

The expert view: thoughts on urban transport

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Interviewee: [Susan Handy](#) – Professor at the [Department of Environmental Science and Policy](#) at the [University of California at Davis](#)

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Susan,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about your research towards urban transportation and how we can make it better for everyone.

Could we start this interview with a brief outline of your background, and where you see yourself heading in the coming years?

***Susan:** Happy to be here. I have been in the faculty of the University of California at Davis (UC Davis) since 2002. Before 2002 I was a member of the faculty of the University of Texas in Austin. My background is in civil engineering and urban planning, and I approach the topic of transportation from these two perspectives.*

As it happens, I am taking a sabbatical in 2025-26. During this period, I'm planning to spend time experiencing transportation systems outside of the United States and thinking about different approaches to our transportation problems.

Gareth: Thanks for this context, Susan. A lot of my questions about improving transport relate to points you make in your book, [Shifting Gears](#). Whilst I appreciate this book focuses in particular on transport in the US, it contains many salient points for cities and towns in other parts of the world.

Noting that the book was published in 2023, have you been planning it for some time (I notice the book includes many of your own photos, stretching back a few decades)?

***Susan:** Yes, *Shifting Gears* brings together a lot of my thinking and observations I have made over the last three decades.*

The idea and the genesis for writing the book came about during a previous sabbatical. At the time, I happened to come across an industry movie that had originally been released in the 1950s by General Motors (GM). The movie was pushing the benefits of using buses, and it was also talking about the concept of moving people around rather than vehicles.

This concept struck a chord with me because this idea was also being actively discussed in the US when I entered the field of transportation in the 1990s (shortly after which, some policy changes in the US reduced this focus). Watching this 1950s movie, I found it interesting to see how we were talking about the concept of moving people back in the 1950s – and it was GM that was talking about it in this instance – and to then see where we are today.

Some of us are talking about this matter today as an important area to review, and I kept thinking also about other examples of important concepts in transportation that people have been talking about for a long time. If we can embrace these concepts in enough numbers, it could lead to a very different type of transportation system in the US in place of the car-centric one that exists today.

*For some reason, “people movement ideas” have not succeeded over the current car-centric transportation system that is embedded in the transportation profession in the US. Through my book, *Shifting Gears*, I have sought to explore where the current US transportation ideas have originated from, how it is that they are so embedded in the work of transport professionals in the US today, and whether different approaches could potentially be embraced.*

What I have concluded from my research is that while many people within the profession embrace ideas that offer an alternative to the car-centric approach to transport, which I think is positive, we are not abandoning traditional car-centric ideas which continue to dominate professional practice. We can't seem to let go of a lot of the entrenched ways that we have thought about transportation in the US for the last century.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview, Susan. In line with what you have just explained, in *Shifting Gears* you describe how the dominant and prevailing set of ideas about transportation are not serving the US well today.¹ You describe the conundrum of how public transport in the US is not an attractive option for many, yet the option of using a car sees people very often stuck in traffic congestion, in “their isolated environment”. Cycling is feasible for some, and there is evidence of it increasing in popularity (especially with the advent of e-bikes), but it is not feasible for everyone.

Why do you think the US has the status quo with its transport system that exists today? I know there were examples of good US public transport in the past, plus, if I remember rightly, cycling was very popular in the US decades ago – until it wasn't. Other parts of the world seem to acknowledge and use public transport in urban areas a lot more than the US does.

Susan: *In the US at least, what I have found is that it's partly about how the transport profession thinks about the transport system and how we have become accustomed to certain practices and habits. It's hard to break habits once they are instilled.*

It is also about how the public thinks about transport, because they expect and demand action by their policy makers that aligns with what they want.

¹ *Shifting Gears*, by Susan Handy: Introduction, p. 5

A great many of us are not exposed to other kinds of transportation systems and hence what the alternatives could be. Since finishing my book, I have come to think more about the importance of the public's ideas about transportation and how we need to engage the public in an active discussion about it. Involving people is a big part of moving forward.

