

Making the City: The Contested Shaping of Urban Life through Transit Investments

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Mike Bergman (2021). *Seattle's Streetcar Era: An Illustrated History, 1884-1941*. Pullman: University of Washington Press, pp. 111 + xii, notes, sources, index, \$40.00 hardcover.

Brian Doucet and Michael Doucet (2022). *Streetcars and the Shifting Geographies of Toronto: A Visual Analysis of Change*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 264 + xv, notes, index, \$49.95 paper, \$49.95 ebook.

Blair L. M. Kelley (2010). *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp. xii, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$59.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Patrick T. Reardon (2021). *The Loop: The "L" Tracks That Shaped and Saved Chicago*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 235 + xii pp., notes, bibliography, index, \$26.95 paper.

James Wolfinger (2016). *Running the Rails: Capital and Labor in the Philadelphia Transit Industry*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 292 + x pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$45.00 cloth.

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The transportation system allows us to travel between home, work, and recreation. But it is also a mechanism for influencing city design. The authors under review here force us to contend with the historical links between transportation infrastructure and the built environment. They show that, more than just providing mobility, transit systems co-create the communities through which they run. By increasing access to neighborhoods and connecting to business districts, they provided the means by which cities like Chicago and Seattle grew. And transportation investments affected more than just urban form; they also formed the physical basis for mass movements, bringing people together to fight for equal rights and for better labor conditions.

These authors invite us to think about how cities today continue to be influenced by historical choices related to infrastructure. Although many of the transit lines that served communities throughout North America have been demolished, their presence remains in the more densely packed buildings that still line their routes, in still-strong public-sector labor movements, and in campaigns for racially just access to opportunity through mobility. Their tracks may have been ripped out, but the presence of many transit lines persists.

These authors also extend the discussion of urban history beyond buildings and land uses and onto the streetcars and elevated trains that have connected places like Philadelphia and Toronto for decades. Understanding how these transportation systems originated, and examining their

influence on the way people organize and live in their communities, helps us further explore how cities evolved.

Shaping the City's Built Form

Perhaps Chicago is the U.S. city whose public transportation infrastructure is most unavoidable. While New York and Washington have largely hidden their metro systems underground in subways, in Chicago's downtown, the elevated Loop is a dominant feature. When trains pass, it is loud; it is visible from blocks away; and it throws shadows onto dozens of blocks. In *The Loop*, Patrick T. Reardon takes us on a whirlwind tour of how this unique example of transportation infrastructure came into being—and explains why the downtown and the transit link that serves it have the same name.

A major chunk of Reardon's narrative focuses on the story of Charles Tyson Yerkes, a Philadelphian who had substantial influence in the state legislature and control of many of the city's streetcar and cable car lines. Noting the congestion of streetcars downtown as well as the stub-end terminals of three elevated railroads, none of which served the true center of the city, Yerkes jumped on the opportunity to provide an alternative: the Union Elevated Railroad Company. Yerkes' behind-the-scenes machinations to get his project built, requiring the signatures of the majority of affected property owners, are the highlight of the book. It is a thrilling examination of how a corporate actor navigated the intricacies of the regulatory system to build a major piece of public infrastructure.

But perhaps Reardon's most important contribution is his demonstration of the link between the (transit) Loop as infrastructure and the Loop (neighborhood) as the center of the Chicago economy and society. Although Chicago has grown up and out since the Loop was completed (the city even added two subway lines in the years since), its downtown remains incredibly densely packed with jobs, retail, restaurants, and, as of the past few decades, residents. This concentration of people and commerce was enabled by what Reardon describes as a "magic circle" where the financial performance of buildings "benefited from being cheek-to-jowl with many other businesses, as well as being in the middle of the thick pedestrian streams of shoppers, office workers, and tourists" (p. 137).

Ultimately, Reardon claims, the improved access by public transportation to downtown made possible by the Loop "was about making money" (p. 139). This, in turn, allowed Chicago to maintain a much healthier central city than its Midwestern peers like Detroit, Indianapolis, and St. Louis, none of which had the benefit of excellent rapid transit heading between neighborhoods and downtowns. Despite playing this role as an economic motivator, the Loop faced several existential challenges over the decades. It came close to demolition several times, with some policymakers hoping to replace it with more subway lines. These alternative plans were eventually scuttled in 1979 when Mayor Jane Byrne decided to keep the Loop operating.

To Reardon, this choice helped "save" Chicago. Maintaining the city's historical transit system has ensured that most people riding transit end up—at least during some portion of their day—downtown. Whether this has actually resulted in the city's economic health improving is open to debate. For example, why wouldn't a subway system that replaced the Loop have been just as effective in bringing people downtown? It certainly would have been a lot quieter—and it would have made several of the shadow-covered streets in the area more appealing. Nonetheless, one of Chicago's best-known features is its system of elevated trains, including the Loop; were this particular element of the city's built environment to be eliminated, Chicago would look and feel quite differently than it does today.

