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URBAN DESIGN AND THE CAR

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Creative design of public urban space has been hijacked by the rigid and insensitive imposition of traffic engineering standards. In striving to achieve uniform standards of road layout, materials, signs and street furniture, traffic space has become increasingly divorced from urban architecture and civic design. Such an approach may be justified on safety grounds when designing segregated transport systems like railways and motorways, but most urban streets perform multiple functions and their design should also be multi-faceted.

Some countries, including Belgium, Denmark, Germany and France in recent years have been achieving high standards of public realm design in places formerly dominated by highway engineering. In Britain there are notable schemes in some city centres, but general practice remains lamentable.

In theory, the design of public spaces should follow the procedure:

FUNCTION > OBJECTIVES > DESIGN

First the function needs to be defined according to the range of activities, not just the traffic function. Street and public spaces can be classified according to the balance between different activities. Second, within that framework, objectives can be set as to which activities or functions (or categories of traffic) are to have priority. This can be very specific to location, so that the priority given to pedestrians may vary from one street corner to the next. Third, decisions can be made about what design is appropriate.

With the exception of certain special or show-case locations (e.g. Edinburgh's Royal Mile, the centre of York, London's Oxford Street) street function is too often defined simply in terms of traffic and parking. Highway and traffic engineering considerations take precedence. Thus while effort and expense may often be given to the design of individual buildings and facades, the surfaces and spaces between them are ignored from every viewpoint except traffic.

The creation of an attractive environment in which to carry out other legitimate activities such as strolling, looking, chatting, listening, window gazing, pram pushing, playing and learning has been compromised by the demands of the twentieth century 'space invaders' - motor vehicles.

Verges and gardens are converted to parking. Footways are narrowed to fit in another traffic lane. Corners of buildings are cut off to meet sight-line requirements. Metal guard rails create pens for pedestrians. Forests of poles support signs, signals, and street lights. The ground is patterned with white and yellow paint in the style of "traffique grotesque". Advertisements are illuminated, placed and sized to be read by drivers passing at 30 mph, instead of by people on foot. What chance does architecture have behind this all-pervasive clutter?

The space demanded by the car and other vehicles has eroded space for pedestrians and for amenity. The car is a great waster of space, and much urban space is wasted on it. Buildings can no longer define the shape and scale of public space. The concept of "urban rooms" and "corridors", in which floor and walls are designed together, and bridged with nature's own ceiling - the ever changing sky - is still applied in pedestrian areas, but rarely in other places. Elsewhere urbanity is in retreat. Urban space is dictated and defined by traffic and highway standards for parking, access roads, kerb radii, turning circles, stop lines, lane widths, refuges, crossings, and so on. Yet even if the presence of motor vehicles is accepted, the space provided for vehicles is often excessive and inefficiently used.

It is time for local authorities to embark on a programme of "space reclamation" in urban streets, to bring them back to life. There is enormous potential for converting carriageway space to more profitable and more attractive use. First, however, we have to abandon the outworn notion that our traffic problems have to be tolerated only in the short term, until that glorious day when adequate capacity will be provided, and no longer will there be any traffic jams or need to search for a parking space. We all know now that this day will never arrive. More road and parking capacity simply reproduces the same problems on a larger scale.

There is a lot of surplus carriageway space that provides neither traffic capacity nor space for other activities or amenity. Traffic capacity is determined by key junctions in the road network, not by the width of the streets that run between them so, except at these key junctions, single file traffic in each direction is often sufficient. This happens anyway, even when streets are marked out with two lanes in each direction,

because vehicles parked or loading occupy kerbside space.

Space is taken up not just by the volume but also the speed of traffic. The faster the traffic, the more space must be provided to allow its safe passage. The more space that is provided, the greater the encouragement to speeding. In urban areas, the blanket 30mph speed limit has led to a uniform approach to street design and does not allow priority to be given to non-traffic activities. In streets with a residential function 30mph is too fast. Speeds of 20mph or lower are not only safer but also require less vehicle space. On main roads too, carriageways can be reduced in size providing speed is not the priority. Once it is accepted that priority should be given to “living” rather than traffic, to pedestrians rather than drivers, a whole range of possibilities open up for making streets more livable and more attractive

There is, of course, a limit to how far one can go with space reclamation. There is a limit to how many vehicles can be absorbed without destroying the integrity of human-scale environments, however well designed. This is very clearly demonstrated in some North American regeneration projects where little oases of pedestrian scale environment have been created in a desert of access roads, ramps and parking lots. Often what has been dressed up to look like a genuine mixed-use block is actually shot through with parking decks and loading bays.

Designing for the car is therefore inextricably bound up with designing for lively, sustainable, socially inclusive urban development. Ultimately, our highest aspirations will compel us to embark on radical reduction of the car population. Modern technology and post-modern acceptance of multi-mode lifestyles will enable us to escape from car dependency. As the love affair with the car withers, urban design can play a much greater role than now in creating the quality of living space that in crowded circumstances is desperately needed.

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