

Humanising Urban and Transport Planning ***A forthcoming book by Roger Boulter***

Why this book?

Planning for walking and cycling cannot be successful if pursued in isolation.

They must form a fully integrated part of broad-scale, mainstream urban and transport planning. They have tended to be peripheral, but they should be central.

To understand why they remain peripheral, despite decades of work in this area and a boost in attention and funding for cycling in New Zealand in the last few years, we need to delve into the historical roots of urban and transport planning and the philosophical ideas which underpin them.

Why a book on urban and transport planning at a walking and cycling conference?

Because unless walking and cycling are put into the mainstream of transport planning, little will be achieved.

Mainstream transport planning started with:

- A 'hierarchy' between 'advanced' transport (that is, motorised) and 'yesterday's' transport (that is, non-motorised) in 1930s Germany
- The pioneering of a planning approach in Chicago, USA, based on population, land use and typical traffic generation rate data, to forecast where trips came from; where they wanted to go; whether they would use public transport or private cars; and which arterial roads they would use (classic 'four-stage modelling').

The 'arterial road' concept came from another use of the 'hierarchy' concept; the distinction between 'through traffic' and 'local access' roads (with links between them, such as collector roads). This is still strong as a foundation of transport planning today.

So what? How is that relevant to a walking and cycling conference?

Walking and cycling aren't anywhere in this approach. Walking was seen as an 'amenity' (not transport), and cycling was seen as likely to be superseded by technological advance. This remains the case today, despite recognition of cycling's role since the 1970s 'oil shocks' (steep short-term price rises) or of walking's role in urban design 'place-making' since the 1990s. Even today, the vast bulk of data, and of argued benefits from transport projects (of whichever form of transport) relate to motorised traffic; data on walking or cycling is often sparse or non-existent.

But haven't we seen major advances in planning for walking and cycling since the 1970s?

We've seen 'cycle route networks' and cycling strategies (or, earlier, 'bike plans'), but the primacy of the above concepts has not shifted much in New Zealand.

Cycle route network planning, 1970s-1990s, has mirrored the road network planning approach, traditionally based on quieter roads and off-road paths, as 'parallel' alternatives to the road network. This kept the car supreme, and in some cases led to antagonism against cyclists who used roads rather than 'their' off-road paths. In North America, Australasia and the UK, results were

disappointing – no substantial increases in safety, or in numbers cycling (both contrary to expectations).

In the Netherlands and Denmark, however, cycling advanced steadily to comprise the very high proportion of trips which we see today. In the Netherlands and Denmark there was a move away from the classic road-hierarchy-based approach to general transport planning, and away from the primacy of the car in transport planning generally.

Two major breakthroughs came in the mid-1990s:

- In 1994 it was finally established (after many years of strong professional debate) that expanding arterial road capacity in order to meet demand (the 1930s-1960s approach) generated its own traffic, and
- A major collaboration between cycling organisations, specialist cycling researchers and a UK professional body concluded in 1996 that the best way to help cyclists was firstly reducing, and secondly slowing, motorised traffic; ‘cycling facilities’ were less important (the ‘Five Point hierarchy of Measures’).

Exciting possibilities, and developments since the mid-1990s

Since the mid-1990s we have seen a growth internationally in ‘place-making’ and the turning over of urban space from cars to people on foot; urban rail and trams; densified and ‘transit-oriented’ urban form; and a modifying of the primacy of the car in transport planning. Some of the most dramatic changes have been in the cities which had been most strongly devoted to large arterial road systems, such as Western USA or Birmingham, UK.

In the last 5-10 years, we have seen total vehicle kilometres travelled largely static (internationally as well as in New Zealand) and adolescents no longer seeing driving tests as an essential ‘rite of passage’ to adulthood. The public image of the car has changed dramatically. To put walking and cycling into the mainstream – at the centre – of transport planning would be ‘going with the flow’ of a deep international trend.

The danger, however, is that we focus on the detail, such as engineering techniques like ‘protected’ cycleways, which (where successful) often take space away from motorised traffic and are part of wider change of approach. Changes in planning of the road network (not the cycle route network) are often involved, often together with a significant turning of space over to non-motorised transport, and major public transport developments (particularly rail-based).

Without these wider changes, we will see the failures which the author of this presentation saw in 1980s and early 1990s UK. It’s not about cycling programmes, or cycle route networks – even with some travel behaviour change and revised cycling engineering standards thrown in. It’s about mainstream urban and transport planning. Without this, our ambitious cycling programmes will fail.

That’s why you’ve got a presentation on mainstream urban and transport planning at a walking and cycling conference.

If you want to be kept informed about progress on this book, please let the author know, on roger@boulter.co.nz.

Comments and further dialogue are of course welcome.

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