

JONATHAN BRAY



Sharing ideas in an age of uncertainty

Last month's UITP gathering in Montréal considered bewildering change, and convergence on transit's role in making better places

▶ A vast trade fair in both ideas and equipment, UITP's bi-annual global public transport get-together in Montréal last month took place at a time of uncertainty for public transport. Compared with the Milan event two years previously the impacts of transformative social and technological change are now far more apparent, and the scale of the ambitions of Transport Network Companies (TNCs - the new label for Uber et al) are more manifest. Everyone now is aware that science fiction is turning into science fact at a sometimes bewildering rate.

The ground is shifting beneath public transport's feet with the 'accelerationists' impatient for a future where transport will be electric, on demand, shared and autonomous. But right now it's also too early to know how

all of this is going to play out. Nobody knows which technologies, providers and products are going to prevail, what the public will respond to and what they won't.

In Montréal nobody wanted to look like they weren't aware of the need to be ready to meet these changes in a proactive and dynamic way. This could lead to platitudinous presentations or it could lead to some interesting insights and debates. It depended which session and UITP commission meetings you were in - and there were a lot of them! The choice of Montréal also gave the event a different slant. A French-speaking city not afraid to be imaginative in the way it does public transport, on a continent where there are reasons to be hopeful or pessimistic, as well as generally intrigued, about what the future for public transport looks like.

World War Taxi

What struck me forcibly from the sessions I attended was that it's the taxi industry which is being most rapidly and radically affected by the shock of the new. From New York (where there are now more Ubers than yellow cabs) to England's original York (where friction is leading to protests as incumbent good quality cab companies accuse Uber and others of playing fast and loose with the rules) World War Taxi is taking place.

From China to Australia and from Germany to the USA the rules of engagement vary depending on the existing regulatory framework and the attitude of nation and city states to the future of the taxi. Some let the TNCs rip (like the Philippines), some seek to lock them out one way or another (like Germany), others seek an accommodation - for example, by levying tax on TNC taxi operations to support incumbent and more traditional operations (common in Australian cities). Sometimes peace breaks out where transit operators see a role for a TNC as providing the capillary network which supports the core public transit routes. Or where cities decide that a TNC could do social and education service transport more cheaply than they could do it themselves.

One thing seemed clear: if you sit on your hands, or if your legislation is ambiguous or out of date, then before you know it the TNCs will have determined the future of local taxi services for you - with all that entails. And if you want to keep a high quality traditional taxi service then you need to take active steps to protect it (which is what Transport for London is doing with the black cab).

Taxis are also where the big money is focused on cracking the technical and public acceptability conundrum which is the autonomous vehicle. Whoever wins this particular space race (assuming it is winnable) would be in a good place to win World War Taxi as labour costs vanish, valuations soar and at last the billions that have gone into TNC speculation would be rewarded by the returns that can only come from the victory of monopoly provision. How long will the billions in venture capital continue to be poured into TNC siege engines before that point is reached? And will it be a TNC that generates goodwill in cities and nations, rather than tests that goodwill to, and beyond, its limits?



“All round the world cities that want to be players are adopting similar transport policies”

Convergence

At Montréal there was more tech focus than focus on what transport can do for cities than is to my taste. However it's clear that all round the world, cities that want to be players are adopting similar transport policies because they want to be places which people positively want to visit, work in, invest in and live in. This means modern transit systems with smart means of payment for use and more attractive urban realms with less motorised traffic and more active travel.

My only visit to Moscow was five years ago when the public transport system seemed to be essentially the one bequeathed by the USSR. The road system seemed to be based on the potential to move heavy weaponry 10 vehicles abreast rather than allowing a human being to cross the road to get to the shops, and the idea of cycling anywhere seemed marginally more ill-advised than trying to crack a joke in the queue for Lenin's mausoleum. Not now it seems. Moscow was all over the UITP congress and keen to explain how its legendary Metro now sits alongside the youngest bus fleet in Europe, which benefits from an ever-growing network of bus priority measures. At the same time it's rolling out sleek new trams to replace the ex-Soviet boneshakers (the average age of its trams is now down to 8.1 years). Bicycle lanes and pedestrianisation, alongside a sharp reduction in lorry traffic into the city, is also part of a picture that has led to less traffic congestion, fewer road accidents and higher levels of citizen satisfaction.

Turning the temperature dial up a few notches and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia isn't transforming its public transport network as Moscow is doing - it's building one from scratch - in five years! At its core is a 176km, six-line Metro system with 85 stations (with supporting BRT and DRT networks). Given the breakneck timescales three different manufacturers are building the rolling stock. And only the best will do (including showpiece stations by big name architects) given the need to attract the locals out of the BMWs and Maseratis you could see in the artists' impressions on the Riyadh stand.

The fact that right round the world major cities are on the same trajectory on transport also gives these UITP get-togethers more utility. Given the similar goals, sharing approaches on how to get there has more value.

This Montréal bike counter shows the number of bikes that have passed each day, and so far each year



Vive la difference

Host city Montréal is another illustration of the point. Active travel is on the rise here too with Montréal's wide streets easily allowing for two-lane cycle tracks which now accommodate a rolling procession of cyclists making their way between the city core and its predominantly low rise urban quarters, sub centres and suburbs. It has the same hirebikes as London, though as a visitor the system is easier to use with your credit card getting you a day's use for five Canadian dollars (around £2.89). On one route I passed an automatic cycle counter display at the roadside outside a Metro station which showed clearly to passers-by not only how many cyclists had passed it that day but also progress against a far bigger target. Great idea as it gives a sense that there's an ambitious plan here - and you're part of it.

Down in the Metro you will also find stickers, visual clues and guides to how by using public transport, you are getting more of the daily exercise you need. I've explored in previous columns how public transport should plug into the wider push to improve public health through tackling physical inactivity but this is the first time I've seen a Metro system take practical steps to do so. More widely the Metro itself is a thing of strange and unusual beauty. No cautious designer greys or heritage mish mash here - this is a system that came to fruition at the same time as Montréal's year of

Metro message: 'You walk the equivalent of 2km a day on collective transport'



miracles - 1967, the year of Expo 67. The world fair became the greatest show on Earth and captured the more benevolent spirits of its tumultuous era whilst also transforming the city's idea of its own potential. The Metro still emanates the confidence and brio of the time in the boldness of its colours and materials. The newest trains take this a step further with lights like coloured fluorescent light tubes that change colour to indicate when the train is approaching a station and when the doors open and close. It was also free to use as well (along with the rest of the public transport system) on the day when Montréal celebrated its 375th anniversary.

This is one idea that won't perhaps be taken up with great enthusiasm anytime soon in the UK - but the bigger point is that despite this age of uncertainty for public transport in an era of transformative technological change, the UITP summit showed the value of sharing ideas at a time when there is also policy convergence around transport's role in making better places. ■

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.