Norton Street and Transportation Technologies

Norton St, located in Leichhardt in the Inner West of Sydney, is a mixed-use 'main street' style area, approximately 5 kilometres to the city. This analysis will explore how changing technologies effected the development of Norton St through time. It takes a focus on two major shifts in transportation technology: the introduction of trams and rail-based transport in the late 1800's, and the growth and dominance of the automobile from the mid 20th century. This analysis focuses on Norton St is an example of a 'transit city' area, where development was built around the construction of a public transport node, with automobile-based development later affecting the area.

Transportation Technologies and Cities

Transport has long been identified as a key factor in shaping cities development, with the technology of different periods setting the stage for the urban form of cities.[1] Newman et. al. (2016) outlines three main phases which our cities have transitioned through.[2] The first of these is the 'walking city', covering pre-industrial times, walking defined the main form of transport, and so required cities to have all needs of residents within a small space defined by this. Secondly, innovations in rail allowed for cities to expand along these routes, with stations and stops forming nodes enabling people to travel into cities. This forms the 'transit city'. Finally, the automobile removed the need for people to be close to these transport nodes and resulted in the large and dispersed urban form we see in Sydney and in many cities around the world today.

The transit city

In the mid-1800s, rail-based technologies were taking hold and beginning to be used in urban environments. Previously, walking was the predominant way to move around cities, with horseback, a mode restricted to wealthier people, being the only longer distance method.[3] The tram enabled cities to expand past these limitations, allowing for the mass transport of people past walking distance. Alongside improvements in sewerage and water systems, this enabled the growth of cities beyond what was previously capable.

The first street-running tram system is generally considered to be the New York and Harlaem Railroad in 1832 and consisted of horse-drawn carriages running on rails.[4] They acted as a successor to the horse-drawn omnibus, enabling the more efficient transport of people through the use of steel rails.[3] These systems later spread to Europe, with Vienna opening a

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[1] Clark, C. (1958). Transport: Maker and Breaker of Cities. *The Town Planning Review, 28*(4), 237-250.
[2] Newman, P., Kosonen, L., & Kenworthy, J. (2016). Theory of urban fabrics: planning the walking, transit/public transport and automobile/motor car cities for reduced car dependency. *Town Planning Review, 87*(4), 429-458.
[3] Roess, R., & Sansone, G. (2013). The Beginnings of Public Transportation in New York: Omnibuses and Street Railways. *The Wheels That Drove New York*, 53-61.
[4] Lee, C. E. (1953). The English Street Tramways of George Francis Train. *The Journal of Transport History, May fs-1*(1), 20-27.

line in 1840, Paris in 1853 and London in 1857.[4] Sydney constructed one of these horse drawn tram lines along Pitt St in 1860.[5]

The impact of this technology on cities was profound. In New York, trams enabled the expansion of significant development northward, with the city expanding further north in the 32 years following the introduction of trams than in all of the 200 years prior.[4] In Europe, large-scale plans gaining prominence also began to be designed around this new technology, including Haussman's plan for Paris and Barcelona's Cerda Plan.[6] The Cerda Plan included non-straight corners on buildings to allow trains turn through city streets. Another notable feature is the grid layout, allowing for more efficient transport, and easier expansion. Cities across Spain have been found to exhibit the development pattern of being structured around train and street-car lines during this time period, with significant development being found to take place following the construction of these lines.[6] Rail technology was also influential in Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, where he proposed railways to otherwise self-contained smaller cities.[7]