*It is important to keep in mind that all transport options can be tied together, and transport is part of the broader urban system. The idea that the car is freedom is only partly true when we think about everything that car ownership entails, from financing to insurance and maintenance (as I write about in *Shifting Gears*).*

If we start with the prevailing idea that the car represents freedom, another idea that is central to what most people want is speed and the ability to get to places as fast as they can; they want to minimize their travel time. These two ideas – freedom and speed – help to explain the dominant focus on cars and hence providing for the needs of cars. For me, the question is: can we think about the needs of the overall transportation system in a more holistic way that gives us freedom and speed by means other than driving. We need to tug on some different threads to unravel the whole system and look again at what's best for everyone.

One of my current areas of focus is the obsession we have with traffic congestion. Nobody likes congestion; nobody likes being stuck in traffic. People are demanding solutions, yet the Go-To solution to this problem is highway and street widening, at least in the US. Those of us who are researchers in this area know this does not solve the congestion problem, but the public is not necessarily informed about the reasons behind this.

Decision makers don't necessarily understand the situation, and many professionals that work in transportation in the US have trouble accepting the idea that highway and streets widening could make the problem worse rather than improve it.

Gareth: Your point about how transport options should tie together is one that resonates with me. I have seen some good examples of this in countries such as Japan and the Netherlands.

The interconnectivity of the train, the tram and the bus network in Otsu-Awazucho, Shiga Prefecture, Japan., April 2023 (image: G Byatt)



The integration of public transit, cycling network and car transport in Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 2023 (photo: G Byatt)



I'd like to pick up on your point about the importance of engaging the public in an active discussion about transport – including these points about freedom and speed to get from point A to point B.

I wonder how citizens and businesspeople can be meaningfully involved by city and municipal authorities to review how to improve transportation in a way that works for everyone, of all ages.

On a more general note, I often find myself talking with people who live and work in cities and towns about a dearth of good, meaningful involvement and discussion with citizens and businesspeople on how to make cities and towns better, which includes how to improve transport.

Two of the accepted principles of good governance are transparency and positive engagement. I have talked with people who work in this space about the value of city and municipal authority teams, including mayors, going out to where people live and socialise (such as community centres, sports facilities and also schools and colleges to involve young people) to holding discussions and workshops with them in these places, rather than holding reviews in town hall. Can you see this working in the US?

***Susan:** It is not easy. A challenge I see in the US is that when cities try and do good things with more communal transport ideas, the people who turn up to consultations or reviews about these ideas and approaches tend to be those who oppose it. Even if they are a small minority, if they are the people being vocal, they are the ones being heard.*

Gareth: You make a good point, Susan. Naysayers can add value, as long as we can hear the complete picture and be open to different ideas. I wonder if we could provide people with a way to experience new ideas in a “safe environment”, perhaps with videos, simple online interactive games and maybe having Virtual Reality headsets for an immersive experience? Maybe we could show by video or simulate what some cities where there is a good blend of transport are like, as a way to allow people to “get close” to these cities. Also, maybe piloting small change projects to see how they work could help?

I have to say, I have found it interesting to visit some cities in the US for several years, and to see that every time I visit, I see more people cycling and, in some areas but not others, some evidence of people moving away from a car culture. New York is one, not the only, city that comes to my mind here. And of course, there is the ongoing debate about [the Manhattan congestion pricing scheme](#).

***Susan:** A lot of innovations require a strong leader who finds a way to push things through, including in the face of opposition by opposing groups. As an example of this, [Janette Sadik-Khan](#), who was Commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation from 2007–2013 under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, pushed through a lot of changes to NYC’s streets, including an impressive expansion of bicycling infrastructure.*

Gareth: I'd be interested in your views about transport in other parts of the world such as Europe, Asia and South America. I have spent time in a lot of countries in these regions, and I don't want to say that Europe is perfect but there are examples in the Netherlands, Denmark, France and other countries where there is a lot of focus on active mobility and investment to provide high quality public transport – not just in the centre of a city or a town, to also connect out properly to where people live. I find cities in Asia and South America to be a mixed bag. In all regions, there are still a lot of cars on the roads.

