

discursive practice and transport planning in plymouth



Discourse analysis, as inspired by Michel Foucault,¹ seeks to examine historic and current social practices, with the aim of making more evident their injustice—including dimensions such as power, ethics, truth, and knowledge.

Transport planning does not usually consider these issues—it is positivist in approach, perceiving that there is only one truth to be understood. Quantitative analytical approaches are hence dominant, rooted in the natural sciences, and overlooking the complexities of powerful actors, institutions, and individual behaviours and contestation. But the history of transport planning is not quite like this—it is not just a record of events, but more a question of how transport has been provided and why, including who and what has been included and excluded.²

Let's take Plymouth as an example. The city was reconstructed in the years following the Second World War bombing of the city centre, using the masterplanning of Sir Patrick Abercrombie.³ It is somewhere that all transport and city planners should visit. It gives an illustration of modernist city planning in application, with the medieval street layout replaced and the car given priority in access, with a grid layout, an inner ring road of two-three lanes in each direction, and generous car parking provision. The planning process was completed in almost complete secrecy, hoping to avoid land speculation, with no public participation used until the plans were presented to the city council.

The city centre was assembled as a single site, with separate precincts developed for retail, offices, culture, and civic government. The central axis, Armada Way, was monumental in style, providing a vista for over one kilometre in length, running south to Plymouth Hoe. The Royal Parade acts as the second axis, running east to west, separating the

retail and commercial areas. Beyond the city centre, neighbourhood units were designated, each with their own local centre. There is a tale of urban deterioration in the post-war years, as the naval dockyard declined and little replacement employment was found. Plymouth, with a current population of just over 250,000 now ranks in the worst 20% of local authority areas in the UK for levels of multiple deprivation.

The growth in traffic was unexpected, with large growth in car ownership and use from the 1950s onwards. Pedestrianisation of the city centre in 1987 was very late in arrival, removing some traffic from the central areas, but the inner highway network remains heavily traffic dominated. The current mode share for Plymouth shows the continued dominance of the car, accounting for 61% of journeys to work, compared with the bus 11%, walking 14%, and cycling 3%.⁴

The defining image of the priority given to the car over other street users, and indeed over the urban fabric, is provided by Charles Church, a church destroyed by fire following the bombing of Plymouth during the Second World War. The church was left unrestored as a monument to the casualties of the war but was subsequently surrounded by a traffic roundabout, which gives a poor setting and ensures that pedestrians cannot easily get to see it.

Public policy interventions have been completely inadequate in reducing the priority given to car use on the city streets; indeed there appears to be no real debate or appetite for change among politicians or the public. There are hardly any segregated cycle lanes and only limited bus services. A significant proportion of residents have become reliant on using the car for most of their journeys, despite low income levels. Indeed, there is little demand for transport provision beyond more space for the car.

Modern developments continue this practice (see Fig. 1). For example, the Royal William Yard has been redeveloped as an award-winning Grade I listed ex-naval victualling yard. The architectural quality of building refurbishment, including residential, retail, commercial and public space, is high. But there is little public transport or cycle connections to the rest

