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Why it took a pandemic
to reinvest in our streets



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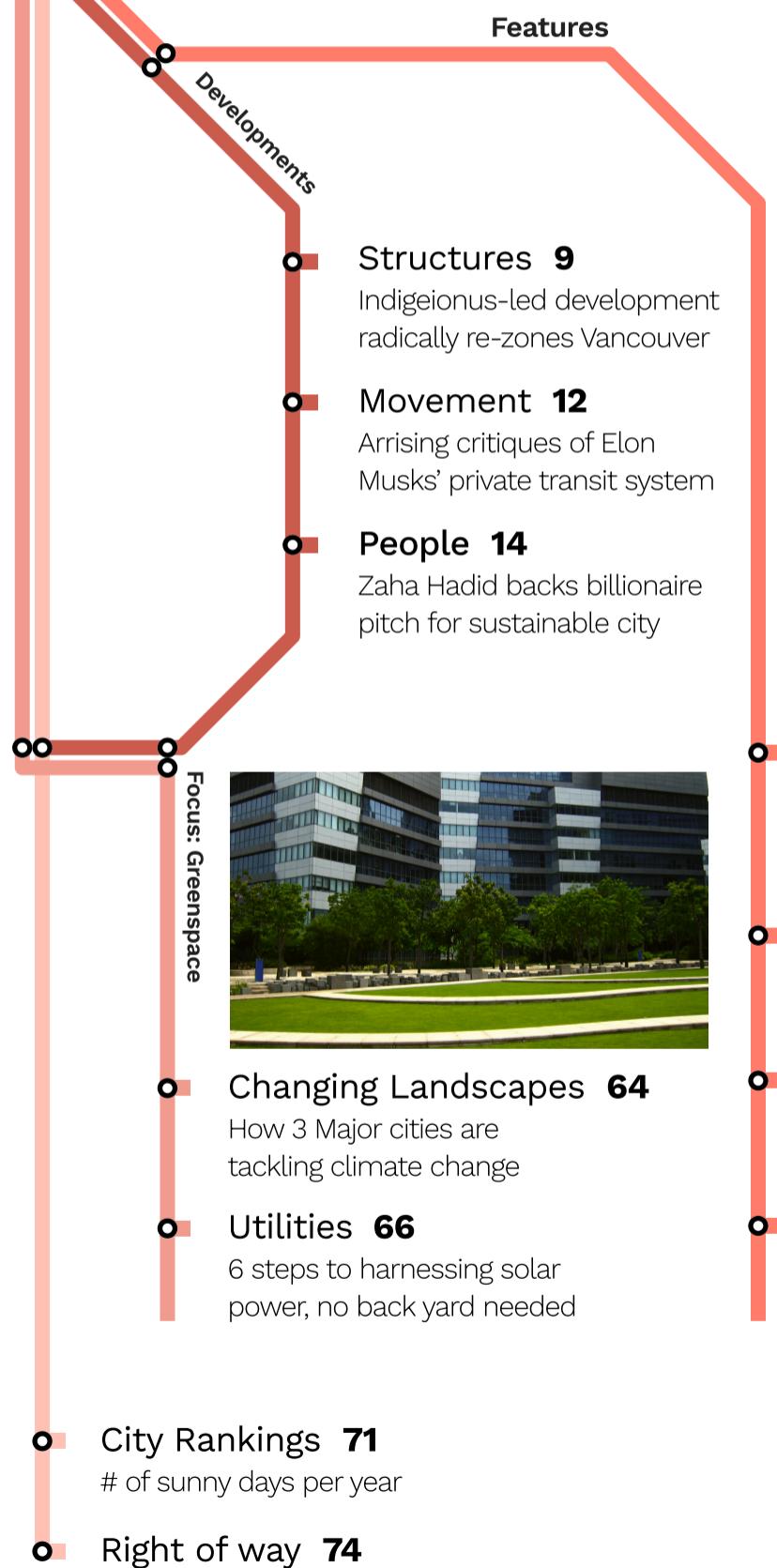
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NO FREE PARKING

ADAM ROGERS

It was easy to find tragedy in the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Vaccines became widely available and proved to be remarkably effective at keeping people out of hospitals, but some people wouldn't get their shots—mostly Republicans. Broader uptake of vaccines could have averted 163,000 deaths between June and November alone. That's tragedy. But you could find hope in 2021, too. It was literally in the air.

