

Buses in the air

Will we ever sort out Oxford Street?



The *Evening Standard* reported last month: "Plans for a light-rail or tram route running the length of Oxford Street will be examined by a commission overseeing the future of the West End. The number of buses travelling through Oxford Circus – about 280 an hour at peak times – could then be cut back.

Sir Howard Bernstein, who is chairman of the West End Commission set up in the wake of the row over parking charges, said he would consider new forms of transport after the arrival of Crossrail from late 2018. The cross-capital rail link will reduce the need for arterial bus routes across central London. Launching the commission Sir Howard

said: "The East-West axis will change and that could create different opportunities for different transport in the West End.

"We should be looking at light-rail and all of those things. We have to have a vision for the future of Oxford Street."

The idea for a tram along Oxford Street was first mooted by Ken Livingstone but was dropped as it was considered too expensive and disruptive.

Sir Howard, chief executive of Manchester City Council, will be looking at the economy, community safety and public spaces as well as transport."

Every couple of decades a scheme pops up to sort out Oxford Street. Despite widespread publicity they end

up only underling the problem. In the end the solution needs to turn around buses at both ends and run a separate elevated system between Marble Arch and St Giles Circus. The affected bus routes will become more reliable and the street largely pedestrianised completing the job recently started at Oxford Circus.

The upper level flow of people will also allow two-level displays and entries to be introduced into the stores. A series of travelators, a light railway or an overhead bus or monorail system with frequent stops will complement the Crossrail/Underground stations at Marble Arch, Bond Street and Tottenham Court Road with their larger capacities.

Bryan Avery: Mall Project: London 1981-83

Oxford Street is not only London's longest and busiest shopping street, it is also one of its primary east-west traffic routes, wrote Bryan Avery in 1981.

The problem it faces is that the more shoppers it attracts the wider the pavements need to be and the narrower the traffic lanes become.

This has been eased in recent years by restricting the traffic to buses and taxis but the growing pedestrian numbers have now reached the point where the only long-term solution is to pedestrianise the entire street and move the traffic elsewhere. But where to?; the other east-west routes are all operating at full capacity.

The solution offered by this 1981-83 design by Avery Associates Architects was to imagine all the east-west traffic

removed to allow the street to be pedestrianised in a chain of spacious precincts between limited north-south crossing roads.

Imagine then a 6m high canopy the length of the street to provide shelter and shade for shoppers and on this canopy invisible from below, a roadway for buses and taxis, with bus stops and taxi ranks.

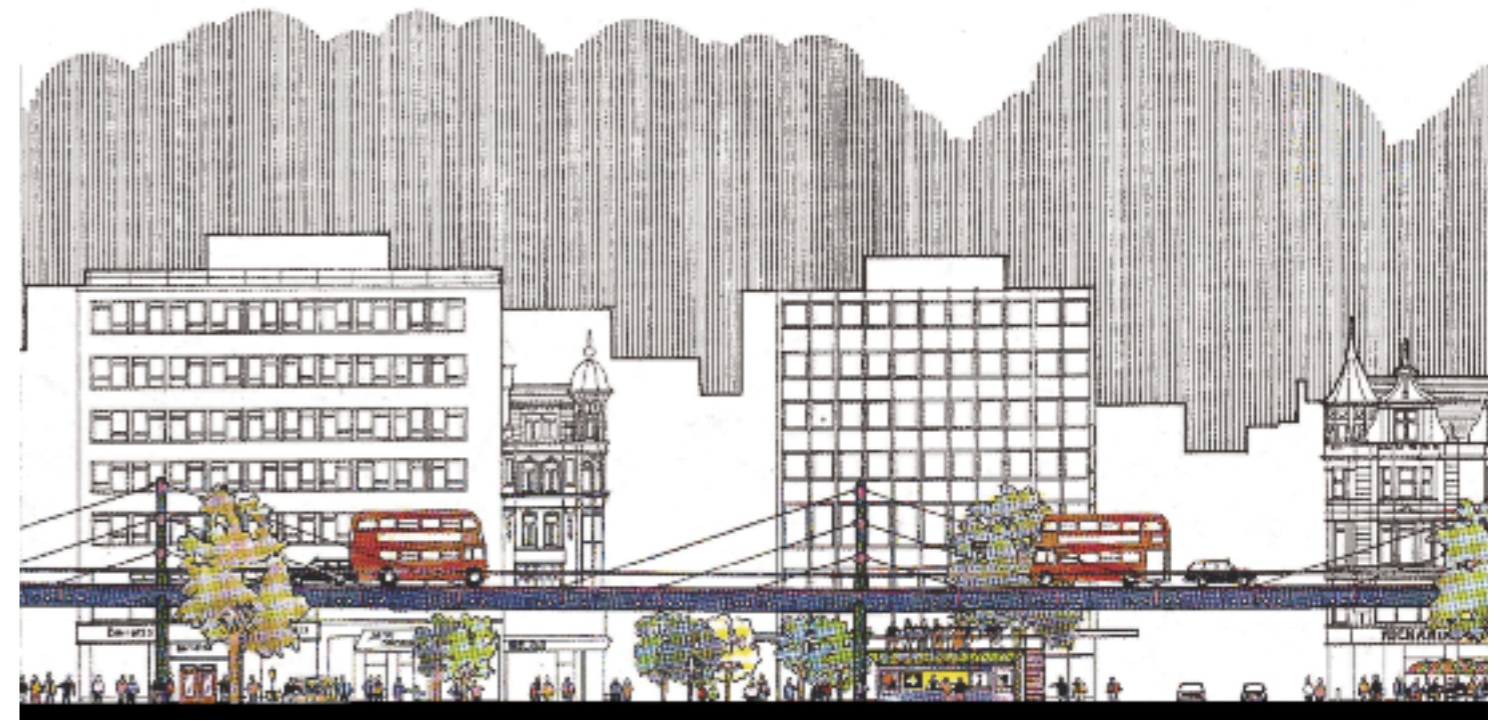
In this way all the traffic could be accommodated exactly as existing whilst also increasing the pedestrians' realm dramatically.

