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Connections

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News and stories of progressive change

I'm glad you asked

I used to think Interrail was basically just something for students to gallivant round Europe for a month. I was wrong. You can buy Interrail travel at any age. You can buy discontinuous tickets (ten days in two months for example). You can use it on Eurostar for around £30, and you also get one free trip in your home country to and from the port of departure (which includes St Pancras International). Given the mind boggling cost of peak time long distance rail travel in the UK it could be cheaper to buy the Interrail just to go peak time to and from London! Downsides? Some European railways (like the French and the Italians) require a supplemental reservation charge on their long distance trains. But in places like Germany and Switzerland you can get on any train you like. So far in 2024 I've used some Interrail days in Bavaria and Bohemia as well as Switzerland on the super scenic Rhätische Bahn from the north of Italy to Zurich. Not a standard gauge railway but the amount of freight that uses the network was impressive – including refrigerated wagons to supply the local Coop stores. Compare and contrast with the UK where cities the size of Bradford have no rail freight whatever.

Back in the UK I've also been virtually, as well as physically, working with colleagues in Wales (on bringing all buses in Wales back under public control) and the North East (advising on the use of transport powers by the emerging North East Mayoral Combined Authority). I'm also working with UITP (the international union of public transport) on a project on public transport governance reform in

Albania. I also had the opportunity to speak at a Strathclyde Passenger Transport fringe meeting at the Scottish Labour party conference

Meanwhile – given the leadership they have shown on transport and climate - I was particularly sorry to see Nottingham city council go into administration. All part of the wider financial malaise which is spreading through local government (and the devolved administrations) after years of brutal cuts by the current Westminster administration. In Scotland, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport's capital budget has been cut to zero. And in Wales there have been big challenges for bus funding as the wider Welsh government budget has been squeezed to breaking point. All this whilst the current Westminster Administration castigates Local Transport Authorities for introducing the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and bus priority schemes it told to them to bring in as part of their own Active Travel and Buses strategies.

It was good therefore to be at the well attended Transport Action Network conference in London in March which brought together anti-road and pro-public transport campaigners together to share experience and draw strength and resolve to keep on keeping on.

Policy geek postcard: Tilburg



These days, on my list of things I could do when I have time in a new place, is to visit the library. It feels almost revolutionary these days to go somewhere where you are not obliged to spend anything at all. The ['LocHal' library](#) in Tilburg is a beauty. And another example of how mainland Europe can teach the UK a thing or two about repurposing former industrial sites without bowdlerizing them ([see Connections 3](#)).

Tilburg was one of the Netherland's rail centres with a rolling stock plant that first began in 1868 and by the 1920s employed nearly 1,500 people. By the time it finally closed in 2009 the municipality had a

plan for the large area of land it covered close to the station and city centre. Part of the plan was to convert the locomotive hall into a library. None of the structural features of what is a large building were removed. The cranes which moved the locomotives around the site were left in situ, as indeed were some of the tracks. The tracks (set in concrete) are used to move three large wheeled 'train tables' so they can be used in different ways. As reading tables, or an extension of the café or as a stage. The LocHal (open from 8am to 10pm - seven days a week) is not only a library but also a laboratory where visitors are challenged, gain new knowledge and learn about new innovations. Specially designed labs can be found throughout the building: the Digilab, GameLab, FutureLab, FoodLab, LearningLab, TimeLab, DialogueLab and WordLab.

More than the sum of its many parts and interlocking dimensions. Dignifying its heritage without being limited by it. Everything about the library feels generous and true. The LocHal is set within a wider and spacious city campus known as '[Sporzone](#)' ([railway zone](#)) where other railway buildings and artefacts have also been repurposed. There are restaurants both in a railway carriage and also in a 1930s locomotive shed complete with an outdoor 1920s turntable. Also part of the zone are new homes for businesses – with a strong emphasis on tech and entrepreneurship. Something which should be boosted by the creation of a young professional campus with 20,000 square metres of living working and education focused on entrepreneurship affiliated with Tilburg university. Elsewhere on site another large railway building is now The Hall of Fame – an incubator for urban sports and culture.

There are many things that are great about Sporzone - not least is that the symbol and showpiece of the whole site is a public library. But also that it can be found in Tilburg - which not chi chi or a property investment hot spot. Indeed it used to be known as the ugliest city in the Netherlands. Yet here is a highly successful repurposing of an industrial site of the highest quality. And it's not the only example in Europe of massive former railway works which have been repurposed into new local mixed economies. [Lokstadt](#) (formerly the Swiss Locomotive and Machinery Factory) in Winterthur and [Telliskivi](#) on the old locomotives works at Tallinn have both gone with the grain of the architecture and atmosphere of the massive railway works they inherited to create new quarters that manage to combine different functions and activities in a way that feels interesting and real.

