

Nolan Gray:

Howdy, I'm Nolan Gray, your friendly neighborhood city planner, research director for California YIMBY, and one of the new project co-leads of the Metropolitan Abundance Project. Welcome back to the Abundance Podcast. In this episode, Ned Resnikoff and I chat with Jake Berman. Jake is the author of "The Lost Subways of North America." He's a cartographer, artist, and lawyer. His work has been featured in the New Yorker, VICE, Atlas Obscura, and the Guardian. He's a native of San Francisco and he lives in New York City. In this episode, we chat about his brand new book, as I previously mentioned, The Lost Subways of North America, and dive into the broader transit history of America and the surprising parallels to some of the other stuff that we work on and we consider, "Boy, what could have been if some of these subway networks had been built?"

A full transcript of this is available on our website metroabundance.org. You can find us on all major social media channels and, of course, while I have you please like, subscribe, leave a review, help us choose those numbers, and with that onto the show.

Hi, Jake. Welcome to the Abundance Podcast.

Jake Berman:

Howdy.

Nolan Gray:

It's great to be here. We're talking about your new book, "The Lost Subways of North America: A Cartographic Guide to Past, Present, and What Might Have Been." It's a beautiful book, nice and large, and has lots of pictures, which I think is very important. Lots of beautiful maps. You're a cartographer, right?

Jake Berman:

Yes, I am.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, say more about your background and what got you interested in our lost subways.

Jake Berman:

I got started in this project about 10-plus years ago when I had moved from New York to Los Angeles and got stuck in traffic on the 101 Freeway one too many times, and I was thinking to myself, "I'm commuting five miles, why can't I just take the train instead of being stuck on the Hollywood Freeway behind some idiot in a Jeep with too many bumper stickers?" I started digging into why LA ended up being such a mess of traffic and freeways and found out that LA used to have the largest electric railway system in the world. I decided I was going to make a map of it because the best way to show the Los Angeles that used to be is through cartography.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, moving from New York to LA is a jarring experience for many of us, including your host. Yeah, let's talk about that, right? You open up the book with a quote from "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" and, at one point, LA had the largest transit network in the country. World? At least the country, I would think, right? And it disappeared because of an evil conspiracy of General Motors and other people. It was this beautiful system that everybody loved and then it disappeared and it's been terrible ever since. This is, I think, the prevailing narrative of what happened with LA's transit system. But you tell, I think, a very different story of what actually happened to transit in LA.

Jake Berman:

In general, it's best thought of as the Pacific Electric Railway, which ran the old Red Car system, built the largest electric railway system in the world, and they proudly put that in their advertising. They were not just the largest electric railway system in the world, they were also the largest real estate developer in Southern California. They held all of Greater Los Angeles in a chokehold for decades. And when it came time for the city to take them over and public transit became a public service as opposed to a business, the voters of Los Angeles said, "No." They didn't want this because the Pacific Electric had been jerks to them for decades, and it didn't make sense to have that kind of corporate welfare.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, that's a, I think, a fascinating history and just to give listeners a little bit of a sense of the structure of the book before we dive too deep into the Los Angeles example. Essentially this book is a chapter-by-chapter look at the transit histories of 23 different cities across the United States and Canada, along with, as Nolan said, big beautiful maps. Something I love about this book is that it's both an urban policy book, like the type we normally cover, but it's also a coffee table book, really. I want to get to LA in a second, but to start, how did you choose the cities you were going to look at, and how did you arrange those cities? Because the book, it feels a little bit like a double album to me, the way it flows from city to city. And it seems like the setup moving from one to the other was intentional. Can you talk a little bit about how that worked?

Jake Berman:

Sure. I cover most of North America's major cities, and the idea is that you can use each city to illustrate a particular aspect of what happened to public transit in North America. If you want to talk about the role of race in transport planning, for instance, well, you've got Atlanta and Detroit. If you want to talk about the role of land use planning and the fact that a lot of very expensive transit systems don't serve their regions particularly well. Well, okay, great. Let's talk about Dallas or let's talk about Miami. And, along the way, there are stories that can be told about the entire continent by illustrating these points with specific city examples because that hits closer to home than trying to tell one unified story by jumping from city to city about the particular point.

Ned Resnikoff:

And what was the overarching point that you wanted to illustrate with the LA example, besides just diving into the history of the Red Car system and why that system ultimately fell apart?

Jake Berman:

I think the idea that I wanted to hammer home about Los Angeles is that the destruction of the public transport network in LA was due to people making decisions that made sense at the time. These decisions were not the product of a conspiracy or some kind of plot. It's that subsidizing the Pacific Electric Railway in the 1940s or 1950s was like the

idea of subsidizing Facebook or Google, today. They were monopolies that had mistreated the public for a very long time, and the public had no patience for these monopolies that had done dirty business for so long. That's the point that I wanted to hammer home, is that LA is a mess of suburbs and freeways because of decisions that made sense at the time. That said, it can be fixed because the idea that you could get rid of the Pacific Electric Railway in, say, 1925, you would've been treated like a crazy person. Things can change, but it requires the effort to change things. This wasn't handed down on Mount Sinai.

