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Multimodal Cities: A Blueprint for Better Urban Planning

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For decades, cities throughout the world have based their mobility programmes on a misguided assumption: that car ownership will only keep growing. But as more cities challenge the auto-centric model and embrace “multimodality”, a new paradigm is emerging. Bringing about this alternative vision requires not only bold, innovative solutions, but also robust new planning institutions.

For many of us, having to juggle work, school, and other daily obligations, getting stuck in traffic is a daily nuisance. In order to carry out our responsibilities, we participate in the traffic system, which costs us a lot of time and money and harms our physical and mental health.

Some of these consequences, such as safety and stress, are easy to recognise. But research tells us that daily urban mobility also has a great impact on rates of obesity, diabetes, heart complaints, respiratory illnesses, dementia, and depression, amongst other health problems. These health conditions are also linked to common harmful transport emissions, such as particles resulting from the friction of tyres on asphalt, exhaust fumes, and general noise pollution created by vehicles. What’s more, traffic also causes greenhouse gas emissions, which are directly linked to the climate crisis and other related social and ecological problems.

In order to improve urban mobility and address its problems, modern cities put special care into the planning of their urban mobility systems. To this end, one of the main goals they aspire to is becoming a “multimodal” city – a place where inhabitants can choose and combine high-quality methods of mobility, and where owning and using a car is the last option, not a compulsion. This means prioritising more active forms of movement, such as walking and riding a bicycle, especially for journeys of only a few kilometres. For longer journeys around the city, the mobility system must offer a variety of complementary combinations using high-quality public transport, such as buses and trams for short journeys, and underground trains and regional train lines for longer trips and transporting large numbers of people.

In practice, however, many cities still struggle to establish effective new planning institutions to achieve this desired result due to a variety of reasons.

Firstly, following the influence of the North American urban planning paradigm, many cities in the previous century gave priority to private cars – by dedicating street space as well as setting aside large areas for car parks – instead of, say, green spaces. This outdated planning approach assumed that the level of motorisation (i.e. the number of private cars per inhabitant) would increase and that, as a city’s population grew, more and more infrastructure would need to be dedicated to this very inefficient form of urban mobility.

Now, cities find themselves at a turning point between old and new paradigms of urban mobility planning. As the problems with the old system become clearer, a new paradigm is still developing and trying to find its way into practice. So far, it appears in cities that have been brave enough to leave

behind old ways of thinking and create new, modern planning institutions. These cities, including Paris, Vienna, Helsinki, and Ljubljana, are leading by example. Although the emerging paradigm is not yet clearly defined, five main elements can often be found in their planning institutions.

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The pillars of good planning

The first and most fundamental consideration in planning for multimodal cities is to have a far-reaching outlook. When it comes to urban mobility, even short-term interventions should follow long-term priorities. Taking a long-term view means considering possible future scenarios at least 20 years from now, and ideally even 30 to 50 years. Moreover, innovative thinking should be an inseparable part of this exercise to ensure that expectations of the future are not just a continuation of past trends. In concrete terms, this means we shouldn't just assume that the rate of motorisation will grow, and that the number of cars on the road will increase as the population increases. Instead, cities must imagine alternative scenarios in which most journeys are made on foot, by bicycle, and by public transport. In other words, such a vision of the future must have citizens' wellbeing at its heart.

This must apply to different types of people with different needs, constraints, and daily experiences of the transport system.

In addition, a strategic planning perspective requires understanding the difference between costs and investment. Changing public transport infrastructure (and especially rail) requires millions of euros in investment, but the investment is well worth it when it is considered over 50 or even 100 years' time – its usual length of service.

A key insight in modern planning courses entails that land use is the first and most important public policy for urban mobility. This brings us to the second pillar of multimodal city planning: the integration of spatial planning into urban mobility as part of a wider package of public policies.

As soon as you have a beginning and end point for any planned movement, you are defining a mobility system. Therefore, to realise the desired vision of the city, the spatial plan and the urban mobility system must be closely connected. This means viewing public space as a whole and considering factors like population density, planned activities, land-use diversity, and the design of all elements that make up the streetscape.

Beyond these infrastructural considerations, an integrated plan must also address economic factors, such as how public transport services, as well as educational and medical infrastructure, will be paid for.

