

Whatever Happened to Ground Euro?

The Borders of Brussels

Bert de Muynck

Introduction

Between 2003 and 2006 I followed, participated in the discussion, and published several analyses dealing with the spatial presence and architectural appearance of the European Union in Brussels.¹ This discussion was limited, spatially, to the area of the Leopold District in Brussels, where the majority of the European Union Headquarters are located. At the time this debate on architecture, politics, and representation attracted quite some attention in the Belgian and international press. To say the least, it had an air of sensationalism, as after decades of backroom dealings between Belgian real estate developers and politicians in Brussels, the city's European Quarter was perceived as facing an identity crisis of sorts. It was felt that none of the existing buildings (including the Berlaymont Building and the building for the European Commission) adequately expressed an architectural identity that was "European." Finally it felt like something was happening.

This essay revisits and reviews what has happened with the debate on the Capital of Europe and its architectural identity in relation to the development of "Ground Euro," that plot of land in the heart of Brussels, actually more commonly known as the European Quarter, which was suddenly bombarded with good intentions, ideas, and a nascent desire to architecturally embody an elusive European identity in a campus-like European Capital.² We are now fifteen years later (and I have been spending twelve of those in China, which itself displays a quicker succession and implementation of national narratives), and I wonder if the debate on the future of Ground Euro proved to be a fallacy; a fake narrative, to state it in today's terms.

It is time to look back and make an assessment of the “Ground Euro Gap,” both in distance and discourse. The focus is on the projects and initiatives undertaken by the European Commission since 2001 to improve its own European identity, thereby focusing mainly on the architectural and urban plans, projects, competitions, and debates, especially for the so-called European Quarter. As a starting point for this overview and update on Ground Euro, I made a selection of key articles, initiatives, and publications that continued the “narrative lines” set out in 2001 by the Erasmus Group (a think tank dedicated to exploring and discussing the identity and image of Brussels as European Capital and as a city, set up by then Premier Guy Verhofstadt and the then Chairman of the European Commission, Romano Prodi),³ as can be exemplified in the initiative by José Manuel Durão Barroso (11th President of the European Commission, 2004–2014) to create The New Narrative for Europe (April 2013).⁴

In an attempt to compare, criticize, and construct an idea of continuity between the two initiatives, I came to the conclusion that few constructive connections have been made to explore the recent history between these two initiatives, while at the same time the spatial development of the European Quarter has continued, featuring architectural interventions that, according to politicians and architects involved, speak of and embrace a European identity. Searching for answers and analysis regarding the evolution of a European identity at the start of the twenty-first century, I delved into “The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative,”⁵ a follow-up project on the Erasmus Group initiative, also instigated by the European Commission, so as to get a grip on the debate, to be illuminated by various European intellectuals and, finally, to determine the dread and destiny of the European Union in Brussels, as exemplified through its buildings.

A new narrative?

Both as a mental and physical place to gather Europe’s decision makers, “Brussels” has been used and abused in past decades as the token city and conundrum to showcase Europe’s strengths and weaknesses. As the Capital of Europe since 2001, the question of Brussels as a spatial representation of a European identity has been subject to a series of debates, local and international, and projects questioning the legitimacy, culture, and vicissitudes of what it means to be the capital of the European Union.

Much of the local discussion on the future of the presence of the European Union in Brussels over the past fifteen years has been locally initiated or centered around the Palais des Beaux-Arts (BOZAR), a cultural venue in Brussels. Exemplary are the exhibition *Imagine Europe: In Search of New Narratives* (April 13–May 29, 2016), the lecture “How

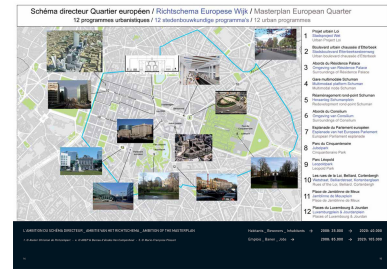


Fig. 1. Masterplan European Quarter with selection of (Belgian) architects, March 2010.

can Brussels save Europe?" (June 13, 2017), and the exhibition A Vision for Brussels – Imagining the Capital of Europe (March 16–May 20, 2007) which all took place in the BOZAR. As a Brussel-based institutional host and partner for both the Erasmus Group and New Narrative initiatives, BOZAR vaguely implements the ideas of the Italian writer Umberto Eco, who (during his participation in the 2001 Erasmus Group meetings) described the role of Brussels as Capital of Europe as follows: "The capital of the European Union should become a foyer culturel, a center for the confrontation of diversities." For a number of years now, the BOZAR program has been helping to make this foyer culturel a reality.⁶

