

Address given by Neil Kinnock on the 'Future of the European Quarter' (Brussels, 25 November 2003)

Caption: In an address given to the European Quarter Foundation in Brussels on 25 November 2003, Neil Kinnock, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner with special responsibility for administrative reform, outlines the main features of the institution's property policy in the Belgian capital.

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Future of the European Quarter (Brussels, 25 November 2003)

Neil Kinnock, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner responsible for Administrative Reform

I am very pleased to join you since we all have a common and deep interest in the future of the European Quarter and the Commission fully understands the value of seeking to base its buildings policy on active participation in the urban development of this area of Brussels.

With that in mind, I must begin by saying that the significant improvement to the *Place de l'Europe* between the *Justus Lipsius, van Maerlant* and the *Parc Leopold* is highly commendable and the extensive renovation of the *Parc* also deserves warm praise. No-one here will need me to say, however, that the *Place* will continue to be seen as something of an oasis until the rest of the surface area is transformed, and the rear of *Rue Froissart* and the buildings at its junction with *Rue Belliard* get similar treatment. Meanwhile, we are striving, with our Belgian colleagues, to ensure that we make a significant contribution to improving the Quartier and improving traffic flow. We have wandered in the wilderness and now we say "Next year, the Berlaymont."

This morning, I think it might be helpful if I briefly describe the basic principles of the European Commission's policy over the last decade and then, against that background, set out the main features of the policy guidelines that I will be submitting to the Commission. As will be clear, those guidelines will be offered within the broader context of the proposals put forward by the Belgian Government in its urban plan for the European Quarter on 3 October this year.

Since 1992, when the formal decision was taken to establish the headquarters of the European Commission permanently in Brussels, the buildings policy of the Institution has developed on the basis of three main principles:

- the systematic and strategic location of Commission departments, with the aim of optimising the size and quality of buildings;
- increasing the proportion of buildings that are purchased rather than rented;
- intensifying the dialogue with relevant Belgian authorities in order to reconcile the increasing property needs of the Commission with urban planning, taking proper account of the views of local residents.

The principles were - and are - clearly intended to reflect understanding of the considerable social and economic impact which European Institutions have on Brussels. For example, in 1998 - according to Belgian estimates - , the European Institutions' operational spending in Brussels was around 27 billion BEF - €670 million. Updated to take account of general price and spending movements the comparable figure is over **€725million**. In addition, account obviously has to be taken of the consumer and capital spending of the people and businesses who are here or come here because of the location of the Institutions. EU officials and their families, MEPs and staff, visitors to the Institutions, national civil servants in Permanent Representations, and the legions of lawyers, lobbyists and media personnel probably total over 60,000. Active and practical dialogue between the Institutions and the Belgian authorities at all levels is therefore plainly vital to all concerned.

In the European Quarter itself, the significance of the Institutions is plain, not least because they currently occupy about 45% of all office space in the Quartier.

Equally evident is the fact that architecture and space and circulation planning in the European Quarter is of varying quality and the area is something of an administrative enclave.

An observer could be forgiven for thinking that much of the area is a somewhat unattractive urban desert with concrete canyons where traffic is jammed during work days and emptiness generates security problems

at other times.

These conditions have induced the Commission towards developing a new policy that has two basic aims:

First to participate more fully in the harmonious development of the European Quarter in order to make an effective contribution to improving the working and living environment and by that means refresh what could be called the “image” of Europe. That involves adopting an approach to buildings policy which consciously serves those purposes.

Secondly - and consequently - we want to ensure that the Commission adopts and demonstrates best practice that is consistent with the policies that we advocate for Europe generally, particularly in transport, environmental and social policy areas.

On this basis, the buildings policy and the development of the European Commission's infrastructures over the medium-term must be guided by a comprehensive approach that seeks to:

- integrate the Commission's buildings into the urban fabric,
- improve the accessibility and quality of Commission's buildings,
- subscribe towards improving mobility in the Quartier and more widely in Brussels.

Operating with these objectives in mind will give clear guidance for reorganising the Commission's buildings and social infrastructures as we deal with the new demands arising from enlargement of the Union which, over the next four years will bring an increase of over 3000 in the number of Commission staff in Brussels as well as a similar growth in the staff of the other Institutions. That will probably take the Institution-related population of residents and visitors to Brussels somewhere over 75,000.

