



Jeroen Stevens

Master of Science in Architecture - Sint-Lucas Architectuur Gent, Belgium

Master of Science in Human Settlements - University Leuven, Belgium

jeroen.stevens@hotmail.com

Framing Luchtbal: Local Muslim Community and Global Urban Machinery.

Abstract:

Luchtbal is a neighbourhood in the North of Antwerp, the major harbour city of Belgium. Since the last decades, the urban quarter became largely inhabited by migrant families. In this paper I will explore some relation between the extremely different scales in the urban process of migration. On the one hand I will elaborate on the historical evolution of the modernist social housing project of Luchtbal, and the way it became the migrant neighbourhood of today. On the other hand I will elaborate on the particular case of the local Atthawid mosque, and the ambivalent role it plays for both the social apparatus of the residential quarter and the global urban machinery.

Keywords: Luchtbal, Muslim, mosque, anthropology, urbanism.

Framing Luchtbal: Local Muslim Community and Global Urban Machinery.

Investigating Luchtbal seems to be trapped in a clash between extremely different scales. On the one hand it is a modernistic residential district. It's a large scale housing estate, for almost one hundred per cent consisting of social housing accommodation, enclosed by large-scale infrastructures and consequently cut-off from Antwerp's urban tissue. Yet, on the other hand it is also fundamentally part of a global urban machinery. Historically the quarter has always been more a part of the harbour than of the city. It is caught between the national railway line, the highway from Brussels to Rotterdam, and the Albert Canal which connects the port of Antwerp to Liège through an industrial economic backbone. (Ryckewaert, 2001) It is interwoven with an urban system of flows, organized in the rational manner of industrial logistics. These flows are not only consisting of goods and capital, but also of people who aim to profit from this economic urbanity, willing to get *inside* of this economic system to benefit from it and possibly establish a higher social status.

How is *the local* of this neighbourhood fundamentally part of this broader context in which it is embedded and entangled? How can both perspectives (the local one and the global one) be linked, how is their dialectic relationship? How do they interfere with each other and affect one another? What does *the local* mean, if approached as part of this huge machinery, turning social capital into an urban middle class?¹ By investigating the topic both from an urbanism perspective and an anthropological perspective inner relationships will be examined between its context at-large as part of different urban systems, and its socio-cultural configuration.

The Attawhid mosque, which is located in the North of Luchtbal and housed in one of the garden-village terraced houses, functions as the spatial centre for the Muslim-community in and around Luchtbal. This specific spatial entity will be used as a strategic case-study in order to have an '*entrance*' to the very local socio-cultural apparatus of the quarter. It will be used as an acupunctural gate to dig into the deeper and hidden layers of the informally self-organized social and cultural life on the site, restricted to the Muslim community for this paper.

¹ This concept of the city as a 'machinery' turning social capital into an urban middle class, and the fundamental role of specific neighbourhoods in this process, is based on Saunders (2010).

Accessing Luchtbal: Methodological Contraposition between Anthropology and Urbanism

'Where is the Synagogue? Where is the door? Happily, we never get there. It was too late. It had just closed. We would not have succeeded in entering' (Cixous, 1997, p.307) In 'Attacks of the Castle' Helene Cixous tries to enter Prague, though as soon as she arrives it vanishes. The theme of access and denial runs throughout her writing. Prague is applied as a metaphor for the city that can never be fully captured. The theme of Prague as a city of multiple interpretations echoes Cixous' earlier observations on Monet's twenty-six paintings, each an attempt to 'capture' Rouen Cathedral, though revealing that in the end there are as many Rouen Cathedrals as there are paintings. After the static and universal models of structuralism, her writing can be read as an introduction to post-structuralism, introducing notions of time and difference, destabilizing the bar that separates signified from signifier. (Leach, 1997) If reality, and thus also urban reality, is indeed a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, a *rhizome*, (Deleuze & Guatari, 1980) in which every fixed entity is in a direct multidirectional relation with multiple other interfering entities, constantly reshaping one another, a wide array of attractions and influences with no specific origin or genesis, no beginning or end, always *in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo*. How then to access it? How to read what vanishes from the moment you arrive? How to grasp it? Five premises are examined to decipher possible points of access.

Global gate: Luchtbal as Part of the Harbour (First Premise)

From its very origin on, as a satellite neighbourhood of Europe's second largest harbour, Luchtbal has been shaped, re-shaped and re-defined corresponding to harbour activities.

