There is no one human scale - Reflections on urban development practice in Luxembourg

Dr. Constance Carr, Rebecca Lutz, Kevin Schutz
Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning University of Luxembourg

Last month, we had the pleasure of participating in Prosud's showing of the documentary, "The Human Scale" at the University of Luxembourg, that was followed by a panel discussion with Markus Hesse of the University of Luxembourg, Eva Westermark from Gehl People, Francois Bausch, Minister of Sustainable Development and Infrastructure, and the Mayor of Esch/Alzette, Georges Mischo. It was a great opportunity for members of the University – students of urban studies and architecture in particular – to exchange thoughts with members of Luxembourgish civil society, and to reflect on the themes presented in the movie and their relevance (or lack thereof) for Luxembourg. Particularly welcome was that the University was used as venue for dialogue and open debate, Prosud and the guests should be recognized for their commitment in this regard. In this entry of *Urbanization Unbound*, after briefly recapping the main messages of the film, we want to address a couple of the associated hidden dimensions of urban development that we as urban geographers know are relevant if not central, and yet were not addressed in the film.

The film
In essence, the documentary showcased some of examples of Jan Gehl's work in various cities around the globe – notably New York City's car free Time Square, traffic calming in Dhaka, pedestrian network in Chongqing, revitalization in downtown Melbourne, and post-quake redevelopment in Christchurch. The underlying argument was that urbanization processes are accelerating and city populations are growing faster than cities can expect to keep up with, so good urban design is necessary. Good (dense) design would not only be able to mitigate this pressure but it can/will revolutionize the way people use urban space. To assure some degree of local acceptance to what is essentially a foreign expert coming in and designing a space with which they have little knowledge, the Jan Gehl approach aims at generating interaction with people on the street. How barriers such as language, or other methodological issues are dealt with, were not explained. But okay, the Gehl approach understands that people are important, and so the general aim is to consider people when planning cities – an angle that, in his view, was not taken seriously enough in years prior. Jan Gehl, together with his bureau, thus tries to reconfigure urban spaces that were initially very accommodating for cars in such a way that people can better use the space walking, biking, and socializing.

The Human Scale documented first and foremost the positive side of design, or perhaps the 'beautiful sides' of urban design that show people hanging about, socializing, and using the space. And, of course, this is great: Indeed, there are plenty of plans in circulation where, astonishingly, people are completely absent. Still, this notwithstanding, it is hardly a secret that,

> "any general plan or master plan for a metropolitan area is in effect a policy statement as to how that area should be spatially arranged," (Foley 1964).

And further, following for example Lefebvre (1991), spatial practice is inseparable from ideology – meaning that spatial arrangements in urban space are reflections of the certain modes of their production. Design is therefore political, and therefore reflects certain dynamics of power and social modes. There are thus further dimensions that need exploring that are not included in the beautiful plans. These include the less comfortable topics such as addressing those who might be excluded or profit a little less than others. It could also include a palate of unforeseen negative externalities. And, last but not least, these dimensions might be about the consequential struggles and conflicts. Ignoring these dimensions is not merely the practice of looking through rose coloured glasses at beautiful plans, it arguably constitutes just plain bad urban planning.

Looking for the secret recipe to urban development

There is a habit (a seemingly North American one?) of looking to the medieval European city for town planning inspiration. This is seen particularly in searches for the ideal green city, in which authors (e.g Wheeler and Beatley 2014) point to Europe's (apparent) compact cities, and use them as model designs, in their search for modes of town planning where commuter distances are reduced and the odds for neighbourly contact and civic participation are increased. In a recent publication in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Lutt (2018), from the University of Cincinnati, even spoke of his "pilgrimage" to Copenhagen – the setting that inspired Jan Gehl's people oriented cities. This search for the sustainable city is an understandable reaction to prevailing problems of urban development that accommodates and encourages car-dependent lifestyles and associated value chains of production. However, the wholesale search for optimal dense design – based on European models – is misguided because policies and designs developed elsewhere in different contexts, and as a consequence of different historical trajectories cannot simply be packaged, imported, and unboxed, ready-to-wear. This is the main message of the policy mobilities literature: Urban policy-making cannot be about finding solutions/recipes because policies cannot simply be transferred from one place to another (Carr 2014; Temenos & McCann 2014; Ward 2009). Context matters.

