

# 'UGLY BRUXY' OR BRUXELLES 'RE-BELLE'?

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A searing diatribe by a journalist bemoaning the flaws of the 'Capital of Europe' sparked much debate on the state of Brussels today, around both its aesthetic attributes as well as the processes going on beneath its surface. Closer inspection reveals how the tangles and disjointedness of the city's politics are mirrored in its public face, yet some 'Bruxellois' – whether by origin or by choice – argue that the city does not deserve its bad press.

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**'BRUXELLES  
PAS BELLE' OU  
BRUXELLES  
'RE-BELLE'?**

Après 40 ans de massacre à la bétonneuse, Bruxelles émerge peu à peu de la grisaille automobile et des limbes de sa gouvernance chaotique grâce à des politiques urbaines innovantes, inspirées en partie par les écologistes.

In spring 2013, Jean Quatremer, a long-standing European correspondent for the French daily *Libération*, who has lived in Brussels for over twenty years, published on his blog a damning indictment of his adoptive town. He describes a 'dirty' city, engulfed by 'car madness', an 'urban planning mess' of 'cracked pavements', at the mercy of 'outrageous property speculation' over which there is no apparent control in light of the impotence of the political will, weakened by its fragmentation between different interests, jealously guarding their own powers and competing levels of decision-making.

In a few hours, and over several days, this 'Ugly Bruxy' post had triggered fierce debate, and indignant reactions from citizens and politicians alike. Yet it seems the most shocking element of this devastating attack was less the substance of the comments than their tone.

For this criticism, so French in spirit, doesn't stop there. It is often expressed by other nationals living in the European capital, whose Scandinavian, Germanic, or Mediterranean urban cultures clash with the Brussels way of life. Between the pleasures of a rich cultural life

and the nightmare of derelict public services, the mood of these citizens, who have made Brussels their home, speaks volumes about the charming and infuriating contradictions of the dual federal capital, that of Belgium and of the European Union.

As with many other cities and capitals, or at least in a more marked way, Brussels demonstrates the interconnection, or rather what has for too long been a disconnection, between city politics and the political city. A scene of struggle but also a societal laboratory, for better or worse, the political character of Brussels the city is re-emerging, amidst the scars of the urban policies which damaged it for so long.

## THE BRUSSELS BULLDOZER MASSACRE

Yet at the heart of the controversy, the notorious ‘bruxellisation’ – the city’s increasingly grey concrete face – is no myth. Indeed, it has become the symbol ‘par excellence’ of what not to do in city planning. The city was wilfully destroyed from the 1950s to the 1970s, with the intention of retaining only administrative functions in Brussels. These post-war decades saw Brussels become directly dependent on federal political power, and decision-makers who, for the most part, lived outside the city.

Brussels was then a tremendous source of profit for dodgy developers, and of monumental inspiration for politicians and bureaucrats, enthusiasts for spectacular building projects and flashy opening ceremonies.

A patchwork of old stone and new concrete, blending Belle Époque art déco marvels and the tracery of medieval lanes with the carving out of new roads, Brussels was changed for ever.

But in many ways the case of Brussels is no exception. The post-war boom of the ‘trente glorieuses’<sup>1</sup>, obsessed as they were by growth at any price, set the scene in Western Europe for a huge massacre by bulldozer and cement-mixer. At the same time, Liège concreted over la Sauvenière, and Paris started bristling with towers, redesigned its ‘Front de Seine’ district, built the ‘périphérique’ ring road, and laid out the embankment roads which today provoke passionate pro-and anti-car debates. In Lyon, the Croix-Rousse and Fourvière tunnels were dug, the Perrache transport hub was built, and the A6 and A7 motorways cut across the city centre. Milan, capital of the Italian economic miracle, underwent a similar transformation, breaking away from traditional Italian urban planning. And what about London’s congestion, or the motor industry’s urbanisation of the Ruhr? Subjected to the ‘social ideology of

