

Whose housing crisis? Transnational elites’ residential strategies in Geneva and the role of public policies

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the way housing crisis influences the residential mobility of transnational elites in the Geneva metropolitan area. On the one hand, it is based on a quantitative research mandated by local political authorities and on the other, on the ongoing research, fieldwork and questions on which my PhD is based. The first section presents the specificities of the Geneva transborder metropolization process and the dynamics of fragmentation that the housing crisis generates. The second section exposes some preliminary results of the transnational elites’ residential mobility through the method of virtual ethnography. The last section analyses the role of public policies regarding the integration of newcomers. It appears that because of the housing crisis it is required to mobilize social networks in order to find a satisfying accommodation. Transnational elites, who are less rooted locally, don’t neglect their preference for a residence in the city centre of Geneva, according to urban lifestyles and thus develop virtual strategies of socialization in order to get integrated to the city. The public policies support the use of virtual networks and thus reinforce fragmentation between both the “international” and the “local” Geneva.

Keywords: housing crisis – residential mobility – transnational elites – public policy – ethnographic methods.

The metropolitan area of Geneva

The metropolitan region of Geneva is a transnational urban space of 2000 square kilometres for a population of about 860’000 inhabitants. It is divided into four separate geographical and political entities: on the one hand the Canton of Geneva and the Nyon District in Switzerland and on the other the territories of Haute-Savoie and Pays de Gex in France. The political authorities of the 208 municipalities that compose this space signed in 2007 an agglomeration charter that defines modalities of collaboration in the fields of mobility, housing, environment and urban planning. This charter gave birth to the so-called “Projet d’agglomération franco-valdo-genevois”¹, with the aim to make out of several economically and socially heterogeneous territories one continuous urban area.

« *The smallest metropolis in the world* »

The touristic and economic promotion institutions of the Canton Geneva frequently present the city as “the smallest metropolis in the world”. With less than half a million inhabitants, it can be said indeed that the urban space of Geneva is far smaller than other European global cities. Nevertheless, the city benefits of an important international position, notably because it hosts the European headquarter of the United

¹ More information on the project’s website : <http://www.projet-agglo.org/>

Nations, 22 International organizations, 250 Non-governmental Organizations and 166 diplomatic missions. In total, the population of transnational elite newcomers², generally called or calling themselves « expatriates » or « expats », is estimated to be of 40'000 people (around 10% of Canton Geneva's population and 5% of the whole transborder region).

The Geneva Canton offers an attractive tax regime within a politically and economically stable investment context. It has thus become a major centre for world finance and multinational firms. Unlike most of the surrounding European countries, Switzerland and especially the Geneva region have been hardly hit by economic crisis. Job and business creation are positive and stable. The particular situation of the transnational region of Geneva results thus in a demographic growth that is one of the strongest in Europe. Between 2000 and 2006, the annual variation of population has been of 1,6%, which is the second highest rate in Europe after Toulouse (1,9%)³. The specificity of the Geneva region is that the population growth is stronger in the French periphery than in the city centre (the municipality of Geneva). The former is of 2,4% and the latter of 0,7%. In 2030, the population growth is estimated to be of 200'000 newcomers for 100'000 new working positions, which means a quarter more than the current situation. Housing planning at the scale of the whole region is thus one of the major issues the authorities have to deal with in order to maintain economic prosperity.

Housing shortage in the Geneva transborder region

It has to be underlined indeed that the region's economic attractiveness is mainly situated in the heart of the metropolitan area, which is in the canton of Geneva. This space concentrates 75% of the whole agglomeration's employment while half of the habitat is situated in the periphery, which is in the French territories. The reason for that is mainly the housing shortage in the Canton of Geneva. With an unchanged vacancy rate of 0,20 % since the year 2000, the surrounding French territories absorb the housing crisis in Geneva. Housing crisis thus hikes up the real estate prices in the French territories, especially since the signature of bilateral agreements between Switzerland and France in the year 2002. Between 2000 and 2004, the average price in the nearby french municipalities for a new apartment has grown 71% in Annemasse, 48% in St-Julien-en-Genevois and 43% in Gex. In the centre of the agglomeration, the rise is of 26% for the Canton and 21% for the municipality of Geneva.

Furthermore, the housing crisis shows strong social-spatial impacts on the residential mobility such as suburbanisation and intensification of cross-border commuter movements from the surrounding French suburbs, which host around 20% of Swiss citizens, most of whom can't afford a rent in Geneva. Commuters living in France and working in Switzerland are officially 52'700⁴. There are every day 500'000 border passing including only 12% by public transport⁵ because alternative means of transportation have until recently never been planned at the transnational level and because of the lack of public transport possibilities in the French territories.

