Architecture and European identity.
A conversation with Romano Prodi

Commentary

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Abstract

The authors of this contribution are participants in a project, the EUPavilion, that investigates the relationship between European institutions and architecture with the aim to rekindle the debate on Europe as a cultural entity as opposed to a mere political-economic union. Particularly lively around the year 2000, at the time of the introduction of the single currency and the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, this debate came to a halt with the failure of the European Constitution project, and was permanently put to rest by the arrival of the 2008 economic crisis. Now, with a view to restarting the process twenty years on, we thought it could be useful to revisit some of the key events of the time with Romano Prodi, the Italian politician who more than any other contributed to the European integration process.

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The EUPavilion study started taking shape in 2018, when it was proposed to set up a European Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The pavilion, an architectural object capable of disentangling itself from any specific function, was seen as an ideal testing ground to investigate the possible features of a (new) European architecture as well as to examine the language of the institutional buildings of a supranational structure such as the European Union.

At a time such as this, when the nation-state and its crisis are at the centre of the public debate, and national identities are once again an instrument of political conflict, the national pavilion appears as a dated concept, no longer capable of reflecting the society's artistic and cultural achievement. For its part, the European Union, which established its headquarters in the Quartier Léopold in Brussels and has promoted significant property developments in the area, seems to have adopted planning indeterminacy as a programmatic manifesto. Over the years, this lack of planning has been the object of criticism, both by Brussels citizens committees and by a broader academic/cultural community. In particular, the former have complained about the systematic negation of a real public space, the missed opportunities to build structures fitting in with their surroundings, and the inability of the entire European Quarter to take on a cohesive role within the city. Criticisms were also voiced against the formal qualities of the buildings, pointing the finger at aspects such as their anonymous bureaucratic drabness or their unjustified façadism.[1]

Because of this, two themes addressing a substantial issue converge in the EUPavilion study: can architecture change the image of a great institution, and can it contribute to the definition of a new international identity? Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission from 1999 to 2004, played a key role in furthering European integration and promoted major initiatives centring on the theme of Europe's image. Of considerable significance in this connection were two symposiums organised in collaboration with the then Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt on the theme "Brussels, a Capital for Europe". Various leading figures[2] in the European cultural scene attended the meetings, including Italian writer and philosopher Umberto Eco and Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who were asked to open the first and second conferences, respectively. Two different approaches to the issue in question characterised their interventions and the discussion that followed, i.e., the idea of a *soft capital*, as put forward in Eco's address, and that of a *hard capital*, as voiced by Rem Koolhaas. This antithesis fuelled the debate on Europe's image, but a clear-cut contraposition between the two viewpoints was blurred by the complexity of the issues at hand.[3] The session inaugurated by Eco addressed the matter of Europe's capital in broad terms and underscored the need to absorb the different identities without imposing a dominant narrative, while evoking the different structures that power had assumed in the course of history to assert itself across the lands of Europe. Opening the session dedicated to Brussels, Rem Koolhaas insisted on the representative role of the institutional buildings and proposed two possible paths towards making Brussels into the capital of the European

Union: one consisted of adding new buildings and redesigning the conceptual framework of the European Quarter, the other consisted of moving away from the current district and inaugurating a brand-new site, an 'idyllic campus' for the European institutions in the Tour et Taxi area on the Brussels canal. Looking back at this lively, and perhaps somewhat circumscribed debate, what the Léopold Quarter puts centre stage today is the translation into spatial terms of a highly complex political project implemented in 'short steps'.[4] A backward glance through the eyes of one of the protagonists of the transformations highlights the close relationship between the political project and its architectural manifestation.

1 - The most recent example is the project for the recovery of the Eastman building in Leopold Park: built in 1935 to house a dental clinic – a function it retained until the mid-seventies –, in 2009, the building was chosen by the Presidency of the European Parliament to be the "House of European History". The design of the new exhibition halls imposed significant changes to the building's layout, while retaining and restoring the art deco façade. As was the case with the small nineteenth-century station facing Place du Luxembourg, which serves as a link between the Léopold Quarter and the complex that hosts the European Parliament, the conservation of some of the historicised elements of the city often ends up being solved by 'façadist' operations with caricatural implications. The scale of the spaces required for contemporary uses and the solemnity imposed by their functions clashed with the desire to conserve parts of the art deco façade, almost as though the intention was to mitigate or partly conceal the real impact of the operations (another eloquent case of this tendency is Philippe Samyn's Europa Building project) .

