Lionel Blaisse

FOREWORD

On 5 May 1949, ten European countries signed the Treaty of London, thus creating the Council of Europe. Its objective was to preserve and promote human rights, democracy and the constitutional state. On proposal by Lord Ernest Bevin – British Minister of Foreign Affairs –, Strasbourg was chosen as its headquarters: “this great city, which has borne witness to the stupidity of the human race is called on to become a symbol of the unity of Europe, an ideal place in which to pursue this great project in an atmosphere of good faith, rather than domination”.

1 January 1958 saw the creation of the European Economic Community instituted by the Treaty of Rome signed in March the previous year by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Sitting for the first time three months later in Strasbourg, its parliamentary assembly acquired its current name of European Parliament in 1962. These countries were joined by Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom in 1973. Elections by universal suffrage only took place in the nine member countries as from 1979. Alternating with the four Council of Europe sessions, its 12 annual sessions were held in the new Palace of Europe built two years earlier by Henry Bernard in the Alsatian capital.

Following accession by Greece in 1981 and then Portugal and Spain in 1986, the Europe of Twelve realised that the fall of the Berlin wall at the end of 1989 would inevitably result in its considerable enlargement. As officially enacted during the 1992 Edinburgh summit, this led to the commissioning of a specific headquarters in Strasbourg exclusive to its requirements and where the twelve plenary sessions would take place, with Brussels hosting the parliamentary commissions and Luxembourg the general secretariat.

In 1990, Strasbourg launched an international architectural competition on a site belonging to the city located in the European institutions district facing the Palace of Europe and the future European Court of Human Rights designed by Richard Rogers. Designated as the competition winner the following spring, the France-based AS.Architecture-Studio agency devoted a vast amount of energy over the next eight years to successfully complete the largest building project in Europe. After 1,188 days of work, its 220,000 m² were finally handed over in January 1999 and, six months later, the building saw the inaugural session of the new assembly – representing 15 member States since 1995 – whose legislative powers had been expanded to share equal decision-making powers with the Council of Ministers.

On completion of two five-year terms of office that saw the European Union expand to 27 members, 2009 sees the European Parliament celebrate the 10th anniversary of its headquarters, a year coinciding with the re-election of its assembly.

To celebrate this occasion, the Parliament’s designers, AS.Architecture-Studio, decided to review the architectural, urban, landscaping, regional and political destiny of this prestigious international institution through this somewhat atypical book. While an emblematic building naturally finds itself under the spotlights of the media at the moment of its inauguration, it is rare for it to continue to attract their attention a posteriori despite the fact that architecture is, by definition, sustainable.

For this review, the author invites the reader to accompany him on a voyage of re-discovery – a visit in the form of a didactic architectural tour – that takes a close look at the November 2008 parliamentary session and uncovers the many facets of this building, as revealed by the photos taken by photographer Georges Fessy.
INTRODUCTION

Over the period from the beginning of the construction of the “Louise-Weiss” building in the 1990s following the fall of the Iron Curtain to its completion ten years ago, we have created the conditions necessary to integrate the Central and Eastern European States into the European Union. The time had come to keep the promise to provide peace, stability, prosperity and progress for all European nations, much in the same way that the free countries of our continent had done in the past for their neighbouring nations.

As the president of the European Parliament elected by members representing the 27 member States, and as the mayor of a city which symbolises the franco-german reconciliation and welcomes the representatives of an enlarged Europe, we are particularly gratified to observe that Europe is now both freely and democratically united. As previously expressed by Jean Monnet, one of the founders of the Community, the task is one of uniting men rather than just the States, and the European Parliament is the best illustration of this ideal. Democracy is fundamental to its existence: it provides a setting where the opinions of 160 national parties earnestly confront one another in 23 different languages, in a way unlike any other parliament in the world, and where seven parliamentary groups attempt to integrate its diversity. Even if a parliamentarian is representative of a minority view within a Member State, this person might find him or herself in a majority party in Strasbourg, and vice-versa. Debate is not rooted in governmental traditions with predictable oppositions. Minorities are formed according to events within varied constellations that extend beyond the frontiers of parliamentary groups.

