Episode 8: Getting Public Transport Back on Track

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VOICEOVER
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SIAN PRIOR
Hello and welcome to Up Close, coming to you from the Melbourne University, Australia. I'm Sian Prior and today we're asking, how do we create the best possible public transport systems for the 21st century. It's an increasingly critical question as we face up to the challenge of preventing further human induced climate change. How do we get people out of fuel guzzling vehicles and onto more energy efficient forms of public transport? How do we plan our cities so that instead of using cars we can walk, cycle or catch a train? And how can we reduce our carbon emissions and achieve environmental sustainability? Well one man who's been offering solutions to these questions for many years is Dr. Paul Mees from Melbourne University's Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. Paul teaches in the areas of transport, strategic urban planning, and planning law. He's the author of numerous book chapters, journal articles and conference papers, and a book entitled A Very Public Solution !V Transport in the Dispersed City, published by Melbourne University Press. Paul has also been something of an activist academic. For almost a decade he was president of the Public Transport Users Association, a consumer group in Melbourne which lobbies governments and public transport authorities in the interests of all public transport users. Paul, welcome to Up Close.

PAUL MEES
Thanks Sian.

SIAN PRIOR
Now first of all Paul how and when and did you first get involved in campaigning on public transport policy?
PAUL MEES
Oh well, I think it was probably when I was an undergraduate student at this very University and it was like a lot of teenagers trying to get around without a car and finding it wasn’t very easy. And, unlike most of my friends who responded by getting a car, I must have been a bit stubborn, so it occurred to me that I should get involved in trying to do something about the state of alternatives to the car.

SIAN PRIOR
So, you were already finding that the state of alternatives to the car in your home town just wasn’t good enough.

PAUL MEES
Yes I grew up in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. And basically, if you don’t have a car, you have to resign from the human race more or less.

SIAN PRIOR
Well, let’s talk about Melbourne, because your book A Very Public Solution looked at the public transport system in your home town Melbourne and tried to offer suggestions about how it could be improved. Now for those people who don’t live here, how would you describe Melbourne’s public transport system. Can you paint us a broad picture?

PAUL MEES
Well Melbourne is a good example of what we call the dispersed city in urban planning terms. It’s really the kind of city that every part of the world is seeing develop now. In the old days, when walking was the main form of transport, then cities couldn’t grow very large because they were limited by a convenient walking distance from things. So if the population increased, the city grew up rather than outwards. Well, Melbourne is an example of the more modern kind of city where motorised transport, particularly cars has permitted the city to spread out over great distances, not only are residences widely dispersed, but the things people want to travel to are widely dispersed as well. So you can’t walk to most of those places because they’re too far away, it’s probably not going to be practical to cycle. Traditionally, public transport systems have had great difficulty serving that kind of travel. Your stereotypical public transport system will consist of train or tram or bus lines that feed into the centre of town, but if you want to travel anywhere else, if you want to go across the suburbs or from one side of the city to the other, its practically impossible and Melbourne has been like that traditionally for decades.

SIAN PRIOR
We do have quite an extensive tram system here in Melbourne and a train system and buses, so it’s not that we’re lacking forms of public transport. What is the the main problem with what we do have?

PAUL MEES
Well, the way you put it is actually part of the issue we have, a tram system. So, if you get on a tram in Melbourne, there’ll be a map showing all the tram lines inside
the vehicle. It won’t show you where any of the train lines are, and it certainly won’t show you where any of the buses go. So, what we have in Melbourne, and this is a very common phenomenon, is little bits of public transport systems that exist in isolation from each other. And one of the things that I think my research [has] uncovered is that if public transport is to enable people to travel around these very dispersed spread out cities where you may wish to travel an almost infinite number of destinations, you can’t continue to have isolated bulkanised bits of public transport that don’t link up with each other.

SIAN PRIOR
Urban sprawl as we’ve just been discussing has been a major challenge for many cities in the 20th and 21st centuries. As populations grow, places must be found for people to live and transport systems put in place to move them from place to place. Which cities around the world Paul do you think have responded most sensibly and creatively to these challenges of urban transport and planning in recent times.

PAUL MEES
Look, I think it’s generally accepted that Europe is the place you go to if you want to find cities that have made the most progress in providing people with alternatives to the car. The problem is, Australians and North Americans and increasingly even people in places like China will say, Oh yes. But those old European cities, they’re hundreds of years old, the kinds of cities we have now are not like that at all.

What people forget is that each of those old historic European cities that we may visit as tourists is surrounded by suburbs that grew up in the 20th century, and that in many respects are just as spread out and sprawly and complicated as the suburbs of a city like Melbourne or cities in Canada or even almost as spread out as the suburbs of cities in the United States. And there are in fact European cities, places like Munich and Zurich for example that have made substantial progress in providing a viable alternative to the car, even for people in their suburban areas.