In 1981 it was calculated that new shop units beneath the canopy could finance the project and had backing from Westminster City Council, the Oxford Street Association and most of the stores in the street.



RIGHT: section across Oxford Street
ABOVE RIGHT: section along Oxford Street

Bryan Avery is an architect known for MOMI, the Waterloo iMax, RADA and the London Transport Museum, amongst many distinguished projects.



Brian Waters: *Get Our Cities Moving*, published by Conservative Political Centre, 1967

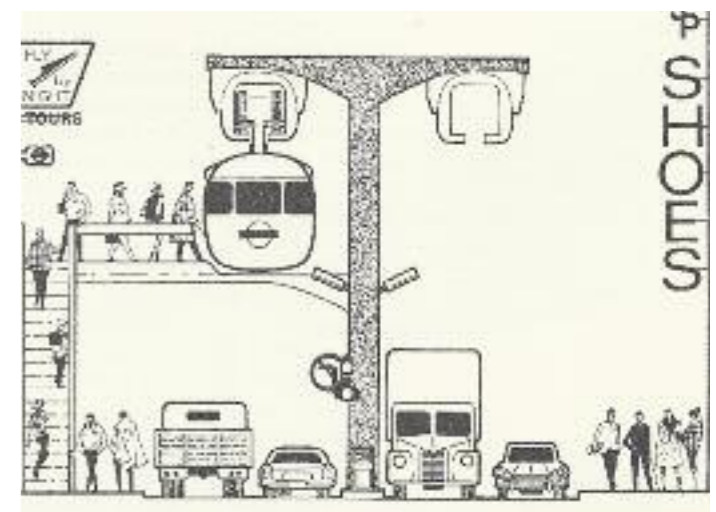
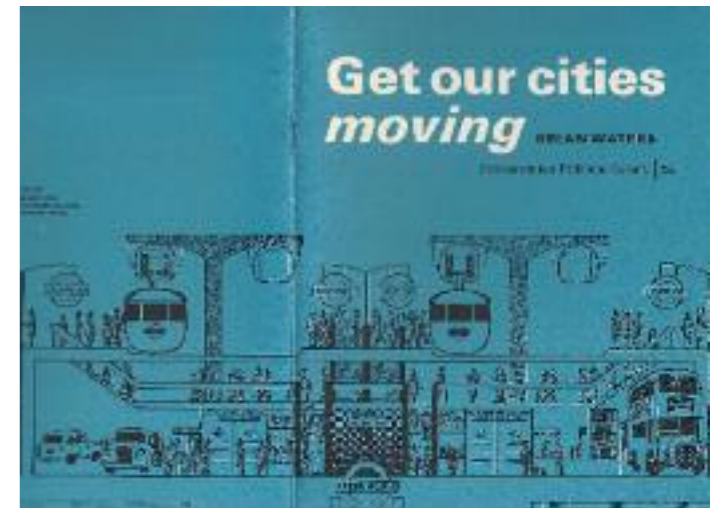
In his introduction Desmond Plummer, leader of the GLC, said: "Brian Waters has suggested a solution which may overcome this apparently insoluble problem (of road capacity in central London). His ingenious and exciting adaptation of the monorail concept for the central congested area deserves the closest study."

Bus travel was in a long decline at the time and the plan was to run overhead buses (a French monorail system licensed by Taylor Woodrow) in four loops north-south across the central area to balance the east-west bias of the Underground. The loops extended to and connected at Baker Street, Camden Town, Kings Cross, Angel, Elephant, Waterloo and Victoria.

The section sketch shows how elevated bus stops would free the streets for other traffic and in the case of Oxford Street for pedestrians, so creating two levels of shop windows and entrances.

Unexpectedly the Tories won County Hall after widespread national press coverage of the proposal, but it was swiftly buried.

The concept was influenced by the pioneering but ultimately failed Barbican pedway network and of course Conservation Areas had not yet been invented! ■



Brian Waters is an architect and planner whose Central London projects include the UK's first apart-hotel, the Citadines opposite the Barbican, Aveda 'lifestyle' stores and adaptations of Sir John Soane's Holy Trinity, Marylebone Road and St Mark's North Audley Street. He chairs the National Planning Forum and edits *Planning in London*.