

Carfree Areas Visited During Summer 2008

The following notes describe carfree areas visited by Steve Melia during July and August 2008 in Germany and Belgium.

Hamburg – Saarlandstrasse and Kornweg

An afternoon was spent with Rose Scharnowski of Autofreies Wohnen, a visit to the two sites. We were joined at the Kornweg by Holger Blauck, a member of Autofreies Wohnen, who has bought one of the new apartments there.

Autofreies Wohnen is a member organisation, which includes both residents of the carfree areas, and other people supportive of the concept. Rose is their sole part-time employee.

It should be noted that both the Hamburg developments are relatively small. Saarlandstrasse phase 1, completed in 2000, has 111 apartments. Phase 2, which was under construction at the time of my visit, will have 53 apartments. The Kornweg development, partially completed and occupied at the time of my visit, will have 64 units, including a few town houses.

Origins and Motivation

The initiative for the Hamburg developments came from a group of activists who began looking for a site for a carfree development in the early 1990s. The philosophy of Autofreies Wohnen is 'purist', in the sense that the aim is to provide environments where people can live without owning cars.

Locations and Land Acquisition

Both the Saarlandstrasse and Kornweg sites were acquired from the City Council. Saarlandstrasse was a former industrial area. It lies about 5km (as the crow flies) from the city centre set back from a main road. It is surrounded by water on two sides, which makes it into a natural cul-de-sac, with a small jetty at the rear, used by residents with canoes. It is a few hundred metres from an S-bahn station and about 1km from another station with both S-bahn (express) and U-bahn. It is entirely composed of apartments – mainly five stories high, which would be normal for a new development in that location.

Kornweg is a more suburban location, about 10km from the city centre. It is being built at lower densities – mainly three stories high. An S-bahn station with a small row of shops is a few hundred yards away. There is only one road access to the site, which will also include some more conventional residential development.

Tenures and Financing

There are several different forms of tenure across the two developments. The originators of the Saarlandstrasse development formed a *Wohnwarft* (housing association), which still owns a proportion of the housing, which is held on a shared ownership basis. New owners must buy into membership of the association, with a

payment equal to around €50/m² (so around €4,000 for an average sized flat), on top of which, they pay a monthly rent.

The land was sold to the *Wohnwarft* at full market rate, but with the help of loans from the City. The original members were required to provide 20 – 25% of the building costs up front.

Eighteen apartments in phase 1 are owner occupied. At the time of my visit, one owner was trying to sell one of these apartments. Rose believed this was the first time this had happened since the blocks were first occupied, so it is not possible at this stage to assess the effect on market values of the carfree model in Hamburg.

One of the blocks was owned by a private management company, who rent the apartments at normal market rates (although these may be subsidised by the state for those on low incomes).

One block includes supported accommodation for people with physical disabilities. Phase 2 will include some more of these units, the rest being entirely shared ownership.

Kornweg includes some shared ownership and a form of collective self-build for new owner occupiers.

Several of the blocks include community facilities, including in Saarlandstrasse a communal roof terrace, a shared garden and a community room of about 35m². The latter has been used for: parties, language lessons, music practice and screening of films.

The Carfree Model

In both Saarlandstrasse and Kornweg, vehicular access was limited to one side of the development. The public areas between the blocks were made up of shared gardens, play areas and semi-private open space.

The parking ratios for the two developments are:

Saarlandstrasse:	0.15
Kornweg:	0.2

The ‘standard’ minimum parking ratio in Hamburg is 0.8, and a condition was imposed at the beginning that if car ownership rose above 0.4, the City reserved the right to require a cash in lieu payment from the *Wohnwarft* – an eventuality which has not occurred.

The parking places on site are intended to be used mainly for visitors and deliveries. The facility exists to apply to the *Wohnwarft* for a parking place due to changed circumstances. This has happened twice since the housing was first occupied.

Apart from these exceptions, all residents are required to sign an annual declaration that they do not own a car. There have been some problems confined to the private rented block. It is believed that the management company may not have made these conditions

clear to all their prospective tenants. This has led to some problems of unauthorised parking, angering the majority who do not own cars.

