

Michel De Beule

Offices and planning in Brussels, a half-century of missed opportunities?

Translation: Gabriëlle Leyden

The relationship between offices and planning in Brussels could be summed up as a series of missed opportunities. Decisions were taken blow by blow, without truly taking account of what had been planned. This real estate game, which has been going on for half a century, has had sometimes obscure causes, often unspoken motives, but reasons that have always been logical for at least one of the four players involved in the overall misunderstanding, i.e., promoters, national government (and then federal and regional governments), local officials, and the residents themselves.

Planning long remained officious, with attempts made to intervene in strips. Even though the authorities made a relevant planning proposal starting in 1958, the future European Quarter was created in silence and without directives. With the country's subdivision into regions planning became official, but the building of offices nevertheless came in for little supervision. In 1999, more than twenty years after the adoption of Brussels's first area plan, 47% of the some 10 million square metres of offices in Brussels (in edifices with at least 1,000 m² of office space, and thus very often mono-functional buildings) was outside the administrative zones that the area plan had set. Another form of planning went into effect in 1995, but the relationships amongst the players of the real estate game remain ambiguous. The four-party misunderstanding continues.

Michel De Beule is an architect and town planner involved in research for several environmental associations. In the course of his career he became interested in the dynamics generated by the co-existence of urban activities, notably through the analysis of statistics in Brussels, a poorly understood industrial centre, and went on to join the Brussels Regional Administration, where he has been in charge of the Offices Observatory since 1998 (where he has completely internalised statistical research and publishing). He is a publication on the research that he has conducted into the history of Brussels planning in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Contacts :

Michel De Beule, +32(0)2 204 23 40
mdebeule@mrbc.irisnet.be

Michel Hubert (éd. en chef.), +32(0)2 211 78 53 –
+32(0)485 41 67 64 – hubert@fusi.ac.be



A succinct definition by way of an introduction¹

The relationship between offices and planning in Brussels could be summed up as a series of missed opportunities. Decisions were taken blow by blow, in different directions, without taking account of what had been planned. However, too succinct a definition would mean glossing over the real estate trends of the past fifty years. The causes have sometimes been obscure and the motives often unvoiced, but at least one of the four dancers in this quadrille – promoters, the national government (which then evolved into the federal and regional governments), municipal officials, and residents – has always had logical reasons for the positions defended. The ambiguous relations amongst these players are not specific to Belgium, for sudden about-faces, equivocal renunciations, and Machiavellian laissez-faire attitudes can be seen elsewhere. However, they followed upon each other's heels faster and more emphatically during the metamorphosis of a capital that still remains somewhat provincial.

Functionalist theories and the law

The post-war period strove to set new rules for organising towns and the countryside in Belgium. Guided by faith in reason, the first law in this direction, which was adopted late, in 1962, defined the subject of its action to be a science in which rationality and harmony were combined for the benefit of regional planning and development. The rational side of this law, which was founded on faith in reason, included economic but also social concerns, for it would be unreasonable to engage

¹ This text is a slightly modified version of an article published recently in DE BEULE M. and DESSOUROUX C. (Eds) (2009), *Bruxelles, ses bureaux, ses employés*, special issue of the office property journal *Observatoire des bureaux*, pp. 70-83 (table of contents available on the [Review of office property website](#)).

in regional planning and development without worrying about the inhabitants' well-being. The harmony side of the coin encompassed aesthetic issues².

Victor Bure, the first Director-General of the Town Planning and Regional Planning and Development Administration, created in 1945, wrote this definition, which was taken up in the beginning of the legislature's text. However, this high civil servant had already weighted his rationalistic conviction, and had done so years before. When he presented the boundaries within which planning – which conceptualised town planning – was inserted in a rather sardonic speech in 1950, he was not at all unaware of the theories from which it stemmed. In striving to strengthen his administration's credibility, he gave it a realistic programme that it would follow with difficulty for the next twenty years, given the strength of the propaganda that these functionalist theories disseminated by constantly invoking their modernity and completely failing to mention their financial implications.

