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Fast Wheels, Slow Traffic: Urban Transportation Choices

By Charles L. Wright
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992

This work represents a modestly unconventional approach to urban transit planning. In twelve chapters the author attempts to instill the reader with a different conceptual framework for urban transit planning. The articulation of the author's approach is presented by a writing style that is distinctly personal and pointed but well illustrated and documented without being obtrusive or offensive.

The book represents a broad perspective that is not bound by traditional disciplines, institutional, or technological approaches to problem solving. The book is also a study of contrasts between the status quo and the author's prescriptions for change and between what the author tries to do and what is actually achieved in this work. These will be the major points in this review.

The author's somewhat different approach to urban transit planning is embodied in the exposition of an analytical framework that embraces "analysis of characteristics." In the opening pages of the Introduction the author favors dispelling what he terms the isolated "project approach" to urban transit planning which has "benefit-cost" analysis tacked on the end. Instead he proposes a new approach to solving urban mobility problems, "a new paradigm, based on the characteristics approach."

His new paradigm represents a form of union of the "characteristics approach" with a sequential problem solving framework analogous to the Scientific Management approach. Not only does the author present what he calls a different framework of analysis in the Introduction, but he accompanies this theoretically larger and more encompassing orientation to urban transit problem solving that includes explicit consideration of non-motorized modes (walking and cycling). A presentation of eighteen qualitative performance characteristics of four modes (walking, cycling, transit, and car) is made to buttress the point that walking and cycling have superior performance on a number of characteristics and should be incorporated into urban transit planning.

The book is organized in three parts: (1) Part I - Introduction; (2) Part II - Characteristics of Transport Modes, Cities, and Users; and (3) Part III - Formulating and Evaluating Transport Strategies and Projects.

The first two chapters constitute the Introduction to the book. The opening chapter, "The Urban Transport Problem," presents a broad perspective of the paradoxical situation of urban public transport. It also furnishes a glimpse of the author's enlightened ecological perspective on why the current approaches to analysis, planning, and control of contemporary urban public transportation do not work.

Chapter 2, appropriately denoted as "On Method and Madness," promises to deliver a distinctly different, almost utopian, form of presentation of material germane to *practical* urban transit planning. The rest of the book is left with the reality of delivering the author's campaign like promises. To a large degree the "success" of this book will be a function of the judgement of the reader about whether the author performs the monumental task of delivering what he is promising.

The delivery mechanism focuses on a structured problem solving orientation of "analysis of characteristics." The author uses this to move forward in a "holistic" approach to urban transit planning involving both public and *private* modes, where the latter includes walking and cycling.

The author's non-motorized orientation is the obvious new ingredient to an otherwise narrow venue of transit choices and flavors that urban (private and public) transit books seem to exhibit. The structure of the author's approach is to define urban transit problems and solutions

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relative to the characteristics of the modes, users, and the city. It is this venue that the book advances beyond the initial presentation of "On Method and Madness."

Following the Introduction are six chapters that deal with the characteristics of transport modes, cities, and users. The author has these grouped as follows: Chapter 3 - Capacity of Transport Modes and the Use of Urban Space; Chapter 4 - Energy, Pollution and the Urban Environment; Chapter 5 - Public Expense, Health, and Accidents; Chapter 6 - Transport Characteristics and Individual Preferences; Chapter 7 - Modes of Urban Transportation; and Chapter 8 - Characteristics of Cities and Their Transport Users. These chapters represent a broad introductory and overall balanced coverage of the issues as they relate to the failures of the current approaches to urban mobility. The author's points are amply illustrated by examples from cities around the world. Some are reasonably well known by urban transport specialists while others may be novel even to more experienced planners such as the diverse ways public policies and investments can be used to modify modal characteristics.

In Part III the author integrates his unconventional walking and cycling strategies focusing on the role these modes have on their own and as complements to buses. In many respects the four chapters in this section represent the mother lode of the book. These chapters can stand or fall on their own strength in terms of what they deliver relative to the promises and potential in the Introduction in Chapters 1 and 2 and the more rudimentary preceding materials in Part II, Chapters 3 through 8. Indeed all of the preceding chapters are in one sense oriented to bring greater focus on the author's perspective of the problem and his prescription for relief in Part III.

Chapter 9, "Selected Modes and City Types," could be regarded as the beginning of the book, depending on the level of credibility that individual readers with varying levels of insight and discernment will attribute to the depth and breadth of the material in Part II. The non-motorized orientation of the book, if not previously recognized as a major them of the author, is solidly established in Chapter 9. The chapter delivers what its title suggests; it contains selections of alternatives and does not present analysis.

The analysis is presented in Chapter 10, "Project Formulation and Evaluation." The author reiterates his analysis of characteristics approach to formulate and evaluate urban transport problems and criticisms of cost benefit analysis from Chapter 2. The main features of the characteristics approach are compared with other approaches: systems engineering, cost-benefit analysis, multicriterial analysis, financial analysis, and analysis of consequences. The chapter ends with a series of descriptive "case studies" wherein the author compares the characteristics approach with cost-benefit analysis.

Chapter 11, "Viable and Sustainable Transport Strategies," represents the main artery of the book. The chapter presents the author's major theme that the non-motorized modes can and should be used in conjunction with public transportation to promote urban mobility and livability. The author's major contribution is that the bicycle is needed to complement and fill the gap between walking and public transportation. He advocates policies that would not merely accommodate the bicycle but would integrate this mode into the city environment, for example: "A complementary network of express bikeways is thus needed for the bicycle to become the fastest, most practical middle-distance mode in the urban setting."

Just when it appears that the chapter will present an in-depth discussion of the details of what seems to be the author's major theme, walking, and particularly cycling, the chapter turns to concise discussion of other topics: public versus private ownership of urban public transit and transit subsidies. The bicycle theme presented in Chapter 9 is never really developed or articulated in Chapter 11. Perhaps the author's case based on the discussion of this mode in Chapter 9 is sufficient. However, in view of the importance of the topic, the bicycle, the author's advocacy position for this mode seems to be estranged at the very location in the book that it would appear most appropriate to articulate *bicycle* urban transport strategies.

The book ends with Chapter 12, "Summary and Conclusions," which is largely a defense of the characteristics approach.

This is a useful, concise work about the various facets and nuances or urban transit planning and problems in both developed and developing societies. Readers experienced in urban transit problems and planning may be

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tempted to skip Part II and settle for the first two and the last four chapters. However, there is risk of overlooking a comprehensive systematic treatment that integrates all the urban transit modes into the city environments.

The book represents a serious effort to deal with a problem that does not seem to go away. The work has some nuances that are stylistic and may or may not be appreciated by the reader. Some of the text contains excessive detail. There is a particular tendency toward presenting a wealth of "literature review" type of documentation which although informative can be distressing in terms of potpourri of statistics that may not always be useful. For instance, there is an isolated example of costs expressed in 1975 dollars. The details in the text flow very smoothly for the most part with a minimum of "cutting and pasting" that can tend to characterize a descriptive, conceptual, qualitative work of this nature. Finally, in terms of organization, Chapter 11 is definitely the heart of the book when linked to the articulation of the bicycle mode that is presented in Chapter 9.

This is a good book about the boundaries of the real urban transport problem. Future work will be needed to fill in the conceptual outline that the author has so well defined.

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