

(Translation of the article in GERFA's Diagnostic magazine, issue 424, January 2025, p. 17-19)

In its September 2024 issue (see 'D' no. 420, pp. 8-11), *Diagnostic* denounced the masterplan project being carried out by the non-profit organisation (NPO) Horizon 50-200, which is responsible for 'revitalising' the Parc du Cinquantaire site in Brussels in the run-up to Belgium's Bicentenary in 2030.

In reality, this is a major property operation, being carried out in haste, without any prior consultation (in defiance of the statutes of the NPO itself), without any real agreement from the federal government and above all without any consideration for the heritage nature of the institutions on the site that are to be dismantled. Three outgoing Socialist ministers from the A. De Croo government are leading this frontal attack on federal scientific institutions such as the Royal Military Museum (RMM), the most affected, with a planned elimination of 50% of the current exhibition rooms, and the Royal Museum of Art and History (MRAH/KMKG).

Numerous irregularities have been committed by this association, originally made up of these ministers and senior civil servants. It is also marred by a notorious conflict of interest, as its chairman is Bruno Van Lierde, the chairman of Tempora, a private firm specialising in temporary exhibitions and museum management.

Following our revelations, the strange NPO Horizon 50-200 tried to put its house in order with a long erratum published in the *Moniteur belge (M.B.)/Belgisch Staatsblad* (26.09.2024), but the accounts and directors have still not been registered with the Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises (CBE Public Search). Having remained inactive since then, the NPO was recently invited by Alain Deneef (now an elected member of parliament for Les Engagés) to the premises of the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) on 10 December 2024.

The outcome: not only was there no response to the severe criticism of their poor governance, but no change to the plan to dismantle the museums was envisaged 'so as *not to compromise obtaining the necessary budget [€160 million] from the future new government*'! The only change, obviously to appease the Flemish nationalist parties who might be reluctant to celebrate Belgium alone, is that 2030 will also be marked by the 50th anniversary of the federated entities.

The masterplan and Autoworld

The persistence of this NPO in such a controversial project, despite well-founded criticism, is deeply troubling.

Let us try to shed new light on the dynamics at work and the networks underlying the announced dismemberment of these two major federal museums.

Initially, and logically, it was up to the Autoworld exhibition centre to provide the spaces needed for the celebrations (creation of an agora and a new access to the exhibition centre to the MRAH/KMKG via the esplanade, very close to the Autoworld and RMM entrances, with part of the collections being moved underground), as only 40% of the South hall is occupied by the classic car collections.

What's more, Autoworld has no collections of its own (like a museum), but houses collectors' cars, which are private "objects" that are easy to move around, unlike the artefacts in the RMM and MRAH/KMKG. By 2023-2024, however, this initial project had been thwarted and ultimately abandoned. Let's dig in.

Autoworld, the World Automobile Centre (company number 0430.368.610), was founded by the Flemish liberal minister (now Minister of State) Herman De Croo (Open VLD). Educated by the Jesuits and then at ULB, he is the father of the outgoing Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo (Open VLD). H. De Croo is still a board member after having been its chairman; he was succeeded in 2022 by Guy Verhofstadt, former Prime Minister (VLD) and Member of the European Parliament. One of the directors is Jacques Deneef, a great collector of classic cars who exhibits them there. As for Autoworld's resident scenographer, he's someone we already know: Bruno Van Lierde, chairman of Tempora...

What happened to explain such a U-turn in the original plan, the broad outlines of which were approved by the federal government in July 2023? Most of the South hall (the former World Palace) has been sublet for almost 40 years (which is forbidden by the lease signed with the Régie des Bâtiments/Regie der Gebouwen, except with the prior written agreement of the lessor (see Royal Decree of 24 June 2021, Art.4)) for private events that have nothing to do with the history of the automobile, bringing in around 2 million euros a year. Renting the hall from the Régie cost only 80,000 euros a year for 14,000 square meters, ten to twenty times less than renting a warehouse to store cars.

The lease was due to end in June 2025. In 2021 (when the lease was renegotiated), the question of the space to be provided for the Bicentenary was already mentioned, but the lease was oddly extended by nine years, without any competition, by A. de Croo on the proposal of Mathieu Michel (MR), in charge of the Régie, until 2030, renewable once (*Royal Decree of 24 June 2021*, M.B. 14.07.2021). Just before the elections, A. De Croo extended the lease from 2021 to 20 years, until 2041 (*Royal Decree of 11 July 2021*, M.B. 24.07.2024), under conditions that remained very advantageous (the rent rising to around 150,000 euros/year), while obtaining, in addition, an investment of nearly 7.8 million euros from the Régie for the renovation of rental spaces, which were prohibited in principle!

All this was wrapped up at the last Council of Ministers meeting in May 2024, without any assessment being made of the balance sheets and accounts of this NPO, which is in reality a particularly profitable private company. As with Horizon 50-200, one wonders whether the Inspectorate of Finance is still inspecting anything...

Once the continuity of the premises and the revenue had been guaranteed - even if this was to the detriment of neighbouring public museums - Autoworld's interests had to be safeguarded while the Bicentenaire project was being developed.

