Place-based problems

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I write about transport, transport strategy, a bit of future thinking, and how it all meshes together to think about the future of transport. Not much then

Are cities unique? And does that mean their smart mobility strategies should be? After visiting Amsterdam, I pondered just this.

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In this blog, I have often railed against the notion that individual places and situations are unique. Consequently, the transport intervention that you have proposed 'will not work here,' despite demonstrable evidence showing that it works in a variety of contexts.

This is used as an excuse for inaction, but it has a hint of truth to it. Ask a traffic modeller and they will tell you that no two traffic junctions behave the same due to a complex mix of geometry, vehicle flows, and surrounding land uses. The same problems that are common to all—road safety, vulnerable road users, congestion—manifest themselves differently in different locations at different times. The same problems, that often have the same source, have very different effects in reality.

But should that uniqueness drive your strategy?

Last week, I was honoured to be invited by the CTO Office at the City of Amsterdam to present to them about the excellent work being done across Europe on strategies for Smart Mobility. At present, they are setting a new vision for smart mobility in the city, using the intelligence gathered from 2 years of smart mobility projects. You can find out more details on this work on their website.

This presentation was part of a much bigger workshop seeking to identify the vision and strategy for the forthcoming years. Now I must admit now that much of the discussion in this workshop was in Dutch, and so passed me by (though I am extremely grateful for all of those who helped by acting as an interpreter). But what was interesting was how their framing of their mobility challenges differs so much compared to the common perception of Amsterdam as the pinnacle of sustainability.

Allow me to explain. Have you ever heard of the phrase "it's a nice problem to have?" To the outside observer, Amsterdam has that by the bucket load. Take cycle tracks for instance. Even just a casual walk around the city reveals that they are *everywhere*. Cycling is so popular that there is congestion at key junctions during the peak hour.

"What a nice problem that would be to have" say advocates in cities that are choked by traffic. But it is still a problem. People cycling are still subject to delay and variable journey times, there are safety issues at congested junctions, and being held up is still very frustrating.

Or how about railways. Yes, there were complaints about late running trains. On a system where there is a national smart card system, walk-up fares are cheap (for me to get a return ticket to Amsterdam Centraal from Schipol Airport on an intercity train was just €8.90), the trains are clean and the public transport network is integrated, the very idea that the odd delay is a bad thing amazes many. But it is a challenge. It just manifests itself differently to what most of us are used to.

The truth is that Amsterdam does have plenty of mobility issues. The shift from short trips inside the city to long distance trips has effectively left the tram network behind. In the words of one workshop participants, trams are only really suitable for the trips that are "slightly too long to cycle," forcing the city and the regional transport authority to radically rethink the purpose of the regional public transport network.

It is a rapidly expanding city, with the latest data showing the city increased in population by nearly 20,000 in 2015–16. Pretty steep for a city of the size of 820,000. Of course, the natural solution for the Dutch is the build a new island to house the additional population, a new island that needs to be planned effectively to work and to be properly integrated into the city.

There are also extensive discussions around the need for new technologies and transport networks to tackle social issues. Whilst the Dutch are famously tolerant, and are seen as a shining light on many social issues, social exclusion is still an issue, with 16.7% of the population at risk of poverty or exclusion.

Of course I am stating the obvious here. Even the best cities in the world have issues. My point is that because these problems manifest themselves differently in different locations, **this can lead to a misdiagnosis of the issue at hand**, and consequently deliver and incorrect solution to the problem. And often solutions delivered tackle the symptom and not the issue at hand.

To use an example from our friends in the Netherlands. If there is congestion at a junction for cyclists along a particular alignment (lets say along a main road, at a junction with two side roads). An obvious intervention is to change signal times or junction geometry to benefit those cyclists on the main road, at the expense of other highway users on other alignments.

It tackles that issue, maybe successfully. But expanding out for a network view may reveal other options to tackle the issue at hand—to many cyclists on that route.

Get my point?

Still, you may not be convinced by this. And that is reasonable. In any case, why should somewhere like Amsterdam, that is streets ahead of many cities in the world, have to deliver smart solutions?

My experience of the city, and the officials in the city, reveals something pragmatic and quintessentially Dutch about it all. Yes, there may be other solutions to these problems, and solutions they have delivered successfully for decades. But the world does not stand still. If there is

the opportunity to experiment with new technologies and new solutions, it is almost a public duty to try them. Otherwise you end up with a 20th Century solution to a 21st Century problem.

That is the journey that the Amsterdam Smart City has been on over the last 2 years. It has delivered an action plan of smart mobility projects to experiment with new technologies, and it is using this knowledge to develop a robust smart mobility strategy to set its agenda in the future.

Strategies can come from all sorts of places. Sometimes they come from political visions, sometimes from great challenges facing a place, and sometimes from the experience of doing things. Amsterdam is an example of the latter.

But what are Amsterdam planning, I hear you ask? Well, it is far too early for me to suggest any future direction in that regard, and they are only part of the way through their process of developing the strategy. But I will share with you some of the advice that I shared with them, as I think that it is equally applicable to many cities developing similar strategies.

Firstly, as much as you should invest in projects, you should invest in your internal capability as well. Great projects have an impact, great people create change. The most successful cities that I have witnessed—I'm thinking Leeds, Manchester, and Birmingham closer to home—invest as much time in the right staff with the right skills as they do in projects. Small, highly skilled, committed teams have delivered initiatives like [Data Mill North](#), [Cityverve](#), and the Amsterdam Smart City programme. All with demonstrable impact.

I also mentioned earlier that strategy can come from anywhere. This is important to remember not as a source of inspiration for strategy, but because of the simple fact that **strategy is delivery**. Anyone can write a plan, and anyone can deliver a project. Good strategy needs both of them to feed off one another through feedback mechanisms and understanding the nature of the linkages between projects, observed outputs, and objectives. It was hard for me to tell the success of this in Amsterdam from a single afternoon that was mostly in Dutch. But from what I saw of the city, they didn't seem to be doing things too badly!

Finally there is a the biggest challenge facing innovation strategy—transferring research and development into business as usual. This involves potentially hundreds of pathways to delivery, assuming that BAU is ready for the solution created through research and development. All of which need one thing—end user engagement in design, prototype, and deployment. And of course the elusive business case.

Cities across the world—Amsterdam included—are in a strange situation on smart mobility. There is a pressure on them to respond to the future mobility challenge. There are findings emerging from pilot projects and academic research into new mobility services. All the while dealing with problems that manifest themselves uniquely in their cities. Strategy can come from anywhere, and that is before the constant disagreement among stakeholders.

Regardless of the future chosen, cities need to be adaptive and learning organisations. From what I have seen, cities are embracing that role. What remains to be seen is what cities can adapt quickly enough to gain competitive advantage.

This is my blog about transport planning, foresight, and strategic planning as it relates to how we plan for the crazy world of transport. Since 2004 I have been a transport planner, working on schemes and strategies ranging from zebra crossings, to new rail lines, via local transport strategies. Since 2016, I have struck out on my own, applying skills in foresight, policy making, and business strategy to develop transport policies and plans in a whole new way.

I also collaborate on a weekly digest of the news in transport technology that was actually interesting. Out every Friday, you can sign up here.

Finally, I tweet regularly on these subjects, and post on Instagram too.