A large majority of the prospective owners of the Kornweg properties are already living without cars. The others have indicated willingness to give up their cars on moving there.

Cycle parking is provided at around 2 spaces per dwelling, with a combination of underground and above ground in lockers.

Other Environmental Aspects

The Saarlandstrasse flats were built to thermal efficiency levels which were high at the time they were built (typical energy consumption 50kwh/m² p.a.) although the standards have since been raised. They have a blockheating powerplant, using waste as well as natural gas. There is on-site recycling of packaging and paper, and compostable materials – which is apparently not usual in Hamburg.

The Context in Hamburg

Hamburg has a population of 1.75m, similar to Greater Manchester.

The City Council has been important to the process. The City has a policy when it sells land for development that 15% of the units in new development should be for *Baugemeinden*, (co-housing groups), which has helped with the acquisition of sites. The attitudes of the Council have varied with political changes over the years. The Green Party has recently entered the coalition governing the City, which is expected to make the Council more supportive. The previous CDU administration had a pro-car agenda, which led them to increase speed limits on some main roads, for example.

Rose explained that Hamburg was ‘notorious’ for doing very little to promote cycling. The cycling network was not as comprehensive or as well implemented as in cycling cities such as Freiburg, Münster, although it would compare favourably with most British cities. The public transport system is also more comprehensive and less expensive than British equivalents. An all-mode all-day ticket for Greater Hamburg costs just €6. (The equivalent ticket for Manchester is valid only off-peak and costs £7.)

Cologne – Stellwerk 60

The following is drawn from notes made during a day spent with Hans-Georg Kleinmann, one of the initiators and a house owner in Stellwerk 60. We were joined for part of the time by a journalist from a local newspaper in a nearby town, also considering a carfree initiative.

When finished, Stellwerk 60 will comprise just over 400 units, of which around 70 are town houses, the rest apartments. At the time of my visit around 220 were completed and occupied. Unlike most of the other German carfree areas, Stellwerk 60 was privately developed with around 70% of the properties for sale and 30% for rent, including one block of about 80 apartments for social housing.

Origins and Motivation

The initiative for the Cologne developments came from a Bürgerinitiative – a citizens' petition, in the early 1990s. This aimed to put pressure on the City Council to allocate a site for a carfree development. As in Hamburg, the development was dependent on the attitude of the politicians. The political complexion of the City Council has changed over the years. Originally, even the CDU supported the initiative, although Hans-Georg felt that would not be the case if they were starting today.

Location and Land Acquisition

The site selected was 4.2 ha, a former railway repair shop, adjacent to a major railway, with some problems of land contamination. Deutsche Bahn had been trying to sell it for some time before it was acquired by the City Council.

It is located in the Nippes district, 2.5km as the crow flies from the city centre. An S-bahn station is 600m south, and an U-bahn station about 600m east of the site.

Having acquired the site, the Council ran a nationwide architectural competition. 77 architects entered. The winning masterplan, selected by the politicians, originally included plans for an employment area, for which a buyer was never found – it has been developed for housing. The land was then sold to a single private developer, who made some minor changes from the original masterplan.

Carfree Model

As with all the German carfree areas, the residents are required to sign an annual declaration concerning their car ownership. The developers are required to hold some land in reserve in case car ownership becomes higher than anticipated.

Those who own cars are required to purchase a space costing €16,000 in the adjacent multi-storey car park. This decision is usually made at the time of purchase. The block will be collectively owned by the purchasers when the development is complete. The parking ratio is 0.2 (see below). At the start of the development, there was no parking control on the surrounding streets, and a minority (Hans-Georg estimates about 20 households) have presumably lied on their declarations, and have been parking on the surrounding streets. This is about to be addressed with the introduction of residents' parking scheme in the surrounding area.

The site itself is entirely free from vehicles, although the possibility of access to within 50m of each property for emergency vehicles was a design constraint.

