Brussels, Belgium

Inhabitants 1'100'000
Urban Region 162 Km2

Brussels in 8 points

1. Small World City
   Compared to London & Paris, Brussels is a small city. It consists of 19 municipalities but have officially 1.1 million people. Even if we take the larger metropolitan region into account, we still have only 1.1 million residents. Although small in size, it is ranking high on the world cities ladder. The presence of the European Institutions (EU), NATO and many related activities gives it a global status.

2. Richest region in Europe, poorest neighbourhoods in Belgium
   Brussel is ranking high on the world cities ladder. The presence of the European Institutions (EU) makes it a global city, giving it a global status.
   - Compared to London & Paris, Brussels is a small city.
   - It is estimated that the coming years there will be 100,000 additional residents due to international migration and a high fertility rate.
   - After a very long period of decline, the amount of residents is growing. It is estimated that the coming years there will be 100,000 additional residents due to international migration and a high fertility rate.

3. Shrinking Growing City
   After a very long period of decline, the amount of residents is growing. It is estimated that the coming years there will be 100,000 additional residents due to international migration and a high fertility rate.

4. Fragmented & Segmentated City
   Not only the urban structure, but also the social composition, political organisation, culture etc., is characterized by fragmentation & segregation. It is a major characteristic of the city, making it quite unique and not always easy to understand.

5. The only city in the world with a prime minister but no flagship projects
   Brussels is run by a regional government (with a prime minister) and 19 municipal mayors. Competition rather than collaboration is the driving force in local politics.

6. Globalizing from below
   More than 50% of the population has roots or strong connections outside Belgium. Some have come to work in international institutions & companies, but most of them are in Brussels to do low paid jobs. Many political refugees have joined recently as well as "sans papiers" (immigrants without official documents, estimated to be 56,000 people). This has led to a growing cultural diversity (a globalization from below). Rich immigrants are to be found in the south-eastern part of Brussel and in the suburbs. Poor immigrants live in the central part of the city, in the working class neighbourhoods alongside the canal which runs through the middle of the city.

7. Rather insurgent than resistant
   The absence of a consistent squatter movement is symptomatic for Brussels. It is a city where resistance is channelled into state-subsidised NGO’s making it the world capital of organised civil society.

8. Old metropolitan mainstream?
   Many aspects of the New Metropolitan Mainstream can be found in Brussels, but not all of them are new or outspoken. Internationalization, Public Private Partnerships and market driven politics have been around throughout the postwar period. Sanctioned came later and were outspoken compared to many others. flagship developments are rather absent. It is still an open question if the NMM paradigm can explain the dynamics of this city.
Brussels plans a large development project (international scale, international contest attracting star architects – PPP) on the Heysel Plateau (67 ha) in the northern part of Brussels, close to the border with Flanders. It includes a congress centre (3,500 places), a shopping mall (100,000 m²) - named “The green belt around Brussels is a blessing for Brussels”, and a congress centre (up to 250,000 m²). At the same time, the Flemish government approved a new private congress centre (3,500 places), a shopping mall (100,000 places), a football stadium (Worldcup 2018), an event hall (15,000 places), offices (up to 250,000 m²). At the same time, the Flemish government approved a new private congress centre (3,500 places), a shopping mall (100,000 places), a football stadium (Worldcup 2018), an event hall (15,000 places), offices (up to 250,000 m²) situated 2 km to the east on Flemish territory (upscale Machelein). The financing of both projects is still uncertain.

The EU-Quarter (15 km) is situated just east of the city centre. In the second half of the 20th century this residential neighborhood transformed, yet without a real planning or development strategy one might expect. In the case of the redevelopment of the South Station area, and partly due to the recession of the 90s, relatively few m² of offices have been built. Instead of having attracted new companies, the new office buildings were even primarily occupied by relocated government agencies or old companies. The promised jobs consequently were never generated, and the area lost a lot of its quality.

High belief in flâneurs resulting in would-be flâneurs.

The government still counts on new large scale projects with an international span to boost the areas. In the EU-quarter the government supports a project of the French star-architect Christian de Portzamparc that wants to redesign the neighborhood drastically. Also for the South Station the government trusts on a project of a French architect Jean Nouvel to reverse the degeneration of the area.

