

House &amp; Home

## The road to ruin – how the car drove US cities to the brink

Car-centric infrastructure turned many into unwalkable wastelands. Planners now look to prewar cities to find inspiration for the future

Ryan M Allen NOVEMBER 5 2021

---

There's an old stereotype in the US of a college junior who studies abroad in France for a semester and who returns obsessed with walking to cafés, biking to class and taking trains across county. When they get home, they are brutally reminded of America's unwalkable suburbs, parking lot-laden strip malls and endless driving.

Given that the pandemic era has glued us to our phones more than ever, it seems everyone has become that college junior. My social media feed is full of photos of café-lined piazzas from Italy and Spain or sprawling train systems criss-crossing [East Asian countries side-by-side for scale comparisons](#) that pose a damning question: why are these foreign cities so accessible, so multi-faceted, so ripe for spontaneous encounters, while [US cities](#) are so sterile?

What many may not realise, though, is that we don't have to make these comparisons with Paris or Florence or Tokyo. Inspiration for the future of American housing, transportation and development can be found in the US cities of the past.

Before the 1950s and 1960s, when the rise of the motor car led to the development of sprawling suburbs, the US had dense, European-style cities. Communities had walkable neighbourhoods with wide sidewalks, narrow tree-lined streets and robust streetcar networks.

Examples can be found from coast to coast, from Los Angeles to Baltimore, and a series of small towns in between. But to see them today, you might never guess that had been the case.

In the years following the second world war, many old-world cityscapes were razed and replaced with highways, parking and suburbanisation. Political and business leaders believed that heavy investment in car-centric infrastructure was the key to a better future, with little recognition of the repercussions.

“History shows that the progress of civilisation has run parallel to advancement in transportation,” touted General Motors’ 1939 New York World’s Fair exhibit called “[Futurama](#)”, taking audiences on the car manufacturer’s vision of 1960s America. “Here is highway engineering at its most spectacular. Traffic may move safely and easily without loss of speed.” The exhibit foretold much of the transportation infrastructure design that would dominate in the decades that followed.

In a project called “[We Ruined Our Own Cities](#)”, I have been chronicling how the urban cores of some US cities have been systematically dismantled and dehumanised over the past 70 years. The project has covered “rust-belt” cities such as [Detroit](#), one of the first urban areas to reorganise around the automobile, but also places such as [Little Rock, Arkansas](#) and [Houston, Texas](#).

The comparisons between historic photos of these cities and today can be stark and disheartening, where blocks of lively neighbourhoods have been replaced by multi-lane highways and parking lots covering acres of ground.



'Futurama', an exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair © Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

## Why did this happen?

What Detroit, Little Rock and Houston have in common is that their leaders envisioned a kind of “urban renewal” by removing so-called “blighted” areas. New civic planning allowed families to live in larger homes, away from the crime and poverty of inner-city areas. In reality, this often meant constructing broad highways through thriving or burgeoning black or less affluent neighbourhoods to connect commercial parts of the city to new suburban developments, which were often restricted to whites.

“Inner-city slums could be cleared, blacks removed to more distant second-ghetto areas, central business districts redeveloped and transportation woes solved all at the same time — and mostly at federal expense,” wrote historian Raymond A Mohl.

Poorer communities were often cut off from city centres, removing the possibility for future wealth generation, especially when coupled with “redlining” (the explicit exclusion of services on racial grounds) and other forms of discrimination. Examples include Detroit’s Black Bottom and Tulsa’s Greenwood District — known as “the black Wall Street” until the [massacre of 1921](#), which saw white mobs attack black residents and destroy homes and businesses across 35 square blocks — but can be seen in many other US cities.

## Hastings Street, Detroit

1959



Hastings Street was once the centre of Detroit’s black community ....

1961



... but the construction of the Chrysler Freeway obliterated much of the area

Broadly, US transportation policy essentialised the automobile. Highways were considered the lubricant of efficiency by American political and business leaders, with other forms of transportation cast aside. Main streets throughout the country, from big urban metro areas to small rural towns, were turned over to cars, either with high-speed roadways or sprawling parking lots. Nimble streetcar networks were ripped up and replaced by slow-moving buses that joined the ever-growing traffic jams in American cities.

For instance, LA’s iconic Red Car transit system, fondly recalled in, of all places, the 1988 film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, at one time offered service across Southern California, but shuttered in 1961 after years of struggling within the car-dominated landscape.

Neighbourhoods, too, followed policies and standards that emphasised moving cars. The streets in modern suburbia have been built wide with few trees and housing set back from the street. These engineering standards were designed to be more forgiving to drivers. Paradoxically, the [result of these designs](#) is that people drive faster and more erratically, says [Charles Marohn](#), author of *Confessions of a Recovering Engineer*.

“When you widen out lanes, when you put in recovery areas, when you remove obstacles, what you do is you induce people to drive faster than they otherwise would,” he explains. “If you need a sign to tell people to slow down, you designed your street wrong.”

With the focus on cars, the experience of walking in these cities is at best unpleasant and inconvenient, and at worst nearly impossible and dangerous — and [biking](#) can be actively lethal throughout the country.

