

The first hemicycle of the European Parliament

Schuman Building, Luxembourg

SUMMARY

In its early years, the European Parliament held its plenary sittings in different locations, made available by other institutions or by the host countries. It was only in 1973, with the construction of the Schuman Building in Luxembourg, that the Parliament finally had its own premises with a hemicycle (debating chamber) for its plenary meetings.

Planned in the 1960s, with construction starting in 1970, the initial plans had to be adjusted to accommodate the expected enlargement of the Communities. In the 1970s, the hemicycle was used regularly for plenary sessions, but with the increase in the number of Members following the 1979 direct elections, the chamber was no longer large enough to hold all Members.

The Luxembourg hemicycle is noted for the artistic value of its decor, in particular the zinc bas-relief created by the Turin-based NP2 Group. Thanks to interviews with the artists, this briefing provides details of the artwork, including the story of how the Italian company came to be commissioned by the Belgian contractor fitting out the chamber.



Emilio Colombo, President of the European Parliament addresses a plenary session in Luxembourg in 1979.

In this briefing:

- The Schuman Building
- The hemicycle
- The NP2 Group
- The creation of the bas-relief
- Use of the hemicycle

The Schuman Building

Since 1973, the Schuman Building has been home to a number of departments of the European Parliament's Secretariat. In spite of its austere look and administrative nature, it houses the first hemicycle (debating chamber) that was designed and built for the plenary sittings of the European Parliament.

Even though the Secretariat had established its seat in Luxembourg from the outset, in the mid-1960s only one building had been built to house the European institutions: the Tower Building, which was opened in 1966 and shared between Parliament and the Commission, and has now been converted into a conference centre.

Parliament's increasing activity and subsequent requirements thus led to negotiations with the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg for the construction of an administrative building in the Kirchberg Plateau area. Thanks to the documents stored in the collection of the Office of the Secretary-General, Hans Nord, we can therefore reconstruct the various stages of the collaboration between the European Parliament and the Luxembourg Government.

In 1965 the European Parliament, represented at the meetings by the Director in the Directorate-General for General Affairs, Pierre Ginestet, launched negotiations with the Luxembourg Ministry of Public Works, in particular with the architect, Laurent Schmit, who was in charge of the project. Parliament was particularly interested in the functional and logistical aspects, involving the



External view of the Schuman building (2012).

construction of some 470 offices, with good lighting, including 30 to be used by the political groups and 15 for purposes of representation, a meeting room for about 100 people with interpreting booths, a library and a range of facilities such as a cafeteria, canteen and several storage rooms, including for archives.¹

Once an agreement had been reached on the building project, in June 1970 the *Compagnie d'Entreprises CFE* (formerly *Compagnie Belge de Chemins de Fer et d'Entreprises*) was entrusted with the project, with the work scheduled to be completed by the end of 1973.

As early as September 1970, the expected enlargement of the Community following the accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark, called into question the size of the building and the project had to be revised, with the addition of an extra floor, thus increasing the building's capacity from 1 000 to 1 200 people. The first departments moved there in January 1973, even though the work was not yet completed,² and the building was occupied definitively by the end of that year. On a proposal by the President of Parliament, Cornelis Berkhouwer, the building was named after Robert Schuman.³

Today, the rectangular building has six floors above ground and two below, with two courtyards that provide natural light for the rooms on both sides of the corridors. The building is 100 m long, 56 m wide and 33 m high and occupies an area of 36 000 square metres for a built volume of 125 000 cubic metres.

A set of plans found in correspondence from 1974⁴ shows how the various floors were used: the library and restaurant were on the ground floor; the hemicycle, Members' bar and President's offices were on the first floor; the second floor led to the hemicycle galleries, the interpreting booths and the control room. On the same floor there were also a press room, the Secretary-General's offices and some offices reserved for Council members. The third floor was for the political groups, while the Quaestors' offices were on the fourth floor, together with a number of administrative offices, the protocol department, some parliamentary committees and offices for members of the Council and Commission. The fifth floor was fully occupied by the parliamentary committees, while on the sixth were the then DG D, Research and Documentation, and the interpreters. The two basement floors housed the printing press, where documents vital to the work of the institution were printed and distributed, and various technical and storage rooms.

The hemicycle

Following the signing of the Merger Treaty, the cities of Luxembourg, Brussels and Strasbourg were chosen as temporary places of work of the European Parliament. In 1965, the services of the Secretariat were established in Luxembourg, while Strasbourg was to host plenary sessions. During the 1970s, the debate on the choice of a single seat for the institution was still a lively and open one. The building of a hemicycle debating chamber which enabled MEPs to meet in plenary sitting in Luxembourg had sparked fears that Strasbourg would be gradually abandoned.