² I distinguish the transnational elites from the rest of the migrant population of Geneva. « Expatriates », as defined by local residents, are considered as working in an international organization, a diplomatic mission or in a multinational company. I chose the word "elite" in its more social than economic sense because many of the transnational elites are interns or are diplomats of poor countries and thus don't have a high income. It's rather the local categorization that forms the group of these elites.

³ Observatoire statistique transfrontalier de l'espace franco-valdo-genevois, *L'espace urbain franco-valdo-genevois en comparaison européenne*, Fiche 01**/06 10

⁴ Observatoire statistique transfrontalier de l'espace franco-valdo-genevois, *Les accrocs de la conjoncture n'entravent pas la dynamique de la région transfrontalière, Synthèse 2010*.

⁵ Direction générale de la mobilité, 2009.

Whose housing crisis?

Considering the above-mentioned housing situation, it is worth asking what are the social and spatial effects on the residential dynamics. Interviews conducted for the purpose of a research on the residential choice in the transborder region of Geneva reveal that the housing crisis influences the way local residents consider the development of the whole region and of the urban space of Geneva in particular (Thomas et al. 2011). Local inhabitants express critiques that reveal a double movement of fragmentation that challenges the metropolization process in which the Geneva region is engaged.

On the one hand, the public authorities attempt to “cross the borders” with the agglomeration charter that has been mentioned. But the analysis of practices and representations on both sides of the border show that the national sentiment of belonging remains very strong, which explains the fact that not all the households would cross the border even for cheaper housing conditions. According to our study, only one quarter of the population:

- Frequent the whole metropolitan area at the transnational level for work or leisure
- Identifies with the agglomeration
- Considers living on the other side of the border as a possibility
- Has lived once in a foreign country
- Has social networks at the international scale

On the contrary, three households out of four have sedentary residential and social practices. They quite never cross the border and consider living on the other side of the border as completely impossible. The average stay in the same apartment or house is 17 years and social or familial networks are mostly at a short distance from the household’s homes. For these reasons, the housing shortage concerns mainly the newcomers.

Nevertheless, critiques are addressed within the public debate to the transnational elites working in the international organizations, the diplomatic representations or the multinational companies. The presence of 40’000 employees of the international sector is considered as having a negative impact on the housing market. Public arenas are taking place in which the figure of the “expatriate” represents excessive economic growth with no profit for local residents. This movement of fragmentation is more social than spatial since it is not related on specific territories as some examples of gated communities built for the transnational elites in developing countries show (Glasze 2006, Smiley 2010). The public debate divides thus on the one hand the canton’s political authorities that encourage a strong demographic and economic growth through high densification of the urban built space and on the other associations against this intense development defined by the “Geneva 2030 Masterplan”⁶.

In European contexts where the housing market is more stable, as it is the case in Brussels, transnational elites’ residential choice focalize on some areas of the city, creating a spatial divide between the local and the international residents (Cailliez 2007). The specificity of the Geneva region is that because of the housing crisis and of the small size of the city, it can hardly be said that there is a geographical segregation between the transnational elites and the local residents, from which many are foreigners or have foreigner origins too. The social-demographic housing landscape shows diversity of income and

⁶ More details on the Canton Geneva’s website : http://etat.geneve.ch/dt/amenagement/projet_plan_directeur_cantonal_genave_2030-686-4369-10508.html

nationalities more or less on the whole urban area. For this reason we rather talk of a social than a spatial fragmentation.

This means that expatriates get also targeted for their lack of integration. They get accused per example to refuse integration by registering their children in private schools and not learning to speak French⁷. Although “expats” can hardly be unified in a homogenous group since their nationalities, professional backgrounds, age or social position differentiate them, they correspond to a well-defined category in the eyes of Geneva local residents. But focalization in the public arenas on schooling and language reveals between the lines a critique of the economic promotion leaded by local authorities of the Canton Geneva. Many interviewees express their wish to see the attraction of foreign companies that move their headquarters and their employees, imposing a high pressure on the housing market, being refrained:

“*[Expats are]* birds of passage, people who don’t speak the language, people who are not interested in the other inhabitant’s living conditions because they are here only for a few years, [...]. An expat is better than anything else, they stay two years and the rent can be raised a little bit every two years” (Paul⁸, 27.09.2010, self-translated from French).

On the other hand, several expatriates who have been interviewed complain about the difficulty to meet Swiss people or affirm that it is much easier to make contacts with people coming from abroad. These dynamics reveal segregation between a cosmopolitan and rootless population, whose social networks are at an international scale and a resident sedentary population who identifies mostly to the municipality and revealing a limited residential mobility.

The transnational elite’s residential mobility

Based on this fragmentation movement, this article aims to understand how transnational elites’ residential mobility is influenced by housing crisis. Since local residents accuse these migrants to be responsible for the housing crisis in the Geneva region, what are their residential strategies? How do they face housing crisis? Does the fact that these migrants are less rooted locally that the border is weaker to them and that they might live as well in France or in Switzerland?

