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The periodization of transport policy: three bus rapid transit cases through time

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ABSTRACT

While the scholarship on policy mobilities shows how transport policy circulates across locations, it has paid less attention to how policy evolves over extended periods of time. This paper brings an in inter-temporal perspective to policy mobilities scholarship by examining how transport policies move through different periods in which they are (re-)assembled. We capture this dynamic through two complementary analytical lenses: durability, which identifies what persists over time and how, and, periodization, understood as extended moments of relative stability in policy discourse that shape the configuration of policy. Relying on a mixed-methods approach, we analyze the reimagination of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) policy through its implementation in Runcorn in the 1970s, Bogotá in the early 2000s, and Nairobi in the early 2020s. We identify three BRT periods, associated with state-led planning and Garden City ideals (Runcorn), 'good governance' and sustainable mobility agendas (Bogotá), and infrastructure-led investment linked to the energy transition (Nairobi). The analysis of durability draws attention to the production of endurance via narratives of success, which challenges interpretations of circulation based on cumulative learning. The concept of periodization underlines the deeply structuring effects of paradigmatic discourse, highlighting how the circulation of globally celebrated models reproduces uneven power relations.

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1. Introduction

As the global climate crisis deepens, the search for transport interventions that may reduce emissions and vulnerability to climate hazards intensifies (Solaymani & Botero, 2025; Vajjarapu et al., 2019). The focus is on learning what to do ('which solutions work?') and identifying transfer mechanisms ('how are solutions shared?'). In every attempt, the possibility of sharing policy across contexts is taken for granted. Urban transport ideas, of course, have long travelled between cities. Public transport interventions, such as streetcars, subways, and road hierarchies, have historically circulated through professional networks, reports, and study tours (Banister, 2002; Pickrell, 1992). What distinguishes the contemporary moment is the accelerating pace and intensification of

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circulation, involving rapid movement across jurisdictions (Peck & Theodore, 2015). Among the most globally celebrated of these interventions is BRT, a family of bus-based systems that combine dedicated infrastructure, fast-access stations, and technological upgrades to deliver high-capacity, high-speed passenger flows at a – vocally declared – fraction of the cost of rail alternatives (Cervero, 2013). Even though its origins can be traced to the 1970s or even earlier (Hidalgo & Gutiérrez, 2013), the model experienced a boom in the early twenty-first century, following the promotion of inflated examples, particularly Bogotá's TransMilenio (Montero, 2020).

Recent assessments, however, suggest that the heyday of BRT deployment may be over. By 2025, more than 200 cities had implemented some form of BRT, yet the number of new systems had stagnated (Venter, 2026). In Latin America, many systems are plagued by overcrowding, unreliability, and poor maintenance. In South-East Asia, several systems have failed or underperformed, while in India, some corridors have been dismantled in the face of political opposition and shifting preferences toward urban rail. These trends have prompted calls to ask whether BRT remains relevant (Hidalgo et al., 2024)? This paper contends that such assessments conflate the decline of a paradigmatic configuration of BRT with the exhaustion of the model itself. What may be losing popularity is not necessarily BRT as such, but a particular version of it: one shaped by the neoliberal sustainable mobility discourse that Bogotá came to represent (Rizzo, 2015). In its place, a new paradigm may be emerging, shaped by Chinese investment and electric bus manufacturing, alongside a shifting geopolitical order embedded in the imperative of the energy transition (Hafner & Tagliapietra, 2020). Bogotá itself illustrates this reorientation: the city that became the global emblem of World Bank-promoted sustainable mobility has recently purchased large fleets of Chinese electric buses, reconfiguring its infrastructure systems within an entirely different set of international alignments. Rather than signalling the end of BRT, these dynamics may point to its ongoing reassembly and raise renewed questions about the logics that underpin its circulation.

Research on policy mobilities shows how policy models circulate through transnational networks (McCann, 2011; Peck & Theodore, 2010), with a global 'consultocracy' playing a central role in facilitating circulation (Diallo, 2024; Silva Ardila, 2020; Wood, 2015). Yet, the scholarship displays a lack of engagement with historical research and long-term horizons (Harris & Moore, 2013), hence producing inadequate representations of how policy models are reconfigured as global discourse evolves. This tendency is linked to at least two limitations. The first is a form of presentism (Silva & Ward, 2024), which obscures rationalities that shaped earlier configurations and realignments involved in emerging orders. The second, relatedly, is a tendency to treat neoliberalism as the dominant backdrop for policy circulation. This emphasis not only obscures dynamics in parts of the world where neoliberalism is not a hegemonic logic (Bunnell, 2015; Parnell & Robinson, 2012), but also how the influence of neoliberal ideology is contingent on a situated moment with limited relevance in historical – and potentially future – configurations. Understanding why and how policy models endure and dynamically evolve requires an expanded temporal view that captures different hegemonic paradigms through which they travel. This paper adopts such a long-term perspective by analyzing how BRT was implemented in Runcorn (early 1970s), Bogotá (early 2000s), and Nairobi (early 2020s). Each reflects a distinct period in which BRT was reassembled by alignment with international policy paradigms. This evolution is showcased from state-led planning and Garden City ideals, through 'good governance' and sustainable mobility agendas, to infrastructure-led investment linked to the energy transition.

Our analytical framework captures continuity and change by focusing on two interrelated elements: durability and periodization. Regarding the former, what persists across these shifting paradigms is not only a particular infrastructure of dedicated bus lanes, but a consultancy-

generated narrative of success, framed in relation to the recurring need to elevate cost-efficient bus infrastructure. This demonstrates how circulation depends not primarily on cumulative learning, but rather on the production of story lines that smooth over or invisibilize implementation failures. Simultaneously, our analysis on periodization shows how policy models are nearly completely reinvented over time, by shifting associated elements, including governance ideals, technologies of deployment, and socio-environmental narratives. The legitimizing effects of these reigning paradigms facilitates the parachuting of globally celebrated models into new settings, while normalizing broader constellations of technologies and practices, which may reproduce uneven relations of authority.