The interconnectivity of the tramway and road transport in Bordeaux, France, October 2024 (image: G Byatt)



Integrated transportation choices in Bordeaux, France, October 2024 (photo: G Byatt)



The integrated roads and cycling network in Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 2023 (photo: G Byatt)



The integrated roads and cycling network in Santiago, Chile, April 2022 (photo: N Gridley)



Public bus transport in Tokyo, April 2023 (image: G Byatt)



The daily transit to work in Ho Chi Minh City, March 2023 (image: G Byatt)



Susan: Yes, Europe is far ahead of the US in terms of public transport. Cars have a role across Europe, of course, but they are not as dominant as they are in the US. Within the urban boundaries there is a good variety of options available to people on how to get around. We can see through policy making that there has been a very conscious effort about this.

We hear about how in the Netherlands they were heading towards car dependence in the 1970s but they made a conscious decision to go the other way. Cities like London and Paris are continuing to rein in car use through various measures, some of them involving public involvement in decision-making, and create a “car light” urban centre. From a US perspective, it's difficult to think how this could happen. The public thinks very differently about transportation in Europe and there's more acceptance and willingness to use alternatives to driving a car.

Gareth: I know London and Paris well and I see each year how they are continuing to change to have less cars. I think people in both cities, and other cities in Europe, would say that there is more to do, but change is taking place.

Your point about the Netherlands is a good one – I have visited the country several times to see how cycling is truly integrated into transport, and I have read some good pieces about the change that was made in the 1970s and 1980s, which have stood the country in good stead ever since.

[The Dutch city of Groningen invented a cycling template for cities all over the world in the 1970s](#) – which, to your point earlier, required pushing through change in the face of opposition by some groups.

The commitment to cycling and active travel in the Netherlands is great. However, [there are some practical considerations to take into account for a country such as the US](#).

***Susan:** As we discussed earlier, changing habits is not easy. It's wonderful to have good examples that show how good communal transport can make life better in a city or a town. When it is done well, it doesn't hurt the economy, it can actually help to enliven the local economy and the street environment. It improves safety, the air quality is better, and it is quieter – so less stress on us all round. There are so many benefits that come with reducing car dependence.*

Gareth: For cities that aren't in this space, in the US and elsewhere, how can they get started with opening the discussion and thinking more broadly about transport options? You talked about the policy makers earlier, and mayors and politics is of course key to determine where this discussion can go. I'm wondering how we can get a robust and rounded discussion started with ideas on transport?

***Susan:** In the US at least, it would take a big shift in thinking and along with that a big shift in how we apply our resources to make things happen, and it would take a long time because infrastructure is a long-term investment.*

Many cities in Europe and countries such as Japan started this journey a long time ago so ongoing change is easier. There is still a sentiment in the US that we are a car society.

Having said this, there are some signs of change. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed a rethinking of streets as a public resource. Whilst a lot of temporary changes to streets introduced during the pandemic such as pedestrianising them have gone away, some changes remain. In the city of Davis, the authorities permanently closed one street and created dining areas. In San Francisco a highway has been closed along the beach to create a public space – which was approved by the public through a vote.

Gareth: Bus networks can be a useful and versatile part of urban public transport. I often wonder why it is that bus networks work well in some cities (such as my home city of London), but they seem to struggle in others. In my visits to different cities and towns, I see different approaches: some have a uniform bus size, others use a variety of bus sizes for different routes, some have more bus lanes than others. Larger cities tend to be adapting their fleet to electric power. Smaller towns don't seem to have the funds for this yet.

Is “micro public transport” – which deploys small-sized vehicles such as vans and shuttles to provide on-demand or fixed-schedule services, sometimes with dynamic routing – an option for some cities and towns to consider, or does it just add to the number of vehicles on the road and cause more problems than it provides benefits?

