

The city and its margins - a long history of constant change

Marin Uhrmacher

Assistant Professor at the Institute for History at the University of Luxembourg.

“Where does the city end? And where does its outskirts and the surrounding countryside begin?” This question arises time and again when looking at the historical development of Luxembourg in the *longue durée*. For spaces are defined not so much by fixed markings such as walls, boundary stones or landmarks, but rather by practice. It is above all the everyday practices of the city’s inhabitants, their mobility and actions, but also their ideas and descriptions that constantly construct the urban space anew and thus also the location and extent of its periphery.

Today’s metropolis of Luxembourg has no clear contours. Yann Tonnar’s photographs demonstrate this impressively in all their diversity. The urban space merges into the surrounding landscape, expanding continuously and morphing into a network of motorways, roads and railway lines that cut through industrial zones and commercial areas. Villages that used to be located well outside the city are being absorbed into the urban hinterland. Urban and rural areas can no longer be clearly separated, the transitions are in flux, becoming blurred and subject of constant change.

In our imagination, the medieval town represents the exact opposite. Clearly separated from the surrounding countryside by its walls, towers, moats and gates. Inside, houses, churches and squares are crowded together, connected by narrow, winding cobblestone streets. Outside the walls, there are fields, meadows and pastures. The historical town views and town plans do not depict a transition zone, a border. But does this sharp division between town and countryside, between *intra* and *extra muros*, correspond to reality?

Or does it perhaps only reflect an idealised vision?

The history of the city of Luxembourg began even before Countess Ermesinde granted the city charter in 1244. Its nucleus was the castle of Count Siegfried on the Bockfelsen, first mentioned in a document in 987, but built already after 963. He chose this site quite intentionally, as there was already a dense, pre-urban settlement along the Alzette valley below the castle at this early time. And the intersection of the Roman road from Reims via Arlon to Trier with the old north-south trade route on the plateau in front of the castle offered ideal conditions for the development of a market. It was here, therefore, that the Salvator Church, now St Michael's Church, was founded on the count's initiative in 987. With the castle, church and market, the necessary preconditions had been set to attract inhabitants from the surrounding region to settle on the site in front of the castle.

And the plan succeeded: The settlement grew steadily and the counts chose the castle as their permanent residence. From 1083, they also named themselves after the castle as "Counts of Luxembourg". At this time, there existed several loosely connected settlement cores, but not yet a dense urban area. The artisanal quarter was dependent on its proximity to the water, which is why it was located on the banks of the Alzette in Grund and Pfaffenthal. The castle and collegiate church as administrative and ecclesiastical centres, on the other hand, were located above on the edge of the plateau. In front of this was the market square with the commercial centre. This settlement continued to grow around the Neumarkt, today's Krautmarkt, and was surrounded by walls for the first time at the end of the 12th century. In the reign of Count John the Blind, the building of a second city wall was started, enclosing not only the further expanding settlement on the city plateau but also the lower quarters along the Alzette for the first time. The wall was not completed until the late 15th century.

But what was the actual significance of the town wall? First and foremost, of course, it served as a defence; it provided security in times of war, also for the inhabitants of the surrounding area. For centuries, it was also the largest joint building project of the city community, financed by taxes and fees from the citizens. In this sense, it was also an outstanding symbol of the wealth and unity of the citizens. This is the impression conveyed by the many well-known engravings and illustrations of the 16th century, which still characterises our image of the medieval town today.

But on a closer look, the many surviving sources paint a different, more ambivalent picture. The town wall was not a dividing barrier in medieval everyday life. With its many gates and smaller gateways, it also had a unifying character. And the surrounding countryside in front of the wall was not a desolate, unorganised space either. There lay a wide belt of garden land that surrounded the city. In historical research, the so-called process of "gardenisation" is referred to, which began in Central Europe at the transition from the High to the Late Middle Ages and led to an

intensification of agriculture, particularly in the areas close to the city. This was particularly encouraged by large quantities of stable manure as a result of the livestock farming practised in the city (horses, pigs, cattle, goats, chickens, etc.). The arable crops grown in the gardens benefited from the increased fertilisation compared to agricultural land. In Luxembourg, the *Bongerten* were fenced-in plots of land where the citizens cultivated fruit and vegetables as a sideline, mainly for their own consumption. There were also numerous large lime and walnut trees that were used commercially.

The proximity of the town's Bannwald forest (today's *Bambësch*), which at that time still extended as far as on the Limpertsberg, as well as the Grünwald forest, gave the citizens access to firewood and timber. The forest was also used by the inhabitants for grazing cattle and fattening pigs.

Consequently, there was a lively bustle every day outside the town walls, on the streets, in the many *bongerts* and in the nearby forests.