The Parliament can only be influential and relevant within the institutional framework of the European Union if its members accept the principle of absolute majority and are able to express the point of view of their deputations to the members of the governments on the Council. In most situations, the European Parliament decides on an equal footing with the Council, which should generally be the case with the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon.

While the European Parliament is a space dedicated to the people’s representatives, it is also open to visitors. It is a setting where democracy expresses itself. When the city of Strasbourg and the Parliament decided, together, to build this monument we needed a building that symbolised opening and transparency, a space within which citizens are able to meet their political representatives in a variety of ways: by following a plenary session from the visitors’ gallery, having one-to-one discussions with a deputy in his or her office, or even more dialoguing with us within a group of visitors.

We would like to say the following to all European citizens: come to Strasbourg and watch the elected at work in the “Louise-Weiss” building. The European Parliament is the largest parliamentary assembly in the world elected by direct universal suffrage. It is here the European democracy’s heart beats. This Parliament is yours. Develop your own points of view on our policies and make your voices heard.
2004/07 EUROPE

Strasbourg
GENESIS

STASBOURG : PARLIAMENTARY CAPITAL OF EUROPE

In 1958, the European Parliament set up its provisional seat in Strasbourg. Today, the 629 elected representatives work in offices and rooms rented from the city and hold their plenary sessions in the amphitheater of the European Council. The city’s mayor, Mrs. Catherine Trautmann, affirmed her desire to construct a building allowing the Euro-deputies to have their own amphitheater. Until then, the Parliament had been a “sub-tenant” of the Council of Europe. As it was expanding (with the addition of Russia), the Council wished to recover its premises. In addition to the desire to make Strasbourg the European capital, was the necessity of building an edifice which could host the Parliament and represent it, in a symbolic manner, in keeping with its mission. In 1990, Catherine Trautmann decided to officially launch an international architectural competition for the construction of an amphitheater intended for the European Parliament on land belonging to the city. The selection of the site corresponds to an idea of multi-belonging : the Vosges visible on one side, the Black Forest on the other, at the intersection of the canal from the Marne to the Rhine, and the Ill river. Out of a hundred bids presented, four agencies were retained : Spadolini in Italy, Powell-Moya in England, Jourda-Perraudin and Architecture Studio Europe in France. The teams presented their project for the Parliament building on spring 1991. The project of the Architecture Studio Europe group was unanimously selected as the winner. On December 12, 1992, the Edinburgh summit confirmed the choice of Strasbourg as the Parliamentary capital of Europe. The Sers, of which Madame Trautmann was President, took over from the city in becoming the Sponsor.