The virus—and specifically the understanding that as an aerosol it spread more easily in poorly ventilated spaces—changed something fundamental about urban life. The expansion of restaurants to curbside spaces and the closure of city streets to automobiles began in 2020, but in 2021 those alterations felt like a new phase in a decades-old cold war over the look and feel of the modern city.



Photo via New York City Department of Transportation

In 2019, white people and more affluent young people were moving to cities—looking for cultural diversity and amenities like being within walking distance to schools or entertainment, proximity to jobs, and access to public transit. After years of decline, transit ridership was increasing around the US and big cities were working to accommodate the trend, using new technologies to figure out where buses and trolleys should go and to take chunks of street—public land, after all—away from cars. There was resistance, of course. In the US, anything that looks like it might jeopardize plentiful free parking, wide-open highways, and the spread of single-family homes gets pushback.

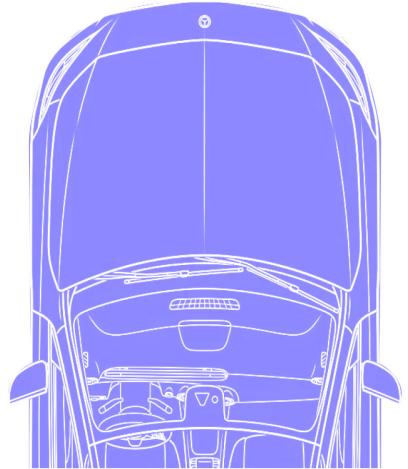
The pandemic torpedoed a lot of that progress. For much of 2020, people with money and symbolic-analysis jobs retreated from cities, if they had the kinds of jobs they could do remotely. (Though by spring of 2021 the momentum had shifted back again; cities are magnetic.) Transit ridership dropped. People stopped driving, too. Even when museums and restaurants reopened, people didn't go.

To save those restaurants and give those homebound families some space, city planners did something that had been unthinkable, or at least undoable. Being outdoors seemed to be far less risky than being in an unventilated indoor space, so leaders started up or expanded nascent programs that converted parking spaces along streets into outdoor dining areas for restaurants, point-of-sale space for shops, and mini-parks—"parklets." They closed some residential streets to cars so people who lived nearby could have safe access to outside space. It happened all over—Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Denver, Philadelphia, Chicago.

Academics, activists, and interest groups have been trying to make this happen for decades—to take streets away from cars and parking and give them over to anything that wasn't just 2 tons of steel moving 40 miles an hour. That's because cars and parking are catastrophes for cities. In the mid to late 20th century, the construction of parking lots and freeways destroyed the downtowns of dozens of American cities and ploughed through or razed nonwhite neighborhoods. More than 30,000 Americans die in car crashes every year, a quarter of them pedestrians. In 2020, fewer cars on the road allowed the ones that remained to go faster; the nonprofit National Safety Council reports that even though people in the US drove 13 percent fewer miles overall, 42,000 people died on the roads, an increase of 24 percent over 2019, and 4.8 million people incurred serious injuries. If a microbe did that every year, we'd call that a pandemic.

