The Post-Automobile City
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Legal Mechanisms to Establish the Pedestrian-Friendly City

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On my first trip to Europe, more than 35 years ago, I immediately recognized the differences between American cities, towns, and villages built for the automobile, and the European counterpart that faces tension with increasing automobile transport, but has constructed its cities around the pedestrian and public transport, with automobiles accommodated in patterns that range from meager to generous. During those years I frequently returned to Europe always anxious to explore both city centers which I had never seen and those that had become comfortable. Long an advocate of the European compact urban design and the extension of public transport, as well as a critic of American urban design, I always resisted expressing my feelings as I had not truly lived a car-free lifestyle through a European winter. It is one thing to celebrate the outdoor café life of Paris or Amsterdam as a short-term visitor, another to do one’s shopping for provisions and travel for work, errands, and recreation. Organizing even a small dinner party can require several series of foraging ventures between wine, beer, other adult beverages, food, flowers, etc. Convenience is the American word that does not immediately come to mind. In 2002, I traveled around Europe visiting car-free housing developments. When I first read about such projects, where occupants agree not to own an automobile, I thought this is not a European innovation that will cross the water easily. Thinking about the American fixation on the automobile and near-inaccessibility of most destinations without a car, I doubted, for most, the attractiveness of such housing design. Of course, America has more car-free housing than any other nation. We call them prisons. To my surprise, as I visited these car-free projects, I grew to recognize that not only were they practicable, they may offer the best strategy for reinforcing community, reducing traffic, and thus health and safety, and reclaiming valuable urban land that is currently devoted to automobiles for uses such as parks, attractive pathways, squares, and piazzas, and rediscovering the excitement and attractiveness of what urban life can offer. Not only are there millions of workers who depend on public transport and prefer living in walkable communities, there
are millions of those with access to the automobile lifestyle, preferring to live an urban lifestyle, where one can walk to most destinations or take efficient public transport or a bicycle rather than an automobile. What I discovered about car-free housing is that the effect of exchanging streets, driveways, and parking spaces for open green space and gardens is remarkable. More remarkable is the extraordinary demand on the part of homeseekers desiring to live in these projects. What I observed, beyond the physical attraction and the opportunity for car-free living, was that these projects are occupied by residents that share an ecological ethic. The set of shared values, that often generates successful cafés, meeting places, and natural and health foods cooperatives, generates a powerful sense of community that is reinforcing and likely to influence both consumption patterns and the initiative to improve the environment, such as improvements to the project that advance sustainability.

Yet, I was reluctant to endorse this radical community design unless I actually lived car-free. Thus, in the winter of 2002–2003, I lived car-free in Utrecht in the Netherlands. It was often interesting to go out and about, particularly in rain and snow, but I found I was walking everywhere, probably averaging five miles (8.5 Km) a day. The attractiveness of walking was in part that it was what everyone else was doing and one adapts to the conventional. More importantly, the paths through the city were quiet and beautiful. It was possible to get to one’s destination along canals, through parks, and along beautiful developed quiet residential streets, frequently with the beautiful medieval old town center and its picturesque canals and preserved old buildings. When I returned to Los Angeles after this idyllic stay, I realized that I had no hesitation in advocating the car-free lifestyle and the extraordinary quality of life enjoyed in a European-style compact city. When I began writing about car-free housing, I realized that the larger story was about the context of these projects and the strategies that exist to advance the lifestyle of the pedestrian, just as cities have accommodated the automobile during the last century. The result is the post-automobile city, a place where pedestrians and economic activity are attracted.

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