Driven by the growing capacity of the harbour and its international importance, Antwerp evolved during its so-called 'Golden Age' of the 16th century to the primary port of Belgium. The harbour's territory systematically enlarged, synchronized with the fast expanding city. The city was harbour, and the harbour was city: one interwoven bustling and sparkling entity, as well spatially, culturally, and economically. During the 19th century the port grew extensively to the north, invading and cultivating the wet polder lands. The port became one of the most important gates to Europe, mainly for shipping from Africa, America and Asia. French, American

and German companies settled in large numbers because of Antwerp's numerous opportunities as main turntable of the West European trade.

In 1891 about twenty-five houses had already been built in the *Merkemse Polder*, five of which were bars, frequently visited by dockworkers walking their way to the northern villages. Café Luchtbal was a popular workman's bar and train stop along the *Ekersesteenweg* and the railway. Expansions of the docks went on and yielded tons of sand, used to fill the polder lands and giving ground to the artificial tabula rasa on which Luchtbal would be built up.

Shifts from brown coal mining and steel industry to the construction of highways, motor-industry and petrochemicals reshaped Luchtbal from a café and train station to a complete new housing neighbourhood for dockworkers. It became a car-based modernistic housing experiment with high-rise residential towers designed by Hugo Van Kuyck. Just like Renaat Bream he introduced at that time a new building typology where housing was combined with vast green areas. It was a *new* and *modern* living, forsaking the old and congested city. This modern living had no need of the city, it was the city. Living was only a fragment of this modernistic machine, organised as a car-based production line between port, apartments, shopping centres and leisure complexes.

However the structure plan of Antwerp defines Luchtbal as part of the '*hard spine*' of the city, and even defines it as a new urban centre, the assumption can be made that Luchtbal to a large extent had more to do with the port than with the city. It was both an attempt to leave the city and to incorporate city-life into the rationality of industrial efficiency.

If the port is a logistic machine, processing goods and generating capital, then Luchtbal can be understood as part of this pragmatic system, housing the social capital of a labour class to keep this machine turning. The modernisation of the port placed Antwerp on the world map, introducing it into the concept of the World Cities theory: spaces of transaction, pointing to new economic capacities and infrastructures. As Simone (2001) points out: '*For such notions may also precipitate new behaviours and positions for individuals and groups residing in cities apparently most marginal from these new economic capacities*', (Simone, 2001, p.16) referring to the vast number of African urban poor in search of an access to the global economic system.

Attawhid Mosque as Local Gate (Second Premise)

'Local reality itself has become impossible without a 'knowledge of the hidden' and of the spiritual worlds beyond the physical reality of everyday life. The local often seems too near to perceive it, while at other times it is too distant to be even noticed' (De Boeck, n.d., p. 8) The complex social apparatus of the local often stays hidden in the shadows, just because of its nearness and remoteness. By examining renovations in the traditional Islamic Swahiyya, AbdouMaliq Simone describes how urban Africa attempts to act effectively within a larger domain. This paper starts from the hypothesis that the Attawhid-mosque on Luchtbal takes a specific place between the global system of flows and the local identity of the Muslim community residing at Luchtbal.

Most people deriving from African origins living at Luchtbal are the second or third generation born in Belgium. This confirms the already prevailing idea that the area is not an arrival neighbourhood (Urban Unlimited, 2012; Saunders, 2010) This recent observation suggests an advanced process of adaptation, of 'localizing' at the other side of the African Diaspora. Simone describes how African cities often appear to act in an *'incessant state of preparedness'* (Simone, 2001, p.18), and De Boeck questions what the local means for people who are physically and materially confined to a spot, a street, a neighbourhood, or a village, but who mentally conquer space and imagine lives for themselves in distant and different elsewhere: *'what does it mean for a city to be filled with people who are mentally no longer there? Kinshasa's streets are extremely full of bodies, but the minds inhabiting these bodies are absent. They already evacuated the place, dreaming of living in Brussels or Paris.'* (De Boeck, n.d., p.7) What does the local mean at the Belgian side of the Diaspora?

However many African people living at Luchtbal might be official Belgians, because of their social status the awareness of being an 'immigrant' still seems very present, definitely when talking with the Muslims visiting the mosque.² The mosque building in this context appears as a very prominent act of *inscription* within the built environment. Kanmaz (2002) described, after extensive research on the Muslim communities in Belgium, how the most obvious sign of Islamic identity is the mosque or prayer-hall. This *inscription* appears even more prominent at Luchtbal because of the generic architectural morphology of the site. Many have indicated the absolute absence of spatial appropriation, despite the very multicultural composition. Large

² Multiple informal interviews with the visitors of the mosque have been conducted during January 2012, as well as interviews with the imam and direction of C.T.L., the non-governmental organisation that owns the building.

vacant green spaces are underused, and buildings appear generic and identical. This 'hiding' of identity enforces the premise that the mosque can act as a methodological gateway to some of the more hidden layers of the self-organization of this community on Luchtbal.

