

Let The Birds Have The Skies at Gare Maritime, Brussels



The first public presentation of the 'Let The Birds Have The Skies' project by artist and curator team Lola Perrin and Rob La Frenais took place on 19 and 20 September 2023 at Gare Maritime, Tour & Taxis, Brussels "A soundscape of specially-recorded voices of business travellers to blend with Perrin's recent piano composition...This was integrated with a stop-motion experience of landscapes, railway architecture and travellers we encountered on trains and stations from Brussels to Davos, Switzerland and from Toulouse to Seville and back, travelling through France, Belgium, Germany and Spain".

It was presented as a two-screen installation, with a large screen showing the trailer for the project, with souvenirs of the artists' voyage by train across

Europe, a grand piano, comments books and a video camera set up to record participants' reactions. For part of the presentation, live piano was played by Lola Perrin. The aim was to address the brief given to us by Transport & Environment's Travel Smart Campaign to "bring home the realities of the environmental challenges we face, particularly those arising from unsustainable transport modes and business travel...to encourage people to think on a deeper level about their impact on the environment and equity, and to inspire change; imagine new actions and new ways of being more compatible with the rest of the planet". Now was our chance to see how this played out in public.



The dates had been chosen to coincide with a gathering of a sample of our target audience, the 'Realty' conference at Gare Maritime. This was a gathering of not only real estate executives but also policy-makers, such as Alina-Stefania Ujupan of European Commission, Joint Research Centre and Head of the New European Bauhaus, who delivered the keynote address. Climate was clearly on the agenda for this gathering, whose press release stated: "This year's central theme is 'Milestones - How will we live in 2050?'...The focus this year is on how we will live in the (near) future, live, work. Because how we will live in three decades' time will be directly linked to current climate goals of 2050, which are already closer than many think".

Delegates, clearly visible with their lanyards, wandered to and fro from the conference to the food court where we were stationed. Gare Maritime, agreeing with our agenda of 'Take The Train Not The Plane' offered us to have a stand and furniture at no cost. Although, inadvertently, the installation was placed away from the main flow of delegates, staff from Transport &



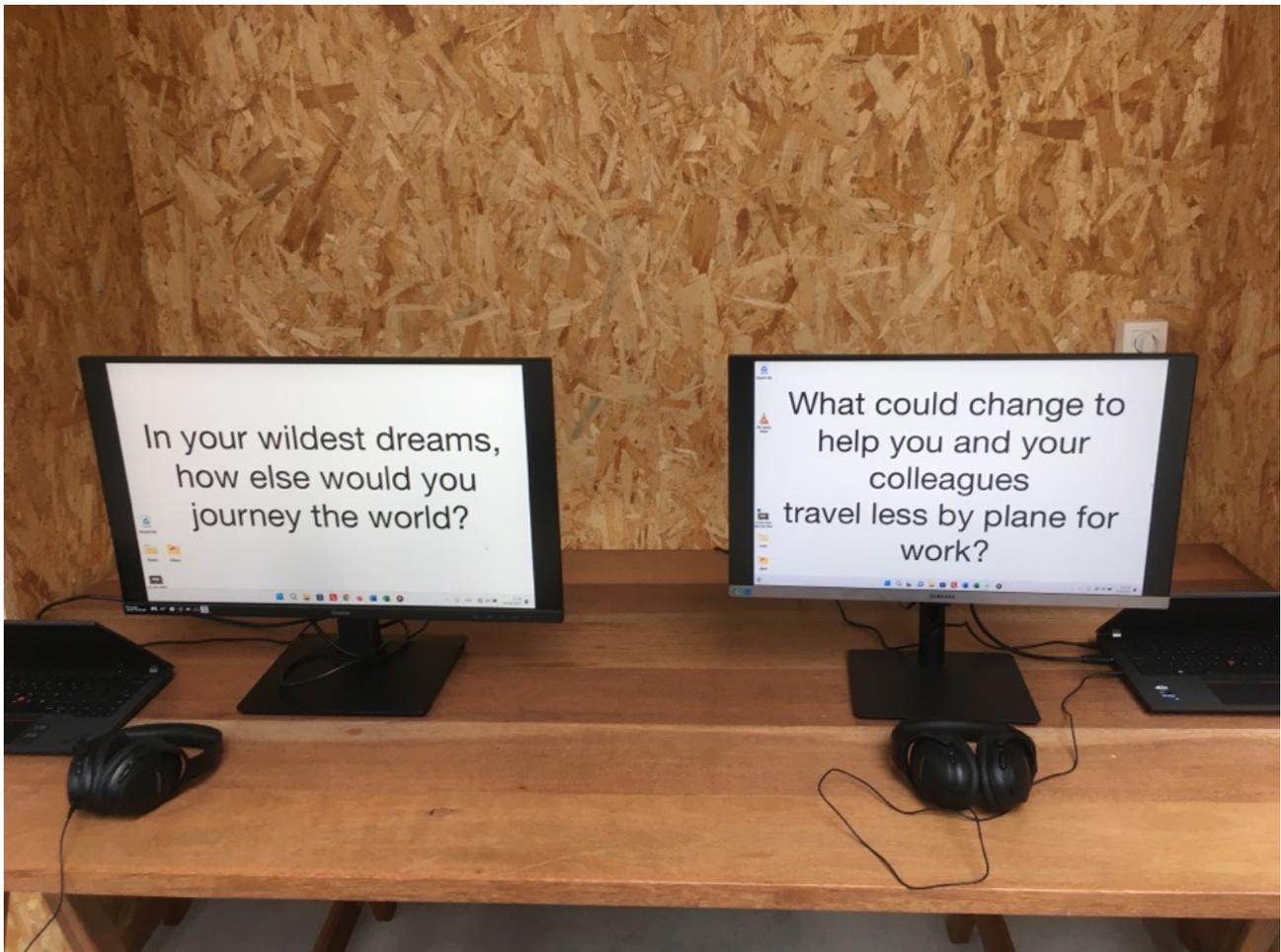
Environment enthusiastically helped to direct delegates to our stand, often engaging them on the spot with the Travel Smart agenda of encouraging business travellers to think again before taking the plane in Europe.