<sup>1</sup> The label attributed to the thirty years from 1945 to 1975 following the end of the Second World War in France, which witnessed strong economic growth and rising living standards.

the car<sup>2</sup>, the 'industrialising industry' of the 20th century, Western Europe, in particular at its economic core, became, according to one's point of view, either a fantastic futuristic megapolopolis, or a vast 'open-air carpark'.<sup>3</sup>

THE CHALLENGE IS  
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This period also witnessed the nascent European Community's institutions establishing themselves in Brussels. The first building to be constructed was the Berlaymont, opened in 1967, and the European district then progressively spread into the spaces freed up by the major arterial roads Loi and Belliard. But there too, the setting up of 'Europe' in Brussels took place amidst enormous chaos, without an overall vision or development plan. Entire historic districts were destroyed, fuelling property speculation, and some resentment from locals feeling neglected by the authorities.

## WHO IS BRUSSELS?

Viaducts, tunnels, and the destruction of historic districts and heritage sites thus represented the heyday of this dark period. But without any overall plan, without thought for quality of life, public spaces, or mobility, the distinctive feature of Brussels lies less in the concrete than in the chaos of its governance. 'Brussels' is not a single entity but a collec-

tion of multiple players. The 19 independent communes which make up the city constitute a remarkable model of decentralised governance, close to their local communities. The downside of this localism can, of course, be seen in the power struggles, the

organised irresponsibility in situations of conflict between competing municipal majorities and lack of communication between administrations, and policy differences where the obvious solution would be harmonisation.

Symptomatic of the chaos of the governance of Brussels' urban planning, the corrupt practices surrounding the 'European Quarter' and the 1965 scandal of the destruction – right in the city centre – of Victor Horta's art nouveau masterpiece the 'Maison de Peuple', underline the traumas which finally managed to awaken the consciences of the people of Brussels. Local residents burst into the public debate, and began to speak up through neighbourhood and local residents' committees, heritage associations and groups of concerned architects, to demand a different kind of regulation of public spaces. The emergence of the Green Parties Ecolo and Groen (then Agalev), in 1980 and 1982 respectively, is an indication of how voices at the heart of political parties also joined

2 André Gorz, 'L'idéologie sociale de la bagnole', *Le Sauvage* 1973.

3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus. Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, Edition Suhrkamp 1989.

the call to demand more ‘power to the people of Brussels’.

A product of this progressive raising of awareness, as well as growing community dissent, the ‘regionalisation’ of Belgium was underway. In 1989, the Brussels region was given its own government and independent institutions, laying the foundations for a more organised approach to planning. By allowing a regional steering of new planning instruments for protecting its heritage and regional development plans, the 1989 regionalisation shifted the paradigm – at least in part.

But, then as today, there is more at stake than just the organisation of the built environment, and urban planning. The impoverishment of the city centre, and the exodus of the rich fleeing an unattractive city, make social cohesion a growing challenge. For, unlike other large capitals, Brussels is wealthier in its comfortable leafy suburbs, and poorer in the city centre and in the northern districts, where life is more precarious for local people, many of whose backgrounds lie in the working-class immigration of the growth years. These social inequalities are reflected in the urban fabric, and highlight the disparity in the resources available to different districts to rise to the challenge of managing growing social and cultural diversity between Brussels natives, the commuters who make up more than half the workforce, European immigration, and immigration from outside Europe.

## **A CITY FOR ALL**

In Brussels, even after regionalisation, the integration of issues of the environment, energy, and sustainability into urban planning is still inadequate and patchy, being fitted round the edge of city policies in a vertical way, rather than being embedded at all levels of city decision-making. It is this challenge which the 2004 to 2014 administration – comprising of Green ministers for the first time – wanted to meet, by trying to pursue more holistic policies, introducing ecological and energy issues into the heart of public, economic, and social policy, to bring in lasting transformation for the Brussels region. The fact is that managing transport, energy transition, and public spaces – the main challenges of a ‘city for all’ – is less about policies for economic redistribution, despite the importance of local social action movements, than about tackling urban segregation.