This questioning is even more accurate since it has been shown indeed by our study of the residential choice in the Geneva region that social networks are important to find an apartment because of the crisis: 35% in the whole metropolitan area and 45% in the city centre of Geneva. In the heterogeneous context of the Geneva region, divided between economic growth and housing crisis, finding satisfying housing is related to the capacity to mobilize social networks. What strategies do the transnational elites develop in order to satisfy their residential exigencies?

⁷ In 2009, the decision to extend the WTO building has been contested by a popular referendum, arguing that the new building will encroach upon a public park by the lake. The WTO had threatened to move its headquarters from Geneva to another city if the referendum had succeeded. For the first time, public debates also considered the departure of an international organization as a positive point for the housing market in Geneva. Finally, the referendum has been rejected and the extension is now under construction.

⁸ Fictive name.

Studies on the integration of newcomers to the city have mainly focused on low-income migrants such as refugees or asylum seekers (Agier 2002, Breviglieri and Stavo-Debaugé 2004, Rea and Tripièr 2008) while residential choice studies often aimed to catch macro-structural urban perspectives (Authier, Bonvalet and Lévy 2010). Regarding the transnational elites, social scientists have frequently focused their studies on rather political than on migration, residential or urban perspectives (Abélès 2008). Some authors have studied the way transnational elites build common identities and frames of reference through specific rituals of socialization but without really asking their integration in the urban space (Gatti 2009; Fresia 2009). Researchers analysing the nexus between transnational elite migration and the urban fabric focused mainly on gentrification (Beaverstock 2005; Butler and Lees 2006), cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1996) and global networks (Castells 2006; Sassen 1996, 2004). In other words, transnational elites within cities are often addressed by academics in the light of their print on the urban fabric and the transformation of cityscapes, as for instance the impact of social-spatial dynamics such as cosmopolitization or gentrification on central urban districts. Few analysed the actual residential strategies of the transnational elites according to the context and its specificities in the housing field. Julie Cailliez studied how the modalities of residential choice of British expatriates, got influenced by the morphology and the spatial organisation of Brussels (Cailliez 2007).

Concerning the urban area of Geneva, studies on the urban integration or the residential choice of the transnational elites have never been conducted. The international role of Geneva has mainly been studied by historians, economists or journalists, and especially regarding the « Spirit of Geneva », developed by Robert de-Traz with the ambition to make out of Geneva a city of peace whose role is to invent a warless world (De-Traz 1995; Stepczynski Maitre 2002).

A matter of lifestyles

In the study conducted by the LaSUR on the residential choice, three questions were used to isolate the transnational elites among the whole population. We asked the participants:

- If during their life, they had lived in another region (than the Geneva region) or in a foreign country for long periods, that means at least for one year,
- What was the municipality where their household lived during childhood,
- Where was their household living five years ago.

The weak point of this kind of quantitative studies is double. First of all it is possible with the above-mentioned questions to isolate the newcomers but not specifically the elites. These results could be crossed with data about salaries but it resulted from our studies that being an “expat”, although belonging to an elite class, is not just a matter of income. A lot of interns, diplomats from poorer countries or international staff from lower positions are indeed identified as “expats” and frequent “expat” circles but they wouldn’t appear in an income-based statistics. The second problem concerns the representativeness of our sample. Because of language problems, frequent international mobility, irregular working times or the absence of a landline phone, the more cosmopolitan newcomers are often invisible in such studies. Transnational elites are thus under-represented in our sample, that’s why these data are combined with ethnographic fieldwork in order to collect qualitative data.

Nevertheless, the results of the above-mentioned study show that the border is a structural element of the residential mobility in the sense that the Swiss territories are inhabited by much more cosmopolitan people than the French ones: almost a third more households in the French territories have grown up in France than Swiss households did it in Switzerland. The French territories are thus inhabited by more sedentary households than the Swiss territories are. There is nevertheless a variation in France between urban and periurban municipalities, the latter being more sedentary than the former. That means that cosmopolitans in France opt rather for urban areas.

The city of Geneva (urban and suburban) and the District of Nyon are the ones that are mostly inhabited by the international populations of the metropolitan area. About one third of the population have lived at least one year in a foreign country. The same sectors count also around one third of the households who have grown up in a foreign country. As a general rule, the households that have grown up in a foreign country live more in Switzerland than in France.

The analysis of the geographical origin of the households that moved in their current residence during the past five years shows that the French territories host mainly households that were prior living in another French municipality, and that are moving to the Geneva region for professional reasons. The households coming from a foreign country choose first the city centre of Geneva, second, the other sectors of Geneva (Suburban and Periurban) and third the District of Nyon.

