

## Urban Traces

### Europe's bicycle workshops as contributors to community economies and sustainable urban transport

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I was delighted to receive a visiting fellowship at the [Brussels Centre for Urban Studies](#) at VUB in 2015.

Most of my work since the early 1990s has not been in cities at all, but actually concerns livelihoods, environmental degradation, and social movements in rural settings, loosely labelled as 'political ecology'. In addition, my regular job was at a university in Australia, very distant from Europe. For both these reasons, I never thought I would end up being awarded an urban studies fellowship in Brussels during early 2015, at a time when I had a gap in my Australian teaching responsibilities.

Admittedly, since the 1990s I have been involved in one urban issue – campaigning for better urban bicycle policies and use. When I started my first lecturing job in the 1990s I also helped to run the [local branch of the London Cycling Campaign](#) in the suburb of Ealing in West London, UK. Campaigning for cyclists was rewarding, but frustrating – at that time, the appetite among city authorities for better cycle infrastructure and consideration of de-prioritising the car was only just beginning. I made some firm friends and we made a small difference through some campaigns and council lobbying. The [Ealing](#)



[Cycling Campaign](#) has survived and prospered. The experience taught me that you cannot wait for government alone to improve urban transport, especially for bikes, the ‘marginal transport mode’ that has only really taken off in a handful of cities and countries despite its enormous potential. Grassroots citizen action is also needed. This sentiment has stayed with me, but lay dormant while I was doing other things in the 2000s. I wrote just one synthesis paper in 2003 ([Batterbury 2003](#)), and I began thinking about bicycle issues again more recently in Melbourne, where I have lived for over a decade.

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So the BCUS took something of a risk when they funded my project and asked me to come to Brussels – one article and some advocacy does not make me qualified in urban studies! But they said kindly that the proposed research mattered more than reputation, and the fellowship I was awarded allowed for 10 weeks of work on ‘community bicycle workshops’ in Brussels, with side trips to other cities.

Cycloperativa moves  
premises to Rue Du Midi,  
Brussels



Bike workshops or ateliers vélo are examples of urban sustainability ‘in action’. Not-for-profit in orientation, they rely on voluntary labour, and cheap or free premises, to provide an ‘urban commons’ where people source parts and learn to fix up a working bicycle, aided by volunteers. Piles of dead bikes and bits are salvaged and brought back to life on city streets. These community non-profit organisations could, I hypothesised, offer local economic and social benefits, in terms of transportation and as part of community economies, acting as hubs for social links and actions. But this remained to be seen. Workshops aim towards *vélonomie* – bicycle autonomy, people that can ride and maintain their own machine. This is their contribution to more sustainable and alternative transport, and also to community solidarity. The crucial thing for the proposal was that bike workshops were almost completely un-researched in 2015, in Brussels or anywhere else, with a tiny number of academic articles about them, and only three

masters' theses available online. How had social scientists missed them? This remains a mystery since some are as much as 25 years old, there are hundreds in Europe alone, a big network in North America, and outposts elsewhere.

When I showed up in Brussels I discovered at least five workshops that I could potentially interact with and visit. First, in the small and convivial Geography Department at VUB I soon learned some basic facts about Brussels; the extraordinary complex multilevel governance system driven in part by linguistic divisions, the congested and polluting automobile culture (planners partly to blame; also the ubiquitous company cars, 36.7% of all registrations in the city, used in lieu of giving higher salaries in Belgium). People drive as little as 2–5 km to get to work, which is far less common in some other parts of the country. Nobody could tell me all that much about the city's bike workshops though, so I started visiting them myself, especially after I brought my own bike to Brussels (you can also rent them cheaply from ateliers). It was immediately clear that this project was going to be feasible and enjoyable, from my brief visits to Les ateliers de la Rue Voot, Cycloperativa and 123 Vélo. I found out the basic workshop history, functioning, and clientèle. Just among these three, there were differences; one had paid mechanics, one was in a regularised squat, and the other was in a predominantly North African quarter of central Brussels and well-patronised by local youth. People were helpful and interested, even though most were volunteers and also led busy lives.

I became a participant briefly, volunteering and helping kids fix their bikes, and trying to remember the right names for bike parts in French, my second language (you can get by with English in Brussels; French or Dutch helps a lot, though). Occasionally there was time to talk with the organisers about the workshops. I then had a month away in the US,



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on a pre-planned family and work trip. I managed to stop off in workshops everywhere I went in the US, including [Seattle](#), [Portland](#) and [Chicago](#), discovering a similar willingness to host a visitor and to talk.

Back in Brussels I carried on with workshop visits, made a few new contacts in cycling organisations, and drank a great deal of coffee with colleagues at VUB. [Cycloperativa](#) had to leave their premises and move to another short lease; helping out on the day of moving was very rewarding. There I was introduced to Inès Vandermeersch, who was actually completing a Masters degree on the social impacts of all 13 Brussels workshops, as well as being an organiser at Cycloperativa. So I was not the first researcher on this topic after all, but I learned a great deal from her, especially about the workshops I had not visited, and we are now collaborating on a couple of writing projects. A trip to Berlin gave a different picture to Brussels – there, workshops have more secure premises, but they also have many customers travelling from further away, and more capacity is needed. They are an urban phenomenon that is ‘on the rise’ to meet this demand, as one organiser told me.

