

Response to Consultation: NPF4 Call for Ideas

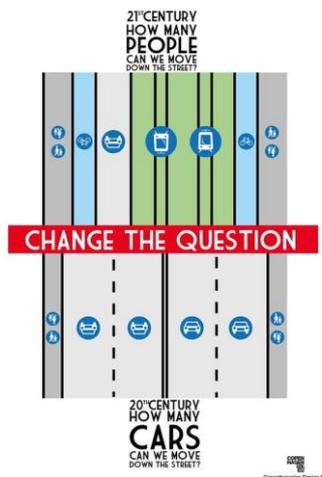
Chris Terrell

29 April 2020

Due to very limited time for this, my response will focus on active travel & its infrastructure and, in brief, the issues of housing and access to land for building homes. I include general comments on my impressions of planning processes and priorities, as they appear to me from the outside from the outcomes on the ground in terms of the quality of active travel infrastructure, urging a change to improve this.

1. What development will we need to address climate change?

Travel – we need a serious shift in commitment, budgets and political will to prioritise (ie: put first) active travel modes (walking, cycling) and public transport (bus/train/tram and I include taxis as a de-facto flexible arm of public transport) over private motor vehicles. This requires action at the budget allocation stages, planning and design process and on the ground if there is to be a real change in people's habits. The graphics produced by Copenhagenize illustrate this well. We need a change in procedures to change the design approach: begin by asking “how can we enable people to get where they want and need to by (first) walking (second) cycling/equivalent (third) public transport?” then: “how do we also enable emergency, public services and commercial deliveries so they do not impede the former?” finally: “what provision do we still need to make to enable necessary car journeys without impeding the foregoing priority modes?”

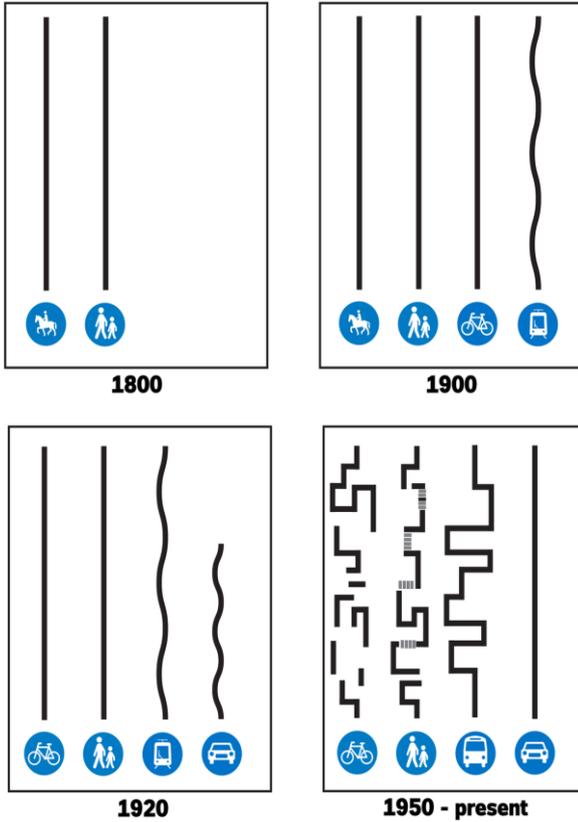


There are more than enough beautifully worded aspirational active transport strategy documents which are not followed up in practice or simply fade into oblivion as design for motor vehicles ahead of people on foot, bike, bus etc is implemented.

Where active travel infrastructure is designed in, too often it is fragmented, does not meet the real needs of the people it is supposedly aimed at and fails to form a wider network; there is a similar and broader need for coherent integration of active and public transport modes to make a simple, convenient and cheap/free means of people moving around without needing to own or use a private motor vehicle.