2 - The first symposium was held in Brussels on 30 May 2001 with a view to discussing the city's future form and character as Europe's capital. In addition to Romano Prodi and Guy Verhofstadt, other conference participants included French scholar, Michel Crozier, Umberto Eco, the former Polish foreign minister, Bronislaw Geremek, Swiss entrepreneur Nicholas Hayek, French director Agnès Jaoui, Rem Koolhaas, the former mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Maragall, British anthropologist, Maryon McDonald, Salzburg Festival director, Gerard Mortier, Belgian comic book artist, François Schuiten, Belgian journalist Geert van Istendael, and the director of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, Juan Ignacio Vidarte.

3 - For further information, see the final report drafted by the European Commission: European Commission and Belgian Presidency, Brussels capital of Europe. Final report, Oct. 2001.

4 - This expression is frequently associated with the so-called functionalist approach inspired by Jean Monnet, as clearly set out in the famous Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950.

5 - For Vittorio Gregotti's considerations on European architecture, see Gregotti V. (1999) Identità e crisi dell'architettura europea ("Identity and crisis of European Architecture"), Turin, Einaudi.

6 - The polyhedron evoked here is one of the many images used to describe Europe's multifaceted identity. It is worthwhile recalling the definition proposed by Rem Koolhaas in USE, Uncertain States of Europe: "It is very difficult to represent diversity. Basically, there is the model of the mosaic: a mosaic is a larger whole that is composed of a series of smaller fragments. But a mosaic in itself is a meaningless thing. A mosaic becomes significant if it represents something, whether it be an idea or a value, or, at least, an image. Perhaps we could compare the European mosaic to a kind of digital screen, which shows incredible tonal richness yet resists congealing or cohering into a single image." See Multiplicity (2003), USE, Uncertain States of Europe, Milan, Skira, p. 226.

Fig. Photograph by Hans Werlemann. Courtesy of OMA.

1 *We would like to reflect with you on the role of architecture in the European project.*

Romano Prodi: It is certainly something I have thought about several times: great changes have always expressed themselves with their own architectural originality. Europe has still not done so.

2 *Perhaps it is worth starting from what we view as one of the most effective descriptions of the European identity. According to Vittorio Gregotti, the identity of Europe as a cultural entity lies in its ability to accept and absorb outside influences, transform them into cultural material of its own, and use them constructively for its own growth5. Thus, Gregotti is thinking of an identity in continuous and rapid transformation. What is to you the fundamental character of the European identity?*

Romano Prodi: A difficult question indeed. Gregotti's words can be easily endorsed. The real problem is that the European identity is an ongoing process of construction. We have a European ideal, that of constructing a unity in the continent that can play a role in this changing world, and this is the goal. European identity, on the other hand, rests on a huge number of factors, including individual cultural identities as well as political traditions and the innovations brought about by modern political developments, such as welfare and the tensions to overcome the concept of nation, putting in place effective integration measures in a world that is becoming global. Above all, the nature of identity is always multiform and never has an exclusive character. Identity is composed of many facets and many aspects: it is a polyhedron[6].

We would like to take a look with you at two experiences that marked a moment of reflection on the image of Europe and its capital – a moment that unfortunately has remained isolated. In 2001, you and the then Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, promoted the organisation of two meetings that brought together European intellectuals of various provenances for a reflection on Brussels as Europe's capital. Where did you get the idea that a reflection of this type was necessary? **3**

Romano Prodi: I remember it well, because I was passionately in favour of it. We knew that it was necessary to make an iconographic effort. Clearly, I would have liked to see the birth of a European iconography, but in five years (author's note: of presidency of the European commission), I was unable to even inaugurate the restored Berlaymont building, though I signed off on it. Precisely because everything is an adaptation in progress, not even the Berlaymont can be used as an example of European iconography – even though it is shown in all television broadcasts and was adopted as a symbol of the European Union in Brussels. Though obviously the Berlaymont is dear to me, it represents Europe only because all the flags are in front of it. Would you ever consider flying the papal flag to signal St.Peter? Yet you can put all flags you want in front of the Berlaymont.

It is no accident that the Berlaymont has the same shape as the building that houses the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, and UN institutions are international' global by definition. **4**

Romano Prodi: Thank you for the comparison, it had never occurred to me. It is quite true, there is a certain similarity.

