

The Charter-ed Accountant ~ Revealing the Walking Economy

Ian Napier

Abstract

The Australian Pedestrian Charter, while it lays down the principles on which improvements to the pedestrian environment should be based, will not, on its own, improve the lot of the pedestrian in Australia. Neither will simple goodwill and the good intentions of a bunch of dedicated professionals and persistent advocates, necessary as both these groups are to the outcome we would like to see.

By comparison with the car-based economy, the economy associated with walking and pedestrians is at first sight minute, insignificant and, as a result, lacks influential champions with financial muscle. By highlighting the financial issues at stake and seeking partners who stand to gain from improved walking conditions and a resulting healthier population then we can start to harness solid collective self interest.

Such financial motivation can most effectively be directed when there is a well-informed and recognised body of professionals able to champion the needs of walkers/pedestrians.

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Ian is the principle consultant with the Australian consultancy *urbis*, which recently merged with his previous urban design and social research company Keys Young, now trading as *urbis keys young*. A qualified architect, planner and urban designer, his early experience in a multi disciplinary team at the former Greater London Council in the UK sparked a career interest in the interaction between physical planning and transport - how people experience and move around cities, especially on foot. His first project on arrival in Australia was to prepare the Pedestrian Action Plan for the City of Sydney and most recently he has completed a Pedestrian Network and Amenity Study for North Sydney. Ian has been involved in a range of urban projects from master-planning of waterfront renewal at Darling Harbour and Geelong, and early planning studies for the Olympic site at Homebush Bay through a variety of town centre studies to the revitalisation of local village centres.

He is a founding director of the Pedestrian Council of Australia, in which capacity he convened the National Pedestrian Summit in Sydney in 1999.

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Introduction

After the Charter

In 1999 the Pedestrian Council of Australia convened a national Pedestrian Summit in Sydney and out of that event came The Australian Pedestrian Charter. Like a number of charters before it, our charter spelt out 'a better deal' for pedestrians, the principles that should be adopted and some implementation strategies about how such improvements might come about. (PCA 1999) Here in Perth the West Australian Department of Transport, already themselves in the process of producing a walking strategy, were the first government agency to adopt the Charter and to include it in their policy document. We hope this will be the first of many such organisations to adopt such policies but much much more needs to be done.

If such documents as the Charter are not to become yet more bits of useless paper and our efforts in putting it together unproductive talkfests, then we must explore better ways of implementing pedestrian friendly policies and creating walkable environments.

For this to happen walking has to be taken seriously as a clean, convenient, space and energy efficient transport mode over distances up to a kilometre or more, and it deserves more recognition as the most popular recreational pastime and also as one of our most cost-effective health measures.

'Cost-effective' is the crucial phrase here and one I hope to develop in this paper as I explore the 'economy of walking'. I hasten to explain that I am no economist, nor even the accountant of my title, but I have become only too aware of the lack of resources devoted to this task. It is therefore not my intention to undertake a fully-fledged academic cost benefit analysis. Others such as Todd Litman are better equipped to do so (for instance see Litman 1999).

My purpose is to stimulate debate, thought and discussion and along the way raise a couple of issues of concern to me. It is in many ways a personal exploration as a practitioner and advocate, reassessing where our energies, both personal and collective, should most effectively be directed.

The Power of Money

My thesis is that, whether we like it or not, in the free market capitalist economy that most of us inhabit, money talks. No matter what the flavour of our local politics, the global economy will tend to influence our lives more and more and in that global economy, oil talks louder than most. There is big money behind the manufacture, sale, maintenance, repair and even the ultimate destruction, of our cars and in the supply of all the infrastructure that supports them. This includes not just the fuel that powers and lubricates them but also the construction and maintenance of the roads and highways on

which we drive, and even includes the significant slice of our valuable real estate devoted to these vehicles, whether moving or stationary.

Political pressure

Faced with such a huge economic juggernaut, local politicians are unlikely to upset the status quo. Which politician is going to turn away the opportunity of 1000 jobs in a car plant or the status of opening a new freeway sold on the basis of not just its transient construction jobs but also its promised travel time savings and economic stimulus? It feels a bit like 'tilting at windmills' to suggest that perhaps there might be an element of futility in some of these community investments. Given the huge sums involved in these projects there is enormous pressure on all involved to demonstrate that, within narrowly defined criteria, benefits outweigh costs. I will leave it to others, more economically qualified, to tilt at these particular windmills. Whether we agree on the beneficial impacts of such expenditure and whether its source is via government (ie taxes) or more directly from our pockets, there is no denying the size of this particular branch of the economy and therefore the considerable vested interests pushing hard for 'more of the same'.