Horizon 50-200, Autoworld and the King Baudouin Foundation

The umbrella organisation for the Bicentenaire is the NPO Horizon 50-200, strongly supported by the French-speaking ministers - this time, socialists - in charge of the project (isn't Belgian politics fascinating?). Autoworld's resident scenographer, B. Van Lierde, was appointed chairman, creating a major conflict of interest, and in May 2024 Isabel Casteleyn was appointed as the new director, just to make sure that the Bicentenary project would never again threaten Autoworld. Isabel Casteleyn is the wife of Melchior Wathelet Jr, former

Secretary of State (CdH, now Les Engagés) and now Chairman of Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps, a public limited company, and SA Spa-Grand Prix, a major motor racing event in Wallonia. The link with the automotive sector therefore seems direct, all the more so as the articles of association corrected in September 2024 now provide that the assets of Horizon 50-200, in the event of dissolution, could revert to Autoworld!

Let's come back to the KBF's acceptance last December of an NPO such as Horizon 50-200, which was also seriously questioned, and which did not fail to astonish. Shouldn't King Baudouin be turning over in his grave, given the fate reserved by the 'masterplan' for the site created by his grandfather and, more broadly, for the federal collections under threat, as well as the collections of the royal donation deposited at the RMM? How can an organisation that is royalist by nature and publishes recommendations on good governance for associations in Belgium continue to support such an association, which is working for the disappearance of priceless State collections, when it itself prides itself on embodying the safeguarding of cultural heritage?

The KBF collects and manages a number of funds for this purpose (including one intended for Horizon 50-200, but whose administrators it is not possible to know, given the total opacity about its funds maintained by this foundation, which is nonetheless of public utility). It should also be noted that Hakima Darhmouch, a former RTBF journalist, is a director of the NPO Horizon 50-200 [\[1\]](#); she is also due to 'rise' as a director of the King Baudouin Foundation on January 2024: a media representative is obviously an essential link for any operation of this scale, a media link that is strengthened by such cross-fertilisation between institutions.

So how do you explain such a paradox and such 'vulnerability' to the aims of the property (and car) industry? Having put Horizon 50-200 back in the saddle, should we not see in the guest speaker at this conference a representative of this other pillar [\[2\]](#) who appears to act as a 'facilitating agent' between this real estate world and the other stakeholders (including the European Union and the City of Brussels; subjects that should be addressed elsewhere)?

Some of the pillars and their associations are represented and have money-raising funds within the KBF, including some very prominent ones, such as the Jesuit Matteo Ricci College in Anderlecht or the Jesuit European Social Centre, an offshoot of the World Union of Jesuit Alumni, which are currently or in the past headed by Alain Deneef. Trained by the Jesuits and then at ULB, a consultant specialising in real estate (he was a manager at CIT Blaton, where the former president of Horizon 50-200 comes from), he is notably president of the European Quarter Fund, 'funded by the property developers of the European Quarter', of EQuAMA, whose aim is to bring public spaces to life, and of the StamEuropa building, all of which are directly managed or located within the KBF, which nevertheless presents itself as a mere outside observer of the dossier. Founder of the think tank Aula Magna, which deals with urban renewal, Alain Deneef makes no secret of his lobbying skills, describing himself as a 'coalition builder' on Wikipedia. It seems unlikely that he has had no contact with Autoworld, where his father, Jacques, is a director. He is also a member of the NPO Quartier des Arts, whose honorary president is King Albert II himself.

An impressive network of parties, families and private interests

The underlying networks and stakes that seem to literally support the project at arm's length certainly merited in-depth attention. They may explain the resilience of Horizon 50-200 despite its huge flaws in good governance, its lack of legitimacy and even its illegality.

The general model pursued by Horizon 50-200, and which seems to emerge from its various ramifications, is one in which the federal museums of the Cinquantenaire are allowed to collapse to the benefit of indirect private interests (Autoworld) or direct private interests (notably Tempora, offices and construction companies) by emptying the federal collections to leave the field open to property developers and interior designers for future new scenographies or ‘agoras’ for the benefit of private operators, who will invest in the recreational and exhibition spaces (but of what relevance and quality?).

What we have here, then, is a truly sprawling organisation in which each participant seems to be contributing his or her own piece of the jigsaw, made up of cronies, exchanges of ‘goodwill’ between political parties and underpinned by solid family, ideological or business relationships. The Bicentenary appears to be taken over by a handful of people who all know each other and who are strengthening their ties around this ‘special operation’ designed to seal the doomed fate of the museums on the site, for the sole benefit of the private sector.

The previous call for a parliamentary enquiry remains as relevant as ever, to shed light on all the players involved, their interfaces, which constitute so many masks, and the financial flows and implications that they are doing their utmost to conceal. Similarly, the launch of the architectural competition scheduled for March 2025 should be reconsidered.

[1] The same system of including a journalist on its board of directors had already been used by Autoworld when it was created, in the person of journalist Alain Van den Abeele, who specialised in motor sports for RTB(F).

[2] For a definition of ‘pillars’ in Belgium, see CRISP:
<https://www.vocabulairepolitique.be/pilier/>