

Creating New Paradigms In Transport

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Introduction

I had to look up 'paradigm' in the dictionary before I could address the topic I was given, but many of the definitions were not very helpful, being in terms of:

- obscure aspects of linguistics; or
- 'philosophical and theoretical frameworks of a scientific school or discipline within which theories, laws, and generalisations are formulated.'

I much prefer the practical definition of paradigm as:

- example or pattern, especially an outstandingly clear or typical example or archetype.

In the real world, of which transport is a key part, a clear example is more valuable than a dozen theoretical frameworks.

Paradigms in Transport

As someone who has returned to transport after looking at the world from a central agency perspective, I venture to say that there are two key new paradigms that should be, but don't yet, drive the transport research, policy and planning agenda.

The first of these is the primacy of outcomes for people and business over the specific outputs of the transport system.

The second is the need for an integrated approach to transport, both in terms of a truly inter-modal mindset and the relationship with the key economic, social and environmental drivers.

These paradigms underly almost every urban transport strategy, but turning the 'philosophical framework into outcomes appears to be more difficult than the theorists expected.

For example, few people now see the 'predict and provide' approach to transport (particularly roads) as being viable - yet most of the transport planning tools in use still work on that basis. We might be a bit cleverer about how we use those tools (although this is not always the case), but they are still what David Engwicht would characterise as "on the basis of current trends, the future is determined" models.

It is encouraging to see the emergence of initiatives such as **TravelSmart** (in Perth) and **Travel Blending** (in Adelaide) as practical demonstrations of the ability to create a different future, but these have to be integrated into the planning and evaluation paradigm rather than existing as examples outside it. This is no mean task, as there is half a century of inertia behind the existing practices.

Too many of the current paradigms in transport policy and planning only go as far as recognising the vehicle as the medium through which the outcomes for people and business are expressed. This can easily lead planners and policy-makers to second-guess what the interests and preferences of our customers are, forgetting that our customers are not only the current users of transport, but also:

- 9 those who benefit from access to people, goods, services and other opportunities, and
- 9 future generations, who are impacted by what we do now.

Turning Paradigms into Outcomes

There are many, many books and articles on how to create and manage change. The keys are often seen in terms of things like:

- 9 Empowering people
- 9 Learning organisations
- 9 Better information

Sometimes it is useful to look more closely at what inhibits change.

- 9 Planning as a substitute for action (Apologies to Liz Ampt, who wrote a paper in 1983 with this as its principal title)

T S Eliot, in his poem 'The Hollow Men (a poem about human inertia), wrote: "*Between the conception and the creation lies the shadow*".

It is still a fact that most organisations, in both the public and private sectors, have trouble bridging the gap between knowing and doing.

In the case of transport, we find it difficult, but not impossible, to reach agreement on the words to be used to describe strategic directions that we all basically agree on.

We find it progressively more difficult to agree as we step down the path towards something actually happening in the transport system.

We may find it totally impossible to reach agreement on actions when organisations' remits have not been updated in line with changes in strategic direction.

And then there is the question of collectively and individually behaving in accordance with the principles we are espousing.

- 9 People as 'expert servants' instead of 'experts'
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Nick MacPhee, General Manager, Corporate Services, Microsoft Corporation recently posed the following question in a Harvard Business Review Case Study:

"... a common mistake [is to adopt] an "expert servant" mentality . . . hired a design team and tried to do just what the CEO wanted. . . . But what if she'd acted like an expert instead of an expert servant?"

The distinction between an expert servant and an expert is that:

- ◆ an expert servant undertakes exactly what the proposer asks, taking the propositions at face value; whereas
- ◆ an expert relates to the fundamental objectives, analyses different options and assesses impacts.

We are all aware of the fact that some consultants have the reputation of giving you the answer they think you want - these are the 'expert servants'. It is equally the case that others will give you the best-informed answer that they can.

One danger with contracting out is that the contractor is more likely to adopt an expert servant approach than an expert one, unless specifically asked by the client organisation to do otherwise.

9 Structural and institutional inertia

There have been very substantial shifts in transport policy directions over the last decade or so, in response to a range of economic, social and environmental imperatives.

It cannot, however, be said that corresponding shifts have occurred in the ways in which we deliver transport programs. The focus has very much been on getting the best value for money within existing programs, for example, through contracting out, rather than looking at whether programs and their institutional reflections could be better structured.

We should learn from the experience of organisations with the adoption of computerisation. Those that achieved the most were invariably those that did not simply automate existing processes but completely reinvented themselves and their businesses. We have not yet done that in transport.

In change-management terms, we seem to have done the 'single-loop' learning but have not made the leap to the 'double-loop'.

Single loop learning means that we monitor how effectively we are implementing strategies, in terms of the objectives established for those strategies, and continually review strategies and implementation with the aim of improvement. It is rarely enough that we do this.

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Double loop learning means that we continually assess how appropriate the objectives are, in the light of changing environments and expectations, and review both objectives and strategies with the aim of improvement. This is even more rare than single loop learning.

