

The village people?

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The impact of COVID-19 on urban life and cities has been increasingly discussed over the last weeks and months. Academics, civil society organisations, policy makers and journalists have reflected on how this exceptional situation impacts cities, urban life, and people's lives in general. A wide range of perspectives emerged in these contributions in the popular media. Almost all of these pieces point at the current shortcomings of our cities and discuss possibilities for improvement, and the role of policy makers in realising greener cities and adequate housing. When discussing the impact of COVID-19 on people's housing preferences it is often assumed that a growing number of people will (prefer to) leave the dense urban cities and move to the country side or the more rural areas where the qualitative living environment rejoices their heart and where they can enjoy their own private gardens.

At least two points of critique need to be raised in relation to these opinion pieces: First, the suggestions and findings are old wines in new barrels. Sufficient green and open spaces, qualitative housing options, the need for mixed area developments and proximity to amenities etc. are indeed important if we want to have cities that provide a good life for all. We have known this for years and the literature on this is substantial.

Second – and central in this contribution – is the observation that these opinion pieces are exactly that: opinions... They reflect the ideas, beliefs and the gut feelings of the authors, but are not grounded in research on the effects of COVID-19. We aim for a more nuanced debate about the urban context, grounded in empirical insights and research findings.

During the lockdown, and as part of a dissertation project, a small research project was set up at the Faculty of Architecture at the KU Leuven. The aim was to get a better understanding of how the COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium has influenced people's own assessment of their living environment and their housing situation. Did the lockdown actually scare people away from cities and housing types mostly associated with (dense) urban contexts? Or was the urban, on the contrary, able to convince habitants of its potential? And if so, under which conditions?

Our project is based on an online questionnaire and five qualitative in-depth interviews with people in their twenties. The questionnaire was available online between the 23th of April and May 7th. It was distributed through a wide variety of social media and specific platforms such as seniorennet.be, the most popular website for 50+, in order to reach a wide cross-section of the population. During these 14 days we received 1 971 responses¹. Respondents are distributed over different age groups (see table 1) and over different housing typologies (see table 2 and fig. 1). We have reached mostly female respondents (77%) and people living in an urban context (42%). All but three of the Belgian respondents live in Flanders.

¹ A small minority of respondents lived abroad. Here, we only include responses of people living in Belgium (N=1944).

Table 1. Age distribution of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent
18 - 25	442	22.4
26 - 35	401	20.3
36 - 49	398	20.2
50 - 70	586	29.7
70+	144	7.3
Total	1944	100.0

Table 2. Distribution of the respondents housing type

Freestanding house	32,1%
Semi-detached house	18,1%
Row houses	24,2%
Apartments	19,7%
Others (collective housing, loft, studio, ..)	5,9%

Figure 1. Different housing types in Flanders



The questionnaire consists of five sections. The first section questioned the respondents on how they were able to cope with the lockdown measures and examined the mitigating role of their residential context (eg. the access to a private garden, ...). Three sections discuss the importance of proximity (of amenities, of public spaces and social proximity) in relation to coping mechanisms in lockdown times. The final section then discusses housing preferences and investigates the impact of the lockdown experience on a possible change in preferences. In this contribution we focus on this final section. We present some first noteworthy findings about these preferences, because they present a more nuanced picture and as such question the current assumptions of urban flight.

RESIDENTIAL CONTEXTS

We have asked the respondents of the questionnaire about their current residential contexts and their preferred ideal living situation post-COVID-19. All the different residential settings (see figure 2) appear to be approximately equally preferred, as shown in figure 3. Interestingly, there is hardly any difference compared to their current living environments. It seems that the urban flight that is so passionately discussed these days is not supported by these initial results. Moreover, the majority of respondents state their current residential settings as the preferred post-COVID-19 living environment (see figure 4).

Figure 2. Residential settings in Flanders. The top row shows how these typologies were represented in the questionnaire.



Figure 3. Respondents current residential settings compared to their ideal post-COVID-19 situation.