2. How do transport policies move?

The question of how policy changes across space and time links the scholarship on policy mobilities and the scholarship on international policy discourse. Policy mobilities scholarship engages with

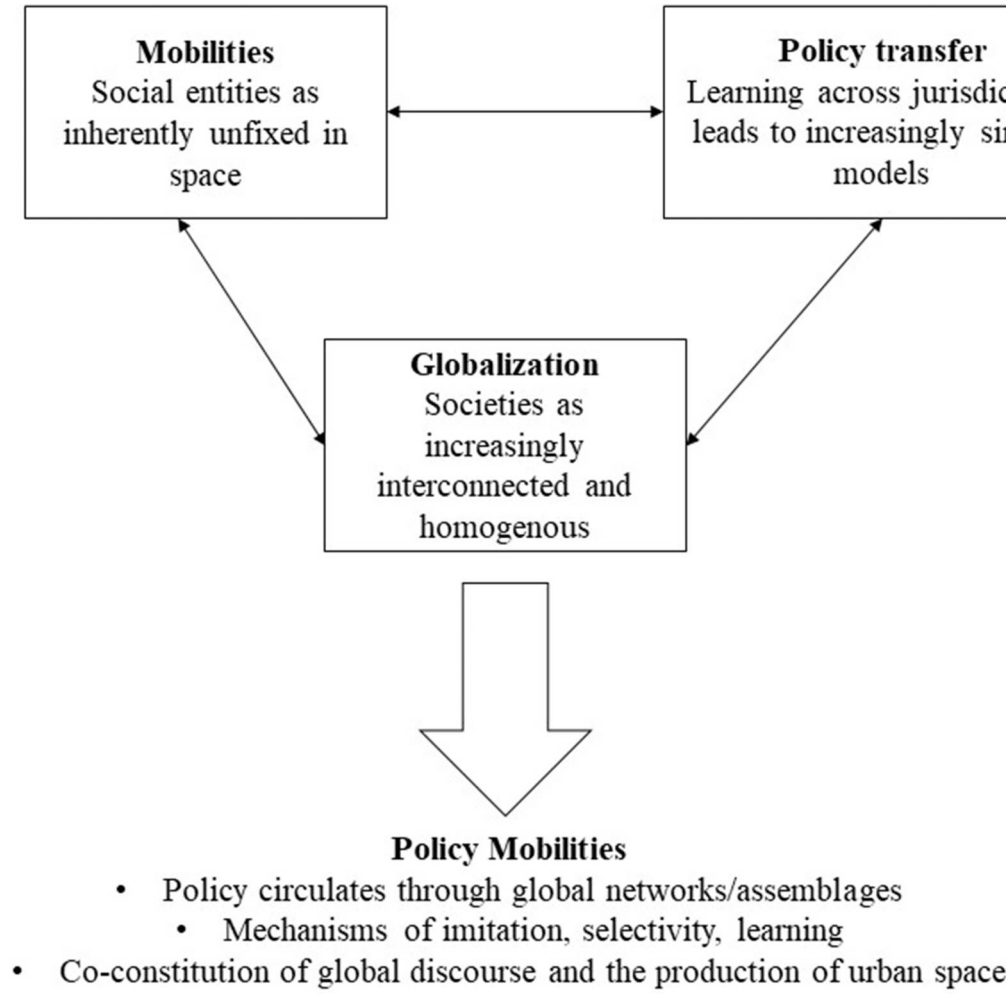


Figure 1. Synthesis of scholarship that informs the policy mobilities literature (authors' elaboration).

policy as always-in-transformation, socially produced, negotiated in space, and shaped by relational networks (Peck & Theodore, 2010). From this perspective, policy models are reconfigured within different socio-institutional arrangements, alongside changing discourses of what counts as usable knowledge (McCann, 2011). Figure 1 provides an overview of how policy mobilities scholarship integrates debates on mobility, policy transfer, and globalization.

Policy mobilities scholarship draws on mobilities studies, which question the assumption that any social entity (including policy) can be fixed in space, as people, materials, and virtual objects are always 'on the move' (Sheller & Urry, 2006). The corollary is an analysis of movement across scales without privileging any particular type of entity, whether humans, ideas, or materials (Cresswell, 2011). Placing mobility studies in dialogue with critiques of globalization, the policy mobilities literature captures the dominance of Euro-American interests in global relations and tendencies toward cultural homogenization (Pieterse, 2019; Westman et al., 2023). Here, the literature on policy mobilities resonates with critical analyses of the impacts of neoliberalism (Peck & Theodore, 2010). In particular, policy mobilities research has traced how global elites shape neoliberal policy through 'well developed and deeply entrenched networks of neoliberal knowledge production and diffusion, intellectuals and think tanks' (Plehwe & Walpen, 2006, p. 28).

At the same time, the concept of policy mobilities responds to political science and sociology research on policy convergence, diffusion, and transfer (McCann, 2011). Policy convergence describes how policies become increasingly alike across jurisdictions, including through emulation or learning (C. J. Bennett, 1991). Policy diffusion is concerned with the explanatory factors and mechanisms behind policy uptake (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996), while policy transfer studies encompass insights on both convergence and diffusion (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996). The policy mobilities literature expands these concepts, including by shifting the emphasis beyond the state (Benson & Jordan, 2011) and exploring a broad range of actors shaping global policymaking (Silva & Ward, 2024). This has contributed to new sites and dimensions of theorizing, such as critical analysis of counter-hegemonic circuits (Plehwe, 2023), the role of affect (McKenzie, 2020), and colonial power relations (Lane, 2022).

In summary, policy mobilities scholarship challenges rational and linear assumptions about how policies circulate, emphasizing instead the power relations that shape their movement, mutation, and adoption. Policies travel via transmission and contestation of knowledge, which involves packaging and imbuing narratives with the symbolic value of global networks (McCann, 2008; Peck & Theodore, 2010). For instance, a well-known narrative package is that of 'best practice', through which translational networks construct inspirational templates (Montero, 2017). Despite a robust critique (e.g. Gudmundsson et al., 2005), benchmarking and best practice have survived in international transport policy, even gaining new relevance through the climate crisis (Fekete et al., 2015; Shen et al., 2020). Consultant storylines play a crucial role in keeping 'models' alive by articulating roadmaps and guidelines (Diallo, 2024; Silva Ardila, 2020; Wood, 2015). At the same time, local sense-making is required to adopt models in place. As Robinson (2015) insists, policy doesn't arrive but is *arrived at*, meaning that policymakers embed policies in collective memories, histories, and storytelling.

