ISSUE

Public investment in transit has increased in recent years in hopes of curbing America’s seemingly insatiable appetite for car travel. Nationwide, public subsidies to transit rose 66 percent between 1995 and 2008. Most research to date has focused on who travels, why, and when. Little research has sought to explain how people experience travel; in the case of transit in particular, how riders experience the physical elements of the complete trip environment and its social aspects.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We systematically analyzed the rider-generated travelogs. Four major themes emerged:

1) Riders define where and when their trips start and end in different ways. While most people travel to transit by walking or biking, they did not always include these parts of the journey in their descriptions. Those who dwelled on the non-transit parts of their trips often described issues related to the safety of crossing intersections, quality of sidewalks, and transit stops and station entrances and exits. In other words, the walking experience outside of the bus or train is critically important to many users.
The walk down Vermont to the Vermont/Sunset Metro Station. “Although the walk is only about two blocks with generous sidewalks, they are long blocks and they have many tree roots buckling the sidewalk. Towards the end of this block there are two curb cuts for two different banks that are always very busy with cars going in and out making it dangerous for pedestrians to cross.”

2) The physical elements of transit systems and surrounding areas are also important. Participants often discussed physical space—both the elements and features that helped facilitate their trip or that they found appealing, as well as things they found to be unpleasant or challenges to their travel—including station design, graffiti, crowded platforms, and public art.

3) System legibility and wayfinding features can greatly facilitate or complicate transit trips. Passengers reported very different experiences in terms of ease of navigation through transit networks. Some did not report experiencing any difficulties while others described frustration with items such as confusing signage and inaccurate monitors.

4) Transit riders are highly aware of the social aspects of their transit journeys as they travel the city. Their photos and text reflected the ways in which passengers interact, participate, and negotiate with a diverse array of individuals. And while people may work to disengage, they cannot escape the reality that transit environments are complex social settings. In some cases their photos showed conflicts and aggravation, but in many other cases participants described the social aspects of transit travel as entertaining, enlightening, or pleasantly unpredictable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While this study was exploratory in nature, our findings suggest that people’s perceptions of safety, security, vibrancy, and beauty both subtly and directly affect the transit experience in ways that may be difficult to control, but are important to understand. Transit managers and planners concerned with people’s decisions whether or not to travel by public transit need to carefully consider aspects of the transit experience that reach well beyond the bus or train door. First, the reports of positive social encounters during participants’ journeys suggest that, for example, friendly drivers and station attendants may have a substantial positive effect on the experience of transit users. Second, while the rules of behavior on transit and the location and design of stops and stations affect people’s transit journeys in both positive and negative ways, improving the walking experience—in terms of sidewalk quality, driveway design, and street crossings—is critically important to riders’ perceptions of public transit.

A comprehensive selection of the photo diaries created for this study is available at the project website: http://www.its.ucla.edu/uclatransitphotos.