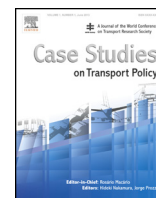


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Framing light rail projects – Case studies from Bergen, Angers and Bern

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ABSTRACT

In Europe, there has been a strong political will to implement light rail. This article contributes to the knowledge concerning policies around light rail by analysing how local actors frame light rail projects and which rationalities and arguments are present in this decision-making process. The article draws on the socio-technical approach to mobilities studies in order to reassemble the decision-making process in three European cases: Bergen, Angers, and Bern. This article provides insights into the political, discursive and material production of light rail mobilities in a European context. It identifies the planning rationales behind the systems and the policies that have been supportive of this light rail vision. Finally, the article identifies the practical challenges and potentials that have been connected to the different local frames of light rail mobility which can be used in future planning practices.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, transport policies in many European cities have supported automobile-oriented developments. However, the discourse of sustainable mobility has led to new policies for managing mobility in cities (Banister, 2008; Hajer and Kesselring, 1999). The trend of constructing new light rail¹ systems in medium-sized cities in Western Europe has become progressively stronger since the first modern light rail system was opened in Nantes, France, in 1985 – also called the ‘tram revival’ (Groneck, 2003; Bottoms, 2003). The sustainable mobility discourse has been fostered by the need to deal with increasing travel demands, struggle for space and liveability in the cities, growing CO₂ emissions from the transport sector, and the need to enhance mobility (European Commission, 2012). European cities have continually cited the flexibility of light rail systems in being able to meet a diverse set of goals despite the fact that light rail systems are a more expensive solution for smaller cities than prioritised bus systems such as bus rapid transit (BRT) (Deng and Nelson, 2011; Hodgson et al., 2013). There are strong discourses linked to the light rail vision which has been institutionalised in many national contexts; discourses such as ‘the struggle for space’, ‘the backbone of the public transport network’, ‘the image of the city’, etc. (Olesen, 2012). Light rail is therefore also often discussed as a potential

tool to upgrade the public transport system in order to mitigate congestion and restructure mobility around urban centres (Mills, 2001), and it is seen as a strategic tool to support urban development (Cervero, 1984; Pagliara and Papa, 2011; Hass-Klau et al., 2004). Furthermore, light rail can be implemented at a lower cost than metro systems. Therefore, especially in many medium-sized European cities, there has been an increased political interest in the possibility of implementing light rail (Bottoms, 2003; Mackett and Sutcliffe, 2003).

In practice, light rail has strong political support and carries a branding value for cities. A previous study by Bruijn and Veeneman (2009) concluded that BRT systems lack the mythical ‘allure’ often linked to light rail systems which can help mobilise various actants in the support of the process. This is the bus rapid transit versus light rail systems debate concerning the choice of ‘the right’ technology (see also Wirasinghe et al., 2013; Wright, 2005; Weinstock et al., 2011). Vuchic (2000) and Hensher (2006) also pointed out that the differences considered in decision-making processes and the choice between light rail systems and bus rapid transit is not only in technology but also in the type of service, its image, and impact. The choice of whether and how to realise light rail systems can be seen as a multi-actant decision-making process (Bruijn and Veeneman, 2009) which requires the involvement of a wide range of experts and stakeholders that might have very different perspectives and rationales on the decision to implement light rail systems. Transport policies are crucial in regard to meeting objectives, especially policies restricting car access, and previous research shows that a lack of these policies will impact on the performance of the light rail (Mackett and Sutcliffe, 2003; Denant-Boeá and Mills, 1999; Babalik-Sutcliffe, 2002). As has been argued by Bruijn and Veeneman (2009), decision-making processes for light rail involve great technical and social complexity.

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¹ Light rail is a hybrid between a bus and a train. Not only does light rail have a lighter vehicle design than metro and heavy rail, it also has a lighter infrastructure that allows the system to penetrate the city centres without such heavy investments as is the case with e.g. metro. Europe is the densest light rail continent with 170 systems in operation and nearly 100 more in construction or planning (UITP, n.d.).

However, there seems to be a lack of practical knowledge concerning this social complexity in various local contexts and the process of integrating the political vision for light rail into existing and new urban policies. Case studies of concrete examples of the decision-making process are, thus, valuable in filling this gap. As [Bruijn and Veeneman \(2009\)](#) argue similar strategies for light rail are not necessarily equally effective in different local contexts; the effectiveness of strategies is dependent on the context in which they are applied.

The performance of light rail systems is often evaluated in regards to patronage, cost effectiveness, travel time, and modal shifts, etc. (see, among others, [Litman, 2012](#); [Babalik-Sutcliffe, 2002](#)). However, not much attention has been given to the rational basis behind the systems, asking the *why* questions of mobility ([Cresswell, 2006](#)), such as the reasons why the light rail is chosen and the rationales behind these decisions and the effects that these frames for light rail mobility have had. This is, however, important in the understanding of the rationales behind light rail mobilities and the challenges that these systems were set to solve. This article will, through a case study of three European light rail systems, Bergen, Angers and Bern, examine how practices around light rail translates differently in local contexts and how this makes the various light rail projects different and similar in regards to the policies, frame, and objectives around these projects. This article is structured as follows. Firstly, the conceptual approach to exploring the different frames of light rail mobility is presented. Secondly, the methodological approach is presented and a short overview of the three cases is provided. Thirdly, examples from the decision-making processes for each of the three cases are analysed, and the main elements in this process are identified. In the conclusion, this article identifies the main rationales in the three cases along with the challenges and potentials that have been connected to the implementation of the local frames of light rail mobility.

