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## **Presentation of the acts of the international colloquium "Brussels and Europe"**

Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Royal Flemish Academy of Sciences and Arts

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Amongst other interesting aspects, the acts of the 2006 Colloquium on Brussels and Europe which Mr. De Groof has so nicely published clearly show us how certain difficulties existed in the past in the relations between the actors present in Brussels, including the European Institutions.

Possibly, 10 years ago no one would have spent time and energy in writing such impressive research: Brussels and Europe were not really seen then as an exciting topic, and the dialogue between the Brussels authorities and the European institutions was quite poor.

Over the last four-and-a-half years, a number of steps forward have been taken. Allow me now to briefly spell out how and why.

### **Relations with Belgian authorities**

My first driving motive in boosting the co-operation 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.

In order to improve the quality of life for its own staff and for local residents, the Commission has been seeking to improve the physical appearance and urban integration of its buildings in Brussels.

This can only be done with the support of the Belgian authorities: hence our call for them to reinforce their coordination at all levels and ensure consistency in their policy of hosting European institutions in Belgium.

Our key objectives are:

1. a regular and open-minded dialogue between all Brussels-based European institutions and all relevant levels of Belgian authorities. It is with this goal in mind that, back in 2005, I proposed to the Brussels Region and the federal authorities to set up the "EU–Belgium Task Force": chaired by my cabinet in close co-operation with President Barroso's cabinet, this task force has reinforced co-operation and transparency.
2. the constant consideration of both the logistic and human dimensions of the Commission's presence: crèches and daycare centres — for which the Belgian authorities play a key role with respect to building permits — and European Schools — for which Belgium has the intergovernmental obligation to deliver the necessary infrastructure. I have read that some in Belgium still believe that European Schools are a source of "social separation" as they do not allow access to local pupils. They seem to ignore two basic facts. Firstly, that it is only due to the cruel lack of space that local children can no longer have access to the European Schools. Secondly, that Belgium is the main opponent of our desire to open up the system, by allowing any interested local school to offer the European Baccalaureate and get some financial compensation for any children of EU staff attending it — an idea which is otherwise broadly endorsed at inter-governmental level in the framework of the ongoing reform of the European School system.
3. last but not least, the availability of adequate public transport connections to and within the European Institutions' sites, in line with our environmental commitments.

## **The building policy**

A key tool to achieve those objectives is our new building policy, adopted in September 2007.

My point of departure there was that, if the European district is today a relatively scattered and irrational gathering of buildings, this is largely due to the lack of a coherent urban planning vision, and not only on the Commission's part.

For a long time, due in part to the lack of a political decision on where to locate the EU headquarters — which was only decided in Amsterdam in 1997 — our institution had a reactive, not a proactive attitude in this area. It was subject to the choices of real estate promoters operating — understandably so — without a coherent urban development vision.

Over the last few years we have tried to reverse this trend, by introducing 3 key novelties:

- 1) long-term planning of the Commission's space needs;
- 2) improved competition through a new building procurement methodology aimed to ensure best value for money and market transparency;
- 3) tighter co-operation among our most concerned internal departments.

We have also confirmed, in line with the philosophy set out by my predecessor, Commissioner Neil Kinnock, our desire to ensure that any new building acquired or rented by the European Commission complies with a number of fundamental principles:

- 1) high-quality architectural design and use of international architectural competitions for all major developments;
- 2) good integration into the urban environment;
- 3) a safe and healthy work environment;
- 4) better access for disabled persons;
- 5) presence of high-quality social infrastructure;
- 6) last but not least, reduction of our carbon footprint, in particular through a design integrating sustainable materials and energy efficiency, better links to public transport networks and greater synergies in terms of buildings management, the ultimate goal being fewer but more efficient buildings for our staff.

## **The rue de la Loi/Wetstraat project**

Let me say a few more words about an initiative which represents, in my view, the first tangible example of our new vision: the “Rue de la Loi/Wetstraat” project.

In April 2008, following successful co-operation between my collaborators and those of the Brussels Region, a major international urban-planning competition was launched, aimed to redesign part of the European Quarter.

Five candidates were pre-selected to present a more in-depth re-design of the area.

An advisory committee, composed of two representatives each from the City of Brussels, the Brussels Region and the European Commission, plus 7 international experts, is about to deliver its final opinion. The Brussels Region will then autonomously decide on the winner. Both Minister Picqué and myself hope to be able to announce his or her name this March.

Our underlying agreement concerning the identified perimeter of the project is to ensure that:

- 1) the European Commission can adjust up to 400,000 m<sup>2</sup> of office space for its own needs along rue de la Loi, by freeing up space in a number of adjacent areas;  
and
- 2) that the Brussels Region can develop up to about 110,000m<sup>2</sup> of housing and about 55,000m<sup>2</sup> of shops and other facilities.

I trust this project will deliver extremely interesting results for Brussels and Belgium.

### **Conclusion**

Ladies and Gentlemen: thank you again for giving me this opportunity to share our vision with you. I regret that not all institutional actors in Belgium are totally convinced yet about the need to ensure that Brussels further consolidates its role of Capital of Europe, to the benefit not only of its own citizens, but of this country as a whole. For my part, I hope I could convince you that our strategy for the future contains many elements for improved dialogue between Brussels and Europe, which is at the core of the today's symposium.

Thank you.