

WHAT HAPPENS WHERE PUBLIC TRANSPORT MEETS THE PUBLIC REALM?

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When public transport facilities were first developed in London, they were often closely related to the people they served. As attention has shifted more to ways of adapting the city to the car, the role of public transport has often taken second place. While the railways are still pre-eminent in providing peak-hour access to central London, they are of marginal relevance to daily life in the suburbs. Buses, trams and trolleybuses used to be the mainstay of journeys of more than walking distance, but bus services now play a fairly small role in suburban transport (Pharoah, 1992).

Thus we find bus stops located for the convenience of traffic capacity rather than the convenience of passengers; we find stations run-down and neglected, creating places of which many people are fearful, especially at night; and we find new developments in which public transport is provided only as a social service for the car-less, if at all. Despite the progressive marginalisation of public transport as an element of modern life, London has been remarkably successful in retaining its basic public transport infrastructure. The network of bus routes is still fairly comprehensive, though frequencies and off-peak services have steadily declined over the past 30 years. Recently bus ridership has increased, and there are many improvements being made in vehicles, information, and bus priority schemes. The railway network too remains largely intact, though the quality of services and equipment is highly variable between one part of the network and another.

London is fortunate also in having retained a large number of suburban and district centres, which enable people to get many of the services and facilities they need without having to travel long distances. The combination of day-to-day facilities locally, and world-class specialised employment and facilities in central London

easily accessible by train is a structure not only compatible with the concept of transport sustainability, but also believed to be popular with Londoners. Certainly, successive plans have sought to retain and develop this basic structure for London. The strategic planning advice submitted by the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) to the Secretary of State for the Environment points to

"the need for a strong strategic reaffirmation of the concept of a network of centres offering different levels and type of services. . . "

and refers in this context to the ability of these centres to reduce the need to travel and to increase accessibility for the population at large. Importantly for the future, it is also recognised that these established centres can

"serve as a key focus for delivery of sustainable development. . . "

This strategy is supported by recent policy guidance from central government, in particular Planning Policy Guidance notes 6 and 13.

The success of such policies is meanwhile undermined by continued development of shopping, employment, leisure, health, education and other facilities which are unrelated to these traditional London centres, and often with poor access by public transport. Many of these new developments are so large that they must draw customers and visitors from a large area, and so they generate longer journeys for people to undertake activities which used to be undertaken locally. The provision, in the suburban areas at least, of car parking on a scale which assumes that all users will travel by car inevitably means that other modes of travel are unable to compete.

So maintaining and revitalising London's suburban, district and local centres is not just a question of improving their quality, but of blocking the spread of investment in car-dependent activities elsewhere. In short, London needs to re-focus its investment, and its planning and community initiatives, on the well-established structure of centres that are highly accessible by public transport.

Re-focusing on public transport could include the following actions:

1. Designing and refurbishing stations to become functionally and aesthetically linked with their immediate surroundings.

The modernisation of stations not only enhances the experience of present users, but also improves the ability of rail to win passengers from the car. Investment in station buildings and facilities gives a signal to potential users of the commitment to rail, and this could influence people's decisions about where to live and work. There are some good examples in London of where operators and local authorities have worked in partnership to provide refurbishments, for example at Wandsworth Town. On the other hand, there are many stations where the immediate surroundings are of poor quality, and discourage rail passengers. The quality of public space adjacent to the new Liverpool Street station, for example, is of appalling quality compared to the spaces inside the station itself. The most prominent example is the newly built roundabout and access roads immediately outside Waterloo's Victory Arch. People are forced into dismal and threatening subways as a welcome to Britain for those arriving on the new high-speed trains from Paris and Brussels. This development encapsulates what has become a general truth in London: we can rise to the occasion when building a fine new station or airport building, but once we cross the threshold into the public realm, the standards of design, construction and maintenance leave much to be desired. The area outside Waterloo international is a shame upon the nation.

2. Encouraging new development at or near stations, for example by encouraging a mixture of land uses, and allowing higher densities.

The central London major rail termini have long been the focus of attention for development. The most impressive example is Liverpool street, where major new development has been combined with the conservation and modernisation of the station itself. Compare it with Euston to see how far we have progressed in 30 years! But we should not think only in terms of the major termini, where clearly there is more potential for large-scale investment. There are opportunities to develop at higher densities, and with greater variety of activities, around many of the stations on the vast London network. Stations at the focus of several public transport routes are particularly suitable for high density non-residential activity, and the redevelopment at Hammersmith is an example of where this is being carried out. Other stations which do not act as nodes in the network can often be the focus for residential development at higher density than would be appropriate elsewhere. Of

course it is not suggested that residential quality should be diminished in the pursuit of shifting travel habits from car to train, but many people prefer to live with less space in exchange for good rail access.

