

Appealingly scruffy

Next Neighbourhood : Saint Gilles, Brussels. By Joshua Chaffin



The area round Parvis de St Gilles

A dozen years ago Ilana Bet-El, a consultant, was sent to Brussels from London and received the same housing advice that greets so many ex-pats on arrival in the European Union hub: live in Ixelles. That would be the bourgeois neighbourhood where Eurocrats tend to lavish their living allowances on handsome apartments, upmarket restaurants and boutiques. "All the estate agents took me only to see places in Ixelles," recalls Bet-El, who judged the place "too white" and "homogenous".

It was only after searching through apartment listings in a local magazine that she discovered Saint Gilles – Ixelles's scruffy, bohemian neighbour – and a love affair was born. Bet-El first rented an apartment in the area before she and her partner took the plunge three years ago and bought a house nearby. "We have only ever lived in St Gilles and we love it," she says. "We never tire of walking the streets and looking at the houses."

They are not the only ones to fall under the spell of St Gilles, a working-class neighbourhood that has seen an influx of foreigners in recent years – from eastern European diplomats to students and interns at the European Parliament.

They have been lured by a stock of *maison de maître* townhouses that feature the sort of space that only hedge fund managers and bank high flyers could afford in London or New York. These are often adorned with the fanciful accents wrought by artisans from an era gone by.

"St Gilles has the reputation of old houses with wooden floors and lots of charm," explains **Patrick Menache**, founder of estate agency **Macnash Associates**.

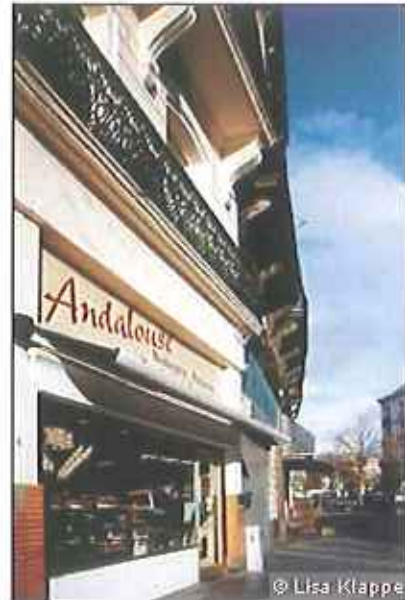
It also boasts an eclectic mix of bars and restaurants – from Belgian brasseries to Portuguese bakeries and Italian trattorias, all in the space of just a few blocks. If that were not enough, there is its prized position amid a criss-crossing network of tram and subway lines.

"Fifteen years ago people would not willingly go to live in St Gilles," says Mark Gray, an aide to José Manuel Barroso, European Commission president. "Now it's one of the most desirable parts of town."

Prices have risen in recent years as foreign licence plates have proliferated. A three-bedroom home that might have fetched €200,000 a decade ago would now go for at least €350,000, according to Menache.

Yet – for better or worse – the neighbourhood has managed to retain its old-fashioned and unwashed feel. Its pavements are still a minefield of dog poop and its walls sprout vines of graffiti in spite of repeated efforts to whitewash them. While St Gilles enthusiasts optimistically describe their neighbourhood as "bohemian" it can sometimes feel more like an open-air methadone clinic.

"It may be slightly gentrified but it certainly hasn't become chic by any means," says Cleveland Moffett, an American writer who has lived in St Gilles for more than 20 years. "Some of us like the scruffy nature of it."



Shops offering ethnic cuisine

The area's richness derives from the fact that it has long served as a landing point for generations of Brussels' immigrants, from Italians, Spanish and Portuguese to a more recent wave of north Africans.

It is actually several neighbourhoods in one. It starts down at the gritty Gare du Midi train station and, from there, follows an uphill slope – both in geographic and socioeconomic terms – until it runs into Ixelles.



Its higher elevations feature dozens of elegant, art nouveau houses designed by the likes of Victor Horta and Paul Hankar. "The most beautiful art nouveau houses are in St Gilles," marvels Anne Borgers, a Belgian architect. "There was a real focus on the neighbourhood in the 1920s."

The home Horta designed for himself still stands on Rue Américaine, where it has been converted to a museum celebrating his life and work. The local government has enhanced its inheritance by installing old-style street lamps from the gas-light era.

Incongruously situated among these architectural treasures is a turn-of-the-20th-century prison that is still in use. While Belgian prisons have a relaxed attitude about holding on to their occupants, that does not seem to spook residents of the high-priced homes just outside its stone walls. (In fact, to a seasoned St Gilles ear, the phrase "I live near the prison" can sound like a snobbish boast).

St Gilles's regeneration began in the late 1990s, when developers learnt that the Gare du Midi was to become the Brussels terminus for high-speed trains from Paris. In ways that still rankle some locals, they began buying up and demolishing buildings around the station, which had been a notoriously dingy, dangerous and urine-soaked part of town. It now hosts unimaginative office towers.

"That was a big thing," Moffett recalls. "The Gare du Midi used to be absolutely dreadful. Friends from Paris used to come here and say: 'My God! What is this place?'"

Sprucing up the Parvis de St Gilles, a square that hosts a regular market, has also added to the neighbourhood buzz. The Parvis features some of the rickety, smoke-filled bars that are an ever-present reminder of Brussels' cheap beer and high unemployment. But a new clutch of artsy cafés has moved in, bringing the laptop and iPod set with it. Chief among them is the Maison du Peuple, named for a famous Horta building that once housed the Socialist party but was later torn down in one of Brussels' periodic fits of self-mutilation. St Gilles has also sought to showcase its creative community by sponsoring regular weekends in which local artists open their homes to the public.

The area's diversity extends to its prices. A no-frills, two-bedroom apartment a short walk from the Parvis de St Gilles is listed with **Macnash AssociateS** at €180,000. By contrast, a 165 sq metre, three-bedroom flat in a building just off Brussels' main thoroughfare, Avenue Louise, is listed at €750,000. That price includes a mezzanine and terrace, two bathrooms, a garage and a generous helping of turn-of-the-century grandeur.

As with the rest of Brussels, one benefit for investors is that properties tend to hold their value – even amid an economic crisis – because of the growing ranks of EU diplomats with money to spend.

Still, there are several pitfalls and challenges for potential St Gilles' buyers. Brussels charges a hefty 12.5 per cent registration fee on top of the purchase price; and, in a bid to reduce the number of cars on the streets, local authorities now prevent buyers from carving houses into multiple units, thus depriving them of potential rental income.



Old-style streetlamps

Bet-El notes that properties are often bought by neighbours through word-of-mouth before they reach the public listings, making it difficult for newcomers to penetrate the market.

Finally, many St Gilles homes will require extensive renovation – from changing the doors to patching up roofs and refurbishing the electricity and plumbing. "When you add it all up, it's not always such a bargain," says **Menache**. But, for St Gilles's devotees, those sorts of obstacles might help their beloved neighbourhood retain its character just a little bit longer.

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