3.5.4 Provisional Permanence. The NATO Headquarters in Brussels

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Abstract
In the course of the twentieth century, national governments have become increasingly subordinate to intergovernmental organizations such as IMF, EU or WTO. Embodying a political culture based on compromise and bureaucracy, the headquarters of these organizations rarely possess significant representational qualities. However, one might also consider them as 'machines for solving international conflicts' (H. Stierlin). Such instrumental perspective sheds another light on these strongholds of globalization, highlighting their qualities on the operational plane. To this effect, this paper looks into the headquarters of a prominent example of such an organization, namely the NATO. After London and Paris, NATO moved to Brussels in 1967. This relocation pattern not only reflects fluctuations in the international power balance but also reveals a permanent process of introspection within NATO itself. The decision to transform the new facility – a temporary structure in attendance of a permanent building on a more prestigious location – into a standing headquarters in 1972 is a clear instance of this. Initially dubbed Little Siberia by reason of its remote location and austere aspect, internal memos from the NATO archives show a growing appreciation for the provisional site. The extreme rapidity of construction and moving was almost mythologized while the premises' utilitarian aspect conveniently supported NATO's 'no-frills' self-image. Its non-hierarchical lay-out further seemed to suggest equality and harmonious collaboration whereas the self-contained nature of the building and its off-centre location reinforced the organization's extra-territorial character. Thus, as we will argue, apart from economical and pragmatic reasons, the decision to upgrade the provisional structure might also have derived from the growing insight that it not only embodied but also fostered values of crucial importance in facing the challenges of the Cold War.

Keywords
International organizations, NATO, groupe structures, Brussels

Installation in France

Founded in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (henceforth NATO) is an intergovernmental military alliance whereby its member states agree to mutual defence in response to an attack by any external party.[1] It was the first unified multi-national command structure set up in peace-time. Its military headquarters (called SHAPE: Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) were established in Rocquencourt (near Versailles), while its political branch, the North Atlantic Council, held its regular Ministerial meetings in London. Already at the Lisbon summit in February 1952, NATO engaged in the first of long series of reorganizations. To enhance its operational performance, the Council was transformed into a body of Permanent Representatives (national delegations) and their supportive staff, presided by a Secretary General.[2] The inefficient geographical divide between the military and political branches was also addressed. Whereas London seemed the natural bridgehead between Europe and America, Paris kept one trump card in reserve: it possessed ready-made office space at the Palais de Trocadéro (opposite the Eiffel Tower), where vast (albeit temporary) office infrastructure had been built on the occasion of the sixth session of the UNO in 1948.[3] As a consolation prize, the very first Secretary-General would be British (Lord Ismay). Although the arrival of yet another international organization confirmed Paris in its status of capital of the 'free West', there was much ado in the French press about maintaining a provisory structure on such a prominent location. *Le Figaro* even headlined '*Il faut délivrer Paris de la lèpre de Chaillot!*' This dissent can retrospectively be considered as metaphorical for France's mitigated feelings towards NATO.

In April 1954, NATO decided to construct a building of its own at the Porte Dauphine on a plot of land donated by the French state. Designed according to an A-shaped plan ('A' for 'Alliance' or 'Atomic'? as *Libération* joked) by an international team of architects headed by Jacques Carlu, the structure housed in fact two self-contained buildings: one housing the assembly rooms, a bank, a post-office, a newspaper shop and a fully equipped cinema, and another, highly secured one, with the Council room, various committee rooms and approx. 1000 offices.[4] This enormous amount of office space derived from the fact that all the national delegations were now united under one roof instead of being scattered all over Paris – an improvement that significantly accelerated and intensified the consultative process. Quite surprisingly, the monumental, glazed façade towards the Porte de Dauphine (subsequently redesigned as a giant roundabout) had no ceremonial function; it only served as a backdrop for a series of flagpoles as the principal entrance to the building was located in the courtyard (between the two legs of the 'A'-shape). This ill-resolved tension between transparency, secrecy and communication with the public domain seems to have been the least of NATO's concerns, however. Indeed, apart from functional requirements, cost and speed of construction, the organization regarded the structure first and foremost as a practical instrument in the pursuit of its goals: 'A utilitarian building has been produced (…), a manifestation of fifteen nations' resolve to work in harmony on the task of defending their common heritage'.[5] No wonder that appreciation for it was mitigated. The *Times* correspondent commented for example on its 'unadventurous' character both with regards to construction and design, and stated that it shared with many other French public buildings the characteristic of only being superficially modern. Moreover, compared to the recently opened UNESCO building, the fact that an organization of such symbolic importance as NATO could not erect a more challenging and revolutionary building was felt as a missed opportunity. There was not much time to ponder about such issues though as on 10 March 1966, President De Gaulle announced his intention to terminate the assignment of French forces to international commands, requesting the removal from his territory of all foreign military units and facilities.[6] This meant that both SHAPE's and NATO's headquarters needed to be relocated.