Getting back to the round tables on Brussels as European capital: at those meetings, the position shared by nearly all the participants in the debate was that Europe needed a 'soft' capital, in an attempt to give a voice to all the differences at the core of Europe's identity. **5**

Romano Prodi: Certainly. Brussels will never be Washington, that is obvious.

Architect Rem Koolhaas maintains that it is necessary to build a hard capital even if this were to require the extreme option of rebuilding the European Quarter. **6**

Romano Prodi: Even if I thought so too, unfortunately it was not possible. It was no accident that we called Koolhaas: it was because he was a strong supporter of this idea. The result, however, was the one you yourselves can see now. You can say in a certain sense that the problem was that the European Quarter actually 'worked'. This is also what is blocking the development of alternative proposals: the fact that 'it works'.

7 *OK, let's say that from a strictly functional standpoint, it fulfils its role, but, as you said, it needs flags in order to become a recognisable backdrop.*

Romano Prodi: Without a doubt. However, perhaps, in a few centuries…

8 *Among other things, both the debate on Brussels Capital of Europe and the project "The image of Europe" are experiences that developed in a context of great optimism and faith in the European project, and this is why they are fatally dated.*

Romano Prodi: Exactly. Because let us remember: it is no accident that they were accompanied by the introduction of the Euro, the establishment of the Commission, the great enlargement that was supposed to bring peace in Europe. And note that people love Europe when it accomplishes great projects, which may even be misguided but are the sign of a political journey. When the tensions, the fragmentations and divisions that have occurred over the last ten to fifteen years started to thwart the great political objective people began to love Europe less.

9 *Do you think that now, at a distance of almost twenty years, a fresh examination of this theme would be useful, or do you feel that the results achieved then were satisfactory?*

Romano Prodi: No, it would have to be accompanied by political objectives. Capitals, projects for capitals, materialise at the time when an idea, a power, an identity, a common force affirms itself. So, I would not repropose it today, but I hope it can be reconsidered in the future.

10 *You could say that those experiences were possible specifically as a result of the positive atmosphere prevailing in Europe at the time.*

Romano Prodi: Exactly. We were convinced that an institutional building should have cultural implications. We felt that we had a duty in this regard. During those same years, we had established a cultural identity commission which worked for two years. It was challenging. Some of the commission members were not of European descent, others were Muslims, and I had hopes that the commission could become the reference point for the cultural transformations sweeping across Europe. The rejection of the constitution put a great brake on this cultural process. If you work on a constitution that is then rejected by the French and the Dutch people, it is all over. Rem Koolhaas being Dutch is almost a paradox. Some say I am the one to blame for the enlargement of the European Union [editors' note: that started with optimism and was then left unfinished]. I have thought about it a lot, coming to the conclusion that history's trains only pass once. If the shards left behind by the Soviet Union had not been put back together again rapidly, we would be facing an even more fragmented scenario today.

To return to Brussels: it seems to us that the fundamental problem with the European Quarter is not the individual buildings but the absence of relationships between them – from a spatial and a symbolic perspective. We feel that the desire to represent oneself in the urban space is a fundamental expression of democracy: just think of the urban structure of our old cities, in which the square was the place where the various powers were represented (church, town hall, etc.), or the perfect correspondence between the institutional architecture of American democracy and the Washington city project.
It should be noted that since the 2000s various competitions have been held for the design of public buildings and spaces in the European Quarter (Rue de la Loi, Place Schuman, the Europa Building, the renovation of the Berlaymont), but those involving the public space have never seen the light of day.
Is it no longer possible to conceive a project for a radical renewal or a refoundation of Europe's capital? Can you think of alternative models? Can the public space on which they rise still play a fundamental role?

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Romano Prodi: By now, these buildings have acquired their own history. True, they are not buildings that 'sing in chorus' according to their initial design, but by now they are here, and I cannot see any alternative. I do not see Brasilia, I do not see Astana on the European horizon. Adjustments will be made without any doubt because they always are. What I mean is that the Parliament has its own great identity and so does the Berlaymont – they are close to one another. There is no square that unifies it all, but this is the new world and that is the way it is. There is no Mall like Washington, there is no Champs-Élysées. I imagine that there will be a somewhat closer link between them, there will be pedestrian areas, and there will be footbridges, connection ideas.

Is the lack of a place tying together the relationships between these buildings one of the key factors in what Koolhaas specifically defined as the European Union's iconographic deficit?

