

Edinburgh Trams – A Streetcar named Desire?

✘ Professor Iain Docherty delivered an intentionally thought-provoking and determinedly controversial talk about the Edinburgh Tram Project at the Royal Scottish Society of Arts meeting last night, which left The Reporter wondering whether anyone at the council had ever heard about transport planning. There are many in the city who decry the project, and who hold the view that it is intrinsically flawed, but not many who, like Docherty, who can actually tell you quite succinctly why.

He is well qualified to do this, as he is the Professor of Public Policy and Management at The University of Glasgow Business School, and has spent his professional life studying transportation of all kinds in cities around the world.

The outgoing President of the Society, former Green MSP ✘ Robin Harper, briefly introduced the academic to the assembled audience, and then spent much of the hour of questions afterwards reining in some of the members of the audience, all eager to have their say on the subject of Tramadrama.

No city councillors thought it a good idea to expose themselves to the discussion at the Augustine United Church on George IV Bridge. It must be said that many of those attending had little good to say about the elected body round the corner on the Royal Mile, but much to say about the 'democratic deficit' between the planners and government at all levels. One member of a community council present expressed his view that people simply do not want to engage with their elected bodies any more as they do not think it does any good.

The professor posed a question at the start of his presentation: "What kind of cities do we want in the future?" He explained that the way that our cities are developed and the street patterns created is fundamentally affected by our transport choices. Pre-1840 our urban areas were 'foot cities' with narrow streets or closes, after that they became 'track cities' allowing space for horse-drawn vehicles and latterly they have become 'rubber cities' populated by cars.

Docherty demonstrated this assertion visually, by showing the audience a photograph of the New Town, where pavements were only introduced to separate pedestrians from horses drawing the carriages.



He also demonstrated to the audience from other photographs and maps, that Edinburgh was built in a way which reflects the fact that it did have a tram system in the past, but also shows our love of and attraction to the motor car. A depiction of the typical home with a double garage and conservatory are the modern aspiration replacing the city centre tenement building, which he hinted was more sustainable.

"So what will be different about a tram system in the 21st century?" one member of the audience asked. "We had an extensive tram system in Edinburgh until the 1950s when the lines were demolished." Docherty replied that the difference now, some 60 years later, is that tram vehicles have increased capacity and faster journey times. He also claimed that trams result in the best walking environment, allowing people to really enjoy the spaces in the city centres. Docherty is quite clearly pro-Trams but alluded to the Edinburgh Tram as this administration's vanity project.



Today when all economies are being pushed to improve, there is both intense global competition for investment and an increasing importance of the urban space. "So transport is essential to allow us to live the lives we want to," said Docherty. We were introduced to the idea that economically successful cities elsewhere have chosen something different from buses and cars as their main ways of getting about, but they have effected the transformation with careful planning.

Docherty extolled the virtues of cities in France such as Bordeaux, where a third of the project cost was spent on improving the public realm, and Nice our twin city, where good transport including a tram network has been built. He claimed that France just 'gets it right' and showed us new buildings in Montpellier which were built on the premise that they are only accessible by tram.

One memorable photograph in the hour long presentation showed us the platforms in Waverley Station set in a grey walled backwater of the station. This is the first glimpse of Scotland for many visitors, a view which he described as 'appalling'. Professor Docherty also said:-"The lack of ambition causes it. This thinking is desecrating our urban environment."

Explaining that the route for the tram originally went from Leith, where The Scottish Office is based, to the airport, Docherty asserted that the simple reason for this was that the decision was made by civil servants rather than transport or city planners. He compared this to the Channel Tunnel, which only became reality when MEPs had to get to the continent for EU meetings. Other cities had built small tram systems and then added extensions on to reach other areas, which Docherty said has to include other areas of the city apart from the centre. He also admitted quite freely that the tram system has to integrate fully with bus and train networks to work

properly.

A member of the audience, former councillor Lawrence Marshall, reminded the audience that the tram development had really been initiated by the proposed Waterfront development where a town the size of Falkirk was supposed to be built. But, he continued, "Noone has got to grips with the tram project for the last two years."

Speaking at an RIAS conference back in 2004, Docherty explained way back then that transport planning is very simple. He explained that it is well established transport theory that the major transport generators are Railways, Universities and Hospitals. Given that none of these will feature on the Edinburgh Tram route, it seems in his opinion doomed to failure. If the system does not take people where they need or want to go then it simply will not be used. Asked for his thoughts on what will happen in Edinburgh in the future, he replied that it will go the same way as the tram system in Manchester, where the network has been sold off to a private contractor.

A member of the audience argued that the tram route had been based on simple geography, around the main job centres in Edinburgh Park, the city centre and Leith. Another caused some mirth claiming that the tram system was perfect for someone leaving Saughton Prison, going straight to Harvey Nichols to buy a new suit and then on to the airport.

Docherty concluded that he hopes that we will love the trams when they are eventually up and running. He said:- "When you get it right, the public appetite for getting it right is insatiable, and the public will engage and use the trams." But he also explained that we should all expect better value for money from our public projects, which are around 40% more expensive here in the UK than they are elsewhere in Europe.

One fascinating fact which had surprised Professor Docherty

himself, is that for every tram journey which is created, a new journey on foot is also created. This is not simply the walk to and from the tram stop. Apparently workers coming into the city centre by tram then start taking lunchtime walks, as it is more pleasant and much safer to do so. An improvement in the public realm means that people want to stroll around city centres or use pavement cafes there and trams are actually more than a mode of transport, they are a way of improving our social and civic lives.

Will we love or hate the trams when they are up and running?
What do you think?

Iain Docherty BSc PhD CMILT is Professor of Public Policy and Management at the University of Glasgow Business School. Iain's research and teaching addresses the interconnecting issues of public administration, institutional change and city and regional competitiveness, with particular emphasis on the structures and processes of local and regional governance, policies for delivering improved economic performance and environmental sustainability, and the development and implementation of strategic planning and transport policies. Iain also works with and acts as an advisor on strategic policy issues to a range of private sector, governmental and other organisations including several in the UK, US, Canada and Sweden. He served as Non-Executive director of Transport Scotland, the national transport agency for Scotland, from 2006 – 2010, and in 2011 was appointed as one of the inaugural members of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Young Academy of Scotland.