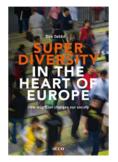# HOMInG interview

with Dirk Geldof

University of Antwerp and Odisee University College Brussels

conducted by Milena Belloni in Berchem, Antwerpen on 12th July, 2018

Photos by **Jorge Alcalde**. Extracts from the series *"Antwerp... in the year 5777" : the Jewish quarter"*
and *"A stroke of light...the neighbourhood"* (www.jorgealcaldephotography.be)

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What does home mean to you, to your work and to your disciplinary approach?

I work as a sociologist on migration and superdiversity, mainly on superdiversity in urban areas and in majority-minority cities. The most evident link between my work and the sociology of home concerns housing policies. How are people living? What is the happening behind the front door? How is the housing market functioning? Who is building where and for whom? These are the most common questions for those who are interested in urban development.

In particular, when you look at the limited number of sociologists interested in home in Flanders (Belgium), the region where I live and work, they are interested in housing policies and not in "home" as such. At the same time I work as a sociologist in the faculty of design sciences, where I am trying to inspire architects and interior architects about looking beyond the house they are constructing. I try to make them reflect on the impact of architecture on how people live, how they relate with each other and how the city develops. The most interesting part of our work, I believe, is to see how people are living, how people are using their houses, what home means for them. My colleague Els De Vos, who is an architect, wrote her phd on how the concept of home changed in Flanders from the second world war until today. What was the ideal home in the 1950 or in the 60s? And did this ideal evolve to the idea we have today? For example, it was completely unthinkable to have an open kitchen in the 50s and 60s. But today it is very trendy. These architectural patterns show different ways of conceiving the family, the space and home as a whole.

Combining these aspects of home in my work, the one which regards superdiversity and urban development and the other which relates to architecture and design, brings us to the question: if our societies are becoming more and more diverse and superdiverse, and if our cities are becoming majority-minority cities, are there any implications for the way we build houses and develop cities? Does it matter if people have a migration background or are coming from other cultures and have other ethnic backgrounds? Or are these issues

irrelevant in a superdiverse society? These are the two ways which I have developed through my work: through the classic understanding of sociologists in Flanders who have worked on home looking at houses, and through the focus on housing policies and the study of how people create their home.

And what is your opinion about that? What are the implications of living in a superdiverse society for the housing market?

Surely, it has a lot of implications, but there is hardly any research in Flanders yet that examines to what extent and why. Certainly living in a superdiverse society matters simply at a social economic level. Many of the people with a migration background live in more vulnerable positions. Often arrival neighbourhoods are places where the houses are cheaper because they are in worse conditions. The fact that different people are moving in also changes the neighbourhood, from processes of gentrification to processes of impoverishment. Neighbourhoods can have a good or a bad reputation, and this impacts on the housing market etc. That is quite evident. But superdiversity is not only about socio-economic vulnerability. When you look at Brussels for example, you find those very cosmopolitan neighbourhoods where EU people and well paid diplomats are living and working. This is part of the superdiversity but on the complete different end of the housing market. So to answer your question, yes superdiversity has many important effects on the housing market, but we don't know to what extent these effects emerge from socio-economic stratification of the superdiverse population (they may be the result of different income levels and abilities to buy and rent), and to what extent they partly depend on cultural and/or religious differences. There is hardly any research in Flanders about that.

How would you address such a question? What kind of research you would have to do to understand that?

We had a very small research project about that. We did not gather the data ourselves but we were able to look at the data of a research project commissioned by IKEA. They asked a commercial research partner to write a report on how people with a migration background experience their house and made their home in Belgium. So they visited 30 people coming from completely different ethnic, religious, migration backgrounds. They visited them at home, did in-depth interviews and photographed the interiors. And of course the question for IKEA to fund the study was: do we have to change anything in our product offer? If almost 50 percent of people in Antwerp have a migration background, the large IKEA shop in Antwerp will also have a lot of these people as customers.