12

Romano Prodi: Yes, that is correct, but it was also a consequence of the efforts required to push the process forward, and the result of the disagreements and the adversities.
Indeed, I believe that, from a certain standpoint, the city of Brussels was one of the most flexible places in which these things could be done. In Paris, or in some other capitals, it would have been impossible. So, it is true that there is no overall picture, but at the same time this enormous European Quarter embodies the scale, the strength and the importance, as well as also the fatigue, with which Europe made itself. The Parliament built itself on its own, the Council went its own way and the Commission scattered buildings and skyscrapers – mini skyscrapers – popped up here and there, all over Brussels. What I am trying to say is that it

was history that meant we did not get the strong iconography advocated by Koolhaas. When we inaugurated *The Image of Europe* exhibition, the central question posed – though in a provisional manner – was specifically that of the iconography.

13 *You have pointed out several times that because of its democratic nature the process of European integration is inevitably a slow process that takes place one step at a time. A process whose fundamental nature is like that of a building in continuous evolution. If you wish to establish a parallel with architecture, your image invokes the Gothic cathedrals, built over the centuries, whose meaning actually lies in their construction. Identity is built along with the building itself. What could be the European Union's cathedral in your view?*

Romano Prodi: The Gothic buildings, the cathedrals, took a long time to be built, especially because the money ran out, but nobody was trying to destroy them while they were being built.
Building Europe, on the other hand, hinges on the continuous dynamics between those who want to build and those who pull back' It is a completely different purpose, there is never a condition of uniformity, a common goal fully shared by all the builders.
Perhaps, at the beginning of both post-war periods, there was a moment when this equilibrium existed, but now the political aspects have to be taken into account: the European Commission represents those who build the cathedral, while the European Council represents the interests of those who must invest the money in the building and oftentimes they pull back to prevent the cathedral from being built. Not everyone is going in the same direction in this interaction.
What I hope, and what I see, is that all things considered there is a sort of long-term instinct that ensures that the building process goes on, albeit very slowly. This is what consoles me, let's say, what makes me confident that the process will go ahead. But you have seen how slow it is, haven't you? How the European Constitution was rejected, how more power was given to the countries and not to the Community structures, and how the Parliament struggles to obtain strong autonomous power. In short, it is true that the comparison with the Gothic cathedral can work if you think of construction time and complexity, but paradoxically the European Union is also hampered by the difficulty of the relationships between the various parties.

14 *You rightly promoted the introduction of the single currency as an event of enormous political importance. For us, this is all the more interesting because the Europe of the single currency decided to use buildings to depict itself. The structures reproduced are not real but are lifelike, and constitute a catalogue of the styles we can find in most European countries. We believe that the current circumstances in which we all find ourselves,*

confined within private spaces – domestic and otherwise – are once again highlighting the role of our public spaces, monuments and parks – not only in building identity, and with it the sense of belonging to a community, but also in bringing about social cohesion. It is no accident that during the last two centuries national states have built and represented themselves through architecture. Obviously, we are not only thinking of the monumental structures of the 19th century or of totalitarian states, but also of more successful experiences with the use of architecture as a fundamental expression of the democratic character of the European democracies, as in the cases, for example, of the Grands Travaux in Paris or restoration of the Bundestag in Berlin. In your view, could architecture and the design of spaces with a powerful symbolic charge still play a role in the construction of a renewed European image?

Romano Prodi: There are two different aspects to this question: first of all, the architectural images that appear on the Euro banknotes were at the centre of a very long debate in which I took part personally, and from which some aspects clearly emerged. On the one hand, the symbolic importance of the architecture was evident, on the other, it was essential to avoid the portrayal of specific national identities on the notes. Mediation was achieved by depicting on paper money architectural images that acted as an abstract symbol, which could be accepted unanimously by all the countries, without offending anyone or evoking identities other than one's own, elements that could take on a highly abstract form. In contrast, coins showed the national symbols: from the German eagle, to Leonardo's euros, or even the sovereigns for some countries. It's interesting that paper money depicted a step forward into the future, while memory was impressed on the metal coinage. What you say is true – architecture was used as an instrument of unity – but it is an architectural symbol that can hardly be traced back to any specific model of reference. There are arches, bridges, and elements we can all recognise as familiar and unifying, but, at the same time, they have to be abstract because – and here I am coming to the second part of your question – the monuments you have referred to are all profoundly national and strongly represent a national identity.
The Pompidou Centre is the pride of France, not of Europe: personally, I think we have not got there yet. When Koolhaas addressed the theme of Europe's image, he started to think about flags: it is much more difficult to describe the European features of the monuments. Certainly, we have now adopted the European Commission building in Brussels as the symbol – it is a fine example of modern architecture –, but in cultural terms it cannot be said to have a different, exquisitely 'European', design.