In this study, we explore how circulating policies are moulded by the discursive arrangements of international policy. The policy mobilities scholarship engages with components of discourse through assemblages, understood as constellations of actors, networks, and relational sites: 'the agencies, the partnerships, the political intermediaries, and the associations and connections that bring them together' (Allen & Cochrane, 2007, p. 1163). Assemblages operate through 'an interplay of forces where a range of actors mobilize, enrol, translate, channel, broker and bridge' – power is

understood to be dispersed and obscure, generated as a 'relational effect of political interaction' (Allen & Cochrane, 2007, p. 1171). Assemblages also produce symbolic orders, demonstrated through the normative visions that orient circulation (McCann, 2008). This understanding has much in common with scholarship on discourse, as both highlight constellations of actors and institutions, accompanied by systems of knowledge and authority, which generate normative orders. While discourse is approached in varying ways, our analysis follows a definition fixed in evolving matrices of knowledge and power, structured by epistemic alignments (Foucault, 2010/2010). Discourse manifests in linguistic expression (narratives, terminology, jargon), but also through shared perceptions of the world, which produce interpretations of appropriateness (Dryzek, 1998). We understand discursive constellations to be constituted by heterogeneous, reinforcing elements (actors, institutions, material resources, symbolic orders) bound together by distinct rationalities, yet never crystallized into clearly bounded units.

Our emphasis on discourse, rather than assemblages, responds to three distinct limitations in policy mobilities scholarship. The first is a tendency toward presentism (Silva & Ward, 2024) – while the literature has long emphasized the spatial circulation of ideas, it has paid less attention to temporality. Recent interventions have challenged this orientation by insisting that policy mobility is a temporal process, shaped by learning, delay, repetition, and reinterpretation. For instance, Wood's (2015) longitudinal analysis of BRT adoption in South Africa demonstrates that what appeared to be a rapid uptake was the outcome of decades of prior encounters with similar ideas. By extending the temporal frame into the past, Wood shows that repeated exposure creates fertile ground for adoption, demonstrating that policy learning is gradual, repetitive, and at times delayed. Likewise, Temenos and Lauermann (2020) call attention to temporal dynamics to analyze power, capturing how political struggle and governing rationalities shape policy trajectories. Similarly, Morais (2024) advances a multiple temporalities approach that highlights how policies are assembled through overlapping rhythms, tempos, moments of synchronicity and disjuncture. Yet, long-term analyses that attend to historical perspectives remain notably rare (Harris & Moore, 2013). There is a lack of longer temporal views, capable of capturing how policy is configured against the backdrop of shifting global landscapes. We choose a discursive lens to interpret the slow and successive modification of policy, reflecting an understanding of discourse as historically situated and perpetually contested (Foucault, 2010/2010).

The second – highly interconnected – limitation is a tendency to treat neoliberalism as the political economic conjuncture against which policy circulates. Several authors have challenged this tendency, arguing that neoliberalism is an insufficient explanation for the constitution of circulating policies, particularly in the Global South where neoliberal logics manifest in highly variegated forms (Bunnell, 2015; Jacobs, 2012; Parnell & Robinson, 2012). This critique gains renewed urgency in light of recent geopolitical shifts. Scholars point to the emergence of a multipolar order, shaped by the 'rise of China', as well as an increased complexity of military-economic interactions reordering global relations (Peters, 2023). These dynamics generate new circuits of finance, capital, and knowledge that cannot be captured through a neoliberal lens alone, especially as the normative orientations that have structured global debates for decades no longer can be taken for granted. While we may be entering a new discursive paradigm, which evades the lexicon of the neoliberal critique, a broader analytical lens is also required to interpret rationalities that structured historical configurations of policy models. Again, we focus on discursive analyses because it assumes that hegemonic constellations are dynamic; they rise and fall and exercise a powerful influence only within their contemporary moment (Foucault, 2010/2010).

Finally, the emphasis on discourse draws attention to forces beyond intentionality. While the scholarship on policy mobilities emphasizes the diffuse authority of assemblages, a discursive lens assumes that power is produced through the very taken-for-grantedness of discursive configurations. Discourse produces a 'sense of commonsense-ness' through repeated association (Milliken, 1999), although these are also reproduced by political-economic arrangements (Brand, 2005). This means that while operating within any paradigm, dominant configurations exercise power by virtue of their unquestioned and hence often invisibilized position. The difference in nuance lays in influence created purely through the sense of appropriateness; actors that are part of dominant constellations gain legitimacy via association, rather than through deliberate acts of persuasion.

Through the empirical section, we illustrate how circulating policy – in our case BRT – is configured by policy discourse via an analytical framework that captures both endurance and change. First, through a focus on durability, we map continuities in this policy over the decades considered in this study. Second, we track how this policy has been reimagined in three distinct time periods by alignment with reigning paradigms, a process we describe as 'periodization'. We define periodization as extended moments of relative stability in international policy discourse, visible through alignments in systems of knowledge and capital, with deep ordering effects on policy configurations. The concept functions as an analytical lens that captures the situated character of discourse (Foucault, 2010/2010). The definition also draws on studies of historical patterns in international policy, which reveals tendencies toward doctrinal or orthodox thinking (Harriss, 2005), understood as 'clearly bounded, successive periods characterized by specific theoretical hegemonies' (Kothari, 2005, p. 66). Supporting this phenomenon, research on international climate policy reveals a limited number of discursive orientations, structuring the debate for decades (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2006, 2019; Jernnäs & Linnér, 2019). Likewise, international urban policy has evolved in distinct, relatively homogenous phases, alongside policy orthodoxies (Westman et al., 2022). International policy paradigms exercise a powerful influence over decision-making by conditioning available repertoires of action (Coleman et al., 2021). Such paradigms are resistant to change, and, despite evidence of failure, tend to be dismantled through slow fragmentation rather than deliberate reasoning (Kaya & Reay, 2019). Below, we demonstrate this argument by following the reimagination of BRT through its application in Runcorn, Bogotá, and Nairobi.

3. Material and methods

This study focuses on how the local formulation of BRT projects, in three different locations and time periods, has been shaped by international policy discourse. In line with previous studies on international policy discourse (Jaschke & Biermann, 2022; Jernnäs & Linnér, 2019), the analysis tracks the articulation of linguistic patterns (e.g. themes, storylines, categories of thought) and their consistency of expression. Wherever possible, the analysis links narrative patterns to material configurations, such as political constellations, systems of expertise, and flows of finance.