We were not interested in the commercial side of the research, but it gave us the opportunity - especially through all the pictures taken in the houses – to reanalyse some aspects of interest. 30 people is a far too small number to draw conclusions, but it was a nice way to gather some ethnographic information. It would be interesting to redo it at a much larger scale. Combined to the research on how superdiversity influences interior design, preferences for furniture and ways of living in the house, it would also be crucial to investigate housing pathways. For example, it is evident that a refugee who is now looking for his first house will have other criteria than he or she will have in 5 year-time when (s)he will have a job and more money. At first it will be only about finding a roof and a bed which is affordable. Culture may intervene later in choosing a better house. But a newly arrived refugee may mostly count on his ethnic networks to find a dwelling. So again structural, socio-economic and cultural reasons influence housing patterns of migrants.

But when people have some means to organise their houses, then you see the differences. My Moroccan neighbours here in Antwerp, two doors away from here, have a very 'Moroccan' house. Already when you enter the hallway you can see Moroccan fences, the Arabic decoration. The saloon is also organised in a very traditional, Arabic way. But when I visited some Moroccan friends who went to university, they live in quite modern apartments and you can hardly find any cultural and religious connotations in the house. This is

superdiversity. It is not because people have a Moroccan background that they live in a traditionalist or western way. You can see a whole spectrum of differences. This is why research on housing pathways would be very interesting. It is not only about looking at the ethnic background. There are other factors such as: are people born here? how long have they lived here? do they have financial means to make choices or not?

Are there studies about this outside Flanders?

Hardly. Maybe some in design and architectural design studies, but these are quite stereotypical, culturalising research which just highlights cultural differences but they do not go into depth. They do hardly try to understand why some people develop cultural differences and other don't.

What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and migration?

As I said, housing pathways are very important I think. People's preferences about housing change a lot over time due to their age, financial means, things they learned from their parents, what they are taking with them etc. Looking at what home means, implies also examining life trajectories and the crucial transition periods: for example when someone leaves his or her parents for the first time, starts living together with a partner, when a child comes into the picture, when someone divorces. In that case, who keeps the house? What happens to the way in which people live? How does it change intergenerationally? How is the housing situation of the second and third generation different from the first generation of migrants? And if it is different, has this change to do with money or with other cultural patterns? Housing pathways is for me a crucial topic to analyse dynamics of transition and see how people deal with them differently.

About the second question. The city of Gent has invited us recently to collaborate in a research on housing policies. We should advise them about housing policies for the city from now to 2050. The administration is preparing a note for the next city government. It should be ready before the elections which we will take place in October 2018. Our main question is: how shall we deal with the housing market in a city that is becoming superdiverse? How can we keep, support or develop social cohesion in superdiverse neighbourhoods? How do we organise superdiversity not only looking at the home as a house but also considering the neighbourhood? What kind of infrastructure is there in the neighbourhood and for whom? Do people feel home? Are children going out to play? How do you organise or facilitate conviviality? How do you manage social tensions between different inhabitants? What we see is that in most European cities, the most diverse neighbourhoods are often characterised by high levels of deprivation. There people live in very small and run down houses. A good example is the north of Antwerp. This is the most diverse part of the city and also the poorest and most densely populated area. 80% of the people living there have no garden, not even a balcony. It means that they have no private outside space connected to their houses. Which means that to be out, they need to go on the street and this produce a complete different street life, a complete different way of living together only 4 km away from here [Berchem neighbourhood in Antwerp]. How do you organise conviviality in a place like that? This is why it is important to look at home in the context of the neighbourhood.

Diversity in Antwerp north (Photo credits: Jorge Alcalde)

Interesting considerations…I often heard people saying things like "Mediterranean, Southern people tend to be on the street much more because of their culture". Instead, you are saying "they do not have space inside in their house, that is why they are spending more time on the street".

Well it can be both: a cultural influence and a material necessity. What kind of house do they live in? Where can they go in summer when the temperature reaches 30-35 degrees? Can their children play in the garden or only on the street and the squares? Cultural explanations should always be combined with an understanding of the structural conditions people live in.

