Urban Traces

Academic research is an inherently networked endeavour. We share, critique, debate, and refine our work by participating in a wide range of knowledge exchange activities including research, publishing, formal and informal presentations, and meetings.

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The collaborative nature of academic is not restricted to those who are considered to be gregarious and connected but also includes lone scholars who cannot avoid engaging in scholarly networks, presenting their papers at conferences and workshops, and producing and receiving peer reviews. The visiting fellowship programme at BCUS provides multiple opportunities for academic networking to occur in ways that would not normally occur. This networking benefits the visiting fellows by providing a sounding board for emerging ideas while also providing 'grist for the mill' for those who host and interact with them.

With my current research on smart urban development, my BCUS fellowship provided multiple opportunities to exchange ideas with like-minded scholars at the VUB. Informal conversation is one of the easiest and perhaps least appreciated forms of networking that can potentially have the most lasting influence on our thinking. I had multiple dialogues with colleagues at Cosmopolis and MOBI as well as other BCUS centres in the hallway, at lunch, over afternoon coffee, and after work over a beer about smart cities. These conversations ranged from in-depth discussions on theories of 'smart' as it relates to urban development to constructive disagreements about the merits and drawbacks of how the smart agenda is being rolled out in cities today. These conversations broadened my understanding of how various disciplines frame the topic and also provided concrete examples of the tensions and opportunities being faced by smart city practitioners. Of particular note was an extended lunch with Pieter Ballon at iMinds who leads the living labs agenda for iMinds and also serves as international secretary for European Network of Living Labs (ENOLL). We had a lively conversation about the connections between smart cities and living labs and the centrality of learning activities to both agendas.

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And every once in a while, these informal conversations transform into formal collaborations. Early in my stay, I had a productive meeting with Imre Keseru in MOBI and Eugenio Mantovani in LSTS about the centrality of decision making and governance to smart urban development. Our overlapping interests quickly transformed into a research proposal to the Joint Programming Initiative Urban Europe for a project titled 'Looper: Learning Loops in the Public Realm'. The project combines MOBI's expertise on multi-actor, multi-criteria analysis (MAMCA) with notions of living labs to address issues of air pollution, congestion, and anti-social behaviour in specific areas of Brussels, Verona, and Manchester. If successful, the proposed project will provide an opportunity to develop and test a method of co-production with urban residents through real-world demonstration projects in each city while furthering our understanding of how smart governance can be shaped in progressive ways.

Our overlapping interests quickly transformed into a research proposal

Finally, I presented a paper to smart cities researchers at BCUS on 'From the Sustainable to the Smart City: Complementary or Contradictory Urban Visions?' at a lunchtime seminar hosted by Cosmopolis and MOBI. The aim of the talk was to summarise a few of the main tensions that have arisen in the joining up of smart and sustainability agendas related to resilience, economic growth, consumption, resource distribution, participation, and knowledge transfer. The subsequent debate with the audience was rich and wide-ranging and explored the role of academics in promoting and assessing smart city projects, the potential for citizens to co-designing and co-produce smart solutions, and the challenge of transferring findings from one locale to another, among other topics.

The aforementioned activities exemplify different modes of networking and interaction to inform our individual research agendas. It is precisely this type of intellectual space that provides opportunities to share our perspectives, identify connections, challenge arguments and assumptions, and consider alternatives. This form of collective learning is what fuels our internal curiosities and forms the lifeblood of the academic pursuit of knowledge.

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Biography

Andrew Karvonen is Lecturer in Architecture and Urbanism in the School of Environment, Education and Development at the University of Manchester. He is also the co-director of the Centre for Urban Resilience and Energy where he contributes to critical studies of urban sustainability, resilience, and energy. In his research, he combines ideas from science & technology studies and urban studies to examine the politics and governance of infrastructure networks. He has completed research projects on energy and water systems, smart districts, and low-carbon housing, and has published his research findings in internationally leading journals including Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Environment and Planning A, and Progress in Planning. He won the 2014 Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning John Friedmann Book Award for his research monograph, Politics of Urban Runoff: Nature, Technology, and the Sustainable City (The MIT Press).