Yet both projects seem to lack the necessary confidence and the trust to meet their goals. After comments and questions in the press, the latter project is even removed from the website of the Railway Company. As for the EU-quarter, it was presented at the international trade show MIPIM in Cannes and only afterwards in Brussels...

Despite the incorporation of some side measures, the latest proposals are clearly property development-led and design-oriented. The consequences of the very expensive offices or residences on the local property market seem to be of less priority. The limited interest for the actual content of the development program in both cases makes it very hard to assure local or regional social embeddedness of the projects.

Brussels and the Flemish area around Brussels are functionally part of the same metropolitan region, but planning and development for both areas is done separately. This often leads to strategies fostering competition between regions without taking into account social reality (often shopping centers which are planned next to each other).

This dynamic is also reflected in the development of green, open space and nature protection. Brussels puts a lot of effort in becoming a "green capital", through the development of green corridors etc. A strategy of cooperation works surprisingly well for the protection and management of the immense forest located to the south of the city (Forest de Soignes/Zoniemend), yet in many other cases environmental management becomes an element that accentuates the gap between political strategies and socio-economic realities.

As an example, Flanders focuses on the protection of undeveloped open spaces such as meadows, fields, river valleys, forests, etc.; in the area around Brussels, yet for new inhabitants that are willing to integrate in the Flemish culture (language); Nevertheless, this “green” policy in the periphery of Brussels mostly attracts the well-paid citizen to move to the countryside close to the forest, parks, horse stables and golf-courses. Due to the international character of Brussels, most of them don’t speak Flemish, but mostly French or English. Therefore they are determined by the Flemish community as immigrants that form the integrity and culture of the region. This fear of further “Galiatization” of Brussels is a historical fact that goes back to the 90s when the Flemish emancipation struggle started. Currently, local mayors attempt to stop the further spread of the French language by introducing language tests, offering integration courses, etcetera. Social housing, as an example, is reserved for inhabitants that can prove that they live with their community.

The Flemish community ignoring the fact that they are part of a larger metropolitan area with its own socio-economic dynamism. On the private market, property owners, mostly local inhabitants, simply seek to sell their houses for the highest price. Buyers able to afford these prices often are well-paid citizens, working in Brussels who like to live in a nice, green and beautiful urban countryside close to economically the most important area of Belgium, namely Brussels.

Brussels, as many other urban regions, is growing increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic origins of its inhabitants. The urban region furthermore is characterized by spatial segregation with a differentiation between poorer, mixed and more affluent areas.

Place de Bethlem, a recently refurbished triangular square in a colorful neighborhood, only a stonewash away from the South Station is surrounded by a few local shops, McDonald’s or Zara are not interested in the area but Greek restaurants are flourishing. Cars, always in a hurry, and school children pass by in the morning. On sunny afternoons the place becomes crowded, children run all over the place, mothers or fathers gather on benches. During a couple of hours in the evening, the restaurants attract a mix of people, including the urban professionals looking for authentic atmosphere. After dark, the place, as well as its contents, transforms into a male environment.

In 2010 the Rhode had been reported widely in the media “several Brussels neighbourhoods are going through safety issues. Police is trapped regularly” and words such as “impunity" are used to describe the situation. On the evening of April 12th, several cars burn around Place Bethlem, the public call was raised, police forces arrive in large number on the slippery square and are welcomed by stone throwing youngsters. Two hours later, the square is back to normal.

Violent uprising was of short nature, but tensions always exist. Discontent, expressed by those that are excluded from processes of economic growth and the wealth generated by financial globalization. Discussions after the riots are often racist, the elimination of illegal economic activities and zero-tolerance the main answer. Yet, should earnings as these not form the occasion to start thinking on how to foster processes that may bring belief in the future for the excluded in a region where about one out of three children grows up in a household that has no income from employment?

Resistance in Brussels could also have been portrayed by pointing to the everlasting struggle of the sans-papiers; to the numerous associations and citizen groups working to improve life quality in their city; to the King resisting on how to foster processes that may bring belief in the future for the excluded in a region where about one out of three children grows up in a household that has no income from employment?