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IX: Mobility as a Service: The Transport Revolution that Never Arrived

Big promises. Billions invested. Minimal impact. Why the MaaS mirage has persisted, what went wrong, and where transport should go next.



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Acknowledgement of Country

We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past and present – of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years, they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

Mobility as a Service: The Transport Revolution that Never Arrived



Prof. Matthew Beck

Mobility as a Service was meant to change everything. One app. Every mode. Seamless planning, booking and payment. Public transport, ride share, bikes, scooters, taxis and car share, all bundled together. People would give up cars. Congestion would fall. Emissions would drop.

It was a beautiful idea. It was also, in practice, mostly nonsense.

MaaS was almost perfectly designed for the modern policy ecosystem. It sounded innovative. It had an acronym. It involved apps, platforms, sustainability, behaviour change and disruption. Governments could look future-focused without necessarily building much. Technology companies saw a new market. Researchers and consultants saw an emerging field. Grant bodies saw something modern and fundable.

And after years of pilots, strategies, conferences, papers and public money, the promised revolution never arrived.

MaaS may end up being remembered as one of transport's great disappearing acts. Like Keyser Soze, its trick was convincing policymakers that it existed as a practical solution, when in most places it was little more than a concept moving from one funded research project to the next.



The central mistake was simple: MaaS treated transport as an information problem. If travellers could see every option, book every mode and pay

for everything in one place, the theory went, they would change how they travelled.

But car dependence is not a software bug. An app cannot make an hourly bus arrive every ten minutes, make an indirect journey direct or turn a sixty-minute public transport trip into something competitive with a thirty-minute drive. Software can make good transport easier to use. It cannot make bad transport good.

People choose transport because it is fast, reliable, affordable, available and convenient. MaaS did not struggle because travellers failed to understand the offer. It struggled because, for many people, the transport underneath the app was simply not good enough.

The evidence increasingly reflects that. MaaS has struggled with profitability, low market share, willingness to pay below cost-covering levels and a mismatch between what platforms offer and what users actually want.^[1] It has equity problems because participation depends on resources such as money, digital literacy, physical ability and actual access to multiple modes.^[2] Even its sustainability benefits remain uncertain and depend heavily on uptake and what travel MaaS actually replaces.^[3]

There are useful things associated with MaaS. Journey planners, smart ticketing, contactless payment, fare capping and real-time passenger information all make transport easier to use. Keep them. But they are not evidence that the grand MaaS proposition worked. They are evidence that reducing friction around good transport is worthwhile.

Indeed, there are remarkably few convincing examples of MaaS operating at scale as originally imagined. This is despite large scale efforts to get it off the ground.

This matters because MaaS was not a harmless fantasy. It consumed serious policy attention, research funding and public money. Governments and grant bodies poured resources into pilots, platforms, demonstrators and strategies chasing a model that repeatedly struggled to show either commercial viability or meaningful behavioural impact. The opportunity

cost matters. The issue is not simply that MaaS underdelivered. It is that governments were encouraged to keep searching for a technological shortcut while the underlying transport problems remained.

The bigger problem is that MaaS offered governments exactly that tempting escape route. Improving transport is hard. Railways are expensive. Better bus frequencies cost money. Network redesign is politically difficult. Land-use reform is slow. Building an app is easy.

MaaS offered the comforting possibility that behaviour could be changed without fixing the transport system itself. Instead of asking why the bus was infrequent or the train inconvenient, policymakers could talk about platforms, integration and seamless mobility.

That was always the fantasy.

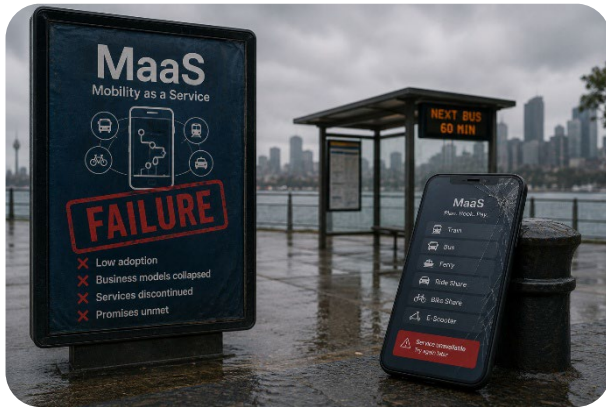
Then there is the research problem. Public funding should support experimentation, and ideas sometimes fail. But there also comes a point when failure is evidence about the idea itself.

