TOD: Institutional Change or Mere Policy Reform?

ABSTRACT

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) has become a central planning strategy in U.S.A. metropolitan regions. Yet its implementation is slow and piecemeal despite widespread policy support. This paper argues that TOD fails not because of technical or regulatory deficiencies but because it confronts deeply entrenched institutional and cultural structures that privileges automobility. Drawing on institutional, organizational, political-economic, and communicative planning theories, the paper shows how auto-oriented norms are embedded in cultural–cognitive meanings, professional routines, zoning systems, governance fragmentation, and regime coalitions. These structures shape development behavior even when TOD-supportive policies are adopted. The analysis reframes TOD as an institutional transformation project requiring changes to cultural meanings, legitimacy structures, and collective narratives—not merely zoning or transit investments. The paper concludes by outlining implications for planning theory and practice, arguing that meaningful TOD implementation requires cultural alignment, collaborative governance, and long-term institutional learning.

I. Introduction

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is now a key approach in urban planning, aimed at reducing car use, meeting climate goals, increasing housing, and improving access to opportunities. Over the past three decades, many U.S. regions have articulated TOD-supportive policies—including station-area plans, parking reductions, and incentives for mixed-use development—while federal and state transportation agencies have funded new rail, BRT, and frequent bus corridors. Yet despite these stated commitments, TOD outcomes remain limited. Many station areas contain low-density or auto-oriented land uses; transit ridership has struggled to rebound fully after the pandemic; and most new development continues to follow auto-centric patterns. These patterns point to a gap between regional aspirations and on-the-ground results.

Understanding this gap means looking closely at the institutions that shape TOD. Metropolitan areas, defined by the U.S.A. Office of Management and Budget, are statistical regions—not governing bodies. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), which coordinate regional transportation planning and control federal transportation funds, have influence over long-range planning but lack zoning authority. They cannot force local governments to adopt land-use rules. Similarly, most transit agencies have no power over land use; their role is limited to station ownership, joint development, or state laws. In the U.S.A., land-use regulation mainly rests with cities and counties, while actual construction decisions depend on private developers responding to local permits, market conditions, and financing. As a result, TOD occurs in a fragmented system where no single organization has all the tools to achieve its goals.

These governance realities create a critical distinction between policies and regulations. Regions and MPOs may adopt TOD-supportive *policies*—plans, goals, funding priorities, and visions—but these documents do not automatically change zoning codes, development rights, or

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regulatory standards. Station-area rezoning, parking minimum reforms, subdivision codes, and development approvals remain in the hands of municipal governments, which vary widely in capacity, political will, infrastructure resources, and community preferences. As a result, regional TOD policies often lack binding force, and the regulatory conditions necessary to enable TOD emerge unevenly across jurisdictions.

The persistence of auto-oriented development reflects this fragmented authority, even in regions that have articulated TOD ambitions. Early TOD practice and scholarship often attributed this to technical barriers—restrictive zoning, parking requirements, land assembly challenges, financing constraints, and outdated engineering standards—and focused on correcting them. However, recent research in planning, public administration, and urban governance shows that technical explanations alone are insufficient. Institutional logics, organizational routines, cultural expectations of mobility, and fragmented authority all play critical roles in reproducing auto-oriented development—even after formal policies shift toward TOD.

This paper argues that TOD struggles not primarily because of technical or regulatory shortcomings, but because it confronts a deeply entrenched institutional and cultural landscape organized around automobility. For nearly a century, American transportation and land-use systems have been shaped by values that equate the private automobile with freedom, autonomy, and economic success. These values have been institutionalized through zoning codes, professional norms, financing practices, governance structures, and political coalitions that collectively privilege auto-oriented development. As a result, even when regions adopt TOD-supportive policies, the underlying institutional logics continue to reproduce low-density, car-dependent patterns of growth.

