

General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars

One of the most persistent debates in transportation history surrounds the decline of streetcar systems in American cities. Once the primary mode of public transportation in the United States, streetcar use declined as other modes of transportation, most notably motor buses and private automobiles, became more widely used. Possible explanations for this decline are varied, ranging from concerted efforts by auto manufacturers to replace streetcars with buses, to simple demand-and-supply economics shaped by consumer preferences. However, it is the former theory that has garnered the most significant public attention, manifesting in federal lawsuits and even popular movies.

The possibility of a plot by General Motors raises several troubling questions. If the replacement of streetcars with buses was the result of such corporate strategizing, how could it have proceeded unchecked? Should the transportation community be concerned about future plots that could have counterproductive social costs? And if the demise of streetcars was not the result of such concerted actions, why does this argument persist? Does demonizing GM divert us from coming to terms with the real problem—our tastes for automobile travel and their high social costs?

In this section of "Ideas in Motion," the debate over the factors that caused the rapid demise of streetcars continues. In the Summer 1997 issue of *Transportation Quarterly*, Cliff Slater outlined the case that streetcars were the victims of high operating costs, local government regulation, affordable personal autos, and rapid suburbanization rather than a plot by GM. This issue of *TQ* presents three responses to these assertions, each addressing GM's complicity in such a plot, and whether streetcars were inherently less viable than motor buses. With the benefit of hindsight, such exchanges help shed light on this chapter of transportation history and its implications for transportation today.