Erosion of Cities or Attrition of Automobiles

by Jane Jacobs[1]

Today everyone who values cities is disturbed by automobiles.

Traffic arteries, along with parking lots, filling stations, and drive-in movies, are powerful and insistent instruments of city destruction. To accommodate them, city streets are broken into loose sprawls, incoherent and vacuous for anyone afoot. Downtowns and other neighbourhoods that are marvels of close-grained intricacy and compact mutual support are casually disemboweled. Landmarks are crumbled or are so sundered from their contexts in city life as to become irrelevant trivialities. City character is blurred until every place becomes more like every other place, all adding up to Noplace. And in the areas most defeated, uses that cannot stand functionally alone – shopping malls, or residences, or places of public assembly, or centres of work – are severed from another.

But we blame automobiles for too much.

Suppose automobiles had never been invented, or that they had been neglected and we travelled instead in efficient, convenient, speedy, comfortable, mechanized mass transit. Undoubtedly we would save immense sums which might be put to better use. But they might not.

For suppose we had also been rebuilding, expanding, and reorganizing cities according to the project image and the other anti-city ideals of conventional planning.

We would have essentially the same results as I blamed on automobiles a few paragraphs back. These results can be repeated word by word: The city streets would be broken down into loose sprawls, incoherent and vacuous for anyone afoot. Downtowns and other neighbourhoods that are marvels of close-grained intricacy and compact mutual support are casually disemboweled. Landmarks are crumbled or are so sundered from their contexts in city life as to become irrelevant trivialities. City character is blurred until every place becomes more like every other place, all adding up to Noplace. And in the areas most defeated, etc.

And then the automobile would have to be invented or would have to be rescued from neglect. For people to live or work in such inconvenient cities, automobiles would be necessary to spare them from vacuity, danger, and utter institutionalization.

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Good transport and communication are not only among the most difficult things to achieve; they are also basic necessities. The point of cities is multiplicity of choice. It is impossible to take advantage of multiplicity of choice without being able to get around easily. Nor will multiplicity of choice even exist if it cannot be stipulated by cross-use. Furthermore, the economic foundation of cities is trade. Even manufacturing occurs in cities mainly because of attached advantages involving trade, not because it is easier to manufacture things in cities. Trade in ideas, service, skills, and personnel, and certainly in goods, demands efficient, fluid transport and communication.

But multiplicity of choice and intensive city trading depends also on immense concentrations of people, and on intricate minglings of uses and complex interweaving of paths.

How to accommodate city transport without destroying the related intricate and concentrated land use? - this is the question. Or, going at it the other way, how to accommodate intricate and concentrated land use without destroying the related transport?

Nowadays there is a myth that city streets, so patently inadequate for floods of automobiles, are antiquated vestiges of horse-and-buggy conditions, suitable to the traffic of their time, but...

1 From Chapter 18 of *Jacobs, J. (1961): The Death and Life of Great American Cities, pp338-371, abbr.*

Nothing could be less true. To be sure, the streets of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cities were usually well adapted, as streets, to the uses of people afoot and to the mutual support of the mingled uses bordering them. But they were miserably adapted, as streets, to horse traffic, and this in turn made them poorly adapted in many ways to foot traffic, too. Victor Gruen, who devised a plan for an automobile free downtown for Fort Worth, Texas prepared a series of slides to explain his scheme. After a view of a street with a familiar-looking automobile jam, he showed a surprise: Just about as bad a jam of horses and vehicles in an old photograph of Fort Worth.

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We went awry by replacing, in effect, each horse on the crowded city streets with half a dozen or so mechanized vehicles, instead of using each mechanized vehicle to replace half a dozen or so horses. The mechanical vehicles, in their overabundance, work slothfully and idle much. As one consequence of such low efficiency, the powerful and speedy vehicles, choked by their own redundancy, don´t move much faster than horses.

Trucks, by and large, do accomplish much of what might have been hoped for from mechanical vehicles in cities. They do the work of much greater numbers of horse-drawn vehicles or of burden-laden men. But because passenger vehicles do not, this congestion, in turn, greatly cuts down the efficiency of the trucks.

Today, those in despair at the war between those potential allies, automobiles and cities, are apt to depict the impasse as a war between automobiles and pedestrians.

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This problem is I how to cut down drastically the absolute number of vehicles using a city.

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The conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles on city streets arise mainly from overwhelming numbers of vehicles, to which all but the most minimum pedestrian needs are gradually needs are gradually and steadily sacrificed. The problem of vehicular dominance, beyond toleration, is not exclusively a problem involving automobiles. Obviously, excessive numbers of horses produced similar conflicts; people who have experienced Amsterdam or New Delhi rush hour report that bicycles in massive numbers become an appalling mixture with pedestrians