The European Union's approach to its architectural and urban presence in Brussels, and the way in which architects, politicians, and intellectuals understand the case of Brussels as Capital of Europe, is the subject of this analysis. At the same time that Umberto Eco focused on culture and the idea of a foyer, the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas made in 2001 a plea for communication and construction to represent the European Union in Brussels: "Communication about the European Union is lifeless. It needs to be represented through its buildings. In the last twenty years, it has required important headquarters and offices for numerous institutions, but this appeal has never been accompanied by an architectural preference, an aesthetic idea."⁷ At the time the architect proposed a future for the European Quarter in Brussels through a spatial intervention: a new, circular path of demolition and new construction around the existing buildings of the European Quarter was required to upgrade the existing situation aesthetically, politically, and scenically.⁸

Between 2013 and 2014 the European Parliament initiated the pilot project "New Narrative for Europe," an exchange platform challenging citizens to reflect on possible new narratives for the European project, new narratives in which culture and science occupy a central position. In essence, one could argue that the New Narrative initiative is noble, as it aspired, in the words of Barroso, "to involve artists, scientists, writers, intellectuals and all kinds of cultural practitioners in an effort to reconnect the European Union with its citizens."⁹ Here the key concept and ambition is "reconnect," in line with the ambition of a decade earlier to "connect" the European Union through the improvement—a facelift, so to speak—of the physical outlook of its home base, Brussels, perhaps through buildings, symbols, or translations.

This ambition to reconnect can obviously lead to the question to what degree these practitioners are involved with, representative of, or have connected themselves, prior to the project, to the European Union. The documents feature a plethora of rather personal statements on Europe by individuals such as Olafur Eliasson (Danish-Icelandic artist based in Berlin), Okwui Enwezor (Nigerian curator), Sir Jonathan Mills (Australian-British composer), Michelangelo

Pistoletto (Italian artist), Luc Tuymans (Belgian artist), Maria Thereza Alves (Brazilian artist), Jimmie Durham (Cherokee-American artist), and Fabrice Hybert (French artist), to name a few, and for whom the selection criteria is unknown. This shows the range of participants voicing their opinions in the document, in conjunction with those of politicians such as Barroso, Donald Tusk (former Prime Minister of Poland and President of the European Council), Enrico Letta (Prime Minister of Italy, 2013–2014), Alenka Bratušek (Prime Minister of Slovenia), and Angela Merkel (Federal Chancellor of Germany), among others.

Wolfram Kaiser, Professor of European Studies at the University of Portsmouth, sheds light on the complicated composition of these cultural and political representatives: “In reality, however, the European Parliament and Commission President Barroso organized a few representatives from the cultural sphere in a neo-corporatist manner into a dysfunctional group of individualists who neither shared a strong interest in writing ‘a new narrative for Europe’ nor managed to agree on its direction and content. Crucially, the project failed to connect with earlier initiatives like the work of Prodi’s Reflection Group (Erasmus Group), or to learn from the failures of older cultural projects such as the EU-sponsored attempt by the French historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle (1990) to write a long-term European integration narrative.”¹⁰

The outcome of this initiative was “The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative” (hereafter referred to as the New Narrative), a questionable editorial project accumulating a series of rather simple statements—few exceptions aside—displaying a profound disengagement with the intellectual, creative, artistic, social, and critical potential of a past, existing, and emerging European identity. The texts and discussions published in the New Narrative are collections of individual reactions and personal impressions, thereby bypassing the possibility for fundamental and collective engagement with the perceived need for a European identity on all levels, across locations and generations.

While the debate and discourse of the New Narrative embodies another round of soul-searching among a group of Europeans for whom the selection criteria is unclear, its counter-image, the reality on the ground—Europe’s self-representation through the buildings it constructs and inhabits on Ground Euro in Brussels—is emblematic. It is the construction of this built reality that is, partially, the subject here, connecting today’s situation with the ambitions of change—in scale, aesthetics, organization—uttered about fifteen years ago in a scenario quite similar to the New Narrative.

Today there are clear signs of a bureaucratic bifurcation giving a new push and face to this architectural ambition in Brussels. In one corner we have the bureaucrats building Europe’s presence in Brussels while botching their

appearance there; in the other corner we have the bureaucrats stitching together Europe's identity, thereby avoiding dealing with or mentioning Brussels at all cost.

