

INURA REFLECTS ON LUXEMBOURG

RESULTS OF A FEEDBACK SESSION WITH INURA

by **Karinne Madron and Constance Carr,**

Department of Geography and Spatial Planning (DGEO), University of Luxembourg

One of the great traditions of INURA is providing feedback on the places participants visit. This is valuable information for conference organizers, local actors, decision-makers and politicians. Van Wijngaarden, looking back at 30 years of INURA (See page 44), lists some of the inputs from previous conferences. In this entry, we review some of what we, the conference organizers presented, followed by the feedback from INURA.

Presenting Luxembourg

In basic terms, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is a sovereign small state wedged between France, Germany and Belgium. It is a founding state of the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Eurozone, Schengen area, the UN, NATO, the OECD, seeking national sovereignty through international integration and stability (Bousch et al., 2009), and 'political brokering' (Wong et al., 2019). Luxembourg City is also a business city, hosting the European headquarters of the RTL Group, SES, Amazon, Skype, ArcelorMittal, BGL BNP Paribas, KPMG, RE/MAX, iTunes, Ferrero, to name a few. Given the hundreds of mailbox companies that one can locate in the lobbies of office buildings around the City, there are probably many more 'HQs' settled in the Duchy as well. Hard to say. It is a major center for big players like PwC, Ernst & Young, and Deloitte, and of course, many other institutions of the financial industry. The Luxembourg Statistics Office (STATEC, 2022) lists 79 "banks incorporated under Luxembourg law, plus another 45 banking enterprises offering financial services, and 198 reinsurance companies."

During the day, over 200,000 people working in the Grand Duchy are also daily cross-border commuters, who reside in one of the neighbour

countries (France, Germany and Belgium). This puts significant pressure on the existing road infrastructure and most newcomers are struck by the cars everywhere (which, don't get us wrong, include plenty of domestic vehicles). One is also struck by the free public transit, which solved a problem that didn't exist (Carr and Hesse, 2020) but at least saves an individual just a little headache by not having to figure out a new ticket system, in addition to saving 2€. That's not all, perhaps newcomers are struck by the air traffic over the small, well-kept city. Here, it is notable that the Luxembourg airport is also the largest cargo airport on the continent. Sending cherries from Chile to China (Hesse, 2014)? They passed through the Duchy.

The European feel in the city is reflected in the linguistic melting pot. In shops, restaurants and cafés you hear every major language from French and Finnish to Estonian. One must always begin every new encounter with: "What language shall we speak?" This is reflected further in the Duchy's unique demographics, which also implicate rather strange dynamics of citizen participation: About 47 per cent of the roughly 645,000 inhabitants are non-Luxembourgers. In Luxembourg City the share of non-Luxembourgers reaches 68% (STATEC, 2022). In the north, this statistic is the opposite.

Perhaps all this activity is surprising for a tiny city with a population of just 115k (STATEC, 2022). On one hand, one can respond by saying that it's international interweaving is hardly post-war (Péporté et al., 2010), and it goes to show how nations do not exist in isolation (contrary to populist thought). On the other hand, it is part of the puzzle that reveals the Duchy as a relational state:

"Luxembourg, one of Europe's smallest territories by landmass and population, is

also one of the largest satellite operators in the world [...] today evolved to be driven by pan-European access to human capital, multi-lingual expertise, and multi-national legal expertise” (Wong et al., 2019).

INURA 2022’s organizing team wanted to show you some of the tensions associated with this kind of urban space. Even though the extensive visits originally planned for 2020 could not be entirely fit into the short programme of the 2022 conference, two tours were proposed with the aim of showing the range of challenges and contradictions that constitute the urban spaces of Luxembourg—a small state, city-state, multilingual sovereign nation, European capital, financial capital, international business hub, and cross-border (sub)urban region.

The Tours and Events

The first tour was of the sites of two major projects underway in Luxembourg City – Place de l’Etoile and Josy Barthel Stadium. During the tour INURA met with two members of EisStad, a non-profit association which demands more engagement with local citizens. In Luxembourg City the alliance of land and money breeds profit, undisturbed—or even mastered—by politics and planning. This, in the context of a nation that, following the Global Financial Centers Index 2021, ranks 4th in Europe’s financial sector development, and 3rd in business environment

(3rd and 2nd, respectively, if we account for Brexit), being particularly competitive in the areas of investment management, finance, insurance, government and regulation. Real-estate developers extract value by transforming and trading urban properties. The members of EisStad explained the difficulties of, and barriers to participation and citizen engagement in urban development in such a context.

The second visit was of the Kirchberg Plateau. Kirchberg was once a field on the outskirts of the (old) City of Luxembourg. Today, it is one of the central axes of the city, sitting between Findel Airport, the old city and the central train station. It was conceived in the 1950s as a place to house the institutions of the European Union as both a post-war peace project, as well as an opportunity for the Grand Duchy to secure its place in that international network. The Government of Luxembourg preemptively acquired the land, built the Red Bridge, as well as the A1 highway to this end. Today, it is home to banks and investment funds. Slowly retrofitted—with mixed reviews about the success of this endeavour—Kirchberg can be conceived as the Duchy’s first attempt to drive a large-scale project to satisfy and secure the national interests of the small Grand Duchy. That this planning style would later be replicated in Belval (in the South) and arguably again in Cloche D’Or, Kirchberg has become a symbol for the planning policy in the country known as



Snapshots of the 2022 tours by K.Madron

the Kirchberg Syndrome (Hesse, 2013).

