

The Eastman Building: A Brussels architectural gem for the House of European History

SUMMARY

The Eastman Building, which is situated right beside the European institutions in the heart of the *Quartier Léopold* is set to become the House of European History, opening its doors in May 2017. The choice and renovation of this former dental clinic will highlight the building's historical value to the cultural heritage of Brussels and Europe. The dental clinic was set up by George Eastman, the founder of Kodak. It was built in 1935 in *Parc Léopold*, a centre for science and recreation since the end of the nineteenth century. At various stages it has been a public clinic, a learning establishment and a retirement home. The European Parliament leased the building in 1985 to accommodate its administrative services, a print shop and a crèche. Over the years, it has also been used by other EU bodies such as the European Ombudsman and the European Court of Auditors. In 2009, the European Parliament decided that, after substantial renovation and extension, it should accommodate the House of European History. Its mission will be to present European history over the last two centuries through resolutely modern museography. Thus, the Eastman Building will continue to educate and reach out to the public.



Source: Atelier d'architecture Chaix & Morel et Associés, Paris JSWD, Köln Image: © E.Young / AACMA - JSWD.

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George Eastman, philanthropist

George Eastman was born in Waterville (New York State, United States) in 1854. George Eastman was a fatherless young man of 14 when he began working in insurance and then in banking. But it was through photography, ten years later, that he discovered his true vocation. Working frantically in his mother's kitchen to simplify photography, he succeeded in developing a dry plate process, which he patented in 1880. Four years later, he revolutionised photography and paved the way for cinema by inventing celluloid film. In 1888, he founded Eastman Kodak, the source of his wealth.

George Eastman was also remarkable for his considerable generosity. He distributed much of his wealth to charitable causes and a third of his company's shares to his employees, paving the way for employee share ownership. Deeply concerned to see how little oral and dental healthcare children from disadvantaged backgrounds generally received, Eastman funded the establishment of a first dental institute, which was inaugurated in 1917 in Rochester (New York State), the location of the first Kodak factory. This institute provides free dental care to the public. George Eastman went on to establish similar institutes in London, Rome, Paris, Stockholm and Brussels. In 1931, Eastman donated one million dollars to the Brussels public welfare committee in order to build a model dental institute to provide free treatment to the city's disadvantaged children. A site measuring 2 000m² on the edge of *Parc Léopold* was selected and the building's foundation stone was laid in 1934.

Parc Léopold and the dental clinic

Parc Léopold – a space for science

This park is a remnant of the Maelbeek valley. During the mid-nineteenth century it was an English landscape park designed for recreation and the leisured classes. People mainly came to see the exhibits and curios of the Royal Society of zoology, horticulture and recreation. But at the turn of the 20th century, Ernest Solvay, a Belgian industrialist, suggested turning it into a 'city of science'. Solvay was fascinated by the sciences and organised regular meetings between the most prominent scientists of the day, including Marie Curie, Henri Poincaré, Albert Einstein and Paul Langevin. With the support of the city of Brussels and private patrons, five institutes were quickly built in the park, the institutes of physiology, hygiene, anatomy, sociology and a business school. In the 1920s, one after the other, these institutes moved to the new campus of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*. The George Eastman Dental Institute opened its doors in 1935, following its inauguration in the presence of King Leopold III and Queen Astrid, one month before she died in an accident. The Émile Jacqmain grammar school took over the old building of the physiology institute in 1955.

Michel Polak (1885-1948)

Michel Polak, a Swiss architect, was born in Mexico. He worked mainly in Belgium after studying in Zurich and Paris. The city of Brussels owes many of its key buildings to him. These are mainly built in the Art Deco style and include large hotels or town houses such as Villa Empain. Two of his buildings are currently used by European 'institutions', *Résidence Palace* (European Council) and the Eastman Building (House of European History).

The construction of the dental clinic

The design of the Eastman Building was based on the plans for the clinic in Rochester, and its construction was explicitly entrusted to the architect Michel Polak, who used reputable local companies for the interior decoration. Its white stone facade comprises a central block of 15 x 31.4 metres, flanked by two protruding wings of 11.4 x 35.4 metres. Imposing bluestone steps lead to an entrance hall embellished with reliefs and encrusted enamel and an impressive door with decorative wrought iron panels. The 1930s interior woodwork is made of precious Congolese wood. The wings contained a classroom, a small orthodontics museum, a library, a cloakroom and sanitary facilities.

