

Property

European quarter heads back to the future

By Patricia Kelly

13.09.2007 / 00:00 CET

Plans to redevelop land around the EU institutions in Brussels hark back to the past, writes Patricia Kelly.

Here is a warning for people currently parking their cars beneath the rue de la Loi: the European Commission and the regional government of Brussels would like to extend the tunnel that goes under the rond-point Schuman to at least as far as the avenue des Arts. The idea is to force as much of the through traffic as possible underground. But no one should worry about where to park the cars. Commission officials working in the district will no longer need cars because they will be able to live within walking distance of the office in new housing that is planned for the area. And they will be able to buy their groceries in the new shops. There are also tentative plans to build a new European school, so the school-run will be a thing of the past. No longer distracted by the noise of passing traffic, all the television journalists jostling for space on the rond-point Schuman at the thrice-yearly European summits will doubtless be able to do their pieces to camera in one take.

The Commission has dubbed these plans "Operation Face-Lift", referring to a "makeover" and "changing the face" of the area in Brussels known as the European quarter. Aside from the worrying thought that the planners may have been watching too much reality television, transformation of the European quarter is likely to need more than the nip-and-tuck that Commission literature suggests.

It has taken some ten meetings over two years for Siim Kallas, the European commissioner for administrative affairs, and Charles Picqué, the minister-president of Brussels, to come up with their redevelopment strategy. The idea is for the Commission to purchase more real estate and rent less. It wants more space in bigger buildings, but fewer of them. In the long term there are plans to develop up to three other sites in and around Brussels to cope with the expansion of the Commission occasioned by EU enlargement: most likely the already existing sites in rue de Genève in Evere and Beaulieu/Delta, plus one other area – as yet undisclosed, possibly in an attempt to deter the property speculators and circumvent local protest. Or maybe because they have yet to decide where and simply just do not know. The thinking behind the Commission's policy of decentralisation, which is already under way, is to exert downward pressure on property prices in the European quarter, which it considers to be too high; the Commission claims decentralisation has already put a brake on prices.

The Commission/ Brussels-Capital vision sees most of the rue de la Loi taken up by office space occupied by the Commission. The ground floor of these buildings will be given over to shops which will line both sides of the rue de la Loi from just beyond the Charlemagne building down to the Avenue des Arts intersection – the image of a kind of rue Neuve populated by Eurocrats, lawyers and lobbyists springs to mind, although it seems there will be access for local traffic. Side-streets and those immediately parallel to the rue de la Loi would be turned

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into residential property for those who want to live in the shadow of high-rise office buildings. By creating larger buildings in which to concentrate its activities, the current office space abandoned by the Commission will be converted to housing, a crèche and maybe a European school campus (the planners are not yet sure of the latter), all served by improved public transport. This could mean that the Commission becomes a property landlord as well as an owner.

The regional government will not say when it will launch an international architectural and town planning competition, but the winners will be announced in 2009 and the planning will start being put into practice in 2011.

The Kallas/Picqué partnership, known as “la task force”, is anxious to let it be known that agreement on this as yet undesigned ambitious redevelopment programme marks “a historic moment”.

In the words attributed to Commissioner Kallas, “one in which we turn our back on the image of a lifeless, unassimilated administrative ghetto which still clings to the European Quarter”.

Ironically, that is exactly the image that the protesters of 30 years ago warned of when they campaigned, in vain, against the demolition of houses, shops, crèches and schools to make way for the current crop of buildings that the Commission now wants to desert.

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