

Urban Traces

Bridging European Urban Transformations

April–July, 2016

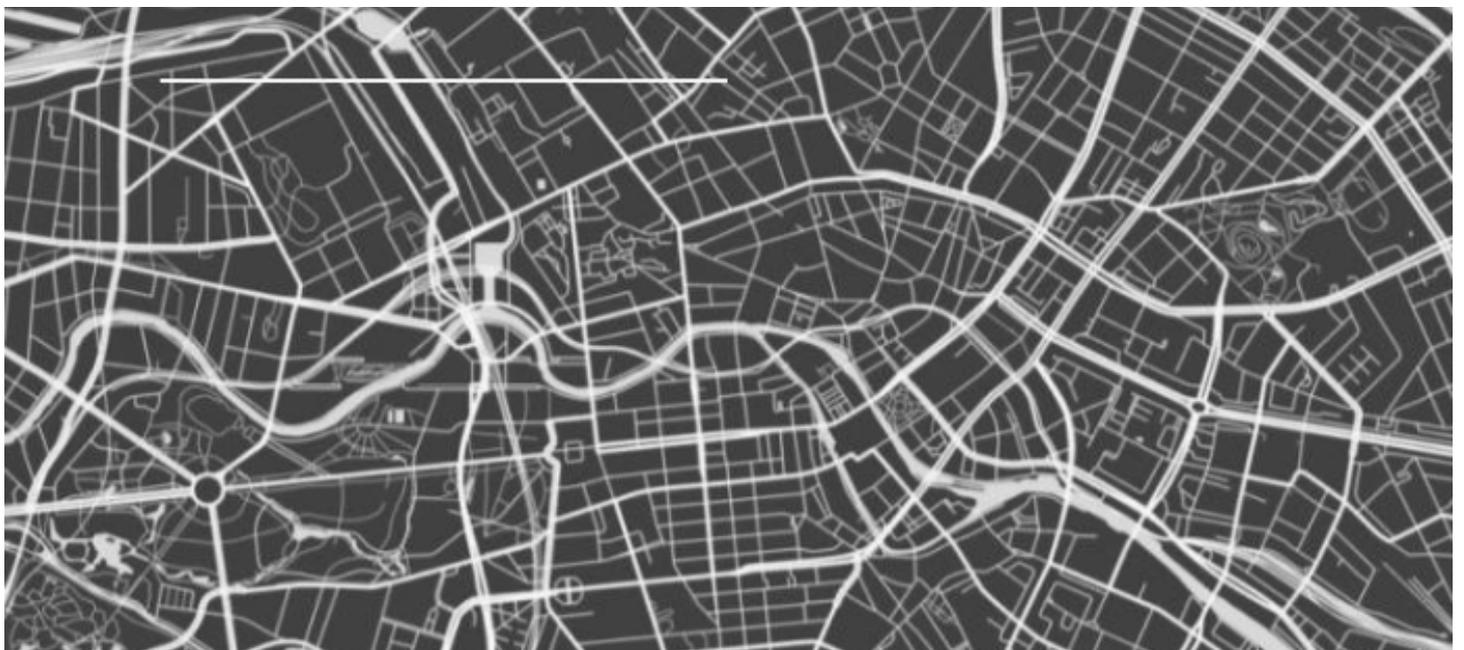


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Academia should (ultimately and) inevitably transcend its disciplinary boundaries when engaging in knowledge exchange activities in order to tackle political and city-regional challenges. Despite the current post-Brexit scenario's uncertainty and the similarly evolving context of the European regional realm, research collaborations among urban scholars across Europe through interdisciplinary scientific ties are vital to building further democratic cities and regions, even more so now and for the future. The present circumstances urge us to take action in support of this socio-political endeavour to, as it was the main purpose for this visiting fellowship.

Regardless of how time-consuming it is to plan ahead when most academics are dealing with research activities such as projects, publications, conferences, and workshops in academic life, every once in a while, the unexpected could be a valuable source of innovation and experimentation. Actually, my visiting fellowship at BCUS was kicked off as a collaboration with the VUB political science department because of their interest in

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my research on comparing devolution through innovative democratic processes in several European city-regions (cityregions.org). Devolution is a highly contextual socio-territorial phenomenon that differs considerably within a wide range of nation-states such as Belgium, the UK, Spain, or even, as latest news depicts, Italy and France; because of this variation, deeper research was needed to address these differences through new publications on the topic¹.

Nevertheless, for scholars like me, having experience outside of academia after working both in the public and private sectors of the social innovation field, the attempt to cross fields by building upon new interdisciplinary realms might not follow the mainstream research pathways as they stand. Instead, timely events could provide even more remarkable research and policy collaboration opportunities. The visiting fellowship programme at BCUS therefore provided multiple opportunities for policy-making networking within EU institutions, which enriched the research activities that were to come.

Thus, during the timeframe of the fellowship, I conducted interviews with key people working on the following four main domains: (i) institutional and policy domains, such as

¹ Calzada, I. (2017), Metropolitan and City-Regional Politics in the Urban Age: Why Does ‘(Smart) Devolution’ Matter? Palgrave Communications 3(17094): 1-17. In the Special Issue ‘Politics of the Urban Age’ (ISSN: 2055-1045). DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2017.94

Calzada, I. (2017), Problematizing and Politicizing Smart City-Regions: Is Devolution Smart?, Territorio, Special Issue ‘From Smart City to Smart Region. Meanings, Governance, Policies and Projects’. (ISSN: 1825-8689) [In Print]

Calzada, I. (2017), The Techno-Politics of Data and Smart Devolution in City-Regions: Comparing Glasgow, Bristol, Barcelona, and Bilbao. Systems Journal 5(1): 1-18. Special Issue ‘Smart Cities and Regions as Systems of Innovation’ (ISSN 2079-8954). DOI: 10.3390/systems5010018

Calzada, I. (2017), Metropolitan and Post-national Urbanity Beyond (Pluri)Nation(al)-States in the EU: Benchmarking Scotland, Catalonia and the Basque Country, JEMIE Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe 16(1): 51-78 (ISSN: 1617-5247).

