‘Gentrifying the Re-urbanisation Debate’, Not Vice Versa: The Uneven Socio-spatial Implications of Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Brussels

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges recent views of the sociospatial transformations of inner-city neighbourhoods as ‘reurbanisation’, for, it is argued, such views tend to divorce the demographic dimensions of the processes at play from their contrasted social class meanings and implications. In addition, it argues that the ongoing demographic diversification of inner cities in the Western world do not stand for the obsolescence of gentrification as a key concept for understanding sociospatial transformations in these places, but rather that this trend alerts to a need to complement existing interpretations of gentrification with new insights into its demographic underpinnings. This point is illustrated via an exploration of the implications of contemporary changes in transition to adulthood for urban sociospatial structures and housing market dynamics in Brussels. Findings stress that the rapid rise of middle-class young adults in non-family households in Brussels’ inner neighbourhoods brings about the reinvestment of the existing private rental market, fuelling in turn a process of rental gentrification. Such process exacerbates the competition for residential space in the city, being strongly detrimental to low-income, working-class households. The paper concludes that notwithstanding all local specifics, everywhere at stake is the need to keep a clear sense of the multiple social class stratifications of demographic change in inner neighbourhoods. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the late 20th century, significant changes in the age distribution and household composition of central neighbourhoods have been documented in a wide range of cities in advanced capitalist societies, notwithstanding the general continuation of suburban population growth (Bonvalet and Lelièvre, 1997; Ogden and Hall, 2000; 2004). At theoretical level, these trends have motivated some to revive the notion of ‘re-urbanisation’ (e.g. Ogden and Hall, 2000; Haase et al., 2003; Butler 2007; Buzar et al., 2007a,b). A concept once introduced in the early 1980s in order to encapsulate the most recent phase of urban development as seen from a demographic perspective (see Lever, 1993), re-urbanisation is attached to a rather broad definition in recent works, including an analytic dimension as well as a normative, policy-oriented one. On the one (analytic) hand, re-urbanisation is thought of as ‘a process of repopulating the inner city with a variety of social groups and lifestyles’ (Buzar et al., 2007a: 671). As such, this concept displays a number of similarities with other notions used to analyse processes of urban
change, not least with gentrification – that is, ‘the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use’ (Lees et al., 2007: xv). However, Buzar et al. (2007a: 673) argue that ‘re-urbanisation has a wider socio-spatial extent than gentrification, because it involves a variety of multidirectional flows and socio-demographic strata, rather than the concentrated spatial agency of a specific social class.’

On the other (normative) hand, re-urbanisation is conceived of as ‘a comprehensive dynamic of improving the residential attractiveness of the inner city for a wide variety of population groups’ (Buzar et al., 2007b: 64), as well as ‘a process of optimising economic, legal, social, built and environmental conditions to provide vibrant living space within the urban core (encompassing identity and cultural heritage) where individuals and households choose to live and which attracts investment’ (Haase et al., 2003: 5). This depiction eventually supports a wider claim that gentrification is unable to encompass the complexity of recent changes in core city neighbourhoods, and that it is now time for ‘“re-urbanising” the gentrification debate’ (Buzar et al., 2007a: 655).

In this paper, I take issue with this line of reasoning. I argue that calls for ‘re-urbanising the gentrification debate’ should be considered at best as a plea for a renewed analytic attention to the demographic underpinnings of contemporary socio-spatial transformations in inner-city neighbourhoods. However, the one-sided normative dimension attached to the characterisation of re-urbanisation in recent works simultaneously refers to a wider endeavour to strip perspectives on contemporary urban change of insights into the contrasted social class characters of the multiple processes at play (Slater, 2006). As such, ‘re-urbanisation’ appears very much in line with a batch of other terms – such as urban ‘revival’, ‘re-vitalisation’, ‘renaissance’, or ‘resurgence’ – that tend to naturalise socio-spatial transformations in cities, and to present them as providers of generic ‘win-win’ solutions to urban social problems, whereas only very limited attention is paid to exploring the actual experiences of low-income groups living in – or making use – of inner neighbourhoods vis-à-vis these transformations (Lees et al., 2007; Wacquant, 2008).

I will build on the first dimension of the ‘re-urbanisation debate’ (i.e. its analytic proposal) and simultaneously argue against its normative content. That is, I will argue that a renewed focus on the demographic dimensions of changes affecting inner cities should not lead to divorce the analysis of these changes from an assessment of their contrasted social class meanings and repercussions. My point is that the ongoing demographic diversification of core cities do not stand for the obsolescence of gentrification as a key concept for understanding socio-spatial transformations in these places, but rather that this trend alerts to a need to complement existing interpretations of gentrification with new insights into its demographic underpinnings. Accordingly, I will argue that the class dimension of gentrification debates should be infused into understandings of contemporary demographic changes in cities. To put it shortly, I claim that the argument made by Buzar et al. (2007a) should be turned the other way round, that is, to ‘gentrify the re-urbanisation debate.’