It was the President himself, Walter Behrendt, in his opening address at the first plenary sitting held in the Schuman Building, who explained the reasons for the decision: 'It is absolutely not a question of reducing our political presence in Strasbourg. It is, however, in 1973 as in previous years, a question of trying to deal with, as economically as possible, the growing amount of work which obliges us to hold an increasing number of part-sessions.'⁵



Simone Veil, EP President during the African Caribbean and Pacific group of states' dialogue with Europe – 1979 in Luxembourg.

If indeed, during the initial discussions on the project in 1965, Parliament had requested the construction of a large meeting room for around 100 people, a note of 1970 from Secretary-General Hans Nord to President Mario Scelba⁶ clearly shows the need for appropriate premises and working conditions in both Strasbourg and Luxembourg. The 1971 version of the project, therefore, involved the construction of a hemicycle that would enable plenary meetings to be held in an appropriate manner.

From a note of January 1971 sent by Pierre Ginestet to Hans Nord, the criteria which had to be met by the chamber can be deduced. It had to accommodate the 142 Members of the European Parliament, but had to be able to be extended by up to 208 seats, in anticipation of the likely entry of the UK, Ireland and Denmark (as well as Norway, although it subsequently decided against accession). The chamber also had to have room for Parliament's President and Bureau, a podium for speakers, the representatives of the Council and the Commission and the officials accompanying them, and a table for the stenographers. The plan was to build a gallery on the upper floor, accessible from both inside and outside the chamber, to accommodate up to a maximum of 200 people, including journalists and the general public.⁷ The chamber had to have interpreting booths and technical equipment such as headphones, microphones and TVs broadcasting the debates and showing the names of the speakers and titles of the reports being discussed.

While the attention of Parliament's officials was focused mainly on the technical and practical aspects of the chamber, the final result also shows great refinement as far as the interior design was concerned. The rectangular chamber (28 m x 20 m) was finely decorated using a combination of different materials such as leather, which covered the walls, wooden seats and metal chandeliers and ceiling. The Members' chairs were arranged in a U shape, facing the lectern and the President's podium. The rear wall was dominated by a geometrical zinc bas-relief, designed by the Turin-based NP2 Group. In the middle were two doors decorated in the same theme and perfectly camouflaged within the sculpture, giving access to the President's office.

The project for the chamber was awarded to Belgian interior designer and cabinet-maker, René Simonis, who, in 1928, had founded the *Entreprise Simonis*, which is still operational today and is known for having collaborated in major projects such as the chamber of the Belgian Senate and the Bank Brussels Lambert. What the documents do not say is how Simonis and the NP2 Group were commissioned to decorate the chamber. The fact that the project left no traces in the historical archives of the European Parliament or in those of the Luxembourg Ministry of Public Works or even in the architect Laurent Schmit's plans, suggests that this aspect was handled entirely by the construction company. Simonis, who was well known in Brussels circles at the time, was probably selected by the Compagnie d'Entreprises (CFE) due to his proven experience.

Thanks to interviews with members of the NP2 Group and documents provided by the Nerone Ceccarelli archive, we have been able to identify the steps that led to the NP2 Group being commissioned to sculpt the bas-relief.⁸

The NP2 Group

The NP2 Group was founded by Giovanni Ceccarelli, known as Nerone (1937-1996), and Gianni Patuzzi (born 1932), who worked internationally⁹ between 1962 and 1974,¹⁰ receiving major awards¹¹ and collaborating with well-known artists such as Emilio Vedova, Marcel Breuer and others. The two young artists got to know each other while still students at the Venice Fine Arts Academy (*Accademia di Belle Arti*) and met again in Turin in 1959, where they began a successful partnership, founding the NP2 Group in 1962. Their work was based on the idea of freeing art from museums and galleries to make it accessible to a wider audience, by integrating art with architecture.

The studio in Borgaro Torinese, where the two used to work, turned out to be a real hotbed of experimentation, open to collaboration with other artists and craftsmen.

Their product ranges were vast and varied: they created and built monumental sculptures, furniture, fittings and panels, with techniques ranging from metalworking and woodworking to working in concrete and marble engraving, demonstrating original creativity and great technical capabilities. At the end of the 1960s the two artists began to differentiate their creations and alongside their unique works of art (which continued to bear the NP2 signature) they began creating serially produced coverings and architectural accessories. During our interview, Gianni Patuzzi pointed out that they worked hard in the studio,¹² but his words still convey the enthusiasm that characterised the Group's creations.

