Supermarket and superdiversity: the public domain of the suburb

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Antwerp’s twentieth-century belt is difficult to characterise. The terms that are in vogue for this among geographers or urban planners including periphery, urban field, network city, suburb, are totally inadequate. The same applies to new concepts such as urban sprawl, void or terrain vague. At least if you want to describe the experience of travelling through this vast territory. So which words should we use then? Chaos? No, for there is too much order, unity, structure. A warehouse or storage facility? Possibly, but who would put together such a motley collection? Collection then? Yes, but a collection of many subsets that have been scattered.

Perhaps suburb is still the best option. However in the way this term has always been used for the area extra muros, in Dutch ‘voorstad’ and in French ‘faubourg’, where everything which could not or would not thrive within the city walls would end up. That feeling of being in such a suburb is only enhanced by the Antwerp ring motorway and the green areas around it. Once beyond this, you find yourself in the suburb, a city that is still in the process of becoming a city, the city’s precursor. And although the same term is used, the actual suburban belt distinguishes itself in this way from the usual modern meaning of the suburb as the residential neighbourhoods for the middle classes that were built outside of the city, in reaction to the living conditions in the city. Neighbourhoods that were never designed to be urbanised, although in many cases they actually were.

Antwerp’s twentieth-century belt also has such suburban neighbourhoods, which followed the trail of the country houses, the country estates and the villa neighbourhoods of the nobility and the wealthy bourgeoisie. However, they find themselves surrounded by a proliferation of businesses, shops and residential buildings along the existing roads or by paltry residential neighbourhoods in between. In addition, everything that is too large for the existing city has been moved to the suburb, including hospitals, colleges, institutions, barracks, cemeteries, factories, an airport, a large hypermarket...
(Makro) and mall, the Wijnegem Shopping Center. The old villages and country estates have also been incorporated in this development.

**Urbanisation and urbanity**

In a certain sense the suburb has been urbanised without becoming urban. In German you can really put this in words: *Die “Peripherie” ist zwar verstädtert, aber nicht urbanisiert*. The point then would be to find ways of urbanising this sprawling and conjoined suburb or intermediary city. 

In which urban refers both to a sophisticated or refined environment, as to urban behaviour in the sense of courteous, polite, civilised, well-mannered. The idea would then be to civilise and domesticate this uncivilised world. At the same time, however, we realise that this is an impossible undertaking.

This realisation is prompted by the scope of the suburb – which certainly applies to Antwerp’s twentieth-century belt – and inspired by the fear that this may compromise the urban qualities, the social diversity, the cultural energy and the economic dynamics. The solution therefore does not involve merely curtailing development and creating coherence throughout the entire area. Instead the scattered fragments also have to be connected and articulated within the various subsets.

This approach is also reflected in the four Lab XX studies, but with two different accents. Two emphasise the connection, either of the fragments of the landscape and the green-blue networks, or improving public transport. The other two focus on the articulation of fragments, while searching for new places of centrality, which urban planners in Southern Europe mainly equated with urbanity in the urban sense in the Nineties. One of the two advocates an approach that resembles urban acupuncture, the second places an emphasis on new development and financing models. All the proposals consider densification with housing an important means to achieve consistency and articulation.

**Decay or resilience**

After examination of the proposals one might readily conclude that we need to do it all! Strengthen the landscape by connecting the parks, the country estates, the forts, the cemeteries, the stream valleys, pastures, fields and lanes with one another. Enhance the radial transport system with a tangent and develop a selection of stops into new urban centres. Transform existing amenities such as hospitals, supermarkets and barracks and commercial premises that are becoming vacant into smaller centres, which appeal to specific groups and which constitute an intermediate layer of urbanity across the belt. Use dwellings to help shape these new centres and fill in the gaps in the landscape. Finally, design new development models and new forms of funding to achieve this. All this is possible, because the proposals do not exclude each other, in terms of their approach or their development. In fact they even supplement each other nicely.

