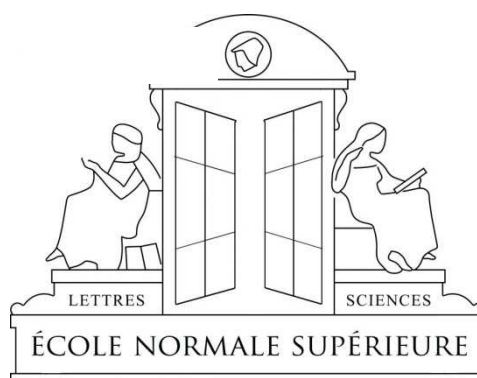


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Transportation policy and mobility in Los Angeles - June 2013

Summary report



This report follows an investigation in Los Angeles. The project “Transportation policy and mobility in Los Angeles” questions the theories of Tim Cresswell in his book entitled *On the Move*. The goal was to test its relevance ten years after the book’s publication. Cresswell noted that mobility, defined as a right in California, has not negatively affected social inequalities – far from it – and that part of the L.A. public transportation network was actually built by reinforcing these inequalities. Mobility thus has an obvious social component that must be taken in to account.

The investigation was preceded by numerous observations, analyses and interviews with key actors in the L.A. transportation system, within institutions and NGOs, and with scientific actors.

In this report, we will focus on the social, economic and environmental significance of the transportation policy put in place by L.A. authorities. One of the major challenges for the future has to do with issues of mobility in a city dominated by the car. Transportation policies play a key role in the changes in mobility practices and the vision of the various modes of transportation. It is not only a question of moving people, but of considering *how* this movement occurs, its social importance, the modes favored and the vision of the city that underlies it. What we hope to show through this study is the radical change proposed by the L.A. transportation authorities, and that METRO in particular. The agglomeration is at an important crossroad: the local government wants to rethink the way transportation marks and shapes the city. In this respect, it is important to note the change of representation with regard to the car, which is no longer the mode favored by public policies, even if it remains the principal mode of individual transportation. So, what sense can we give to transportation policies in Los Angeles? What discourse accompanies the funding choices for the various types of transportation, and why? This study seeks to highlight the balance of power that may exist between the various themes of transportation policies: social, environmental and economic.

Three lines are proposed:

- Governance and funding of the transportation network: who drives and funds L.A.’s transportation policy?
- Modal issues and their relationship to the mobility of the disadvantaged, in order to question the concept of “spatial mismatch”: reconsidering the social and economic impact of transportation in Los Angeles.
- The relationship between the network’s evolution and the city’s development policy: a transportation policy for a new vision and new practices in Los Angeles.

1. Governance and financing of the public transportation network

L.A.’s transportation policy is led by one key player: the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which organizes the public transportation network for the entire agglomeration. Its impact, however, is at the crossroads of social, environmental and economic issues.

Governance

The main body in charge of transportation, the *Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority* (formerly called MTA and now METRO), operates at the countywide scale. METRO became a planning and coordination agency for the development of public transportation infrastructure in Los Angeles, as well as the network's main operator. Today, it is the third largest public transportation company in the U.S. in terms of passenger volume.¹

Most notably, METRO is responsible for the management and planning of the subway and exclusive bus lane networks. The administration of buses is complex; it is divided into five "Sector Governance Councils," each of which organize and administer the bus routes in their respective territories. These councils are composed of municipal and county council members, as well as users. The sector councils are charged with approving the sector budget, have the power to summon and conduct public inquiries on the state of bus services, and approve and evaluate local programs. Finally, the sectorial councils have a duty to ensure the compliance of their activities with METRO's general policies regarding buses. The second point relative to the bus is that the existence of METRO has by no means led to the elimination of offerings from other companies: over 40 municipal carriers of variable size operate in the Los Angeles network, serving the municipalities that finance them and sometimes other municipalities as well. This multiplicity of actors could occasion strife between the actors, or hinder any cooperation. However, common policies are developing between these different operators. Some companies even accept METRO tickets and passes (in other words, have agreed to participate in the METRO fare system). Others have maintained their own fares.

In addition, METRO funds - while not being burdened by the responsibility of - carpool and bike lanes. It also partially funds Metrolink, the regional rail transport service, which links the various counties of California.

Funding

Out of a budget of roughly 3 billion dollars, tickets sales represent approximately 345 million dollars annually. In Los Angeles, the fare is \$1.50, versus \$2.50 in New York, \$2.00 in Boston and \$2.25 in Chicago, making Los Angeles a city with relatively inexpensive public transportation. METRO's leadership - at least in its rhetoric - sees itself as having a social role that permits the poorest (which it also knows are its main customers) to travel for less. Thus, METRO's transportation policy is partly guided by a social discourse.

Nevertheless, the ticket price does not cover operating costs and does not guarantee investments. While other possibilities exist, it would seem that METRO has chosen to increase fares.

