

Converting obsolete offic

One of the consequences of the general desire to return cities to their inhabitants, is to reconvert obsolete or unused office buildings into residential accommodation – in some way reversing the trend of past decades which has seen entire districts submerged by offices. The trend is beginning to make ground in Brussels, and we asked two of the major players to explain the stakes.

Firstly, we took the political view, represented by the Brussels Regional Development Agency and its president Denis Grimberghs. We started by asking what the City's role was.

Are you expecting to see this relatively new trend develop further, and do you have some examples?

Denis Grimberghs: Well in certain districts of Brussels, there are examples of buildings which were originally residential, and which were then transformed into offices. So there are some opportunities to return these buildings to their original vocation. This is in particular the case with the Louise district – especially the Avenue Louise itself – which saw many of its elegant residential buildings turned into offices. But there are not yet really any examples of very large office buildings which have become unused and have been converted into residential use.

Does the City have concrete objectives in this domain?

DG: The first objective is qualitative rather than quantitative – it is simply to avoid the existence of disused eyesores. Because the new eyesores of today are largely made up of former office buildings which have become abandoned and which are little more than carcasses. So here we have a real opportunity to intervene, and we can at the same time satisfy

two genuine demands which exist in the city and which we cannot easily satisfy: the first is a demand for residential accommodation, because there are districts within the city where we know we have to continue to increase the amount of housing. The second demand – which is somewhat allied to the first – is for social service facilities, such as crèches, old people's homes, schools, places for handicapped persons. These services find it difficult to install themselves because real estate is expensive for their needs, so we are able to recycle available constructions. In this way we can help to achieve a balance between supply and demand, especially where the supply is otherwise completely lacking.

Do you see the conversion of office space into residential as a way of decreasing the historically high office vacancy levels?

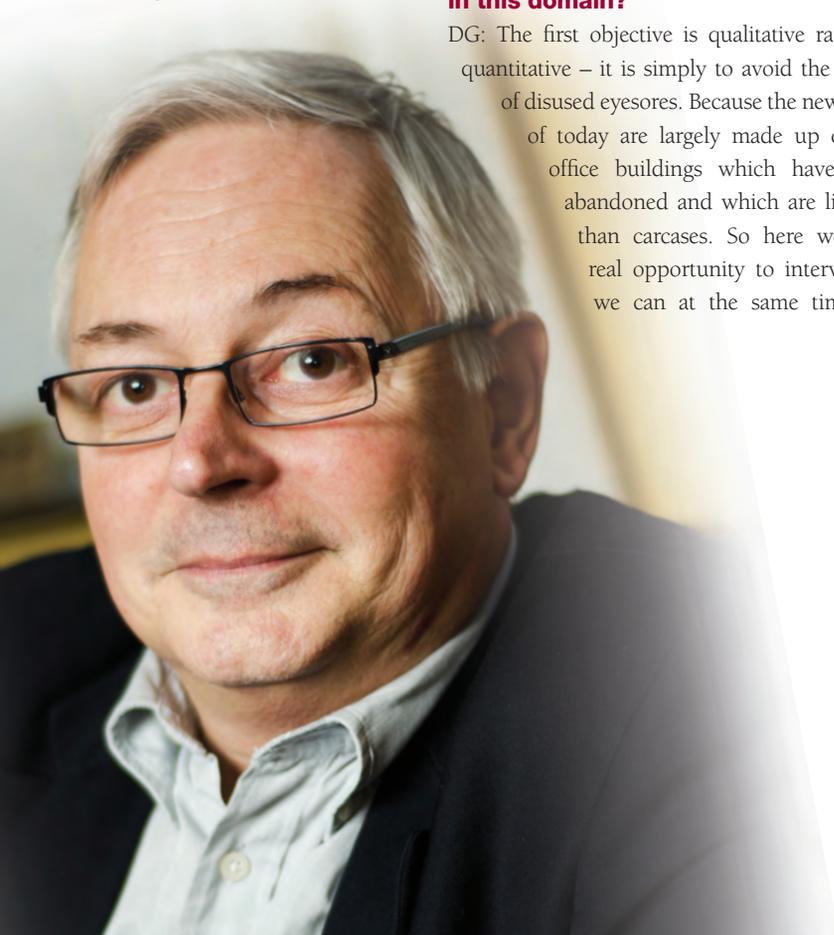
DG: I would start by saying that some of the types of buildings we are looking at may be completely degraded as offices, and probably do not appear in the official 'vacancy' figures in the first place. So our actions in converting them into housing use will not have a great effect on vacancy levels.

