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EUTOPIA

On a cold december morning, a hundred or so *gilets jaunes* had gathered in the vicinity of rue de la Loi in Brussels.[1] Blocked by the police, they were chanting 'All together, all together, all . . .', as they struggled in vain to move towards the Robert Schuman Roundabout. The goal was to get inside the Berlaymont building, the cruciform office block that houses the European Commission. No luck. The Belgian cavalry, in the shape of mounted police, was already on its way. Nevertheless, everyone understood the need to target 'Europe' before booing national governments. That's what issues the instructions to keep us in our place. Unshakable, invincible, 'as cold as an EU directive on insurance policies',[2] the Berlaymont sits at the heart of what's known as the city's European Quarter. It faces the newly rebuilt home of the European Council and Council of Ministers, a giant mish-mash of steel, glass and art-deco façade known as the Europa building, on the other side of the rue de la Loi. (The sprawling new NATO HQ occupies a former airfield, 5 kilometres to their north.)

The Robert Schuman Roundabout was not chosen by chance. A gateway to the city, straddling the rue de la Loi, which in turn links the avenue de la Joyeuse Entrée to the rue Royale, it has long attracted popular mobilizations. It was repainted by Greenpeace only recently, transformed into a giant sun: 'Go Solar!' That touch of gaiety couldn't conceal the infinite sadness of the rue de la Loi. Slicing through the district, noisy, hostile, exhausting, walled off by blind buildings raised in an uninterrupted belt, it presents its four lanes and 40,000 cars a day to scared pedestrians. The European Quarter itself, with its checkerboard grid of streets, seems like a gigantic building game that consists of piling up glass and concrete cubes. Every day, 27,000 EU functionaries hurry through. The district, bounded by parks, is still known to local citizens as the wealthy Leopold Quarter; its mansions once sheltered huge colonial fortunes

from the Congo's mines. The eighty-five office blocks in which EU policy is manufactured—along with thousands of prescriptions, norms, regulations and technical constraints—are built upon their rubble.

Yet there is always something new to be demolished in the European Quarter, since, as Ludovic Lamant notes in his engaging critique of 'building-site Brussels', the newly constructed offices are almost identical to the ones that have just been torn down.[3] Demolitions cleared the ground for yet more offices; new motorways and access roads were driven through the neighbouring districts, to the anger of the locals. Brussels wasn't chosen at the outset to be the administrative headquarters of the EU. Although Jean Monnet's memoirs speak of the dream of uniting all the European institutions in a single urban space, in architectural terms, Brasilia might be a better example of what he had in mind. It was only little by little that the Belgian capital assumed this gloomy status. Most Brussels residents are allergic to the European Quarter, which they seldom visit.

Strangely enough, symbolic structures are rare. It's enough that two dozen blue flags with gold stars flap on Berlaymont's façade. Perhaps the tragic fate of the World Trade Centre furnished a negative example: let us abolish symbols, the coldness of the office blocks seems to say; we will avoid planes. Yet eventually, building office blocks alone no longer sufficed. The exigencies of the monthly shuttle of 4,000 European factotums to the Strasbourg Parliament, 430 kilometres to the southeast, was taking up 10 per cent of the institution's budget. Quietly, secretly (it wouldn't do to annoy the French, for whom Strasbourg remained a point of honour), planning began for the construction of a huge semi-circular chamber, which was passed off as a conference hall until the point where the scheme had to be acknowledged. In this way, European functionaries nibbled away at what remained of the Leopold Quarter. The invitations to tender were nebulous, the responses uncertain, the disagreements frequent, the construction rushed through at high speed. The Espace Léopold was inaugurated in 1993. The debating chamber of the Europarliament was located in the Paul-Henri Spaak building, named

[1] First published as 'Architectures Bruxelloises', *Médium*, no. 58–59, 2019; abridged and translated with kind permission.

[2] Pascal Marie, 'Parlement européen de Bruxelles: un nouveau caprice à un demi-milliard d'euros?', *Marianne*, 23 June 2017.