The first part of the paper will elaborate on this point. In a second part, I will illustrate it via a focus on the implications of one particular set of socio-demographic trends – i.e. changes in transitions to adulthood – for urban socio-spatial structures and housing market dynamics in Brussels. A focus on young adults is particularly relevant here, for youngsters at the beginning of their autonomous housing career, often living alone, with an unmarried partner or in groups of friends have repeatedly been identified amongst a broader set of key protagonists of re-urbanisation (e.g. Ogden and Hall, 2000; 2004; Buzar et al, 2007a; Bromley et al., 2007). In parallel, there is a long-standing consensus in the gentrification literature that young adults are central figures amongst gentrifiers, as epitomised in the archetypal figure of the ‘yuppie’ (i.e. young, upwardly mobile professionals) – or in the less-publicised case of the young ‘marginal gentrifier’ (Rose, 1984). Like in several other cities in Europe, the expansion of the category of young adults in non-family households makes a significant contribution to the ongoing diversification of socio-demographic profiles in Brussels’ inner neighbourhoods. Evidence presented in this paper will show that this trend bears contrasted geographies and distinct meanings for different social groups, and brings about the reinvestment of the existing private rental housing market rather than the expansion of the market for new,
developer-led residential developments – hence, making a difference with models of ‘new-build gentrification’ documented elsewhere (Davidson and Lees, 2005). In a third part, I will argue that urban implications of changes in youth transitions to adulthood take diverse forms in different urban contexts. In this respect, I will explore Brussels’ specificities as far as the real estate market and policy responses to socio-demographic change are concerned.

GENTRIFYING THE RE-URBANISATION DEBATE

The renewed scholarly interest in the concept of re-urbanisation can be situated against a knowledge gap in recent contributions to the gentrification debate and the wider urban studies literature as regards the socio-spatial implications of changing household geometries and reshaping of life courses. In a recent literature review, Buzar et al. (2005) note that households, family, and life course dynamics related to the Second Demographic Transition have been consistently marginalised in these literatures so far, whereas ‘...the demographic, cultural and economic outcomes of household-level dynamics constitute a powerful force of urban transformation’ (p. 424). Smith, D. (2002) makes a similar point in observing that population geographers have not engaged very far with the gentrification debate, and in noting that ‘(to) date, researchers of gentrification have not established links between processes of gentrification and wider population changes bound up with the multiple, and overlapping, transformations associated with the population processes of re-urbanisation, suburbanisation and counterurbanisation’ (p. 390). This leads this author to call for the development of new life course and household perspectives to the study of socio-spatial transformations in inner cities (see also Bondi, 1999; Bridge, 2003; Karsten, 2003; Lees et al., 2007).

Such perspectives, however, are not without forerunners. In the 1980s and early 1990s, a range of demographic arguments has been put forward to account for the production of potential gentrifiers in inner cities, not least by feminist authors (see Lees et al., 2007: 99–103 for a review). Most of these contributions were focused on changes in household demographies brought about by the coming of age of the new middle class of the baby-boom generations. Today, these cohorts are reaching retirement age, hence bringing up concerns about (notably) the socio-spatial implications of empty nest migrations, the constitution of ‘lifestyle communities’ catering to retired home-buyers, or processes of ageing in place (Rose and Villeneuve, 2006). In contrast, much less attention has been paid to the socio-spatial implications of contemporary changes in transitions to adulthood and the coming of age of the post-baby boom cohorts. Young adults born after 1965 – hence entering urban labour and housing markets since the mid-1980s – have to deal with very different economic, social, and political conditions in comparison with those conditions which were shaping transitions to adulthood in earlier decades. Sociologists and demographers have now assembled an impressive body of knowledge in this respect (see e.g. Corijn and Klijzing, 2001; Galland, 2004; Settersten et al., 2005). These works stress notably that the process of attaining adult roles (i.e. achieving economic, family, and residential independence) is much less linear and predictable that it once was in post-war decades, and that normative expectations concerning early adult life course transitions have been considerably reshaped since the 1980s. In addition, some works also highlight the role of housing market dynamics on the shaping of youth trajectories – such as the rise in housing prices in metropolitan areas and the gradual retreat of the State from public housing provision since the 1980s (Ford et al., 2002; Chauvel, 2006).