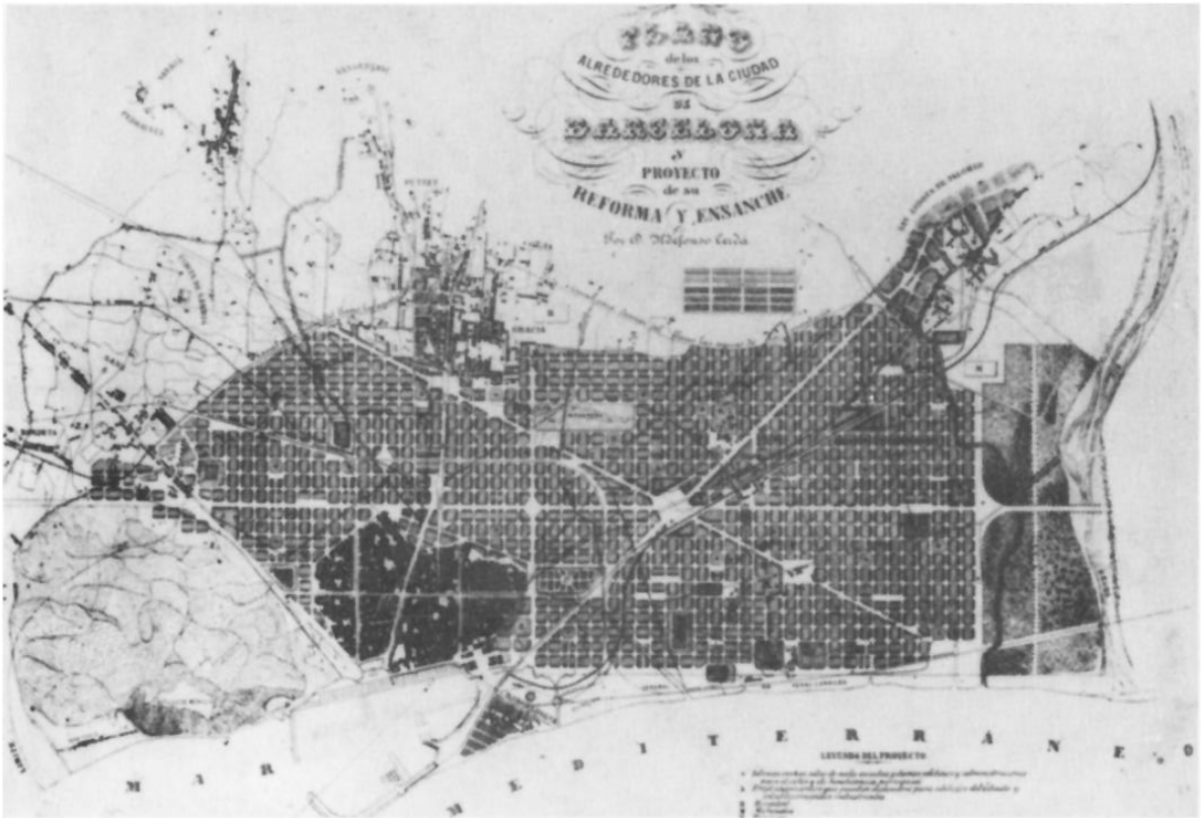

Figure 1: The 1859 Cerda Plan for the expansion of Barcelona past it's city walls (bottom-left of image).[8] Some of the features of the city include a grid layout and wide avenues, aiming to take advantage of growing rail transport at the time

[5] City of Sydney - Archives & History Resources. (n.d.). *Pitt Street*. Retrieved June 2025, 4, from https://archives.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/nodes/view/1938837

[6] Méndez-Manjón, I., & Plasencia-Lozano, P. (2025). The role of tramway systems in shaping urban growth: a historical GIS study of four Spanish cities. *Planning Perspectives*, 1-22.

[7] Howard, E. (1902). *Garden Cities of To-Morrow.* London: Faber and Faber.

[8] Aibar, E., & Bijker, W. E. (1997). Constructing a City: The Cerdà Plan for the Extension of Barcelona. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 3–30.

The transit city consists of an expansion of the walking city along public transport routes, and retains the original fabric of urban areas, where a mix of different uses takes place, and the street forms the basis for commerce.

The automobile city

In contrast, the rise of the automobile constituted a vastly different urban form for cities to follow.