THEN VERSUS NOW: 2001 versus 2013 – translating a state of mind

In the latter part of 2001 the Belgian Premier Guy Verhofstadt and the Italian Romano Prodi (10th President of the European Commission, 1999–2004), decided to establish a think tank called the Erasmus Group, with which to discuss the identity and image of Brussels as a European Capital and as a city. After years of spatial neglect—or, more precisely, the spatial outcome of decennia-long close relations between Brussels politicians, architects, and real estate developers—a bracing storm was to blow its way through the European Quarter. Under the motto “the more daring, the better,” the Erasmus Group was free, in a few organized sessions, to unleash its intellect on Brussels and Europe.¹¹

Since then, five of the thirteen original members of the Erasmus Group think tank have passed away: Gerard Mortier (Belgian), Umberto Eco (Italian), Bronislaw Geremek (Polish), Nicolas Hayek (Lebanese), and Michel Crozier (French). Despite not explicitly referencing the work and thoughts produced on Europe in 2001, the echo of the Erasmus Group can be found in the New Narrative document. It is the echo of Eco, faintly pulsating from beyond the grave; his insights are, on multiple occasions, of utmost importance to Barroso, as he stresses the importance that “the language of Europe is translation,” an idea Eco launched during the May 30, 2001, meeting of the Erasmus Group. There Eco presented the idea of Brussels as “the ‘soft’ capital,” showcasing a diverse Europe that was turning into the Europe of diversity through typical “multi” aspects, such as multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious. In the New Narrative this echo has become an eternal European mantra, a reflection turned into a rule and repositioned by Barroso in his claim that “the basis of our unity is a pluralist, multilingual culture, as acknowledged by Umberto Eco when he says that ‘the language of Europe is translation,’”¹² or, as the Hungarian György Konrád puts it, “Translators are the Europeans of classical times. Through them, we can understand one another.”¹³

Not unsurprisingly, the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, is one of the few contributors to the New Narrative to bring a great sense of intelligence to its core question, as she is eloquently able to reiterate Eco in her speech and touch upon the various dimensions of the discourse, thereby referencing the past and present as a cautionary tale and ambitious agenda for the future. It is also the only speech of a politician in the document that focuses on the present, combining a historical, personal perspective with European and global analysis and call for action. Moreover, she does



Fig. 2. Romani Prodi & Rem Koolhaas in conversation at the opening of the exhibition *The Image of Europe*. Brussels, September 14, 2004. Photograph: Bert de Muynck.

this intelligently, by embracing Eco in a manner that is genuine, evocative, and necessary. It becomes clear that Europe is not only about the body and mind but also about its soul when she states, “Thank you for writing a Declaration on Europe’s state of mind. It’s difficult to translate certain things into German, but ‘state of mind’ means something like *Geistes—und Gemütsverfassung*—in this case, the outlook and disposition of the European Union. *Gemüt*—which roughly translates as ‘disposition’—is a very interesting word.”¹⁴ Merkel is not replicating the translation mantra, but she is engaging with it, illustrating and thereby contributing because she is “convinced that tolerance is something like the soul of Europe.”¹⁵



Fig. 3. The EU barcode, 2002.
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THEN VERSUS NOW: 2001 versus 2016 – false flags, the farce as fun, and vertical blinds

The sole survivor of the 2001 Erasmus Group in the New Narrative is the globally recognized and acclaimed architect Rem Koolhaas, but his position is rather different and his thoughts, ideas, and proposals on the identity of the European Union are solely about Brussels and largely architecturally centered. Besides being an “associate member” on the board of the New Narrative project, his claims, statements, and positions, especially when connecting these back to the Erasmus Group, have become questionable in their intent and content. The reason is that a large part of his engagement with Europe, the European Union, and Brussels during the past fifteen years has been to seemingly wait, repeat, rephrase, repackage, and redistribute the group’s initial, rather straightforward findings and observations—that there is a lack of communication of Europe through its buildings in Brussels—in a contradictory fashion, while in the meantime waving, like a pirate masquerading as a survivalist, the same flag over and over again. This should be taken almost literally as the single most iconic outcome of Koolhaas and his in-house think tank, AMO: the proposal in 2004 for a new flag for the European Union. Its design condenses all the member states’ flags into a panoramic barcode.

By 2014 the work developed in the context of the aforementioned Brussels, Capital of Europe project was explained by AMO director Reinier de Graaf¹⁶ as follows: “For example, this European Flag and all the iconography stuff from the European project; they came to us thinking we would make a masterplan of Brussels. That was the official title of the exercise: ‘Brussels, Capital of Europe.’ I’m sure they came and expected us to look at the European Quarter, that we would do things to it like propose some kind of big renovation or big change of the urban fabric. And of course we did something completely different.”¹⁷ This statement, of course, as smooth as it might seem, is largely spin; a repositioning of the ideas produced by the office so to fit within the pantheon of the “European project.” To be clear; the architects did not produce “something completely different” from what was initially asked of them, but they did

propose a big change to the urban fabric. Under the concept of remodeling the European Quarter in Brussels into a “Euro Campus” of sorts, in 2001 Koolhaas proposed a solution through design. A new, circular path of demolition and new construction around the existing buildings of the European Quarter was required to upgrade the existing situation aesthetically, politically, and scenically.