[3] Ludovic Lamant, *Bruxelles chantiers, une critique architecturale de l'Europe*, Montréal 2018.

for the Belgian social democrat (1899–1972) who had been secretary-general of NATO for four years, and prime minister at regular intervals. The cost of the new parliament—more than €300 million—and its ovaloid shape, reminiscent of a famous cheese, earned it the immediate nickname, 'Caprice des dieux'.

The first fissures in the edifice appeared in 2012, at the height of the Greek crisis. An inspection revealed defects in three structural beams overhanging the debating chamber. In December 2016—as the imperial-scale Europa Building opened its doors—Brussels residents learned that further parts of the Europarliament building were developing cracks. There were problems with subsidence, damp, insulation and security. Should it be demolished? Repaired? Were the cracked beams the symbol of a political crisis, a fundamental rupture between capital and labour, the imbalance between social rights and economic laws? Was it plausible to see in this the physical and moral collapse of the EU? Could we hope that the building works would bring with them the promise of democratic renewal, a genuinely pan-European debate?

Views from Venice

A visit to the Venice Architectural Biennale, in the beautiful gardens opening on to the sea, where enormous gleaming liners cruise by like floating towns, is endlessly astonishing. A couple of years back, the 2018 Architectural Biennale proposed the theme of 'freespace'—in the French translation, *lieux infinis*: infinite or unfinished spaces. At the Belgian Pavilion, four newly qualified architects took on the project of constructing an anti-European Quarter in the limited space available to them—in a sense, following the model of the lumbering insertion of EU buildings into the Leopold Quarter. If Berlaymont and the Europa Building resist popular intrusion, block dialogue and repress critical reflection, the young Belgian architects aimed to use construction and fiction as tools for a critical analysis of the contemporary world, offering a terrain for discussion.

Their *Eurotopia* materialized in the form of an amphitheatre of concentric circular steps, or benches, all painted ultramarine; white walls reflected a soft milky blue. Visitors are free to spread out on the steps, sit, lie down, stand in the middle or find a nook of their choice. The movement of the terraced benches creates a twelve-tone ode, evoking

the 24 official languages in simultaneous translation at EU sessions. Hot in summer, cold by mid-autumn, the Pavilion discourages making light of climate change. Blue was not always Europe's favourite colour. The ancient Greeks and Romans thought it hard on the eye. Although by the eleventh century it had become the colour of the Virgin's robe, the colour of power, that of Pope and Emperor, was red. However, little by little blue became royal, the colour of sovereignty. It was already political when it was adopted as the emblematic colour of the Strasbourg Parliament and that of the European flag, designed in 1955. Thenceforward, ultramarine signified a supranational value.

In proposing a utopian space for listening, reflection and discussion, the architects of *Eurotopia* expose the absence of these values at the heart of the European institutions. For them, architecture is also a process of revealing malfunctions. Visitors to the Belgian Pavilion were given a document that narrated the architects' initiative in the form of a travel diary, while offering a series of perspectives—some critical, some fantastical—on the European Quarter. One story is set in the wake of a European Civil War between nationalists and federalists. A newly elected Euro deputy leaves her homeland and travels across the war-torn continent to Brussels, where the European Quarter itself has been partially destroyed. The deputy finds her office, on the sixth floor of the Paul-Henri Spaak building. Duly equipped with a digital audio guide, she learns the reasons for the choice of Brussels as the heart of European political activity: the city made a well-judged assessment of the way the wind was blowing, anticipated the options and offered a fully equipped city, dirt cheap.

It isn't, then, a matter of thinking of the European Quarter as an island, a world apart, a closed universe, but of grasping it in its originality. The Civil War prompts self-questioning: how did we get here? After the bloody episodes that have once again plunged the continent into mourning, two positions emerge. Some wish to defend Europe as it was, with its Council dominated by the nation-states, its Parliament stifled. Others, while opposing the sovereigntists, believe that Europe's institutions bear a real responsibility for the conflict. The need, then, is to build a new Europe, but this time with the support of its inhabitants. Must we wait for a new civil war before tackling that work of reconstruction?