City planners in the early 20th century saw technology as a way to spread city out past what was seen as crowded and unsanitary. Frank Lloyd Wright based his Broadacre city around the use of the automobile, and Le Corbusier stated "the motor-car that has completely overturned all our old ideas of town planning", enabling his functional zoning and modernist visions to come to fruition.[9, 10] This allowed for the development of cities outside the key corridors that made up tram and train routes, and for greater distances to covered, expanding cities across a much wider area.[6]

Nichols' 1922 Kansas City Country Club Plaza pioneered the impact of the automobile on cities. Now, shops and services no longer had to be in areas close to where everyone was but could instead maximise business by providing adequate parking for people to travel to the location for great distances.[11]

The street also takes on the role of transportation rather than commerce, with the winding and disconnected urban form aiming to reduce traffic rather than encourage it, with few intersections and wider street layouts. This contrasts with the grid layout designs that preceded it.

In addition to changing the layout of how commerce and uses were laid out, the change to automobile-based development spread the "1 hour wide" radius of cities across a much greater area.[2] The 1969 Melbourne transport plan shows how freeways were used to spread out the city far beyond its original limits, and enable population density to remain stagnant in the inner suburban areas.[12]

The new technology of the automobile created cities that were much larger than before, reduced the desire for transit services, and created a new model of parking-based commerce.

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[9] Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. (2017, September 8). *Revisiting Frank Lloyd Wright's Vision for "Broadacre City"*. Retrieved from https://franklloydwright.org/revisiting-frank-lloyd-wrights-vision-broadacre-city/#:~:text=This%20new%20democratic%20city%2C%20as,which%20the%20individual%20would%20flourish.

[10] MIT. (n.d.). *THE AUTOMOBILE IN LE CORBUSIER'S IDEAL CITIES*. Retrieved Jun 7, 2025, from http://mitp-content-server.mit.edu:18180/books/content/sectbyfn?collid=books_pres_0&id=9008&fn=9780262015363_sch_0001.pdf

[11] Missouri State Parks. (n.d.). *Country Club Plaza: History and Significance*. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from https://mostateparks.com/sites/mostateparks/files/KC%20Country%20Club%20Plaza%20Report.pdf

[12] The Metropolitan Transportation Committee Victoria. (1969). *The Transportation Plan*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://www.vgls.vic.gov.au/client/en_AU/search/asset/1286832/0

Methods and Application to Norton St

Research on Norton St primarily involved using information from the Inner West Council. This comes in the form of archival records and community history websites. Norton St was formerly managed by the Leichhardt Municipal Council until it's merger into the Inner West council in 2016. The Leichhardt Council Archives provide the place to search for archives on Norton St. Searching for "Norton St" and "Elswick Estate" were used and returned many maps. From the Inner West Council, the historical walking tour provided an overview and some key events of the area. Additionally, Leichhardt Library was visited to try to provide insights into the historical artefacts available for the area.

Newspapers were also used as a source for information on Norton St. Historical newspapers were looked at, by finding the newspapers active in the area around key dates and using Trove's key search terms to find articles. For example, with information on the tram network recommendation being in 1949, searching for "tram" and "closure" in the 1950s uncovered articles regarding events and public perceptions of the tram closures at the time.

To gain a wider contextual view of planning in the area, national and state archives were consulted, finding a map of Sydney's tramways, showing the former tram route along Norton St. The impact of Sydney's wider planning policies is also important, with metropolitan plans from the national archives, as well as the NSW government website being found to gain insights on the policies and philosophies of different time periods.

Norton St and changing technologies

Development of Norton St (1880s)

Much of Norton St's initial growth took place in the 1880s alongside the construction of the tram line. The tram line down Norton St was built in 1884, extending the Annandale line down Parramatta Rd to Leichhardt. [13, 14] This helped facilitate the growth of Norton St as hub for the area, and encouraged more development.

Several of the key historical buildings along Norton St were constructed in this time period, including the Town Hall (1888), post office (1889) and public school (1891).[15] All of the buildings constructed at this time are street-facing and designed around people walking or utilising the tram line to arrive at these locations.