Perhaps, with reference to some of the experiences we mentioned as examples, it is not possible to speak of a European character, but in them you can discern a tension towards an international language, conveyed first of all by modernism.

15

Well, the Brussels building could very well be in Beijing. Koolhaas himself designed the headquarters for China Central Television: a building that could just as easily be in Beijing as in Brussels. The Shard could be in Shanghai. And honestly, the skyscrapers of Pudong could be in London.

16 *In fact, the aim of our project, which takes the form of research, and especially of research by design, is to understand whether there is a possibility of overcoming this sort of overlap between the generic nature of the architecture of globalisation – the most evident manifestation of the 'archistar' phenomenon – and localism that degenerates into nationalism.*

Romano Prodi: As I am not an architect, you can have my reaction as an economist. Globalisation has not only resulted in all television stations being identical, but also all the skyscrapers. Today architecture is part of a globalised world. Accordingly, it is difficult to imagine a European architecture, other than by means of a specific analysis of the individual buildings, in which you architects can provide your views. We jokingly called the first part of the Council of Europe building (*author's note: the Justus Lipsius Building*) Tutankhamen's tomb, it was so gloomy [for us without an architectural background]…

17 *Two distinct approaches have been at play in the evolution of the European integration process: Jean Monnet's so-called functionalist approach, which has exerted great influence since the 1950s, and the constitutionalist approach inspired by Altiero Spinelli. Following the failure of the European constitution project in 2007, the hypothesis of a 'founding experience' seems to have been temporarily set aside. Over the last ten years, following the 2008 crisis, the European conversation has inevitably concentrated on the economic aspects, ignoring perhaps the cultural aspects that we have examined together. Do you believe that culture can and must find a new space in the indispensable reformulation of the European project?*

Romano Prodi: I must make an initial consideration. You have rightly said that Monnet's functionalism was the guiding principle, and was the salvation: because of the great differences, progress is made step by step. Could architecture have followed a different path?

18 *This is what has emerged very clearly from this conversation…*

Romano Prodi: Today the future is uncertain, and it cannot be otherwise when facing the risks, the crises and the challenges that trigger certain transformations. Just like the war triggered the spring that created Europe – this Europe, however imperfect – in the same way other crises will set other mechanisms in motion. I am talking for example of the excessive American-Chinese power we are experiencing, of the sudden fear of being marginalised from the world scene.

Without a doubt, there can be a great many different occasions, but in my opinion the thrust for a real leap forward can only come from a crisis. I'm certainly unable to describe what type of crisis it should be, for example, I never would have thought that a new crisis could be brought about by an epidemic. In any case the European Union has made more progress during the two months when the pandemic was most severe than in the previous fifteen years. I would have more readily thought of a globalisation crisis, of tensions associated with the economy. I am thinking, for example, of the extraordinary power of the new means of communication, of the new networks as it were. They are practically all American or Chinese and are dominating the world: for example, in a single day Alibaba made sales amounting to 38 billion dollars, and the first billion in 14 seconds. Well, once matured, won't these reflections trigger that identity thrust we are talking about? Perhaps the consolidation of nationalisms that has occurred in recent years has inhibited this thrust, but I believe that world events can still trigger it.

You work in Venice, which was a cradle of civilisation for a long time: think of the Renaissance, think of when the European nations were the leaders in everything: from finance to the art of war, technology… The first globalisation process coincided with the discovery of America, and, after that, none of the small Italian states was able to build the great galleons that crossed the oceans. The Venice Arsenal could only make small vessels: it is stupendous, but it is small. The big ships were built only by the great kingdoms of France, Spain and England. Look, now we are in the middle of a second globalisation process, in which the great galleons are Apple, Google, Alibaba, eBay and Amazon: not even one of them is European. If Europe keeps on this way, we will end up like Renaissance Italy and will no longer exist for five centuries. If Europe takes a leap forward, we too will build the ships of the future.