

Places in Brussels of symbolic significance for Europe

SUMMARY

Although Brussels is often referred to as the *de facto* 'capital of Europe', the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has argued that the city suffers from an 'iconographic deficit', because the way the space is organised, together with the architecture of EU buildings is insufficiently distinctive to be particularly memorable.

In fact, there are quite a number of places of symbolic significance for Europe to be found in Brussels and which reflect three main themes: pre-EU culture involving European myths and medieval imagery of Charlemagne; the EU founding fathers, notably Robert Schuman, Altiero Spinelli and Paul-Henri Spaak; and the Cold War and dissidence against authoritarian regimes.

Over the past decade, a number of ambitious urban projects have been launched to raise the European profile of Brussels and give the European quarter more of the architectural distinctiveness it lacks. For example, a competition was launched in 2009 by the Belgian authorities and the European Commission for a complete transformation of the Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat.



Photo: European Parliament.

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Brussels as an iconographic capital

The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has argued that Brussels, as the *de facto* capital of the European Union,¹ has an 'iconographic deficit', meaning a certain form of 'memory deficit' compared to national capitals. Indeed each capital city has its monumental landmarks and these institutional buildings can become central elements of the national memory, as is the case with the parliament buildings of the United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary and the United States. They form what Alexander Etkind calls the 'hardware of memory', meaning the concrete elements of public memory (objects, statues, buildings, places), as opposed to 'software' (texts and symbolic memories) of such memory. This hardware of memory can be divided into buildings and places with a practical use, but a significance created over time – like important official buildings – and 'places of remembrance' – monuments specifically created for the purpose of a common history.

At least three explanations may contribute to understanding why Brussels has a lack of 'hardware of memory' on the European front. First, this 'memory deficit' relates to a long-lasting debate about the type of capital the EU should have. The two opposing camps in the debate are well illustrated by the report on '[Brussels Capital of Europe](#)' published by the European Commission and the Belgian Presidency of the EU in 2001, following the discussions of a working group on the subject: either a centralised model, with all the EU institutions in the same city, on the one hand, or a 'Beneluxian model', with several capital cities, on the other hand. The perceived 'deficit' could in part be the result of the hesitation between these two models. Second, EU authorities have few means to shape the European capital. Third, Brussels only [recently](#) became a permanent seat for the EU institutions in 1992, together with Luxembourg and Strasbourg.

Brussels as a recent capital of Europe

Washington or Berlin, as capital cities, have a much more distinctive design and a long list of monuments related to the history of the US or Germany. The main reason is that they were consciously conceived of, or rebuilt, as capital cities.

In comparison with other capital cities, Brussels, in its capacity as 'capital' of the Union, has only a few monuments related to EU history. This symbolic or memory deficit contrasts with the international status of the city. It hosts the [NATO](#) headquarters as well as other international organisations such as [EFTA](#). But it was only relatively recently that the Belgian capital city was recognised as a European 'capital' by the EU Member States, during the December 1992 Edinburgh [European Council](#).

Brussels has long been a growing hub of international politics. In 2009, the European Commission [noted](#) that Brussels is the second diplomatic city of the world, with over [2 500](#) accredited diplomats. The European quarter is [home](#) to 3.4 million square metres of office space, half of it occupied by the EU institutions. The European institutions occupy 1.9 million square metres of office space, of [which](#) the European Commission and its executive agencies use 1 million. But even if these figures show how international and European Brussels is, this is not reflected in its design. The main reason is that the choice of Brussels was an incremental decision, as a compromise instead of a grandiose project.

In search of a capital city

In the 1950s, the Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) discussed various projects of capital cities. Some private actors promoted independent projects for a capital city on the border of France and Germany.² Karl Schreiner (1894-1972), a former prisoner-of-war of German nationality and Georges Henri Pescadère

(1915-2003), a Frenchman who was also imprisoned in Germany, during the war, jointly proposed Wissembourg / Bourg-Blanc as a location in French Alsace for a new European capital city after the Second World War. But the Member States turned down the project in 1952, as France opposed any idea of an extraterritorial zone in Alsace. Other regions offered to build a new capital city for Europe, including Saarland. Saarland became a French protectorate after the Second World War (1947-1956). Its future was uncertain, so the local authorities conceived a project for a European district, in order to escape the dilemma of French / German tensions. The municipal authorities of Saarbrücken wrote to the Member States and the ECSC institutions to welcome the institutions to their region as early as 1951.³ They proposed a European federal district not far from the region's capital and launched an international competition to design the new city. A draft resolution by the Council of Europe in 1953 advocated a European status for the region.⁴ But the hopes for that project diminished after the Franco-German treaty of 1954, which scheduled a referendum on the future of the Saarland (held the following year, with the result that Saarland was integrated into the Federal Republic of Germany).

