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What do bus stops tell us?

A long-term perspective on a family of objects (not only) designed and used for waiting

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Abstract

The bus system is probably the oldest public transport system in the European cities. Directly linked to the processes of industrialization and urbanization, it has been operated during the 19th century with horse--drawn vehicles, before getting motorized during the first decades of the 20th century. By the way, the bus system has slightly become the slowest one, in comparison with the underground and the tramway, but also with the car. As a consequence, buses have built a peculiar relationship to speed, and more generally to time.

This paper proposes to shed light on this relationship by addressing the problem of waiting for buses and the historical evolution of technical devices designed for this activity. Different generations of bus stops can be identified : small connexion stations with employees, bus poles, bus shelters of different scales, etc. These objects raise different questions. Who are the actors behind them and how are they conceived, designed and financed? What are the uses developed by people around them? How do they integrate the landscape of the city and become a constitutive element of the local identity?

Paper

¹ This is only a draft paper, that should be completed by references that are not mentioned on this paper.

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This paper will discuss these points mainly through two focuses. On the first hand, the relationships between stakeholders of this small sector will be more particularly analysed (local authorities, transport operators, street furnitures providers). On the second hand, uses will be considered in order to understand how behaviours have been controlled by authorities and how travellers have found their own way to wait.

The general idea discussed in this paper is that waiting has always been a key factor in the functioning of bus systems, with specific stakes linked to information of users but also to control of behaviours. If changes are to be noticed on the recent decades, they are linked to different dynamics: the new role of private companies able to find an economic and political interest in bus furnitures, the processes of standardization between cities and the transfers from transport systems to another (from undergrounds and tramways to buses).

On a modest basis, this paper will mainly propose an overview on this topic in order to underline the historical interest that it deserves. It is mainly based on the Parisian history of buses.

1. The relationship between bus system, speed and time: the frame of waiting

The omnibus system was the first public transport system implemented in the streets of European cities, when they began to become less and less easy to be crossed by foot, due to their extension during the industrialization of the 19th century. Born at the end of the 1820s in France, this transport system quickly spread across the continent and over the Atlantic Ocean. The organization of the operation differed from a city to another, from publicly owned monopolistic companies to totally free competition, but in every city, waiting became an important factor in the general functioning of the networks.

Two opposite situations were to be observed: when private companies competed for a same market, travellers waiting at bus stops were considered as potential customers that had to be picked up and coachmen were fighting for them. We can supposed that waiting times were shorten by competition. But, in this scheme, only central lines were really operated by companies, so that the networks were often reduced to some central axis. In other words, you had to walk a lot if you wanted to catch an omnibus from a somehow peripheral area.

The other configuration was the monopoly, when a public company operated lines – generally more widely spread lines –, following a pattern imposed by the public authorities, but had a lower incentive for reducing waiting time. With the success of omnibuses in the middle of the 19th century, the high figure of travellers led to a succession of full coaches passing by bus stops.

Then travellers had to wait for an hypothetical available seat and had to wait a long time during the rush hours.

Both situations could be more similar than expected when the economic climates imposed a reduction of competitions between operators in the first model.

With the 20th century, the situation changed, both on technical side and on organizational side. Motor buses replaced horse-drawn omnibuses and underground networks opened before the First World War. In the same time, public authorities became more and more involved in the field of public transport, so that free competition between operators became an exception and monopolies were more constrained by public authorities in order to supply high-level services.

However, the limitation of available seats on board did not disappeared so quickly. If London allowed travellers to be standing during the First World War, in order to increase the transport supply, Paris still prohibited this way of travelling inside the vehicles during the Interwar Period. As a consequence, waiting was still a Parisian reality during these decades.

But the second half of the 20th century saw the bus traffic decrease in the main European cities, with the new democratization of cars. Whereas the capacity of vehicles and motors had increased. As a consequence, people did not wait any more for a seat, but waited for the bus itself. The doubt concerned the time of arrival of the bus and not the possibility of getting on the bus.

2. Different generations of bus stops

Along the decades of operation of bus networks, there have been different pattern of bus stops.

First, bus stops are not mandatory for stopping buses. For instance, horse-drawn omnibuses of the 19th century could generally be stopped anywhere along the line for hopping on or off the vehicle. The low speed due to the high weight of the omnibuses and the limited forces of the 2 to 3 horses allowed such a functioning.