Nolan Gray:

Let's go back to the beginning. You have a chapter on Richmond, Virginia, which is, of course, the first city to have an electric streetcar system. Something that I picked up and you touched on this with your discussion of Richmond and other cities, the extent to which almost every... Even small and mid-sized American cities at one point had a streetcar network. A real wake-up moment for me was seeing these photos of the Lexington, Kentucky streetcar network map, and you can be born and raised there and have no idea that this ever existed. But I want to talk about the genesis of these early streetcar systems. One, how are streetcars different from the modern transit systems we have today? And who is running these systems? Who was setting them up? How did they get set up in the first place in Richmond and other cities?

Jake Berman:

Sure, in the old days, the way that a streetcar system would get built is the city council would grant a monopoly over a particular route to a particular company, and they would let the companies compete as to who could provide better service, who could provide better coverage, things like that. They would issue a franchise to say, "Company A has a franchise to run a streetcar on 1st Street. Company B has a franchise to run a streetcar on 2nd Street." And so forth and so on. Over time, these private companies would gradually be consolidated into one monopoly that had control over all public transport within the metropolitan area because of the network effects. If you have everybody using one transit company, it's a lot more efficient than, say, different transit companies on every block. That said, you also have the problems of monopoly power that you have today in the various social media companies in the tech giants where you really don't have any other option if you want to get around.

Nolan Gray:

We're turning to the LA example. An important point you raised is that in many cases, as with the Red Car system and many other systems, they were built as part of real estate schemes and the real money making part of the operation was selling the land at the end of a new line, but there wasn't necessarily always a long-term plan for profitable operations of that line, and that coming to a head. Another theme that you touch on with a few different cities here is that because these entities become very unsympathetic monopolies, you get these price controls on fares that makes these systems just totally unprofitable to run. Then once cars come into the picture, everything really starts to escalate.

Jake Berman:

Yeah, I think it's really interesting to note that in the 1920s, the car companies, like the Walter Chrysler's and the Henry Ford's and so on, are part of a big progressive movement in North American society to break the power of the transit monopolies, which had run roughshod over American cities and Canadian cities for so long. In a sense, if you are a car company in the 1920s, you're really striking a blow against these transit companies which have extorted you for money for decades, and nobody at the time really considered that the automobile would become universal.

Ned Resnikoff:

I think another important piece and something that I think we've discussed on the pod before when it comes to LA is this nexus between land-use and the viability of transit—whether you have the density of population to actually support a transit system through fare recovery. You mentioned that, I think, in the context of the chapter on Dallas, but that comes up in the context of LA too, where LA is very much, with some patches aside, a horizontal city, very spread out, very difficult to sustain transit over that. You make an interesting point about how Prop 13 and the tax revolt—Prop 13, for listeners outside of California, being the amendment to the California constitution that set a very low ceiling on property tax rates and property tax increases—between that and the density of LA and the viability of transit. Could you talk a little bit about that part of the story?

Jake Berman:

Sure. One of the things about California that really fascinates me is, as somebody who grew up there, is that so much of what happens is because of the fact that your property tax is based on the price you paid, not the price that it's actually worth. My brother used to live in a condo that was valued at \$225,000 because the owner bought it in 2011 after the real estate crash. It's now worth 800,000 or something like that, but the person who lives across the hall who bought an identical unit pays tax based on a value of \$800,000. This causes two things to happen.

First of all, it's very difficult for people to give up their low property tax because if they move, well, they're going to be charged a lot more money. There's a lot less turnover in the residential housing market. The other thing that makes it difficult is that because it entrenches these homeowners, it makes it really hard for the city council to stabilize their finances, because city councils are now stuck with residential real estate that's basically dead weight. So building vertically is not a way to increase the tax base like it was in decades past. That is you can be a city and have a stagnant population, and the way that you stabilize your finances is by building tons of strip malls to get sales tax money as opposed to relying on property taxes to keep the lights on.

Ned Resnikoff:

This is something that Nolan and I chew on all the time because it's an area where sometimes there might be a gulf between how cities view their fiscal incentives and what their fiscal incentives actually are. Let's say you upzone a chunk of Beverly Hills. So all of a sudden you can build an enormous residential tower in Beverly Hills. If you actually build it, then the lot gets reassessed at the value of the new parcel, right? The new value of the parcel, I should say, with the building on top of it. But I think what's interesting here is that that's not necessarily how LA and how many other cities in Southern California saw their incentives. It wasn't like, "Okay, Prop 13 passed, so we should do a bunch of upzoning."

It was exactly what you said, we should essentially treat housing as a net fiscal loser and build a lot of commercial development. There's that war in developing malls across, I think, a chunk of Southern California—like developing different malls and strip malls to try and capture sales tax instead of building housing. Maybe to just extend that out a little bit, could you go further into how Prop 13 undermined the viability of public transit in the LA metro area?