SIAN PRIOR
And, is it about quantity of public transport available, or is it about quality or a combination of both?

PAUL MEES
Well, it’s about a particular way of combining them that I call the network effect and I was chuffed to read that 18 months ago a bunch of Danish and Norwegian transport planners wrote a manual for the European community on transport public transport planning for suburban regions in European cities in which they sighted this concept and were even kind enough to attribute it to me.

The network effect is about saying you can’t have thousands upon thousands of little bus and tram and train routes to connect up every conceivable trip origin with every conceivable trip destination. There are too many of them and the numbers of people wishing to travel along each of these possible routes is so small you couldn’t
economically provide the service. What the network effect says is that you can have a much smaller number of public transport routes, but by linking them together and making it easy for people to transfer between them, you can achieve the same effect that you would’ve achieved by having thousands upon thousands of direct services. Probably the most common example people as tourists are used to is the Paris Metro. If you wish to travel between two parts of Paris almost invariably you get on one metro line, you transfer part way along the route, and you complete your journey on another line. It’s been generally believed that you can only have that kind of a system in a high density old city like Paris, but what places like Zurich and Munich, and increasingly, other cities like Copenhagen are beginning to show us is that with very, very careful planning, you can replicate that effect even in very low density spread out areas.

SIAN PRIOR
I’m Sian Prior and you’re listening to Melbourne University Up Close, where our guest today is transport and urban planning expert, Dr Paul Mees from the Melbourne University Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning. Paul, you’ve long been an advocate for public ownership and government control of public transport systems, but here in Melbourne we’ve followed the British lead in privatising our public transport system in recent years. The argument is usually put that the private sector does most things cheaper and more efficiently than the public sector. Does it?

PAUL MEES
Well, I think in fact the argument for privatisation in public transport is even a little more subtle than that. I think there’s a kind of image in people’s heads that if the travel patterns of our cities consist of, if you like, small parcels of people roaming around all over the place, then a large public, centrally planned system appears like it wouldn’t be flexible enough to cope with those people, so we think perhaps what we need is lots and lots of little flexible public transport services running around all over the place, like the jeepneys you see in Manilla or the similar vehicles you see in Jakarta or Bangkok. But I think in fact it’s the precise opposite. In order to create flexibility using the network effect you actually need to coordinate and plan things very, very carefully and comprehensively in the sense that every single link in the public transport system needs to be planned as part of a whole, so that when you get on your local bus you will know that when you get to the transfer station the train will be there and you won’t have to spend your time trying to look up the timetable for the train and thinking, Oh am I going to meet the train or not.  

So, the irony is you need to have central planning of a very rigorous and comprehensive kind to make all the different bits of the system to work together and that only appears to be possible if you have a public authority in charge. Various people have claimed in economics journals generally using mathematical models to illustrate them, that in theory it’s possible to do it through competition, but it’s never happened in practice. It only ever happens when you have public control of the system. Now there are many public systems that don’t in fact realise this potential and therefore don’t deliver this kind of service, but all of the public transport systems
that are delivering this network effect are publicly controlled.

SIAN PRIOR
So you’re not arguing that a privately owned transport system is less efficient than a publicly owned one, what you’re arguing is that in a sense the different parts aren’t talking to teach other, and that’s causing the inefficiencies.

PAUL MEES
Yes it’s a different concept of efficiency. [You] See, a lot of people focus on efficiency questions like how much does it take for the organization to produce one kilometre of bus service. Well, sometimes private sector organizations can do that more cheaply than public organizations, but that’s a very narrowly defined notion of efficiency, that’s the efficiency of the individual component considered in isolation. The kind of efficiency that the private sector doesn’t seem to be able to produce is the efficiency of integration that you get through linking all these things into a network. So, it seems to me that the ideal way of organising things and this is the way it’s organised in places like Zurich, is to have the public authority in charge of the strategic planning of the system, responsible for organising the complete integration of all the individual components and in theory at least, it could use private subcontractors to provide part of the service. So, if the public authority decides we need the bus service between A and B, that it’s to run every ten minutes and so forth and so forth, then they could perhaps call competitive tenders and perhaps a private firm could do that, but they’d be doing it for the public agency, so it’d still be part of a public system.

SIAN PRIOR
One of the models that it’s often claimed Melbourne’s privatised public transport system was based on was the British model and Britain of course is a place that Australia often likes to compare itself to and exchange ideas with, but so are the USA and Canada, another couple of English speaking nations with lots of cultural similarities. Has there been many moves towards privatisation in those countries?

