

Life Stories of Infrastructure – Selected Research Excerpts

Project Overview

The aim of the Life Stories of Infrastructure project was to examine the long life of infrastructure in the North East, looking at changing stakeholder perceptions over that life and telling its story, with a view to gaining insight that will help design more long-lived and sustainable infrastructure in the future. We focused on three case studies of North East transport infrastructure – the A1 north-south road corridors, the urban rail/Metro systems and the Tyne ferries.

The stories we learned from a historical and contemporary investigation into these three case studies gave rise to a number of questions that we think apply to all infrastructure projects.

Questions

The following, arising from our research, are questions to ask about infrastructure at its inception and at any point in its life or death, particularly when changes are being considered. They are all questions that could be addressed in the theatrical response:

- Who benefits and who loses? Which communities gain opportunity from this infrastructure, and whose neighbourhoods, air quality, connectivity or other measures are diminished?
- What is this infrastructure fundamentally for? Is it to move people, reduce congestion, enable economic growth, reduce carbon, enhance quality of life, or something else?
- What bold vision does this serve? Is it a component of a transformative system, or just incrementally patching local problems?
- What are we asking communities to sacrifice, and for how long? Construction disruption, land take, visual impact, noise — are these temporary impositions for permanent benefit, or ongoing costs for someone else's convenience?
- Who isn't in the conversation yet? Which stakeholders—future users, adjacent communities, maintenance workers, people currently excluded from this infrastructure plan should have input but don't?
- Will anyone care about this in 30 years? Beyond pure function, does this infrastructure have aesthetic, symbolic, or cultural qualities that might make communities fight to preserve it? Or are we building something communities will actively campaign to demolish?

Dramatic Presentation

The Life Stories of Infrastructure Team arrived at the idea of presenting some of our infrastructure stories as a drama in the theatre. This would make them available to a public beyond academia and infrastructure designers and provoke thought about the past, present and future of infrastructure and how it makes and/or breaks communities and societies.

The task we want to achieve is to take inspiration from the questions and stories presented above and turn them into a script for a drama that brings out some of the emotion involved and poses some of the questions, either directly or indirectly.

The Stories

The following are highlights of the stories emerging from our research into our three North East case studies:

ROADS – THE A1 CORRIDOR

Background

The north-south route through Newcastle and Gateshead has huge significance both regionally and nationally. The Tyne Bridge opened in 1928, on the main north-south trunk route through Gateshead. At the time, there were constant debates about a western bypass for Newcastle, debates that continued in years to come, especially during the construction of the Gateshead flyover and the Chandless Estate.

The years since then have seen the construction of the Tyne Tunnel, the A1 Western Bypass, the incremental upgrading of the A1 western route including the recent widening, and of course the closure of the Gateshead flyover.

People Involved in Research

- People who moved to Chandless Estate from Gateshead slums, only to find work on the highway beginning almost directly outside their front door.
- A civil engineer working on site for the new Allerdene Bridge on the A1 western route.

Quotes

So, we lived in one of the three blocks in what was called Lichgate Court. So, they demolished the two... So, there was a tall block of flats as well called Monk Court, and the two blocks adjacent to Monk Court had to be demolished, as well as one on the other side of the field.

So, there was an open playing field when we first moved into the houses. Probably about a 100-yard stretch over to another part of the estate. So, it was a big playing field, which was obviously quite convenient for children, because you could just open the back door and go out, and that was the route where the overhead flyover structure came through.

In my mind, looking back, it was a bit odd from a planning perspective, because they built this estate in what must have been about the time I was born, '62, '63, and then just six years later, actually had to demolish three of the blocks because they put the road system in, completely changed it.

My mum was even interviewed on the local television. And as were a couple of other people along the block that we lived in, it was on the BBC News. And oddly, they left us... we were still living there while most of the construction was going on. So, you literally went from opening the back door, but having a clear, plain field, to literally a building site, which, I mean, would never happen now. There was no boards, hoardings up or anything. You literally could step out your back door, and you could see the foundations being constructed.