Jake Berman:

Sure. What Prop 13 created was a whole lot of people who had abnormally low tax valuations and they wanted to keep things that way, and because all of those people had an amazing deal—Why wouldn't you want to pay extremely low taxes on a house in Beverly Hills, say. This works great as long as you can fob off all of the bad side effects on your neighbors. And the problem is, especially in Los Angeles, everyone decided to fob off the side effects on their neighbors. Beverly Hills said they don't want to build any more housing. Their population has been stagnant since 1970, give or take. Redondo Beach same, Manhattan Beach same. Because every city council decided to say, "we can just fob it off on the other guy," those people eventually have to live somewhere. And because California is a prosperous state and it's creating new jobs at a very high rate, well, where do those people end up living? Well, they end up living in the desert or they end up living in fire zones or they end up living in flood zones. That's not good. It's the result of everybody making decisions that are reasonable for them, but eventually the piper has to be paid.

Nolan Gray:

Prop 13 is definitely a challenge too with transit to the extent that it applies to commercial and many strip malls that in many cases are right next to transit stations in LA and the Bay Area and across California. But another enduring theme of the book is you have to do land use planning alongside transit planning. This is a mistake that's not just made in LA, it's also something that comes up in Dallas and Atlanta where they'll invest a lot of money in new transit, but they'll build it to places where nobody currently lives, and then they won't actually allow the land-use and zoning regulations that allow you to build new jobs and housing. I look at this and I think, "Well, this is obvious, right?" Obviously, if you're going to build a new transit station, you should build tons and tons of offices and residences around it. What is the mentality of these systems when these transit networks are being planned out and built and there's no actual commensurate allowance for development? What do you think explains that sort of mistake?

Jake Berman:

I think what explains it is the local politics of the place. Suburbs for instance, in Greater Dallas or in, say, San Jose and the Bay Area have agreed that they should have some kind of mass rapid transit network, but it's treated as an urban amenity. That is, people in the burbs will use light rail to go to a ball game. Or they want to use it to get

downtown for individual events. It's a nice thing to have, but it's not a need to have. And the result of this is that transit service is just not great because you have to serve these suburbs that are part of the transit district, but there's no requirement at the other end to require these suburbs to get their act together and put stuff near train stations.

Nolan Gray:

Right. Yeah, that's an interesting point, that there's this large metropolitan transit push, but no commensurate tie to transit. One of the things that we've done a lot in California is to try to basically say, "Okay, within proximity of transit, certain allowances are going to be granted to allow for additional density." Some of my favorite chapters were on smaller cities that either tried and failed to set up subway systems or set them up and then immediately had them collapse. I'm from Lexington, and we were just talking before we started recording. Just about an hour south of Cincinnati, and I'd always heard of the Cincinnati tunnel suburb vision that goes nowhere. Also, I hadn't realized Rochester also briefly experimented with a subway system. Do you want to explain a little bit more about the context for these systems and what went wrong?

Jake Berman:

Sure. Cities like Cincinnati and Rochester built subway systems in the 1920s. In the 1920s, a subway system would often be built on speculation. That is, they assumed that the city would grow forever and that, of course, you would build upward near the subway stations because that's how cities developed in that period. In Cincinnati, what happened was that the Cincinnati subway was intimately connected with a corrupt political machine. Once the machine fell, the good government reformers who came in said, "We need to get rid of this political pork. We will finish the subway at some unspecified point in the future, but this whole thing has been a white elephant and we don't have the money to finish it right now."

In Rochester, a different process happened because the subway was built on a derelict canal. The city never really made the land use changes necessary to get the city to the subway as opposed to bringing the subway to the city, if that makes sense. Because of that, the subway never really ended up becoming a part of the urban fabric like it did in, say, New York or Boston or San Francisco, because the city never made the conscious effort to focus urban development around the train stations. They decided to use the existing canal bed and that made perfect sense, but they didn't put in the work on the land use side to make the subway system effective.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, that's an interesting point about political corruption because it seems to be a recurring theme in the book that there are a few chapters where you can see either outright machine politics shaping the map of the city or even just standard political wheeling and dealing. I think in the case of Toronto, you talk about the political hot potato of their transit system. It strikes me that this is something that is just a perennial problem. Maybe in some way innate to dealing with something like transit where it's a very large infrastructure project, where there are a lot of opportunities to make money off of it. The construction of transit is obviously extremely labor-intensive. There are a lot of opportunities for political patronage, giving contracts to various allies.

Somehow some cities are able to avoid this trap and others aren't. I'm curious why you think that is. Some cities obviously had different paths to political development where they were more corrupt or more reliant on political machines than others. But is there something about the nature of transit decision-making or governance itself that allows some cities to be more successful at avoiding those traps?

Jake Berman:

I do think political accountability matters a lot. That is if you have a transit system that is politically unaccountable, like, say, the New York MTA, for instance, which is run by the governor's office in Albany and city voters can't vote out the bums if the subway sucks. That's a problem because not only does it provide opportunities for corruption, but there's also no feedback mechanism when transit isn't working correctly. And there needs to be that kind of feedback mechanism because in the old days, if the train sucked, the mayor was going to be on the hook for it. You see these examples before World War II a lot where it's a major political fight and mayors can and do get voted out because the public transport network is bad. I think in today's world, you see a lot of the incremental improvements happening in San Francisco's bus system precisely because the San Francisco MTA answers to the mayor. And if Muni, which is the light rail and bus system of San Francisco fails, then we all know who's to blame if Muni melts down.