1952: Luxembourg, a temporary solution

On the side of national governments, the Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) could not agree on a single project, be it an existing city or a new capital to be built from scratch. On 27 July 1952, they met in Paris to resolve the issue. Five cities were on the list: Saarbrücken and Strasbourg, both presented by France, Liège presented by Belgium, Luxembourg and The Hague (for the Court of Justice only).

The ministers could not agree on a city, because of the unanimity rule and the fact that the Netherlands proposed to host only one institution. At 3 o'clock in the morning, with negotiations deadlocked, [Joseph Bech](#), Luxembourg's Foreign Minister, unexpectedly declared: 'I suggest that work begins immediately in Luxembourg; that will give us time to think about the future'.⁵ Luxembourg welcomed the ECSC institutions, as a provisional solution, while the Common Assembly (CA) was to hold its plenary sessions in Strasbourg.

Private initiatives continued after 1952. An American architect, James Marshall Miller, proposed the creation of 'Lake Europa', a federal European capital city on an artificial lake on the Mosel River, at the crossroads of France, Luxembourg and Germany, close to Schengen.⁶ Other architects, such as Maurice Rotival, proposed to re-design large parts of Paris, in order to welcome the European institutions.

In 1952-1953, the Common Assembly of the ECSC and other ECSC institutions called on the Member States⁷ to choose a single seat for all the European institutions in the context of the possible creation of the European Defence Community (EDC) and the European Political Community (EPC). Indeed, the CA – later the European Parliamentary Assembly (EPA) (1958) and then the European Parliament (1962) – played a pivotal role in the debate on a capital of Europe.

The 1958 competition

A year after the signing of the EEC and Euratom Treaties in Rome, a renewed debate on the seat of the institutions took place. The Council decided to organise a competition to choose a capital for Europe. This time, France presented further candidates (Paris, Nice, Strasbourg and the Oise department); while Italy proposed Monza, Stresa, Milan and Turin. Luxembourg wanted to keep its status,⁸ particularly since it had already invested in the transformation of the Kirchberg area of the city. A Committee of Experts was tasked with making proposals to the Council of Ministers, after a vote of the European Parliament.

The European Parliamentary Assembly and the 1958 competition

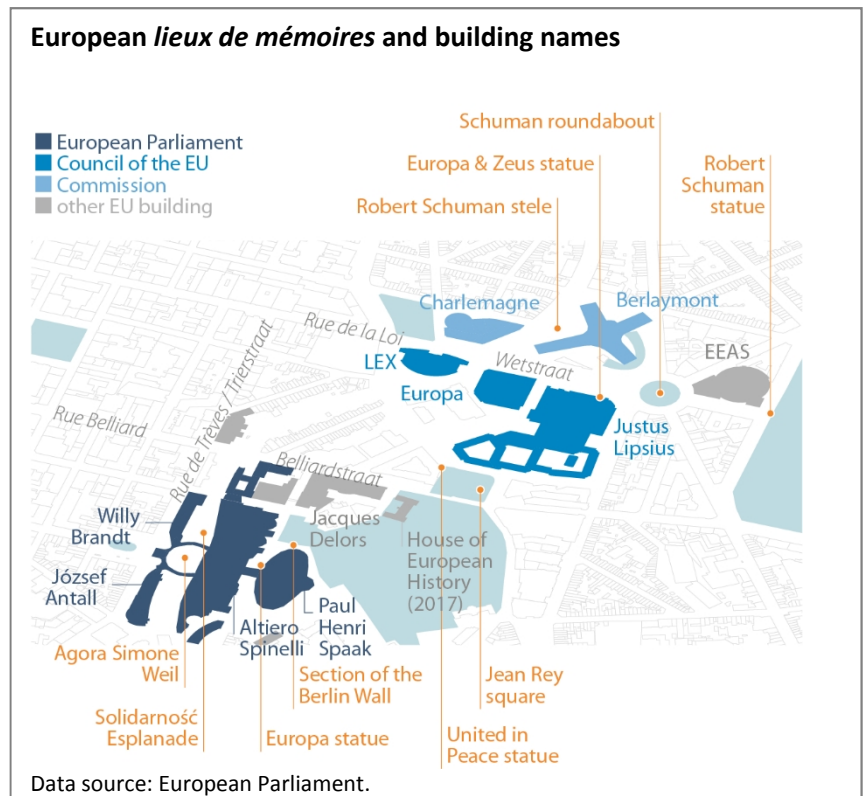
The EPA held two debates in 1958 on the question of a capital of Europe. On 21 June, the first was related to the procedure of choosing a city. After a long discussion, the Members decided to choose by a preferential vote, rather by an elimination system. During the second debate on 23 June 1958, 126 Members voted. Brussels won by 170 points, followed by Strasbourg (161 points), Milan (155), Nice (153) and Luxembourg (99). The EPA informed the Member States of the vote, but they did not take a formal decision on it.