The aim of achieving better integration of the Commission's buildings into the urban fabric clearly relates directly to the urban planning problems affecting the European Quarter and there are three implications of that which I would like to relate to you.

First, in common with many here, we think that activities within the European Quarter should be diversified by encouraging a mixture of office space, shops and housing.

Achieving such a mix would obviously help to improve access to local services which are not conveniently available because of the mono-functional nature of the district, stimulate a greater sense of community, and consequently strengthen security.

Housing is plainly a major determinant of such change and I am therefore going to propose that the Commission should take a favourable view of development - with the obvious provision that the authorities responsible for granting planning permission also take a measured attitude towards the extent and character of property development in the area.

On commercial service activities, I would simply mention that we have changed our internal rules in order to facilitate the provision of public shops and restaurants on the ground floor of Commission buildings. We do not anticipate any major expansion in these activities our aim is simply to provide some convenient extra service for staff and visitors and for others working and circulating in the Quartier.

Ideally, of course, the eventual outcome of such evolution would be for office buildings that house street level lively shopping and eating facilities, some of which match Commission and general office working times.

The second part of efforts to contribute to improvement in the general environment relates to an associated aim of promoting the image of Europe through the character of the Commission buildings.

We do not aspire to the features which are common to many ancient and modern Governmental buildings throughout the Union : No-one left us with a legacy of Imperial palaces and offices, and we tend to avoid emulating the more exotic and symbolic edifices developed by Member State Governments in recent times. But we can and do insist more rigorously on quality architectural design which combines efficiency, sobriety and attractiveness to try to ensure that each Commission building meets the requirements of utility and also conveys a more welcoming and open attitude to employees and visitors. The need, therefore, is for buildings which are functional but because of design and materials quietly elegant.

As most people here will know, the Commission now normally seeks to purchase the buildings which meet its core needs, and we intend to use this fact to become involved in planning and specifying buildings at a much earlier stage of development of individual building projects. I will be proposing that we systematically launch international architectural competitions for large renovation or construction projects. I don't want to suggest an unfair inside track. But, since I am leaving the Commission next November, I do feel free to say that anyone who can offer a design for building or renovation that provides an external "Portland stone" effect, avoids Ceausescu, gives a hint of Horta and provides a stimulating interior working configuration and décor is likely to be given favourable attention!

The third part of the effort to achieve a more integrative approach to the character and location of Commission buildings relates to the urban planning framework.

The Commission manifestly features prominently as a major property user in the Quartier, and that will continue. Recognising that, the Institution will in future seek to participate in drawing up projects for the development of blocks and/or streets in co-operation with the Belgian authorities and to take an appropriate part in the decision-making process.

Achieving that objective would plainly have advantages for Brussels as well as for the Commission. I must say, therefore, that the chances of mutually beneficial success would be greatly assisted if we could relate to a single contact point in the form of a public body that has the appropriate powers in urban development. Thus far, the fragmentation of decision-making within the Brussels Region seriously inhibits or prevents the adoption of a coherent urban-planning policy. I appreciate the structural reasons for such diversity and I readily acknowledge that the matter must be dealt with by the Belgian authorities rather than the Commission. But since we have the common purpose of ensuring that Brussels gains *de facto* recognition as the headquarters city - the capital city - of the European Union, I must register the urgent need for co-ordinated and effective action to focus on that purpose.

As I indicated earlier, in order to subscribe to overall improvement and to serve its own interest, the Commission wants to achieve better integration of its buildings into the surrounding urban area by improving the accessibility and quality of the Institution's buildings.

That obviously requires specific measures that are primarily the responsibility of the Commission but they also concern the Belgian authorities.

Facilitating access for members of the public is a case in point: Improving signposting, and implementing - with the assistance of the Belgian authorities - an enterprise similar to the "*Sentier de l'Europe*" project would be a simple and effective way of assisting the public and providing general benefit.

