

Building Identities? A letter from Rome

Europe today is experiencing unsolved and overlapping time lapses. They are Inconspicuous and invisible, but meaningful. In the Europe of the European Union, the Italian anthem sings of an Austria drinking the blood of oppressed peoples, and the Dutch anthem of a revolution against Spain. The Swiss constitution declares that its citizens are conscious of their responsibility towards the Creation and humanity, while that of the Vatican puts its powers in the hands of one person. The new embassies built in Berlin by the countries of Europe during the last ten years are tangible examples of these kaleidoscopic positions. Why does a European nation choose to represent itself in such a stately way in another member state's capital belonging to the same parliament? Any office would suffice. A few possible answers sprang to mind at the "Building Identities?" exhibition between February and March in Rome. While listening to the national anthems and reading the texts of the European constitutions, one could examine the projects of Berlin embassies. On the one hand, there is the Berlin factor. To build in this city is to interpret a role in the world media theatre. This theatrical factor nicely matches the publicity that embassies today are expected to create. Diplomatic headquarters today are places that have an appearance of immediacy. They are showcases pledged to communicate a way of being. This change stems from *Public Diplomacy's* political philosophy. There is now a reversal in the relation between the once small public area and the larger areas of no admittance to the general public. Everything must be accessible, and the traditional functions must operate despite visitors. Then came September 11 and things have changed since then. All of a sudden, the old embassies seemed safer and better suited to the times than the modern ones. Above all, what the visitor sees and expects has changed. The wall of copper blades surrounding the Nordic Embassies, envisaged as warmly embracing the separate buildings and being a welcoming boundary, is today understood as armoured protection against possible suicide bombers. The imaginary has gained the upper hand over reality. In any case, for at least 30 years West Berlin was itself essentially one big embassy of capitalist and western life to the communist world of the Soviet bloc. And contemporary Berlin is literally new. With the historic city it shares a geographical situation and the idea of being Berlin. So 30 years later, like Max Frisch we may question: "what do you define as a homeland: a village? A city or one of its districts? A linguistic area? A continent? A house? And furthermore: supposing you are hated in your homeland, will you be able for this reason to protest that it is your home country?" And he adds: "How much homeland do you need?"

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