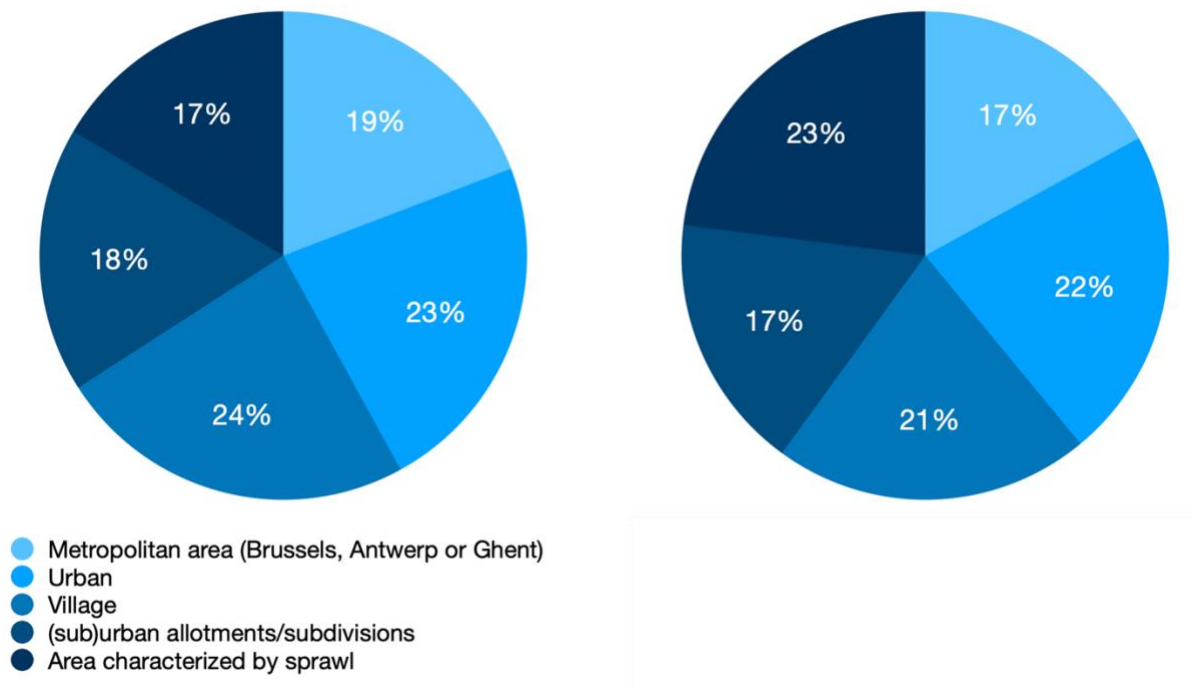
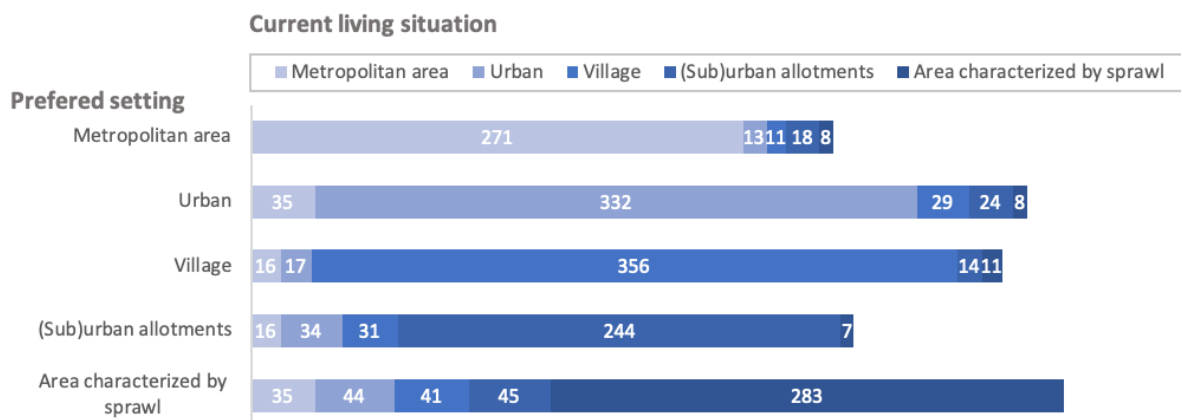