In 1964, Piercarlo Ceccarelli, younger brother of Nerone and then only at the start of his management career, also joined the NP2 Group. Piercarlo dealt with the administrative and commercial aspects and his contribution proved vital in the promotion of the work produced by the Group. Through architecture exhibitions he managed to create a tight network of contacts with architects, showrooms and art and design galleries, which he initially developed in the United States and later in Europe.¹³ Orders soon started to come in, from both public and private sectors.



Giovanni Ceccarelli, known as 'Nerone', and Gianni Patuzzi, with their team.

The creation of the bas-relief

In the late 1960s the works of NP2 were exhibited in many showrooms, including the gallery of designer Roger Vanhevel, still in existence today, on Avenue Louise in Brussels. This was probably how the artists came to be commissioned to sculpt the bas-relief. Given that Simonis and Vanhevel¹⁴ knew each other both personally and professionally and given the proximity of the premises, at the time, of the Enterprise Simonis and the Galerie Vanhevel, it seems likely that Simonis got to know the works of Nerone and Patuzzi in that showroom and chose them to complete his project.

Thanks to the interview with the artist, Gianni Patuzzi, in December 2014, we have managed to glean many additional details regarding the creation of this work of art. Patuzzi remembered that Piercarlo Ceccarelli brought into the studio a drawing of the elevation of the wall they were supposed to be decorating. The wall featured four rectangular holes in its top half, which would house the interpreting booths and from which the artists drew inspiration for the development of their theme.

The bas-relief covers an area of some 150 square metres (25 m x 6 m) and consists of 83 rectangular zinc panels, of irregular sizes, mounted on six levels. The pattern around the four upper holes creates a Greek-style decoration. The straight lines of the upper part of the work are counter-balanced by the curved lines of the lower part, which, like parentheses, open and close the abstract geometrical pattern. As Nerone

Ceccarelli said, it was a message which needed no translation¹⁵. The bas-relief dates back to 1972.

The sculpture was created entirely in the Borgaro Torinese studio, where the artists used to work with the aid of assistants. The entire process, from the design to completion of the sculpture, lasted around two months, including a fortnight to paint the panels and a fortnight to etch them. The plates originally measured 1 m x 2 m and were 2 mm thick.

They were the same kind as those used to make coffins and were purchased, as was typical for these artists, from a local dealer.

The panels were worked on using the etching technique, normally used for engraving and printing. The design on the panels was painted with a greasy material, making it a negative, in order to protect the metal parts that were not supposed to be etched. They were then wiped with sponges soaked in nitric acid, which etched into the metal up to a maximum thickness of 1 mm, creating a surprising *chiaroscuro* effect. The panels, numbered and packaged in special cases, were sent to Luxembourg and, as was customary, were installed on site by the company responsible for the work, following the artists' instructions.

Use of the hemicycle

The first part-session in the new hemicycle was held on 12 February 1973; on that occasion, the then President of the Commission, François-Xavier Ortoli, presented the Commission's sixth annual programme, for 1973. Between 1973 and 1979 the hemicycle hosted 35 meetings of the European Parliament, chaired by four different presidents. During this time the plenary part-sessions of the EP were held alternatively in Luxembourg and Strasbourg, with almost half of them being organised in Luxembourg. The annual calendar was adopted by the enlarged Bureau.



Meeting of the ACP-EEC Consultative Assembly in Luxembourg, 1976: Jean, the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, and Joséphine-Charlotte, the Grand Duchess.

In response to comments made after the first meeting, the chamber was readjusted several times. A statement by Secretary-General Hans Nord included a list of improvements that needed to be made, especially regarding the inadequacy of the sound system, the lack of equipment enabling staff to follow debates from their offices and the need to increase seating for Commission and Council staff.¹⁶ The number of interpreting booths was also increased, from four to six languages.

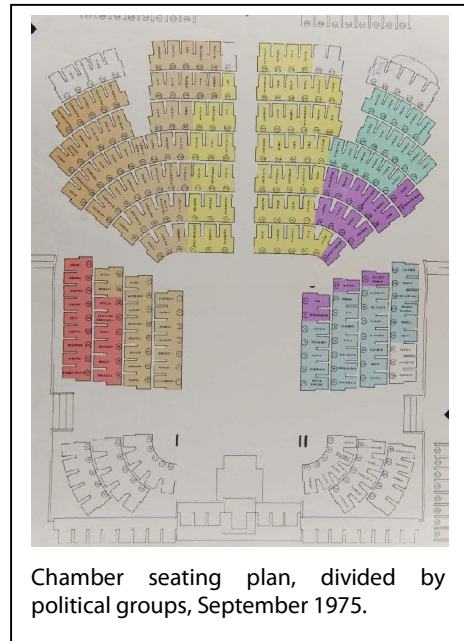
Among the numerous reports presented in this chamber we would highlight the Patijn report, 'Draft convention on elections to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage', debated during the plenary sitting of 14 January 1975. The transcript of the debate shows how important Parliament felt it was, in this particular context, to make the debate public and to communicate with European citizens, as

demonstrated by the presence of numerous reporters and TV cameras in the chamber.¹⁷