Leaving the parental home is no longer closely associated with crossing over a short period of time – usually around 20 – several conventional thresholds of transition to adulthood like finishing school, starting a career, getting married, and having a first child. Rather, new patterns of transition to adulthood commonly involve several movements into and between diverse transient, highly flexible non-family living arrangements, as well as prolonged stays in the parental home – including return moves after a first leave. This de-synchronisation of conventional thresholds of transition to adulthood brings about the opening up of a new stage in the life course that is referred to in various ways in literature – ‘early adulthood’ (Settersten et al., 2005), ‘post-adolescence’ (Corijn and Klijzing, 2001), or ‘new age of life’ (‘un nouvel âge de la vie’ – Galland, 2004).
Seeing the magnitude of these transformations affecting the household scale, it is surprising that researchers have not engaged far with the exploration of their socio-spatial impacts in various urban, suburban, and non-urban contexts. Here, the recent resurfacing of the notion of ‘re-urbanisation’ may seem promising at first sight, for this concept has a genuine connection with the demographic dimensions of contemporary urban change. As formulated by Buzar et al. (2007b: 64–65), ‘(m)any of the social groups that drive re-urbanisation stem from the demographic changes encapsulated by the “Second Demographic Transition”: population ageing, low fertility, the postponement of marriage and childbearing, declining marriage and rising divorce rates, increasing proportions of children born out of wedlock, and growing numbers of households cohabiting or living in nonconventional or “fluid” household structures.’ Yet, I will argue against such a conceptual move, for in my view calls for ‘re-urbanising the gentrification debate’ inappropriately brings the social class dimension out of the discussion of urban change while (usefully) bringing demography back in it.

The recent resurfacing of ‘re-urbanisation’ is closely associated with the completion of a EU-financed research programme – ‘Re-Urban Mobil’ (2002–2005) – entitled ‘Mobilising re-urbanisation on condition of demographic change.’ As stated on the project’s web page, the project’s aim is ‘...to analyse re-urbanisation potentials and obstacles of inner-city residential areas and to develop instruments, incentives and strategies for an appropriate and long-term use of these areas taking into consideration changing demographic preconditions’ (http://www.re-urban.com/project.htm – last accessed 19 August 2009). Looking further at the research project’s premises, it is said that ‘the concept of re-urbanisation discussed as a possible and desirable stage of urban development in the 1980s and beginning 1990s has to be revived, and at the same time, reformulated in order to work out a theoretical and methodological framework for a promotion of inner-city areas in European cities’ (Haase et al., 2003: 5). These quotes clearly underline the normative tone attached to the re-use of the re-urbanisation concept, that is, re-urbanisation is conceived here as an intrinsically desirable policy goal whose implementation has to be informed by relevant research findings.

As a corollary, very little room is left here for consideration of how demographic transitions might affect different social groups in different ways. This hiatus is salient if looking at the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the four cities involved as case studies in the Re-Urban Mobil programme (i.e. Leipzig, Ljubljana, Bologna and León). It is stated that ‘(t)he observed processes [of re-urbanisation] have deeply transformed the traditional working-class character of the surveyed inner-city quarters, which are now more socially diverse and spatially fragmented. As a whole, re-urbanisation is “splintering” and fluidising the urban socio-economic landscape’ (Buzar et al., 2007a: 673). In a parallel paper dealing solely with a case-study neighbourhood in Bologna, Buzar et al. (2007b: 78) state that ‘(d)espite the lack of clear gentrification patterns, inner-city Bologna has seen a dramatic rise in the number of young one-person households,’ and the authors add that ‘twenty years or so ago, areas such as Bolognina were very much working-class neighbourhoods, whereas today there is a varied occupational structure including a significant proportion of private professionals and a high proportion of students’ (idem, p.80). Quite surprisingly, however, very little is said about the impact of the rising presence of youngsters living alone on the housing market, the provision of services or the retail supply in inner neighbourhoods – as well as about the socio-economic profiles of these young one-person households compared with other young adults in the city or the rest of the urban population. In addition, the actual experiences of incumbent working-class populations vis-à-vis the ‘deep transformations’ of their living environment is consistently kept far away from the research focus.1 In this sense, the assertion that ‘clear gentrification patterns’ are lacking is at best premature.

Moreover, the wider concluding argument – that is, ‘the advantage of this concept [i.e. re-urbanisation] is contained in its ability to capture the wide variety of processes unfolding in the urban fabric -including gentrification- that have dynamised the socio-spatial development of the central city’ (Buzar et al., 2007b: 80) – appears highly questionable. Many gentrification researchers as well as community advocates would indeed find it difficult to learn here that gentrification is supposed to have ‘dynamised the socio-spatial development of the central city,’ whatever this might mean.
Accordingly, I argue that the re-emergence of the re-urbanisation concept do not keep to its promise of providing a comprehensive understanding of current socio-spatial transformations in inner cities, for it ignores the uneven distribution of social costs and benefits of these transformations. There is now a large body of evidence to indicate that inner neighbourhoods in ‘revitalising’ cities are becoming increasingly socially exclusive places (e.g. Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Bromley et al., 2007), hence indicating that much of the reality of the urban ‘renaissance’ is about social violence rather than socio-economic ‘fluidity.’ In this sense, I feel that following calls for ‘re-urbanising the gentrification debate’ bears the risk of inexorably loosing a clear sense of the class stratifications of socio-demographic change in inner neighbourhoods, and install instead vague, and indeed politically-correct perceptions of generalised ‘win–win’ situations.

