INTERCHANGING: Future designs for responsive transport environments
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Future designs for responsive transport environments
GARDNER HAEUSLER MAHAR
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For example the Brisbane River is criss-crossed by ‘CityCats,’ the local river ferries. Tourists frequently hop onto a CityCat, not necessarily because they want to go from A to B, but because they enjoy the journey on a ferry, to take in the views, take photos, and enjoy the breeze. It is not uncommon that they return and disembark at the same stop from which they first departed. It is not getting to a destination, but the experience of the journey itself, that is their primary goal.

Digital information, ubiquitous computing, mobile devices, social media, and urban informatics offer new possibilities to bridge the digital and physical layers not just of cities, but of public transport as well – before, during, and after a journey (Foth & Schroeter, 2010). Location-based services not only allow passengers to access more accurate information from the transport provider, but also engage in a dialogue to report maintenance issues and provide feedback. This dialogue has also been extended to consider passenger-to-passenger communication and interaction. For example, the TrainYarn application was inspired by the popular ChatRoulette web service and allows commuters to anonymously chat with each other (Camacho et al., 2013b). The Cart-load-o-fun study by Toprak et al. (2013) re-conceptualises public transport vehicles as game spaces in order to bring about a more playful, enjoyable, and engaging passenger experience.

What does the future hold? In the short term, many interaction design applications seek to enhance and improve the experience of using public transport, so to make the journey a little bit more convenient, personal, and comfortable – just like being driven in your private vehicle. At the same time, single-occupant vehicles continue to contribute to major traffic congestions and parking problems in urban environments, and as a result, ride sharing and car pooling applications have been developed that make private transport a little bit more public (Brereton et al, 2009).
Perhaps we won’t see a convergence of public and private transport straight away, but this perfect storm has already given rise to emerging new forms of hybrid public/private transport. Similarly how apps such as Airbnb allow ordinary people to compete in the short-term letting market (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2014), smartphone apps such as Uber, GoCatch, and WunderCar introduce share economy principles to the public transport market by reducing the barrier between drivers and passengers, challenging existing pricing structures and business models, and designing new innovative value-add services. Following Gandhi’s famous quote, “first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win,” it seems this trend has now (June 2014) advanced to the fighting stage as “angry cab drivers gridlock Europe in protest at ‘unregulated’ taxi app.”

People may still want to own personal vehicles for a while, but the advent of more sophisticated car-pooling and car sharing schemes, and ‘DIY public transport’ services such as Uber will increasingly make these alternatives more attractive. At the same time, as they compete with the conventional public transport space, they are blurring the boundaries between public and private transport. Once the proponents and engineers of autonomous cars hurry to sort out their ethical dilemmas and arrive at ready-to-market solutions, the driver may soon be obsolete, as the driver-less robot car picks you up when and where you need it and drops you off wherever you want. Running after the bus may soon be a relic of the past, as public transport will follow the people.


