

How to motivate middle income families to stay or settle in Brussels?

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- Perceptions about Brussels are mediated by people's affinity with the city and resonate with ingrained urban and anti-urban ideologies.
- The press is strongly polarised, contributing to an image that is either positive or, more frequently, negative.
- People's housing aspirations are the result of a complex interplay between factors related to work and family, lived experiences, personal taste and socio-cultural and ideological values.
- For a significant group of Brussels residents, bad governance has become a negative characteristic of their day-to-day residential life.
- There is a mismatch between prevailing housing preferences and the dominant mode of housing production in Brussels, contributing to the emigration of certain groups of households.

The continuing negative internal migration balance for the middle- and higher income groups remains one of the main policy concerns of the Brussels Capital Region. Among other things, this erodes the tax base of the Capital Region. Literature on the migration dynamics between Brussels and its wider region is quite extensive. However, the underlying causes, motives, and push- and pull factors behind these residential dynamics in the wider Brussels Region remain underexplored. The overall aim of the B-REL research project was to map out the conditions that explain why people decide to move to or away from Brussels, or why they decide to stay. The project departed from three research questions:

- 1 What are the perceptions of Brussels as a residential area, both amongst the public and in the press?
- 2 What are the socio-economic and cultural profiles of entrants, stayers, and leavers?
- 3 What are the characteristics of the built environment, housing stock and potentially available dwelling environments in the Brussels Capital Region?

The B-REL research project examined the interaction between household characteristics, the reality of the available housing stock and the impact of existing stereotypes and perceptions. Thereto, different methods were combined: a perception study with 180 respondents, a content analysis of 800 newspaper articles in the Dutch- and French-speaking press, an interview study with 153 participants and 5 Brussels housing and 7 international housing case studies (see figure 1). Important input for the policy recommendations was also gathered during the stakeholder workshops organised at Perspective Brussels on 17 and 18 February 2020.

Our findings suggest first of all that beliefs about Brussels are not only mediated by people's affinity with the city as residents and commuters, but also resonate with deeply ingrained beliefs about the opportunities and risks of living in big cities (i.e. urban and anti-urban ideologies). Secondly, people's housing aspirations are the result of a complex interplay between the individual housing pathway, factors related to work and family, and socio-cultural and ideological values. From this, 10 ideal-typical profiles of relocating households were constructed (see figure 2). These reveal, amongst other things, that leaving Brussels is not always a deliberate choice 'against' the city, but more a choice in favour of a certain housing typology and living environment which they do not find, or cannot afford, in Brussels. Linked to this, there is, thirdly, a mismatch between prevailing housing preferences and the dominant mode of housing production in Brussels, contributing to the emigration of certain groups of households. Newly built housing should therefore reflect the diversity on the demand side.

Figure 1: Overview of housing case studies, sorted by density

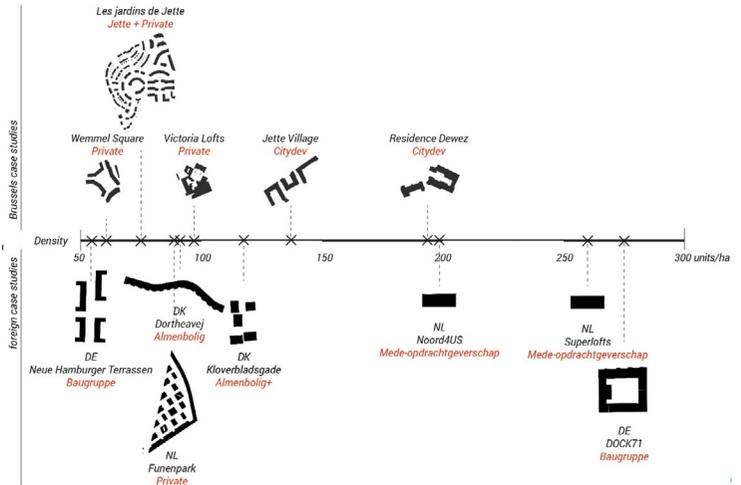
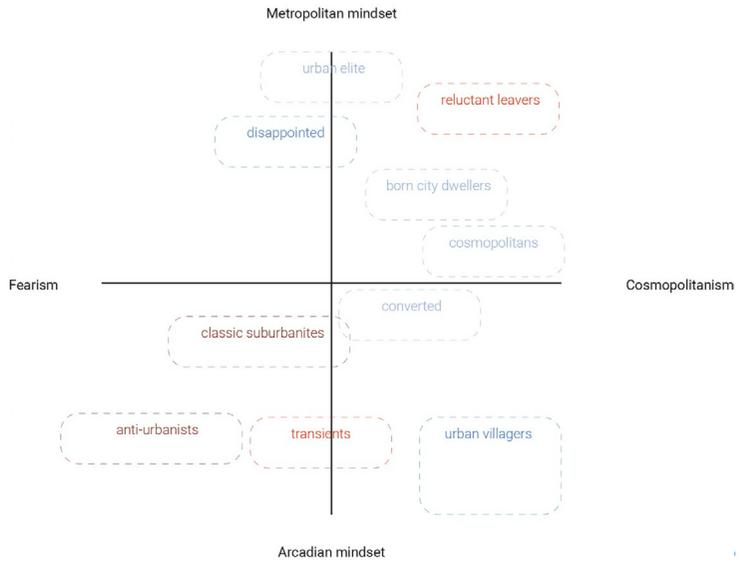