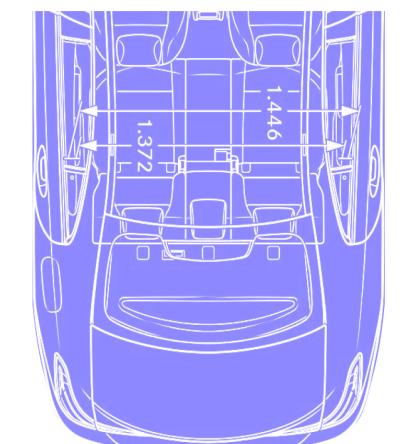
Also, almost a third of carbon emissions in the US come from transportation, most from cars and trucks. In the US, transportation emits more carbon than anything, including energy production. But denser, more urbanized areas give off less greenhouse gas than suburbs do (maybe because people don't have to drive as far, but also heating and cooling multi-unit buildings is more efficient). So basically cars pump out lung-destroying particles and an invisible gas that, if it builds up to high enough levels in the atmosphere, besets the planet with disasters and makes the whole place less inhabitable. The planet everyone lives on.

But any attempt to shift away from car-centric cities, even in this small way, was—as University of Iowa law



13%
Fewer miles driven during
the early pandemic

24%
Increase in
on-road deaths



professor Greg Shill puts it—a “classic diffuse benefits/concentrated costs problem.” Business owners would complain that the loss of nearby parking spaces would cost them customers. But since there was no such thing as outdoor dining yet, there were no outdoor diners to defend the idea, says Shill, who frequently writes about transportation and land use law. The same thing happens when people try to expand transit services or build more apartments. The users aren’t there yet, so they don’t come to the (interminable, inconveniently scheduled) meetings.

Then Covid happened. “As is often the case with disruption, we had much more rapid change than anyone would have expected,” Shill says. “One of the barriers that fell faster than anybody expected was legal and institutional opposition to repurposing streets.” The problem with taking outdoor space away from cars isn’t just an infectious-disease issue or an aesthetic one. It’s also about equity. More than 100

million Americans live too far away from public parks to access them easily—and that’s more likely to be true for people who are nonwhite and poor.

Certainly, keeping restaurants and other services open during a pandemic means the people who work there get exposed to customers and their diseases all day long. “During the early stages of the pandemic, there was a lot of disagreement about the equity impacts of, for example, expanding sidewalk space for restaurants. I think there were a lot of people suggesting that somehow that was against the interests of essential workers,” says Yonah Freemark,

a researcher at the Urban Institute. “The reality is, people need space to be outside, people need space to participate in society, and the pandemic made it difficult for everybody.”

If any of that convinces you that, hey, cities should be denser, with more housing and transit close to jobs, and with lots of public space—well, you’re probably a Democrat. Since the

pandemic began, Americans have become more likely to say they prefer large houses, further away from schools, stores, and restaurants—and each other. In 2019, 53 percent of Americans agreed with that sentiment; by July of 2021, the ratio was 60-39. But those numbers mask a partisan split, one that has also worsened during the pandemic. Among Republicans, 73 percent prefer suburbs (call it what it is, right?); among Democrats, it’s 49 percent. One 2021 study—by policy and planning researchers from a bunch of different universities and the director of policy research at Lime, the scooter company—found that pretty much everyone, regardless of stated political affiliation, agrees that mixed-use neighborhoods, transit, bikes, and walking are great. But conservatives don’t think it’s the government’s job to make any of that possible. They just want driving to be really convenient.

Even with those opinions on the books, the pandemic—or really, the haphazard response to it—has shifted people’s

One of the barriers that fell faster than anybody expected was legal and institutional opposition to repurposing streets

Photo via Jim Simmons





perceptions of what a city can be. "As a species, we are not great at imagining things we've never seen, and the vast majority of North Americans have really only seen automobile-dominated, single-family homes as the way we build things," says Shoshanna Saxe, an engineer at the University of Toronto who studies sustainable infrastructure. "That wasn't the only option. It didn't have to be that way. We made a choice. In the pandemic, people saw something different." The question is whether things will stay this way.

For the first time in a long time, policymakers at lots of levels are supporting these kinds of changes. In 2019, municipalities like Portland, Oregon and Minneapolis, Minnesota started getting rid of exclusive, single-family zoning to try to address justice and the climate crisis. Under the Biden Administration, transportation grants to states are still allowing for expansions of highways, but also smaller-scale, neighborhood-improving changes.