In practice, this means public policy needs to consider a package of complementary measures: those that encourage walking, cycling, and public transport, as well as measures to discourage unnecessary car use. Here, complementarity also means measures which relate to other areas of public policy, such as education, health and employment systems.

The third element crucial in successful urban planning is having quality data about mobility systems for different groups of people. The basic idea taught in traffic management courses for decades is that cities must follow a digital-numerical model of urban transport systems. This enables the modelling of a series of steps – from how the need to move around develops to how movement equates to traffic flow on this or that street or line of public transport. A computer model like this is ideal for examining the complex consequences of different intervention packages, because it not only allows us to understand the problems that exist today, but also enables us to explore different future scenarios relatively cheaply. Urban mobility models should be built based on relevant data about people's daily travel habits as well as their characteristics and desires. This kind of analysis is usually done through questionnaires that ask residents about their current and desired travel patterns.

That said, models and surveys are not enough on their own. A modern planning institution needs to collect large amounts of automatic data, as well as data that enables deeper analysis. One example would be information collected anonymously and automatically by smartphone, through analysis of telecommunication network signals or various applications using GPS or other telephone sensors. Another useful strategy would be collecting data about reasons for travel, such as attitudes and beliefs, as well as information about the characteristics of movement for particular groups of people – data obtainable only through carrying out surveys or interviews with the relevant population sample.

Perspective is key

You may have noticed that this text does not use the traditional term "traffic planning", but instead talks about mobility planning. This is one of the important assumptions that a modern urban planning institute should have. The aim of planning is not to enable traffic flow or prevent traffic congestion. Those are important elements to consider, but the primary concern is creating a system that enables people to move around the city and gives them access to all the various activities a city can provide within a certain timeframe. This must apply to different types of people with different needs, constraints, and daily experiences of the transport system. Therefore – and this is the fourth pillar of good planning – evaluating different scenarios must include systemic perspectives as well as those of citizens themselves.

The city's inhabitants themselves should be included in the planning process – not only at the end, when the alternatives are being evaluated, but already in the early stages, when alternative scenarios of the future are being created.

On the one hand, it is necessary to show with a model what the cumulative effects of any mobility infrastructure will be, for example in greenhouse gas emissions caused by the transport system, or the overall level of noise on one street. On the other hand, it is necessary to assess whether an alternative system can offer a functional and high-quality daily experience of mobility infrastructure. The model

mentioned in the third pillar is a way to achieve this, but we can also use other methods. One of these solutions, which can be called the “person method,” evaluates mobility systems from the perspective of specific groups, such as children, older people without access to a car, or young parents with limited financial means.

It must be noted that high-quality planning focuses not solely on the content, but also on the infrastructure development process itself. The essence of a modern planning institution is a carefully considered process that develops through a series of clearly defined activities over time, with shared and clearly defined responsibilities for all participants. It is vital to include a range of experts, in addition to those who traditionally take part in urban mobility planning projects. For example, a high-quality process should include experts in regional economics, sociology, psychology, and the environment. What’s more, the city’s inhabitants themselves should be included in the planning process – not only at the end, when the alternatives are being evaluated, but already in the early stages, when alternative scenarios of the future are being created.

A planning process that explicitly includes different perspectives – the last of the five pillars – makes it possible to develop solutions that take into account citizens’ needs and experiences, rendering the various public policy measures more acceptable to them. Citizen participation itself can be organised using traditional methods, such as workshops and public hearings, as well as through modern digital tools like online questionnaires which use interactive maps. These tools provide valuable data, comments, and suggestions from citizens which can be directly linked to concrete locations in the city. Such an inclusive approach demands robust cooperation and entails constructive conflict between different values and assumptions about life in the city.

Towards a 21st-century paradigm

Cities have always changed and will continue to do so, along with humanity itself. New forms of mobility will appear in the transport system, as we have recently witnessed with the arrival of electric scooters on streets across the world. People’s habits will also change and diversify, leading to ever-increasing demands on urban mobility systems. Thanks to the rise of remote working, we are also seeing a change in people’s mobility habits.

Even though the majority of these and other aspects will remain extremely difficult to predict, one thing is certain: planning institutions need to change. They need to rise to the challenges of the 21st century in order to respect the needs of citizens as well as the environment. New institutions will also have to think carefully about how to invest in effective, applicable interventions that fulfil the desired objectives of new mobility paradigms. Only through the development of visionary and brave planning institutions can a city of wellbeing emerge.

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