PAUL MEES
There isn’t a single privately operated urban public transport system in either the United States or in Canada in any city smaller than a small country town. There are hundreds and hundreds of large city urban transit systems. They are all run by public authorities, although a relatively small number of them do employ private subcontractors to provide some of the service mileage, they’re all run by public agencies. So, there isn’t a single city in English speaking North America that followed the British lead in the same way that Melbourne has. And I think that’s significant. I’m very interested in Canadian cities because Australia and Canada are about as similar as any two countries that can be. If the Quebec I’ll excuse me for overlooking their role in Canada, Canadian cities like Toronto and more recently Vancouver, have in fact been able to replicate the network effect that you see in European public transport systems in cities with much lower densities that are really very difficult to distinguish from the kind of urban environment we have here in Australia. So, I think they can provide further confirmation of the fact that this model
does seem to be genuinely transferable to a wide range of urban contexts. I have been trying to persuade the government here to take a good hard look at the results of our British rail style privatisation to see whether they’ve really delivered the community value for money, or whether things could be better. Many public organizations that are privatised are sold because they were profit making entities. We sold our electricity-generating companies, for example. If the government was to buy them back, it would cost a fantastic amount of money. Public transport’s in a completely different situation. It requires government subsidies to keep it going. So what we have is effectively a series of contracts with private operators, in which they deliver some measure of service in return for being paid very large government subsidies. So, there’s no cost involved at all when those arrangements terminate in saying thank you, your contract has expired, you can go now, we’ll do something else in future. So that’s why I think Melbourne might have a chance to do something different. Are there precedents for it? Well most of the publicly operated public transport systems in the world and in the developed world, almost all of them are in fact publicly operated, started off as privately run systems. So they were all nationalised or municipalised at some point or other.

SIAN PRIOR

I’m Sian Prior and you’re listening to Melbourne University Up Close, where our guest today is transport and urban planning expert, Dr Paul Mees from the Melbourne University Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. Paul another controversial issue in the area of transport planning has been the introduction of so-called congestion charges, making road users pay for the privilege of using their cars in particularly in highly built up urban areas. The city of London introduced one fairly recently and other cities have tried charging big money for city parking places or city or charging road tolls. What’s your view on congestion, should we be doing all we can to prevent it?

PAUL MEES

Well I think congestion is our friend you see. We always have to think an American transport planner called Bob Savero who’s a friend of mine says, the first question to ask is what is your objective. Is in fact our objective in transport planning to enable everyone to drive at the speed limit whenever they feel like it? That’s actually not the underlying objective of an urban transport system. An urban transport system is supposed to get us from A to B in a reasonable amount of time at a reasonable social and economic cost. It doesn’t follow from that, that one has to be travelling at high speed. If one lives in Los Angeles and has to drive 20 kilometres to the nearest shop to buy a bottle of milk, one will demand to be able to do that at a very high speed. If one lives in Vienna and can do the same thing by walking 100 metres one won’t require to walk at such a fast pace. So, getting from A to B is what it’s about, rather than driving at the speed limit. Congestion is simply a word that’s used to define the difference between how fast we actually drive and how fast we could drive in the imaginary situation where we were all travelling at the speed limit. The most invaluable thing I think that transport policy makers can do in response to traffic congestion is to give people an alternative, to give people congestion-free public transport but also to do intelligent land use planning so that people don’t need to
travel as much or as far in the first place and so therefore they might not care whether they're doing it at 20 kilometres an hour rather than 100 ks. Now that's a minority view because most of my friends in the transport planning industry have been intimidated by economists who think that you can conduct [what] seems to me completely bogus imaginary exercises in which you pretend to have calculated the cost of not being able to drive at the speed limit. You know it's a bit like calculating the cost of not being able to fly with wings on my back, really, I think. But you could calculate that too, but it wouldn't be a very meaningful exercise. Now, in London it's quite funny because Ken Livingstone the Mayor there who's introduced congestion pricing is generally regarded as a bit of a leftie and the idea that he'd use a pricing mechanism suggested by economists has kind of shocked people. But the real reason why Livingstone did it was to raise money to improve the public transport system, particularly the bus system which he controls. Unfortunately, the national government controls the underground or at least does to some extent. So there's been a fantastic amount of additional bus service put on in London which has been very successful and a lot of it's been funded by this so-called congestion charge. In addition to that, the congestion charge has resulted in a very modest reduction in the number of cars entering central London and a significant increase in the number of people travelling into Central London by bus. And if you just report those two figures, it sounds very exciting. Problem is 92% of people who travel into Central London come in trains, and there was actually a small decline in train patronage after the congestion charge was brought in.

