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The look and feel of public transport

It's time for bold and fresh thinking about how we design public transport to best serve a changed market in changing times

▶ A draining Covid epidemic and the ungainly pirouettes of government policy on public transport from one extreme ('we want all day bus lanes') to the other ('we hate all day bus lanes'), has not been conducive to big and optimistic thinking about how public transport should look and feel in the future. But, ready or not, there have been some major shifts out there that public transport vehicle design needs to be alive to. For example, the railways used to be about commuters and now passenger rail's main market is leisure travel. Meanwhile, older people have proved reluctant to return to bus and the bus itself is an extinct species in some parts of the country - and critically endangered in many others. Obviously public transport vehicle design isn't the whole story on how public transport retains existing users and attracts new ones. But it's part of it. So, here's some thoughts.

Let's start with the big growth market: leisure travel. The interiors of a lot of UK rolling stock can be somewhat basic - even on routes that have a strong leisure component. There's a big contrast with the big picture windows that are now common on many new regional units in mainland Europe (though maybe there is a technical or loading gauge reason why this is harder to achieve in the UK). Meanwhile, modern buses do have big windows (and in many cases more legroom and more comfortable seats than you get on an LNER or GWR Azuma). Where the bus can struggle for longer leisure journeys is

ride quality and comfort. Those big windows can create a greenhouse effect, and when combined with the noise and random lateral and vertical vibration, I, for one, have often had enough after about 30 minutes. With hotter and weirder weather on the rise this raises the question of air con for buses (common on trains). All of which would add to vehicle weight and complexity, of course. But would there be a side benefit given that heavier buses can also have better ride quality?

It was fascinating to hear from NatEx in Coventry about two routes operated by the same type and design of bus. The difference was that the route where the bus was electrically powered was outperforming for patronage the route where the same bus body was powered by diesel. Not only that, but drivers of the electric buses were happier, the buses were driven more smoothly and accidents reduced. So, are we making enough of the co-benefits of electrifying buses and has the arguably superior passenger comfort made a difference? After all, everyone raves about Glider in Belfast but one of the reasons why Glider works, and FirstGroup's FTR didn't, is Glider's vehicle quality and spec.

Meanwhile, on rail not only are some

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train interior's depressingly drab and poorly specced, the ride quality can also be unimpressive. In an era where everyone does their own thing on rolling stock (and from a very limited number of suppliers) are we missing out on what we used to have when British Rail had both a design panel and a substantial centralised research and development capacity? In some countries a lot of attention is given to the 'national train'. It's seen as a reflection of national style and aspirations. Something to be proud of. For example, there is nothing 'off the shelf' about the interior of the new Danish IC5 trains. A design team of architects, interior designers, product designers, and lighting designers drew inspiration directly from famous pieces of Danish design to make something that aims to reflect the national character and the best of its design traditions. We don't have a national train design, (or indeed a national intercity network anymore in the UK) and this contributes to a fragmented and variable offer which is under-marketed on the national stage.

By way of an aside it's also interesting to see how some overseas railways (eg Lithuania) give more prominence in their marketing to rail's green credentials than is generally the case here. Finally on this rather loosely themed section on leisure travel, public transport needs to integrate itself better with big leisure attractions (most of whom are seeking to reduce their carbon footprints). 'Good Journey' is the organisation which can bridge the gap between the two sectors.

From leisure to commuting; whilst bells and whistles are good for leisure travel I sometimes wonder if we are overdoing it for the urban bus. Isn't what we need for short urban journeys something that is consistently clean, simple to use and green? A reliable utility rather than something that is pretending it's a fair swap for a BMW? There is a case however for the exteriors of the urban bus to look the part in the urban environment by looking good (or at least dignified) and to relate to the identity of the places they serve - so the placemakers don't see them as a chaotic mass of shouty shoeboxes which they are consequently keen to consign to the backstreets.

Alongside the relative roles of leisure and commuting there are other dynamics in play too. For example, we have an ageing population, a growing cycle leisure market



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and the rise and rise of a growing diversity of light electric vehicles (from mobility scooters to e-scooters). In short, public transport vehicles are being asked to do more for a greater diversity of different needs and wants (in this regard it's interesting to see in Europe more partitioning of on board space with dedicated space for families). But let's focus in on older and disabled people for a while. The UK has been relatively good (compared with other countries) at improving and prioritising the physical accessibility of public transport vehicles and supporting passenger infrastructure. However, it sometimes feels like we have taken a legalistic approach ('we have met the standards, what more do you want?') rather than embodied it fully in the way that public transport works and presents itself (for example, how reliable is the kit and who is there to help if there's a problem?).

Indeed, does every type of passenger, and potential passenger, feel like there is a guiding mind behind their journey which is there to look out for them? This is a particular issue for buses where (outside of franchised markets) there is no one body in charge of a journey, because of the nature of bus stops and because

where, once on board, the bus can feel like an unsupervised space. Unlike rail where, by and large, the staff do speak to passengers over the PA this isn't often the case on buses - even when the bus has a PA system. When Transport for London encouraged bus drivers to communicate more with the passengers it made a big psychological difference (for example explaining to passengers why and for how long the delay will take when the bus stops for a while to regularise the service). It is even better when this happens alongside automated audio visual bus stop messaging.

Of course there are many possible (and reasonable) objections to these ideas. Cost for one. There's also the fact that people are clearly prepared to rough it to save money (hello Ryanair and SNCF's budget Ouigo network). And also, many public transport vehicles serve more than one kind of market during an average day (never mind a lifetime). All of the above is also based on my perceptions which are informed by my background, wants and preoccupations. But at a time when the next Westminster administration is likely to be recreating some form of national rail system again, and when

we are looking at a big transition from private to public control of buses - now is the time when we should be thinking big again.

There are some indicators of what this new era could bring. Like Merseytravel pushing the manufacturer hard to make its new urban, hydrogen-powered bus state-of-the-art, or the stunning murals by local artists on the interiors of the new Tyne and Wear metro trains. In short we have the opportunity to make this positive transition something more than a technical and contractual shift and also an opportunity for bold and fresh thinking about how we best serve a changed market in changing times. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. www.jonathan-bray.com