PERGAMON

Journal of Transport Geography 11 (2003) 241

JOURNAL OF TRANSPORT GEOGRAPHY

www.elsevier.com/locate/jtrangeo

TGRG page

Transport and the urban renaissance agenda

Although there remains a healthy debate over the depth and sustainability of the trend, there is no doubt that 'cities are back' as crucial drivers of regional and national economic prosperity. In recent years, there has been considerable attention paid to the concept of urban competitiveness, or more simply trying to understand the factors that explain why some cities have successfully negotiated the transition to the 'new' or 'knowledge' economy, while others have continued to struggle to regenerate themselves.

There is now a relatively rich and diverse literature on the various dimensions of urban economic competitiveness, and those key public policy interventions that have helped make the 'urban renaissance' a reality in some cities. Many of these contributions have focused on the 'asset bundles' that cities must have if they are to be competitive in the global marketplace. However there is, as yet, only a limited understanding of the role that transport infrastructure and services can play in this renaissance process.

This is because our understanding of how transport underpins the urban economy has yet to fully move beyond the more traditional conceptions of how the economy is organised. Traditional economic models—and even, to some extent, 'the new economic geography', tend to concentrate on the role of transport in shaping the time and resource dimensions of economic space. This is why there remains significant (and valuable) energy devoted to understanding, for example, how the pattern of international air transport linkages can affect a city's economic performance and its propensity to generate innovative products and services. However, this focus tends to be at the expense of fully understanding how transport also helps to shape the *places* in which economic wealth is generated. With an exciting new agenda emerging which seeks to better understand how the concept of 'quality of place' can drive economic development—such as by attracting talented people to work in the creative industries—there is a real opportunity to develop a new niche for transport research that reinvigorates the study of urban transport systems and locates more precisely their roles in the wider processes of spatial restructuring.

There are already many examples across the world of innovative transport investments that have played a key role in developing a greatly enhanced 'quality of place', in addition to other direct benefits such as reducing congestion or improving access to employment. In Europe, many modern tram and metro systems have been designed to enhance the 'liveability' of the city by enabling people to live closer to the city centre, increasing activity densities and generating a renewed vibrancy of social exchange which brings with it clear economic opportunities. Some cities, perhaps most notably Strasbourg, have used investment in surface light rail to drive a process of physical renewal of their streetscape. This not only improves aesthetic amenity, but can also help recreate a vision of urban living in which the car no longer dominates the daily rhythm of the city. In North America, Portland, Oregon has followed a similar policy trajectory, with intensive regeneration of the historic downtown in large part based on the opportunities for urban living and consumption brought about by light rail transit.

The TGRG has a long history of supporting research into the role of urban transport systems in economic and social development. In the mid 1980s, the Group sponsored innovative research addressing how investment in high quality fixed urban transport systems represented a signal that the processes of urban decline—in large part due to the orthodoxy that policy should cater for unrestricted use of the car—should not be seen as inevitable. Almost 20 years later, with the urban renaissance agenda having developed considerably, there exists renewed opportunity for updated research in this innovative, and critically important, area of public policy. Starting at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in London this September, the TGRG will seek to use its expanding international relationships to stimulate research in this field as part of its continuing commitment to foster excellent, policy-relevant research in all aspects of transport geography.

Iain Docherty
Department of Urban Studies
University of Glasgow
25-29 Bute Gardens
Glasgow G12 8RS, UK
Tel.: +44-141-330-3668; fax: +44-141-330-4983

doi:10.1016/S0966-6923(03)00034-6