New York City, Washington DC, New Orleans, and San Francisco have all moved to make pandemic parklets permanent; Boston has not. "We don't know whether those changes were just a reflection of the desire for local business to continue to have service, or a desire to change our relationship with the street," Freemark says. "The reality is, we're somewhere in between."

What people really don't like, and have never liked, is to travel much more than half an hour to get anywhere. Until about 150 years ago, that meant most folks lived at most a mile or two from the places they worked, ate, learned, and partied, because that was roughly the distance a person could cover on foot, or, if you were rich, on a horse. The result in practice is a high-density town—a downtown like you'd

see in Europe, or the older cities of North America. It's the goal of leaders in places like Paris or Barcelona, which are building out bike and transit infrastructure to meet climate goals and make for more pleasant urban experiences.

When electric trolleys and buses came into cities in the 19th century, the radius of that circle expanded to dozens of miles. The result was (as this very good account says) higher-density corridors linking neighborhood to neighborhood or, more likely, places where there are lots of houses to a place where there are lots of jobs.

The post-World War II insertion of the automobile into this spatiotemporal calculus really messed things up. One car, unconstrained, can easily go 30 or 40 miles in half an hour. But as soon as lots of cars try to do the same thing along the same route, the system falls apart—especially if one end of the route is mostly houses and the other end is mostly jobs, so everyone wants to drive to the same place at the same time.

In the United States, instead of building more houses inside the old circle (or, heaven forbid, even closer together and near the places people go), people have built houses even further away. For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, transit got built before the houses; the trolley lines were what made the housing developments practical—even valuable. When the car came in, the tracks got ripped up, but the exclusionary (and usually racist) zoning that favored single-family homes on large lots stayed in place.

The cost of housing went up. And, well, you can see the geometry problem here.

Any move in a city away from privileging cars is going to be a slog: people really like cars, especially big ones. Car sales in 2021 are down, but only because manufacturers can't keep up with demand and the computer chips that control cars are in short supply. Four of the top five models are carbon-spewing SUVs or trucks.

But people love 'em to the point of building a world to their specifications: big highways, wide streets, and lots of free parking. Even though, since the 1990s, a UC Berkeley urban planner named Donald Shoup has been showing—decisively, if you ask me—that free parking on city streets is an economic death, destroyer of nice things. Drivers searching for free parking orbit around, their cars polluting and clogging the streets. Parking minimums applied to housing—every unit gets some number of parking spaces—are one of the things that makes new homes too expensive to build. (You have to use too much space for cars, which means building expensive parking lots and not having enough space for the actual housing units that people pay for.) Before the pandemic, a few cities got rid of parking minimums—Portland, Seattle, San Francisco. In 2021, Berkeley, Minneapolis, and Sacramento did it, and California's working on doing it statewide.

Yet in many places—even nominally progressive ones—street-level retailers continue to stand strong against bike lanes and defend free parking on streets. This is almost certainly crazy pants. Study after study shows that streets with bike parking and lanes set aside for cyclists make more money for the shops than streets with only parking for cars. In 2010, researchers in

Australia determined that people who drove to a shopping district in Melbourne spent more per person than people who rode bikes, walked, or took public transit to get there—but not when you take into account how much space those cars take up versus bikes. Do that math, and every square meter of space for bikes yielded five times the money as the same space given to car parking.

This year, one of those Australian researchers, working with an urban planning consultancy, evaluated the

economic impact of a Melbourne outdoor dining program instituted to deal with Covid-19. The revenue results were even clearer (though not published in a peer-reviewed journal). A single parking space generated revenue for nearby shops and eateries, but a restaurant parklet taking up the same amount of space generated nearly twice as much. And six spaces for bike parking—again, the same amount of curbside space as taken by a single car—generated slightly more than that. “The evidence behind the opposition to change was

never really the point. The point was, it was an exercise of raw political power,” Shill says. “For a window—in 2020, and in many places also in 2021—cities were willing to experiment.” Like all experiments, this one has had rough edges. Disability advocates rightly pointed out that parklets given over to restaurants often made sidewalks unusable for people using wheelchairs or other mobility tech—especially earlier in the pandemic. A parklet used by a restaurant to expand services isn’t the same thing as a public space—so

