

25th February 2025

CIHT Dubai Online Seminar – Bulletin

John Dales – Director at Urban Movement

About the Event

One of the first lessons transport planners are taught or should be is that transport is a derived demand: a means to an end, not an end in itself. While this principle is generally well understood in theory, it's worth questioning how effectively we apply it in practice. Understandably, those of us tasked with planning or engineering how people and goods move often concentrate primarily on movement. However, if we overlook how this movement interacts with or impacts the places it connects or passes through, the intended transport benefits may be undermined—or even outweighed by unintended harm to the urban environment.

Globally, many cities are now facing the consequences of highway-led strategies adopted in previous decades. These once-touted solutions have, in some cases, created urban problems that are now extremely costly to reverse. The root of the issue often lies in failing to consider “place” when designing for “movement” a mistake that continues to affect everything from individual streets and neighbourhoods to major commercial centres.

This CIHT Dubai Group seminar uses real-world examples, both positive and cautionary, alongside key guidance and frameworks, to make the case for integrating transport problem-solving with place-making. It calls for transport professionals to adopt a broader perspective on their role and to embrace more collaborative, interdisciplinary ways of working.

Transport planners, traffic engineers, and highway designers all play a role in shaping cities not only by improving mobility or enabling a shift to walking, cycling, and public transport, but by contributing to cities that are more liveable, inclusive, economically vibrant, and resilient to climate change.

About the Speaker

John Dales (CMILT, MCIHT, HonFIHE, MTPS) is Chair of Urban Movement, a consultancy specialising in urban transport strategies and public realm design. A traffic engineer, transport planner, urban designer and writer with 40 years of experience, he was previously the independent design advisor on the streets of the City of Edinburgh and the only transport specialist amongst the Mayor of London's Design Advocates. He currently has senior advisory roles for the London Borough of Ealing, Sunderland City Council, developer British Land, and The Crown Estate. John is also the past Chair of the UK Transport Planning Society and a former trustee of the walking charity Living Streets. He is currently a working party member of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Transport Safety (PACTS) and a trustee of the disability charity Transport for All.



“Transport is not just about getting from A to B it's about shaping the spaces in between. When we plan with purpose and place in mind, we don't just move people, we build thriving, connected communities.”



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Webinar Content Summary

CIHT Dubai hosted an insightful seminar led by renowned urban planner John Dales, focusing on the paradigm shift needed in transport planning moving from a focus on vehicle movement to one that prioritises people and place. The event brought together professionals from across the region to discuss how urban transport projects can and should be reframed as city-building initiatives.

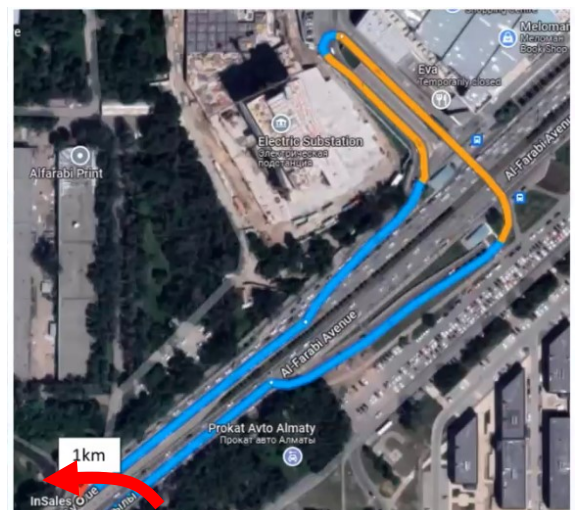
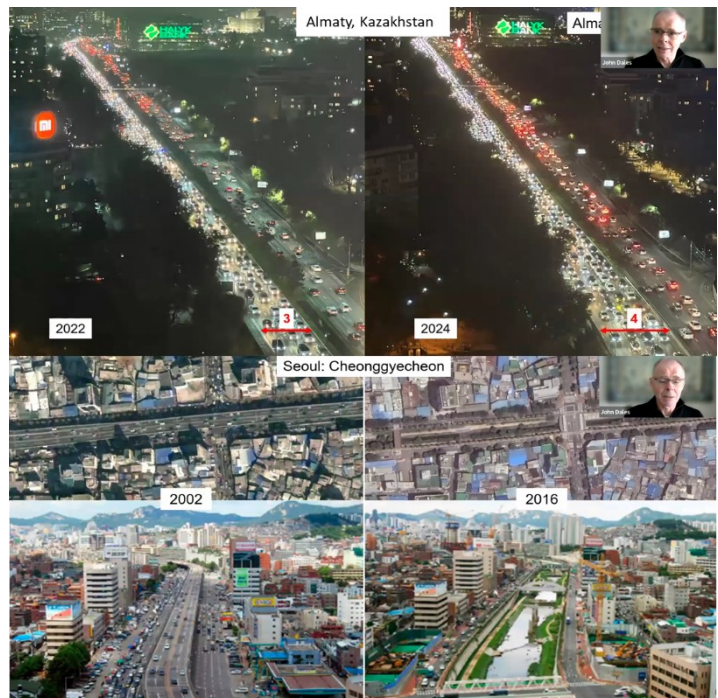
In his talk, John challenged the conventional approach of developing roads in urban areas. He argued passionately that there should be no "roads" in cities only streets. Roads are about movement; streets are about life. The distinction is crucial. Streets, he explained, must serve as shared public spaces that support walking, cycling, and social interaction not just vehicles. Drawing on over 40 years of experience, he made a compelling case for treating transport not as an end in itself but as a tool to shape healthier, more vibrant, and accessible cities.

