

Kristiaan Borret: it's time for action

The Brussels Region government has just appointed its second Master Architect, or 'Bouwmeester'. Kristiaan Borret thus took over from the first incumbent, Olivier Bastin, in January of this year. Right at the beginning of his mandate, this former Antwerp Bouwmeester gives us his thoughts in its interview.

Kristiaan Borret describes his career so far as atypical, because he has worked in both the public and private sectors, in architecture and in urban planning and also both in the theoretical domain (research at university) and in practice, creating real urban planning projects. And most recently he spent 8 years as the Bouwmeester of Antwerp.

How does this new post differ from the one you held in Antwerp?

One thing is that Brussels is more complex – not only because it is bigger – twice the size in fact – but also of course at an institutional level. There are the communes, the Region, the international players with developers at a different level... But I welcome the complexity and it is a challenge I wanted to take up.

On this topic, your predecessor Olivier Bastin said that good relations with the political authorities are vital...

Yes, and he gave me this advice. The Bouwmeester is a position of a special kind. In the first place, it is an independent position, so I am looking forward to this independence. But I am the first to point out that it is a relative independence in that it is not absolute. I often say that being a Bouwmeester is like walking a tightrope...

There are two extremes – you can be critical all of the time and especially when you are in the public media. But if all you do is criticise then people stop listening and you lose your influence. In fact people start to avoid you! But on the other hand, if you never criticise anything, people think you are just there for decoration – and why did you bother to become Bouwmeester at all? So a balance between being too critical and being too loyal has to be struck. The extremes lead to loss of impact.

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Kristiaan Borret
Bouwmeester

You have to present your ‘orientation note’ to the authorities by the end of June. Can you tell us what it contains?

Well obviously I presented some of my ideas when I was putting myself forward for the job. My slogan was ‘It’s time to act’, and I really do believe we are at a turning point in Brussels. Some people are saying that there is no vision in Brussels – no development vision, no planning vision... I don’t believe that – I fact I think there is a great deal of vision, or I should say a lot of visions. There is a lot of intellectual capacity in the City to produce high quality ideas, master-

is very important too, and this could represent a quick win, because a large part of the site is ready for development – so we shouldn’t wait too long. Another one is Reyers which is a huge and important project on a Regional and supra-Regional level – because it involves the two major national television channels. This adds importance to it, but it is also more complex because it is not a ready-to-go brownfield site like Josaphat. Reyers is quite a puzzle: first you have to construct the new television buildings and only then can you start removing the existing buildings and redeveloping the site.

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plans and so on. The problem seems to be that there are too many of them and that they are too widely spread. What is lacking is coherence for these visions. So over the longer term I would like to work on bringing some coherence into these visions by constructing a sort of ground narrative – forging them into one coherent whole. The other thing, which is more linked to ‘moving to action’, is that despite all the good ideas, a lot of quality is lost between the idea and the finished product. The time between the two is too great and this leads to the loss of quality. So I want to speed things up.

One of the jobs of the Bouwmeester is to organise the competitions for the designation of an architect for a particular project, and I want to compress the time competitions take up – make them more compact. I also want to compress the time between the winning proposal and the actual construction: permits etc... But while I can easily act on the competitions, when it comes to building permits and the rest, this is something else, but I want to play my part nevertheless!

The Canal zone is a well-known priority for Brussels – do you see others which stand out?

Within the canal zone there are priorities other than the section around Tour & Taxis. There is the Bassin de Biestebroek in Anderlecht where a lot of private developments are being considered at the moment. But I believe Josaphat

Along with these, we have to (re)develop the South Station district. And here we have to integrate the private proposals into a coherent whole.

Does your role involve the private sector?

The city is not only built by public authorities, of course. And my mandate is for a mission which has been enlarged by the Brussels government. It now takes in private projects as well, in a surveillance and dialogue role. But rather than surveillance I prefer to take the approach of stimulating, looking for collaboration, between my role and the private players. So I see my appointment and this widening of the role as an invitation to the private sector to develop a collaborative approach. I used this approach in Antwerp and it seems to have been successful because some of the major players even asked me to organise architectural competitions for their private projects. I would be really interested to meet some of these types of players in Brussels – so it is an open invitation to begin a new way of collaboration between the public authorities – which I represent – and private parties. I want an exchange of ideas not just a complaints forum over building permits taking too long, or lack of trust.

Interview by Tim Harrup ✍