EUROPE : PROJECT STAKES

Constructing a building for Europe represents the most exacting requirements. The aim is to incarnate the idea of democracy in motion, of Europe becoming, of freedom, peace, a strong but deliberative power, to design an architecture capable of concretely transmitting these values. How to build 220,000 m² by translating openness, dialogue, debate, thus an essentially dialectic spirit, and escape an architecture which runs the risk of totalitarianism by its scale alone? DESIGN The site To the north east of the historic center of Strasbourg, the river Ill runs into the canal linking the Marne to the Rhine. On a bank 360 meters long, the river serenely completes its perfect curve, opposite the buildings of the Council of Europe, while to the west, a garden city from the twenties aligns its regular geometry of tiny identical, old-fashioned houses surrounded by trees. Strasbourg’s cathedral spire pierces the horizon in the distance. The arc, the dome and tower : three grand architectural figures in response to the program On the 4.5 hectares of land dedicated to construction, the architectural project immediately expresses the choice of nearly saturating the plot : the dialectic between interior and exterior space, between fullness and void will interplay in another dimension. The building is broken down into three interacting figures : the arc, the dome and the tower. These three beacon-elements whose general volume is on an urban scale, structurally deploy the four major functions of the program. The amphitheater, the only “monolith” of the project, corresponds to the first function, the primary and most emblematic : deliberation. Its wooden shell rounds out to form a dome above the sloping roof of the part of the building which reflects and reveals, like a prow, the contour of the riverbank. Like a meteorite suspended in flight, the amphitheater appears ensconced in the successive transparent frames of the arc which house the conference areas, meeting rooms and auditoriums corresponding to the activity of a session. The tower houses the 1133 offices of the Parliamentary representatives. But the four “tracks”, the private part of the work of Parliamentary representatives, the public part at the heart of the amphitheater, the area intended
for the press, and the catering infrastructure, cannot precisely be located by one or another of the figures since without ever colliding, these four circuits with their separate accesses and precisely determined functions, overlap and cross each other unceasingly in a simultaneously complex and fluid system. A last figure, concave, which was not present in the program, has become one of the project’s founding elements. An agora, a monumental square for the city, located inside the hollowed out tower, creates a spatial and symbolic replica of the amphitheater, echoes it and represents the public dimension. Finally, a barely curved axis crosses the entire building from the large open space located at the threshold of the tower to the edifice created on the other side of the Ill (to establish a link with the office building occupied by Parliamentary civil servants). This axis, whose imperceptible curve traverses all the successive spaces of the building like a spine, offering a sort of promenade with multiple viewpoints and perspectives, is materialized by a walkway suspended over the water visibly linking the Parliament outside to the site, the city and which marks the “piano nobile” of the whole, the reference plane.

A Building Read Two Ways

Seen from the outside, the building is thus immediately legible, identifiable: arc, tower, dome, and “umbilical cord” above the river, almost signed, logo-typical, like a drawing, an image all the more memorable in that it has no reference, and is yet a non-autonomous object morphologically linked to the site, contextual. Under this sage appearance of simplicity, the building then harbors the complexity inherent to its scale, but also the desire to create an architecture which sets up systems of open relationships, an architecture reflecting democracy, single and composite, in the process of becoming and alive.

A CLASSIC AND BAROQUE BUILDING: The Circle and the Ellipse Representing Democracy...

Two large geometric figures preside over the development of this whole whose scale is that of a city. Entirely designed around the circle containing the ellipse - the tower - and the ellipse which contains a circle - the amphitheater-the project, as architecture and allegory, is almost essentially based on this dialectic between a classical reference and a baroque reference. The initial symbolic challenge of representing democracy finds its expression in this tension between the circle and the ellipse, in their dialogue, their confrontation and their alliance. This choice, which roots the building a double historic heritage, is also its combining factor. It renews the vocabulary while referring to it like a quotation, thus situating the project at the interface of its anchorage in European culture, and of its openness to modernity, the future.

Dialectic of the circle and the ellipse

On one side the circle, the perfect form, full and closed, with a single center, autonomous, cosmogonic, which is also a dome when referring to Boulée, utopian and total. On the other the ellipse, with its multiple focuses, whose etymological meaning (elleipsis) is metaphorical for lack, whose image in the heavens is not that of a star but of its orbit, which is a form which develops, by accepting it, the dimension of a void, and dynamic multiplicity, slippage, anamorphosis. But the combination of the two figures, like a mathematical formula, opens an infinite number of spatial hypotheses and at the same time, liberates the architecture from its link to one and the other, as it liberates the dimension of motion. Through this set purpose, architecture becomes multi-centric, setting up a gigantic open mechanism, similar to a kaleidoscope where each step made modifies one’s vision and transforms perception.
COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE

A Kaleidoscopic Composition
The wooden sphere (elongated) is mysterious and opaque. The glass and sandstone tower apparently dense, appears unfinished, balancing unequal heights between the spans of its metal structural elements and reserving the surprise of its ellipse-shaped public square (70 meters along its longest axis) which it harbors in its hollow. Here, from the agora, over the entire height of the tower, a fault opens out onto a perspective which crosses the thickness of the building like a slim loophole framing the view on the Cathedral made of pink Vosges sandstone, an unforeseen visual escape onto the city. On the other side, like a counterpoint, tangent to the amphitheater and the arc, a glass rectangle breaks the visually hermetic continuity of the deliberation room, opening suddenly a perspective over the water, like a painting in which the water becomes abstract. The glass arc, opposite the tower which it half circumscribes, and the amphitheater it contains, paradoxically seems impossible to grasp. The images of the tower and sphere contrast with the arc, which becomes an echo of space, propagating planes, transparencies, visual immateriality. Its double thermal glazed facade rests on a steel structure, itself broken down into horizontal planes by the curved lines of the cat-stepped openwork grating. It is not a surface but many walls more or less encroached upon by voids or transparencies which compose the design of the arc in a succession of planes. Inside, the logic of this transparency geometrically orchestrated by the encounter or distancing of the circle and the ellipse, and by the different axes, creates an effect of constantly renewing the landscape, framing the water and sky in the motion of the tableaux over the city which combine, digress and are recomposed following a movement through space.

The arc’s roof, a slope suspended in the sky, whose regular metallic proportions and profiles are interrupted by the incomplete immersion of the sphere (elliptical), and by the glass fault which signals the design of the main street inside like a collage, is visible diversely from the tower or the city, similar to a “fifth facade” Inside, the main street (200 meters long, 26 meters high, 9.6 meters wide), an inaccessible fault, also a tableau projected on the ground, is covered with black schist tiles unequally broken, crisscrossed with climbing vines, irrigated and lit by optic fiber cables stretched across the entire height. At each level, arced walkways bridge the more or less dizzying void of this main street. Two perpendicular streets cross the first, while the axis of the building distributes the inflections of its curve over the entire route. Planted in the sky on the stepped terraces, the hornbeam and vegetation accompany the volute of the tower and help erase the precision of its geometric lines on its horizon line, and endow it with its unfinished aspect through the appropriation of random contours. Far below, the espaliered linden trees take up the mineral line of the floor of gray stones and the red wall they run along. Around the arc, between the glass facade and the water, Japanese cherry trees punctuate the promenade which follows the loop of the river.

A Mesh and Grid Structure
A grid system, handled differently depending on the figures, structures the entire building. Based on the emblematic theme of the column, the post, which poses the classic problem of the relationship of the structure to the surface shells - articulations with the beams, floors, walls, ceilings - the project highlights a circular post whose shafts are hollowed out. Cross-shaped through opposition, it structures the figure of the arc in a regular 9.6 x 9.6 meter meshing, sometimes in the form of a tall column, 50 meters high, sometimes in the form of a quarter circle of variable height when it intersects with the perpendicular walls. This mesh layout changes when it encounters the transparent double glazed facade of the arc, resting on a ladder structure which supports the welded steel tube grid and the glass modules of the exterior partition. Outside, the circular tower is structured by radii calculated from the center, which appear in a huge fan of concrete
stems, and a succession of turning planes. On the ellipse side, the radiating structure is calculated on the basis of the dual focus of the geometry. On either side of the ellipse, the imbrication of the two figures generate two crescents which structure the tower and contain the stairways, elevators, technical duct work.

THE AMPHITHEATER

Mirror Ellipse

The ellipse of the amphitheater is mirrored by that of the agora. Equivalent in size, the relation of the two ellipses are determined by a circle, but in the amphitheater, the ellipse contains the circle, inscribed by the arrangement of the concentric rows of seats, while in the tower, the circle hides and envelops the ellipse. The ellipse thus split, propagated first by the circle, then by the relation between the strong fullness of the amphitheater echoed by the open space of the square, gives birth to the twin positioning of this place of power. The amphitheater is not ontological. The configuration of the spaces suggests that the agora has dreamed the amphitheater which is its idealization, projection, reflection, a mirror, almost symmetrically; the amphitheater is the place where the agora becomes concrete, polemical and politic.

