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Comfort or 'capitalist realism'?

Many are unhappy about the utilitarian nature of modern train design in the UK. We could learn much from elsewhere in Europe

▶ There are a lot of new trains - faster and with more seats. So that's good. Some of the nose cones are sleek and the exterior styling is impressive. But it doesn't seem like the same amount of thought has always been put into the design of train interiors and passenger comfort. Poor ride quality, harsh lighting and hard seats are common. Standard class provision feels more abundant - but at the same time sub-standard and utilitarian. It was as if the design brief stated "...imagine that the GDR still existed and that there are only two colours left in the world".

Why are train interiors being designed by this, does it matter and if so what's to be done about it? I suspect the reason it's happening is that we have a railway which is ruled by engineers and financial engineers plus an absentee landlord in the form of the Department for Transport. And with passengers flocking to rail (almost regardless of what's sometimes done to deter them) train design becomes all about meeting a seemingly unquenchable demand for rail travel. The big challenge is finding more places to cram more passengers on to more trains. So why make the extra effort on comfort and style?

There's also a hole in the centre of the railway, the place where British Rail used to do the R and D and think big thoughts about the issues that are less immediately critical. Like comfort and design.

But does it really matter? Not if you look only at passenger growth figures. But then

the national passenger surveys tell us that more people were satisfied with their last bus journey (88%) than were satisfied with their last rail journey (82%). But the patronage stats also show that passengers have been abandoning the bus whilst flocking to rail.

So let's go deeper, and then deeper still; beyond the facts and figures and down into the netherworld of feelings and emotions and instincts. Where even the colours and the sounds we experience influence our actions in ways we weren't even aware of. By way of example, when two different liveries for the existing Merseyrail fleet were presented to the public they rated the one with the livery they liked best better for comfort, despite the fact that aside from the livery the trains were the



same.

Meanwhile, in Japan, CityLab recently reported that suicides have decreased at stations where overhead blue lights have been positioned at platform ends. Because blue is a calming colour.

And then there's time. In many ways choosing to travel by train is a logical choice with journey time being a big factor. However, once you are on board your sense of time can start to become elastic. The commute or trip for work can take on value as a transitional or preparational time. A firewall between domestic and professional life. A time when zoning out is absolutely fine. Where 'anti-activity' is acceptable and to some extent revered ('the quiet coach'). Where train travel 'gifts' you a different kind of time.

Perhaps this is one reason why commuter trains can be as quiet as a monastery. Perhaps part of the agitation about having to stand, or travel in grimly designed trains where you don't have any space, is to do with the loss of this kind of time?

It's different for leisure travellers. The research suggests that leisure travellers actually want more stimulation en route as the journey is part of the purpose. If there's someone noisy in the morning commute it's much more likely to be a stray leisure passenger than a work traveller.

It's also interesting to speculate how the all pervading always online nature of modern life has flattened out the experience of rail travel - for travellers for work in particular. If you tune in beneath the silence of the commuters, and the sound of the train in motion, there is the insect-like clatter of tapping keyboards. The single seat on the train journey becomes an extension of the single desk at the office - rather than a prelude to it.

And whereas there is no doubt a strength to the argument that the ability to go online for work or leisure is an advantage public transport holds over being a car driver, could it be true that conversely this could make driving more attractive insofar as it becomes one of the few remaining places where you can force yourself to avoid going online? In which case does rail design need to offer something more?

I'm always interested in what's going on in the Netherlands, as their base level of rational pragmatism gives them space to be creative on transport (and public policy more widely),



“Speed and ease belong to the core business ... Comfort and experience are satisfiers” Dr Mark van Hagen



NS is working on train designs that enhance the experience for customers



and then to implement at scale - and boldly. On this topic this includes the work of Dr Mark van Hagen of NS, the Netherlands state railway, from whom a lot of the content of this article is inspired (although any misinterpretation is mine). NS has been trialling different approaches to the design of the environment that passengers experience at stations and on trains and methodically assessing how this influences the way passengers respond.

I could feel that NS had been benevolently messing with my head when I was last at the new Rotterdam Centraal station which despite its impressive scale has a sense of all pervading calm which you can feel literally slowing your mental metabolism.

One of the reasons why they have put a lot of thought into it is that interchanges are a big source of negative experiences for passengers. They are also places where time can slow down (because waiting for a train can be boring if the environment is too harsh and without facilities or distraction), or stressful (if you can't find your train). So they have sought to create an environment which all passengers can easily navigate and where they feel socially as well as physically safe, whilst providing facilities and

attractors (useful retail) where it doesn't get in the way of the station's essential function.

Some of this is also about ensuring passengers feel in control of an experience. Where the railway is getting the basics right, then adding the extras - like pianos on concourses - can give a lift to satisfaction scores (including for other aspects of the experience of the station which in reality haven't changed one iota).

With a large station it is easier for the same station to give different types of passenger what they want from the same building - but not so easy with train design. At present the prevailing style of modern train travel in the UK might be best described as 'capitalist realism'. You can sense the financial calculations about what was realistic to provide.

But travel on scenic and secondary lines in many parts of Europe now and you will find single car units which look extraordinarily generous and 'unrealistic' in what they gift to passengers, with huge near floor to ceiling windows and the feeling that the whole train is basically an observation car. Take the German ICEs with their family cabins, or the experiments with social and shared space that are increasingly taking place in train design.

None of this seems 'realistic' to us - but there

you will see it, pulling into the platform in Wroclaw or Dusseldorf.

However, in the UK there are also signs of restlessness against the capitalist realism of modern train design - with the backlash against hard seats on Thameslink and elsewhere. Scotland too is increasingly unwilling to accept that the trains serving some of the world's great railway journeys should be so uninspiring and without guaranteed access to the views.

I will leave the last words to Dr Hagen: "If the desire for speed and ease is met, the passenger will experience a sense of control and be satisfied with the journey (but no more than that). Speed and ease belong to the core business of train travel; they are generic and apply to each station and train. Comfort and experience are satisfiers." ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.