This is one fundamental problem about the product (pedestrian zones, bike lanes) that Gehl People sells. First, such plans rarely reflect properly the city-regional morphologies and functions of current lived urban spaces, nor do they reflect local socio-political and economic contexts and respective pressures. Take Kirchberg, for example. This is one of Luxembourg's large-scale projects (Leick 2016) where the interests of global corporate finance, the institutions of the European Union, the ministries of the Grand Duchy, cross-border commuters, high school students, moviegoers, and shoppers all collide. On a single tram ride, alone, one can expect to engage with at least five languages. The routines, practices, structures of power, flows and pathways that constitute this space are simultaneously global, international, local, multilingual, and multi-level. The corresponding needs and problems are equally diverse and pressing. There is no one human scale. So, a single pedestrian path will serve only limited impact (that only certain persons will feel). Second, Luxembourg has undergone a specific growth trajectory that was based on the car. Even in the Ville de Luxembourg, a lot of space was and remains dedicated to cars (e.g. the Glacis area, or the former EU-parking spot on Kirchberg). Sure, it would be nice if these were people-friendlier. Any imported design, however, would need take into account the sociopolitical dynamics of the rental markets and the consequences on, for example, cross-border labour. Third, there is another underlying problem concerning the general feeling that many have about Luxembourg being a car-addicted nation. It is continually debated what the root of this phenomenon is – whether it is a reflection of Luxembourg's rural legacy, whether it is a kind of "wealth sickness" (*Wohlstandskrankheit*) (MDDI 2010), whether it is a necessary flexibility in a small state vulnerable to economic volatility, whether it is a result of cheap gasoline prices, or whether it is something else altogether. It is clear, however, that imposing a sudden people-friendly zone (as enticing as that sounds!) will hardly address the underlying issues, and thus remain sort of incomplete.

The dialectics of conceiving, perceiving, and living the Cité de Sciences

All of the above issues come together in Belval, which in retrospect was the perfect setting for the event. Belval, a local *lieu-dit* referring to the brownfield urban redevelopment project in the southern part of Luxembourg, is the site of the University of Luxembourg, other knowledge sector industries, and government institutes that together constitute the Cité de Sciences. It, like Kirchberg, is another one of Luxembourg's large-scale projects (Leick 2016), with its own special set of problems. Like Kirchberg Plateau, too, there is no one singular human scale at Belval.

As a large-scale planning project, one could perceive it as Luxembourg playing the long game. That is, Belval is supposed to be a land use development scheme that will ensure decades of prosperity derived from the international knowledge sector and associated economic activities (commerce, rental markets for office space and housing). The actors in this game that structure development land use relations are big businesses and big government, involving inputs from starchitects and possibly, as was suggested during the panel discussion, starplanners. Actually, it looks as though Luxembourg is trying to reproduce the Bilbao Effect, which has already been problematized in urban studies (González 2011). More to the point, however, Belval is a place where the lived experiences of thousands of cross-border

workers, international specialists, and students unfold. Like two sides of the same coin, one conceives the long term, the other lives the immediate term, and both simultaneously contradict and constitute one another. Academically, this discussion closes in on the thoughts of Lefebvre (1991) again, where one could explore the moments of social production of space – Lefebvre's "triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived," (p. 39) – and conceptualize how they are dialectically constructed.

While many are worrying about the elections (also part of the long game), there is an urgent need to address immediate shortages that students and staff are currently coping with, such as a functioning transport system to reach the area. There is a need for bike lanes connecting to the City of Esch-sur-Alzette for students and staff who, more and more, are settling there. There is also a desperate need for faster trains connecting Belval to Bettembourg and/or Luxembourg City (that don't predictably stop for 10-20 minutes just 500m before reaching the main central station, Gare …). If these are too difficult or complicated to realise, a fleet of buses would suffice as well. Students also voice needs for free spaces (*Freiräume*) and meeting points. The emergence of urban gardening at Belval, **Gaart Belval**, was a great start here(!) – as a place to meet, exchange, and be creative without also being someone's customer. From this perspective, the long game of starstruck development is perceived as exceptionally slow and altogether missing the mark. How is the bold promise of a high-speed tram that won't materialise for another 20 years useful? From this perspective – on this Other scale – what is needed is not dreams, conjecture, and speculation about what might be awesome later, but for someone with the power to make decisions to represent the everyday at the relevant political economic platforms and address these imminent problems.

The panel discussion was an excellent venue to begin these discussions, and students of urban planning and architecture at the UL really took advantage of the opportunity to articulate their perspective as well as their analytical standpoints. So, let's do it again. Bring it on! Let's talk some more.

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