Transfer to Belgium

Typically for international diplomacy, the relocation of both the military and civilian branches of NATO engendered ample background manoeuvring. Nevertheless, quite quickly, consensus grew that Belgium was the best option. Apart from the geo-strategic location of the Brussels area as well as its increasing statute as European capital, Belgium's reliability to the alliance also played in its favour.[7] One of its top politicians, Paul Henri Spaak, had been one of the Treaty's architects and later Secretary-General (1957-61), while the then Minister of foreign affairs, Pierre Harmel, was a leading figure in international diplomacy. The vote in Parliament was far from unanimous however: with more than one third of the votes against the installation of SHAPE and NATO, the debates reflected the growing animosity towards militarism in the public opinion.[8] Nonetheless, once approved, the relocation was put through at an impressive speed. Although the allied commanders had lobbied for a site closer to Brussels, the Belgian authorities decided that SHAPE should be located at least 50 km from the capital as it constituted a major wartime military target. In order to limit costs and speed up the project, a 200-hectare army summer training camp near Mons was proposed instead. Thus, it was hoped, could the installation of SHAPE contribute to the region's economic redress after the closing of the coalmines. In less than nine months, the entire site was transformed into a fully operational military headquarters, including a hospi-

tal, a shopping centre, two chapels, an array of sports and leisure facilities and a school for 2000 pupils. This feat received great acclaim in the international press, quoting General Lemnitzer who called the operation 'a miracle of achievement'. [9]

Then, the more delicate issue of housing the civilian headquarters came to the fore. Just like the French authorities fifteen years before, the Belgian State proposed a provisory solution in attendance of a more prestigious building. One option consisted in renting the recently completed Madou Tower at the Porte de Namur. However, just like in Paris, where the local municipality had imposed strict rules on the architects, the issue became a matter of borough politics as the Ixelles city council feared for a similar scenario as in the Leopold area, where the European administration was squeezing out al residential and commercial activity – all the more since NATO insisted on becoming the sole tenant of the building. Alternative locations in less densely populated areas were therefore examined, which led to the idea of erecting a new headquarters on the 1958 World Fair grounds – quite ironically, right on the site of the former French pavilion. In attendance, a make-do structure would be erected on the former military airfield of Evere, along the road linking the national airport with the centre of Brussels.

The design of the provisional facility was entrusted to a temporary association of two respected firms namely Groupe Structures (architecture and planning) and Traction et Electricité (infrastructure and engineering).[10] Developed in only a couple of weeks, the plans of the temporary facility read as a diagram of the alliance's principal components and processes.[11] (Figure 1) The heart of the complex was formed by the 'Situation Centre', a communication room linking the facility with all other NATO stations around the globe (building M), the array of 14 conference rooms (building L) and the Secretary General's office (on the first floor of building O). Together they commanded a sort of supply chain staffed with 2000 office workers, each processing, discussing or filing bits of information in one of the 1320 offices of the 15 national delegations (buildings A – E), the Military Committee (formerly in Washington, buildings F-H) or the International Secretariat's supporting services (buildings I, J). These highly secured (accessible only for NATO staff) areas were connected by an East-West circulation axis, linking the secured zone with the 'public' zone (i.e. accessible for accredited visitors) comprising a large restaurant, a bank and postal office, a travel agency, a library as well as the press centre and broadcasting studios. This entire little city was sealed of from the outer world by means of a fence and accessible only though the security gate on the Boulevard Leopold III.

Not only the design, but also the construction process was organized in an almost industrial fashion. Totalling a built-up area of 30,000 mq, the facility

was built in less than six months' time thanks to a rigid day-by-day planning and heavy prefabrication. For example, the precast panels arrived at the site in the morning, were checked by the site architect on the truck itself, and installed right away, leaving no room for hesitation or mistakes.[12] Just like for all major NATO projects, the rough work was done by an international consortium of contractors (EGTA-Nederhorst-Lucks, Strabed and Heinen & Fils) while many more firms from various countries contributed to the interior finishing. As it was rightfully noted in the architecture periodical *La Technique des Travaux*, such a degree of team spirit and professionalism in public command was rare in Belgium.