[13] NBRS + Partners. (2016). *Norton Street Corridor.* LEICHHARDT COUNCIL.
[14] Godden Mackay Heritage Consultants. (1994, March). *Tramway Workshops, Depots and Substations*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://www.railpage.org.au/tram/goddmack.html
[15] Inner West Council. (2023, September 11). *Norton Street Historical Walking Tour*. Retrieved 19 April, 2025, from https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/explore/libraries/community-history/our-community-history/self-guided-heritage-walks/norton-street-historical-walking-tour

Figure 2: Leichhardt Town Hall c. 1888 [14]

Much of Leichhardt's development and subdivision came through the Elswick Estate subdivision, providing more residential and commercial land for the growing city of Sydney. The below image shows an advertisement poster for Elswick Heights Estate, nearby to Norton St, and highlights the key role of transportation to residents at the time. The advertisement focuses on the benefit of being "close to electric tram" and "excellent train service", emphasising the key role of these technologies at the time.[16]

[16] Inner West Council. (n.d.). Elswick Heights Estate. *Leichhardt Subdivision Plans and Maps (IWC_LC_SP_L5)*(Reference Number: IWC_LC_SP_L5_96), 3343354. Retrieved 26 April, 2025 from https://innerwest.spydus.com/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/ENQ/OPAC/ARCENQ?SETLVL=&RNI=3343354

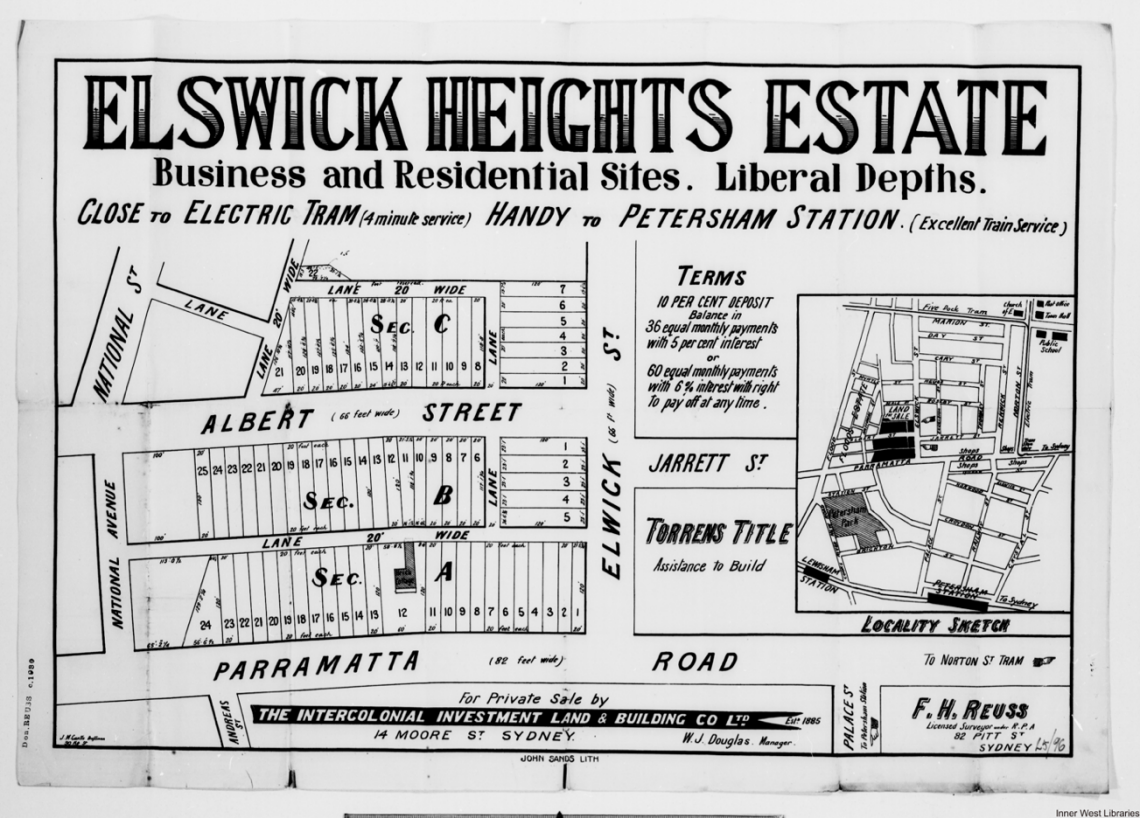


Figure 3: A subdivision of the area around Norton St, highlighting the importance of transport in the growth in the area[16]