Recently the flag has made a comeback. Now, rather than a cultural condenser or sorts (flat), it has become a token of crisis—wallpaper, stripped down—and its origin and foundation myth rephrased by De Graaf, who is also project partner in all EU-related projects by AMO, as follows: “We invented the EU barcode some fifteen years ago: an alternative, colorful symbol for the European Union. A symbol of optimism. The EU—that was the idea—could be fun.”¹⁸ It was mandatory for the flag’s objective to be rephrased, as its symbolism by the mid-2010s was equally repurposed by the office from a symbol of faith into one of fun. “The fact that the output of the European Flag project is largely visual also allows you to cloud that agenda as much as you want, so you can keep a client on board.”¹⁹ More pirate tricks than survivor talent.

In 2016 the flag made a mutilated reappearance as a vertical blind, because, De Graaf notes, “vertical blinds have become the silent witnesses of an emerging European unity.”²⁰ The blinds were incorporated into a Brexit installation—called The Pan-European Living Room—for the opening of London’s Design Museum in November 2016. The installation features a piece of design from each of the twenty-eight EU member states, because “our very notion of the domestic interior has been shaped by an ideal of European cooperation and trade.”²¹ The barcode flag has been minimally and conveniently modified as “the slat that carries the colors of the Union Jack that has broken off, leaving an opening through which we see the daunting remnants of Europe’s historic past.”²²

It has become clear that the Dutch architects at OMA/AMO are struggling to keep up their European rhetoric and engagement and, in the end, have somehow lost their focus, reducing and redacting their own body of work on Brussels to fit any possible narrative. De Graaf, once again: “Common in interiors from Sweden to Italy, from Ireland to Greece, vertical blinds have become the silent witnesses of an emerging European unity.”²³ If we follow the blindsided silliness of this statement it would be easy to argue that also frontiers, windows, and wallpaper are part of an emerging European unity. Of all things European, vertical blinds? Really?

Brussels: what about it?

Surprisingly, “Brussels” (whether as a city, capital, or simply being the go-to culprit for a decade-long European



Fig. 4. The Pan-European Living Room, commissioned by the London Design Museum for the exhibition Fear and Love: Reactions to a Complex World (2016). Photograph: Luke Hayes.

constitutional conundrum) is hardly mentioned in the New Narrative document. In all fairness, the New Narrative is not intended to discuss place, cultural positions, “pluriform” politics, or even aspire to remotely and pragmatically explore the possibilities for change on the territory of Brussels. Whereas the first attempt of the Erasmus Group focused on symbols, representation, territories, potential architectural ambitions, and the role (mental and physical) of Brussels as a capital, now the discussion has veered towards a rather depressing analysis of a European culture of fear, doom, and crisis (whereby no one seems to have taken into account the specific ambition of this document to be for its “citizens”; the intention should be to give them faith in the project, not instill fear and a sense of failure), and to contextualize these challenges as they relate to Europe today.

The annoyed architect

As part of the Narrative for Europe project, Koolhaas was set to make a reappearance on the European stage, in an apparently not well-received pop-up performance during the first meeting of the New Narrative. “As an ‘associate member’... [Koolhaas] effectively pulled out of the Narrative for Europe project after the inaugural meeting in Brussels in April 2013. He was ‘annoyed’ not to have been allocated more than five minutes for a convoluted political statement. In it he advocated that the EU must learn more from China, where the communist party pays well for the construction of many buildings designed by him and his company; an idea that, not surprisingly, did not find its way into the committee’s declaration issued on 1 March 2014.”²⁴ As the architect of China’s Central Television (CCTV) headquarters in Beijing (construction 2005–2010), Koolhaas thus participated during the same period in two projects of political representation, one in Beijing, the other in Brussels. Mark Leonard described this situation in 2006 as follows: “If CCTV is the epitome of a modernist political project—projecting the power and ideology of the most centralized and powerful government on the planet—Koolhaas’s European project is the defining experiment in postmodern political architecture—capturing the essence of a network of interdependent states without a single political center.”²⁵

In the New Narrative document Koolhaas only shows up as part of the conversation during the 2014 Venice Biennale of Architecture (of which, conveniently, he was the curator) and in summary talks about his past European experience. “I have been working with the European Union on its narrative for about ten years, off and on, and it’s been an interesting, though not a particularly rewarding, experience, because to some extent it has meant listening in on an intimate identity crisis or confession without a possible point of resolution.... During my engagement with Brussels, there were a number of territories where I would have loved to have interfered and have had an impact on.” It is clear that even the contribution, or lack thereof, is in the eye of the beholder, as suggested by De Graaf, without providing evidence, in an interview

during the exact same period: “It’s not like this image has been adopted as a single flag for Europe, but there were a lot of other ideas that were taken.”²⁶

There is no evidence supporting this last, simple assertion, thereby illustrating that neither AMO’s claims regarding Brussels and the European Union nor vertical blinds, whether convoluted or casual, should be taken at face value.