On top of this, we are also concerned, of course, to ensure that there is space available at reasonable prices for economic activity to come into the city, and so it is not in our interest, through our actions in the domain of residential accommodation, to have the effect of causing office rental prices to rise. And it is not our vocation to intervene in changing the usage of a building which may quite naturally find a taker in the normal course of business. Where we really do have a role is in some of the central districts, where there may have been older office buildings constructed for administrations and similar activities, but where the buildings no longer respond to required norms.

How much extra housing Brussels is going to need in the coming years?

DG: We are anticipating an increase in population of around 170,000 persons over the next 10 years, but it is difficult to translate population growth into a specific number of apartments. This is because there is also expected to be an increase in the average size of the household, and this would not

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es to housing...

be very difficult because in Brussels at the moment, one out of every two apartments is occupied by just one person. So an increase of any given percentage in the population does not lead to an equivalent increase in the number of apartments required.

We then turned to the practical side, explained by one of Belgium's leading architects, Philippe Verdussen of Archi 2000, whose bureau has experience in this type of operation. He explained how he saw the situation and the architectural challenges:

Is there a growing demand from owners, from your perspective, for this type of conversion?

Philippe Verdussen: There is a trend, that's for sure. We have recently been approached for certain large projects. One of these is in the area just below the major European institutions, where we are to convert some 15,000 m² into residential accommodation. We can see that as the office market is relatively flat for the moment, owners are looking for other solutions. Owners are finding themselves with buildings that are unoccupied, empty and deteriorating, and which will in any case have to be reconditioned. So it's a question of investing intelligently, deciding whether to invest in refurbished offices – which may be of little interest in the current market – or in hotels, in housing... The political world is also applying some pressure in this area, given the expected demographic changes. From a more architectural viewpoint, what are the technical challenges allied to this type of operation?

PV: The main technical issues concern acoustics and the energetic performance of the buildings. In terms of acoustics, there are substantial requirements in residential accommodation which are less of a priority in offices. And where energy performance is concerned, there are demands from the residential market which do not necessarily exist for offices, and which affect this performance – terraces for example. But on the other side of the coin, in housing there is not a need for the same room height as there is in offices, and there is less technical equipment, and therefore less technical equipment which has to be 'camouflaged'.

Is there a type of building which is not suitable for this type of conversion – certain volumes for example?

PV: Too great a depth is a problem, approaching 20 metres for example. We had this situation recently

in a city centre administrative building with a depth of 18 metres. So we had to find a solution in which the terraces played a role. There are many buildings in the European district with this type of depth. One of the ways around this is to create apartments which do not occupy the whole of the depth of the building, which means having apartments with one façade only. But this is not an ideal solution because there is a certain quality to an apartment which traverses the entire building depth and has daylight at each end.

The price...

There is also a cost consideration to be taken into account, though this appears to be diminishing in its importance. Previously, an obsolete office building may have sold for only 600-800 Euros per square metre if it was to be converted to residential use, against 1,400 to 1,600 Euros for future (renovated) office use. This reflected the lower returns on residential accommodation than on office space, but the gap is narrowing considerably. While there used to be a maximum future value of 2,000-2,500 Euros per square metre of residential space in Brussels, recent transactions have been achieved at much healthier prices, achieving 2,800 to 3,500 Euros, a price to which medium quality office buildings have now dropped. The experts agree that this type of conversion is neither the magic solution to growing office vacancy, nor to future housing needs, but it is a step in the right direction and is a valid concept in its own right.

Tim HARRUP ■

Philippe Verdussen (Archi 2000):
"The major challenge lies in the building depth".