What equivalents of scale do we have in the UK for old railway sites (outside of restorations primarily for heritage or enthusiast purposes?). Kings Cross railway lands, Swindon works, Derby roundhouse, Camden Market, Manchester Mayfield all spring to mind. Though I'm not sure any of them are quite the mixed economy which Tilburg has pulled off. And what we usually get outside of the property hotspots is demolition followed by chainlink fences and big blank sheds. Can we imagine a Sporzone equivalent?

Stories of progressive change: Frank Pick



Always a hero of mine. Indeed I would argue Pick is by far the most significant public transport leader we've had in this country. He didn't just make London Transport the best designed and most progressive urban transport system in the world - he evolved the notion that public transport should be well designed and progressive in the first place. Something that in turn has insinuated itself into the city's very conception of itself. And as for legacies, the idea that London transport shouldn't just be good, but that it should be the best and most pleasing to use, is still there. Indeed I'm not sure I would be doing what I'm doing now if it wasn't for what he showed is possible.

There's more in [this piece](#) I wrote on Pick on the occasion of the unveiling of an installation in his honour at Piccadilly Circus tube station.

In depth: An ode to Lothian Buses



It's good to be in the warmth of the good value Lothian Buses cafe at their Shandwick Place TravelHub. Outside a pitiless January morning wind has chased the buses down nearby Princes Street. The commuters on board the buses are happy to be cocooned (for just that little bit longer) against the cold, behind mostly steamed up windows. They leave the windows steamed up as they've seen the views before, and there aren't too many visitors aboard keen to see the brazen theatricality of the Edinburgh skyline imprint itself on the winter dawn. At this time of year this is an Edinburgh as free of tourists from exotic places as it's ever going to be. The exotic (to the non-local) can instead be found in the mysterious sounding origins of some of the bus routes: Hunter's Tryst, The Jewel, Silverknowes.

Sitting in the Lothian Buses liveried cafe, decorated with pictures of the forebears of the buses passing outside, it seems a good place to reflect on the chat I'd had with Lothian MD, Sarah Boyd the previous day and to write my ode to Lothian Buses. So why should we love Lothian Buses? Well let me count the ways.

Edinburgh is a city where every kind of person uses the bus - there isn't the stigma that's attached to bus travel in many other parts of the country. Quite the opposite - using buses is a social norm in Edinburgh. It's easy for a city to fall out of the habit of using the bus - and once that habit is gone it's very hard to get it back. Pre-COVID Lothian was doing one better and growing the habit (patronage went up from 109 million to 124 million in the ten years to 2019). One way that Lothian has kept all social classes on board is ensuring that the buses are clean and well maintained. As Sarah Boyd told me you should ask yourself would you want to sit on that seat. I've travelled, under sufferance, on plenty of grubby buses in my time - but never in Edinburgh. Well maintained is also easy to do if you bought higher end buses in the first place - which Lothian tend to do.

Whilst we are covering off the basics of what a good urban bus network should do - let's also tick the box marked simplicity. Lothian has bucked an industry trend of seeking to make buses stand out on the

streets through branding that aims to sell the attractions of the service, or route, with the aim of tempting non-users across the threshold. Branding that also seeks to challenge pre-conceptions. There's a case for this. When done well. But it can also look shouty and confusing when there are lots of buses looking to stand out in urban centres. It can also end up positioning the bus as something akin to a mid-market supermarket. Lothian Buses don't look like they are trying to be Sainsbury's on wheels. They look like what they are: a public service done well that belongs to the city it serves. The livery keeps it simple - as do the simple contactless flat fares, the audio-visual announcements, the stop information, the app. It all means that someone unfamiliar with the city can have the confidence to give the buses a go - and not be let down when they do. And with the leisure market emerging from COVID far more strongly than commuting, having a service that visitors feel comfortable using really matters.

As Sarah Boyd told me, Lothian is also a company that isn't afraid to try new things (or to pull out of them if they don't work out). New things like the triple axle ADL/Volvo leviathans that can Hoover up more than a hundred passengers at a time whilst making a statement about who these city streets are for. Or the expansion (the Lothian Country and East Coast Buses networks) beyond the city's borders to move into more semi-urban and rural territories largely abandoned by the private sector both east and west of the city. In some ways Lothian (with over a century of municipal ownership behind it) is reminiscent of the responsible but enterprising municipally and locally owned operators that are common in countries like Switzerland and Germany.