Building at such a speed comes at a cost however. By contrast with the Parisian headquarters, the premises at Evere were of an almost martial austerity. To save on the foundations and rule out elevators, the facility was entirely spread out on ground level, while the concern for standardization resulted in only two types of office space (3,5m x 3,75m and 4,20m x 4,50m), uniformly laid out around a series of interior courtyards. Contrary to the Parisian building, where the offices giving out on the Bois de Boulogne were the most sought after, there were no privileged spaces in Evere with the exception of the Secretary-General's office on the 2nd floor above the entrance, from which, the Atomium could sometimes be seen. It comes as no surprise, then, that the move to Brussels was not really looked forward to by many NATO staff members.[13] Dubbed 'little Siberia' for reason of the cold and forbidding appearance of the sparsely built up area at the time, the Belgian authorities (unconsciously?) even emphasized the isolated,

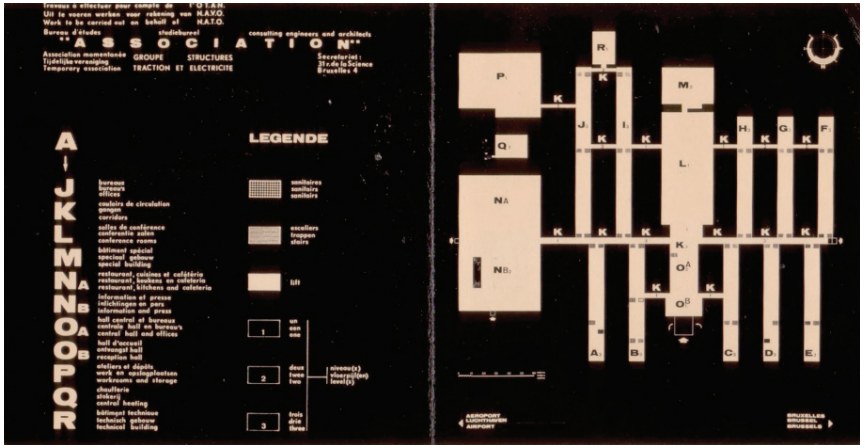

Figure 1. Schematic plan of NATO premises, 1967. *Source:* Private collection of the author.

extra-territorial character of this international island by assigning it a proper postal code (1110).

Transformation into standing headquarters

On the occasion of the inauguration of the new premises on 16 October 1967, the correspondent for the *International Herald Tribune* wrote: '[…] the Belgians are already putting to good use the bureaucratic proverb that "nothing is more permanent than the temporary". With its prefabricated concrete panels, the complex is certainly solid enough for a long stay. The interiors are far more attractive than the outside.'[14] With hindsight, these were prophetic words: only two years later, the NATO council effectively buried the plans for a new building at Heyzel, deciding instead to transform the provisory facility into a permanent headquarters.[15] In the first place, the price tag of building anew, estimated at a stunning 2.5 billion Belgian francs (approx. 60 million Euros), was difficult to defend in a context of increasing pacifism in the public opinion. Still a hefty expenditure, modifying and extending the existing premises for one fifth of this sum seemed a more reasonable alternative. Further, car access to the Heyzel became an issue as traffic coming form the airport and the residential areas West of Brussels (where most of NATO personnel had settled) needed to cross the Willebroek channel via an already congested bridge.[16] By contrast, the remoteness of Evere – considered a major disadvantage at first – provided for excellent accessibility. Moreover, many staff members had quickly become attached to the relative tranquillity of the site, the isolation of which allowed for watertight security without hampering any third parties.[17] Finally, in 1970, 375 extra offices and 2000 mq of additional conference rooms were created to cater for the increase in personnel, due in part to the arrival of yet another NATO branch, namely the Military Agency for Standardisation.[18] Additional conference rooms were also provided, together with more extensive facilities for the press and a sports centre for the staff and their families. Finally, one large conference room was also upgraded and refurbished as a 'prestige room' for ministerial meetings, while wall-to-wall carpeting and some greenery were installed to upgrade the barren interior environment. In order to not disturb the routine activities and respect the organic unity of the ensemble, the additional office capacity was concentrated in two longitudinal bars on the north side of the existing building. The resulting 200 m wide façade significantly augmented NATO's presence along the Leopold III Boulevard, determining its visual identity up till the present day. (Figure 2)

Architecture and NATO Rhetoric

As the NATO historian Ian Q.R. Thomas has observed, in the context of the Cold War, words and metaphors were crucial weapons. As he states, throughout NATO's existence, rhetoric has always formed a substantial factor in its cohesion, as a mechanism or instrument of unity.[19] We may therefore wonder if, at all, architecture (in its capacity of communicating ideas and meanings through built form) had a role to play in the NATO discourse. The inauguration address by the then NATO Secretary-General Mario Brosio on 16 October 1967 is revealing in this regard. Brosio stated:

> After the Casteau miracle, we are now faced with a new wonder achieved within an extraordinarily short time by the firms of your own and other friendly countries. […] I like to see this spirit of co-operation and mutual understanding as a token and pledge of the feeling we can expect to see develop between NATO and your country […] NATO's new location gives further cause for optimism. The transfer of NATO is no mere removal operation; it will also be the source of improvements in the future working of our organization. [20]

As we have seen, NATO's successful transfer to Belgium, involving the transportation of 300 tons of documents and approximately 15,000 people (staff, families and relatives included) without interrupting the activities of

Figure 2. NATO premises after alterations in the early 1970s. *Source:* NATO Archives (used with permission).

the organization, remains a feat that is unequalled in the history of international organizations and that has provided us with textbook examples of rationalist design, standardization and prefabrication. Yet, in Brosio's mind, progress was not only to be expected from technology and innovation, but first and foremost from cooperation between people across disciplines, ranks and nationalities. This emphasis on the new headquarters as a product of the Alliance's core values of unity, solidarity and cooperation must be understood in the light of the slumbering crisis within the organization. On the one hand, its future was uncertain as the Atlantic Treaty expired in 1969, leaving each partner free to withdraw without further consequences. On the other hand, NATO faced wide-spread scepticism as it was felt that it had fulfilled its original purpose and had become somewhat obsolete. Moving into the new premises at Brussels thus went hand in hand with a process of self-reflection and reorientation. Indeed, as one journalist noted, after all the splendours of Paris, NATO's taking up residence in a precast concrete structure located in a developing industrial area outside town, was symbolic of the *retour aux sources* the organization was going through.[21] This transitory ritual was completed during the very first meeting of the Council in Brussels in December 1967, with the unanimous adoption of Belgian Foreign Minister Harmel's *Report on the Future Tasks of the Alliance*.[22] While it stressed the continuing importance of the Atlantic partnership's twin identity, it pleaded for a more political role of NATO as a complement to its predominantly military means of action. This might explain why in a report on the new facility in the *NATO Letter* (the organization's official monthly magazine), emphasis was put on its non-hierarchical and 'democratic' layout as a symbol of equality and harmonious collaboration, while the so-called 'Main Street' – the central hallway bisecting the entire building from East to West, connecting its various parts – was presented as a crucial feature in facilitating encounter and consultation between military and civilian staff members.[23]

Thus, in NATO's rhetoric, the new building not only constituted a metaphor for the Alliance's strength to overcome logistical and technical challenges, it also became considered as an instrument in preparing its future *modus operandi*. Seen from this perspective, economical and pragmatic reasons left aside, the decision to upgrade the provisory premises at Evere to a standing headquarters may thus as well have had to do with a certain attachment to the temporary facility and an understanding that it not only embodied but possibly also fostered values of crucial importance in facing the challenges of the Cold War.

1 On the origins, evolution and working of NATO, see James R. Huntley, *The NATO Story* (New York: Manhattan Publishing, 1969); Jean de la Guérivière, *Voyage au coeur de l'OTAN* (Paris: Seuil, 1996); Andreas Wenger, Christian Nuenlist, and Anna Locher (eds.), *Transforming NATO in the Cold War: Challenges beyond Deterrence in the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 2007).

2 Note "Reorganization of NATO," 17 March 1952. Facsimile reprint in *On the Move*, unpublished booklet edited by NATO Transition Office and NATO Archives, p. 11. For a succinct account of NATO's early institutional reforms, see Jenny Raflik, "La France et la genèse institutionnelle de l'Alliance Atlantique (1949-1952)," *Relations internationales* 134 (2008), 55-68.

3 On the presence of NATO and SHAPE in France, see Jenny Raflik, "Lorsque l'OTAN s'est installée en France," *Relations internationales* 129 (2007), 37-49.

4 Jacques Carlu (1890-1976), 1913 Prix de Rome winner, is best known for his redesign of the former Palais de Trocadéro in the monumental classicist style of the late 1930s on the occasion of the 1937 World Fair. He also designed the temporary structure that originally housed the UNO in 1948 and subsequently became NATO's home between 1951 and 1959. In the same period, he was also responsible for the extension of the United Nations building in Geneva. Between 1959 and 1971, he presided the Architecture section of the Académie française. It is probably for reason of his prominence and experience with international organizations that he became entrusted with the task of designing the permanent NATO building in Paris. For contemporary coverage in the architectural press, see "À Paris: après le palais de l'Unesco, le palais de l'OTAN," *La Construction moderne* 1 (1958), 33; "Le palais de l'OTAN," *Tuiles et briques* 40 (1959), 10-7; "Le nouveau siège de l'OTAN, Porte Dauphine à Paris," *La Technique des Travaux* 3 (1960), 66-76. On Carlu, see the website of l'Institut français d'architecture: http://portaildocumentaire.citechaillot.fr/CARH/PDF/carlu.pdf.

