
Transport of Delight: The Mythical Conception of Rail Transit in Los Angeles.

By Jonathan Richmond. Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2005.
Pp. xix+498. \$49.95.

“This book is a study about the failure of thought and its causes,” writes Jonathan Richmond in his introduction to *Transport of Delight*. “It starts with a bizarre decision: to construct a comprehensive rail passenger system in an environment where it appears incapable of providing real benefits.” Richmond analyzes the decision to redeploy rail-borne public transit in a metropolitan area infamous for its congestion, smog, and sprawl, and, most importantly, where he believes that by any rational measure buses provide a superior mode of transit. He finds the explanation for this decision in the power of myth and symbol, image and metaphor, citing extensively from linguistic experts such as Susan Langer, George Lakoff, and Martin Foss—and on his first page quoting a passage from Russell Ackoff’s *The Art of Problem Solving*: “We usually try to reduce complex situations to what appear to be one or more simple solvable problems . . . sometimes referred to as ‘cutting the problem down to size.’ In so doing we often reduce our chances of finding a creative solution to the original problem.” This is exactly what Richmond believes happened in Los Angeles beginning in the 1980s.

Richmond has done his homework. His book is based in part on more than two hundred interviews with public officials. He presents a history of Henry Huntington’s Pacific Electric, the storied Red Car system that once operated 1,100 miles of track radiating in all directions from Los Angeles. He evaluates the case for modern light rail and the forecasting methodology used to predict passenger demand for the first route planned for the Los Angeles area, the Blue Line connecting with the region’s second-largest city, Long Beach. He reports that ridership forecasts were initially inflated. Then, just before the line opened, they were deflated in order to make the actual numbers look good.

Transport of Delight devotes considerable attention to the political decision-making process that led to passage of Proposition A, the local half-cent tax that funded the return of electric railways, a process ultimately dependent on “availability of a set of symbols, images, and metaphors which come together coherently to create a myth that acts with the power of truth” (p. 6). The human body’s circulation system, for example, became a powerful metaphor for transit planners. Likewise valuable was the perception among civic leaders that electric trains were “sexier” than buses, a perception Richmond addresses at length in a section titled “The Train as Symbol of Community Pride: Penis Envy in Los Angeles.”

Richmond notes the power of the mental image that remained after the last Red Cars disappeared in 1961, an image that gave rise to the notion that

the demise of a superior mode of transit was the result of a conspiracy in which General Motors played a key role. The first local railway started running between the harbor and downtown Los Angeles in 1869, the last Red Car line operated along this same corridor, and, thirty years after service ended on that line, rail-borne transit was reborn in the form of the Blue Line. This, Richmond feels certain, was a big mistake. In his view, buses are a superior mode of transit for Los Angeles, particularly in terms of their cost-effectiveness; just about everything involving an electric railway is vastly more expensive than rubber tire on paved roadway.

The Blue Line was brought into existence not on the basis of any rational assessment of available choices, but to reward political acumen, particularly that of County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn (now deceased, though his son became mayor of Los Angeles), through whose Fourth District was routed not only the Blue Line but also two other new electric rail lines—all this in the wake of devastating riots in South Central Los Angeles and repeated recommendations that improved transit would have beneficial social consequences.

The problem was “cut down to size,” yes, but Richmond is certain that it was the wrong size. Whatever one may happen to think about the virtues of different modes of urban transit, *Transport of Delight* presents an excellent case study in the power of myth, and it provides us with a compelling picture of a place where culture and technology blend seamlessly.

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Suburbanizing the Masses: Public Transport and Urban Development in Historical Perspective.

Edited by Colin Divall and Winstan Bond. Aldershot, Hants., and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003. Pp. xvi+319. \$99.95.

The impact of streetcars on urban form is thought to be well understood, at least in the United States. After 1888 the low cost and relatively high speed of streetcar technology precipitated a middle-class migration from center cities to single-family homes in surrounding countryside. The newly suburbanized middle classes remained tethered by streetcar lines to the central areas they left behind, which quickly transformed into shopping, office, and entertainment districts. Streetcars were too expensive for the working classes, however, who continued to live in dense tenements within walking distance of factories. Popularized by Sam Bass Warner’s histories of street railway development in Boston and Philadelphia, this view remains central to the curriculum of urban transit evolution in the United States.