3.1. Case study selection rationale

The methodological approach follows a case study logic that aims to capture how international policy discourse shapes implementation in place. By examining BRT projects across locations and time periods, the analysis helps theorize the relationship between international paradigms and the local formulation of policy models. In this context, comparison serves as a generative strategy for mid-level theorization that connects grounded empirical analysis with global policy dynamics (Montero

& Baiocchi, 2022). Each case study represents a 'well-defined aspect of a historical happening' selected for analysis (A. Bennett, 2004, p. 21), following the potential for 'analytical leverage' (A. Bennett, 2004). The unit of analysis is the discursive process surrounding BRT rather than technical variations of BRT systems or specific cities. Hence, we selected the three cases to analyze how BRT was configured in each time period, in relation to rationales of urban and environmental governance, based on a situated analysis of each contemporary manifestation of the policy.

At their most basic level, BRTs are bus systems with dedicated bus lanes and a limited number of stops, which allows for high speed of movement (Wirasinghe et al., 2013). As BRT systems bundle disparate elements, they appear in various configurations. For example, a review argued that BRTs encompass five elements: vehicles, guideways, control systems, fare collection, and passenger information systems (Diaz & Schneck, 2000). In practice, the combination of attributes leads to definitions based on laundry lists of indicators (Table 1, Appendix 1). We followed this broad and multipronged definition of BRT to select three cases (Table 2, Appendix 1). While many studies situate the origins of BRT in Curitiba, Brazil (Lindau et al., 2010), its origin its contested. For instance, according to Wirasinghe et al. (2013), the BRT model was first developed in Chicago in 1937. This article does not seek to identify a single origin or to provide a comprehensive linear history of BRT. Instead, the case selection strategy is analytically driven, using the analysis to explain the re-assemblage of BRT across distinct discursive periods; the cases represent heuristic anchors for different moments in the temporal deployment of BRT, which reflect shifts in how the policy has been conceptualized, justified, and governed.

The first case, Runcorn (UK), represents an early period in which dedicated bus infrastructure emerged. Although Runcorn's busway was not labelled BRT at the time, it has since been retrospectively incorporated into the model's genealogy (Wirasinghe et al., 2013). This case allows us to examine how elements later associated with BRT were embedded in expert-driven narratives. The second case, Bogotá, represents a period in which BRT was framed as an international benchmark for sustainable mobility planning. The third case, Nairobi, captures a BRT system still under construction (as of March 2026), which hints toward anticipatory changes in policy paradigms where justification and contestation is ongoing.

3.2. Data collection

Data collection followed a mixed methods approach adapted to each case. Thus, each case included a review of previous research (e.g. customer surveys, overviews/assessments, journal articles), a policy document review (e.g. government decisions, funder reports, feasibility assessments), exploration of news and social media, site visits, and interviews (Table 3, Appendix 1).[1] We placed comparatively greater emphasis on archival material in Runcorn (due to limited access to other material from this time) and on interviews, news articles, and social media in Bogotá and Nairobi.

3.3. Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed in Nvivo, alongside secondary materials. The analysis proceeded through multiple steps. First, the analysis focused on local sensemaking, that is, what narratives justify BRT in relation to local context. Narratives were assembled in chronological order, and the analysis considered historical and political conditions shaping narratives, as well as local stakeholder interests. Second, the analysis examined the influence of international discourse, including how urban planning and environmental orientations matched influential

discursive elements. This required an iterative process that moved between empirical material and the literature on international policy paradigms. A comprehensive review of international policy discourse was simplified and synthesized (based on Castán Broto, Westman and Huang (forthcoming)) to provide an initial definition of periods for this study (Table 4, Appendix 1). Further analysis focused on how two dimensions – urban planning and environmental management – manifested in each case. Our focus was on what elements remained durable and how, as well as what elements were reimagined in each era and how these corresponded to dominant discourse.

4. Three BRT periods

4.1. Runcorn: state-led planning and the garden city

> *… he was struck by the enormous chasm between the sixties architects utopian vision for what new towns should be and the sticky-floored, piss-streaked reality … Runcorn was the last great UK modernist, futurist building project (*Chapman Fox, 2021*, p. no page).*

The busway in Runcorn – and the New Town of which it forms part – is held up as a global pioneering exemplar but shaped by profound contradictions. The deep mismatch between its grandiose design and the reality of life in Runcorn makes the case a textbook example of the impact of 1960s-70s planning paradigms.

Representing an intervention of the modernist planning era, Runcorn's busway was part of a highly ambitious spatial design, planned from scratch by a team of prodigious designers (Ling, 1967). Even though the plan involved a public local inquiry (which identified local resistance (TPE, 1998)), the comprehensive plan was mainly expert-led. The plan sought to encompass every aspect of life, including employment and economic-industrial arrangements, housing, transport, and leisure (Ling, 1967). Runcorn, like other New Towns at the time, reflected the ultimate (peak and final) manifestation of modernist, top-down planning in the UK, regarded 'as the "jewel in the crown" of British post-war planning' (Couch & Fowles, 2006, p. 88). Hence, the state-led nature was evident as well. At the time, New Towns were formulated as a national strategy based on 'decanting' overpopulated urban centres (Proudlove, 1968). With little glamour, Runcorn was selected as a location to support the 'de-slumming' of Liverpool (Lesley, 1983, p. 232; TPE, 1998). A consolidated criticism of these utopian projects is their tendency to produce soulless environments, which reproduce the socio-economic issues they were meant to address (Rose, 2019). Such problems did emerge in Runcorn. Southgate, an emblematic social housing project, was targeted for demolition by the late 1980s ('it became socially unstable, families moved out, homes fell empty … the place was a mess' (Pearman, 2010, no page)). Years later, an assessment concluded that the housing developments had not 'stood the test of time' (TCPA, ND, p. 23). Halton Borough contained ten of England's most deprived areas in 2010, seven located in Runcorn, with residents displaying 'some of the poorest health outcomes and shortest life expectancies of any area in England' (TCPA, ND, p. 23).