In my view, the gentrification concept remains a crucial entry point into the multifaceted and multidirectional maelstrom of contemporary urban change because it intimately articulates the social, economic, demographic and political dimensions of these changes, and because it distances oneself from normative – and actually neoliberalised – views of the city’s future. What is now at stake is to refresh existing views on the demographic underpinnings of gentrification, notably as far as the role played in the process by youth in transitions to adulthood is concerned. The next part of this paper is an attempt at such an approach, taking Brussels as case study.

BRUSSELS: FROM DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE TO RENTAL GENTRIFICATION

In this part, I will explore the implications of recent demographic trends for socio-spatial structures and housing market dynamics in Brussels. Urban implications of changes in transitions to adulthood and the rise of young adults living alone or in other non-family households in inner-city neighbourhoods will be particularly focused on in relation with the aforementioned debates on re-urbanisation and gentrification.

Demographic Trends

After a quarter of century of continuous population loss, the Brussels Capital Region (i.e. the politico-institutional delimitation of the core part of the Brussels’ metropolitan area) is gaining inhabitants since the mid-1990s, and the city’s population is above one million since 2001. In parallel, suburban population growth is ongoing, bringing the new suburbanites to settle down in new developments in ever more distant municipalities (Fig. 1). Accordingly, the characteristics of the re-urbanisation phase of urban development (see Lever, 1993) are not met here, for both the core city and its suburbs are gaining inhabitants. In addition, contrary to what a back-to-the-city model would imply, the migration balance between the core city and its suburban fringes remains negative. The recent repopulation of the city is rather linked to a largely positive – and actually growing – migration balance between the Brussels Capital Region and foreign

Figure 1. Evolution of the population numbers in the Brussels metropolitan area.
countries, as well as, to a lesser extent, to a positive birth-to-death ratio (Table 1). This implies that international immigration originating from both European and other, generally Third-World countries, makes the largest contribution to the recent repopulation trend in the city.²

In addition, Brussels’ demographic structure is also becoming less family-oriented in the sense that, between 1981 and 2004, there has been an apparent decrease of households composed of a married couple (with or without children) and a rapid increase of one-person households (especially men living alone), lone-parents households (especially mothers with children) and other (non-)family households (including couples of unmarried partners) (Table 2). The rapid rise of one-person households over the last two decades has been particularly striking for young adults living alone: between 1981 and 2001, the number of individuals between 18 and 34 living alone has escalated by 46.0% (+48.1% for men; +43.2% for women) compared with a growth of 26.0% for one-person households (all age groups taken into account), and a quasi-stagnation for the 18–34 age group as a whole (−1.6%). Accordingly, the increase in numbers of young adults living alone accounts for about half (45%) of the increase of one-person households in the Brussels Capital Region between 1981 and 2001 (Census data, author’s calculations). Such expansion of the category of young adults living alone over the last two decades echo similar findings, notably in British and French cities (e.g. Ogden and Hall, 2000, 2004; Ogden and Schnoebelen, 2005).

Who are Young Adults in Non-family Households in Brussels?

Table 3 displays the socio-economic, tenure, and gender profiles of young adults (18–34) in non-

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Table 1. Detail of the demographic evolution, Brussels Capital Region (BCR), period 2000–2005.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population gains (Mean per year)</th>
<th>Population losses (Mean per year)</th>
<th>Balance (Ratio to population number ‰)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Births</td>
<td>14,567</td>
<td>10,095</td>
<td>+4,472 (+4.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburbs to BCR</td>
<td>11,261</td>
<td>18,652</td>
<td>−7,391 (−7.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of Belgium to BCR</td>
<td>9,459</td>
<td>11,855</td>
<td>−2,396 (−2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign countries to BCR</td>
<td>26,696</td>
<td>10,096</td>
<td>+16,600 (+16.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62,252</td>
<td>50,698</td>
<td>+11,554 (+11.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FPS Economy – Statistics Division, Population Register data, author’s tabulation.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women living alone</td>
<td>116,952</td>
<td>128,732</td>
<td>+10.1</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men living alone</td>
<td>71,719</td>
<td>116,946</td>
<td>+63.1</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-family households</td>
<td>13,463</td>
<td>23,107</td>
<td>+71.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married couples, no child</td>
<td>91,564</td>
<td>65,953</td>
<td>−28.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married couples, with child(ren)</td>
<td>112,776</td>
<td>86,408</td>
<td>−23.4</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers and child(ren)</td>
<td>28,998</td>
<td>42,962</td>
<td>+48.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers and child(ren)</td>
<td>5,167</td>
<td>6,658</td>
<td>+28.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family households</td>
<td>11,169</td>
<td>18,081</td>
<td>+61.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1,970</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>−89.0</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>453,778</td>
<td>489,063</td>
<td>+7.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Couples of unmarried partners are ill defined in Belgian statistics; if without children, they appear in the category ‘other non-family households’, if with children, they appear amongst ‘other family households’.
family households in Brussels in 2001, and contrasts them with the profiles of young adults in other household types and with the rest of the population in the city. In order to avoid possible misclassification of youngsters de facto cohabiting with a partner but officially registered as living alone, individuals between 18 and 34 living alone or in a childless couple of unmarried partners (including same-sex couples) have been grouped together as ‘young adults in non-family households’.