SIAN PRIOR
So, people were getting out of the trains and into the buses because the roads were clearer.

PAUL MEES
The buses were faster and there were more buses and some people that used to drive cars then transferred to buses, which is good. Some people that used to take trains also transferred to buses which is bad because the buses create air pollution in the urban area, whereas the trains run on electricity and if they create pollution it can be in a power station somewhere, where no-one breathes it in. So, I think congestion pricing is part of the general concept that says that anti social activities and environmentally damaging activities should be taxed at a higher rate than environmentally virtuous activities makes some sense. But I'm very sceptical of the idea that one can solve all our urban planning and transport problems just by manipulating the pricing of things.

SIAN PRIOR
Paul it seems to be that part of what we're talking about is a cultural or social issue. People living in wealthy western countries like Australia are often described as having a love affair with their cars. You know we're very wedded to the idea of the individual freedom that a car offers us. We can choose who we spend our time with, we can put the music on, we can you know control the climate of the car. Are you trying to tell people they should give up some of that freedom?
PAUL MEES
Don’t know that I am you see I’m I’m I can’t help but note that Zurich is the wealthiest urban area in the entire world and this problem doesn’t seem to be the case there. About 40% of people travel to work by public transport in the entire state of Zurich; about 30% travel by car and the rest of them walk or ride bikes, and no one seems to think that that’s an infringement of their dignity as citizens of the wealthiest city on earth. And the point is that the 30% travelling by car was 35% ten years ago and it’ll be 25% in a few years time. So they’ve been able to overcome the cultural situation by changing the underlying reality that gives rise to it. I know there’s probably a certain class of adolescent or delayed adolescent male that does have a love affair with the car, but I think the other 99% of the population make relatively rational decisions about how they travel. They’ll take the fastest and most convenient and most economical mode of transport. They won’t use something that’s either incredibly slow, incredibly unreliable, an affront to your human dignity or something that actually makes you feel physically unsafe using it. And our public transport systems everywhere in Australia with the possible exception of Perth, are of that kind. So the fact that people don’t want to use them is entirely understandable, they don’t need to have a love affair with anything not to want to use something that’s second rate.

SIAN PRIOR
Well finally Paul there’s been growing anxiety all around the world about the threat of climate change and a growing acknowledgement that major changes will be required in the way that many of us live to prevent further and more catastrophic global warming. This idea of living more sustainably is taking hold. Are you optimistic that this will lead to better public transport systems, not just in your home town Melbourne, but all around the world?

PAUL MEES
Well I am because I think it the environmental imperative can’t be ignored, the greenhouse can’t be made to go away by wishful thinking. Similarly the fact that there isn’t an unlimited amount of oil around, and the fact that a lot of it seems to be in politically unstable regions of the world can’t be wished away either. So these are fundamental constraints on urban transport and planning policies, that I think people are facing up to at different rates. In Europe, they’re beginning to face up to them to some extent. In Canada, they’re beginning to face up to them. In the United States on the whole, the nation is still in deniable. One of the things that interests me is that the Chinese government is finally starting to face up to these questions because Chinese cities have been receiving a lot of unhelpful advice from American transport planning consultants and have been trying to turn themselves into a cross between Los Angeles and Houston, which is simply physically impossible I think given the size.

SIAN PRIOR
Wrong way, go back.

PAUL MEES
That’s right. So it’ll be very interesting to see how that plays out in China over the next decade or so because the logical consequence of the Chinese government starting to take the greenhouse effect seriously and even being embarrassed at things like the pollution in Beijing in the lead up to the Olympic Games, might well be that Chinese cities start to follow more of the European models, shall we say, than the American model. And I think if that happens, there’ll be environmental benefits. But I think we’ll also have fairer cities because while in first world countries, just about everyone can afford a car, the fact is even in China the vast majority of the population can’t afford cars and will probably never be able to afford cars and a car based transport system effectively says to those people, you are second class citizens and I think it would be a shame if we continued to operate that way.

SIAN PRIOR
Well Paul it’s been fascinating. Thanks so much for coming into the studio today.

PAUL MEES
Thanks for having us.

SIAN PRIOR
I’m Sian Prior and my guest today has been Dr. Paul Mees from the Melbourne University Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. Melbourne University Up Close is brought to you by the marketing and communications division in association with Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Our producers for this episode were Kelvin Param, Eric Van Bemmel, and myself, Sian Prior. Audio recording by Craig McArthur and theme music performed by Sergio Ercole. Melbourne University Up Close is created by Eric Van Bemmel and Kelvin Param. Until next time, thanks for joining us. Goodbye.

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