

Insertion of modern architecture in historical centers.

The case of Brussels

(Summary)

François-Xavier de Donnea, Ph.D., M.P.
Former Mayor of Brussels
Former Minister-President of the Region of Brussels-Capital

Prague, September 21, 2009.

Introduction.

The issue discussed today is indeed an issue with which I was confronted for many years on a daily basis, first as Mayor of Brussels (1995-2000) and afterwards as Minister-President of the Region of Brussels-Capital (2000-2003).

This is a delicate issue because it involves (subjective) value judgments on the esthetic and functional qualities of buildings and neighborhoods.

It remains a very actual and hot issue in all historical centers of European cities and is often at the origin of passionate political and social debates.

This is especially the case today in many cities of Central and Eastern Europe whose historical centers have been preserved (e.g. Prague) or reconstructed during the communist regime (e.g. Warsaw). But since the fall of the Berlin wall, because of the economic development which luckily followed, several of these cities have been facing pressures of real estate developers, which threaten - or already damaged - the integrity and harmony of historical neighborhoods.

The case of Brussels.

In Western Europe, Brussels offers a very good example of what should not be done in city planning and cohabitation of new and old architecture.

Many town planners, inhabitants and visitors of Brussels have denounced since the sixties what has been called in city planning textbooks "Brusselization" of a city.

This concept refers to the anarchic development of an old city by uncontrolled real estate developers and politicians.

"Brusselization" started in the forties with the building of a rail connection between the South and the North railway stations of Brussels. A big trench was dug through historical areas and covered by a large lane bordered by functional office buildings, many of which don't have much esthetic or architectural value. It also disrupted the social links between the higher and the lower parts of the cities.

However the most important impulse to "Brusselization" occurred during the sixties and seventies.

For six main reasons:

- the rapid economic growth in the "golden sixties" and early seventies;
- the expansion of the European institutions in the "Capital of Europe" which stimulated the demand for office space;
- the absence of a tight and coherent regulation for city planning and architectural rules (concerning height, form, colors, materials,... of buildings);
- The absence of a strong and independent institution in charge of protecting the architectural and monumental patrimony of the city;
- the objective alliance between some dynamic, but ruthless, real estate developers and some corrupt politicians.

The results of "Brusselization".

- Large neighborhoods, with beautiful houses built in the late XIX and early XX centuries were demolished and replaced by dull office buildings.
- Ugly towers and high rise buildings were built in historical areas in a completely erratic way. They destroyed perspectives or dwarfed old buildings or monuments with great esthetic value.
- Blocks of houses bought by real estate developers were left to rotten for many years for speculative purposes or to put pressure on reluctant city officials to grant building permits for projects of questionable interest.
- In several areas a hybrid mixture of styles, of old and new buildings, of heteroclite building heights and volumes giving an impression of "bric à brac" and creating "hollow teeth" cityscapes.

When I became Mayor in January 1995, in the historical center or "Pentagon" of Brussels about 530 buildings were left to rotten by their owners!

Reactions against Brusselization.

In the sixties and seventies, more and more voices arose to condemn the evolution of the city and the passivity or complicity of politicians and city officials confronted with "Brusselization". A coalition of citizens, NGO's, politicians, intellectuals obliged city officials to adopt tighter and tighter city planning regulations.

This trend culminated with the adoption by the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region of two important regional laws:

- the Brussels Code of City Planning (1991);
- the Law on the Protection of Patrimony (1993).

The 1991 Code of City Planning lays down the requirement to establish:

- regional and municipal development plans;
 - regional and municipal land use plans;
 - regional and municipal architectural regulations (height of buildings, materials,...)
- Municipal plans can only lay down tighter regulations than the regional plans.

The 1993 Law on the Protection of Patrimony created an independent institution in charge of enforcing the protection of monuments and valuable sites. The law lays down the procedures for scheduling buildings and sites for protection. It also created an inventory of valuable buildings and sites in the Brussels region.

The 1991 and 1993 laws made continued "Brusselization" impossible. Of course, they were the result of a strong reaction against previous gross abuses and anarchy. Hence, some of the new procedures to obtain building permits or renovation permits are cumbersome. Some rules are somewhat dogmatic. But overall, these two laws could successfully stop further "Brusselization" in the Capital of Europe.

Several municipal councils voted the establishment of very high taxes on abandoned buildings to limit speculation and avoid rotten building blocks which make it difficult to refuse permits for projects of mediocre value or questionable interest.

Several incongruous or ugly high rise buildings were also totally destroyed or partially destroyed and revamped.

Cohabitation of new and old architecture.

Whenever the homogeneity and harmony of historical neighborhoods, streets or squares can technically be preserved, insertion of modern buildings should, in my opinion, be avoided.

It is of course not always possible to renovate very run down or obsolete historical buildings. Because of the public outrage resulting from the destruction of valuable buildings in the past, city planning administrations in Brussels became more and more reluctant to permit the destruction of façades with some architectural value. This resulted in a large practice of what is called "façadism": the building behind the façade can be destroyed, but the façade has to be preserved or reconstructed as an exact copy of the existing one. This can be sometimes justified for highly valuable historical façades, like those of the "Grand Place" of Brussels, but in many cases this practice leads to bizarre results. Hence I believe that "façadism" should remain an exceptional practice. It is better when an old building cannot be saved to replace it by a modern building, whose architecture should of course be in harmony with its historical environment.

In my view, to ensure good cohabitation of classical and modern architecture in a neighborhood, it is important to ensure the harmony of the heights and volumes of neighboring buildings. A modern building should never dwarf its historical neighbor(s). For example there is a large variety of architectural styles on the

Champs Elysées in Paris, but because of the alignment of the heights of the buildings, you have an impression of harmony when walking along them.

Of course compatibility of colors and materials of neighboring new and old buildings is also very important, but this principle is often violated.

Let's never forget that a building, which is beautiful in itself, can become very incongruous in inadequate surroundings.