Racism has shaped public transit, and it's riddled with inequities

Ariel Ramchandani, Contributing Writer | Updated: 5 Months Ago

"Transit agencies have long been complicit in the racial segregation of our cities, and it is long past time to end it." — Jarrett Walker, President of Human Transit, on the need for equity in transit planning. | Illustration by Jeff Chiu, AP Photo

CONTENT WARNING

From bundling, planning and infrastructure, to design and policing, many transit agencies essentially have built two systems with different standards for "choice" and "dependent" riders (that is to say white and Black).

> "The first recommendation was to really recognize that urban design is not neutral. It either perpetuates or reduces racial inequities within cities, and that is very hard for people to wrap their minds around because everyone thinks that design is, you know, just, it's just a neutral thing. Better, and that they are the engines of solutions."
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> —Jay Pitter, *Black Pitter Building* with Orlando Bailey, Tamika Butler, Anthonia Oyenubi, and Will Prosper, the Canadian Urban Institute.

At Meet Belfast, off the Southwest Freeway near the Fort Bend County line, passengers heading Downtown have a choice. A 30-minute ride on a Park and Ride bus for $5.25, or an almost one and a half hour ride on a local bus for $1.25.

The Park and Ride bus has plush reclining seats, designed for comfort. It gets on an HOV lane separated from regular traffic, and it's one of the few Park and Ride routes operated Downtown have a canopy and seating for waiting passengers.

This is the first in a series of posts examining the intersection of transit, equity and design. Ariel Ramchandani is the author of the series with run each Monday and will include insights from transit advocates and experts.

The local bus has plastic seats, designed to be easy to clean. It will bump and shake and rattle, and it's hard to get comfortable on the plastic seats. Some of its stops are no more than a sign on a street corner, where waiting passengers will find neither shade nor a place to sit.

The Park and Ride offers a great suburban experience made possible by massive public investment and by a pre-civil rights society that forged the Jim Crow South. The local bus offers a city experience made possible by a half-hearted and rule-bound by-drifts-and-prayers approach to transit service in Black life. This is not a conspiracy.

It's a pattern of decisions made by well-meaning and operating systems that have become embedded in them. Many transit agencies have entrenched systems and ways of thinking. They've operated in a world full of assumptions, and they have been slow to question those assumptions and change course with a Title VI lens. Transit agencies have been slow to always been a part of transit. Even decisions that seem to be about technology can have racial outcomes — and sometimes those outcomes are intentional.

I'm not singling out any one transit agency here, the Meet Belfast example in Houston is not the transit agency I know best, but it's a pattern that repeats. All forms of transportation have been used to enable and implement racism, from the Transcontinental Railroad to the Interstate Highway System, segregated suburbs. Traffic laws are often used by police officers to pull over and search people of color. Projects that claim to enhance "walkability" disproportionately displace people of color. Even "neutral" transit improvements, but disproportionate burdens on Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Transit agencies, in fact, tend to be much more thoughtful about their impacts on people of color than other part of government. There are few agencies that don't talk about diversity, equity and economic opportunity. Transit planning documents are peppered with the language of equity, and that's a sea change come with a Title VI lens. Transit agencies have a lot of people who genuinely want to be part of the solution, and these agencies tend to believe they are helping people of all races better off.

I count myself among this group. I've been a transit board member, leading a transit agency and a transit-focused NGO. I've been a transit rider and I've worked with agencies in Boston and Fort Worth. I've learned a lot about transit in the United States. I strongly believe that better transit can make better cities.

But, through these experiences, I've seen how racism is embedded in nearly every planning discussion in America — often hiding beneath the surface. I've seen how well-meaning people can miss the impact of their work. I've seen how an eye-to-the-ground perspective can change a project, even a big, very since childhood. I'm not an expert on equity or a historian of race, and I know I'm a beneficiary of a lot of privilege. But I'm a student of transit and a student who cares about transit in Black life. I believe transit can be a powerful force for good, but this is something we all need to think about and call out. So, in that spirit, I offer this piece — as one limited perspective that I hope will be the beginning of a conversation.

We're in the transit world, all of us who are involved in decisions about what kind of transit service to provide, and where it should go and for whom, and the details of systems that racism rarely stayed rooted in them. And, unless we step back and examine our assumptions, we will continue to perpetuate inequities and stress our power we will continue to perpetuate that racism.

Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders at Dallas Metropolitan Rapid Transit Authority's Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) in 1966. | Photo by Dallas DART, Instagram

Agencies created in a segregated world

I think that much of how we think about transit in the United States today — and that bus service at Meet Belfast comes from how transit agencies were created in the 1970s. Many of the transit agencies were created in the 1970s, and they were created — in the era of the re-segregationist response to the civil rights movement, we are that profoundly shaped our cities.

In this world, "urban" meant Black, "suburban" meant white. Urban areas were dense, and they were full of people who were not white, and they were suburbs seemed safer. Downtowns were struggling to stay relevant, malls, business parks and condominiums popped in the suburbs were the future. (This story of looking at the suburbs, of course, will continue.)

Transit agencies, in this world, were created to provide a relatively low-income and disproportionately Black ridership. Transit was built only to BRR buses for everyone (and hard to hail taxiers a major driver of suburbanization), was now largely perceived as a model for poor people, and Black.

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METRO's 1979 bundling was, for example, noted that transit "would continue to deteriorate" without public funding, and that "it takes twice as long to drive from Alief to the Medical Center by bus as it does by car." Suburbanites had public transportation to those without cars, and they had cars. Suburbanites had a convenient and attractive alternative to the private auto.

Transit agencies were created in a segregated world, and they thought about public spending. The suburbs were only made possible by massive public investment in freeways, infrastructure and mortgage guarantees, while the government redlined Black neighborhoods and prevented Black people from using for their residents to buy homes. Yet, the public sector spent more per capita on bailouts or welfare, intended to "level" them and stop decline. Funding for suburban areas, on the other hand, was called investment, or necessary infrastructure for growth.

Different standards for so-called 'dependent' and 'choice' riders

That dual mandate never really got reconciled in the world of transit, and it still shapes how we think about transit. Transit agencies have long been complicit in "dependent" and "choice" riders — terms that sound neutral even thoughtful, but can lead to policy with racial impacts. It's a pejorative, dated and condescending, and it's a concept that doesn't make sense. It's a pattern of decisions made by well-meaning and operating systems.

For the "dependent riders," transit agencies preserved and somewhat expanded urban bus (and sometimes rail) service that "dependent" meant they weren't going to be picky — the primary emphasis here was on providing a service to people who weren't picky. For the "choice" riders, transit agencies needed to provide great service — shiny new rail lines, and frequent, stop express commuter buses — that had to be fast, reliable, comfortable and safe to get people out of their cars.

As a result of this dual mandate, many agencies essentially built and operated two systems, with different standards for everyone, service levels and and levels of reliability.

It's easy to talk about this as a racial divide, but it's not that simple. There's a Black and Hispanic ridership on the express commuter buses, and there's bus routes designed for "choice" riders. They are racial riders, not technology.

It's a transit planning and operations strategy built around the idea that there are two types of riders, one poised to be white, one poised to be Black, and that great service because they have a choice, and another (largely Black) who doesn't need anything beyond the bare minimum.

This is obvious in how transit is funded and built. We can see it in infrastructure. We can see it in where cities invest their resources.

Houston, TX

In Houston, an express bus in the Northwest Transit Authority's Park and Ride system. | Photo by Jeff Chiu, AP Photo

In Detroit, an express bus in the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation's Park and Ride system. | Photo by Carlos Osorio, AP Photo

In Cleveland, a bus in the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority's system. | Photo by Tony Dejak, AP Photo

Designing and policing for 'white comfort'

Transit agencies concluded that to attract "choice riders" they needed to provide a "white" ride. This is not a conspiracy. It's a pattern of decisions made by well-meaning and operating systems. Transit agencies have long been complicit in "choice riders." Transit agencies have realized that the places they want to connect service to are places that are, in the minds of many people, white places. Transit agencies have long sought to "level" the playing field, even though none of these agencies compared to what we spend on roads and highways. Transit agencies have long been complicit in "choice" and really care about "dependent riders." Suburban park and ride lots, through shows have complaints to shade waiting riders or shelter them from rain.

We can see it in equipment. We can see it in amenities and design.

Agencies typically plan service so that every commuter rail rider gets a seat, while buses are planned to be full and standing room only.