"And, when it comes to town planning, we must take care above all not to try to recompose the structure of society. If something comes out of these cogitations, they can be only unfeasible plans, which is even much more dangerous than doing nothing at all, for the enemies of town planning will grab a-hold of them and triumph".

Despite these clairvoyant warnings, which fell upon mostly deaf ears, the past was swept under the rug. According to functionalist theories, the city was to be placed in the countryside or at least redistributed into areas that were as specialised as possible: housing in one area, industry in another, offices in a third, and urban "expressways" to serve all the parts.

"Enlightened people have long known, Victor Bure added, that genuine town planning is town planning that is possible, and not at all this sort of devastating cataclysm with which capitals are threatened from time to time. However, the others, those who, in flipping idly through the literature, read the first text that comes to hand, well, we can indeed excuse them for believing that it means razing Paris and Brussels and replacing them with brand-new cities. Such theses have been uttered and their outrageousness, whether premeditated or not, makes a deep impression on the average reader. Why is it necessary for a new idea, which needs to be supported by the public at large to develop and succeed, to have been presented to this public under a hair-raising appearance?"³

² Preamble of the organic regional planning and development and town planning bill, *Pasino-mie*, 1962, I, pp. 205 and 206).

³ BURE V. (1950), "Frontières de l'urbanisme", in *Cahiers d'Urbanisme*, n° 41, pp. 11-12 (2nd quote) and 26 (1st quote).

Brussels, capital of Europe: a first missed opportunity

The European Economic Community was taking shape over the same period, but the representatives of the six future founding countries could not manage to choose its capital. Brussels was an option amongst several others, one at the boundary between the Latin and Germanic worlds.

When Victor Bure mockingly compared the merits of the cities and regions vying for the honour, he could not imagine in 1958 that his amusing description would also apply to the candidacy of Brussels and the series of fragmentary projects that would be linked to it:

“That is why, re-utilising shamelessly an image that had already served me, I compared the Common Market to a prince in search of a bride who was presented with a series of young women with all imaginable qualities. The one who was offered to him that evening was definitely very pretty, but as a dowry she brought only her nakedness. Now, the Common Market is a demanding man who wants to have everything necessary immediately to hand the day after his honeymoon. He hasn’t the time to wait for his capital to be built bit by bit. He requires one that already exists, that he need only outfit according to his needs”.⁴

The ironic director-general still believed a few years later that the government would follow the plans – very partial ones at that – that he had published on the eve of the World’s Fair. Several facets of the preplanning survey and a few regional development proposals excerpted from a preliminary draft of the regional plan studied by the town-planning agency Groupe Alpha between 1948 and 1957 was also published. The solutions put forward in this preliminary draft, which covered 320 km², were too radical to be presented to the general public. Groupe Alpha wanted to transform all of Brussels and its hinterland: It depopulated the city’s centre, without air, light, and sunshine; redistributed the housing according to very strict standards; and limited the peripheral neighbourhoods’ expansion by a green belt. Finally, twelve satellite housing developments would be built to keep the workforce that the capital needed within a 25-30 km orbit of Brussels.

For the European administration’s offices, the agency settled upon three sites in Brussels, namely, the disused military exercise grounds (*La Plaine*), the former rifle range (*Le Tir national*), which was also disused, and the Heysel plateau (after demolishing the World’s Fair pavilions). Three sites in the city’s suburbs (Tervuren, Rhode-Sainte-Genèse and Argenteuil) were also envisioned⁵. However, the government took up none of the proposals that it had itself put forward and preferred to purchase the Dames de Berlaymont’s estate in 1960. This confined (scarcely three hectares) site was close to the other buildings in which the European civil servants were temporarily working.

The EEC’s six Member Countries could not agree on the location of their institutions’ headquarters. The uncertainty prompted the government to play for time and to prolong in the same neighbourhood the informal office-housing arrangements that had been initiated by a few real estate promoters. The imperturbable Town Planning

⁴ BURE V. (1962), "Autour du District européen", in *Terre d'Europe*, Issue 18, p. 31.

