



Explanatory sheet (type 4a) Pre-wars modest house

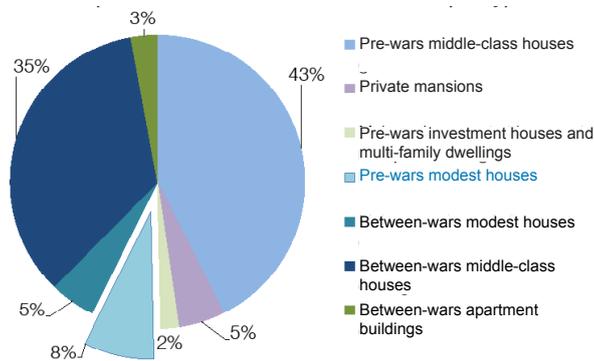


Figure 1: Representation of pre-wars modest houses and multifamily dwellings in the Brussels dwellings stock before 1945.



Figure 2: Urban repartition of modest houses built before 1914

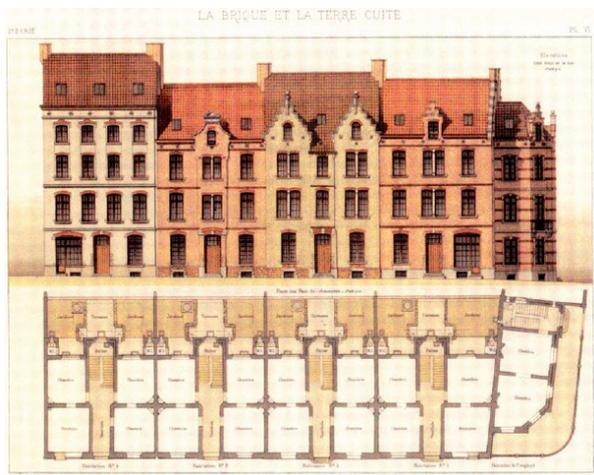


Figure 3: Workers' housing in Laeken
Source: G.Ledent

Preamble

« In the 19th century, housing for the popular classes becomes a major preoccupation of the governing classes. The middle classes attempt to prevent any social trouble by keeping these popular classes under its control. Thus housing becomes one of the lever arms of this policy. The ruling class attempts to direct modest populations by setting them a single living model, theirs ».
Source: G. Ledent

Following the growing industrialisation of the start of the 19th century, Brussels experiences the appearance a significant influx of workers in the city. Expansion of the city is then restricted by the enclosure walls and the lack of land fronting the streets is felt. This rapidly leads to the construction of modest housing, inside islands in the form of cul-de-sacs. The cul-de-sacs multiply throughout the first half of the 19th century, especially in the city suburbs, near the industrial areas. The cul-de-sacs then multiply in the peripheral communes, mainly along the roads on already built sections. Indeed, up to 1844, building inside the islands escapes communal control, which enabled the exploitation of this land by rich industrialists or owners.

Access to each dwelling is through a lane or cul-de-sac whose shape and size mainly depend on the plot grid. Most of the cul-de-sacs are relatively narrow around 2.5 to 3 metres.

From 1860¹, because of the major sanitation and enhancement works, these worker families are expropriated and rejected out of the Pentagone, increasingly to the outer reaches of the periphery.

There is a wait until the rise of social tensions, the great cholera epidemic of 1866 and the development of hygienic concerns for the middle classes to become interested in the housing conditions of the working class and develop different initiatives in their favour. In 1867 and 1889², the first laws on worker housing are adopted by Parliament.

The law of 1889 encourages the construction of affordable housing and access to property for workers. Private and communal societies invest in this type of housing. It enables the development of various Foyers : Foyer Schaerbeekois, Foyer Saint-Gillois that are at the origin of a series of urban collective residential ensembles.

The law of 9 August 1889 on housing policy reorients worker housing policy in Brussels. This law consecrates the single-family house by encouraging access to private ownership. The desire to isolate worker housing is clear. It is a matter of avoiding gatherings that could disturb public order. In order to prevent any social outbreak and be able to control this section of the population, the ruling class decides to reinsert worker housing in small groups of dwellings in existing quarters. In this desire for isolation, the formal language of the individual middle-class house is transposed to popular housing. The standard plan recommended by the Congrès d'Hygiène Publique of 1852 proposes « one entrance, two rooms and one annexe on the ground floor, two bedrooms on the upper floor and a loft sometimes arranged as attic rooms under the roof ».

Pre-wars modest houses represent, according to the analysis carried out as part of the B³RetroTool project, based on

1 The law of 1 July 1858 enables the expropriation of housing for sanitation reasons of the slums. The law of 15 November 1867 extends the right of expropriation to all improvement and enhancement works. This law is strongly used to realise the urban projects of Léopold II.
2 In 1886, following the great general strike, the government carries out a large survey whose goal is to study employment, working conditions and the material, moral and intellectual situation of the workers. Following this a new law is passed in August 1889 to stimulate the creation of affordable housing and make workers owners.

