Case Study 2: Opening Cape Town streets for a low carbon future

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Introduction
Cape Town’s apartheid spatial form combined with its weak and under resourced public transport system has resulted in a resource inefficient city where many people rely on carbon-intensive private vehicles, or taxis for mobility (Wilkinson, 2000; Statistics South Africa, 2014a) More than half of the energy used in the Cape Town metro area is consumed by the transport sector (City of Cape Town, 2015). At a macro level, the city authorities and partners have drawn up strategies including the Comprehensive Integrated Transport Plan (Transport for Cape Town, 2014) and the Low Carbon Central City Strategy (Cape Town Partnership, 2014) to encourage ‘own-steam’ transport (e.g. walking, cycling), public transport and smarter private vehicle use (e.g. car-pooling). However, despite these policy interventions the carbon footprint of transport continues to grow (City of Cape Town, 2015).

While it is true that the current transport system, with its prioritisation of private vehicles and lack of adequate public transport, has traditionally favoured the affluent, it is not clear whether increasing the financial resources allocated to public transport will be sufficient to encourage a shift to low carbon alternatives. This case study addresses a civil society movement called Open Streets through the lens of transition theory. It suggests that this movement is a niche development in which a transformation of the way people and places are valued could occur. This niche has the potential to significantly alter the regime of the urban transport system in Cape Town and assist in shifting the city towards a low carbon urban mobility future.
The co-evolution of urban transport systems

Transportation systems are intricate socio-technical systems (Rees et al., 2016) that are difficult to change because they often involve heavy infrastructure costs and profound changes to people’s behaviour patterns (Geels, 2012). Major shifts need to happen within civil society, among firms, politicians and policy makers. This process is co-evolutionary and can take decades to happen. This case study highlights two overlooked factors in co-evolution: ‘conscientisation’ about these often taken-for-granted systems; and experiences of streets outside of the mundane every day.

In Cape Town, like many South African cities, the issue of place-making is complicated. The city’s apartheid patterns of settlement disadvantaged Black South Africans by placing them on the outskirts of cities and forcing them to spend high proportions of their low wages on public transport to get to work in the city centre (Cape Town Partnership, 2014). Now, despite the democratic political situation, the outskirts of Cape Town remain places where affordable housing is available and the central city is home to a large proportion of the jobs. This means the underprivileged remain reliant on the city’s substandard public transport system.

The racial segregation of the past created a fearful society (Lemanski, 2004). Many White South Africans lived behind high walls and their use of public street space was very limited. By contrast Black and Coloured South Africans used streets for access and as playgrounds (Coetzer, 2004), in part because of limited access to amenities. Now, more than 20 years after the arrival of democracy, as South Africa seeks to transition to a lower carbon future with fewer cars and more community interaction, the privileged are still hesitant to switch to lower carbon modes of transit that require a great utilisation of what they have traditionally considered unsafe public open spaces and and are less convenient in terms of flexibility (Statistics South Africa, 2014b). Moreover, the previously disadvantaged, often forced to use public transport, still see the private car as the preferred mode of transportation.

South Africa’s National Department of Transport, in an attempt to address the inefficiency of travel in the country’s cities and motivated in part by the hosting of the 2010 Football World Cup (ITDP, 2008; Boulle & Van Ryneveld, 2015), began a bus rapid transport (BRT) system in the country’s five metropolitan areas and 10 smaller cities. This programme, which is called the MyCiti bus in Cape Town, is ambitious. The city plans to expand it so that most residents are within 500 metres of a trunk (BRT/rail) or bus feeder route, allowing for even those on the periphery of the city to be able to reach their destinations within an hour (Boulle & Van Ryneveld, 2015; City of Cape Town, 2014). However, despite these good intentions, the system has struggled to be financially viable (Lewis, 2015) and widespread public transport uptake by the higher income segment of the Cape Town population has been limited (Donaldson, 2015).
To address access, and other related ‘street’ concerns, the Open Streets movement was initiated in Cape Town 2012. It was formed by a diverse group of actors, ranging from those interested in climate change and low carbon forms of travel to others focused on civil rights and the allocation of urban space, social cohesion, creative arts, job creation, security, sports and recreation. All believed in the power of street design and street use to contribute to these diverse policy agendas. A decision was taken early on to embrace the wide ranging, and often eclectic possibilities for street development and to find ways to work across the various interests in a productive way. In this way, Open Streets aimed from the beginning to break down the silos commonplace in government thinking about urban development.

