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Public Transport, Urban Renewal and Social Inclusion

A car dominated transport

system is a recipe for disaster. They are expensive, unhealthy and dangerous. Without a total rethink and dramatic change our cities risk economic and environmental collapse.¹ People are pushed into private vehicles. Building more freeways is seen as a solution. Minimal planning or spending has not gone into healthier alternatives such as cycling and walking.² There are rising health costs due to toxic gas and particle emissions; medical costs due to obesity; and the cost associated with accidents. The threat from greenhouse gas emissions to global warming might be the greatest cost.³

For many people, riding to work is unthinkable, but it is better for our health and our planet as well as more efficient. Bikers tell how they passed through suburbs and beaten cars to work by 15 minutes.⁴ Bicycles are still not considered a genuine form of transport though attitudes are changing due to petrol price increases and greater awareness of global warming. Bicycles have many positives: they save on petrol, burn body fat and protect the environment. 52% of typical car trips in Australian cities are less than 5 kilometres – about a 20 minute ride – and could account for the loss of 220 calories. The health benefits notwithstanding, *Access Economics* says it would contribute to cutting \$21 billion spent on obesity annually in Australia.⁵ Better cycle tracks would facilitate better movement of people, have health benefits, benefit the environment and contribute to social inclusion.

Our cities can be more environmentally and socially friendly spaces; places with a heart, more enjoyable to walk

around on boulevards where previously there was traffic. We do not have to tolerate the noise, pollution, congestion or disconnection of our cities. Things can be different but it calls for imagination and engagement.⁶ It also calls for a different mindset.

What is possible!

Enrique Peñalosa, former Lord Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, transformed a city of seven million from a third-world gridlock of congested streets to a poster child for sustainable cities. This was not done at great cost except in terms of mindset. His vision turned a city for traffic into a city for people with a world-leading public transport system, 300km of bicycle and walking trails, and a green network of 1200 parks and quality public spaces. His efforts earned him a Stockholm Challenge Award — the environmental equivalent of the Nobel Prize. The transformation of Bogotá in terms of spatial, social, political and economic structure came despite the deep economic crisis and violence the country continues to experience.

Mayor Peñalosa's main actions addressing these issues were designed to:

- improve public transport
- restrict private automobile use
- expand and improve bicycle paths
- enhance public space

The majority of the projects initiated by Peñalosa were completed, started, or contracted during his term. He invited residents of Bogotá to imagine a different city, 'a city that today seems utopian, with trees, bicycles, beautiful



sidewalks, full of parks, with clean rivers, lakes, libraries, clean, egalitarian...'. Though the inhabitants of Bogotá were told that they could build whatever they imagined, the residents remained sceptical until the projects were completed.⁷

Studies indicate that people are least happy when in their cars, largely because they cannot predict what will slow them down, or when. But communities are more and more designed around moving cars rather than people. Too much is tied to the car and services tend to be out of walking and bicycling range for many people. It has been found that the happiest places in the world were designed to accommodate and support people rather than their cars.⁸

We see what imagination can do to bring about urban renewal, social cohesiveness and transform a congested city. Peñalosa, on becoming mayor, refused to accept funding for more freeways and worked to transform his city.⁹ On the principle of equal rights for

all people to transport, education and public space, cars needed to be reduced, and bicycles, buses, schools, parks, public places and pedestrians were given their rightful place. The priority shifted from a city for cars to a city for people. Space for cars was reduced by building sidewalks, establishing cycle paths, narrowing roads and widening footpaths. This plan included the building of more parks, schools, nurseries and libraries. A city that was hated became one to live in and socialise in. It became more democratic as public interests outweighed the wants of private interests. Another social benefit was that crime, especially murder, was reduced by about 70% [87 per 100,000 to 24].¹⁰

Why can't this be replicated in Australian cities? Mayor Peñalosa's advice to Australian planners was to stop building highways and motorways and use existing highways for public transport; increase bus priority on the roads; and construct more bicycle ways. It will not take place voluntarily, but has to be a political decision. Peñalosa pointed out that a vision is needed of what is wanted: a city that gives priority to people over the motor vehicle.¹¹

Myths

Building more roads is not the answer to growing congestion. We cannot continue to cling to the myth that congestion can be resolved by freeways used by mostly sole occupant vehicles. Architect and urbanist, Lewis Mumford, warned that trying to cure traffic congestion with increased road capacity is 'like trying to cure obesity by loosening the belt'.¹²

A second myth is that investment in new and rapid rail lines is more costly compared to building more roads. The opposite is true. According to John Hewson, the cost of building a freeway at \$100 million a kilometre is 10 to 50 times more expensive than the rail equivalent. Louis Fouvry, transport

consultant and engineer, says the cost of a road tunnel per kilometre is 2.5 to three times the cost of a rail tunnel of equivalent passenger-carrying capacity.¹³

A third myth is that public transport costs place a heavy burden on the budget. But the cost of hospital beds, deaths, accident repairs, emissions, pollution, and tax concessions for road transport are many times the operating costs of public transport. The cost of road collisions alone — \$1.7 billion each year in Victoria — is more than the combined cost of running train, tram and bus systems.¹⁴

Finally, there is the myth that suggests that car transport is more efficient for cities. If we compare the 2000 people an hour carried on one freeway lane with the transportation of 60,000 passengers an hour on a single rail line we see that this myth has no validity.¹⁵

Environmental Considerations

Car travel uses 300-400% more energy per person per kilometre than public transport. It is also more costly for users than public transport. It is time to question government leaders who fund road projects that only increase city congestion, impede public transport priority and set back federal targets to reduce emissions.¹⁶

Problems

John Pucher, professor of urban planning and transport at Rutgers University in New Jersey (USA) and visiting professor at the University of Sydney 2005-2006 asks 'why can't the traffic and public transport authorities get their act together?' Referring to Sydney, he asks why less than a tenth of trips made are on buses and trains. His response is that 'services are slow, infrequent and undependable'. Other factors are the high and uncoordinated fares among different modes of transport and the poor condition of buses and trains which does not make

them a feasible alternative to cars. They compare unfavourably to public transport systems in Western Europe and North America.¹⁷

Strategies for improvement

- integrated ticketing
- simplified fare structures and distance based fare zones valid for all types of service
- prepaid fares for buses as cash slows down travel and distract drivers.
- introduction of monthly passes with large discounts to attract regular travellers.
- more bus-only lanes which are strictly enforced
- buses to have absolute traffic priority at all intersections as is the case in most European cities where approaching buses and trams automatically trigger a green light to permit immediate passage through intersections.
- create special express bus corridors in suburban areas.
- experience shows that high-speed bus rapid transit systems can be established much faster and more cheaply than light rail.
- close the most congested central roads to private cars and trucks during the day.
- facilitate walking and cycling by creating car-free zones
- increase the distance between bus stops which seem to close together
- provide comfortable waiting areas and accurate information about arrivals and departure.
- replace old train carriages and buses as soon as possible
- make funding for vehicle modernisation top priority.
- improve walking and cycling access that are convenient and safe.
- integrate cycling and walking with public transit services.¹⁸

Full set of references are on the ERC website



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