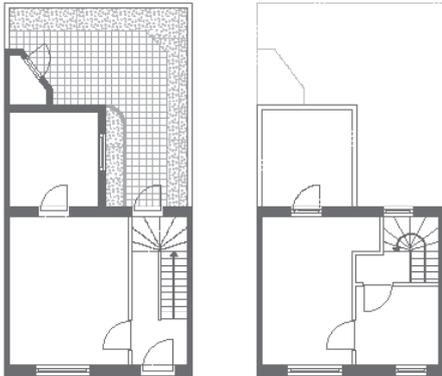


Figure 4:
Workers row house - one living room and appendices
Source : M.SMETS, *L'Avènement de la cité-jardin en Belgique, Histoire de l'habitat social en Belgique de 1830 à 1930*, Edition Pierre Mardaga, Bruxelles, 1977

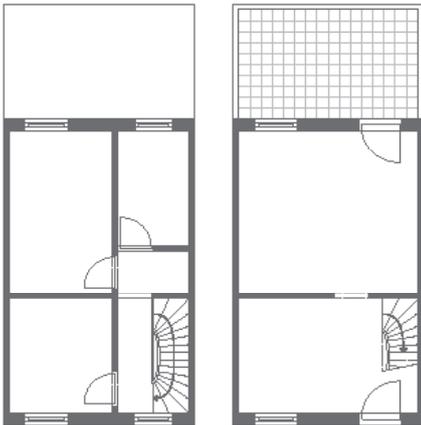


Figure 5:
Workers row house - 2 rooms in a row



Figure 6:
Workers row house – rue Jean Deraeck - 1150 Brussels

the land registry table No. 212AM (situation at 01.01.2012), around 8% of the pre-1945 Brussels residential stock.

General description

The plots for this housing type are strongly limited. The modest house's plot has width around 5 metres and depth around 11 metres.

Consequently, the dwelling, which follows the middleclass model, is reduced to its simplest expression of one or two spaces in succession and relative equivalence of the longitudinal spans.

The modest house has two floors: ground floor and first floor. The first floor is partly under the rafters.

Most pre-1945 modest houses, and mainly those located in the cul-de-sacs, were destroyed during the major sanitation works from 1860 to 1890.

Today there are still some cul-de-sacs bordered with this housing type in quarters close to Place du Sablon, between Rue des Minimes and Rue Haute

Urban situation

These modest houses are located in narrow streets, lanes or cul-de-sacs, either in industrial areas of the inner-city suburbs, or in certain suburbs on the outskirts of Brussels.

Spatial organisation/programme

The modest house has the following scale :

- width of façade from 4.8 metres to 5.5 metres;
- depth according to the number of rooms in succession from 5 metres to 8 metres;
- height of façade not exceeding 6 metres under cornice

The modest house has two floors: one ground floor and one first floor. The first floor is mostly partly under the rafters.

The ground floor is only raised by a single step above street level and, in general, ceiling heights do not exceed 3 metres. Some dwellings have, in part of the area, an unlit cellar space in the basement.

The modest house is generally completed with one or two annexes in the interior court: kitchen and toilets. These annexes have only one story. Sometimes the kitchen annexe is topped with a second level with bedroom (in the extension of the main bedroom).

In the case of two rooms in succession, the kitchen is integrated into the dwelling.

Circulation and stairs

The entrance of the modest house is through a threshold one step up from the street.

According to the width of the street façade, the entrance door leads either to a hallway, or directly into the first room of the dwelling.

The stairs leading up are wooden. It is well-built and located either in the hallway, or in the first room of the dwelling.

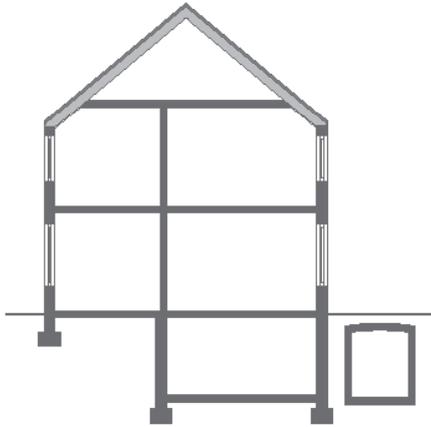


Figure 7: Workers row house - section

Construction system

The construction system of the modest house follows that of the middle-class house while being much reduced. The partition walls are not load bearing, they are made of locally sourced brick.

The upper floors bear perpendicularly to the street on façades and shear walls. The joists are spaced from 35 to 40 cm.

The façade walls are 36 cm thick at the ground floor and 28 cm at the upper floor.

Façades and materials

The street façade is reduced to its simplest expression. It is made of bare brick or rendered.

It has few decorative elements: plinth, sill and sometimes bands in natural stone, wooden window frame, etc.

The ground floor window onto the street is sometimes given shutters.

In the first dwellings, the ground floor is still dirt.