

Why America is Terribly Designed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6K8KEoZwMRY>
Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/cities3.pdf>

This is a map of Philadelphia's parking lot density over a small area.

The pink patches represent parking lots and as you can see, they're all quite large and quite close to each other.

Now Philadelphia has a population of 1.6 million people but they have 2.2 million parking spaces, so Philadelphia has more car slots than it does human beings which should sound absolutely ridiculous to anyone.

But if you've never experienced anything else, you might not understand the depth of this problem so let's compare Philadelphia to a European city, Amsterdam, for example, a city that's roughly the same size in population but with a completely different view on urban planning.

Now sure, they do have parking lots, but instead of having an excess of one per person they instead have one for every three people although that's not the entire story because 40 percent of these parking spaces are actually underground making room above ground for what is significantly more important: sidewalks and bike lanes.

And to understand why they are so important you only need to use some common sense.

See, if you have a car based city, or country for that matter, with no bike lanes or sidewalks you are actively excluding those who can't afford to pay thousands of dollars a year on a car from society since they can't go to and from work or even to the grocery store in a safe, efficient way.

And if you add to that, terrible public transportation, it will lead to charts like this where you can clearly see the most popular mode of transport in America that just so happens to be the car.

Which isn't too surprising, since America is designed for cars not humans.

And while there are some sidewalks and bike lanes in the United States in it's larger cities, they are either unprotected and really scary to use.

Or, just end abruptly with no other option but to use the street itself to walk or bike on, which is really not ideal if you want to send your kids to school on their own or to get some milk at the store.

I mean, I biked everywhere when I was a kid and it seems like if you're under 16 in the US and therefore don't have your driver's license yet, you're practically under house arrest until your parents come home which doesn't sound that fun to me.

And I remember clearly, when I visited the United States with my parents a few years back, whenever we tried to walk anywhere it felt like we were intruding on the car's territory since we literally had to walk through various parking lots and streets with no sidewalks in sight to get to our destination just a few hundred meters away.

And it doesn't have to be this way, see the streets of Amsterdam for example, are filled with pedestrians because they have sidewalks that aren't at all scary to use.

Because you feel separated from the road and that's because you are separated from the road.

The most beautiful thing about Amsterdam though, is that it's incredibly bike friendly as it's filled with designated bike lanes that don't end up abruptly and are instead carefully laid out all over the city to make it easy for people to commute anywhere.

Amsterdam even has no car zones and even underground bike parking spaces that look pretty insane, something you'd never find in the US.

But if you think it's unfair to compare the United States to literally the best city for bikes in the world then just remember it's practically the same story in all of Europe's largest cities like Copenhagen or Paris.

Now, sure, they aren't at the same level as Amsterdam but whenever I bike around Copenhagen I don't feel like a car is going to hit me because we have our own designated lanes that are sometimes as wide as the road itself.

And you might think, well, the United States will never be able to get to that level so why even compare them?

But the thing is, and this might surprise you, not too long ago the United States' largest cities were actually designed exactly like these European cities.

Take for example, Houston, that currently looks like this with tons of space allocated to these massive parking lots.

Seems like it's always been this way, but that's not the case because in 1920 Houston looked like this with a lot more space for pedestrians.

They could actually walk around the city without fearing for their lives or feeling like they were intruding on the car's territory.

This means the United States didn't design their cities to be this way they bulldozed them to be.

And while European metropolitan areas are increasingly rolling back on the car's dominance with high-speed trains, metros and non-automotive methods of transit, the United States is increasing their dependence on cars by expanding highways and demolishing houses, apartment complexes, businesses and schools to fit them which doesn't really make any sense.

I mean if a city is expanding the number of highway lanes from 16 to 20 there is a problem so I've been trying to figure out why they've done this to themselves and what actually happened.

And what I found was surprising to say the least.

Here, take a look at this, in cities like Charlotte [North Carolina] or Portland, Oregon there's parking lot minimums that are placed in high schools which is actually a practice adopted by many States and cities.

And this means that a high school containing hallways, a cafeteria, an auditorium, offices, restrooms, gyms and everything in between can be around 5100 square feet in size just for the buildings alone.

But because of these parking lot minimums a school of this size must also have a parking lot that's half the size of the entire school.

That means 2005 square feet of space has to be allocated to parking lots and driving aisles alone which is absolutely insane as this simply isn't an option in some areas.