From flags to fries, icons to interiors

The first time “Brussels” is mentioned in the New Narrative, the city makes its appearance not as a place/space or territory but as an institution. The honor goes to the Cypriot Androulla Vassiliou (European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, 2010–2014), who stated, “‘Brussels’ is easily blamed even for political decisions taken at the national level.”²⁷ The second time “Brussels” appears not as a city but as an interior condition—the one of Ground Euro, the place that has no soul but has translation—apparently also challenges bureaucracy. Only halfway through the New Narrative document, Merkel’s observation on Brussels clearly combines all of the important Brussels bureaucratic icons (its buildings, interiors, translations; its European Union, meetings, achievements, and realizations). “We often get stuck in the extremely comfortable rooms that Brussels has to offer—in this context, the word ‘cozy’ comes to mind. I’m not talking about the restaurants, which I would like to go to one day, but rather about the perfectly equipped meeting rooms where you can have everything interpreted into a large number of languages. Of course, this is important so that people can understand each other. When I’m in these meeting rooms, I frequently realize that while we have certainly achieved great things, European life fortunately means far more than this.”²⁸

A ten-year-long facelift

It is not that Ground Euro got locked up in the past fifteen years, or even that change, construction, and development remained stagnant. At least a few competitions have been launched since 2006, a few constructions finished and institutions refurbished, in order to accommodate the growth of the European Union. While outcome of the Erasmus Group’s and New Narrative’s vision and ambition have become uninspiring in terms of real physical architectural change, because of being high in aspirations, low on content, and limited (myopically narrow) in what can be understood as representative (or not) of the kaleidoscope of European (architectural/spatial) culture, it is clear that the European Commission seems to have opted for shortsighted strategies of conviviality on the ground in Brussels, so as to connect the European Union with its local citizens.

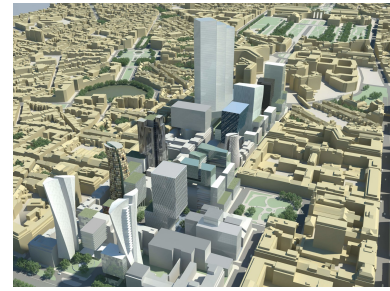


Fig. 5. The winning competition proposal by Christian de Portzamparc for the Rue de la Loi transformation (the European Quarter, Brussels), 2009.

Billed as “Operation Facelift,”²⁹ the European Commission issued a press release in September 2007 stating that “the European Quarter will soon be given a makeover by the Brussels-Capital Region and the European Commission,” which, according to the Estonian Siim Kallas (European Commissioner for Administrative Affairs, 2004–2009) “marks a historic moment: one in which we turn our back on the image of a lifeless, unassimilated administrative ghetto which still clings to the European Quarter.”³⁰ Rather quickly, on April 10, 2008, future plans were released under the heading of “Operation facelift begins,”³¹ stating that “the authorities of Brussels-Capital Region, in close partnership with the European Commission and the City of Brussels, are launching a major competition aimed at defining a new urban design for the European Quarter.”³² Soon after, an international competition was co-organized by the Brussels regional authority and the European Commission to create a powerful image of the European entity, and the symbol of its integration into the Belgian capital, while at the same time creating functional and social density by building residential units, commercial structures, and public spaces. Strangely, but not unsurprisingly, a large part of the focus—or should we say, the soft selling point to the public at large—is the promise of new housing in the European Quarter, the promise of “a neighborhood presenting a mixity of functions” and featuring “an area of diversified housing” through the “massive introduction of housing, shops and facilities within the Loi Urban Project zone.”³³ The document even reveals the projects and associated architects that will take care of their design. Without exception the architects are Belgian,³⁴ and strangely (or not) all already had experience and projects in the European Quarter in the 1990s, just before the storm would ensue and thereby their achievements also be questioned.

