THE NEW URBAN MOVEMENT
Balancing need for ‘place’ over ‘friction of space’

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0. INTRODUCTION

Conventional transport planning adopts a narrow focus on solving problems and seeks primarily to accommodate, rather than influence, the transport demands arising from regeneration and development projects. In our increasingly complex urban environments, however, such approaches fail to deliver attractive places that work efficiently for different users in varying circumstances. For this reason, new approaches to urban transport planning stress the importance of place-making, as opposed to simply seeking to overcome the friction of space by maximising the efficiency of transport through it. This is quite a change, and quite a challenge: it’s new, it’s urban, and it’s all about movement.

1. WAS THERE AN OLD URBAN MOVEMENT?

By name, no. In effect, yes. Since at least the 1940s, the design of highways in the UK has been dominated by a very clear and very simple philosophy, which can be summed up along the following lines: vehicular traffic is implacably hostile to the movement of pedestrians and, unless the two are separated, the latter will die in large numbers. While this might sound a little over-stated, the language is positively restrained compared with that in this very revealing quotation from the Steering Group for ‘Traffic in Towns’ (1963):

“it may be that future generations will regard our carelessness in allowing human beings and moving vehicles to use the same streets, and our apparent callousness to the inevitable results, with the same horror and incomprehension with which we recall the indifference of earlier generations to elementary sanitation”.

Those with this perspective thought that allowing traffic and pedestrians to mix was simply too dangerous to contemplate, and their response is perhaps best summarised in the Ministry of War Transport’s ‘Design and Layout of Roads in Built-up Areas’ (1946), which stated, unequivocally, that “traffic segregation, which may be defined as the separation of traffic in the interests of safety and free flow, should be the keynote of modern road design.” Twenty years later, when the Ministry of Transport produced ‘Roads in Urban Areas’ (1966), nothing had changed with regard to the pre-eminence of this central design philosophy: “Traffic segregation should be the keynote of modern road design and should be arranged to reduce the conflict between one vehicle and another and between motor vehicles and slower-moving and more vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and pedal cyclists.”
From the standpoint of the early 21st Century, it’s all too easy to look back and patronise our professional forebears. ‘They were so naïve, weren’t they?’ ‘They really did think that cars were monsters that would devour the living – how very quaint.’ Nevertheless, the history of casualties on our highways bears full testimony to the fact that a pedestrian found in physical conflict with a motor vehicle will always come off very badly, and that this state of affairs occurs far too frequently. The problem, as the authors see it, is that the progenitors of segregation, while having the right motives at heart, were too hasty, too decisive and too narrowly-focused in devising a response to the challenge they identified.

Segregation fails to consider the wide range of other impacts that might arise when parts of town are reserved exclusively for (fast moving) vehicles or, alternatively, for pedestrians. Segregation also overlooks the fact that, in certain (not uncommon) circumstances, it might well be possible to design environments in which pedestrians and motor vehicles can successfully co-exist. And segregation, as generally practised, nearly always prioritised the movement of motor vehicles over that of pedestrians.

A narrow focus still characterises the old urban movement of today. While the grade separation and liberal use of concrete that characterised highway design in the 1960s and 70s may no longer be prevalent, adherents of the old way continue to see movement, and provision for it, as an end in itself. We need to think much more about the real ends: the places we’re moving to, from and within. Until we do, we’ll keep making the same mistakes.

2. WHY HAS THE OLD WAY BEEN FOUND WANTING?

But exactly what mistakes has the old urban movement actually been responsible for? And in whose view? It may seem a strange way to attempt to answer such questions, but if towns and cities had voices they would say, ‘The old way has usually been bad for us’. In complex urban environments, simplistic solutions rarely if ever deliver long-lasting success. Take the example of classic town and city centre relief roads. While many high streets may well have needed some traffic relief as car ownership and usage increased, carving a relief road through the urban fabric on the periphery of the centre and pedestrianising the high street – an approach typical of the old way – has delivered results best described at ‘mixed’.