But official stops were also organized, particularly in places where you could find different lines. In Paris, these *bureaux de correspondance* (connexion stations) were disseminated in the various districts of the city. Each one of these real little stations was managed by an employee who was in charge of controlling the connection asked by travellers. Whereas railway companies had impressive stations, the omnibus company had these buildings, much more modest but broadly spread in the city and well known by the public opinion.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the motorization of the networks led to changes in the conception of bus stops. First stops on demand were generally abandoned because of the new speed that the motor allowed. Stopping became a more complex process and the general system – companies, drivers and travellers – focused more and more on speed as a key factor. In some situations, stop on demand persisted, for instance in the late hours of service, during the night. But it became an exception. Along the century, the increasing speed of vehicle and operation led to a new conception of stop on demand: an increasing number of bus stops became optional, so that stop on demand became the rule for bus stops themselves. On a long-term, this is a sign of the process of acceleration that occurred in the world of transport, as well as in other sectors of our societies.

This general trend caused another change in the world of bus stops, by the reorganization of networks. Whereas the horse-drawn systems were very capillary networks, the era of motor imposed to reduce the number of lines and to design bus lines along the main streets. Thus, companies tried to share

bus stops between different lines, that had common sections.

The process led to the constitution of bus hubs, particularly in already busy places, such as railway stations, main squares of city centres, etc. In these places bus hubs were also built in order to get connections with other transport systems, mainly undergrounds and trams. In many cities, the old bus system became a secondary transport solution compared with railway systems. The focus of public authorities, transport companies and travellers on the characteristics of underground – speed and capacity – imposed to buses to copy railway systems. One of the main dynamics of this process was the lengthening of the average distance between bus stops, on the pattern of the underground, which led to the disappearance of many common bus stops.

In terms of furnitures, two main models of bus stops were established. The simple pole seems to be the first one, but many bus stops get equipped along the 20th century with bus shelters.

3. The stakes of bus shelters for companies and authorities

For the different authorities involved in the organization of bus networks, bus shelters bear different stakes, which are differs according to the type of authorities. We propose to basically point three kinds of actors : public authorities for the city area, transport companies, urban furniture companies.

Public authorities face two kinds of problems with bus stops. First, bus poles or bus shelters are technical devices a priori specifically dedicated to bus services. But they freeze areas of a public space, supposedly shared by all users, both on the pavement and on the roadway. Secondly, if the transport operator is controlled or even financed by public authorities, installations for waiting for the bus have a cost, that has to be included in the general budget of transport. As a consequence, historically public authorities have seen bus shelters as a load more than an opportunity. Poles have been conceived as less

problematic for them. Concerns about heritage may also occurred when choosing the places where bus shelters should be installed and the design of bus shelters themselves.

For transport operators, the installations around the bus stop have another meaning, not totally disconnected. The financial problem has been very similar. It can be shared in investment for the installation of bus shelters and operating costs for cleaning and lighting. The unit budget for a single bus shelter is not very high, but the number of installations required by bus networks explains the old reluctance of operators in the development of bus shelters.

But, bus stops can also be seen as public signs directly linked to the company in the mind of bus users, pedestrians, car drivers, tourists, etc. The repetition of bus shelters or bus poles, on a same model, make them particularly easy to recognize – and it is also one of the goals of these devices. So they get easily associated with the corporate image, even if bus shelters are designed and maintained by a street furniture company and paid by public authorities. So transport companies have to seriously take into consideration bus stops, even if they do not finance them.

For them, the right place chosen for their installation is also an important point. The companies generally prefer to locate them after the crossroads, for operating reasons. But public authorities have to conciliate this preference with other constraints due to the configuration of public space, other interest of other activities, etc.

The last important institutional actors dealing with bus stops are street furnitures companies and mainly, since the 1960s, advertising companies such as JC Decaux and Clear Channel. Financing street furniture with advertisement is not a new idea. For instance, public toilets were based on this model in Paris during the 19th century. But for bus shelters, the concept has been progressively broadly adopted only since the 1960s. In France, bus

shelters have been the first step in the development of a complex link between public authorities and companies providing street furniture. The goal of these companies is to develop other kind of services (advertising boards, benches, bike sharing systems, etc.) on the basis of the market on bus shelters. By the way, they increase the complexity of their relationships with public authorities. The result of such a policy is to build a monopolistic situation in a city, due to the intensity of exchanges between the company and public authorities. Faced to different contracts and different dates of renewal, public authorities are strongly incited to keep the same operator.