As a municipal Lothian's future is bound up in the future of the city it serves. Ask people about Lothian Buses and many will say its biggest problem is reliability because of the congestion on the roads. Most people look up at the skyline and the buildings when they are in Edinburgh but look down at the streets and you can see street clutter, battered roads and too much space for too many cars. The tram extension down Leith Walk shows how new public transport infrastructure can be the catalyst for fixing tired and car-dominated streetscapes in a way that is sensitive to the city's historic built environment. The city council has a target of reducing car traffic by 30% by 2030 and a battery of strategies at various stages of development designed to support this goal- including a city centre movement strategy and a public transport strategy. A city centre low emission zone is already in place and will start to be enforced from June. But as Sarah Boyd says there is no single silver bullet that will fix everything across the network - it's about having a targeted package of measures which benefits the bus network as a whole. Edinburgh is also a place where people want to be and this creates twin challenges of recruiting and retaining staff in a competitive labour market whilst ensuring that the bus network keeps pace with a city that's growing. This includes serving from the start developments like West Edinburgh where there are plans to build 11,000 new homes. One of the things that has been holding Lothian back (which is currently getting 90% of pre-COVID patronage on 80% of the pre-COVID network) is shortage of drivers. In response Lothian has combined a competitive package of pay and benefits with streamlining of the process of getting new recruits qualified to drive vehicles (the time it takes to get an applicant into class has been reduced from four weeks to one week). The next big challenge is the decarbonisation of the fleet which will require the transformation of both fleet and depots between now and 2035. A sign of things to come will be in the spring when the first of an initial fleet of 50 new Volvo BZL electric double deck buses enter service. Meanwhile away from the buses the success of the well put together Newhaven extension of the Edinburgh tram has drawn the sting from the saga of the botched procurement of the initial route (where an interminable public inquiry has now firmly bolted the door after that particular horse left the stable). This opens the way for the next stage to emerge from the shadows (a north-south link from Granton to Dalkeith). Edinburgh is also criss-crossed by a dense network of former, freight and mothballed railway lines which could play a part in this extension, and more besides, in the future. All of which opens up the prospect of giving Scotland's capital more of the integrated bus, tram and rail network that it needs. It's time to come back to the present and venture out of the cafe and into the cold again. Outside a constant flow of buses (the green country buses reminiscent of London's former Greenline network) is punctuated by the bass and treble notes of the rumbling trams and their

bells. Time to explore more of the UK city where the buses are used by everyone. And where everyone owns them too.

This piece first appeared in Passenger Transport magazine and a full colour pdf version can be downloaded [here](#)

The future shock three



1. **'Nomadification'**: Digital nomadism is such an entrenched trend now it's actually distorting urban economies (sometimes at the expense of locals as well remunerated digital nomads from the global north decamp to enclaves in the global south where they drive up prices). Meanwhile the blurring of leisure and business travel (Airbnb say that long term stays of 28 days are their fastest-growing category of stay) has spawned a new word: 'bleisure'. A word so ugly that it's actually memorable. For example Zurich now markets itself as a **'Bleisure' location**. All of which raises some big questions (explored [here](#)) for towns and cities about how they present themselves in a world where leisure travel, remote working, business travel, nomadism and short stay residency are getting all tangled up.

2. **'Tile whipping'**: The concreting over of suburbia is moving at pace in the UK it seems as people stop putting their giant vehicles in garages (maybe they don't fit) and concrete over their front gardens to jam them in where the flowers once grew. Just add water from more extreme rainfall and hey presto – more flooding as water runs off all this concrete PDQ. In the Netherlands they are trying to reverse this disastrous trend by 'tile whipping' - encouraging and incentivising people to de-pave (they will take the stones away and swap them for free plants). See also 'rain gardens', blue green infrastructure', 'slowing the flow' and 'sponge cities'.

3. **'Carbon budgeting'**: Every organisation has a target for reducing carbon emissions. Well done you. But if it doesn't dictate what what each Department in that organisation is doing all day then so what? Carbon budgeting is the next level beyond carbon targets because the Director of every department (including, crucially, the finance director) has a carbon target which is as important as their financial targets. It's a sign of getting serious about carbon reduction.



CROSBY BEACH IN THE STUCK SUMMER

At Crosby Beach not only are there Anthony Gormley standing men statues but also spilling out from beneath the turf that edges on to the beach are the remains of buildings dumped there after the bombing of Liverpool in the Second World War. It led to me writing this [poem](#)

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