

DEMOGRAPHIA



BRUSSELS: SURBURBAN AND SUBURBANIZING

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Urbanized Area* Population	1,570,000	Portland, Goiania, Stockholm
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	255	Grand Rapids, Quebec, Porto Alegre
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	675	
Population per Square Mile	6,200	Toulouse, San Jose, San Francisco
Population per Square Kilometer	2,400	
*Continuously built up area		

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Brussels is the home of the European Commission --- the European bureaucrats, and can be said to share the title of capital of Europe with Strausburg, France, home of the European parliament. Unlike Strausburg, which is one of the new international metropolitan areas, spreading across the Rhine to Germany, Brussels is a metropolitan area wholly contained in one country.

But Brussels is diverse. In some urbanized areas, there is a favored quarter, such as the north sides of Dallas-Fort Worth, Atlanta or San Antonio, and a less affluent side, in each of these places to the south. But in Brussels, the demarcation is cultural and lingual. To the south are the suburbs of the Walloon region, where the people and language are French. To the north are the suburbs of the Flemish region, where the people and language are Dutch. In a world where such differences are often the source of strife, Belgians have for some time managed to get along quite well together (as have also the four lingual groups of Switzerland).



This is not to suggest that there have not been conflicts. One of history's great battles occurred in the southern suburbs, near a small town called Waterloo. Here was Napoleon's last stand. It was very nearly Wellington's last stand, but like trailing Southern Cal that overcomes a Notre Dame

(or vice versa) team in the last quarter,¹ Wellington rallied late in the battle. The result was to define history for many decades to come. But even this fabled battle was not between Belgians -- it was rather a battle between foreign powers waged on foreign ground.

What everyone knows of Brussels is a very dense and attractive pre-automobile city. Indeed, Brussels has the reputation of being one of the most dense urban areas in Europe. The International Union of Public Transport (UITP) *Millennium Cities Database* indicates that the Brussels urbanized area covers approximately 50 square miles and with a population of approximately 950,000 has a density of nearly 19,000 per square mile. This is very dense for an urban area --- more dense than Tokyo-Yokohama and Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto urbanized areas.

But the UITP definition misses 40 percent of the population and 80 percent of the land area in the Brussels urbanized area (continuously built up area). In fact, it appears that what UITP defines as the urbanized area is the Brussels of 50 or more years ago --- the core district which included the city and its suburbs. UITP data indicates that the urbanized land area is smaller than that of the Brussels region, the nation's capital district. But another 600,000 people live in areas suburbs that sprawl outward from the capital district. And, more than 500,000 people have been added to this metropolitan area in the last 50 years, *all* of them in the suburbs. The core city itself has lost one-third of its population, more than Milan, Chicago or Paris, but less than Antwerp or Copenhagen.



To consider the core of Brussels as the Brussels urbanized area is akin to believing that the San Francisco urbanized area does not extend beyond the boundaries of the concentrated core city, or that in New York, the urbanized area is within the city limits outside of which development jumped and has been jumping for nearly 100 years. To consider the Brussels urbanized area to be the 50 or so square miles of the core is to “view the sky through a bamboo tube,” as the old Chinese proverb goes. It is to define myopia.

In fact, the suburbanization of Brussels is so significant that it is, overall, little more dense than San Jose and 15 percent *less* dense than Los Angeles. It can be seen on the national roads leading from the core. For example, the N-8 heads westward with mile after mile of continuous urban development, none of it in the UITP urbanized area. Then the development becomes more core oriented, following just the corridor of the national road.

The far southeast suburbs contain one of the most attractive planned new towns to be found anywhere, Lovain-la-Neuve. The Belgian national railway built a special route extension to serve this area, and there are reports that the new town is a net importer of employment. But this is the

¹ One of the most important US college football rivalries is between the University of Southern California and the University of Notre Dame. In many years, seemingly more than in other rivalries, a team far behind late in the game has rallied, in the spirit of Wellington, to win.

exception. But note the location --- the *far* southeast suburbs (if not the exurbs). Like new urbanist design purported to fight sprawl in the United States, new towns on the edge of the urban area simply increase the expanse of sprawl. Of course, that's not bad, since sprawl is the principal form of urbanization in the high-income world and has produced higher incomes, better life-styles, less intense traffic congestion and less intense air pollution, and the opposite of which are produced by compact city (so-called "smart growth") strategies.

Brussels is Wavre, Asse, Meise, Waterloo and more, all of which are as much a part of the urbanized area as the historic city of Brussels itself. And, it is important to get off the freeways. An urban planner taken on a once-in-a-lifetime freeway tour of a European urban area could well think that there are no suburbs. Within three miles of the European Commission offices itself, the leafy borders of the Ring Road look no different than 50 miles away where just behind the trees graze the famous Belgian Blue bulls. What looks like undeveloped country is urbanization well inside Brussels --- rather like sections of Atlanta's I-285 Perimeter Highway, which only miles from downtown often looks little different from rural south Georgia. But both in Atlanta and Brussels, the urbanization is there. Sometimes, however, there are hints. Soundwalls can give it away. Even in Belgium, you can be sure that behind soundwalls are urbanization, not Belgian Blues. All of this suggests why it is so important to get off the freeway and drive the national roads and the principal arterials (main streets with traffic signals and "roundabouts").

Beyond walking distance of the train stations (which, like Phoenix and Portland, is most of the Brussels area), the Brussels area has a wide variety of suburban housing. Some of it looks like the small ranch style tract housing that was built in North America before 1970. Usually it is brick. But there are also more contemporary designs, especially in the new housing developments that can be found all around suburban Brussels. Much of it looks much more like German suburbs than American or Canadian suburbs, but suburban nonetheless. This is particularly obvious outside the new town (Lovain-la-Nueve). New suburbs and old are to be found, testimony to an urban development pattern that has proceeded in the Brussels area for 40 years or more. The average American suburbanite would be at home here, though somewhat more cramped due to smaller Belgian household budgets.

The sprawling suburbs of Brussels are the bane of urban planners, who consider them unplanned. But planning is a matter of perspective, and not all of it is the responsibility of government.



Among some there is a view that would establish a monopoly on things urban for a profession that destroyed tore down African-American neighborhoods and incarcerated the refugees in 15 level monuments to Josef Stalin with out-of-order elevators.

But there is no medieval guild right for the experts to plan the lives of others. People actually do a pretty good job of planning themselves. The suburbanites who are moving into the new suburban houses seem quite content with the extent of planning in their lives. And there

appears to be no reason to question it, despite the offensiveness of the urban landscape to those who would force their values on everyone else, as Christian armies baptizing captured heathen at spear point through the nearest river.

The Brussels suburbs should be on the must-visit list for any North American planner interested in an intellectually honest and comprehensive view of European urbanism. Like in Atlanta, one can travel for miles and hours in Brussels without seeing medieval cathedrals, museums, tourist attractions, large multi-family apartment blocks or metro stops. Sites such as these can surely be found inside the urbanized area as it was 50 or 100 years ago (though medieval cathedrals are in admittedly short supply in Atlanta). But what can also be found is an attractive metropolitan area, in which people have chosen to conduct their lives surrounded by grass and free to travel throughout the area wherever they like in a reasonable period of time. Such is Brussels, suburbs and city.





PICTURES

South suburbs (#1-4)
West suburbs (#5-7)
New Town (Louvain-la-Neuve)
National Route 8
Freeway Within Brussels
Freeway with Soundwall
All pictures outside UITP Urbanized Area

By Wendell Cox

Urban Tours by Rental Car

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