Piazza Schuman!
What YOU can do to help embellish the heart of Europe’s capital

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How can you expect Europeans to love their Union and its capital if the public space that is meant to symbolise it is nothing but a sordid roundabout along a motorway? Back in February 2001, Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission, suggested turning Rond-Point Schuman into «the European meeting point, the piazza of the continent, if you like. It should give Europeans a sense that they’re visiting the heart of Europe.»

The Belgian authorities seemed to share his opinion. In November 2001, the first plan for the European Quarter was published at the initiative of Isabelle Durant, federal transport minister. It proposed that transit traffic should go through a tunnel under the roundabout. Two years later, deputy prime minister Laurette Onkelinx, declared in the federal Parliament: ‘I have asked my services to conduct studies in order to move the traffic underground under Avenue de Cortenbergh and Rond-Point Schuman. Given the prospect of all European summits being organized in Brussels, a solution was indispensable.”

Study after study took place, the neighbourhood committee expressed its support and the regional authorities confirmed theirs. Thus, in July 2010, Brigitte Grouwels, the Brussels Minister of public works expressed her determination to «make Schuman roundabout largely car-free and turn it into a genuine meeting place for the whole neighbourhood ». The office of the Minister-President even organized an international competition to reshape the surface of the roundabout, and a project was selected in November 2011.

In January 2013, it was rumoured that Beliris, the federal service in charge, was finally on the verge of officially requesting a permit to construct a tunnel between the existing road tunnel and the prospective railway tunnel under the Avenue de Cortenbergh. But nothing happened. Why not? Apparently because of the prohibitive additional cost involved, due to a new European directive on the safety of long road tunnels. Thirteen years after President Prodi’s exhortation, the miserable roundabout is no closer to becoming a piazza. Ten years after Minister Onkelinx’s declaration, the “indispensable” solution is still nowhere in sight.

What can be done to overcome this impasse? Perhaps — if it would really do the trick, — find a cheaper alternative that would dispense with the new tunnel and make transit traffic go through Montgomery. In all events, the Brussels and federal governments must honour their commitments and allocate the resources needed. But it is also high time that the European Union should realize that it is now far more than an international organisation that happens to have located the bulk of its administration in Brussels, just as NATO did in Evere: it has now become a democratic political entity with a genuine capital. This gives the EU some rights over our city, but also some obligations,
including that of contributing financially to the quality of the neighbourhood in which it has so massively settled.

By way of stimulation and support for what needs to be done top-down, a bottom-up initiative is no less appropriate. One century ago, affluent Brusselers did not pay high taxes. It is nonetheless to their contribution — in the form of voluntary “public subscriptions” — that Brussels owes the embellishment of many of its public spaces, for example through the erection of monumental fountains. Affluent citizens did not mind giving up a small part of their private consumption in order to create public spaces that they could enjoy and take pride in. Today, a growing proportion of Brusselers — EU civil servants, diplomats and many others — find themselves in a situation comparable to that of the Brussels notables of a century ago: they are affluent enough but pay little or no income tax to the local authorities. I know quite a few of them who do not feel entirely comfortable about this. They may therefore welcome the following suggestion.

Let us set up a “Piazza Schuman Fund”, to be fed by crowd-funding, today’s high-tech analogue of yesterday’s public subscriptions. This would enable European Brusselers to contribute directly to the qualitative improvement of Europe’s capital. It would also be a tangible message from Brussels’ European citizens to the regional, federal and European authorities: please urgently do whatever is needed to ensure that this spot, which is constantly appearing on millions of TV screens, can generate more affection than repulsion.

Who wants to take such an initiative? Who has ideas for improving it and making it happen? Who wants to simply come along and dream with others about what Schuman and its surroundings could become? Perhaps a handful of enthusiastic European Brusselers tired of living in their bubble? Perhaps some candidates for the regional, federal or European elections of 25 May? Perhaps yourself? If this is the case, I suggest we meet on Saturday 17 May around 12.30 on Rond-Point Schuman, where a “fête du pain” will be taking place on the occasion of the open day of the European institutions. Whether with or without rain (4.4% of the time in May), I shall be there with an orange cape, in recollection of William of Orange, arguably the greatest Brusseler of all times. His motto is alleged to have been: « There is no need for hope in order to undertake, nor for success in order to persevere. »

Reactions, suggestions and expressions of support are welcome at piazzaschuman@bxlconnect.com

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