To explain this contradiction, the paper draws on institutional, organizational, political-economic, and communicative theory. Scott's (2013) pillars illuminate how cultural–cognitive meanings stabilize auto-oriented practice; Powell and DiMaggio (2010) explain organizational reversion to auto-centric routines; Ostrom (1990) highlights coordination failures in fragmented metropolitan governance; regime theory (Logan and Molotch 1987; Mossberger and Stoker 2001) reveals coalitions that mobilize auto-centric values; and communicative planning theory (Davoudi 2015b; M. Westin 2022) explains how public narratives shape legitimacy.

By situating TOD within these theoretical traditions, this paper contributes to planning scholarship in two ways. First, it reframes TOD implementation challenges as outcomes of institutional logics, cultural meanings, and political coalitions rather than isolated technical barriers. Second, it highlights the necessity of cultural transformation as a precondition for institutional change, arguing that TOD initiatives must engage narratives, values, and legitimacy structures alongside regulatory and financial reforms. In doing so, the paper provides a conceptual foundation for understanding why TOD has struggled in the United States and what would be required for meaningful transformation of metropolitan mobility systems.

The sections that follow develop this argument in three steps. Section II identifies the core contradiction between widespread policy support for TOD and the persistence of auto-oriented development. Section III introduces the institutional and organizational theories necessary to explain this contradiction. Section IV synthesizes these frameworks to show why TOD requires

cultural and institutional transformation, Section V presents the pathways to solve current problems, and Section VI outlines the implications for planning theory and practice. The paper concludes by reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of reshaping the cultural foundations of mobility in American metropolitan regions.

II. The Core Contradiction: Policy Support vs. Institutional Resistance

Despite growing policy support for TOD, American metropolitan regions continue to produce overwhelmingly auto-oriented development patterns. This mismatch suggests a deeper institutional contradiction that cannot be explained by regulatory barriers or technical constraints alone. Over the past several decades, many regions have adopted TOD-supportive reforms—upzoning around transit stations, introducing density bonuses, relaxing parking minimums, and expanding rail and BRT networks. Metropolitan planning organizations have incorporated compact, transit-supportive growth into long-range plans. Yet empirical research consistently shows that TOD projects remain relatively rare, station areas are underbuilt relative to permitted densities, and most new development continues to follow auto-centric formats (Cervero 2004; Boarnet and Compin 1999; Curtis et al. 2009; Zhang et al. 2023).

This persistent gap between TOD policy and actual development reflects a fundamental misalignment. While formal policies signal support for TOD, the institutional environment remains deeply anchored in automobility. Policy signals point in one direction, yet organizational routines, professional standards, and cultural expectations continue to steer practice toward low-density, car-dependent growth. This tension underscores that transit infrastructure alone cannot reshape land use; it must be supported by a broader institutional framework (Knight and Trygg 1977). Today, TOD policies are layered onto systems still designed for dispersed, automobile-oriented development, making implementation failures predictable. Understanding this contradiction requires recognizing that the barriers to TOD are primarily institutional and cultural rather than technical.

To understand the cultural and political construction of automobility, researchers have examined how symbolic meanings were attached to the automobile to promote its growth. Throughout the twentieth century, American mobility became linked to a vision of freedom—autonomy, privacy, individualism, and personal control (Seiler 2008). The private car came to embody these values, reinforced by marketing, policy decisions, and economic incentives. These framings were so powerful that policymakers rarely questioned the full social and environmental externalities of driving. Because automobility was quietly subsidized, it appeared financially rational for both households and governments (Whitelegg 2015). As a result, cultural narratives established driving as the most legitimate, desirable, and "normal" form of mobility.

The cultural and political construction of automobility spread through the organizations too. After World War II, U.S.A. transportation planning claimed to follow the rational planning model, which promotes evaluating all options against clear criteria. In theory, this approach is neutral and based on full information and explicit goals. In practice, however, it operated within institutions already centered on cars. Planners didn't start from neutral assumptions—the criteria they used, such as minimizing travel time and projecting vehicle volumes, were rooted in car-

focused thinking. As a result, technical analysis often reinforced automobile-oriented norms instead of fairly considering transit or multimodal alternatives.

