

HELP US BUILD THE EUROPEAN CITIZENS' HOUSE

European citizenship needs strong symbols, including its own home, starting in Brussels, the centre of EU activity. In the European quarter with the gleaming towers of the EU Institutions, the prestigious buildings of some 30, 000 lobbyists, lawyers or journalists embedded around them, citizens should have a place they can call their own. Such a house and its services should not just be a physical space but accessible virtually from anywhere in the EU and beyond, a product of the digital age. For a Europe of the citizens should not only exist in Brussels, and the house should be an immediately recognisable symbol anywhere across the continent.

Why such a house? Should it not be set up by the EU? In the past there has been support particularly from the European parliament for such a house which even created a budget line for this purpose- a win-win situation both for citizens and the EU by reducing the gap between them. Would-be reformers of the EU also, however, meet resistance.

The EU Institutions claim to be already open and transparent with information, advice and assistance services as well as procedures for consultation, petitions or citizens' initiatives whereby over 1 million citizens can demand a new law. Among 508 million citizens these remain though unknown and where they are used, expectations are often frustrated. Reforms to make the EU more open and democratic are failing to materialise and when they are introduced do not go far enough to inspire confidence.

A European citizens' house as well as other reforms are much more likely to come from bottom -up initiatives by citizens rather than top-down initiatives by the EU. All over Europe people -especially young people-are becoming increasingly alarmed by the rise in nationalism, racism, other forms of discrimination and intolerance and the reinstatement of borders. How can Europe be more welcoming towards refugees and immigrants and less divided? Why is the EU charter of fundamental rights not being enforced more decisively in countries which violate European values and the rule of law? Why does Europe appear indifferent towards those who feel left out of the advantages it offers and insufficiently protective of the less well-off and minority interests? Why does money buy influence to the detriment of the citizens' interests?

The reason for optimism is that the crisis of Europe has now become so apparent that all over Europe people, networks and civil society are not just asking these questions but also looking for answers and taking action both at a local level and across borders. There is a grass -roots fight back for Europe going on, the visible signs of which such as the various marches for Europe and the mass petitions are simply the tip of the iceberg. How to reveal and connect so much more that is going on below the surface? How to bring citizens together across borders to deliberate and come to common understandings, showing the way? By providing the hot-house for a thousand flowers to bloom.

In the current climate of flux and uncertainty, **a European citizens' house could become a powerful point of reference, a lighthouse of optimism.** The very reasons why such a house is needed also make its construction a process of marrying disparate interests and features:

-the house can only work if it is **built by citizens for citizens**, which poses the challenge of local citizen participation with a European venture coupled with a strong transnational and multi-cultural dimension. It should be open to citizens providing public and more private spaces they can shape according to their needs and occupy for the time it takes;

-it has to marry its local environment so that any barrier with Europe is paper thin. **An over-centralised Europe is not a citizens' Europe.** The house should certainly not exist only in Brussels which means giving it a strong identity and design features which can be recognised anywhere.

What would the European citizens' house look like and what would it do? Essentially **3 C's**:

C i) **CONNECT.**

The first task is to provide a platform to meet, get to know each other and understand both what is different about us across Europe but also what we have in common. A welcoming frontline service giving out basic information is a starting point.

Useful connections can be made by using the services which should be provided by the house, but they can also happen by chance. The different spaces for public or more private meetings, discussion or research, eating or drinking, should be open to each other and the design of the house should be such that any part is visible and accessible from the other parts.

Innovation centres can take the form of open structures with a common space at the centre or contain agora-type features to encourage brain-storming. Inside-outside meeting spaces are a part of this picture. Anyone who has built European ventures will remember that some of the key discussions took place outside the formal meeting room, weather permitting.

The EU institutional buildings are cut off from their local communities, partly for security reasons, except by appointment. To encourage the public to engage with Europe, the European citizens' house should do the opposite.

C ii) **CO-CREATE.**

Just to connect encourages a sense of active European citizenship, but when participants return home they become re-absorbed by their daily studies or professional lives and the thinking and work on Europe turns out to be only temporary. Those who have organised European campuses, conferences or trans-European citizens' deliberations are well aware of this phenomenon and that promising beginnings fail to translate into permanent action. Just drop-in advice centre do not work when it comes to the complexities of Europe.

If some connections at least are to turn into more permanent European citizens' initiatives, the European citizens' house has to provide support This can take the form of advice on fundraising for example and seeking to connect proposals to existing well-established European associations which can carry them forward. Sometimes it may be a question of providing support for an initiative to take shape in a new legal entity such as an international non-profit association. It is not possible to know in all cases which projects have a real chance of enduring success, but it is possible for the house to provide the service and support which can increase the chances of success and speed up the development process.

This means that the house should provide a residence facility for social entrepreneurs setting up new European ventures and researchers. This is a feature which singles out this project, based on the idea that when it comes to a Europeanising venture, there is no instant solution; time and patience are required. The idea is that resident start-ups should

occupy an open office space, an incubator to speed up the process of development by sharing know how, contacts, data-base development, website and social media and common services such as accounting, fundraising and press relations or publishing.

Closely linked to the incubator there should be a library and resource centre on international associations open to the public, students and anyone planning to set one up. Such a centre does not currently exist. There could also be permanent and temporary exhibitions of the work of international associations and over time a special museum could be created by the users of the house.

C iii) CAMPAIGN

These first two objectives can be achieved if the European citizens' house is able to show that it is more than just a meeting place and resource centre and has facilitated the birth of more permanent European citizen action, its spread and translation into results.

This can take different forms. In the first place the process of incubating new European and international associations should result in some at least developing enough resources and visibility to become self-sufficient and go their own way leaving space for new start-ups. Residents should be asked to mentor newcomers. Such a house can also be a cross sectoral dialogue centre to facilitate the building of coalitions: there are often too many scattered individual initiatives.

The house should be able to show over time that proposals taken up by the EU or coming on the European agenda were first discussed thanks to the opportunities it offered. It could become a headquarters for citizens' campaigns, for example to increase the success rate and follow-up to European initiatives collecting over 1 million signatures.

What could be the next steps to launch this initiative? First, building on work done by a group of architecture students at Zurich University we are illustrating this outline of the house and its activity by pictures of what it could look like, which can be found here. This vision of the house both fits a particular location in Brussels where ECIT is based with the "Maison des Associations Internationales", 40 Rue Washington, whilst having at the same time a distinct brand which can be replicated anywhere across Europe.

We are crowdfunding to be able with your support to lay the foundations for the house:

- look for a possible location and support*
- carry out a survey and citizen deliberation process*
- launch a proposal before the next elections to the European Parliament in 2019, which is also the centenary of the Belgian law on creating an international non-profit association.*