

Mobility Book

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Introduction

In the 1950s as a primary school child in Oldham (UK) I had very limited mobility measured in terms of the number of miles I ranged over each week. Life was intensely focused on the locality, intense contact with other children who lived within 500metres of my home, and intense outdoor play for as many hours as my parents would allow (usually more than they would allow). We children decided when to go out, where to go, with whom and what to play and from an early age acquired a great deal of proficiency in negotiation skills, dispute resolution and independent decision-taking. Life was very good, full and rich and the low level of mobility contributed to that richness. Time that might have been spent in a car being taken to organized “things” was put to good use in ways we decided. We did not need to roam very far from home and we enjoyed our local streets, second world war air-raid shelters (dark, dirty and mysterious) and large amounts of untidy urban space.

Daily activities included digging in clay pits to release ground water, playing on “the woods” (large structures of substantial planking erected to support an unstable wall on a public building) and playing in derelict homes scheduled for demolition in the massive “slum clearance” fetish of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Oldham. As an aside they were not really slums but that is another story about the destruction of traditional urban communities and the compulsory relocation of thousands of residents to remote outer areas which then necessitated more travel to do anything i.e. more mobility.

Mobility measured crudely in terms of how many kilometers we move around every day has nothing whatsoever has to do with quality of life, rich human interaction, satisfaction, happiness and a detailed knowledge and familiarity with places and the things we chose to do in those places. I would go further and say that the limited mobility we experienced actually contributed to the development of self-confidence, spatial ability and relationship skills.

It is fashionable in an age of high mobility to dismiss these views as another example of looking through “rose-tinted spectacles” or even worse as the ramblings of older people reminiscing about a golden age or signing up to the “things were better in my youth than now” perspective. These dismissive comments should be dismissed. The reality of those years in the 1950s is documented in many oral histories and contemporary documentaries and is rich in corroboration.

The importance of these personal stories lies in their ability to question the centrality of the mobility paradigm that grew in strength through the decades after 1960 and continued to grow in strength in the first two decades of the 21st century. Whatever high levels of mobility have brought to enrich the lives of children or improve the quality of life of all of us, and the balance sheet is far from positive, it is clear that low mobility was associated with high level of satisfaction, enjoyment and developmental significance.

The low mobility world of the 1950s was embedded in a wider life style and societal context that has been largely swept away in so-called developed societies or post-industrial societies. The Oldham of my childhood in the 1950s was characterised by large numbers of local shops within walking distance, a vigorous and enormous open air market and indoor market (Tommyfield) again within walking distance, local parks, a local library, a local swimming pool (Robin Hill Baths) and perhaps even more surprisingly a public wash house where my mother took the family washing and joined in with many other women to do the washing in an enormous, steamy room full of washing and drying facilities (and from the point of view of a 6 year old boy, full of very scary women). This was less than 500m from my home and on the way to my primary school (Dunbar St infants).

At some point in time around the age of 10 or 11 the world got bigger as we children roamed even further afield but once again under our own steam, control and decision-taking responsibility. We used the number 9 bus to travel approximately 8kms to a huge countryside park (Tandle Hills) and played all day in wooded areas with numerous paths and byways. We discovered the train and went to Manchester, 12kms away on a line now closed and replaced by a tram system from Oldham Werneth station to Manchester Victoria. We then wandered aimlessly and slowly around the centre of Manchester and then went home.

Fast forwarding to the year 2015 we find a lively discussion amongst

architects, urban planners and transport experts about compact cities, sustainable cities and “children’s independent mobility” (CIM). We are told that increasing urban density is a good thing, that we should increase the amount of walking and cycling and that we should reduce car use. These are all laudable aims but surely it is necessary to try and understand why these things were the norm in the 1950s in many parts of Britain and were then swept away by decades of thoughtless road building, tearing down the kind of densely populated streets we are now trying to reinvent and encouraging car use even for very short journeys.

Just as stories about life in the 1950s reveal the emptiness and sham of stories around the wonderful things that flow from higher mobility so the same stories tell us that there are many examples of sustainable cities and child friendly cities and they did exist and we did destroy them. If we really do want to restore this kind of world with all its benefits we can only do so if we redefine our love affair with mobility, redefine it as an historical blip, show how lower mobility produces magnified benefits and embed 21st century “new” urban thinking in a strong low mobility context. That is the objective of this book.

