

2030.lu

A CHANGE IS GONNA COME

The opening salvo by the 2030.lu – Ambition pour le future initiative attracted a diverse audience and unveiled some of the challenges that face Luxembourg over the next 15 years or so. Theme specific workshops follow over the next few months and a report on their findings is due to be published in the autumn. But will politicians take notice and can enthusiasm and fresh ideas spark real change?

Text by *Duncan Roberts* Photography by *Olivier Minaire*

NICO STEINMETZ
Densification is an
opportunity

If attendance alone is any guideline, then the first public event of the 2030.lu – Ambition pour le future initiative can be judged a success. Some 450 people were at the inaugural debate at the Forum Geesseknäppchen to hear five guest speakers present their views on the challenges that Luxembourg must meet if it is to change and thrive. The debate was hosted by presenter Gabriel Boisanté and the director of the Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce, one of the 2030.lu initiators, Pierre Gramagna, gave an introductory speech. In addition, a panel of young students from the Youth Parliament of Luxembourg and the Association of Luxembourg Student Circles (ACEL) helped spark discussions. One of the speakers, architect Nico Steinmetz left the event impressed.

“I found it excellent; all of the presentations were very pertinent and clear. It was lively and I had the feeling that the audience was paying attention and the panel of young people asked interesting questions,” he says speaking a few days later at the offices of SteinmetzDemyer in Clausen. But he had one proviso. *“There were not enough politicians, I only saw François Bausch [deputy mayor of Luxembourg and a parliamentarian for the Green Party]. That was a pity, because politicians and the people from administrations should be listening... they need to get out of their everyday business and open their minds.”*

This is a crucial factor in the initiative’s goals. The idea is to be a catalyst for public debate but also to present the findings of a number of theme specific public workshops to the government at the end of the exercise in the

autumn. But will politicians really sit up and take notice of those findings just nine months away from the next general election in May 2014? Natalie Oberweis, a political scientist, freelance journalist and activist who was also one of the speakers at the event is unsure. *“Normally I am quite reserved. But this is quite a broad initiative and the Chamber of Commerce is quite a big social and economic player with a big network. So I suppose the government should really listen--it’s not just one NGO doing a project,”* she says. *“Everybody feels that something has to happen. Even conservative Luxembourgers, and there are many conservative forces in Luxembourg, feel that it cannot continue, that change must come. This should be a push for politicians to have the courage to change strategy, because I think they also know this is necessary.”*

But both Steinmetz and Oberweis, young professional Luxembourgers who have studied abroad, find that the Grand Duchy is still at



2030.LU INFO

Two public events remain on the 2030.lu calendar. Entrance is free but registration in advance is required.

Saturday, May 11

A territory designed to meet future generations’ needs
Workshop addressing energy, environment, green economy, infrastructure and housing.

Saturday, June 15

A sustainable economy serving the country and its inhabitants
Workshop addressing financial independence, productivity and wealth creation.

Contact

info@2030.lu, tel.: 8002 2323
(green number, free)
www.2030.lu

NATALIE OBERWEIS
 Foreigners create
 wealth but have no
 political voice

the mercy of conservative forces and are urging the authorities and individuals to look to other countries for solutions and a change in mentality.

Global vision

Steinmetz, for instance, decries the complication of laws and regulations that he says has put the brake on urban development and helped create a housing problem. He feels that politicians and those in charge of bureaucracy at national and local level sometimes don't share a global vision or take a pro-active enough role in urban development. On the other hand, he points to the way things are done in the Netherlands, where ministries and local administrations, developers and other actors, work together and bring their knowledge to push towards a common goal. *"In Luxembourg the administrations don't push at all. There is a lack working together."*

But Steinmetz says there also has to be a rethink of how we live in urban spaces. During the debate, he responded to one young student on the panel who had asked whether she should give up her dream of a detached house with a garden... the sort of property her parents have. Steinmetz responded that her dream was fine, but that he had a dream of a city that allowed this. *"A dream of collective housing with great quality that has outside spaces where families can meet and play. But that requires us to think of social housing with all these qualities that is even more attractive than a house in a green space with four façades."*

He says it is a question of responsible and collective thinking. The cost of individual housing in terms of infrastructure and the environment is too great, he argues. It makes a huge difference if 50 families rather than two share the costs of building new roads and laying down utility pipes and cables, never mind their subsequent maintenance. Ecologically, collective housing uses far less energy, both to build and to heat. Furthermore, public trans-

port is not viable for low density neighbourhoods. *"So people rely on their car and become prisoners of the car again,"* says Steinmetz. The spread of low density housing projects also takes away from the countryside. *"And we need to maintain enough green spaces that we can use for leisure."*