Although these newcomers might be less rooted in a specific territory than the local residents, their residential choice prioritizes largely an urban localisation in Switzerland. This fact can firstly be explained from a functional point of view: according to the law, spouses of the employees of the international organizations can work in Geneva only if the household lives in Switzerland. The advantage of a residency in Switzerland is also true for diplomats because the legitimation card that they by the Federal Department of foreign Affairs. This card provides them with immunities and exemptions and is only valid if they are residents of Switzerland. This reason could explain the reason why the Swiss territories are preferred in comparison with the French ones. Second, since the major international organizations are situated in the very centre of Geneva, it might be hypothesized that it is convenient to live next to them, especially for people who travel often for professional reasons.

But analysing residential mobility through a lifestyle approach shows correlations between social practices such as leisure and mobility and not only the area but also the morphology of the inhabited space. Thus, the preference of the transnational elites to live in the centre and the suburbs of Geneva or the Nyon District could also be explained by the fact that most of these newcomers, having a cosmopolitan lifestyle, seek dense urban spaces. The approach developed by the LaSUR maintains that lifestyles are not directly related to income and type of housing (Pattaroni, Thomas and Kaufmann 2009; Thomas 2011). Since most studies concerning transnational elites have studied gentrification and cosmopolitization processes in major global cities such as New York or London (Lees 2003; Butler and Lees 2006) as being the main residential dynamic, we rather propose that many transnational elites wouldn't choose a residency in very central urban districts of a global city. Some members of this

population feel closer to more rural lifestyles. It appears that they are distributed in all the existing lifestyles in the same amount⁹.

But as I mentioned it earlier, cosmopolitan migrants are under-represented in our sample. The understanding of how the transnational elites integrate the urban space, interact in it and qualify it, requires indeed a qualitative approach. But traditional anthropological methods wouldn't be appropriated to the cosmopolitization and the transnationalization of social dynamics as the example of the elite migrants shows, since these populations are strongly mobile and cosmopolitan, live in average less than 5 years in Geneva and have social networks at an international scale. Recent developments in anthropology might help to analyse in a more precise way how housing crisis impacts on the transnational elites residential choice.

Cosmopolitizing fieldwork

In the last decades, anthropological approach to fieldwork redefined its methods to correspond to the intensification of transnational flux due to a globalizing world. After James Clifford and Georges Marcus' *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), patterns of malinowskian ethnography methods have been considerably criticized and anthropology turned in a more interpretative manner (Geertz 1998). In that sense, anthropological studies claimed the importance to understand how cultures interpret their way to interact with institutions, objects, people, etc. Although the concept of culture has been severely criticized during the nineties (Abu-Lughod 1991; Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992), the challenge of the contemporary change in societies and especially the difficulty to undertake long-time, slow and patient ethnographies produced a revision of ethnographical methods. While some expressed the necessity to take account of objects (Rabinow 2003; Akrich 1987), Georges Marcus insisted on the importance and multi-sited approaches of ethnographic fieldwork (Marcus 1995).

Considering these changes in social dynamics and the development of information technologies, the use of Internet provides very rich ethnographic data about contemporary socialization. It appeared that Internet is a tool that is frequently used by transnational elites who arrive in the Geneva region and who are seeking several type of information. When asked how he knew about Glocals.com, a website that focalize on the expatriates in Geneva and elsewhere in Switzerland, an informant gave this answer:

“I don't know exactly how [...] two months before I came to Geneva I went to the internet and typed something like “expats in Geneva” or something like that or “forum” and I just found Glocals which is a really nice site I got to say, yeah, the site offers almost everything, offers information of almost everything I truly need here, yeah, about insurance about the apartment or something or the bank” (Alan¹⁰, 23.07.2011).

On the one hand, Internet forums or Websites such as Glocals seem to offer Information about housing or administrative issues, as states the officer from the social welfare of an international organization in Geneva, whose help she was providing for expatriates' housing has been replaced by the use of Internet,

⁹ For more details about this lifestyle approach and the different lifestyle that have been identified through a similar research conducted in Bern and Lausanne, refer to (Pattaroni, Thomas and Kaufmann 2009 ; Thomas 2011)

¹⁰ Fictive name.

she says. On the other these tools facilitate or even stimulate some kinds of social contacts: forums that are directed at transnational elites and to read blogs where newcomers in the region write publically about their living conditions, administrative difficulties, “cultural shock”, etc. As a result, social life between “expats” is strongly influenced by online practices since several sites are used to organize social events such as “welcome drinks” or “new expat in town drinks”. Other events bring together newcomers who share affinities such as jogging or samba dancing.

Online practices thus aren’t just a way of acquiring information. Forums and blogs are constitutive of a sense of community shared by newcomers in the sense Marion Fresia shows it for the transnational elites working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Fresia 2009). Furthermore, online practices might have a territorial impact in the way “expats” conceive, qualify and frequent the urban space of Geneva.