During the development of these ideas in the next 14 chapters it will be important to keep uppermost in our minds the very clear implication of “low mobility”. Low mobility is a decoupling concept. This book argues that we must decouple mobility from its association with progress, happiness and quality of life. The consumption of ever-increasing amounts of distance does not increase happiness or improve quality of life and is associated with a growing list of negative consequences. Low mobility quite simply suggest that we can all benefit enormously from reduced levels of physical travel and an intensification of what we do within smaller geographical areas. This will not “sit well” with the world view of most of us in 2015 but the point of this book is to demonstrate that a low mobility world has a great deal to offer and its opposite is a logical impossibility. We cannot accommodate an annual average percentage increase in distance travelled for all 7 billion of us so we may as well start explaining, designing and delivering a low mobility alternative.

It could not be clearer that most governmental statements in the UK about new urban design or so-called “active” transport (this means walking and cycling) are meaningless unless we engineer this paradigm shift from high mobility to low mobility. Such a paradigm shift also involves a shift in language. The phrase “low mobility” whilst accurately describing a world characterized by fewer kilometres travelled per person per annum

fails to convey the richness of a world characterised by many more destinations opportunities within a much smaller physical area and a world where enormous amounts of time and money (and pollution) are not devoted to the business of accessing distant places. This is a world where we can do far more “things” within walking and cycling distance of our homes than is now the case. It is a world that can be described as “the city of short distances” for those who live in urban areas and it is a world where accessibility has replaced mobility as a key policy objective.

Mobility is a very slippery concept and for a word and an ideology that is used to support much of the contemporary rhetoric about progress, economic growth and modernity this is rather odd. Mobility is associated with more wealth, more social mobility, opportunity and more happiness and all these notions are untested and cannot be corroborated by reference to an evidence base. The attentive reader will struggle in vain to find a convincing argument based on evidence that higher levels of mobility equates to higher levels of quality of life, happiness, social justice or health.

At the risk of labouring the point (but it is necessary to labour the point given the paucity of clear thinking on mobility) let us imagine a report from a CEO to the annual general meeting of shareholders who announces with great pleasure that the company has had a very successful year:

“In the past 12 months we have moved all our outward freight shipments twice as far as in the previous 12 months and we have achieved an increase in the daily commuting distance for all our staff from 20kms per day to 50kms per day. More significantly as a sign of our commitment to expansion and innovation the inputs into our manufacturing process now come twice as far as in the previous 12 months and the food in our excellent staff restaurants now travels on average 1200kms for one lunch sitting compared to 800kms 12 months ago.”

Is this a very successful company? Whether it is successful or not the company has fully embraced the ideology of mobility. Everything that can move now moves much more than it did in a previous accounting period so if we are to celebrate mobility and encourage higher level of mobility (which we do most of the time) it follows that we must congratulate this company on its success.

The reality, however, is different. The CEO's annual report will strike most people as rather odd. There is something not quite right about it and the thing that is not quite right about it is that mobility is problematic. It is not an unalloyed good thing. It is not praiseworthy if we increase levels of mobility. It could signal the opposite of success if we choose to source inputs into our manufacturing process that originate thousands of kilometres away and en route pass nearer sources. Boege (1995) revealed the depth of this inefficiency in her classic yoghurt study which we return to in a later chapter. For now we note that the substitution of far for near is illogical and perverse. It generates extra kilometres of movement. It is a sham.

The CEO's report could be replicated with an average family living in urban England. If that family has to double its kilometres of travel to go shopping, go to school or attend a hospital appointment is that a good thing? If we think mobility is a good thing then these increases in mobility are a good thing but they are not. It rarely attracts the interest and excitement of urban and transport planners that we routinely create the city of longer distances by closing post offices, closing smaller primary schools and centralizing hospitals at ever-more remote locations, all of which add to the amount of time that must be allocated to our journeys, and then put time savings at the center of our decisions making and appraisal when we come to look at ways of prioritizing spending on transport projects. This is clearly illogical and self-defeating but most professionals seem to be content with managing policies that directly contradict each other.

