

Editorial: Walking in the city

Introduction by Tim Pharoah
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“A short walk is the highest achievement of transport planning”.

J. Michael Thomson, 1976, “Great Cities and their Traffic”, Gollancz

Walking is the most sustainable mode of travel, and yet in Europe people are spending less time on their feet, and more time travelling in vehicles.

As a general rule, people are not making more trips, nor are they spending a larger proportion of their time travelling, but they are switching from walking to faster modes of travel, especially the car. The trips they make on average are getting longer, and the costs they incur in getting about (even if they themselves do not pay the full environmental, accident and other costs) are increasing.

Walking makes an important contribution to minimising transport costs, yet cycling and public transport usually receive much more attention from decision makers. Why should this be? Part of the problem is the “ordinariness” of walking. For most people it is such a natural, instinctive and fundamental part of being human that it is hardly thought of as requiring special policy attention. In Britain (where walking has declined by 20% over the past 25 years) Government policy on walking has just been scrutinised by a Parliamentary committee. Hopefully its recommendations will prompt the Government to promote walking more vigorously than in the past.

The aim of transport planning throughout Europe must be to reduce the cost of transport, especially the social, environmental and resource costs of motorised travel. Encouraging walking by the provision of safe and attractive facilities, and by planning development so that distances are kept short is vital.

Despite this, walking continues to be neglected at all levels of government, and the debate about transport sustainability centres on public transport. Yet in most cities the non-motorised modes (walking and cycling), play a much bigger role than public transport. European towns and cities typically have a walk/cycle mode share well above 30% of all trips. In USA cities, by contrast, the figure is often below 5%. This almost defines the cultural difference between the two continents.

Members of the Network for a New Mobility Culture are gaining valuable experience in the promotion of walking, and are showing what can be done to raise awareness of its importance, and to promote greater use of non-motorised travel.

The cities referred to here have all been active in trying to promote walking, and each local authority refers to achievements over the past few years.

Strasbourg is noted for its ultra modern tram. But it is also a city with a pedestrian-friendly centre. **Malmö** is trying out small scale, low speed electric public transport that will blend more easily with pedestrian-priority environments.

There are often fears that pedestrianising city centres will harm trade. Both **Helsinki** and **Athens** are overcoming such opposition and have removed traffic from key commercial areas. As so often occurs, well-planned schemes can lead to enhanced trade.

Ferrara is known especially for the way in which cycling has become so embedded in the city culture. Everyone cycles, it seems, and the city centre within the old fortifications is a place where walkers, cyclists and drivers blend easily. Low speeds, the removal of through traffic, but above all a culture of tolerance all make for a successful city, where the “slow modes” account for half of all journeys.

Action in city centres is important to ensure their vitality, and to make them places that people want to visit on foot. But reversing the general decline in walking will require action throughout our cities, not just in the centres. The London Borough of **Camden** recognises this through the adoption of a walking strategy, and publication of a streetscape design manual. Their key “boulevard” project also aims to create high quality conditions for walking over a wider area.

