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Route master: London by bike

Jonathan Ives reviews London's bike hire scheme, its impact on the environment and its contribution to the language of the city.

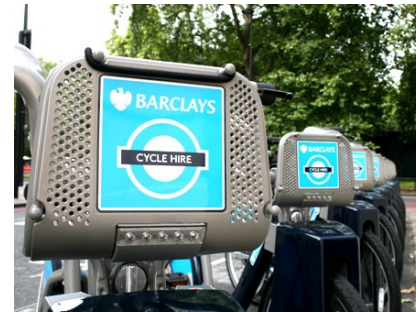
When Ken Livingstone returned from a visit to the 2007 Tour de France and, in his capacity as London mayor, asked Transport for London to come up with plans to emulate the Paris Vélib cycle hire scheme it seemed that environmental issues were central to his thinking. The announcement of detailed proposals the following February promised a London cycle hire scheme with 6,000 bikes and made much of the scheme's potential environmental impact: 20% of the carbon emissions savings that were to be made in London by 2025 were to come from changes to methods of travel; and achieving a target of one in 10 of the capital's round trips being made by bike would save 1.6 billion tonnes of CO2 a year. An accompanying range of projects and policies would "change the profile and priority of walking and cycling in London", all facilitated by £500 million of investment.

By July 2010, when Livingstone's mayoral successor, Boris Johnson, was able to unveil the ranks of blue-liveried bikes of what had become officially known as the Barclays cycle hire scheme, the environmental focus had been widened to include the impact on the physical and financial health of the city. At the official launch Barclays chairman Marcus Agius described London's cycle hire as "a flagship scheme that will change the face of London forever" and he was clear about the benefits the scheme would bring: "We believe there are huge benefits for the public in a low-cost, affordable, sustainable and environmentally friendly scheme. It will introduce thousands of people to one of the cleanest, greenest and quickest ways of navigating the city. An extensive transport system with good accessibility is also essential to the health of London's economy."

This wider understanding of the scheme's ability to impact on the environment of the city is indicative of the impact the scheme has had in the relatively short time since its inception. Where the environmental context had once been couched in terms of CO2 and sustainable travel, any debate of the scheme's effects is now as likely to include discussion of new understandings of the public realm, behavioural change and urban etiquette.

Visit the centre of London and you do not have to wait long to see the scheme in action. The Barclays-blue bikes with their flashing LED lights to front and rear stand out among the traffic and the pedestrians, while a short walk in almost any direction will bring you to a docking station, the pick-up and drop-off point for hire bikes. Launched with 5,000 bikes and 315 docking stations spread around the central area, the scheme was initially restricted to members registering their details and paying an up-front fees of £3 for a key and then a daily, weekly or annual charge (£1, £5 and £45 respectively) to use a bike; the first half hour of use is free and then a sliding scale of hire charges is applied, with up to an hour costing £1 and up to 90 minutes costing £4. By December 2010 when access was opened to casual users, who can use a credit card to pay a daily or weekly access fee, 110,000 people had registered as members and more than two million journeys had been made, approximately 20,000 a day.

Transport for London now plans to extend the area covered from Olympia in the west to Bow in the east, adding another 2,000 bikes and 4,200 docking points to the scheme. This eastern extension will take the scheme to the edge of the Olympic park, helping London 2012 organisers to pursue their aim of getting everyone to travel to the London Games on some form of public transport, whether bus, train, boat, bike or foot. It will also throw up a potential branding conflict between Barclays, sponsor of Boris's bikes, and Lloyds TSB, sponsor of Seb Coe's London 2012 Olympics, something that



A new symbol for the capital and its transport systems

"Perhaps the scheme's most charming contribution to London life has been a new word: to boris, an intransitive verb meaning to cycle around the city with style and an insouciant air for less than a quid."

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might explain why the cycle hire scheme is to be expanded to the edge of, rather than beyond, the Olympic park.

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Peter Treadgold, a keen London cyclist who has spent a significant part of his professional career delivering cycling infrastructure and promoting cycling in London and beyond, is intrigued by the role of London's hire bikes in attempts to create a European cycling model in the UK. As an experienced cyclist, he is also conscious of the need to challenge and overcome a series of misconceptions and barriers that might dissuade individuals travelling around the city to change their habits and use a bike.

"It is tempting to discuss the impact of the scheme and its part in an integrated travel system at a sociological level," Peter said. "The premise of integration is compromise but there's not much in British culture that leads you down the path towards compromise; British culture tends to lead towards regulation. The essence of whether we can achieve such a European model in the UK is whether we can truly integrate. It seems to me that it's a challenge we have to come to terms with. We have to behave differently if we want these compromise situations. There's a lot more compassion needed at an individual level, whether that be pedestrian, cyclist or motorist. If we want to be integrated we have to change our behaviour."