These fare hikes have given rise to discontentment, especially on the part of the Bus Riders Union (BRU). The objectives of this association of bus users include lowering the price of bus fares and passes by substantially reducing investment in rail infrastructure, with the savings to be fed back into operations costs for and investments in buses. The BRU is nonetheless faced with a problem: federal and state funds, the main sources of funding, direct funding towards specific modes (as seen through the Regional Transportation Improvement Program). Legally speaking, these funds cannot be used towards investments in operations or other transportation modes. Nevertheless, the BRU argues that the bus - being more suited to L.A.'s

¹ Source: The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LACMETRO) website.

urban morphology - should get more funding. Moreover, as it is less expensive in terms of investment costs, the bus would better serve the needs of the most disadvantaged. In the eyes of the BRU, investing so heavily in the subway is unfair as regards the poor. In addition, the association feels that only by improving the bus network can the use of private cars in L.A. - and hence the pollution they generate - be reduced. For its part, METRO considers that rail transport is more environmentally friendly than buses, and likewise fosters a more positive image for a city like Los Angeles. This serves to demonstrate how transportation financing is subject to the discourses of the various actors, each with its own logic: whereas the BRU sees unnecessary and unjust spending, others, like METRO, defend the rail in the name environmental and ecological considerations.

Beyond ticket prices, it is the issue of funding, as well as that of new infrastructure that uses existing structures, that gives rise to a great deal of debate and discussion. Effectively, L.A.'s transportation policy is backed by grants from the State, but also by local taxes, of which the most emblematic - and problematic, to the minds of its critics - is Measure R, a kind of VAT that will allow METRO to collect roughly 40 billion dollars over the next 40 years.

Thus, transportation governance in Los Angeles is dominated by an agency at the countywide and metropolitan scale — METRO, which plays the role of both public transportation operator and planner. METRO was created for the purpose of leading a single transportation policy on a large scale and over the long term. It proposes a service that is a public utility - moving people - but that is also subject to economic concerns, such as performance. It is therefore at the crossroads of what can be contradictory discourses that, on the one hand, support the right to mobility for all, and a goal of economic efficiency on the other. Indeed, METRO employees are committed to ensuring that the costs of their company's business activity are in line with the service rendered. The idea is not to build a network that is under-used or not in line with demand, but to align supply and demand so as to optimize investment and operations costs. Many comparisons are made with subway systems in other big cities, like New York and Chicago, especially with regard to ticket prices, the size of the networks and the level of services offered.

2. Mobility under debate: approaches, perspectives and the role of modes

METRO's transportation policy has social and economic consequences on L.A.'s geography and its population. To begin, travel within Los Angeles results in the deterioration of the quality of the air and of living, which is increasingly condemned. The pollution generated by traffic increases each year, affecting the health of all Angelinos.

Transport is also the cause of social disparities, due to its cost and/or the lack of access. One of the main disparities resulting from L.A.'s current transportation system involves the mobility of individuals. One concept Tim Cresswell puts forth to explain mobility inequalities in Los Angeles is that of "spatial mismatch" – a concept proposed by J.F. Kain in 1968. A concept specific to American urbanism, it highlights the growing distance between employment and residential areas of the poor, resulting in long, difficult commutes for these populations. This concept supports a hypothesis that attempts to explain the increase in unemployment rates among Black populations living in Downtown areas of American cities.

Public transportation policy can be designed in a way to overcome these difficulties, by facilitating the mobility of poor people. It remains to be seen what mode will favor this mobility, and what planning should be implemented in the short and long terms. On this point,

the BRU and METRO disagree, and likewise disagree regarding the choice of modes and types of travel. While the BRU defends the bus as most suited to travel within Los Angeles, METRO wants to connect the territory with subway lines that will then be linked with a more efficient bus service. Here, it is no longer an issue of funding, but of spatial planning through public transportation that is at stake.

This opposition is based on different types of discourses, the first being economic. In fact, the choice of one mode versus another depends on the number of users who make the same trip at the same time. The choice of modes is strongly influenced by the travel demand. Only when the flow of passengers is great enough are investments in heavy infrastructure justifiable, e.g. subways, in terms of operational and economic efficiency. Compact cities have high concentrations of passengers, which justifies the choice of a subway. When the demand is weak, dispersed or irregular, the use of buses or vans is more effective. Los Angeles falls somewhere between these two extremes. It is for this reason, according to the BRU, that the bus is the ideal transportation solution. In reality, L.A.'s transportation policy is above all a decision that impacts the city in the long term. The influence of these choices is paramount to the city's image: Should Los Angeles, a low-density city, be served by a subway network? And, conversely, could its weak density be compensated by a subway? In this respect, the BRU points to the dispersion of populations and jobs, the high cost of the subway and its lack of flexibility once its route has been determined, to instead favor massive investments in bus lines. The METRO, however, highlights densification around certain bus lines, used by more than 30,000 people a day (for the least routes), in order to legitimize a policy of networking and a complete restructuring of service.