⁵ [GOUVERNEMENT BELGE] (1958), *Bruxelles E[urope]*, pp. 7, 94-97.

Administration recalled in 1962 the advantages that the old military exercise ground offered: Well situated and served by transport lines, completely unencumbered over 46 hectares with the possibility of being extended another 25 hectares, and belonging to a single public authority, the site could easily become a specialised neighbourhood with all the additional residential, shopping, and leisure facilities required. Victor Bure considered it an attractive complex that appeared to have a natural European calling⁶. This was the first and biggest of the city's missed opportunities.

One year later, in order to remedy the lack of space in the Berlaymont building (with its 135,000 m²), of which the first wing had not yet been completed, the Belgian representation to the EEC proposed to assign to the European institutions, whose staff was growing by leaps and bounds, the 35,000 m² of office space that a promoter had decided to build on a block next to the Berlaymont site. This regrouping around the other buildings already rented for the European administration appeared to be the logical thing to do⁷. Inserting the administrative complex willy-nilly into an already inhabited neighbourhood was deemed preferable to building a convenient but no doubt overly ostentatious complex on an unoccupied site. Politics has reasons that planning cannot fathom!

Birth of a real estate market

The square footage of office space⁸ in the nineteen boroughs of Brussels more than doubled between 1949 and the late fifties, going from an estimated 615,000 m² to 1.3 million m², and quintupled to 3.3 million m² over the next ten years. Over the same period, the city changed considerably. The development of the private service market, accommodation of international bodies, and influx of multinational corporations into the area (stimulated by tax incentives for setting up corporate co-ordinating centres) amplified a mutation that had started with the completion of the north-south train link.

The underground link between the city's North and South Stations that was completed in 1952 cut a hut gash through the middle of downtown Brussels. Its width varied, reaching 150 metres in some places and even more than 300 metres in the area around the new (central) station for a 35-metre-wide channel⁹. The result was a huge wasteland on the surface. The State used the expropriated plots to concentrate its ministry buildings. In addition to the extensions to the National Bank, the State's Administrative Complex, in which more than 7,000 civil servants were assembled, became even more compact and monolithic. Another new station (Congress) was designed for them in a continuation of an already long-standing policy of promoting to-and-fro movements (commuting) between the capital and provincial

⁶ BURE V. (1962), *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁷ DEMEY T. (1992), *Bruxelles. Chronique d'une capitale en chantier*, Vol 2, Brussels, pp. 186, 191 and 192.

⁸ These figures refer to buildings with at least 1,000 m² of office space. They are underestimated for the period prior to 1950.

⁹ The width of the channel was doubled at the Central Station to place three platforms between the six tracks.

regions. The clustering of State and semi-State services in Brussels was followed by a reorganisation of major private businesses' administrative offices.

The very good economic cycle and labour management copied after the American model accelerated the clustering of offices along rue de la Loi between the Belgian decision-making centres at one end and the European decision-making centre (Berlaymont building) at the other end. The Leopold Quarter (the neighbourhood around Luxembourg Station) bore this change without recrimination. The wealthy landlords abandoned their mansions without regret and having reaped capital gains to move to the suburbs or get rid of buildings that they had already vacated. The monofunctionality of this first business district was rapidly reinforced. This is when an office real estate market appeared. Until then, the growth of administrative office space had been primarily the business of institutions or firms building for themselves. In response to the strong demand, investors – foreign ones foremost amongst them – spawned a specialised real estate market in the late 1960s, one marked by imperatives of promotion and profit. This market snowballed rapidly over the next decade.

Two very officious plans

Planning occurs in strips

There was indeed a preliminary area plan for the Brussels urban area that was produced by the same Groupe Alpha between 1962 and 1965, but it remained just as officious as its predecessor, doubtless for the same reasons. The proposals for reorganising the city that it contained were just as radical: the demolition and standardised reconstruction of entire neighbourhoods, hierarchised redistribution of community facilities according to a grid that had no relationship to the nineteen boroughs' borders, and 188 kilometres of urban expressways (whether primary or secondary). The business district, running from Rue de la Loi to the North and South Stations, was nevertheless supposed to be linked to a proportional amount of housing. The exercise grounds or Heysel plateau still offered two sufficient alternatives for decentralised office space, if required, according to the planners.

