

Address to the Institute of Engineers NSW Transport Panel

Tuesday 1st May, 2001

FOOT N' MOUTH - TALKING WALKING

A report from the Walk21 Conference, Perth, WA

Ian Napier, *urbis keys young*

INTRODUCTION

I am this evening attempting the impossible. I have to squeeze into the next, say forty minutes, 24 hours of formal presentations and countless other hours of informal exchanges that occurred over three days at the Perth Walk 21 Conference this February.

A lot of talking but actually, apart from the Sydney 'warm up', not much walking, ie not much FOOT but plenty of MOUTH.

This is not totally divorced from my topic, however. The paper I gave at the conference was about revealing the walking economy and not long after I got back I received a message from one of the UK delegates we had hosted here in Sydney to the effect that their walking economy was dead. Foot and Mouth has virtually closed down the UK countryside - at least all off-road movement, notably the network of footpaths and rights-of-way that have crisscrossed the country for centuries. In the process it is having a major impact on the local economies that have come to depend on walkers. (It is true that other visitors have also been deterred but it is interesting that most of the roads remain open. It would seem that it is people on foot who spend money and for a significant number even a drive in the country is not much fun without the opportunity to get out and walk.)

So TIME is something we are short of this evening but it was one of the recurring topics that came up often at the conference (together with its travel companions and relations, distance and speed). It is perhaps this particular travel mode's distinguishing characteristic - **it is slow**.

We learned, for instance, that lack of time was the reason given by over 50% of survey respondents for NOT walking.

Rebecca Solnit, the author of 'Wanderlust, A History of Walking', however notes that she likes walking BECAUSE it is slow. She says

'I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought or thoughtfulness.'

Ellen Vanderslice, President of America Walks, in her keynote address also reminded us that speed is not everything, but she quoted no less an authority on life than Mae West who apparently observed that

'Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly'

Ellen, when not trying to manage her national federation of pedestrian advocacy groups, practice as an architect and consultant, not to mention being wife and mother, also happens to be an accomplished jazz singer and song writer with a number of CDs to her name. It was therefore appropriate that she should structure her address in the musical format as '**Improvisations on a theme**'

This phrase could equally well sum up the whole conference. The theme was obvious enough. The improvisations or variations on the theme were many.

Let me therefore borrow her structure if not in every case her improvisations or vignettes. She had seven. I will try and squeeze into four namely..

* Walking as a **utilitarian means of travel**

* Its role in the **history of planning** and the **layout of settlements** and their **future design**

* Its importance as a **health promoting** activity and as a **pleasurable** activity in its own right

* The **economic, political and behavioural** aspects including the organisational structures that can best support and promote walking.

The 43 speakers from a wide range of fields provided plenty of improvisations and variations on the theme. Their topics were divided into two streams which could loosely be classified as

* **Pedestrians - urban/utilitarian** and

* **Walkers - recreational/rural**

The difference between a '**pedestrian**' and a '**walker**' has been described thus -

Walkers drive to their walk, whereas pedestrians walk to their drive.

While these may be categorised as two separate breeds with different needs, there is considerable overlap. Indeed, one could be viewed as a set within the other. We are all at some stage or another pedestrians, yet not all of us would consider ourselves recreational walkers, let alone serious long distance walkers or athletic race walkers.

My personal view is that if we can upgrade the safety, convenience and amenity of conditions for pedestrians going about their daily tasks it will also encourage people to walk for recreation and health. You would imagine that to a health professional it wouldn't matter whether the exercise was part of normal activities or a special recreational pursuit provided there was sufficient of it and it was regular (in the case of walking, about 1/2 hour per day). The advocates of 'Active Transport', however, will point out that discretionary recreational exercise is the first to be dropped when we come under time stress and that it is much better to build into our normal daily patterns activity that gives us adequate exercise.

That said, another keynote speaker, Rodney Tolley, who heads up the Centre for Alternative and Sustainable Transport in the UK, is currently exploring the links between recreational and 'utilitarian' walking. If you have discovered the pleasure of walking for its own sake and maintain a reasonable level of fitness as a result, then you are in a better position to discover that these things called legs can also be used as a readily available and cheap transport mode from time to time.

WALKING AS TRANSPORT

Statistics - how much walking do we actually do?

