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BOOK REVIEW

BOOK 'TRANSFORMING URBAN TRANSPORT: THE ETHICS, POLITICS, AND PRACTICES OF SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY' REVIEW

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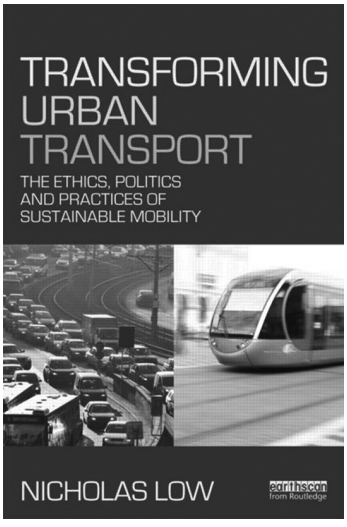

This review is written from the perspective of someone who is always on the lookout for suitable textbooks to introduce the subjects of transport planning and policy to students who have a wide variety of backgrounds.

This book (Low 2013) is the product of a team of researchers affiliated with the Australasian Center for Governance and Management of Urban Transport (GAMUT). They were supported in large part by the Volvo Research and Education Foundation through their Centers of Excellence program. Full disclosure: I work with one of these Centers as well led by the University of Cape Town. Almost all the researchers are in Australia, with the exceptions of a few from the UK, Japan, and China. As a result, most of the examples and research data came from the Australasia region. It is also very much written as a social science tract rather than an engineering or planning textbook. It is not full of graphs and equations but draws more on theories about governance, rational decision-making, deliberative planning processes, and so on.

The book is divided into three sections: Global Dilemma, Global and Local Change and Persistence, and Strategies of Transformation.

The first section is a fine overview of the scope, seriousness, and urgency of the sustainability problem. Importantly, it also includes the freight and logistics dimensions of the problem so that one does not need to find additional books or articles to address them. This material is usable on any continent.

The second section gives an interesting perspective that one might normally see in political science texts but not in texts used in planning and engineering programs. Planning and engineering professionals and their books tend to give technocratic explanations for the limited progress to date such as the inevitable downside of the business cycle that deprives governments of revenue, the inevitable impact of technology that reduces local control and wages, and the public preferences for conservative politicians. In contrast, *Transforming Urban Transport* focuses more on an inevitable crisis of capital overaccumulation as a result of a turn toward neoliberal policies and away from Fordism. That is, the lack of buying power at the middle and bottom as capital moves upward then translates into reduced tax revenues and ability to make needed investments. This rings more true to someone like me who has been working in the USA for many years than an explanation limited to a public preference for business-as-usual and temporary downturns in tax revenues. It is also supported by polls showing that the public wants more public transport.

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The second section provides an institutional explanation: that governments have 'path dependencies' and an inability to integrate policies between departments and across the various levels, making it hard to change directions despite the urgency to do so. It also gives some interesting examples of how occasionally 'critical junctures' come along to break path dependencies and allow a genuine reform of policies. This sets the stage for the last section.

The third section attempts to provide some successful strategies to overcome the difficulties outlined earlier in the book. One of the most interesting examples for getting policies changed across an entire region is from Vancouver, British Columbia and is a worthy case of study. The authors also provide worthwhile case studies of megaprojects from Perth, Sydney, and Melbourne showing the complexity and time taken to change directions. There is a chapter on children and how much travel independence they are granted in various places that reveals much about societies in general. That is the one I will be showing to others outside the urban transport planning community.

I want to pay particular attention to the chapter entitled *New Analysis for a New Synthesis*. This chapter aims to offer strategies for necessary reforms, but sometimes without sufficient attention to their underlying assumptions. For instance, the authors are correct that networked public transport systems usually perform better than isolated lines aimed only along separate corridors. But they also state that '. . . its application is a more important predictor of public transport success than the density of residential settlement'. So, the question: are seven-story apartment buildings, which is not an important reason for the dense network of streetcars and buses in the district of Helsinki where I live, not worth considering? In reality, density raises demand levels by increasing the number of people near a stop, and by reducing the percentage of trips it is physically possible to carry by autos.

