

**BULLETIN
DE LA SOCIÉTÉ
GÉOGRAPHIQUE DE LIÈGE**

N° 24 – 24^e année – 1988

BELGIUM

**A GEOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION
TO ITS REGIONAL DIVERSITY
AND ITS HUMAN RICHNESS**

by

Ch. CHRISTIANS and L. DAELS

with collaboration of

J. PATERSON

A. VERHOEVE and B. MÉRENNE-SCHOUMAKER

5.- BRUSSELS, BELGIAN AND EUROPEAN CITY

First urban region in the country, Brussels is a spatial reality strongly marked by the Belgian politico-administrative background. In fact, as we already mentioned, the actual agglomeration has been limited to 19 communes since 1963, they constitute the bilingual "arrondissement" (administrative district) of Brussels-Capital; since 1970 this legal agglomeration also corresponds with the Brussels Region.

And so the agglomeration of Brussels covers a restricted territory that is equal to the area covered by the town of Paris (162 km). Moreover it is a space coveted economically, socially and above all linguistically. Besides it is a space divided between 19 self-governing communes, the Agglomeration Council, the Cultural Committees, the Ministerial Committee for regional matters, etc. The regional framework of Brussels is hence very particular what explains some of the specific features of the agglomeration. However, like in some other towns, the organization of space cannot be understood without an analysis of the *site and the stage of urban development*.

Indeed one of the major elements of the territory is the Senne valley oriented south-southwest to the north-northeast. It is a 1500 m wide plain that seems out of proportion with the river and still more as the river is not visible for it is vaulted since 1871. This plain, where traffic has always been easy, has been chosen in the 19th century by lots of manufacturing firms in search of flat country side, little expensive, near a waterway and a railway. The result is that there is today a real barrier cutting the agglomeration of the city since in the district near the industrial zones there is a concentration of working people and/or immigrants. The slopes extend on both sides of the plain. Their dissymmetry is quite net : in the west, the slopes are gentle (in the clay) whereas in the east the slopes are steeper (in the quartz sand). Those topographical conditions have oriented the urban development eastwards and southwards. The centre of Brussels also owes its duality to those conditions : there is a lower town in the plain (at more or less 17 m) and an upper town on the slope (64 m at the "Porte Louise" and 76 m at the "Porte de Namur").

The urban development of Brussels mainly took place at two periods : from 1830 to 1914 and since 1960. In the 19th century, the changes were important : they are explained by the new part played by Brussels as a national capital. Hence a spectacular growth of the population (140 000 inhabitants in 1831 - 760 000 in 1910) and the multiplication of industrial activities as well as tertiary ones. Moreover, the aspect of the town at that time was deeply modified by the great works undertaken during the reign of King Leopold II (1865-1909) : big boulevards, prestige monuments, new residential quarters, etc. On the other hand the changes recorded since 1960 were quite different : they were brought about in the context of a stagnating not to say declining population (1961 : 1 023 000 inhabitants - 973 000 today) and they seem to be due to two causes : exurbanization of the populations as well as of the activities and the growing assertion of the international part played by Brussels.

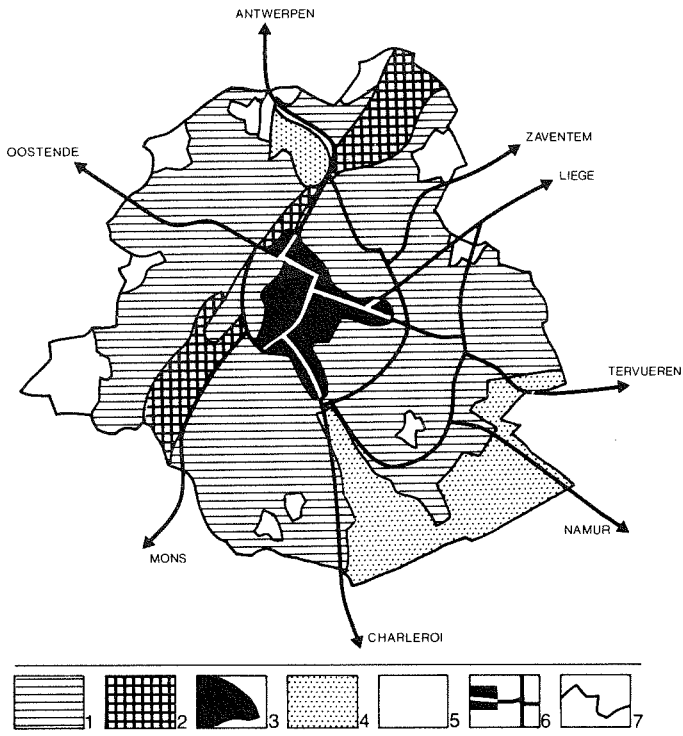
On the sketch showing the occupation of territory in the Brussels agglomeration (fig. 24), you can easily identify the main elements of the spatial structure : the Pentagon (central space at present surrounded by the boulevards of the "petite ceinture" (small belt) built on the place of the last ramparts - dating back to the 14th century - ramparts that demarcated the city up to the beginning of the 19th century), the industrial axis of the valley, the business centre in the eastern and southern space around the heart of the city and the two large green zones : the Forest of Soignes (1 600 ha in the SE) and the Laeken park (160 ha). This sketch also allows to discover another important fact : the scarceness (and consequently the high cost) of the landed property reserves available for the future development. The pieces of ground that are still free represent only 13 % of the whole territory (table p.101), consequently how will a rational organizing and planning of space be possible and especially if you are aware that most pieces of ground are private property ?