The Council eventually decided to add Brussels as a third temporary capital city pending a final decision in 1962, once there was a decision on the European district option, something still favoured by some of the European founding fathers, such as Jean Monnet,⁹ but which never came about. In 1965, the Member States' decision¹⁰ on the provisional location of the institutions confirmed the existence of three European seats for the institutions: Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg.

The choice of Brussels

In Brussels, in 1958, private companies proposed to erect new buildings in the Leopold Quarter to house the European Communities. As the Berlaymont project was delayed several times, the first building, the Charlemagne, started to house European civil servants in 1967. The Berlaymont was eventually completed in 1968. Meanwhile, the Belgian authorities renamed the roundabout on the Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat as the 'Schuman roundabout', to underline the new character of the neighbourhood.

In the following years, the European institutions needed more and more office space in Brussels, especially after the merger of the ECSC High Authority and the EEC and Euratom Commissions in 1967.¹¹ But the lack of a decision by the Member States on a permanent location for the institutions pushed the Belgian authorities to favour buildings that could be converted into general business use in case the institutions were to leave. These elements provide a first explanation of the 'symbolic deficit' of Brussels. Until the Edinburgh European Council in 1992, the city remained a provisional site for the institutions it hosted.



Three references of European symbolism in Brussels

A study of European symbols embodied by the architecture and monuments in Brussels shows the predominance of three elements, revealing the state of European historiography as well as different strategies of the various EU institutions.

Pre-EU symbols

The 'places of symbolic significance' in the EU quarter created before 1992 mainly relate to Belgian (Berlaymont and Justus Lipsius) and pre-EU historical heritage (including Charlemagne and European mythology) rather than to the founding fathers and the history of European integration. This is very much in line with the places put forward in the post-war period by European Member States.¹² The Charlemagne Prize was created in the early 1950s in Aachen, and the Carolingian emperor was highly popular in this period because he appeared German to the Germans and French to the French. His empire also very much encompassed the regions that united in the ECSC.

These rather discreet places of symbolic significance focused on the few symbolic options available: names of buildings and statues. They mainly embody a particular memory of Europe, disconnected from the ongoing process of integration through the European Communities or Union. These mythological or historical elements were also used in the inter-war period and relate to the common cultural heritage of the European continent.

Goddess Europa by the Schuman roundabout



Source: Council of the European Union / authorisation by the artist.

The statue by Léon de Pas was placed at the entrance of the Council of Ministers in 1997 for the 40th anniversary of the Rome Treaties. The artist insists that it is a project rather than a definitive piece of art.

Another interesting element of this memory is the development in recent years of a combination of symbolic statues representing peace, or the euro currency. In 2003, the European Commission erected a monument dedicated to peace near the Jean Rey Square, representing different hands holding the Earth. 'Unity in Peace', by the French artist Bernard Romain, was inaugurated in 2003 for the year of solidarity with disabled people and enlargement. It was created by visually impaired children from many countries under the guidance of the artist.

