

INSIDE-OUT

A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON LUXEMBOURG

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The debates during the 2022 Annual Meeting of INURA inspired me to rethink my own experience of being situated between urban knowledge created inside the country, and the perspectives taken at the same subject from outside. I am now wondering how a renewed, critical view from outside could contribute to changing discourses within Luxembourg.

Small states are an exciting subject for geographical research – they lack size and a sufficient internal market and, as a result, are forced to maintain strong foreign relations. Consequently, an outbound orientation has always been part of the *DNA* of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. This applies particularly in considering Luxembourg's economic development and its evolution, which has variously drawn from labour migration from Italy or Portugal, the adoption of steel production from the German Ruhr Area, and, most recently, the development of a full-fledge financial centre as a nodal point of global investment flows (and its associated importation of a specialist workforce).

Having emerged from small-but-global urbanization, the country is thus “punching far above its weight”.(1) Strong growth rates are accompanied by growing pains. As a result, Luxembourg faces a range of conflicts between wealth, economic power, and development pressure on the one hand, and small territory, poor infrastructure provision, and limited governance capabilities on the other. These conflicts mark some key characteristics (and dilemmas) of the country. However, they are often hidden behind a façade of growth and modernity that appears hermetic to alternative views from outside, which makes mainstream discourses in the country even more hegemonic.

Views from outside

Admiration from outside is a common, day-to-day practice in the small country, when groups from abroad visit, and individuals deliver invited talks or advise institutions like the government or municipalities. Luxembourg is used to attracting a high number of visitors as it presents itself as a place of both tradition (the Capital City being a UNESCO World Heritage site) and modernity (as the Plateau Kirchberg or the new science city Belval have demonstrated). An entire CBD-regeneration project in the Capital (Hamilius) was tailored mainly to the demands of the affluent shopping tourist and the global property investor. Another case in point is the international media coverage of the European Capital of Culture 2022, which took place jointly in Esch-sur-Alzette with ten smaller municipalities in Luxembourg's south and eight French communes. Without having done a statistically valid survey, my impression is that almost all press articles on the 2022 European Capital of Culture have highlighted not only Esch-sur-Alzette but Belval, the new services district, in particular – most notably using a combination of the red “*Dexia*” building and the refurbished High Furnace as illustrations (see Figure 1). Two iconic representations of the progress the country has made in its transition from steel production to becoming a (real, permanent) Capital of the European Union and a hub of modern services industries.

Planning policy mobilities

Inspiration from abroad has also directly shaped planning and the built environment. This applies, for example, to the work of German urbanist Joseph Stübgen in Esch-sur-Alzette or in the Capital City in the 1920s; the (eventually not successful) attempt of Nazi-occupants to leave a

planning footprint in the country during WWII; or the emerging ‘starchitecture’ practice when the Plateau Kirchberg (which we visited with a small group of INURIANS during the conference) was developed since the early 1960s. More recently, the import of planning concepts became standard practice, for example, when the 2004 IVL Concept, which borrows heavily from Central Place theory, was created as one of the very first strategic planning guidelines developed by the government, and the underlying spatial rationale of the then Programme Directeur (2003). The IVL had evolved from an international expert group that included mostly German experts. Likewise, architectural competitions and planning related calls-for-proposals aim to include international authorities and their expertise. Such practices

have persisted, with competitive processes such as “Luxembourg in Transition 2050” being launched, under which international teams envisaged a decarbonized future for the high-emission society. The same applies for the call-for-proposals for the new neighborhood on the territories of Esch and Schifflange, or the government’s internal consultation on the new state planning directive Programme Directeur (PDAT) 2023. These efforts can be understood as invitations for outside world expertise to redesign the small state.

The PDAT perfectly illustrates the constraints of local complexities being assessed by observers from outside. As members of the government’s official Advisory Board on Spatial Development (CSAT), we were introduced to the



Figure 1: Another outsider’s view of Luxembourg published in the travel section of the daily German newspaper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (February 10, 2022), finding both the glossy and the rough

draft framework for the new PDAT 2023. When asking whom the advisers from Switzerland had consulted to obtain the knowledge basis for this endeavor, the answer was: “admittedly, this was based on *internal* consultation only”. In effect, this means seeing the territory through the lens of the government. This may also explain why perspectives from outside are often disconnected from ‘real’ developments, and the conflicts and contradictions that come into play here. Moreover, they often overlook the structural reasons that have caused the dilemma. While visitors tend to be impressed by buildings, districts or even just colourful plans, the specificities of the case and how they are linked to what are often particular or peculiar problems remain hidden.