In comparison, the walking /pedestrian economy is a very poor relation and so long as that is the perception, progress on such documents as the Australian Pedestrian Charter will continue to be slow.

Self interest

I have to declare an interest, first as a professional in this field and as a member of an advocacy group struggling to survive on limited or nonexistent funding and on the good will and voluntary efforts of its key members.

Such community-spirited devotion to a 'cause' is of course to be commended but it is neither very reliable nor sustainable. Those of us trying to make a living from such professional activities may also at times be forced to question the morality of cross-subsidising pedestrian studies with other work. The only sustainable approach is for the community, whether public or private, to recognise the value of the work we are doing and treat it as an investment with long-term community benefits. The other side of the coin is to identify the costs of continuing down the path we are set on and demonstrating convincingly that our financial interests will suffer unless governments, industry and we as individuals change course.

Unfortunately for such self-interest to be harnessed (after all, it is the most honest of motives) there has to be some alignment of personal benefit and community benefit. Too often the costs fall on one part of the community and the benefits another. Too often the political pain has to precede the political gain. What politicians are going to blow their budget on something that is not going to get them elected in three years time?

As to my other self-interest, the funding of pedestrian advocacy groups, yes, I would love to see them adequately funded but with qualification. In an ideal world we should not need such groups and pedestrian issues would be given the political priority they deserve. Unfortunately we are not yet in that world.

In these circumstances we must look for ways to appeal to economic self-interest. If we can appeal to our better natures then that is a bonus. For the moment we can't rely on it so let's get with the strength. Greed might not be good but it often gets a hell of a lot done.

Who gains, who loses?

The economic implications cover personal, community, industry and the voluntary sector.

Personal

Personal benefits flow on three levels. We benefit at the most basic level even if we are not substituting such walk trips for vehicle trips. These are the health benefits one would get from walking the dog but could equally be had at the local gym (although walking would be a lot cheaper). Further benefits flow if we substitute some vehicle trips by walking trips or walk/public transport trips and, as we shall see, some of these benefits also flow through to the community. The greatest benefits, however, flow when the degree of trip substitution allows the purchase of a car to be foregone. For a proportion of inner city residents this may mean no car at all but for other households it is more likely to be the second or third car that is done without. This implies that if the quality of public transport and the pedestrian environment is good enough then one can choose not to drive, and even not to own, a car. For many not capable of holding a driving licence, whether through age, disability or financial circumstances, that choice is not a voluntary one.

The personal benefits may be financial but there will also be physical and mental health benefits. In addition the environmental and aesthetic benefits that flow from numbers of individuals walking (discussed under community benefits) will also have individual benefits.

Community

The community as a whole benefits from the cumulative benefits to individuals but there are two aspects to the benefits as they affect the wider community, some of which are just the other side of the same coin. There are the positive aspects that flow from more people walking then there is the absence of, or reduction in, negative impacts of motor vehicle (particularly private car) travel.

One positive for the community is also a 'chicken and egg' conundrum. An improvement in the quality of the public domain to me goes hand in hand with an increase in the number of walkers using that environment... but which came first? Are more people walking because it is a more pleasant people-friendly space or is it a better environment -

- a) because the people themselves add to the atmosphere of the place and
- b) people on foot can experience and appreciate better their surroundings than when cocooned in a capsule and focussing on the road in front of them and, as a result, demand more of those designing and controlling these spaces?

Related to a) above is the public safety benefit that flows from more eyes on the street. Such benefits are difficult enough to quantify, although the cost of assaults and the

associated policing costs should be able to be estimated. Even more elusive are concepts of 'community' itself, of a more civil (civilised) cohesive society. Can we put a value on a more caring environment and indeed can we link the words 'walkable', 'livable' and 'valuable'? The 'New Urbanists' are attempting to recreate traditional neighbourhood communities not because it 'feels good' to do the right thing - not out of altruism, but because the marketplace believes it adds value.

Industry

At first sight those same considerations that commend walking as a non-polluting cheap and equitable mode of transport are just those same factors that cause it to have little political influence – it is cheap. There are few juicy contracts employing thousands of people and injecting millions into the local economy. We are not pushing out the boundaries of science and technology with pedestrian facilities so it does not attract hotshot scientists and fat research budgets.

When we choose to walk we don't directly contribute much to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), one of the measures of our economic health. The irony of our national accounting system is that the GDP benefits more if pedestrians are knocked down on the road. While personal and community costs and benefits may provide the moral imperative for action and possibly also a political pressure point, the key drivers will be with the 'industries' that might see financial gains in alternative modes.