Each property is allocated between two and five cycle parking spaces, in a mixture of underground and surface lockers.

A residents' organisation has some management responsibilities which will increase once the developer finishes. Membership costs €60 p.a. and is entirely voluntary; it currently has 61 members.

Deliveries

Deliveries are largely done by hand. A communal building is currently the headquarters of the firm responsible for on-site security. In conjunction with the residents' organisation, this building has become a central point for deliveries, with a range of hand carts, which can be used by residents. For the time being, packages addressed to residents are delivered to this building, and for the time being, the security staff (who have spare time available) deliver these packages by hand or hand carts, to the residents. The residents' organisation will inherit this building, and will need to find a longer-term arrangement, possibly involving volunteers, when the security guards leave the site.

Site Layout and Observations

The site is bounded on the eastern side by a terrace of older two to three storey houses. The density of the site has been graded, starting with 2.5 storey terraced houses at that end, rising to 4.5 storey apartment blocks at the opposite side overlooking the railway. There is a small park adjacent to one corner of the site.

A paved street, with bollards closing it off to vehicles under normal circumstances, runs along the southern boundary of the site. This road is heavily used by pedestrians, cyclists and children playing. The houses all have small private gardens, but most of the space between the buildings is made up of pedestrian streets or public open space. As with Vauban, this was considerably used by children and residents generally.

Sales and Marketing

According to Hans-Georg, at the early stages, the developer did not understand the market for carfree housing:

“The salesmen came along in their Mercedes. People from the initiating group felt the salesmen didn't understand them. It was a bit of a fiasco.”

In the original plans there was to be no parking allocated for residents' cars. The developer tried to persuade the City Council to increase the parking ratio to 0.5. 0.2 – 80 spaces – was agreed as a compromise. The developer therefore needed to ration these spaces, so was forced to find buyers who did not want parking spaces.

According to Hans-Georg, the salesmen then began to gain an understanding of the niche market; instead of trying to sell to anyone and everyone, they began to discriminate, suggesting properties elsewhere, for those buyers for whom car ownership was important. The marketing literature and website emphasise the carfree aspect of the development and its advantages. Recently, one of the salesmen said to Hans-Georg:

“If we had known when we started what we know now, we could have sold them all without parking.”

As with other carfree developments, a number of people who bought properties with a parking space have since given up their cars and are looking to sell the parking spaces.

The prices of each property vary according to their situation, so it would be difficult to make an exact comparison, but in Hans-Georg's estimation, the sale prices within the

development excluding the cost of a parking space, are similar to those in surrounding developments. If a parking space is included, then the properties in Stellwerk 60 are more expensive. This would suggest that the carfree model would be more profitable, although obviously more detailed work would be needed to confirm this. Hans-Georg's own house (3 bedroomed 120m² terraced), cost €250,000, which he says was average for the area.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the developers do not agree with Hans-Georg's version of events. In email correspondence they have claimed that the sale prices of the carfree housing were slightly lower, although they were unable to quantify this. Hans-Georg subsequently consulted with neighbours and replied:

I have talked to some people around here. The Kontrola-prices are regarded as fair in comparison to the surroundings. They are slightly higher in comparison with the conventional Siedlung 100 meters away. It's hard to make a proper comparison, because the conventional has a Tiefgarage for their cars, we've got bikeports and Bike-Tiefgarage, they've got bigger gardens, we've got common shared places, may be we shall get a room for our assemblies and so on...

Demographics and Buyer Survey

The association did a survey of residents, asking why they moved to Stellwerk 60. The top two reasons were:

1. Its location within the City
2. Its carfree nature

As with other German carfree areas, the proportion of households with children, particularly young children, is high, particularly in the individual houses. They were often people who were "looking for a place with a sense of community".

As in Vauban, there are many residents from middle class and professional backgrounds, particularly education and creative professions. This has apparently been (belatedly) recognised by the developer as a positive sales point. As Hans-Georg put it:

"The title 'Autofrei' keeps certain people away. Those who you don't want to see, you don't see here."

