

JONATHAN BRAY



Is it time to embrace our inner hipster?

Should urban transport policy begin to reflect the ‘new economy’, with interesting places accessible by active travel and mass transit?

► Something is happening to our bland, branded up High Streets in the same way that something fundamental is happening to our urban economies. The hipsters have arrived. Sure, Greggs and Virgin Money and all the other High Street chains have most of the prime spots but springing up everywhere, and at quite a rate, are shops, bars, cafes, barbers (or a fusion of them all behind one artful plate glass window) which are ‘artisan this’ and ‘craft that’ valuing the authentic, the independent, and the culturally and digitally savvy.

And behind those shaken-up High Streets, in former industrial areas and repurposed office blocks, similar preferences inform the wider ‘Flat White economy’ or ‘new economy’ (the communications, information, digital and media economy), which is also surging. After all, most people are on some kind of computer most of their work and leisure time - the digital natives - there’s money in it. And just as for those (who can afford the prices) who are shifting away from boring chain stores in the High Street for shopping, so too is a linked shift away from dull isolated business parks for working - at least for the refuseniks or those with the skills the booming new economy needs. All of which helps explain why more new economy businesses want exciting urban locations where ideas and talent can spark off each other rather than fizzle out in sterile suburbs, malls and business parks. In doing so, the new economy also joins the financial and legal sector which has always preferred to

cluster in city centres.

What does all this mean for transport? Well our latest Urban Transport Group report, *Banks, bytes and bikes: The transport needs of the new economy*, explores this issue. Much of existing transport policy has been predicated on the economic value that can

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The rise of the ‘Flat White economy’ has implications for transport

be derived from reducing journey times between point A and point B - the not unreasonable argument being that reducing the time and cost of moving goods, people and services is good for the economy. This in turn has tended to favour ‘inter’ rather than ‘intra’ urban transport projects. After all, that’s what business says it wants, isn’t it? It’s certainly what a lot of business wants. But it is not necessarily what all business now wants to give overriding priority to. It’s not just greenies who are prioritising making places interesting and accessible by active travel and mass transit, over traffic speeds and volumes - it’s the Corporation of the City of London. And it’s not just in European cities that this is happening - it’s in the USA too - as a fascinating contribution from APTA (the American Passenger Transportation Association) to our report shows.

But it would be wrong to replace one monolithic view of what business wants on transport with another. It would also be wrong to ignore the needs of the thousands of employers and millions of people who do not work in city centres and who also work in less celebrated or in-vogue sectors of the economy (such as retail, catering and hospitality). This is one reason why we will be following up this report with one on towns later this year. However, a valid challenge from this report remains - which is: is it time for urban transport policy to better reflect the priorities of the new economy, and as part of that get more in touch with its inner hipster?

“Walking needs to get a bit more rock and roll. Get a bit more edge and a bit more bite”

It is solved by walking

It was great to have the opportunity to be one of the sponsors (and chair one of the sessions) of the full-to-capacity Living Streets *Walking Summit* at the Guildhall in the City of London earlier this month. Here's what I took from it on what's next for walking...

Politicians used to be nervous about giving walking any air-time for fear of ridicule. Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks sketch cast a long shadow (I kid you not - it used to come up regularly in conversations with officials about walking as part of a broader fear that given everyone walks why does the government need to get involved?). That's changing. For example, Chris Boardman specifically requested that his cycling tsar role in Manchester should also include walking, and the DfT too groups cycling and walking together. Walking also doesn't bring all the tribalism and culture war baggage that cycling can bring with it either. Very few people hate walkers and walking! So putting the two together can help set the scene for a very different kind of conversation.

There was a focus at the event about the need for more emotional intelligence and plain talking in the way the case for walking (and active travel more widely) is communicated. The public block out moral exhortation and technical talk about 'mobility'. Car restraint in general is fine - but it's for other people. However, design schemes of the sort Chris Boardman wants to focus on, such as pavements on which you could use a double buggy with ease, and cycle facilities that parents would feel happy to let a 12-year-old use, and people will start to look out of their car windows and say 'I could give that a try'. It's about making the case more compelling and the schemes that are built easy to use. And what about adding a "how people feel about a place" indicator to the way we assess schemes?

In my words to the conference I also made the case that walking needs to get a bit more rock and roll. Get a bit more edge and a bit more bite. A bit less wholemeal. In the same way that cycling has. Not so long ago cycling was very fringe - borderline naff. Now it could hardly be cooler. Five years ago I remember going to an event in London about spreading its moves to increase cycling to other UK cities. One of the presentations was about cycle cafes in Hackney. And reader, I don't mind telling you I openly scoffed. I'd never



Caffeine fixie:
One of many
cycle cafes
in York

heard of such a thing. Maybe in Shoreditch - but with cycling levels so low in many of our cities there seemed zero point in talking about the potential to export cycle cafes outside the gilded capital. But then what do I know? Now there seems to be a cycle cafe on every other major street in York city centre. So if cycling can acquire some cultural capital and become a two-wheeled zeitgeist - then why not walking? What about the 10,000 steps that Fitbit users obsess about? What about pilgrimage walking and psychogeography?

Local and devolved authorities talking the talk on active travel is all well and good, but whatever fine words go in the text of a strategy document it's the annexe with the numbers showing what the money is actually being spent on which counts. Historically, at both national and local level, the bulk goes on big roads with some left over for public transport and a wafer thin slice for active travel. This is beginning to change with Scotland up to £13.50 per head, London at £17 per head for cycling and Greater Manchester's recently approved Chris Boardman plan implying a spend of £53 per head on cycling and walking. All of which compares with estimates of £6.50 per head in England outside London.

A benevolent arms race is underway -

showing who is really walking the walk. The range of materials from Transport for London on healthy streets (and the systematic and sensible way they are presented) is growing into a toolkit that authorities anywhere could use - including ways in which schemes can be assessed and their benefits captured. There's also a 'Small Change Big Impact' practical guide to delivering temporary, light touch and low-cost projects to change the way a street looks and feels. At Urban Transport Group we want to play our part in spreading the word on the benefits of the Healthy Streets approach - more news on this soon. Meanwhile, could it be that the City of London becomes Britain's most radical transport authority - as it continues its push to plan traffic out of the Square Mile in favour of people and place? Solvitur Ambulando as Diogenes once said ('It is solved by walking'). Right, I'm off for a walk. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.