"Densification is an opportunity to improve things," Steinmetz argues. He approves of the plans by the city of Luxembourg to have a primary school every 500 or 800 metres or so. *"In villages the kids have to be collected by bus, so they become used to mechanical transportation from an early age. In the city, children learn the way to school, can spot the dangers or traffic and so forth, and eventually develop their own territory and can then walk to see friends in the neighbourhood."*

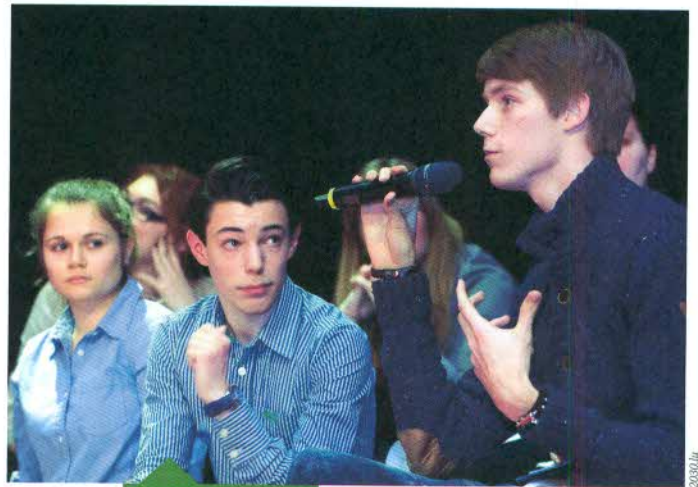
Oberweis was invited to the debate to talk about immigration and integration, a subject that she feels is always looked at superficially. *"We always look at the tip of the iceberg. When we discuss immigration we discuss security issues*

and national sovereignty, but I suggest we should take a more human approach and be more individualised, focus on the migrant rather than just us as Luxembourgers." And she warns of the danger of an "us" and "them" mentality, especially during economic crises when it would be easy to fall into xenophobia. She also believes there are exclusion strategies in some areas, such as the public service sector that is a closed shop for Luxembourgers only, as well as voting rights. *"Foreigners create wealth and pay tax, but don't have a political voice. We need more inclusion, for everyone to have the same rights."*

Content not language

As for language, which remains another barrier to inclusion for many, Oberweis is also quite clear. She finds it rather sad that during the first days after the launch of the 2030.lu website one of the main discussions on its online forum was about that fact that the site was in French and English, and Luxembourgish





YOUTH PARTICIPATION
A panel of young people helped spark debate



Julien Becker (archives)

was not included. *"Really the debate should be about content rather than language,"* she says with a hint of exasperation. *"We want to talk about the future. In the end language is a tool for communication, which is the most important aspect. I understand that people are worried about their language, but we have to be more open and not focus on that if we really want to take advantage of the international finance sector. We wouldn't be where we are without foreigners."*

Oberweis has lived in Niger and also visited Palestine for work, and says she learned that people who live in extreme poverty are often more social. *"I don't want to romanticise poverty, but often they are happier than we are. I think I learned not to judge so quickly, because we are quick to judge those who are different without trying to understand what they have experienced, where they come from."* She says she has never encountered so much tolerance and open-mindedness as when she lived in a Muslim community for two years in Niger. *"We need to*

be aware that what we see on the surface never reveals the whole truth about a person."

She admires the way people managed to live in circumstances that she believes would be impossible for many in Luxembourg. *"In Niger, one of the poorest countries on earth, and in Palestine, which is under occupation, the people still manage to live with courage and humour and patience. I am so inspired by these people. We are so spoiled here."* She says that a real change in mentality is required and may not just develop naturally because future generations are a product of the conservative education system. *"The school system here is not geared towards developing critical facilities."*

This was echoed by University of Luxembourg rector Rolf Tarrach during the debate. He wants the authorities to encourage more young people to have the courage to think outside the box and to leave their comfort zone. *"I also feel that a problem is precisely that many young Luxembourgers have never encountered real difficulties in their lives,"* he said. ■■

"MANY YOUNG LUXEMBOURGERS HAVE NEVER ENCOUNTERED REAL DIFFICULTIES"

ROLF TARRACH