MaaS showed an extraordinary capacity to survive that reckoning. Poor uptake produced another study. Commercial failure became a governance problem. Weak behavioural change became a reason to investigate adoption. Problems integrating operators became another research stream. Failure rarely killed the idea. It created the rationale for the next project.

Part of the explanation may lie in the incentives facing the research community. MaaS attracted substantial research funding, creating a strong incentive to keep the idea alive even as the market rejected it. Funding bodies should be alert to this dynamic. At some point, repeated failure should count against the underlying proposition, rather than simply justify another funded attempt to explain why it has not worked.

The bankruptcy of MaaS Global, the company behind Whim, should have prompted a serious reckoning. Even sympathetic accounts acknowledge that MaaS 1.0 was app-centric and too inclined to treat transport as a technology problem.^[4] Instead, the language evolved: MaaS

2.0, Public Mobility, Collaboration as a Service and Mobility as a Feature.



Collaboration as a Service at least recognises that integration is really about governance, contracting, institutions and operator cooperation.^[5] But that rather gives the game away. If those are the things required to make transport work, the app was never the difficult part.

Mobility as a Feature takes the next step by embedding mobility within products and services people already use, such as housing, employment, hotels or sporting events.^[6] That idea has since been developed further as a proposed next generation of MaaS.^[7] But MaaF looks less like a saviour than the vestiges of an idea that has already failed. MaaS could not find a viable business model, so MaaF proposes finding somebody with a viable business model and attaching MaaS to it.

And then there is the slightly ridiculous part: MaaS existed before MaaS.

It was called Uber.

People already had an app that let them find, book and pay for mobility in one place. The commercially viable version of the idea was already in the market. What MaaS added was mostly the harder, less commercially attractive part: integrating operators, bundling modes, selling subscriptions and trying to engineer behavioural change.

Perhaps we did not need quite so many pilots to discover that.

None of this means abandoning digital innovation. Improve ticketing. Improve information. Integrate payment. Make good transport easier to use.

But stop pretending software can compensate for a transport system people do not want to use.

Transport is not simply a collection of journeys waiting to be optimised by an algorithm. It is the product of decades of planning decisions about where people live, where jobs are located, how infrastructure is funded and what alternatives exist to the private car. Software can make those systems easier to navigate. It cannot rebuild them.

The future of sustainable transport will not be determined by whoever develops the smartest application. It will be determined by whether governments and the voting public have the courage to build transport networks that people genuinely want to use.

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Guest author



Matthew is Professor of Transport Economics at the University of Sydney. His research focuses on human decision making, transport behaviour, infrastructure pricing and investment, and the impacts of uncertainty and disruption. He has attracted more than \$6 million in research funding, including ARC projects, published extensively in leading international journals, and advised governments across Australia on transport policy and disruption.

He also has substantial experience in teaching, curriculum design, academic leadership and industry engagement, and has a particular interest in challenging ideas that become accepted simply because everyone has been repeating them for long enough. This article is a provocative opinion piece. It is intended to poke at some of the assumptions, incentives and occasionally sacred cows that have sustained Mobility as a Service and its various reinventions. If it makes MaaS enthusiasts slightly uncomfortable, it has probably done its job. <https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/matthew.beck>

Editors of series

John rejoined the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies as the Neil Smith Research Chair in Sustainable Transport Futures in October 2022, after an 8-year absence. Over the course of his academic career, John has published over 300 scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings. He has also been an Associate Editor of Transportation, and Co-Editor and Chief of the Journal of Choice Modelling and Transportation Research Part A. He has also held various roles on multiple conference committees both in Australia and overseas.



Since graduating with a PhD, John has been obtained numerous grants worth over \$3.4 million. These include a number of ARC discovery grants in the areas of Public Health, Transportation crowding, general economic theory related to utility separability as well as one on improving the external validity of Discrete Choice Experiments. In addition to academic grants, John has been involved in \$9 million in industry-based contract research since the year 2005. Find out more about John: <https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/john.rose>



Andrea joined the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies as the Neil Smith Lecturer in Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility in March 2023. Before becoming a lecturer, Andrea spent three years as visiting research scholar thanks to two scholarships, the Early Postdoc mobility and the Postdoc mobility, awarded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Andrea holds a Master of Science in Statistics with Honors from the University of Bologna and a PhD in Economics from the University of Lugano. Over the years, Andrea has taken part in different consulting projects with several public and private institutions such as NSW Government, University of Florence, and University of Catania. Find out more about Andrea:

<https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/andrea.pellegrini>

For more information
University of Sydney Business School
Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies
business.itlse@sydney.edu.au
sydney.edu.au