

The academic year seems to be suddenly drawing to a close – our final term ends at the end of the month with our final masterplan presentation in urban design. After this it will be somewhat calmer with two months to spend on our dissertation topics, which will be a welcome change of focus and a chance to really engage with the topics. This term seems to have gone by very quickly, and in addition to our normal lectures, we have also had two field trips to give us a change of scene, a different perspective in planning and to remind us that there is a life outside campus!

Life outside campus turned out a very enjoyable week in Lille and Brussels and the Flanders region. It's always good to get a different perspective on planning, and also to see different cultures and experience new places. We got a chance to reflect on planning issues in a different context – for example both cities have also seen major transformations as a result of European or EU influences, which have influenced their physical form – the modern *Euralille* quarter was influenced by the arrival of the Eurostar, and Brussels has been clearly influenced by the presence of the EU in the city..... Even rural areas such as Flanders have a cultural landscape affected by the actions of many nations during World War I.

Travelling around the Lille metropolitan area and then the Brussels area also gave me a new perspective on the concept of a city region, and of regional planning. The fact that planning at a regional scale is more established at the European level seems to make more sense when experienced at first hand - in contrast to planning at an island level, European regions such as Flanders can involve different languages, cultures and different countries which are interconnected in many ways.

The concepts of spatial planning outlined in the ESDP would seem to me to be much better understood by experiencing the reality of polycentric cities which are physically close and really well connected by public transport. Our concepts of well connected cities or towns (either gateways or hubs) need to be grounded by good quality transport connections, both public and private. An encouraging development is the re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor later this month from Ennis to Athenry, which will create a connection from the gateways of Galway and Limerick, and onwards to Cork. It is to be hoped that this will provide an effective alternative to road based transport and reduce carbon emissions – and by linking two Gateways on the west coast, that it may see a strengthening of regional links....

It so happens that my next trip to be taken is some research in Galway – a very good opportunity to take the train.....