

Lessons from the Continent: A WTS-LA Tour de Course



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Traveling is rarely about the destination. More often than not, it's the journey itself that provides transformational experiences. As ex-patriot, American writer Henry Miller put it, "One's destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing." And on a recent sojourn to Europe that's exactly what happened to a WTS-LA delegation that included WTS-LA Director at Large Eric Shen, Mott MacDonald senior project engineer and WTS-LA Programs and Professional Development vice president Lisa Karwoski, Fehr & Peers transportation planner/engineer and former WTS-LA president Amanda Heinke, and WSP transportation and environmental planner and WTS-LA Transportation Resume Book chair Todd Nguyen. For them, this trip was nothing short of a transportation version of a trip to Lourdes.

"This expedition was a huge success," explains Mr. Shen. "And we learned something new from each place we visited! The trip's purpose was to gather best practices in three European countries, exchange ideas, then bring back what could work for us in the US. And our hosts were equally eager to learn from us. This kind of technical study tour is invaluable because it gives us an opportunity to recharge and reflect. It helps rekindle the passion and enthusiasm we have for what we do. There's an added benefit to a trip like this—planning.

"Dealing with the logistics of a trip like this provides its own lessons. There were a lot of details to coordinate. By itself, the trip was virtually another transportation project. From the initial planning to the end of our trip, we counted on each other's cooperation and developed strong friendships. But while we planned the itinerary with precision and certainty, we also built in some flexibilities for each member to shape their individual travel experience. And because of WTS, the brand, we were able to access project sites and have in-depth discussion with our hosts in every city."

The itinerary was daunting. Leaving in late September, the group first journeyed to London, which included a tour of the Network Rail at London Bridge

WTS-LA TECHNICAL STUDY TRIP 2017
LONDON | AMSTERDAM | ROTTERDAM | LYON

SEPTEMBER 29 - OCTOBER 10, 2017

DELEGATION MEMBERS (BY FIRST NAME)
ADA OSOY . AMANDA HEINKE . DAVID MIEGERD . ERIC SHEN . LISA KARWOSKI
MARITZA ACOSTA . NANCY PFEFFER . RACHEL VERBOORT . ROBIN OWEN . TODD NGUYEN

Station construction site. They also visited the multi-modal connections at St. Pancras and King's Cross Stations. Still in London, WSP led a goods movement and logistics tour for the group with a site visit at a construction consolidation warehouse at CSB Logistics. WSP also gave a presentation on "Future Ready, intelligent digital rail, and active transportation." ARUP then welcomed the group and provided lively discussion on sustainability and the built environment, as well as the work they're conducting at present.

The group then travelled to the Netherlands via EuroStar high speed train, where they biked and walked all over Amsterdam Centre, toured the Port of Rotterdam, and witnessed the Maeslantkering—the world's largest storm surge barriers in Hoek van Holland. A small group then continued on to Lyon, France. There they received a briefing from GrandLyon (a county-level agency responsible for water, waste, urban transportation, and traffic operations) and SYTRAL (an equivalent to a regional-level transportation planning agency). They also enjoyed a comprehensive, zero-emissions, multi-modal transportation tour in Lyon Central. Overall, it was an extraordinary series of programs.

"There was so much to take in," adds Ms. Karwoski. "For example, I had no idea of the size of the port (Rotterdam). And all of the things we did in Amsterdam were at the top of my list, even the sea infrastructure and the flood prevention gates, particularly in terms of magnitude. The ones we saw were the length of the Eiffel Tower if it were laid on its side! They're really massive pieces of infrastructure. And it's timely as well, when you consider climate change and the recent storms we've had in Houston, Florida, and Puerto Rico. But that was a theme in Holland. They identify an issue and they deal with it. In the 1960s, they started having traffic congestion issues. So, they started a ride-sharing system—in the 60s! And look at their bike lanes. They take them very seriously and consider them a main mode of transportation, not an adjunct or an afterthought. When it comes to infrastructure, they're very forward thinking. They identify a problem, make a plan, and take action. It was really very impressive."

Todd Nguyen agrees. He, too, was struck by Dutch dynamic efficiency and action. But for him, London left more of an indelible impression.

"I've always enjoyed coming to London and now being able to come back as a transportation professional and connect with my firm's global presence was a great opportunity and experience. I'm grateful for the time I had there and look forward to sharing it back in Los Angeles and with others."

Nguyen was instrumental in connecting the group with WSP in London and arranging for tours and presentations. And he returned the favor there by giving a presentation on California high-speed rail. And





he found an eager audience, as the Europeans were keen on ideas and best practices on dealing with geologic and seismic issues when designing and constructing rail in California. But the greatest takeaway for all had to do with seeing work at home through “new eyes.”

