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What kind of city do we want?

The split is not between choosing the car or another mode. The future of the city and achieving a calmer urban existence are the real issues ◀



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At least the present crisis is making things clearer, faster. Everything is in a state of flux! The signs have been there for a long time. We can no longer ignore them. It is time now to take stock and move on to a diagnosis, and if we all agree on it, it will soon be time to come up with solutions.

In the case of the car, which is the source of the largest number of journeys, the market has exacted harsh punishment. Sales have plummeted while the consumption indicators (fuel and mileage) have been decreasing slowly but surely for over a year. Motorists are still with us, and will be for a long time to come, but they are baffled when confronted with the reorganization of mobility behaviour. It seems as if the users themselves are in the process of reformulating their own vision of mobility. The crisis is sharpening people's judgement. They are realising that the pendulum has swung too far in terms of the car – in distance, time, costs, and wider damage. The car has caused cities to sprawl unreasonably and, as a consequence, daily travel time has lengthened too (the distance between home and work has increased ten-fold in France in the last ten years).

How can we tackle the issue of mobility within accessible parameters at a time when the indicators have been sent into a tailspin? Does the solution involve solely transport provision? Questions we might well ask ourselves. In Randstad, The Netherlands, half of bosses are offering employees teleworking jobs, against just a quarter five years ago. This is in response to the hundreds of miles of traffic jams every day. They have tried everything: increasing frequencies, extending networks, adding extra tracks, extending lines, applying discounts, expanding hubs, creating more stations, integrating modes, introducing charging schemes, providing free bicycles, reinstating trams, etc. A slow and steady way of trying to stem the increasing flow. The same budgets are put in place year after year to add bypasses to motorways, trams to trains, and tunnels to bridges, thus absorbing traffic from further afield. But ultimately the benefits do not

last; the channels become larger which partially stems the increasing flow, but at the same time creates breathing space for a new generation of journeys: a Danaides' barrel, in a sense. The penalty for decoupling demographic growth and territorial expansion on the one hand and the acceleration of mobility on the other is severe. Our landscape has been built on this logic for decades. Society has chosen urban sprawl, and so it must live with the congestion this engenders. Today's society calls for a 'sustainable city', which goes hand in hand with a 'liveable city'. We need to look at the question the other way around: what kind of mobility do we want?

The immobility that the car forces upon us grew from the lack of adequate space for driving and parking combined with the low productivity of the private car ('productive' for only on average 5% of its lifetime). Im-mobility that also stems from the lack of coherence in urban transport provision; for a



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long time now, congestion has formed part of the landscape without us being aware of it, or doing anything about it. In addition, public transport operators are ill-equipped to deal with the shift from the car to other modes, at the same time having to absorb the natural growth in travel. In the city, we are coming very close to (or even reaching) congestion in the metro, train and bus systems. Once away from the densely populated centres, the solutions are insufficient, often inadequate, and always expensive. With the cuts in infrastructure budgets, the bottom line is beginning to look untenable. Which system will absorb these extra journeys? Who is going to pay for them? So let's ask the question another way: how can we reduce travel without affecting the right to mobility?

Change will not mean choosing between the car or another mode. The future of the city and achieving a calmer urban existence are the real issues. City and mobility form an inseparable pair, a fact that town planners tend to forget. The gap we perceive takes place at another level: we are in the process of moving away from transport management – performed by operators under regional authority – towards regulation of mobility behaviour by the users themselves, using the tools of the new mobility operators. To put it succinctly, we are shifting from the era of the object (car, bus, train, etc) to the service age (how to access urban resources). In a sense, this is a model borrowed from the internet, networks, and user involvement. This makes a huge difference, and gives cause for hope. Effectively, we think less in terms of 'travel' and more about 'the city'. A journey is after all just one of the available modes for accessing the city. In this way, digital technology offers a substitute for certain types of travel (online shopping or working, for instance). What kind of city do those who live and work in it want, whether they reside there or not? What kind of city can be envisaged that does not make us slaves to an excessive need to travel? Only after that do questions about transport and travel arise. Looking at things the other way round changes our perspective and consequently our analysis of it. Innovation is not far behind.

A recent study¹ by the US Congress recommended a levy on mileage travelled instead of energy consumed: a revolution in the land of automotive freedom. Now things are becoming interesting. It clearly means that the solution is less to do with energy itself than reducing the number of journeys (even though the two are linked), in order to curb both conges-

tion and time spent travelling. At the same time the Danish government is overturning the priorities reflected in statistics on the modal split between the car and other modes, launching a programme entitled 'Two-thirds green, one-third black'² (black of course meaning tarred roads).

Things are beginning to move. Where will innovation begin to emerge?

- *Town and country planning.* How can we get back to the sense of neighbourhood which forms the basis of free and sustainable mobility and a liveable city³? This question was posed at the recent UTP/Chronos symposium entitled 'Put the City into the Networks'⁴. The answer was to be found on the podium itself: there was an eclectic and unexpected mix of authorities and transport operators, car manufacturers, telecom companies, the media, urban service providers, and distributors. A circle as wide as this is essential if we are to arrive at multi-stakeholder responses.
- *Resource management.* How can we combine the useful aspects of the car and other modes? We need to leave aside the object for a moment and look at the services making up a global mobility system that transcends the simple notion of 'journey'. The focus is on networks and the 'connectivity' that opens up possibilities for intelligent mobility flow models.
- *'Mobilities and de-mobilities'* is the provocative title of a recent Chronos debate⁴ which explored the reduction in the extent of travel, digital substitutes, or even the avoidance of certain types of travel. Reduced growth is no longer necessarily a taboo subject, at least where mobility is concerned. So leading his response to the Greater Paris project, Yves Lion's agency has come up with a bold pledge: 'Half an hour less travel time for everyone in the Ile de France region, every day.'
- *Regulations.* Along with digital technology, regulations offer a promising prospect since they seek to better use existing resources. Authorities in the UK, inspired by the London congestion charge, are thinking about a time shift⁵. In other words, how can travel be shifted during the day to create a balanced mobility flow? But whether it is a question of adjusting the timing of mobility flows or sharing cars (car-sharing schemes, self-service cars, car pooling, on-demand transport, etc), or even joining up the different modes intelligently, we are talking about the same thing –

improving infrastructure usage rates. To achieve this, digital technology is a prerequisite. Let's not ask computers to solve our congestion problems; instead we should exploit the highly developed features of the internet, networks, and mobile equipment to create a paradigm shift and expand the circle of people who can produce solutions.

- *Mobilise digital technology.* Above all this means trusting the user and the choices or trade-offs made so that this virtuous circle can have an effect on general mobility as part of a collective vision. This is a theme of the Villes 2.0 programme⁶.

The good news is that the issue of mobility is no longer simply the remit of transport companies. The other good thing is that transport companies' involvement now transcends transport itself, and companies are being called upon to shape the city and the everyday lives of us all.

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