

UC Berkeley

Berkeley Planning Journal

Title

The Transit Metropolis: A Global Inquiry by Robert Cervero

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1wh7z9zr>

Journal

Berkeley Planning Journal, 14(1)

Author

Wheeler, Stephen M.

Publication Date

2000

DOI

10.5070/BP314112990

Copyright Information

Copyright 2000 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

The Transit Metropolis: A Global Inquiry

Cervero, Robert. 1998. Washington, D.C.:
Island Press, \$54.

Stephen M. Wheeler

The recent upsurge of interest in metropolitan regionalism—catalyzed by concerns about growth management, ecological sustainability, and suburban-central city equity disparities and found in the writings of Peter Calthorpe, Anthony Downs, Myron Orfield, Douglas Porter, and David Rusk—often focuses on the question of how planners can help create a more compact, transit-oriented metropolis. To many this seems to set an impossible goal. Indeed, a few observers such as Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson even argue that compact development is not necessary, believing that plenty of land and resources exist for suburban development and that traffic and efficiency problems are benign. A much larger number of planners believe that suburban sprawl does jeopardize equity, environmental, and even economic objectives, but have little hope of changing current land use and transportation patterns anytime soon.

In *The Transit Metropolis*, Robert Cervero addresses both sets of issues, laying out the case that metropolitan form does matter, and then showing through detailed case studies that it is in fact possible for urban regions to achieve high levels of transit ridership while restraining sprawl and creating livable communities. This work is particularly significant because unlike much academic literature it addresses the question of how things could be different in the future.

Cervero starts by laying out the case for the transit metropolis, arguing that this is an essential “paradigm for sustainable regional development.” He describes the spectrum of public transportation technologies, from small, flexible paratransit services to highly elaborate rail systems. Next he briefly analyzes economic, technological, spatial, social, and institutional factors which have led to the decline of public transit in most cities, and resulting problems. These include traffic congestion, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, energy consumption, loss of open space, and social inequities resulting from the spatial isolation of certain segments of society. The author’s analysis takes the form of an authoritative synthesis of existing literature.

The book’s third chapter investigates demand side and supply side forces affecting automobile use, as well as land use strategies for reducing driving. Cervero illustrates the role of these factors in shaping

urban development through brief descriptions of transportation and land use planning in Toronto and the San Francisco Bay Area. The former metropolitan area successfully pursued transit-oriented development beginning in the 1950s, and shows how strong land use planning, powerful regional institutions, and fortuitous circumstances can help create a highly livable urban area. However, in recent decades Toronto's regional institutions have lost power, and sprawl has advanced rapidly. For its part, the Bay Area has seen little development around BART stations, and shows how leaving development entirely to market forces fails to produce a transit-oriented metropolis.

The bulk of the book, however, is devoted to more extensive case studies of twelve metropolitan areas from around the world. The author has divided these into four categories: adaptive cities, adaptive transit regions, strong core cities, and hybrids. Adaptive cities are ones in which urban growth has been guided by transit, such as Stockholm, Copenhagen, Tokyo, and Singapore. In these regions strong governmental or private sector planning has shaped the metropolitan footprint around the transit system, producing extremely high ridership levels as well as high levels of pedestrian activity and cycling.

In contrast, adaptive transit regions are places in which the transit systems have been adapted to existing urban form, often very creatively. Examples include Karlsruhe, Germany, where special dual-voltage streetcars were developed to take advantage of existing freight rail tracks; Adelaide, Australia, which has developed a pioneering track-guided bus system; and Mexico City, where enormous numbers of entrepreneurial small-vehicle operators transport millions of residents each day. In strong core cities authorities have successfully tied transit to central city revitalization efforts. Examples include Zurich and Melbourne. Lastly, hybrid cities such as Munich, Ottawa, and Curitiba have fit both transit to the city and the city to transit.

Cervero's case studies are fascinating in that they give a sense of the variety of possible regional transportation and land use arrangements. Along the way he disproves several common assumptions made by transit advocates. For example, although fixed rail systems are usually thought to promote transit-oriented development much more than buses, the examples of Ottawa, Curitiba, and Adelaide show that cheaper bus systems can attract development just as well if the buses travel apart from streets on fixed guideways. These systems then provide greater flexibility because the buses can eventually leave the guideways to ply feeder routes in local communities. Also, although it is often assumed that the public sector must take the lead in constructing expensive rail transit systems in the modern era, the example of Tokyo shows that both rail and station infrastructure can be built entirely by the private sector if it is allowed to benefit from land development around stations.

In *The Transit Metropolis*, Cervero draws many useful lessons

from comparison of his case studies. These include the importance of well-articulated visions of the future, the need for efficient metropolitan institutions engaged in pro-active planning, the value of small cumulative steps, and the need to design cities for people rather than cars. Another main implication of this book is that strong and creative political and planning leadership is needed to develop transit solutions meeting the unique needs of each metropolis. The details of transit and land use systems can work out in many different ways; what is important is a visionary, flexible approach taking the realities of each region into account.

Cervero writes with great authority and breadth of understanding. Unfortunately, although the accomplishments of many of these metropolitan regions are undeniable, one gets the sense that he at times repeats boosterish hype a bit uncritically. He cites the Pleasant Hill BART station for instance as “one of the best examples of suburban transit-oriented development in the United States” (93). If so, then the U.S. is in serious trouble. While it is true that a good bit of housing and office space has been built near this station, it is also surrounded by vast surface parking lots, wide and pedestrian-unfriendly arterial streets, and relatively sterile and uninteresting public spaces, hardly making it an example of livable community development. Likewise, Cervero lauds Vancouver’s *Transport 2021 Plan* by saying that it “boldly calls for assigning ‘priority for increased roadway capacities first to high occupancy vehicles’” (424). This ignores the fact that some of his other transit-oriented cities view any increase in road capacity as undermining transit and that HOV lanes have often simply been used by U.S. metropolitan planning agencies as a backhanded way to increase highway capacity.

Still, such lapses are uncommon, and the main arguments of the book rely on big-picture comparisons rather than details. *The Transit Metropolis* seems aimed at a relatively broad audience of practitioners and educated citizens as well as academics, and will be essential reading for transportation planning professionals and students alike. One main problem unfortunately is the book’s price. Although published as a trade paperback, it lists for around \$54. This may put the work out of reach for many and deny it the readership it deserves.