Journal of Transport Geography 82 (2020) 102399

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Transport Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jtrangeo

Book review

Lost in the Transit Desert: Race, Transit Access and Suburban Form. Diane Jones Allen. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. (£95 (Hardback), from £20 (eBook). ISBN: 978-1-138-95424-3 (Hardback), ISBN: 9781315667027 (eBook))

In this book, Diane Jones Allen provides a clear account of the emergence of 'Transit Deserts', which can simply be defined as underserved areas in terms of transit access, and points out its ramifications for different social groups, particularly African Americans. She also offers forward-looking, holistic solutions to the problem. The social dynamics of transport disadvantages and the lack of urban access have been a long concern in transport and urban studies (Schwanen et al., 2015). The disruptions caused by infrastructure investments and urban renewal projects are accompanied by further racial, gender and socioeconomic segregation. Through personal narratives, Jones contributes crucial insights into the implications of lack of transit in places where there is a high demand for public transit. She is particularly critical of the transport-housing policy aspect of suburban sprawl in relation to racial and socioeconomic inequalities.

The initial chapter presents the characteristics of transit deserts and their emergence and expansion in the American context. Having set the theoretical and empirical context of the book, the following chapter presents detailed case studies of New Orleans, Baltimore and Chicago focusing on their histories of transit and gentrification. The New Orleans case is particularly interesting, as it deals with a complex situation of climate risks, gentrification and social segregation. The impacts of the Hurricane Katrina in 2005 on the physical structure of the neighbourhoods and the demographic shifts are explained through individual stories as well as the official statistics of displacement and travel patterns. Varying levels of transit dependency that is contingent upon the physical structure of cities are successfully illustrated through individual stories. In Baltimore, transit implications of gentrification and the social and racial composition of the displaced are described in terms of convenience, affordability and alternative means to public transport, such as the illegal act of picking up people on the street in return for money. The Chicago case draws attention to infrastructure development, industrial location, housing policy and the racial segregation of the Chicago neighbourhoods, which is largely due to loss of public housing and lack of affordable housing. Despite the extensive transport system in Chicago, the lack of access near new developments and affordability remain key issues.

Following the narratives from the three case studies, Chapter 3 provides a discussion on how traditional travel demand forecasting has led to these transit deserts. It also discusses how the 'catalytic-forecasting', which provides a more place-specific approach, may overcome the challenges of lack of transit. In Chapter 4, holistic approaches to transport and housing planning are called for to consider the needs of the transit dependent populations. The current practices that act as solutions to the last-mile problem in the transit deserts are also presented including car sharing, hacking, and the use of digital technologies. The culture-specific responses to these alternatives are also outlined drawing on the residents' accounts. Jones argues that these practices should be explored and supported as needed.

By the end of the book, the reader is left with a clear understanding of the histories of transit access in the selected case studies. Migration from urban centres to outer urban areas, where access to employment and social infrastructure is limited due to lack of physical access, is not a new story. However, drawing primarily on interviews complemented by contextual trends, this book sheds light on the individual experiences in light of the political, economic and physical changes. Moreover, the personal accounts entail clear distinction between the actual and perceived access, which is increasingly crucial to understand in transport planning. The book also offers specific policy pathways to avoid future transit deserts as well as addressing the current issues primarily in the transport policy realm. Examples mobilised in the book illustrate clearly the intersection of socioeconomic and racial disadvantages through the course of migration from urban to suburban areas. In places, the alternative policy and transport solutions seem slightly disconnected (Chapters 3 and 4, but especially in Chapter 4) from the preceding narratives outlined in Chapter 2. It would have been helpful to see more details on the rationale of the policy solutions in relation to the specific case studies. Doing so would also bring a more critical perspective on the implications of some of the practices mentioned in the chapter.

Overall, this book presents valuable evidence on a timely and important topic of transit disadvantages in the era of market-led urban renewal and infrastructure projects. I recommend it to the researchers and practitioners working in the areas of transport and housing policy.

Reference

Schwanen, T., Lucas, K., Akyelken, N., Solsona, D.C., Carrasco, J.A., Neitens, T., 2015. Rethinking the links between social exclusion and transport disadvantage through the lens of social capital. Transp. Res. A Policy Pract. 74, 123–135.

Nihan Akyelken,
Sustainable Urban Development Programme, University of Oxford, United Kingdom
E-mail address: Nihan.akyelken@conted.ox.ac.uk.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2019.02.004

Available online 06 November 2019
0966-6923