Ned Resnikoff:

Maybe this is a good segue to talking about one of my favorite misbegotten transit projects from your book. One of my favorites, because I've actually written about it, is the People Mover in Detroit, Michigan, which is just so bizarre... It's literally like the monorail from that Simpsons episode about the music man character who comes to town and convinces Springfield to build a monorail. It's just like this bizarre loop around downtown that you can't imagine anyone using for their daily commute. Of course, when I took it, it was practically abandoned except for me and the people I was on there with. Could you talk a little bit about the People Mover? I think someone that you quote called it a very nice looking Stonehenge. How did this come to be?

Jake Berman:

For those of you who are not familiar with Detroit, the People Mover is a one-way elevated loop that goes around downtown Detroit and it only goes in one direction. That is, it has stops every half a mile or so, and it only covers a couple square miles of downtown Detroit. The People Mover was built to be the downtown circulator for a full-sized regional subway system, and the regional subway system never got built. Because the mayor of Detroit supported this project, it ended up going through anyway, and the Michigan congressional delegation made sure that Uncle Sam paid for it. Because of that, the People Mover ended up being a white elephant, but it didn't have to be. The People Mover would've actually been useful had it been connected to the regional subway system. That never happened because Detroit had a fraught relationship between the mostly Black city of Detroit and the mostly white suburbs.

Nolan Gray:

I want to pick up on some themes there. I'm a little bit of a People Mover contrarian. Yeah, a huge boondoggle at the time, and for many decades. I rode it as a tourist and there were all other fellow tourists there on a weekday when I was in Detroit. It almost felt like a little bit of a weird Detroit High Line, in the sense that it's actually a nice way to see the architecture around downtown. Yes, completely useless as actual mobility infrastructure—although we build lots of transit infrastructure like that. That was basically the recent streetcar boom. A lot of that was just downtown redevelopment. It's not what I would put my transit dollars into, but now that we've wasted the money and done this crazy thing, Detroit has this unique piece of infrastructure.

I was just in Irving, Texas where they have a business park that also has a fairly large people mover system. I was totally unaware of it, and it was shut down. I remember I

stayed at a hotel specifically because it was actually going to be... I was one of maybe 10 people in human history for whom I was going to stay at the hotel and then take it to my location. Yeah, these people mover systems, maybe they're so old now that they actually can transition from useless boondoggle to amusing tourist infrastructure.

Jake Berman:

I think so. If you treat the People Mover as a way to see downtown Detroit and its beautiful architecture—no joke, Detroit has wonderful architecture, from 60 feet in the air—then yeah, it's great. Just treat it like the Disneyland Monorail. Use it to sight-see. Yeah, go ahead and do it. Would I have spent this money on it to be transport infrastructure and actually useful? Absolutely not. But do I have a time machine to change that decision? No.

Nolan Gray:

Fair enough. Well, I want to pick up on something here. Another theme throughout the book, and this is certainly present with Detroit, is the relationship between race and America's transit history. We talk a lot about this with respect to housing and land-use here, but it's extremely pertinent with transit planning beginning with Richmond, right? Where essentially they invent the streetcar and then immediately there's a giant fight over, "Okay, are we segregating our streetcars? Are we segregating cars where you can sit within them? Then, of course, this is a major factor in Detroit and Richmond. Do you want to say a little bit more about how that's influenced the transit systems that we have today?

Jake Berman:

Sure. Public transport really reflects the kinds of larger social issues that the country faces at a particular time. In 1901, the segregation of the Jim Crow era hadn't been fully solidified into law. And because of that, when there is an attempt to segregate Richmond public transport, you have an alliance between Black activists and white streetcar company owners against a segregation bill because the streetcar owners don't want to run separate trains for white and Black people. That's too much work and it's too expensive. Blacks, of course, don't want to be segregated. You see the same thing

happen in New Orleans where the transit companies are hugely against mandatory racial segregation on public transport.

In 1904, you actually had a streetcar boycott by the same Black activists that prefigured the Montgomery bus boycott several decades later. Unfortunately, unlike the Montgomery bus boycott, this didn't work in 1904 because the company eventually went bankrupt. But that's not enough to convince the state legislature to stop a mandatory streetcar segregation law. In later decades, you see Atlanta's bus ridership drop by double digits when the buses are desegregated after World War II, and there is a very strong thread in United States public transit where when desegregation happens, you also see a big drop in people willing to ride the bus or the train with people of different races.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, and that leads us into the era of white flight, which is a huge part of the dynamic in Detroit that led to this shape of their current transit system—this relationship between the predominantly Black city of Detroit and the predominantly white suburbs. I was really struck by someone you quoted, the county executive of Oakland County in Michigan.

