

A New Model of Transport in Cities

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*A thinkpiece for comment by Eric Britton
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The king is dead:

Once upon a time, not all that many years ago, there was a particular way that many people had of thinking about how best to get about in cities. This way of thinking dominated just about all the decisions that were made and the actions that shaped the transport systems of just about all of our cities. Looking back on the process and results with a bit of perspective, we can perhaps refer to this as the "20th century city transport model".

There were a few quite interesting things about that model and the kinds of situation that it brought about in all those many places where it was put into practice. The first was that, having dominated the choir of the expert community early on in the process, it came to be generally accepted as the only responsible way to do things. The second was that as the decades passed and more and more people and places got involved, it gradually was able to take on the patina of being ever more "scientific", with the results that the ever more elaborate structures of analysis that were applied worked to render the conclusions and recommendations ever more difficult to question. The third is that lurking beneath the "rational, informed, scientific" overlay were a certain number of fundamental implicit assumptions, that were rarely questioned by the main practitioners and decision makers. The fourth, last and most surprising of all, was that almost nobody seemed to realize that in the final analysis it was not the real human needs of the place in question nor the science that were driving just about all the decisions being made in the sector, but all those hidden, unacknowledged assumptions.

Without wishing to take on the task here of trying to exhaust and then break the neck of each of the longish list of these implicit assumptions, I think it fair to point out that at the core of the lot was (and is) the shared belief that a private car-based transport system central the central element in the formula for success. In lock step with this assumption was the broadly accepted belief that for those who could not have access to their own cars (usually assumed to be a minority), the necessary response was to build a "public transport system". This last benevolent delivery system was to take the form for the most part of largish vehicles, centrally managed and ever more technologically enhanced, that were somehow going to do the job for the rest. (Central to this was the shared belief this was of course the "second class" component of the city mobility system which at best was handled on the basis of 'kind paternalism' thinking of the indulgent (i.e., car owning) upper classes and decision makers.)

The old model was, we have to admit, a very American creation, not surprising of course given that country's role as the birthplace of the world car industry and all its assorted companion businesses and interests. But here too we have to be a tad sophisticated and recall not only that the model was American in its principal origins, but that it was fully and vigorously promulgated by the US-influenced leading edge of the international aid agencies (notably of course the World Bank) as well as the associated consultancy, research, supplier and trade groups who collectively came to shape the main thrust of policy and practice in the sector. (This was not, it needs to be noted, so much a conscious conspiracy ,as what Hannah Arandt so well called "a study in the banality of evil")

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Our first obligation in this respect should be to make a genuine attempt to be lucid in the face of the realities that are out there on the streets of the world's cities for all to see (and smell and suffer and feel). The first has to be to have the maturity and balance to accept that the 20th century model is marked by its overwhelming irresponsibility from a broader public policy perspective, and for its failures. This model not only has been a catastrophe for virtually all of the Third World cities, but it has also rent enormous havoc on our cities in the States, where in city after city it has led to a situation wherein the central cores have been calamitously gutted and where the majority of our citizens are forced to live in a situation of truncated access simply because their daily needs are far from best served by the car-based system.

Which brings us today right smack up in front of the problems and the options that we have in making transport policy and decisions in the Third World cities, where the issues are in almost all cases in stingingly high relief. Take the mega-city of your choice - Santiago, Sao Paulo, Bangkok, Lagos, Cairo, of whatever -, consider the issues and the priorities, and then reflect on the inevitable implications of about any investment or policy that will come out of the old model. And what do you get? Simple!

No matter what the old model tells us to do, the inevitable result will be a situation that will quickly become radically worse than the point of origin. The engineers' lovely new urban highways are quickly going to break down with the new traffic they generate. All those parking structures are going to be in yet more cars and traffic. That new metro project is going to tie up the city in traffic and debt for many years before coming on line, and even then will cater to no more than a few percent of the region's total mobility requirements. And what is perhaps worse yet, will lock in the unsustainable patterns of long distance daily transport.

Put in others words, it is clear for all to see that the old model left us with a situation where today just about all of the most pressing problems we face in the sector are in fact and quite precisely the result of someone's old solutions. And so, if we accept that, what next?

Well, the first step has to be our collective realization that the old model is more than broke and that we once and for all have to abandon it and leave it behind us. As the poet Robert Frost put it so well years ago : "No more to build on there". We have to look elsewhere and not just for some fine-tuning and band-aiding but for an entirely new approach to the issues,

Long live the queen:

The good news is that a new model is now coming into sight, and what we now need is to encourage a massive shift in the highest and farthest reaches of the transport policy community around the world to get to work on it - the 21st century model for transport in cities.

There are of course many precursors for it. Over the last twenty years there have been a growing wave of innovations and new ways of doing things that constitute important elements of the new model that is so badly needed. In parallel there have been examples of strong pattern breaks in a growing number of European cities where the role of the car (and the proportion of the urban space dedicated to them) is being consistently and wisely reduced, where much greater emphasis is being given to new ways of getting people around in groups, where provisions are ever more wisely for safe and efficient non-motorized transport, where better clustering of activities is being encouraged so as to reduce the need

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for unnecessary movements, and where technology is beginning to be harnessed to be the partner in the move to a more sane, efficient and equitable non-car based system.

And in the Third World we are seeing signs of the needed new approaches, of which one of the most oft-cited is the Curitiba system, which has its firm base not so much in the technology and the technicity of their busway system, but in the underlying commitment to a fairer and better mobility deal for all of the city's citizens. There are other examples of course, but the fact is that for the most part until recently most of the Third World cities have continued to be victim to the old model.

But if we are looking for one outstanding example of the sort of new systemic thinking that needs to be brought together within the new transport model, we can turn to the recent events in the city of Bogotá Colombia, where on Sunday, the 26th of October of this year, and for the first time in the history of the Third World, the citizens of the city went to the polls to vote on a policy of removing all cars from the city's traffic stream in deliberate steps, beginning already today and gradually extending it in steady increments to completion by the year 2015. If you want to know more about this most important development, you can find a comprehensive base of information and background on the "Sustainable Bogotá " site at <http://ecoplan.org/votebogota2000/>.

My point here, dear friends, is not to try to sell the Bogotá experience per se, as to draw your attention to the implications of these events as quite possibly a major turning point in terms of transport thinking, policy and practice in cities - quite possibly the most important single landmark event of the last half century or more. It is not that the Bogotá model is as yet complete, far from it their task as only just begun, nor that it cannot be improved in a number of its parts. But it is clear that a new model is already at work, and it is out there for all to see, judge and, if they wish, make use of and build on.

"Sustainable Bogotá " - <http://ecoplan.org/votebogota2000>