Associated challenges are reflected in the Runcorn busway. The plan was inspired by Ebenezer Howard's (1898) Garden City, shaping urban planning at the time. The Garden City, representing an idea of networks of settlements in proximity to ecosystems, was embedded in the New Town concept (Ward, 1993). Transport theory was central, as inhabitants were imagined to walk to social facilities, use public transport to access employment, or travel by rail to larger urban areas (Proudlove, 1968). These principles are visible in the design of the Runcorn busway. The novelty

consisted of a spatial design entirely devoted to public transport; 'for the first time a whole town has been designed around a public transport system' (Mercer & Toole, 1974, p. 610). The design followed a figure eight pattern, extending from the residential area into the nearby shopping district, industrial estates, and schools (Ling, 1968, p. 81). The system was to 'serve 90% of the community within 5 min' walking distance' (Mercer & Toole, 1974, p. 610), allowing for a 50% higher efficiency than regular bus service. One of the ten objectives was 'to make all parts of the town accessible from one another' (Lesley, 1983, p. 232). Architect Ling (1968, pp. 81–82) explains the design as follows:

> *We took 500 yards as our walking distance module … If one can arrange for the local social journeys to be on foot, the transportation system is relieved of unnecessary traffic and can be designed primarily for the longer distance journeys … we have given priority to the route – a reserved track for buses only.*

These aspirational designs broke down in the face of social life in Runcorn. A central issue was the assumption that most residents would be employed in an industrial cluster outside the town. With a constantly developing economy, many residents working in locations unconnected to the transport system or other cities, this layout was flawed and increasingly outdated with time. A survey from 1983 found that the 'town is not self-contained' (Lesley, 1983, p. 243), that nearly half of the population *never use buses* (original emphasis), and that buses were only significant in school trips (Lesley, 1983, p. 243). Returning to this question in 2015, a follow-up survey revealed that bus ridership had dropped to 5% of trips – a far distance from the imagined 50:50 modal split (Lesley, 2015). Runcorn Busway was, nevertheless, incorporated into policy documents on BRT best practice (Table 5, Appendix 1). As a town planner working in the 1970s recalled, 'Runcorn was very much a place that people wrote about, that civil engineers discussed' (I.1). Elements of the Runcorn busway were mobilized and reimagined as the BRT concept emerged elsewhere. Over time, the original state-led planning paradigm became detached from the intervention, enabling reimagination through an alternative understanding of sustainable development involving a wider range of actors.

4.2. Bogotá: 'Good governance' and sustainable mobility

> There has not been a technological invention made in Colombia [that] has had as much international impact as TransMilenio … although we initially copied it from Curitiba, we made some improvements that changed it completely … There are 300 cities in the world with systems like this (Peñalosa, 2012).

In the early 2000s, Bogotá's TransMilenio emerged on the global stage as a high-capacity, low-cost public transport innovation and a flagship expression of the 'good governance' paradigm (Gilbert, 2008; Hidalgo & Gutiérrez, 2013; World Bank, 1994; 2010). Initially funded by the City of Bogotá and the Colombian national government, with support from the World Bank, TransMilenio was implemented in less than three years through a highly centralized mayoral executive. It rapidly became a visible symbol of urban transformation, framed through discourses of efficiency, order, and inclusion (Cesafsky, 2017). Its branding, institutional architecture, and futuristic aesthetics deliberately contrasted with the city's previous fragmented and purely private transport regime, producing a narrative of rupture that proved central to domestic legitimacy and international circulation. TransMilenio delivered measurable improvements in mobility and safety, including reductions in travel times, traffic fatalities, and breaking spatial barriers between working-class and wealthier neighbourhoods (Bocarejo et al., 2016; 2022; Velásquez, 2009). At the same time, the governance arrangements relied heavily on technocratic authority and the insulation of key transport agencies from democratic contestation (Gilbert, 2008)

Prior to TransMilenio, public transport in Bogotá was provided through private operators holding individual route permits, with limited state coordination. The introduction of BRT entailed restructuring a fragmented private regime into a state-led structure, which was highly contentious. The incorporation of incumbent bus operators and drivers into the TransMilenio involved intense and at times violent negotiations, including protests, strikes, and confrontations, as actors resisted the loss of routes, income, and autonomy. The resulting governance model was hybrid and contradictory. Discursively, TransMilenio mobilized neoliberal imaginaries of efficiency, competition, innovation, and financial sustainability. Empirically, control was consolidated within a publicly owned entity, TransMilenio S.A., which retained ownership of infrastructure, planning authority, and coordination, while contractual arrangements tightly regulated private competition (Paget-Seekins, 2015). This hybrid political-economic structure reflects broader dynamics in Latin America, where processes of democratization and neoliberal reform unfolded simultaneously, reshaping urban governance in new and contradictory ways (Caldeira & Holston, 2016; Chapple & Montero, 2018).

Bogotá's TransMilenio marks the beginning of a distinct period in the global circulation of BRT, in which a 'good governance' discourse associated with the World Bank and international development institutions became aligned with sustainability agendas. Here, good governance refers to an international development paradigm advanced since the 1990s, which emphasized institutional reform, managerial capacity, and replicable governance models as a pathway to development (World Bank, 1994). This paradigm assumed that development depended not only on markets, but also on effective state institutions. In the case of TransMilenio, this paradigm shaped local governance arrangements and international narratives of promotion. However, from the mid-2000s onward, the project became embedded within environmental agendas focused on air pollution and climate mitigation. International think tanks such as EMBARQ (now part of the WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities) and the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), alongside philanthropic foundations (e.g. the Hewlett Foundation), played a growing role in promoting BRT as a sustainable and climate-friendly solution, reinforcing its global visibility (Montero, 2020). The alignment with sustainability narratives, however, was sequential rather than original, as explained by a former TransMilenio official involved in the system's early development:

> *For the BRT in Bogotá, environmental concerns emerged in stages … first air pollution in 2003 [linked to World Bank–led clean air agendas and NGOs such as WRI/EMBARQ], and later came greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, especially after the Clean Development Mechanism was developed for TransMilenio … However, [GHG] were not so much about [new buses being cleaner], but about replacing [old and highly polluting] small vehicles with fewer. large ones (interview, 2023, translated by the authors).*

This temporal sequencing is critical. Environmental justifications for Transmilenio emerged in 2003, three years after the first line opened, initially centred on air quality and public health. The subsequent reframing of TransMilenio as a climate policy solution occurred in 2006, when TransMilenio became one of the first urban transport projects registered under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) established by the Kyoto Protocol. This shift illustrates how sustainability became a mechanism for globally circulating TransMilenio. From the early 2000s, project teams in Bogotá and Santiago began developing methodologies to quantify GHG reductions associated with BRT systems, to access carbon markets by generating Certified Emission Reductions (CERs). These efforts revealed significant methodological challenges. Early proposals submitted by Bogotá were rejected by the UNFCCC, highlighting the difficulties of establishing credible baselines and counterfactuals, particularly where emissions reductions involved fleet renewal, fuel

standards, and mode shifting (Wright & Fulton, 2005). Yet, TransMilenio was ultimately registered as a CDM project in 2006, marking its formal recognition as a climate mitigation intervention and the first BRT system approved under the CDM.