Zoning and land-use regulations added another layer of institutional resistance. Euclidean zoning and federal housing policy produced low-density, single-use districts, large minimum lot sizes, and stringent parking requirements (Hirt 2014). These spatial patterns undermine the densities and mix of uses necessary for transit viability (Cervero et al. 2004). Although TOD can reduce auto trips where it is implemented (Arrington and Cervero 2008), such cases remain exceptions because zoning codes and market expectations overwhelmingly favor car-oriented development.

Political-economic arrangements then consolidated auto-favorable logics into durable institutions. Logan and Molotch's (1987) "growth machine" theory shows how business elites, developers, and public officials coalesced around auto-oriented growth models that promised economic expansion: suburban subdivisions, highway corridors, strip commercial development, and ample parking. Simultaneously, state organizations further mechanized this paradigm by forming a stable auto-oriented regime (Mossberger and Stoker 2001). The 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act channelled massive federal resources toward road building while leaving transit underfunded and governed by fragmented institutions (Branham 1957). Over time, these coalitions created path-dependent systems that continue to shape expectations about infrastructure investment, land values, and "successful" development.

These dynamics have created a self-reinforcing cycle: dispersed development weakens transit ridership, which reduces service quality, which in turn stigmatizes transit as a lower-status mode. This stigmatization reinforces political and cultural support for automobility, shaping the preferences of residents, developers, lenders, and elected officials. Even when TOD-supportive policies exist, development actors interpret them through an auto-centric lens and often revert to familiar suburban templates (Innes and Booher 1999).

The result is a persistent misalignment between policy and practice. Without confronting the cultural meanings, legitimacy structures, and institutional logics that sustain automobility, TOD remains structurally disadvantaged within the existing system. Technical reforms—such as rezoning or adding transit infrastructure—cannot overcome these deeper dynamics. Therefore, understanding TOD's limited impact requires explaining how institutional and cultural forces maintain auto-oriented development despite increasing policy support for transit-supportive alternatives.

III. Theoretical Framework

The gap between policy support and institutional resistance suggests that framing TOD as merely a technical problem of zoning reform, infrastructure investment, or urban design obscures the deeper forces at play. The continued dominance of auto-oriented development—even in jurisdictions that formally endorse TOD—shows that the primary obstacles are institutional and cultural rather than technical. To move beyond surface-level explanations, this section examines institutional, organizational, political-economic, and communicative theories to uncover the deeper causes of TOD failures. These theories demonstrate that entrenched cultural meanings shape development practices, while self-reinforcing institutional norms, fragmented governance

arrangements, and legitimacy systems collectively privilege automobility. Understanding TOD, therefore, requires examining how these interlocking forces stabilize the auto-oriented paradigm and constrain possibilities for transformative change.

III.A. Cultural–Cognitive Foundations of Automobility

The cultural–cognitive foundations of automobility in the United States have developed over more than a century, producing deeply embedded beliefs that normalize driving as the natural mode of mobility. These meanings not only shape individual preferences but also structure the institutional environment by framing problems, legitimizing solutions, and influencing the formation of regulations.

Cultural scholarships show how the car became woven into American identity. Gartman (2004) traces the shift from automobiles as elite status symbols to mass-produced expressions of freedom and, later, lifestyle branding. Urry (2004) and Sheller (2003) highlight the affective and sensory experiences—autonomy, privacy, control—that anchor automobility within a socio-technical system. Seiler (2008) demonstrates how driving came to signify liberty and citizenship, making car ownership a prerequisite of full social participation. These cultural meanings form what Scott (2013) calls the cultural–cognitive pillar that make driving feel intuitive, inevitable, and legitimate.

