

Urban freight: a public / private comprehensive approach

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Urban freight is not a new topic on the agenda, neither for freight nor for urban issues specialists. Numerous enquiries, research projects, experiments were conducted in the 80' in several countries around the world, but few had then a substantial follow-up. Obstacles (technical, organisational, political) were too high to overcome, or the need for change was not yet strong enough.

To-day, concerns for a sustainable model of production and consumption are more powerful, while the cost of urban logistics is increasing, due to congestion, lengthening of pick-up and delivery operations, etc. Both politicians and professionals look for new solutions, to redesign existing methods.

The search for solutions is necessarily difficult because urban freight is a complex system. Its direct operation requires the efficient cooperation of many actors, in spite of their diversity. Freight transport takes place in a public space that is shared between several usages, where road traffic is no longer the only function to take into account and optimise. Logistics also requires static facilities (terminals, depots, warehouses, freight villages, etc.) the proper location of which in an urban area is more problematic, according to the land and real estate market. Finally, external effects of urban freight, positive and negative, concern all citizens and this topic is no longer a matter for specialists only.

In a significant way, a professional organisation in France has recently published a "White paper on urban logistics" showing that firms are conscious of the current difficult situation and of the need for innovation, but also that progress nowadays requires an original cooperation between enterprises and public authorities. The list of chapters of this paper shows the variety of elements of solution to be investigated and combined: among the 23 items that are listed, some concern public authorities considering general political choices as well as local traffic regulation. Some concern professional bodies (for a better training of drivers, for the exchange of best practices). Some insist on technical solution (adequate vehicles). Some address urban planning and land planning, to preserve existing logistics facilities and to support the building of new, innovative ones.

In the same time, a State administration published a document about "strategic issues for freight" in Paris metropolitan area. It also suggests a comprehensive approach, for the observation and diagnosis of the situation, for the elaboration of a coherent framework for logistics development at regional level, including transport infrastructure and services, traffic management, multimodal facilities and services, for the support of experiments and innovation, for the inclusion of freight delivery operations and premises into urban developments.

The situation will go on evolving in all countries, fostered by factors like the development of e-commerce and of new consumption habits, etc. The Japanese case of "takyubin" shows that urban freight opens new business opportunities, affecting the transport and logistics industry as well as political matters. Time has come for a provisional international synthesis of conceptions and notions, experiments, practical solutions and policies. The work is in progress...