Turning inside-out

Having dealt with the contents and the participants’ presentations of the INURA conference in last June, I recall this experience as completely different and rather enjoyable. During the debates, experienced urbanists proceeded to detect key problems and conflicts of urban development and policy in the country and its capital. This is also indicative from other contributions in this Bulletin: Observations include the clean and proper built spaces, which are provided “at least for its own citizens”, while the commuting part of the population does not enjoy “all the rights and privileges of the residents” (Arie van Wijngaarden, see page 20). The glass & steel palace of the money industries, on Blvd Royal or Plateau Kirchberg, stand in perfect contrast with areas that are occupied by marginalized groups. Nothing unusual for cities at all, but the contrast is particularly stark. Social inequality is also an issue, i.e. when it comes to the housing crisis, but remains hidden from the visitors’ perspective on the built environment. In other words: “Luxembourg destroys the myth that small is automatically beautiful, or automatically easier to understand or simpler to manage.” (Carr and Madron, see page 10)

What are the factors that help to deconstruct

the myth of the tiny little country? In the most general terms, we assume the explosive growth of the past – Luxembourg having doubled its population and increased its GDP by a factor seven over four decades only – is an important framework condition for planning. In fact, the country’s political economy is *the* main driving force behind growth and development. However, this is barely mentioned in planning discourses. Even more so: recent growth rates are expected to remain in place for the foreseeable future, and there is no Plan B for Luxembourg’s development trajectory being disrupted. At the conference, the link between the political economy driving the country’s growth and the related urban and planning outcomes was indeed clearly established, which was much appreciated.(2)

We also discussed the governance conditions, state of planning institutions and governmentality practiced in the country. Yet the conduct of conduct is, like the political economy, rarely analyzed by planning and policy discourses. Planning is used to treat most problems as mere technical issues, ignoring the many relationalities, vested interests, and contradictions that are at work. Governing bodies seem open to the importation of ideas, and for public participation, but one tends to do both quite selectively, eager to leave the very peculiarities of decision-making untouched. Unfortunately, the planned exchange between the Minister of Spatial Planning and INURA had to be replaced by a video speech. His response to the audience would have been very interesting to follow ...

Renewing the outside-in perspective

By concluding this reflection, is there a place for conceptual innovation that would bring us out of our dilemma? One could think of the policy mobilities literature, on success and policy failure, but in fact it seems too early for that. Still, we need to understand the subject matter before intervening in or telling others about any outcomes. Therefore, I’d treat this as a question of different analytical views of the same subject – between inside and outside.

The problem at stake here is what Ash Amin once observed as ‘telescopic urbanism’.(3) By this he means a highly selective, abstract and territorially-bounded view of cities or urban sub-areas that neglects the nature of the urban economy and society: “Telescopic urbanism, in focusing on specific sites, leaves out everything else, above all the myriad hidden connections and relational doings that hold together the contemporary city as an assemblage of many types of spatial formation, from economically interdependent neighbourhoods to infrastructures, flows and organisational arrangements that course through and beyond the city.” (Amin 2013, p. 9)

Luxembourg appears as a template case where the telescope has ultimately replaced a detailed, critical analysis of the idea of development and its ramifications for city, region, and society. Starting with this reflection on the past INURA Conference, I wonder how Luxembourg could improve in this respect: how to share more appropriate and comprehensive perspectives, and how to better align the different views from

outside and inside the small state in the future? Perhaps the secret is in the key mission of INURA: to combine urban research with action. This is easier said than done, but is there space for a renewed agenda for critical research jointly *with* politics and practice, rather than only on it? I am tempted to think the unimaginable... even if it seems totally unrealistic. In fact, that would enable us to get rid of the telescope and to advance our insight into the urban and the planning field.

Notes

1. Wong, C., Hesse, M., & Sigler, T. J. (2022). City-states in relational urbanization: the case of Luxembourg and Singapore. *Urban Geography*, **43**(4), 501-522.
2. Our case was nicely embedded in stories from other cities such as Zurich. For a general debate see e.g. Weber, R. (2015), *From Boom to Bubble*. Chicago, UoChicago Press.
3. Amin, A. (2013). Telescopic urbanism and the poor. *City*, **17**(4), 476-492.



Photo by K Madron

Part of the ArcelorMittal industrial site in Belval is still operational. It is seen here from Maison du Savoir which hosts part of the Belval Campus of the University of Luxembourg.

LUXEMBOURG

PAST AND PRESENT

by **Arie van Wijngaarden**,

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Past

It was the 4th of July 1970 while travelling from Rotterdam to Montmédy in France that I missed my train connection in Luxembourg. No more trains that day. At the Luxembourg station, I met a girl from Amsterdam who was heading for the same working holiday in Northern France and had the same problem, so I proposed: Let's head for the youth hostel! We asked for directions and arrived at the Pfaffenthal location. At the given address, we found an old building which had been empty for a long time, waiting to be demolished. The windows were broken and there was glass all over the place. In the meantime, dusk had set and we had no money for a hotel. So, we opened one of the doors and rolled out our sleeping bags in a room on the first floor. During the night we heard a group of young North Africans entering another room for the night. We got our train to France the next day.

Present

How much Luxembourg has changed since then: from a tourist-based economy in the north and the steelworks in the south back then to an advanced service based economy today. Arriving at Findel airport the expansion is already evident, just witnessing the enlarged airport and availability of surrounding facilities, including freeport called Luxembourg High Security Hub, secretly housing more artworks than most art museums in the world.

A free bus takes you to the city center, in the future to be replaced by a more efficient tram line. The bus passes through the Kirchberg Plateau, which looks like a huge spaceship full of buildings that has landed at the only flat area close to the city center. Where star architects have produced their individual jewels with buildings which do not relate to each other in the slightest. Initially made possible by the European establishments like the European



Photo by A. van Wijngaarden



Photo by C. Carr

The building of the former youth hostel as I found it in 1970 and the present facilities (spacious, clean and affordable).