Similarly, the authors advocate for the use of timed transfers within this integrated network. But, there are losses associated with timed transfers, such as longer layover times and more circuitous routings. Therefore, they cannot always be made to work. Here again, density plays a role. Timed transfers become necessary because the headways are so long that it is unattractive to have waited for a random amount of time. But in high-demand environments, all headways on connecting lines become so short that random waiting times are acceptable. The interested reader should see Lee's (1998) dissertation. He studies the same network under conditions where there are high and low demand levels, high and low travel speeds, and high and low transfer penalties. Then, by minimizing social costs (monetary operating plus monetized time cost of users), different types of optimal route networks emerge. Higher demand makes the planner's life easier: both direct (conventional) and networked systems work well.

This brings me to one shortcoming of the book: the authors really missed some relevant references outside their Australasia sphere. As an example, they cite Vuchic's (2005) book as the only book in the English language where everyone can learn more about timed transfer networks. In addition to Vuchic (2005), several researchers (Bruun 2007; Ceder 2007; Maxwell 2003) provide substantial information. Bruun (2007) also provides a summary of Lee's (1998) aforementioned work. Ceder (2007) gives a treatment that requires a stronger math background. Occasionally, there have been articles in journals on this topic, such as Maxwell's (2003) about converting the entire San Francisco Bay Area. On the effective use of information technology to influence public policy, Orfield's (1997) *Metropolitics* is a seminal work and a must read. His efforts to create a regional government were centered around the use of GIS maps to influence politicians, reporters, and the public. Orfield (1997) recounts an (almost) effective strategy for their use, which came very close to creating a genuinely strong regional government in the Minneapolis–St Paul region. The models developed by the GAMUT team and highlighted in this section of their book are examples of tools for generating further, ever more sophisticated maps. But they need skilled leaders and coalition builders like Orfield (1997) to maximize their effectiveness.

This last section of the book goes to great length to argue that the time is right for more deliberative democracy. We have a larger number of nonofficially involved experts, better analysis and visualization tools, and more means for public participation through the entire planning and policy-making processes. I fully agree that the new age of information technology allows better outcomes. While the aforementioned tools by the GAMUT team are great, as are similar ones elsewhere, not much time is spent explaining to the student what is really involved to collect data, load data, set parameters, and so on. What if one does not have cooperative public agencies? How much volunteer help can we really expect? My experience is that the places with policies and plans are most in need of challenge and also have the poorest databases about nonauto modes, have done the least analysis work, and are the least transparent. Articles and books showing case studies on how to deal with the real laggards are needed to supplement this current book.

As slow as it might seem in Australia to transform urban regions, think what it is like in some other 'developed' countries, let alone some of the genuinely poor countries. Let me just briefly describe the current

state of urban transport development in two regions I know exceptionally well, as I have lived in both for many years. In the Seattle region, it is going to take 26 years after the authorizing legislation for a rail line to reach nearby Bellevue, an important employment and activity center. The already slow project has been slowed down further due to insufficient tax revenue after the 2008 crash. There is a record public transport demand, and large queues exist to board some regional bus routes. Yet, services have been cut and might face a further round. In the Philadelphia region, public transport ridership is at the highest level in 24 years and continually growing, yet regional rail lines are facing truncation due to an inadequate capital to repair bridges. Rural legislators talk about how they are subsidizing the city and there is lots of racial innuendo. As this is being written, the Governor of Pennsylvania is proposing a budget that will mean further cuts to infrastructure maintenance. There has not been a new rail project in decades and the short 'wish list' in the City's master plan, even in the very unlikely event it would be funded, is still grossly inadequate to respond to global warming.

Many more examples could be cited. Are these really just transport planning and policy problems? Schools, public universities, water supply systems, rural roads, parks, and many other parts of the public space are also in decay in many countries. If capital overaccumulation is really the root problem, as the book strongly suggests, then moving quickly toward sustainability requires large-scale redistribution of this capital to where it is needed, not mere sector-specific reforms with modest increases in funding for each.

The book has a lot to offer and gives the student an understanding of transport sustainability issues in a way that is grounded in high-quality social science research. It would be a great starting point to expand into the literature farther and to begin one's own research. But it does not deliver strategies that are up to the urgency of the problems. The value and contribution of good ideas, quality research, and facts and figures are overstated. As detectives and investigative reporters say – follow the money. Many of the most powerful politicians and institutions respond to constituencies, not to the public interest. They are unimpressed by the quality of arguments even when such arguments invoke their grandchildren's future.

In summary, this is a highly usable book, as long as it is supplemented by additional suitable region-specific case studies and more materials about building countervailing power against entrenched politicians and constituencies.

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