Materialized Manifestation of Muslim Presence (Third Premise)

If indeed, being defined as local or global '*has everything to do with the possibility to be visible, with the power constellations in which one is inscribed and entangled, with the (im)possibility, also, to construct and put into broader circulation an objectified identity oneself*' (De Boeck, n.d., p. 9) then the mosque can be read as the materialized manifestation of this Muslim presence. This process of 'becoming visible' of the Muslim community in general has gone through a long history in Belgium, and Europe in general.

The first Muslims to settle in modern times were soldiers from North and Sub-Saharan Africa who fought with the Allies to liberate Europe from the Nazis. Still, the first real wave of immigration started only after the Second World War when workers were recruited as a source of cheap labour to rebuild the ravaged European economy. In Belgium, they were mainly recruited in the 1960's to work in the steel and mining industries. (Kanmaz, 2002; Yazbeck Haddad & Golson, 2007) In 1964, Léon Servais, minister of employment wrote to the Moroccan media: 'Denkt U eraan naar België te komen? Wij Belgen, wij zijn gelukkig dat u ons land jullie kennis en kracht komt brengen!'³ In Antwerp many of the guest-workers settled to work in the harbour and the surrounding industries. In 1973, with the slowdown in Europe's economic expansion due to the worldwide depression caused by the first Gulf oil boycott, governments began to phase out guest-workers programs and many lost their jobs. It soon became clear that many of the Muslim *guests* were losing sight of their original intention to eventually return home. At once, tens of thousands of young Muslim men, suddenly unemployed, were now more of a burden than a boon to the struggling European economy.

In an effort to ensure some measure of social stability, governments began to allow the systematic reunification of immigrant families, and all of a sudden *guest-workers* became *immigrants*. (Yazbeck Haddad & Golson, 2007) It is from this moment on that

³ 'Do you consider coming to Belgium? We Belgians, we are happy if you bring us your knowledge and force!'

Muslims became prominently visible in the public space. Instead of living in poorly maintained guest houses with other workers, families now started to settle within the existing urban fabric. Moroccan families started to change the image and street life of whole neighbourhoods. Moroccan children went to local schools and vast networks of Muslim-oriented services emerged, ranging from shops and travel agencies to mosques and Koran schools. At the same time, the myth of returning to their countries of origin dissipated for most of the immigrants, and was replaced by the recognition that their futures lay in Belgium.

From only a few at the beginning of the 1980's, the number of mosques grew to nearly a hundred several years later, to over two hundred by 1990. Today the number is estimated around three to four hundred (Mana vzw, 2011). Most of them are comparable to the Attawhid mosque on Luchtbal in their spatial manifestation. They are spaces of worship, hidden in garage boxes, attics and cellars, behind Flemish masonry facades. European governments explicitly began to provide expanded services, including the outsourcing of the maintenance of the religious needs to the immigrants' home countries. This way they hoped to maintain their loyalty to their homelands, encouraging their repatriation at the earliest possible time. (Yazbeck Haddad & Golson, 2007; Kanmaz, 2002)

Once the possibility to start up small businesses linked to the homeland became easier because of easy access to goods, African shops, bars and barbers popped up, very often in concentrated neighbourhoods, creating small replicas of African street life (Sleepstraat Gent, St. Jans Molenbeek, Schaerbeek, De Marollen, Matongewijk, etc.) This *concentration* of what was easily perceived as a *penetrating global process of Islamization* gave birth to a growing process of stigmatization, and an intensive intellectual and political debate, up to today, about minarets, headscarves and ceremonial holidays.

Both these policies and the media debate reinforced the impression of an *interrupting* Islam. Because of the direct relation between the home country and the mosques in Belgium, ostensible '*misplaced*' activities, unseen in the western world, raised the impression of an intruding Islam as a threat. Halal-slaughters in backyards, Eid al-Fitr or Sugar Feasts, noisy wedding parties, honour and revenge family dramas: many of the Flemish neighbourhoods that attracted the immigrating Muslims felt overwhelmed, and many voices shouted that the 'Flemish culture' (whatever that might be) was threatened.

Also concerning the African continent this policy opened up new gates and flows. As extensively described by Saunders (2010), the process of urbanization has a big impact on both the cities and the rural areas, because of the great amounts of cash

that are sent over by the urbanites to support their native village, their parents who stayed behind, or their children who are still being raised in the village. Comparably, Simone (2001) describes how the intricate framework for operating at world level '*cultivates permeable boundaries through which goods and money can pass with minimal regulation.*' (Simone, 2001, p. 23) Local residents and visitors of the mosque at Luchtbal confirm this trend.

