Vertical urbanism and the unrealised hopes of mass helicopter travel

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Theoretical context

- Infrastructural archaeologies
- Fascination with the recent past - 1950s
- Counter-factual histories - ‘what if infra...’
- History of helicopters and need for city centre heliports contributing to ‘vertical urbanism’ agenda
- Lucy Hewitt “Cities have been explored in terms of distributions, concentrations, networks and sprawl [which] has established an epistemological and empirical bias towards geographies of the surface. Increasingly, however, there are now concerted attempts to interrogate the vertical, sectional and volumetric use of space.”
Scheduled inter-city service

Trial services for paying passengers:
• Liverpool - Cardiff, 1950-51
• Birmingham - London, 1951-52
• London: Waterloo - Heathrow shuttle in 1955-56
Planning for the helicopter

• How to insert new mode of mass transport into existing city fabric….? centrality of heliport
• Logic of the rooftop landing
• Commonsensical at first glance. Get above congestion on streets below
• Some antecedence of (wild) speculations from the 1930s for city centre airports
London leads the way

- People anticipate demand for helicopter service right into centre of London
- Through the 1950s multiple schemes advanced. We’ve noted at least 15 different sites put forward with ‘serious’ schemes
- These included heli-decks on the roofs of all mainline rail stations, landing platforms over bridges and wholesale markets,
- and, heliports in the Thames, mushroom-shaped skypports
Model of one-tenth of the proposed replacement for Covent Garden Market, which would be built over King’s Cross, London, railway sidings and surmounted by an 800ft × 1,200ft heliport. (Architects, C. W. Glover & Partners)
“Since the helicopter’s appeal depends on saving time, the heliport should be brought as close as possible to the main source and destination of a substantial proportion of the traffic. ...it should not be much more than a quarter of an hour from Grosvenor Sq, and ideally, between the West End and the City” (p.4)

“Three possible sites are suggested: Nine Elms goods yard, Cannon Street Station and St. Katharine Docks”
Plate IV  St. Katharine Docks - (A possible heliport viewed from the North)
Battersea pad actually built out in the river, 1959
What they had hoped for .... And what really happened with helicopter passenger services
Scheduled helicopter services fade in the face of four issues

- Noise
- Planning Blight
- Safety
- Economics
Helicopter hopes fades

- Safety - perception, reality
- Single-engined, complex aircraft
- Rare and spectacular failures weigh heavily on our risk judgements - aircraft accidents make headlines, car crashes do not
Scilly helicopter flight link ends

Daily flights by British International Helicopters (BIH) to the Isles of Scilly are ending.

The last flight at 17:30 GMT on Wednesday brings to a close 49 years of a helicopter link from Penzance to the Isles of Scilly.

BIH has cited rising costs and falling passenger numbers.

The islands, which have a population of 2,200, will have plane flights six days a week and a ferry, the Scillonian, which only runs in the summer.

Emergencies will be answered by the Royal Navy air sea rescue crews and the Cornwall air ambulance.

BIH is moving from its 15-acre site in Penzance at the end of October after selling the land to Sainsbury’s.
Conclusion

• City as a volume - seen clearly in helicopters and their failed history of development as urban transport in post-war period

• But is the air above going to be buzzing soon?

• Are we at cusp of major change, not for buses of sky, but actually the dream of autonomous personal flight on large scale? Routinised air taxis ...

• Software code can do the control safely, new lightweight materials, battery powered, much quieter
slide 1
- Right image, “Suggested Inter-City Helicopter Traffic Routes”, courtesy of Liverpool City Archives, ref. CE13162

slide 2

slide 3

slide 4
- “The Modern Way”. Image courtesy of Richard Brook taken from a brochure held The National Archives, ref. HLG51/111
- “First Airline Helicopter” Sikorsky advert, image available at http://c590298.r98.cf2.rackcdn.com/TM1_708.JPG

slide 5
• Slide 6
  - Left image, from “Kings Cross airport scheme”, *The Builder*, 25 December 1931, p. 1046

• Slide 7
  - Design for a city centre heliport in Manchester by J.J. Spyra, in *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Nov. 1951, p. 8

• Slide 8
  - Sketch of heliport on Victoria Station, Manchester, 1956. Image courtesy of Manchester City Archives, ref. GB127.M723/81

• Slide 9
  - Sketch of the Paradise Street / Strand development and heliport, Liverpool. Image courtesy of Liverpool City Archives, ref. 352 ENG/2/12031

• Slide 11

• Slide 12

• Slide 13
• Slide 14

• Slide 15
  - Image courtesy of The National Archives, ref. BT247/240

• Slide 16
  - Photograph of Westland heliport, 1959, taken from http://pictures.historicimages.net/pictures/_5/4229/4228143.jpg
  - “Westland opens the WAY” advert image courtesy of Dave Robinson, www.content-delivery.co.uk/aviation/airfields/acads/1959/WestlandHeliport.html

• Slide 17
  - Right map from “British Airways helicopters - 30 years old”, *Flight International*, 13 August 1977, p. 494

• Slide 18
  - Left image, author scan of the *Noise: Final Report*, 1963
  - Right image from “Hypothetical helicopter landing ground” image taken from Hough H T, 1955, “The design of helicopter operating sites for passenger services”, *The Surveyor and Municipal and County Engineer*, 24 December, p. 1251
• Slide 19
  - Top right photograph posted on this forum, www.caliberforumz.com/showthread.php?37188-Idlewild
  - Bottom right newspaper article image posted on this forum, www.caliberforumz.com/showthread.php?37188-Idlewild

• Slide 20

• Slide 21
  - Author’s postcard of the Penzance heliport