Streetcars and the Shifting Geographies of Toronto by son-father pair Brian and Michael Doucet explores transit from a related dimension: that of its visual impacts on the city that surrounds it. The Doucets' point of view here is unique. Taking advantage of a visual archive of

hundreds of photographs of Toronto from the 1960s through 2020, they document how that city has evolved around the streetcar lines. The authors offer dozens of delightful comparisons, showing how intersections have changed—or not changed at all.

The Doucets take a historiographical perspective in analyzing variation over time, pointing to the streetcar as a companion, and perhaps sometimes a motivator, of urban transformations. Using their visual evidence, they illustrate how once working-class and industrialized neighborhoods have transitioned into consumption-focused, sometimes gentrified spaces. Although Doucet and Doucet do not claim to test the causal connections between streetcar availability and those trends, they provide ample evidence to suggest that there is a link.

Indeed, one interesting contribution of the book is its repeated comparisons between the “streetcar city”—the parts of Toronto served by the system at its maximum extent, in 1928—and the “automobile city,” the rest of the metropolis. They show that, though the two areas now have similar rates of transit ridership, their characteristics have evolved in considerably different ways as Toronto has grown. Notably, the streetcar city has become increasingly wealthy, replacing its former factory worker residents with white-collar denizens and experiencing the arrival of upscale boutiques and cafes. The automobile city, on the contrary, was originally a site of upward mobility for suburbanizing largely white residents, but now has become the home of a less wealthy, and far more diverse, populace, thanks to decades of in-migration from around the world.

The transitions Doucet and Doucet describe raise questions for Toronto that they are not fully able to answer. Does streetcar service—even streetcar service that has now been discontinued—result in gentrification? Or are there other factors at play in Toronto’s unique history, such as its rapid growth in financial services over the past few decades, that have encouraged growth in the city core, which happens to be where streetcars run?

The Doucets’ tome focuses on a city where streetcars remain a dominant mode of transportation. Their photographs reveal a city where transit remains essential, the lifeblood of vibrant neighborhoods. The contrast with the down-and-out characteristics of many inner-city U.S. communities, where streetcars once ran but where service was largely eliminated by the 1960s, cannot be starker.

Despite the difficulties gentrification may present to Toronto, as well as the challenges the city continues to face in expanding its transit network, *Streetcars* ultimately presents the story of a place whose vitality has been buttressed by the maintenance of excellent transit service; Toronto now has the largest streetcar or light rail network in North America. Unlike many U.S. cities that slowly abandoned their transit systems, here we find a community whose wealth and growth have been enabled by it.

Mike Bergman’s *Seattle’s Streetcar Era* also explores the role of this transportation technology in shaping the urban environment, though with a greater emphasis on the specific history of the transit system. Through extensive photographic documentation and mapping, plus profiles of several of the major actors involved in shaping the local streetcar industry, he shows how the city grew up around its transit network. This investigation of Seattle takes us on a tour of that city’s particular transit history during the pre-World War II period, in which the streetcar system dominated life.

Rather than examining more exhaustively documented transit histories of cities like New Orleans or San Francisco, Bergman focuses on a city whose transit history is comparatively unknown. Americans may not know it, but streetcars were omnipresent in virtually every U.S. city between the early 1900s and 1930s.¹ Even cable car systems operated in many cities, including Seattle! Streetcar ridership in the 1920s across the United States was far higher than national bus ridership currently—despite the country’s population now being three times as large.² Bergman thus invites us to view what it was like in what might be understood as a typical U.S. city.

Seattle's Streetcar Era tells the story of the public sector taking leadership of transit planning. After a boom in private investments in street railways in the 1890s, local advocates increasingly pushed for municipal control of the system, arguing that private corporations were leveraging the streetcar network as a pseudo-monopoly and making unfair profits from its riders. Beginning in 1912, the city began to invest in streetcar lines of its own, starting with a route into the Queen Anne Hill neighborhood. As private operators increasingly struggled to make ends meet during that decade, members of the city council and Mayor Ole Hanson jumped at the opportunity to purchase the Puget Sound Traction, Light and Power Company's lines, and the city took possession of the full operation in 1919 through the Seattle Municipal Railway.

In theory, municipal ownership—combined with support from the public purse—could have meant a growing and effective streetcar system. But the network jumped from financial crisis to financial crisis, advancing a series of plans to resolve its problems, none of which ensured the long-term stability of the system. Bergman shows how Seattle gradually moved to bus operations, hoping they would save it money. The last streetcar of this era ran through the city in the early 1940s.