So, my mum was interviewed and basically said, 'look, we can't hang washing out, we can't do anything. It's just, we almost feel like we're living in a building site.' [...] we thought it was a big adventure. I mean, as children, we didn't really feel the impact, y'know, as much. And I spent time playing around, y'know, once the work was stopped on an evening, we just... was still a big

playing field to us, but just different, y'know. So yeah, it was, we didn't feel, personally, as a child, I can't think back and say, y'know, it impacted me in this way.

I don't know whether this is apocryphal, but apparently someone in the flat that was level with the traffic actually turned their clock to face out of the window so the people could see the time as they drove past it. They were very close to the to the flyover. So, obviously that, that really wasn't on for residents living in there.

Walking on the motorway during construction works - an unpleasant but also strangely fascinating experience. Walking together with engineers and construction workers as a social scientist – where she sees philosophies and then they see just an ever-changing material. Sometimes we need to think of motorways according to the way they shape society.

I followed this sentiment seeking and looking for someone who loved the A1 Western Bypass or maybe tried to love it myself. No one seemed to love the A1 Western Bypass! Maybe love was the wrong word, maybe 'meaning' is a better way to describe it. No one on the [construction site] compound laid meaning on the A1 Western Bypass. Those around- on the road with me- they only spoke of completion, development and construction. I understood why. It had to be completed. It was a development and it included a construction site. The engineers spoke of materials, expansion and the greatness of the task. But after it was over- would they reflect back on it with joy, memory, pride?

The motorway beside me roared as I spoke about smart motorways and poor motorway designs in America. 'Everybody uses a motorway'. Did everyone also have some form of attachment to the motorway if we all used it?

URBAN RAIL – THE METRO AND ITS PREDECESSORS

Background

The North Tyne Loop was electrified in 1904, replacing the earlier traditional local railways with advanced (for the time) electric trains. Decline and closure in the 60s and 70s then led to the construction of the Metro system in the 80s, with the years since then seeing various extensions and increasing unreliability as the replacement of old trains was delayed.

More recent investment led to new train (with varied reception) and now proposals for more extensions.

People Involved in the Research

- More affluent passengers, complaining that the new electric trains had no first-class compartments meaning they had to mix with workmen, getting dirt on their clothes.
- People living on the Chandless Estate in Gateshead, having been disturbed by the road construction, now had the Metro tunnel being excavated beneath them, creating significant vibrations.
- Two people who meet at the Metro every morning; they are both in the same university class and are consistently late due to metro difficulties. They have a pact to always wait for each other rather than go to class late as individuals.

Quotes

While under the old system the fishwives were allowed to travel with their creels by every train throughout the day, they are now only permitted to go to the Central Station by the trains which

leave North Shields at 9.25, 10.15 and 10.55 each morning, while the only morning train to New Bridge Street which is available for them is the 9.24 from Tynemouth.

A well-known personage dubbed "Nannie" here interposed the remark: "They're tellin' lies when they say that. Thor's nee dreep from the creels. The dreep comes from the fish packed in ice." One reply to the official's objection was that: 'the smell was the healthiest he had ever smelt, proved by the fat and healthy condition of the people of Cullercoats.'

On the Tyneside lines commercial and professional men are practically forced to travel first class, not through any feelings of superiority or exclusiveness, but simply because they cannot travel third class without detriment to the attire, they are compelled to wear. But on the electrified lines on the north side of the Tyne the running of first-class carriages has been arbitrarily discontinued, while the carriage accommodation provided on these trains is at certain times of the day completely inadequate.

If there was a better service of trains more people might be induced to live in Wallsend. The working men complained bitterly of the insufficiency of accommodation on the riverside line. Before the electrification they had complete trains every hour, and now there was frequently only one carriage for the traffic, with the result that there was considerable overcrowding.

[Regarding the Metro tunnelling] Sometimes the noise is awful [...] the men work 24 hours a day and we can't get any peace at all. Noise travels further at night and many mothers have complained that their children can hear the men swearing.

