

In our autopian society, sound transit is to park your car



Straphanger:
Saving Our Cities
and Ourselves
from the
Automobile
by Taras Grescoe

BY TOM WATSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Most major United States metropolitan areas gave the keys to the city to cars and freeways years ago, sacrificing scores of neighborhoods in the process. Public transportation has somehow managed to stay alive and is even expanding in fits and starts in Portland and other cities, but it always seems to be on life support. Many politicians refuse to fund public transit, trashing it as wasteful, and lots of Americans still think of a bus as the “loser cruiser” for people not successful enough to have a car.

Taras Grescoe eloquently blows apart those ridiculous notions in his compelling new book, “Straphanger: Saving Our Cities and Ourselves from the Automobile.”

With current, well-researched examples from around the world, Grescoe shows how urban bus and train systems link neighborhoods and cultures, connect people with jobs and reduce global warming. Not only is effective public transportation the lifeblood of a vibrant city, but it opens the door to opportunity and social justice for all residents.

As Grescoe explains, this book is partially “the story of a bad idea: the notion that our metropolises should be shaped by the needs of cars, rather than people. ... Simply put, I like subways, buses and trains because I believe they make better places than cars and freeways.”

But the great strength of “Straphanger” is that it’s not simplistic. Grescoe colorfully analyzes public transit systems (mostly with a chapter apiece) in New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Portland, Ore., Vancouver B.C., Montreal, Paris, Copenhagen, Moscow, Tokyo and Bogotá, and he never finds a perfect system, although Copenhagen comes close.

Grescoe finds challenges and problems

with public transit in the real world, but more often he sees shining beacons of hope.

As an international traveler, a user of public transit (or “straphanger”) all his life, an excellent journalist and a deep thinker, Montreal resident Grescoe expands our thinking about public transit. It’s not just about buses and trains. It’s also about how often they run, where the stations are and how people get to the stations. The biggest revelations are when he describes the vital roles of bicycling and walking in public transportation. The bicycle, in Grescoe’s view, is “the most decentralized, affordable and efficient mode of mass transit ever invented.”

Although Copenhagen is frequently lauded in liberal media as the ultimate bike-friendly city, Grescoe goes beyond platitudes as he describes how Copenhagen utilizes separated bike lanes and other tools to make cycling a way of life. The results are astonishing. Thirty-seven percent of metro Copenhagen’s residents get to work or school by bicycle. “More people commute by bicycle in greater Copenhagen, population 1.8 million, than cycle to work in the entire United States, population 310 million,” Grescoe writes.

Closer to home, Portland also scores points with Grescoe as a cycling hub. “Thanks to a network of 260 miles of bike paths, Portlanders are now more likely to get to work by bicycle than the inhabitants of any other American city.”

But Copenhagen and Portland rely on extensive bus and train networks as well, and Grescoe shows us the pros and cons of transit systems there and in every other city he highlights. He ponders the big questions but also delves into the nettlesome details. How does a subway system get built and maintained? What’s “transit-oriented development”? Do streetcars work? What’s “bus rapid transit”? How do cultural factors

affect the use of public transit? What’s the best model for regional transportation planning? Should transit systems be publicly or privately owned? Grescoe cogently addresses all those issues.

“Straphanger” also spells out the environmental costs of our reliance on the car. Looking at the climate change implications, for example, Grescoe notes that the average American is responsible for emitting 24 tons of carbon annually.

“Thanks largely to widespread transit use,” he observes. In contrast, the share of the average Tokyo resident is only 4.8 tons of carbon.

If any fault can be found with this book, it’s that Grescoe gets a little carried away with his vocabulary. He freely uses obscure words – proleptic, bosky, osmotic, coruscating, ramified, pantiles, chamfered, hecatomb – that might drive you to the dictionary (or not). But that’s almost endearing. What matters is that we take public transportation seriously. Grescoe makes us do that, writing with uncommon wit and warmth.

He’s a proud straphanger, and he’s not alone. “Half the population of New York, Toronto and London do not own cars,” Grescoe writes. “Public transport is how most of the people of Asia and Africa, the world’s most populous continents, travel.” Are they all losers because they don’t drive a car? Maybe our personal cars are the real “loser cruisers.”

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