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Practice and public–private partnerships in sustainable transport governance: The case of car sharing in Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades car sharing has become a mainstream transportation mode for over a million users worldwide with organisations now operating in more than 1100 cities across 26 countries and on five continents. Car sharing has developed alongside significant intellectual currents exploring the attributes and effectiveness of the diverse strands of transport policy. These debates include the efficacy of behaviour change programmes to shift transport practice, the imprints of neoliberalism on transport policy, and the withdrawal of the state as active agent in shaping policy privatisation. Despite its emergence amid these debates, car sharing has largely escaped their due consideration. This paper brings car sharing and transport policy scholarship into explicit conversation. It suggests that thinking car sharing through the broader lens of transport policy can produce a richer understanding of why car sharing works, and demonstrates that the case of car sharing sheds unique light onto key contemporary debates in transport policy. We present empirical data from an in depth content analysis of car sharing policy in Sydney, Australia. This data is used to explore the ways transport policy can, and does, facilitate successful car sharing. We draw upon two key theoretical frameworks to explain this success–practice theory and public–private partnerships. We conclude with a discussion of the way this unique analysis contributes to ongoing debates about the broader contours of transport governance.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, car sharing has become a mainstream transportation mode for over a million users worldwide with organisations now operating in more than 1 100 cities across 26 countries and on five continents: Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America (Shaheen and Cohen, 2012). Car sharing is arguably one of the more successful sustainable transport innovations of the past decade, with evidence suggesting that car sharing reduces rates of car ownership, frequency of car use and vehicle kilometres travelled (as reviewed by Kent (2013)).

Car sharing is a broad concept that covers several business and operational models (Shaheen and Cohen, 2012). Car sharing can be 'peer-to-peer', one-way, or affiliated with a specific public transport network. Car sharing organisations can be for-profit companies, community cooperatives, or non-profit organisations (Hampshire and Gaites, 2011). This paper adopts a conceptualisation of car sharing as a for-profit service that provides members with access to a fleet of vehicles. After becoming a member of a car sharing organisation, the user can book a car online or over the phone, typically on an hourly basis. The car is then accessed using an electronic key card or key fob, and members are billed at the end of the month for time and/or kilometres travelled. Cars are located in central business areas, neighbourhoods and major employment centres. In between bookings, idle car share cars usually occupy dedicated parking bays (sometimes referred to as 'pods'—'points of departure') positioned on or off street. Each car share car has its own pod, and the car must be returned to that specific pod once the booking is complete. Car sharing organisations in the model described here are privately owned and they target their services at households and businesses. This is a relatively simple, yet extremely popular kind of car sharing (Shaheen and Cohen, 2012), and examples include Zipcar in the United States and the United Kingdom (http://www.zipcar.com/) and GoGet in Australia (http://www.goget.com.au/).

Car sharing has emerged amid intellectual currents exploring the attributes and effectiveness of the diverse strands of transport policy. This includes, *inter alia*, prolific concern with attempts to shift travel toward more sustainable modes through behaviour change and the imprints of neoliberalism on transport policy (whether that be through the role of corporations influencing and formulating transport policy, the continued prioritisation of

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economic growth as a societal goal, or the withdrawal of the state as active agent in shaping policy privatisation and devolution (Aldred, 2012; Goulden et al., 2014; Marsden et al., 2014)). Car sharing has largely escaped consideration in these transport policy debates. Intellectual attention to sustainable transport policy has instead largely focused on other alternatives such as cycling, walking and public transport use. In contrast, an abundance of scholarship is emerging that identifies the key dimensions, influences and implications of the growth of car sharing (see summary in Shaheen and Cohen (2012)). While this literature includes some analysis of the policy mechanisms that encourage and support car sharing (Shaheen et al., 2010), it has tended to devote more attention to reasons for individual adoption of car sharing, and its business and technological underpinnings. Scholarship on car sharing has proceeded, in other words, parallel to, rather than through an engagement with, debates on sustainable transport policy. This lack of discussion across these two intellectual currents impoverishes both. As we contend in this paper, bringing the key intellectual concerns of transport polity to bear on car sharing can produce a richer understanding of why car sharing works. Equally, the case of car sharing sheds unique light onto key contemporary debates in transport policy.

This paper brings car sharing and transport policy scholarship into explicit conversation with the dual objectives of (1) offering an expanded perspective on the need for transport policy to facilitate and guide the initiation and ongoing development of successful car sharing and (2) contributing to ongoing debates about the nature of sustainable transport policies. Using insights from practice approaches to social life, critical analyses of transport policy and theories of urban governance, we undertake a critical examination of the planning and regulation of car sharing. We begin with an outline of the empirical case that is explored in the paper: local government responses to, and shaping of, car sharing in Sydney—Australia's largest city. Transport in Sydney remains characterised by high levels of automobile dependence (Mees, 2012), yet the city has also recently experienced phenomenal growth in car sharing (SGS Economics and Planning, 2012). We then bring car sharing and transport policy into conversation in two sections that combine theory and empirics: first through practice, and second through public–private partnership. Our paper concludes with a discussion of the ways this unique analysis contributes to ongoing debates about the broader contours of transport governance.