Figure 4. Preferred post-COVID-19 residential setting based on current living situation

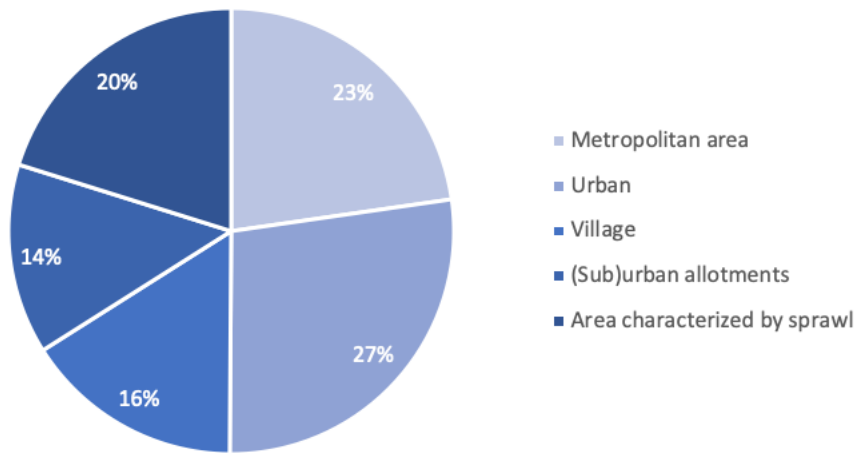


What is most interestingly though, is the attraction of the urban as a residential context to those considering moving. 24% of the respondents indicated a possible intention to move. Half of these, see the city as the ideal residential context (see figure 5). A majority of those considering a move (65%), are aged 18-35. Hence the urban context might attract a new generation of inhabitants if it can indeed convince this group to actually move.

The second intriguing observation is that the respondents who are currently living outside of the cities more often consider a different residential context as an ideal setting, while current urbanites are less

likely to appraise the other residential contexts. We need additional research on this aspect as the differences between the groups are small.

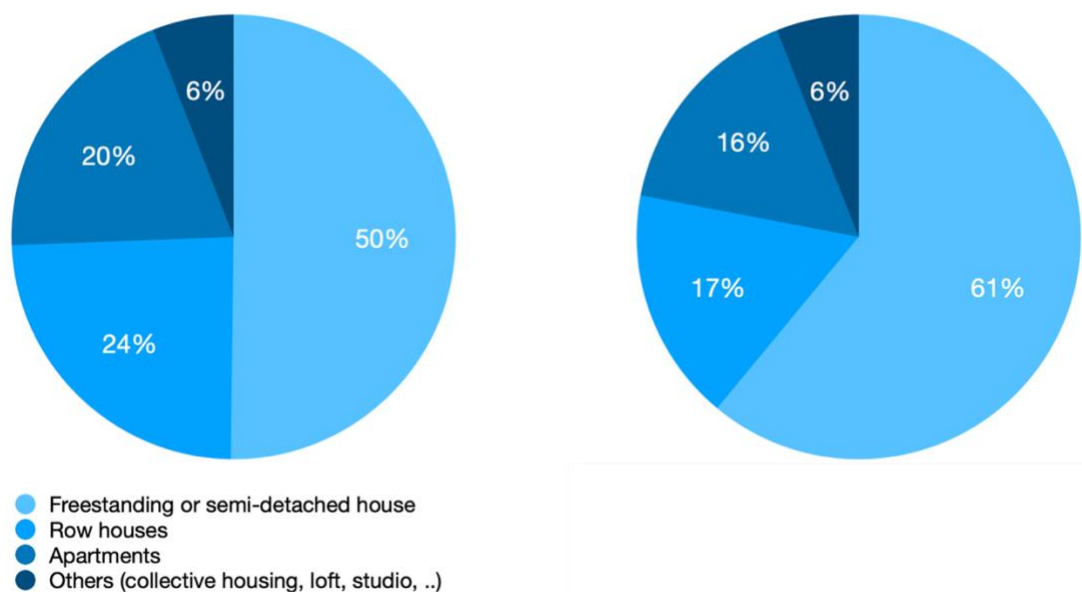
Figure 5. Preferred post-COVID-19 residential setting of the 24% of respondents who have the intention of moving