We argue that Open Streets provides an example of a *niche* development that could assist in addressing the social transformation needed to assist South African travelers to move to lower carbon forms of mobility in Cape Town, and possibly elsewhere in South Africa.

Transition theory is an attempt to explain how sustainability innovations occur in large systems (Hodson & Marvin, 2010; Horisch, 2015). It does this with the help of multi-level perspective that consists *niches*, *regimes* and *landscapes* (Geels, 2002). A regime is the prevailing socio-technical system that is characterised by a specific logic because technologies are inevitably linked to a variety of interests including political, business, cultural and consumer interests. Occasionally, cracks occur in a regime as a result of external long-term macro-level tensions at the landscape level (i.e. societal values, political ideologies or macro-economic patterns) and then new practices emerge.

Niche developments are the protected spaces within regimes that support emerging innovations and alternative practices. These niches allow learning processes that enable communities to overcome both technical and social problems in one regime, to transition to another regime (Geels, 2012). They create space for the articulation of the visions and expectations of people as well as facilitate social networking opportunities. If these innovations grow in support and attract funding and they coincide with the emergence of gaps in the regime (influenced by the macro landscape level) then they break through the existing practices of the current regime and create new and alternative practices. It is with this transition theory lens that we examine the impact of the Open Streets movement in Cape Town.

During the first six months of Open Streets, attention was focused on its manifesto, which set out to promote shared places in Cape Town that ‘embody respect for all and help bridge the social and spatial divides of our city’. The manifesto promoted a vision for streets that should ‘enable safer and more cohesive communities; provide platforms for creative expression of local cultures and values; be places for recreation and social

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1 One of the paper’s authors was a co-founder and has been able to observe the development of the movement at close hand.
interaction; contribute to job creation and local economic activity and provide choice how people move around the city’ (Open Streets website, 2015a, np).

Over the lifespan of the project, the interests represented have changed. Early on, it was necessary first to engage the public and to place ‘streets’ on the agenda as a conversation piece. before Open Streets could be used as a platform for change. Media interest and the development of a cohort who were interested to engage further was seen as essential. As funding was not secured, the group made intense use of social media, especially Twitter and Facebook to gain attention and interest. One member wrote a regular newspaper column and the group were proactive in writing and publishing opinion pieces.

To date, the flagship programme used to raise awareness about the Open Streets manifesto and movement has been a series of Open Streets Days. The first of these took place in Observatory, an eclectic suburban area about 5km from central Cape Town which has a strong creative community. The Open Streets organisation generated local buy-in through a series of public meetings and on-the-ground, conventional and social media networking over two months (April-May 2013). Open Streets then facilitated the day by closing the road to traffic and ensuring the soft and hard infrastructure necessary was in place for about five hours initially on a Sunday and subsequently on a Saturday. The Observatory Improvement District, a strong and enthusiastic local area partner, ensured local support and engagement. The setting brought an estimated 5000 participants, performers, activists and enthusiasts to the first Open Streets days and generated positive media interest from the outset.

Subsequent surveys of more than 100 participants at the Open Streets Days conducted by Open Streets volunteers revealed that citizens enjoyed the diversity of the crowds who came to Open Streets days and although this has varied over the eight Open Streets Days (in Observatory, Langa, central Cape Town and Bellville) it seems that this somewhat taken-for-granted quality of Open Streets Days is seen as a powerful positive, in a political context currently of high awareness of unresolved racial division and inequity. Survey participants also remarked on a sense of freedom (especially for children) which Open Streets Days provide, and a safe, relaxed ‘vibe’.

