Scott Conarroe: Tracking the Parallel Universe of North American Rails

Scott Conarroe frequently notes that Barack Obama was the first president in over fifty years to arrive in Washington by rail. For their historic journey in January 2009, the Obamas shunned travel by private jet or motorcade and opted for the august simplicity of train travel. Their inaugural journey coincided with the end of Conarroe’s year-long road trip around North America, a grand tour of the continental rail network that spanned the USA and Canada. While Obama’s seven-hour train ride promoted rail travel as a kind of all-American experience, as much a part of the country’s past as its future, Conarroe’s longer, slower, and notably less staged journey yielded a sweeping portrayal of the North American rail network that was far more equivocal.

By Rail is timely in many respects, though it is neither celebratory nor polemical. Conarroe’s project takes stock of the rail system in North America at the outset of the 21st century and serves as a somber reminder of the railways’ persistence here. Paradoxically this network remains a defining geographical feature of a continent whose spatial patterns are now largely organized by the automobile. The preponderance of post-industrial spaces shaped by driving are evident in many images that betray the material traces of people who live their lives independently of trains. Their SUVs, pick-up trucks, suburban homes, parking lots, roads, storage spaces and trailer parks occupy the margins of these broad vistas traversed by tracks.

Our built environment is still ubiquitously marked by railways, but at some point in the 20th century the rail cut became the negative space of cities and suburbs, recessed into the landscape or dislocated from the mainframe of our daily lives. In many photographs tracks seem as though they occupy a parallel universe: in Storage Lot, Cochrane AB, for instance, the rail line in the foreground is in shadow, but it establishes a kind of proscenium space separated off from the scene in the valley below where seasonal trailers and RVs are tucked into the rolling foothills of the Rocky mountains. Viewed from a nearby hill top, this pastoral landscape is illuminated by the pale pink glow of flood lights that surround the area like a secret compound. At first glance the composition is oddly reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel’s 15th-century landscapes, but the scene is updated to fit a 21st-century vision of bucolic country life that is shot through with signs of ‘rurban’ expansion on the outskirts of Calgary.
This kind of rural-urban fantasy has become the mainstay of the recent housing boom in North America: the suburb in the woods or on the prairie (within a five-minute drive of the golf course or Wal-Mart) is a popular formula in North America, and these recent developments make the first suburbs of the 1950s seem almost ecologically sound by comparison. This long, slow, post-urban drama unfolding in Cochrane is one that suggests spatial planning and development have moved a step further away from the centrality of the rail lines established in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

However, in other images rail and road seemed to occupy a sort of symbiotic relationship: Bonneville Flats or Car Lot, Great Salt Lake UT represents the proximity between freeways and railways, particularly in the
West, where the two often run parallel for hundreds of miles, branching off at seemingly random intervals. This proximity enabled Conarroe to drive to the majority of locations included in By Rail, which initially might seem surprising given the title of the series. Even though the trip was taken by car, it is the association between roads and rails that lends a kind of conceptual tension to the series. Ironically, after a century of government subsidies to highways and car companies, driving is a significantly faster and cheaper mode of transportation; it is also a deeply cherished part of North American identity, so much so that our fondness for driving is never really questioned. It is commonly known that the railways played a critical role in the development of national identity in Canada and the US in the 19th century; their status in nation building has turned them into static monuments that serve as nostalgia machines for simpler times, tarted up as museum displays or drive-in diners. But the story about how we managed to abandon railways in our rush to embrace the automobile as the symbol of modern efficiency is less easily traced or recounted, and also less popular given our affection for cars.

According to Owen D. Gutfreund, we can, paradoxically, first blame cyclists for the shift away from railways. In the 19th century rail companies were the first modern corporations, and many had monopolies on transportation and communication. Near the end of the century resentment toward their control initially took root in the form of the League of American Wheelmen, an association of cyclists financially supported by Albert Pope, who was then [the] largest manufacturer of bicycles in the US. By 1885 the Wheelmen had joined ranks with farmers eager for less costly alternatives to rail transport, and the two groups founded the Good Roads Movement to lobby government to finance the expansion and improvement of roads. The curious detail in this history is that it chronicles a preference for road over rail that predates the invention of the automobile. By the beginning of the 20th century the concept of ‘automobility’ was fully formed along with the manufacture of the Model T, but the idea of ‘self-movement’ contained in the emerging culture of automobility was established some twenty years earlier with the Wheelman’s League.¹

