

STRATEGY TO REDUCE RESIDENTIAL VACANCY BY REACTIVATING VACANT DWELLINGS ON UPPER FLOORS

Strategy for reactivating upper floors and supporting residential use -
Brussels, Belgium

1. DESCRIPTION

Launched in 2010 and still ongoing, the strategy developed by the City of Brussels aims to tackle property vacancy in the historic centre and to sustainably strengthen the residential function. The initiative combines several complementary tools: financial assistance for renovation, technical support for owners, schemes promoting affordable housing, and measures to regulate non-residential uses. Its objective is to re-use the vacant upper floors above shops, thereby increasing the housing supply and encouraging the return and retention of residents.

2. CONTEXT THAT MOTIVATED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRACTICE

During the 1980s, the gradual shift in property ownership patterns and the profitability of ground-floor commercial activities led many owners to neglect the upper-floor dwellings, resulting in their vacancy and, in some cases, their deterioration.

This situation contributed to the weakening of the residential function, a decline in the number of residents in certain areas of the city centre, and reduced urban activity outside business hours.

3. APPROACH/METHOD

The strategy was developed gradually around several complementary levers.

Introduction of financial incentives (2010). The City introduced a grant to fund the creation of separate access points to flats located on the upper floors of commercial buildings. This grant can reach USD 17,000 (EUR 15,000) or even USD 21,000 (EUR 18,000) when the flats are entrusted to a social housing agency to ensure the housing remains affordable.

Development of a municipal policy to tackle vacant properties. Initially led by a specialised para-municipal body, the strategy is gradually being integrated into municipal services, which now handle the processing of applications, the implementation of enforcement measures (taxes or fines for vacant properties used only as a last resort), support for property owners and the monitoring of results.



Example of a building renovated for residential use (8–10 Rue du Marché aux Herbes) © City of Brussels

Technical support for property owners (since 2023). The City funds an external architect tasked with providing free support to property owners in project design, feasibility analysis and planning permission applications. This support enables the various stakeholders to be brought together at a very early stage to reduce the risk of deadlock and simplify procedures.

The public budget allocated to this initiative is approximately USD 175,000 (EUR 150,000) over three years. At the same time, the City is coordinating this strategy with other measures to combat vacancy and regulate tourist rentals to ensure the residential use of the historic centre.

4. EXPECTED/IMMEDIATE/MEASURABLE EFFECTS

Measurable results

In a reference area within the UNESCO protection zone, the population has risen from 1,863 inhabitants in 2002 to 2,717 inhabitants in 2022, reflecting a trend towards residential repopulation.

Immediate effects observed

- Gradual reactivation of vacant floors.
- Improvement in the condition of buildings thanks to renovation works.
- Simplification of procedures for property owners.
- Higher quality of projects thanks to direct technical support.
- Development of new housing adapted to the needs of households, including family homes in the historic centre.

Expected effects

- Sustainably strengthening the residential function of the historic centre.
- Maintaining a residential presence in areas under heavy commercial or tourist pressure.
- Developing a supply of affordable housing.
- Encouraging the return of families and social diversity.
- Improving the urban vitality and liveability of the historic centre.

5. KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The regeneration of existing buildings is an effective lever for enhancing the habitability of historic centres without resorting to new construction.
- Financial support is more effective when combined with personalised technical and administrative support.
- Coordination between housing, urban planning, heritage and social development enables us to move beyond a sectoral approach to interventions.
- Political support and the simplification of procedures are essential conditions for engaging private owners and generating sustainable results.



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