These cultural–cognitive foundation directly shapes the development of the normative and regulative pillars. First, cultural frames influence problem framing by upholding social expectations: when autonomy and speed are valued culturally, congestion becomes the dominant policy problem, while pedestrian safety or transit access are de-emphasized. This selectively elevates norms that privileges social expectations, in this case automobility. As these values diffuse, they create the normative pillar—shared professional and societal expectations that "good planning" means providing ample parking, preserving free-flow traffic, and separating land uses to reduce conflicts.

Second, these normative expectations become codified into technical standards and professional practices. Mid-century engineering manuals institutionalized cultural assumptions—such as speed as a proxy for efficiency—into scientific-seeming metrics like Level of Service. Zoning codes embedded cultural preferences for privacy, spaciousness, and homeownership into minimum lot sizes, parking minimums, and single-use districts. These standards then become the basis for the regulative pillar, as elected officials enact laws and ordinances that formalize auto-oriented expectations into binding rules.

Finally, the regulative outcomes—sprawl, segregated land uses, abundant parking, and auto-centric streets—feed back into cultural cognition, making driving not only normal but often necessary. This built environment reinforces the cultural–cognitive pillar by structuring daily life around automobility, thus stabilizing and reproducing the normative and regulative pillars.

In this way, the three pillars operate as an interdependent system: cultural meanings shape norms, norms become encoded in regulations, and regulations reproduce the cultural meanings that legitimized them. Automobility endures not simply because of policy choices but because

the cultural–cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars have co-evolved to make car-centric development seem natural, appropriate, and inevitable.

III.B. Institutional Stability of Automobility

While cultural–cognitive beliefs define what feels normal, institutional stability explains how organizations systematically reproduce auto-oriented development through rules, standards, and routines. Automobility became deeply institutionalized during the same period that planning, engineering, and real estate were professionalizing—a rare historical coincidence. Between the 1920s and 1950s, zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, road hierarchy designs, traffic engineering manuals, and later, parking minimums and trip generation rates were standardized across jurisdictions (Brown et al. 2009; Kay 1997). These tools did not merely reflect automobile use; they actively produced and stabilized it by embedding auto-oriented assumptions into technical practice.

Powell and DiMaggio's (2010) framework of institutional isomorphism clarifies these dynamics. **Coercive pressures** stem from federal and state requirements such as AASHTO road design standards, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review processes that emphasize traffic delay, and funding formulas that prioritize highway throughput (FHWA 2023; Handy 2015). **Normative pressures** arise from professional training: engineering and planning programs teach LOS analysis, roadway classification, and auto-level accessibility as default methods (Levinson et al. 2017). **Mimetic pressures** urther reinforce these patterns, as organizations replicate established suburban development formats because they are financially predictable, legally defensible, and institutionally familiar (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006). For example, when a suburban municipality is presented with a mixed-use or transit-oriented proposal, developers often revert to conventional single-use subdivisions with wide arterials, cul-de-sacs, and large parking lots, since these formats resemble surrounding projects, align with existing traffic-impact methodologies, and are more likely to receive rapid approval. Together, these coercive, normative, and mimetic forces lead municipalities, MPOs, and private developers to default to auto-oriented templates even when TOD frameworks are formally in place.

Empirical research illustrates this institutional lock-in. In case studies of TOD attempts in Portland and Denver, Dill (2008) show that despite region-scale transit investments, municipal planning departments continue to rely on auto-oriented zoning classifications, parking requirements, and traffic-impact analyses inherited from earlier decades. Similarly, Manville (2013) documents how minimum parking requirements persist across cities because they are embedded in interlocking systems of liability avoidance, fire access standards, building codes, and lending practices. Kahn (2011) finds that even when TOD districts are formally adopted, local engineering review processes often require intersection widening or turn lanes— undermining walkability and transit access. Similarly, when TOD supportive new standards— such as TOD zoning overlays, form-based codes, or VMT-oriented metrics—are added on top of entrenched systems without removing the underlying automobile-based assumptions, it can only sustain the force that the foundations allow. In other words, TOD policies typically overlay

rather than replace existing auto-oriented rules, akin to constructing a multi-storied building on brick foundations.