4. The uses in and around bus shelters

Finally, bus stops are also social places, where different people wait for the bus together, meet, avoid themselves, sleep, etc. The social intensity of those devices is probably linked to the type of bus stop and to its size.

For instance, during the second half of the 19th century, Parisian *bureaux d'omnibus* suffered from a poor reputation. These places were among the first ones to make necessary for people to gather together with other unknown citizens. In that sense, the *bureaux* were significant of the paradigm shift to the industrial way of life, before the underground. As a consequence, they were supposed to be badly frequented, to smell bad and to be dangerous for young women. Prostitute were supposed to use waiting time in order to seduce travellers. And the manager of the *bureau* was often overwhelmed by the flow of travellers and could only give a bad impression of the company.

But bus stops are also places for learning how to use the bus. Because this transport system is often much more difficult to know than the underground, devices such as bus stops can also be understood as milestones of the learning process that you have to follow if you want to use the bus. Information were often only available in the bus stops, where maps could be stick up. Bus stops are also places where bus travellers attitudes have to be learned, such as the

sign that must be addressed to the bus drivers when you want to stop the bus.

But the biggest issue on a social point of view is the problem of queuing before the middle of the 20th century. When you are not sure to have a seat on board, the problem of queuing becomes a major issue. It was solved differently in London and Paris. Whereas the English capital city decided to use posters in order to convince people to queue, in the line of the new communication policy developed at the beginning of the 1930s, the Parisian authorities tried to get people disciplined with technical devices. They were expected to directly control the behaviours of travellers.

With the motorization of omnibuses that occurred around 1910, various technical proposals were made when the transport company noticed that people were fighting in order to get on the new motor buses. The company decided to install queue tickets. People were supposed to take a ticket when arriving at the bus stop. When the bus arrived, the conductor called the tickets in ascending order. So people did not need to mind for others and the crowd around the bus was in complete disorder.

Quickly, cheating tricks were developed during the 1910s. It was easy to pick up the tickets thrown away by the previous passengers, even if the conductor was supposed to collect them. An original solution was proposed by some of the coffees around the main bus stops: in the morning, the waiters could take lots of queue tickets in order to give them one by one to the clients during the day. This trick allowed people to wait for the bus at the coffee without any stress.

The last failure of queue tickets was due to the fact that the ticket box could be empty. What happened then? People were not used to queue without tickets and different tensions could be noticed then. The company feared also false queue tickets, but there is no historical evidence about theme.

The system was not really efficient and the company chose to base its reaction

on an increasing trust in technical devices. During the 1930s, queue lanes were installed on public space around the main bus stops. They were either painted on the ground or delimited by metal barriers. People were supposed to wait within these barriers. As a result, it was not possible any more to use benches or to do something else when waiting for the bus. When different lines served the bus stops, the company had to install different lanes.

But this technical vicious spiral opened the way to new deviant practices. People jumped on the barriers or went under them. The solution finally came from two factors: the decreasing traffic figures of the bus network during the 1950s and the progress in bus motorization which allowed to take on board all the people waiting at the bus stop.

If bus stops are a place of confrontation between people, they are also a place of confrontation between transport systems. When waiting for the bus, people can observe pedestrians, bikes and especially cars. Whereas bus travellers are waiting, all these other systems are moving. This dialectic is one of the basis of the business of a company such as JC Decaux. The target of the advertisement stick on bus shelters are car drivers. The fares of this advertisement depends on the flow of cars, not on the figures of bus travellers. Another way to see this configuration is that waiting at the bus stop, because you are immobile, induce doubts about the system that you want to use - the bus - and give you a feeling of eagerness, because of the spatial cohabitation of mobility systems.

This short paper has tried to shed light on the historical interest of bus shelters as places of social tensions, peculiar relationships between human bodies and technology, and economic stakes for companies of different nature. Of course, railway stations or underground stations are better known than bus shelters or *bureaux de correspondance*. But a more precise study of the historical dynamics around these objects would probably be interesting for historians of mobility.