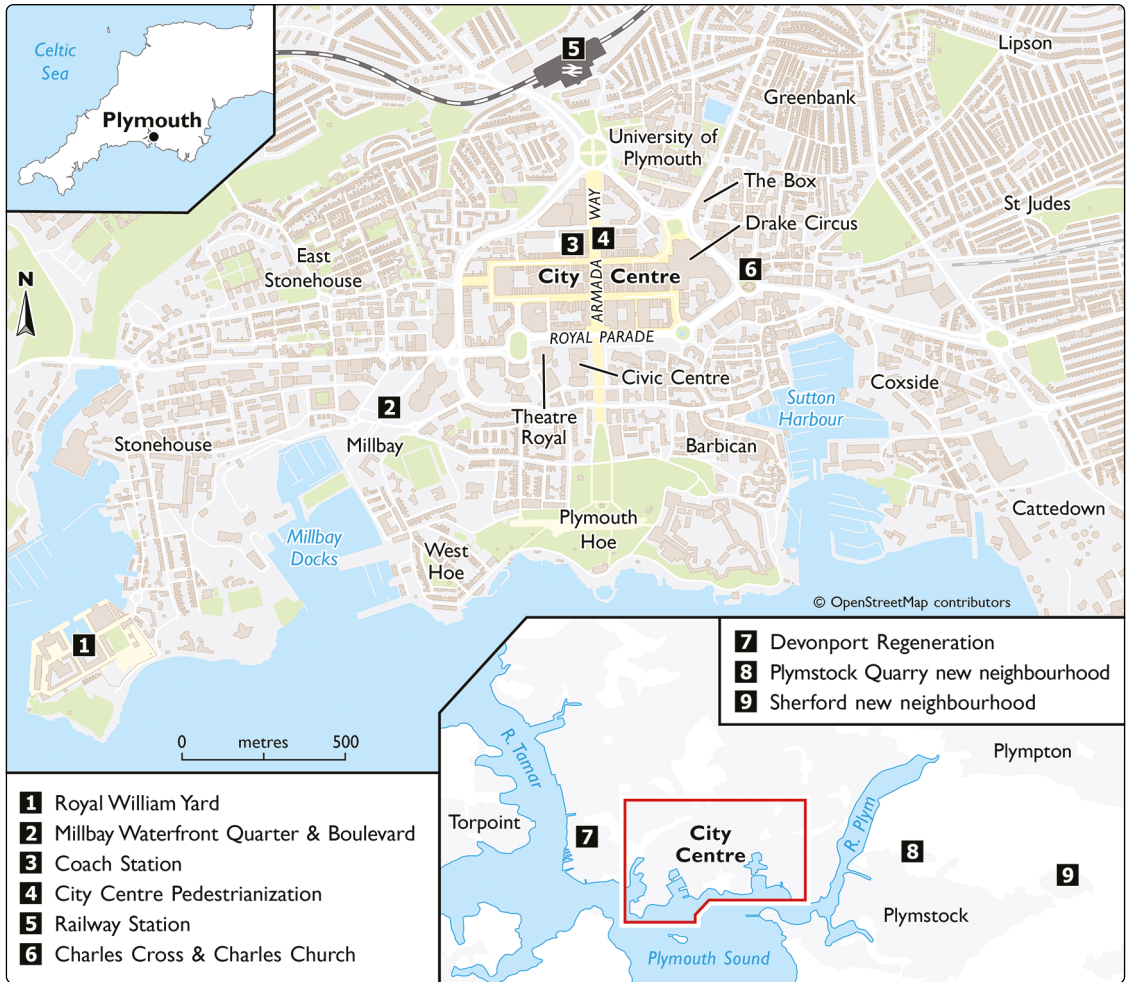


Fig. 1 Emerging urban development and transport in Plymouth

of the city and most journeys to and from the development will be by car. Sherford, a new planned neighbourhood to the east of Plymouth, with an envisaged 5,500 new homes and a population of 12,000, has only a limited bus service to the city centre, and the main connection is via the A38 highway. There is much street and open space given to the car, and car parking is freely available and free to use, even when on street. Journeys to and from Sherford will be overwhelmingly by car—contrary to the aspirations for a sustainable new neighbourhood.

The new neighbourhood at Plymstock Quarry is even worse. This is located within the urban boundary and is a smaller development, with just 1,500 new homes. There are, again, limited public transport services, and most of the streets in the new neighbourhood are filled with on-street parked cars,

and even the supposed central open space is partly used as a car park. Again, the vast majority of journeys to and from the new neighbourhood will be by car.

Hence, across Plymouth, transport remains a huge problem, with too much traffic capacity and priority across the city, too little reallocation of street space to other users, no traffic demand management, plentiful and inexpensive car parking, little high-quality public transport or bus priority, and few high-quality, segregated cycling facilities being considered or implemented. There is no effective plan for sustainable transport in the city centre or outer suburban areas, and hence travel behaviours will remain car dependent.

The discursive practice is very important here, but poorly appreciated. A historically and culturally specific set of rules and procedures were developed to form the urban and transport planning disciplines from



Power/knowledge (Charles Church): the mechanisms of power produce a particular built form and transport system—and a process of transport planning that is difficult to move beyond or counter

the 1950s onwards, helping to define knowledge in subsequent years and ultimately the social condition. There is an ideological shaping and functioning of the science, and the process has been used, in this context and many others, to develop motorisation. The wider *savoir* (knowledge in general) coalesces around this mainstream technical view and the social practice that is provided, assuming that catering for traffic demand and giving the street mostly to the car is the ‘best’ way, indeed the ‘only’ way, to shape the transport system.

Any counter to these views faces much opposition. The power is given to urban planners, developers, transport planners and traffic engineers, but simply provides developments that further motorisation, over decades. This is in direct opposition to public policy goals such as mitigating climate change and improving social equity—yet this remains largely undiscussed. The ethics of the history of urban planning and transport planning, including in the newer neighbourhoods, is to ignore the residents who do not wish to drive, and to not provide for participation and debate on different approaches to urban planning that might lead to more environmentally acceptable and socially equitable futures. The perceived truth and knowledge are shaped to further a motorised city.

There are clear winners—the usual triad of the motor manufacturers selling the cars, the oil industry selling the petrol and diesel, and the development

industry selling the new, dispersed neighbourhoods. The urban planning and transport planning professions have been weakened over decades and cannot respond effectively. In the end, the residents lose out as they remain dependent on car usage, with all the associated adverse impacts of energy depletion, carbon emissions, traffic casualties, and inactive travel. Many are forced to use cars as there is little else on offer. Activity participation is limited for those remaining without access to a car.

We can see a clear exercise in power in the historic and contemporary planning of Plymouth, indeed in most cities and towns across the UK—and unfortunately society is very uneven relative to who benefits and who doesn’t.

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Notes

- 1 M Foucault: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Tavistock Publications, 1972. English translation
- 2 R Hickman: *Discourses on Sustainable Mobility*. UCL Press, 2024 (forthcoming)
- 3 P Abercrombie and J Paton Watson: *A Plan for Plymouth*. Plymouth City Council, 1943
- 4 2011 Census. Office for National Statistics. www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census