The only thing missing is attention to the social and cultural cohesion or the lack thereof and ways of enhancing this. Here and there the proposals allude to this. Secchi and Viganò, the designers of the Antwerp structure plan, are quoted when they write about *a territory of inhabited places with*

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problems of decay, ageing and segregation. This perception is a familiar one, it is associated with the older urban neighbourhoods and is now also used for the suburb. American literature about the older suburbs coined a term for this: it is called trouble in paradise, emphasising the sharp contrast between the idyllic setting of the suburb and the decay due to the arrival of other demographic groups. Another issue that is raised is the lack of community. A solution could be to strengthen the collective domain and jointly develop or improve dwellings.

The attention to social-cultural changes is thus limited to the neighbourhood level, more specifically to the sprawling neighbourhoods with terraced houses along bare streets. The changes that take place here are important but are mainly considered verstädterung or urbanisation. The question remains whether this is the right definition for the developments in the suburb, which in fact should be seen in terms of transformation, innovation, vitality, resilience and integration, in short, in terms of urbanisation and a new public domain.

Parochial spaces and the public domain

The public domain is where social and cultural exchanges take place in the city. Not between neighbours or members of the same group but between members of different groups, based on nationality, country of origin, ethnicity, or lifestyle. This exchange significantly defines the city’s resilience, vitality, and integration capacity. All attempts to urbanise the suburb should focus on this instead of just focussing on the landscape or on various spatial
fragments. We should aim for the social worlds that are the outcome of the social-spatial practices of the various groups that live, work, shop, go out, relax and so on in the suburb. These worlds consist of an amalgam of very different places which form a group’s parochial domain.

At the crossroads of these parochial domains, or where such domains overlap a public domain is created, a place of cultural exchange. Different groups can also use these places. They can also be dominated by one single group, which leaves its mark on it without excluding other groups. The experience of the public domain, of a foreign, unknown world is created precisely because you enter a place that is dominated by others.

The public domain is therefore created where groups encounter one another, in the old villages, in the supermarkets and superstores along the old main arteries, in the parks and in sport centres. Possibly also in hospitals, cemeteries, schools and university colleges. In any event they offer potential for the development of a public domain. This however depends on the location of these places in the urban fabrics: the proximity of specific parochial realms, in terms of distance or time.

Some places in the suburb are also significantly defined by the connections with neighbourhoods that are dominated by specific groups. Strangely enough the main arteries, the ‘steenwegen’, are absent in all four proposals. Sometimes they crop up, but just as obstacles. Nonetheless these old main roads organise the suburb, especially when a tram rides along them, which is usually the case. They are the most important connections, with the city and with the country. But they are also important public domains. This applies to the street and the adjacent amenities as well as to the tram as a moving public domain^2.

Structure and anti-structure of the suburb

The various worlds are dispersed. They are not evenly distributed throughout the suburb however. This is abundantly clear when you look at the maps in the “Analysis of the city-region”. The south-eastern side of the twentieth-century draws much more people from elsewhere than the other side. There are also differences in terms of potential within this urban area. You need to be aware of them, even if you choose a local, acupuncture-style approach. Because that is when you need to know where the nerves and knots are.

These parochial worlds also distribute themselves in other ways across the various layers that organise the public domain of the suburb. For example in time. Firstly this is the layer of the daily social-spatial practices: the layer of the economy, of employment and commuters, of practical matters such as shopping and bringing or picking up your children from school, the Daily Urban System (DUS). Generally speaking this garners the most attention in urban and spatial planning. This is also the layer of traffic and transportation, of the network city and multimodal nodes.

Besides the DUS there is also a WUS, the layer of the WUS, of the weekly shopping, shopping on the weekend and Sunday excursions. Likewise you could also identify the MUS and YUS of extended weekends and holidays. And then there is the layer, which you hope represents an even longer interval, namely that of illness and death, the hospitals and the cemeteries. The sub-

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urb has something to offer in terms of all these layers, from Agfa-Gevaert to the Albert Canal, from the supermarket to Wijnegem Shopping Center, from the parks and the cycling routes to Middelheim Museum and the airport and from Sint-Augustinus Hospital and the University Hospital to Schoonselhof Cemetery.