Although the shopping core may have felt benefit, during shopping hours, all too often the part of town adjacent to the relief road, as well as the pedestrianised area after hours, are sterile. Indeed, these environments are frequently hostile to pedestrians, enforcing movements through subways, over bridges, through ‘cattle pens’, across car pars and service yards, along deserted ex-streets, and generally along routes that are not natural pedestrian desire lines. All this has overlooked the fact that, ultimately, the success and vitality of towns and city centres depends on their being attractive to people who are walking, whatever other mode they may have used to get there.
The pairs of photos below are a small selection showing pedestrianised streets and the relief roads that were created to allow the pedestrianisation. All photos were taken during shopping hours on an ordinary weekday.

If the life of towns and cities only consisted in the success of their shops, the old way might have worked. Free-flow highways plugging directly into multi-storey car parks, themselves seamlessly linked to traffic free shopping streets and malls is probably the dream scenario for retail developers. But urban life is much richer, more complex, more interesting and more challenging, and any approach to the design of the built environment (which of course includes the public highway/realm) that ignores this complexity will be found wanting.
Problem-solving is all very well, but a narrow focus on what the problems are has often meant that the solution delivered has simply become a different kind of problem in due course. We need a more comprehensive approach, one that encompasses a better understanding of what makes towns and cities tick and recognise that transport must serve them, not dominate them.

It is no longer acceptable for transport planners to adopt silo thinking and simply ‘do their bit’, ignoring whatever lies beyond their immediate brief or scheme ‘red line’. In addition to the problems outlined above, this approach has been responsible for the creation of a plethora of bland, cluttered, over-engineered, unattractive streetscapes that fail to value the people who do or would use those streets.

3. WHAT IS THE NEW URBAN MOVEMENT?

The old way focuses on problems. The new urban movement focuses on places. In doing so, it starts with the street.

Streets are the vital essence of public life. They’re where people meet, shop, work, play and move. They’re where people do all kinds of work, meet for all sorts of reasons (in pairs as well as large groups), move in all sorts of ways and by many different modes, and visit all kinds of shops, restaurants and other leisure attractions. There is huge variety in what goes on in any given street – consider a quiet residential street and a bustling high street – and it should be the role of transport and other built environment professionals to encourage and enable a balance to be struck between the different uses that are necessary and appropriate in each.

The new approach to urban movement actively considers the inter-relationship of movement with the built environment, the interaction of numerous users and uses, the creation of a high quality public realm, and of course the planning context. Recent years have seen the development of a wide range of new approaches to the planning of highway space and the emergence of numerous buzzwords and phrases: Woonerven, Home Zones, Traffic Taming, Quality Streets, Shared Space, Space Syntax, Living Streets, Psychological Traffic Calming and even Naked Streets. Collectively these approaches are indicative of the (approach to) new urban movement that is gaining credibility and acceptance across Europe.

This new urban movement is not a bunch of nice ideas about how towns and cities should be in an ideal world. Neither is it merely a reaction to the old urban movement. Segregation was defined as ‘the separation of traffic in the interests of safety and free flow’. The new approach may be defined as ‘managing the many demands for urban movement in the interests of the safety and success of towns and cities’.

4. WHAT CAN THE NEW WAY ACHIEVE?

How do we measure the success of a town or city, and what do people mean when they speak of making better places? An interesting perspective on such
questions is the question that graced the cover of the Liverpool Design Guide: ‘Why is the city we are building so different from the cities we like?’ As this question implies, the best measure of how successful a place is, or whether it is considered to have improved, is how popular it is with people. People who live there, work there or visit it.

In 2000, the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, along with the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, published ‘By Design – urban design in the planning system: towards better practice’. Perhaps the most significant achievement of By Design was to set out the following seven objectives of urban design:

**• CHARACTER.** A place with its own identity
**• CONTINUITY & ENCLOSURE.** A place where public & private spaces are clearly distinguished
**• QUALITY OF THE PUBLIC REALM.** A place with attractive and successful outdoor areas
**• EASE OF MOVEMENT.** A place that is easy to get to and move through
**• LEGIBILITY.** A place that has a clear image and is easy to understand
**• ADAPTABILITY.** A place that can change easily
**• DIVERSITY.** A place with variety and choice

These aren’t qualities dreamed up by a bunch of academics, they’re the characteristics of towns and cities, old and new, that work. If we achieve these objectives we’ll have created the kind of towns and cities that people like, and we’ll have answered the question Liverpool posed.

