create a development strategy for the Léopold area, while the following year, the federal authorities organized a consultation round on the same topic amongst the European institutions. This new dynamic led to the so-called 'Ombudsplan Bru/Eur' in 2002, aiming at restoring the lost interaction and confidence between the various political and sectoral levels in the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, the Léopold area was the subject of an intense debate among the architectural and academic community. The

exhibition 'A Vision for Brussels' at the BOZAR museum in Brussels in 2007 (an initiative of the Dutch Berlage Institute), for example, illustrated how the cultural, ideological and intellectual aspirations of European unification could inspire the design and aesthetics of its institutional buildings, while speculating about how they could be used as the cornerstones of the future territorial development of the Belgian (and one day, European) capital.

The last step so far in this renewed interest for the Léopold area was the *Schéma Directeur Quartier Européen* of 2008, which dictates its long term planning until this day. It stipulated five strategic development lines to improve sustainable building development, a better mobility of bicycles and pedestrians, allocate 110.000m² housing and 60.000m² commercial area, and emphasize the urban quality through cultural and recreation activities. In sum, this attempt principally targeted an improvement of the *Quartier Léopold* for residents and visitors of the area, despite the massive presence of the European bureaucracy. This poses the question if such development plans should not precisely embrace the presence of the European institutions, and play them out as spatial and symbolical markers.

Seen from this perspective, the question remains pertinent whether the European institutions should, and could actively contribute to these developments. The European Parliament, at least, made an active contribution in advocating since 2009 for a 'Museum of the EU'. The House of European History was eventually realized by the architecture firm Chaix & Morel et Associés, and opened in 2016. However, the museum has been criticized as its exhibitions for showing biased and fragmentary perspectives on European history, focusing largely on East-West conflicts instead of transnational interdependencies or the post-colonial situation. Whether this initiative stimulates the interest of citizens for European politics is another question for debate, but it shows that the larger vision for Europe has to be brought in discussion with local policy makers, planners and citizens if the perception of Europe on a transnational scale needs to be reconsidered.

1 This text synthesises the principal elements of two earlier publications by the authors on the development of the EU area, namely Dennis Pohl, 'Brüssel, Luxemburg, Straßburg: Die Hauptstadtfrage und die Infrastrukturen der Europäischen Union', *Archplus: Zeitschrift für Architektur, Städtebau und Design*. N°239, 2020, pp. 62-69; and Sven Sterken, 'Bruxelles, ville de bureaux. Le Berlaymont et la transformation du quartier Léopold', *Bruxelles patrimoines*, n°15-16, 2015, pp. 102-117.

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