Book review

Cultural perspectives on transport, urban planning and design


This book review essay examines three publications, each considered in turn, with a final commentary on common themes and issues. The books have some commonality in that they discuss transport, urban planning and design from a cultural perspective – re-orientating the analysis away from a static consideration of single disciplines, towards a discussion situated within dynamic processes and based on multidisciplinary perspectives. This, I think, is critical if we are to understand (and to impact on) transport planning and travel behaviours as part of a complex political and social process.

The first book is from Helmut Holzapfel (University of Kassel and Centre for Mobility Culture), on ‘Urbanism and Transport’. This provides a much-needed historical exposition of the appropriation of the street by the private car. In effect, it provides a fundamental critique of the discipline of transport planning as it has developed over the years – many of the arguments made are much too seldom heard in the transport planning world, if at all.

Transport is viewed throughout as a cultural phenomenon – with travel behaviour and the purchase of the private car seen as a social construct, reflecting the images associated with it, and framed as an integral part of human culture. This includes issues of linguistics – for example, ‘verkehr’ (transport or traffic) originally meaning the interaction of persons, but developed over time to mean the transport of persons or goods by vehicles.

Transport planning as a practice has been orientated around encouraging the use of the private car. Many examples are discussed, such as the positive framing of the street network as an organic network, including traffic ‘arteries’ and traffic ‘flow’, analogous to the necessary flow of blood or water, hence making investment in new highway capacity seem as necessary. The case for bypasses, sold as important to traffic reduction in city and town centres, but usually leading to an overall increase in road space; the worship of speed; the use of a road hierarchy and distributor streets, promoting high speeds and long distance private car travel; and the downplaying of cycling and walking and short intra-urban trips. All of which help privilege the use of the private car over other modes and long distance travel over short.

The use of the private car is thus advanced as the defining element of the urban experience. This has often been pursued in an undemocratic manner – with a select group of architects, engineers, transport planners, motor manufacturing and trade organisations, and other practitioners, formulating policy, and lobbying for investments to favour highway building and private car usage. In Germany, there are linkages to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) (the Nazi Party), with leading urban planners and engineers such as Hans Bernard Reichow and Kurt Leibrand, being members, and leading reconstruction efforts after the Second World War.

In addition, private cars and heavy good vehicles have not paid for the enormous damage they cause through air pollution, and the deaths and injuries associated with traffic crashes. The state is subsidising this costly mode of transport, and long distance travel in particular, with little apparent debate. Torsten Hägerstrand’s thoughts on daily activity choice, including coupling, capability and authority constraints, are used to describe how the encouragement of long distance travel has adversely affected short distance and urban travel. Increasing speed and distance, for some, has produced transport systems that sever communities and restrict the mobility possibilities for non-users. These are fundamental criticisms of the automobile system, based on the German experience, but with resonance in almost all contexts.

Holzapfel instead calls for the redesign of the street for the pedestrian and cyclist; the city seen as an opportunity for exchange, with local transport used to facilitate this. Internal, local-scale communication and travel should be encouraged over long distance journeys. This means that urban transport (and not inter-urban), and in particular walking, cycling and public transport, become the focus for investment. This is a debate that is not really heard in the UK, perhaps beyond parts of the environmental lobby – that short distance urban travel should be the focus for investment. The last chapter, on examples of new transport planning, is promising in giving a few potential solutions to examine. This is perhaps the real weakness of the book – it is a little too short! Perhaps it would be better as a preface to the next book, with a much longer consideration of alternative approaches that might be pursued. There is mention of transport planning practice in Kassel, Tubingen and elsewhere – but this can be much more thoroughly developed.

The second book is from Tigran Haas (KTH – Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm) and Krister Olsson (Gothenburg University), an edited and varied collection covering ‘Emergent Urbanism and Beyond’. Emergent Urbanism is defined as urban planning and design within the complex processes of economic, social, environmental, cultural and spatial change. There are three main sections – the New Urban Context, Processes of
Planning and Urban Change, and the Urban Design Product. There are 17 chapters, including a number of well-known authors. I would say the chapters are varied in quality, much of it could do with a close copy edit, and the images can be much improved. But, beyond this, there are some very interesting ideas pursued.

I pick out some of the highlights, starting with Alexander Cuthbert who considers the future of urban space and form. He argues that only superficial interpretations of urban planning and design can be developed, unless globalisation, capital formation, the role of the state, and other forces driving development, are fully understood and reflected. The tendency is that the state's urban planning role becomes aligned with the objectives of private capital – and we can see this in many cities. A weakened and submissive state is not strong enough to influence what is being developed and there is little alignment of development with societal objectives, such as social and environmental goals. Masdar, United Arab Emirates, is discussed as an example which has been marketed as a ‘model’ of sustainable development, yet is clearly flawed in social and environmental terms. Society in Masdar remains class, gender and racially divided; and technology is put forward as the primary solution to environmental concerns in transport. This is clearly problematic if the development is to be seen as a model to be followed, yet the promoters and consultants involved of course overlook these issues. The belief that capitalism will recant and become sustainable over time is simply a form of false consciousness and unlikely to happen – hence there is a problem with the political system within which development is progressed. Without modification to this, sustainable development remains little more than a fuzzy concept.

Kim Dovey examines informal settlements, the central element of urbanisation in the last 70 years, but largely undiscovered as the most common form of development. Informal development is defined in terms of lack of space, clean water, sanitation and durable shelter; in opposition to formality, liveability and legality. These areas account for 50% of the population of some cities, particularly in South America and Africa. They are far from marginal to cities in economic terms, providing the so-called formal city with a cheap workforce, and without this the formal city would look very different. Incremental upgrading is discussed as a positive way of improving conditions, and distinct from comprehensive planning. Yet the problem is to not surrender to the problems of market-led deregulation – where upgrading of facilities and lifestyles are likely to be overlooked.