Bergman's focus on Seattle is intriguing given the city's current transit expansion program, arguably the largest in the United States. Thanks to three regional ballot measures that increased taxes, the city and its suburbs are currently creating a network of light rail lines that will eventually span 116 miles from Everett in the north to Tacoma in the south. Most of the new network—unlike Seattle's prior streetcar system—will be either built on an elevated alignment or tunneled underground; in other words, it will not face the challenges of competing car traffic that the original streetcar system endured. (Seattle did have a short, elevated streetcar line, completed in 1919, connecting downtown with West Seattle.)

Seattle's new transit plans are in this way quite different from the previous system. Both the streetcar's private operators and its later public owners failed to develop a concrete plan to guarantee speedy movement of the system through downtown. As a result, the streetcars were never able to adequately compete with private cars. People were simply able to get around a lot more easily by driving. In *The Great American Transit Disaster*, Nicholas Dagen Bloom argues that places that made the choice to definitively improve their transit systems through grade separation—cities like Boston and San Francisco, which built tunnels for their former surface streetcars—were better positioned to keep riders using their local transit networks.³ Cities like Detroit, Bloom argues, did not. Seattle may offer another cautionary tale in that regard.

Nonetheless, the contrast between the history of streetcar development in Seattle and Toronto raises questions about this hypothesis, since Toronto never grade-separated its streetcar system and yet its transit network remained popular. Perhaps Toronto's decision beginning in the 1950s to simultaneously invest in a complementary subway network, which has become one of the most popular in North America, is the key difference here. Seattle, ironically, did have a plan in the late 1960s and early 1970s to build a large transit system that would have been supported by federal matching grants.⁴ That "Forward Thrust" initiative, however, lost at the ballot box in 1968 and 1970, resulting in funds being redirected to Atlanta for its MARTA rail system. Meanwhile, Seattle voters simultaneously approved tens of millions of dollars for a sports stadium and a set of arterial highways.

The present-day, large-scale transit expansion program in Seattle, then, is a shift from the past and an opportunity for the city to move beyond its failures to keep effective rail-based public transportation services going after World War II. It may also offer a mechanism for the city to reorient its approach to development such that its future growth can be linked to its transit stations.⁵ In so doing, Seattle may be adopting what King and Fischer describe as a turn toward strategic spatial planning, leveraging transportation investments as a means to induce new construction.⁶

Who Are Public Services for? Labor and Racial Contestation over Public Transportation

The histories of transit investment in Chicago, Seattle, and Toronto outlined by Reardon, Bergman, and the Doucets, touch on race and class, but do not wade into those issues deeply. Yet, transit has been deeply touched by those demographic matters. White households in the United States are far more likely to own a car than Black, Hispanic, or Asian households.⁷ And people with low incomes are far more likely to use public transportation than people with middle or high salaries.⁸

Ironically, however, people of color have had to fight for access to transit. The Montgomery bus boycotts—set off by Rosa Parks' unwillingness to move to the back of the bus in 1955—is undoubtedly the most famous of these efforts. But the campaigns of Black Americans to advance equality in public transportation started many decades before, as Blair L. M. Kelley describes in *Right to Ride*. Kelley's fascinating contribution investigates how Black residents of southern cities fought against the segregation of transportation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

At the height of the Jim Crow period, rights for Black people in much of the United States were dramatically curtailed. On intercity trains, Black passengers were often forced to sit in dilapidated carriages apart from white people, sometimes being refused first-class seats even when they had already paid the appropriate ticket price. On many streetcar systems, Black residents were required to stand on outer-facing platforms, no matter the weather. Notes Kelley, "segregation was not only a daily inconvenience and public humiliation but also part of a focused attack on the citizenship of all black southerners" (p. 10).

But Kelley shows how Black people across the south fought these rules, protesting for their rights to equal citizenship, sometimes through boycotts of the streetcar systems that then dominated travel in urban areas. They capitalized on their collective organizations, from churches to business enterprises, to build support. Ultimately, these boycotts threatened the economic viability of a number of streetcar systems. But Kelley shows that this mass action was ultimately unsuccessful in altering the racist status quo policies, in part because class division weakened the ability of protestors to keep their actions going.

Kelley notes that the physical segregation passengers experienced on trains and streetcars often did not extend to workers; dating back into the 1800s, in fact, many railroad employees were Black, such as the Pullman Porters. They were, however, often poorly treated and undermined, never allowed to become conductors, for example. This is of course no longer the case, in part because of the presence of strong transportation unions. Thanks to its position at the intersection of local government and the transportation industry,⁹ transit agency workers are now heavily unionized, with an estimated 74 percent of U.S. transit workers represented by the two largest unions.¹⁰ But the story of the collective labor action of U.S. transit workers has been little discussed.