On the first floor there was a radiology room, operating theatres, anaesthesia or extraction rooms, girls' and boys' wards and laboratories. On the first floor of the central part of the building, 26 modern dentist chairs were set out in three rows in a large area, with light pouring in from large metal-framed windows.

Figure 1 – Construction of the Eastman Institute in 1934.



© University of Rochester Medical Center, Eastman Institute for Oral Health.

The Eastman clinic – a space for science and solidarity

Since the clinic was designed with healthcare in mind, it had state-of-the-art medical equipment, but it was also remarkable for the thought it gave to its young patients. Polak was convinced that a clinic must be as attractive as possible and should do its best to distract children from its clinical purpose. He made an effort to avoid white, and used a wide range of colours on the floors and walls. He had the waiting room decorated with a frieze fresco by the Belgian painter Camille Barthélémy, depicting scenes from La Fontaine's fables. A bronze aviary with exotic birds was placed in the centre of the room to entertain children waiting for their appointments. During its lifetime, the Eastman Institute treated about 150 children a day and served as a dental training centre. It was also a space for scientific gatherings, thanks to a conference room with seating capacity for 150.

The clinic and the European Parliament

As of 1955, the building also accommodated a retirement home, the Eastman residence. However, after the institute had provided dental care for over 50 years, the Brussels centre for social welfare (CPAS–OCMW) decided to close down its medical and retirement facilities in order to incorporate the building into its private assets. Since the 1970s, the European Parliament had occupied rather impractical premises on boulevard de l'Empereur. Since it was planning to develop the activities of its political groups and committees in Brussels, it decided to construct a building on rue Belliard, leased to the Belgian government and sub-let to the European Parliament. The Eastman Building is

situated right next to rue Belliard.¹ In 1985, the Brussels CPAS–OCMW let the building to the European Parliament. This lease was renewed several times before the European Parliament finally acquired a 99-year leasehold on the building in 2008.

1985 is an important milestone in the institution's history, since the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the development of its facilities in Brussels and the construction of a hemicycle with a

minimum capacity of 600 seats.² In the absence of a decision by the Member States to establish the European institutions at a single location – a decision which the European Parliament had called for – parliament decided to use its narrow margin of manoeuvre under the Treaties to reorganise its work. The Single Act under preparation was meant to enhance its role, and to this end, the European Parliament held a plenary session in Brussels for the second time in 1983 at the *Palais des Congrès*, rue Ravenstein. However, this first exercise was dogged by technical difficulties and proved that parliament needed to develop its own infrastructure,³ more suited to its work and future enlargements (Spain and Portugal in 1986).

In 1986, only 11% of the European Parliament's staff worked in Brussels, and in 1983 they were accommodated in 413 offices in rue Belliard and 80 offices in rue Remorqueur. But their working conditions were cramped and, pending the construction of new buildings, it made sense to rent the Eastman Building. After 1985, the building hosted many conferences and acquired a cafeteria, print shop and meeting rooms. In 1993, it was turned into a crèche with about 220 places for the children of staff. Since then, it has hosted several European associations such as *Femmes d'Europe*, *Fondation Pégase* and the European Union Choir. Over the years, some parts have accommodated departments of the European Ombudsman and the Court of Auditors.

Parc Léopold and many of its buildings, such as the Pasteur institute or the Solvay library, were listed in 1976. The Eastman Building itself is not listed but the facades overlooking the park are nevertheless covered by the listing of the site itself. This has facilitated its renovation and enhancement for cultural purposes with a view to a broader regeneration of the park. On 17 June 2009, the European Parliament's Bureau approved the repurposing of the Eastman Building to accommodate the House of European History.

Figure 2 – the Eastman Institute waiting room and its aviary in 1935.



Source: Modern architecture archives, Brussels.

Stages in the conversion process

In July 2009, the European Parliament launched a three-phase international architectural competition. Throughout the competition, emphasis was paid to aspects such as the project's museological concept, access for people with disabilities or reduced mobility, needs analysis and evaluation of operational costs, and even the building's environmental impact and energy performance. The final stage of the competition was completed at the beginning of 2011, with the winners being *Atelier d'Architecture Chaix & Morel and Associates* (France), *JSWD Architekten* (Germany) and *TPF Engineering* (Belgium). The project includes the construction of a contemporary extension and the restoration of the original facades and certain rooms in order to preserve the historic aesthetics of the site. The completed project will require twice as much space as the current building and will extend into the courtyard and onto the roof. This three-storey building will nevertheless respect the composition of the original structure, which is based on the pre-eminence of the central part of the building and its axial symmetry. Above the old roof, the extension's screen-printed glass framework will allow glimpses of the interior: opaque prisms will appear to float in a transparent box.