The new urban movement does and must embrace each of these objectives, whereas adherents of the old way would probably recognise ‘ease of movement’ as the only objective affecting the work they do. This doesn’t mean that transport practitioners must suddenly skill-up in a wide variety of new disciplines, although some broader training will be highly beneficial. It does mean, though, that we must appreciate the broader issues at play in delivering urban success and actively seek to work collaboratively with those who specialise in related, relevant disciplines.

The new urban movement is intended to facilitate the creation and transformation of places that people will like. It can do so by recognising that each street, each place, is subject to numerous demands, and not only with regard to movement. It can do so by focusing on how the best mix between these different and often competing demands can be achieved. Not all users will get all they want, but the dominance of one user group over all others will cease. Towns and cities should be vibrant, dynamic, mixed-use places, and the new approach to urban movement has this objective above all others.

If this is what the new urban movement aims to achieve, what evidence is there that it can be successful? The following section showcases some examples of different types of streets that have been subject to, or are in need of, the new approach.
5. **CASE STUDIES**

These case studies will be fleshed out in the presentation and are included here primarily as encouragements to investigate the streets named. The proof of the pudding is always in the visiting!

- **Church Way, Doncaster**

  A relief road originally designed to allow the pedestrianisation of Doncaster’s main shopping street, Church Way now constrains the westwards expansion of the town centre.

- **Northfield Avenue, Ealing, London**

  The local High Street of one of the authors, and well-liked by local people, Northfield Avenue is nevertheless in danger of having its vehicle/pedestrian balance disturbed in favour of the former. The recent installation of speed cameras is both a symptom and an inadequate response.

- **Kensington High Street, London**

  Already something of a cliché, this scheme nevertheless demonstrates how a busily-trafficked street can be successfully transformed in favour of pedestrians, without excessively penalising general traffic.
• **Newland Avenue, Hull**

A classic under-performing local high street that has been uplifted by innovation in street design, despite a relatively small budget. A scheme from which many can learn.

• **Maid Marian Way, Nottingham**

A busy edge-of-centre dual carriageway, that remains a busy edge-of-centre dual carriageway and yet still manages to be much more pedestrian-friendly, replacing double subways on a key desire line with direct surface-level crossings.
• **Chepstow High Street**

Another underperforming high-street that has been uplifted through a comprehensive public realm improvement strategy, including new materials throughout and incorporating three small, new, public squares. Again, traffic movements are essentially as previously.

![Chepstow High Street](image1.png)

• **King Street, Hammersmith, London**

This busy, one-way road through an important shopping centre has recently undergone a comprehensive programme of reallocating carriageway to footway. Space is at a premium, but the new layout gives more priority to pedestrians and encourages safe, informal crossing movements.

![King Street, Hammersmith, London](image2.png)

6. **NEW THINKING – NEW ACTION**

We need for a new breed of ‘movement professional’ to deliver this new *Urban Movement*. A new breed of transport professional is already emerging that is neither engineer nor planner. Instead they are hybrid of a number of different disciplines.

What defines them is what they achieve, what they deliver. Their skill lies in being able to see the bigger picture, to see the wood for the trees, to think outside their silo. They are ‘visioneers’ able to fuse practical experience of
planning and engineering whilst retaining sight of what they are seeking to achieve.

As shown in the diagram below, transport professionals play a crucial role in delivering sustainable communities the ‘places’ that will make them liveable. The problem is that currently most transport practitioners will see the issues from only a limited perspective. Like the fable of the Indian Elephant where one blind man grabs hold of the beast’s leg and declares it a tree, another its trunk and declares it a snake – too often transport practitioners fail to appreciate what they are seeking to achieve. A traffic engineer might concentrate efforts on accommodating traffic flow, a travel planner on the marketing strategy, a safety officer on minimising conflicts, etc, etc. What they usually fail to do is define a vision for the street, for the area that will create the type of place that fulfils the myriad of policy objectives.

**Components of a sustainable community**

![Diagram showing components of a sustainable community](image)

It is interesting to note the synergy between the objectives of urban movement and key areas of macro policy, namely: health; pollution; climate change; and sustainable transport. Good places are usually those that tick all the boxes.

