

Urban Transportation and London's Imagined Infrastructure

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WHEN Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the famed Parisian planner, died in 1891, some in London marked the occasion by imagining what might have been. “It is hard to repress the unavailing sigh at the thought of what such a man would have done for us,” lamented one journalist, while another fantasized that “a great fire” might consume the city and allow a figure with the “ambition and efficacy of a Haussmann” to remake it on a grand scale.¹ Britons had often regarded the Haussmannization of Paris starting in the 1850s—the demolition of narrow, winding streets, the tactical construction of broad avenues joining the city’s monuments and major sites, the imposition of architectural uniformity, and the centralization such reforms necessitated—with suspicion. But by the end of the century, some complained that London’s overall plan lacked the “unity of design” found in the French capital.²

London might have lacked a Haussmann, but the layout of its streets achieved coherence and legibility by other means. Whereas Romantic writers like William Wordsworth and Thomas De Quincey described the city as a “labyrinth” in which individuals might lose themselves,³ for early Victorians the city’s geography came to be understood and navigated through the collective, cumulative routes traced by its population—on foot but also, with the rise of forms of urban transportation, in cabs, omnibuses, and, eventually, on urban railways.⁴ The commute, the landmark, the stop, the station: all these mapped London in ways that, even without Paris’s grand boulevards and sight lines, made the city’s spatial logic perceptible to inhabitants.

Hackney coaches plied for hire in London’s streets in the eighteenth century, but the lighter, more agile cabriolet of the nineteenth century became a popular and affordable mode of transportation. Whereas the omnibus traveled a predetermined route, the cab could convey residents

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and tourists alike wherever they chose. Still, in public debates over the fares that could legally be charged, members of Parliament, the period's journals, and the public referred to cabs as operating between a finite number of points across the city. These discussions and the period's fare guides helped define the geography of the city as a kind of network of "points" commercial, architectural, and institutional. Such guides, descendants of the eighteenth-century coach fare and distance charts, proliferated starting in 1853, when Parliament ordered that an official fare table be published and made available to all passengers.⁵ The official guides were easily surpassed by competing, privately published works, many of which advertised the numbers of listed fares on their covers. One 1853 guide, for example, boasted "*Twenty-five Thousand Cab Fares*," while an 1862 volume promised "*29,520 References*," and later references claimed to display over 35,000 listings each.⁶

Although these guides seemed to offer ever greater numbers of possible routes across London, the advertised figures largely reflected a mathematical rather than geographical operation, a result of calculating the many permutations available from what were, ultimately, a finite number of locations. To some extent, that constraint reflected the legal requirement, in place through much of the century, that drivers collect passengers from established stands rather than along the street. But the medium itself, especially concerns about the volume's size and legibility, imposed its own limitations.⁷ The result was a guide that mapped the gentleman's London, the listed locations effectively routing possibilities for moving through a defined set of points and along a finite number of paths. One might choose journeys to and from places of business, such as the Bank of England, the Custom House, Downing Street, and Gray's Inn Gate; sites of leisure, such as the British Museum and Haymarket; and the city's institutional landmarks, such as the Foundling Hospital and St. Paul's Cathedral.⁸ Passengers and drivers often retraced such paths when they complained about fares and routes: "the Temple to Paddington Railway Station"; "from the Elephant and Castle to Waterloo Bridge"; "Regent-street. . . to the Marble Arch."⁹ That vision of the city, as made of up a collection of point-to-point journeys, also served as the basis for the Knowledge-of-London examination, introduced in the 1860s and still the standard by which prospective cab drivers are assessed today.¹⁰ But even for the layperson, holding these routes and their corresponding prices in mind was essential to the urban consciousness; as Charles Dickens wrote, "We are a walking book of fares."¹¹

Each point not only designates a specific edifice or site (Exeter Hall, Chancery Lane) but also stands as a kind of metonym: geographical shorthand for a neighborhood and cultural shorthand for a set of professions and concerns. To envision the city as a system of points is to create a map in the imagination, to distinguish what's significant from what's not, as well as to generate a field of possibilities for movement and connection within the city. These points function as what urban theorist Kevin Lynch calls a city's "nodes."¹² For Lynch, these are "key places" within an urban environment, "junctions" or "break-points of transportation."¹³ Where Haussmann realized a nodal plan for Paris that enforced geographical directness and visual continuity through the construction of grand boulevards and the unification of its architecture, in London that vision existed as a kind of virtual infrastructure, constructed in the imagination and reinforced through everyday practice.

But cabs weren't the only form of transportation to contribute to a nodal vision of London. Omnibuses, introduced onto city streets in 1829, were emblazoned with the names of major stops; for example, the side of the Conveyance Association bus, which ran between the New Inn at Ealing and Bank, read "BANK HOLBORN OXFORD St PANTHEON," and then above (tracing the route in the opposite direction): "EALING ACTON BOTTOM SHEPHERD'S BUSH."¹⁴ Such placards effectively outlined a commuter's geography, a route into the City and back, punctuated by major points between. The *Illustrated Omnibus Guide* (1851) detailed the journey in a percussive fashion: "Cheapside, Newgate-street, Holborn (Blue Posts), Oxford-street (Boar and Castle, Moore's Green Man and Still), Bayswater, Shepherd's Bush, Acton Bottom, Acton-hill, Acton, Ealing."¹⁵ Describing an equivalent journey in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) from the passenger's perspective, Dickens's narrator details "our daily peregrination from the top of Oxford-street to the city," a route marked by a series of stops: "Lincoln's-inn-fields, Bedford-row, and other legal haunts," "Shoe-lane, and . . . the corner of Farringdon-street," and eventually "Bank."¹⁶ At some point, he observes, "Conversation is . . . entirely dropped; each person gazes vacantly through the window in front of him."¹⁷ What Dickens describes is a collective experience, organized around a repeated, shared commute into the city on the omnibus, and a common understanding that the journey will consist of "vacant" blanks devoid of eye contact or conversation, broken only by the conductor's announcements and the vehicle's regular stops.