The estate plan also shows these sites as "business and residential", showing the mix of uses that took place in the area. Norton St had many businesses form along it, with a wide array of uses, from retail and entertainment, to light industrial.[15]

An example of industrial development was 256 Norton Street, where the Roebuck family used the location as a factory for the construction of rocking horses and various other wooden crafts from 1911.[15] Other uses on the street included coach building and plumbing.[13] Various other diverse land uses took place on Norton St, and this reflects the mixed-use nature of the transit-fabric city. The bars and restaurants were continued forming these uses to today, with Italian immigrants forming many of the key establishments of the area still seen today, these include Bar Sport and Mezzapica café.[15]

Outside of Norton St, Sydney's tram network and development grew considerably during the late 1800's and early 1900's under this form of development. These similar mixed-use main streets can be found throughout inner Sydney, many along former tram lines.

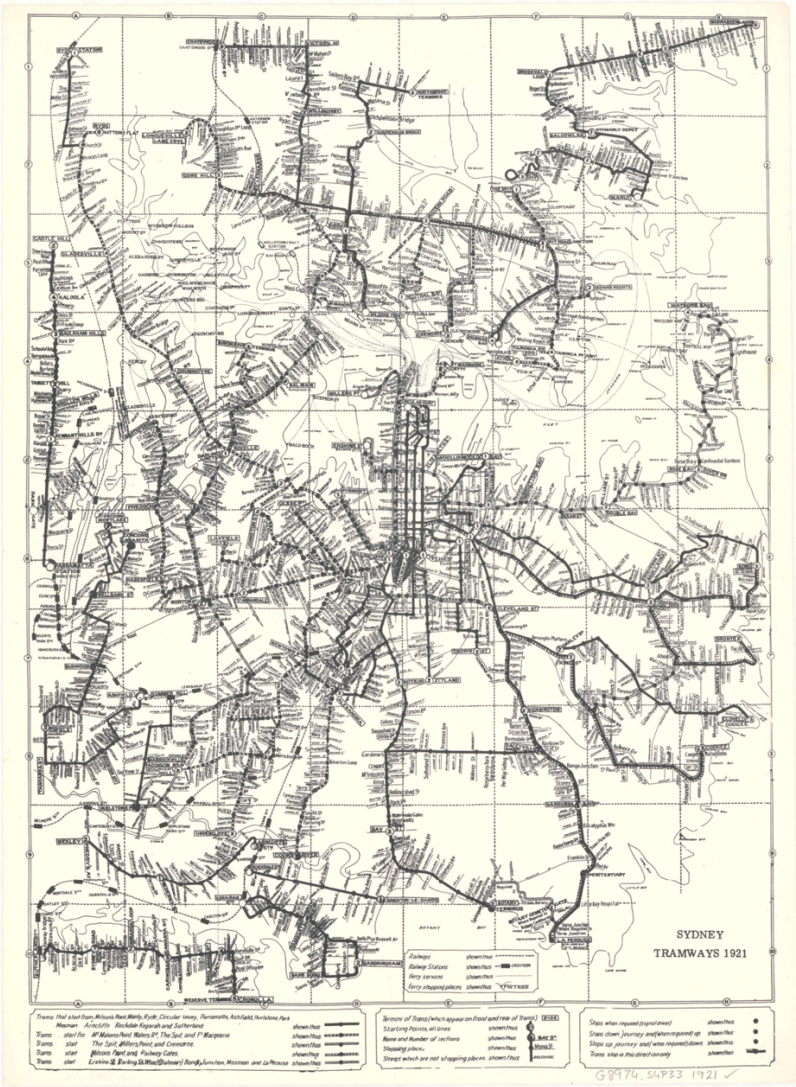


Figure 4: Extent of Sydney's Tram network in 1921, showing the widespread use of this transport mode, and its importance in shaping the city[17]