The urban expressways that the Highways Administration advocated influenced the locations of offices more than Groupe Alpha's plan. The modification of Avenue Louise, which was turned into a primary expressway, is a perfect example of this. Office towers would be erected along it as well as along the boulevards forming the inner beltway, which likewise became urban expressways.

Three boroughs, namely, Brussels, Saint-Josse, and Schaerbeek, undertook a huge real estate operation in the North Quarter without departing too much from the officious plan. Each of them adopted an local special plan (*plan particulier d'aménagement* or PPA in French) in 1967 with regulatory force.¹⁰

The (central) Town Planning Administration redid the preliminary area plan in 1970 to make it more operational. There was no longer any question of compartmentalising facilities in a similar manner, of demolishing and rebuilding housing that had been

¹⁰ MARTENS A., "Ten years of expropriations and evictions in the Brussels North Quarter (1965-1975): what are the legacies today?", in *Brussels Studies*, 29, 5 October 2009.

judged too hastily to be insalubrious or inappropriate, or of creating new shopping districts. Whilst functionalist theories were no longer mentioned in the reports, they subsisted in people's minds and were confined to the operability that was required. Everything continued to revolve around the model of circulation in a city governed by the automobile.¹¹ The zoning, which was subject to national standardisation, considered the strong interweaving of activities in an urban environment in terms of highly simplified aspects only. Residential areas harboured all businesses without any restriction other than their size. The gradual eviction of the inhabitants of the Leopold and Schuman roundabout neighbourhoods triggered no more than an indifferent remark concerning what was described as a spontaneous phenomenon, namely, that the regional planning measures in this ordinary residential zone, that is, the least differentiated zoning label that the civil servants could give to this part of the city, still had to be studied. This second missed opportunity could be likened to an amazing "wait and see" attitude. Planning likewise seemed to have become Machiavellian.

The future European Quarter is created in silence and without instructions

This strange way of allowing for the European Quarter's development is also the result of truncated planning. The forty-eight future area plans covering the national territory were supposed to take up the co-ordination that had been withdrawn from the twenty preliminary regional plans that the government had abandoned. Their programmes were too broad and directive. Approving a development scheme, both public and private, became a politically difficult balancing act, considering that the functionalist theories began to frighten people. The planning hierarchy was decapitated and the area plans, which espoused wiser forecasts, took on a co-ordinating role that the law had not intended for them. Their land-use categories, which were from then on designed to be applicable to the country's entire territory, were poorly suited to the case of Brussels.

The second preliminary Brussels area plan thus disappeared amidst the general hoo-ha, but not for that reason. Due to an indiscretion¹², its road network came in for increasingly strong and converging criticism. Neighbourhood committees sprang up like mushrooms and in their wake the municipal authorities contested the 225 km of planned urban expressways. Everyone had seen how the formerly prestigious Avenue Louise had been turned into a six-lane expressway.

¹¹ HUBERT M., "Expo '58 and "the car as king". What future for Brussels's major urban road infrastructure?", in *Brussels Studies*, 22, 20 October 2008.

¹² STRAUJEN F., "Plan de secteur à Bruxelles. Dissoudre ou compléter, c'est la question", in *Wonen-TAVBK*, 1975, Issue 15/16, p. 59.

Regionalisation and official planning

Following the country's division into regions – a development that was enshrined in the constitution in 1970 – the spatial planning powers of the Minister of Public Works Jos De Saeger were shifted to the Minister for Brussels Affairs Guy Cudell. The latter thus developed, along with a Town Planning Administration that had likewise been regionalised, a sample area plan in 1973, and everything began again from scratch.