First, this category displays a positive sex ratio, mainly because of the predominance of men living alone over women living alone. As such, this discrepancy shows a local measure of the generally higher propensity for men to live alone after leaving the parental home in Western societies (Galland, 2004). The sex ratio is conversely

Table 3. A comparison of the socio-economic and tenure profile of young adults (18–34) in non-family households, other young adults and the whole population, Brussels Capital Region, 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young adults in non-family households</th>
<th>Other young adults</th>
<th>Total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population number</td>
<td>49.877</td>
<td>39.890</td>
<td>75.942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender distribution (%)</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position vis-à-vis the labour market (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students/pupils</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non active (e.g. retired housewife)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower education or no diploma</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary education</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education (undergraduate)</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education (postgraduate)</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional position (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White collar in the private sector</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collar in the private sector</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff public sector (white &amp; blue collar)</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of company</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential mobility (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved in between 2000 and 2001</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved in between 1996 and 2001</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>54.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure mode (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner-occupier</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renter – private landlord</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renter – public housing</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other EU-15</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maghreb, Turkey, Congo</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FPS Economy – Statistics Division, 2001 Census and Population Register data, Author’s tabulation.
Note: ‘Young adults in non-family households’ are people between 18 and 34 living alone or in a childless couple of unmarried partners; young adults living in households comprising several unrelated people (e.g. a group of friends sharing an apartment) could not be included in this category because of data unavailability.
negative for young adults in other household types mainly because of the prevalence of mothers with children over fathers with children.

The vast majority of young adults in non-family households are active on the labour market – but including a significant share of unemployed persons. Conversely, only very few amongst them are students, hence motivating to widen perspectives on the role of young adults in urban change well beyond ‘studentification’ processes (compare Smith, D., 2005). In addition, young adults in non-family households are about 1.5 times as likely than other young adults in the city to hold a higher degree, with a maximum ratio for women holding postgraduate degree, and white-collar workers are predominant amongst them, even more so amongst women in this category. Finally, young adults in non-family households display very high levels of residential mobility: almost 90% of them have moved during the 5-year period prior to the 2001 Census, and almost 40% have moved during the year just prior the 2001 census. These very high residential mobility levels are to be linked with the large proportion of private renters amongst young adults in non-family households (almost 80%), most of them holding short-term leases. By contrast, other young adults are about twice less likely to rent accommodation from a private landlord.

Finally, non-Belgian EU-15 nationals are over-represented amongst young adults in non-family households, in comparison to both other young adults and the whole population. This finding is indicative of the presence in Brussels of young expatriate professionals gravitating towards the EU and EU-related international organisations headquartered in the city (e.g. EU Commission trainees, journalists, lawyers, NGOs employees . . .), and typically living alone or with a partner. By contrast, North African, Turkish, and Congolese nationals (i.e. nationalities representatives of working-class migrants) are less represented amongst young adults in non-family households.

To summarise, empirical evidence presented in Table 3 indicate that young adults in non-family households in Brussels are typically educated individuals, white-collar workers, and highly mobile individuals renting their homes from private landlords. In addition, evidence from a recent enquiry with private renters in Brussels highlights that the disposable income of renters aged between 25 and 34 and living alone is generally slightly higher than for the whole set of renters in the city (De Keersmaecker, 2006). Such findings suggest therefore that the social class dimension remains a key aspect of early adult life course transitions. As such, there are in line with results brought out by multiple works in the field of sociology of youth in different national and regional contexts (see e.g. Jones, 1987; Corijn and Klijzing, 2001; Galland, 2004). These works have repeatedly stressed that those in early adulthood benefiting from residential independence and lifestyle autonomy decoupled from conventional commitments regarding marriage and childrearing (i.e. living alone, in childless couples of cohabiting partners, or living with friends) are mostly middle-class young adults. In contrast, youth from working-class backgrounds are generally much less likely to move into independent non-family living arrangements.

