BRUSSELS
PERSPECTIVES ON A EUROPEAN CAPITAL

SOME QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS...

What future for the European district and its surroundings?

Convert the underground parking Rue de la Loi to transit traffic?

Apart from the Summits period, is the visual and / or pedestrian link still possible?

Future meets Past. A hi-tech box slipped into the historic iron and glass Cinquantenaire Hall for a major socio-cultural space for European events?

A new metro branch in the parking of Rue de la Loi?

Dépôt légal: D/2007/11.036/1

Éditions ALITER

What future for the European district and its surroundings?

What future for the European district and its surroundings?

What future for the European district and its surroundings?

What future for the European district and its surroundings?
The concept of the Central Belgian mega-city was developed in Peter Hall’s Polynet study of 2006, as one of several urban regions from across Europe, focusing on their “physically separate but strongly networked systems, be they visible or invisible”. The Central Belgian mega-city includes to the north a triangular/trapezoidal space made of Antwerp, Ghent, Leuven, and Brussels, and to the south an area of around 30 kilometres including Nivelles and Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve/Wavre. This configuration and its growth from 1990 to 2000 is the result of land cover satellite observations. While the institutional evolution of Belgium has been centrifugal, the economic geography suggests a centripetal evolution in favor of the Central Belgian mega-city.

POINT 3. The Brussels-Capital Region: a small territory but an economic and cultural motor

As per its geographical location and history, the Brussels-Capital Region is an economic engine and cultural pivot, at Belgian and international level. It qualifies as a metropolis, or economic and cultural motor.
BETWEEN BRUSSELS, LUXEMBURG AND STRASBOURG

PROJECT FOR A TILTING TRAIN
BETWEEN BRUSSELS, LUXEMBURG AND STRASBOURG


The rail link between Brussels, Luxemburg, and Strasbourg remains weak. It takes around five hours by train. The work planned for the Belgian section, together with the projects that are being promoted by the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the portion of the Paris-Strasbourg TGV route that has been realized between Beaudreaut (Metz) and Strasbourg, will constitute an important improvement to the rail link. They will enable the introduction of a tilting train that would reach speeds up to 250 km/hour on the existing tracks, thereby reducing travel time between the three cities by fifty percent.

‘BRXLBRASVO Arts Festival’, ‘Coulour Café’ and ‘Zinneke Parade’ are embodiments of the multi-cultural character of Brussels’ civil society, if not its educational system. Given the continued enlargement of the European Union, multiculturalism is becoming an increasingly important feature of Europe in general and of Brussels in particular. For member and applicant nations and their regions, establishing an active presence in Brussels is an opportunity to showcase their own cultural diversity, not to forget the Flemish, French, Walloon and German cultures of Belgium. Additional cultural agreements and programmes would be an appropriate tool for affirming cultural diversity within a common European historic heritage.

POINT 4. Making highest and best use of the semi-annual rotation of EU Council presidencies
Brussels could make better use of symbolic occasions like the semi-annual rotation of the EU presidency. It might serve as an occasion to trigger titular nations to put on extensive cultural programmes, not only in Belgian cities (particularly those with specific historic connections to the historical nation), but in cities across Europe. Between 2008 and 2011, eight countries will hold the presidency: Slovenia, France, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Spain, Belgium, Hungary, and Poland.

POINT 5. Decentralising the European institutions in different parts of the Region
In terms of urban planning and environment, Europe’s challenge to the Brussels-Capital Region is embodied by the European Quarter (about 3% of the Region’s territory) and its eastern crown. Starting in 1998, the decision by the Belgian Government to locate the Commissions in the verdant, residential Cinquantenaire Quarter, instead of in the publicly owned vacant area next to the North Station, has transformed this residential quarter into a rather boring office area. Today, some are thinking about siting other activities there (see below 6.) and to locate more European institutions in other areas (see below 7.). A multi-stakeholders’ forum has proven useful in Hamburg or Berlin in transforming similar areas, and such a forum might be considered for the Brussels-Capital Region.

POINT 6. Improving the existing European Quarter, with the help of civil society
The existing European Quarter can be improved through urban design, enhancing the quality of public space and emphasizing the symbolic representation and visibility of the European Union. The Region might proceed in a number of ways:

• By channelling the through traffic Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat, using one layer of the long underground existing car park and restoring street level pedestrian links between both sides of what is presently a canyon. This would also give a new visibility to the Cinquantenaire Arcade from the Berlaymont.

• By completely rebuilding the bland facade of the Justus Lipsius Council building on the Place Jean Reyplein side, and creating a pedestrian street that also would be a visual link between the Berlaymont and the Leopold Park), passing through the Justus Lipsius building.