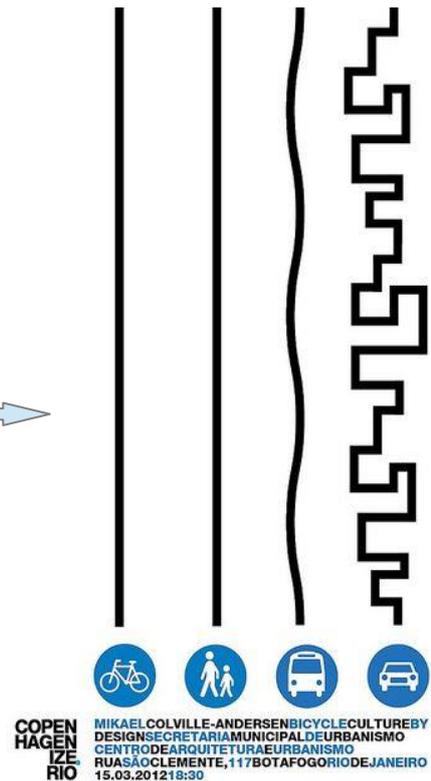
Making it safe, easier, cheaper and more direct (than driving) to take legs, bike or bus/train for as many journeys as possible (not just short or very local ones) will draw people towards actually using these modes. This will of course mean dealing with some resistance and complaining, achieving change of habits is challenging but it is what Leadership is about. Directness, convenience and networking are core qualities:

A Short History of Traffic Engineering



COPENHAGENIZE
EU
Copenhagenize Design Co.
2013

Out of these two diagrams, which mode of transport would you choose?



MIKAEL COLVILLE-ANDERSEN BICYCLE CULTURE BY DESIGN SECRETARIAMUNICIPAL DE URBANISMO
CENTRO DE ARQUITETURA E URBANISMO
RUA SÃO CLEMENTE, 117 BOFATOGÓRIO DE JANEIRO
15.03.2012 18:30

Some, if not many, of the improvements in design can be achieved by proactively involving people from the public who actually use the infrastructure, not just in consultations but in the design process from the earliest stages through to completion. Benefits of this include saving money on wasted design and construction of unsuitable, frequently dangerous, infrastructure that nobody uses and political support from a public that sees stuff being designed with their input and that actually meets their needs. If officials don't like being lambasted in the press for spending public money on incomprehensible dead-end cycle lanes etc then it is easy to avoid by involving the

users from the start. It's also helpful for building a sense of community and engagement. The benefits of achieving this are many, evidenced in several mainland European countries (NL, Denmark, Sweden etc) and go beyond just moving people around, the physical, psychological, educational and economic benefits are well researched and documented – I refer you to organisations such as Cycling UK for more information.

Healthy and sustainable transport infrastructure helps enable viable, sustainable and healthy communities to endure and develop, especially in rural areas.

Housing – we need a real change of building methods here, to genuinely low-embodied energy techniques, much more use of locally-sourced materials and labour and integrating renewable energy micro-generation into larger developments from the start. There are a variety of exciting, durable and aesthetically pleasing options available but these are too often reserved for expensive and exclusive housing and rare self-builds. Making more land available for self-building schemes that can be afforded by people in rural communities on local wages (such approaches have been used in isolated cases in the past, the Walter Segal model being one), facilitating co-housing, use of modern and efficient prefabricated building methods and the like would be a useful part of the mosaic of approaches to making housing available to all, regardless of means. Among the benefits of making these changes are enabling more resilient, engaged and skilled communities to develop, with more likelihood of social stability as people who are involved in the building of their own homes have a solid stake in making it work in the longer term.

A wider issue with this is changing housing from being an investment opportunity to being a fundamental factor in enabling society to operate, it's a basic need for every citizen, the myth of “affordable housing” (affordable, by whom and for how long before it's just another investment?) must be tackled head on. Without a safe and secure home, people cannot even begin to realise their potential and build a prosperous society.

2.How can planning best support our quality of life, health and wellbeing in the future?

The planning process and aim can best support these by ensuring that it is not perceived as a barrier to experimentation, innovation and social/economic development. In part that includes making permission procedures more streamlined, especially for small groups and individuals, and opening out attitudes to building, especially house, design and methods to support a high quality of life for all. An example pertinent to the current lockdown is the common lack of outdoor space, such as a balcony or garden area, in high-density developments such as flats. A common problem in flats is a lack of secure storage space for things like bicycles, resulting in a real barrier to active travel choice. These are the result of planning approval and could be changed to **require** developers, especially of “social” housing schemes, to design these features in from the beginning. “Encouraging” developers to do these things is rarely sufficient and is an entirely appropriate area to use some regulatory muscle!

