

The automobile and New York City

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New York City's residential population, business population and number of tourists continues to grow, and our streets have become more crowded as pedestrians and motor vehicles compete for the same finite spaces. While many American sprawl cities continue to spread out and build more roads and auto parking spaces, New York City and scores of cities

around the world become more densely settled. When the buildings become taller and the cities even more crowded, these cities have little choice but discourage the unregulated use of private vehicles. The problem in New York City is that while the number of people and motor vehicles continues to grow, the land for roads remains fixed. Reporting about the imminent banning of cars from 14th street in the [New York Times](#) last week, Winnie Hu observed that:

"The busiest stretch of 14th Street—a major crosstown route for 21,000 vehicles a day that links the East and West Sides—will mostly be off limits to cars. Drivers will be allowed onto the street for just a block or two to make deliveries and pick up and drop off passengers. Then they will have to turn off. The sweeping restrictions come as New York and other cities fundamentally rethink the role of cars in the face of unrelenting traffic that is choking their streets, poisoning the environment and crippling public transit systems by trapping buses and light rail systems in gridlock. It is becoming a moment of reckoning—and, cars, which once had absolute hegemony over the streets, are losing."

Hu describes the growing number of bike lanes and pedestrian plazas along with the institution of congestion pricing in lower Manhattan as elements of a fundamental attack on the automobile in New York City. These restrictions are largely limited to Manhattan and the more developed parts of the city's other boroughs. New York's many neighborhoods are far more diverse than its media image. Parts of Forest Hills and Riverdale could be confused with Westchester and Staten Island is really an extension of the suburbs in New Jersey. In those places, the auto and other forms of personal transit will continue to dominate transportation. These neighborhoods simply don't have the density to support [mass transit](#), and they were built around the auto. In fact, most of the land in New York City sits beneath single-family homes, even if most of the city's people live in multi-family dwellings.

It's true that when new subway lines are built subway stations serve as a magnet and concentrate development, but the high cost and disruption of new subway construction in the outer boroughs seems to render it infeasible. It's true though, that a policy of distributing population pressure out of Manhattan by extending the subway would be another method of easing congestion.

Nevertheless, the auto is not going away and that is why some folks are frustrated by anti-auto policies. The 14th street auto-ban appears to be close to implementation, but as David Meyer reported in the [New York Post](#) this past Friday:

"The city's plan to ban cars from five blocks of 14th Street in Manhattan is on hold—yet again. Manhattan Supreme Court Judge Troy K. Webber on Friday issued a stay on the project, delaying its launch just days before it was about to proceed. The city had planned to start the initiative on Monday after getting a previous injunction lifted earlier this week. Webber's injunction came after block associations in the West Village and Chelsea appealed Judge Eileen Rakower's Tuesday ruling [that allowed the plan to proceed.](#)"

Businesses on 14th street are concerned that they will lose business, as some shops did in Toronto when a similar policy was enacted. People with property on adjoining streets worry that all the cars that once drove on 14th street will simply move to 13th or 15th street. The policy is an 18-month experiment and the city's Department of Transportation plans to closely examine any unanticipated side effects. Still, any new policy will have winners and losers, and it seems as if the momentum in New York has moved away from the car.

It wasn't always so difficult to navigate New York by auto. When I was growing up in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn in the 1950s and 1960s, my parents could drive us into Manhattan on a weekend day and park on

the street in Times Square or the Lower East Side. Since we lived in what used to be called a "two-fare zone," in the era before free transfers from bus to subway, we had to pay twice when we took a bus to get to the nearest subway. A trip to "the city" by mass transit was a 90-minute odyssey. Back then, you could take the Belt Parkway and the Battery Tunnel or one of the East River bridges and get to midtown in 45-55 minutes. Today, that trip takes much longer by car, and between the traffic and parking, you are much better off in a cab or some type of mass transit. The parts of the city that are auto-dependent are more crowded than they were a half-century ago, but their growth has been dwarfed by the congestion in Manhattan. Even in Manhattan, quiet residential areas are being redeveloped with larger buildings at a ferocious rate.

All this means that the way we move around the city must be rethought as the city becomes more crowded. One of the reasons we live in cities is to engage with other people in other neighborhoods and to experience culture, entertainment, and personal relationships throughout the city. We also like to go to particular neighborhoods to dine: The great Italian food on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, the wonderful Chinese food in Flushing, Queens and of course the fabulous Greek food in Astoria... To experience New York, we need to be able to get from place to place quickly, conveniently and at a reasonable price. The automobile has a role to play in making that happen. But that role now has to be thought about in new ways.

The Department of Transportation should not simply be working to limit autos, but to accommodate the people that use cars and the businesses that have customers who rely on cars. We should be promoting electric cars along with charging stations on public land. A parking garage near the 14th [street](#) excluded zone with park and ride parking and bus discounts could be explored. The Department of Transportation should be looking at ways for cars and bikes to be used to get to subway stations

and should work with merchants to provide parking discounts for customers who participate in park and ride. The city government should be engaging with the public and developing creative alternatives to reduce congestion.

Even if we don't build new subway lines, the best way to encourage people to explore mass transit options is to make mass transit more reliable and comfortable. One of the reasons that private vehicle use persists is that the [city](#)'s mass transit system is unpleasant to ride. Busses are slow and subways are unreliable, dirty, and crowded. A better policed, faster and more comfortable ride could effectively compete with the uncertainty of navigating a private auto through the center of New York City.

Although private autos will always remain an important part of New York's transportation system, New Yorkers are far less dependent on cars than most Americans. In most parts of America, you simply cannot participate in the local economy without a car. In New York City, most people commute to work via mass transit, and many people do not own cars. Young people are abandoning car ownership for the convenience and lower price of ride-sharing and occasional rentals. The private automobile should be seen as a valuable piece of a complex, varied system of transit. It should not simply be shunned but electrified, accommodated and regulated.

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