Jake Berman:

Oh, yes.

Ned Resnikoff:

He said... I'm just going to read this quote because it just boggles the mind. Now, mind you, to the listeners, this is in 2014. This is not in 1964. This is 50 years later, 10 years ago in 2014. Here's Oakland County Executive Brooks Patterson, "What we're going to do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn."

Jake Berman:

Yep. That's Brooks Patterson.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, first of all, I'm tempted to just sit here and marinate in how absolutely horrific and racist that quote is on multiple levels, both against Black people and against American Indians. But maybe instead, I'll just ask you to expand a little bit on, after you have the end of formal segregation and you have the beginnings of white flight and de facto segregation instead of de jure segregation, how does that dynamic between the cities and the suburbs affect transit systems, maybe specifically in Detroit, but also in general?

Jake Berman:

Sure. When the prosperous post-war happens, and the United States, in particular, decides to start demolishing its cities in order to rebuild them around the automobile, there is a very strong thread where Blacks would be left in the cities and whites would be able to move out of the cities into these new suburbs where, either by legal means or by unofficial means, it would be impossible for a Black family to also get out of the city. You have these really just unbelievable demographics where you'll have a city of 35,000 with one Black resident. This is after racial segregation has been legally banned. Much of this dynamic is because the end of legal segregation also meant that people were still going to be racist; it's just that they used land use policy to achieve similar results to the kinds of racial covenants that were used in the 1940s and before. For those listeners who are not aware of how racial covenants work, a racial covenant would be language in a property deed saying, for instance, that no person of the Negro, Asian, Filipino or Jewish race shall live on this property.

Ned Resnikoff:

Right, and how does this affect the shape of public transit in places like Detroit or the broader metro area when you have these segregationist suburbs on the periphery?

Jake Berman:

It means that public transport becomes a proxy fight for segregation. That is in places like Detroit, but also in places like, say, Beverly Hills, the opposition to building

high-quality public transit was intimately tied with racism. In San Mateo County outside San Francisco, a fellow named David Bohannon whipped up a bunch of opposition to the BART system going down to San Mateo County for fear that it would bring Asians and Blacks from San Francisco down to the suburbs. In Beverly Hills, in the 1980s in Los Angeles, same thing. There were fears that Blacks would get on the subway, take it to Beverly Hills, break into suburban houses in Beverly Hills, steal their televisions, and then use the subway to escape to somewhere else because Blacks don't have cars? I don't know. The same process happened in Detroit where Metro Detroit turned down billions of dollars offered by the federal government to build a regional subway system because the suburbs were opposed to Blacks from the city of Detroit being able to easily access the suburbs without a car.

Nolan Gray:

Well, I want to get a little bit more into the politics of the relationship with the car. You got at this a little bit earlier, "the car is this interloper who comes in and allows people to escape the tyranny of the local transit monopoly." We've mentioned San Francisco a couple of times. I don't know if folks know there is another major city in California. It's nice. It's not as nice as LA. In any case, San Francisco has a very different transit history from a lot of the cities that we have discussed so far. I believe it's the first city to have created a municipal transit system. It's one of the first American cities to basically try to put an end to urban freeway construction. What's unique from a lost subways perspective? What's unique about the San Francisco story?

Jake Berman:

Well, San Francisco for a very long time was 20 years ahead of the curve. If you want to think about the Bay Area and all the innovations that have come out of the Bay Area—Google, Facebook, whatever—San Francisco was ahead of the curve when it came to public transport too. In 1912, the good voters of San Francisco decided to say that they were going to establish a municipal streetcar company to beat the hated transit monopoly at their own game, which is today the San Francisco Municipal Railway. They were ahead of the game when it came to opposition to urban freeways when they voted those down in the 1950s.

Similarly, they were ahead of the curve when it came to environmental protection and things like that because that's just how San Francisco has been. And sadly, with the San Francisco Bay Area, it's also the case that they were a leading indicator for the housing

crisis that is now facing the country as a whole, where they put in place all kinds of restrictions to make it impossible to build housing near transit the way they did in the old days because of the excesses of the freeway era.

Nolan Gray:

Ned, you probably actually can speak a little bit better at this. Is it Geary Street in San Francisco? It's probably one of the most underserved streets in the country. You get into these totally understandable reactions to urban freeways that give you this policy infrastructure that then ironically makes it impossible to build the actual transit needed to make a non-freeway carved-up city work.

Jake Berman:

Right. I think of it a lot using a Spanish phrase—that is, San Francisco is the city of the future, and that's how it'll always be. A lot of the mentality in San Francisco is that we screwed up so badly with these freeway projects that we need to freeze the city in place. We need to make it so that nothing will ever change from the way that things are right now, let's say that right now is 1970 or 1975, which is great if the year is 1975 and you're trying to stop freeway projects, but it's not great when the year is 2024, and the problems that San Francisco faces today are not the same as the ones faced when Richard Nixon or Gerald Ford was president.

Ned Resnikoff:

Could you tell a little bit more of the history of what exactly happened on Geary Street, because I do think it's pretty illustrative. Just walk us through why isn't there some sort of high-quality transit running down that street now?