In my [final presentation](#) in mid-June 2015 at the Beursschouwburg in the Stadssalonsurbains series, I presented the [‘story so far’](#).

Brussels Critical Mass/  
Véloration, May 2015



Here it is. While workshops usually reject profit motives, and have significant troubles finding and keeping a premises to operate from, this is not always true. Some do transition towards larger social enterprises with more stability, losing a radical edge but retaining an enthusiasm for bikes and all that they stand for – [CyCLO](#) in Brussels is an example. This transition is most advanced in France. It turns out that not all volunteers and staff are radical bike activists, and as Inès [argues](#) (2015), many workshops have a social or community cohesion agenda that is just as important for them as creating vélonomie. Workshops still emerge as a largely grassroots responses to addressing bicycle justice, or social justice, in our cities; they overlap with, but are not the same as, more overt actions like [Critical Mass rides](#) and bike advocacy directed at changing the streetscape (in Belgium, the latter is done by several groups, including [GRACQ](#) and [Fietzersbond](#)). Workshops also have a unique pedagogical agenda, teaching maintenance skills.

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I concluded that there was a lot more to do on understanding the demand-side factors in urban cycling; the ‘bike culture’ that provides enthusiasm and passion, as well as the culture of utilitarian bike use, as I saw in Ghent, Utrecht and Berlin on short visits. Currently urban policy is skewed to addressing ‘supply’ of new bike lanes, paths, and engineering solutions – and offering some support to employers to have sustainable commuting plans and so-on. Planners hope new cycle lanes will eventually be filled with riders, but creating ‘demand’ for cycling is also vital, and seems a more promising route. In Brussels at least, there is a very long way to go with all of this – cycling remains resolutely unimportant as a mode of transport even compared to Flemish-speaking Belgium, especially for commuting (at just 3–4% of all urban journeys). The audience picked up on these points and the discussion, carried out in English and French, was a highlight of my trip and a delight to experience. A couple of people asked about the next phase of this research, and now there are contacts and ideas to pursue.

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VUB offered a fine collaborative environment with regular meetings, chats, and shared lunches in the (cheap) university refectory. The ‘Urban Traces’ of the fellowship will be diverse, spread as they are between academic and civil society organisations. I have benefited hugely from the contacts I have made, and from the groups I was affiliated with at VUB ([Cosmopolis](#) and [MFYS](#)). I have two joint articles/chapters already underway, and plans to do a short book with my Australian research partner, Ruth Lane, are a step closer now.

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I strongly recommend applying for these BCUS fellowships. Brussels is a great place to experience and to reside for a while, with its old and its new cultures and institutions. I had visited the city several times before, but I got a

different perspective as a resident pedalling the streets every day. The culture is edgy and interesting and the streets are alive and chaotic much of the time (although badly congested, as I mentioned). My family joined me in a marvellous apartment for the second half of the fellowship and we all benefited from the kids' activities, festivals, museums,

and parks around Brussels, and meeting new people. A special thanks to my two hosts, [Bas van Heur](#) and [Bas de Geus](#); [David Bassens](#) for inventive conversations and use of his office, and [Stefan de Corte](#) for arranging everything.

For further information on this project as it unfolds, please see [bike-workshopsresearch.wordpress.com](http://bike-workshopsresearch.wordpress.com). We have become a small research team and all our outputs and links to global research on bike workshops can be found there.

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### **Biography**

**Simon Batterbury** is the inaugural Professor of Political Ecology at LEC, Lancaster University and was Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at the School of Geography of the University of Melbourne, Australia. He is from London (PhD, Geography, Clark University, USA) and previously taught at Brunel University, the London School of Economics, and the University of Arizona. He was also a visiting professor at Roskilde University, taught at the University of Colorado, and was a James Martin Fellow at the University of Oxford in 2007. His research has been in Burkina Faso and Niger, working on rural development issues, and then in East Timor, and New Caledonia (on indigenous responses to mining). But he has also has worked with environmental and development organisations and NGOs, and set up a bicycle advocacy organisation in London. He has been co-editor of the [Journal of Political Ecology](#) since 2003. [www.simonbatterbury.net](http://www.simonbatterbury.net)

### Written outputs

S.P.J. Batterbury and I.Vandermeersch 2016. Bicycle justice: community bicycle workshops and “invisible cyclists” in Brussels. In A. Golub, M.L. Hoffmann, A.E.Lugo & G.F. Sandoval (eds.). Bicycle justice and urban transformation: biking for all? Routledge. 189-202. [Researchgate draft](#)

Batterbury SPJ, I Vandermeersch, W. Kębłowski, B. de Geus, B van Heur. Community bike workshops in Brussels – what contribution to sustainable transport and the social economy? draft

website <http://bikeworkshopsresearch.wordpress.com>

### Talks

Batterbury, S.P.J. and Lane, R. 2016. Community bike workshops or bike kitchens: contributions to new urban geographies, transport, and community economies. AAG annual meeting, San Francisco, March.

Batterbury S.P.J. 2015. Community bike workshops: their contribution to justice, sustainable urban transport and the social economy. Geography Seminar series, Univ. of Melbourne. Sept.

Batterbury S.P.J. 2015. Oily handshakes: bicycle workshops; sustainable urban transport and the community economy. Stadssalonsurbains, Brussels Academy, Brussels. June

Batterbury S.P.J. 2015. Community bicycle workshops and sustainable urban transport: vive l'atelier! Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). May