After the first European elections, held in June 1979, the number of MEPs increased from 208 to 410, making the hemicycle inappropriate for hosting plenary meetings, which, over time, were held increasingly often in Strasbourg. Between 1975 and 1980 the three constituent meetings and five annual meetings of the ACP-EEC Consultative Assembly took place in the Schuman Building's hemicycle. The Assembly consisted of the representatives of 46 states from Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific and the nine EEC Member States that were signatories to the Lomé Convention.

Over the years, the hemicycle continued to be used by the European Parliament and other institutions to host various events and meetings, for instance events or round-tables organised by MEPs, and other institutions such as the World Peace Forum or the Luxembourg National Youth Council. The hemicycle is also a major attraction for the group visits organised by the EP Information Office in Luxembourg.

The chamber, decor and large zinc bas-relief are still perfectly preserved today and are, with their history, a living testimony to a period of strong growth and major changes for the European Parliament.



Notes

- ¹ Site de Luxembourg, construction du bâtiment Robert Schuman, plans, compte-rendu : première phase de réflexion sur un projet de construction (1965), (English version not available) Historical Archives of the European Parliament (HAEP), SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-060 0010.
- ² Site de Luxembourg, construction du bâtiment Robert Schuman, photographie : descriptif du bâtiment (1973), (English version not available) HAEP, SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-060 0060.
- ³ Site de Luxembourg, construction du bâtiment Robert Schuman, (English version not available) HAEP, SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-060 0060.
- ⁴ Site de Luxembourg, gestion des locaux du bâtiment Schuman, notes : problèmes relatifs à l'aménagement du bâtiment (1974), (English version not available) HAEP, SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-070 0040.
- ⁵ Debates of European Parliament, speech of Walter Behrendt, President, 12/02/1973, HAEP, PE0 AP DE/1972 DE19730212-01 0010.
- ⁶ Site de Luxembourg, construction du bâtiment Robert Schuman, notes, compte-rendu : échanges entre l'architecte, l'État luxembourgeois et le PE sur le projet de construction (1969-1971), (English version not available) HAEP, SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-060 0040.
- ⁷ Site de Luxembourg, gestion des locaux du bâtiment Schuman, notes : améliorations à apporter en matière d'aménagements et d'installations (1970-1973), (English version not available) HAEP, SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-070 0030.
- ⁸ During our research the following were interviewed: Gianni Patuzzi, artist and former member of the NP2 Group; Piercarlo Ceccarelli, manager and former member of the NP2 Group; Philip Lenaerts, former assistant to Roger Vanhevel, now director of the Roger Vanhevel Gallery. Our thanks also go to Saar Ceccarelli and to the *Associazione Archivio Nerone Giovanni Ceccarelli* for the documentation provided.
- ⁹ For example, the marble façade of the Corbeil-Essonnes cultural centre, the large metal sculptures for the Hotel El Conquistador in Puerto Rico and the construction of zinc doors in Marcel Breuer's Villa Sayer.
- ¹⁰ In 1974 Gianni Patuzzi left the NP2 Group to pursue his artistic career independently. Nerone continued his experiment, as the NP2/Nerone Group, until 1988, collaborating with other artists and founding the *AR?* magazine.
- ¹¹ The artists were awarded the Niveau de Bronze award in 1969, for art in architecture, and the Prestige du Monde award in 1971.
- ¹² Interview with Gianni Patuzzi, December 2014.
- ¹³ Interview with Piercarlo Ceccarelli, August 2015.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Philip Lenaerts, December 2015.
- ¹⁵ 'Senza bisogno di traduzione', Gruppo NP2, in *AR?*, No 0, December 1974, pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁶ Site de Luxembourg, gestion des locaux du bâtiment Schuman, notes : problèmes relatifs à l'aménagement du bâtiment (1974), (English version not available) HAEP, SG 02HN 2000/IMMO IMMO-070 0040.
- ¹⁷ Debates of European Parliament, Convention introducing elections to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, HAEP, PE0 AP DE/1974 DE19750114-01 9900.

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