

Focus - Car-free Brussels

Reclaim the streets

It's been 40 years since The Bulletin organised a sit-in on Brussels' Grand'Place to protest against traffic, yet it provided the inspiration for last Sunday's Picnic the Streets. Here's what happened — and why

BY PHILIPPE VAN PARIJS

PHOTOS BY FILIP VAN ZANDYCKE

On June 10, at noon, hundreds of people started sitting down in the middle of Boulevard Anspach in Brussels, in front of the Bourse. At their peak, they were well over 2,000 people, with their kids, their blankets, their sandwiches and their salads – some even with their garden chairs and barbecues. The picnic was a Facebook event, coordinated by a handful of young Brusselers. It was meant as an act of protest. No permission had been asked to hold it. Politicians from every political party expressed their support, however, and after some hesitation, Brussels' mayor, Freddy Thielemans, declared that the picnic was “an absolutely charming idea” and would be, though not authorised, tolerated. Police were present, but to gently redirect traffic, not to jail the picnickers.

This extraordinary happening was not quite unprecedented. On a smaller scale, another picnic had been held for analogous reasons more than 40 years ago on Brussels' Grand'Place. In its issue of May 7, 1971, The Bulletin launched a petition expressing indignation at “the world's most beautiful car park” being permanently spoiled by traffic. The petition was signed by many Brusselers, including Jacques Brel. As the city administration refused to budge, The Bulletin organised a “sit-down protest” in the form of a picnic, preventing cars from entering the Grand'Place. Success was not immediate. It took several months for then-mayor Lucien Cooremans to finally give in. But the outcome is still there for us to enjoy today.

The picnic on Boulevard Anspach was partly inspired and encouraged by this memorable precedent, but also by the realisation that so many other cities, both in Belgium and abroad, are now treating their public spaces so much better than Brussels does. They have managed to transform their central areas, rehabilitate their public squares, make it pleasant to stroll, chat, linger on a terrace, sit on a bench

and breathe in the fresh air. In comparison, despite some progress – too modest and too slow – Brussels remains pathetic. This call for quality public spaces in the city is not a mere luxury. The upgrading of public spaces in our cities is essential if we are to be able to say to our children and grandchildren: “You will have to consume less than we do, yet your life will be better than ours.” Why?

Fundamentally, because the future of our planet can only be ensured if the inhabitants of the ‘North’ consume far less of its resources than they do today. They will only succeed in doing so if they live more closely to one another in their cities. This will inevitably inflate the cost of urban housing, and therefore reduce the average size of housing units. The scarcity of private space will make pleasant and safe public spaces more important than ever to ensure a well-balanced life for us all; above all, for young people who would otherwise go crazy between cramped apartments and exiguous pavements. Attractive public spaces are also indispensable to facilitate serene encounters between the increasingly diverse components of our urban populations, instead of keeping them locked up in their respective ghettos.

In Brussels, as in other cities, no major progress in this direction can be made without freeing large spaces from traffic and parking, either permanently or at certain hours or on certain days. Cars keep killing pedestrians and cyclists, not only by occasionally mowing them down, but above all by constantly injecting dirt into their lungs. Moreover, cars spoil the pleasure citizens can take in walking around their city: they clutter up public space, they disfigure the landscape and bombard our ears with their noise.

Driving a car in the city centre must cease to be the rule. It must become an exception only justifiable by a specific reason: the transportation of a disabled person,



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for example, or of heavy objects. In Brussels, as in other cities, there are dreams and plans that are going in the right direction. But it is high time to move faster and more vigorously. As the capital of a troubled European Union, Brussels has a special responsibility to lead by example. If the municipal and regional authorities prove incapable of taking the plunge, then the citizens of Brussels need to take the matter into their own hands, following the example of The Bulletin 40 years ago.

These considerations inspired the suggestion I made on May 24 in *Le Soir* and *Brussel Deze Week*: why not hold a picnic every Sunday lunchtime across the width of Boulevard Anspach between the Bourse and Place De Brouckere? It would suffice to politely explain to drivers that, for once, it is not for them to impose their

rule. A touch of gentle civil disobedience is more than legitimate in response to irresponsible lethargy. Brussels is brimming with musicians and talented actors who could brighten up the event, even in gloomy weather. They could make it much more than a simple picnic or *passeggiata*. And to organise all this, I conjectured, there are certainly people far better equipped than an old philosopher: a handful of Twitter virtuosos, perhaps, or Facebook addicts, or flashmob pioneers.

Sure enough, they managed it, and beautifully organised Sunday's event. I hope this is only one of many similar initiatives, preferably organised by the city administration itself or, if not, in the same bottom-up way as this time. Whenever I can, I shall be there with my sandwiches and, if necessary, my umbrella. Do join me! ■

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With thanks to Filip Van Zandycke at HoedGekruidd vzw for the photographs. www.hoedgekruidd.be

Above

Various scenes from the Picnic in the Streets held on June 10, including spokesperson Philippe Van Parijs (centre) addressing the crowd