A single parking space generated revenue for nearby shops and eateries, but a restaurant parklet taking up the same amount of space generated nearly twice as much

that poses serious equity issues again. In San Francisco, the effort to make parklets permanent came with a 60-page manual of rules to ensure their safety and accessibility (which probably means some restaurants, already cash-strapped, will have to pay more money to retrofit the spaces meant to save the business in the first place). For every effort to make a street better, it can seem like profound forces align against it—like, for example, when a Los Angeles County supervisor ousted, without warning, all the food trucks lining a high-speed boulevard in East LA in

mid-December. More cars and fewer tacos seems like a terrible trade-off. Anyway, without a widespread network of protected bike lanes, denser multifamily housing, and streets built to serve and protect pedestrians, a few scattered examples of outdoor dining aren’t going to save the world.

Still, this new image of the city offers a sense of possibility—of hope, even—in the fight against climate change and inequality, a battle that after all has always been something of an urban insurgency. The pandemic forced some threshold number of

people to stop driving to work, which constrained their half-hour circle anew. They had to really look at the bubble of space around where they lived. And now they’re considering some significant redecoration—maybe even a full-on remodel.



Photo via New York City Department of Transportation

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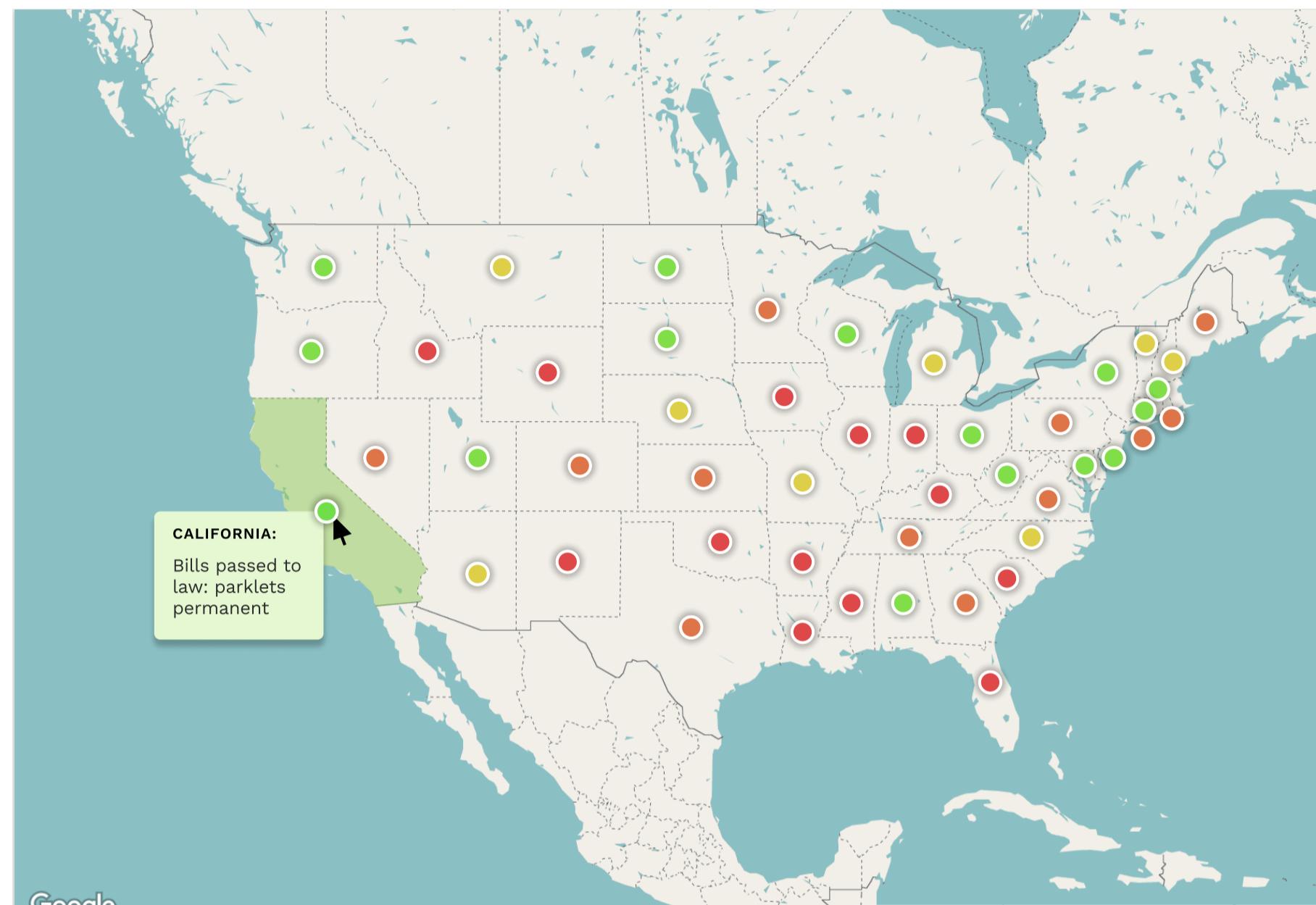


