



City boosterism and place-making with light rail transit: A critical review of light rail impacts on city image and quality



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ABSTRACT

As an agent in the production of place, transport plays a key role in shaping cities and their wider urban regions. Light rail transit can contribute to city boosterism - helping to enhance a city's image and quality towards broader development agendas such as economic growth and creation of sustainable and liveable cities. This paper examines the place-making role of light rail (supertrams, light metros and streetcars) through analysis of its material and meaningful impacts in relation to boosting city image and quality. It provides a critical synthesis of empirical ex-post evidence from a literature review of published and unpublished sources on wider economic impacts of light rail. Impacts include a modern image, reinforcement of cultural identity, prestige, social inclusion/exclusion, environmental quality, and physical transformations such as pedestrianisation and 'greening' the city. More positive impacts than negative impacts were found, though these vary with geographical location and over time. Some cities deliberately seek to maximise impacts through integrated transport and urban planning strategies. The paper complements existing cultural approaches to transport geography to shed light on the relationship between transit development and city boosterism. The paper makes recommendations for future research.

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1. Introduction

Light rail transit (LRT) (by which we refer to supertrams, light metros and streetcars) has been recognised, among academics and various stakeholders, as a tool to bring about social, economic and environmental benefits for medium- and large-sized cities, and urban regions, across the globe (Banister and Thurstain-Goodwin, 2011). In developed countries, in particular, light rail has been promoted as a catalyst for broad development agendas such as urban regeneration and revitalisation (Babalik-Sutcliffe, 2002; King and Fischer, 2016; Knowles and Ferbrache, 2016), as well as a focus for cities wishing to boost their status and prestige as 'world class', liveable or sustainable cities (Ferbrache and Knowles, 2016; Paget-Seekins, 2015; Vuchic, 1999). Through a cultural geographic lens and conceptualisation of space as socially constructed, light rail can be understood as part of place-making strategies that help to rejuvenate individual streets, (re)produce urban spaces and, in turn, shape discourses about the city and its image. This paper brings together perspec-

tives from transport and cultural geography to examine urban place-making in the context of light rail impact and development.

1.1. Research aims

The aims of this paper are three-fold: (i) to explore a cultural geographic perspective as a way of conceptualising the relationship between light rail development and city boosterism; (ii) to evaluate existing empirical evidence in terms of what it reveals about (mainly) ex-post impacts of light rail on city image and quality; and (iii) to identify gaps in light rail literature and provide directions for future research.

The relationship between transit development and city boosterism has rarely been the primary focus of research on light rail, yet existing literature reveals many examples, which, when synthesised, provide deeper insight to this relationship. This paper is based on a critical review of empirical evidence from a wide range of LRT sources. The nature of the evidence calls for a qualitative methodology to capture meanings and significance of ideas and perceptions ascribed to light rail by social actors, as well as material elements of light rail that transform cities. Space, understood to be socially constructed through an assemblage of heterogeneous entities and their interrelations (Massey, 2005), provides the theoretical terrain to conceptualise the relationship between light rail

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and city boosterism as one of place-making (Jensen, 2013; Lefebvre, 1991; Shields, 1991).

The need for such research is paramount when recognising what Hensher (2016:289) refers to as a resurgence of “emotional ideology” in decision-making, including “a strong sense of imagery conditioning modal preferences for LRT” (see also Edwards and Mackett, 1996; Hensher and Mulley, 2015). This emphasis on image also emerges in discourses on sustainable and liveable cities (Mulliner and Maliene, 2011; Vuchic, 1999). Yet, subjective assessments, as well as qualitative analysis of light rail, have been overlooked in the typical quantitative calculations that have provided justifications for acceptance or rejection of transit schemes. Cost benefit analyses (CBA), for example, have been unable to place numeric value on social, environmental and wider economic effects, or incorporate subjective ideas and perceptions (Pickrell, 1992; van Wee and Rietveld, 2013). The extent and influence of “emotional ideology” in transit decision-making is not always clear, and while ex-ante decisions are not the focus of this paper, ex-post impacts become empirically specifiable as “social discourses on space which (1) underpin the rhetoric of ideologues and politicians and (2) pervade and subvert even the rationalistic discourse of planning and regional development policy.” (Shields, 1991:6).

To achieve its aims, the paper is structured as follows: first, it positions LRT at the interface of broad urban development agendas linked to city boosterism and cultural geographic understandings of space as socially constructed. Second, methods of review and analysis are explained. Third, existing empirical evidence from a range of medium- and large-cities, as well as wider urban areas, mainly in the developed world, is evaluated. Finally, the paper concludes key findings and directions for future research.