He went on to explain that he was not implying any racial aspect to this; there are people of many different nationalities amongst the new residents (although a large majority appeared to be white).

Hans-Georg himself, having previously worked in commercial environments, now works part-time for the Green Party, which allows him time to work for the residents association.

Transport

The city-wide car club has 10 vehicles parked on allocated spaces on the edge of the site. Around half of the residents are members.

Hans-Georg (without any prompting) made an observation, consistent with research findings elsewhere, that the residents make surprisingly little use of public transport. Most people find it quicker to cycle. This is not to say, he added, that public transport can be neglected in the planning of carfree. Access to rail is particularly important for longer-distance travel.

Relationship with Surrounding Residents

During the early stages there was a demonstration by some of the surrounding residents, who were not convinced that the carfree model would work. One of the access roads to the perimeter of the site runs through a homezone, so the main issue appeared to be that vehicles destined for the carfree would be driving along this street, allegedly endangering the children of those residents.

Although the volume of traffic would presumably have been higher if the site had been conventionally developed, the prospect raised an emotional issue that residents of the carfree area, whose children were protected from traffic, would be responsible for traffic allegedly endangering the children in the home zone.

As the development has progressed, relationships with the surrounding areas have improved. The carfree residents' have made common cause with some residents of surrounding areas on a number of issues relating to both.

The Context in Cologne

Cologne had a population of 986,000 in 2006. It has one of the densest public transport networks of any of the cities I have visited, with 18 tram lines, as well as S-bahn and regional express lines which also serve several centres within the city. A city-wide all-mode day ticket costs just €5.20. Conditions for cycling were generally good, although the many surface tram and rail lines reduce permeability for cyclists and pedestrians in many places.

Louvain La Neuve

These notes follow a two day stay in LLN, including an interview (in French) with Prof. Bernard Declève of the Department of Architecture at the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL).

LLN is a 'new town' built to accommodate and service the university. It has a pedestrianised centre, and a parallel network of carfree streets run through all the residential areas. In 2006, the resident population of LLN was 18,799; the 'domiciled population was 10,281 (Wikipedia). The student population is around 20,000, not all of whom are resident.

Although LLN was planned before the concept of sustainability was established, it does have a number of aspects of relevance to the British Eco-town programme.

UCL have published a survey of LLN, conducted in 2006. *Les Neo-Louvanistes, Qui Sont Ils?* A copy of this has been ordered, and will be used to update these findings.

Origins and Motivation

Building of LLN was begun in 1971 to accommodate the separation of UCL from the old bilingual university at Leuven. The split followed a campaign by Flemish students and MPs to remove the French-speaking section from Leuven University. Other local people supported the campaign for more practical reasons. As in most European countries, higher education was expanding, and further expansion at Leuven would have swamped the local population.

The original plan, which was influenced by the ‘campus model’ of development, foresaw a ratio of three permanent residents to one student, which has never been achieved. Following national political changes, there were difficulties in securing the funds for infrastructure, including the railway extension. Development slowed during the 1980s, but picked up during the 1990s, and is continuing today, with a gradual expansion of non-university employment in the town.

Location and Land Acquisition

The Catholic authorities wanted a site within a French-speaking area, close to Brussels, with the potential for good connections. There was already a plan for a university development in the Commune of Ottignies, 15km southeast of Brussels, and the municipal authorities there supported the idea of an adjacent new town. Ottignies, has a slightly smaller population today (9,549 domiciled in 2006), but still feels like more of a local centre than LLN.

Following a similar pattern to the British New Towns of the period, the land was compulsorily purchased by the state at existing (mainly agricultural) use values, and acquired by UCL, with much of the funding coming from the Flemish authorities, who wanted a solution to the crisis. UCL have retained the freehold across the whole town with a few exceptions such as an employment park on the periphery. The residential properties are almost entirely leasehold.