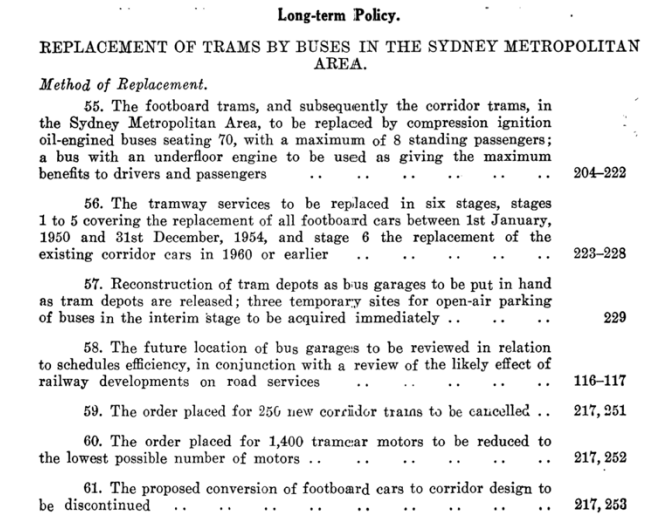
The automobile's impact on Norton St

In the 1940's and 50's Norton St shows the wider spread in the city of car-dependent uses and the shift away from transit-based designs. Two key documents from the time regarding transport include the 1949 "Report on Road Passenger Transport Services" and the 1951 Cumberland Plan.

In response to decreasing financial viability of the public transport networks, Premier James McGirr commissioned a report to be undertaken on the subject.[18] The resulting 1949 "Report on Road Passenger Transport Services", acted as a catalyst for the removal of trams

[17] (1921). *Sydney tramways 1921* Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-371208079
[18] Premier Worried About Transport Finances (1949, January 28). *Singleton Argus (NSW : 1880 - 1954)*, p. 5. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article82574872

throughout Sydney.[19] This involved the contracting of three transport engineers from Britain to advise on transport policy.



Long-term Policy.

REPLACEMENT OF TRAMS BY BUSES IN THE SYDNEY METROPOLITAN AREA.

Method of Replacement.

55. The footboard trams, and subsequently the corridor trams, in the Sydney Metropolitan Area, to be replaced by compression ignition oil-engined buses seating 70, with a maximum of 8 standing passengers; a bus with an underfloor engine to be used as giving the maximum benefits to drivers and passengers 204–222

56. The tramway services to be replaced in six stages, stages 1 to 5 covering the replacement of all footboard cars between 1st January, 1950 and 31st December, 1954, and stage 6 the replacement of the existing corridor cars in 1960 or earlier 223–228

57. Reconstruction of tram depots as bus garages to be put in hand as tram depots are released; three temporary sites for open-air parking of buses in the interim stage to be acquired immediately 229

58. The future location of bus garages to be reviewed in relation to schedules efficiency, in conjunction with a review of the likely effect of railway developments on road services 116–117

59. The order placed for 250 new corridor trams to be cancelled .. 217, 251

60. The order placed for 1,400 tramcar motors to be reduced to the lowest possible number of motors 217, 252

61. The proposed conversion of footboard cars to corridor design to be discontinued 217, 253

Figure 5: Extract from the 1949 "Report on Road Passenger Transport Services", recommending the replacement of the tram network with a bus system [19]

This report highlighted the attitude of the time, where new road-based transports were seen as the future and a more flexible an efficient solution to transportation problems in the post-war era. However, this plan was criticised, given the large amounts of people that relied on this transport method.

WIDE PROTESTS ON 'SCRAP TRAMS' PLAN

THE recommendation to scrap Sydney's trams and replace them with buses provoked a storm of criticism today.

Heading the protest are some members of the Labor Caucus, and the Tramway and Bus Employees' Association.

Angela Calomiris, Greenwich Village (N.Y.) photographer, testified at the trial of 11 Communist leaders in New York that she had donated £15 to the Communists' trial fund while acting as an F.B.I. informant. (Associated Press.)

Sufferer Sits—And Waits

R. H. Martin, 30-years-old Londoner, today enjoys an overnight limelight

THE DAILY MIRROR, THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 1950.

Our transport system needs trams—and action!

It's no consolation to the citizens of Sydney, bedevilled by an entirely unsatisfactory transport system, that people endlessly make promises and reports about it. This article tells what is, and is not, going on about our public transport.