5 "Nato's New Home. Press kit n. 2, 3 December 1959," NATO Archives.

6 Walter Schütze, "La France et l'OTAN," *Politique étrangère* 2 (1966), 109-18; Martin Garret, "The 1967 withdrawal from NATO – A Cornerstone of de Gaulle's Grand Strategy?" *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 3 (2011), 232-43.

7 The diplomatic processes behind the relocation of SHAPE are described in detail in "Le Transfert du Shape et le siège de l'OTAN en Belgique," *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* 357 (1967), 2-26. On the Belgian role in the Alliance, see Rik Coolsaet, "La Belgique dans l'OTAN (1949-2009)," *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* 1999 (2008), 1-46.

8 Mark van den Wijngaert, *Oost West, West Best: Belgie Onder de Koude Oorlog, 1947-1989* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1997), 57-60.

9 The master plan was conceived by the

temporary association ALPHA-Sobemap-Electrobel. A map of the ensemble was published in *NATO Letter* 12 (1966), 13.

10 Groupe Structures was founded by four former students of the Sint-Lucas architecture institute in Brussels in 1949 and became particularly active in the field of public housing, adopting prefabrication techniques imported from the USA. In the 1960s, Groupe Structures became the favourite architectural firm of the Brussels economic and political establishment, realizing a great number of office buildings that changed the capital's skyline. We have not (yet) been able to verify why Groupe Structures was entrusted with the task of designing the NATO headquarters. Allegedly, as suggested by Leo Ravestijn, project leader at Groupe Structures at the time, it might have had to do with both the partners' talent for lobbying as well as with the simple fact that their firm was probably the only one in Belgium with sufficient capacity to accept such a job. On Groupe Structures, see Sven Sterken, "Architecture and the Ideology of Productivity. Four Public Housing Projects by Groupe Structures in Brussels (1950-1965)," *Footprint* 2 (2012), 25-40. *Traction et Electricité* was one of the major players on the Belgian electricity market. After World War II, the company diversified its activities and started to provide consultancy for large building operations. The scale of the firm and its operations can be derived from the fact that its participation in the construction of the NATO seat constitutes only a minor footnote in the company's history. It later merged with *Electrobel* to form the holding *Tractebel*. See René Brion and Jean-Louis Moreau, *Tractebel: 1895-1995. Les métamorphoses d'un groupe industriel* (Antwerp: Mercator, 1995).

11 For a detailed account of the technical aspects of the new premises, see "Les installations du siege temporaire de l'OTAN à Bruxelles," *La Technique des Travaux* 5 (1968), 155-66. For an 'official' reading of the new building, see the note "Background for the press", 12 October 1967, NATO Archives, Brussels.

12 As reported by Leo Ravestijn, Alsemberg, 28 March 2014.

13 As reported by Pierre Deschamps, a former staff member, cited in "On the Move" 110.

14 Ronald Koven, "An Optimistic NATO Opens Shop in Belgium," *International Herald Tribune,* October 17, 1967. David Spanier, "Changes in NATO Aims Forecast," *International Herald Tribune,* 17 October 1967.

15 Note "Conversion of temporary HQ into a permanent HQ," April 20, 1969 (NATO archives).

16 M.J., "Le problème du franchissement du canal de Willebroek", *La Libre Belgique*, February 22, 1967.

17 Alfred Deroux, "Le maintien de l'OTAN à Evere: une économie de deux milliards", *Le Soir,* June 19, 1969.

18 Source: various notes in Series AC/267-D/6, NATO Archives; "Bâtiments temporaires de l'OTAN à Bxl: aménagement en siège permanent," *Traction et électricité* 7 (1970), 4.

19 Ian Q.R. Thomas, *The Promise of Alliance. NATO and the Political Imagination* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), x.

20 Speech given by Secretary-General Mario Brosio, October 16, 1967. Facsimile in "On the Move," 82-83.

21 David Spanier, "Changes in NATO Aims Forecast," *The Times*, October 13, 1967.

22 Pierre Harmel, "The Future Tasks of the Alliance," NATO website, Official Texts Section, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_26700.htm; see also Vincent Dujardin, "Go-Between: Belgium and Détente, 1961-73," *Cold War History* 1 (2007), 95-116.

23 Anne Sington, "NATO Settles Down to Work in Brussels," *NATO Letter* 12 (1967), 18.