Beyond these issues, the theory of spatial mismatch has been challenged by certain authors (Blumenberg, Evelyn, Baldwin and Ong, most notably), who feel that it does not apply to the reality of Los Angeles. For them, it is less a question of transporting the poor or giving them the means to be mobile than of knowing what mode of transport is best suited to their needs. It is therefore more a question of *modal* mismatch than *spatial* mismatch; more than the distance separating the employment and residential areas of poor people, it is the absence of access to an efficient mode of transport – in their case, a car – that poses a problem. These researchers favor a new kind of policy that promotes the acquisition of cars for poor families to facilitate their travel needs – thus, using public subsidies *not* for collectively addressing inequalities through a public transportation policy, but compensating for these shortcomings through actions designed for individuals.

However, despite these scientific arguments, none of the actors we interviewed during our trip (Pamela O'Connor, the mayor of Santa Monica, the METRO, or the BRU) seemed interested in the idea of developing such a policy, which reflects the strong institutional ties to public transport. The possibility of subsidizing individual mobility is seen not only as a threat to the environmental cause, but also as an affront to the fight against traffic jams that the METRO has been leading for years. This reflects a strong political desire to change travel habits: most of the players wish to focus on collective modes. Mobility in Los Angeles, which has always been essentially private and individual, is aiming to become increasingly collective.

This policy, however, has the advantage of raising the question of the role of the car in L.A.'s future development. Effectively, in a city built around the car since the 1930s through the development of a dense highway network, the question of the future place of the car is essential. Here again, while convergence may be seen in the various actors' willingness to diminish the car's role, opposition exists between the BRU, whose ultimate goal is the

abolition of the automobile, and the METRO and UCLA, who emphasize “reasonable” use of the car and a decrease in the pollution they generate through the development of “environmentally friendly” vehicles, like hybrids or electric cars.

This opposition is fraught with meaning in many ways. Firstly, it can be said that, in light of the current research being funded by UCLA, the university is leaning towards rational use of the car and a gradual shift towards a less polluting fleet of vehicles, rather than its abolition or even a significant modal shift — hence, more a question of sustainable cars than of a sustainable city, in considering that changes in car use and types could greatly contribute to urban sustainability. Secondly, it is likely that the radical character and marginal nature of the BRU in public debates are largely the consequence of their position on car usage. Whereas UCLA and METRO are pragmatic in recognizing the impossibility of changing habits in the short and middle terms, and the political impossibility of a clash between the car and public transportation, and whereas drivers are – in terms of sheer numbers – more numerous and politically more influential, the BRU’s desire to intervene directly by limiting car usage undermines its discourse, making it politically unacceptable and, practically speaking, not very workable.

One advantage of the subway, especially Downtown, lies precisely in the fact that it does not compete with the car for space, as it runs underground, and not at street level. While this dimension was never explicit in the discourses of our contacts, it is not absent from calculations and remains one of the subway’s strongpoints. The METRO, whose role is more institutional, is more in line not only with the political expectations of elected officials, but also with powerful trends taking shape at the federal level, which largely finances specific kinds of developments. In fact, the federal government now seems to favor investment in subway lines, which also helps to strengthen the METRO’s desire to invest for this purpose. Again, the BRU seems to be outside of the institutional game, which weakens its message and, consequently, its aim.

In addition to these issues, new mobility practices are also emerging, including increased use of the bike. Clearly, given the amount of travel in Los Angeles, the bike’s modal share remains limited. However, double-digit growth and the organizing of events around cycling indicate that this mode is experiencing a veritable craze. Used by the well-off and the poor alike, the bike is receiving greater attention from the government, which is increasing the number of bike paths and listening attentively to various cycling associations. These associations have even taken on the right to represent the interests and viewpoints of illegal immigrants, as the municipality argues that the latter are likely to use bikes.

These new practices suggest that L.A. is becoming “greener” in terms of travel. Each of the players stresses the environment in its discourse on mobility. UCLA, for instance, has adopted a discourse that is decidedly oriented towards environmental issues by attempting to analyze what a greener Los Angeles would look like, and the different options available to the city for greatly reducing its greenhouse gas emissions. The METRO likewise adheres to this rhetoric, giving priority to heavy modes like the subway, no doubt, but presenting them as less polluting. The BRU, known to have pushed especially hard for city buses powered by natural gas, is also linked to these issues. Most notably, it emphasizes the fact that a light network is ultimately less polluting, and advocates for buses lanes, which would help increase bus speed. Nevertheless, it is the social question that prevails in the association’s discourse.

