

Park and Place

By Simon Pelletier

Why is it in Canada that most adults own vehicles? I shall use Winnipeg as an example. But we can start with people outside of cities. If you live rurally, far away from a town, there isn't a very easy way to acquire food and the necessities of life without a car. And for this reason most people have one. I won't explore amish communities and their methods for avoiding vehicle use. Lets acknowledge that if you're passionate enough you can craft a rural life without a car, but it's outside the scope of most individuals desires.

In the city the stores that you need to shop at for essentials are closer to ones home. However most people in Winnipeg still have a vehicle. Why?

Suburban living is one reason. Enclaves of giant homes are built alongside each other. Separated from commercial property where stores, restaurants and bars are located. These neighbourhoods are designed for cars and thus the distances to these stores are too far for the average person to consider walking. And so a vehicle is the default. I don't feel like it's necessary to discuss these places anymore. They are stupid and require a vehicle unless you are very into dragging around things in a bike trailer.

There are urban residential areas. They have apartments, single dwelling homes, townhomes and overall more density than suburbs. This is where the mixing of commercial and residential begins to facilitate a daily walking life. And yet most of these people still have a car. Why?

I have three general points I shall make that I think keep most of us attached to the car.

1. We work too far from where we live.

I've noticed that most people divorce their place of work and their place of residence. We look for a job that we want and so long as its in the general area of where we live we take that job. Usually this geographical area we would consider for work can be quite large. And it's large because we have a car. And once we accept the job that requires the car we are stuck.

2. We make and keep connections with people that eventually move far away from us.

We have friends that we want to keep and when they move far away we still visit them because we can. Since we can drive forty five minutes to visit a friend doesn't mean we should. By having the vehicle we keep this large friend circle open and invest in people who are not a few blocks down the street but a whole city away. For everyday interactions this is an isolating experience. If we have a myriad of social connections that are a short distance on foot from our place of residence we will often bump into these individuals when we are outside doing chores, going to restaurants and living our lives. If we instead maintain this much larger circle of people that require the vehicle we are much less likely to run into people we know on during our day to day activities since we will be facilitating the daily activities with incessant car use.

3. Habit

The third point is that once this car culture is taken up it can be very hard to remove oneself from it. By tying friendship, community and work-life into the vehicle the prospect of removing that tool from our existence is almost an impossible one to contemplate. Lets say that you worked at the end of your block and had most of your friends in your immediate neighbourhood, but you owned a car that you use for a routine weekend visit to a park outside of the city. In this situation you would be easily able to entertain the idea of getting rid of the car. Maybe you do city park visits instead, maybe you plan weekend trips with friends who have a vehicle. But if your car is integral to each and every day, to all of the meaningful experiences of your life, then how can you even begin entertaining the notion of selling the thing?

Owning a car is a much more expensive proposition than most are aware of. There is insurance, depreciation, maintenance and the health effects of excessive sitting and the exercise we are forgoing in place of a walk or bike ride. These are some obvious benefits from the removal of a car centric life. There are other more subtle advantages.

I'm going to just state right here that I'd prefer to almost completely remove the car from my daily life and instead use it as a tool to get me to far away places or to move large, awkward items.

How does one go about doing this?

One way is to sell your car. By removing this freedom from your life you basically force the other parts to conform to the new restriction on your movement. You will get a job closer to your home. You will hangout with friends down the block. You will not drive willy nilly around the city on the daily. Done.

The other way is to keep the vehicle and craft a routine that wouldn't look very different from someone who owns no vehicle. A harder proposition but not an impossible task.