

From Paris To Portland, A Desire For Streetcars

By NORMAN GARRICK

January 21 2007

In 1957, Paris said an emphatic adieu to the tram in favor of the putative urban transportation of the future - automobiles and buses. Now, 50 years later, the tram is back in Paris with the December opening of the Boulevard des Maréchaux tramway.

The reintroduction of the tram in a major world city such as Paris means that an idea that has been germinating for a long time in smaller places from Strasbourg, France, to Portland, Ore., is now taking hold in the mainstream. The idea is a simple but powerful one - transportation should be about building social and economically vibrant communities and not simply about moving vehicles. In fact, we have learned that an obsession with moving vehicles at any cost works to degrade, rather than build, social capital in a city, and can even undermine its economic viability.

Paris is a truly lovely, human-scale city in many ways, yet in spite of its many charms the City of Light has still managed to become hostage to a U.S.-style auto-centric transportation policy. True, Paris always maintained an excellent Metro system and so did not suffer the level of urban degradation of most American cities. However, in comparison to, say, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, Paris suffers mightily, with too much valuable urban space being devoted to the movement and storage of traffic, and with Parisians living with an untenable level of noise, pollution, and threat to life and limb from fast-moving vehicles.

Paris has relatively recently begun to work seriously to reclaim urban space and tranquility from the automobile. The city is fortunate to be able to draw on the decades-long experience of cities such as Zurich, Switzerland, and Freiburg, Germany, that have used smart transportation planning to transform themselves.

The experience in those cities has shown that a balanced transportation portfolio is crucial for creating a healthy urban environment. The once largely abandoned technology of the tram (or streetcar or strassenbahn) is proving to be a key cog in a transportation system that supports rather than degrades city life.

It is worth noting that in the 1970s, the term streetcar or tram was so out of favor in the United States that transportation planners even came up with a new term - light rail - in reintroducing this technology to the American public.

Now the tram is back in a big way in this country, with more than 50 cities having installed systems since the first tentative experimentations in Portland and San Diego in 1981.

The modern tram is a thing of beauty: sleek, quiet, comfortable, safe, clean and, with its low floor design, easily accessible to all. Trams are very compatible with urban life, coexisting comfortably with walkers and bikers, and enhancing street life by adding vitality and urbanity.

Paris is also using the introduction of the tram as an opportunity to rethink how urban space is apportioned. Less for cars, more for people!

They have converted what was once an ugly, harsh six-lane road to an elegant boulevard, with a tree-lined linear park in the middle that just also happens to have two tramlines and promenades for pedestrians and bicyclists. This is all part of a larger effort by Mayor Bertrand Delanoë to convert road space to other uses, including more space for pedestrians and bikers, dedicated lanes for buses and most famously, the conversion each summer of a stretch of highway along the Seine to an artificial beach called Paris Plage. The whole effort is often referred to as the "greening of Paris," with the goal of making Paris the greenest city in the world.

Predictably, not everybody is happy. Though there has been a decrease in traffic volume and pollution, there is also an increase in congestion. Some also fear that this policy will harm the economy of the city, making it less of a working city and more for residents and tourists.

But this viewpoint ignores the positive economic experience in other cities, including London and Copenhagen, that have put their own restraints on car travel.

The greening policy of Delano is likely to be a factor in this year's municipal elections. Current polls show that the policy is, on the whole, popular with Parisians and that some aspects of the policy, including the Paris Plage, are wildly popular.

New England cities, with the exception of Cambridge, Mass., have yet to tap into the transformative role for transportation that has been successfully realized in cities as diverse as Curitiba, Brazil; Melbourne, Australia; and Arlington, Va. It is time we joined this worldwide revolution.

Consider the potential for urban transformation of putting a tramway on Farmington Avenue in Hartford or on the Post Road in lower Fairfield County. Trams would convert these abused bits of urban fabric from auto-dominated places that we simply want to pass through to urban corridors of life and vitality that could activate their host cities. We just need a small dose of imagination.

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