

TRANSPORT FOR SUBURBIA

review

Stuart Harrison

book

Paul Mees

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TRANSPORT FOR SUBURBIA is a discussion of how public transport can work in lower-density environments: in the suburbs, as opposed to the high-density places that Australia and other western countries may aspire to, but don't really have. It is an international publication, printed in London, and as such looks at transport in cities around the world, with a focus on Australia, Canada and Switzerland. The book starts with a story of catching public transport to Monash University in Clayton, Melbourne. It's a common experience for visitors, staff and students, and Mees continues to refer to it as a true failure of integration – the sight of the bus pulling away from the nearby bus stop as you arrive at the station.

Mees' central argument is that density and good public transport do not have to be related – but that most people think they do. This in turn, he argues, lets governments off the hook, by allowing them the argument that we need to make the city denser before we can fix things up. Mees argues that good public transport is well within reach for the whole of the city encompassing outer, middle and inner suburbs, through network-based planning that is centrally coordinated (but not necessarily centrally owned).

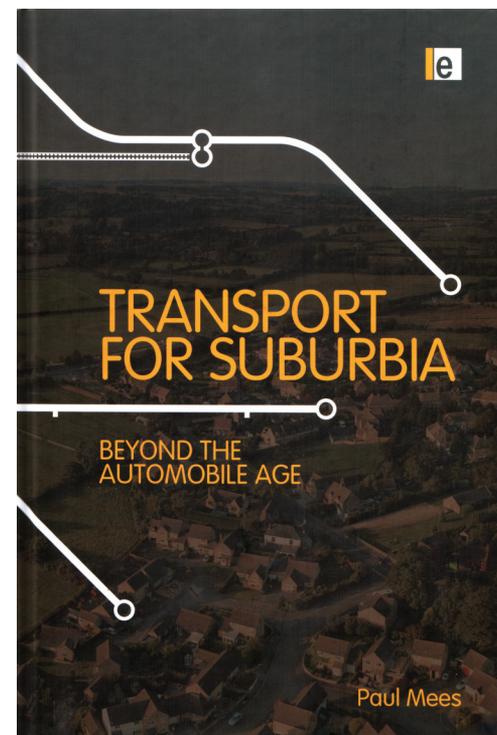
Mees is a big fan of Zurich's transport system, and goes to some length to show it is not just about the central city, but the outlining rural areas. These have densities below that of outer Australian suburbs, but are still able to have good coordinated services through a series of integrated bus and train systems.

This is an academic book, but very clearly written. Mees himself is a controversial figure, a rare breed

in the consultant-based critique economy that accepts ideals of transport-oriented development, but struggles to implement them. Typical of the book is its investigative approach to problems such as how density figures are arrived at – particularly the problem of getting people-per-hectare figures, which are often inaccurate. Boundaries of cities are hard to define; while some cities may seem dense, a closer examination will often prove otherwise. If you take into account New York's complete metropolitan area, for example, its density is lower than Los Angeles. Think about the opening credits of *The Sopranos* – where does that city end? There is perhaps a linguistic problem – what does the word 'city' actually mean? The historical heart or the metro area that sprawls and merges with others?

In Melbourne, Mees catalogues both the litany of failures to provide a suitable mechanism for the delivery of public transport and the pandering to the operators who have failed to deliver good services – initially by claiming the service wasn't being used enough, but then after receiving a further \$1 billion in subsidises (more than the cost of direct funding the system, according to Mees) claiming the system was too popular. There are better examples, and the coordinated bus feeder and train system in Perth is a qualified success – other Australian cities must wonder why they are unable to do the same thing, while they can still build freeways, such as Melbourne's EastLink, that are underused, but look good.

The book's subtitle is *Beyond the Automobile Age* – Mees doesn't like cars much and sees them as



somewhat unnecessary if good frustration-free public transport is provided. Often people say the car is a problem, but see this as related mostly to its method of propulsion – whether the car is electrically powered or not, Mees thinks it is effectively unnecessary for general use. He suggests that part of the problem is the obsession transport planners have for new types – it's hard to suggest to many that trams, trains, bikes and walking (pre-20th century solutions) are the answer. The bus, as the most recent innovation, is examined also, and he sees it as part of a solution that works within the integrated network approach. Also discussed is the competition among non-car transport solutions, which can occur in poorly managed situations, such as the use of lanes for buses and bikes simultaneously.

The book is an engaging read and a must for anyone working within urbanism or transport. It has no pictures at all, which may have helped describe some of the case study scenarios, but the content is there. There are some tables, and the big one that describes the density of different cities accurately (according to Mees' model) is most interesting. Mees argues that urban design is often seen as the answer to developing good cities and good transport systems because it is more interesting and creative, but that what is needed first is the 'dry' stuff of good management – of making things efficient and coordinated. **ar**

Stuart Harrison is an architect and director of Harrison and White. He teaches at RMIT, hosts The Architects on Melbourne RRR and is Melbourne editor of AR.