For instance, in Orange County, where I live now, despite nearly perfect year-round weather, walking and biking are relegated to recreation. Sidewalks on major streets are often narrow, blocked by poles or other obstacles, while protected bike lanes are practically non-existent. The only option for most Americans has been to drive. The good news is, this is slowly changing.

## Taking back the streets

Across the country, Americans have been trying to take back their spaces from cars. Take my home city of Oklahoma City, for example.

When I was growing up, it was as unwalkable as any city in the country. At one point, the city was infamously crowned the most obese city in the nation, which got the attention of local policymakers and advocates. However, over the past two decades, the city has added more urban spaces and development, interlocking business, society and transportation. It more than doubled the inventory of downtown housing from 2000-2010 and added a bike-sharing programme in 2012.

“Another substantial investment was sidewalks,” says TO Bowman, sustainability manager for Oklahoma City. “Trying to mend the gap of 50 years of not investing at all into pedestrian infrastructure.”

It started with refurbishing a crumbling warehouse district called Bricktown with bars, restaurants and other entertainment. Slowly, downtown apartments and lofts started popping up. The area became a destination to go out and have fun, an exciting place to live.

In 2018, Oklahoma City opened a streetcar network with two lines, reviving a public transportation option that had ceased operation in 1947.

**People talked about being able to lay down in the middle of Main Street at 5pm. After people left work, there was no one**



**TO Bowman**

“People talked about being able to lay down in the middle of Main Street at 5 o’clock. After people left [work], there was no one else down there,” says

Bowman. “So having residences downtown, and having more amenities like this are things we hope will get people to want to spend time in our city.”

The changes to Oklahoma City go beyond downtown. There are now pockets of walkable and bikeable neighbourhoods throughout the city, often in areas that used to be serviced by the old streetcar network. These offer smaller housing units that are closer together with fewer setbacks, along with various styles of apartments. Bars, restaurants and corner stores are within walking or biking distance, too.

These movements have been happening across the country, making American cities look more like they did prior to auto-centric development. From [Duluth, Minnesota](#), where mobilising locals are taking back its waterfront from the Interstate 35 motorway, to [Lancaster, California](#), making its downtown pedestrian friendly by reducing car lanes and slowing speed limits, change is coming.



A recent transformation in Lancaster, California © TLP Architectural

## An appeal to local conservatism

Another reason I prefer the comparison to US cities of the past over those abroad is due to the current political climate. Many Americans would eschew the suggestion of becoming more like Europe. But looking at our own history and structures can appeal to the traditional localism of conservatives, as well as to the environmental consciousness of liberals.

After all, Oklahoma City is one of the most conservative urban metro areas in the country. But much of the incremental and steady transformations of recent years were financed through a tax increase voted on by the residents. This is a conservative state that voted on increased taxes to make their capital city denser and more walkable.

It is not just midsized cities either. Small towns across the country have vestiges of walkable downtown cores and city centres, such as Winchester, Virginia, thriving with the help of its still intact colonial-era design. Development does not mean these small towns need to look like New York City with massive skyscrapers. Instead, the gentle density of multifamily and mixed-use development should be prioritised, just as they were for much of our pre-1950s history.

By no means are these changes going to solve every problem. Even with the recent transformations, Oklahoma City is still dominated by unwalkable suburban sprawl, including historical legacies of past racist redlining or other hurtful policies. But now, perhaps more than ever before, people are looking for more choices, and they shouldn't have to go to the so-called Superstar Cities, such as New York, San Francisco or Washington, DC, to find them. Non-coastal cities and even small towns can provide options by looking at development from their past to understand the wants of today.

## The pandemic changed things

What happens to cities designed around the car when no one has to drive to work any more? The rise in working from home during the pandemic gave us this natural experiment. While commentators were lamenting the death of the city due to Covid-19, people were working from home and realising what was directly around them. Or in many cases, what *wasn't* around them.

Cities began making pedestrian-only streets, allowing outdoor dining and turning parking into parklets. Parents saw kids playing in the street without fear of a reckless driver for the first time. It was the American version of those European piazzas with cafés, life and community. Localities are now fighting to keep them car-free post-pandemic.

One type of place that many people are looking for is often described as “the 15-minute city”, where all daily needs are within a 15-minute walk or bike trip. Often, older parts of US cities and towns have these features: schools, grocery stores, restaurants, bars, entertainment — it's why real estate in these places has been rapidly increasing.

However, we must not follow the same mistakes that doomed us before. In the past, we bulldozed less affluent neighbourhoods to make way for highways and suburban development — we should not do these policies in reverse, locking disadvantaged communities in the car-centric suburbs while the wealthy members of society gentrify the older parts of cities due to a newfound appreciation.

Instead, we should look at the principles of these older neighbourhoods for emulation. With the digital commuting era upon us, we don't need wide streets, deep setbacks or minimum parking spot requirements. Why not build housing with gentle density, and have more protected buildings, and allow corner stores to open in residential neighbourhoods?

The pandemic has only shown more people that their place and space matter to them, and has emboldened groups pushing for urban reforms — reforms that aren't making the US more like Europe, but making the US more like the US.

*Ryan M Allen is an assistant professor at Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University*

*Follow [@FTProperty](#) on Twitter or [@ft\\_houseandhome](#) on Instagram to find out about our latest stories first*

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2021. All rights reserved.

---