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THE END OF DISPERSAL?

transportation planning and public policy

by D. N. M. STARKIE
 volume 1 part 4 of the series
Progress in Planning.
 Pergamon Press. 1973. £1.85

At times of self-appraisal it is comforting to be clear about previous experiences and the lessons to be learnt from them. The present heart-searching amongst transport and town and country planners (if a distinction should still be drawn between them) should therefore be helped considerably by Starkie's review of transport planning and its relation to public policy over the past twenty years. The review is timely also because the new pattern of local government in the provinces has thrust transport planning responsibilities on people with little, if any, previous experience of the subject. In the old authorities, transport and related functions were carried out largely in isolation; Starkie reminds us that "the general isolation of public transport in the transport planning organization of [the old] local authorities is something which emerged very clearly from the Sharp Report".

The book looks further than local transport planning, however, and manages to pull together urban, regional, and national aspects, showing what has been taking place in recent years, and why. All this is harnessed to a basic theme which Starkie illustrates in each of the chapters; this basic theme is to explore "the extent to which the methods of analysis used by the transport planner disregarded instead of served those who decide upon matters of policy". We are given interesting accounts of examples

from recent planning practice, ranging from decisions about ports and airports and the use and development of transportation models to the evaluation of specific projects such as the M1 motorway and the rail link to Heathrow airport.

Perhaps the clearest points emerge from the account of developments in urban transport. In particular, Starkie shows how the inadequacies of the early studies and models reflected the narrow, but commonly held, view that the transport problem was the "traffic problem" (i.e. congestion of vehicles) and that the answer was to provide more roads and parking space or, as Starkie nicely puts it, "more of the same". He goes on to show that the development of the transportation study to take account of such factors as parking controls and the effects on travel patterns of improved bus and rail facilities, was largely prompted by policy changes that had already taken place; in this case the acceptance of traffic restraint and the desire to promote public transport. It appears from the account that in many respects the development of techniques has lagged behind changing policies and attitudes at the political level.

We have yet to see the emergence of a transportation study which has entirely won the confidence of decision makers, despite the fact that transport planners seem finally to have abandoned the totally inappropriate assumptions and methods which characterized the early, American-based, studies. Some of the methods used in the earlier transportation studies appear now to be quite absurd. Starkie states that "the implicit conceptual basis of the traditional travel model is that the traveller first decides to undertake a journey, then proceeds to choose his mode, subsequently his destination, and lastly his precise route". It was not until recently, he tells us, that the sequence was modified "so that the decision with respect to mode either follows or . . . is made simultaneously with the choice of destination". If the earlier studies expected us to believe that we choose our mode of travel without first deciding whether or not it will get us to our preferred destination, is it surprising that their conclusions were treated with caution? At the end of the day, transport plans have been determined more by current policy attitudes and budgetary constraints than by the results of technical analysis.

Starkie concludes that "in this sense the sophistication of transport planning during the 1960s was illusory".

It is difficult to avoid the disturbing thought that the plans we are now preparing will appear equally full of holes in ten or fifteen years' time. Because of this, Starkie appropriately concludes his review with a look at some of the possible developments in attitude that might occur in future; as he says, "to be forewarned is to be forearmed". In this final chapter our attention is drawn to a possible greater emphasis on the social effects of transport, such as the deprivation of non-car-owners when there is limited public transport accessibility to employment. Another view, expounded by Dr Mayer Hillman, is that the important task is to provide mobility for those with little or no prospect of acquiring the independence afforded by car ownership (e.g. children, the disabled, the aged). This view may go a long way towards removing the transport planner's traditional obsession with the journey-to-work problem.

None of the scenarios mentioned by Starkie, however, challenge the view that an increase in mobility is a desirable social objective. Yet can we safely assume that people will continue to want to travel further and faster to an ever widening range of destinations? It may well be that people will in future attach less importance to so-called choice of opportunities through more and better transport facilities, and will instead seek greater satisfaction on or near their own doorsteps. Such a change of attitude is already being primed as soaring fuel prices emphasize the true cost of distance and speed by car, and as the character of our towns and countryside becomes increasingly dominated by the paraphernalia of "accessibility" to them.

We might therefore expect a much greater emphasis on travel on foot and on pedal-cycle facilitated by local land-use planning, and a consequent revival of the "place-based" community. To return to Starkie's theme, one of the implications for transport planning methods would, hopefully, be that pedestrian and cycle trips would no longer be ignored. The omission of these trips in the transport modelling process for example, has produced the "finding" that people make many more trips when they acquire a car. So far, no

one has seriously explored the probability that many of these so-called "new" trips were in fact previously made on foot or by pedal-cycle. More importantly, this oversight automatically leads to the untenable assumption that a journey made by vehicle is necessarily more important than a journey on foot; in this situation a transport plan apparently produces "benefits" (i.e. the satisfaction of motorized trips) which should be counted as "costs" (i.e. the cost of providing for vehicles where previously the use of legs sufficed).

The reader will no doubt have his own view of how transport attitudes will develop, but Starkie's book will almost certainly provide him with valuable food for thought. Apart from the infuriating number of printer's (editor's?) errors, the book is very readable and although some ideas are rather compressed there are many useful references for further reading.

T. M. PHAROAH

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