2. Conceptual approach

As previously argued by [Richardson et al. \(2010\)](#), frames of mobility 'can be understood analytically as a coming together of a particular language of mobility, grounded in an underlying logic, or rationality, and applied in a certain context. The frame contains a problem to be solved, a course of action to be followed, a more or less reasoned justification for this, and a consideration of the consequences of doing so.' (p. 55) However, not only language, but also semiotics plays a role in socio-technical construction processes ([Law, 1999](#)). This article is founded in the socio-technical approach to mobilities studies which emphasises how transport systems are part of enacting certain realities of urban life, acknowledging that both human and non-human actants play a role in the socio-technical constellation of transport projects (see among others [Farias and Bender, 2010](#); [Vannini et al., 2012](#); [Jensen, 2013](#)). Human actants, such as politicians, planners, engineers, transport operators, etc. as well as the non-human actants such as the light rail, urban development projects, maps, policy documents, etc. are part of enacting certain frames of light rail mobility. The light rail is, in itself, a very important actant in the decision-making process since the technology is associated with certain political visions and planning decisions that are performed during the decision-making process. The tracks signal stability for developers and users and are, thus, indicators of a long-term public transport system. Furthermore, rail born transportation enacts a different political vision than do bus systems: this light rail vision is often articulated by its image, urban development potentials, and political support, as will be exemplified by the cases (see also [Olesen, 2012](#)).

The analysis of frames behind light rail projects furthermore draws on the concept of 'travelling ideas' introduced by [Tait and Jensen \(2007\)](#). Travelling ideas explain how certain planning ideas,

such as light rail mobility, circulate between different contexts and translates into new spatial settings and as a means to re-envisioning the city. These planning ideas propagate particular visions of space and place, and experiences from similar projects in other parts of the world or alternatives that have proved problematic or successful elsewhere is often of great importance ([Hughes, 1998](#)). The local translations ([Latour, 2002](#)) of light rail mobilities are dependent on the actants involved in the process of producing a local frame for the light rail vision and the particular objectives that the light rail vision was set to solve. The cases will exemplify how ideas of light rail mobilities are translated and framed in three practical case examples ([Callon, 1986](#)).

3. Methodological approach

The constellation of humans and non-humans enrolled in the framing of LRT systems in a European context was retraced through a case study design. The case study methodology enables a study of the decision-making process and framing of light rail mobility in its concrete practical context ([Yin, 2009](#)) and, as argued by [Flyvbjerg \(2006\)](#), the know-how from practical case examples has a great value, especially in the study of policy processes that are context dependent. The research questions leading this study are: Why and how are light rail implemented in European cities? What is the rational basis for this choice of transport system? Two of the cases are examples of cities which have introduced completely new light rail systems; this is the case in Bergen, where the light rail was implemented in 2010, and Angers, which implemented it in 2011. Bergen is an extreme case ([Flyvbjerg, 1996](#)) of the role that LRT has had in pushing for a change of local and national policies to support a LRT vision, since Bergen is the first LRT in a Norwegian context and the main rationale has been to structure urban development. Angers is not an extreme case in regards of changing local and national policies; it is rather an extreme case ([Flyvbjerg, 1996](#)) on the urban redesign vision associated with LRT in a French context. It is furthermore a paradigmatic case of transformation of urban space in the light rail corridor which was the major rationale behind the project. The city of Bern is an extension of an existing tram system: the line to Bern West opened in 2010 and is the first new light rail extension of the old tram network. Switzerland is often mentioned as a paradigmatic case on policies dedicated to public transport ([Kaufmann, 2004](#)). The Bern case will exemplify the policies that led a strong focus on public transport policies in urban contexts, and the rationality of urban regeneration which was an important argument behind the light rail project to Bern West. The selection of cases was made to show maximum variety in different national contexts and rationalities behind the decision to implement light rail. A further criterion was that the light rail network, or extensions, should be recently implemented in order to trace the decision-making process.

Empirical data was collected through explorative semi-structured interviews with key actants involved in the decision-making process as well as a review of the relevant policy documents produced as part of, or a supplement to, the light rail project. Furthermore, the public debate around the projects has been reviewed by the use of local media as well as previous research studies from the three cases. Altogether 13 interviews have been carried out in the three cases with politicians, planners and transport operators and researchers – a list of the persons interviewed and their role in the light rail project is provided at the end of this article. The aim of the methodological design has been to pin-point the key moments and the actors and rationalities and decisions enacted throughout the decision-making process. Through the analysis of policy documents and interviews, the main arguments behind the chosen frame of the project have been

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