The result is a system characterized by institutional inertia: organizations continue producing auto-oriented outcomes because changing standards, procedures, and evaluation tools requires confronting deeply embedded routines, risk structures, and inter-agency dependencies. Cultural beliefs make automobility intuitive; institutional structures make it durable.

III.C. Fragmented Governance and Collective-Action Failures

The persistence of auto-oriented development in the United States is intensified by fragmented governance structures that make coordinated regional planning extremely difficult. U.S.A. metropolitan regions are divided among numerous municipalities with independent zoning authority, each pursuing its own fiscal and political interests (Feiock 2009). MPOs provide regional plans but lack land-use enforcement power (Lewis 2010), transit agencies rarely control zoning around stations (Cervero et al. 2004), and state DOTs continue to prioritize vehicle throughput based on long-established engineering norms (Levinson et al. 2017). This fragmented institutional landscape creates classic collective-action failures: while the benefits of dense, transit-supportive development accrue at the regional level, the perceived costs—congestion, density, renter inflows—are borne locally, leading municipalities to maintain restrictive zoning, high parking requirements, and auto-oriented infrastructure (Fischel 2009; Levine 2005).

As a result, even when regional plans call for TOD or reductions in automobile dependence, individual jurisdictions act in ways that reproduce car-oriented urban form. Local governments compete for sales-tax revenue by favoring auto-accessible commercial uses (Nelson 2017), suburban municipalities resist upzoning near transit due to homeowner opposition (Glaeser and Gyourko 2018), and state DOT roadway widening projects often undermine local walkability and transit-supportive design (Boarnet and Compin 1999). Because transit agencies lack authority over surrounding land use and municipalities lack incentives to coordinate across boundaries, no single institution can unilaterally shift the regional development trajectory. Fragmented governance therefore reproduces automobility not through deliberate preference, but because institutional misalignment makes collective action toward transit-supportive development structurally improbable (Ostrom 1990; Giuliano and Hanson 2017).

III.D. Development Coalitions, and Their Discourse

Beneath the surface of fragmented urban governance, powerful coalitions of public and private actors shape land-use and transportation outcomes. Logan and Molotch's (1987) "growth machine" theory shows how local elites—developers, business leaders, and elected officials— mobilize political and economic resources to maximize land values and maintain growth trajectories. Auto-oriented suburban development has historically aligned well with these interests because it opens large tracts of land for subdivision, facilitates, speculative gains, and reinforces stable property values. Consequently, these coalitions often resist TOD, which requires higher densities, walkability, multimodal design, and limitations on automobility— elements perceived as disruptive to established market expectations.

Urban regime theory (Mossberger and Stoker 2001b; Stone 1989) explains how these coalitions maintain influence not only through formal authority but through informal, symbiotic relationships with public institutions. In the U.S.A. context, car-oriented development regimes typically include state departments of transportation (DOTs), suburban developers, municipal governments, and homeowners' associations. These actors align around a shared logic of auto-centric growth, influencing capital investment, regulatory decisions, and public narratives. For example, state DOTs continue to devote the majority of capital spending to road expansion, while local governments uphold parking minimums, single-family zoning, and subdivision codes that sustain low-density development patterns (Shoup 2005; Carruthers and Ulfarsson 2003).

In addition to resource control and regulatory authority, discourse plays a critical role in sustaining auto-centric development. Narratives that equate roadway expansion with congestion relief, suburban growth with family-oriented success, or parking provision with economic competitiveness reinforce the cultural foundations of automobility. Conversely, TOD advocates often struggle to construct equally persuasive narratives that resonate with local political values, homeowner concerns, or economic development priorities. Without discursive shifts that challenge the taken-for-granted legitimacy of auto-centric development, TOD remains politically and culturally marginalized—even where formal policies appear supportive.