Werner Brog from the German Institute, Socialdata, posed the question

'Does anybody still walk nowadays?'.. and if so, *'is it just young and old people who are pedestrians or perhaps walking is just really limited to inner city shopping and hiking on Sunday?'*

He sought to provide the facts to correct the prejudices against walking as a means of transport putting the proposition that walking deserves to be taken seriously in both urban and transport planning. For too long mobility statistics have

tended to ignore short trips, particularly walking trips associated with other modes, and in addition surveys and data collection have focussed heavily on the journey to work.

Brog points out that it is not enough to study individual phenomena via, for instance, traffic counts, but rather that we need an understanding of complete out-of-home activity patterns considering all modes used - especially walking. This has been available since 1975 in Germany through the use of travel diaries (and similar data are now also available in NSW through the Travel Data Centre's Household Survey material)

It is only when we start to examine all the legs of a trip or journey that we begin to appreciate how important walking is and how providing secure comfortable walking conditions is in the interests of every mobile person.

Carmen Hass-Klau in her address also made reference to walking statistics. She noted that walking would appear to have declined, both in terms of the number of journeys on foot and the total distance covered each year (although the average walking journey distance has remained fairly constant over time and over different countries). She nevertheless cast doubt on the accuracy of walking statistics and their ability to provide the whole picture, claiming that in travel surveys walking is always underestimated, that the counting techniques are not very accurate and that linked trips are rarely properly identified.

Relationship with Other Modes

- with private vehicles

Walking has its intrinsic advantages and its limitations - but it can't be discussed in isolation. It must be seen in context.. We think most often of its complementary role with public transport but even when mostly relying on the private car, walking has a supportive role.

Before we rely **too** heavily on the private motor car, it is relevant to ask 'how long will it (or more correctly, the oil on which it currently depends) be around? This question was addressed at the conference by Brian Fleah from WA. Now I know this topic and Brian's propositions have been the subject of a previous meeting in this forum at which Dave Kilsby reported on another conference, so I won't dwell on this further. Brian however linked his predictions about a severe decline in the availability of oil, and the slow uptake in viable alternatives, to the West Australian government's 'Travelsmart' program. This is one of the initiatives aimed at reducing the predicted 4.7 million car trips in the Perth Metropolitan area down to 3 million within the next 30 years. Brian's point was that, if you accept for a moment that we are starting to run out of oil and that the pace of bringing on-stream substitute fuels and technologies is not nearly fast enough to catch up with the growing global demand, then what strategies do we have in place to temper that demand?

Travelsmart was also discussed by two other speakers, Gary John and Catherine Baudains and is worth a few moments here.

The program adopts individualised marketing to induce travel behaviour changes over a 10-year period. It is about encouraging a lot of people to make small changes in behaviour that cumulatively makes a big difference. A pilot program has already resulted in a 14% drop in car travel and significant increases in walking, cycling and public transport use, improvements which have been found to have been sustained when surveyed a couple of years later. While such individually targeted marketing is not cheap - the planned program to reach 600,000 residents over a 10 yr period is estimated at \$26 million, the returns are predicted to be considerably greater - estimated to be \$1 billion in savings to the community over 15 years.

- Integration with Public Transport

Firstly, a quick return to the treatment of walking in statistics. You will notice that in much of the literature walking and cycling are combined and in that Travelsmart material you may have noticed that they are lumped in with public transport as 'Environmental-friendly modes'. Sometimes the phrase used is 'alternative', 'non-motorised' even 'slow', but better than being ignored altogether under the 'lost souls' column of 'OTHER'.

This was a point made by Professor Carmen Hass-Klau complaining that such a practice leads to an impoverished understanding of each mode, concealing their unique and quite different characteristics. She illustrated this by asking us to imagine what practical policies could develop if we defined a single mode called 'high speed trains and shipping'!

I noted that when Prof Hass-Klau came through to Sydney after the conference she was billed as a public transport expert and her writings on pedestrian issues were hardly mentioned, if at all. This is consistent with her own observation that walking has always been a fringe subject in transport planning and engineering and hardly a significant and decisive part of land use planning either - surprising, in that more people walk than use any other form of transport and that it is such a crucial part of everyday life.

She acknowledged that walking and pedestrian behaviour are complex issues but that we will never fully understand them until they are accorded the same professional respect as is paid to motoring or public transport use. But even these modes will not be understood properly without an understanding of the contribution of walking as a stage, short or long, in virtually all other journeys.

She then sought to explain the sometimes-complex relationship between walking as a mode on its own and as an essential component of public transport journeys. While a good public transport service can entice people out of their cars or discourage their acquisition in the first place, thus in the process increasing the number of partial journeys on foot, a better public transport service can reduce the number of walk-only trips and reduce the walk length because of the density of the public transport.

