

Brussels - Perspectives on a European Capital

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Speaker profile

Pierre Laconte was a founding partner of the *Groupe Urbanisme-Architecture*, which produced in 1970 the master plan of Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium), the new university town and co-ordinated its implementation.

From 1984 until 1998 he was the secretary general of the *International Union of Public Transport* (UITP), a think-tank on urban mobility and intermodality.

Since 2006, he is president of the *International Society of City and Regional Planners* (ISOCARP). He is also the *European Environmental Agency's* scientific committee member in charge of urban matters

Case study 1 - The European quarter, Brussels, Belgium

Brussels became host to the largest number and the most powerful institutions in Europe almost by accident and despite a lack of planning. In 1952, the refusal of Belgium's national government to host the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in Brussels, and thus make Brussels the capital of all future European institutions, determined the remaining ECSC nations to select Luxembourg and Strasbourg as temporary capitals. It was only in 1957 when the location of the new European Community became an important issue that Belgium proposed Brussels as a host for the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom.

The first presidency was hosted by Belgium in 1958, as it was the first of the six founding members in alphabetical order. It was only then that a provisional secretariat was set up. Brussels thus became *de facto* one of the three capitals of Europe, together with Luxembourg and Strasbourg. The three capitals kept a temporary status until 1992, when the Council of Edinburgh confirmed the three temporary headquarters as the definitive ones.

Due to the temporary status of Brussels, the Belgian government never invested in its European image, with the exception of the Berlaymont, therefore allowing for a day to day addition of speculative projects on former residential plots, which did not consider the integration of the new buildings in their neighborhoods. Even the landmark buildings of the European Parliament were originally planned as a congress center. It just so happened that they complied with the requirements of the European Parliament for its meetings at the time.

The Debate

A focus on the much debated topic of density indicated that besides being an issue of definition (e.g. dwellings per hectare or jobs and people per hectare), density is more about perception than numbers of floors. Compared to other European capitals, Brussels has a low density. Whilst it seems unavoidable that a compact city and sustainable development go hand in hand, building sizes need to remain humane for people to feel at home, leading towards high-density low-rise urban forms.

The creation of the European quarter in Brussels shows that applying mere market economics does not necessarily generate good urban design. In the 1950s, the area around the North Station had been cleared by the local governments and was ready to accommodate office buildings thus making for an ideal location for a European quarter, accessible by train from the airport in fifteen minutes. However, developers opted for developing the European institution buildings on a plot by plot basis in the residential Cinquantenaire area – an area of particular architectural interest due to its late nineteenth century building stock. It was obviously cheaper for them to buy out the residents, tear down their houses and build office blocks in their place than building on vacant, but more expensive, land designated for commercial use.

The current image of the European quarter as a series of chaotic, non-integrated office buildings, without any spaces for interaction and social gathering, except perhaps the ones that emerged spontaneously (Jourdan and Luxembourg) has its roots in a lack of long-term vision of both the responsible Belgian and the European administrators who were led by speculative developers. At the same time, besides exceptions such as the Berlaymont building and the European Parliament premises, the European constructions do not differ from other nondescript office buildings, resulting in a lack of symbolism and imagery relating to the EU.

Therefore, a crucial factor in any sustainable urban development must be public involvement including those whose lives are affected by a new development or a regeneration project. Such a dialogue between developers and the citizens would respond to local interests and preferences while formulating appropriate aesthetic and political architecture for a European Capital. Indeed, one should always involve the public in the process of urban planning and development.

A European Stakeholders Forum would provide a place where all stakeholders could meet and discuss the integration of the proposed buildings and sites in the existing city or area. These stakeholders could include, depending on the case, national and regional government players, representatives of civil society, citizens groups, and the private sector and the media. The common formulation of guidelines for the proposed developments would support the legitimacy of the new initiative. For a successful regeneration project, a recommendation would be to develop a deliberate discussion European Stakeholder Forum to ensure legitimacy and acceptance.