



B³RetroTool - pre-assessment webtool

Explanatory sheet (type 3b)

Pre-wars investment house and multiple dwelling

Preamble

Two attempts were required to establish the apartment building for the Brussels middle classes. The first attempt took place in the 1870s following the channelling of the Senne. Some sixty apartment buildings are then built along the grand boulevards of the centre. But they prove difficult to acquire – the Brussels lower middle and middle classes consider the fact of cohabiting under the same roof as a situation of poverty and promiscuity. Consequently, up to the First World War, multiple dwellings remain principally for workers, and the single-family house remains the most common form of dwelling in Brussels

According to the analysis of residential housing carried out as part of the B³RetroTool project, based on the land registry table No. 212AM (situation at 01.01.2012), pre-war investment houses and multiple dwellings represent around 2 % of the pre-1945 Brussels residential stock and 6% of the dwellings.

Background

By 1850, 60 % of the Brussels population is working class (it is only 40 % in 1910). Most often, this working population shares houses with one to two floors and lives as several families (one to two rooms per family), in not very salubrious conditions. The construction of housing for the working class is mainly left to private initiatives. And most of the owners are not from the middle classes but from the lower middle class. They seek to become owner landlords by renting back yards, or small pieces of land adjoining their homes. Few of these dwellings survive today as many were destroyed during the sanitation works of the Brussels city centre in the 1860s.

The 1866 cholera epidemic and the law of 1889 on worker housing encourage the construction of worker housing by limited companies, cooperatives or public administrations like Immobilière Bruxelloise or the Société Anonyme des Habitations Ouvrières. The SNHLBM (Société Nationale des Habitations à Bon Marché) is only created in 1919. These dwellings are intended for purchase, renting or hire purchase, and reserved for the working population. Sets of houses and apartments are built. Mostly, these structures have the appearance of single-family homes but are in fact divided into apartments. They are called **investment houses** because they are rented by one or several owners as financial operations.

To improve the living conditions of their workers, some major industrialists take the initiative to build housing for their own workers. This also ensures them a certain social control. At the end of the 19th century, humanist and hygienist concerns also make housing an instrument of stabilisation of the social order and the living conditions of workers improve (increased privacy, presence of toilets and a terrace per dwelling, etc.). The first **worker apartment buildings** are then built.

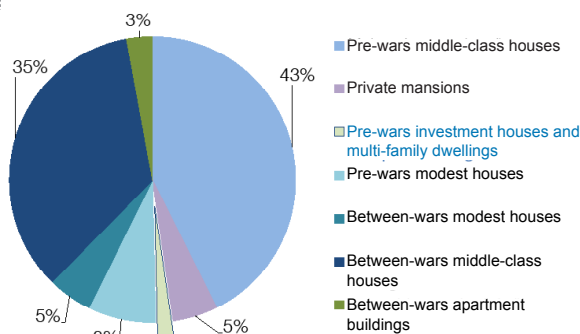


Figure 1a: Representation of pre-war investment houses and multifamily dwellings in the Brussels dwellings stock before 1945.

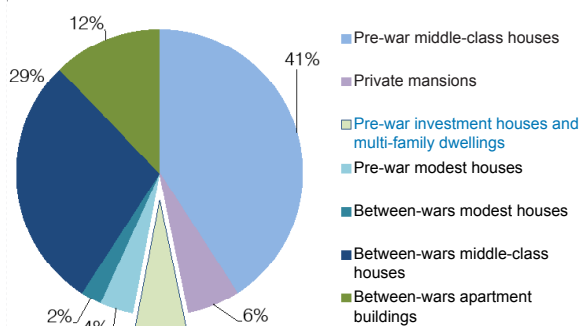


Figure 1b: Dwellings distribution, by type, in the Brussels dwellings stock before 1945.



