

## BOOK REVIEW

# Seeing through the myths that shape urban transport thinking

Much of the conventional wisdom about urban transport policy and planning doesn't actually stand up to careful scrutiny, says **Steve Melia** in a new book, *Urban Transport Without the Hot Air*. **Alan Wenban-Smith** finds the argument persuasive

The 'Without the Hot Air' series at present includes books by David Mackay on Sustainable Energy and David Nutt on Drugs, while Volume 2 of Urban Transport looks at the US context. Both the title of the series and the choice of authors demonstrate a welcome commitment to mounting an authoritative challenge to conventional thinking. A tough brief and hard acts to follow – so how well does Steve Melia perform?

The book is in two parts: the aim of *Part 1* is to debunk conventional thinking, whether on the part of the public or the experts, by setting up a series of 'myths' (for example about the 'war on motorists' and the 'economic benefits of roads and airports'). The myths are juxtaposed with brief discussions of the issues, buttressed with well-chosen data. The strategic value of the evidence is much enhanced by being broader and/or longer-term than often cited in such cases. Nor are just fashionable targets selected, like the two mentioned above. The 'myths' include swipes at some policies beloved of Guardianistas, such as 'All we need is better public transport' and 'The car can be a guest in our streets'. Something for everybody then.

The unifying theme is the inadequacy of the narrow and short-term approaches of official policy to tackle the big strategic issues we face. In particular Melia lambasts the deficiencies of conventional economic thinking in the face of the existential challenge of climate change, and similar deficiencies in respect of the crucial impacts of urban traffic on the health and quality of life of citizens. His charge is that Governments of all parties have promoted the belief that they are 'trying to get people out of their cars' while in fact doing little to counter the many vested interests in the status quo.

*Part 2* examines how cities in the UK and elsewhere in Europe have sought to deal with 'the rising tide of cars' in the 50+ years since Colin Buchanan first used the phrase in *Traffic in Towns*. Melia's city-scale continental examples (Freiburg, Groningen and Lyon) will be familiar to many readers, but those at smaller scale probably less so (Louvain-la-Neuve, Vauban (in Fribourg), Stellwerk (in Cologne)). In the UK the examples chosen (in order of appearance and reverse order of depth) are London, Brighton, Cambridge, Bristol and Liverpool.

The examples are extremely varied, in the problems they faced, the political and professional imagination and energy applied, and the level of success achieved. However, two broad conclusions do stand out:

1. Congestion cannot be 'cured' by transport measures – if at all. It is an inseparable concomitant of a lively economy. Combatting congestion has, nevertheless, been the prime objective of UK transport policy since the 1960s, and remains the bedrock of transport economic appraisal to this day.
2. Successful urban transport policies can only be developed or recognised from the perspective of a wider view of what we want from cities. Measures aimed merely at reducing congestion will not do as well (even on congestion) as approaches that integrate cycling, walking and public transport, reduce car-dependency and improve urban quality of life.



In relation to this latter point, Melia's penultimate chapter looks beyond urban transport, to the pattern of land-use. He argues that urban intensification, *as long as it is allied with improving the quality of urban environment*, offers the best chance of meeting the challenges raised in *Part 1*. As a land-use planner deeply involved in the housing crisis, I strongly endorse this conclusion.

Current housing policy, driven by market preferences for greenfield land, are as ineffective as transport policies focused on curing congestion. They will not make housing either more affordable or more plentiful (why would builders increase output if prices are falling?). The highest level of housing output over the last 20 years was achieved during the currency of 'brownfield first' (1997-2005) – and the supply of brownfield land actually increased over this period. Transport and land-use policy could thus mutually reinforce each other – but only if the barriers between them are broken down.

Melia's book, on the contrary, shows how longstanding UK governance practices combine a culture of targets with undue reliance on market forces. This prevents proper consideration of a broader and longer-term view of the purposes of public policy and investment. Phil Goodwin's Foreword raises the question of how we should sequence the components of a sustainable transport policy, if unable to afford all at once. To this I would add the question how we can achieve better correspondence between housing and transport policies.

The achievement of this book is to raise such matters in an accessible (and affordable!) format – and to cast significant light on where the answers might be found. The same qualities will also forward the agenda set out in his final chapter, entitled 'What can I do?' **LTT**



Steve Melia lectures in transport and planning at the University of the West of England, advised government departments on sustainable transport in Eco-towns and advised the Olympic Park Legacy Company on the transport planning for the site of the London 2012 Games.

**Special Offer: 30% off for LTT readers.** UIT Cambridge is offering *Urban Transport without Hot Air* for just £13.99 in paperback (RRP £19.99) or £27.99 in hardback (RRP £39.99), with free UK delivery. Enter voucher code 'PR2015' in the cart at [www.uit.co.uk/urban-transport](http://www.uit.co.uk/urban-transport). Offer valid 27 June 2015 to 31 July 2015.



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