Significant improvement of access and movement for people with disabilities, particularly mobility handicaps and impaired vision or hearing, is also very necessary. We have revised our rules and provisions to make it absolutely clear that European standards of best practice must be applied, both inside and (to the extent we have control) around Commission buildings, and where possible, the Commission seeks to ensure that its buildings meet those requirements. Clearly, however, cobbled pavements are among the infrastructural features which can inhibit movement for people with physical disabilities, and we hope that the local authorities have that very much in mind when making repairs and improvements.

Meanwhile, inside buildings we are trying to ensure high quality technical fittings that conform amongst other things to best environmental practices, safety protection and fire detection and control requirements.

In addition to those considerations we will continue to try to group all sections of a department within the same building so as to reduce the journeys between sites that obviously take staff time and often mean short (and therefore particularly polluting) car journeys.

The issue of journeys between buildings brings me to the more general problem of mobility within Brussels.

In the Commission, we are still developing our detailed mobility policy, but basic considerations and general constraints that have to be dealt with are clear. In seeking to design practical policies I must say that we consider the IRIS project for mobility in Brussels to be well conceived as well as practical in its details. The Commission welcomes and will fully co-operate with this initiative to promote a major modal shift throughout central Brussels in favour of public transport.

We have, of course, already adopted some measures to help to minimise the effect of work-related journeys between Commission buildings on traffic congestion and environmental pollution in the European Quarter.

Since 1998, under agreements with the *STIB/MIVB*, buses Nos 21 and 22, serve all the Commission's buildings and link the European Quarter to Brussels National Airport.

The Commission is also making bicycles available to its staff for journeys between its buildings and in the last 2 years we have increased the number of free bikes from 20 to 45 and we will have around 100 in the next month. They are, I'm glad to say, in frequent use.

These initiatives need to be developed further and I'm sure that they will be. Meanwhile, the most important component of the Commission's mobility policy must obviously relate to journeys to and from work in the European Quarter.

To tackle this issue effectively and to provide a basis for a future mobility plan, it is now essential for a thorough study be urgently undertaken into traffic flows and the modes of transport used to and from Commission buildings.

In the meantime, a range of measures will be implemented to stimulate a more efficient use of private transport - for example by car-sharing - and increased use of public transport.

Commission parking accommodation is, in future, likely to be much more limited - partly by design and partly as a result of space and cost limitations - so we will be considering how best to allocate the space available, and also how to address the substantial imbalance in the support that we give to staff parking by comparison with the use of alternative means of transport.

The aim for public transport must of course be to improve the frequency, quality and accessibility of services in order to increase usage. We will consequently be commencing a dialogue with *STIB* and *SNCB* to determine how we can do further work together to achieve this.

More generally, and to conclude: As some here will know, the President of the Commission and I agree with the general principles of the draft urban plan for the European Quarter that is supported by the Belgian authorities - the so-called *Aries Plan*.

The promotion of a mixture of activities in order to make the area's facilities less compartmentalised, the development and modernisation of public spaces, the promotion of architectural diversity and quality, and the emphasis on security are all essential components in efforts to fulfil the common objectives of advancing the attractiveness and vitality of the European Quarter.

Clearly, focussed attention must now be given to establishing the best means for ensuring systematic co-

operation between the bodies concerned with implementing this project - and that must apply across the spectrum of initiatives necessary to ensure infrastructural and planning coherence and to deal with the financial consequences of effective partnership.

To contribute to such a focus, I will be asking the Commission to appoint a single representative to conduct detailed dialogue with the Belgian authorities on the project. That approach is consistent with the recent creation of the Commission's own Office for Infrastructures and Logistics in Brussels - OIB. The Office is mandated to perform all tasks relating to the office accommodation of staff, the management of social welfare infrastructure, and the logistical requirements of the Institution. The establishment of that facility reflects our understanding of the benefits of concentration of responsibility and use of expertise, and the advantages of economies of scale. We certainly do not claim perfection, but we hope that the development of specialisation recommends itself more widely.

Like other who have had the good fortune of living and working in Brussels, I have developed affection for, and interest in, the wellbeing of this city. I therefore attach great importance to reaching an agreement on policy between the European Institution and the national public authorities. Such a synergy is essential to increase the attributes of Brussels as a good place for living and working. And that, after all, is that what we are here for.