HOUSING TYPES

Half of our respondents live in either a freestanding or semi-detached house. We see that in an ideal post-COVID-19 situation even more people prefer a semi-detached or freestanding house (see figure 6). A private garden is the most important motivation for this preference. Respondent most often explain that the garden offers space, peace and privacy.

Figure 6. Respondents current housing compared to their ideal post-COVID-19 type.



THE LOCKDOWN AS AN OPPORTUNITY: DISCOVERING PROXIMITY WITHIN THE CITY

Next to the questionnaire five in-depth interviews were conducted with people in their twenties, because they are at the start of their personal housing trajectories. Two of them live in the bigger cities, while three of the interviewees live in smaller cities. Two interviewees temporarily moved during the lockdown period, one went back to the villa of his in-laws, while the other moved to the city to be together with her partner.

All of the interviewees explained that the lockdown period had created an opportunity for them to, in a first instance, explore their immediate neighborhood in more detail. In addition, they also stated that they explored the wider city, often by bicycle. This experience has showed them that, using a bicycle, most of the amenities and activities were easily reachable. Or as two of the respondents explained:

“Due to the lockdown I became more convinced that I might also want to live in Merksem. I always thought I wanted to live in the city center. I got to know other neighborhoods now, also because I bought a bicycle because I really wanted to be able to go further because I was within a radius of 100 m all the time. Then I was in Merksem and I thought yes it is actually not that far with the bicycle, it is still feasible and affordable... so yes.”

(A, 26 years)

“I really walked almost every day for a while and the good thing about it is that you can rediscover your neighborhood so I took more streets that I did not know. (...) I also took the bike to a nature reserve to walk there. So I got to know new places and that is nice, then I have the feeling of being somewhere else even if it is only 20 minutes by bike.”

(B, 25 years)

In contrast to the specters of urban flight that are presented in the popular media, the urban context seems to have the potential to convince new and pre-COVID-19 residents of its advantages. However, we identify a number of preconditions to make the city a preferable living environment in the longer term. When discussing future housing aspirations, the interviewees pointed to the need of a qualitative private outdoor space, especially in relation to having children of their own. Mostly these outdoor spaces were defined as gardens, but these gardens did not necessarily need to be big. Another important feature of the envisaged future housing is the proximity to shops, amenities, the city center and social activities. When asked about where this residential setting would be and how they imagined the features of it, all of the respondents referred to areas just outside of the city centers, where you would still find ample shopping possibilities and, importantly, areas that have a village atmosphere. One of the interviewees, when asked to explain what (s)he understood by ‘village atmosphere’ answered: *“those areas with many quiet streets around a church ... yes that is what makes it a village”*.

WILL THE FUTURE CITIES BECOME ASSEMBLAGE OF VILLAGES?

We have started this contribution with questioning the fear of urban flight, and using first findings from our analysis we have shown that these claims are not grounded. In both the online questionnaire and the in-depth interviews, a more nuanced picture emerges.

It is clear that the COVID-19 lockdown has forced people to really engage with their residential context, both their individual houses, their immediate neighbourhoods, but also their wider residential environment. This close and embodied experience has made people aware of the need of decent outdoor spaces, both private and public, but has also made them aware of the importance of proximity. Mixed urban areas offer their residents a wide variety of amenities and services and thus might be more pandemic proof than is currently assumed in the popular debate.

More research is definitely needed not only in order to answer some questions that are still unanswered, but also in order to understand the impact of this emerging “village-in-the-city” idea.