

European district and PUL on the move

There are changes in the way the Brussels Capital Region is going to manage the European District. A new position of Commissioner has been created, and in January, Alain Hutchinson began work in the role. One of the best known personalities on the Brussels real estate landscape – Marie-Laure Roggemans or ‘Madame Europe’ – is to leave her post in July (although she will remain as President of the Historical Sites and Monuments Commission). We asked both of them to explain the change, and to give the latest evolutions on the ‘Projet Urbain Loi’ (PUL) and the European District in general.

How do your roles currently fit together?

Alain Hutchinson: Our two roles overlap somewhat. Up to now the Region’s energy was expressed through Marie-Laure Roggemans, ‘Madame Europe’, within the European district. She was involved in all the projects in the district, and including of course the Projet Urbain Loi. My function is a little different because it is new, a desire of the Brussels Government to operate its own policy in terms of welcoming international bodies to Brussels. Previously, this was under the umbrella of the Federal Government. But after the sixth reform of the State, it became necessary to make a change.

The various bodies coming into Brussels will be able

to have a single point of contact, a political representative and not an ambassador connected to the Foreign Ministry. We are trying to shorten the time between them expressing their needs, and responding to these. It is necessary to receive these bodies under the best possible circumstances – Brussels needs them – and they need someone who can furnish precise and rapid responses. The Commissioner also has a wider sphere of competence than Marie-Laure Roggemans has always had.



Marie-Laure Roggemans: Alain Hutchinson will have a much wider remit than myself. When I was named to this post in December 2005, there was no vision for the European District. There had been a number of master-plans which had never come to fruition. When Charles Picqué asked me to take on this role, the imperatives were to synthesise the master-plans, and everyone agreed that making a mixed use district was vital to the future of the district. Secondly, we needed structural relationships with the European institutions. The objective was very specific.

Alain Hutchinson: The difference when I take over completely is that I will not manage the dossiers themselves, but I will continue to work with the ADT as well as with other administrations.

Turning to the Projet Urbain Loi itself, are the figures still the same?

Marie-Laure Roggemans: No, not at all, they have changed because since the programme was drawn up in 2009, when the European institutions occupied 170,000 m² and needed an extra 230,000 m², there have been movements. Today the situation is roughly the opposite in terms of numbers, but the position changes all the time, as the institutions leave some buildings and move into others. But the major principal remains the same: to break up the ‘corridor’ effect of the Rue de la Loi. The local planning regulations allow for the number of square metres to be increased by 20% when a building is demolished and replaced by another, as you know. If this was done systematically on the Rue de la Loi, the situation would be worse than before. The masterplan of Christian de Potzamparc favoured this increase and also favoured the traditional Brussels model of adjacency.

The second important point is that in freeing up the ground, the transversal elements could also be created, and on top of this, the communes of Saint-Josse and Ixelles could be linked together, which wasn’t the case before. When the district committees oppose some of the ideas, they forget that the bourgeoisie which previously lived in the European district made the Rue de la Loi a barrier between them and the popular district of Saint-Josse. So the master-plan is still current, and it achieves the objective of breaking up the barrier and making the road more transversal, and creating green areas. The masterplan of



Alain Hutchinson
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Christian de Potzamparc was selected because it enables a spread over a long time – gradual achievement over 25 years or so...

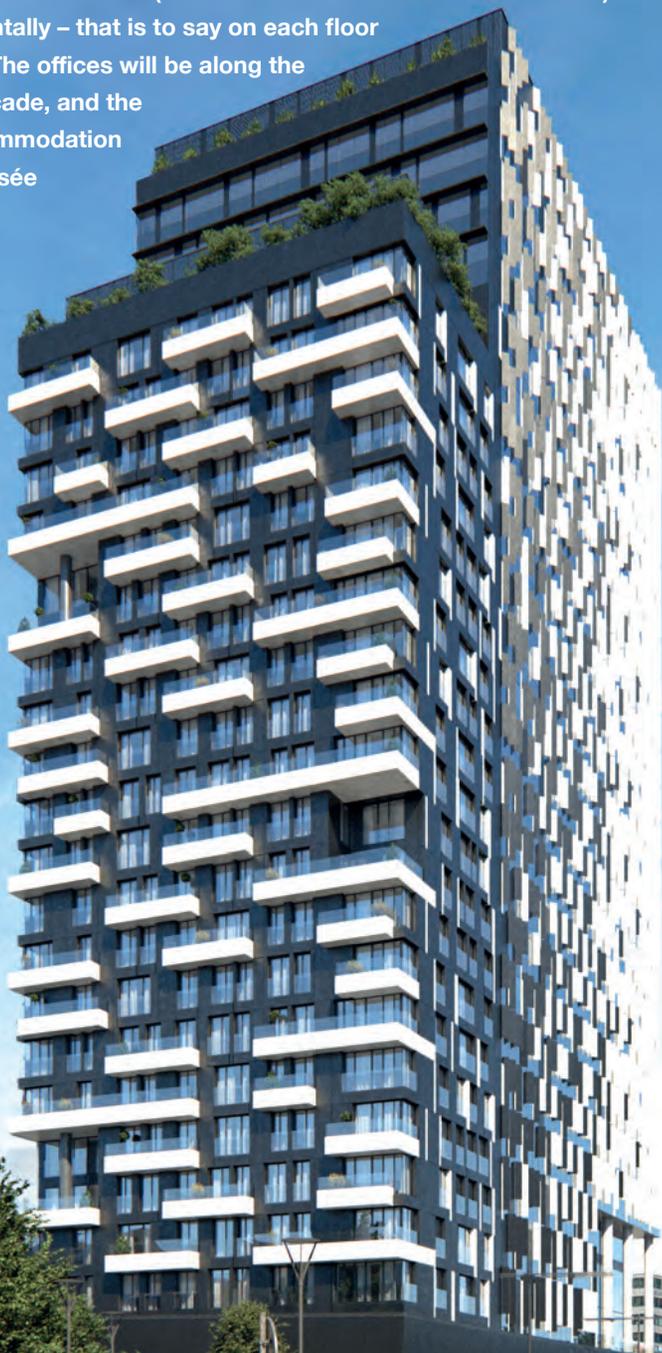
The ‘PUL’ is a relatively restricted area – will all of the European District be included in a development plan?

