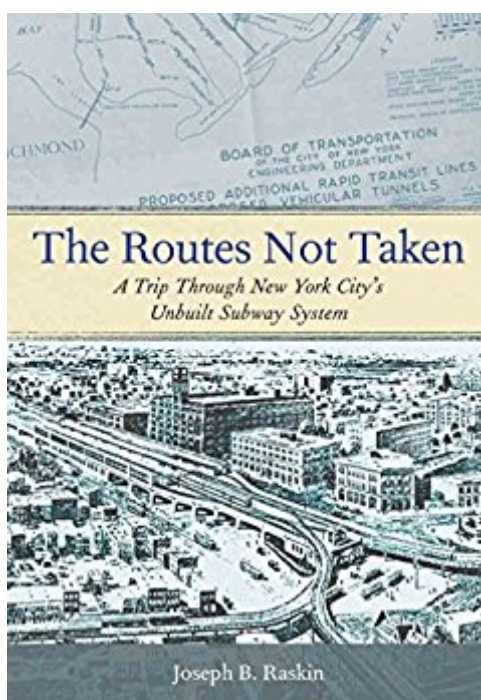


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The Routes Not Taken: A Trip Through New York City's Unbuilt Subway System



Synopsis

Robert A. Van Wyck, mayor of the greater city of New York, broke ground for the first subway line by City Hall on March 24, 1900. It took four years, six months, and twenty-three days to build the line from City Hall to West 145th Street in Harlem. Things rarely went that quickly ever again. The Routes Not Taken explores the often dramatic stories behind the unbuilt or unfinished subway lines, shedding light on a significant part of New York City's history that has been almost completely ignored until now. Home to one of the world's largest subway systems, New York City made constant efforts to expand its underground labyrinth, efforts that were often met with unexpected obstacles: financial shortfalls, clashing agendas of mayors and borough presidents, battles with local community groups, and much more. After discovering a copy of the 1929 subway expansion map, author Joseph Raskin began his own investigation into the city's underbelly. Using research from libraries, historical societies, and transit agencies throughout the New York metropolitan area, Raskin provides a fascinating history of the Big Apple's unfinished business that until now has been only tantalizing stories retold by public-transit experts. The Routes Not Taken sheds light on the tunnels and stations that were completed for lines that were never fulfilled: the efforts to expand the Hudson tubes into a fullfledged subway; the Flushing line, and why it never made it past Flushing; a platform underneath Brooklyn's Nevins Street station that has remained unused for more than a century; and the 2nd Avenue line along the symbol of dashed dreams deferred countless times since the original plans were presented in 1929. Raskin also reveals the figures and personalities involved, including why Fiorello LaGuardia could not grasp the importance of subway lines and why Robert Moses found them to be old and boring. By focusing on the unbuilt lines, Raskin illustrates how the existing subway system is actually a Herculean feat of countless political compromises. Filled with illustrations of the extravagant expansion plans, The Routes Not Taken provides an enduring contribution to the transportation history of New York City.

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Customer Reviews

I've been waiting for a book like this for a long time, and I was so excited to learn of it. And so my disappointment in the actual result was profound. While it's clear that Raskin knows the stories of the unbuilt lines in tremendous (even excessive) detail, the organization of the book is baffling, and the lack of maps and legible diagrams is unforgivable--especially since Raskin refers to the lines by their historic names (e.g., the Sea Beach Line instead of the N). This is an understandable decision, but it must make the book daunting for those who haven't internalized the old names. A list of lines and names in the back helps a little, but a map or series of maps would have made a huge difference. I know maps are expensive and that old ones often don't reproduce well. But Raskin needed to make the investment in new drawings to illustrate much of what he talks about. I'm very familiar with New York's transit geography, but I repeatedly had to go to other sources to figure out what he was referring to. The narrative structure is equally baffling, with stories coming and going in no particular chronological order. I can't imagine what a more casual reader would make of this. I really wanted to love this book, but I think only the most diehard of NYC railfans will get through this happily.

I am a NYC history buff and have read a great deal on the history of the subway so I while I was expecting another perspective on NYC subway history, this was very disappointing. It turned out to be more of a detailed chronicle of transportation legislation. This can be very very dry if you are expecting to learn about actual subway history. Moreover it is more about discussions about about legislation in the form of sometimes very long quotes taken directly from minutes of meetings and reports which seems more like a short-cut the author decided to take rather than describe in a

concise narrative. In fact for the most part I found the author's writing style often rambling and disjointed, turning from a discussion of a proposed route to the eastern Bronx to suddenly a route in Brooklyn. Since none of these routes were actually built, this, combined with the author's inability to compose in a clear, concise, and most of all engaging manner make for a very disappointing read.

A thoroughly researched book rich in footnotes. The theme is largely political showing the conflicts between proposed routes, construction (subway vs. el), real estate developers vs. riders, private management (IRT and BMT) vs. city constructed and managed. (IND), and the conflicts between state and city. There were endless and enervating political delays which delayed construction of new routes for decades. The impacts of the great depression and WW2 are well drawn. One is impressed at the power held by various mayors, Robert Moses, and administrators who were advancing their own political agendas at the expense of sound economic and engineering considerations. These factors persist to this day. It is a wonder that the LIRR to the eastside, the extension of the 7 to the westside, and the initial phase of the 2nd avenue subway are underway despite the political and economic environment. On the negative side, the maps and figures are often poor copies barely readable with a magnifying glass. I wish for clearer and, perhaps, redrawn supporting artifacts.

For anyone with a serious interest in the history of the New York City subway system, this book is a must have. The book cites many important references to substantiate the text in the book. It is a little disappointing that the book did not include discussions of the earlier steam and elevated. For example, The suburban extensions of the Manhattan elevated lines were never built, as shown on the February 1879 map in Harper's Weekly. When Brooklyn West End line was elevated, why was the route changed from that of the original surface line? One very perplexing question relates to the original 1885 Brooklyn elevated line (the "Old Main Line"). The Brooklyn Bridge construction began in the mid-1870's, and it was opened in 1883. Construction for the old Main Line must have begun in the early 1880's, when the Brooklyn approaches to the bridge must have been well known. So why was the terminus of the Old Main Line not re-routed from the Fulton Ferry to the Brooklyn Bridge approach? The book is replete with many logical examples of new routes, and route extensions that would have been highly beneficial to the riders of the New York City subways, but were never built, or as in the case of the Second Avenue Subway which is finally being built, is the subject of many cost saving measures, that limits its usefulness. However, one thing that detracts from the book is the poor quality of some of its illustrations. All-in-all, this book is an important

addition the libraries of people with serious interest in the history of the New York subways.

Having been a subway rider and subway fan since the fifties, I always used to look out the front window whenever I could. Unfortunately full width cabs make that impossible now, but that's a different story. I always used to see those unused ramps and platforms and structures that should have had tracks but didn't. This book answered all my questions and filled in all the blanks. The quality of the many maps was disappointing, but maybe that's just in the kindle edition. This book is a "must read" for any NY Subway aficionado.

A great read for rail historians, as well as anyone interested in NYC transportation history. Politics and dreams, along with a little insight, keeps it interesting.

Although this work is well-researched, scholarly and thorough, unfortunately it has some flaws. The thoroughness results in a long, detailed and complex narrative. It is not an easy read by any means. Perhaps more importantly, the illustrations are essentially unreadable. Figure after figure contain useful information that defy discernment, even with a magnifying glass. I do not know how this critical flaw could have been resolved - perhaps with a larger-sized publication?

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