

TRANSPORT PLANNING:
GETTING THE PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORK RIGHT

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"An Academic's View"

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A radical change for transport planning.

There is widespread acceptance of the need for change in transport planning. A good transport system would provide access for everyone, be popular with the public at large, efficient in the use of resources, friendly to the environment, and supportive of urban life. It is difficult to argue that past and present practice, however one describes it, has delivered a system which meets any of these criteria.

Who or what is the problem?

The diverse aspects of regional and urban organisation are undertaken in splendid isolation. Some aspects, like highway engineering, have dominated, while some like urban design have been side-lined. Other aspects have been neglected altogether. There may be talk, for example, about the need to encourage alternatives to the car, but planning for walking, cycling and public transport is almost non-existent.

The problem, then, is lack of integration of skills, of practice and of policy. Land use is separate from transport, roads are separate from public transport, railways are separate from buses, and all of these are separate from functions of design, amenity and welfare.

Are these divisions recognised? Let me quote:

"Traffic and transport can no longer... be dealt with simply by providing more roads and making the best use of them. What is needed is a total transport policy for each major town, or inter-connected group of towns, and its hinterlands, related to the land use plan for the area. This transport planning job is quite different from the traditional highways planning job.

This was written nearly a quarter of a century ago, in a report to the Minister of Transport by Lady Sharpe. Attempts in the late 1960s and early 1970s to achieve better integration were thrown into reverse almost before they started out.

In addition, local government has been weakened over the past fifteen years, and especially any role it had in strategic

planning. Indeed, in some circles it is no longer politically correct to utter the term "strategic planning". In recent years, the obsession with private sector involvement and finance has been a distraction from the real issues of transport and development, and has absorbed professional energies that could have been put to better use.

In short, the chaos we now face is in part due to the deliberate disintegration of the transport and planning systems.

What about the professions?

The established professional institutes have paid insufficient attention to integrated policy and practice. They failed to prevent the dismantling of strategic planning in the 1980s, or to prevent the negative impacts of deregulation, privatisation and market dominated decision making. Indeed divisions and rivalries between the professions may themselves have been part of the problem.

Engineers...

The failure of practice is in part due to the dominance of the engineering professions in the decision-making process. In general, the training of engineers is not well suited to the task of policy making and analysis. The orientation of training towards either operations or engineering has often led to reliance on technical solutions to transport problems, which has tended to obscure the fundamental need for transport policy reform. The transport problem is not primarily a technical problem, it is a social problem.

Town Planners...

Town planners are more likely to have skills in policy work, but they often have less influence than their engineering colleagues. They have little training in the technical or economic aspects of transport and may have little understanding of the interaction between transport and development. In a recent survey conducted by the University of Westminster, about half of planners interviewed said they had insufficient transport training. Some town planners regard transport as boring, or irrelevant to their work. I challenge them to name a single important planning issue that is not related to transport.

And others....

Urban and landscape designers are barely visible in mainstream practice. A variety of other disciplines potentially could make valuable contributions, but again mostly work outside the world of planning and transport.

None of this professional parochialism is surprising. Professional activity is driven largely by the requirements of practice as laid down in the various streams of legislation: for example the Transport, Highways, Traffic and Planning Acts. If there is no

statutory duty to plan strategically, or to integrate different modes, or to plan land use together with transport, then there is no motivation for the professions, or for individuals to develop the appropriate training and skills. Interaction, integration and coordination all involve resources and time; they cannot be achieved by goodwill alone, there has to be a statutory obligation to achieve them. There are few such obligations at present.

A new agenda?

Now, however, it appears that there is growing discontent with the direction that transport and development has taken. There has always been a small core of malcontents within the existing professions, of course, but what was seen as heretical or subversive 20 years ago is now becoming accepted as inevitable. A new agenda is being drawn up, and there is a growing realisation that much traditional practice is losing its relevance.

What can be done?

There is an urgent need to close the gap between what is being done and what needs to be done. We are concerned here mainly with the professional viewpoint, from which there are three key issues.

First, there is a need for a proper framework for transport planning, integrated with land use and environmental planning. Integrated planning needs to be given a high priority, and within a proper statutory framework, alongside other major central and local government duties. (Why is local government being reviewed without any commitment to future mechanisms for strategic planning?) This will not come about without a change of Government priorities and attitudes to intervention, and this in turn will not happen without powerful pressure from professionals to underpin the gut reaction of the public that major change is needed. It will be necessary to rise above the familiar squabbles between ideological zealots. "Strategic" and "Planning" are not four-letter words, nor for that matter are "privatisation" and "competition".

Second, there is a need for training in the art and science of integrated approaches to achieve better transport and environmental outcomes. In the short term, such training may need to be innovative and geared to promoting a vision of better practice. In the longer run, if practice does not change, such training may be wasted; there is no point in training people for jobs that do not exist.

Third, who is to determine the training and professional standards of those engaged in implementing the new agenda? Can existing institutes adapt? Is informal cooperation between disciplines sufficient? Or is there a need for a new professional body?

A new institute?

A new institute can be justified, in my view, if its purpose is to promote the new agenda and, in line with that, to develop

practice, training and professional standards. What is not needed is any new body which simply aims to protect a narrow set of interests, or to offer polite commentary on government policy.

A new institute could attract strong support if it set out from the start to:

1. Represent those who are working for the genuine integration of transport, development and environmental planning at all levels of government and scales of practice.
2. Campaign actively for changes in legislation to make such planning a statutory duty of elected central and local government bodies.
3. Recognise training which emphasises the integrated approach, and which promotes a synthesis of ideas, techniques and practice.
4. Guard against domination by any one of the traditional disciplines.
5. Maintain strength through the competence and commitment of a wide membership, rather than through exclusivity of membership rules.
6. Contribute to the future harmonisation of qualifications in Europe.
7. Attract a diverse membership in line with equal opportunities best practice.

Is a new institute a threat to existing institutes? If the role of present institutes continues to be relevant, then their future will be secure. In any case, the promotion of inter-disciplinary practice does not diminish the role of individual disciplines. What is important is the achievement of the new direction for transport and development planning, and this is not at present adequately served by the existing institutes. One or more of them could change, of course, but there is no reason why professionals who are eager to promote and develop the new agenda should be weighed down with the baggage of other professional interests. Those who travel light travel faster!

Finally, our problem is not just the lack of an appropriate professional institute, it is also the lack of appropriate professional practice, which in turn is the consequence of deficient legislation, inadequate government structures and misguided policies. We have a large army of professionals out there in the battle field. If I were the general, I would say that we have been fighting the wrong war.

Reference:

MOT "Transport Planning: the Men for the Job", a report to the MOT by Lady Sharpe, HMSO, January 1970.