

Reflecting on research and activism in times of uncertainty and crisis: The 30th Anniversary conference of INURA in Luxembourg



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The International Network of Urban Research and Action (INURA) is a wide network of scholars and activists who research and teach about (post)(sub)urban spaces and/or are actively involved in community and environmental groups, artist collectives, political groups or administrations in various cities across the world. Members are campaigners, artists, students, researchers, professors, politicians, urban planners, architects, and journalists who all agree that cities are important nodes of societal affairs, and critical points of intervention towards environmental protection and social spatial equality, and are committed to confronting contemporary urban issues, harnessing professional perspectives in urban geography, sociology, and urban planning.

INURA meets in a new city every year to explore and examine the local urban geographies and modes of urban governance. They have visited Zurich, Toronto, Berlin, Mexico City, Istanbul, and many others. This year (June 25-29th) INURA met in Luxembourg. As the smallest country that INURA has ever visited, and as a globally oriented, cross-border, urban agglomeration, Luxembourg was a unique addition to the catalog of diverse urban spaces that INURA has considered.

It was also the 30th anniversary conference, delayed by two years, and taking

place during a period of horrific conflict; It was a special moment for all those present.

Hosted by the Department of Geography and Spatial Planning of the University of Luxembourg, and supported by the Ministry of Energy and Spatial Planning and the Luxembourg National Research Fund, the conference welcomed attendees from all around the world.

A critical eye on the City

Opening with tours of Luxembourg City and the Kirchberg Plateau, visitors were introduced to the social contradictions that constitute these distinct urban spaces. Members of activist group «Eis Stad» led a tour of Place de l’Etoile and Josy Barthel Stadium, two sites where large projects are being planned, and explained the difficulties of, and barriers to participation and citizen engagement in Luxembourg urban development.

Many participants found the City to be somewhat of an enigma. On one hand, they saw it as a pristine city with its high-end shops, tidy public spaces, and historical heritage on display. A common comment was that it was obvious that considerable investments were being poured into the city. On the other hand, several commented that the utopian “genteel” image was problematic, as the social fault lines were difficult to see behind the polished appearances. The area around Luxembourg Station thus seemed a rare glimpse into reality. To many participants, the city also seemed strangely empty. They wondered whether



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INURA on tour of Luxembourg city guided by members of activist group Eis Stad.

people were working from home, on vacation, or where the teenagers were.

INURA members were particularly interested in Luxembourg's free public transport. The tram came across as efficient even though it seemed to be serving mainly the banking and business quarters, at least for the moment. Questions were raised about the efficiency of this free transport system, especially for cross-border commuters. Many commented that there are a very large number of cars in the city which is even more surprising considering that public transport is free.

Evening events included dinner at Rives de Clausen, which was also an opportunity to experience and discuss urban renewal in the City. The evening of the 27th was dedicated to a projection of the movie "How Poles Became White" by TUNi Productions at the Ancien Cinéma Café-Club in Vianden, a venue intended as a platform for cooperation between local and international artists and a place where "west meets east". Other movie projections included "Museu da Mare" produced by Tesserae Urban Social Research and ogino:knauss, and "The Truth Lies in Rostock" by Spectacle. The producers/ directors of those movies are INURA members who were present at the projections to discuss their works.

Addressing urgent contemporary issues facing urbanity in a not-really-post-covid situation

Meeting for the first time in three years, the conference was also an opportunity to confront urgent contemporary issues facing urbanity. Two days of panel discussions addressed:

1) Global urbanisms under conditions of crisis and uncertainty, with panelists sharing different patterns and pathways of urbanisation in Latin America, Asia,

and Africa - places where conditions of uncertainty and crisis are not new.

2) The ongoing climate crisis and the continued trajectory of the environmental demise despite various recipes for sustainable planning, green cities, and low-carbon design.

3) The financialisation of the housing sector and its consequences on young people who are staying at home longer, people accepting smaller dwellings and/or having less to spend on food, or leaving the city altogether and tolerating longer commutes.

4) The emergence of an urbanization of disaster as Covid-19 demonstrated the importance of building resilience to protect people from the vulnerabilities and risks in a world of upheaval.

5) The devastation brought about by modern authoritarianism as revealed by the war in Ukraine.

6) The role and meaning of Marxist movements as strategies of transformation, organization, and social movements.

7) The role, links, and contradictions of politics and activism. Some INURA members were appointed to positions of political power and administrative responsibility in their careers. Here, they discussed the challenges faced in governing a city while carrying into their positions the principles of the social movements.

8) Large digital corporations such as Google or Amazon and their influence on urban governance with a focus on data centers as increasingly important digital infrastructures in the unfettered pursuit of digitalization despite of their significant environmental impact.

The panel which undoubtedly marked the conference was the one on modern authoritarianism. Panelists discussed the Russian aggression on Ukraine as an imperialist project underpinned by patriarchal values. The session included powerful witness statements of INURA members who had recently fled Ukraine.

"The day before my life was turned upside-down seemed like an ordinary day"—shared a student of V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University who made the difficult decision to leave her hometown as attacks got closer to her apartment building. Another witness, a researcher from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, described suddenly leaving her life behind and undertaking a difficult journey from Ukraine with a toddler to finally settle in Luxembourg. She shared with INURA members how despite the active hostilities that are currently taking place in Ukraine, the Government of Ukraine approved the Transition Period Policy to begin the restoration of the deoccupied territories. The policy strategy is based on the involvement of different countries in the reconstruction of cities, villages, communities, and regions. It is also planned to build industrial parks in large cities and regional centers. One of the conclusions of this session was that there is a need for urban studies scholars to expose and explain the different dimensions of reconstruction agendas for recovery and resilience in Ukraine, which are efforts in imagining a range of urban futures, both in the short and long term.

The need for resistance and resilience were the core messages of the discussions of this year's INURA conference. The consciousness of the fragility of the moment amid uncertainty and crisis was ever present during the conference despite the idyllic context of these sunny summer days in the Alzette Valley. The different panels on urgent urban issues made clear how the search for alternatives to harmful patterns of urbanization and active opposition to forces driving these harmful patterns are as important now as ever.

Sources for further information:

A Bulletin with more details about the conference will be published in the coming months.

Urbanization Unbound <http://urbanunbound.blogspot.com>

INURA Common Office <https://www.inura.org/v2/>

Dispatches from INURA 2022 in Luxembourg https://urbanpolitical.podigee.io/54-inura_luxemburg

INURA website: <https://www.inura.org/v2/index.php/publications/books/#about>