The Geography of Young Adults in Non-family Households

Young adults in non-family households are not evenly distributed in the city. As Figure 2A shows, this group is mostly concentrated in the eastern inner city and the historic core (i.e. the area referred to as the ‘Pentagon’ after the layout of the boulevards marking its boundaries). This spatial pattern has been consolidating over the 1990s, for these neighbourhoods have concentrated most of the increase of this household type over the last decade (Van Criekingen, 2008a). These neighbourhoods concentrate a large stock of rental accommodations, mostly in 19th century, former one-family houses divided up in apartments and rented out by private landlords (i.e. about 60% of the local housing stock). Accordingly, middle-class young adults leaving the parental home (to enter university, for instance) have ample possibilities to start their housing career in a privately rented apartment in the inner city. Very often, however, renting in an inner neighbourhood has limited temporal boundaries in their housing and socio-spatial trajectories, for many of them will move later in the life course to more socially homogeneous residential environments in (sub)urban municipalities outside the city core (Grimmeau et al., 1998).
There is no sign of a recent expansion of this market for privately rented accommodation, but rather strong indications that a wave of reinvestment has hit the private rental housing market since the mid-1980s. Between 1986 and 2004, rent levels have increased 46% above the inflation rate (Zimmer, 2007), and this increase has been highest (in relative terms) for small housing units in older buildings in inner neighbourhoods (Defeyt, 2004). In addition, there is evidence to indicate that rent increases in these neighbourhoods often run parallel to housing renovation by property-owners (Van Criekingen and Decroly, 2003). Such trend does not translate, however, in the emergence of a homogenised landscape of reinvestment of the existing rental housing market in the inner city. Rather, reinvestment is a piecemeal process whose advance is strongly influenced by the fragmented character of home ownership in the city. Accordingly, Brussels’ inner neighbourhoods display generally very heterogeneous landscapes, showing the juxtaposition of rehabilitated properties, non-rehabilitated ones and some new developments.

Neighbourhoods in the city’s wealthy southeastern outer ring are barely penetrable for young adults in non-family households. Middle- and upper class owner-occupiers are predominant in these neighbourhoods, and one finds here the largest proportions of young adults living in the parental home (Fig. 2B). This pattern shed light on the territorialisation of the so-called ‘Tanguy phenomenon’ (or ‘in-house adulthood’), that is, the prolongation of youth’s residential dependence on parents (see Rombauts et al., 2007 for the Belgian case). In these neighbourhoods, young adults in middle- and upper class families can counterbalance a – relative – lack of residential independence and lifestyle autonomy by benefiting from comfortable living conditions in generally spacious homes. However, Figure 2B also indicates that many young adults living in the

Figure 2. Geography of young adults (18–34) in Brussels Capital Region, 2001, living in (A) non-family households and (B) the parental home.

Source: FPS Economy – Statistics Division, census data, data transformation and mapping by the author.
Effects on Low-income Groups

Seeing that the private rental housing market also accommodates most of low-income households in the city, the reinvestment of the market for rented accommodation amongst middle-class young adults translates into a rising competition for residential space in Brussels’ inner neighbourhoods. Actually, the stock of rental accommodations in the inner city acts de facto as social housing provider, for it is the only segment of the housing market low-income households can afford considering the shortage of public-owned de jure social housing (i.e. only 8% of the housing stock, whilst a proportion as high as 30% of the city’s population is below the poverty line – FPS Economy – Statistics Division, EU-SILC 2005) (Charles, 2006). Accordingly, the position of low-income households on the inner-city housing market is severely jeopardised in case of rent increases, even if most of the newcomers are not amongst the wealthiest categories of the urban population. In addition, the high mobility of middle-class young adults in the private rental housing market in Brussels’ inner neighbourhoods (see Table 3) acts as a powerful catalyst for escalating rent levels, for there is no legal restrictions on rent levels in case of rental vacancy. That is, how the new rent is worked out once a tenant leaves and a new lease is concluded is entirely left to market mechanisms within the framework of individualised negotiations between the landlord and would-be renters, and landlords have ample possibilities for ending a lease before its term (e.g. for self-occupation purposes or for the implementation of substantial renovation work) (De Decker, 2001). It is therefore quite practical for landlords to respond to demands of middle-class young adults for small, non-luxury though comfortable rental units in central neighbourhoods, and upgrade the characteristics and pricing of their properties accordingly.