The third element about your question on empirical and methodological challenges in studying home: I believe that a *diverse sensitive approach* should be more widely implemented. This is an underdeveloped research lens in Flanders. Research on architecture and housing policies has almost been completely colour blind in the last 50 years. When I see the kind of courses followed by my students in architecture, I see that there is no understanding of what diversity means in practice. They are taught to build houses for classical white families with two parents and one, or maybe two or three children. And they are missing the boat. There is no understanding of the fact that the housing market has completely changed. Half of people in Belgium are single, many are divorced and/or live in complex family situations. The houses they have are linked to kind of new relationships they develop over time. Families and relations have become much more dynamic. For my parents' generation things were much clearer: they started working, then they bought an apartment and they died in that same apartment. Instead, this is already the 6th house I am living in since I left home. And probably it will not be the last one. Housing pathways and the housing market are today much more dynamic, but architecture taught at university has not changed in this way. There is no reflection on the fact that the society they are producing houses for is an individualised and superdiverse one.

Some architects, the most advanced may have reflected on some aspects…for example, there is some awareness in Antwerp that some members of the traditional Jewish community have specific housing needs. The very religious ones need to have two kitchens in their apartment so that they can prepare food in a kosher way. Sometimes, in some areas of the city, developers and architects would take these issues into account, but these are exceptions. There are so many other ethnic and migrant groups in the city! Either it is assumed that there are no relevant cultural differences or that these cultural necessities can be solved by small internal decorations. There is little dialogue with local communities to understand what people from other ethnic backgrounds expect from their houses and what 'home' means for them living here now.

The Jewish quarter in Antwerp (Photo credits: Jorge Alcalde)

Are both architecture or urban studies colour blind in your opinion?

It is more of a problem in architecture. Urban studies have a long tradition in understanding the way in which migrants and foreigners change or organise in a city, starting from the Chicago School. But urban policies and planning have not incorporate these reflections yet in practice. Building new neighbourhoods is an everyday reality. Cities like Brussels and Antwerp have an incremental increase of their population. Antwerp has increased of 70 000 inhabitants in the last 15 years. Quite a lot new neighbourhoods are built but these are built for the white middle class. Public administrators do not think about social mix and how to organise it.

In the Jewish neighbourhood - Antwerp (Photo credits: Jorge Alcalde)

This is why our project with the city of Ghent is interesting. They asked us to help them think about housing a superdiverse population in the next 30 years. There is huge pressure on the housing market in Ghent. Especially for renting, prices went up enormously. Students contribute to the pressure on the housing market it. But there are other reasons too. The number of inhabitants of all Flemish cities is going up in the 21st century, not only due to international migration but also due internal migration. People tend to stay in the city longer.

Methodologically, you said that it would be interesting to study housing pathways. But how would you do that?

In an ideal world, if we had the resources, the best way would be longitudinal research. But there are other ways we could think of. Ethnography or collecting pictures from the past houses and interiors could also be a way ahead.

Our project is framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this approach can add to the field of migration and home studies?

I think that macro, meso and micro level should be distinguished here. On the macro and meso level it is crucial to assess the impact of migration on the neighbourhood and the city: how urban transition processes are going on, how and why neighbourhoods are changing, how does it link to the arrival of new people, how arrival neighbourhoods are functioning. A colleague of mine at KUleuven, Elise Schillebeeckx, is finishing a PhD on arrival cities and neighbourhoods.