2. The empirical case: car sharing in Sydney

With a population of over 4.4 million people, Sydney is Australia's largest city (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The majority of all journeys are by private car (NSW Bureau of Transport Statistics, 2014)—a fact underpinned by the city's low population density (3.55 persons per hectare) as well as suburban areas that have poor public transport options. Sydney's first car share vehicle became available in 2003 (Simpson, 2009). Growth in the ensuing decade meant that by 2013 there were over 1000 car share vehicles across the metropolitan area. These vehicles, according to one estimate, service approximately 20,000 members (SGS Economics and Planning, 2012). A recently released cost–benefit analysis in the Sydney CBD found that car sharing benefits to members in the aggregate totalled more than $200 million, taking into account the deferral of car purchase and health benefits (SGS Economics and Planning, 2012). Car sharing is becoming an increasingly popular transport alternative in a relatively car-dominated city.

Car sharing is geographically concentrated in the city's inner urban core. We compiled online information from each of Sydney's three car sharing organisations to identify the number and location of car sharing cars across the Sydney region. Eight local authorities, all within a ten kilometre radius of the central city, capture 87 percent of Sydney's car share vehicles, with the remaining 13 percent scattered across the office precincts and major transport corridors of the greater metropolitan area. As summarised in Table 1, almost half of the city's car share vehicles are found in the City of Sydney, a local government area encompassing the central business district and its immediate surrounds. Notably, almost one third of car share members in the City of Sydney are businesses rather than individual residents (SGS Economics and Planning, 2012). The other areas in which car sharing is prominent display a number of common traits. North Sydney hosts a large commercial precinct as well as incorporates a swathe of higher density suburbs comprising Sydney's wealthy lower north shore. The urban form in the local government areas of Leichhardt, Marrickville and Ashfield is also dominated by high density residential uses, reflecting inner urban processes of gentrification characteristic of Australian cities (Bridge and Dowling, 2001). The suburbs in the areas covered by Waverley, Woollahra and Randwick display a diversity of densities, however all are coastal and host a series of higher density precincts associated with beachside inner urban uses. All eight areas are well serviced by public and active transport networks and infrastructure. The level of car ownership and reliance on the private car for the journey to work is also low relative to the Sydney GMR (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). As found in other international studies, then, car sharing in Sydney is concentrated in areas in which it serves as a complement to other forms of transport (Celsor and Millard-Ball, 2007).

In this paper we are interested in how this growth has been facilitated and regulated. We focus on the two key characteristics of car sharing that shape its regulation: car sharing as a for-profit business, and the primary role of local authorities. In terms of economic organisation, the ownership structures of car sharing organisations range across small-scale collectives, to large global businesses. Car sharing in Sydney is a private sector, rather than public, or cooperative, venture. Our audit of cars provided by all car sharing organisations in Sydney revealed that ninety percent of car share vehicles are owned and operated by the business 'GoGet'. Founded by two individuals, the business began with four cars in 2002 and has quickly expanded across Sydney, such that by 2014 it had more than 1000 cars across Sydney. Two other private corporations—Green Share Car and Hertz 24/7—are also active in some parts of Sydney, but have relatively small fleets (approximately 22 and 56 vehicles respectively). Second generation car sharing models such peer-to-peer car sharing are also slowly emerging, with the organisation 'Car Next Door' claiming a fleet of just over 100 vehicles in 2014. Nonetheless, the provision of car sharing in Sydney remains dominated by GoGet. The overwhelming concentration of car sharing vehicles with one organisation shapes the way it is governed, as we explore below.

In terms of the regulatory and policy mechanisms through which car sharing is facilitated, the first key point is that car sharing is absent from strategic and citywide transport planning. A review of key planning and transport planning documents for the metropolitan region revealed that car sharing was omitted from past and present (the most recent being 2014) Sydney metropolitan planning strategies, and it fails to feature in any past or present metropolitan wide transport planning document, including the NSW Long term Transport Master Plan, and the State Infrastructure Strategy. In essence, car sharing has remained outside the purview of conventional transport policy, and conventional transport agencies. Car sharing is, however, prominent in the activities and regulations of local government authorities in areas in which car sharing is established. Like elements of urban carbon governance identified elsewhere (McGuirk et al., 2014), car sharing

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