

Journalists Forum on Land and the Built Environment

Urban Infrastructure

Anthony Flint

Stephanie Pollack, associate director of the Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University, noticed something seriously amiss when she analyzed the results of a survey on the public transportation needs of lower-income residents in Massachusetts. The survey asked respondents to indicate their main mode of transport, and there were the traditional choices like taking the train or the bus. But there was no box to check for what turned out to be the most common means of getting around: Dozens of respondents had written in “someone else’s car.”

For Pollack, the discovery underscored the difficulties of matching transportation systems to realities on the ground as well as the need for better metrics and engagement to satisfy the true needs of those who use public transportation. As part of a project called The Toll of Transportation, the Dukakis Center sought to determine how residents get where they need to go in such cities as Lynn, Worcester, Springfield, and East Boston. But “someone else’s car” was not a category recognized in standard transportation data collection.

“We measure equity in education and health care, but not in transportation,” Pollack told writers and editors gathered for the Journalists Forum on Land and the Built Environment, in Cambridge, March 28 to 29, 2014. “We have no concept of how a transportation system would be ‘fair.’”

The theme of the forum was infrastructure—who it’s for, how to plan and pay for it, and why we need smarter investments for 21st-century urban environments. It was the seventh year of the annual two-day gathering for journalists, hosted



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by the Lincoln Institute, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, and Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design (GSD).

Pollack also shared research on transit-oriented development (TOD)—a policy increasingly encouraged by cities through zoning reform and financial incentives. The data revealed some troubling outcomes in terms of equity and transit use: The higher-income residents who move into TOD areas, which rapidly become expensive places to live, don’t tend to use the transit; whereas residents who do use transit must move farther from the stations, to more affordable neighborhoods—a displacement that raises the costs and complexity of their commutes. In a third of TOD sites studied, ridership actually went down after new development went in.

Unlike some mega-event sites, East London is still benefiting from infrastructure investments made for the London 2012 Olympics.

In another presentation, Judith Grant Long, associate professor of urban planning at the GSD, looked at mega-events, such as the World Cup and the Olympics, which also inspire cities to invest billions in infrastructure. There is little evidence of a payoff in terms of permanent jobs, revenues, or even branding, she said. The International Olympic Committee could help cities plan better and deliver more compact, “right-sized” games, Long suggested. Barcelona, Rome, Tokyo, Munich, Montreal, and London all have had some success in transforming Olympic villages for long-term use that benefits a broader population after the games are over.

Public-private partnerships, private roadway building and operation, and tolling systems have marked recent innovations in the financing of infrastructure, said Jose A. Gomez-Ibanez, professor at the GSD and the Harvard Kennedy School. But, arguably, since the completion of the interstate highway system, the federal role has been unclear; the challenge is showing the public who benefits from projects, in order to justify how they are paid for, he said.

Governments are going to have to become smarter and more targeted in building future transportation and other types of infrastructure, especially as metropolitan areas seek to become more resilient in the face of the inevitable impacts of climate change, several presenters said.

Rich Cavallaro, president of Skanska USA Civil, Inc., cited the D+ grade in the latest “report card” on infrastructure issued by the American Society of Civil Engineers. That group estimates that the nation needs to spend \$1.6 trillion more than currently planned to bring infrastructure across all sectors to an acceptable level. In contrast to hugely expensive projects, such as floodgates similar to those on the Thames River in the United Kingdom, Cavallaro spoke in favor of more achievable steps, such as equipping subway tunnels with giant inflatable plugs, raising up grates and power substations, and designing parking garages and similar facilities so they can be flooded and then cleaned up when the waters recede.

Several nations are better at coordinating disaster relief and recovery efforts, according to surveys by Robert B. Olshansky, professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Laurie A. Johnson,

principal at Laurie Johnson Consulting|Research. Building long-term resilience as part of that process was the subject of the recent Lincoln Institute report, *Lessons from Sandy*.

Susannah C. Drake, principal at dlandstudio pllc, detailed creative approaches such as retooling the waterfront apron of lower Manhattan and capping sunken highway trenches through urban neighborhoods. The nation cannot simply seek to rebuild what existed before a disaster—especially now that advances in technology make infrastructure less expensive, compared to the massive investments of the New Deal. Marcus M. Quigley, principal at Geosyntec Consultants, explored how smart technology and dynamic, intelligent controls can transform major facilities. “We can change the way our infrastructure acts on our behalf,” he said. “Every time we repave a street or a sidewalk, we’re burning an opportunity.”

The dark side of smart infrastructure was also discussed. Ryan Ellis, postdoctoral research fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, addressed the complex challenge of security and infrastructure, revealing the cloak-and-dagger world of cyber attacks, vulnerabilities, and zero days. Hackers routinely hijack emails and can sabotage our power grid, air traffic control, and financial systems. The key, Ellis said, is to “design for security now,” because “it’s hard to bolt on after the fact.” For planners engaged in building smart cities, he said, security must be part of the conversation.

The interconnected impacts of global urbanization require a broader framework for urban infrastructure, outside the “box” of individual metropolitan areas, said Neil Brenner, professor of urban theory at the GSD. “We need to update our cognitive map of urbanization,” he said. Pierre Bélanger, associate professor of landscape architecture at the GSD, predicted that working with nature—and even allowing certain abandoned areas to return to a wild state—would eclipse the traditional approach of controlling water and putting streams in pipes.

Political leadership is the key to reinventing and designing new infrastructure in the urban environment, said landscape architect Margie Ruddick. Fortunately, mayors have become some of the most innovative leaders to take on these kinds of challenges, said David Gergen, senior

analyst at CNN and director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School. Mayors may not routinely become president, but they are practical problem solvers at center stage, said Gergen, who was the guest speaker at the forum's traditional evening gathering at the Nieman Foundation's Walter Lippmann House. "Cities are where the experimentation is taking place," he said.

The political difficulties of transforming the urban landscape were also noted by Janette Sadik-Khan, former transportation commissioner of New York City and now at Bloomberg Associates. She noted that bike lanes, a bike-share program, and car-free spaces in Times Square had prompted opposition from drivers, business owners, and others who viewed the initiative as impractical and "vaguely French." But many shopkeepers have since reported a big uptick in business because of increased foot traffic, and the moveable chairs in the car-free areas are continually occupied.

"When you expand options, people vote with their feet, their seats, and their bike share key fobs," she said. "New Yorkers have changed in what they expect from their streets."

The forum traditionally includes two sessions devoted to "practicing the craft." Brian McGrory, editor of *The Boston Globe*, detailed efforts to integrate "searingly relevant" journalism in a digital business model that is sustainable. *The Globe* has more readers than ever, he said. Inga Saffron, architecture critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, who won the Pulitzer Prize shortly after the forum, joined *Chicago Tribune* architecture critic Blair Kamin, Jerold Kayden from the GSD, and Gregory K. Ingram and Armando Carbonell from the Lincoln Institute in a conversation on the interaction between journalists and expert sources.

Several participants among the 40 journalists and Nieman fellows filed dispatches, including Roger K. Lewis at *The Washington Post*, Tim Bryant at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Christopher Swope at *Citiscopes*, and Josh Stephens writing for *Planetizen*. **L**

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Bike lanes are relatively inexpensive to install and eligible for federal grant money.



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