Jake Berman:

Sure. To go all the way back to the beginning, Geary Street has been the busiest transport corridor in San Francisco since the 19th century, and there was originally a steam railway running on Geary Street out towards the Pacific. That Steam railway was taken over in 1912 by the municipal railway and turned into the first city-owned streetcar line in North America. The streetcar line, the A, and now the B Geary was closed down

as part of the streetcar shutdowns of the 1950s under the expectation that Bay Area Rapid Transit would run a subway line under Geary shortly. The problem was San Mateo and Marin County, the suburban counties that were supposed to be part of the BART district and that were supposed to fund the Geary Boulevard subway line, pulled out for the racist reasons that I discussed earlier in the pod. People were afraid of Blacks and Asians moving to the suburbs.

After that, Geary also got bad urban renewal where they demolished these functional but working-class neighborhoods and replaced them with crummy towers in a park. The only public transport on that corridor has been the 38 Geary bus, which is the first or second-busiest bus west of the Mississippi, and it has been that way for decades. Now, in 1989, the city of San Francisco decided, "Well, we're going to pass a tax to build high-quality public transport under Geary, which would include a light rail line." But because of the reforms passed during the freeway era to make it harder to change things in the city, that light rail line got bogged down in bureaucracy. And the light rail line gradually degraded to a busway, and then the busway was actually cut short so the bus lanes don't run the length of Geary. All in all, it took nearly four decades to build a busway that doesn't even run all the way to the Pacific.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, to your point about political institutions that were meant to answer one problem, which was the problem of urban renewal and freeway expansion not being able to really deal with the challenges of the present day, I think it's remarkable that the story you're telling there about endless delays and red tape. It's one that persists to this day if you think about from something as complicated as a second BART tunnel or getting the Bay Bridge bikeway to extend all the way from San Francisco to the East Bay to something as simple as, "Can I replace the windows on my historically protected home with better insulated windows to save on energy costs in San Francisco?"

I think what's striking here though, also is how urban renewal figures into this. I think this is an important thing, because you write in the book that Geary Street was in some ways a victim of poorly designed urban renewal where you get the worst consequences of the displacement, the destruction of existing housing, but you also don't get the addition of new public infrastructure like public transit. Is this how urban renewal has played out in a transit context across the cities you look at?

Jake Berman:

I think so, because the types of changes to the city, like these types of utopian changes were not carried out in a uniform way, and they were often carried out pretty haphazardly, which is how you end up with the problems that afflicted public housing, for instance, in the 1990s and 1980s. Especially because so much of this new public housing that was built was intended to be served by public transit that just never arrived. You have all of these towers that are just isolated from other things. It's not just a San Francisco question. For instance, you can also see this, say, in the towers on the far east side of Manhattan in New York City or in various parts of Los Angeles where you have the people concentrated in one place, but it's awfully hard to get there.

Nolan Gray:

We've talked about US cities and the US experience a lot so far in this podcast, but you also profile a few Canadian cities. I'm curious if you could elaborate a little bit on how the Canadian experience has been different.

Jake Berman:

Sure. The Canadian experience has been pretty dramatically different from the American experience because they got started later on their freeways. In the United States, large-scale freeway construction began in 1940 or so with the construction of the Pasadena Freeway in Los Angeles. In Canada, there was about a 20-year lag. Canadian cities learned from our mistakes. When Vancouver put a large-scale freeway plan to a vote in the early 1970s, it got shot down. And the reason was because Vancouver understood that it was a mistake to build a large-scale freeway system through the city in Seattle, and they use the specter of Seattle and Los Angeles as things that should be avoided.

Nolan Gray:

Canadian transit mode share too is dramatically higher than a lot of comparable US peer cities today, right?

Jake Berman:

Yeah, and part of it is because Canadian cities never built the center city freeways that we did. But it's also because Canadian cities competed with each other to produce the best transit systems in the 1970s and 1980s after the freeway era had really ended. In the 1970s and 1980s, Vancouver, which had been awarded a World's Fair on Transportation, decided that they needed to build a world-beating rail system because they didn't have one while Montreal or Edmonton or Calgary had already built theirs. In Vancouver, that's how you end up with the SkyTrain system, which is one of the best in North America, and which is my personal favorite because it just works so well. And because of that, their urban planning is generally a lot better than what you see in the States. In Toronto for instance, they build tons of towers right next to the train stations. Same thing in Vancouver. In Montreal, they never let go of the old way of doing things, which is to build lots of townhouses.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah no, I'm with you on the Vancouver SkyTrain. Remarkable. Small cars that are fully automated that run at incredibly high frequencies. Really, a really neat system. I'm curious, taking a step back and reflecting on the book as a whole, if you could wave a wand, which of the lost subway proposals would you go back and make happen? Only one, excuse me, I should say.