This nodal vision both anticipated and helped drive the development of what would become the London Underground. In 1846 a

parliamentary committee questioned private railway company officials in an effort to address the worsening road traffic in London. The city's many cabs and omnibuses contributed to the problem, but so, too, did the railway companies' multiple terminal stations at the edges of the city. Passengers and goods deposited at one station needed to take to London's already congested roads in order to transfer to another railway line. A number of those interviewed admitted the need for some means of "connecting all the Railways entering the Town with each other"—a wide road passing through the center of the city or perhaps another railway, running over a "Viaduct" or at "basement level."¹⁸ A subsequent discussion outlined multiple hypothetical visions of a city defined by major nodes: a series of streets cutting across the city, from "Holborn-hill to King's Cross, 100 feet in width, from Holborn-hill to Smithfield, from Farringdon-street through the site of the Fleet prison, to the Sessions-house, Old Bailey," or a single major road from "Holborn" to "New Victoria-street. . .going diagonally through Smithfield, across Aldersgate-street, along the district between Aldersgate-street and Moorgate-street. . .crossing Bishopsgate-street and Houndsditch in a straight line, and down to the south end of Commercial-street, and across Whitechapel."¹⁹ If Haussmann realized a vision for Paris in which the unified and unifying streetscapes joined the city's major sites, these testimonials imagined a London made coherent in a similar fashion, through the building of roads and railways. Providing the legislative and conceptual foundation for the opening of the Metropolitan Railway, the first underground line in 1863, they treated London as a cartographic abstraction, a collection of points through which one might draw the most efficient and direct lines.

But understanding the metropolis in these terms also had real, material effects for the city and its inhabitants. Not only did it inform the paths the underground rail would take in ensuing decades, but the main omnibus stops and railway stations also encouraged the growth of urban ecosystems—inns, shops, and pubs—around them, reinforcing their visibility and legibility as nodes. Even (or especially) for those supposedly "vacant" spaces between nodes, this vision of the city could prove critical; as at least one early observer pointed out, for example, the building of an underground line would provide a "beneficial" opportunity to "clear . . . the very worst neighbourhoods of London."²⁰ Among those living at the margins, however, such nodal knowledge also represented opportunities to survive, even thrive, in the city. One impoverished man mapped London with respect to the "heap of stones near the pillar at Charing-cross" where he

slept, and Hungerford Market and Covent Garden where he scavenged for meals, while a woman identified as a prostitute delineates a geography of trips “to the Holborn” for dancing and “to the Haymarket” for its cafés.²¹ Those trajectories of movement—in Dickens’s words, “wherever we went, City or West End, Paddington or Holloway, North, East, West, or South”²²—existed as much in the imagination as they did in any physical infrastructure. While London might have lacked a Haussmann-like authority figure, the choices made by railway and omnibus companies, and especially by the daily, collective movements of city dwellers, generated their own legible, visionary design for the city.

NOTES

- 1 “Baron Haussmann,” 65; Shaw-Lefevre, “A Model City,” 435.
- 2 Shaw-Lefevre, “A Model City,” 435.
- 3 Wordsworth, *Prelude*, 7.201; De Quincey, *Confessions*, 34.
- 4 As Jonathan Grossman argues, these modes of transportation gave rise to a networked sense of community shared by the Victorian novel; see Grossman, *Charles Dickens’s Networks*.
- 5 *Rowe’s Cab Fares*, 3.
- 6 *Rowe’s Cab Fares* (emphasis original); *London Cab Fares* (emphasis original); *Beeton’s Penny Book; Ward and Lock’s*.
- 7 A usable guide was something of a challenge; it had to be compact and portable, but the font size needed to be large enough to allow quick consultation in a moving vehicle. Dobraszcyk, “Useful Reading?”
- 8 See *Dolling’s*; *London Cab Fares*; *New Handy Pocket Map*; *Reynolds’s Distance Map*.
- 9 “The Barrister and the Cabman,” 6; “Cabs,” 176; “Short Cuts,” 5e.
- 10 There seems to be little consensus about the exact date, though May 1866 seems likely; see May, *Gondolas and Growlers*, 99. An 1867 source mentions the exam; see Charley, *Handy Book*, 54.
- 11 Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, 106.
- 12 Lynch, *Image*, 72.
- 13 Lynch, *Image*, 72–73.
- 14 *Illustrated Omnibus*, 8.
- 15 *Illustrated Omnibus*, 8.
- 16 Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, 167, 169–70.
- 17 Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, 170.

- ¹⁸ UK House, *Report of the Commissioners*, 12, 15, 13.
¹⁹ UK House, *Report from the Select Committee*, 135, 130.
²⁰ UK House, *Report from the Select Committee*, 130.
²¹ Mayhew, *London Labour*, 1:356; 4:219.
²² Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, 171.

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