Islamophobia & the domestication of Islam (Fourth Premise)

Muslims in Belgium became in disrepute not only because they were seen as competitors on the labour market. Some global events triggered the *Islamophobia* and gave birth to an increasing stigmatization. Throughout the 1980's, as the number of resident Muslims grew and the conflict and political turmoil in the Middle East began to spill into European cities, anxieties about Muslim immigrants intensified. (Yazbeck Haddad & Golson, 2007) The first headscarf affair in France in 1989 triggered the debate on Muslims public presence in the whole of Western Europe, including Belgium and not least Antwerp. The Rushdie affair⁴ brought the Muslim community to the fore as intolerant and conservative, clashing with the Western structure of society. This trend dramatically accelerated after September 11 when European governments and their citizens realized that the hijackers' networks extended deeply into Europe. (Yazbeck Haddad & Golson, 2007) For many, the mental connection between the mysterious meetings in garage-box mosques and terrorists crashing into the WTC-towers was easily drawn. The Danish cartoon controversy⁵ contributed to this perception of an intolerant and aggressive culture, unmatched with Western society.

More and more governments drastically changed their strategy. Redirected policies aimed at the institutionalization of a moderate, Euro-friendly Islam. The integration issue turned from '*how to help Muslim people feel at home in foreign societies*' to '*how to ensure that these societies produce the right kind of Muslims*'. At Luchtbal, this

⁴ The Rushdie Affair, also known as The Satanic Verses controversy was the heated and sometimes violent reaction of some Muslims to the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, which was first published in the United Kingdom in 1988. Many Muslims accused Rushdie of blasphemy or unbelief and in 1989 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill Rushdie. Numerous killings, attempted killings, and bombings resulted from Muslim anger over the novel.

⁵ After a Danish newspaper and other European publications displayed 12 cartoons caricaturing the Prophet Muhammad in 2005 and early 2006, violent protests erupted around the world. Muslims throughout the Middle East and Africa rioted. They burned embassies and churches and fought with police; at least 200 died and many more were injured.

debate manifested itself in April 2011, when Monica De Coninck (SP.A), deputy mayor of integration, proposed to rent the General Motors' vacant factory building located at the edge of Luchtbal to the Muslim community, to host there what was called a '*super mosque*'. What for many Flemish appeared as again another concession to the Islamic community was in reality a political attempt to institutionalize and centralize the scattered and uncontrollable representative Islamic bodies all over the country. Even so, it clearly underestimated and ignored the great diversity in the Muslim community, as if there are no distinctions between Pakistanian, Moroccan and Turkish places of worship, to give only one example.

The super-mosque issue was part of a process, ongoing since the 1990's, to 'domesticate Islam' by severing its transnational ties and selectively encouraging a state sanctioned form of Islamic identity. Islam needed to become increasingly centralized, localized, and independent of foreign influences. Browsing through popular media reveals various political interventions confirming this tendency. (Flemish Imam training programs, a recognized institution, subsidized fundings, etc.) The perspective seemed to have turned from a state policy acting in response to the religious needs of Muslims, to a Muslims community which is determined by state security policy. The state is increasingly working to recreate Islam as a Westernized, liberally manageable religion on par with other faiths, and to bring about a generation of obedient Muslim Europeans whose first loyalties lie with their countrymen (Yazbeck Haddad & Golson, 2007).

It's remarkable how all three categories, as described by Yazbeck Haddad & Golson (2007), through which this religion-change is brought about, are concentrated in the case of the mosque building at Luchtbal: (a) the recognition and incorporation of Islamic organizations, (b) the Islamic schooling and (c) the treatment of the Muslim clergy, mainly Imams.

The first category, the recognition and incorporation of Islamic organizations, became very soon the main subject when talking with those responsible for the Attawhid mosque. Until 2009, the mosque at Luchtbal had been operating in a garage box owned by one of the Moroccan residents, though it was financed by a Moroccan Islamic instance. Because of multiple warnings for fire safety and anxious neighbours who had no trust in what the Islam worshippers were contriving behind the closed portal, the City of Antwerp negotiated with some of the prominent figures, and came to an agreement. The Muslim community established a non-profit organization and subsidized by the city, they could buy one of the terraced houses in Baltimore Street. Remarkably, the association was named 'C.T.L. v.z.w.: Centrum Toekomst Luchtbal' ('Centre Future Luchtbal'), by which its main focus was apparently replaced from a

religious local Islamic centre to a centre for the whole neighbourhood, concerned about Luchtbal's future.