For these reasons, recent methodological and theoretical developments in virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), also called netnography (Kozinets 2010) or the anthropology of online communities (Wilson and Peterson 2002) can explain some modalities of integration to the city that are specific to the transnational elites. In this perspective, online spheres are considered being able to reveal social change and thus force anthropologists and urban scientists to redefine their methods of doing traditional fieldwork.

The approach of virtual ethnography aims to analyse the way online socialization impacts on the physical urban space. The study of blogs and forums concerning “expats” in Geneva are thus taken into account to understand the modalities of urban insertion of the transnational elites in the city and the dynamics of segregation with the local residents. This article constitutes an exploratory attempt of virtual ethnography applied to the case of the transnational elites’ residential mobility in Geneva.

Residential choice precedes residential mobility

We showed earlier that elite newcomers mostly prefer a residence in the city centre of Geneva. This data is confirmed by an interview conducted with the staff counsellor of one of the international organizations in Geneva. According to her, most newcomers feel proud to live in Geneva for the international image of the city. In their eyes, it is the headquarters’ city, which means the city of power, where decisions are taken. Frequently, residential mobility to Geneva thus results first of all in an upward social mobility. She adds that families who move to the French territories are often forced to do so because of economic reasons. I will show now that as it is the case for local residents, obtaining a residence in the city centre of Geneva is also closely related to the mobilization of social networks and not a matter of privileges.

Analysis of virtual data such as forums concerned by expatriation reveals that many transnational elites planning to move to the Geneva region initiate their residential choice process prior to the actual move and sometimes even prior to the actual decision to do so. Future migrants use online forums to acquire information about accommodation, schools, or even social life issues. As the below transcript shows, the way transnational elites apprehend the city is influenced by virtual construction of space:

“Considering moving to Geneva or Zurich

My girlfriend and I live in San Francisco. One of us is also a EU citizen. We are both professionals and considering Switzerland as a place to raise a family.

Workshop 03 – Housing challenged by new issues of sustainable development

We have developed careers in Banking and Technology. We have gathered a lot of information on the internet but we would appreciate actually chatting with some U.S. expats and listening to their experiences. If anyone has done a similar move (California -> Switzerland) we'd appreciate if you were available to contact you for some more relevant info (e.g. a feel of the more day-to-day life, transition problems etc).

Also, to get some first hand information we are planning to visit the two big cities in the fall. Are you aware of any expats events taking place in September?

Thanks a lot!"

(Expatriate-blog, July 2010)

It is interesting to underline that according to this post, although work conditions seem to be the main element that brought this couple to move to Switzerland, what is looked for is mainly "a place to raise a family" and what is considered "a relevant info" is more related to the importance of feelings than of practical aspects ("a feel of the more day-to-day life, transition problems").

Another interesting point this post highlights is that the author says he would prefer "chatting with some U.S. expats" in order to listen to their migration and expatriation experiences. He also asks a question about social life that suggests the attachment to an "expat identity": he doesn't ask whether there are some public events taking place during the visiting period of the couple, but what he's looking for are "expat events". Does this mean that transnational elites are responsible for the fragmentation dynamics we talked about earlier? Do the "expats" form a cultural entity isolating itself from the local residents? How is it possible this sense of an "expat community"? The following transcript, which is an answer to another message posted on the same forum, suggests that the movement is double and that segregation is also a feeling "expats" suffer from:

"Geneva is a nice place to live!

the bright side is geneva is a safe place (maybe less safe than many years ago, but still more safe than many world known cities), a REAL international city, very good standard of living, transportation system, etc. And the dark side is the crisis of accommodation, unemployment (compared to many other big swiss cities), the poor night life (many people find it boring to live here), locals very reserved (nice though)etc. from this last, no need to say it's not easy to make friends. but if you really search for friends, you will easily find some in the expat community. ways to meet them include meetnewface, glocals, internationals...just to mention some.

I hope this helps"

(Expatriate-blog, November 2010)

This example suggests that the "expat community" seems also to be developed in reaction to the fact that "it's not easy to make friends". This affirmation can be analysed in relation to other discourses collected during ethnographic observation held within the above-named "expat events" (socializing and networking events such as "welcome drinks" or workshops, etc.). Participant observation of networking rituals shows an opposition between how it seems easy to enter in contact with other expatriates for who respects some rules such as the way to look at a name tag, and the discourse about the difficulty to enter in contact with

“Genevans”. As a result, the idea of an “expat identity” and thus of a social fragmentation, have to be studied by drawing attention on specific modes of sociabilization.

The first post transcribed above shows also that online forums and the sharing of migration experiences help to make a residential choice even at a very macro level (“Geneva or Zurich”). But forums are also used at a more micro level:

“Where to live in Geneva

Hi,

I have an ongoing job project in Geneva (I cross my fingers...!)