It is crucial to better understand mobility. We come from a very static view on what home means for people. I provided the example of my parents earlier on: many people in those days only lived in two or three houses: the one of their parents when they were children and the one they rented or bought after they got married. This is the way it was in Flanders and many other parts of Europe two generations ago. Stability was the norm. Now we are in a liquid or fluid society, as Zygmunt Bauman would name it. Consequently

people move much more. When you see the statistics of the people moving every year from one house to the other (these are data available for each Flemish city because there are a lot of changes of addresses), we witness an enormous increase of mobility in the last 20 - 30 years. This is not only the case for migrants, but also for autochthons, due to the individualisation processes. If you combine this increase of mobility with larger processes of international migration and transnational pathways, you get a much more complex picture. Part of that mobility has nothing to do with the local housing market and people's private relationships; it has to do with international mobility. The home- migration nexus can help us understanding how people construct a home many times in different locations and countries.

We are approaching homing as a special kind of relationship with space that involves domestic environments as well as neighbourhoods. How do you see the connections between these dimensions of home?

It is what I try to teach to my students in architecture and interior design. Home does not stop when you close the front door. It has to do with the street, the neighbourhood, the traffic, the infrastructure and the city. The fact that people feel at home in a place does not only have to do with how you organise or decorate your house, but also in what neighbourhood your house is located, what kind of relationships you have with your neighbours, how functional your area is, but also how safe it is. Home does stop when you leave your house. From a migration point of view I have just read a research coming from the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRIS, Birmingham) on migration, real estate and urban planning. They did a research on a number of British cities. The question was "Why would people with a migration background go to certain neighbourhoods?" The expectation was that people would look for their fellow ethnic people. That was not always true. People were looking for neighbourhoods with a lot of diversity, where their ethnic background was not so remarkable. They felt at home and safe there because they did not feel different from the others. If you think that Polish or Ghanaian people only would look for so called Polish or Ghanaian neighbourhoods, then you are wrong. They were looking for places with a lot of diversity where they could almost become invisible because they were all part of a larger diversity and everyone would feel at ease in that diversity.

Carnotstraat – Antwerp north (Photo credits : Jorge Alcalde)

Could it also be because the fact of living in an ethnic neighbourhood is discriminating from the outside?

Yes, it encloses people and involves a lot of social control too.

Is Borgerhout *[a neighbourhood of Antwerp north]* **an arrival neighbourhood?**

Dirk: It was certainly an arrival neighbourhood in the sixties and seventies. There most people from a Moroccan background migrating to Antwerp could find cheap housing. Before it was known as a blue collar district. At the time, white people with a blue collar background were slowly aging and dying or moving out, and the empty houses were taken by newly arrived Moroccans. But today the neighbourhood is in a process of gentrification. Those who were voting extreme right wing are dying of old age and those who moved in are either Moroccans which arrived there through chain or family migration or young Belgian people who are interested in this superdiverse neighbourhood and want to buy their houses there. It is a process of gentrification from below, not driven by project developers though. Now an arrival neighbourhood in Antwerp is the one next to it in the north of Antwerp, known by its post-number '2060 Antwerpen'. More recent arrival neighbourhoods are, on the other side of the motorway, where the city expanded in the 20th century. People with Eastern European backgrounds, who migrated in the late 1990s or in the 21st century, they don't go to Borgerhout because the housing market is under pressure and prices go up quickly. Their arrival neighbourhood is Deurne-north. So arrival neighbourhoods change over time. Again, this was not so much due to culture, but rather to structural reasons connected to the housing market, the availability of cheap housing that led to the creation of new ethnic neighbourhoods. Moreover, arrival neighbourhoods can be of different sorts. You can have arrival neighbourhoods where there is a high rate of turnover: nobody stays there for long. And others which have progressively become residence to a more stable population.

Borgerhout- Antwerp (Photo credits: Jorge Alcalde)

In the north of Antwerp for example, as an arrival neighbourhood, you can see that 20% of the people change their address every year. There has been research 10 years ago that showed that only 50% of the people who lived in the neighbourhood are still living in the same neighbourhood after 6 years. Which means that the turnover is huge. At the same time we know that a lot of those who were living there for more than 6 years, were living there for over 15 years. This means that might be a lot of hidden stability too in those areas characterised by high mobility.

And how would you manage conviviality and social cohesion in these neighbourhoods?