Marie-Laure Roggemans: There will be work groups between the City and the Region, because at the moment it is the Region which imposes the planning rules. But we have to work with the PPAS which is drawn up by the city. So we have to find agreement between City and Region.

Alain Hutchinson: The form all of this takes is indeed important, and I want to be able to speed things up. I have spent some time over these first months organising meetings between the European institutions at the highest levels and the Region’s ministers. At the end of the first meeting towards the end of March, it was agreed to set up work groups between the Commission and the Region and also between the European Parliament and the Region. The Parliament also has a series of needs.

The next big get-together will be at the end of June, when we will handle all these things face to face. Previously, there tended to be huge task forces with maybe 40 people or so – and little in the way of efficiency – but now we want to have small working groups with the right people from both sides.

The tower named 'The One' which is to be constructed by the ATENOR group on the site of the former Crowne Plaza hotel, just below the European Commission's 'Justus Lipsius' building, will represent a new icon on the Rue de la Loi. The tower fits perfectly into the 'Projet Urbain Loi (PUL) concept drawn up by French architect and planner Christian de Potzamparc. In a total break with tradition, the mixed nature of the tower (offices and residential accommodation) will be found horizontally – that is to say on each floor of the building. The offices will be along the Rue de la Loi façade, and the residential accommodation along the Chaussée d'Etterbeek.



We will structure the relations more flexibly work more closely together, and more efficiently. I point all this out because while under Marie-Laure Roggemans there has been very significant progress where the thinking and the structuring of the plans is concerned, what has been lacking is structured and efficient relationships between the various partners on both sides.

Too much time has been lost on both sides. I am an optimist in all this, but I am not a blind idealist – I know that the district committees sometimes have very dogmatic views we have to consider, for example. The actions we take have to respect the (few) residents who live in the district now, and above all those who will come and live here in the future.

What is actually happening in the district now – are things beginning to change?

Alain Hutchinson: There will very soon be changes, particularly in terms of mobility. The Schuman-Josaphat line, for example, will be open in December – it is scheduled for December 13th. This will have a considerable beneficial effect in terms of traffic congestion. The European institutions around Schuman and the Place du Luxembourg, and in the district in general, will be served by train directly from Zaventem. And then the metro will become automated from 2017-2018, which will enable greater frequency and again have a beneficial effect on traffic.

The space around the Schuman roundabout and the Rue de la Loi is being redesigned: it will be provisionally re-laid out for the end of this year, and definitively for the end of 2017 or 2018. These will be significant and visible changes. There will be changes to traffic flows too, with the narrowing of the Rue de la Loi, Rue Belliard and the Avenue de Cortenbergh. I think these things will act as a catalyst for everything else.

... and what about buildings?

Alain Hutchinson: Where buildings are concerned, permits have now been granted for the two towers scheduled for the Rue de la Loi within the PUL. The ground is being prepared for the first tower, and developer Atenor has been demolishing the Europa Hotel ready to build the second tower. We are also trying to give a push to the establishment of a PPAS to reinforce the PUL and give the necessary guarantees, because everything which is planned for the district at the moment has recourse to the district committees and so on.



Marie-Laure Roggemans
 “The major principal of the PUL remains the same: to break up the ‘corridor’ effect of the Rue de la Loi. The local planning regulations allow for the number of square metres to be increased by 20% when a building is demolished and replaced by another, but in height to free up the ground.”

The Region has need of the European institutions, but of course their needs have to take account of the local inhabitants too.

There is also movement in terms of both the Commission and the Parliament. This latter is going to vacate the iconic oblong building it occupies (the ‘Caprice des Dieux’) in terms of office use. The 600 or so offices will disappear and the building will become a sort of meeting and conference centre. So all these people have to be relocated – and of course the Parliament’s administration already occupies a building on the Square de Meeûs in the former Belgian State Security building. The Parliament is also to occupy the Atenor building currently known as ‘Trebel’, but which is being renamed ‘Martens’ by the Parliament. So things are moving quickly.

Might the Commission still create a new hub, such as was previously suggested for Delta?

Alain Hutchinson: Well the Commission currently occupies some 61 buildings, and it will have more needs. But one of the main objectives is to avoid being too thinly spread, both for reasons of security and good functioning. So it wishes to find places where it can establish concentrations, without necessarily being all in exactly in the same place. And there is no longer question of the Commission leaving Brussels, as was once suggested.

Interview by Tim Harrup