The urban design competition for the Rue de la Loi, the heart of the European Quarter, was won by the French architect Christian de Portzamparc and announced in March 2009.³⁵ Here it is not the architect professing a potential symbolism hidden in the proposal for the new masterplan, but the politicians who are able to read it as part of this ambition “to devise a comprehensive, fifteen-year plan” for Brussels “that would not only create new office space but also provide an architectural framework symbolizing the European Union.”³⁶ The aforementioned Kallas, who in his role as European Commissioner oversaw administrative affairs as well as building projects, explained the motives of the European Commission in February 2009 as follows: “My first driving motive in boosting the cooperation with the Belgian authorities is to ensure that Brussels becomes, and is perceived, as a better Capital of Europe, capable of hosting people from an increased number of Member States, whilst preserving its most authentic, national features.”³⁷

Portzamparc, when explaining his winning proposal,³⁸ is rather generous in supporting this ambition and throws another reference in the mix, claiming it “would be a city of Europe, with lots of periods present. It’s a formidable



Fig. 6. The winning competition proposal by Christian de Portzamparc for the Rue de la Loi transformation (the European Quarter, Brussels), 2009.

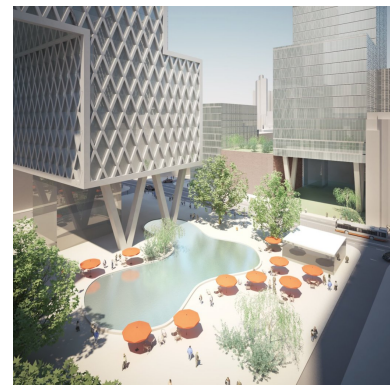


Fig. 7. The winning competition proposal by Christian de Portzamparc for the Rue de la Loi transformation (the European Quarter, Brussels), 2009.



Fig. 8. The winning competition proposal by Christian de Portzamparc for the Rue de la Loi transformation (the European Quarter, Brussels), 2009.

opportunity... I told them it should be like a downtown American city, with three skyscrapers, yes, but with open islands, keeping historic buildings, with pocket parks.”³⁹ In another memo released in March 2009, coinciding with the announcement of the winner of the aforementioned competition, the European Commission stated that, with its participation in the competition, the Commission’s “aim is to give the European Quarter a strong, positive, symbolic image as the Capital of Europe by making the buildings more beautiful and more efficient and by integrating them more into their immediate surroundings in the heart of convivial areas of housing, shops, green spaces or whatever.”⁴⁰ The overall plan, visualization of potential life, and proposal by Portzamparc emphasizes creating public life, opening up new vistas and viewing perspectives in the long, dull, and enclosed corridor that is known at the Wetstraat, the central axis of the European Quarter. More an exercise in playing with perspectives, density, setbacks, and interconnected public spaces, the proposal, from a professional’s perspective, is in line with similar manicured initiatives of twenty-first-century urban solutions reacting to the problem created by the large-scale implementation of twentieth-century central business districts in Europe. It might be telling that the proposal embraces and purports to embody coexistence (the other four proposals also seem to defend this as a concept). Personally and professionally, and not only due to spatial semantics, I prefer a plan and vision that propagate the concept of co-evolution, a term used to describe cases where two (or more) species reciprocally affect each other’s evolution.

Since the plans by Portzamparc were launched, Ground Euro has changed along the lines of renovation, construction, and even a little demolition (or plans to do so). One important recent addition in 2017 was the “House of European History,” a renovation of the 1935 Georges Eastman Building, the result of a competition won by a “symbolic German-French team” of architects.⁴¹ As the press release reveals, the symbolism of this project might not necessarily lie in its architectural aspirations, although the architects describe it as “the transition and the cohabitation between the new and the old.” Strangely, the architecture alludes to a sense of European identity, not through vertical blinds, but in the case of the House of European History it is opaque prisms that seemingly float within this transparent box, whereby a “grouping of singular elements create a unified and harmonious whole representative of the European ideal.”

It is clear that the theme of the expression of European identity through architecture is not related to style, iconography, size, color, form, or even history or far-sightedness, but is about construction materials, the most simple of simplest things, and—even in this case—it is only decoration. It is dressing up the identity, rather than designing the identity.



Fig. 9. Rue de la Loi, Brussels, 2008.

Another architectural contribution is the “EUROPA,” the new headquarters of the Council of the European Union and the result of a European architecture competition launched in August 2004. In 2005 a team of architects and engineers composed of the Belgian firm Philippe Samyn and Partners (lead and design partner), together with Studio Valle Progettazioni (Italian), and Buro Happold (British), were announced winners of the competition. Here again the architects seek to represent the European identity through the use of material, in this case, the windows in the building’s facade, which is not only acoustic but also shows symbolic, if not didactic, diversity. “The new double facade, made of a harmonized patchwork of re-used oak windows with simple, crystal-like single glazing (from the different European countries) provides the necessary acoustic barrier from the traffic noise of the Rue de la Loi – Wetstraat and it also offers a first thermal insulation for the inner space. [...] This new facade will be both a practical and philosophical statement about the re-use of these traditional construction elements, expressing the European diversity of cultures.”⁴² Window frames, shutters, and prisms; so far the European identity, in the era of constructions supervised by Kallas, has led to a series of pretty unimaginative makeovers for a body that does not know itself, resulting in a facelift performed for fun.