The layers of the excursions, the holidays – and of life and death – could also be referred to as the anti-structure, the opposite of the structure of daily routine and hassle. This anti-structure is breaking free and on occasion even rebels against this structure, the layer of use and necessity, which occupies the attention of planners and traffic experts. The anti-structure represents freedom and futility, of erring and lingering, compared with effectiveness and the time schedule. It also encompasses the rituals, the funeral as well as the carnival and the fancy fair, when the world briefly comes to a standstill or is turned upside down. In this perspective the landscape, with its castles, manor houses and pleasure gardens, parks and cemeteries is so much more than a green-blue network. What does a twentieth-century belt look like, which has been designed much more in line with the anti-structure, than with the structure? I think that this is a nice challenge, and that the expertise of the designers of theme parked also must no be excluded in this.

In any event we need to take the way in which structure and anti-structure organise the suburb with different intervals much more into account. We need to understand which programmes and atmospheres are part of this process and how these can be articulated on the spatial level. This is important in any approach, whether you are strengthening the landscape, the transport system, an acupuncture of small centres or strengthening the community.

Superdiversity and new familiarity

The various worlds also penetrate the realm of everyday familiarity or conviviality, as Jan Blommaert calls it in his study of his own neighbourhood, Oud-Berchem. At first glance, this neighbourhood evokes the aforementioned notion of decay, ageing and segregation. The familiarity that possibly used to exist here has fallen prey to the growing differences between the inhabitants, in terms of income, employment and education as well as position, status, the time one has lived here, lifestyle, origin, ethnicity and language. But the increased differences also create a new form of cohesion. A few years ago you could have still distinguished between established and outsiders, between the indigenous original neighbourhood residents and a group of foreign newcomers, whether of Moroccan or Turkish descent. This clear, albeit tense, situation no longer exists. We can now distinguish several groups, along a multitude of dividing lines. Young, highly-skilled residents have moved in, gentrifiers, Turkish entrepreneurs who have made it to middle class, new transit workers from Central and Eastern Europe, refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East.

The situation is superdiverse as well as being unstable and constantly changes. There are fewer people established here, on two levels. Some groups, however, do not think of the neighbourhood as just being a transition home. They organise their life transnationally, straddling two countries, including their country origin with which they are in touch daily thanks to

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social media. In view of this situation some would call this neighbourhood an accident waiting to happen. Actually that is the case, in Belgium and in the Netherlands. But the opposite is true. The same superdiversity generates a diverse offering of amenities, which are interesting for one’s own group as well as for different groups. It also forces the people living here to speak a common language, however difficult this may be, namely Dutch. These are the elements of a new cohesion, of a light community, of a new urbanity, characterized by ‘weak ties’, within and between groups.

While the situation in Oud-Berchem does not apply to the entire twentieth-century belt, it sheds a different light on the social changes there. We have observed similar developments in some neighbourhoods in the suburb. The problem is, however, that these residential neighbourhoods often lack the space that old urban areas like Oud-Berchem have, which provide the space for these shops and restaurants. They establish themselves elsewhere; possibly thanks to the expansion that forces so-called ethnic grocery shops that have turned into complete supermarkets and tea houses that have become large restaurants and party venues to move across the ring motorway to the suburb. Conviviality will take on a different form in the suburb and will occur in different places. On places that are suited to the new centrality on the intermediary scale as well as in vacant lots and buildings along the main arteries and in public transport. The anti-structure plays an important role in this framework: where will festivities and rituals find a new space?

Conclusion

The social-spatial practices of different groups will shape the suburb’s urbanisation, on the social level as well as on the physical level, by establishing new amenities and by investing or building. The way in which this is stimulated and arranged is sometimes discussed in great detail in the proposals. They also contain an opinion on the public domain, which shall be understood at this point as the government as the representative of public concern. What is striking in this respect is that the government should mainly take measures to create more value so inhabitants, real estate developers and builders have an incentive to invest. Many of the proposals also rely on a collective approach to area development. It is not clear how public space ties in with this. How does this value increase serve as an incentive for investments in the public domain. Interesting models have been developed for this elsewhere. This is called value capturing. The strategy of Curitiba (Brazil) was based on this. Private individuals, inhabitants or businesses are given building rights but to avail themselves of these rights they must contribute to the public domain. As a result, added value is sometimes created very simply, for example by raising the building height or changing the use of a building. This is how public space was created in New York but has Antwerp not been transformed in the same way within the Leien?