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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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