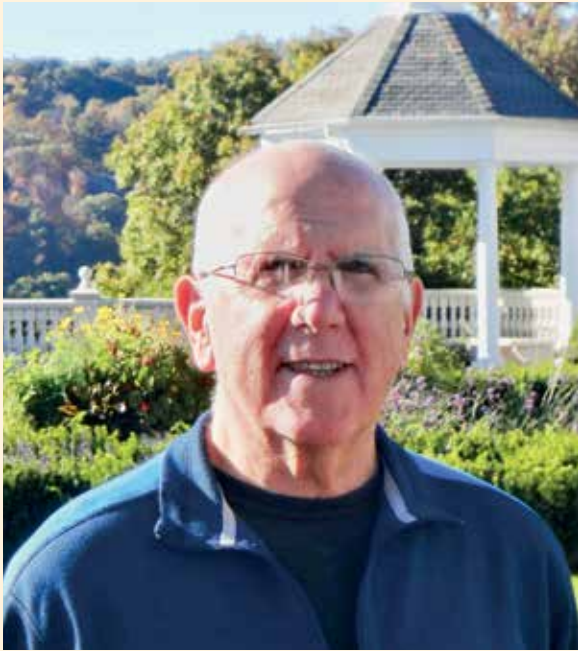


# Mobility vs. Access: An Interview with Dr. Elliot Sclar



**Elliot Sclar**, Professor Emeritus of Urban Planning at Columbia University, directs the Center for Sustainable Urban Development (CSUD) at the University's Earth Institute. CSUD is one of the ten global centers of excellence in Future Urban Transport initiated by the Volvo Research and Education Foundations. Sclar is an economist and urban planner. His two most recent volumes *Improving Urban Access: New Approaches To Funding Transport Investment* (2016) and *Urban Access For The 21st Century: Finance And Governance Models For Transport Infrastructure* (2014) address the issue of reforming the institutions governing transport finance. Sclar's book on the economics of privatization, *You Don't Always Get What You Pay* won two major academic prizes: the Louis Brownlow Award for the Best Book of 2000 from the National Academy of Public Administration and the 2001 Charles Levine Prize from the International Political Science Association and *Governance* magazine for a major contribution to public policy literature.

As most of us know well, the mid-20th century was a time of profound shifts in urban planning and transport infrastructure in the United States. Major economic incentives and policy changes led to a sprawl, car-oriented model for cities, a model which has been, and continues to be exported throughout the world.

By 1980, resistance to this model was building throughout the country, as the negative environmental, social, and economic factors became more and more apparent. Elliot Sclar's book, *Access for All*, laid out the problem from an equity perspective. In it, Sclar argued that in trying to solve a mobility problem, we have ignored the access issues that people face. The solution is to give people entry points to transport that empowers them, rather than excludes them.

As we near the 40th anniversary of the book's publication, these issues could not be more relevant today. There is a growing consensus that private car-based transport is inherently inequitable. ITDP's Michael Kodransky spoke to Dr. Sclar about his reflections on this work, and the history, tactics, and lessons passed down to us for 2017.

**Michael Kodransky:** *If, as you state in the book, cities are the solution to the transport problem, and before the automobile, access to transportation was more evenly distributed, how did urban planning in the 70s change this?*

Elliot Sclar: In the 70s, we saw massive urban highway expansions tearing through the heart of American cities. Lost in the freeway slicing and dicing was any sense of access destroyed in the name of mobility. The compact, transit oriented, mixed land use city that evolved by the mid twentieth century was being obliterated. Massive freeways were destroying the access of those living in lower middle class, poor, ethnic, and minority neighborhoods. Faster mobility for an affluent middle and upper class was being purchased by making access harder for others. As we saw then, and contemporary traffic jams now bear out, it was a lose-lose situation. The neighborhoods were damaged, causing massive displacements and the road congestion expanded. The substitution of urban highways for urban neighborhoods failed. We now reap the social costs.

**MK:** *Is that failure the reason many cities are now tearing down urban freeways? But then why are others still building them?*

ES: We must distinguish the cities tearing down highways from the ones building them. It is largely US cities, the early highway adopters that have learned the lessons and are removing or modifying freeways to diminish their worst anti urban features. US cities are not alone, cities like Tokyo and Seoul, early adopters of the US model have also followed suit.

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**MK: So who is still building them, and why?**

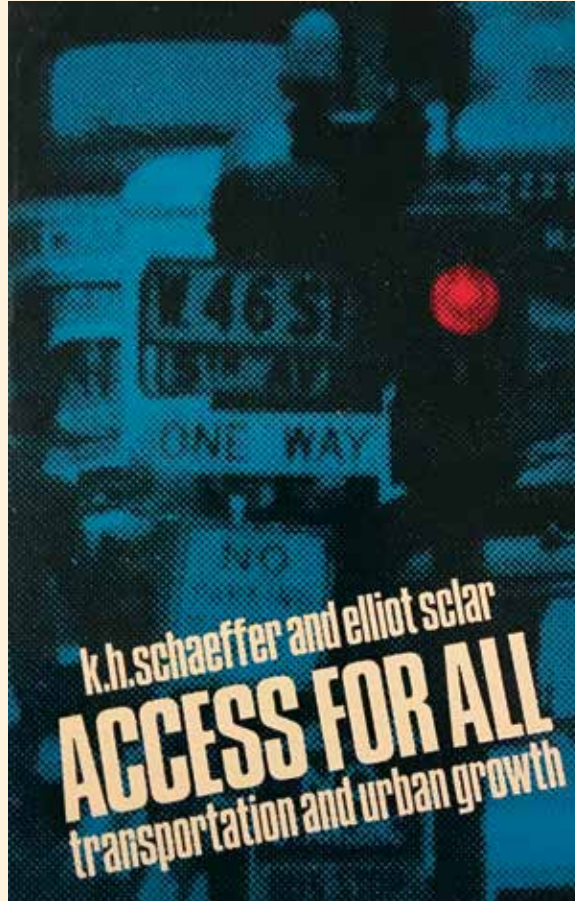
ES: African cities are prime. Kenyan officials are told by international finance and aid organizations that if Nairobi is to be a “world class African metropolis,” urban highway construction is a necessary price. From the perspective of international lenders and private investors it is easy to see why; monetizing and capturing returns on highway infrastructure projects is comparatively easy.

