

History Of The Washington Metro Creating The North American Landscape



When it comes to shaping the landscape of North America, few public transportation systems have had a more significant impact than the Washington Metro. Since its inception, this metropolitan rail system has not only revolutionized commute in the nation's capital but has also influenced urban planning and transportation networks across the continent.

Birth of an Icon

The Washington Metro, also known as the Metrorail, has a rich history that dates back to 1959 when preliminary discussions about the concept of a rapid transit system in the D.C. area began. It wasn't until 1967, under the guidance of President Lyndon B. Johnson and local leaders, that the project received congressional approval and construction began.



The Great Society Subway: A History of the Washington Metro (Creating the North American Landscape) by Zachary M. Schrag(Kindle Edition)

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

Language : English

File size : 4739 KB

Text-to-Speech : Enabled

Screen Reader : Supported

Word Wise : Enabled

Print length : 575 pages



Spanning five phases and over two decades of planning and development, the Washington Metro finally opened its doors to riders on March 27, 1976. The first line, known as the Red Line, connected the Rhode Island Avenue and Farragut North stations, covering a distance of about 4.6 miles.

Engineering Marvels

What makes the Washington Metro truly remarkable is not just its impact on transportation but also the engineering marvels it comprises. The system boasts a mix of underground tunnels, bridges, and elevated tracks that seamlessly connect various parts of the city and extend into neighboring regions in Maryland and Virginia.

Notably, the construction of metro stations presented a unique architectural challenge. Architects and engineers went beyond mere functionality to create aesthetically stunning designs that blend harmoniously with the urban landscape. Many stations exhibit striking modernist and brutalist architectural elements, adding to the charm and allure of the Metro experience.

Redrawing Urban Planning

The success of the Washington Metro undeniably changed the way urban planning occurred in North America. Prior to its creation, cities relied predominantly on road networks to accommodate increasing traffic. However, the Metro introduced a novel approach to transportation, emphasizing the importance of efficient, affordable, and sustainable public transit systems.

Following the Washington Metro's footsteps, numerous cities across the United States and Canada sought to develop their own metropolitan rail systems. These projects aimed to reduce traffic congestion, decrease air pollution, and create new opportunities for economic growth within the urban centers.

The Impact Today

Over four decades since its inauguration, the Washington Metro continues to evolve and expand. Today, it spans a network of six lines that collectively cover over 100 miles. With an average daily ridership of nearly one million passengers, the Metro remains a vital lifeline for commuters and tourists visiting the nation's capital.

The Metro has also played a significant role in shaping the economic and social landscape of Washington D.C. The development of new neighborhoods, the rise of commercial centers near metro stations, and the revitalization of previously underprivileged areas are just a few examples of the Metro's lasting impact.

The history of the Washington Metro is a testament to how public transportation systems can transform a city and shape an entire continent. Through its innovative design, revolutionary urban planning, and continued growth, the Metro symbolizes the progress and development of North America's transportation infrastructure.

As we look to the future, it is clear that the Washington Metro's legacy will continue to inspire and influence the creation of sustainable and efficient transportation systems around the world.



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Drivers in the nation's capital face a host of hazards: high-speed traffic circles, presidential motorcades, jaywalking tourists, and bewildering signs that send unsuspecting motorists from the Lincoln Memorial into suburban Virginia in less than two minutes. And parking? Don't bet on it unless you're in the fast lane of the Capital Beltway during rush hour.

Little wonder, then, that so many residents and visitors rely on the Washington Metro, the 106-mile rapid transit system that serves the District of Columbia and its inner suburbs. In the first comprehensive history of the Metro, Zachary M. Schrag tells the story of the Great Society Subway from its earliest rumblings to the present day, from Arlington to College Park, Eisenhower to Marion Barry.

Unlike the pre–World War II rail systems of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the Metro was built at a time when most American families already owned cars, and when most American cities had dedicated themselves to freeways, not subways. Why did the nation's capital take a different path? What were the consequences of that decision?

Using extensive archival research as well as oral history, Schrag argues that the Metro can be understood only in the political context from which it was born: the Great Society liberalism of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. The Metro emerged from a period when Americans believed in public investments suited to the grandeur and dignity of the world's richest nation. The Metro was built not merely to move commuters, but in the words of Lyndon Johnson, to create "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community."

Schrag scrutinizes the project from its earliest days, including general planning, routes, station architecture, funding decisions, land-use impacts, and the behavior of Metro riders. The story of the Great Society Subway sheds light on the development of metropolitan Washington, postwar urban policy, and the promises and limits of rail transit in American cities.



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