[From a letter sent to Margaret Thatcher] 'For year [the residents] suffered with the environment [they] lived in' caused by '[t]he noise of the flyover [...] [t]he nearby railway [...] [t]he bus depot [and] [t]hree years blasting while the Metro was under construction. They stated that the 'final crunch' was the Metro service and the 'noise and vibrations which [they had] to contend with'

Going to classes on average, I always say to my tutor now expect me like half an hour late. I just expect that as the norm. It always makes you look a little bit bad when you often say 'no, I'm going to be late because the Metros'. It's like why aren't expecting that, you know, prepared for it.

THE TYNE FERRIES

Background

There were once many ferries across the Tyne at various places, providing cheap transport for workers to shipyards and many other places. Now there is only the Shields Ferry, and that has been variously threatened with closure. In 1969 there was a petition to save it that gained 4,000 signatures. The Shields Ferry remains valued, but its role is very different from ferries of the past - it has been turned into a tourist attraction.

People Involved in the Research

- A South Shields Town Clerk. A person from the Shields Daily Gazette getting signatories to the petition for the saving of the ferry.
- Various voices from the ferries of the past. Captain Humble, the passengers and crew of the old ferry Northumbrian.
- Passengers on the modern Shields Ferry.

Quotes

The provision of the tunnel is all right for the man with the car, but with the man who has to go on his feet it is by no means a substitute.

South Shields and North Shields prosperity depends to a great extent on the casual and spontaneous visits of people from one side of the river to the other - very often the sheer pleasure of crossing the water, and in the summertime particularly, the absence of Scottish visitors, for instance, to Whitley Bay, who 'pop' over to South Shields will be felt by business activity on the beach.

South Shields and North Shields owe their very existence and history to the River Tyne. South Shields, at least, is in the greatest danger of becoming an outpost, with no through traffic, and the inevitable consequence will be that it will cease to flourish.

At South Shields for one of the last trips on the old Northumbrian, memories go back over the years to journeys long ago. Journeys in sunshine and shower, in wind and storm, on peaceful days and war-torn nights, when fog was the only enemy which could immobilise the big steam ferries. As a kid, it was the actual engineering of it, the smell of it, the sound, you know, you could look in the engine room, the pistons were going and the steam and it was just that whole sense of being on a big old machine.

I can remember being on there with my parents when I was little and the story was, I got absolutely filthy. I was tiny and I think I was crawling around. My mum said 'I had to turn your leggings inside out to bring you home. You were black.'

...there's a draw to water, there's something about water, there's a draw. Even though I say it puts a barrier and people seem to have this irrational thing about crossing the river and the north and the south, there's something about water that definitely appeals to me.

I am hoping never disappears because if it does, I mean there is a walkway that it actually goes underneath the water. You walk over to the other side. Not keen on that, but if it disappears it means I would have to drive over which is expensive and also going through that tunnel is not exactly what you call pleasurable... it's easier getting the ferry much easier.

I used to live in Hebburn, and there used to be a ferry at the bottom of our street in Hebburn, and when I was a child, it was a penny to go across. But you only paid one way. I used to go on with my dolls. This ferry was further up the river. It's not there anymore. It was when the shipyards were around. My dad used to travel for the shipyards, and he used to go to go over there. It was when you know less safeguarding is huge, so 5-year-old girl on her own is sitting with her old on a ferry without a problem.

My first time on the ferry was around 60 years ago. On this ferry last year, but the first time was like 50/60 years ago. As I said before it was an old steam ship and had cars going on it. This boat was built at Swan Hunter. I have worked on the river all my life - new buildings and stuff - I had my apprenticeship here when I was younger. It's got a nostalgic feel to me. And feel to me a long, long time ago the ferries to be steam operated driven. When I was a little boy, my Nana would take me and show me the steam, and the engine room will have it. So that's it's quite nostalgic really to me just making this crossing.

I think it is a very good service, very reasonable price. And I hope we never lose it. Because I was looking at the notice and how many different ferries there used to be, there are from different points over from south shields and they've all gone. And I keep thinking please don't lose this.