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‹Access for all› in Saint-Gilles

Saint-Gilles is one of the 19 autonomous communes that constitute the Belgian capital of Brussels. Unlike the other districts of Brussels, Saint-Gilles's center has hitherto been spared any large-scale interventions. The competition for the Schindler Award shows how the commune could enhance the status of its center under the aspect of "Access for all."

Text: Werner Huber

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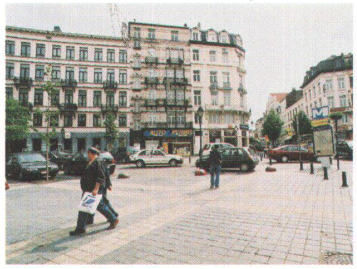

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1-7 **The buildings on both sides of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles make a unified, homogeneous impression.**

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8-10 **The houses on Rue Jourdan are smaller, and the character of the street rather more suburban.**

11-13 **Rue de Moscou connects Rue de l'Hôtel des Monnaies with the Parvis.**

14-17 **Rue de l'Hôtel des Monnais marks the southern boundary of the competition area.**

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: Brussels, the capital of Belgium and the capital of Europe, is made up of 19 independent communes. The city of Brussels consists solely of the center within the former ring of fortifications and two suburbs towards the north and east. The metropolis, as the bilingual city of Brussels is usually called, is officially known as "Région de Bruxelles-Capitale" in French, and "Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest" in Flemish. The political fragmentation of this densely interwoven city is one of the reasons for the often disorderly urban development of the city during the course of the 20th century. Experts speak of the "Bruxellisation" that has disfigured the town beyond recognition in several places.

Parvis and Carré, the heart of Saint-Gilles

Saint-Gilles is located to the west of the "Pentagon," as the Brussels city center is known owing to its characteristic shape. The origins of Saint-Gilles date back to the hamlet of Obbrussel (Haut-Bruxelles), which in 1216 acquired its own church, dedicated to Saint Gilles, which finally gave the commune its name in 1800. Up to the mid-19th century, Saint-Gilles remained a suburb along the road to Alsemberg, but the complex of boulevards that replaced the second fortifications ring, the newly built church and the construction of a community house in 1860 marked the beginning of a turbulent development for the community. The area was overlaid by a grid of roads, and in the course of the decades was densely built on until it formed a part of the Belgian capital.

The Quartier du Centre, where Saint-Gilles originated, has remained the center of the commune up till today. The Parvis de Saint-Gilles, a funnel-shaped, slightly crooked square where the market is held in the mornings, is situated in front of the church. An important role in the square was played by the "Aegidium," a complex constructed as a "diamond palace" in 1905 with various halls accessed only by a narrow passage from the Parvis. However, the building has been more or less deserted since the 1970s when the fire authorities virtually forbade its use. At the end of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles, the crooked urban area joins rue Jourdan, a long, straight road leading to the avenue Louise which accommodates the luxury shops. A rhomboid piece of ground at the end of the Parvis was once the location of the Hôtel des Monnaies, Belgium's mint. After its demolition in 1979, the resulting free area was turned into a car park, a park and a market place. In the mornings, the Carré was the scene of lively activity, but for the rest time it eked out a shadowy existence, and it never developed into a center of the commune.

Using the potential

Unlike some of Brussels' other communes in which the demolition hammer had done a thorough job, the developments carried out in Saint-Gilles during the turn of the 19th to the 20th century have remained largely untouched. Many of the properties are, however, in bad condition, and the rents are correspondingly low. The people who live here are not EU diplomats but mostly immigrants from the south of Europe and north Africa. They make the street bright and colorful, particularly the market on the Parvis de Saint-Gilles. With the competition for the Schindler Award, the authorities of Saint-Gilles hope to acquire ideas and suggestions for enhancing the status of their center. The competition area comprises the Parvis de Saint-Gilles and the Carré de l'ancien Hôtel des Monnaies. The central functions of Saint-Gilles are to be supported, and the Carré that has hitherto eked out such a shadowy existence is to be integrated in the urban life, thereby reinforcing the importance of the area as a nerve center between the old Porte de Hall city gate, the business center along the avenue Louise, and the Hôtel de Ville location 500 meters to the south.

The competition program stipulated the construction of a covered market place, the revival of the urban area of the Carré, housing for 150 persons and a culture center. The competitors were asked to work on the whole area and select one part of it for profounder analysis – cultural and social facilities, housing, shops and a market.

"Access for all"

The most important aspect of the competition is "Access for all." But although this will include accesses via ramps and elevators, this in itself is not enough. "People with disabilities may no longer be regarded as 'special cases.' They must neither be forced to use special routes in order to reach their destination, nor must they have to rely on special premises and installations," wrote Miguel A. Rodríguez, President of Schindler Europe, in his preamble to the competition. And something that must not be forgotten is that unrestricted accessibility must not be limited to persons in wheelchairs – which is often what one thinks of first – but be equally available for the partially sighted, the partially hearing and the mentally handicapped.

As the results of the competition have shown, these stipulations are not always taken seriously enough. Certainly, there are cultural differences in dealing with disabilities; some countries are way ahead on the path towards the equal integration of all members of society, whereas in others exclusion is still rife. Only a few of the submitted works succeeded in providing convincing solutions to the requirement of "Access for all."

St-Gilles must take the bull by the horns

With this competition, Saint-Gilles received ten proposals for ways for the community to up-value its center. The fact that among them were some fantastic, unrealizable designs is typical of student competitions, and some of the designs make it clear that their authors did not have the opportunity to view the site and had to make do with the plans, texts and photographs that were put at their disposal. Sometimes, however, it is precisely the unprejudiced view from outside that reveals unexpected perspectives. However, some of the contributions show that Saint-Gilles can enhance its center without having to resort to exaggeration. Up till now, the center of Saint-Gilles has been spared "Bruxellisation." This means that careful procedure is indicated, for the magnificent urban qualities – in particular the interesting crooked shape of the Parvis de Saint-Gilles – must on no account be destroyed, but reinforced. With its participation in this competition, the commune has virtually committed itself to this aim under the aspect of "Access for all." •

The Competition

Organisation:

--› Initiator & Sponsor: Schindler Holding Ltd; Miguel A. Rodríguez, Yvan Huyghebaert
--› Competition Management: Nüesch Development AG, Andreas Binkert, Tobias Reinhard, Dagmar Ross
--› Communication & Coordination: Schindler Management AG, Ivo Zimmermann, Petra Schmidig, Stephanie Graf, Willy Gsell, Jed Fraser

Jury:

--› Thomas Sieverts (Chairman)
--› Luc Bonnard
--› Thore Garbers
--› Pierre-Louis Grosbois
--› Gilbert Huyberechts
--› Hans Jappsen
--› Pierre Lallemand
--› Jean-Pierre Le Dantec
--› Joe Manser
--› Miguel A. Rodríguez