THREE years ago, the Premier (Mr. McGirr) said: "I will let nothing deter me from making our transport system comparable with that of any country in the world . . . New noiseless trams will be built. My Government is determined to give the people safer and speedier transport with the highest degree of seating comfort."

"BEFORE accepting Mr. Winsor's reasons for the change, I want to know two things — the amount of maintenance expenditure required to keep the trams on, and the profit or loss incurred by the Watson's Bay service in the last five years," Mr. Robson said yesterday.

Figure 6: Newspaper extract from the Daily Mirror, 11th May 1949 (left) and 26th January 1950 (right) [20, 21]

Despite opposition, the 1949 report's recommendations were implemented, and trams were removed in Sydney, highlighting the shift to automobile-based development.

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[19] Sinclair, G. F., Andrews, A. F., & Ellen, E. R. (1949). *Report on Road Passenger Transport Services in the Sydney Metropolitan and Newcastle Areas New South Wales*. Retrieved May 8, 2025, from https://www8.austlii.edu.au/au/other/nsw/NSWBCPubInq/1949/1.pdf

[20] WIDE PROTESTS ON 'SCRAP TRAMS' PLAN (1949, May 11). *Daily Mirror (Sydney, NSW : 1941 - 1955)*, p. 1 (Late Final Extra 3). Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article274109618

[21] Our transport system needs trams -- and action! (1950, January 26). *Daily Mirror (Sydney, NSW : 1941 - 1955)*, p. 16 (Late Final Extra). Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article273409749

Figure 7: The last day tour of the tram down Norton St, 1958, here turning onto the street from Parramatta Rd. [22] *Already, the prevalence of cars on the street can be seen*

Another key document that showcased the shift in planning styles was the 1951 Cumberland plan.[23] One of the first key strategic plans for the development of Sydney, it was an example of a metropolitan-wide plan, spanning across the entire city as opposed to previous plans, which were only at local scale.[24] It expanded the Local Government Act 1919 to a wider scale.[24] This followed the example of those metropolitan plans seen in Chicago and New York in early 1900's.

Characteristic of the automobile city, the plan envisioned the construction of expressways spanning the city, to enable fast travel across the city, bypassing local and regional shops. Functional zoning was also introduced in this plan, separating further industrial development from residential areas.[24]

[22] Vic Solomons. (1958, November 22). Parramatta Road to Norton Street Leichhardt. *Vic Solomons Photograph Collection* (*Unique ID A-01170745*) Retrieved May 24, 2025, from https://archives.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/nodes/view/1934743?type=all&lsk=7e80fa71d4846bcec8e85045a72f89ae

[23] Cumberland County Council (N.S.W.). (1952). *Guide to the County of Cumberland Planning Scheme Ordinance* Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2829510962

[24] Sheehan, J., & H. Kelly, A. (2015). The underlying zoning enigma. *Pacific Rim Property Research Journal, 21*(3), 291–303.

Figure 8: Norton St 1983. Il Globo News.[25] Showing the dominance of the automobile throughout the street

The automobile effected the urban form of housing as well, driving residential growth to the outsides of the city. The Cumberland Plan used the assumption "only a very small part of the expected population increase will be accommodated within existing urban areas" and that "housing densities will not, in general, increase".[23] This meant limited additional growth along Norton St, and the street today consists mainly of the low-rise buildings that were originally built.

[25] Il Globo. (2019). *Inner West Council votes to name Leichardt Little Italy*. Retrieved June 4, 2025, from https://ilglobo.com/en/news/inner-west-council-votes-to-name-leichhardt-little-italy-45277/

Figure 9: Comparison of historical imagery (1943), to current (2020) Norton St. This shows the maintained urban structure, the shift in transport modes can also be seen, with trams being seen in 1943, and extensive car usage in 2020[26, 27]

Today, one of the busiest areas on the street is Norton Plaza, a shopping centre inspired by the automobile city style of development. It has free 2-hour parking, and parking is mentioned first and foremost in the location information of the centre. This is very characteristic of Nichols' Country Club, where parking provides the main role in attracting customers.[28]

Figure 10: Norton St 2025, where parking is a major factor in transport to the street