Also the educational aspect took strange bends, if approached from a global-local perspective. As one of the local non-profit organizations, C.T.L. co-organizes the Dutch language courses in the cultural centre. In the small entrance room of the mosque, where the Muslim prayers wash their feet and stack their shoes, a poster advertising the Dutch language courses sticks to the wall, right next to the Islamic calendar, the first one with the mark of C.T.L. clearly visible, the latter with 'Attawhid-mosque' in a curly and exotic font on top, surrounded by images of grand mosques in Marrakech. Every Saturday morning Muslim children - and they are many at Luchtbal - take the local buses to the cultural centre in the south of Luchtbal to follow the Dutch courses, and go from there straight to the Attawhid mosque in the north to follow Koran lessons in the afternoon.

Other activities that C.T.L. organizes demonstrate the same duality, the same quest between integration and Islamic roots, between the local of Luchtbal as a neighbourhood, and the global of their diasporic identity, or could one say: the global of Luchtbal as an access to urban middle class, and the left behind local of African roots. C.T.L. is very active in the neighbourhood. Enthusiastically I am shown photographs of soccer games, picnics and street barbecues, though quickly the visits to the great mosque in Rotterdam are skipped. Apart from Muslim clothing, the pictures I am shown could be taken from any local neighbourhood committee. The Muslim identity as shown on the street during the various activities apparently has been reduced to the shoddy touristic kitsch of Moroccan thee, dates and halal lamb brochettes. The Muslim meeting in the prayer hall next door is continuing meanwhile. Weekly sessions attract up to one hundred worshippers and Muslim holidays up to three hundred. C.T.L. puts great effort in organising the small space to correspond to the constraints that Antwerp imposed. Letters and signs on all doors remind everybody to keep silent outside and to park the cars further away in the street, in order to avoid disturbing the neighbours.

Religion as a Platform (Fifth Premise)

In 'On the Worlding of African Cities', AbouMaliq Simone (2001) describes the evolution of the Zawiyah, a traditional Islamic religious school and monastery. Within many Sufi traditions, the Zawiyah plays an important role as a service to members of a specific brotherhood and as an embodiment and facilitator of the

translocal character of this affiliation. The Zawiyah was an important site through which migrants could be incorporated into the city. (Simone, 2001) A comparable interface between the local and the global as the latter was described in Simone's case study. The more social functions the Zawiyah started to incorporate as information point, service centre for the brotherhood and facilitator for worship, the more it started to function as a travel agency as well. Increasingly, it was incorporated into the orbit of new organizations and objectives. What at first sight might be perceived as a materialization of tradition, conservative religion confirming and consolidating the very local as *rootedness in past and present* (De Boeck, n.d.), appears as well to be the place where one leaves behind this very locality, gaining access to a larger world and the process of modernization. Comparably, the mosque at Luchtbal was systematically incorporated into the western orbit of formalization and institutionalization.

'Islam remains a consistent reference point. What Islam may mean, however, to various African actors and institutions is, of course, not consistent in itself. Nevertheless, Islam remains an important platform on which many Africans of various capacities and walks of life attempt to access and operate at the level of a larger world.' (Simone, 2001, p.36) Where at one side of the Diaspora, Islam has been a main focal point to enter the process of *Worlding*, once at the other side it became primarily the focal point to refer back exactly to what was left behind, a micro-cosmos between walls where the African life is represented.

Conclusions

Processes and systematic global shifts and changes shaped Luchtbal both as a built environment and as a socio-cultural compound. However every global shift, every industrial process is apart from the big story, also an assemblage of individual stories, as a result again of personal intentions, visions and objectives. As Deleuze noted, the tools (the infrastructures, the technologies) always presuppose a machine, and the machine is always social before it is technical. (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977)

It became clear how networks of social organization work behind the generic and unappropriated facades of the Luchtbal neighbourhood. While the district is often described and perceived as a problematic area, one could ask if this definition of 'problematic' refers to the subject-matter or to the instances defining the question.

As a city district, Luchtbal has always been in a certain conflict with the city of Antwerp. Its former modernistic objectives to re-create the city on an artificial

plateau, and its later appropriation by migrant families made it a distinctive urban district in Antwerp's urban fabric. While its distinctive '*otherness*' gave birth to a common sense of *wrong-ness*, of '*problematic and to be aligned*', I suggest to approach its *otherness* as what might be this neighbourhood's main value. If indeed, according to the structure plan of Antwerp, it should become a new urban centrality in Antwerp, it might be important to have a deeper understanding of the hidden logics of the complex and multilayered social and cultural apparatus of this urban quarter.

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