Responses, some recorded on video, were various, but many already had made the positive decision to take the train: "Travelling by train is great. You can relax on the train. You can get on with work if you have it. You can enjoy the sights. A lot of the trains in the UK are becoming electrified now".

And of course the biggest issue is price: "I just want to mention about price as well. People like lower or middle class, with not the biggest incomes.

Travelling by train is one of the most expensive things you could do. Ryanair will give you a flight to Brussels for thirty nine quid, I know. And what are they going to do? Are they going to eat for the month or when they go on holiday, the one holiday they get, are they going to spend 260 quid (on Eurostar)? Absolutely not".

But were we really reaching the right people? One delegate, although enthusiastic about the project, thought we were not: "The trouble is we're probably targeting the wrong people. We need to be starting from the top, working down. Fortunately we're working from the bottom on the way up. People like you and me. But fortunately it's good that we can make a change. Small, increments, person by person. If there is legislation, that's the problem, then everyone has to. And I believe that pretty much 60% of the world is good. They're good people and they want to do the right thing and have social values and all this good stuff. Yet there is a 40% of people that don't believe and they want to watch the world burn. So we can only do so much as individuals. Unfortunately, I think it needs to change from the top down".



This person's company had paid for him to take the train. But in conversation we heard of several instances where the person in the company who passes their travel expenses will not allow train travel because it's too expensive. We even came across an instance of one business person who had offered to pay the extra and a senior manager had said, "no, you can't do that because then it would set a precedent for other people to do it".

We talked to one policy-maker about the French short haul flight ban, where if you can take a train for less than two and a half hours, such as Paris to Bordeaux or Nantes, the airlines were prevented from flying this route, which was recently approved by the European Commission. "So I think the European regulators were quite supportive of the measures. I think the big question that we have is that no one is talking about reducing demand, no one is questioning aviation's constant growth, fast-paced growth that actually

can't be dealt with technology. And so I think that's the next big challenge is - Okay now we've all agreed what the problem is that we need to do something about it but now we're going to fight about how and when".

Aviation was obsessed with technological solutions to reduce emissions, but it was too late: "And so when you talk about that to policymakers it's like "oh no, don't worry, we'll have the technology in 15-20 years" and what we're saying is, actually you need to take measures today to reduce the climate impact because every tonne of CO2 that you release is going to stay there for hundreds of years. So I think on the flight ban issue, I think it was quite smart. Well it's quite innovative. It's the first kind of measure that questions a bit".

As well as visitors to 'Realty' we also encountered some younger people, not delegates, heading to the food court. They felt their voices were not being heard. They said they are constantly being fed the myth of exotic travel: "So I say, yeah, I feel the impact. Yeah, I feel the impact when I'm travelling because I know what's going on with the planet. And I think then it's a bad choice to take the plane. But when you see on TV and you read on books that you can visit this and that and the wonderful places with wonderful people and with wonderful food, then you want to go there, because you see it on TV and you want to do something else in your life that you don't have to do anymore. I say anymore but I want to say something that you're never going to do again because it's far away, it's like exotic, it's like you have to do all this thing because you think. So I think we have to take the plane a lot less more".