3. Controlling and reducing parking to maintain high environmental standards for people coming to and from stations.

Areas with good public transport access can function without much parking, and this should be a feature of planning policy. Central London has taken the lead in Europe in restricted parking standards, and this now should be extended to other parts of London. Locating development at stations is not enough to get people to travel by train; parking must be restricted as well. Without parking, the locality can be designed to a much higher standard, and can give much more convenient connection between the station and the activities it serves.

4. Improving the means for passengers to reach stations, for example by traffic calming the roads linking to the station.

The "safe routes to school" initiative in some towns has never yet been matched by a "safe routes to stations and bus stops" initiative. Yet if we are serious about more people choosing public transport rather than the car, the safety and comfort of footways leading to and from public transport stops and their catchment areas must be improved.

5. Planning, for the first time in London, a major improvement of interchange opportunities, between both rail and bus services.

Public transport in London grew up mostly as a result of uncoordinated private initiatives, a fact which is sadly still reflected in the uncoordinated and disjointed pattern of services we have today. The Underground and British Rail systems might almost be in different cities for all the connection between them. There is no consistency of frequency, routing or interchange, especially as between Underground dominated north London, and British Rail dominated south London. The bus services are only occasionally linked into rail services in such a way as to

encourage use of the network as an integrated whole.

Consequently, there is enormous potential to plan for better interchange between the various public transport services, and to use the higher quality interchanges as locations for new development.

6. Creating stronger community focal points at major bus stops and stations. From the simple integration of telephones and information points at bus stops, to the wholesale development of major facilities as at Liverpool Street and Hammersmith.

Integrating public transport with the community is not primarily a matter for the operators, but for the local planning authorities. This has not yet even been achieved at the big showcase developments, far less the more humble suburban station, or local bus stop. This reflects the marginal role envisaged for public transport in the past, and the years of giving priority to private road transport. A switch of priority to non-car travel opens up possibilities for major and widespread community-building using public transport stops as catalysts in a new type of urban design.

7. Developing bus stops so that potential users can see that we "mean business" when we say we want to encourage bus use.

Bus stops in London are almost universally poorly designed, and unprotected from obstruction by cars and vans. When did you last see a bus pull up adjacent to the kerb? Yet the humble bus stop can be radically improved to enhance the image and friendliness of the whole system. We now have some excellent bus shelter designs in parts of London, and passenger information is usually of a higher standard than in the de-regulated environment outside London. A start has also been made with real-time bus information and bus boarders. It appears that the operators are willing, but that they are getting little support from the highway authorities. A major opportunity exists to create public transport stops and their immediate surroundings which act as local focal points in the community. For example, where there is a bus stop there should also be a local map, public transport information,

a letter box, a telephone, somewhere to sit and shelter, and often a kiosk or shop as well.

Conclusion

London is fortunate in having a comprehensive public transport infrastructure. There is a great opportunity to exploit that asset by making stations and other public transport stops brighter and better integrated with their local communities. This will benefit both the environment and the economy, and raise the quality of Londoners' lifestyle and "travelstyle".

With the urgent need to limit the role of the car, and to boost the role of public transport, the time has come to re-focus development on public transport facilities. This is not a return to the past, for the standards of design and quality of service will need to be much higher in order to attract custom and investment away from that most formidable competitor in the transport game: the private motor car.

References

Department of the Environment, Planning Policy Guidance Note 6, Town Centres, 1993.

Department of the Environment and Department of Transport, Planning Policy Guidance Note 13, Transport, 1994.

London Planning Advisory Committee, "Draft 1993 Advice on Strategic Planning Guidance for London", LPAC 1993.

Pharoah, T, "Transport: how much can London take?" in London: A New Metropolitan Geography, eds Green, D and Hoggart, K; Edward Arnold 1991 (paperback 1992).

Accompanying Photographs



1. Welcome to Dortmund, the Ruhr, Germany. A broad ground level crossing of the inner ring road outside the main railway station welcomes visitors to the town centre.



2. Welcome to Britain! A new pedestrian subway is what confronts passengers arriving at the Waterloo international Eurostar terminus from Brussels and Paris. A shame upon the nation.



3. A suburban bus stop in Dusseldorf, accompanied by an attractive parade of shops and other local facilities.



4. A suburban bus stop in London: passengers must make their way helped neither by illegal parkers, nor the design of the bus stand, nor the generally run-down appearance of the locale.