In reality for Brussels, region planning is a major problem not only because of the smallness of its territory but also because of the recent important changes that have been recorded for less than thirty years in the populations as well as in the activities.

In the first place, the population as a whole has decreased a lot: a loss of more than 100 000 inhabitants and everything leads us to believe that this decrease will go on as expectations for the years 2000 take only 789 000 inhabitants into account. At the same time, the population has aged and there are more and more foreigners (25 % today and probably 39 % in 2000). The average income has gone down too for the exurbanization concerns above all the well-off and finally the housing conditions are worsening all the time (32 % of insanitary dwellings in 1980 and nearly 10 % of uninhabited ones) (P. Kestens, Postiaux J.M. & Vandermodden C., 1983). Like many other big European cities, Brussels has to face a demographic crisis but it still seems more important because of the configuration of the agglomeration limited to a central space. Something should be done but how ?

Since 1980 some actions have been undertaken to restore the good image of the city. Besides, numerous operations of urban renovation have also been undertaken. But will all this be sufficient to reverse tendencies that are very heavy up to now.

The activities have also undergone deep changes. As almost anywhere a *reduced industrial activity* is obvious in particular in the production sector proper. But contrary to elsewhere, this depression appeared very soon, already before 1974. It was due at that time to the tensions on the employment market (due to the very strong competition with the tertiary industries), spatial constraints (cost of the ground, unsuitableness of the premises, traffic jam, difficulties in the neighbourhood, etc. all this favouring the transfers outside the capital, they explain 2/3 of the losses during the period 1960-1974). These transfers were also encouraged to a large degree by the authorities who considered that the future of Brussels was only based on the tertiary sector. Since 1974, the depression persists in spite of the undeniable decrease of the transfers, a voluntarist policy of the S.D.R.B.



- | | |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Habitat | 5. Non-occupied area |
| 2. Industrial area of the Senne valley | 6. Main roads |
| 3. Central business district | 7. Agglomeration limit. |
| 4. Forests and parks | |

Fig. 24.- Brussels Agglomeration : land use.

Brussels agglomeration	% total area	% Pentagone
1. Habitat	35,5 %	27,2 %
2. Industry	5,3 %	4,2 %
3. Commerce and offices	2,0 %	19,0 %
4. Large services and cimeteries	9,0 %	8,7 %
5. Forests and parks	13,8 %	3,0 %
6. Non-occupied area	15,0 %	2,7 %
of which		
- Campus U.L.B./V.U.B. : ± 40 ha		
- R.T.B./B.R.T. : ± 25 ha (Broadcasting and Television)		
- Military hospital : ± 30 ha		
- Campus U.C.L.(W.St-L.) ± 40 ha		
7. Roads and other equipments	19,4 %	35,2 %
	100 %	100 %

Source : Agglomération de Bruxelles. Radioscopie de Bruxelles. Etude statistique, 1983, pp. 39-40.

(Société de Développement Régional de Bruxelles) in particular ready to welcome new activities (in industrial zonings or/and in renovated buildings) and the maintenance of the existing industries. Unfortunately the creations do not make up for the losses which fit into the general pattern of the changes in our economy. Therefore, Brussels, the first Belgian industrial region in 1947, loses every year industrial employments and sees more and more fallows especially in the mixed districts and in the sectors of the old industrial axis. On the contrary, a new industrial axis has been growing strong for more than ten years in the north-eastern part of the agglomeration nearby Evere.

On the other hand tertiary activities have developed strongly. Nowadays the tertiary employments represent more than 83 % of the total employment whereas at national level they only reach 65 %. The tertiary specialization of the region asserts itself in all sectors, except the transports; however it is very strong in the insurances, the financial and civil services. This tertiarisation deeply marks the Brussels landscape via the "office block" phenomenon : at present the office park is rated at 6 000 000 m², i.e. 75 % of the whole Belgian office park. And yet the load of these offices is unevenly felt in the agglomeration for it is unevenly distributed : some quarters (Leopold-Nord) nowadays are only "concrete and metal" whereas some others see progressively the offices supplanting the other functions (Avenue Louise, Evere, boulevard de Woluwé, Watermael-Boitsfort). Here too the intervention of the authorities is indispensable. It must be added that the "plan de secteur" voted in 1979 has anticipated quite precise areas for those offices. Indeed the growth of the office park is subsequent to 1961 (at that time they only covered 1,6 million m²). It has coincided with the setting up of the European Communities from 1958 onwards and also with the transfer in 1967 of the seat of the NATO from Paris to Brussels. Today Brussels is the seat of more than 1100 international organizations and has more than 200 embassies. Its international vocation need not to be proved any more even in the private sector. Furthermore the agglomeration concentrates numerous seats of Belgian private societies and especially lots of civil services national as well as regional ones.

Hence an important hub of employments (more than 500 000 in the sole tertiary sector) and a constantly growing number of commuters (nearly 300 000 - 60 % are coming from Brabant). However this important commuting movement sets a problem particularly at rush hours : the trains are crowded and the traffic jam is total on most major routes (even on the Ring) in spite of important modernization works achieved recently. And so Brussels is facing a key problem of the Brussels urbanism : the population or the activities. In other words, how is it possible to make approaches easier, to welcome the enterprises without prejudicing the frame of life and consequently the residential populations. It must be admitted that the problem is a difficult one to which no answer has been found up to now in spite of the numerous urban contests. But is there a solution to this problem in the big agglomerations ?