

# Urgency to build more housing

**Céline Fremault is the new Minister for the Environment of the Brussels Capital Region, but with a wide-ranging remit: Housing, Environment, Energy, Handicapped Persons... Her objective is to draw a link between all these areas and create a better life for citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. She speaks to us about housing in particular.**

Céline Fremault began by observing that between 2008 and 2012, more than 70,000 people had left Brussels to go and live in the periphery. She believes lack of suitable housing was the principal cause, and she wishes to create a living framework which means that people will prefer to stay in the capital. The challenges are to provide quality housing and to ensure that people can afford to stay in Brussels, and to move in the direction of an economy which is more sustainable and which creates jobs. The priorities are therefore to offer better and higher quality housing, and to provide a framework for subsidised rents with a ceiling. This is designed to provide a sort of transition between the private sector housing in which they find themselves, and the public sector housing they are looking for. The Brussels government will help.

“ It is clear that the public sector will not be able to construct the necessary 6,500 public housing units on its own “

Céline Fremault,  
Minister for the Environment  
of the Brussels Capital Region

## **There is of course the expected increase in the population...**

Céline Fremault: Yes, this is much talked about and we know that there are currently 1.163 million people living in Brussels, with an average increase of 14,000 per year since the beginning of this century – although there has been a slight dip over recent years. But this does not change the situation. Demand for housing therefore never stops increasing.

We have therefore set out an ambitious programme which in the first instance involves finalising the Regional Housing Plan which was set up between 2004 and 2009 but which has not met its objectives. It was expected to see some 5,000 units constructed, but only arrived at around 1,300. And it is also clear that the public sector will not be able to construct the necessary 6,500 public housing units on its own.

On top of this, the average income of Brussels residents used to be 12% above the national average, but today it is actually below the national average, by 15%. This is concerning.

Our Region is largely a rental landscape in terms of housing. In the other two Regions of Belgium, ownership represents some 70% of the population, but in Brussels we are under 40%. In some districts it is only 20%. Average rents are 695 Euros and are rising by 2% a year when you look at the health index. Rent also takes up an average of 60% of income for those households whose revenues are less than 1,500 Euros per month. Where purchase is concerned, the average price in Brussels is 226,000 Euros for an apartment and 350,000 Euros for a house. But with the population exodus, less than 40% of young couples with two incomes are able to buy on the private market.

## **How are you going to involve the public sector in the solution?**

Céline Fremault: I organised a conference at Mipim dedicated to public-private partnerships, to see how we can encourage the production of housing. We have an overall framework which involves the ten priority housing zones in

Brussels. The questions of architectural quality, and of quality of life, have to form a part of this. And the public and private partners also have to address the question of densification of the Region. This is a question for all cities, as we saw at Mipim. This densification has to be done harmoniously, taking into account the green fabric of the city, and its water network. Densification has to be qualitative as well as quantitative – otherwise we will repeat the errors of the past.

#### **Let us return to the current lack of housing.**

Céline Fremault: The gap between supply and demand for housing is currently standing at around 6,000 units per year. The building permit observatory reveals that some 4,000

appointed to keep a check on the progress being made in the projects, and to coordinate with the Master Architect of Brussels. The private sector also has to be involved in producing affordable housing with finance plans. The private sector produces most of the housing in Brussels, and the public sector has to assist them in doing this – environmental concerns, receiving permits... We have to arrive at a 'cruising speed'.

#### **Does the conversion of old office buildings into housing play a part ?**

Céline Fremault: Yes, because we don't exclude any formula. This is a promising area because there is office vacancy in Brussels of around 8%, and this is persistent in terms of some of the stock or buildings. A list of all the unoccupied buildings is currently being drawn up, although

“ The gap between supply and demand for housing is currently standing at around 6,000 units per year “

permits are granted each year (4,000 units), but very largely for private sector housing. So when it comes to launching more housing production, the situation is serious. We have to arrive at production of 6,500 units of housing per year by 2019. This has to involve all types of housing, subsidised rents, social housing, housing for purchase and we are giving the SLRB (Regional Housing Association) a very important role in this. To do this, we have to take land constraints into account, and look at how to speed up the administrative procedures.

#### **How have you started to address these issues since you took office?**

Céline Fremault: We have set up a Housing Coordination Committee which meets here in my office every six weeks, and which brings together public bodies in the first instance, to create synergies and encourage mixed use projects. Each time, a different commune of Brussels is also invited, to talk about its own housing projects, and explain where the land is being found. A facilitator has also been

we do know that not all office buildings are suitable for conversion. But where it is possible, it has to be done.

#### **What about the energy performance indicator?**

Céline Fremault: I have said that I don't want to break up the 'virtuous circle' which has been set up in Brussels. We are working hand in hand with the sector and have started by correcting some of the existing technical errors, which make some of the requirements unable to be applied on the ground.

The sector is happy about the way we are going about this. The Energy system (PEB) is also being evaluated, and the whole sector is being consulted. This is taking place in May and results will be known in September. And we are of course taking European requirements into account, especially in view of the fact that 70% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions come from buildings. So we know the challenges in terms of environment.

Connect to  
[www.pro-realestate.be](http://www.pro-realestate.be)

→ NEWS

news on market trends, projects and transactions

→ PROJECTS LIBRARY

town planning master plans, offices,  
logistics & retail projects

→ LIBRARY

trends & best practices in property,  
workplace and facility management

→ NETWORK

coordinates & company profiles of key players  
in the Belgian real estate industry,  
along with suppliers



[www.pro-realestate.be](http://www.pro-realestate.be)



**Does this mean 'passive' conversions?**

Céline Fremault: No, and this is because there has always been a difficulty with the terminology. The term 'passive' has often been used wrongly, when what is important is 'energy performance'. There will be no moratorium on the PEB 2015 norm, especially as the sector has been consulted and given its approval to this. All our consultations show that there is no need to call this principle into question. We are working on the regulations regarding ground use and a conference will be held with all interested parties on May 26<sup>th</sup>.

“We investigate public-private partnerships to see how we can encourage the production of housing”

During this conference the results of a survey involving different sectors will be presented (economic, housing..) which are currently impacted by the ground use legislation. There are points of agreement which pose no problem. By contrast, some points need to be discussed during the conference. A work group will be set up to review the legislation.

**Will you be maintaining the 'Exemplary Buildings' programme?**

Céline Fremault: The Exemplary Buildings programme will not be repeated this year because the objective of demonstrating to the sector that it was capable of constructing in an exemplary manner, where energy is concerned, has been achieved. Nevertheless, many exemplary buildings are still to be constructed, and the experience gained in the past and to be gained in the future thanks to these buildings, will be to the benefit of Bruxelles-Environnement. This experience is shared with the sector via the 'sustainable building guide' which is regularly updated.