The successful coupling of TransMilenio with climate finance played a decisive role in its global circulation. From the mid-2000s, BRT replication in other cities became increasingly justified through sustainability narratives, amplified by the growing involvement of development banks, NGOs, and philanthropic actors framing cities as sites for climate action (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020; Westman et al., 2022). Bogotá represents a key period in the evolution of BRT, in which the system's international influence and replication potential stemmed from the assemblage of BRT through Bogotá's specific configuration of executive authority, technocratic governance, and hybrid public–private arrangements. This locally contingent political economy allowed TransMilenio to align with dominant international policy paradigms, including good governance reforms and later sustainable mobility agendas. A periodized reading, therefore, reveals that lessons about sustainability were not inherent to BRT, but historically constructed through the interaction between urban political-economic arrangements and shifting international development and environmental agendas.

4.3. Nairobi: infrastructure led development and energy transition

> *Bus Rapid Transit ("BRT") is increasingly recognized as amongst the most effective solutions to providing high-quality transit services on a cost-effective basis to urban areas (*NaMATA, 2022*, p. 8).*

Only about a decade passed between the launch of the TransMilenio and the development of BRT plans in Nairobi – many narrative elements remain the same. Yet, as the quote above shows, the focus turned back to low-cost, high-efficiency transport, with a new emphasis on infrastructure development, including logistics, electrification, and ICT, as drivers of urban growth. As Wood (2015; 2022) argued, BRT was deliberately brought to Africa by international consultants previously operating in Latin America, but their priorities were different. There was a shift in the gravitational centre of the debate, toward BRT as an element of investment- and infrastructure-driven development. This brought the private sector to the forefront, consistent with the rise of an 'extreme' pro-private sector orientation in international policy (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015).

In the early 2000s, the discourse on urban governance through enabling highlighted collaboration across public and private stakeholders. In the past few years, however, the conversation has consolidated around the mobilization of finance, especially through the private sector, and infrastructure investment. These tendencies are evident in the BRT project in Kenya. In 2008, the Government of Kenya adopted *Kenya Vision 2030*, which set the goal of becoming an industrialized middle-income country. Similarly, the Ministry of Nairobi Metropolitan Development produced *Nairobi Metro 2030* to represent a vision of a world-class African metropolis. The plan has been evaluated as 'highly business-oriented', with terminology circulating around economic rationales: 'development, economy, investment, infrastructure, global, world-class, and business' (Myers, 2015, p. 338). Transport is central to this vision, including through infrastructure investment, as developing BRT corridors would 'support Kenya's economic development strategy' (World Bank, 2012, p. 13). This aligns with parallel experiences in African cities, such as Lagos or Johannesburg, which have experimented with BRT systems inspired by Bogotá's TransMilenio (Wood, 2015). These narratives continue an extended planning history to reimagine Nairobi as an attractive, high-performing city (e.g. 1948 Master Plan, 1973 Metropolitan Growth Strategy (Heinze, 2018; Myers, 2015)).

The formulation of the BRT system in Nairobi draws heavily on proposals by development organizations, which insert the model into their development logics. Interview respondents testify to the strong influence of donors over transport planning (see also Table 6, Appendix 1):

> *[W]hen there is an investment in the road sector, the investor usually comes with their own standards. So, they determine what is to be constructed, when, and where, and how … there was an expert from South Africa who had been employed to take over the BRT system in Nairobi … There was actually a very big mistake that was done … it was literally copy–paste … nobody realised until the implementation, and then they realised, 'Oh wait. They drive on the other side of the road' (I.9).*

> *Of course, it comes with donor funding … we would look at the project, however bad the project is. Sometimes, we might fold to the development partners for funding projects that are actually going to affect millions and millions of people (I.14).*

These two quotes demonstrate the widespread perception that foreign investors align local practices with their own standards, priorities, and interests. An overarching need to attract international funding may even lead local decision-makers to override or ignore pre-existing needs. While the orienting principle behind this tendency may be economic development, the production of new markets or profit-making opportunities is sometimes more closely aligned with objectives of international organizations. For example, development partners with specific expertise or capital promote BRT projects to expand the incomes of foreign consultancy firms (e.g. via the market for appraisals), engineering companies, and manufacturing businesses. Respondents acknowledged these tendencies:

> *[H]ere is a country that wants to put in place a transport system, but it doesn't have the money. So, then it becomes … an attraction internally and externally. Because the external people who fund BRTs are also floating their money all over. The consultants are good at appraising, we've had so many appraisals in these five lines … they even repeat appraisals (I.12).*

> *[P]erhaps a bit cynically, the reason that they were put on the table, first and foremost, is that there's a lot of money to be made, potentially. I mean, whether it be bus manufacturers, or engineering consulting companies, or, you know, there's a lot of money to be made, potentially, in all of that (I.13).*

At the same time, international organizations advance diverse priorities. One planner explained that the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) traditionally preferred to invest in rail infrastructures and consistently supported the expansion of the rail network in Nairobi (I.16). Document analysis shows that railways are a primary target for JICA funding, especially railway megaprojects (Endo & Murashkin, 2023). In contrast, Chinese investment has prioritized road infrastructure. This includes the contested Nairobi expressway (Guma et al., 2023) and the Thika highway (Line 2 of the BRT). In 2020, a US$ 50 million contract was secured between the Kenya Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and the Chinese firm Stecol Corporation, positioning the firm as a lead implementation partner (Construction News Online, 2020; Oluwole, 2020). This focus is consistent with the emphasis of Chinese investment on infrastructure-intensive projects, with transport representing a strategic sector, including through the development of roads (Wang, 2022).

