



A ROAD TO SOMEWHERE

by Monica G. Tibbits-Nutt

In the course of my career, I have been asked many times why I became a transportation planner. And I've given all sorts of answers. I love SimCity. I want to transform my built environment. But, until this past election season, I have never really pushed myself to answer honestly.

I'm from an extremely rural community in the Midwest. Where I come from, most people don't go to college. Some finish high school. (My father did not.) Most people work in factories (including my mom and my dad). To say that it's not a very diverse place would be an understatement.

It was profoundly important to my mom that I get a good education. I could have traveled just 15 minutes to the local school but would have walked through metal detectors to get to class. Instead, my mom put me on a bus for more than an hour every morning to reach a beautiful campus with all the books I could read and teachers who really wanted to teach—and who were given the resources they needed to do so.

Not everything about this choice was idyllic, though. I got on the bus before the sun came up and was bullied as the wheels went round and round for having the wrong hair and the wrong clothes. (You can't buy the "right" clothes at Goodwill.) When I got off the bus my very first day, one kid met me with a hateful racial slur. I didn't know what it meant, beyond the fact that I was different. On the ride home, I would sometimes see the Ku Klux Klan handing out fliers to passing motorists. Despite everything, my mom kept putting me on that bus.

I rode the bus to school for 10 years. Now I know that someone planned its route very intentionally. Some transportation planner designed that bus route, hoping to reach kids who otherwise left school after eighth grade to work on farms or in factories. Some transportation planner hoped to change a few kids' lives.

Of course a bus can't fix everything. It can't keep kids from hearing things they shouldn't have to hear. (My chemistry teacher at parent-teacher conferences: "She's the dumbest student I've taught in 40 years of teaching." My advanced English teacher, while discussing *Fantastic Voyage*: "Guys, how do you know that the nurse is black? Because she's picking cotton out of the patient's ear.")

But that bus did change my life. It gave me access to resources, books, and lectures otherwise reserved for much wealthier students. It put me on the road—literally—to becoming the first in my family to attend college and then graduate school. That bus gave me a route out.

Good transportation design is about access—to better educational and employment opportunities, to a better life. As transportation planners, we have the power to open up whole new worlds to our communities, even if we can't make those worlds as kind or just as our communities deserve.

We can argue about different cost-savings approaches, competing definitions of innovation, or our various politicized projects, but we cannot forget that we are in the business of access. Now, more than ever, we have to hold ourselves accountable to the lofty goal of fighting for equity of access. The communities on whose behalf we work need to hold us accountable. I hope it's why we do this. It's definitely why I do. ■

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ABOVE

Vanishing Trolley, Liudas Parulskis, 2016. Vilnius Street Art Festival, Vilnius, Lithuania. Photo: Ronaldas Buožis/Studio Vieta