Illustrating his points with global examples, John contrasted the people-friendly transformations of Paris, Utrecht, and Seoul with car-dominated environments in cities like Amman and Almaty.

John showed how attempts to reduce congestion by expanding roads often leads to negative consequences loss of public space, poor walkability, and ultimately, even more traffic. Instead, he urged city planners and engineers to start by asking, "What do we want this place to be like when we're done?" Only then can transport solutions support broader city goals.

The discussion also touched on the challenges faced in the Middle East, particularly the cultural association of cars with modernity and convenience, and the climate's influence on mobility choices. Nonetheless, John remained optimistic that cities like Dubai could become regional leaders by prioritising mass transit and limiting car dependency through smart design and policy.

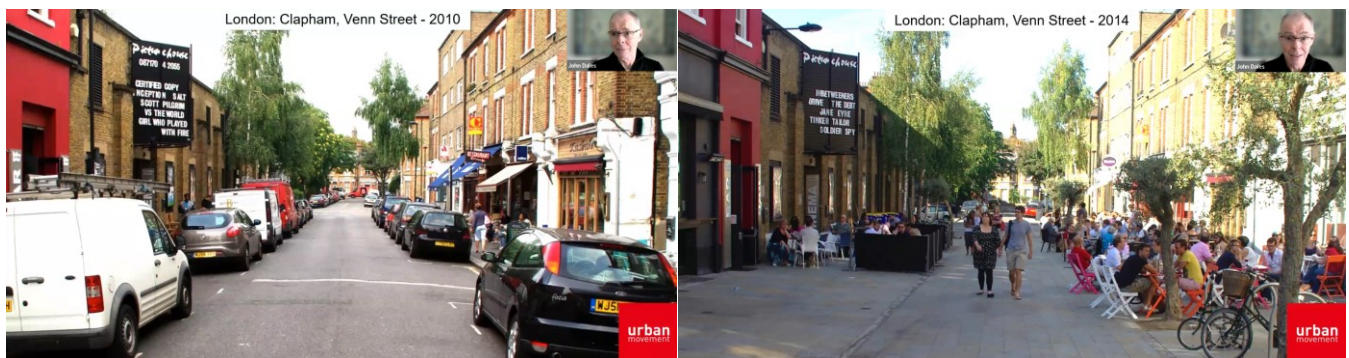
A related issue discussed was the unintended consequences of severing direct movements through road redesigns. A striking example was the conversion of a signalised T-junction into a right-in, right-out (RIRO) layout see the red arrow in the figure. Although this modification aimed to benefit a specific turning movement by saving a few seconds of delay, it imposed circuitous routing on all others. This led to a substantial increase in vehicle kilometres travelled (veh-km) and created congestion downstream where vehicles were forced to make U-turns. Such interventions focused narrowly on optimising individual flows ultimately degraded the overall efficiency of the network. They exemplify how short-term traffic "solutions" can generate longer-term urban mobility issues and diminish place quality when the broader



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implications are overlooked.

Another important theme discussed in the webinar was the idea that well-designed open spaces will attract people, contributing significantly to a city's livability. John Dales emphasised that when public spaces are made accessible, comfortable, and inviting particularly for walking, sitting, or gathering people naturally begin to use and enjoy them. This was illustrated through examples like the Hashemite Plaza in Amman, where a previously underutilised area was transformed into an attractive public square near the Roman theatre. Similarly, improvements to streets in Paris and London showed how reallocating space from traffic to people through wider footways, added greenery, and seating can lead to vibrant, social environments. These transformations underline the principle that place-making is not just about aesthetics, but about enabling healthier, more connected, and enjoyable urban life. When cities design for people first, the result is often a self-reinforcing cycle of activity, safety, and economic vitality.



