First light
Is China poised to clean up?

The car in front is electric
Mass transit gets sexy
and
Jonathon Porritt swims upstream
Rites of passage

Interactive bus stops, driverless cars and brief encounters... Could tomorrow’s transport be even sexier than a soft-top convertible? Anna Simpson takes a ride into the future.

The number 57 glides to a halt by the skytrain interchange and a modern Celia Johnson steps in. Reaching into her purse for a BlackBerry she flips it open and studies it for a minute, then turning round with a smile taps a gentleman on the shoulder. He gets up to offer his seat but she holds out her hand: “Mr Rose, so glad to meet you. According to the transit network you work with an old friend of mine – time for a chat?”

This vision of mass transit as a future LinkedIn-on-wheels is a favourite of Professor Glenn Lyons, from the Centre for Transport and Society. It’s about making it fit with people’s lifestyles, he argues, when asked how low-carbon transport can realise its potential. Innovators are already coming up with designs to bring such visions to the streets. In May, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology unveiled a solar-powered digital bus stop. Dubbed The Eyestop (right), it allows passengers to check their emails, browse community message boards and track the location of all the buses in the area, turning the tedium of waiting into time well spent. The sleek glass frame of the Eyestop is also designed to glow brighter as the bus nears, so signalling how close it is.

But however slick this stop, futurologist Ian Pearson dismisses buses as a clumsy way to get around. “You see buses with nobody on them, still using a lot of fuel to get where they have to be.” He envisages a fleet of publicly owned computer-driven electric cars – or pods: “You’d just pick up a phone and say ‘I want a car please’, and the pod turns up outside your house, picks you up and drops you at your destination, then heads off to answer someone else’s call.” The pod would have a sensory system, Pearson explains, capable of reacting in milliseconds to other vehicles and pedestrians by braking or accelerating. It would react so quickly, in fact, that colliding with another pod would be impossible, and this means that there’d be no reason why one pod shouldn’t drive a fraction of an inch behind another, improving the capacity of the roads by a factor of three or four.

Pearson isn’t the only one convinced that computer-driven pods are the way forward for urban transport. “It’s the biggest and most radical thing that could happen,” says Brian Route, CEO of transport giant Stagecoach, who believes it could be a big cost saving, too. “People think the cost of public transport is going up because of fuel – but fuel is only 10% of the service cost... 60% of it is labour. Without drivers you could run more vehicles at much higher frequencies – and save money.”

It sounds good, but will it ever move from science fiction into reality? “I remember as a kid futurologists saying ‘We’ll all be driving around in computer-driven cars,’” says a disenchanted Richard Brown, CEO of Eurostar, “and now I’m 56 and it hasn’t happened.” Yet prototypes on show at the Future Mobility Solutions Conference in Helsinki suggest that driverless cars are indeed just around the corner. Developed by the EU CyberCar project, these intelligent machines have high-tech lasers under the hood to avoid crashes and follow paths mapped out by GPS. They even have an...
have a car parked outside their house, instinctively feeling that there’s a lot of habit – a lot of ritual – in it. If people change their ways, says Pearson, “it’s fashion.” But what’s really going to change isn’t the bus, it’s the way we travel. “People are coming back to live in the inner city. Little more than 20 years ago politicians waxed lyrical about solving inner city problems – now they talk about green estates or edge of town.”

Interestingly, the most attractive town centres in Britain – those where a fine cathedral drew interest and industry in the past – are also those where transport behaviour is really on the move. “They have the greatest interest in preserving their environment,” explains Souter, “because no matter how far you go, the price of a single journey stays the same. Following in Curitiba’s footsteps Hong Kong’s LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability) Park. There, walkways are designed so that pedestrians never have to cross a road, and all pathways lead towards the public transport interchange. It isn’t about mass transit on its own,” explains Joseph, “it’s about the land use patterns that make mass transit worth having.”

Personally, I’d say a transit system is ‘worth having’ when using it stops being a bore (“I’ll have to take the f***ing tube”) and becomes a pleasure. In transport terms, speed will always be associated with pleasure and short journeys give the impression of having travelled quickly. And so those of us who can’t move to newly built eco-towns might find ourselves relocating so that our social, domestic and professional lives can play out in close proximity. Instead, Brown is convinced this is already happening.

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In the pink: the healthy glow of an approaching bus.