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Figure 2:
A set of eleven investment houses drawn by G. Cochaux around 1898 (Rue de la Poudrière, 1000 Brussels). Behind their neogothic facades characterized by stepped gables, hide cramped apartments for the working class.
(source: Google Maps)

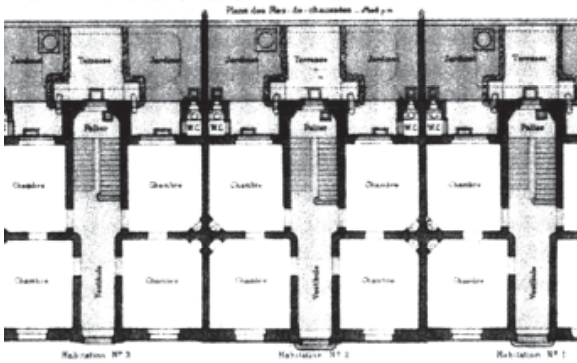


Figure 3:
Investment houses, Laeken (around 1900) - Facade and groundfloor plan
(source: G.Ledent, PhD thesis, UCL, 2014)

The first major property operation of constructing multiple dwelling buildings intended for the middle and lower middle classes is carried out in Brussels following the channelling of the Senne in the 1870s. Some sixty **investment properties** – actually financial investments made by rich owners – are then built along the grand boulevards. These buildings do not have the success found in Paris at the same time. Indeed, the Brussels middle and lower middle classes consider that cohabiting under the same roof is a situation of poverty and promiscuity (the multiple dwelling up to then is mainly for workers). Also renting a dwelling in an investment property does not allow the targeted population to satisfy its desire to access property. These buildings thus find tenants with difficulty and the attempt to reach the middle classes remains a failure overall. This has to wait for the between-wars period and the shortage of housing for the Brussels middle and lower middle classes to finally take an interest in apartment life.

General description

There are three types of pre-war multi-family housing:

- investment house, occupied by several worker families;
- worker apartment building, built with a hygienic approach;
- investment property, intended for the middle class and lower middle class.

• Investment house

Investment houses have an external scale and appearance similar to the single-family house. They are most often occupied by the working classes. Their façades convey a desire to improve the image of worker housing. Investment houses are distinguished, among other things, from investment properties by the fact that the bedrooms are rented individually and that the toilets, usually located in the entresols, are shared. These houses are also less luxurious than the investment properties of the grand boulevards intended for the middle and lower middle classes.

The investment house, while dedicated to housing several families, can be considered as a variant of the middle-class house. This housing type is often inserted between two adjoining properties and has a scale similar to the latter. In its more luxury versions, occupied by the middle classes, each dwelling of the investment house is equipped with toilets (see Figs 3 & 4).

• Worker apartment building

Worker apartment buildings are usually simple, functional and designed with a hygienist approach. The apartments are composed of a set of specific rooms: a kitchen, a living room, one or two bedrooms and toilets, often accessible from a terrace. The stairwell is in general common to several apartments. These dwellings are not at this time equipped with a hot water distribution system, or central heating, or door phone. Some buildings offer their residents collective



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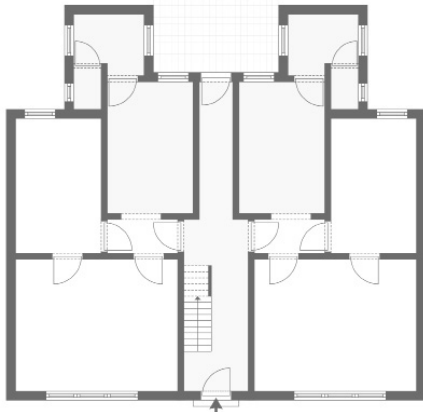


Figure 4:
Investment house, schematic plan



Figure 5:
Investment house, rue Montenegro in Saint-Gilles (1911)
a) front façade, b) courtyard
(source: projet BATEX, IBGE)



Figure 6:
Social multifamily dwellings «cité Hellemans», Marolles district, Brussels (1912)
(source: Google Maps)

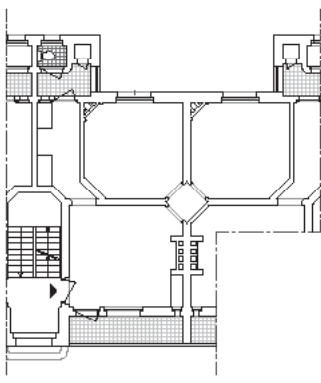


Figure 7:
Social multifamily dwellings «cité Hellemans», Marolles district, Brussels (1912)
plan of social apartment
(source: G.Ledent, thèse de doctorat, UCL, 2014)

equipment like a laundry room or crèche

Because of the very high cost of lifts for this housing type, the height of worker apartment buildings usually stays limited to four stories. They therefore have a height similar to that of neighbouring buildings.

