



Mobility and the making of the neoliberal “creative city”: The streetcar as a creative city project?



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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a remarkable rebirth of the streetcar in cities throughout the United States, with dozens of projects under consideration, in planning and construction, or already completed in cities throughout the country. Building on transport geography research on the streetcar, urban studies contributions on neoliberal urbanization and the creative city, and insights from the new mobilities paradigm, this paper sets out to investigate the broad political – economic logic driving this nationwide development trend. Based predominantly on a qualitative content analysis of selected project documents from 12 streetcar projects, I find that the reemergence of these streetcar projects in recent years reflects and is embedded in the general trajectory of neoliberal urbanization and can more precisely be understood as a creative city development tool.

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1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, the streetcar had been the urban mode of transport *par excellence* in the United States. In fact, the streetcar was a symbol of what it meant to be a city, and US cities had the best and most extensive urban streetcar networks of any country in the world (Jackson, 1985, p. 111). However, beginning in the 1930s, and hastily progressing in the post-war years along with automobile-based suburbanization, the streetcar systems throughout the country that had once epitomized urbanity were nearly all eliminated, such that single lines remained in only seven US cities by the late 1960s that have survived until today (Levinson et al., 2012). In light of the near complete death of the streetcar in urban America, the apparent rebirth of this mode of transport – evidenced by the development of projects in cities as diverse as Atlanta and Detroit, Kansas City and Portland, Washington D.C. and Tempe, and New York City and Fort Lauderdale – has been nothing short of “remarkable” (Brown, 2013, p. 44). However, the question of which political and political-economic interests are driving this trend, and what some of the social implications of it might be, has gone largely unexamined.

In a recent contribution to this journal, King and Fischer (2016) provided a much-needed and compelling analysis of the recent wave of streetcar projects in the United States, arguing that the planning of these reflect a shift in transport planning away from a more straightforward transportation planning and toward using streetcars as a vehicle

of strategic spatial planning in cities. With this, King and Fischer have laid a solid foundation for making sense of a significant trend in urban transportation development that has otherwise received too little attention in the literature. The task of this paper is to investigate an aspect of this nationwide development that King and Fischer's work begins to suggest—that in line with other interventions in urban development in recent decades, the surprising reemergence of the streetcar in dozens of cities throughout the United States in recent years reflects and is embedded in the general trajectory of neoliberal urbanization, and that, in practice, the modern streetcar can be understood as a creative city development tool.

I begin the next section by contextualizing the rebirth of the streetcar and briefly discussing a gap in the streetcar literature, and as a response to this gap, I outline a few essential points on neoliberal urbanization, particularly regarding its manifestation in the urban planning and development discourse of the creative city. Then, I discuss how this relates to social justice and mobility. Next, I argue that the rebirth of the streetcar in US cities can be meaningfully interpreted as a creative city urban development strategy, followed by a discussion of my methods and the research results that I believe support this argument. Finally, I offer some caveats regarding these results, which suggest ideas for future research, as well as concluding thoughts on this dynamic development.

2. Streetcar, neoliberal urbanization, and mobility in the making of the creative city

In the early decades of the 20th century, the networks of streetcars and interurban trolleys (streetcars that generally ran between cities,

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towns, and stops in the surrounding countryside) epitomized urban transport, yet nearly entirely disappeared from the American landscape by the mid-1960s. This end of the streetcar as a transport technology marked the beginning of a period of broad retrenchment of rail-based transit, a period characterized by mass suburbanization and motorization, along with the decline of population and transit ridership in America's downtowns. A handful of heavy rail systems (which are powered through a third rail and thus must be entirely grade-separated, such as a subway or elevated train) did begin operation during this period of retrenchment in San Francisco (1972), Washington, DC (1976), Atlanta (1979), Baltimore (1983), and Miami (1984). However, on the one hand, heavy rail is expensive to build, and on the other hand, most of these particular projects saw higher costs and lower ridership figures than initially projected, and this helped to diminish the prospect of new heavy rail systems elsewhere (Baum-Snow et al., 2005).

In this context, the streetcar as a transport technology would see a first "reincarnation" (Black, 1993, 151) during the light rail transit (LRT) boom beginning around 1980. The new moniker of "light rail" described a train powered by an overhead wire, allowing it to run at grade or even on city streets (Huang, 1996). The generally cheaper and easier-to-build light rail lines were thus viewed politically as a compromise solution for rail transit in medium to large metropolitan areas moving forward (Black, 1993). The first new LRT systems began running in 1978 in Edmonton, Canada, and 1981 in San Diego, United States, followed by projects in a number of cities throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s (see Fig. 1). Ultimately, such projects were criticized among a number of transport professionals as being oversold by local politicians who had misrepresented ridership figures and cost projections in order to secure competitive federal funding to realize their cities' projects (Black, 1993; Kain, 1997; Pickrell, 1992). Moreover, concerns arose over transit equity, as many of these LRT systems appeared to disproportionately serve wealthier, suburban, majority white communities, while some bus services, which disproportionately served

communities of color, were being cut or reduced. Such was the case in Los Angeles, where the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union organized to combat racial discrimination in Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (LACMTA) after the city's Blue LRT line was built serving wealthier, white areas, while communities of color saw bus service decrease and fares increase. This culminated in 1996 with an out-of-court consent agreement, which not only saw LACMTA agree to decrease bus fares and improve bus service but also set a serious precedent against discriminatory spending among US transportation authorities (Soja, 2010).