9 The best as the enemy of the better

This is a sensitive issue to raise at a research conference, but the fact is that the world moves on, whatever we are doing. It might once have been true that “the ox is slow but the earth is patient” (apologies to Confucius and Mick Malthouse), but no longer - these days, the earth is decidedly impatient.

We do not have the luxury of perfecting our research before putting it to the practical test. If we try to get it ‘absolutely right’, we will miss opportunities to put it into practice and the world will pass us by. We need to use research to establish examples that we and others can learn from. Analysis-paralysis must be replaced by professional judgement and assessment of risk.

9 Not really believing it yourself (or at least acting: as if YOU believe it!)

At a recent meeting of senior management in a transport organisation that I shan’t name for fear of embarrassing people, the question was asked “How often does any of you not come to work by car?” The answer was, unfortunately, predictable - and, to the participants, completely justified because of the way in which they had structured their activities.

It was all the more unfortunate that this was an organisation that has strongly espoused the need for a substantial shift away from the car in metropolitan transport.

Sounds rather like “Oh Lord, give me the strength to give up my addiction to the car - but not yet.”

If we don’t work on the basis of ‘do as I do’ not ‘do as I say’, we have little chance of convincing people that change is even feasible.

Thinking (and Acting) Outside the Box

A pre-requisite for effective change is the ability to stand outside the current paradigm.

Vivian Loftness, Professor of Architecture at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) put it very bluntly when she said: “*Never hire an architect who claims, 'I'm an architect - not a change management consultant'*”.

Loftness was talking about office design, but the same principle applies anywhere.

Let me ask the question: “Are you in the transport policy and planning business or the change management business?”

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Are there changes to the way we think about transport that could produce major benefits at little or no cost?

I recently established a small team, with the rather prosaic name of the Transport Infrastructure Project', with the overall remit of finding ways of improving the provision of transport infrastructure.

This team was specifically told to *'think outside the box'* and to *'take a satellite view'*. To assist it in doing so, TIP was established outside the Department's program structure and reports direct to the Director General. TIP has no allegiances to any of the silos that are a feature of any large organisation.

It also helps that TIP is staffed by people who happen to think that boxes look much more interesting from the outside than on the inside. Inside a box is dark and airless; outside is light and the breath of new and different ideas.

TIP has already acted like a breath of fresh air in several respects.

9 TIP has established the importance of taking a Strategic Asset Management to infrastructure, such that we don't automatically revert to the 'default setting' of building more when demand increases. Instead, we need to look at

- ◆ whether we can get more out of is already there, as traffic engineers already to some extent do,
- ◆ whether the demand can be met more effectively by other means
- ◆ whether given information and opportunity, people would choose to do things differently.

9 TIP has, through its close working with a wide range of stakeholders, identified a number of key gaps in transport infrastructure provision for the achievement of government objectives and strategies in areas such as forest management the environment, resource development, road trauma management and sustainable metropolitan development.

In this last respect, the **TravelSmart** program, which is the subject of several papers at this Forum, is a key component of **infrastructure** that has no 'natural' source of funding under present funding arrangements.

9 TIP has established the desirability of a more co-ordinated approach to funding decisions for transport that is better integrated with the objectives and strategies of **government**, business and the community. It has already initiated a study to scope how this can be achieved through a comprehensive Transport Infrastructure Information System.

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The challenge for those who place themselves outside the box

The challenge for those who place themselves outside the box, or even just cut windows in it, is an age-old one, eloquently described by Plato, the 4th Century BC Greek philosopher, in his allegory of the cave. The challenge is to persuade those who remain inside that there is a better world to be had.

In a rapidly-changing world:

- ◆ If we don't look outside the box, we will never discover what business we are in.
- ◆ If we don't act outside the box, we soon won't be in business.

A Word of Caution . . . Don't Expect to Take the (Political) Credit

The idea most likely to succeed is one that the decision-maker can be made to believe was his or her own.

The next-best is one that the community takes on board and uses to put pressure on the decision-maker - the proverbial 'idea whose time has come'.

In either case, as a transport professional, don't expect to take the credit for what happens out there - although you might expect to take the flak if it goes wrong!

But . . . Do Take the Professional Credit

It is important, though, to place the professional credit where it is due. If we fail to recognise professional achievement, we will stifle enthusiasm and progress.

The Australasian Transport Research Forum is a key opportunity to recognise the value of research, policy and planning work leading to real improvements in transport outcomes.

The first ATRF was held in 1975. In that 24 years, ATRF has been characterised by a mix:

- 9 Of 'old hands' and 'young turks';
- 9 Of those who see a career in transport and those who see transport as an aspect of some other career;
- 9 Of disciplines from engineering to economics, from physics to behavioural science;
- 9 Of the 'pure researcher' and the pragmatist, the analyst and the intuitive; and
- 9 Of the public and private sectors.

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This diversity has contributed greatly to the robustness of the ATRF and the fact that it has survived without any formal organisational structure. This tradition of 'self-help' is one that will continue to stand the transport profession in good stead.

A Word of Conclusion

I note that Phil Skene and Derek Scrafton, in their paper to the 1997 ATRF argued that transport professionals need to get out of their comfort zones and to address scenarios that are 'uncomfortable'.

I can only agree!