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Contact

mail onscenario@iuav.it

web <https://www.iuav.it/scuoladott/>

Main location

Aula Tafuri

Palazzo Badoer - Scuola di Dottorato Università Iuav di Venezia

San Polo 2468, Venezia

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How a territory lost its project: automobility and the Liège-Aachen diffuse city

Cédric WEHRLE Université de Liège (BE)

cedric.wehrle@uliege.be

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A rich body of research has been done on the many types of contemporary diffuse cities around the world (Barcellona Corte and Viganò 2022), whose specific characteristics arise through specific geographic, but also social, technical, and political factors. The Liège-Aachen metropolitan axis is such an example of a diffuse city, sharing common topography, soil properties, and water resources. Through constantly shifting national and cultural boundaries and being well served by transcontinental infrastructure, it notably features a long common story of mining and vivid subsequent industrialisation.

The Liège-Aachen metropolitan axis fits on many aspects within the research lineage on the diffuse city but sets itself apart from neighbouring western European examples in several ways. Firstly, it lies both at the centre of Europe and at the edge of two countries, languages, and planning cultures. Secondly, as it was primarily defined by geography rather than by human settlements, it crucially lacks a hegemonic urban centre of which this case study can be seen as the hinterland. Lastly, despite being part of the oldest recognized European cross-border collaboration, it lacks a common territorial project.

This socio-technical system of automobility, (a term coined around the same time as research around the diffuse cities grew manifold), constitutes a defining catalyst not only for accentuating already present dispersed settlement structures, but also for producing characteristic urban forms in a very short time span. A growing body of work is being collected to envision post-car future scenarios (in which the prevalence of the car (today recognized as a largely counterproductive system) and its ancillary spatial imprint would dramatically shrink in favour of new territorial configurations (Cogato Lanza et al. 2021).

To accompany the massive urbanisation process induced by the car, two radically different planning traditions have been pursued between Liège and Aachen since the 1960s: the banlieue radieuse ideal was accentuated in Belgium (De Meulder et al. 1999), while the German area became a laboratory for Christaller's central space theory (Blotevogel 2004). This results in very different settlement patterns, despite a rather similar built density.

This contribution aims to address this gap in the research about

this very type of transborder diffuse city through the lens of automobility and a future post-car discourse. It will argue that despite strong historical and geographical links, ties within this territory have been severely weakened as the consequence of the system of automobility taking effect, illustrating this contradiction called splintering urbanism (Graham and Marvin 2001): more infrastructure can lead to less connections.

This very point will be shown through the comparative analysis of urban morphology, social indicators, and contrasting urban planning practices. Secondly, this paper will outline how, through the testing tool of a post-car scenario, new territorial solidarities between estranged neighbours can lead to new opportunities for addressing ecological challenges.

In 2021, violent floods in both Germany and Belgium highlighted how the geographically inherent territorial solidarity is ever more a crucial factor for understanding our territories in a way that is meaningful to tackle the challenges of the transition. Necessary changes in social and planning practices, but also new solidarities between territories sharing common ecological threats are urgently needed.