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## **Why Public Transportation Works Better Outside the U.S.**

**The widespread failure of American mass transit is usually blamed on cheap gas and suburban sprawl. But the full story of why other countries succeed is more complicated.**

When it comes to the quality of public transit, comparisons between American cities and international counterparts are usually met with a simple response: “It’s different over there.”

These differences, the argument goes, are vast and fundamental: Europe is far more densely built, and its older cities—settled centuries before the automotive age—will always be innately transit-friendlier. In Asian cities, meanwhile, explosive urban growth has been accompanied (and accelerated) by massive government investments in urban rail networks. But the U.S. boomed in the 20th-century’s automobile age, and the private car is still king; most American cities and their suburbs are utterly dependent on them.

How did transit become such an afterthought in Americans’ transportation habits? I addressed that question in detail in an [earlier CityLab piece](#). But to briefly summarize: Transit everywhere suffered serious declines in the postwar years, the cost of cars dropped and new expressways linked cities and fast-growing suburbs. That article pointed to a key problem: The limited transit service available in most American cities means that demand will never materialize—not without some fundamental changes.

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CITY LAB

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