

John Dales presentation to Wandsworth Society, February 2015

SAFE, SIMPLE, SUCCESSFUL STREETS

John Dales, Director of Urban Movement and a Trustee of Living Streets, attracted an excellent turnout for the February meeting. Originally a traffic engineer by profession he now describes himself as an urban designer – which, he suggested, all traffic engineers should see themselves as. John gave us the proposition that there should be virtually no 'roads' in London, just streets - and that the design of our streets should reflect and support their various functions, e.g. social and economic, not just movement. 'Manual for Streets' (2007) has helped get this wider thinking about our streets onto the agenda.

John amusingly illustrated how streets and roads differ in their representation in our culture, including media as diverse as LP covers, movies, book titles and social media ('Street Life' being a prime example). Connotations of 'streets' and 'roads' tend to differ - compare 'street party' and 'road rage', or 'The word on



the street' with 'The rules of the road'. This reflects John's view that streets are for people. He used a quote from Al Murray [AKA the pub landlord] to illustrate the self-perpetuating nature and damaging implications of car-dependence: "Parents drive their children to school in order to protect them from danger presented by other 'school-run' parents; so we'll end up with a generation of flat-footed, asthmatic kids, with no sense of direction".

Designing streets isn't straightforward, since people have differing needs and preferences, which may change over time. How to measure street changes isn't obvious; making a street more interesting might mean that someone lingers (perhaps even chatting to others), increasing their journey time.

Although walking's the fundamental mode of transport - nearly everyone walks and the national foot ownership rate is c.2/person - it's often undervalued by businesses and decision-makers; TfL research however shows that walking is usually the local high street's most valuable mode of access. Even so, we've all experienced street environments that seem designed to discourage people from walking, whether it be cutting off obvious 'desire lines' with pedestrian guard-rail or unfairly dividing up highway space between modes, resulting in pedestrians spilling onto the carriageway in order simply to make progress.

John recently contributed to an international benchmarking study of cycling for TfL (see both <https://www.tfl.gov.uk/cdn/static/cms/documents/international-cycling-infrastructure-best-practice-study.pdf> and <https://www.tfl.gov.uk/cdn/static/cms/documents/international-cycling-infrastructure-best-practice-study-appendix.pdf>). Cities with high modal share of cycling take it seriously as a mode of transport, in contrast to the 'lip service provision' commonly seen here.

One reason is that designing for cycling in successful cycling cities isn't ghettoised - it's just a normal part of professionals' jobs. A holistic, practical approach to street design is needed, asking 'what are we trying to achieve here?' 'What is the purpose of the street furniture?' - rather than slavish adherence to standards.



It was encouraging to see examples of improved streets in other London boroughs, including nearby in Clapham (see left).

As the wide-ranging Q&A session highlighted, Wandsworth Council hasn't, yet, sought John's advice in our own borough. Achieving change, and especially introducing new street layouts, isn't easy; barriers are political, social, and professional. However, Einstein's axiom that 'We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them' is clearly demonstrated in our streets.

To those expressing concerns about motorists, John reiterated his remarks about the fundamentals. What do our cities need; what makes sense, in terms of transport, for the city? These should be our guiding principles in thinking about we design and manage our streets.

I couldn't have put it better myself.

Susie Morrow
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