[26] NSW Government. (2020). *Greyscale imagery of inner Sydney and highways circa 1943.* Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://portal.spatial.nsw.gov.au/portal/home/item.html?id=b427b8f5e8164dd8a420ca2a97f9ee0f

[27] NSW Government. (2020). *NSW Explorer basemap*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://portal.spatial.nsw.gov.au/explorer/index.html

[28] Norton Plaza. (2025, June 7). *Location & Parking*. Retrieved from Norton Plaza: https://www.nortonplaza.com.au/location-and-parking/

With no tram, limited bus service, and a small walking catchment, the automobile is the dominant transport mode to the area. The technology of the automobile had substantial impacts on Norton St, the 1951 Cumberland Plan set out most development outside inner areas, enabling it to be better preserved; the 1949 Transport Report removed the tram based mode from the area, showcasing the switch to automobile-based development and the prominence of the Norton Plaza shows the influence of suburban-style on the area.

Conclusion

Norton St, predominately built in the 1880's exemplifies how cities designed under the 'transit city' model of development are structured. With a wide mix of uses, and buildings focused toward a street frontage, the street's structure is built around people walking and utilising public transport in the space. However, the effects of post-1950s development are clearly present in the area, with large amounts of car traffic, a removed tram line and the Norton Plaza representing elements of the automobile city that have developed around it.

Norton St presents an example of how cities were built around public transport, and this initial structure could be a guide for future development, in a time where the negative outcomes of automobile-based development become increasingly problematic.[29]

[29] Miner, P., Smith, B. M., Jani, A., McNeill, G., & Gathorne-Hardy, A. (2024, February). Car harm: A global review of automobility's harm to people and the environment. *Journal of Transport Geography, 115*(103817).

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[3] Roess, R., & Sansone, G. (2013). The Beginnings of Public Transportation in New York: Omnibuses and Street Railways. *The Wheels That Drove New York*, 53-61.

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[6] Méndez-Manjón, I., & Plasencia-Lozano, P. (2025). The role of tramway systems in shaping urban growth: a historical GIS study of four Spanish cities. *Planning Perspectives*, 1-22.

[7] Aibar, E., & Bijker, W. E. (1997). Constructing a City: The Cerdà Plan for the Extension of Barcelona. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 3–30.

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[9] Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. (2017, September 8). *Revisiting Frank Lloyd Wright's Vision for "Broadacre City"*. Retrieved from https://franklloydwright.org/revisiting-frank-lloyd-wrights-vision-broadacre-city/#:~:text=This%20new%20democratic%20city%2C%20as,which%20the%20individual%20would%20flourish.

[10] MIT. (n.d.). *THE AUTOMOBILE IN LE CORBUSIER'S IDEAL CITIES*. Retrieved Jun 7, 2025, from http://mitp-content-server.mit.edu:18180/books/content/sectbyfn?collid=books_pres_0&id=9008&fn=9780262015363_sch_0001.pdf

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[12] The Metropolitan Transportation Committee Victoria. (1969). *The Transportation Plan*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://www.vgls.vic.gov.au/client/en_AU/search/asset/1286832/0

[13] NBRS + Partners. (2016). *Norton Street Corridor.* LEICHHARDT COUNCIL.

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[18] Premier Worried About Transport Finances (1949, January 28). *Singleton Argus (NSW : 1880 - 1954)*, p. 5. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article82574872

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[20] WIDE PROTESTS ON 'SCRAP TRAMS' PLAN (1949, May 11). *Daily Mirror (Sydney, NSW : 1941 - 1955)*, p. 1 (Late Final Extra 3). Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article274109618

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[23] Cumberland County Council (N.S.W.). (1952). *Guide to the County of Cumberland Planning Scheme Ordinance* Retrieved June 6, 2025, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2829510962

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[27] NSW Government. (2020). *NSW Explorer basemap*. Retrieved June 6, 2025, from https://portal.spatial.nsw.gov.au/explorer/index.html

[28] Norton Plaza. (2025, June 7). *Location & Parking*. Retrieved from Norton Plaza: https://www.nortonplaza.com.au/location-and-parking/

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