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Designing For Chicago Bike Culture

PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS?

By Zack Furness



In the early 1960s, a historian of technology and cities named Lewis Mumford stood out as one of the most vocal critics of urban automobile transportation in the United States. In particular, he saw the ever increasing use of cars as one of the main factors deteriorating social life in cities and he posed a question that is as relevant today as it was a half-century ago: "Does the city exist for people, or for motorcars?"

Mumford was certainly not the first person to call attention to the everyday problems associated with urban driving or the development of vast landscapes around the automobile, but as a prominent writer and public intellectual in New York City he influenced a wide range of activists, scholars and city planners who have been instrumental in rethinking America's collective obsession with the automobile.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people like Lewis Mumford don't get much proverbial airplay in the United States; the country that birthed the 'drive thru' restaurant, the parking lot, the strip mall, the mobile home, and the personal tank known as the Hummer. But then again, neither do the droves of other critics who rightfully raise poignant, biting questions about the automobile and the slew of problems built into its material and cultural infrastructures. Indeed, despite the dire picture painted by climate science, the pleas from activists about global dependency on war-saturated oil, or the outrageous statistics regarding auto fatalities (1.2 million each year worldwide), injuries and billions of dollars wasted on traffic jams alone, automobile transportation and the broader car culture continues to thrive in the US and in so many other countries where the franchise of the "Freedom of the Road"™ has been continually exported, (re)branded, and sold.

Automobiles undoubtedly provide solutions to a range of very real transportation problems, and it is also true that the customs, cultural practices and rituals associated with cars are as interesting and diverse as the people who use them throughout the world. Moreover, there are certainly places where cars are the only logical form of mobility because of constraints posed by weather, geography, a lack of public transportation and/or bicycling infrastructure, or the basic demands posed by a globalized economic system (capitalism) in which time equals money. But the allure of the car is hardly about the mere process of getting from point A to point B...any idiot can tell you that much. Indeed, the production of decades of TV commercials, galaxies of print advertisements, archives of promotional films, and forests of literature have not been intended to simply advocate a faster way of getting to work or an easier way to haul food and kids to

(and from) the market. Rather, such techniques have historically been used to sell something much more expansive than the automobile itself, which is to say, an entire ideology and belief system associated with personal transportation and the values of autonomous mobility (auto-mobility). The core principles associated with this paradigm are familiar to most, and they are not altogether different from those articulated by US bicyclists during their twinned campaigns for both 'good roads' and highways in the late 1880s and 1890s. They are: freedom, independence, and above all else, the seemingly eternal value of being 'modern'. These are all fabulous principles, in theory, but more often than not the appeal to such grand ideas are used to mask the realities of a system in which the 'freedom of the road' most commonly translates to "GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY!"

The tragedy of 'auto-mobile' paradigm is both the way it positions people as atomized individuals who jockey for space in their enclosed personal bubbles, and the way it encourages us to adapt to the automobile's every contour—from the way we organize (or divide) our neighborhoods, to the ways we utilize (or eliminate) public spaces, or the manner in which we use (or destroy) natural resources. Far from giving people freedom, car culture requires people to collectively subject their lives, livelihoods, and natural resources to the needs and demands of the car in ways that are simply not comparable with cheaper, more efficient technologies like bicycles and other pedal-powered auto-mobiles—the very kind that people are taught to see as mechanically and socially inferior, if not symbols of everything to be transgressed on the aimless and often blind drive down the highway of 'progress' and 'development'.

The ideology of automobility, as it were, is thus not only the desire to own or need cars but the myopic belief that things always have been and always will be this way. Consequently, instead of asking crucial questions whether cities should be designed for people or cars, or whether 'freedom' means proliferating a transportation system that marginalizes the poor, decimates the environment, and stands as one of leading killers of people under 25 (worldwide), we are too often placated by the idea that driving is either an inherent American 'right', or somewhat differently, the product of a romantic 'love affair' with the car. Similarly, instead of asking what it really means to live in a 'modern' world, or whether it's wise to promote simplistic individualized solutions for complex social problems like mobility, we are too easily smitten with the idea of driving shiny new cars down shiny new roads...content with seeing the world through the narrow frame of windshield.

There are clearly no easy answers to these questions. Nevertheless, it is clear that we all need to begin asking them, debating them, and thinking critically about how something as mundane as getting from point A to point B can severely impact the ways we live and our ability to collectively imagine something different. Perhaps most importantly, we should probably figure out what we mean when we talk about 'progress' these days... instead of just trying to drive there really fast. As for the road ahead?

Well, instead of just putting one foot in front of the other, as the old saying goes, it seems like the best place to start is by making sure those feet are pedaling.

BIO: Zack Furness is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at Columbia College Chicago. He is the author of *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility* (Temple University Press, 2010), the editor of *Parademics* (Autonomedia, 2011), and the co-editor of a forthcoming collection of critical/cultural essays on the NFL. In addition to co-editing and contributing to *Sad Subjects*, Zack's writing has also appeared in several books, journals, and magazines such as *Punk Planet* and *Bitch*. He is old for a punk, young for a teacher, and pretty happy with both.