The minister wanted to improve the mapping through greater participation so that it would reflect the complexity and singularities of land use in Greater Brussels¹³. He wanted first and foremost to maintain and defend housing. Next, he wanted to discipline the siting of offices by allowing them to be set up only where offices were already very present. "In future," he stated in a televised report, "*we shall situate offices along certain stretches – and let me stress the words 'certain stretches' – of the major thoroughfares for automobile traffic. In this way, what we want to avoid radically in future is the development of what we have called office cancers*".¹⁴

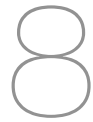
The sample plan openly abandoned the Leopold Quarter to the administrative activity that had already taken it over and transformed it to a great extent whilst spreading this land use to the thoroughfares that led to it. Avenue de Cortenbergh was the prototype of this planning measure. The North Quarter, the demolition and reconstruction of which were halted as a result of the first effects of the global economic crisis that struck in 1973, kept what remained of its mix of activities.

After the 1974 elections another minister, Paul Vanden Boeynants, continued the work. Vanden Boeynants distributed a preliminary area plan (the third one of its kind) at the end of the year for discussion and amendment before being adopted as a draft plan with regulatory status. Criticism was levelled at it from all sides. The cordons of offices that had become the norm along more than fifty kilometres of boulevards and avenues with heavy traffic were erased to leave on the regulatory maps only the existing administrative areas plus a few new decentralised clusters.

The remarks made by its critics were heard. Serge Moureaux explained his position as deputy mayor for the Greater Brussels (*Agglomération de Bruxelles* in French) in a televised report as follows: "*As of this moment, we see on one of the break-down maps that we drew up from the area plan that the option of the Minister's proposed area plan is to break up the office sector along the major thoroughfares, and we believe that that will exacerbate the situation, the matter of motor vehicle traffic, whereas on the contrary we want to try to concentrate it in what I have called one-off development or restructuring clusters that would facilitate the neighbourhoods*"

¹³ ATELIER DE RECHERCHE ET D'ACTION URBAINES (1984), *Quinze années d'action urbaine ou Bruxelles vu par ses habitants*, Brussels, p. 56.

¹⁴ RTBF's archives (S. Imadoc), news report *Situation 74. Nous avons acheté la moitié de Bruxelles et l'autre est à vendre* (devoted to British promoters' investments in the capital).



spontaneous and natural development and, it seems to me, would be more compatible with proper urban life.”¹⁵

The criticism that the Deputy Mayor in charge of town planning levelled was predicated upon his experience and irritated a minister with whose thinking he was competing. Greater Brussels – an institution that was created in 1971 in the wake of the law on conurbations – ran various activities that had been managed by the nineteen component municipalities until then, namely, fire-fighting and emergency medical aid, trash removal, town planning (in part, including the drafting of the nineteen general municipal planning schemes in parallel with the area plan, which never got any final approval), and so on. Town planning powers overlapped and generated emulation between the two men.

The neighbourhood committees were not to be left out: they denounced the fact, through their federation Inter-Environnement Bruxelles, that offices were to be authorised in residential areas, even though this acceptance was limited. The administration then adopted a solution based on more restrictive prescriptions that could be modulated by meetings with the various public authorities involved and after consulting the residents. The so-called “concertation” procedure (or multipartite consultations) was legitimised through the subjective and complex discussion of mixing housing and economic activities. However, the contestation accentuated the opposition to the urban expressway network, which had already been partly dismantled in the document, even more.

During this period, the pressure of public opinion led Minister Vanden Boeynants to worry about the irreversible situations that were created by extremely active real estate speculation. Pending the draft plan’s entry into force, he decided no longer to authorise demolitions without concomitant reconstruction proposals. He also chose to subject all applications to build office buildings to his administration’s opinion and wanted to ban all more-than-ten-storey buildings (unless they were allowed in a municipal plan). The missed opportunity was visible between the lines only, for the ministerial directive could not thwart the trend of higgledy-piggledy bulldozing and rebuilding known as “Bruxellisation”. The demolition of buildings that threatened to collapse was not affected by his instructions, as such measures were prerogatives of the individual boroughs.

