

JONATHAN BRAY



I build therefore I sprawl

Will where future Britons live rely on, or ignore, public transport? We should study examples of transit oriented development

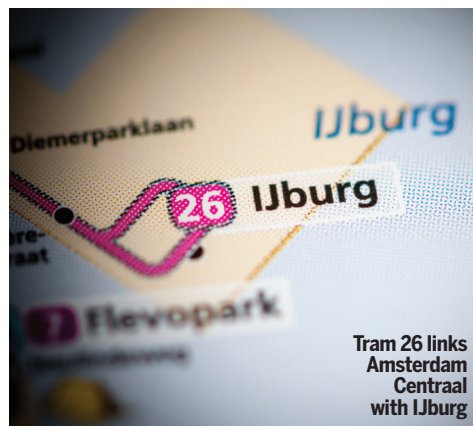
► Tens of thousands of homes lying empty whilst people sleep on the streets, not enough homes of the right type in the right places, unaffordable homes, not enough new homes being built. Britain has a housing crisis. Nothing new there. Cathy never did come home. But what is new is that Britain's housing crisis is now near the top of the political agenda. Everyone is now agreed: we need to build more homes. But where will they be and will the places where future Britons live rely on, or ignore, public transport?

How quickly Britain takes to the concept of transit oriented development could be key to answering that question. Transit oriented development means putting public transport at the heart of new developments which are also sufficiently dense to make that public transport viable. Developments where walking and cycling is easy and car use... not so much. Places which are not flats and houses and nothing else - but places which are mixed - combining housing with shops, healthcare, schools and other key services. Brownfield sites should be the first location choice and there should be a significant role for the public sector in their development (as someone needs to hold the ring to ensure quality, affordability, public transport access and that mixed developments happen).

In short they should be places to be. Places to really live. Places that people don't just sleep at night but places that might be destinations in themselves.

Last time I was in Amsterdam I got tram 26 from Centraal station to an entirely new residential area of the city called IJburg about which I'd read good transit oriented things. The tram romps along, soon escaping the claustrophobic world of selfie-taking, Harry Potter loving mass tourism in the city centre. And in 20 minutes flat it has tunneled and bridged its purpose-built way to the central boulevard of IJburg. Constructed on a series of seven artificial islands on Lake IJmeer on the city's eastern side, IJburg was created from scratch. Land, street layouts, buildings and all other components of a complete urban district have been developed in less than 10 years on what had previously been the seabed. The plan is that 45,000 people will live there.

Acclimatising in the wintery pre-dusk it took a while for its charms to beguile me; but after a while I got what they mean when they call



it the 'good ordinary' (which is harder than it looks to achieve). Sub-districts vary from a mix of denser residential and commercial blocks with an earth tone, house style (though with some subtle visual reminders of traditional Amsterdam architecture) and lower density family homes (again with lots of variations in design style). The more I wondered around the more the quality of the architecture and design became apparent as well as the peace and quiet, this place is reverential to its big skies and calm waters. And although some of the roads were generously proportioned for vehicle traffic; somehow the peaceful nature of the place seemed to be slowing everyone down. This place was somewhere where kids could wonder with abandon. You can see why (as a triangulation between suburb and city) there are more families in the place than was originally anticipated.

Pleasing to British eyes was that there seemed to be more independent shops and eateries around rather than our beloved chain stores and estate agents. It also seemed more diverse, settled and faintly egalitarian than its UK counterparts. But despite the mesmerising calm of IJburg (with the sun setting at a watery horizon at the end of its streets), wherever I was, I was rarely out of earshot of the sound of the next tram ('the people's gondola') rumbling its way through the spine of the entire development on its way to the city centre.

Good transit oriented development is not unique to the Netherlands of course. In our recent report (*The place to be - How transit oriented development can support good growth in the city regions*) we highlight Kirkstall Forge in West Yorkshire, Salford Quays and Northstowe (on the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway), as well as Kings Cross. We are also seeing a new push from transport authorities to build new housing as part of existing, or new transport infrastructure - including Transport for London converting tube station car parks to housing and Transport for Greater Manchester making housing part of its new Stockport bus interchange development. RATP takes this approach even further in the Greater Paris region with subsidiaries which build, develop and run housing - including social housing for public transport employees and new housing developments as part of new transport infrastructure (such as the scheme at Montrouge bus depot which will



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include 650 new flats).

Back in the UK, Kings Cross is a particularly good example of the key role of the public sector in controlling the pace and quality of regeneration and capturing the uplift in land value in order to fund the supporting infrastructure. The quality control role of the public sector in IJburg was also a major factor in its success with the city council ‘quality team’ having a ‘coach’ working on each part of the development who acted as a coordinating architect, ensuring that the building and block designs of individual designers combined coherently, and that potential conflicts between different users were also considered. All so that “nobody can simply choose the path of least resistance and trot out a design on autopilot”.

Again Kings Cross is a good example of a UK transit oriented development that the public sector ensured was not trotted out on autopilot. Unfortunately there are many residential schemes in the UK which may have good public transport access but feel transient, hollow and fixated on the financialisation of the proximity to views of water. There’s nobody about and nowhere to get a pint of milk.

And meanwhile, out of the cities, in too many places it’s like the nineties never ended: all big sheds, edgelands, none places and ever widening roads. Dystopia is the default and all viewed out of the window of your car as there are no bus stops, and on some new housing estates, no pavements either! Estates built

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without even the possibility of a conventional bus service because the developer says they won’t build the estate at all if they have to go to the expense of designing the roads to accommodate buses. An Englishman’s home is his castle - and the place where nobody can hear you scream from loneliness if the statistics are anything to go by. The danger is that a rush to build more houses will rush us into a future which is ugly and unworkable.

In our report we make five recommendations on how to make more quality transit oriented development happen in the UK.

Firstly, we need to ensure that we have a national planning framework that favours transit oriented development over car based sprawl.

The second is for a national funding framework that allows more options for ensuring that value uplift from new developments can be used to improve transport connectivity.

Thirdly, planning authorities need more influence over land held by agencies of national government which would be prime sites for transit oriented development schemes. In particular, city region authorities

in England need the same veto powers over Network Rail land sales that the Scottish Government currently enjoys.

Fourthly, transport authorities need more powers over stations where they have the ambition and capacity to take on those responsibilities.

And finally, we need to invest in the planning capacity of local authorities so they can respond effectively rapidly and imaginatively to opportunities for high quality transit oriented development.

All of this seems ambitious in the Westminster context but pales when compared with the Netherlands VINEX plan which increased housing supply by 7.6% in 10 years mostly through urban extensions (of which IJburg was part). And all supported by government funding for the necessary infrastructure. Things are getting ugly out there but it doesn’t need to be that way. We can make places to be. And with wider public transport patronage trends going weird on us, also places that need public transport to thrive. ■

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.