In this context, rising competition for residential space in Brussels’ inner neighbourhoods bears a range of harmful consequences for low-income groups. Amongst them are the severe exclusionary displacement pressures (Marcuse, 1986; Slater, 2006) faced by working-class youngsters in poor neighbourhoods. That is to say that their residential trajectories are heavily restricted – and increasingly so – by the takeover of the central city’s private rental housing market by more affluent groups, notably middle-class young adults. Moreover, escalating rent levels translates into deteriorating living conditions for low-income households in poor neighbourhoods, like, e.g. housing downsizing and overcrowding and forced cutbacks in essential household expenses such as education or healthcare as an inflating share of earnings must be devoted to housing costs (i.e. in situ impoverishment). Parallel empirical investigations have also indicated that direct displacement of socially vulnerable households out of reinvested neighbourhoods in Brussels is an actual, though limited constituent of the migration dynamics in the inner city (Van Criekingen, 2008b).

On top of consequences brought about by housing market dynamics, the influx of middle-class young adults in non-family households in inner neighbourhoods also underpins visible changes in the local supply of retail and services. Since the 1990s, neighbourhoods in the historic core and the eastern inner city have been reconfigured by the rapid emergence of new landscapes of ‘trendy’ consumption structured around a range of modish eateries, cafés, and boutiques. A detailed analysis in one such new ‘trendy’ neighbourhood in the historic core has showed the key role of entrepreneurial strategies targeted at the niche market of middle-class young adults in the emergence of such landscapes (Van Criekingen and Fleury, 2006). In the end, such transformations add noticeably to the pressure felt by those who do not patronise the new ‘trendy hotspots’ and may feel loosing a sense of place (such as
elderly working-class people or youth from immigrant origin).

In sum, analysing the urban implications of youth transitions to adulthood in Brussels highlights a particular trajectory of neighbourhood change fuelled by the rising presence of middle-class young adults in non-family households in the private rental housing market in the inner city. In previous accounts (Van Criekingen and Decroly, 2003), this trajectory has been referred to as ‘marginal gentrification,’ after Rose’s (1984) depiction in Montreal. I will switch here to ‘rental gentrification’ for this designation stresses more clearly the essential association of this trajectory of neighbourhood change with the reinvestment of the existing private rental market, while bearing less risk of misleading *a priori* interpretations based on possible semantic associations of ‘marginal’ with ‘unimportant’, ‘gentle’, or ‘soft.’

REAL ESTATE MARKET AND POLICY RESPONSES

The process of ‘rental gentrification’ makes a notable difference with both classical stories of gentrification (i.e. whose key protagonists are affluent homebuyers in the inner city), and trajectories of ‘new-build gentrification’. There is a growing body of evidence from the UK and North America to link the expansion of the middle-class young adult population to the latter kind of process, that is, the development of new-build complexes of apartments or condominiums on former brownfield sites, railway yards, or recycled waterfront sites, and geared to urban-seeking middle-class clienteles such as young professionals in living alone or in childless households and working downtown, or empty nesters (Davidson and Lees, 2005; Lehrer, 2006; Allen, 2007; Bromley *et al.*, 2007). This emerging ‘city living market’ (as it is branded by real estate actors – see e.g. Knight Frank, 2005) comprises various segments, amongst which a non-luxury section adapted to relatively moderated earnings (Rose and Villeneuve, 2006).

In Brussels, new-build gentrification is only incipient. For the whole Brussels Capital Region, volumes of new residential units built annually by private developers have doubled between 1996–1998 (1,595 housing units per year) and 2003–2006 (3,013 housing units per year – FPS Economy – Statistics Division, building permits data), but they remain limited in absolute terms. This apparent under-development (so far) of new-build gentrification schemes in Brussels can be related to the long-standing bias of large-scale real estate developers towards investment in the office market, with correlatively few investments in the residential market. This situation results from a long history of *laissez faire* attitudes vis-à-vis office development in the city consistently legitimated by a strategy to secure the presence of the EU and other international institutions in the city, facilitate their further expansion and attract related organisations and businesses looking for a presence in the (self-declared) ‘Capital of Europe.’

Moreover, many housing developments are built in the outer ring of established middle-class neighbourhoods (Ananian, 2007). In the inner city, recent developments are either in small-scale infill schemes on vacant sites, or in former industrial buildings converted into lofts complexes. These are typically upmarket projects, geared to high-income clients such as expatriate professionals or affluent empty nesters. Accordingly, such schemes are commonly unaffordable for the vast majority of middle-class young adults currently renting in the inner city – and *a fortiori* for youth in poor central neighbourhoods.

