

[Ethan Elkind](#)'s new book, [Railtown](#), tells the story of LA's rail system. It's a fascinating account of LA's move away from an almost religious attachment to the automobile. The LA story has some important implications for other cities.

It took several decades to get the current rail system built. There were many detours and delays along the way. Mass transit in LA has to confront not only a sprawling geography but a sprawling political situation, which meant that the route was set as much by neighborhood politics as planning needs. For instance, although Wilshire was a prime candidate for rail, because of its population density. But environmental icon Henry Waxman blocked the ideal route, seemingly in order to protect a neighborhood with which he had a class connection.

Partly because of political delays and poor management, construction costs went way over budget.

As it turned out, heavy rail (that's the kind with the famous "third rail") only turned out to generate enough traffic on a few routes. But light rail (a/k/a trolley) worked well on some routes, and dedicated busways turned out to be a success in other places. Committing too heavily to the idea of a subway turned out to be a mistake. Another issue, which Ethan has written about [elsewhere](#), was the failure to promote high density development along main routes.

This short summary leaves out the fascinating twists and turns of the narrative. It lacks the sex and violence to be another [Chinatown](#), but it's still quite a story.

P.S. For those in the area, Ethan will be speaking about the book topic with Martin Wachs at UC Berkeley on March 11th from 6 to 8pm. Link is here: <http://www.iurd.berkeley.edu/transit-and-cities/ethan-elkind.shtml>