John mentioned the following resources for further reading:

- Manual for Streets (2007)
 - Published by: UK Department for Transport and Communities and Local Government
 - Focus: Redefines streets as places, not just corridors for vehicles.
- Manual for Streets 2 – Wider Application of the Principles (2010)
 - Published by: Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation (CIHT)
 - Focus: Extends the principles from MfS1 to a wider range of streets, including those beyond residential areas.
- Global Street Design Guide
 - Published by: Global Designing Cities Initiative (by NACTO)
 - Focus: International best practices in street design for walkability, safety, and sustainability.
- Creating Better Streets: Inclusive and Accessible Places (2018)
 - Published by: CIHT
 - Focus: Guidance on shared space and creating accessible public environments for all users.
- Improving the Health of Londoners – Transport Action Plan
 - Published by: Transport for London (TfL) / Mayor of London
 - Focus: Links street design and transport planning with public health outcomes.
- Practitioner's Guide to Movement and Place (2023)
 - Published by: NSW Government, Australia
 - Focus: Framework to implement movement and place principles in urban planning in New South Wales.
- World Class Places – The Government's Strategy for Improving Quality of Place (2009)
 - Published by: HM Government (UK)
 - Focus: UK strategy to embed quality design across planning and development policy.
- By Design: Urban Design in the Planning System (1998)

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- Published by: Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), UK
- Focus: Foundational guide promoting urban design quality within the UK planning system.

The session closed with a strong **call to action**: cities must stop chasing congestion relief through road expansion and instead invest in infrastructure that supports walking, cycling, and mass transit. As a parting note, CIHT Dubai reiterated its commitment to promoting best practices, supporting professional development, and encouraging dialogue among transport and infrastructure professionals in the region.

Questions

- 1. Cities should only have streets not roads. How applicable is this to megacities like Mexico City, Istanbul, or São Paulo, where transit demand is massive? Can public transport and streets alone meet that demand?**

Yes, the principle applies to any city. The solution in dense cities is usually mass transit. Large roads aren't necessary within city centres if public transport is prioritised. Istanbul, for example, has successfully implemented pedestrianised areas, efficient trams, and multi-modal transit systems. Cities must start from a place-focused perspective and design accordingly.

- 2. You've shown great examples from the UK and France. Why aren't we seeing similar success stories in the Middle East?**

Multiple factors play a role in shaping transport choices in the Middle East. Car ownership is frequently seen as a symbol of status, progress, and personal freedom, while the region's hot climate naturally encourages reliance on private vehicles. When designing public spaces, planners must take these realities into account and work to reduce their impact such as by incorporating shaded areas through thoughtful tree planting, installing seating, and creating pedestrian-only streets. Unfortunately, many cities continue to repeat the mistakes of the past, prioritising major highway investments over sustainable transport options. However, with strong leadership and active community engagement, there is significant potential to shift towards more people-centred, liveable urban environments.

- 3. Would it be reasonable to limit road and carriageway widths in cities as a spatial constraint and work within those limitations for mobility planning?**

It could help, but the real issue lies upstream with the client and political decisions. If authorities continue commissioning large highway projects, engineers and planners will follow. Structural change begins with decision-makers prioritising place and sustainability over capacity.

- 4. You said congestion could be a sign of a healthy city. But how do we manage it before it becomes detrimental to the economy? Can change be rapid or must it be phased?**

It's a balancing act. Short-term fixes like road widening may ease congestion quickly but worsen the long-term urban experience. Rapid behavioural change is possible through congestion pricing or road user charging, especially if paired with reliable public transport. Political will and vision are key.

- 5. Is there a global manifesto or roadmap cities can use to undo poor past decisions in road and city design?**

No universal manifesto exists yet, but it's a great idea. Some cities (like Paris and Portland) are setting good examples. Creating a shared framework among city leaders could be a powerful step. John Dales expressed interest in contributing to such an initiative.

- 6. Is congestion in cities caused more by residents or by people driving in for work and shopping?**

It varies. In London, data shows that most short car trips are made by residents within the same zone, and many could be made by walking or cycling. In other cities, like New York, a significant portion of congestion comes from commuters. Understanding trip origins is essential to designing effective solutions.

- 7. Is congestion pricing a potential solution?**

Yes, congestion pricing is one of the most effective tools available. It manages demand, raises funds for alternatives, and influences behaviour. However, its success depends on public support and strong transport alternatives.