There were some exceptions: "But I think you can do it for long distance. Like if you want to travel to USA or something else, but not for Europe, then I think the impact on my life when I take the plane is just horrible. But sometimes we have no choice because it's a lot cheaper than taking the train in Europe. So I know I was going to France with a plane because the plane was a lot cheaper than the train and it's like horrible because the train is not pollution. It's much

better than the plane. That may be a great alternative for now it should be comfortable, it should be family friendly there should be something about that and also reduced price of course but I think we should still manage to think that train it's okay to pay the price that we have right now for the train. It's like a pair of shoes we agree to buy some Doc Martens - we should agree to travel by train and pay that price".

They also raised the issue of fast fashion. in Belgium we are more talking about the clothes. So we don't take clothes, expensive clothes from fast fashion. We are a lot of thinking about that and I think we think more about that than about train and planes. Yes, it's really embedded in our culture, I think and all social media and pop culture it's all about aesthetics and it's really important there's a double like something is happening at our age because we have also other issues. We are discovering ourselves. We want to prove ourselves... So it's like crucial for us to show who we are and we can. Do it because we have a lot of stores in Brussels like Secondhand and that are cheap and they are good stuff. So we can do with clothes a lot of things to reduce the CO2. I'm already trying to sew my clothes whole. And slavery. Slavery. Around cheap clothing, et cetera, as well as what it's doing for planet. And also a lot of people play dumb. They know they can access things, so they will try it. It's an ego thing".

What did people think of the artistic presentation? One Realty delegate, who was clearly taken by our installation, was frank about it: "Well, I'm going to be very honest, actually. I don't know if it was really the expectation that what the images would have as a consequence on me, or if it was maybe the quality of the video that did it, but it made me feel like actually riding a train. And I must admit, maybe in my case, I'm the exception. But I'm not very fond of riding trains. It made me feel like very, should I say, like the flashing images it was and the images of full railway stations have a very negative connotation for me. So in that way, maybe it was meant to be that way, but for me it depends



on what the mission was of the video. But for me I think had the inverse effect because, like, for instance, I'm now at one of the fairs and I hate those kinds of situations where it's many people, a lot of noises and definitely yeah, something that I don't really like. I know. Obviously, for me, the alternative I think was a bit the idea behind it, if I understood it correctly, was maybe to promote railway usage, if I understand it correctly".

But the presentation clearly stimulated reflection: "As an alternative, obviously flying is a lot more polluting and I don't like flying either, but at least it takes less long to be in this kind of situation where you don't have any personal space. So for me, that's kind of the factor that makes it for me. And obviously I know it has a large negative impact on the climate, obviously, but that's why I try to have all my travels as less as possible rather than making unnecessary trips".

How about not travelling at all? "I think there is a big difference caused by the whole COVID issue where a lot of meetings can be held online. Although I know that obviously personal contact is obviously more effective, it's still a lot



easier to realise a steady communication stream with regular contacts, even if it's through the intermediary of internet, rather than a personal contact, which would then imply having to go there. So that was actually more or less my point on that, if I might add, just a little thing and that's something that you couldn't do anything about. But it is regretful because I really appreciated the piano but it was so sad that there was all the background music that was playing while you were playing the piano. You have all the noises where you can't focus on the piano".

A Transport and Environment staff member reported from several conversations. The question of the difficulty of booking the train arose with one delegate: "He takes both the train and the plane. He said that it works very well for a destination like London or Paris. But when you have to go to the south of France, then it can take a whole day. And he doesn't necessarily feel that he can be very productive, active or make good use of his time in the train, that you have limited space even if on the train you have more space than on the plane. So his thought was that you also don't necessarily consider on the one hand so he's not able, when he books travel, to see the choice for plane with the choice for train alongside it. If he wants to book the train, he has to find it himself".

He also pointed out the hidden time costs of getting to the airport: "When you take a plane, you also have the time that you have to come to the airport. People don't necessarily take it into account. So it could be useful then if when you book a trip that you would have the total travel time visible and plane and train alongside each other. And he thought that even it might be useful to have the environmental impact as well. It's not the case today and some people wouldn't care. But it could be good to have all of that information together when you're making your choice for your trip".

Then there was the question of leadership: "Another visitor said that he personally only travels by train now and he finds that setting an example from the leadership is very important. He has a small business and he has set a rule for his employees that if they can travel by train in a day's time, they can't take the plane. He had some colleagues that were pushing back and saying, no, the plane is more convenient. "He said, look, if you want to go somewhere and you don't want to take the train for a day's trip, then you won't make the trip and maybe someone else will go and take the train".