Jake Berman:

Only one. Okay, as a New Yorker, I think I have to wave a magic wand and say that the 1968 plan to expand the New York City subway would be my preference, but that's because I live in New York and it would make my life significantly more convenient to be able to take all of the lines that never got built because of New York City's financial crisis of the 1970s. That said, if you wanted to give me control of a magic wand, I think my magic wand decision would be to ban freeway construction through existing urban areas. Because that's really the thing that the United States got wrong compared to everywhere else. Most places in, say, Europe or Japan ended up getting rid of their streetcar systems, but what they didn't do was demolish most of the city core in order to ram freeways through.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, my New York answer here would probably be the interborough. That's what they call it, right? The Interborough Express. The train that would run along the existing right of way through Brooklyn and Queens. Such an obvious no-brainer connection in the system. Ned, I'm curious, what was yours? You get to wave a wand and make one of these systems happen or a particular arm of a system happen.

Ned Resnikoff:

While we're talking about New York examples, if I could wave a magic wand, I would replace Kathy Hochul with someone who isn't trying to kill congestion pricing. But to answer your question more fully-

Jake Berman:

Too soon, too soon.

Ned Resnikoff:

I think having a more robust transit system in LA, comparable to what we lost without running into some of the pitfalls that we discussed earlier with the red car system—I think in terms of major urban challenges in the United States, just getting Los Angeles to a density where you have much less homelessness and it's much more affordable, and also where it can sustain like a real active transit system and then building that transit system. Those seem like defining challenges for urban America in the modern era.

Nolan Gray:

The example of the new Red Car proposal in 1976 was really fascinating to the extent that—I mean, I'm happy that we got something in LA. Something that I thought was neat about the new Red Car system was it was a little bit more openly polycentric, which I think better reflects the reality of commuting around LA. If I can do the same thing Jake did, if I could wave a magic wand, maybe it isn't any of these transit systems, but it's just, build a ton more housing around transit in LA and San Francisco. Both of these systems are staring down fiscal crises, and it's like, "People want to live and work right next to this thing and ride it every day, and we simply make it difficult to do that."

Jake Berman:

Yeah, I think what's really interesting about Los Angeles, in particular, is that so much of LA's history is about building a major city that doesn't look like the overcrowded tenements of New York or Chicago, and they made a conscious effort to build sprawl. In the 1920s, there was a height cap of 13 stories in Los Angeles, which is crazy when you think that New York was already at 30 or 40 stories, and same thing for Chicago. This isn't even an earthquake thing. They were specifically doing it so that LA would spread out more and thus ironically have less traffic congestion.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, I think also to add to our wishlist, one of the things that's really critical about the situation in LA, but also virtually every American city, is the abundance of parking. That if you're really going to get a significant mode shift to transit in addition to the need for more housing density, but also the need to actually have the transit in place, the other thing is you just need to have significantly less free parking. I wanted to ask though, maybe Nolan, is it time to do lightning round? Should we do lightning round now?

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, let's do it.

Ned Resnikoff:

All right. Do you want to kick us off?

Nolan Gray:

Sure, I can.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah.

Nolan Gray:

Okay. City with the most underrated transit system.

Jake Berman:

Ooh, that's interesting. Okay. City with the most underrated transit system, Houston, Texas.

Nolan Gray:

I think you make this case as well in the book, Pittsburgh. The busway is great.

Jake Berman:

Yeah no, Pittsburgh is a close second. I think that Pittsburgh was able to make its busway system work because they had such an abundance of industrial-era railways that they could repurpose into busways, and not every city has that. Houston, on the other hand, is basically starting from a blank slate and they have a bus network and a rail network, which works unusually well with their land-use. They make a point of putting stuff near train stations and they're not running these long lines out to the suburbs.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, the book you talk a little bit about... Sorry to steer us off the lightning-round track for a second, but you talk-

Nolan Gray:

Probably the first time the lightning round ever was not a lightning round.

Ned Resnikoff:

But you talk a little bit about how organic densification is one of the secrets to Houston's ability to actually build out its transit system. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean by that "organic densification?"

Jake Berman:

Sure. In the old days, the value of the land would be reflected in how near a particular train station was. If you ever come to New York City, take the A train outbound from Fulton Street, which serves the World Trade Center, and starting in downtown Manhattan, you have these enormous 90-story buildings at Fulton Street. You go four miles outbound, it's six-story townhouses and four-story townhouses. Go further out to Euclid Avenue, another three, four miles out, and it's two and three-story townhouses. Then by the end of the line at Lefferts Boulevard, it's all recognizably suburban where there are standalone houses, although they're all on individual lots.

This is the old way of doing things, that you would build up in proportion to the value of the land. Now, in Houston they still do that. The city core is very much allowed to develop around the land in a way that doesn't happen in, say, San Francisco or Los Angeles or other cities that have a housing crisis. If you go to, say, North Berkeley BART station outside of San Francisco, you'll see the same kinds of bungalows that were built in the 1920s and they're just stupidly expensive.

Ned Resnikoff:

It's a little triggering for me to think about the North Berkeley BART situation.

Jake Berman:

I went to Berkeley for undergrad, so this is something that I will bang on until hell freezes over.