Among the first major collective social housing projects built at the start of the 20th century there are:

- the affordable apartment buildings of Rue Marconi, in Forest (~1901)
- the Cité Olivier, in Schaerbeek (~1905)
- the Cité Helmet, in Schaerbeek (~1905)
- the Cité Hellemans, in the Marolles quarter, which is inspired by the Cité Olivier (~1912)

Between the two wars, social apartment buildings continue to be built to cope with a shortage of affordable homes.

Certain similarities with the pre-war social housing (like the Cité Hellemans) can be highlighted:

- the common stairwell
 - the fact that each apartment is equipped with a kitchen, a living room, separate bedrooms and a toilet, often accessible from a terrace.
 - the fact that simplicity and hygiene remain the key words.
- Secondly this housing type becomes equipped with hot and cold water distribution, central heating, even a door phone.

• Investment property

The first Brussels investment properties intended for the lower middle classes are built along the boulevards of the centre, following the channelling of the Senne. They are usually built to a height of four to five stories and do not have lifts. They are the same height as neighbouring structures. While less luxurious, they resemble the private mansions surrounding them. They are often located at street corners and squares, i.e. on plots where it is not possible to install a garden.

In general their ground floors are occupied by shops. The first floor is a prestige apartment whose rooms are large with high ceilings. The second floor is comfortable but less luxurious. The third floor is a modest apartment. The attics house the rooms of servants or artists. This difference in quality between the floors is reflected in the façade: when observing them it is possible to note differences of ceiling height and details.



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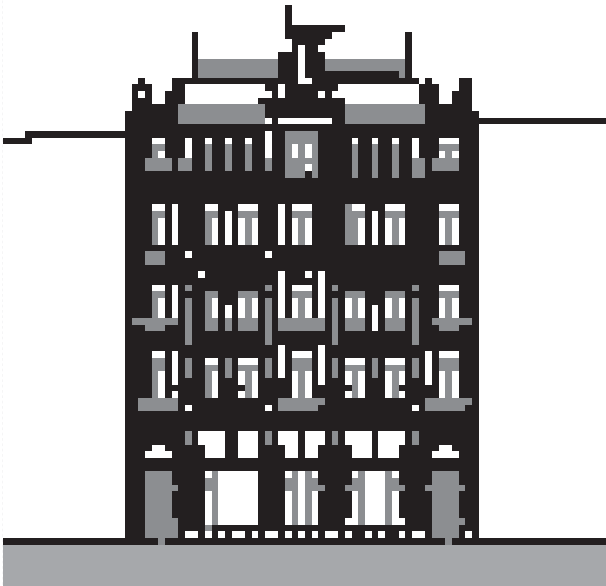


Figure 8:
Investment property, Place de Brouckère (1876)
(source: G.Ledent, PhD thesis, UCL, 2014)

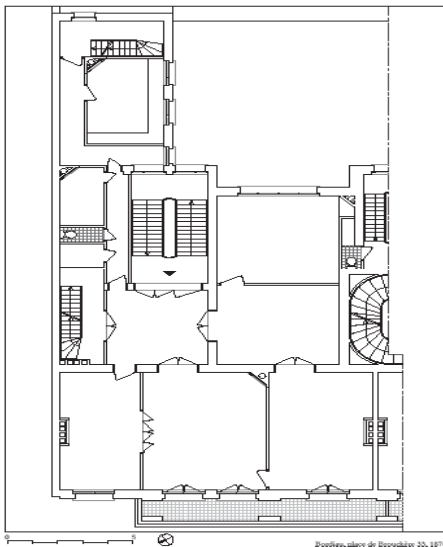


Figure 9:
Investment property, Place de Brouckère (1876)
(source: G.Ledent, PhD thesis, UCL, 2014)