

Bike paths in abandoned tube tunnels: is the London Underline serious?

Gensler's proposal to turn disused underground tunnels into arteries for bikes and pedestrians looks like fun. As a sober response to congestion, it's ridiculous



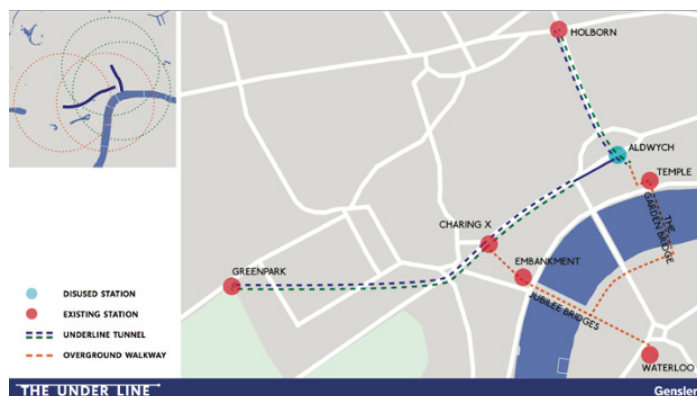
Pie in the earth ... a rendering of the proposal for the London Underline. Photograph: Gensler

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Could the answer to London's congestion be a network of subterranean cycleways? A new project from design firm Gensler suggests that maybe - just maybe - it might. Dubbed the London Underline, the project would turn London's abandoned tube tunnels into living streets beneath the city. While there's still a speculative, utopian look to the proposals - renderings showing the tunnels packed with youthful Londoners resemble an updated version of Logan's Run - the London Underline is being taken seriously enough in some quarters. Earlier this week, it won the Best Conceptual Project gong at the London Planning awards.

The project would use dual tunnels in the Underground's defunct stretches to create parallel pedestrian paths and cycle ways, also lined with cafes and click-and-collect points for online shopping. To help make the tunnels more financially viable, each path could be surfaced with kinetic paving, which uses footfall and the friction created by bike tyres to generate electricity. The tunnels would not need to be connected directly to ground level. They would be accessed via tube stations, while Boris bikes for hire would lurk at the mouth of each stretch.



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] a vast network of unused tunnels slithering beneath its surface. The truth is that it doesn't really - but there are some interesting subterranean stretches here and there that are currently lying dark and sullen. Perhaps the key unused tunnel is the defunct branch of the Piccadilly Line that runs beneath Kingsway, from Holborn to long abandoned Aldwych station. There's an even longer artery from Green Park to Charing Cross, along what was the final leg of the Jubilee Line before its eastern extension opened in 1999.

While these are the only two stretches Gensler has a serious eye on, there are some other possibilities elsewhere. Stretches of vacant tunnel remain at Goodge Street and Stockwell, for example, remnants of a bizarre second world war plan to connect deep bomb shelters into an express connection running parallel with the Northern Line. Saying that these scattered stretches could create "the first city-wide network of its kind" pushes credulity, but at least as Gensler's co-director Ian Mulcahey frames it, opening the Underline for business needn't necessarily be a major funding drain:

The idea of an Emirates Underline or an O2 Underground snaking beneath London might not be everyone's dream of London's bright future, but if the project created some quirky new spaces that generate revenue for TfL, who's to complain if somebody wants to at least think the concept through?

The snag is that Gensler is also presenting the plan as a sober response to London's congestion. On their hypothetical maps, they've suggested ways the Underline could connect up to other car-free routes. They've linked it, for example, to surface pedestrian walkways crossing the Thames, one at Jubilee Bridge and the other across the Garden Bridge ... across which it will be forbidden to cycle.

Personally, if I were trying to find a congestion-free way to reach the South Bank from Bloomsbury, I wouldn't rent a Boris bike at platform level in Holborn station, cycle it five-odd minutes down a tunnel, dock it again and take a lift up to ground level, then rent another Boris bike only to be forced to wheel it across a bridge. It might look like fun for some, but the Underline is about as practical a way of clearing the roads as buying every Londoner their own miniature zeppelin.