• By creating a broadly-based multipurpose Center of European social and cultural events with full translation facilities in the North Hall of the Cinquantenaire.


• By planning a coach and car park under the Parc du Cinquantenaire connected with a new Metro station which would also serve the Museum and the future European Center for Events at Cinquantenaire.

These ideas are in line with the proposals of the citizen group Fonds Quartier Européen, set up within the King Baudouin Foundation. This group recommends recreating the vista towards the Cinquantenaire Arcades, making an urban plaza from the European Parliament Esplanade, filling the present vacant space between the Schuman area and the Parliament area with a mix of urban uses, and attracting new residents to the European Quarter through appropriate incentives.

POINT 7. Planning for European extensions around Delta and Josaphat railway stations
This includes selecting appropriate sites in the Region for orderly planned extensions into areas well served by public transport. These areas should have provisions for both European institutions and related services, such as a sixth European school, housing, and commerce. Particularly well suited are the surroundings of Delta and Josaphat railway stations, which already host European institutions. Josaphat railway station is located at 8 minutes from the airport and 5 minutes from Schuman station.

POINT 8. Reinforcing the accessibility to Brussels from neighbouring countries
Brussels already has all the geographic qualities of a crossroads city. Today, 120 million people can reach it by train in 4 hours by train. Its position will be further enhanced by the activation of high speed rail services between Brussels, Luxembourg and the Amsterdam airport, which will significantly improve access to the city from distant destinations. As for Strasbourg, the present five hours it takes to get there by train could be cut in half through the introduction of a tilting train – an opportunity that might be exploited by a private operator in the context of European rail liberalisation.

POINT 9. Improving the links between Brussels gateways and the European quarters, and improving general traffic conditions
The tilting train connection between Brussels and Strasbourg would bring the added symbolic value of having both the Schuman station (Council of Ministers/ Commission) and the Quartier Léopold station (Parliament) served by fast international train.

To improve general traffic, we propose creating new dedicated surface sites for public transport (especially Chaussée d’Etterbeek / Etterbeekse Steenweg), building new cycle paths, and duplicating the east-west metro axis by making creative use of existing infrastructures.

POINT 10. Improving planning governance within the Region and its municipal components
The challenge for Brussels seems to be developing a strategy for the effective administration of its own territory, which is presently underutilized (as compared with Paris for example). Such improvement might include, for example, creating solidarity between richer and poorer municipalities and harmonizing housing and social help policies. Territorial strategy should combine regional and communal politics, and should emphasize the city’s principal asset: its ability to operate at the European and international levels, while maintaining the local character of its 19 communes and the patchwork of its 1,000 neighbourhoods.
The European Quarter occupies some 3% of Brussels-Capital Region’s territory, which totals 160 sq. km. Its origin is the 1958 offer of the Belgian Government to its European partners: it concerned the residential area bordering the Cinquantenaire Park, a site which was eventually extended towards Leopold Park and the Luxemburg railway station.

That whole quarter and particularly the Berlaymont building focused international attention on Brussels as Europe’s political capital but it also created an image of bureaucratic boredom, which ignored the rich cultural diversity of the nearby existing neighbourhoods.

Fifty years have elapsed since the decision on the original location. Since 1992 the status of Brussels within the network of European institutions host cities has been confirmed. The time has come for a fresh assessment of the European Quarter and its future, as well as that of other areas that could accommodate further clusters of European activity.

The European Quarter could be improved by giving a new quality to its public space, reopening lost vistas towards the Cinquantenaire Arcades and the Leopold Park, attracting a residential population wishing to live close to its work, improving pedestrian mobility within the area and improving the relation with the surrounding residential neighbourhoods. Indeed, the Brussels European Quarter is located within the urban fabric and not in remote outskirts, as is the case with NATO Headquarters.

Other areas in the Region would be well suited as future clusters of European activities, mixed with other uses, in particular the areas around Delta and Josaphat stations, which already host European activities. This would give Brussels the opportunity to receive new agencies, as advocated by the European Commission’s Vice President Kallas in his foreword to the book of the Foundation for the Urban Environment “Brussels: Perspectives on a European capital” (Pierre Laconte and Carola Hein eds).

Finally Brussels is not only a political capital of a European Economic Union also a multicultural pivot for a Europe of Cultures. The six-monthly shift of the European Council of Ministers’ presidency opens a wide field of cross-cultural activities centred on the titular country and enriching the Belgian and other European regions through an array of cultural events.

Pierre LACONTE
International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP.ORG)
Foundation for the Urban Environment (FFUE.ORG)