Figure 2: Ideal-typical profiles on the matrix of identified tension fields



Perceptions about Brussels are structured along two dimensions: fearism-cosmopolitanism on the one hand and arcadianism-metropolitanism on the other. Within these dimensions or tension fields 10 ideal-typical profiles of relocating households are identified. The most rewarding middle-class profiles for policy makers are the profiles of the 'urban villagers' and 'disappointed' since these are the most susceptible for concrete policy actions. The least rewarding are the 'anti-urbanists' and 'classic suburbanites' as these households combine an arcadian disposition with a fear-motivated attitude towards living in Brussels. Finally, we show how the housing production in Brussels needs to adapt its design practice and organisational structure towards developments that are more demand-centred, in order to respond to the diverse housing aspirations.

Conclusions

Pursue an active land policy based on leasehold systems

To assure the architectural quality and long-term affordability of public housing, the Brussels region should pursue an active land policy based on leasehold systems. In housing projects on public land or initiated by public authorities, a balance between social, affordable, cooperative and innovative housing must be realised and leasehold contracts should focus on quality and stipulate clear conditions for rent, sale, or cooperative tenures.

Improve the design of collective housing and adapt it to the needs of various households

Appropriate regulations and incentives should assure typological diversity and improve the quality of shared and collective spaces in housing projects. This, as well as involving (future) residents more in the conception of their dwelling environment, will result in housing projects that are better adapted to the needs of a variety of households and residents potentially enlarging the pool of household that want to stay in Brussels. The best practices abroad show that different forms of public-‘common’-partnerships are able to meet these new standards of quality and liveability, through varying degrees of resident

involvement and with the introduction of new actors and mediating roles.

Improve the age-friendliness of the city

Thanks to the proximity of various facilities, Brussels has a lot to offer as a living environment for residents of all ages and households of all types. However, the child-friendliness of the Brussels living environment is strongly questioned by many middle-class families and Brussels is seen as a ‘harsh’ environment for older people. By focusing on the accessibility of its public space and new housing developments, Brussels can cater to the needs and concerns of its current, future and past residents of all age groups.

In terms of housing, this means that Brussels should support and invest in intergenerational housing projects and initiatives that make it possible to care for older people at home and create a support network for young families with children.

In terms of the living environment, this not only entails a more accessible and age- and woman-friendly public space, but also improvements in air quality, road safety and an even stronger shift to a less car-centered mobility approach. Finally, also the social infrastructure for both older residents and families with children should be supported and expanded in order to retain or attract them in/to

Brussels. Think here about the creation of more flexible child care facilities and the support of meeting spaces and local citizen initiatives. An additional benefit is that the involvement with such citizen initiatives contribute to a stronger attachment to the city.

Invest in a harmonized and long-term place branding strategy

Brussels has a rich image, as the city is often portrayed in the media and frequented by visitors and commuters. However, many conflicting narratives exist about Brussels, contributing to a fragmented image of the city, if not to the absence of a distinct identity. It is therefore worth considering to appoint a chief storyteller for Brussels, possibly assisted by a team of local storytellers. In any case, Brussels policy makers and leaders will have to work together. Provide training for all communications professionals working in institutions that build the place and image of Brussels. Provide insight in how different perceptions of Brussels are composed and patterned. Start with the key institutional stakeholders.

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