But since it's preset in many school budgets it just leads to cramped learning spaces and an emphasis on buying cars to get to and from school.

It's essentially a silent message sent to students, teachers and parents: buy cars or else.

I mean, this would never work in Copenhagen. Not only don't we have space for that, but there's no need.

We don't drive our kids to school here, we just give them their backpack and then they either walk or bike to school from the age of six, alone I might add, that's normal here.

But going back to the parking lots, it's simply the result of city planners mandating nearly three to eight parking spaces in city areas per car, a practice that started in the 1930s as cars became more affordable for the average American family.

But costs were also decreasing in price in Europe at this time yet they didn't bulldoze their cities to make room for them.

So something strange is happening here and experts are asking for an end to the massive parking lot requirements because of the valuable space they eat and the uglification of the urban landscape.

And I tend to agree that this isn't particularly beautiful so what about the solutions?

What about instead of remodeling entire cities the United States just implemented better public transport?

I mean in Copenhagen, I live right next to both the train station, metro station and bus stop and therefore I can literally go anywhere in Copenhagen without the need of a car or bike for that matter.

So would that be a good idea? Well, currently only five percent of Americans use public transportation and there's actually a very simple reason for that: it's terrible.

This is a map of Chicago's train system. If you look at its design it's not very hard to figure out what it was built to do.

All these different lines intersect here in Chicago's downtown and then fan outward.

This is a system that's really good at moving people between the suburbs all the outer rings of the city and then downtown.

Meaning there's a complete lack of routes going from suburb to suburb making it useless to a lot of people who need those connections for public transport to make sense.

Transit systems across the US were built to serve a very specific type of commute from outside the center of the city to inside it.

But studies show that today the most common American commute is actually from suburb to suburb routes that public transit in the US usually doesn't serve and the train routes that do exist aren't exactly desirable.

I think it's time to talk about Amtrak. Amtrak has become somewhat of a plague on the American railway system with constant train derailment, increased taxpayer funding, expensive tickets and lack of connectivity.

This means most Americans aren't too keen on using trains to get around even if they technically serve a route they could use.

Stations are also far from each other and major train riding cities like Boston, Washington and New Jersey haven't gotten an upgrade in years.

The system pales in comparison to Switzerland's sophisticated railways that more than 450 million passengers use each year.

Which, by the way, is around 13 times as many passengers as Amtrak has per year and let's not forget Switzerland only has eight and a half million inhabitants compared to the United States' 330 million making these numbers absolutely insane.

But even with Congress's recent plans to hand 30 billion dollars over to Amtrak for a high-speed train, Amtrak has no plans to use that money for such a system.

Instead they're pouring all of that cash into restoring 18 tracks from New York to New York City, repairing an already existing tunnel and expanding Penn station.

Basically meaning they are going to invest in government funds in what is proven to be profitable and neglect everything else.

So maybe the train idea was too far-fetched, but buses should work.

The only problem is that someone needs to pay for them and currently only a quarter of public transit is paid for by ticket sales meaning 75 percent is subsidized by the local state and federal government.

Which is truly not ideal but it certainly doesn't make sense to just spend that money on expanding highways instead as that will only worsen the problem.

A fix needs to happen and the best place to start might be the parking lots.

We know the United States has way too many parking lots, so demolishing the unnecessary ones and condensing the cities would allow for more residential and commercial areas to be within walking distance of one another.

It would also allow for green spaces that can be used as recreational spots further improving the quality of life in each city.

But, obviously, that would require the US to remove mandatory parking minimums from state laws and that would be pretty difficult.

But the benefits would be huge as it would lead to the reduction of housing costs, something that's also a pressing problem in the United States these days.

And, sure, major cities like Seattle, Austin and Detroit will never be as condensed as Copenhagen or Zurich but the vast spaces can be used in a sort of hybrid mashup of interstate connectivity and pedestrian alternatives.

The US could also take a page out of Paris' book as they've been doing radical infrastructure changes over the past three decades to accommodate other modes of transport.

Paris even has car-free days where residents are encouraged to explore their city through alternative means and they have committed to reducing the number of on-street parking spaces by 72 percent before 2024.

But realistically, would the United States ever be able to implement anything like this?

And will they ever be able to solve their infrastructure problems?

A solution is needed, but what do you think that will end up being?