To further complicate the issue, if this is reversed and the level of service is reduced, the result might initially be longer walk journeys by those without cars but in the longer run will have the effect of reducing walking by inducing more car ownership (and therefore car use).

If, on the other hand, a bus service is replaced by a light rail service offering a faster but less dense route structure the number of walk trips may go down but the average walk distances go up as passengers demonstrate a willingness to walk further to modes offering faster and more reliable levels of service.

She then drew a link between the introduction of light rail, or indeed underground metro systems, and the ability to introduce rigorous traffic and parking restraint measures, including large-scale pedestrianisation. To further demonstrate the complexity she threw into the equation the parameters of political forces, the economy of the city and the quality of the shopping.

Simplistically (as I understand it) the relationship goes something like this.. Light rail (or Metro) successfully introduced, generates political confidence through favourable public opinion and creates the technical and political conditions to enable more radical traffic restraint measures and extensive pedestrianisation. The resulting pedestrian-friendly conditions induce longer average walking distances and (either as a result, or coincidentally) richer cities, supporting better quality shops with more attractive variety.

Prof Hass-Klau would be the first to point out some of the tenuous connections in this, but her point, as I said, was to demonstrate the level of complexity, the poverty of data and the need for more research (as any good academic would!). But she also wishes to demonstrate that certain combinations of circumstances can produce the level of income and economic growth that everybody wants, together with a pleasant environment in which walking becomes a favoured high-status mode - not a last resort for the poor.

-Cycles, Scooters and Toy Vehicles

The sharing of pedestrian routes and spaces with a variety of wheeled vehicles is a thorny issue touched on by a few speakers but deserving a presentation on its own and not something I am going to tackle here. We accept and design for wheelchairs as part of the pedestrian environment, but what will we do with a growth in the number of electric scooters as baby-boomers start to need more mobility aids? ...or if the fad for these little 'Razer' push scooters doesn't fade but grows and converts to the motor-assisted variety? Could we ever find sufficient space to introduce the network of 'slow-ways' that Elias Duek-Cohen talked about?

WALKING IN PLANNING HISTORY AND SETTLEMENT DESIGN

No matter their central thesis or professional background, it was difficult for any of the speakers to avoid comment on the physical conditions in which walking occurs. A number traced the role of walking and subsequent transport modes in the structure of settlements and the nature of their land uses, while others delighted, appalled and amused us with images of a variety of walking environments.

We were treated in one of Ellen Vanderslice's vignettes, and more comprehensively in Professor Peter Newman's address, to an historical analysis of the growth of settlements. Limited for millennia by the distance one could walk, it is only relatively recently have we seen the expansion of these settlements with the introduction of horse-drawn, steam then electric buses, trams and trains, typically along defined corridors. Finally, with the widespread availability of the private motor vehicle, we have seen the rapid expansion and infill between these corridors to form the familiar modern conurbations. Most of you will be familiar with all this and possibly also the suggested 'constant' of an average 30 minute commute ie that a city will take approximately an hour to cross from one edge to the other using the prevailing mode of transport. Speed and city area grow in tandem.

As society gradually absorbs that there is a downside to the 'freedom' in space and time presented by the private car, there has been a re-discovery of the walking-scale core of many of the older settlements, but also the growth of suburban activity centres which in extreme form become 'Edge Cities'. We have begun to revisit the perceived benefits of 'Traditional Neighbourhood Development', 'Urban villages and 'Transit Oriented Development' and this was discussed by Evan Jones from the WA Ministry of Planning in the context of that State's 'Liveable Neighbourhoods' policy. Sadly we have also reverted in places to a modern equivalent of the medieval walled city, or at least a mini version of it - the 'Gated Community'. This was observed by Matthew Burke of Queensland University as a growing phenomenon in Australia. It unfortunately takes a stage further the damage to pedestrian permeability and legibility that was caused by the 'dead worm' cul-de-sac layouts of our modern suburbs.

Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzoe, architects and urban designers from Denmark and authors of several books on the design of public spaces, were also concerned about the structure and physical design of cities. Lars used Copenhagen as a case study for the role of pedestrians in the planning process while Jan's was a rousing inspirational finale to the conference that left us on a high. Without a couple of hundred of his slides and another hour of your time I won't attempt to replicate it.

His classification of cities was into four categories

- * **Traditional** cities eg Venice and small Italian hill towns.
- * **Invaded** cities - inundated with car traffic to the extent that pedestrians are almost pushed out - eg Madrid, Naples and many cities in the Americas.
- * **Abandoned** cities - where neither walking nor public life can be found - eg many cities in North America.

