

Urban Traces

Running in Brussels



I Andrew Barnfield

Running research is a difficult topic to explain. Normally people are slightly bemused or bewildered that anyone would research something as apparently ephemeral as running. However, running is much more than a short lived activity. This, indeed, is the very point of running research: to explore the different practices, techniques, objects, and connections with and within urban space that running involves. To understand the complexities my chosen methodology is to physically participate in running activities with respondents.

Brussels may also seem an unlikely place for anyone wanting to research a physical activity like running. The grey sky, the traffic choked roads, and the cobbles. But, it is in spaces like these that people not only do run, but also need to run.

The challenge of non-communicable diseases presents a whole host of problems for cities. A key challenge is how to give people living in cities the opportunities to be physically active. This includes people starting and maintaining their activity levels. In addition, cities need to make sure that new arrivals, refugees, and migrants can participate in physical activity as well as providing an opportunity to become socially included.

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It was these issues and more that I came to Brussels to explore. My research took me to all parts of the city. I ran in the forest with a group of keen amateur runners that meet weekly and also run in organised events throughout Belgium. I ran with a group from Buurtwinkel association that organisation weekly runs for refugees and Brussels citizens in the Warandepark. I ran with Les Gazzelles du Bruxelles who have an amateur group of refugee runners who help to organise weekly running sessions for beginner runners. I ran with groups who organise themselves through the internet to keep fit and find new friends. I ran with individual runners along regular routes that took in pathways, parks, canals, roads, trails, and tracks. I ran on routes recommended by other runners and I explored the city by myself, one foot at a time.

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Throughout my fellowship I was particularly interested in exploring two aspects of running in Brussels: how people learned and assembled where to run, and the different ways running was organised as a tool for social inclusion. Learning to run in a city entails a lot of different things. Cities have been designed and planned to help people and things move about as quickly as possible. Roads, tracks, cables, and pipes are the things that dominate cities in all sorts of ways. To find somewhere to run is a process of learning how you run, how to interact with different objects, and bodies, and how you want to feel while running. Running also means battling with an environment that does not welcome moving, sweating bodies. Some runners ran only in the park due to safety, air quality, and for a sense of

relaxation. Other runners battled the streets and footpaths of the city. Staking their claim to space through exertion and endeavour. Running should not be relegated to running machines in gyms or parks where access can be limited. Running routes through cities would make an ideal urban trace that brings together fast and slow, movement and rest.

Running is an excellent tool for public health and social inclusion. The running groups in Brussels that organise weekly runs between new arrivals and established citizens present a glimpse of how cities can be. The writer and theorist Erin Manning argues that movement presents an opportunity to unite the thought and the affective. The sight of different bodies moving through the city showcases a politics of movement that is about pluralistic urban spaces. It also attempts to emphasise the connections between people. In running with the groups I learned the difficulties of organising such events, how new forms of media and communication are essential to get the message out. Another requirement is hope. The actions of the groups speak to hopeful ways of seeing urban



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space not only as a facilitator between different people but also as space that is open to movement and more sustainable ways of living together. The running groups are examples of what Davina Cooper calls 'Concrete Utopia'. They are trying to make the world they want to see in the future in the present and are an example to different organisations throughout Europe.

The research was fascinating and the data is extensive. Participant observational research involves getting involved, getting your hands dirty. It enables a deep and rich understanding of situations and contexts. The challenges I worked through with colleagues at BCUS were around methodology and data capture. How to best record, analyse, and interpret data gained through being mobile and render it in a form that otherwise over-prioritises fixity and rigidity. In my opinion writing is a form of methodology that is often overlooked by researchers. This could be for many reasons. I do think that a turn towards the imaginative, in writing and presentation, would yield fascinating results. A look at books like Annemarie Mol's 'The Body Multiple', Lesley Stern's 'The Smoking Book', or Michael Taussig's 'My Cocaine Museum' show the rich diversity that is possible.

I met many people during the course of my fellowship at BCUS. I was able to participate in an engrossing reading group at Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research that critically examined 'Seeing like a City' by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift. To be a part of such a vibrant group of

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post-doctoral and PhD researchers was a fantastic experience. The many and varied seminars that are organised by the Geography Department, BCUS, and the Brussels Academy bring together a wonderfully eclectic array of speakers and topics. I was overjoyed to run in the Park National initiative organised by the Socialist Party that wants at least a part of the Domaine Royal of Laken to be opened for all residents and visitors in Brussels. Accessible green space is not a luxury: it is an absolute necessity for quality of life in all cities. I also deeply enjoyed the commitment at the VUB to social causes that bring together the academy and civil society. I am pleased I was able to take part in the growing air pollution protests by Clean Air Brussels. Air pollution is a growing public health challenge that will need multi-stakeholder participation to eradicate.

I will be using the data from my fellowship to write a paper for a special edition of a journal and a book chapter that is due out later this year. There is a growing body of research from within Geography that looks at running in different contexts and I am pleased to say that my fellowship at BCUS will help to contribute to this collection of work. It will also contribute to a growing effort to make cities more sustainable, pluralistic spaces.