2. Boosting city image and quality

According to Banister and Berechman (2001:211), “image building is key to the revitalisation of central areas and in maintaining strong city centres”. High quality transport infrastructure can assist image building through the materialisation of ideas and perceptions held by social actors, as well as re-shaping physical spaces, for instance, through improved accessibility and connectivity (Vuchic, 1999). Niedzielski and Malecki (2001:1414), for example, indicate that rail-based systems have often been seen as “symbol[s] of development, progress, and identity”, while Nolte and Yacobi (2015:33) demonstrate the way in which light rail has been central to reconstruction of Jerusalem as a modern and dynamic city by means of “improving the city’s transportation” and “restoring the city’s charm and appeal”. Image building is also a key strategy associated with city marketing or “boosterism” to help cities develop a more competitive edge (Newman and Thornley, 1995; McLellan and Collins, 2014; Paget-Seekins, 2015), not only economically, but socially and politically (Hubbard, 2008; McCann, 2002; Sari, 2015). A city’s ability to compete in ‘non-conventional’ ways may contribute significantly to its image and reputation, further stimulating economic growth through its ability to attract more people and commerce into the city. High quality transport infrastructure can help to facilitate these processes (Banister and Berechman, 2001).

Public transit is increasingly linked to institutional discourses on sustainable mobility (Hickman et al., 2013), sustainable cities (Ferbrache and Knowles, 2016), and social equity/inclusivity (Farmer, 2011), each of which projects ideas that cities should be attractive and high quality places to live. Mulliner and Maliene (2011), argue that people’s perceptions of the quality of their environment is central for generating sustainable cities that enhance the attractiveness of an urban area. In this way, image and quality

are interlinked. Urban design, including plans for public transit, is at the forefront of cities’ efforts to increase the quality of life of their inhabitants (DETR, 2000; ODPM, 2005; Urban Task Force, 1999). For example, Thomson (1978:322) argues that:

The choice of transport strategy is not simply a calculation of cost-effectiveness. It is also a choice of way of life. Moreover, it is a choice which may affect different sections of the population very differently.

In the United States (US), in 2010, revisions to new federally-funded transit projects emphasised criteria that promoted ‘liveability’ over cost-effectiveness (Vincent, 2010). While cities have sought to tackle traffic congestion, accessibility and environmental impacts as key objectives of light rail development (Babalik-Sutcliffe, 2002), increasingly, wider impacts in terms of economic growth and the creation of sustainable and liveable cities are part of broader development agendas (Banister and Berechman, 2001; DETR and CABE, 2000; ODPM, 2005; Urban Task Force, 1999; Vuchic, 1999). However, light rail, often implemented as a neoliberal project (Grenge, 2005; Paget-Seekins, 2015), has not always achieved its objectives (Babalik, 2000; Babalik-Sutcliffe, 2002; Farmer, 2011; Hass-Klau et al., 2004), often because broader goals of social equity and economic growth are not compatible (Grenge, 2005). However, additional or unintended benefits, such as boosting city prestige on the international stage, may occur and help to raise a city’s ‘world-class status’ (Paget-Seekins, 2015).

In this paper, image and quality enhancement are considered as part of broader urban development goals towards city boosterism - i.e. improving image and quality to help boost the status of a city as sustainable, socially equitable, and liveable. Social actors are central to this process: as designers and planners of these urban areas, and as individuals or social groups valuing the city. Image and quality are problematic categories as their meanings and application rely on subjective assessments. How we measure them is also problematic, particularly those based on subjective valuations for, after all:

The imaginary (thoughts, fantasies, and desires) is a fertile source of all sorts of possible spatial worlds that can prefigure - albeit incoherently - all manner of different discourses, power relations, social relations, institutional structures and material practices.

[Jensen and Richardson, 2004:65]

A cultural geographic perspective and conceptualisation of space as socially constructed and relational, helps us to analyse the place-making relationship between light rail development and city boosterism, and to make sense of what happens to city image when light rail is introduced.

3. Place-making

Following Lefebvre’s (1991) argument that “space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things”, we approach cities as socially constructed spaces and also draw on Massey’s (2005) relative understandings of space to suggest that cities are heterogeneous assemblages of movements, materials and ideas that are integral to their production and reproduction. She argues that “identities/entities, the relations ‘between’ them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive.” (p. 10). Jensen (2013:6) provides specific reference to the types of ‘identities/entities’ that influence the production of urban spaces: “planning, design, architecture, governance systems, technological networks as well as by the social interactions, cultural meanings and the production of social order”. From this perspective, transport becomes an agent in the production of space; a conceptual contrast from more traditional views of transport as something that moves

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