



# JONATHAN BRAY



## An agonisingly slow tram renaissance

Over the past three decades trams have been returning to the UK streets - but the process is a protracted and expensive one

▶ In 1992, Manchester's city centre once again reverberated to the sound that means public transport is getting serious. The sound of the low rumble of trams. Prior to that every UK tram system (bar Blackpool) had been silenced decades earlier. A light rail revolution had begun. A revolution which tied in with the revival of urban living in reinvented post-industrial city centres. Since then the tram has returned to a further five UK cities. And, in some cities, what were one-line systems have evolved into something more like networks. But it's been slow progress. Agonisingly slow. Easily blown of course by changes in the political and economic weather during the painfully protracted approval process.

Meanwhile, across the channel, France (which like the UK had trashed its urban tram networks decades earlier) also started a tram revolution. But unlike the nation of shopkeepers they did it with zeal and elan. If you were a mayor elected on a pledge to build a tram - the tram system was built during that term. In French cities as small as York tram systems are built in less time and less cost than in much larger cities in the UK. And whilst Paris is deploying new tram routes at scale as part of its quest to transform both orbital public transport, and the public transport connectivity of its suburbs, the tram seems to be the forgotten mode in London. According to an excellent recent report by Create Streets/ Britain Remade, 21 cities in France now have a light rail system, which means that a light rail or metro system now serves every city with a population of more than 150,000. Meanwhile, 30 British cities with a population of over 150,000 do not have a tram. We have settled into an acceptance in the UK that building a tram is an exceptionally expensive privilege - only available if you are prepared to persist for year after year - or even decade after decade.

But why is there this 'British disease' when it comes to trams? If France can do it why can't we? We haven't done it because of costs (it costs us twice as much to build a tram in the UK than it does in France). And a key factor in this is over-engineering. Trams are still seen as some kind of alien and exceptional concept in the UK. Not therefore worth developing a specific and linked set of norms around designs, impact on utilities and planning processes. Instead we have imported heavy rail



Trams in the French city of Dijon. Across the channel the return of light rail has been much more rapid



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thinking (and costs) into trams and exported large amounts of public money into the pockets of the utilities.

You can see too in UK tram systems the UK heavy rail sector’s tendency to ‘build and walk away’ from new infrastructure. Whereas in France a lot of attention is paid to the tram’s role in renewing and remaking the streets through which it passes. Some argue that Very Light Rail (VLR) is the way to dramatically cut the ties with a culture of over engineering. I have to say I have my doubts. The point of light rail - and why people like it - is speed and ride quality. If you significantly downgrade the experience you lose the point of it in the first place. If the hideous contraptions that ride like they have square wheels on the Stourbridge town branch are an indicator for the future then I’m getting the bus.

However, where I do think VLR could show the way is its approach to the track the vehicles run on. Instead of digging deep down into the street (and paying whatever the utilities ask for to locate, move and gold plate their pipes), go shallow and lay track panels on top. Sure you may have to do some short term closures in the future to sort out any utility problems but a short term closure of a tram line is better than not having a line in the first place. Either way the privatised utilities need facing down over their current ability to ‘name their price’ for moving utilities for light rail schemes.

Also contributing to over-engineering on light rail is the lack of standardisation on UK tram systems (which in turn is linked with low levels of tram scheme build). In Germany there is a long unbroken period of municipally-owned tram systems which gives them the confidence to work together. For example, in 2022, VDV, the German equivalent to the Urban Transport Group, co-procured an order of up to 504 tram train vehicles worth up to 4bn euros from Stadler on behalf of seven different operators and authorities. This secured a discount of around 20% on the costs compared with making individual orders.

There’s another financial challenge in the UK too. In the UK, by and large, buses and trains aren’t expected to cover their operational costs. By and large (because they are seen as exceptions) tram systems are. This has had a number of knock on implications. The financing and fares models can stand

outside the rest of the local public transport network - which can make it harder to provide integrated ticketing at an attractive price.

Costs can also be added through the need for stand alone organisations and financing arrangements to run them.

The danger is that the ‘British disease’ on tram costs is accepted as a permanent condition and instead attention shifts to the hope that a high quality bus service can replicate the benefits at much less cost. Belfast’s Glider is often held up as the success story that others hope to repeat. I’m a big fan of the Glider. But it works because its been done in quality throughout - and on the right corridors. It therefore wasn’t cheap. Cheaper than building a tram - sure. But then again buses don’t last as long as trams and you need more drivers than you would to provide the equivalent passenger carrying capacity as a light rail system. So the cost equations all start to change the longer view you take. Glider

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also works because all the detail has been done in quality and the whole has become greater than the sum of the parts. Skimp on costs and you won’t get the Glider effect - and certainly nothing like the tram effect.

So the answer is not to strip out the quality of the tram mode or think that another mode can do the same job at much less cost. Nor is it to make the mode largely a prestige option for prestige destinations (like airports). From Dusseldorf to Gdansk the tram is an egalitarian part of everyday life serving everyday places and it should be here too. The answer, instead, is a systematic approach to getting the costs of UK tram systems down to something more like the European norm through the centre establishing more appropriate and less cumbersome national standards for scheme processes and implementation, and a fairer deal on utility costs. At the same time transport authorities need to get more serious about co-specification, standardisation and tackling over engineering whilst ensuring that trams are as much about remaking the places they serve (on the French model) as they are about getting people from A to B.

Our UK tram systems are very different and there’s something to admire about all of them. There’s Nottingham building in Park and Ride from the start, Sheffield Supertram taking trams to housing estates and workaday suburban centres on the historic and egalitarian European model, the scale and reach of the current Manchester Metrolink network, the skilful and sympathetic working of the Edinburgh tram extension into the urban fabric of Leith. There’s no doubt the tram has proved its worth - and if Manchester Metrolink was the start of the first light rail revolution now is the time for a second light rail revolution to begin. ■

### 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](http://www.jonathan-bray.com)