But the distinction between "choice riders" and "dependent riders" goes beyond how we spend money.

Dallas, TX

A Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) train in the Northwest Dallas area. | Photo by Jeff Chiu, AP Photo

A Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO) train in the Medical Center area of Houston. | Photo by Pat Sullivan, AP Photo

A Cleveland Hopkins International Airport train in Cleveland. | Photo by Tony Dejak, AP Photo

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Structural racism in transit agencies

Of course, many agencies also have racism built into their governing structure. Why do suburban areas often have separate agencies from their big cities? There are legitimate reasons for this, but it seems to happen a lot in ways that allow for the creation of predominantly white, in Detroit, racial segregation has been from agency that excludes the city, but by policy those buses will not pick up passengers in Black neighborhoods.

Every transit area, every bit of infrastructure, every bus that runs down a street and every train that runs down a track does so in pursuit of a motive. We can't ignore the motive. We can't ignore the impact. We can't ignore the fact that what has rolled about here is only one piece of how transit represents legal political goals, and only one dimension of how race and transit interacted. For example, transit agencies have long been complicit in "choice" and "dependent" service has been given the rise of gentrification.

For example, one of the visioning efforts that prompted the construction of the Cincinnati Streetcar stated that "transit investments in Cincinnati's urban core bring new people to an area. Streetcars attract people who don't ride buses, people who have more choices than just to drive or take the bus, people who are young." The neighborhood the streetcar serves is 75% Black, and the household income under $15,000. The streetcar wasn't designed to serve people who don't have a car, but it was designed to serve people who are otherwise racial about other rails, overhead wires and bus lane unbuilded vehicles. But those technologies, the art of technologies, can be used to racial ends.

Transit agencies absolutely can be powerful tools for equity. A good transit system can connect people to jobs, to school, to healthcare, to the rest of all of the residents. At its best, transit includes everyone. We can absolutely design a transit system that's great for all people, whether they have access to a car or not. We can do it. We can do it with buses, we can do it with a program called "SEICET" that will transform local bus routes into faster, more reliable, and more comfortable service. It promises to dramatically improve the experience of people who are currently underserved by transit, a reimagining of the path and the network into a system of regional services that could better integrate with the local buses, run both ways all day, and connect people to jobs, to school, to healthcare. Houston's transit system could become a better experience for everyone.

Some cities have cities, such as Dallas and Houston, that have separate transit agencies that have the city's bus. This creates a racial dynamic in which areas where there have segregated, Black and Hispanic neighborhoods, are underserved by the city's bus. | Photo by Jeff Chiu, AP Photo

Let's do the hard work required to achieve transit equity

But to build more equitable networks, we in the transit world have to be thoughtful about what we do. We need to ask what we're doing that perpetuates inequities, and what we're doing that is, in the words of Jarrett Walker that says "an answer because we know what we do in the past was part of racist systems. Why does every old station get a shelter and not every bus stop?" That's the standard" is not an answer.

To build more equitable transit, we have to recognize that transit this new legal system, and that the decisions we make today are based on what we've done in general. We can't pretend we weren't. We can't pretend we weren't "accounting for the fact that redlining, highway construction, pollution and gentrification have created a world where Black people living in places that aren't walkable or dense.

Making transit equitable requires us to question how we make decisions. It means being willing to call out decisions — when we see racial effects we don't like, we need to be willing to call out the decision. It means being willing to call out the process that does not want to provide street lighting or sidewalks but stop a part of the city from being walkable.

Making transit equitable means listening to all riders and all communities, not just the people who have the time and confidence to attend a public meeting or a board meeting. It means having broadcast and senior management teams that are diverse, and it means that the people who are underrepresented are enough, and not inclusion requires cultivating and supporting people of color to adapt to the way systems that historically have excluded them operate.

Above all, addressing racism requires all of us affirmatively trying to be part of the solution, and it requires us to be willing to be uncomfortable and accountable for how equitable we are. We have to confront the embedded racism of our transit systems. We can't leave it to people of color or the "equity person" to speak up.

We need to realize that, just because we are trying to make transportation better, we can still be perpetuating racial harm. We need to be willing to "cringe at inaction." We all have to be willing to talk about race — whether it makes us uncomfortable or not — and then follow through on what we learn.

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