IV. Synthesis: Why Cultural and Institutional Transformation Is Required

Across these theoretical strands, a unified message emerges: TOD is not simply a design or regulatory challenge; it is an institutional transformation project. Auto-oriented development persists because it is culturally favored, institutionally encoded, organizationally legitimized, politically supported, and discursively reinforced. Fragmented governance structures and entrenched coalitions further stabilize this system.

As a result, TOD struggles not because of weak technical tools but because it confronts deeply rooted institutional logics that define what development should look like. Achieving meaningful TOD implementation in the United States therefore requires cultural change—shifts in public meaning, professional identity, and collective expectations—alongside institutional and organizational reforms. Only by targeting the cultural–cognitive foundations of automobility can TOD move from aspirational policy to sustained practice.

V. Gradual Pathways to Institutional Transformation

Institutions do not form in a day. In the United States, car-centric development has persisted for a century and become deeply entrenched in social, economic, and spatial systems. While TOD policies can challenge this foundation, they cannot uproot it overnight because auto-centric development has created strong path dependencies. Therefore, TOD implementation should follow a gradual and incremental trajectory. Empirical evidence from San Diego shows TOD advanced through small steps—parking code revisions, selective upzoning, and interagency agreements—rather than sweeping reforms(Boarnet and Compin 1999).

Mahoney and Thelen (2010) argue that institutional change often occurs through layering, conversion, drift, and displacement. For example, layering happens when TOD zoning overlays

are added on top of existing auto-oriented codes without eliminating them. Conversion occurs when parking structures near transit stations are repurposed for mixed-use development. Drift emerges as outdated traffic-impact standards remain formally in place but lose relevance as cities adopt multimodal performance metrics. Finally, displacement takes shape when new priorities— such as climate goals or housing affordability—gradually supplant auto-centric objectives in regional plans. These mechanisms illustrate that institutional transformation is cumulative and often subtle.

Whenever possible, policymakers should exploit ambiguity in the existing norms and reframe institutional logics through communicative processes. Communicative planning theory (Davoudi 2015; Westin 2022) reinforces this perspective by emphasizing deliberation and discursive action to build shared understanding and legitimacy for new norms. In contexts of entrenched auto-centric culture, communicative practices—public engagement, interagency dialogue, and collaborative visioning—are essential for overcoming resistance and aligning diverse interests.

Mahoney and Thelen (2010) also remind us that institutions adapt to external shocks. The negative externalities of car dependency, oil price volatility, and supply disruptions—whether from market instability or geopolitical conflict—reveal the fragility of systems built on cheap fuel. Wars and global instability further threaten energy security, making reliance on automobiles a strategic risk. These dynamics underscore that auto-centric institutions require cultural and institutional transformation—not just regulatory tweaks—and that such transformation depends on both incremental institutional shifts and communicative practices that reshape expectations and norms.

VI. Implications for Planning Theory and Practice

If TOD depends on cultural transformation, planning must move beyond a narrow focus on regulatory design toward strategies that address institutional, organizational, and discursive change. The synthesis above demonstrates that TOD's challenges stem from deeply rooted institutional and cultural forces rather than isolated technical constraints. This insight carries major implications for both planning theory and practice.

First, these findings challenge planning theory to move beyond rational–instrumental frameworks that treat mobility as a purely technical domain. The persistence of automobile dominance shows that planning outcomes are shaped by cultural–cognitive logics, professional identities, political coalitions, and discursive frames. Institutional theory therefore calls on scholars to foreground legitimacy, meaning, and narrative in mobility research. Planning theory should integrate insights from political economy, organizational sociology, and communication studies to understand how change occurs in complex, multi-actor environments.

Second, the analysis calls for expanded approaches to planning practice. Because TOD requires changes in cultural norms and organizational routines, planners should act as institutional intermediaries, coalition builders, and stewards of long-term learning processes. This includes facilitating interagency coordination, supporting cross-jurisdictional agreements, and fostering

shared visions for station-area development. Planners must also challenge deeply ingrained assumptions about parking, density, neighborhood character, and mobility.