In spring 1976, Paul Vanden Boeynants signed before the press the draft area plan that was supposed to combat the abusive encroachment of office buildings, amongst other things. Four specialised land-use categories were adopted, although they were not exclusive, for within each category a main function was spelled out but additional functions were allowed. The main function was protected to the extent that the additional functions were subject to a procedure of public announcement and consultation when they were likely to jeopardise the main function. What is more, offices could not exceed a certain quota of the square footage per block in residential and mixed land-use areas.

¹⁵ AATL’s archives (Planning Department), retranscription (done at Greater Brussels’s administration on 5 February 1975) of Serge Moureaux’s statements during the Belgian Broadcasting Network RTB’s *Antenne Soir* of 28 January 1975.

Guy Cudell, who meanwhile had returned to the regional government as a Junior Minister in the Regional Executive, oversaw the minor changes that the draft plan required to be adopted definitively in 1979. It had taken six years to achieve this goal, without counting the aborted earlier plans.

Offices left to their own devices in spite of everything

The area plan had regulatory value and contained only a large administrative zone in the Leopold Quarter. It would be unravelled over close to the next twenty years. Given the careful periodic surveys that they required, not a single borough administration complied with the maximum office quotas, despite a reminder sent out in a ministerial circular in 1991. The challenge came above all from the local special plans that waived the area plan's requirements and were very often designed to accede to the requests that real estate agents put to the local authorities, as research commissioned by the regional authorities in 1986 revealed. Some dozen such plans were on the drawing board at the time and would be added to the thirty other plans already identified¹⁶. The city's massive de-industrialisation during the last quarter of the 20th century – by the late 1990s Brussels was no longer the country's leading industrial city – contributed to this circumvention of the law, which could not be called a pragmatic way of coping with the changing employment market, for no justification was expressed in this form.

Certain colleges of aldermen interpreted the special plans' ability to waive area plan requirements very broadly. This practice, which was considered legal, did not have an epilogue until 1988, when the Council of State ruled on an appeal filed by an environmental association¹⁷. The administrative jurisdiction confirmed its jurisprudence and the hierarchy of standards (and thus of the plans) in its ruling concerning a borough of Brussels¹⁸.

Meanwhile, the urban business zones, which had been conceived of in the area plan to develop light industry and shopping malls, were put to other uses. Administrative buildings gradually occupied these areas, especially when they bordered the major traffic arteries, *i.e.*, the Liège motorway (Rue Colonel Bourg in Schaerbeek/Evere, Avenue des Pléiades-Gulledelle in Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, and Boulevard Léopold II-Avenue du Port in Molenbeek). Other major thoroughfares were hijacked in the same way to the detriment of other uses: Offices were built near the Namur motorway (Boulevard de la Plaine in Ixelles, in an area that was supposed to give priority to housing and facilities to supplement the nearby university campus, according to

¹⁶ Bureau d'architecture A.M. VANDENBOSSCHE (1988), *La problématique de l'implantation des bureaux en Région bruxelloise*, study report (of Phase B), p. 3.3.

¹⁷ Council of State ruling of 10 September 1998 (No. 75.710, Front commun des groupements de défense de la nature, on www.raadvst-consetat.be).

¹⁸ The prescriptions of a lower plan (*PPA* or local special plan), that was prior to the higher plan (*plan de secteur* or area plan), and which were contradictory to the latter's clauses, were abrogated implicitly if they were not abrogated explicitly. In contrast, the prescriptions of a lower plan that was subsequent to the higher plan could be exempt from complying with its prescriptions subject to strict cumulative conditions.

the area plan), near the Paris motorway (Boulevard International-Boulevard Paepsem in Anderlecht, in an industrial zone), and next to the motorway heading out towards Zaventem (Brussels and Evere, also in an industrial zone).