3. Gradual but non-systematic urban densification inspired by other cities

The redesigning of the public transportation network is evidence of the desire to change the city, particularly by creating greater density along subway lines, along with the creation of a real centrality Downtown. From a city marked by strong multi-polarity and a lack of a strong centrality to one marked by strong polarities Downtown — under the influence of both the municipality, which has multiplied its achievements in the past fifteen years, and the METRO, which, through the structuring of the subway, has created a city with linear centrality along Wilshire Boulevard.

This policy is patently part of a larger trend in the U.S., known as *transit-oriented development (TOD)* – a policy that combines transportation and urban development, particularly and most notably around clear building densification along public transportation routes, especially stations. Thus, through mobility, the issue of the future urban form, which public policies seek to promote by encouraging collective (as opposed to private) transport, is played out. In this case, the METRO is developing a dense subway network, thereby prompting people to use of this mode of transportation. At the same time, municipalities are being encouraged to change land use destinations near stations to favor densification

This gradual densification seems to make sense with regard to other cities, and New York in particular. During our trip, many people commented on the most recent U.S. census analyses, which estimated that New York's metropolitan area was, on average, less dense than that of Los Angeles. Clearly, this data demonstrated the unique nature of the urbanization in Los Angeles around the key concept – however paradoxical – of *dense urban sprawl*, which refers to relatively high density over long distances, with highly-concentrated residential areas (unlike New York, where residential density decreases rapidly the further one gets from the city). Nevertheless, these morphological specifics and constant comparison to New York also seems to indicate a strong attraction to the dense city model, similar to that of Manhattan. While Downtown Los Angeles will never be as dense, a densification policy will nonetheless make Los Angeles more like other North American cities. The dense city model with its subway system seems to prevail in the minds of city planners, and, according to the BRU, casts aside the specificity of L.A.'s planning.

The structuring of the subway thus leads to new urban practices, densification in certain places, and a shift in business activities (most notably, from light industries to service industries). While the METRO's investments now tend to favor the emergence of a networked system, its first achievements clearly promote the centrality of Downtown.

To this process of densification can be added a process of partial gentrification, especially in the city center, in Koreatown, and just to the North of the Golden Line. Condominiums for young professionals are being built close to the new stations, to encourage the arrival of a new social class. However, social housing remains as proof of the desire to ensure social diversity.

Still, a creation of a subway will not necessarily lead to residential densification or gentrification. For instance, in the areas surrounding the Blue Line, which serves extremely poor neighborhoods (including South Central), we see little evidence of change in land use or residents' professional categories, even though the BRU claims that gentrification is on the rise. This can be explained by the fact that land and transportation policies are not linked. There is no L.A. master plan for areas around stations. METRO has no control over land use around stations, and does not seem to want any, preferring to accompany municipalities that

desire localized densification. Transportation policy thus seems independent of existing local potentials, as there is no proven will to gentrify areas via subway lines.

The city is nevertheless becoming denser and seems to be spreading less. However, we must not conclude too hastily a lasting change in the lifestyle in Los Angeles, a city characterized by a predominance of individual homes and car usage. Condominiums are mostly intended for members of the upper middle class, suggesting that others are either not wanted or not interested. Moreover, Los Angeles is witnessing an interesting generational shift. Younger generations indeed seem to adopt both public transportation and car usage more easily, while densification also seems to meet their approval, especially in the city center. However, one may wonder about the sustainability of these changes.

Conclusion

While new mobility practices are indeed developing, and are changing the urban morphology, one must be careful not to conclude too hastily that the face of Los Angeles will radically change in the decade to come. The extension of existing subway lines and development of new ones are responses to some of the issues faced by modern cities, through the development of alternatives to the car. METRO and the federal government thus seem to favor what is perceived as a fast, low-emission mode. In doing so, however, they neglect the observations of the BRU, which criticizes the subway as a mode that is poorly suited to the city's morphology and the mobility needs of users.

The discourse underlying these policies goes hand in hand with an ideal of an environmentally friendly, sustainable city. It is notably from this perspective that part of the work being done at UCLA focuses on possible changes in the automobile industry to pollute less, and adjustments the city must make to accompany these changes.

However, the numerous comparisons with New York and its subway system highlight the urban marketing aspect these projects invariably take on. The subway is appropriate for a dense urban model that, today, seems to be considered the alpha and omega of urban policy, even in a city like Los Angeles, which – in principle - is far from it. Through the construction of these new lines, the image of a modern city suited to the sustainability issues of the 21st century seems to be at stake. The subway thus appears as an indispensable vector of modernity, a key element for any city of international renown. The comparison with New York, L.A.'s rival, shows that the symbolic value of the subway goes beyond its function as a mode of transportation, to become an instrument of metropolitan affirmation on several levels. The growing number of North American cities with subways or tram-trains encourages the promotion of this marketing aspect of a mode that is both a transportation object and a sign of membership in a metropolitan club.