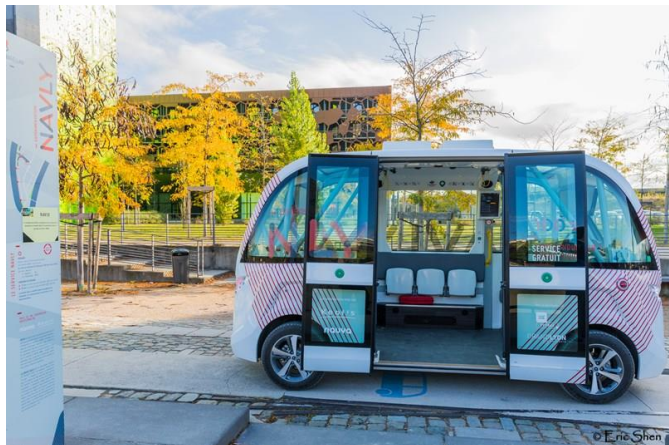
“It’s so interesting that instead of just accepting things, they question them there. I don’t think we question things enough here,” adds Ms. Karwoski. “For example, at the Port of Rotterdam, they were talking about natural gas shipping. And it turned out that much of the regulation surrounding natural gas shipping was a legacy from a time when there were

only five natural gas transport ships and Japan was wholly reliant on them. So, an overabundance of regulation protected those ships fiercely. But shipping natural gas is no more dangerous than shipping oil. Once they revealed that, people realized it was perfectly safe and started to relax regulation. I was also impressed with the way they approach safety during construction. It was very impressive. Both above and below ground, they seem to have much greater safety margins than we do. Also, I was very excited to see that the London Bridge subway construction project leader was a woman. And she was very, very impressive. She was very much in charge and was younger than a good portion of the construction staff. To see her in that role was very exciting. They’re definitely taking women in leadership roles very seriously. This was a huge project at a major station.”

Mr. Shen agrees. There were many examples of practices there that caused great reflection for situations at home.

“If you really think about what the US is all about, we’re far more diverse than almost all of the places we visited. We truly have very diverse technical people from all over the world making things happen here. But what is stopping us from making things happen at a rate compared to Europe and Asia? What is slowing us down?”

“Transportation policy truly affects the health of society. In the U.S., when we build infrastructure or implement a service involving federal funds, we are required by law to integrate community perspectives and mitigate negative impacts. The goal is to provide equitable and accessible mobility options for all. In Europe and Asia, those requirements are different, less prominent. But through the exchange of ideas, we seek best practices from our European counterparts to shorten and streamline our project development process. And that’s exactly what we took away from some of these meetings.”



Though poignant and important, that was by no means the only revelation Mr. Shen and the group experienced. In fact, two unconnected events helped inspire the group even more. Mr. Shen explains.

“In London, we learned the on-going European railway modernization calls out ‘Seamless Travel’ as its number one objective. That struck me really hard. I could not stop thinking about the idea of seamless travel throughout Europe. And then I got to experience it. When my flight from Amsterdam to Lyon was cancelled unexpectedly, I *never* felt that I was stranded. I could just take the train. It was that easy. While each of our host company/agency focuses on their specialty, no one loses the end-user’s perspective.



That should be the ultimate goal—to provide transportation means for all users. What’s missing in our work here is that we’re modal-centric. When we build infrastructure or initiate a transportation service, we are often constrained by funding, jurisdictional arrangements, and risk considerations. It is easier to stick with the status-quo than to innovate. Therefore, we tend to fall short on viewing the holistic aspect of the user’s experience. Most projects and programs that I was in charge of, I’ve always focused on achieving the specific goals and objectives within all constraints. When I saw that bullet point about seamless travel, it made me think about what needs to be more present in our process—that transportation is about people.

The users’ perspective needs to be part of the planning process.”

Ms. Karwoski experienced the same epiphany.

“The key is the overall redundancy in their system. Yes, your flight got cancelled. But there’s a high-speed rail connection that can get you where you need to go easily and quickly. And it’s reliable. Now, move that scenario here. If you’re going from Los Angeles to San Francisco and your flight gets cancelled, you either rebook a new flight whenever it’s available or you rent a car and drive a very long way. There’s no redundancy at all. There’s more on the East Coast, but there’s no high-speed rail, so it’s not really equivalent. And that’s the perspective we gained there. We also gained the understanding that we have the ability to challenge these things. We can make these changes here and improve things.”

Traveling is rarely about the destination. More often than not, it’s the journey itself that provides transformational experiences. Without question, the WTS-LA group that journeyed to Europe on a technical study tour experienced profound transformations—from technical specifics to profound conceptual epiphanies. But there was one truth that all of the tour participants stressed that they knew long before they boarded their first flight.

“It’s not very hard to plan a trip like this. It just takes one person to get things rolling,” adds Ms. Karwoski. “In our case, Eric started things off in terms of planning, but then it really became a group effort. And as he said, WTS-LA opens so many doors that the planning excitement only builds. So, we all recommend that everyone start thinking about traveling overseas on a tour like this. The benefits are invaluable and the lessons are indelible.”

So, where is the next destination?

“We are considering Asia in late 2018 or early 2019,” explains Mr. Shen. “Japan, Korea, China, and Vietnam are implementing many innovative transportation projects. There is also very strong interest in Australia and Panama. And as Lisa said, what we learned from this trip is that if someone is willing to start, we can plan out any trip and learn a lot of things that will enrich our profession when we return. But don’t wait for someone else to plan it. Just start.”