

Europe on the edge

We are hearing less and less about Eurocentricity and its alleged evils nowadays. This is not only because the mental climate is in metamorphosis towards an overt appeal to healthy self-interest, and not so much because relativism has had its day as a cultural critique, but mainly because a new geopolitical configuration seems to have developed at a dizzying pace in recent times, a configuration in which Europe is no longer allowed to play even second fiddle. While the transatlantic axis seems to be waning in importance, new conditions are being forged in Europe which are pushing the Cold War into oblivion. The de facto power has been concentrated in the hands of other, larger players for quite some while, and now this seems to be gaining a basis in a world view. America, Russia and China are less and less concerned with the region that was once considered the cradle of Western civilization. While the defence of that civilization has become the explicit premise of political rhetoric, the political leaders of the Old World have rapidly been reduced to the status of dwarves. What is more, the disdain for these leaders not infrequently slips into unvarnished irritation at the cavilling and ethical quibbling of countries that lack the clout to drive home their views.

The Europeans have been well aware of this regrouping on the world stage for some while now, yet they remain incapable of coming out unambiguously for a real European Cause. So they dither between forlorn attempts to bolster ties with the New World on the one hand, and complicating the internal market on the other by expansion to include ever more member states under the flag of European integration. The EU's solutions to the latter now include the Euro and an increasingly restrictive immigration policy. Fortress Europe is doing its best to turn itself into a great power, but does it really have the right cultural make-up to achieve this? Can the Continent shed its historical patchwork garb so as to form a power block capable of measuring up to bigger brothers who have had their fill of time-honoured lip service and shared values? And if so what price must be paid?

Answers to that kind of question almost always take the form of abstract principles, and seldom relate to the real, concrete situation. But it is sometimes a good idea to scrutinize the latter more closely, in particular the transformations taking place in the cities that form the soul of Europe. In this issue, Archis takes stock of several such cities located at the frontiers of Fortress Europe. They are cities on the edge, literally on the outer margins of the European territory. That means they are frontier towns, places of mediation and transition, but also bulwarks and toll gates. Admittedly, the frontier is nowadays not necessarily an outer wall. It is increasingly a notional rather than a physical barrier. But these are places where Europe shows its face to the outside world; or, even more, places where Europe stops and another world begins. It will soon become obvious that the face is a rapidly changing one. Sometimes this is being brought about by long-established means, by governments who set pile-drivers in motion. More often, however, it comes through a mixture of almost desperate policy and irrevocable modernity.



Archis 2

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