Third, these findings underscore the importance of narrative and framing in shaping public legitimacy. Communicative planning research shows that debates about transit, density, and neighborhood change are fundamentally shaped by shared meanings. To make TOD politically feasible, planners should help cultivate narratives that connect transit-supportive development to widely held values such as opportunity, affordability, climate resilience, and community well-being. Equitable TOD (eTOD) approaches illustrate how incorporating community voices can reveal alternative interpretations and build trust.

Fourth, the analysis points to practical reforms in governance and institutional design. Polycentric regions must invest in collaborative governance structures—cross-agency task forces, joint-development agreements, shared funding mechanisms, and integrated land-use–transportation institutions—that align incentives and promote collective action. Mechanisms of gradual institutional change, such as layering TOD overlays onto existing zoning or converting parking requirements into flexible performance-based standards, offer realistic pathways for incremental transformation.

Finally, understanding TOD as an institutional challenge reframes how planning success should be evaluated. Rather than focusing solely on built projects or density targets, evaluation must also consider changes in organizational behavior, governance partnerships, professional norms, and cultural meanings. Tracking shifts in discourse, institutional routines, and coalition-building can provide more accurate indicators of progress toward long-term transformation.

Taken together, these implications demonstrate that TOD is not simply about aligning zoning with transit investment. It requires rethinking the foundational assumptions that underlie planning systems in the United States. Recognizing these deeper dynamics provides planners with a more realistic and theoretically grounded understanding of what meaningful TOD implementation demands.

VII. Conclusion

This paper argues that the persistent gap between policy support for TOD and the continued dominance of auto-oriented development in the United States reflects not technical deficiencies but deeply entrenched institutional and cultural dynamics. While many metropolitan regions have adopted TOD-friendly policies, these reforms operate within an institutional framework that continues to legitimize automobility. Historical values emphasizing freedom, autonomy, and property have embedded the automobile into the cultural–cognitive foundations of American planning. Over decades, zoning systems, financing practices, professional norms, and political coalitions have reinforced these values, creating strong path dependencies that constrain efforts to reshape urban form.

The theoretical perspectives explored in this paper clarify why such resistance persists. Scott's three-pillar model reveals how cultural meanings underpin normative and regulatory structures; Powell and DiMaggio's concept of organizational isomorphism explains why organizations revert to auto-oriented routines; Ostrom's polycentric governance theory highlights the difficulty of coordinating fragmented metropolitan actors; regime theory shows how coalitions mobilize resources around culturally defined notions of value; communicative planning emphasizes the role of narrative in establishing legitimacy; and theories of gradual institutional change demonstrate why transformation occurs slowly through cumulative shifts in norms and interpretations. Together, these frameworks position TOD as an institutional transformation project rather than a discrete design intervention.

This insight carries significant implications for planning practice. Promoting TOD requires more than regulatory adjustments or transit investments—it demands engagement with culture, meaning, discourse, and legitimacy. Planners must build shared visions across fragmented institutions, challenge entrenched assumptions about mobility and neighborhood identity, and foster narratives that connect transit-supportive development to widely held values such as affordability, climate resilience, and community well-being. Institutional change will likely proceed incrementally—through layering, conversion, and reinterpretation—but these gradual shifts can accumulate into meaningful transformation.

Ultimately, TOD's success in the United States depends on confronting and reshaping the cultural and institutional foundations that sustain auto-oriented planning. Policy reforms alone are insufficient; without cultural alignment, institutional trust, and shared meaning, TOD will remain peripheral within a system structured around automobility. By situating TOD within broader theories of institutional behavior, political economy, and communicative practice, this paper underscores both the challenges and the possibilities of redefining mobility and urban development in American metropolitan regions.

Statement on AI Use: This manuscript benefited from AI-based language support for reviewing consistency, cohesion, and error correction. All substantive arguments and interpretations are the author's own.

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