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**“Brussels – Perspectives on a European Capital”**

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**Abstract.**

**1. The societal context of urban development.**

As an introduction the lecture sketches the overall societal forces shaping land use today, i.e. individual values and material consumption. The automobile and the detached house, and the ensuing urban spread, fit in this pattern, up a certain limit.

Applying this pattern to Belgium satellite observations confirm that whole of Central Belgium is made of one metropolis, institutionally divided among multiple levels of government in competition with each other but forced to cooperate (“coopetition”). This metropolis is itself at the heart of a centrifugal European Union made of 27 countries

**2. Brussels in history.**

Brussels has the specific historic feature to have been shaped throughout the centuries by outside rulers.

Prominently among those, Duke Phillip the Good of Burgundy (and later also Duke of Brabant) initiated the grand assembly hall Aula Magna. Habsburg Emperor Charles V settled in Brussels and developed the city. Empress Maria Theresa transformed the Coudenberg Hill. During the early nineteenth century, Belgium and Brussels were further developed by King Willem I of the Netherlands and by Leopold I, Prince of Saxe-Cobourg-Gotha (and later King of the Belgians). During the Belle Epoque, Leopold II, King of the Belgians, had a personal development policy of his capital, and his personal staff to implement it. During the second half of the twentieth century, after the parenthesis of two German occupations, it was the European Union’s turn to play a determining role in the city’s development.

### **3. Brussels and Europe.**

In 1952, the need to locate the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) presented Europe with a historic opportunity: creating a single capital. Brussels was the unanimous favourite among the partners of the ECSC, but the Belgian government blocked Brussels from becoming the seat of the first European capital (presenting the exclusive candidacy of Liege), what obliged the founding nations of Europe to locate their provisional capital in Luxembourg. This decision had important implications for Europe, for Belgium, and for Brussels:

- At the European level, the Belgian government's refusal to host the ECSC led to the emergence of the idea of a polycentric European capital. This was a completely new idea; Luxembourg, for example, had never before been envisioned as a seat of European institutions.
- Within Belgium, the government's decision marked a departure from the nation's age-old tradition of openness to foreign influences and international commerce – a tradition dating from even before the Dukes of Burgundy. This decision was also unprecedented in that Brussels' international role had been thwarted not by the city itself, but by the Belgian government, which had been expected to support its capital.
- As for Brussels, this decision was a clear signal – although perhaps not fully understood at the time – which was that the city's European development, a natural consequence of its geographic position, would not be realized without the direct compliance of local actors with European requests. Local progress would have to keep pace with the national government's own relationship with European institutions.. The private sector subsequently wisely established a "Centre of Congress" in the Leopold Quarter, which was handsomely outfitted to accommodate, at the opportune moment, either a part or the whole of the European Parliament.

In 1958 the European Commissions of the European Economic Community and of EURATOM were located in Brussels, not by a deliberate political choice, but indirectly, with the help of the alphabetical order. The Treaty of Rome (1957) made provisions for a rotating six-monthly European presidency system based on alphabetical order. Since the letter 'B' was first in the order, Belgium was charged with chairing the Council of European Ministers – a task that required putting offices at the disposal of the civil servants of both Commissions. This confirmed the multiple locations of European institutions, besides promoting Brussels to the rank of main European capital.

#### **4. The European quarter and its perspectives.**

Today the European Quarter occupies some 3% of Brussels Capital Region's territory. Its origin is the 1958 offer of the Belgian Government to its European partners to locate the European Commission in the residential area bordering the Cinquantenaire Park, not in the office area planned next to the North Station...

The Cinquantenaire site 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.

Some 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 links between the three capitals and of the Brussels European Quarter, as well as that of other areas that could accommodate further clusters of European activity.

The lecture makes a few suggestions on how the European Quarter can be improved from the European island it is today (or 'ghetto' as it is sometimes referred to) to an integrated and sustainable part of the Brussels region.

#### **About Pierre Laconte**

Pierre Laconte is the President of the International Society of city and Regional Planners and of the Foundation for the urban Environment; He is Honorary Secretary General of the International Association for Public transport and the European Environment Agency's Scientific Committee member in charge of urban matters.

After having studied with Professor Raymond Lemaire at the University of Louvain (UCL), he became his associate as partner of Groupe Urbanisme Architecture, which was in charge of the master plan of Louvain-la-Neuve, an entirely new university town developed around a new railway station.

His latest publication is titled "Brussels – Perspectives on a European Capital", co-edited with Carola Hein, Brussels 2007 ([www.ffue.org](http://www.ffue.org))

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