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TGRG page

RGS-IBG Annual Conference, London 2006

The annual Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) Conference was held in London at the end of August and the Transport Geography Research Group (TGRG) was as usual well represented. This year the Group sponsored two sessions, on Gendered Mobilities and Gateway Cities, and both were full of stimulating papers delivered by colleagues from around Europe and beyond. The increasing internationalisation of our sessions is one of the best aspects of recent RGS-IBG conferences, and we hope to continue welcoming international guests long into the future. Also very pleasing was the number of non-TGRG sessions using transport – or at least the concept of mobilities – as their focus, and four full sessions considered methodologies appropriate to learned study within the 'new mobilities paradigm'. Of course the rise of interest in this area is hugely welcome and presents an opportunity that should not be missed by the transport geography community.

The TGRG this year also ran a field trip to London's Docklands to look at the Olympic 2012 site and its supporting transport infrastructure plans. The trip, arranged by *Journal of Transport Geography* Editor and former TGRG Chair Richard Knowles, of Salford University, was hugely interesting. Delegates went first to the headquarters of the Olympic Delivery Agency (ODA), high in the brand new Barclays world HQ at Canary Wharf which affords splendid views over the East End of London and the Olympic site itself, where we learned about the transport plans in some detail, before being taken on some of the existing services and receiving more information about the specific plans for infrastructure and service upgrading on the ground.

Obviously there is a very significant level of planning going into providing for the arrival of the athletes and spectators in five and a half years' time. Of note to those with an interest in such matters was the institutional organisation put in place to ensure the punctual delivery of all of the Olympic infrastructure – a traditional 'authority' with a defined hierarchy and strong statutory powers as opposed to the more fashionable 'partnership' approach adopted in efforts to achieve other goals. The discussions also revealed the importance of devolution in the efficacy of both bidding and preparing for the Games. Until the recent establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA), which includes an Assembly and the office of the Mayor, (currently Ken Livingstone), London functioned – astonishingly, in any rational analysis – without an overarching governing institution. Instead, the 32 Boroughs and the City of London each held unitary authority status and as such no-one was in a position to take a strategic view or even act as a spokesman for the city (which, let's remember, is just about the most significant in the world in terms of its status as a financial centre). Under the devolved arrangements, the Mayor has taken full advantage of his powers to set up a strong, effective, highly regarded and extremely ambitious transport organisation, Transport for London (TfL), which has responsibility for the delivery and regulation all of London's transport modes except heavy rail (and some of this is transferring across in the near future). TfL is, as would be expected, closely involved in the Olympic planning activities.

The extremely successful Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002 showed that fractionated governance arrangements and the vagaries of deregulated transport – legacies of the Conservative administrations of 1979–1997 – can be negotiated in the staging of a major international event. But the scale of the Olympic Games, the infrastructure needed to support them, the size of the host city and the considerably larger number of potential actors under the pre-devolved governance arrangements would have posed entirely different strategic and logistical difficulties for the bid organisers. Certainly the ODA representatives we spoke to were very glad indeed not to have to function in the complex multi-actor system of governance in place in London prior to the arrival of the current devolved structure.

With City Regions now back on the agenda elsewhere in England following the demise of plans for elected regional governments, it is to be hoped that the positive lessons of the GLA, combined with those of its transport system such as bus regulation and conurbation-wide strategic planning and large scale on-time, on-budget delivery, can be learned in other cities across the country.

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