By late 2015, the Open Streets movement had attracted sufficient public interest that it began being seen as a possible platform for change agendas. The Western Cape Provincial Government tested a concept (‘Streetiquette’) for using street theatre to raise awareness about pedestrian street safety (one of the manifesto aims) with the help of Open Streets (Western Cape Government website, 2015). The organisation has also recently received funding from World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Nederbank Green Trust for the development of more Open Streets Days with an associated low carbon transport focus. This will mean developing a programme for rail, bus, mini-bus taxi and bike access to Open Streets days, and a series of campaigns and research in low carbon transport.
There are many factors that influence whether niche innovations such as the Open Streets programme in Cape Town are able to become mainstream, and challenge the hegemony of the dominant regime. One such factor is timing. If tensions within existing transport regimes are too small and the current regime is able to handle the pressure within the system for decades, then insufficient windows of opportunity open up for niche innovations to grow (Geels, 2012). However, it is perhaps the systemic pressures on South Africa's transport systems which will compel the uptake of innovative solutions: gridlocks in the city centre and on major arterials; reaction against the on-going high loss of life on roads and associated costs and the increasing and stubborn contribution of the transport sector to carbon emissions. One could also argue that the worldwide shift at a ‘landscape level’ towards a new sustainability paradigm also stands in the Open Streets programme's favour for gaining acceptance.

The following quotes on the Open Streets website (2015b) posted on 11 May 2015, are an indication of the diversity of interest groups that it appeals to:

- ‘Open Streets is an opportunity to see what the city might be like if priority was placed on people - skaters, cyclists, pedestrians and families - instead of cars’ (Marco Morgan, National Skate Collective)
- ‘The City is really excited to be part of [Open Streets], to be supporting this. By removing cars I think we really do make a statement about sustainability and liveability and that's what this City and this government is about.’ (Brett Herron, Mayco Member for Transport, Roads and Stormwater)
- ‘Streets matter, they do not only connect us with each other they also connect us to ourselves… The phrase ‘I grew up in that street’, says so much. Open Streets have connected Lower Main Road in Obs, Bree Street in the City and Bunga Avenue in Langa by simply allowing ordinary people to lay claim to these streets albeit for a short while. May this brave little initiative grow from strength to strength and may we open our hearts and minds to rediscover the importance of the streets we walk every day!’ (Nico McLachlan, MyCiti and N2 Express Facilitator)

As the above quotes indicate, the problems Open Streets face going forward are not ones of popularity. Instead the growth of Open Streets faces a series of organisational, logistical, regulatory and funding barriers. It is not clear, for example, where Open Streets, and similar initiatives fit within current governance structures, even those that are focused on transforming the city to a low carbon future. This begs questions therefore about how such cross-disciplinary initiatives can be funded and supported into the future. The apparently simple act of closing a road to traffic has proven to be expensive due to event regulations in place to offset perceived risks. These regulations require traffic and security officers, advanced and same-day signage, toilets and cleaning, the transport of barriers and cones, and public liability insurance. These posts mean that the roll out of Open Streets at scale is not currently financially viable.
Despite the currently prohibitive costs of Open Streets Days, the organisation has a mandate from the City to explore ways of growing the Open Streets Day network in a financially sustainable manner. Now that Open Streets has a higher profile, and with funding from WWF Nedbank Green Trust, Open Streets will be focusing on three key areas over the next three years:

1. Highlighting concerns of street design and use, transport and roads within the public realm and media through targeted campaigns. The management team consider this essential to addressing and reversing existing private vehicle ownership and use aspirations.

2. Giving all people, but in the case of low carbon work especially the affluent car driving South Africans, a different outside-the-car experience of the street and the city and so to raise awareness and facilitate engagement in alternative visions of the city.

3. Allowing children, whose parents are often justifiably fearful of the street, to experience a different city. Inspiring them is one key to Cape Town’s immediate low carbon prospects, and to South Africa’s long term future.

References


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