

'The European Parliament tries out its new seat for the first time amid protests against attacks on heritage ' from El País (30 September 1993)

Caption: Published in the Spanish daily newspaper El País on 30 September 1993, this article retraces the steps that led to the successful construction of the new building for the European Parliament in Brussels, despite adverse criticism from defenders of the architectural heritage of the Léopold district.

Source: El País. 30.09.1993. Madrid. "El Parlamento Europeo estrena su nueva sede con protestas por la agresión al patrimonio", auteur: Bassets, Lluís.

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The European Parliament tries out its new seat for the first time amid protests against attacks on heritage

Brussels has lost 500 buildings of architectural merit over the last 15 years

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As of yesterday the European Parliament (EP) has a new Chamber in which to hold plenary sittings. It is its third, after the one that it uses in Strasbourg and the one that it doesn't use in Luxembourg. The building, which is only half finished, is the source of a bitter dispute between heritage conservationists and those who actively want to promote the city as the capital of Europe. The former consider that the *Caprice des Dieux* — the building's nickname — is the culmination of an organised campaign to destroy Brussels' heritage. This paper has been told by Linda van Santvoort, who works for Sint Lucas Architect, that since 1979 when the most recent list was compiled, Brussels has lost 500 buildings of artistic merit, most of them Art Deco, and a good number of those were in the district where the European Parliament is situated. The latter believe that the building represents the step required to bring the European Parliament to the Belgian capital definitively and that it is, therefore, the jewel in the Belgians' European crown. The *Caprice des Dieux* owes its name to the shape of the building because from above it bears a striking similarity to the cheese of that name. The project was drawn up by eight major architectural firms. The building, which was inaugurated yesterday with a plenary sitting of Parliament, covers just 57 000 square metres out of the total of 370 000 square metres which the building complex will occupy once it is complete.

The overall investment is ECU 1 billion (PTA 150 billion), the administration of which was the responsibility of a private consortium including the savings bank of the Christian Socialist unions and the Société Générale de Belgique, the principal Belgian corporate holding company. The history of this urban development project is littered with incidents such as a building licence being granted by the very person applying for it (a Minister for the Brussels Region) and a court order to suspend the works which was later overturned by the courts.

The EP is tied into the project by a lease with option to purchase for a rent of ECU 100 million (PTA 15 billion) over 20 years as from the handing over of the building complex. Signature of the lease and purchase contract was one of the final acts performed by Enrique Barón as President of the EP on 8 January, a few hours before he was replaced by the German Egon Klepsch.

'It was my job to sign and I agreed that I should do so,' he said yesterday on the telephone. The socialist MEP gave an assurance that he had 'plucked up the courage' to make sure that the decision was watertight. Nor did Barón have any difficulty in conceding that his successor, the Christian Democrat Klepsch, had the power to freeze the project in order to promote the best interests of Strasbourg. The former President vigorously defended the management of this property investment, the initial decision for which was taken by his predecessor, the British Conservative Lord Plumb. Barón sums up his activities in three points. First he obtained a standby agreement from the Bureau of the European Parliament by maintaining the three seats (Strasbourg for plenary sittings, Brussels for committees and meetings, and Luxembourg for the Secretariat and General Services). Secondly, he had the initial lease redrafted so that it became a 20-year lease with option to purchase. Thirdly, he signed the contract after the parliamentary working party on buildings policy, known as *Pim*, secured an ECU 3 billion reduction (PTA 450 billion) on the contract. 'Everything was duly audited in stages,' he says.

The district where the new European Parliament building is located, a stone's throw away from the bureaucratic mausoleums which accommodate the other European institutions, used to be made up of 19th-century buildings 'of all styles — classical, renaissance, gothic, in an eclectic mix,' explained the Brussels film-maker André Darteville in the introduction to his film *Bruxelles réquiem*.

Now only traces of this delightful old *quartier* remain. One of them actually happens to be the building housing the former Spanish Embassy, which is currently being restored. The monstrous metamorphosis of the district, which has been damaged by two tunnels for fast through traffic, occurred between 1960 and

1990, more or less during the years when Brussels was being consolidated as the capital of the Community.

Dartevelle says that ‘the ruling classes of the fledgling independent Belgian State constructed [the district] as a civic work and model to the glory of progress, the monarchy and national unity,’ but now, ‘the disastrous decision to select an area built at the end of the 19th century as the place to build the European institutions has led to the Léopold district being taken over by shops and offices to the extent that it has now become nothing more or less than a business district.’ Linda van Santvoort stated that the EC cannot be blamed for the destruction of Brussels’ architectural heritage; rather, the blame lies with the Belgians themselves, especially the Belgians involved in Expo 1958.

In favour of the European Parliament building in Brussels have been the majority of MEPs who wish to see all the services moved to a single seat and who view Brussels as the appropriate place because the city already houses the Council of Ministers and the European Commission, the institutions whose actions the MEPs must monitor. The more pro-European Belgian politicians have also been in its favour; their wish is to consolidate Brussels as the capital of Europe.

The major party against it is France, which wants to maintain Strasbourg as a seat and prevent the passing of the years from leading to a slow but unstoppable drift towards Brussels. Germany is also acting as an ally to French interests because the capital of Alsace, where a German dialect is spoken, is a symbol of the Paris–Bonn axis. Also against are the Belgian politicians who are most resolutely against Brussels being the capital of Europe, some of whom take the view that it means the loss of the city’s Flemish identity and its character as the capital of Flanders. The latter group includes the nationalist and separatist groups such as Vlaams Blok on the extreme right.

Ecological and heritage groups and associations of Brussels residents are allies of the anti-Brussels lobby but in their case they rely on the weight of self-evident facts: the Community buildings are usually very ugly, although that is not true at all of the *Caprice des Dieux*, and this property transaction represents the culmination of destructive town planning which utterly horrifies all Belgians and MEPs who acknowledge what little success in the aesthetics department Community architecture has had.

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