Justice, Ethics & Power: Ethical Ideas for Livable Communities

Passenger rail occupies a tricky space in the effort for equitable communities and neighborhoods. It can attract economic development like few other infrastructure investments but those gains can be offset by skyrocketing housing costs and loss of the very historic and cultural identities that made a community authentic in the first place. Bearing in mind that paradox – and the limitations of transit entities’ authority we describe in our commentary – Dr. Laura Hartman discusses the intersection of transit and ethical challenges in sustainable communities, as presented at the Pecha Kucha Slam at Rail~Volution 2014 in Minneapolis, Minn., and republished her with permission – ed.

By Laura M. Hartman, Ph.D.

Ethics is about right and wrong and the reasons why. Here’s what’s wrong: our car-centered cities.

I’m here from the world of academia. My specialty is ethics. So why is an ethicist crashing your rail magazine?

I’m not here to tell you how to avoid getting sued. My style is more to be a philosopher.

So here’s the deal: ethics is about right and wrong, and the reasons why.

As an ethicist, it’s my job to name what’s wrong and advocate for what’s right.

Here’s what’s wrong: our car-centered culture. You know that it’s bad for the climate. It’s bad for our health. It’s bad for land use. It’s bad for communities.

Well, here’s what’s right: your work. You create places and systems that encourage better, healthier ways to move around. You have a very real impact on human health, on the health of our communities, on the whole planet. Your work really matters. It influences whether people do what’s right or wrong.
Justice

So, you’re reading this article because you already know what’s right within transportation but it can be hard to express those ethical views. So I’m going to highlight three major ethical ideas that pretty much everyone from every cultural perspective is going to agree with.

The first one is justice. Cause nobody wants to be unjust. Now, justice means lots of different things. It can mean fairness – like a fair distribution of goods and pains in society. What we want is balance. We don’t want anybody overburdened and we don’t want anybody overprivileged. But ultimately what we want is completeness or wholeness.

There’s some idea of a just society that includes everyone. The complete streets model has a kind of justice to it. Now, many of our streets are unjust. When there’s no sidewalks, pedestrians are unfairly vulnerable to injury. The streets are public spaces, they’re owned by all of us. But not all the modes have equal access. There’s an imbalance between modes and some are privileged over others.

That should set off the alarm bells that say injustice! Because the worst off – the poor – are excluded from mobility, and the young and the old. So, when you have a just streetscape, you’re closer to something like equality. You feel safe: there’s balance, there’s completeness. So, when we re-work the street in this way, we are committing justice, and to fail to do so is injustice.
Hospitality

Hospitality: concept number two. Every culture has a norm of hospitality, you welcome the stranger because we all want to be welcomed. It conveys respect for each person's dignity. You need an ample welcome that communicates the value of the person being welcomed.

Now, the Americans With Disabilities Act requires accessibility but did you ever think about whether a transit system is more than just accessible but hospitable? We’ve all seen inhospitable systems where they have dangerously-placed bus stops, or grudging, sparse service that communicates that the users are not valuable. So what would transportation hospitality look like? Well, even something like shoveling snow is an act of hospitality to those using the sidewalks. And why do most cities plow their streets but not their sidewalks? But we know what hospitality would look like: gracious welcome for all users.
The final concept is power. Power is usually defined as the ability to do something, to have agency in a situation. But it also entails certain responsibilities. And that’s what I want to highlight, because power can be used well or it can be abused. And when there are power differences in a streetscape, we need to look at those with more power and whether they’re being responsible or whether they abuse their power.

You’ve seen this before: a pedestrian in an area clearly designed for cars. The only power that they can assert is the power to risk death in order to slow traffic. It doesn’t need to be this way. If we care about justice and hospitality, then we create streets and systems that are mutually empowering, leading not to a power clash but empowerment for everyone, so that even those who have disadvantages or disabilities can be empowered in their mobility. That’s the work you are doing: you are empowering people to have greater justice and greater hospitality.

I want to bring up a story that comes from religion – don’t be afraid of religious people; religious people are on your side. The Story of the Good Samaritan, many of you have heard this before: there’s a man who is beat up and left for dead by the side of the road. And only the Samaritan – who is himself a social outcast – really sees the problem and is willing to stop and help. The Samaritan takes the man to an inn and leaves money to provide for his care.

Now, Eric Jacobson observes that if someone were left for dead by the side of the road today, no one would even see him, because we’d be driving rather than walking. His point is if we’re going to create a society where we care for one and other, we have to get out of our insulated metal boxes on wheels and place ourselves on the streets and on the buses or trains where we see our neighbors.
We're maybe avoiding the streets because we want to avoid the need but that's not the way to solve these problems. We've got to find ways to use our power responsibly in service of hospitality and justice to create real, living communities. Sometimes it's hard to get people to see things this way, it's hard to get reluctant partners because they're valuing convenience or they're valuing money or they're valuing their autonomy. It's really hard to change things, the status quo is too deeply entrenched. Yes, change is hard.

But remember, every single religious and non-religious perspective in the foundation of our government values these things: justice, hospitality, responsible use of power and those outweigh money and convenience. Always. So, to appeal to those values can be a powerful bridge-building exercise, to realize we value the same things in the end.

The work that you do, it really does matter for ethics. The decisions you make, the plans you create, they can manifest justice, they can create gracious welcome, respect for dignity, they can moderate that power into responsible hospitality.

There's a lot more to be said about ethics and transportation, inclusion and exclusion; gender, safety, self-sacrifice, community-building. It's your job to keep the conversation going.

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