Gregory Ashworth and Mihalis Kavaratzis discuss city branding, through events, slogans and other means. These initiatives are used to help provide some distinctiveness to the city and to shape and sell a place as a product. This can be aimed to appeal to visitors and investors. Four techniques are typically used: signature structures (e.g. flagship architecture, urban design and street furniture), which help proclaim attractiveness for a particular neighbourhood or quarter. If successful, the rebranding can become synonymous with the city, such as with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Other examples include hallmark events (e.g. City of Culture), personality association (e.g. Gaudi in Barcelona; Vermeer in Delft; Joyce in Dublin), and branding as creative colonies, where artistic freedom can flourish (e.g. New York Meatpacking district, London Hoxton Quarter). However, on closer examination, there can be important negative impacts, including the subsequent gentrification and loss of the original communities – all of this shaped by economic, social and political change.

Finally, Douglas Kelbaugh compares Landscape Urbanism (e.g. the High Line in New York) and New Urbanism (e.g. Seaside, Florida). Both are described as evidence-based movements and tackling sustainability from an urban design perspective. They claim to reject the one-variable-at-a-time, one-size-fits-all approach of modernism, focusing on form. Kelbaugh argues that design has an important role in addressing society’s problems, but that the movements would do better to collaborate, and learn from each other, rather than to compete. The problems of society require different perspectives, and collaboration to help address complex issues.

In conclusion, there can also be much more from the editors – the introduction is very short and there is no conclusion. There are lofty ambitions stated for the book, in hoping to contribute to a conceptual framework for theory and practice in urban planning and design – as an intellectual road map for moving forward. It is difficult, for this reader at least, to understand what this might be without a clearer framing and bounding of the topic in the introduction, and then a strong conclusion bringing together the different contributions. But, having said this, there are a number of interesting chapters, and the issues pursued are of great interest. Urban planning and design is relatively weak in theoretical framing and in situating practice within a wider context. This book can help strengthen the debate in this space.

The final book is again an edited collection, this time by Julie Cidell (University of Illinois) and David Prytherch (Miami University) on ‘Transport, Mobility and the Production of Urban Space’. The book starts with two excellent forewords, the first from Susan Hanson, giving a useful historical overview of transport planning as a discipline, in research and practice, developing as a systemic science and based on quantitative analysis in the 1960s. It was influenced by behavioural geography from the 1970s onwards, helping to further understand disaggregate approaches and human-based mobility. Perhaps in practice this has not caught on as much as is envisaged – still the vast majority of transport analysis is quantitative in nature. Cultural geography became more influential from the early 2000s, in academia at least, helping us to further understand peoples’ experiences in travel and more fully recognise the importance of different cultures, values and political contexts as the framing for travel. Second, Mimi Sheller discusses the recent growth in mobilities research, arguing that every transport decision is grounded in and has impacts upon urban spatiality, inequalities and culture – hence transport needs to be understood as part of these processes.

This is a very strong collection, expertly written throughout, with 15 chapters considering how urban places and transport intersect and function, how transport is experienced and represented, how mobility is spatially and socially distributed, and how urban places and transport shape each other. Again, I will dwell on only a few of the highlights. Bascom Guffin discusses driving in Hyderabad, using ethnographic research to examine the relationship between drivers, traffic rules and the police enforcing these. There are elements of legality and illegality in something so mundane as crossing a junction, and the types of intervention (traffic lights, speed hump) effect behaviours in different ways, and not always as intended.

Greg Culver examines the use of ‘levels of service’ (LOS) for engineering standards in highway planning. LOS are used to help the design of junctions and highways, particularly in the US and Australasia (such as through the US Highway Capacity Manual). This is put forward as a dispassionate, technically-objective design process, but results in encouraging use of the private car, rather than cycling or walking – space is prioritised for the private car on the street. Hence within the approach there is a particular automobility bias – the predict and provide approach is operationalised and the aim is to accommodate peak period traffic wherever possible. A strong political decision is made in following the process, but with the embedded values obscured.

Finally, Theresa Enright discusses the extension of the Métropolitain (Métro) Transit Network into the outer suburbs of the Grand Paris region, including the Grand Paris Express, a project involving a 75 km circular line around Paris. It is argued that urban mobility systems fundamentally shape political-economic production and consumption, and that the transit network will be an essential element of how inhabitants and visitors experience the city. Certainly a project of this scale will have significant impacts on travel behaviours and location decisions, and shows an ambition to tackle car usage in the suburbs. Discourses concerning the project are considered, including how infrastructure is important to capital accumulation in the city and how the transport system contributes to a particular type of society.

Though the three publications are very different in nature, including a monograph and edited collections tackling quite different subjects and
contexts, there are common themes and issues. The cultural context to infrastructure investment is highlighted and there is a consistent call to better theorise transport, urban planning and design. The aim is that this will give a greater rationale for strategies and projects, and that interventions might more effectively tackle societal problems. Intervening to the benefit of all in society, and rooting analysis more effectively in particular contexts, including the political and cultural dimensions, seems critical – giving a greater focus and resonance to the interventions that follow. In addition, to effectively implement projects and, for example, to achieve the ridership we may envisage, the political and cultural context also needs to be considered and shaped.

Each publication deserves a wide readership, by transport and urban planners, in research and practice, and by politicians and wider decision-makers. Perceptive discussion is offered from different angles with an illuminating set of case studies. As Mimi Sheller notes in the third publication: we need to be more innovative, multidisciplinary, humanistic and critical in the methods we employ, and the theories we advance – and only then may we start to make some significant progress towards more sustainable behaviours.

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