If we want to set out to increase mobility it is rather easy to do. We can start by closing local hospitals as Plymouth (SW England) did in the 1970s. If we close local hospitals and build a new one that is many miles away from where people live we force users to travel the extra miles and increase mobility. Derriford hospital (the new one that replaced 3 closed hospitals) was the subject of a major transport study in 1995 that revealed a car-trip generation of 3 million pa. This added many problems of congestion and delay to the highways system and forced people to travel further. Mobility went up but so did the difficulties associated with accessing health care and so did expenditure on highway "improvements" (i.e. extra road space) to cope with increased demand. Higher mobility also added to inequality. Those with cars could access the new hospital relatively easily but those without cars could not. Increased mobility comes with very serious consequences which is a redistribution of costs and difficulty to penalise poorer groups in society.

In Oldham in the 1950s it was not necessary to consume so much distance each day. Shops, schools, markets, health care, libraries and swimming pools were all within easy reach. We accomplished all our daily travel purposes on foot, within a very short time budget and at a very low cost and in a curious kind of way contemporary urban and transport planning tries to recreate this mixture but on the back of higher mobility. This was clearly demonstrated by Illich in his 1974 publication “Energy and Equity”:

“Beyond a certain speed, motorised vehicles create remoteness which they alone can shrink. They create distances for all and shrink them for only a few”

Illich (1974), page 42

The Derriford Hospital example is a clear example of decision-making creating remoteness, increasing distances to be travelled and penalising those who do not have the means to overcome the barriers of longer distances.

Holzapfel (2012) has shed a considerable amount of light into the dark corners of the mobility debate. He makes very clear links between mobility, accessibility, urban design and quality of life through two accounts of daily life and travel choices in German localities:

“If I’m going to be talking about mobility today, I should start with two fictitious everyday scenarios, which illustrate people’s situations: Mr Branger lives somewhere small near Kassel called Kleinalmerode. He works in a large factory approximately 50km away. As far as shopping goes, of course, there’s nothing left in Kleinalmerode. But Mr Branger has an estate car, and regularly drives to a supermarket 10-15km away. If he can’t do it, then his wife does, in her small second car, which she also uses to take the children to kindergarten and school, as Kleinalmerode doesn’t have a school or kindergarten any more. As a result the Branger family has built a lovely, big and low-cost detached home on an inexpensive plot of land, with lots of space round about outside.

The second everyday scenario shows the Kebberich family, who live in a terraced house in the old part of Tübingen. He or she – let’s leave that open for the moment – cycles to work at the university; the other half has a part-time job, let’s say, in a fashion boutique nearby. The children go to a nearby school. They can get to this school on foot. The family’s small car is parked little-used in a communal

garage nearby. The Kebberichs use the small space in front of the house as a garden. The couple regularly discuss whether it wouldn't make sense to get rid of the car, because the mileage is very low, and when necessary sign up to a car sharing scheme.

Which family is more mobile? The Kebberichs in Tübingen or the Branger family in Kleinalmerode with their detached home – whose adjoining double garage already has space reserved for the children, so that perhaps they too can have wheels later on. Who lives better? Where's the better place to be living? In the detached house in the open countryside or in Tübingen?"

Source: Holzapfel (2012)

It is clear from these two accounts that a high quality of life with a large number of associated benefits for public policy and expenditure can be the result of lower mobility. The task for all of us is to elevate this rather obvious story line into a clear policy imperative and one that can replace the dangerous, outmoded and perverse "mobility is good" paradigm.

In the remainder of this book I will attempt to demonstrate that mobility is a chaotic concept already in a state of collapse as a result of internal contradictions. The elevation of mobility to a central position in political, economic, architectural and planning discourse represents a significant error in those areas and social science discourse in general. The time is now right to correct that error. Mobility as a goal or a central organising principle is irrelevant and should be deleted from the transport and urban planning lexicon. Other things matter much more including time budgets, fiscal prudence, equality, accessibility, and health and all these dimensions of everyday life can be enriched within a low mobility framework and will remain unobtainable if we continue to pursue high mobility goals.