

JONATHAN BRAY



Going Overground

The sign and symbol of the times is no longer an outer orbital motorway, it's an inner orbital railway - the London Overground

▶ London, 1983. Much of the capital looks like a backlot for *Minder*. Every pub is Taylor Walker or feels like it. Backstreet cafe menus and ambiance are little changed since the early '60s. Cities are not cool. They are chaotic and dying stars spewing out energy to the suburbs. The M25 is the sign and symbol. The future is the business park and the retail park: shedlands and edge lands.

The car is the only way this new landscape can function. The car is to be the public's transport. London Transport is collapsing in on itself. There's a hit list of Tube stations to be sealed up. Imperious Routemasters doggedly approximate their timetables on networks that are impervious to change. Passengers lose their lives as ancient, grease-clogged escalators at King's Cross go up in flames. On the railways London's local trains are getting in the way of the only trains that matter - the ones that get you out of the city altogether.

The North London Line is non-corridor, 'jail wagons' with bars on the windows. An essay in grim so thorough it might as well be up North. The Broad Street to Watford variation on the North London Line is nixed to the satisfaction of the people who matter, who know they are right about the pointlessness of such services. The eastern end of the route meanders through the cinematic dereliction of the Royal Docks.

The West London Line has no local service other than a locomotive-hauled, rush hour-only from Clapham Junction to Olympia.

The South London Line is in the shadow of the valley of withdrawal as it shuttles between Victoria and London Bridge.

The East London Line traces and retraces connections between some of London's more shadowy enclaves, back and forth through dripping tunnels.

These orbital routes don't connect. I have to be honest and say that part of me liked this dowdy moribund London - a London where you could truly get lost. Where you could get a seat. When London sunsets were private pleasures, not triggers for automatic Instagram reflex actions. But that's immaterial. London's gone supernova now. The whole world lights

up when you mention its name. The whole world is here. And the whole of the world's money flows through it. And now the energy flow has reversed. Away from the outskirts and into the centre. Business parks are now seen as stupefyingly dull. If you want people who think (the last jobs that computers can't do) in your HQ, at your start-up or in your studio, then the city is where you need to be.

The sign and symbol of the times is no longer an outer orbital motorway, it's an inner orbital railway - the London Overground. The Overground's orbital nature means London's rail network is no longer only linear, it now has both major and minor keys. It's suddenly given all sorts of often poorly connected places fabulous connections in entirely new directions, re-orientating London geographies. It's put rocket boosters on the transformation of inner suburbs. Joined the dots between creative centres. It has its own sceptical poet, Iain Sinclair, who has written a book about walking round it in a day.

It has its own subcultures and regeneration microclimates - that just happen because the Overground is there. The Overground has made urban heavy rail kind of cool. Everyone wants a piece of it. Every London commuter wants their line to 'go orange'.

Back in those rotten days of the '80s I was involved with some South London hold-out campaigners who, despite being told again and again by BR that they were wrong, just could not unsee the stark staringly obvious which was that more should be made of London's local rail network in general and the orbital routes in particular. And now, many years later, I'm spending a day on what we campaigned for, with my patient hosts from Transport for London and LOROL putting up with my Rip Van Winkle-style reminiscences as I spend a wide-eyed day on a wholly different railway serving a different city.

Here's what I learnt on my orange line orbit.



London Overground's expanding network

Get the spec right

Most articles you ever read about rail franchises (once they've stopped delineating rolling stock statistics) are usually about the dreams and labours of the franchisee. Rarely about the franchisor. Yet arguably how the franchisor plays its end of the contract is more important. In the case of the Overground it's all about having a demanding, multi-tiered spec

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which seeks to ensure that the Overground is a safe and efficient place to be - where you know what you are getting in terms of staffing, information, security and cleanliness.

And what you are getting is reassuringly good. Right down to zero tolerance of chewing gum on the platforms or graffiti on the underpasses. Leaflet racks will have leaflets in them and staffing is more than a numbers game - there's mystery shopping to test for helpfulness. This matters because the sum is more than the parts with transit systems. Unless you have them captive then the overall feeling that people have about a transport option will make the decision for them. It's this tight spec that's helped make the Overground feel like one of the safest and most comfortable places to be in some of the areas it serves.

Some of the London Overground territories had (before takeover) become erratically supervised zones where the vices of dark corners could be practised - urination (or worse), drinking, smoking, abuse of staff. Now ridership is up 30% on the newly Orange former WAGN services, despite less of a seismic change in the product that happened on the orbital routes. It's this good association in the minds of travellers with the totality of what the orange brand means (which in turn is based on attention to meticulous detail) which is leading to commuters voting for the Orange brand over TOC brands every time.

...but nurture the quirk

High spec railways with a strong corporate identity can however be somewhat cold, deadening and impersonal, so beyond the contract there's leeway to nurture the quirk of what is a fascinating railway anyway. Take Acton Central, for example, with its station garden, free book exchange and railway history pictures. Or the outreach work into local communities that my host for the day - Sam Russell - does along the line. Or the sector-leading work on apps, smart watches, smart phones and tablets for staff complete with a 'lorolpedia' of info from training videos to station announcements. As well as apps with enough live information (including maps which show which train is where in real time) to ensure that rail staff are one step ahead of tech-savvy passengers in knowing what's actually going on out there - which is not always the case for rail staff on the rest of the network.

A London Overground train at Haggerston on the East London Line



“Every London commuter wants their line to ‘go orange’”

Circles and lines

All of which in turn raises some interesting questions about how the Orange brand develops. Orange is synonymous with the original orbital lines but of course it's already much more than that. There are six Orange lines already (compared with 10 underground lines) - and with more to come. The on-train maps on the Overground are already bent all out of shape to accommodate the growing network (including the cartographically orphaned Romford to Upminster shuttle). There's a danger that in London's rush to go Orange that it loses some of the identity and quality control (given infrastructure capacity crunch on some of the linear Orange lines) that made people love it so much in the first place. In particular there's the virtuous circles of the original orbital routes that perhaps are already seen as the deeper shade of Orange, or ginger - in that people refer to it as the 'ginger line' singular. Plus at its original size it was big enough to matter but small enough for passengers, staff and management to feel ownership. But all of this is a nice problem to have - a problem caused by success.

And whilst on the subject of circles and lines - what the Overground also tells us is that the future could be a little less linear and a bit more circular for public transport in general. It will need to be if public transport wants to grow to match more of the travel patterns that people make. Other UK cities used to have orbital heavy rail passenger routes. Perhaps one day they will again.

Devolution works

Both BR, and the Whitehall-led franchising system that followed, failed to detect the benefits that could be had by making far more of what was London's half-hidden transit system. A system with the bridges, viaducts and tunnels already in place - just lacking the modern, integrated services to take advantage of them. When devolution came the slumber and inertia ended and the commitment and investment followed. If there are any devo doubters left - then more proof to follow in future columns... ■

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.