

JONATHAN BRAY



Small town blues and sponge cities

What can transport do to help the towns that orbit our big cities? And what will making cities 'spongier' mean for public transport?

► Big cities are cool these days - but smaller cities and towns are not. Not that long ago people couldn't get away from big cities fast enough. Nobody lived in their city centres. They were dead after five. That great sucking noise was the sound of people and jobs evacuating troubled stony Victorian citadels to create new worlds out in the suburbs, small towns and edge lands. At the same time the spiky steel works, coal mines, shipyards, factories and marshalling yards that made those cities, and that visibly punctuated an inter urban road or train trip, disappeared in favour of blank and mysterious big sheds only visible from orbital roads. It was a shame the cities were fading out but what could you do? There was nowhere to park. The M25 became the new Circle line.

But then the urban atrophy that had seemed endemic began to reverse itself. The gravitational pull of the urban reasserted itself. Enough people decided they didn't want to be buried alive in a business park in the middle of a car park in the middle of nowhere. They didn't want a safe but sterile suburbia, they wanted the thrill of urban disjunctures and the big city buzz. And now the biggest cities really are buzzing - retail which is better than the mega out-of-town malls; new or transformed galleries, theatres and museums; 20 hotels for every one that there used to be; tech and cultural start-up zones; serried ranks of speculative flats that infill where the backyards of dying inner city boozers used to stand. The zeitgeist is now the London Overground rather than the M25.

And not only are these flat white economies buzzing, superstar academics jet around the world proclaiming that big cities won't only save national economies but they can save the world too. Because it's cities that are first and fastest off the mark on carbon reduction and it's cities that are thinking about the future rather than retreating into a dangerous past of ethno-nationalism as some lumbering nation states are tending to do.

However, in all of this there is the danger of going from one extreme to another. From 'cities are dying' to 'cities are the only places that truly know how to live' - in the space of a few decades. It doesn't take too long to walk from the epicentre of any of our large cities to find yourself in torn up districts. And it doesn't



Buses in Aalborg, a city which has reinvented itself

take too long a bus or train journey to arrive at towns within the large urban conurbation that are struggling. Indeed ones where the shiny new public sector investment (often including a public transport interchange) gleams among the Poundlands and Paddy Powers like the embassy of another planet. Clearly as in macro economics as in urban economics - trickle down from strong big city centre economics isn't enough.

All of which is why we are doing some thinking about what transport can do for urban towns. I'm not sure we are going to have all the answers, but I do think we are asking the right question and that we will have enough answers to get a long-overdue debate going. For instance, capital investment alone in hub and spoke transport investment is essential but not enough on its own. Many lower income jobs are in dispersed locations and involve shift work.

What kind of transport provision can best serve these needs and how is it best priced?

If a city region is a jigsaw then what part of the jigsaw is each town?

What is it good at?

What are its health, housing and labour market needs and how do these fit with the rest of the city region's needs?

How does a town make people welcome on arrival and make itself an attractive place to spend time and money?

Transport can be a major local employer in itself (from bus drivers to logistics hubs); what can the sector do to make sure it's playing its role in supporting good jobs for good growth?

And when transport infrastructure projects are given the go ahead how can we ensure that they are not just delivered as standalone engineering projects, but by working across policy sectors how can the wider economic and social benefits be maximised?

There are examples of how some of these tough questions have been answered on the ground in real projects - from the wider bespoke economic strategy within which the Borders railway reopening in Scotland was anchored to the way in which smokestack Aalborg in Denmark reinvented itself. Big cities will continue to be vital to the UK economy (indeed there's a strong argument that they should be bigger and denser) but the surrounding towns should be more than dead moons orbiting superstar cities. They need to develop their own stronger gravitational pull.



“It’s the public transport estate that could feel the heat to get spongier first”



Deansgate Castlefield tram stop Manchester. The wall on the stairway access has been planted creating a living wall

Sponge cities

If urban centres are to keep their cool as climate change destabilises the weather then they need to get spongier. And not only spongier but have more space for farming, water roofs, smart weather coverings as well as glowing trees and pavements. But let’s start with sponge cities. When rain hits a city of brick and concrete that city’s infrastructure is pre-set to channel as much of that water as quickly as possible into drains and rivers. The more intense that rain the more the system is likely to generate floods, chaos and disaster. Sponge cities aim to reduce flood risk and keep themselves cool by getting better at imitating how nature does it. Which means more rooftop gardens, greenery on the ground, and more heat resistant road and permeable road surfaces. Indeed wherever possible avoiding sealing up too much of the ground surface with concrete or tarmac and wherever possible making water surfaces permeable. In short the colour of a city when viewed from the air should shift from grey to green.

Sponge cities can also mean more urban farming or at least more urban forests. Go to Singapore and high rises sprouting vertical forests are less than rare. Water roofs could also temporarily hold storm water and in future bioluminescence technology could mean urban trees could light themselves to provide more secure and attractive public spaces whilst glowing pavements could use particles in pathways to provide environmentally efficient and interesting ways to light urban streets, parks and squares. Urban spaces could roof themselves over automatically depending on the weather or changing function.

What’s all this got to do with public transport? Well a lot of transport architecture is utilitarian behind the scenes and increasingly showy in front of house. Stations are designed to create a memorable and positive impression - or ‘starchitecture’ as it is sometimes known. Stand by in coming years for a greater focus on architecture which not only looks good but can also cope with more climatic extremes whilst enabling the city as a whole to do

likewise. There are examples of this already with transport infrastructure powered directly by sun and wind, or bus stops with green roofs, and mossy metro stations (like Deansgate-Castlefield). But I hope that what is the novel and picturesque exception will increasingly become the spongy norm. It’s already starting to happen at scale in Chinese cities. And here at home, with public transport’s wider green credentials, the role of public transport stations and interchanges as anchors of the local urban scene and with cities proclaiming that they are now leading the global battle against climate change - it’s the public transport estate that could feel the heat to get spongier first. ■

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.