The originality of the ecologists has been to join the dots between social inequality and environmental problems, rather than standing and watching as the better-off flee the city. It is decent transport which helps to avoid ghettoisation; it is an energy transition which will help tackle both poverty and climate change; it is with green recreation spaces that a better quality of life for all can be provided. In sum, to put in place new policies, alliances between different sectors of activity, consultation with local people, positive information and communication, and

real incentives. All of this in a bid to increase residents' pride in their city, and make of them ambassadors to the outside world. And all while protecting existing neighbourhoods, and the architectural heritage that blends art nouveau, art déco, modernism, and innovation.

### **A CITY TO CALL HOME**

After forty years of soulless concrete, the region's 'Beacon Buildings' initiative has highlighted integrated eco-design approaches, combining energy efficiency with variety of materials, architectural quality, and replicability. Since 2007, a combined area of more than 500,000 m<sup>2</sup> has been built or renovated, through hundreds of projects: collective and individual housing, offices, schools, nurseries, etc. Little by little, the face of Brussels is changing, and this method is now being copied as far afield as New York and Vancouver.

From 2010, the 'Passivhaus' standard has been imposed for all new public buildings, and, since 2015, for all new private buildings. This building revolution means conventional heating can be avoided, and ensures substantial gains both for public finances, as well as for fighting climate change. What is more, this new building stimulus is in part meeting the need for social housing by increasing housing stock and tackling the precarious situation of renters, whose energy costs are sometimes higher than their rent.

From 'beacon buildings' to 'sustainable neighbourhoods', every transformation of the city must combine building the future with enhancing the past. Rather than demolishing the old industrial districts and historic heritage sites, the region is choosing to renovate and improve neighbourhoods with 'sustainable neighbourhood contracts'. Distributed across Brussels (four per year), and with a clear timetable (over four years), these programmes involve buildings as much as public spaces. What is more, these 'neighbourhood contracts' enable residents to actively participate in the renovation of their urban environment, through inclusion initiatives and renovation skills training for young people. These contracts also integrate environmental issues such as water management, transport, waste treatment, and preserving biodiversity.

### **A CITY OF THE FUTURE: CAP 2030**

Brussels has not yet healed the wounds of its past unrestrained development. Its greatest challenges are certainly to reduce excessive car use, improve air quality, give more space to pedestrians and cyclists, and preserve and enhance its existing heritage. But it must also dare to take some bold contemporary architectural initiatives, to create sustainable neighbourhoods along the old railway lines, to integrate nature into these districts, and to ensure that population density increases at a human scale. Brussels is also facing an

enormous social and economic challenge: the struggle against a growing ‘precarity’, and very high youth unemployment (over 20 per cent, rising to 40 per cent in some districts), improving qualification levels for young people in Brussels, and bridging the gap that has opened up between certain neighbourhoods in the north and the south of the city.

As a predominantly French-speaking city in Flemish territory, a European capital which has not yet managed to reconcile natives, expatriates, and Eurocrats, Brussels remains torn between regional, municipal, and federal powers. It still suffers from multi-layered governance of badly shared out responsibilities, and sterile competition between the Region and its 19 communes. Greater Paris, Greater London, Metropolitan Lille... on a sheer regional scale, Brussels is facing the same problem as all large European metropolises: that the interdependence between different administrative levels, from neighbourhoods to the greater city, is not reflected in the political and administrative governance of the city. The challenge is more one of politics than of planning.

Jean Quatremer’s very harsh words still resonate, emphasising the scale of the challenges ahead. But they do not do justice to the greatest strength of this city which stands apart:

the affection it evokes in its inhabitants. Its charm, the parks which make it the greenest city in Europe, its cosmopolitan diversity, its multilingual cultural life. Little by little, Brussels is humming its old charming tune, Bruxelling<sup>4</sup> again, and one day, even the nay-sayers will join in.



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<sup>4</sup> Following Jacques Brel’s famous tune “C’était au temps où Bruxelles bruxellait”...