In late 1999, shortly before the area plan was replaced¹⁹, 47% of the city's approximately 10 million square metres of offices (in buildings with at least 1,000 m² and which were thus very often monofunctional) were situated outside the administrative zones set in the plan. The opportunity to do things right (as the plan stipulated) had failed. Of course, not all of the offices existing before the plan's adoption had been included in the administrative zones tailor-made for such land uses. Some of them ended up in residential or mixed zones (8% and 5%, respectively)²⁰, especially along Avenue Louise, as well as in urban business zones (3% of them). Similarly, offices were permitted in these same areas after the plan's adoption thanks to waivers in the local special plans²¹ (the percentage was 6% for all three categories). However, a quarter of them (2.5 million m²) invaded places that were not intended for office buildings²², with the exception of late zoning changes for some of them. The latter benefited from a new plan in 1995 that superimposed metropolitan administrative areas on the old plan in various places without abrogating it altogether. Offices on concrete slabs buried Luxembourg Station's platforms whilst other rows of office buildings towered along the boulevard leading to the North Station.

Despite everything, the North Quarter remained very available. It concerned only three boroughs and a single real estate promoter²³. Other entities also wanted to take advantage of this tertiarisation of the city. However, the area plan could not reorient this neighbourhood's calling along the lines advocated by the two ministries. The revised local special plans met with renewed interest from real estate promoters, who had become active again in the late 1980s after an approximately decade-long recession due to the glut of office space on the market. The colleges of aldermen authorised the construction of administrative buildings as long as housing and shops were erected nearby. They combined these new requirements with countervailing charges to compensate for the added value that their permits generated. The idea of getting the promoters to participate in more holistic regional development by supporting less profitable housing development gradually prevailed. The presence of

¹⁹ Abrogated at the end of 1998, it was re-instated a year later until mid-2001, *i.e.*, the time it took for the 2nd regional land-use plan or PRAS (without regulatory force) to be adopted.

²⁰ The company Solvay had filed an appeal with the Council of State because its headquarters (in Ixelles/Elsene), the size of which had been poorly evaluated, was inserted in a mixed area in the area plan. The administrative court found in Solvay's favour and cancelled the contested land-use assignment in these two contiguous blocks in 1982 and 1983. These two buildings thus were not counted.

²¹ Local special plans that explicitly allowed office buildings (see the table in DE BEULE M. and DESSOUROUX C., *op. cit.*, p. 78).

²² The draft area plan had regulatory status for three years, but its land-use map was modified slightly during its final adoption (the number of urban business zones was increased, for example). That is why the numbers are based on the plan that was ultimately approved in late 1979.

²³ VILLE DE BRUXELLES (1988), *Bulletin communal*, I, p. 30. The political situation was not summed up in such clear terms in the town council's debate.

this housing and shops thus diversified the side streets fanning out from the boulevards of office towers, the sizes of which were scaled down accordingly.

For the area around Luxembourg Station (known as the Leopold or European Quarter), the plan did not challenge the choices that the national government had more or less approved when it came to the European Council of Ministers. It tried to protect the housing close to the coveted sites. The erection of an amphitheatre, which was coyly called an “international convention centre” and the MEPs had called for in 1985 to hold European Parliament sessions in addition to those in Strasbourg, was preceded by a study called “Espace Bruxelles-Europe” or “Brussels-Europe Space”. However, the building permit was granted even before this study was completed and upset the area plan, which had to be partially revised, since it had made no provisions for such a complex²⁴.

The case of avenue du Port-boulevard Léopold II gives a glimpse of some excuses that did not attend other, older, cases. So, when the Molenbeek Borough Council adopted the special plans containing exemptions from the area plan’s land uses, it exhibited a quasi-unanimous will to do like the other boroughs of Brussels, that is, to modernise without neglecting the more prosaic satisfaction of having a new line-up of buildings that would screen the eyesores in the back streets; get enough new or renovated housing in exchange for allowing offices; trigger a change of atmosphere and forget the trials and tribulations of the traffic viaduct; and counterbalance the closings of customs agencies, which were less and less useful as the European Single Market drew nigh. Molenbeek’s borough councillors quickly approved the last plan before the new town planning ordinance went into effect (in 1992), for those in the know knew that it would allow fewer exemptions than the law that had been adopted thirty years earlier²⁵.