In 1993, the European Parliament erected a statue dedicated to Europe near the entrance of the Paul-Henri Spaak building. An emerging spiral of men and women supports a woman holding in her right hand the European 'E', symbol of both Europe and the euro. Over time, it became a popular spot for tourists, taking pictures of themselves visiting the institutions.

Statue 'Unity in Peace'



Photo: European Commission.

Europa statue



Photo: European Parliament.

The 'Europa' statue, 1993, was presented to the European Parliament by the Belgian artist, May Claerhout.

Naming EU buildings

The European Parliament has proactively developed a ‘memory policy’ for its premises. In the footsteps of the Parliament, other European institutions have followed. In 1973, the Parliament decided¹³ to name its buildings in memory of former Presidents¹⁴ and later other leading European figures. In that year, the Kirchberg II building in Luxembourg was named after Robert Schuman. [In 1999, the Parliament](#) named the Brussels D1-D2 building after Paul-Henri Spaak and the D3 building after Altiero Spinelli. At that time, the Montoyer building, also in Brussels, was named after Bertha von Suttner and it is today home to the Committee of the Regions and European Economic and Social Committee, as is Parliament’s former Belliard building, now named after Jacques Delors. Since 2007, the two new EP buildings next to Place Luxembourg/Luxemburgplein in Brussels have

Agora Simone Veil



Photo: European Parliament.

been named after Willy Brandt and József Antall. The agora in front of the European Parliament is named after Simone Veil, the first female President of the institution and the first President of the directly elected Parliament. She and Jacques Delors are the only living figures to have given their name to an EU building during their lifetime.

Cold War memory

The European Parliament has also been a pioneer in the integration of the Cold War heritage in the European memory. After 2004, the Parliament passed a number of resolutions: on the [25th anniversary of Solidarność](#), the [50th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising](#) of 1956, and on the naming of 23 August as the [European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism](#). This resulted in a number of Parliament locations in Brussels being named after Cold War-era events – for example, the ‘Solidarność esplanade’ outside the Parliament, and the ‘Baltic Way’ inside. These later events played an important role in the fall of the Berlin Wall itself, prelude to the reunification of Europe. Sections of the Berlin Wall are exhibited in the Leopold Park and some were previously displayed on Place Luxembourg/Luxemburgplein.

Berlin Wall



Photo: European Parliament.

Solidarność Esplanade

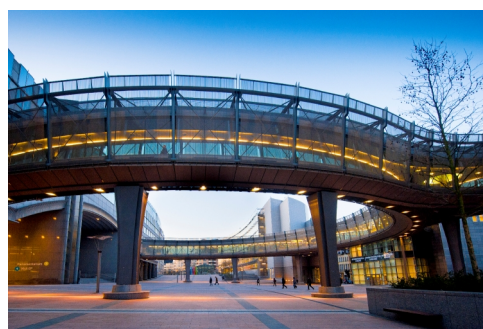


Photo: European Parliament.

The Parliament has also named some of its buildings after important figures from central Europe to: József Antall in Brussels, and soon Václav Havel in Strasbourg. Another element of the Cold War heritage of Europe is the creation of the [Sakharov Prize](#). The Solidarność esplanade includes a corner dedicated to the memory of Sakharov and to the Sakharov prize. A prominent Soviet-era dissident, Andrei Sakharov, was 1975 Physics Nobel Prize-winner and joint inventor of the Soviet hydrogen bomb. After his career in

nuclear engineering, he became a campaigner for human rights and nuclear disarmament in the Soviet Union. This attention by the European Parliament to the memory of the Cold War has recently been adopted by the European Commission too. In 2015, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker [inaugurated](#) a monument to the fall of the Berlin Wall, close to the Berlaymont.