Conclusion

As an observer of the Erasmus Group’s debate and a reader of the discussion around the New Narrative, it is clear that despite, or because of, the debate on Brussels, European Union, and identity, change has been made. Objectively the result is that the new face of Europe’s bureaucracy is less bland and architects are eager to connect a narrative of European value to their buildings and ideas. It is a changing one, simple sometimes, like a window frame, a vertical blind, a flag without a pole, or a prism, but it only architecturally creates a narrative for Brussels. Because of that, and especially in the field of thinkers about architectural space, representation, and the built environment, the discussion on Europe has been stale, stagnant, and sabotaged, slowly yet steadily, from within.

Surprisingly, architecture, the built environment, and the culture and identity of spatial transformation still need to find their entrance into the debate European identity. Which not only sounds strange to me, but is a flaw in the thinking of Europe about Europe. Just look at the rich, diverse, connected history of built Europe; it would be hard not to argue that the shared evolution, change, and transformation of the territory (through industry, religion, housing, and culture) is what connects culture and, with a bit of critical insight, has the potential to reconnect living cultures across Europe, thereby accelerating the understanding and conception that makes this continent unique, distinct, diverse, and European.

Is it surprising that, in the notion of culture or politics, territorial planning, architectural culture, and the built environment are not part of a shared European identity? Maybe not. Is it alarming? Yes, indeed. Especially when a topic of this importance and impact on the everyday and everyone's lives has the potential to transcend political cycles and interest, and should be able to incorporate the near and distant, the far and close, the amateur and professional, the politicians and the people. It is my conviction that we share the same space, but are literally unable to read that space. There is a need and opportunity to transcend the discussion on European identity by looking—really looking—and engaging, changing, altering, connecting, and reconnecting Europe's territory in ways that allow everything and everyone to move, meander, co-evolve, or mingle if the desire to do so exists. Europe's identity has been and will be that one.

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1. For a more in-depth reference to my writing on the subject, see Bert de Muynck, "The future history of the European Quarter," *Archis* 1 (2003); Bert de Muynck, "Rem Koolhaas and the European Conviviality Revolution," *Archis* (2003); Bert de Muynck, "Ground Euro verdient beter," opinion column in *De Standaard*, February 3, 2003.
2. In 2003 I proposed the existing "European Quarter" or "Quarter Leopold" to be renamed Ground Euro due to the lack of planning and decision making in that area, which at the time were akin to the conditions of Ground Zero in New York.
3. The think tank, also known as "the sages" or the "Erasmus Group," consisted of the following members: Gerard Mortier (former director of the Salzburg Festival and one-time intendant of the Muntschouwburg Theatre, Brussels), Umberto Eco (Italian semiologist and author), Bronislaw Geremek (Polish historian), Nicolas Hayek (Lebanese-Swiss entrepreneur who created the Swatch), Agnès Jaoui (French actress, scenarist and cinematographer), Rem Koolhaas (Dutch architect), Maryon McDonald (British anthropologist), Pasqual Maragall (Spanish politician, former mayor of Barcelona, and expert on urban renewal), Juan Ignacio Vidarte (Spanish economist and director of the Bilbao Guggenheim), Michel Crozier (French professor of the sociology of organizations), François Schuiten (Belgian artist and cartoonist), and Geert van Istendael (Belgian journalist).
4. The New Narrative for Europe is a EU pilot project initiated by the European Parliament and implemented by the European