Inside the Amphitheater

This room, with 650 tiered seats for the deputies and 650 balcony seats for visitors, is the largest in Europe. Its scale reflects to the utmost its assembly function. A shell covered with shadow-less light (filtered by glass blades), and lit from the ceiling by a waved constellation of light points, the amphitheater succeeds in restoring the perception of a human scale with a very precisely engineered set of proportions: slope of the tiers, proximity of the ceiling whose depth is highlighted by the motion of the light waves and the play of the ellipse.

THE SCALE: A MATHEMATICAL ILLUSION

Two hundred thousand square meters distributed over 18 levels of a building whose sixty meter height is measured from the balcony of the cathedral, immediately positions the building as macro-architecture. But while the building may be read from outside as a unitary object, inside it deploys and breaks down an entire range of planes, measurements, perspectives, in a reversing movement, proper to the two scales: urban and human. If the architects pronounced the issue of scale to be one of the main difficulties of the project, but also its greatest challenge, it is because the "format" of the architecture could at no cost find its solution in a monolithic, authoritative or unilateral response. In this tension, at the extreme limit between the building and the city, the positioning of a succession of intermediate scales, opening onto each other in a polymorphous relationship, allows the installation of constant passages from one dimension to the other. All the thresholds are proposals, hypotheses to different routes. The play of horizontals (lines and curves) and verticals (alternatively cadenced by voids and filled in spaces according to the levels and locations), with their own logic and their combinations, beyond the precise mathematics of measurements produces the "disorder" necessary to the dimension of the city, with its breaks in scale, its accumulations, surprises, view points, places of retirement and of show. In the variety of scale relationships the role of a decomposed, recomposed, discontinuous architecture is organized, one which knowledgeably sets up loss of reference, loss of scale, of illusions, reflections and optical effects, while installing a rigorous marking system. The grids, the layout providing the place with its legibility, the color coding - blue near the water, red near the tower - the slight inflection of the axes, the multiplication of the planes, the structural materialization of the vanishing lines, let us know at all times where we are. The spaces are identified because they form a syntax of different configurations, and at the same time, create the
imaginary topography of the building. The question of scale is solved thus in the development of a paradoxical architecture whose complexity is deployed simultaneously like an exact science and a narrative.

THE PUBLIC DIMENSION: THE SHOW

Aside from its primary function, the Parliament incarnates a strong symbol, attracting a large number of tourists, of “spectators” come also from all of Europe. As a representation of this public aspect, the agora, the pathways and places provided for the visitors, are equivalent to an “orchestra seat” at the theater. But the Parliament, the “echo chamber” of Europe, also includes in its design the creation of its image broadcast on European and world stations. The decomposition of spaces into successive planes, built up or virtual, goes along with this transposition which, like in photography, goes from three to two dimensions. The architecture plays with this public dimension and stage setting in its scenography. Through a classic set of proportions, the open space in front, planted with high poles from which all the colors of Europe fly, and the entrance to the tower create a surprise effect, dramatizing the arrival onto the enormity of the agora. Likewise, symmetrically, the passages to access the amphitheater are reduced in scale, theatrically discovering the breadth of the ellipse, almost without scale, both gigantic and intimate. On a scale with the city, like the futuristic conniving between Parliamentary business and the inhabitants, a lighting system of optical fibers is installed like a constellation around the dome of the amphitheater, blinking more or less intensely according to the sound level of the Parliamentary debates.

BUILDING PRODUCTION

For Architecture Studio Europe, the construction of the Parliament provided the opportunity to experiment and develop new working methods linked to the development of information technologies which profoundly changed industrial production, hence formal possibilities. The most significant aspect of this evolution was the capacity of the industrial object to incorporate unique characteristics. Industrial production thus breaks with that which defined it: a repetitive object, identical, standardized, produced in series. Paradoxically, the greater the technological definition, the more it leaves room for the re-appropriation of the hand, opening the way to an industry capable of reincorporating qualities proper to craftsmanship. Numbered, the glass elements of the arced facade are dissimilar one from another, their measurement varying at each intersection of the orthogonal geometry proper to the structure of the building and the curve which surrounds it. This nomenclature, made possible by information technology allows new technical interpretations which impact the design, expanding the vocabulary and modifying the esthetic of the architecture. For Architecture Studio Europe, this evolution marks a decisive turning point in the conception of architecture, but also constitutes a greater societal movement where differences, diversity of form, the possibility of personalizing objects, goes along with a more open culture, perhaps more humanistic, which harnesses anew the knowledge of the hand while using the increasingly sophisticated tool which is information technology.