The surrounding urban area also housed many economic facilities: Numerous mills were located alongside the Alzette, Mühlbach and Petrus rivers: Grain mills and fulling mills for cloth production, later also paper mills, powder mills, hammer mills, etc. The daily exchange of goods with the town by means of pack animals and carts was correspondingly intensive. There were also various public institutions outside the walls. On the one hand, there were the execution sites, which were clearly visible with their gallows on the main streets leading into the town. Executions were carried out here in public, usually with lively participation from the population. The execution sites served not only as a deterrent to potential criminals and violent offenders, but also as a highly visible symbol of jurisdiction and power in the suburban area. In the present day area of Luxembourg City, there were three execution sites belonging to different high court seigneurs in the Middle Ages and early modern times: the gallows of the count's/duke's court was located along the "Arloner Straße" near the *Maternité*. The municipal execution site lay a little further south in today's Belair quarter. And finally, Altmünster Abbey also had a gallow located at Fetschenhof.

The leprosarium, documented since 1238, also had a prominent, highly visible location in the surrounding urban area. The "Siechenhof" was used to house and care for citizens suffering from leprosy and was located beside the Alzette north of Pfaffenthal near the *Siechengrund* (today "*Val des bons Malades*"). The property was surrounded by a wall and consisted of a chapel, a cemetery and a row of small houses for the leprosy sufferers.

Medieval leprosariums were generally located on the outskirts of towns, not only in Luxembourg. This was less due to the fear of infection than to Old Testament norms, according to which the homes of the healthy were to be separated from those of the lepers. Now one could assume that the Luxembourg leprosarium near the *Siechengrund* was a place of exclusion in order to hide the sufferers, who were often mutilated as a result of leprosy, from the eyes of the citizens.

But the opposite was the case: the leprosarium was deliberately built prominently at a busy crossroads. This is where the main road leading northwards from the "Siechenpforte" in Pfaffenthal met the trade route leading up the Kirchberg to the old Roman road. The community also invested considerable sums in the construction and maintenance of the Siechenhof in order to provide adequate care for the leprous citizens. The 13th century chapel, which is still preserved today, is proof of this. It is an impressive building with well-balanced proportions, built with outstanding craftsmanship. The Leprosium, located at this central point in the suburban area, was passed by many citizens, travellers, merchants and pilgrims on a daily basis and therefore also served to enhance the town's prestige. It allowed the municipality to show how God-fearing it was and how much effort it put into caring for the lepers in the Christian spirit.

A fundamental change in the character, of suburban space occurred at the beginning of the early modern period. It was the military that now gained increasing influence as a force for spatial change in shaping and structuring the areas in the urban hinterland. In the course of the 16th century, the extension of the city walls began with the construction of bastions, which subsequently grew more and more in depth in order to provide adequate protection against artillery fire. This process began particularly early in Luxembourg, where the territorial claims of the Habsburgs and the French kings collided, turning the city and the duchy into a permanent centre of conflict and theatre of war for almost 300 years.

The construction of this early modern fortification belt around the city had a profound impact on the surrounding area: the constant expansion of the defence lines resulted in the loss of valuable garden and agricultural land. Many of the buildings in the city's neighbourhood were also demolished so that they could not provide possible cover for potential attackers.

The close spatial relationship between the city, the surrounding gardens and the suburbs, which was so characteristic of the Middle Ages, was increasingly lost. Finally, for military reasons, the fortress only had a single entrance, in contrast to the medieval town walls with their many gates in all directions.

The wall had now effectively become a separating, impassable barrier; its previously connective character to the surrounding hinterland had been lost. Now the main fortress walls, moats, outer works and the glacis surrounded the city, creating an empty and uninhabited wasteland.

In the 18th century, the Austrian governor von Neipperg (1730-1753) even removed the soil in the area of the outer glacis over a width of 300 toises [approx. 600 m] down to the bedrock in order to make a possible attack more difficult. This wasteland was labelled “champ pelé” on maps and plans. The Luxembourgish word “verschampeléieren”, which means to devastate or disfigure, originated from this expression.

Even beyond the Glacis, the military continued to exert a restrictive influence on the structure and utilization of the suburban area through the rayon regulations until the middle of the 19th century. Any development was consistently suppressed in this area, which extended far beyond the actual city boundaries. The only exception was the construction of the first railway line in 1858. The original railway station was built - again for military reasons - in timber and outside the fortifications at its current location.

A fundamental change then took place in 1867 with the dismantling of the fortress of Luxembourg as agreed in the Treaty of London. The city was now released from its centuries-old corset and the surrounding countryside in the area of the former vast fortifications could also be developed. The following decades saw an upswing, which was reflected in urban expansion beyond the old city and fortress boundaries in the form of new neighborhoods. From 1874, the area around the railway station was developed according to plan. The new neighborhoods such as Limpertsberg, Belair, Rollingergrund and others soon established links to former villages on the outskirts of the city, such as Bonneweg, Hollerich, Hamm, Merl, Kirchberg and Weimerskirch. The city of Luxembourg, which was previously clearly separated from the surrounding countryside, developed into a metropolitan agglomeration with fluid transitions into the hinterland, not least due to advancing industrialization. A process that still continues today.

In this book, Yann Tonnar's photographs from the margins of the city impressively document and showcase this process.