



City-centre, pedestrianization and lifestyles

Ongoing research

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2018

End: 01 April 2020

In 2015, a vast project to pedestrianize Brussels' main central avenues was launched, transforming the face of a city-center designed for cars in the decades following the war. The study aims to make an in-depth assessment of how this pedestrianization affects lifestyles. Its originality lies in its focus both on how activities are carried out in the constructed and social environment of the pedestrian zone, and how these activities fit into each individual's life. The purpose of this study is to understand what lessons we can draw from a project aimed at drastic car reduction in the heart of a major city, and to assess to what extent such a project can help the transition towards more desired and sustainable lifestyles.

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The research

The research aims to understand how the organization of the pedestrian zone has impacted the whole lifestyle of those who frequent it, as well as those who used to visit it

and those who live in the area without necessarily frequenting it. Inhabitants of the pedestrian zone, people who work in the area, occasional or regular users, inhabitants of the city of Brussels, former users of the city-center: all these different people may have been impacted by the development of the pedestrian zone. The hypothesis is therefore that the pedestrianization project has had an impact not only on the regular users of the city center, who are visible in the public space, but also on those who aren't regularly seen there, whose entire range of activities, from shopping habits to leisure, mobility and social connections may also have been reconfigured. The project may have also influenced their representations of the area, of their living environment, of Brussels or even their opinion on the pedestrianization of city centers.

It is also postulated that for those who use the new pedestrian zone today, traces of these changes in their lifestyles will be directly visible in the public space. The diverse populations and uses that inhabit this space, coupled with the heterogeneity of the redevelopment which is still in different stages of advancement, makes this whole pedestrian zone a true laboratory for studying the social interactions, mobilities and behaviors of those who use it. Three sub-hypotheses can thus be proposed:

The morphological and material characteristics of the different areas involved in the project will have an impact on the activities and experiences of users.

From being a transit route, forming an urban highway, the pedestrian zone will become a destination in itself, reconfiguring activities and mobilities.

Because of its location in the multifunctional center of Brussels, its social composition and that of the surrounding neighborhoods, and its attractiveness on a regional, national and international scale, the new pedestrian zone is a privileged space of social mixing.

A double methodology

To investigate these questions, researchers will rely on a double methodology, consisting of two work packages conducted simultaneously.

The first work package, based on an analysis of photographs and observations in the public sphere, aims to materialize, spatially and temporally, the activities that happen throughout the pedestrian zone, considered as traces of the users' lifestyles. The photographs and observations will focus on different parts of the pedestrian zone, studied at different times (weekdays, weekends, different hours of the day and night...). The goal will be to produce a localized description of activities and social experiences in space and time, in order to better define the spatial, temporal and collective materiality of people's lifestyles.

The second work package aims to offer a more sensitive perspective – through insights and perceptions - on these activities and social experiences to view them as part of the wider picture of people's lifestyles, as well as to identify how the pedestrian zone has impacted the lifestyles of those who stopped going there (or never did). For this, spatialized activity diaries and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with volunteers, inhabitants and workers as well as regular, occasional and former users of the pedestrian zone.

Results of the project are expected at the beginning of 2020 and will support the debates on how the pedestrianization of city centers can contribute to the transition towards more desired and sustainable lifestyles.

The context of Brussels' city center

Urban policies from the 1950s to the 1980s embodied a vision of Brussels as both a consumption hub and an administrative capital, designing it to become a "convergence point of the national motorway network." ¹ Public space was then planned for cars, with central four-lane avenues, relegating pedestrians to crowded sidewalks and underground tramways. In the 1970s, some voices criticized the city's design and called for a of its organization. Besides claims pertaining to sustainability and citizen participation, other arguments focused more on the image of Brussels' city center and the need to attract middle classes inside the city. Indeed, Brussels has a history of strong peri-urbanization, with many high-income households choosing to establish themselves in the outer suburbs, leaving the city center mainly to the working classes. And yet, due to its high multifunctionality (in housing, businesses, administrations, tourism and leisure), the city center is an attractive place on a supra-local scale, leading to accessibility and mobility issues.

Planning for the "pedestrian zone"

In this context, a project was launched in 2015 (called "le Piétonnier" in French) to extend the pedestrian zone in Brussels and include parts of the main central boulevards and avenues. However, it was poorly prepared. The implementation of the work relies on three plans: one for mobility, one for reorganizing the public spaces and one for commercial development. The first was implemented almost two years before the second. Work on the reorganization of public spaces began in September 2017 on several sections of the main avenues. At the beginning of this research project, the pedestrian zone included areas at different stages of advancement: some were already properly developed while others were still untouched or under construction.

The heterogeneity of the whole area was made worse by the diverse types of mobilities that use it. While the zone was initially intended for pedestrians, other active modes (bicycles, scooters...) are permitted throughout, and in some places buses are allowed and even some vehicles under certain conditions: residents, deliveries and even taxis. A single lane of traffic was also reopened in some parts of the pedestrian zone, following legal claims against the town planning permits and police decisions.

The implementation of the pedestrian zone caused much controversy, especially because of the lack of public consultation and the unpreparedness with which it was put in place. It is in this context that the Brussels Center Observatory was created within the Brussels Studies Institute² to objectively debate the pedestrian zone project and assess its impact on the city's functioning. To conduct the current project on how pedestrianization affects lifestyles, a research team was established within this Observatory involving experts in different fields such as sociology, anthropology, archaeology and geography. Working alongside them, a team of experts from the TOR Research Group at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) that have been leaders in the field of *Time Use Surveys* for several years, will implement a device for keeping spatial diaries of spatial activities.

Notes

1 DE VISSCHER, J.-P., NEUWELS, J., VANDERSTAETEN, P. and CORIJN, E., 2016. Brève histoire critique des imaginaires à la base des aménagements successifs des boulevards, In : CORIJN, E., HUBERT, M., NEUWELS, J., VERMEULEN, S. and HARDY, M. (eds), Portfolio#1 : Cadrages - Kader, Ouvertures - Aanzet, Focus. Brussels : BSI-BCO, pp. 135-147, <http://bco.bsi-brussels.be/portfolio-1/>.

2 The Brussels Studies Institute (BSI) is a research platform bringing together 27 research centers and more than 250 researchers from six different universities and specializing in various fields. It consists of a team of academic and nonacademic experts who support research projects and help disseminate the ensuing findings. BSI is currently pursuing 15 research projects involving teams that are multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder, inter-university and cross-community, tailored to the subjects at hand. The Brussels Center Observatory (BSI - BCO) was formed within the Brussels Studies Institute (BSI) to deal with the controversies raised by the pedestrian zone project and render the debates more objective. It studies the effects of pedestrianizing central avenues on the multi-scalar functioning of the city-metropolis. This Observatory now includes around 50 academics and researchers from various fields and affiliated with 15 research centers linked to five different universities.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

More

Keywords : [Belgium](#), [Brussels](#), [soft modes](#), [walk](#), [pedestrian](#), [city center](#)

Disciplines : [Humanities](#), [Social sciences](#), [Urban studies](#)

Transport mode(s) : [Pedestrian](#)

¹ <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/>

² <https://www.hbits.io/nl/>

³ <mailto:anne.fuzier@sncf.fr>

⁴ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>

⁵ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/lifestyle-1756>

⁶ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/belgium>

⁷ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/brussels>

⁸ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/soft-modes>

⁹ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/walk>

¹⁰ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/pedestrian>

¹¹ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/city-center>

¹² <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/sciences-humaines>

¹³ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/sciences-sociales>

¹⁴ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/urbanisme-architecture-et-paysagisme>

¹⁵ <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/modes-transport/marche>