Ned Resnikoff:

Well, let me ask you another lightning round question. Worst New York City subway line?

Jake Berman:

The worst New York City subway line is, I think, whichever one I'm on that's delayed. But seriously, I reserve my love-hate relationship for the C train because it's the line that I've lived on for 15 years now, give or take.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, when I lived in New York, everyone hated the G. I always felt like that was a little outdated, that the G had actually gotten a lot better. I don't know. I'm a G defender.

Nolan Gray:

I was going to say the G...

Jake Berman:

The G train is fine. It runs on time.

Nolan Gray:

Okay. I'm glad you've had a better experience. It runs through a lot of really cool neighborhoods and it's an essential connection. But my proposal for the Interborough Express is partly because Brooklyn, Queens connections are so bad that I had in mind the G. But hey, it's great. All transit's good, right? In the spirit of my contrarian take on the Detroit People Mover, what's a transit boondoggle that in retrospect you're glad happened?

Jake Berman:

My favorite transit boondoggle is actually the original independent subway system. For those of you who are New Yorkers, that's the ACE, BDFM and G trains, which was

stupidly overbuilt for what New York needed at the time. As it turned out, because it was so stupidly overbuilt, it continued being useful in the decades when New York basically did nothing with its transit system. All of these provisions that they built into the thing and the extent to which it was overbuilt have meant that it continues being a valuable utility nearly a 100 years after it opened.

Ned Resnikoff:

Favorite transit station? And don't say Penn Station. I know Nolan's a total sicko, and he's going to try and get you to say Penn Station in New York, but a favorite-

Jake Berman:

Wait, old Penn Station or new Penn Station?

Ned Resnikoff:

Nolan, you want to defend yourself here?

Nolan Gray:

People just talk about it like it's hell on earth. And I'm like, "Okay, it's not..." I've been in a lot worse airports, by the way. I think I have some nostalgia. I was commuting in and out of the city when I was living in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and I spent a lot of time in Penn Station. At the time I hated it, but in retrospect, I kind of miss it.

Jake Berman:

Okay, I'm going to answer this with a two-part answer. My favorite train station is Grand Central in New York City, because it is a lovely, beautiful station that is the best that America can do in terms of both functionality and just sheer architectural beauty. That said, my favorite train station overall is... Wait, can I include mainline railway stations or is it just subways?

Ned Resnikoff:

Railway stations are fine.

Jake Berman:

All right, cool. In that case, I have a certain nostalgic love of Puerta de Atocha in Madrid.

Nolan Gray:

I think we're leaving lightning around here a little bit with this question. You spent a lot of time thinking about subway proposals that died. What lessons have you learned that you would share with somebody who wants to massively scale up their transit system or potentially, if they're in a city that doesn't have a system at all, build a new subway system?

Jake Berman:

Bureaucracy matters. If you want to make these kinds of large-scale changes to the urban fabric, you also need to figure out how you're going to do it. Because in the old days, the city council would vote to build a subway and then they would just do it. Right? New York City approved its subway in 1899 and the first subway line was finished five years later. How you build something is just as important as what you build. Going back to the Geary Boulevard subway, that became a light rail, that became a busway, that got cut down to half-length. Well, this is because San Francisco's bureaucracy makes it really, really hard to get things done. This necessarily has to be a part of getting those transport improvements built. It's not just about what you want to build, it's also how you plan to build it.

Nolan Gray:

Sometimes I'm struck by a little bit of transit doomerism, and I'm curious if you agree or if you have reason for optimism. It seems like there's so much energy now around alternatives to a classic heavy rail subway. It seems like a lot of these systems that get built now... Even here in LA, which I think is one of the American cities that's making a lot of progress. We get these light rail systems that periodically duck in and out of traffic

and the whole premise of the subway, right, theoretically the focus of the book, even though you talk about L's and lots of different types of systems, is that it has its own grade-separated track, and it's genuinely just a faster, more convenient, more pleasant system. Are we just done building systems like that? Is just cost issues and NIMBYism just so overwhelming that we're just going to have a lot more lost subways going forward and not so many new systems or massive expansions?

Jake Berman:

I say that doomerism is boring and it's a really good way to let yourself out of the fact that these things were not handed down on Mount Sinai. Things can and do change, and if you had told somebody in 1980 that LA would have 100 miles of subway light rail and buses in 40 years, you'd just be like, "What? Okay, Mr. Time machine, what are you talking about?" Things don't have to suck, but you have to put in the work and you have to have the maturity to understand that these are things that have to be changed through the hard work of politics. There is no magic wand that's going to save you and suddenly turn Los Angeles and its metro into Tokyo and the Tokyo subway. You have to put in the work.

Nolan Gray:

Well, that's a great place to close. I think a lot of YIMBYs will hear this where housing's concerned and feel inspired to continue to put the work in on transit. The book is "The Lost Subways of North America: A Cartographic Guide to Past, Present, and What Might Have Been." Jake, thanks so much for joining Abundance.

Jake Berman:

It was a pleasure guys.

Ned Resnikoff:

Pleasure was all ours. Thanks, Jake.