‘Carfree’ Model

Unlike the German carfree areas described above, reducing car ownership was never an objective for LLN. There was, however, a deliberate emphasis on ‘walkability’. Everything was intended to be within a ten minute walk. Signposts as you enter LLN today announce that it is a “pedestrian town”.

The pedestrianised town centre is built over a large concrete platform (*la Dalle*) with car parking, through roads and the railway station at the lower levels. Two parallel road networks span the town, one open to all vehicles, the other pedestrianised but open to cyclists.

Many of the residential properties face the pedestrianised streets, following the Radburn model, with parking at the rear. The original concept is being retained in extensions.

Transport

The railway station is accessible from one of the squares in the town centre. It forms one terminus for the regional rail services with a half hourly service to Brussels during the day (journey times around one hour) and an hourly service to Leuven. Bernard, who commutes from a Brussels suburb commented that the service was “even worse than in Britain”!

There is a bus station also at ground level (i.e. below the *Dalle*) near to but poorly connected to the train station.

LLN is ringed by major roads, with another major though route passing underneath the *Dalle*. The road network within the residential areas is made up of loops and spurs, which are no through roads for motor traffic. Combined with the pedestrian network, this generally makes the town a model of ‘filtered permeability’. However, the pedestrian network is not always ‘legible’ or direct. There are some examples where a vehicular road without a pavement provides a more direct route than the pedestrian alternative, with the result that people walk along the vehicular road.

According to Bernard, LLN is a “functionalist” town, with little concept of “shared space”; its design has become dated.

Most residential properties have relatively unrestricted parking nearby. There is also a considerable parking capacity, some of which is reserved for UCL staff, under the *Dalle*.

Within the town, walking is clearly the main mode of transport for most people. The UCL survey shows a big difference in this respect between the student and non-student populations, the transport behaviour of the latter being much more conventional, and car based.

Cycling is allowed in the town centre and on nearly all the pedestrianised streets. As a visitor, this feels rather strange, as though you are riding unauthorised in a pedestrian domain. According to Bernard, little thought was given to cycling in the original plan, and there is a serious shortage of cycle parking.

As in elsewhere in Wallonia, there are many cycle paths in and around the town, some of which are pleasant and well-used for transport and leisure, but signposting is poor and there is no coherent network. Travelling between LLN and Ottignies was particularly difficult as the signposted routes lead to a main road where cyclists are banned.

Other Observations of the Town

At the time of my visit in August, the university was partially open for re-sit exams. The town centre was fairly busy with shops and other businesses all open. The centre has many bars and cafés well patronised by students and others, with much seating outdoors, giving a lively feel to the pedestrianised areas.

There is evidently an active cultural life in LLN, although cinemas, theatres etc were all closed over the summer. Over the university vacations, the town can apparently feel rather “dead”.

Originally, the centre was intended purely for academic and commercial buildings, but this has changed recently. UCL was approached by developers wanting to build an edge of town shopping centre. They were persuaded to build it in the town centre, instead, also helping to finance the construction of a pedestrian new street nearby, with apartments over the shops.

The new shopping centre has attracted mainly large chain stores, and appeared busy when I was there.

I asked Bernard how long it was anticipated that the concrete *Dalle* was expected to last. He was not aware of much consideration having been given to this.

Although LLN’s parallel pedestrian network may sound similar to British New Towns such as Milton Keynes or Runcorn, for a town of its size LLN’s network is more extensive and comprehensive than other new towns of the period. The ‘pedestrian town’ label feels appropriate when you are there.

Several people I spoke to compared LLN unfavourably with other older towns and cities. The word ‘artificial’ was used more than once. The predominance of concrete around the town centre contributes to this feeling. Some students and residents do apparently like living in LLN. One person explained that there was a “certain type” of academic who liked living there, a “provincial type” who was less attracted to the big city environment of Brussels.

As in Vauban, there is an ‘alternative’ community on the edge of the town (La Baraque). This grew from an alliance of the few original rural house owners, and student squatters, who persuaded UCL to abandon its redevelopment plans for the area, and allow the development of an autonomous neighbourhood, which pursues a number of sustainability objectives.