

Conclusions from European Study Visit - 2001

(Members of the House of Commons Transport and Environment Select Committee, with Tim Pharoah as technical advisor)

Barcelona

The city has gained renown for its spectacular transformation of the waterfront area, and for a series of regeneration projects aimed at making high-density areas more habitable. New urban spaces have been created by selective demolition and by converting parking and roadspace to areas for pedestrians. One major initiative was the decking-over of a major urban spine road to provide a level of parking, and a new linear park on top.

The City has a vision for improving conditions for walking, with plans to link the parks and spaces with coherent walking routes, and to make crossing of the major traffic arteries easier. This is underpinned by fairly comprehensive data on the extent of walking trips within the overall transport mix.

But the key to maintaining high levels of walking in Barcelona is the commitment to making high densities work, and avoiding the damage that would come from creating new developments that build in dependence on the car.

Milan

Like Barcelona, the city recognises that maintaining a high level of walking requires action across the city, not just in a number of high profile city centre locations. Attempts are being made to plan comprehensively, though the recently approved street classification system appeared to step backwards to the now-discredited Buchanan philosophy of “environmental islands” divided inexorably by uncrossable streams of traffic on the main thoroughfares.

What impressed the committee, however, was the quality achieved in the design and especially the execution of pedestrian areas created in the heart of the city. The architectural coherence of Via Dante had been respected with simple but beautifully constructed paving design and materials, while the square on which La Scala opera house sits has been recreated as a fitting foreground and place of repose. Stone benches have been provided in response to criticisms of earlier schemes (such as by the Duomo) where there was nowhere to rest.

Ferrara

Unlike many Italian cities, Ferrara is a place where people ride bicycles rather than motor scooters. In the city centre at least, pedestrians, cyclists and moderate traffic levels blended easily together without physical measures to separate the traffic streams or to control pedestrian behaviour. Not a single metre of guard railing was to be seen. This relaxed blending of people using different travel modes was due to three things: the exclusion of vehicles having no

business in the centre, thus keeping traffic levels low; an overall speed limit of around 20 mph; and perhaps most striking of all, walking, riding and driving behaviour that demonstrated mutual tolerance.

The single most extraordinary feature is that this happy blend has been achieved largely through a shift of attitudes rather than through traffic engineering. The mechanisms for allocating permits to drive into the city centre also are people-oriented, and physical limitations on vehicle movement were few and unintrusive. What impressed us was that everything to which we aspire appeared to have been achieved without any engineering measures, unless one includes the awareness and promotion campaigns as social engineering!

Munich

Munich has one of the largest pedestrian areas in Europe. The lessons from this are mostly to do with the need for a comprehensive and bold approach to planning. First, the pedestrianisation is linked to support for specialised and mainstream retail activities (each having their own pedestrian spine route). There is no policy of progressively adding to the pedestrian area, and the retailers would oppose this. Second, the creation of a high quality city centre is seen as totally dependent on access by a high capacity and high quality rail-based public transport system, including trams, metro and fast trains serving the greater Munich area. The efficiency and quality of this system is at a level that currently in Britain we can only dream of, but it results from strong political support, and the money to go with it. Thirdly, and again in stark contrast to British practice, development of commercial and retail facilities outside the city centre or beyond the reach of public transport interchanges is strictly controlled. Accessibility is a key feature in the planning of land use and public transport, with threshold distances being 600 metres from a rail station, and 400 metres from a bus stop.

Planning of the transport system is founded on the basis of mode split data, and targets for changes in this. Although it is not intended to increase the mode share of walking trips, this is partly in recognition of the expanding city, and the longer travel distances that will result. Public transport and cycle shares are both targeted for increase, however, at the expense of the car.

As in Barcelona and Milan, Munich pays close attention to the design and quality of public spaces. Pedestrians are not herded behind railings, paving materials landscaping and street furniture are hotly discussed, and the quality of workmanship is unmatched by most British local authorities. The use of streetscape designers within multi-disciplinary teams was confirmed in all the cities visited, and the benefits are clearly visible. Civic pride is nurtured by the work that is undertaken to create and improve public spaces, and that in turn is seen as important for maintaining the importance of cities, and holding back the threat of US-style sprawl.