***Susan:** Micro public transit, if done in the right way, has potential, especially in suburban areas where it may be hard to justify operating large buses to limited places. There are pros and cons and different people have different views about micro public transport. People would need to look at it carefully and assess the difference between larger buses that are less frequent and smaller ones that could be more frequent. Perhaps running short trials can give us some answers. I think some cities are doing this and there are different views and outputs from it. Different kinds of places need different kinds of public transit services. Micro transit has a lot of potential in certain suburban areas where it's hard to justify a large bus going to limited places.*

Gareth: I wonder what role the private sector can play in supporting good urban transportation. In many parts of the world, property development by the private sector, especially housing communities that are typically built on the outskirts of inner urban areas due to land availability, are not well connected to the urban centre by public transport or active travel. The bare minimum seems to be provided for – an occasional bus service and a few cycle lanes. The way they are set up in most places (with some exceptions, such as Utrecht and other cities in the Netherlands) tends to perpetuate people’s use of private cars. Can “perimeter areas” where people live be well served by good transport options to reduce people’s reliance on cars for their regular daily activities?

***Susan:** In fact, in the US the original streetcar systems 130-140 years ago were largely subsidised by developers, to provide access to the land they developed.*

I think there is some exploration to be done about how we think of land value and how public transit can support an increase in land value by making the area more attractive to people. This can be a win-win social and economic outcome. For the private sector, maybe they will see that, if the conditions are right, it makes sense for them to invest in transit as a way to increase their profits.

We also have to recognise how planning currently works for street requirements, such as layouts required and minimum specified widths of streets which exist for various reasons.

Gareth: Do you think cities and towns around the world have enough freedom and accountability to act in their own interests to optimise their transport systems for their specific context, whilst there is appropriate governance and oversight from the state / national / federal government that they are answerable to?

I am thinking about where receipts from transport income and taxes go to (you provide an example of how the tax system works in the US in Shifting Gears), and some of the transportation schemes launched in some cities, such as road congestion pricing schemes, and how some cities have autonomy to push them through whilst others do not. Likewise with cycle transit schemes.

Susan: *It can be very complicated, and it is a key point to the whole discussion for cities and towns. Who has power over what, how does the money flow, who collects it and who has authority to decide what to allocate it to.*

Perhaps this goes back to our earlier discussion on how we should involve everyone in the discussion and be transparent about this.

Gareth: Do fast-growing young and emerging cities, including mega-cities and towns in developing economies such as South Asia and Africa have an opportunity to set up their transportation structure in a better way than what we see today in many western countries, and if so, given their resourcing constraints and people's desire to own a car as they increase their wealth, how could this be achieved?

Micromobility (rickshaws, tuk tuks and mopeds) on streets of Jaipur, India, January 2024 (photo: G Byatt)





Susan: *Some of my colleagues at UC Davis are involved in collaborative research in these parts of the world. I do hope that we see some good public transport advancements in these places.*

From an efficiency standpoint, the mega cities of today and the future need to be built around transit. It's the only way they can realistically function.

Gareth: In a discussion I had with the Urban Economist Alain Bertaud in April 2025., one of the points we talked about was how to best use metrics and key indicators to improve cities and towns. Do you think there is merit in city and municipal authorities agreeing a small set of meaningful transportation metrics which can be used to orientate transportation in a good direction? With all sorts of data widely available today, including transport modes and times, we can easily set targets such as the time it should take to get from A to B with different forms of transport, for example.

Linked to this point is the importance of involving communities and businesspeople in the discussion.

Susan: *Definitely. One of our problems is that transportation planning has been dominated by one key metric focused on congestion. If that's our only metric, that's what we focus on fixing. We should spend some time thinking about our top goals and adopting metrics that help us monitor our progress toward those goals.*

Gareth: Thank you very much for your thoughts and perspectives, Susan.