**MK: And they are being pushed to build these by institutional funding, right? There is much more money available for roads than transport.**

ES: Right. Kenya needs external finance if Nairobi is to modernize. Highway projects are an attractive investment to outside finance. But as the world class cities tearing down highways demonstrate, they are built on agglomeration economies derived from good public transport, safe non motorized transport and pedestrian friendly spaces. Such democratically diffuse benefits are not easily captured as tolls or fees on highly specific infrastructure items. But it is these externalities that foster democratic urban access and personal opportunities, the essence of “world class” urbanism. Mistakes are sure to be made, but let African cities at least make new ones. We already know this doesn’t work.

**MK: When you wrote the book, what did you mean by access and how does it differ from mobility?**

ES: Access is a social concept that is only partly manifest spatially. It is the public good created by urban density. People from all walks of life must have more or less equal and unfettered access to the opportunities urban life makes possible. High quality access is the base on which a vibrant urban and democratic society exists. Urban planning, governance and financing must be made to mesh if we are to achieve Access for All.



*Access for All* by K.H. Schaeffer and Elliot Sclar, published in 1980, was part of a new discussion of urban planning based on the principles of community and equity that continues to guide sustainable transport and urban planning.

**MK: How can planners focus more on access rather than mobility in practice across different regions?**

ES: To embed mobility in access it must be conceived as multi-tiered and multi-determined. The access-mobility nexus has five tiers in priority order: 1) mixed use land use (less trip generation); 2) pedestrian friendly public spaces among urban locations; 3) easy and safe exclusive corridors for non-motorized transport; 4) exclusive street lanes for public transport, such as BRT, and exclusive corridors for metros and



The city of Seattle removes part of the Alaskan Way Viaduct, a process that is currently underway. Several other US cities including Portland, San Francisco, and Milwaukee have removed highways or halted their construction.

commuter rail; 5) lastly automobile, taxi, but more importantly freight access for activities of daily life that fall outside of the other realms.

Because access is qualitatively social, sound physical planning must be embedded in a strong social policy commitment to equity. Specifically this takes the form of ubiquitous affordable housing options (including both public and private arrangements), good public schools and excellent public services overall. Absent that, mobility planning alone quickly devolves into gentrification, gated buildings and gated neighborhoods. That is to say less access, more segregation and a weakening of democracy.

**MK: In 1980 you wrote critically about Personal Rapid Transit (PRT), a transport system that consists of small driverless vehicles operating on a network of exclusive guideways. Contemporary driverless vehicle (DV) developers promise even more door to door service in private automobiles traversing public thoroughfares. Are there lessons to be learned from PRT about how well DVs will fare?**

ES: Both PRT and DVs offer the promise of highly personalized time saving, congestion free travel. DVs, like PRTs, promise to decongest roads and reduce travel time on an individual basis by ignoring laws of physics. No two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. Serving the density that good urbanism requires means efficiently using precious urban space. In PRT computer simulations it was quickly discovered that as use expands and guideways congest, the system responded by prioritizing trips. Efficient prioritization was not by who was first in queue, but which vehicle could move next most efficiently. Later it becomes more efficient to put more people into vehicles going the same way and have them occasionally change PRTs at various stops along the routes. When run to the limit, the simulations reinvent metros with fixed routes.

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DVs have the same problems with rationing existing street capacity. It will become efficient to reroute and regroup riders. The driverless bus on fixed routes is an outcome I heartily support. The use of DVs to enhance public transport holds our great promise for expanding both access and safety, if done properly.

**MK: If you were to write a 2017 version of the book, what would you add or change?**

ES: A good question, one I often think about. The book as written made sense for its time and place. Moreover, the principles about cities and access that it articulated have not changed. But does it make sense for the present moment? Much about the urban condition has changed. There is now an awareness of the rapid global nature of urban transformation. We will not effectively address global climate change unless we embrace the fully urban nature of the modern world. The size and social composition of global urban populations is dramatically different. The nature of urban work, and demands for workspace and living space has changed. Most important for present purposes, the technology of urban mobility no longer fits well within the governance silos charged with overseeing it. So while the articulated principles abide, the governance context calls for innovative policy and planning prescriptions. A rewrite would focus on the challenges of effective transformation of the governance institutions for a new time. Twentieth century urban transport governance is obsolete. It does not effectively meet the challenges of 21st century possibilities. The need for change is as imperative as climate change is a ticking clock. In a revision I would especially focus on the remarkable global convergence in the institutional ways mobility and access challenges are playing out across all countries.