Another round of planning

The ordinance adopted in 1991 reflected the new town planning policy that the first Brussels government defended in the regional parliament. The principles changed little: Programme planning, with programmes to be renewed regularly on the regional and local levels alike, was superimposed on land-use planning (likewise on two levels), which distributed over the territory the land uses necessary for the planned socio-economic development. In 1995, the regional development plan (RDP or PRD in French) set the economic, social, and cultural objectives that the government intended to achieve. They were as varied as they were ambitious. The RDP’s regulatory strand supported the much-mauled area plan. A maximum square

²⁴ CONSEIL DE LA RÉGION DE BRUXELLES-CAPITALE, *Documents*, session 2002-2003, n° A-403/1, proposition de résolution concernant l’implantation des institutions européennes à Bruxelles, rapport, pp. 3-21 (Brussels-Capital Regional Parliament’s draft resolution on the European Institutions’ localisation in Brussels).

²⁵ COMMUNE DE MOLENBEEK-SAINT-JEAN, *Compte rendu de la séance du Conseil communal du 14 décembre 1989* (n° 10), p. 37, du 10 janvier 1991 (n° 1), pp. 14 and 15, du 23 septembre 1991 (n° 9), pp. 5, 8 et 11 / du 4 mai 1992 (n° 6), p. 4 (Minutes of the Molenbeek-Saint-Jean Borough Council Meetings of 14 December 1989, 10 January 1991, 23 September 1991, and 4 May 1992).

footage of offices per building could not be exceeded. An administrative area confirmed the local plans (and the waivers that they contained) covering the North Quarter and crowned the tracks of Luxembourg Station, located so near the European Parliament. An additional 300,000 m² of offices was allowed in a defined area backed up by a programme around the South Station. Commuters were urged to leave their cars at home and come to work by train.

The regional land-use plan (RLUP or PRAS in French) was definitively adopted in 2001 after two preparatory exercises (the first draft in 1998 and second draft in 1999). It followed the intentions stated in the RDP whilst taking up the philosophy of the area plan that it replaced, without challenging the administrative land-use exemptions provided in the local special plans. Quotas of offices (called “acceptable remainders”) in the residential or mixed-use zones were updated by the regional administration. A second regional development plan was approved in 2002, this time without a regulatory strand, for an amendment to the ordinance gave it indicative value only. However, the cyclic wave that had carried offices for some ten years fell just as the wave carrying housing unexpectedly swelled. The pace of converting old offices to housing in residential neighbourhoods quickened and the calculation of quotas worked increasingly in reverse²⁶. The administrative zones filled up slower than expected, be it in the North Quarter or around the South Station.

Today, relations amongst the players of the real estate game remain just as ambiguous. Of course, when the Heads of State and Government met in Edinburgh in 1992, the European Council came to a first agreement on distributing the EU institutions’ locations amongst its three capitals. However, the four-partite misunderstanding continues. Anything else would be impossible. The square footage of administrative offices in Brussels continues to rise, as the regional government tries to organise the locations of office buildings more precisely and enhance the city’s international attractiveness. A future is taking shape for the city’s large urban wastelands through various master plans, under the watchful eyes of municipal officials, real estate promoters, and residents. The determined reinsertion of housing in the European Quarter is being envisioned, in exchange for which office buildings will be allowed to rise higher. The new global economic crisis should, however, slow down these real estate trends. Will planning finally play its intended role in this story?²⁷

²⁶ *Observatoire des bureaux*, issues 19 (p. 19), 20 (p. 19), and 22 (p. 20).

²⁷ This review of developments is based on research conducted on the basis of the archives kept by Brussels’s regional administration and the respective borough administrations (DE BEULE M., *La planification bruxelloise aux 19^{ème} et 20^{ème} siècles*; SILVESTRE M. and WAUTY É., *Histoires de quartiers planifiés* – in press).