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For urban explorers, the Underground revolution is a bitter blow

By Bradley Garrett

We hope the 24-hour Tube will end up a bit lawless, writes Bradley Garrett



When Boris Johnson announced on Thursday that London will start running a weekend 24-hour Tube service in 2015, I found myself nodding approvingly. Indeed, as a geographer, I felt the city's mayor – never known to miss a chance for self-promotion – was understating the social impact, in particular the boost to London's "vibrant night-time economy". The capital has never truly been an all-day city like, say, New York, with its 24-hour underground service. The upgrade will trigger big changes in planning, licensing and labour in a city that aspires to compete globally.

Like many who have suffered the grim slog home after a night out in London, I was also relieved. I have spent too many shivering hours at bus stops after night-time adventures. And, as anyone who has played this wee-hours waiting game knows, sometimes the only thing worse is actually getting on the night bus and feeling the full brunt of London's collective drunken rage at being marooned all over town.

But the urban explorer in me is bitter about the loss of one of our favourite nocturnal playgrounds. Urban explorers are seekers of the hidden city. We explore derelict buildings, subterranean tunnel stems and under-construction skyscrapers – all without permission. People who disregard "no trespassing" signs and tend to have a relatively libertarian attitude towards rules. Over the years, we have spent a lot of time running around in the Tube after hours, photographing junctions and abandoned stations. The Tube is always fascinating: both for its history as the world's first metro system; and second for its beauty, the black walls and gleaming rails snaking through twisting tunnels.

Because while most travellers think of the Tube as "closed" once the last train speeds away from the platform, this is when the system springs into its second life. The "fluffers" cleaning dust off rails and "trackies" doing inspections take over, along with graffiti writers in disposable rubber gloves painting trains in yards and urban explorers wearing head torches, mapping the system; while the British Transport Police monitor it all, trying to catch all the trespassers until the first trains fire up again.

It is an underground game of cat and mouse that has been played for years, and will not be the same once the 24-hour trains start running. The system will feel more like the New York Metro, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Tube tickets cost almost twice those in New York – despite the fact that the last London train has left before 2am and the Metro carries 1.7m more people every week. A large part of this comes down to the cost of "security".

One look at staff loitering beside barriers, chatting with colleagues with glazed looks in their eyes, and it is clear that a lot of the money travellers pay is hoovered up by the combative Rail Maritime and Transport union to protect jobs that do not recoup their own costs. Urban explorers have proved time and again that most security on the Underground is a façade – and, in any case, the majority of Londoners are too polite to hop barriers.

Since the government transferred control of the Tube to a public-private partnership with Transport for London in 1993, the primary function of the system has shifted from its original mandate of serving public need. The main goal today seems to be increasing private profits for the corporation, seen in the unrelenting escalation of ticket prices at the expense of travellers to whom it is essential for work and access to the cultural events on which the mayor hopes to capitalise.

Yet job cuts, 750 of which were announced on Friday alongside the extra hours, need not be a bad thing, especially if as promised they pay for much-needed upgrades such as the 24-hour service – or even a cut in fares, to bring them more into line with other great cities. The question, however, is why ticket office jobs rather than barrier-lingers are going. A likely answer: the ticket office is the only place in the station to obtain a refund when, for instance, you touch in with your Oyster card to get to the platform, see your train is delayed, exit minutes later and find you have been charged the full fare of almost £8 for doing so.

The changes will transform the Tube indelibly. I would like to think it will feel more like New York or Paris, where a friend of mine would jump down on to the tracks when he got bored waiting for trams that never came, explaining that walking the tunnel home would

be faster. Since he never paid for a ticket anyway, he lost nothing.

In other words, London's system might end up a bit lawless, a bit loose, but working for the public benefit and open to others besides urban explorers willing to risk electrocution, arrest and oncoming trains in the pre-dawn hours.

But, alas, this looks more like another opportunity to increase profit margins at the expense of Londoners who fork out the gross domestic product of a small country every day to keep it all running. I, for one, look forward to jumping the barriers on the Piccadilly line at 3am in 2015 and riding for free – one of the only forms of mild-mannered protest that remains available to us.

The writer is the author of 'Explore Everything: Place Hacking the City' and a researcher in geography at the University of Oxford

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