While a number of light rail lines have been built throughout the United States since the 1990s, LRT has largely been overtaken in what can be considered a second reincarnation of the beginning-of-the-century streetcar technology in the form of the "modern streetcar" (see Fig. 1). The modern streetcar essentially uses the same technology as LRT, but typically runs on street with vehicular traffic, stopping more frequently on shorter routes, and thus providing shorter distance trips in the urban core rather than serving a suburban commuting population (Ramos-Santiago and Brown, 2015). The lack of a need for a dedicated right-of-way and the shorter route length typically make new streetcar routes cheaper to build than LRT, while the fact that in most of these cases streetcars are limited to the core city arguably reduces or eliminates the need to negotiate with neighboring suburban municipalities. Although predated by a number of heritage streetcar routes, this second reincarnation of the streetcar was most notably marked by the highly praised Portland Streetcar in 2001 (Brown, 2013). Since then, dozens of cities of every stripe across the country have considered reintroducing streetcars, with a number having been completed, under construction, or planned for construction, reflecting a truly astonishing national urban transit development trend.

Within transport geography, attention to the reemergence of streetcars has mostly been limited to a focus on quantifiable issues such as a streetcar's impact on property values, congestion mitigation, transit

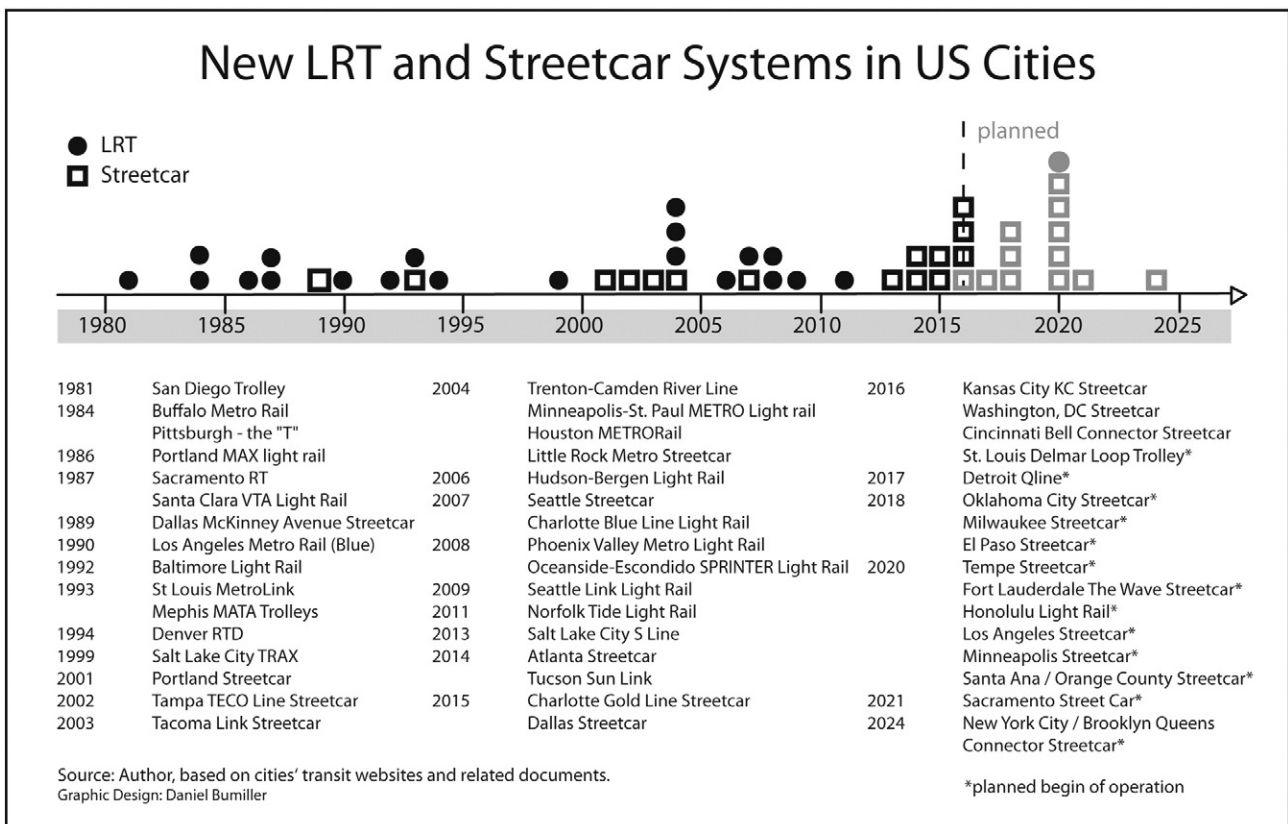


Fig. 1. New LRT and streetcar systems in US cities.

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