Knowing that I would work near the airport, that I have children, what are the nice place to live in Geneva or in the outskirts, without hearing always the noise of the airplanes:)

Thanks for your advices”

(Expat-blog, February 2011, self-translated from French)

This other example shows that the residential choice is always a complex combination of social (a nice place for children), functional (close to work) and sensitive (not noisy) dimensions. This analysis has been developed by the Laboratory of Urban Sociology (LaSUR) in several researches concerning the residential choice (Pattaroni, Thomas and Kaufmann 2009 ; Thomas 2011).

The importance of (virtual) social networks

Our study revealed indeed that for the entire metropolitan area, more than one third of the households declared to have found their residence through social network and not by formal ways. This percentage is even higher in the city centre of Geneva where quite half of the households used social networks to find a satisfying housing. The other strategy used by the households in order to get satisfied of their housing is to extend the research over the long term. These strategies compensate for the strength of the housing crisis, in Geneva especially. In this area social networks or time help to find accommodation seem to be necessary.

Therefore, it is worth to ask how transnational elites manage to live in the centre of Geneva since they frequently don’t know local people when transferred and are used to stay little time in the same city.

The hypothesis that will be verified during the following steps of this research is that this population not only use Internet tools to acquire information but also to develop the necessary social networks to find a satisfying housing in the centre of Geneva, as the following example shows:

Hi there. I will be in Geneva starting in May. I have begun my search for an apartment or a roommate. If anyone knows of a space available or is looking for a kind, quiet, clean roommate, drop me a email.

I am working with one of the international humanitarian orgs. in the city, and would be interested in meeting people from all walks of life.

Workshop 03 – Housing challenged by new issues of sustainable development

I am currently a grad student in vancouver, canada.

look forward to hearing from you. take care

(Glocals, May 2011)

It is meant that that strategies of virtual socialization help rootless transnational elites to develop networks that will help them to find accommodation according to their residential choice, in spite of the strong housing crisis, as this answer to the previous post shows:

Hi (...),

i read your post, we are in the same boat..i'm coming to Geneva on May too ,so if you find a house to share with more flatmate send me an e-mail...

It appeared in this section that the use of the Internet helps the transnational elites to build social networks that are necessary to obtain a satisfying residence. In other words, it seems that the elite newcomers, contrary to what local interviewees say, elite migrants face the housing crisis with equal difficulty and are also dependant on informal relations in order to live according to their residential preferences. Since they are often very cosmopolitan and rootless, the Internet provides them with the possibility to make quick relations for information but also for networking purposes. Nevertheless, the effect of these dynamics is to analyse in terms of the creation of an “expat” sense of community or an “expat identity”, which reinforces fragmentation with local residents.

For the purpose of my PhD, further research will focus on the formation of this identity and on the specific modes of socialization it requires and generates. I now interrogate the role of the public policies towards these dynamics. Are they aware of these growing tensions and do they act to resorb them?

The role of the public policies


Political authorities make great efforts to promote the international position of Geneva and to attract new international organizations, NGOs or companies in the region, it is interesting to understand what these public policies actually do to help these migrants to get integrated and what the territorial impact these actions have. This section results from ongoing fieldwork and consists mainly in a dozen of interviews conducted with professionals of the State or of the international organizations in charge of hosting “expats”.

Gentrification in the city centre

As a result, the presence of the transnational elites in the Geneva region has an impact on the cosmopolitization of this urban space. By their circulation through diverse cities in the world, their print in the urban fabric is the introduction of cosmopolitan influence such as images, practices, behaviours, language, activities, etc. (Hannerz 1996; Smith 1999; Beaverstock 2005). Figure 1 shows a high-luxury building project that is currently under construction in a very central district of Geneva. This working-class district called Les Pâquis is mainly inhabited by low-income people shows since the past decade

strong dynamics of gentrification. The reason for these transformations might be the area is very close to the train station and the UN district, it is very close to the lake and the luxury hotels. Last, as we saw earlier, dense urban areas are becoming very attractive for elite newcomers.

Figure 1 : High-luxury building project in Les Pâquis, Geneva, and its description by the property developer (www.1gevray.com)



“On the Rive Droite, just 150 metres from the lake and right next to the Hotel Kempinski in Rue Abraham-Gevray, located in the heart of Geneva’s 5 star luxury hotel district, the development features twenty-five high-profile apartments up to 450 m² and distributed over eight floors, with internal courtyards and gardens. A centre for thinking, business, finance, art and culture, the product of a prestigious history, Geneva is one of Europe’s most important cities. Situated in a strategically advantageous position, between one and two hours from Paris, Milan, London, Rome and Madrid, it boasts beautiful natural surroundings and an urban environment, which is one of the most desirable and

liveable in the world. Looking over Lake Lemman, nestled between the Alps and the Jura, Geneva is a cosmopolitan city and home to the headquarters of numerous international organizations (...). 1 Gevray enjoys an ideal position in the city : within easy reach of the airport, motorway and train station, it is situated in the liveliest and most elegant district of Geneva with its luxurious hotels and restaurants, a short stroll from the lake, parks and various walks.”