Furthermore, there is also ample evidence to support the statement that contemporary processes of demographic diversification or repopulation of core cities in the advanced capitalist world are intimately integrated in policy frameworks and linked to public interventions in various fields (e.g. Smith, N., 2002; Atkinson and Bridge, 2005). Such link is relevant too for the Brussels’ case, for the repopulation of the city is a major policy goal since the institutional birth of the Brussels Capital Region in 1989. This option is referred to in regional policy documents and mainstream media discourses in terms of an ‘urban revitalisation’ leitmotiv. Its major objective is to divert middle-class households from moving to the suburbs, and to keep them as owner-occupiers in the city. Diverse policy instruments are dedicated to this aim, amongst which renovation grants to homeowners and tax cuts for homebuyers, the refurbishment of public spaces in disinvested inner neighbourhoods, as well as the patronage of multiple festive events and promotional campaigns designed to enhance
perceptions of living in the inner city to middle-class (extra-)local audiences. By contrast, regional and municipal authorities – in Brussels as well as in the rest of Belgium – are historically ill-equipped as far as public housing production is concerned. Accordingly, the number of housing units produced within public-funded ‘revitalisation’ frameworks remains very limited (539 per year over the period 1989–2005), and this number has dropped to extremely low levels in recent years as far as the production of social housing units is concerned (28 per year over the period 2000–2005 – adapted from Zimmer, 2007).

In this context, middle-class young adults willing to prolong their stay in the city have few other options apart from circulating on the private rental market, or for those able to access homeownership, looking for a dwelling to renovate in a working-class neighbourhood and capitalise on public-funded improvements to the neighbourhood and available renovation grants. As such, parallels can be made between the Brussels’ case and other cities. For instance, Slater (2004: 1209) has noted that ‘[i]n a booming housing market that has made many New York neighbourhoods affordable only to the corporate elite, the middle classes have fewer options than ever before and are “overspill” settlers in this neighbourhood [i.e. Lower Park Slope] not by choice but by few other choices’ (emphasis as in original). In a similar vein, Beers (2007) has commented that the allegedly successful revitalisation of Vancouver implies that the city is now ‘eating its young’ because of skyrocketing housing prices. However, in pointing at these statements, I do not intend at supporting some sort of (young) middle-class victimology. Rather, competition for residential space in Brussels, New York, Vancouver – as well as in many other cities – bears much more harmful impacts for lower-status groups – amongst whom youth from working-class or immigrant origin.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to overcome the bias identified in the renewed scholarly interest in the concept of ‘re-urbanisation’ – that is, its apparent sightlessness to the social class stratifications of urban demographic change – this paper has shown that gentrification processes at play in Brussels have specific demographic underpinnings. That is, the reinvestment of inner neighbourhoods in the city is driven to a large extent by the expansion of the category of middle-class young adults in non-family households, with generally transient attitudes to city centre residence. This household type embodies particular conditions derived from the increasing flexibility of early adult life courses, which is a part of the Second Demographic Transition.

The residential trajectories of these households are largely directed towards the private rental market in the city’s historic core and inner ring of 19th-century neighbourhoods. This accounts for the development of rental gentrification processes in Brussels, that is, the reinvestment of the market for privately rented accommodation amongst middle-class young adults. In contrast, new-build gentrification appears only incipient. Rental gentrification processes trigger a rising competition for residential space in the city, bearing a range of adverse effects – including exclusionary and direct displacement, and in situ impoverishment – for other population groups, not least for youngsters from working-class or immigrant origin that appear to be increasingly ‘locked up’ in less-gentrified inner neighbourhoods.

Accordingly, evidence brought out of the Brussels’ case shows that the territorialisation of changes in youth transitions to adulthood bears contrasted geographies and distinct meanings for different social groups, and even adds to the marginalisation of low-income residents in inner neighbourhoods. This suggests that, notwithstanding all local specifics considering real estate market and policy responses to socio-demographic change, everywhere at stake is the need to explore the contrasted socio-spatial implications of these changes. We need to keep a clear sense of who is benefiting from current waves of urban change and who is affected by them, and how.

NOTES

(1) Moreover, in the case of Bologna, one should mention the role of particular, and indeed quite unique anti-displacement regulations enforced in the 1970s and 1980s under a Communist-Socialist coalition.

(2) Since 1996, population numbers include people in the waiting register for asylum seekers (in 2006: 2.6% of the Region population, 0.5% of the population in the suburbs); accordingly, part of the post-
1995 population growth in the city is due to the – still very partial – regularisation of undocumented foreign immigrants.

(3) Put another way, 39.4% of those who changed residence between 1996 and 2001 are young adults in non-family households, and 48.3% of those who changed residence between 2000 and 2001.

(4) Information about the income levels of particular households types are not available from the Census.

(5) Figures for the whole city are 47% of the households renting their home from private landlords, 42% owner-occupiers, 8% tenants in the social housing sector, and 3% tenants in other public properties (data for 2001).

(6) Compare for instance the number of renovation grants allocated to private homeowners during the same period (3,332 per year) or the size of the housing stock in the Region (about 500,000 units) (figures adapted from Zimmer, 2007).

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