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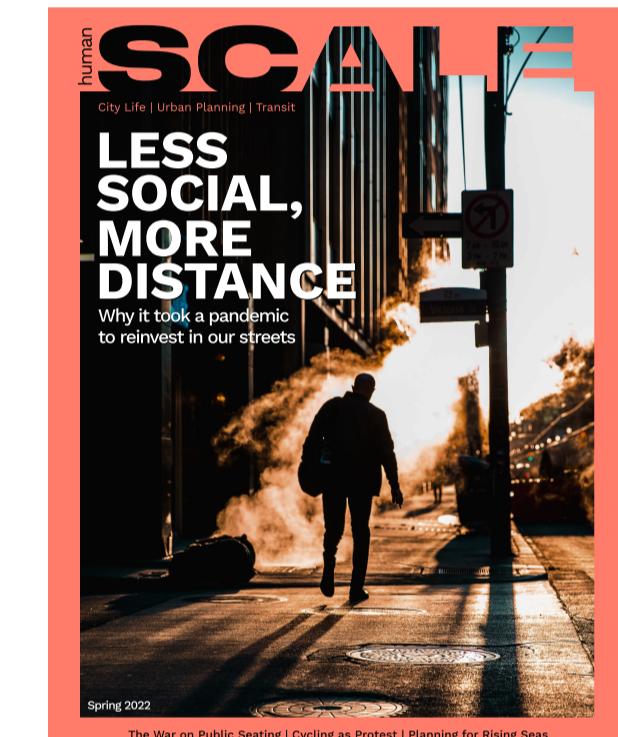
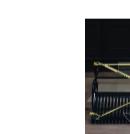
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Adam Rogers — 30/12/21

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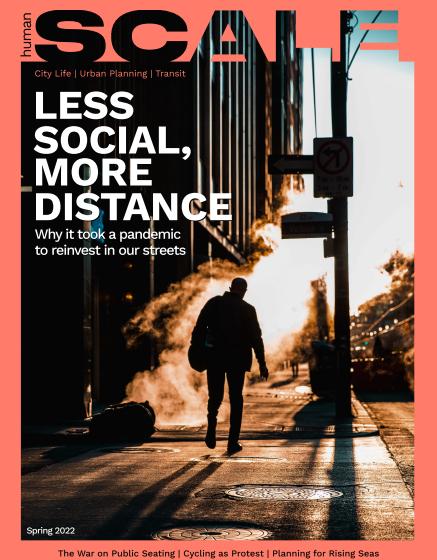
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