In the long term it can be about changing the composition of the housing market, who is owning and who is renting. The more people rent, the higher the turnover is. The other way round is how do you organise connection among people in this very mobile neighbourhoods. What do you do for the newly arrived people in the neighbourhoods? What kind of services are necessary or do they need?

What kind of strategies would you suggest for studying home-making practices, considering that privacy is sensitive point? How did you deal with that gesture of censorship, which came from the mouth of those you were giving voice to in your writing? Do you think that some of our ethnography on the nexus home-migration might stir similar rejection from our research participants, either during fieldwork or at the time of results publication?

As my research was on superdiversity and I did not use ethnographic observations in their homes, I generally found that my research participants were happy to share their stories. There is a large willingness to share. For example last months in the Netherlands a research was published about the living conditions of Syrian refugees who had got their status in 2015-2016. They had a response rate of over 81%. It is amazing.

Could you tell us a bit more about the two projects on refugees and home which you are working on at the moment?

We are running two projects on refugees now. The first one is about building resilience in refugee families with young children. We are trying to bring together different sectors who are working in this field. It could be reception centres, school teachers, social workers, psychotherapists, volunteers and NGOs. Quite often all those professionals do not know each other and their reciprocal activities. The starting point of the project is that the relationships between the parents and the children are often changing in the migration process, for many reasons. During displacement, they are often separated from one parent and sometimes from both for long time. Moreover, once they are here, children go to school and they learn Dutch much faster than their parents. These then become dependent on their children for many practical issues. This can lead to problems.

Are there ways to restore resilience before these problems pop up? This is what we focus on, starting with understanding families' living conditions in reception centres and in their first dwellings once they are recognised. The research participants are Syrian, Afghani and Iraqi families (20 cases) who have arrived less than 2 years ago and have children between 6 and 12. Children and parents are interviewed, as well as professionals working with these families. We do this in 4 -5 locations, in smaller and bigger cities in Flanders.

The other project is about the refugees who have to find housing after recognition and thus after leaving their reception centre. Once recognised as a refugee, they have 8 weeks to find a house, and this is not easy, for many reasons. Not only discrimination, but also availability of affordable housing, linguistic problems, income, …. Who is helping them to find housing then? Professionals (mostly social assistants employed in refugee centres) were the ones who would help them. But the government is cutting down on these human resources and this has created a void. Social housing is not easily accessible, because the waiting list is very long. In Flanders there are almost 100.000 people on the waiting list: from waiting periods of 6 months for single people to 5-6 years for larger families for which it is harder to find a suitable housing. More and more the heavy task to help refugees finding a house is left to volunteers. We are then trying to make an inventory of all the projects created to help refugees in this process. We analyse the good practices and why they function as good practices. Based on interviews with volunteers, we try to understand what could be done to support the good practices and the volunteers, as one step towards more structural housing solutions.

Given your experience with refugees and home, what do you think is specific to this category of migrants?

Mostly the fact that these refugees are often received in a contexts of emergency. This is characterising their reception and integration process. There was an exhibition about refugees' housing in emergency settings in the Singel last year. It was about refugees and housing, and the challenge for architects. How should we design houses and shelters in a time of a refugee crisis? When you see how institutions reacted to 2015 refugee crisis in Belgium, you see that old empty unused places have been filled with refugees, old hospitals or abandoned military facilities. However, there was no vision about what a good architectural plan could be for temporary refugee housing, suitable for people who come after traumatic flights. There was also no reflection on how we could stimulate integration afterwards. Military facilities for example where located lost in the country side, and after 2 years when people obtained their papers, they moved to the city. Such transfers make integration processes much more difficult. You see how important it is to think in advance on refugees' homes and their location since the very initial phases of their reception process as these could influence their following integration pathways. Many European countries focused on shelters in case of emergency, but they hardly invested in adequate housing pathways afterwards. As a result, the refugee crisis of 2015 is now becoming part of an increasing housing crisis in many European cities.

Thanks very much for this interview!