



Image: Queen Street, Brisbane, 1928, courtesy of the John Oxley Library

MOBILITY CHAMPIONS: THE VISIONARY TRANSPORT PLANNERS OF BRISBANE'S PAST AND FUTURE



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“Why did we get rid of the trams in the first place?” As a Brisbane-based transport planner, people ask me this all the time. If the asker knows a bit of context, it's often followed by a jab at “those Americans coming out here and telling us to build highways instead” – referring to Wilbur Smith and Associates, and their 1965 *Brisbane Transportation Study*, which recommended both closing the tram network and an extensive program of highway investment and was adopted in earnest by then Lord Mayor Clem Jones.

It sounds backwards today, but in the context of 1965, it was a visionary plan which influenced governmental decisions and accommodated a daunting growth challenge. Wilbur Smith and Associates were, in fact, mobility champions for Brisbane.

The view from 1965

In 1965, Brisbane was in the middle of a mass car adoption trend. The freedom and mobility range provided by cars was driving suburban development

beyond the catchment of the tram and rail lines, and public transport patronage (and revenue) was in a steep decline. To governments of the time, these changes represented unprecedented new challenges.

Enter Wilbur Smith and Associates. Their plan called not for closure of the tram network, but for replacement with buses. Buses were substantially cheaper, unrestricted in their route options, operationally flexible, safer to board and (tram stations were usually in the road median) and moved with the car traffic instead of disrupting it. They also called for a connected network of highways to carry the bulk of the transport task. In context, it's hard to argue against those recommendations.

We can look back now and throw stones at parts of it. I don't think anyone regrets that the 'Petrie Bight Expressway' never eventuated (imagine if we built a second Riverside Expressway in place of Eagle Street Pier). But the fact is that this was the

work of visionary planners, and it provided infrastructure and service solutions to respond to very challenging growth circumstances and guided governmental decisions for decades to come.

The extent of the plan's influence, and the underlying car travel trend, was such that it would be thirty years before public transport infrastructure next vied with a road investment option and won.

The end of the trend

In 1996, the Borbidge Government won power in Queensland with a promise to expand the Pacific Motorway to eight lanes between Brisbane and the Gold Coast. For thirty years, transport in Brisbane had been focused on more roads and bigger roads, but public expectations were changing.

Traffic congestion was becoming a problem. Parking prices were increasing. Suburban housing densities were slowly starting to increase. The appetite for more highway infrastructure in inner-Brisbane

was low. Visionary planning was needed to change the direction of infrastructure delivery to respond to these changing trends.

Planners at Queensland Transport had been developing just such a plan, which recommended a network of busways to provide dedicated infrastructure for fast and reliable public transport services. The South East Busway was developed as an alternative to the eight-lane Pacific Motorway plan between Eight Mile Plains and Brisbane, and was supported by integrated land use development, and through community consultation was proven to be preferred by residents.

The South East Busway was adopted in place of the corresponding section of the eight-lane upgrade of the Pacific Motorway. For the first time since the replacement of the trams, a public transport alternative was chosen over a road project. It was an instant success and became an internationally-recognised example of dedicated bus infrastructure. The momentum of this project led to the Inner Northern, Northern, and Eastern busways which are now at the core of Brisbane's public transport network.

This was a paradigm shift in government investment in the transport network, and as in 1965, it was the result of visionary planners developing a clear direction and doing the dedicated work to build support. These Queensland Transport planners were the mobility champions of Brisbane in the 90s.

Change is the only constant

In 2018, we are on the cusp of another technological change. In 1965, it was car adoption. This time, connectivity and automation will change the landscape of transport.

The early stages of this change are visible with the introduction of ridesharing services. You simply tell an app where you are and where you want to go, and it connects you with someone who can take you there. These services aren't public transport, but they also don't fit with the conventional understanding of private transport.

Now imagine a similar ridesharing app, except it gives you options. For example:

- **The free option:** walk or ride a bike. It'll take you two hours to walk, or half an hour on a bike.
- **The low-cost option:** leave no later than eight minutes from now, walk 400m to a pick-up point, a bus will take you to the train, which will take you to your destination. It'll cost you \$4 and take half an hour.

- **The medium-cost option:** a minibus will pick you up from your door in six minutes. It'll drive you to your destination, but there are already two other people on board and will probably stop to pick up two more. It should take about 20 minutes and will cost you \$8.
- **The high-cost option:** a car will pick you up from your door as soon as possible and drive you directly to your destination. You will have the car to yourself. It will take about 12 minutes, including waiting time, and will cost \$15.

This is the concept of 'Mobility as a Service', and is the manifestation of the technological change of *connectivity*. Public and private transport elements are both in there, but the lines are blurred, and any variety of alternative options could also be presented. The future of transport is not centred around clearly defined modes. Traditional infrastructure and mass transit services will play an important role in the future, but they will not define our transport systems. We are entering an era where transport service supply will adapt to demand through market forces, and governments must intervene to ensure that shared-interest is valued above self-interest.



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Simultaneously, *automation* is expected to remove the need for drivers, at least in some situations. Automation might result in a 'business as usual' situation where people own their autonomous cars which make empty trips, circulate to avoid paying for parking and dramatically increase congestion on the road network. Alternatively, they may be shared through a subscription service, reducing overall private travel costs, improving vehicle utilisation and reducing traffic on the

roads. An unregulated market, driven by corporate interests, will aim primarily to sell more cars – the 'business as usual' approach. It will be politically challenging, but the shared-use alternative can be achieved through regulation which will be researched, recommended and marketed to our decision-makers and the public by visionary planners.

With these technological changes comes a host of other questions in need of answers. How will we fund improvements when electric vehicles reduce or remove fuel excise revenue? If we're more efficient with our cars and don't need to park, what will we do with surplus road space? Are there opportunities to give street spaces back to the people? How can governments regulate to manage travel demands and encourage efficient travel behaviours? What micro-mobility solution will come next, after e-scooters? And most importantly, what are we going to do with all the empty garages?

The coming decades present an opportunity to find answers to these questions and create a people-focused transport system, which is safe, equitable, efficient and integrated into the public realm. Alternatively, unfettered self-interest may drive the transport system to chaos. The outcome will be decided by our elected leaders, but they will be informed by visionary planners. Planners who, like Wilbur Smith and Associates in 1965, take ownership of these issues, provide clear direction, gather support, engage their community and industry and influence our future. Planners who take on the role of mobility champions for our future.



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