A more recent trend is the interest of EU collaborators in electrification. In 2022, the EIB announced 200 million Euros in funding for BRT Line 3, as part of the Nairobi Sustainable Transport Programme ('Clean BRT Line 3 will provide a substantial improvement … by offering a green solution to the challenges of an efficient bus network' (EIB, 2022)). An assessment pointed to significant benefits, including through CO_2 emission reductions (Charles & Barker Ltd, 2021; EIB,

2023). Associated calculation exercises are reminiscent of discourse in Bogotá, but the emphasis has shifted to electrification. In March 2023, the EU committed over 300 million Euros to the construction of a dedicated electric bus lane (Lutta, 2023). This can be viewed in parallel with the ambition of the European Commission to produce a globally competitive zero-emission vehicle industry and independent EV battery supply chains (European Commmission, 2025). In the same year, the Governor of Nairobi participated in an Electric Mobility conference, where BRT was portrayed as central to emission reductions (Koech, 2023). As explained by a respondent, e-mobility represents a donor-driven investment agenda:

> *[I]n 2018, these conversations started becoming very noticeable … e-mobility gets a lot of traction due to the investors … the donor stages the interventions. They come with their ideas, and then there's a lot of money that suddenly is put in e-mobility … the campaigns on BRT system have been to introduce e-mobility buses (I.9).*

Electrification and e-mobility are emerging as new domains of international investment in Kenya. Simultaneously, the influx of international finance into e-mobility buffers the growth of a local industry. An individual representing a Kenyan e-bus manufacturer described their advocacy to expand the industry through policy support (an electric mobility tariff, financial incentives, permits, standards) (I.11). Rather than being driven by local government, this development is demanded by private sector actors, representing a vision of profitable urban futures where they advance infrastructure development.

5. Durability and periodization of transport policy

The three cases analyzed above reveal that BRT policy moves not only across space but also through historically specific periods in which its meaning and modes of governance are repeatedly reassembled. What drives this successive reassembly is not cumulative learning about what works, but alignment with successive hegemonic paradigms. We explain this movement through two analytically complementary lenses: durability, which identifies what persists across those configurations and how, and, periodization, which captures the succession of relatively stable configurations through which BRT has travelled.

Regarding durability, what endures across the three periods is an extremely skeletal version of BRT, in essence, the notion of dedicated bus lanes that enable comparatively low-cost, high-speed public transit. Durability is not attached to a fixed 'model', as the governance arrangements, environmental justifications, financing mechanisms, and technological parameters of BRT have been completely overhauled across the timeframe considered here. Rather, what persists is a particular narrative framing, one that repeatedly elevates cost-efficient bus infrastructure by aligning it with the hegemonic paradigm of each era. This narrative makes the model attractive to investors, local authorities, and development organizations despite its deeply ambiguous implementation outcomes.

Durability is sustained by two mechanisms, both related to the international consultocracy and its persuasive narratives of success (Diallo, 2024; Silva Ardila, 2020; Wood, 2015). The first is the production of a body of evidence that showcases feasibility, economic gains, and (later) environmental benefits, often smoothing over failures or mixed results. For instance, despite the contested outcomes in Runcorn, this case has nevertheless been integrated into consultant jargon as an inspirational story (Table 4, Appendix 1). In later decades, the consolidation of BRT terminology improved the opportunities for such storytelling. Following TransMilenio, advocacy became

increasingly institutionalized by international development agencies, NGOs, and philanthropic organizations. These actors stabilized BRT as a form of sustainability policy by embedding it within benchmarks, indicators, and scoring systems, including those associated with the CDM. In doing so, they helped shape how urban transport interventions are evaluated internationally and how 'success' is defined and rendered comparable. Second, consultants and engineers intentionally replicated lessons using their own experiences. This was most clearly showcased in Nairobi, where individuals with expertise from South Africa and Latin America were employed to apply their insights. The connections created by international firms constitute another institutional channel through which planning approaches and technologies travel. Crucially, both mechanisms gain influence through paradigmatic alignment; the consultocracy does not simply transmit lessons but actively reframes BRT to fit dominant agendas, making the same basic proposition legible within successive discursive configurations. Hence, what makes a version of BRT attractive is not necessarily evidence of effectiveness but the availability of international resources and legitimacy, including the finance and expertise embedded in dominant discourse.

Turning next to periodization, the three cases represent distinct alignments with international paradigms (summarized in Table 7, Appendix 1). Over the period considered in this study, most ancillary elements assumed to be part of the BRT model today (design, technological parameters (e.g. vehicles, ticketing), method of delivery, management systems, connection to societal problems) have been completely reimagined. Shifts between periods are driven by broad transformations that underpin discursive realignment, such as reconfiguration of geopolitical relations and global political economic arrangements, the consolidation of new knowledge (e.g. the accumulation of science on climate change), the rise and fall of global ideology, and the emergence of new technological regimes.

Accordingly, the ideas that shaped the BRT in Runcorn demonstrate the last years of adherence to the modernist era. Although the New Town was designed toward the end of this period, it is permeated by strong elements of grandiose, top-down, expert-led planning. On the other hand, environmental arguments were surprisingly absent. In an evaluation of the busway conducted in 1973, Mercer and Toole (p.61) observed only a vague potential for environmental benefits, including neither air pollution nor ecological concerns. Reflecting an era prior to the establishment of environmental deterioration as a broad societal issue, transport was considered a single-sector domain. Specifically, the busway presented a solution to the growing reliance on cars, which dominated public debate in the 1960s. An influential policy report in England, *Traffic in Towns* (Buchanan, 1963) advocated aggressive promotion of public transport to 'force' individuals away from private vehicles (Proudlove & Shaw, 1970). Runcorn's transport plan sought to do precisely this, while also mirroring the ideal of the Garden City and the ambition to reduce the distance between humans and nature (Rockey, 1983).