- Commission, which set up a cultural committee to assist in implementing the project. See "The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative" (2014), <http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/new-narrative>.
5. Ibid.
 6. Introduction text to the exhibition "Imagine Europe: In Search of New Narratives" (April 13 – May 29, 2016), <http://www.bozar.be/en/activities/107619-imagine-europe>.
 7. For the full analysis see Bert de Muynck, "The future history of the European Quarter," *Archis* 1 (2003).
 8. Ibid.
 9. José Manuel Durão Barroso, "Interweaving Narratives," in "The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative." (2014), <http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/new-narrative>.
 10. Wolfram Kaiser, "Clash of Cultures: Two Milieus in the European Union's 'A New Narrative for Europe' Project," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 3 (2015): 364–377.
 11. The outcome of the reflections undertaken by the Erasmus Group can be found in "Brussels, capital of Europe," published by The Group of Policy Advisors (GOPA) of the European Commission (2002).
 12. Barroso, "Interweaving Narratives."
 13. György Konrád, "A European Ars Poetica," in "The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative." (2014), <http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/new-narrative>.
 14. Angela Merkel, "Translation of the speech delivered by the Federal Chancellor of Germany at the Academy of the Arts, Berlin, on 1 March 2014," in "The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative." (2014), <http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/new-narrative>.
 15. Ibid.
 16. In 2002 he became director of AMO, the think tank of OMA, and produced *The Image of Europe*, an exhibition illustrating the history of the European Union. See <http://oma.eu/partners/reinier-de-graaf>.
 17. "Ulterior Motives: OMA/AMO's Reinier de Graaf on 'Research,' Europe and the 2014 Venice Biennale" (June 21, 2016), see <http://www.archdaily.com/789832/ulterior-motives-oma-amos-reinier-de-graaf-on-research-europe-and-the-2014-venice-biennale>.
 18. See <http://oma.eu/projects/the-pan-european-living-room>.
 19. "Ulterior Motives: OMA/AMO's Reinier de Graaf on 'Research,' Europe and the 2014 Venice Biennale."
 20. Reinier de Graaf, "Exclusive: OMA on the European Union," *Icon* (September 29, 2016), see <https://www.iconeye.com/opinion/rethink/item/12538-exclusive-oma-on-the-european-union>.
 21. London Design Museum, "In conversation with OMA," December 6, 2016, see <https://designmuseum.org/things-to-do/talks-and-events/in-conversation-with-oma>.
 22. De Graaf, "Exclusive: OMA on the European Union."
 23. Ibid.
 24. Kaiser, "Clash of Cultures: Two Milieus in the European Union's 'A New Narrative for Europe' Project."
 25. Mark Leonard, "Profile of Rem Koolhaas," published on the Foreign Policy Center website (September 15, 2006), see <https://fpc.org.uk/profile-of-rem-koolhaas>.
 26. "Ulterior Motives: OMA/AMO's Reinier de Graaf on 'Research,' Europe and the 2014 Venice Biennale."
 27. Androulla Vassiliou, "Europe as a Shared Purpose," in "The Mind and Body of Europe: a New Narrative." (2014), <http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/new-narrative>.
 28. Merkel, "Translation of the speech delivered by the Federal Chancellor of Germany at the Academy of the Arts, Berlin."
 29. See http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-07-1280_en.htm.
 30. Ibid.
 31. Operation facelift begins, IP/08/552, Brussels, April 10, 2008.
 32. Ibid.

33. BIP - Brussels Info Place, “‘URBAN PROJECT LOI’ – An urban design for the rue de la Loi and its surroundings” (March 2010).
34. Architects such as Arch. Montois & Partners (renovation of Le Charlemagne in the 1990s, now the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs for the European Commission, the construction of Eurosquare [1990s] and the renovation of The Residence Palace [2002-05]), Arch. Art & Build (Belliard 40 [European District], Council of Europe [Agora Building, Nursery, European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines and Healthcare, both in Strasbourg], and the renovation of the Jacques Delors Building in the European Quarter), A2RC (Brussels Regional Parliament, 1996–2000; partners with Jaspers-Eyers & Partners s.a., BUUR, Altiplan, Archi 2000 in the Project Tour & Taxis development, 2007–2017; and the Residence Palace, 2004–2009).
35. See <http://www.christiandeportzamparc.com/en/projects/la-rue-de-la-loi-2>.
36. Open Europe blog team, “City of Europe,” *openeuropeblog* (June 26, 2009), see <http://openeuropeblog.blogspot.com/2009/06/city-of-europe.html>.
37. Siim Kallas, SPEECH/09/67, “Presentation of the acts of the international colloquium ‘Brussels and Europe,’” Brussels, February 18, 2009.
38. Participants in the completion included: OMA-NFA “BrEUssels,” JDS Architects and Secchi-Vigano “United in Diversity,” Fletcher Priest Architects and WIT Architecten “Spatial orchestration: local / global,” Xaveer De Geyter Architects “Hardware for Europe,” and Atelier de Portzamparc “Block by block, the street views open.”
39. Open Europe blog team, “City of Europe.”
40. The European Commission’s buildings policy in Brussels, MEMO/09/94, Brussels, March 5, 2009.
41. The client was the European Parliament (Direction of Infrastructure and Logistics) and the design/renovation was done by Atelier d’architecture Chaix & Morel et Associés and JSWD Architekten (2017).
42. See <https://samynandpartners.com/portfolio/new-headquarters-of-the-council-of-the-european-union>.