I divide this section into firstly suppliers, who are actually supplying products either directly related to walking environments or which indirectly benefit from such provision, and secondly professionals who are providing services related to walkers/pedestrians.

Suppliers

The most direct suppliers are the footwear and clothing manufacturers, but other obvious suppliers are those building suppliers providing pavers, bricks, light standards and other street furniture elements aimed at pedestrian areas (although in practice it may be the same firms selling and installing materials for roads). Less obvious are the builders providing the land uses that constitute walkable, accessible environments. Again it may be the same firms that are providing medium density mixed use and transit-oriented developments around activity centres as are contributing to urban sprawl.

Retailing

Another group of players in this economic equation is the retailers, and the suppliers of retail space, although they have more usually been the contributors to the problem rather than the solution. Small corner stores and neighbourhood shopping centres stand to gain from more walkable environments but large regional shopping centres can also adapt to gain custom by public transport and from a local walking catchment. If such shopping centres can successfully demonstrate a pattern of mode shift away from private vehicles then new stores can be built with less parking (which can be expensive to provide) or existing parking areas can be redeveloped for more productive trading space. Many such centres have the opportunity to diversify and become genuine mixed-use centres with community facilities, entertainment and medium density housing. If so,

they can reap further economic benefit through longer trading hours, in some extreme cases 24 hours, hence the return on capital can be considerably greater.

Public transport.

A further industry to benefit from improved walking environments is the public transport industry as for most transit trips there is a walk component at each end that is an integral part of the trip. Improved walkable environments can greatly expand the catchments for public transport systems and hence greatly increase the systems' viability. When we start to see walking as an integral part of that industry then it greatly extends the economic sphere of influence.

Tourism

Another industry of growing importance to our economy here in Australia, if not already one of the largest, is the tourist industry. It is one area where the importance of pleasant walking environments is sadly underestimated. We are aware of the 'package' tourists who are flown in and spend the bulk of their visit piling in and out of a coach going from photo opportunity to duty free shopping opportunity to eating opportunity. Independent tourists, on the other hand, tend to do more walking when on holiday than they would normally do at home. Over and above this sightseeing and exploratory tourism, there is the great potential of walking tourism where one of the prime purposes of the travel is walking. This might feature the classic walks such as the Milord track in New Zealand or the Cradle Mountain track in Tasmania, the Pennine Way in the UK or Appalachian Trail (of Bill Bryson fame) in the US. This industry involves both suppliers of products and professional services. It can require the construction of actual facilities such as graded walking tracks in wilderness areas and national parks or the construction and running of accommodation facilities and possibly the provision of connecting transport. In many cases, however, it merely involves introducing the public to the opportunities for walking, inspiring people to use the facilities already in existence, planning the logistics of connections and interpreting the experience. The process can involve something as simple as a single page leaflet produced by a local Council to encourage people to utilise a local park, or can involve a highly professional team of guides and other staff planning and supplying logistical support, catering and accommodation for a five day wilderness trek. It requires, as with any kind of tourism, interesting and attractive places that we want to explore and reasonable conditions under which people can enjoy doing so. Good interpretation and some imagination can transform some at first unpromising sites. Two that come to mind are the 'underground' or basement tours of old Seattle and, closer to home, the outstanding success of walks over the arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

As a growing market it can be an add-on, 'value adding' to existing tourist activities but, as discussed earlier, it reaps most rewards when it can displace vehicle trips. We derive maximum benefit when we can confidently enjoy holiday and tourist destinations without arriving by car, hiring one or relying on tour buses or coaches. Everyone else benefits too!

One of the tests of a city's public transport system is whether visitors can work it out - How do you pay? Where does it go? Does it provide information on and access to walks in the city and its outskirts?

My first introduction to this idea was the books describing countryside walks put out by London Transport which utilised its metro trains and buses to access starting and finishing points for walks through the country around London. The books provided maps and interpretive material for the area covered.

This became my inspiration for a book of walks I produced for the then Public Transport Commission to coincide with the opening of the new Eastern Suburbs Railway in Sydney over twenty years ago.

Pedestrian Planners

From devising pleasant and interesting walks utilising existing routes, it is a small but significant step to evaluating pedestrian environments, making recommendations for improvements and additions or planning entirely new routes, environments and facilities. An example of this was the Pedestrian Action Plan that we undertook on behalf of the City of Sydney in the early '70s and a number of similar pedestrian plans and strategies in various forms produced since in a number of towns and cities. The most recent examples of 'Pedestrian Planning' in New South Wales are the Pedestrian Access and Mobility Plans (PAMPs) jointly funded by local Councils and the State Roads and Traffic Authority.