* **Re-conquered** Cities - where public life and walking have been strongly reinforced or reintroduced during the past two or three decades eg Barcelona, Lyon, Strasbourg, Freiburg, Copenhagen, Portland (Oregon) Curitiba (Brazil) and even Perth and Melbourne got a mention.

These cities were drawn on with others to celebrate public spaces that court foot traffic and accommodate all manner of human interaction. This is much more than just grudging acceptance of the need to accommodate pedestrians. It is saying 'come, you are welcome. Walk awhile. Stop awhile and stay as long as you like.' Copenhagen, for instance, once an 'invaded' city, over a period of 40 years has converted 100,000m² of motorised traffic space for the enjoyment of pedestrians, complete with new surfaces, lighting and furniture. It has been a slow but deliberate process reducing traffic lanes and parking by 2-3% per year and in the process changing the whole idea and use of public space in the inner city. It has also changed the traffic culture, with much more provision for bicycles, resulting in a work trip mode split of 1/3 cycle 1/3 private cars.

Significantly, when Jan and Lars talk about the studies monitoring the process going back to 1968, it is not the change in pedestrian flows, the foot traffic, that excites them but the opposite, the ability to linger. 60% of the pedestrian space is for resting and enjoying life. As a result, 'staying activities' have increased 3-4 times since the initial study. Despite a constant catchment population (1.3 million) the number of people spending time in the city public spaces has been constantly growing. They reckon that for every additional 13-14 m² of pedestrian space added one more person has settled down to enjoy city life, ie 2 people for each parking space removed. A further indication is the increase in outdoor café seats from 2900 to 4800 during the last ten years.

A section Jan's presentation could well have been subtitled, after Kevin Lynch's book '*What Time Is This Place?*', as '*What Speed is this Place?*' In this he illustrated the kind of environments designed to attract the attention of motorists passing at 60kph or more, such as the garish and banal commercial strips that line our highways. He contrasted their crude architecture of drive thru' diners and car yards with the delicacy and refinement of architectural detail and texture that can be appreciated by the walker at 4 kph.

Changing times - adapting to the new

City spaces were once able to combine three functions, traffic, trade and communication (meeting place and information exchange). In the walking city the public streets and squares were able to accommodate all three. New patterns of traffic, trade and communications have radically changed, or, as Jan Gehl puts it, 'interrupted'. centuries of tradition in how people use the city.

Speakers commented on the geographical imperatives of the early settlements and the limited options for their inhabitants. Their location (particularly industry and trade) was more often determined by energy source or transport linkages or both. Now the portability of energy and the revolution in electronic communications has dramatically increased our locational options. Employers, employees, producers, sellers and consumers all operate within larger and larger markets and spheres of interest offering unprecedented opportunities and choice.

Cities are competing for investment, for the biggest events, for company H.Q.s. Their prosperity depends on attracting and retaining the best entrepreneurs, the best brains, the best professionals and staff. In this more discerning globalised competitive marketplace those cities that offer lifestyle advantages are those that will attract both the investment and the human resources that will help them prosper. They don't want cities whose only claim to fame is that you can travel through quickly, but rather they want places that they can linger in, enjoy and be stimulated by.

WALKING FOR HEALTH AND PLEASURE

Various speakers reported on programs designed to get otherwise sedentary populations walking. This was seen as a safe, cheap and convenient form of exercise in response to what the World Health Organisation describes as one of today's most blatantly visible - yet most neglected - public health problems, the escalating global epidemic of overweight and obesity. As an example, Dr William Bird started his walking program in Oxfordshire, UK, for purely health purposes. Seven out of ten people in Britain are inactive, storing up health problems such as heart disease,

strokes, diabetes and colon cancer. As a measure of just how seriously this is considered his 'Health Walks' program has just received a 7.4 million pound (Sterling) grant from something called the New Opportunities Fund.

In most of the programs described at the conference the process of walking as a group provides the reinforcement and the encouragement necessary to sustain regular involvement (an essential requirement for true health benefits). As these programs are often aimed at the elderly, the group provides safety in numbers (not an insignificant matter in some areas) but it also adds a social component, ensuring that both physical and mental health is maintained and improved.

Often the papers reported on the evaluation processes of pilot programs, the provision of resource kits and on training programs for leaders. It seems ironic that we have to go to such lengths to encourage and cajole people to do something as basic as walking but such is the level of our 'advanced' society that we now have to relearn and artificially reconstruct some of the things we used to take for granted. Our health depends on it!

ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ASPECTS

Just as virtually all presentations had some physical references and implications, so most included socio-economic, psychological/behavioural and particularly political aspects.

We heard from Spence Havlick, Professor of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado who has served on Boulder City Council since 1982 where he has had considerable influence in reducing that city's dependence on the private car and promoting 'alternative' transport modes. While most of the pedestrian issues naturally revolve around the local, Spence took the more difficult and less well travelled course of examining the pedestrian as 'the forgotten factor in Regional Transportation Planning'.

So often the pressures that make livable, walkable design solutions at the local level so difficult originate in decisions made at regional, state or even national level. He talked of the political battles to change deeply ingrained cultures wedded to road solutions aided and abetted by powerful lobby groups with major financial interests. At the other end of the scale Ellen Vanderslice described her radicalisation as a young mother with two kids in tow trying to cross busy streets in Portland and the political power that comes from concerted community action. Lars and Jan demonstrated through Copenhagen the wisdom of slow and gradual change taking the public with you at each stage, which in Carmen Hass-Klau's terms is the process of building political confidence, drawing strength from the gains of one improvement to win approval and support for the next. Rodney Tolley pointed to some research that indicated that often the public are ahead of our politicians when it comes to support for environmentally sustainable transport solutions and, interestingly, recent community surveys conducted as part of the Warren Centre's Sustainable Transport project here in Sydney has found similar discrepancies between what the public would be prepared to accept and what decision makers believe is politically possible. Rodney further advised, based on his qualitative research, that we should not focus on being anti-car but should instead emphasise all the positive aspects of walkable environments, particularly the strong money arguments - and there were plenty of these peppered throughout the conference.

Before leaving the political I want to refer to one particularly British political sensitivity which was raised by at least two of the speakers but which I have been aware of for some time. It is that despite some very extensive work on behalf of walking by departments and senior public servants in the UK, it has been very difficult to get the relevant cabinet ministers to come out publicly with any major policy announcements. The problem lies with John Cleese's Monty Python Ministry of Silly Walks sketch which has been used to ridicule such announcements in the past and still apparently leaves government spokesmen very wary of anything that could be interpreted by Fleet Street along these lines.

Closer to home in the political stakes, and certainly close to the conference, the West Australian government machine used the conference to showcase a number of its policy initiatives demonstrating that it was serious about the role of walking, both as a transport/land use planning matter and as a health issue.

I say 'government machine' advisedly as the State had just voted in a new government a matter of days before the conference. But it was clear that the momentum of departmental advice would carry the bulk of the policies through and

the new infrastructure minister opening the conference as her first public duty made that clear. WA, through its Perth Metropolitan Pedestrian Strategy was the first State body to endorse the Australian Pedestrian Charter and I learned that some Local Councils had also adopted it. The State has also just appointed Professor Colin Marsh to head up the new WA Pedestrian Advisory Council. That raises a whole topic of the political and organisational structures that can best deliver safe, attractive walkable environments both in government and outside it. That will have to wait another day perhaps for a Second National Pedestrian Summit to be held next year.

This has been of necessity a very partial glimpse at the material presented, but you can access it all at <www.transport.wa.gov.au/conferences/walking> and I am assured by John Seaton that it will remain there until the next WALK 21 Conference. That will be in San Sebastian, Spain, on May 8th and 9th, 2002. If your diary is already booked up for 2002 then think Portland, Oregon, in 2003. Ellen Vanderslice has already got a team together to plan that event.

SUMMARISING THE SUMMARY

- * While surveys and our own gut feelings and observations would suggest that we are walking less, we walk more than traditional travel statistics would have us believe.
- * Walking is a critical part of virtually all journeys and deserves to be taken seriously and provided for.
- * Given favourable conditions, walking can serve as a convenient, demand-responsive, equitable mode of transport for short journeys - even of as much as two and a half kilometres.
- * Attractive pedestrian spaces are a critical component in urban regeneration or the 'urban renaissance'.
- * Walking is a cheap, convenient and convivial means of health promotion.
- * It is not easy to make cultural and behavioural changes in the face of institutional, corporate and public inertia, and blatant commercial self-interest. But with patience, determination and an emphasis on the positive benefits, building success out of success, progress can be made towards more safe, healthy, accessible, amenable, enjoyable, walkable, and indeed, liveable environments.

Now, WALK THE TALK!