

JONATHAN BRAY



Civilising the City of London

The City of London is definitely one to watch in terms of taming traffic and creating an attractive and enjoyable environment

▶ London is not like other world cities - it rarely does grids. Its villages that grew into each other around a dumbbell of medieval power with the City at one end and Westminster at the other. And neither the blitz nor the motorway builders got near to eradicating these fundamentals. Most markedly in the City which retained both its medieval structure of governance and its medieval street pattern (which is still imprinted between its steel and glass towers).

If London is now nothing like the rest of the UK then the City of London is nothing like the rest of London. Whilst the rest of central London buzzes at the weekend your footsteps echo in much of the Square Mile. As imperious as ever, the City has now shrugged off the banking crisis in which it was entangled and which nearly led to the ATMs running dry for you and me. And whilst the banking crisis set in motion the politics that continues to shake the UK and the wider world, here in the City the towers get bigger and more numerous.

Nearly half a million people already work in the Square Mile and another 90,000 are expected to work there over the next 10 years. With nearly everyone entering their office on foot the pavements are frequently not wide enough to contain the numbers of pedestrians. And when Crossrail opens there will be another jolt in the footfall as it is capable of increasing the numbers pouring out of Liverpool Street by 20% in the morning peak. That's as many as 150,000 people in the morning peak. This

is like three well-filled major football stadia emptying out on to that tight tangle of streets.

The practicalities of allowing these kind of volumes of walkers to keep moving is one of the drivers behind some of the remarkable changes that are happening in the City - which is making it one of the places to watch for radical shifts in urban transport policy. A place that has rooted out its pedestrian guard rails, made 'Twenty Plenty', adopted Vision Zero, slayed the traffic beast that was Bank, refuses planning permission to new towers unless



all deliveries are off-peak and which is quite happy that car commuting is all but dead (it's now the norm for new towers to have zero car parking but a thousand or more spaces for bike parking). Indeed the number of motor vehicles in the Square Mile has halved since 1999 whilst the number of people cycling has increased by a factor of three.

But before exploring how the guard rails came off the City of London Corporation's transport plans there's another reason why the City is adopting a more radical stance on transport. In short, it's because those City bosses with the corner views at the top of those City towers want it. "We have gorgeous offices and now we want gorgeous streets," as Iain Simmons, assistant director of city transportation at the Corporation, and my guide for my morning in the City, relays their words.

Even though the City sits alongside New York as a world leading financial centre it is not immune to the wider rebellion against the deadening horrors of the office cube farm. People want something more these days. Something that resembles, I don't know, let's call it a life, during working hours. Especially when tech allows you to do many white collar tasks from anywhere. Or as the City Property Association puts it, back in 1985 workplaces were overwhelmingly about desk space and then to a secondary extent about meeting space. Now the priorities are equally desk space, formal meeting space, informal meeting space and 'beyond the building'. In 2025 they say that the biggest factor will be 'beyond the building' followed by a mix of collaborative space, meeting and social space and desk space. The City's constraints limit the extent to which you can replicate the fun and games available on a big tech-style Silicon Valley campus which makes the role of the City's streets in providing that wider attractive and enjoyable environment all the more important.

So the City has been on a journey - one that continues and could (depending on the outcome of the current consultation on the City's first ever formal transport strategy) get far more radical yet. It's a journey which started with the IRA's version of the big bang in 1993 and the consequent rapid implementation of traffic restraint in the form of the 'ring of steel'. Then, in this sudden new context, this was followed by a series of carefully considered traffic restraint and urban



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realm schemes, combined with wider civilising measures to shut down rat runs and unwind the dismal ‘traffic first’ legacies of sixties highway engineers. As confidence has grown in this new approach so has the level of ambition with big schemes at St Pauls, Cheapside and Holborn Circus followed more recently by Bank Junction and Aldgate.

Iain emphasises that the Corporation has taken great care to take people with them to avoid the backlashes on individual schemes that can unsettle decision makers and knock the overall strategy back. So each scheme has its own dedicated stakeholder management lead, project board and extensive and continuous engagement with affected businesses and communities. There’s also inter-working with the City’s dedicated urban realm team, which commissions public art of wider significance. With the Corporation seen by the unforgiving eyes of City firms as having a good track record of competent delivery of quality schemes, they have also been prepared to let some of their oodles of cash trickle down into urban realm schemes that sit outside their own office doors thus getting more schemes delivered.

You can see the latest fruits of this careful and considered approach in the fabulous quality of the new park which now sits where traffic used to hammer round the old Aldgate gyratory. No-one without a drug habit or other unsavoury predilections would have cared to hang around the area before. Now it’s hard to imagine how it used to be, or why you wouldn’t want to have a sit down amid the carefully chosen and maintained greenery, the mesmerising tricks of the fountain’s water jets, the pocket parklets that now surround what is now a much busier church, or the splendid new cafe (a community interest enterprise). A cafe complete with its City-owned and marked chairs which seem to deter both thieves (who are perhaps dimly in fear of the City’s long memory and its mysterious standing whilst also reflecting some satisfying municipal enterprise in a locale that prizes privatisation above all things).

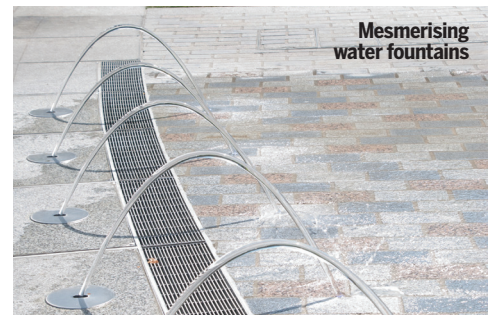
All of which it’s clear that Iain is justly proud of. As he is of the way in which the needs of bus operations were carefully studied so that the new arrangements would bring benefits of £2m per annum for London Buses. As Iain says, you can do a lot for the bus through careful study of how buses operate now and



A new park has been created, with a splendid cafe



City of London branded seats



Mesmerising water fountains

looking in detail about how they could work better in a new scheme without resorting to simply getting the white paint pot out and plonking in a bus lane to tick a box.

The same is true at Bank where an initial safety-driven traffic scheme has cut out all traffic other than bikes and buses with the careful design of the scheme saving three to five minutes per bus through the junction amounting to around 25 hours in the morning peak (8-10am) and making life easier for the 20,000 cyclists who now pass through it every day. But whilst Bank is better it still isn’t beautiful and the roadscape and its remaining traffic still dominate your vision. It’s only when you make the effort to lift up your eyes you see what a stunning ensemble of buildings it contains and what an amazing space it could be with a less messy streetscape and the right lighting. The task now, says Iain, is to make this into one of the world’s great urban squares.

Indeed there is much more that the new City of London transport strategy could further pick up the pace on. Many of the City’s streets

are still far from gorgeous and even when traffic has been taken off them through traffic schemes they still look like your regular vehicle racetrack. As part of this pedestrians too clearly need a better deal, as the Corporation’s own consultation document says, 84% of people think pavements are too crowded. There’s scope too for more radical approaches to freight (lorries and vans now make up 27% of daytime motorised traffic) with the potential for more consolidation of deliveries. The City is unique in many ways - including the resources at its disposal. But not so unique for what people want these days from a Central Business District. And definitely one to watch. ■

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.