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AT CONTROLLED COSTS

The new amphitheater of the European Parliament is remarkable in more ways than one. It is the largest construction site in Europe (220,000 m²) and it is a site whose costs are controlled. When the bids were opened, the ceiling amount was FRF HT 2,195,702,060 (value June 1998). This amount included the contractual safety margin of 6% for technical problems during construction. The amount posted currently is FRF HT 2,142,437,514 (value June 1998). The cost of construction of this building is 9,740 francs/m².
Partners:

CLIENT : S.E.R.S
MAIN CONTRACTOR :
ARCHITECTS : Architecture Studio Europe (General agent) Martin Robain, Rodo Tisnado Jean-François Bonne, Alain Bretagnolle René-Henri Arnaud, Laurent-Marc Fischer and Gaston Valente
Public building furniture : Avant-Travaux
High-rise furniture : D.Studio - Architecture Studio
Kitchen facilities : Arwytec
Audiovisual : Coment
Facade : Ceef
Lighting engineer : L'Observatoire 1
Landscaper : Desvignes & Dalnoky (design), Françoise Arnaud (production)
Acoustics : Avls Security : Casso & Cie
TECHNICAL DESIGN AGENCIES : Sogeler Ote Serue Etf
COORDINATION-CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT : Gpci

Figures:

For the entire building :
Plot surface 45,000 m²
Total building surface area (high-rise plus public building) 220,000 m²
Number of above-ground levels 17
Number of sub-ground levels 3
Total cost of work 1.98 billion French francs excluding tax (value June 1991)
For the high-rise :
: Forum surface 2050 m²
Ellipse dimension L=62 m, l=42 m
Tower dimension Diameter : 100, height : 60 m
Number of offices for European representatives 665
Number of offices for administrative personnel 468
Total number of offices 1133
For the public building :
Outside dimension of amphitheater 74 x 60 m / h = 43 meters
Amphitheater wood interior : oak/exterior : cedar
Inside dimension of amphitheater 56 x 44 m / h = 15 meters
Number of amphitheater seats 750
Number of amphitheater translator’s booths 15
Number of public seats 628
Size of main street 190 x 9.6 m / h = 26 m
Size of lateral streets 40 x 9.6 m / h = 35 m
Dimension glass facade (running along the Ill and the canal) 13 000 m2
Roof surface 14 650 m2
Number of conference rooms 29 for a total capacity of 2690 people
Number of restaurants - 1 representatives restaurant : seating 600 - 1 civil servants restaurant : seating 400 - 1 visitor restaurant : seating 200
Number of bars/capacity/m² 1 general bar 1 representatives bar 1 press bar 1 visitor bar
Press rooms 1 press room for 275 reporters
Press agency office capacity 30 offices for press agencies 20 offices for invited
Television stations
Number of reception rooms 5
For the bridge/tunnel:
Dimension bridge (L) 60 meters
Dimension tunnel (L) 60 meters
Concrete ton 130,000 t Steel ton 14,000 t
Kilometre cable 2,000 km
Contractors numbers 150

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**LECTURES :**


**26 octobre 1999** à Strasbourg Lancement du livre «Le Parlement Européen à Strasbourg» de Pierre - François Mourier avec signature des architectes - Parlement Européen à Strasbourg

**30 septembre 1999** à San Nicolas de Los Garza «Architecture Studio : projets et réalisations» Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon à San Nicolas de Los Garza (Mexique) - VIII International Architecture Simposium