The travel agencies employed by companies were also behind the times:

"Set in the ways that they've been doing for years, which is if you give an itinerary, they'll just give you back the flight possibilities. And today they are not giving train alternatives and in a way haven't developed the capacity to be able to do also some research and then show what would be the ways of going by train. So this is problematic because the businesses and the employees of the businesses are often forced to use whatever travel agency is contracted by the company to provide the travel management".



The problem of travelling by train across borders arose: "If you did want to do something about the train, then one thing would be to improve the main international connections so as to say that for the very frequently or strategic itineraries that it could be defined somehow as like critical infrastructure. And so you wouldn't get into a situation that he's experienced where, for example, you have in Hungary a train that's systematically 30 minutes late and then

that affects the next train when you have to make a connection... And until now, that choice about the maintenance of the track infrastructure has only depended on the government of Hungary. But it would be good if there could be a European responsibility on critical lines, that some lines would be defined as critical for business travellers, and that there would be a higher level of attention paid to the proactive maintenance of the infrastructure instead of getting to a point where there's a problem and then it's longer and more costly to fix".

He also raised the issue of night trains: "So maybe again, related to the critical infrastructure, how these different international connections are interlinked. Why don't we have a Brussels Vienna Direct line instead of having to change at Frankfurt? He had tried the Brussels-Vienna night train and he said that it wasn't comfortable for sleeping and so it was difficult when arriving in Vienna to then be productive for the day. So he thought that there could be a small investment to ensure that the bed layout, which apparently is like a seat that converts into a bed, so the seat needs to be firmer than the bed for sleeping. So there could be a kind of like a cushion that rolls out onto the bed to give an extra layer to then really pay attention to the business traveller to make sure that it's comfortable enough that there are the good conditions for the traveller to arrive and be able to start their day fresh."

One delegate placed a big emphasis on personal freedom: "We talked a bit about the Paris to Brussels journey". He lives in Antwerp and he finds it a challenge. He said that for him, three hours driving is feasible, he can leave when he wants and arrive directly at the hotel parking. He did give the positive examples of having a direct train going to Marseille from Brussels and a direct train going to Lyon. On the other hand, in the past there were certain itineraries where you had to change train stations in Paris.

Connections were also important: "As well as keeping attention to the smooth fluidity of the connections between trains, but also if you have, let's say, an hour, two hours in a train station, that you have the proper infrastructure to be able to work while you're there. In Spain they've done a very good job of having areas where you have seating, where you have also a quiet area. It's very hard to find any kind of spot where you as a business traveller can continue to work productively. So that would also mean for the train stations really taking care of the business traveller to think, okay, can we make sure that there's a lounge area so either open or accessible by payment? Then if you have to pay a bit, that's fine. It's a reasonable cost for the business to ensure that the employee is able to have a productive day even in the moment of changing trains".

Locality was important for a traveller from Norway. "When you live a bit outside of the central area where the train station is, it can actually be easier to get yourself to the airport than to the train station. He thinks that it could be



easier to have a bit more parking outside the train station or with the public transport, that the cost is reasonable in comparison to the accessibility to get to the airport."

One visitor had a family member in Sweden, and the disparity between plane and train fares to get there was particularly marked: what he would really like would be a direct connection to Sweden. He says today it's seven trains to get to Gothenburg and so having a direct connection because often then you risk with delays to miss a next train. So having a better schedule, more frequent and also on time would be incentives to use the train more. He said that for one of the main obstacles is about the price. So that when going to Sweden, train is the most expensive, plane is the cheapest. He gave an example that it's about €200 to fly to Gothenburg, €600 to go by train and somewhere in between for driving. So the plane was the cheapest option and he doesn't understand why.

Again, it was down to governments to tax the airlines fairly: "So we spoke a moment about, for example, the lack of tax on jet fuel and he said it shouldn't be the case, so we should take steps on the comparable cost of the two options and that also means making the air tickets more expensive so really reflecting the real price".

So what of the future? One of the things that was discussed was to do this project again in airports. A Transport & Environment Aviation team member pointed out to us that: "In France, for example, the CEO of the Paris airports, he's talking about *sobriété*, talking about 'demand management' and saying at the levels of growth that we're anticipating, we can't expect to be at net zero. So we need to have a discussion about demand management".

Dealing with air travellers rather than train travellers would present a tough new challenge, but the 'Let The Birds Have The Skies' team feel it would be good to try it.



Rob La Frenais, September 2023

(NB we also included a comments book in the installation, the above is based on the audio interviews but some of the comments from the book appear on the Transport & Environment website).