We also hoped that the evening activities presented still further dimensions. In Vianden, we hoped that participants would see a Duchy that is composing many (over 100!) autonomous municipalities, all under growth pressure, and that some of the more independent, ‘alternative’, businesses are operating beyond city limits (of course, one could rightly ask if all of the Duchy is urban). At Rives de Clausen, participants got a glimpse of the downtown party culture, (which didn’t impress everyone), driven by project urban renewal.

Feedback from INURA about Luxembourg

At the 2022 retreat, the INURA organizing team sat down with the INURA membership and asked them to reflect on the City and share the impressions that they could gather from the few days they had spent in Luxembourg. The organizers collected these observations, and they are summarized in the following, as a sort of documentation of this critical collective analysis. Quotes were collected, but not pinned to any one person, in particular. Hesse (page 14) further reflects on these impressions and the added value that INURA has provided to Luxembourg.

i. Initial impressions

Of all the places that INURA has visited, Luxembourg is the smallest, but members were impressed by the diversity of issues and angles. Luxembourg destroys the myth that small is automatically beautiful, or automatically easier to understand or simpler to manage. The City of Luxembourg seems to have excellent transit options, tidy public spaces, new infrastructures, and an unusual topography. For some, Luxembourg reminded them of Zurich—a well-designed place with money available for investment (one person noticed the ‘fancy garbage containers’ in the pedestrian zone). The City also seems to place the history in the foreground. Newcomers easily encounter the well-maintained old city, souvenir shops, and symbols of the Luxembourg royalty. Some were also impressed by how green it was: “It was incredible to be lost in a forest in the middle of a city!” The overall first impression is that Luxembourg appears to be a sort of surprising paradise.

ii. Where is the City?

At the same time, the city is almost “frightening” as the social fault lines are hidden. What and where are the contradictions? All cities have



View of Luxembourg City. Photo by C. Carr

contradictions, problems, but they are hard to see. The strong city center with high-end shops seemed kind of “snobby” or even “fake”. Why is that? Are they hidden? Is it denial? What is the link to everyday life? For example, where were the “small shops for ordinary people”? Where were the homeless? To the keen eye, there are hints that contradictions exist. First, the city was often empty. Where is everyone? Where are the teenagers? Where is the activism? Where are the social fights or the voices for a counter plan? Where is the edge? Indeed, where is the city? To these questions, some suggested that the Gare district or Esch might provide insight. For some, these areas seemed more diverse and more metropolitan than the old city or Kirchberg Plateau and provided “short moments of reality”.

iii. The City as an international hub

Some viewed Kirchberg as an interesting starting point for understanding the City, with its large office buildings, proximity to the airport, and an urban design that does not appear targeted for public use. Kirchberg reveals the City’s position as an inflated international business and administration center, as a node on the international geography of finance, as a tax haven (letterboxes seen there, and in the City), and as a niche in global flows.

Business development was clearly high on the agenda. One participant was surprised to find the Bank of China: Luxembourg does business with China, how interesting! Pfizer surprised another. The City clearly fosters international business development: It is observable on the ground with the high degree of internationalism (many languages, not just the official languages).

iv. Community

Some members asked how this environment affects communities. The following questions were not cynical but genuinely curious: How do communities form (or fall apart) with this degree

of international flow and fluctuation, with this variety of languages? How do children fare? Who uses the public institutions?

v. Transport

Of course, Luxembourg’s free transit is now world famous and deserved some comment. Within the city, the transport options were seen very favorably – not withstanding that there were ‘way too many cars’ in the city. There is also a certain comfort achieved in not having to fiddle with tickets. Less clear was how decisions about infrastructure provision were made and who they were for. The tram, for example, seemed targeted at the banks and other businesses. So, the ‘success’ of the fare-free public transport is really a question about where one comes from. How even is public transit provision across the country? How are the rural parts of the country integrated into the urban agglomerations? Luxembourg is clearly dependent on cross-border labour, how are cross-border transportation needs integrated into policy decisions about infrastructure provision?

vi. What is the trajectory?

Ultimately, the observations and set of questions that were generated invoke larger questions about what Luxembourg is trying to do, and where it is going. It’s ironic that while the history is so elevated, its direction into the future is harder to determine. Is there an urban model? There are many pieces that do not come together: Is there a plan to bring them together at all? Does Luxembourg even want an urban model? Luxembourg is small but also somehow huge. What scales do planners work with? The tours revealed that public participation is difficult at best, or reserved for those with capital power (e.g. Place de l’Étoile). Can a participation be expanded more on the ground to develop a trajectory of development that speaks to the needs of people already here?

Further Readings

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