These studies are generally undertaken by planning and urban design firms like our own, or by traffic planners and engineers but rarely if ever by a firm or sole agent calling themselves 'Pedestrian Planner' The 'iced tea' (ISTEA). legislation in the United States has done much to create a body of professionals in that country dedicated to pedestrian and (perhaps more so) bicycle issues to the extent that they can support an Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals with currently some 300 members.

This collection of government officers, advocates, consultants, academics, planners, engineers, architects and safety experts does not however constitute a profession with an agreed body of knowledge and a regulated set of standards for applying it.

If we are to develop a profession of 'pedestrian planning', which can provide a balanced career path, then we require an 'industry' with sustainable funding. Such funding will obviously vary from city to city and country to country. I hope your experiences contradict mine, but from where I sit the currently available funding is a sad reflection on the status and importance of pedestrians, at least in the minds of those holding the purse strings. Despite what I perceive as a greater awareness of pedestrian issues in the community and lip service on the part of politicians to the priority that should be afforded pedestrians, funds allocated do not even seem to have been maintained, let alone improved. The fees we received for the City of Sydney Pedestrian Action Plan over thirty years ago was very similar in numbers of dollars to the fees recently on offer for the PAMPs mentioned above and in some cases the current fees are less. Given inflation over thirty years, either the time and effort devoted to the projects is cut considerably, one cross subsidises the work with more profitable projects or you go out of business. This is hardly a recipe for a burgeoning profession!

The alternative is the adaptation of the current situation where a variety of professionals make their contribution to the public and private environment, one consideration among many on their agenda being pedestrians. An improvement on this would be some

formalisation of the educational program to ensure that a body of information on pedestrian planning and design is taught to all the relevant professionals having a role in the public domain design process. This then puts an onus on academics such as Rodney Tolley at CAST in the UK and roving missionaries such as Dan Burden in the US to develop curricula and promote at least the foundations of an academic discipline.

Without formal professional backing, pedestrians lack a champion when resource and design decisions are made. In this environment the role of the informed advocate organisation becomes critical.

Conclusions

I am very conscious that in these gatherings, while it is always reassuring to get support and encouragement from like-minded people, there is an element of 'preaching to the converted'. Little of what I am saying will be new to most of this audience. For those of us close to the issues, the merits of doing all we can to encourage more walking, both as sole mode and in conjunction with public transport, appear so obvious and the arguments we read in the literature so compelling. We therefore find it perplexing and frustrating that little progress appears to be made and that we, whether in developed or developing nations, whether east, west, north or south, become more car dependent each year.

I would be glad for some at this conference to persuade me otherwise, but currently the economic momentum is with the car and the global, multi- or trans- national players that propel and support its voracious appetite. Lest we get into paranoid rantings about the 'evil empire' let me be quick to point out that we are willing conspirators. 'They' would not be able to have their way if we as a society were not willing, indeed eager, participants - hooked on the drug of convenient mobility with its promise of power, status and even sex.

Some have attempted to make the comparison with smoking - powerful forces pressing a product on a willing customer base, but one which is progressively becoming more aware that the product is doing them and those around them no good, yet reluctant to do much about it. Whether we can see a similar downturn in car use to match the downturn in smoking in western societies remains to be seen. Can we envisage compulsory health warnings - bumper stickers proclaiming 'the use of this vehicle is a danger to my health and yours'?

One way or another the true costs of car dependency and the benefits of walking need far greater airing, but if we are to act on that knowledge we need improved facilities created and maintained by professional well informed champions within a viable and sustainable industry with demonstrable economic flow on to the rest of the economy. In conclusion let me develop one more analogy or metaphor.

The Iceberg

This was the 'Crash Iceberg' used back in 1975 in the Pedestrian Federation of America's publication, *Walk Tall*, to describe the visible 'official' problem ie the published statistics of crashes and road trauma, and the 'unofficial' problems beneath the surface that go unreported and unrecognised such as near misses, fear and worry,

foregone trips, isolation and a whole series of impacts economists refer to as 'externalities'.

It took only one iceberg to sink the unsinkable luxury liner Titanic.

Our vehicle-dependent economy is going 'full speed ahead'. It will take more than an iceberg to slow it down, let alone stop it and turn it around, and there are too many vested interests to let it sink. Revealing more of the hidden impacts may however force a change of direction, however slight, in favour of more sustainable solutions that include and celebrate walking.

Some of us are privileged enough to be on the bridge of the liner with some influence on how it is steered, some of us are in the engine room obeying orders, but most are just willing passengers enjoying the ride.

It can be cold, lonely and uncomfortable jumping up and down on the iceberg pointing to the impending disaster below!

References

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