

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the Council buildings in Brussels (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

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[Raquel Valls] What do you recall of the former workplaces of the Council and of its installation in the new Justus Lipsius building in 1995?

[Norbert Schwaiger] When I arrived in 1969, we were in the Ravenstein building in the city centre, between the Grand-Place and the Place Royale, near the Château, and so on. At the time it was a traditional building that had not been built for the Council, so we had to make do with what we had in order to set up meeting rooms, interpreting facilities and everything. It all worked quite well until the first enlargement because there were clearly new areas of competence, which were either already in force or were in preparation, and, above all, more delegations — three additional delegations, or one-and-a-half times the original configuration — and there were various other things, such as translators to house, new forms of organisation, and so on.

One of the things initiated by The Hague Summit were the enlargement negotiations. We had already run out of room in the original Ravenstein building. Next to the Commission building, there was a completely empty tower-block that a far-sighted businessman had had built as a speculation — the Charlemagne building — where accession negotiations were started, at least at the technical level. As for negotiations at the political level, we either went to the Ravenstein building or other locations, such as the Egmont palace, and so on. When the Accession Treaty was adopted, the removal had already been prepared for from the first building to the new Charlemagne building. This had not been conceived of as a seat of the Council, but was, nonetheless, a modern building with movable partitions where it was easier to create rooms and other venues, such as dining-rooms and reception rooms, that were needed whilst maintaining a very low profile in comparison with the traditional residences of the chancelleries or the presidential offices of the republics, and suchlike. So it was, of course, very modest.

I am not saying that this was intentional, but it certainly was not something that bothered the Member States. Prestige was not a motivating influence. Perhaps it was a mistake that... Often, when images of the Council are shown, it is above all the Berlaymont that you see, because it was larger and more imposing. If pictures were taken from the Schuman roundabout, the Charlemagne building would seem smaller and, as it were, complementing the large Berlaymont building. All right, perhaps these are perhaps just the reflections of a retired civil servant, and seem somewhat off beam, but I do not think that they are completely inappropriate. At any rate, we were able to live with the Charlemagne building; particularly because it was very close to the Commission, which was not bad functionally speaking, given the easy access to it... We did not perhaps enjoy all the security guarantees, because at that time terrorism was not the concern that it is at present.

It was clear that, following enlargement to include Spain and Portugal — Greece had already joined — something larger had to be foreseen since at the same time new fields of activity were being planned. The philosophy had also changed in the meantime: more binding decisions about seats had been taken because, beforehand, we had always been tenants at Ravenstein and Charlemagne. They were all rented buildings. It was the same for the Commission as well, for it had rented Berlaymont because no decision had been taken on the establishment of permanent workplaces. So because of all this we too opted for the principle of building something for the Council and becoming the owner of it. For the Justus Lipsius building the project supervisor was the Belgian Government — the Ministry of Public Works essentially, which had also found, or reserved, a site opposite the Berlaymont, thus maintaining the unity of the decision-making centres which, together with the Parliament buildings not far away, created a sort of European Quarter. This brought with it a certain image to offer the outside world, not to mention the symbolism.

At any rate, the building was planned around our requirements. Of course our requirements at the time anticipated certain developments — such as, for instance, this studio, which had been planned for as a necessity, but was only built recently, after over ten years inside the building — and other transformations were also needed following the recent enlargements. Then again because the decision was taken in future to hold European Councils systematically in Brussels, all the necessary functional aspects needed to be put in place, such as security and access, which was easier here. It was still a problem, but easier to solve than in a

rented building.

There was, nevertheless, the need to rent office space as well as space for certain activities — the military branch is in a building apart, because security issues are even more important for them than for the Council in general. But I think that for the moment we have reached a point... I cannot say of saturation, but at least we are awaiting future developments with a measure of patience. This centre is operational. With the installation of a large working area and a lobby for the press, we have covered the needs of the European Councils and so on.