'Hard' versus 'light' European capital

The 2001 debate over the type of capital Europe needs

The multiplication of 'places of symbolic significance' in Brussels has not precluded a debate about the transformation of the European quarter. In 2001, with the Belgian Presidency of the Council, the European Commission took an interest in how Brussels could better present itself as a 'Capital of Europe'. Guy Verhofstadt, then Belgian Prime Minister, and Commission President Romano Prodi, [gathered](#) together a group of European intellectuals to reflect on the status of Brussels. Among them, Umberto Eco advocated a decentralised model with Brussels as one of the European capitals, a 'light capital' or a 'soft capital'.¹⁵ The architect Rem Koolhaas opposed this idea, and pleaded in favour of a 'hard capital'. He proposed either improving the existing situation by 'assuming the past' or making a fresh start in another part of the city, for example at 'Tour et Taxis/Thurn en Taxis', a vast and historic former industrial area not far from the city centre. The group proposed the creation of a centre for advanced studies and an institute for multilingualism, as well as 'international urban and architectural competitions for a higher quality of life in the European quarter.

Rebuilding the European quarter

In 2008, the Brussels-Capital Region launched, in close cooperation with the European institutions, an international competition to redesign the European quarter. Several international agencies took part in the competition to develop the EU institutions along the Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat. Christian de Portzamparc won the competition with a huge project, including a new building for the European Commission. However, since 2009, due to the complexity of Brussels' governance, little has been done to implement the project.

Brussels, as one of the three capital cities of Europe is not lacking in symbols, nevertheless it lacks the type of 'grandeur' that some architects advocate for a continental capital city, and this issue is one key element in the development of a European identity.

International competition for 'Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat'



Photo: Agence Christian de Portzamparc.

Main references

Hein, Carola, *The Capital of Europe: Architecture and Urban Planning for the European Union*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004

Société Espace Léopold, *The European Parliament in the Espace Leopold*

Endnotes

- ¹ Under the treaties and decisions of the European institutions, the European Union has not named a formal 'capital', however Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg have been officially designated the seats of the EU institutions. In the parliamentary debates of the 1950s and among the wider public, these three cities are frequently referred to as capitals of Europe.
- ² C Hein, *The Capital of Europe: Architecture and Urban Planning for the European Union*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004.
- ³ Archives Nationales du Luxembourg, Luxembourg. Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Relations internationales. Plan Schuman. Ratification-Commission intérimaire, AE 11391. [CVCE](#).
- ⁴ Conseil de l'Europe-Assemblée consultative-Commission des Affaires générales (sous la dir.). Le statut futur de la Sarre, Rapport soumis par M. van der Goes van Naters, Rapporteur. Strasbourg: 1953. 244 p. p. 217-221. [CVCE \(31 août 1953\)](#).
- ⁵ CVCE, [The question of the seat of the institutions](#).
- ⁶ JM Miller, *Lake Europa, a New Capital for a United Europe*, Books International, 1963.
- ⁷ 'Résolution de la Commission des quatre présidents', 1953. Historical Archives of the European Parliament, AC OD PV! BURE BURE 195305050161FR.
- ⁸ Archives Nationales du Luxembourg, Luxembourg. Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Instituts internationaux - Institutions spécialisées - Organisations internationales. Institutions européennes. Siège - Correspondance 1954, AE 9330. [CVCE](#).
- ⁹ J Monnet, *Mémoires*, Fayard, 1976, p.432-434.
- ¹⁰ *Official Journal of the European Communities*. 13.07.1967, No 152. [s.l.]. 'Decision of the representatives of the governments of the Member States of 8 April 1965 on the provisional location of certain institutions and departments of the Communities (67/446/EEC) (67/30/Euratom)', p. 18.
- ¹¹ After 1957, the European Communities (ECSC, EEC and EURATOM) had three different Commissions. The Member States, decided in 1965, with the '[Merger Treaty](#)' to merge the three commissions into one.
- ¹² A Sierp, *History, Memory, and Trans-European Identity: Unifying Divisions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014
- ¹³ European Parliament, 6 April 1973. Historical Archives of the European Parliament. PE1 P1 358!BATI BATI 1979 4600010.
- ¹⁴ On the Founding Fathers, see C Constantin, *Pour une socio-histoire de la catégorie de père de l'Europe et ses usages pluriels : trajectoires, réputations, mémoires (1950-2010)*, Thèse de doctorat, 2013.
- ¹⁵ European Commission and Belgian Presidency of the EU, *op. cit.*

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