The example of this project shows the importance of being centred to be global. The building is defined as occupying a central position at the scale of the world (one or two hours from the main European cities) but also at the scale of the city (next to the lake, the hotels and the transportation facilities).

This high-luxury project of a new standard (large floor area furnished apartments) shows a double movement of gentrification and cosmopolitization. The former consists in the integration of high-income populations in a low-income area through advertisement that describes this central district as being “located in the heart of Geneva’s 5 star luxury hotel district”¹¹. Gentrification implies also population replacement: in order to realize this project, a former hotel that had been squatted and that then contained 100 rooms for students has been demolished. The latter consists in the appropriation of built forms coming from other urban contexts. The importation of architectural and residential models reveals the cosmopolitization of the urban space of Geneva through the circulation of mobile built forms (Guggenheim and Söderström 2010). An article published by a local newspaper shows this trend:

“Going back home and having one’s car parked by a concierge. Upper East Side in New York ? No, les Pâquis in Geneva. It is indeed in this working-class area, on the ruins of the former hotel and squat California, that will be built in 2013 « 1 Gevray ». First building in Geneva proposing « prestige services » to the residents of the 27 apartments for sale”.

(L’Hebdo, 27.04.2011, self-translated from French)

¹¹ <http://www.1gevray.com/>

This kind of real-estate operations reveals the economic prosperity that characterizes the Geneva region but in the same time reinforces the local inhabitants suffering of the housing crisis. Discourses of inhabitants in this district not only show that transnational elites are considered to be responsible for the lack of housing opportunities, but also that this kind of urban mutation of the city targets this specific population. An interviewee talking about IGevray says:

“I can’t even pronounce its name in French, for me it’s the first expat building in Geneva.”
(Richard¹², 27.05.2011, self-translated from French).

What is the position of the public policies towards the gentrification of the city centre of Geneva? How are legal norms concerning personal status correlated with the residential dynamics of the elite migrants?

Different status, different welcome

Public authorities make a difference between different types of newcomers according to their residency status. Diplomats working in an international organization or in a diplomatic mission become from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs a legitimation card that provides them with immunities, tax exemption, etc. Other employees from the international organizations or from the multinational companies don’t benefit from these privileges, except that for spouses of the international organizations’ staff become a working permit if the household chooses residency in Switzerland.

It is important thus to be aware of these administrative differences that are invisible for the local population’s eyes. The following shows that it is hardly possible to talk about a homogenous “international Geneva” or “expat population”. The bureau for the integration of migrants in Geneva organizes indeed twice a year an “Information and welcome evening on Geneva” to which all the newcomers are invited. The aim of this event is mainly “learn more about Geneva and Switzerland and seek answers to questions (newcomers) may have on subjects like health, social care, housing, employment, schooling and child care, culture, etc.”¹³

But a different status generates a different welcome since an institution called the Geneva Welcome Center offers various services that all the migrants cannot benefit from. For the newcomers holding a legitimation card and/or working in an international organization or a diplomatic mission, the Canton of Geneva and the Swiss Confederation founded the Geneva Welcome Center in 1996 with the aim “to facilitate the installation and integration in the Geneva region of international civil servants, members of permanent missions, consulates and NGOs as well as their families”¹⁴.

¹² Fictive name.

¹³ Canton of Geneva : <http://www.geneve.ch/integration/doc/information-orientation-et-conseil/Seances-d-accueil-Programme.pdf>

¹⁴ Geneva Welcome Center : <http://www.cagi.ch/en/qui-sommes-nous-but-cagi.php>

General residential advises

Housing is one of the main supports the Geneva Welcome Center provides the newcomers with. The housing service of the Geneva Welcome Center offers to newcomers from the International Sector help for their accommodation search. These services can help to get information on prices, conditions, etc., but it helps also people who want to exchange housing or who want to buy a property. Newcomers get informed of this service by a “Welcome line”, which means that an employee from the Welcome Center calls personally every person moving to Geneva with the purpose to work in the public international sector.

According to the person in charge of the housing service for the Geneva Welcome Center, people wanting to benefit of the centre’s support have first to get registered. This means that they have to be accepted by the service in order to use the services. The interview conducted with him confirms the statistical result obtained by our quantitative study since the preferred situation are first the city centre of Geneva and then the Geneva and Vaud countryside. According to him, “expats” don’t often choose to live in France because their legitimization card is valid only in Switzerland, except the employees of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), which is situated between Switzerland and France, who can benefit from their advantages on both sides of the border.

These distinctions are to be found on the website of the Geneva Welcome Center, that says that privileges and immunities are granted by Switzerland on its territory exclusively¹⁵.

