Reclaim the streets

It’s been 40 years since The Bulletin organised a sit-in on Brussels’ Grand’Place to protest against traffic, yet it provided the inspiration for last Sunday’s Picnic the Streets. Here’s what happened — and why

BY PHILIPPE VAN PARIJS
PHOTOS BY FILIP VAN ZANDYCKE

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n June 10, at noon, hundreds of people started sitting down in the middle of Boulevard Anspach in Brussels, in front of the Bourse. At their peak, they were well over 2,000 people, with their kids, their blankets, their sandwiches and their salads — some even with their garden chairs and barbecues. The picnic was a Facebook event, coordinated by a handful of young Brusselers. It was meant as an act of protest. No permission had been asked to hold it. Politicians from every political party expressed their support, however, and after some hesitation, Brussels’ mayor, Freddy Thielemans, declared that the picnic was “an absolutely charming idea” and would be, though not authorised, tolerated. Police were present, but to gently support, however, and after some hesitation, Brussels’ Politicians from every political party expressed their act of protest. No permission had been asked to hold it. by a handful of young Brusselers. It was meant as an pleasant and safe public spaces more important than ever to ensure a well-balanced life for us all; above all, for young people who would otherwise be confined to cramped apartments and exiguous pavements. Attractive public spaces are also indispensable to facilitate serene encounters between the increasingly diverse components of our urban populations, instead of keeping them locked up in their respective ghettos.

In Brussels, as in other cities, no major progress in this direction can be made without freeing large spaces from traffic and parking, either permanently or at certain hours or on certain days. Cars keep killing pedestrians and cyclists, not only by occasionally mowing them down, but above all by constantly injecting dirt into their lungs. Moreover, cars spoil the pleasure citizens can take in walking around their city they chatter up public space, they disfigure the landscape and burden our cars with their noise. Driving a car in the city centre must cease to be the rule. It must become an exception only justifiable by a specific reason: the transportation of a disabled person, for example, or of heavy objects. In Brussels, as in other cities, there are dreams and plans that are going in the right direction. But it is high time to move faster and more vigorously. As the capital of a troubled European Union, Brussels has a special responsibility to lead by example.

These considerations inspired the suggestion I made on May 24 in Le Soir and Brussel DeZev24: why not hold a picnic every Sunday lunchtime across the width of Boulevard Anspach between the Bourse and Place de Brouckére? It would suffice to politely explain to drivers that, for once, it is not for them to impose their rule. A touch of gentle civil disobedience is more than legitimate in response to irresponsible lethargy. Brussels is brimming with musicians and talented actors who could brighten up the event, even in gloomy weather. They could make it much more than a simple picnic or passeggiata. And to organise all this, I conjectured, there are certainly people far better equipped than an old philosopher: a handful of Twitter virtuosos, perhaps, or Facebook addicts, or flashmob pioneers. Sure enough, they managed it, and beautifully organised Sunday’s event. I hope this is only one of many similar initiatives, preferably organised by the city administration itself or, if not, in the same bottom-up way as this time. Whenever I can, I shall be there with my sandwiches and, if necessary, my umbrella. Do join me!

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