Figure 3 – The House of European History project. Side view



Source: *Atelier d'architecture Chaix & Morel et Associés*, *Paris JSWD*, *Köln Image*: © E. Young / AACMA - JSWD.

In 2012, the extension and renovation of the building was estimated at €31 million and the exhibition — including a substantial sum to be allocated to multilingualism — was estimated at €24 million. During the architectural competition, the project generated intense debate on its appropriateness and how it would fit into the Brussels architectural landscape. Nowadays, this type of debate invariably takes place when large museums are constructed, which is justified. In 2012, the European Parliament facilitated the debate by holding an exhibition of the competing projects and the final winner. It also held numerous meetings with residents' associations.

The House of European History – the project

The idea to create a museum about Europe was not new. In the 1990s, the European Commission had considered opening European rooms in various major European museums.⁴ A private project called the Museum of Europe was launched in Brussels in 1997 and resulted in two exhibitions of the concept and a travelling exhibition.

Several European countries have also considered setting up a large national museum. The idea succeeded in Germany with the *Haus der Geschichte* in Bonn. On the other hand, the *Nationaal Historisch Museum* project launched by the Dutch parliament in 2006 was abandoned in 2010. President Nicolas Sarkozy's plans for a *Maison de l'histoire de France* were also abandoned due to the cost (€80 million) as well as criticism over the writing of a national narrative. By contrast, in the United States, ever since the end of the Cold War, a growing number of Washington museums have avoided the idea of an extensive national narrative (*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, National Museum of the American Indian*).

Figure 4 – The House of European History -the interior



Source: Atelier d'architecture Chaix & Morel et Associés, Paris JSWD, Köln Image: © E.Young / AACMA - JSWD.

Against this backdrop, the House of European History, officially launched in February 2007 by Hans-Gert Pöttering in his inaugural address, following his election as President of the European Parliament, would appear to be an ambitious project. In December 2007, a committee of experts was set up. It included nine museum experts and historians from across Europe.⁵ This committee presented a conceptual basis for a House of European History in September 2008.⁶ It was therefore decided that its core mission would be to help people from all backgrounds and walks of life to gain a better understanding of recent European history, in light of earlier centuries which had shaped ideas and values through sometimes long and painful processes. The museum will also enable the public to take a critical look at European history and integration, its origins, future prospects and challenges.⁷ Thus, the House of European History is also conceived as a space for informal learning, an environment where visitors can learn through what they experience at the museum. The House of European History is designed to promote immersion. It will seek to stimulate its visitors' appetite for a history that is presented as their own and their interest in Europe's current journey. By placing the history of European integration in the broader context of Europe's 20th and 21st century history, the House of European History should therefore complement the *Parlamentarium*,

opened in 2011, which focuses on the history of European integration and the functioning of the European Parliament. Visitors to the European quarter will be able to visit both facilities, as well as other places of interest, such as the hemicycle, the esplanade and the protocol entrance. This will give them an overall picture of the functioning of the European Parliament, against the backdrop of European history.

The centrepiece of the House of European History will be a permanent exhibition tracing history right up to the present day, starting with the nineteenth century and the cataclysmic events of the First and Second World Wars, the transition to the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall and the deepening of European integration, and glancing back at the origins of the continent, the Middle Ages and modern history.

The museum's various floors will lead on to each other in a chrono-thematic sequence. Throughout the main exhibition, case studies will be presented from several perspectives, raising questions for the visitor to explore. The sky will be visible from the 'open' ceiling of the top floor, which is designed to illustrate that Europe's possibilities for the future are endless. This will also be a space where visitors can pause and reflect on their impressions. The House of European History will achieve this by tapping into the arsenal of techniques used by contemporary museums to evoke experiences by appealing to all the senses, using objects, visuals, audiovisuals and explanations in the 24 official languages of the European Union.

The permanent exhibition will be complemented by other activities, including temporary exhibitions, travelling exhibitions and a broad range of events and publications. Furthermore, in addition to its exhibitions and guided tours, the museum is designed to offer visitors a learning experience by challenging them to question their perceptions of European history and its legacy to the world we live in today.

When the House of European History opens its doors in November 2016, it will add a new dimension to visits to the European Parliament and is also expected to increase the number of visitors by about 350 000 a year. It could therefore be said that throughout its long history the Eastman Building has remained true to its commitment to innovative equipment, science and public outreach. In this respect, it would be no exaggeration to say that the establishment of the House of European History somehow restores the park to its roots.

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Endnotes

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