However, perceptions of cycling as a mode of transport and of cyclists as individuals create a unique set of challenges when attempting to encourage people who see themselves as non-cyclists to use a bike.

"With other modes of transport people who don't use that mode generally accept its existence and are reasonably amenable to it as a transport option," he said. "However, at the moment you either do or don't cycle. Transport research has demonstrated that at present a view of the other side of that particular fence is reasonably alien but this scheme – which was launched by Boris, who is a keen cyclist, but was conceived by Ken, who isn't – has the capacity to break down that fence. Ordinary people – and of course all cyclists are 'ordinary people' – but ordinary people who don't think of themselves as a cyclist might ride a hire bike because they are there. Everybody can be a bike rider even though they might not choose to be a cyclist.

"The hire scheme also has the capacity to break down the barrier that puts many off cycling, which is convenience. Cycling is not that convenient. For journey time reliability its magnificent, the best way of travelling, but you have to have a bike with you, most people need to leave their bikes safely somewhere, they might need a shower, that sort of thing. Bike hire could well be much more convenient for many but we shouldn't forget that we're asking people to change their habits, people who may not particularly enjoy cycling. It's about the bike as a machine. Once the bike is recognised and accepted simply as a useful and efficient machine rather than a lifestyle statement it becomes available to everyone, whoever they are, however they may be dressed and wherever they may be going. The Barclays cycle hire scheme is another travel option, giving you more access, choice and convenience in the wide ranging transport offer in London."

Given his experience of working to promote cycling in London, Peter is familiar with this argument but he is convinced that the design of the cycle hire scheme, and in particular the bikes chosen for the scheme, can help to overcome the perception of cycling as a high-risk travel option.

"I'm delighted with the bike. I think this element of the hire scheme contributes to safer cycling because they are sit-up-and-beg style, a bike that is definitely not built for speed. This also feeds the environmental agenda because it makes you more aware of your surroundings. An ordinary bike doesn't lend itself so much to looking around. The design of the bike has safety benefits and for me is one of the big positives of the cycle hire scheme. I think they've got it right: you sit up, you see the environment, you experience the environment and you're safer. I am delighted to see these bikes being ridden well and to see drivers giving them room."

The scheme has not been without its critics and the spectrum of negativity is impressively wide. At one end of this spectrum is the £140 million that the scheme cost, £25 million of which was offset by Barclays' sponsorship, which draws frequent complaints. Then there is the Barclays sponsorship, both for associating a public transport scheme with one of the banks that

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has done so much to damage public finances and for allowing the famed and celebrated design integrity of London Transport and its successors to be so crassly compromised. Such complaints can add to the general antipathy towards cyclists from those who consider themselves non-cyclists and warnings that inexperienced cyclists will provide an unacceptable hazard to the rest of London's traffic and, perhaps, to themselves. Criticism directed at the way the scheme operates has included concerns that the scheme predominantly serves commuters moving to and from the rail termini and that the necessity for the bikes to be redistributed by TfL teams illustrates that the scheme is not sustainable, either as an efficient public transport system or in terms of its environmental credentials. Users can find some docking stations empty of bikes when they want to use one or destination stations full of bikes when they want to drop them off. At the more esoteric end of the spectrum are the complaints from experienced cyclists that the design of the bikes means that they are difficult to ride at any great speed. One contributor to an online discussion also noticed that the key members use to access the scheme "tasted funny".

For all its critics and the inevitable teething problems, the first months of the scheme have generally been regarded as successful. While the scheme's pilot period, in which only members had access to the scheme, was extended from a month to almost five, it seems that the blue bikes have been adopted and accepted into London life remarkably quickly. Initial usage figures may have outstripped initial expectations but figures for casual usage and for the first full year of the scheme will offer more accurate measures of return on the considerable investment. Whether demand will be sustained or whether usage will wane after the initial enthusiasm will determine whether the cost of the scheme will be judged a bargain or an indulgence in years to come.

Whatever the future of the scheme may be, it is clear that the cycle hire scheme has already helped to reshape London's environment. The impact and effects of most public investments go far beyond simple measurements of cost savings and time efficiencies but from the outset this scheme has seemed to be more about changing the character, culture and vibrancy of London for social and environmental gain than the economic benefits. Beyond its role as a new form of public transport, the scheme has brought some elegant new street furniture in the form of its docking stations, a new understanding of how individuals can choose – and be enabled – to interact with the city and the blue bike has provided a new symbol of London to go with the black cabs and the red buses. While the iPhone apps that help you make the most of the scheme might be an impressive bit of technology, perhaps the scheme's most charming contribution to London life has been a new word: to boris, an intransitive verb meaning to cycle around the city with style and an insouciant air for less than a quid.

Jonathan Ives is editor of The Leisure Review

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