Calzada, I. (2016), (Un)Plugging Smart Cities with Urban Transformations: Towards Multistakeholder City-Regional Complex Urbanity? URBS, Revista de Estudios Urbanos y Ciencias Sociales Journal 6(2): 25-45. (ISSN: 2014-2714). Retrieved from: <http://www2.ua.es/urbs/index.php/urbs/article/view/calzada>.

MEPs of the European Parliament, key people at the Committee of Regions, DG Regio, DG Connect, and INEA; (ii) city-network domains such as, ENoLL, ERRIN, RSA, and Eurocities; (iii) regional government domains, such as European delegations of the Basque Country, Catalonia, Flanders, Corsica, Skåne, and Northern Ireland, among others; and (iv) finally, the political and think tank organisations operating in Brussels, such as, Coppieters Foundation, Greens-EFA (European Free Alliance), ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), and GUE-NGL (European United Left-Nordic Green Left), among others.

In the spirit of building bridges, a week before the unfortunate Brexit vote in the UK on 15 June 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the University of Oxford, Urban Transformations ESRC Programme and BCUS, pledging to closely collaborate and launch the Workshop Series in a partnership entitled 'Bridging European Urban Transformations' (urbantransformations.ox.ac.uk/news/2017/bridging-european-urban-transformations-build-ing-a-better-understanding-of-the-future-of-eu-ropes-cities); I coordinated this partnership from June 2016 to February 2018.

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During this time, a wide range of debates and inspiring conversations took place in different locations within Brussels by bringing together speakers, projects, and initiatives. This functioned as an active way of doing research by building a research roadmap, which is the final outcome of this Workshop Series as follows:

The first workshop, entitled 'Unplugging Data in Smart City-Regions' (#UnpluggingData), was held on the premises of the SMIT research unit (smit.vub.ac.be) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. In overcoming the 'smart city' buzzword, the event focused on the implications of smart urbanism and the use of big data for citizens by presenting leading initiatives in Europe (Future Cities Catapult, HackAIR, Flamenco, and City of Things, among others).

The second workshop, entitled 'Experimenting Urban Living Labs (ULLs) Beyond Smart City-Regions' (#ExperimentingULLs), explored in-depth the potential opportunities of 'living labs' and urban laboratories as means for more democratic and transparent city-making. The turnout of this event in the Basque Country government delegation, member

of ERRIN, was impressive, drawing attention and gathering a large number of regional governmental delegations from the EU.

The third workshop, entitled 'Scaling Migration through the European City-Regions' (#ScalingMigration), blended very diverse perspectives and techniques. The macro scale examined the nation-state's role in this global crisis of migration and the emergence of city-networks. Moving towards the meso scale, newcomers and refugees' integration programmes were examined before arriving at the micro level, analysing grounded projects set up in neighbourhoods and districts. The event took place in the Maison des cultures et de la cohesion sociale in the neighbourhood of Molenbeek.

Ultimately, the fourth workshop, 'Rethinking the Urban Commons in European City-Regions', revolved around the core idea of the 'commons', which was developed by Ostrom and Hardin, among many others. The event, which took place at Visit.Brussels, piqued the interest of a wide range of stakeholders.

Finally, on 17 November 2016, I presented a paper to smart cities researchers at BCUS on '(Un)Plugging Smart Cities? Transitions, Governance and Devolution' at a lunchtime seminar hosted by Cosmopolis.

I would not like to wrap up this executive summary without acknowledging the support received from BCUS and Cosmopolis, particularly from its director, Bas van Heur. Equally important is the practical support kindly provided by Stefan de Corte and Elena Solonina. Likewise, I would like to express my gratitude to the Brussels Academy team comprised of Eric Corijn, Jessica van de Ven, and Louise Deblieck, for providing logistical support to the activities of the Workshop Series 'Bridging European Urban Transformations'. From 'this' side of the 'bridge' in England, particularly at Oxford, it is also necessary to acknowledge, especially Michael Keith, the UT and COMPAS team, and the ESRC for the funding support received. 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.

Biography

Igor Calzada (igorcalzada.com/about) is Researcher and Lecturer in Urban Transformations ESRC at the University of Oxford. He is also Lecturer in the MSc in Global Sustainable Cities at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. His research interests are comparing socially innovative processes in city-regions by paying special attention to cases and issues of regional and metropolitan devolution. In particular, he is focused on blending two research fields, city-regions (cityregions.org) and smart city, by benchmarking European case-studies through the application of qualitative and action research methods to data-driven cities and living labs (replicate-project.eu). He has completed research projects on smart cities and social innovation funded by the H2020-European Commission, ESRC, RSA, and Ikerbasque, and has published research findings in internationally leading journals including Journal of Urban Technology, Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, and Regional Studies Regional Science. He was the RSA Early Career grant holder in 2014. Previously he has worked at the Aston University in Birmingham, at the University of Nevada (USA), at the University of Helsinki (Finland), and at the University of Mondragon (Spain) (mondragon-corporation.com). He also has experience outside academia working with stakeholders insofar as he was Director of Research in the Basque Government and was project director at the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation in the Basque Country (Spain). He is the co-founder of the spin-off TransLokal, Academic Entrepreneurship for Policy-Making (translokal.com).