



Street Fight: The Politics of Mobility in San Francisco

Jason Henderson

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Faced with intolerable congestion and noxious pollution, cities around the world are rethinking their reliance on automobiles. In the United States a loosely organized livability movement seeks to reduce car use by reconfiguring urban space into denser, transit-oriented, walkable forms, a development pattern also associated with smart growth and new urbanism. Through a detailed case study of San Francisco, Jason Henderson examines how this is not just a struggle over what type of transportation is best for the city, but a series of ideologically charged political fights over issues of street space, public policy, and social justice.

Historically San Francisco has hosted many activist demonstrations over its streets, from the freeway revolts of the 1960s to the first Critical Mass bicycle rides decades later. Today the city's planning and advocacy establishment is changing zoning laws to limit the number of parking spaces, encouraging new car-free housing near transit stations, and applying "transit first" policies, such as restricted bus lanes. Yet Henderson warns that the city's accomplishments should not be romanticized. Despite significant gains by livability advocates, automobiles continue to dominate the streets, and the city's financially strained bus system is slow and often unreliable.

Both optimistic and cautionary, Henderson argues that ideology must be understood as part of the struggle for sustainable cities and that three competing points of view—progressive, neoliberal, and conservative—have come to dominate the contemporary discourse about urban mobility. Consistent with its iconic role as an incubator of environmental, labor, civil rights, and peace movements, San Francisco offers a compelling example of how the debate over sustainable urban transportation may unfold both in the United States and globally.

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