Excessive aesthetic conservatism is also a real barrier to innovation for the future in housing. Public buildings often include modern and beneficial design elements and features but it is rare to see similar in the housing field. Too often I have seen an approach that favours a particular style rather than requiring sensitive and harmonious design. This also limits the suitability of new housing for modern living requirements and the need for bold and effective action to enhance the natural environment.

Infrastructure that is coherent and links communities, beyond the urban areas into the rural zones, especially the formerly well-populated Highlands, will enable resilient and viable communities to survive and develop and we should be encouraging such re-population. Not least because, in the longer term, if sea levels rise appreciably, we will need to move inland and up-hill; we are seeing the consequences of a failure to plan ahead properly in the current situation worldwide, this will not be the last time. There are of course big issues of land-ownership and use, here, perhaps beyond the regular scope of planning departments, but the priority must be the needs of the majority, not a few.

3.What does planning need to do to enable development and investment in our economy so that it benefits everyone?

Ensuring coherent, complete and networked infrastructure is vital. There are some good examples

of this in the Falkirk and Stirling areas, in some sound cycling and walking routes, but they contain significant gaps that remain un-filled (see accompanying document "Joining the Dots" for a specific example) . Infrastructure as a whole needs to be coordinated with housing and other building developments, from roads/paths/rail etc to energy, water, digital communications etc. I don't underestimate the challenges here, given the fragmentation of organisations that deliver and maintain these things, but thinking about the bigger picture, with a coherent vision that is drawn up by all the stakeholders, is essential.

4.What policies are needed to improve, protect and strengthen the special character of our places?

Proactively involving public engagement in developing a clear vision of what is the "special character" of a place is essential here; it is not appropriate to have a top-down or externally-imposed version that may well end up hampering innovation and the viability of a place as a community. We need to move the emphasis to innovation and design that harmonises rather than just copies or blends-in (in which case, is it really anything new?). This is not merely an aesthetic matter, it affects how much we can update and introduce sustainable technologies, materials, processes and social structures that respect and complement the inherited character of a place while enabling all members of a community to thrive in a changing world.

5.What infrastructure do we need to build to realise our long term aspirations?

A complete shift in emphasis and priorities, as outlined above in question 1, is needed in order to reduce polluting emissions, direct hazards to people as they move around and to get the population in general more healthily active, with all the diverse benefits that brings (see the end of "Joining the Dots " for a list that includes some references).

I've referred earlier to a need for coherence in transport infrastructure. There is far too much fragmentation of modes and provision of very desirable schemes such as cycle hire, public transport etc.

An example in Stirling. The NextBike system has been in place for a few years now and is generally well-used and is quite easy to use, once you have signed up and paid your membership fee. Forthbikes have now installed lovely electric hire bikes here and in Falkirk and elsewhere BUT you have to join their own scheme, with a different registration, another fee to pay etc. This is a real barrier to use of hire bike schemes.

The Falkirk rail stations used to have another, different, hire provider, but it was just too inconvenient and costly to use, a taxi was actually cheaper than the membership fee! These schemes all need to be made seamless, from the potential user's perspective, with a "single ticket system" for all of them.

Better still, this should be the approach across ALL public transport, bringing together all the diverse rail/bus/bike passes, cards etc into a single, Oyster or (NL) OV Chipkaart type of payment system; one card, one membership or account, no delays or additional costs to the user who can then simply think "i want to go there..." and choose the most direct and suitable method, just remembering to check-in and out at the change points (and having credit on the card too!). It could conceivably be rolled out to taxis too, perhaps on an opt-in basis. Discounts for selected groups (elderly, students, unemployed etc) could be built into that system.

It is time for genuinely broad, strategic and "joined-up" thinking and action across the whole field of infrastructure and Scotland has an opportunity to lead the way in this. The present COVID pandemic and the generally creative response to it illustrates that imaginative, radical and positive changes are possible as well as vital for our long-term survival.

Most notable is that much of the innovation has come from individuals and the public in general, so it is time to break down the historical tendency to secrecy and top-down management and involve people outside the planning departments in finding solutions and shaping the design of our communities. Scotland will be the better for it.