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The new real estate map - canal zone and housing

For the first of this season's seminars yesterday, Editions & Séminaires (Laurence de Hemptinne) once again managed to gather an impressive panel of presenters, and attract over 300 delegates. Industry presenters were joined by Brussels Minister-President Rudi Vervoort, Federal Mobility Minister Jacqueline Galant and Brussels Master Architect Kristiaan Borret.

The theme of the seminar was 'The New Real Estate Map in Brussels', and for the first report on the seminar, we will focus on housing and on the canal district. Starting with housing, the 'Observatory' reveals that around 4,000 permits for construction or renovation (adding an extra apartment to a building) are granted in the Brussels Region each year. But questioned on whether the much-reported demographic boom in Brussels has already peaked, Rudi Vervoort said it was not now as high as previously estimated, but that the Region still expected to see an extra 6,000 inhabitants per year over the foreseeable future, and that there is still a housing deficit. He also said that policy in real estate has to be flexible – you can no longer set a fixed plan for the next ten or fifteen years.

Looking at the canal district, but still with a focus on housing, citydev.brussels Managing Director Benjamin Cadranel presented two new projects, Citygate I and II. The first of these will provide around 33,000 m² of subsidised housing, and 1,520 m² of free market housing. The second will be located in a former pharmaceutical industry building, and will offer between 11,000 and 21,000 m² of housing. There will be other facilities – a school, production, retailing – all in the same building. This is the ultimate demonstration of 'mixed use', a concept which Benjamin Cadranel describes as a 'virtuous circle'.

Kristiaan Borret said that the canal zone had moved from the conception stage to the concrete stage, and that a 'committee' to oversee development had been set up. He also pointed out that the canal zone stretched across the whole of the Region's territory (north east to south west) and that its 2,800 hectares are located in 6 communes.

The two communes most affected by the developments in the canal zone are Anderlecht and Molenbeek. Setting out the challenges were the officials in charge of town planning for each: Gaétan Van Goidsenhoven and Olivier Mahy. Gaétan Van Goidsenhoven started by saying that the zone has to change, and that the fact that things finally appear to be moving, give confidence to inhabitants. And Olivier Mahy did not hesitate to point to one of the most obvious problems his commune faces in this district: it is heavily dedicated to second hand car dealers close to the abattoirs, and a way has to be found to dismantle or move this activity. The stakes are high – the activity is estimated to swallow up around 60,000 m² in the commune (and some more in Anderlecht) – which could be re-affected as housing. The problem appears to be administrative: the commune does not renew permits, but the Region does, on appeal.

One of the best-known future projects in the canal zone is Atenor's City Docks, which, as Stéphan Sonnevile pointed out, has now received permits for the first 40,000 m² of construction (rest home, housing, services...). He also said that residential developments need to be designed to respond to needs, in pricing among other things. City Docks, he said, had realistic pricing.

A further report on the current situation within the office market of the central districts, will follow. But to close, and to demonstrate that there is no absolute and unchanging reality in the real estate world, two moments which brought a little smile to the delegates' faces:

Stéphan Sonnevile: "When I planned the Up-site tower, everybody said – just you wait, you will be left with the bottom of the tower empty. But the few apartments that were left are at the top..."

Luc Bertrand (CEO, Ackermans & Van Haaren): "When I first started to develop in Brussels everybody told me that nothing would ever come of the North District!"

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