In *Running the Rails*, James Wolfinger delves into the history of transit unionization in Philadelphia, one of the nation's great public transportation cities. Wolfinger's approach focuses on the links between the rise of labor in that city and the role of transit in providing connectivity for the populace. He convincingly demonstrates that concerns about street safety encouraged public support for better labor conditions at the local transit agency. And he shows the links between the growth of labor and first a tightening of municipal regulations over private transit companies and then municipal ownership of the system.

One particularly interesting story Wolfinger describes is the protest of Black residents in the early 1940s against the Philadelphia Transportation Company, which discriminated against them in hiring. Here, the fight of people of color to benefit from the transit system extended not just to riders, but also to the system's workers. While Black people were granted the right to work as mechanics and porters, they were denied the chance to become conductors or drivers.

Black workers were allowed to join agency unions. But the system's major unions, including the Amalgamated and the Teamsters, both affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), reinforced the transit agency's ban on Black drivers and blocked promotions. Seeking change, Black workers collaborated hand-in-hand with organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They also received coverage from the Black press, which framed the discrimination Black workers experienced within the larger claims that the United States' war effort was designed to protect freedom, democracy, and equality—from which many Black workers were excluded.

Protests by Black residents against the transit agency's working conditions coincided with the rise of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which was linked with the Communist Party and affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The TWU was far more sympathetic toward the needs of Black workers. But as Wolfinger recounts it, the other unions fought back against its rise and used race-baiting and a Red Scare campaign as strategies to reaffirm the previous racist labor conditions. Even so, in the 1944 representation elections, the TWU won. That victory, however, increased discontent among white workers and many conducted a "hate strike" that summer to avoid having to work with Black colleagues. But Wolfinger argues that anti-Black racism among company workers declined after TWU successfully negotiated large wage increases for all.

Beyond this exploration of the connections between labor activity and racism, Wolfinger's history offers new insight about the links between public service provision and unionization. His work provides one explanation for why unionization is more common in the public sector than in other parts of the economy. Indeed, Wolfinger suggests that it may be more feasible to generate support for pro-labor outcomes when the workers are engaged in an activity that is extremely public: working the railroad.

Transit's Enduring Place in the Urban Environment

All of the authors recount historical periods of progress, though that progress was, of course, contested. In Chicago, Seattle, and Toronto, new urban growth tracked the presence of transit lines, leveraging the mobility offered by new systems as a mechanism to spur new or denser construction on the edges of rapidly growing metropolises. In Philadelphia, public transportation played a key role in expanding organized labor's position, building on the public's personal familiarity of the difficult conditions faced by transit workers. And across the South, Black citizens campaigned to ensure they, too, were able to take advantage of the benefits public transportation could provide, working together to ensure that the ability to get around was not a privilege reserved for a select few. In every case, the route ahead was enabled through the mass transit mobility.

These authors also consider the growing role of the public sector, which cannot be separated from the story of transit in North America. Most of the transit infrastructure described was constructed by private companies. But the authors explain the ways by which public protests about inadequate service, declining private-sector profits, and a growing interest in local management of the street combined to encourage a different approach. In Chicago, Seattle, and Toronto, local governments first strengthened their regulations over transit providers before eventually purchasing their systems. This move was to some degree the product of a desperation to continue providing service, to some degree a product of genuine support for improved transit that many residents and elected officials believed would only be possible under public management.

In retrospect, it is difficult not to notice the rather shrunken role of public transportation in most cities across North America today. Seattle's initial foray into public management of the streetcar system integrated several line expansions, including some with truly improved service. But that commitment was short-lived. As noted, Seattle converted its streetcar lines to bus

operations by World War II. Barely a decade after the public Chicago Transit Authority went into operation, it closed several of its elevated lines. At the same time, every city in North America—thanks in no small part to a massive infusion of funds from state and national governments—dramatically expanded its highway network, encouraging people out of the train and bus and into private automobiles. The path toward municipal ownership of transit systems was thus associated with long-term decline.

Now, only a small share of residents in either Canada or the United States use transit to travel; it is difficult to believe that this mode of transportation can serve as a unifying force into the future either in shaping the development of our metropolitan areas or in promoting mass movements for positive social reform. Does the optimism in the fight for change cataloged by these authors—whether in terms of the potential for new construction, improved labor rights, or racial equality—still have the physical infrastructure in which to operate? Does the increased anonymization of people in their privately operated automobiles and single-family homes mean that the societal movements these stories tell would be difficult to replicate in our era?

There is room for optimism. Many cities have renewed their interest in expanding their transit systems, Seattle and Toronto among the most prominent on that front. Their elected leaders and their respective publics have recognized the value of public transportation as a tool to encourage their future development. In Philadelphia, transit workers—still mostly under the banner of the TWU—remain strong enough to actively push for better working conditions.¹¹ And across the nation, advocates for social justice have catalyzed an energetic campaign for “fair fares” designed to ensure that everyone can afford to ride public transportation.¹² Perhaps transit systems, after all, still have an important role to play.

Notes

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