Prior to the Obama’s historic train ride, the last president to take the same inaugural journey to Washington was Dwight D. Eisenhower, who has come to be associated more with America's highways than its railways. Eisenhower’s presidency marked a period in US history that drastically reshaped the North American landscape and made the built environment what it is today: his 1956 Highways Act engineered sprawl as a new post-war planning ethos that slowly declimated many older American cities as well as the vital rail links that connected these cities. The major highway-building period that began in the fifties was both a consequence of Cold War military strategy (as decentralized populations are less susceptible to foreign bombing campaigns) and a means of seating the automobile at the centre of a newly revamped consumer society.
More recently it would seem as though we have finally reached the end of the century of automobility; it is
estimated that we are due to reach peak oil by 2020. In an interview with Justin Mah, Conarroe observed that
the nonchalance associated with the idea of the road trip is on its way out: "When I was doing By Rail, gas
was more costly than ever before and the term 'carbon footprint' entered common parlance. My old van was
making uncomfortable sounds and it struck me repeatedly that the window for this type of adventure was
likely closing." This sentiment has been echoed quite differently over the last few years as news headlines
have been populated by a host of contemporary characters promoting the future of rail. From politicians to
financial magnates, the powerful and the wealthy have been busy heralding a kind of rail renaissance in North America. In 2008, Vice President “Amtrak Joe” Biden built his campaign on the rather improbable image of commuter trains as the working man’s transport; more recently billionaire Warren Buffett purchased a majority stake in the dusty old business of rail freight.

But as a mode of transportation in North America, rail is in dire need of its boosters to garner public support. While Washington seemed to be warming up to railways, Detroit’s iconic Beaux-Arts ruin, Michigan Central Station, grabbed headlines as Detroit’s city council voted to have the structure demolished. Michigan Central Station is an empty, hulking super structure of the early 20th century, built by the same architecture firm as Grand Central Terminal. The two stations opened in the same year, 1913, and could not have had more dissimilar fates: while Grand Central has been renovated several times over, Michigan Central has stood empty since 1987. Perhaps the saddest building still standing in North America, it is perilously close to being demolished. It is also rumoured that Detroit City Council, which officially voted to tear down the structure in 2009, had plans to use President Obama’s economic stimulus money to finance the demolition. Almost a year later the building still stands as the last regional sign of a rail network in a city that defined American transportation in the 20th century. Its history bears witness to the long, slow takeover of one system by another, and the current crisis over the failure of both.

Detroit automakers worked hard to kill the rails. Its near-villainous status in the narrative of how we became the most energy-intensive civilization in history makes it a notable absence in Conarroe’s series. But perhaps it is too easy to read history this way. Cleveland, Ohio, a three-hour drive from Detroit, serves as the rust belt landscape in this series, and this was where Conarroe’s grand tour began. Canal, Cleveland OH, presents the intersection of three modalities of transport marking three ages of industry in North America: shipping, rail and road. In this photograph an old rail trestle crosses under a raised freeway and the two lines visually intersect just short of the vanishing point of the image. The canal represents the oldest and slowest conduit and spans the frame beneath both structures. In the foreground snow-covered construction materials appear abandoned in an industrial yard; old rusted cable reels tangled up like tumbleweed, a trailer from a transport truck has been idle long enough to become a structure for graffiti. Though this location might have been a kind of transportation hub at one point, there is nothing here that appears to be moving, nor are there any signs that movement might begin again anytime soon. This utilitarian landscape seems suspended in time and implies a crisis of movement.

With few exceptions there are no close-ups of locomotives, speeding passenger trains or bustling central stations in By Rail; in other words, this series does not directly address the business of trains or what they do.
It is not a glorification of what rail once was, or even what it could be. In these images the track is the thread that unifies a diverse series of locations in North America, yet it is rarely a prominent feature on the landscape, whether urban, rural or suburban. Rather, these images disclose the persistence of this network, the sheer ubiquity of rail lines that remain here even though they are rarely thought of as a defining feature of contemporary North American life. "There are variations in language and currency and time throughout this continent," Conarrow observes, "but train tracks illustrate a certain type of constancy."

In some respects, what *By Rail* highlights is the odd timing of the arrival of empire on this continent. Railways came to prominence as the technological marvel of the industrial revolution and as the organizational metaphor for the British Empire when Greenwich Mean Time was established to coordinate train travel. But by the time Americans began to organize around the automobile they had developed their own time culture that made rail look quaint by comparison. Each empire developed its own form of locomotion, and while rail opened the west in North America the network was as developed as it would ever be on this continent by the end of WWII, when the United States had overtaken the United Kingdom in its own game. It remains to be seen if we might ever seriously return to rail in Canada and the United States, accustomed as we are to the convenience culture of drive-thrus, just-in-time delivery systems and big-box stores. *By Rail* presents transportation as a 21st-century quandary that is at the same time epic and ordinary, but it also invites us to take pleasure in the small details that present conflicting scenarios as to what kind of future we are approaching.

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Notes


   http://www.canadianart.ca/online/features/2009/08/06/scott-conarrow

3. Ibid.