It appears that national administrative settings are contradictory to the local political efforts to create a transnational built-up area that would “cross the borders”. Since all the identified lifestyles exist in all the sectors of both the French and the Swiss territories and since the cosmopolitan newcomers are distributed in all the lifestyles, even the ones who dislike urbanity, it can be understood that some people choose to live in France despite the loss of their privileges but in order to find satisfying housing.

It would be interesting for further research to address the nexus between the Geneva Welcome Center’s indications and the residential choice of the transnational elites, as for example the influence the message below has on the territorialisation of newcomers.

If you take the UN place where you will find the majority of the International organisations, as the focal point, it might be preferable to search on the right side of the lake, included the Canton of Vaud, than in the communes further away on the left side of the lake¹⁶.

In-depth interviews with transnational elites are to be conducted about their residential itineraries in order to identify the impact of these indications. But we can already affirm that the Geneva Welcome Center has a double impact on the housing market. First, it creates a parallel housing market with some offers that aren’t designed for the formal housing market. Second, some owners publish their offers only on “expat” lists in order to become higher prices. Some economists have studied the fact that foreigners pay

¹⁵ Geneva Welcome Center : <http://www.cagi.ch/en/logement/bourse-du-logement.php>

¹⁶ Geneva Welcome Center : <http://www.cagi.ch/en/logement/bourse-du-logement.php>

higher rents in Geneva than local residents (Baranzini, Schaerer, Ramirez and Thalmann 2008). The staff counsellors or the social welfare services inside the international organizations confirm this trend. The role of these professionals will be presented in the following

Social welfare within the international organizations

Each international organization has its own staff counsellors that help new employees arriving in Geneva. Their role is most of the time that of a social worker since they might assist transnational elites in several fields even in their private lives (divorce, schooling issues, judicial affairs, etc.). Housing issues are important since the interviews conducted with these counsellors show that rental agencies exploit expatriates because they ignore local legislation, prices, etc. Staff counsellors accompany the employees through these endeavours. One of them affirms that some nationalities are victim of racism from the agencies, which makes it difficult for some families to find accommodation.

But in most cases, the role of the staff counsellors is to inform the newcomer staff about local administrative rules. For this purpose, some of them edit manuals describing how to rent an apartment or to register a car, while others refer to the Geneva Welcome Center.

According to two of them, residential choice of transnational elites is frequently influenced by the relationship that they have with their home country. Some of international employees make no effort to get integrated because of their plan to save money in order to invest it in their home country, to buy a house or to help other family members.

These interviews show that these professionals don't consider their role in the same way. Some stand back and affirm that the newcomers have to make their own experiences and that they can't interfere in their residential choice. Others are more proactive and give the newcomers precise advices to get better integrated according to their vision of what integration is. Some of them for instance advise newcomers against living in France because they say that there's nothing to do there in comparison to the city centre of Geneva and that as a result they will feel lonely. These social workers might thus have a strong impact on the process of residential choice by transnational elites.

Which globalization? Which city?

This article showed that in the case of the Geneva transborder region, economic and demographic growths have severe impacts on habitat possibilities and choice and that residential satisfaction is strongly related to the capacity to mobilize social networks. The residential mobility of the transnational elites, a population that is locally seen as not suffering from housing problems, appears thus to be handicapped by their cosmopolitanism and rootlessness. We showed that virtual technologies might help to develop the necessary social networks what makes it easier for expatriates to live in the city centre of Geneva. This sector is the favourite one and this can be explained by functional but also social reasons.

It has also been mentioned that the use of virtual social networks, and the frequentation of the associated events contribute to create a sense of identity among "expats". For further research, it would be

interesting to ask in what way the transnational elites are related to globalization. Are these migrants contributing to a cultural homogenization movement as it is frequently argued or do their ways of socialization reveal on the contrary a “vernacular globalization” (Appadurai 1996)? According to Arjun Appadurai, globalization is characterized by the emergence of multiple resurgences of local but non-territorial social dynamics (Appadurai 1996).

Residential choice appears thus as a complex process made of economic predispositions but mainly also on lifestyles and on the capacity to mobilize social networks. In the third section, I also showed that public policies might also have a strong impact on migrant elites’ residential choice by authorizing urban mutations targeting specifically this population and by providing residential advices based both on administrative and sensitive dimensions. It appeared that public policies contribute to the fragmentation of the housing market by creating a parallel one. It is thus interesting to notice that these public policies, by trying to help transnational elites to find a satisfying residence despite housing crisis, contribute at the same time to its reinforcement.

The example of the transnational elites shows the complexity of the contemporary city, composed of multiple possibilities of engagement in the public and domestic urban space. As Ulf Hannerz stated it, discourses on cultures often served more to build an image of the “Other” than to underline actual differences (Hannerz 1992). In that sense, talking about an “international” and a “local” Geneva intensifies the divide between populations that aren’t that different. This shows that making the choice of the agglomeration drives the Geneva region on the way of transnational metropolization but this space and its population haven’t made yet the choice of the global.

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