Few early assessments of BRT systems engaged with climate change, emphasizing other social and economic benefits instead. For instance, an examination published in 2000 suggested that BRTs foster economic development, without listing any environmental outcomes (Diaz & Schneck, 2000, p. 28). A major shift occurred in the mid-2000s, as climate mitigation became institutionalized within international development agendas (Westman et al., 2023). This reconfiguration is visible in the version of BRT promoted in Bogotá. TransMilenio aligned first with air quality concerns and later with GHG accounting, illustrating how sustainability became a mechanism for global circulation rather than an inherent feature of the intervention. As subsequent BRT narratives put it, 'BRT plays an important role in the global effort to reduce transport sector emissions' (ITDP, 2016, p. no page). In addition, the BRT in Bogotá reflects influential ideas on governance of that time,

especially partnership-based approaches and market-based tools. This period coincided with growing efforts by international institutions, particularly the World Bank, to design financial instruments that could support transport reform and sustainability (Hidalgo & Huizenga, 2013). Bogotá's TransMilenio was thus configured through a good governance paradigm that combined technocratic authority, partnerships, and market-oriented reform.

In Nairobi, the contours of the reigning paradigm are less clear as we are currently operating within its emerging logics. Yet, it appears that the BRT is being assembled within a discourse of infrastructure-led growth linked to the energy transition, where technology-driven development has partially displaced the good governance rationale. When BRT promotion in Nairobi took off, the international discourse on climate benefits was consolidated and green finance rapidly came to the forefront (Fan & Beukes, 2021). This reinvention also seems to be linked with geopolitical reconfiguration. In Nairobi, the assembly of BRT through competing bilateral and corporate interests seems to illustrate the pericentric nature of the emerging multipolar order (Schindler & DiCarlo, 2022), in which infrastructure investment is rendered an arena of geopolitical competition (Gong et al., 2026; Jetin, 2023). BRT investment in Nairobi showcases EU commitment to electric BRT infrastructure, framed explicitly around green transition goals and competitive EV supply chains, alongside Chinese investment into large-scale infrastructure. This reflects not simply a new constellation of funders, but crystallization of a new paradigmatic vision of what urban transport infrastructure is for. Meanwhile, Bogotá's recent purchase of large fleets of Chinese electric buses illustrates that even established BRT systems are reconfigured through this symbolic order. This infrastructure is being repackaged within an entirely different set of international alignments (Batista & Bastos, 2023), demonstrating that BRT projects do not belong to a single historical period but continue to be reconfigured as discourse evolves.

6. Conclusions

This paper argues that transport policy moves not only across space but through historically specific periods in which their meaning, technologies of deployment, and modes of governance are reassembled. We capture this movement via two analytical entry points: durability, which identifies what persists across time and how, and, periodization, which captures the succession of extended moments of relatively stable discursive configurations that shape policy models. Together, these concepts show how the same basic proposition is repackaged to serve successive hegemonic agendas, with significant consequences for how we understand cumulative learning and the distribution of authority in policy circulation.

First, by attending to what persists across periods, the analysis shows that durability is actively produced rather than naturally accumulated. Rather than treating persistence as a product of proven effectiveness or learning, we suggest that durability rests on the capacity to create particular narrative framings, especially those which elevate dedicated bus lanes as a cost-efficient solution. Such framings are sustained by the international consultocracy through the production of evidence and intentional replication across contexts. In addition, durability is produced by legitimizing models via association with successive paradigms. Our data demonstrates that lessons in each case were selective, filtered, and conditioned by dominant discourse. Runcorn demonstrates how an intervention with deeply ambiguous outcomes could later be rewritten as a best-practice narrative, once the BRT label was consolidated and consultant-driven storytelling stabilized interpretations of feasibility. Bogotá shows how sustainability claims were not inherent to the

intervention but emerged sequentially. These unfolded through alignment with evolving agendas, accounting methodologies, and funding mechanisms, even as the evidence of GHG reductions remained contested. Nairobi illustrates how contemporary investment around energy transition and electrification shapes what counts as credible evidence in advance of implementation, privileging feasibility studies, appraisal exercises, and donor benchmarks over grounded assessments of everyday mobility needs. Policy learning, in this sense, is neither cumulative nor neutral but structured by temporally situated regimes that determine what lessons can be articulated, institutionalized, or ignored.

Second, our analysis of periodization highlights the profound normative influence exerted by policy paradigms and its ramifications in terms of reproducing uneven relations of authority. Moving beyond the presentist tendency of the scholarship, we demonstrate the evolution of BRT through a series of discursive constellations. This includes reflection on the current moment, in which we suggest that the putative decline of BRT can be understood as the dissolution of its neoliberal manifestation. As these emerging normative orientations are not yet clearly defined, their full implications for urban transport remain to be seen. Yet, what is more definite is that networks associated with this nascent configuration will be granted legitimacy and influence. As our analysis shows, paradigms produce a common sense-ness of associated practices (Milliken, 1999), which automatically privileges particular actors and interventions. In practice, this allows circulating models to operate as conduits that channel global symbolic orders – and rafts of stakeholders with their own priorities and vested interests – into urban decision making. As observed by Kinkaid (2020, p. 466), the reimagination of local policy according to global symbolic orientations 'reproduce[s] relations of symbolic-material inequality'.

The implication is that circulating policy functions as a kind of Trojan horse, enabling the parachuting of external actors into local planning and providing them with unquestioned credibility. Our data provides ample evidence of this tendency. In Runcorn, planning was placed nearly entirely in the hands of prestigious designers. In Bogotá, BRT shifted authority toward technocratic agencies, development banks, and philanthropic networks. In Nairobi, authority increasingly resides with donors, consultants, investors, and firms positioned to mobilize capital, standards, and technologies. This tendency appears especially strong in places where external intervention is already enabled, including relatively peripheral or marginalized urban settings (e.g. Runcorn in the 1970s) or locations dominated by overseas development assistance (e.g. Nairobi in the present). This perspective reinforces known tendencies of configuring cities as sites into which ready-made solutions are helicoptered, such as manifestations of plug-in urbanism (Guma et al., 2023) and bypass urbanism (Sawyer et al., 2021).

While global crises create urgency to deliver the most effective responses available, the endeavour of replicating workable solutions needs to be coupled with vigilance of their ability to reproduce inequitable systems of authority. Periodization offers a way to critically examine such reproduction by analyzing how policy models are assembled via alignments with policy paradigms. For policy mobilities scholarship, this underscores the value of extending analysis beyond moments of circulation to examine how authority and legitimacy are constituted over time. For practitioners, it suggests the need for reflection on how celebrated models are inseparable from the power relations through which success is defined. Understanding these dynamics is not only an analytical imperative but a practical one, as we appear to be entering a new geopolitical moment in which the terms of urban transport are once again being renegotiated.

Note

1. Every interview participant provided informed consent to take part of the study.

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