

# The Post-Automobile City



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*Legal Mechanisms to Establish the  
Pedestrian-Friendly City*

James A. Kushner

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS  
Durham, North Carolina

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kushner, James A.

The post-automobile city : legal mechanisms to establish the pedestrian-friendly city /  
by James A. Kushner.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-59460-001-5

1. Pedestrian areas--Law and legislation--United States. 2. Traffic regulation--  
United States. 3. Pedestrian areas. 4. Traffic engineering. I. Title.

KF5535.K87 2004

343.7309'46--dc22

2003025521

Carolina Academic Press  
700 Kent Street  
Durham, NC 27701  
Telephone (919) 489-7486  
Fax (919) 493-5668  
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

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# PREFACE

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 mediaeval 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.

The author wishes to thank the many people who provided assistance in this research, particularly Dean Leigh H. Taylor for his support and research assistance. In addition, the author wishes to express his appreciation to Professors Aafke Komter and Jan van Weesep of University College, Utrecht University in the Netherlands, where the first draft of this work was produced. It was through their hospitality and financial support that I enjoyed the Spring of 2003, serving as Scholar-in-Residence during my sabbatical leave. Part of the research for this book was performed at the University of British Colum-

bia, in Vancouver, Canada, where the author taught during the summer of 2003. The author also thanks the European Housing Research Network for setting up a tour of the *Floridorf* car-free housing project in Vienna at the 2002 Network Conference. The author also wishes to thank the many people who assisted in my visits to the projects described in this work for their time in providing me with information, documents, and contacts, and most of all their good-natured assistance with my project: In The Netherlands, in Rotterdam at the *De Esch* Housing Estates at *DWL-Terrein*, Joep Boute; In Amsterdam, *WGL Terrein*, Professor Luca Bertolini; Joze van Stigt, and Astrid Fisser; In Germany, in Munich, *Reim Airport Wogeno* Auto-Free Housing, Heike Skok, also at *Reim*, Maria Ernst of *Wohnen-Ohne-Auto*; in Bremen, at *Begijnenhof*, Diana Lemmen of Team2 (as well as the so far unrealized *Hollerland* project sponsored by the association *GEWOBA*), Dr. Erika Riemer-Noltenius; In Hamburg, *Saarlandstrasse*, Dr. Reinhard Merckens (Director of transportation planning with the City of Hamburg); Almut Blume-Gleim (architect and urban planner with Hamburg's planning department), and the architect of a portion of the project, Christine Reumschüssel; In Berlin, the so far unrealized *Aufreies Stadviertel an der Panke*, Markus Heller (architect/site planner); Barbara Beminger (Assistant for International affairs, *Berlin Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung*); Michael Cramer, Member of Parliament and leader of the Green Party; Mr. Wewel Wolf of the Berlin City Planning Department, Cornelia Poczka of the Urban Development Ministry, Martina Pirch (Senate *Verkehr*), Christop Chorhest, Chief of the Green Party in Vienna; and Johannes Withgen, Architect, economist, and leader of the SPD, the liberal party in the parliament). The author appreciates the significant contributions by Brian A. Angelini, Cecilie E. Gerlach, Lindsey M. Haines, Ryan A. Kushner, and Shanon Quinley, who provided research assistance. I deeply appreciate the comments on earlier drafts of the book provided by J. H. Crawford, Michael Dorff, Norman Garland, and Jacki F. Kushner, Dinh T. Luu, and Bianca E. Putters. The author is once again indebted to the publisher Keith Sipe and the wonderful family at Carolina Academic Press (CAP). This is our fourth book publication and it just gets better regardless of how far we push the envelope of traditional publishing. Of course, the author takes full responsibility for the observations, information, and conclusions contained in this work.



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