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The Great Society Subway (Creating the North American Landscape)

Zachary M. Schrag

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Drivers in the nation's capital face a host of hazards: high-speed traffic circles, presidential motorcades, jaywalking tourists, and bewildering signs that send unsuspecting motorists from the Lincoln Memorial into suburban Virginia in less than two minutes. And parking? Don't bet on it unless you're in the fast lane of the Capital Beltway during rush hour.

Little wonder, then, that so many residents and visitors rely on the Washington Metro, the 106-mile rapid transit system that serves the District of Columbia and its inner suburbs. In the first comprehensive history of the Metro, Zachary M. Schrag tells the story of the Great Society Subway from its earliest rumblings to the present day, from Arlington to College Park, Eisenhower to Marion Barry.

Unlike the pre–World War II rail systems of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the Metro was built at a time when most American families already owned cars, and when most American cities had dedicated themselves to freeways, not subways. Why did the nation's capital take a different path? What were the consequences of that decision?

Using extensive archival research as well as oral history, Schrag argues that the Metro can be understood only in the political context from which it was born: the Great Society liberalism of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. The Metro emerged from a period when Americans believed in public investments suited to the grandeur and dignity of the world's richest nation. The Metro was built not merely to move commuters, but in the words of Lyndon Johnson, to create "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community."

Schrag scrutinizes the project from its earliest days, including general planning, routes, station architecture, funding decisions, land-use impacts, and the behavior of Metro riders. The story of the Great Society Subway sheds light on the development of metropolitan Washington, postwar urban policy, and the promises and limits of rail transit in American cities.

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