Many people reading this may be, by this stage, nodding contentedly thinking that this is exactly how they go about their business. This is actually a key part of the problem: that far too many practitioners think they are already delivering best practice. This tends to suppress thinking into the traditional silos and stifle the innovations necessary to create fantastic places.
The new breed of transport professional is often highly conspicuous at meetings. They are usually the ones asking the really basic questions, akin to the little child who keeps asking ‘why’ to which the parent’s standard response is simply ‘because’. They regularly ask a whole host of questions to which there is frequently a stunned silence as attendees slowly realise the magnitude of the work required. The questions might typically include:

- What level of highway provision is really necessary?
- Is the transport strategy likely to induce additional trips?
- How will the urban design proposals work?
- How do the proposals address social exclusion?
- How will parking be managed effectively?
- How much will travel behaviour need to change?
- How have they modelled the options tested the scenarios?
- How do they propose to deliver the transport vision?
- Will air & noise pollution be within legal limits?
- What priority have they given to promoting walking, cycling & public transport?

It is perhaps useful to explain the role of the new breed of transport practitioner required to deliver the new urban movement with reference to a case study example. Many local authorities in the UK are actively involved in the development of Local Development Frameworks (LDF) that contain within them Area Action Plans (AAP).

Far too many towns around the country have been subjected to a sterile approach to urban design that fails to appreciate the need to create ‘places’. Most plans fail dismally to provide a ‘vision’ for the towns to realise its enormous potential by establishing its sense of place, its identity. Instead they consign the towns to mediocrity.

The key issue is most frequently traffic, however many fail to do some if any transport strategy work to inform the development of the plans. Many plans will fail to deliver the busy bustling high streets shown in the pictures with only a few cars mingling sympathetically with pedestrians. Many will either remain dangerous, noisy and polluted, and often more congested or will push traffic onto unsuitable alternative routes.

If the transport studies undertaken to inform the work are not sufficiently thorough, the proposed transport strategy is unlikely to enable the AAP to be delivered. Put simply, many local authorities do not know whether the AAP will work but continue to asking the local residents to approve the plans based on their professional intuition.

In one AAP reviewed recently a serious air pollution problem was identified at the south end of the town. It is so serious that it has been declared an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA).

Despite this the local authority, in their rush to achieve the mantra of pedestrianisation, proposed to divert much of the traffic through the AQMA,
exacerbating the pollution problem. Air quality is a material planning consideration that the Inspector appointed to review the plans will need to take into account. UK Planning Policy Statement 23 establishes that that the impact on air quality is likely to be particularly important where to grant “permission would conflict with, or render unworkable, elements of an air quality action plan”. The UK Government has advised that “in drawing up local development documents, such as the LDF, local authorities have to take air quality into account and should therefore be mindful of where air quality management areas exist”.

It is likely therefore that much of the work undertaken to date will be abortive because they have failed to consider the wider context. In this case they have determined a vision, but without thinking carefully about how to deliver it.

Joined-up thinking is a term coined by many but still executed by few. Many plans seek blindly to consolidate parking in town centres in to large, expensive multi-storey parking blocks with little consideration about how the trip demands could alternatively be accommodated. In many cases huge commuter car parks could be catered for by improved bus services providing speedy links to the door of the railway station, reducing the need to own a second car to sit in a car park all day, and cutting local pollution dramatically. Alternatively, with a good marketing campaign and investment into cycle parking depots at stations, there is often huge potential to increase cycling. In addition to reducing pollution, land-take, etc the health benefits of introducing regular exercise into the daily routine are well documented.

So what is preventing the lateral thinkers from delivering the types of places that work, that policy encourages, that retailers plead for and residents demand?

We suggest that current training of transport and planning professionals concentrates far too heavily on the process of hoops that plans have to jump through.

The new urban movement needs new training regimes that combine the fields of transport planning & engineering with urban design. We need to equip a new breed of transport professional with a comprehensive understanding of how successful places work and how they are dependent on the successful management of all demands for movement.

We need professionals who understand transport as a means to an end and not as an end in itself: Professionals with the vision to make places and the expertise to make places work. These are precisely the individuals JMP and Urban Initiatives are working hard to recruit and mould into the next generation of transport professional.