

From Car Urbanism to Public Space, Tracing the Transition

Several indicators, such as modal shares in mobility practices, reduction in car ownership and increasing lack of interest in obtaining driving licenses may suggest that the century of car dominance - at least in developed countries - is already behind us. Pedestrianization and banishing the car from city centers is becoming a common trend in many cities. Different measures of discouraging car-use such as congestion charges and parking pricing policies are being applied. Cities that were once transformed to accommodate automobiles are now going through an inversion, a process of re-transformation to get rid of them.

The car dominance was questioned early on by advocates of public space, rather than through interests in ecological urban design or other urban planning concerns. Public space is the corporeal, social space of the city and its main figure is the pedestrian. The “pausability” inherent to pedestrian movement (Demerath Levinger 2003) and the fleeting interactions it enables characterizes public space. The antagonist of public space, on the other hand, is the private car - the ‘hard shell private bubble that allows its passengers to encounter the city at the same time avoiding it.’ (Lofland, 1998) It lowers the intensity of public space and threatens its existence by limiting the opportunities for social interactions. ‘Seeking alternatives to the car and going towards low-carbon mobility is not merely a matter of energy concerns - it is rather an opportunity to reclaim public space as well as social equity.’ (Fabian, 2012) In the 60s a universal longing for the qualities of traditional urban space led to a critique of the proliferation of fast roads, and thus the car’s colonization of everyday life. Lewis Mumford’s *The Highway and the City* (1959) and *The City in History* (1961) and Lefebvre’s *Le droit à la ville* (1968) are early examples of this dissent. Lefebvre argues that the construction of highways through cities and the enlargement of existing streets to meet the needs of increased motor traffic have resulted in the disintegration of city life and the disappearance of its communal forms, such as public parks, market-places, etc. Lefebvre described this as triumph of ‘geometric space’ over ‘lived space.’ (Inglis, 2004) In her influential book of 1961, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs devoted a relatively large part of her research to a careful analysis of the city, its parks, its streets, and sidewalks - in other words, an analysis of its public space. Jacobs’ book was instrumental in turning public opinion against Robert Moses’ modernist plans for New York, and led specifically to the rejection of his expressway in 1964 by the city government. Such early initiatives led to a trend clearly detectable in contemporary urban policies, which propose a “return of the criterion of proximity” (Cogato Lanza, 2012) and reinforce the shift-provoking trends towards a new urbanity freed from car dominance.

Anticipating a shift from ‘steel and petroleum car’ (Urry, 2004) as private, individual, motorized transport towards alternative systems of mobility, we attempt to explore the characteristics of the new city that emerges. We will first we evaluate the existence and the intensity of public space in relation to different vehicular units and then by looking into a series of contemporary projects try to see to what extent are urban experts accounting for the limited but visible transition from car-dominated systems towards alternative models of mobility in which individual-motorized mobility is not central, what are the visions and perspectives towards a post-car world.

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