Carfree or Not: The Danger of Designed Spaces

by

Sajay Samuel and Jean Robert

1.0.   Introduction

I am pleased to be invited to this meeting on carfree cities. Yet, for two reasons, I am somewhat apprehensive. First, I am the junior partner in the partnership of Robert and Samuel. Unfortunately for me, Jean Robert is hard at work in Mexico completing his opus on the idea of space. Like you, I would have preferred to listen to him today. But we can take comfort in knowing that the fruits of his ongoing work will continue to nourish our reflections on questions on transportation. The second reason for my apprehension is that our jointly discussed talk will sound a discordant note in the orchestral music that the other participants have composed over these past few days. Let me emphasize that Jean and I are fellow travelers on this caravan to cities without too many cars. Thirty years ago, Jean left the traffic jams of Switzerland to walk in Cuernavaca. By now, its streets are as lost to cars, buses and trains as those of Bombay, which I escaped a decade ago. Now we, like most of you, pass our time in the asphalt desert. Yet, if you find that what we present today is somewhat out of step with your march, please blame Randy Ghent of the Car Busters collective for inviting us here to present our ideas.

Before I begin, allow me to salute car busters of all stripes. In their fight to reclaim the streets, car busters have been doggedly persistent. For the last three decades or so, their opposition to being freighted around like FEDEX packages has resulted in many victories, big and small. Conferences such as this one, magazines such as *Car Busters* would have been almost unthinkable 30 years ago. Cities like Copenhagen, Curitiba, and Portland are shining if fragile points of light reflecting the worldwide effort of citizens, former transportation specialists, NGOs and local governments. Whether through a white-bike or mixed-use zone, each victory by car busters is magnified by the opposition it has had to overcome. After all, the automobile sector spends the most of any industry on shaping opinions and perceptions through advertising. If you are tired of seeing ads for Viagra on TV and billboards, you should know that ads selling the 'freedom of the road' account for many, many billions more. (Worldwide: 24 billion to 5.2 billion in 1998)

Having saluted our fellow travelers we now want to caution some of them. In our readings of urban design and transportation policy Jean and I were surprised by one

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feature: a set of common assumptions supported the contrary efforts of both car busters and car defenders. That is, both busters and defenders agreed on fundamental assumptions while disagreeing on details. This is the thesis I want to present and defend in discussions with you all this evening. In their haste to cross the desert of asphalt and reach the cities without cars, busters are seduced into taking shortcuts. Rather than journeying through the asphalt desert, they want to build cities there. However, their impatience seems to have blinded them to the foundations of their proposed city. In today's discussion we want to reexamine these foundations. We argue that both highway engineers and carfree designers stand on the same foundations. If we are correct, then carfree cities built on the asphalt desert will go the same way as cities built on sand: sooner or later they will be swallowed by the desert they were built to withstand.

2.0.   <u>Busters and Defenders: standing on faulty foundations</u>

So, what is common to say, Wendell Cox and Paolo Soleri? The first is a consultant paid for by the Ford-Highway-Military lobby and defends the absurd idea that people exercise their freedom of movement by being carried in cars. The second is a well-known architect who dreams of an entire city as a hyper-building without any cars. What could possibly be common between the first who so blatantly defends the reign of Ford and Fiat on highways and the second who wants to design carfree spaces for walking and cycling? We argue that at least four assumptions or better, certainties, serve as the shaky pillars holding up the foundation common to car busters and defenders.

Consider the following statement, which is not entirely a caricature of what car busters and progressive urban designers are interested in. "*Designing spaces that satisfies the need for mobility by controlling the speed of transportation...*" It sounds reasonable to many here because something like this sentence occurs routinely in the tracts on carfree cities, eco-cities, and so on. Now what are the four assumptions or certainties that generally go unquestioned by car busters and defenders? The sentence offers the clue: the four certainties are the notions of 1) Design; 2) Space; 3) Speed; and 4) Needs.

A first clue that *both* car busters and car defenders share the same mindset is that both use the word 'transport' indiscriminately. A person walking to the market, a person using the metro or private car to get to work; or commodities being shipped across the seas are all understood as forms of transportation. Thereby three distinct and fundamentally different phenomena are confused. It is no surprise that transportation engineers and economists do not see a difference between things and people. For them, a crate of apples on a Wal-Mart truck and a person in a car or plane are the same: both can be described by fundamentally the same measure: freight or passenger miles. But that

those who struggle to reclaim the streets do not distinguish commercial freight from people treated as freight is shocking. How could those whose very purpose is the defense of pedestrians and cyclists not have a word to distinguish these activities from that of being freighted around like a FEDEX package? So we asked, "is not the agreement on a keyword only the surface of a more troubling agreement between busters and defenders on fundamental assumptions?" The remainder of my remarks this evening is a sketch of our answers to these questions.

3.0.   Design is not _Disegno_.
It is important to start with what is most obvious. It is obvious that the word or notion of "design" is a key to unlock the mindset of both car defenders and car busters. If you disbelieve me, take almost any book or article that writes of carfree cities and you will find "design" used as a key term.

Allow me a brief detour into the history of the modern word "design." It comes from the Latin "_Disegno_." Despite their superficial similarity, they are fundamentally different. First, what is the superficial similarity? Both design today and '_disegno_' some 400 years ago, refer to the entire spectrum of human art: not merely painting, sculpture, or architecture, but chairs, tables and even cities. That today, everything is designed is obvious in the use of the term. For example, cars are designed no less than buildings and cities. That "_disegno_" referred to an equally wide range of human activities is less familiar but no less true. Consider the following sentence by Zuccaro[1]: "There exists among men only one art or science, that is of _disegno_ or _pittura_, from which all others proceed, and of which they are a part." (in Summers 1987, p.302). For Zuccaro, "_disegno_" includes clothing, houses, cultivated fields, sailing ships, ordered battle formations, and all physical movements and actions-even dancing. Superficially then, design is similar to _disegno_ in referring to all the arts and activities of man.

In fact, however, though superficially similar, design and _disegno_ are heterogeneous at the depths. This fundamental distinction between design and _designo_ is perhaps best grasped in a sentence from Georgio Vasari. Vasari, a close contemporary of Da Vinci and Michelangelo, says: "_Disegno_ was the act by which an artist actualized an idea that has been implanted in his mind by God."[2] Thus, man as the artist of both the things he makes and the activities he engages in is not creative in a foundational sense. Generally speaking, art was still understood as an imitation of nature. Art could only bring forth

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[1] Frederico Zuccaro's L'Idea de' pittori, scultori e architetti (1607) is considered the last statement on Italian Renaissance Art and the deepest theoretical reflection on "_disegno_". (see David Summers, Judgment of Senses, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987).
[2] Vasari, G. Lives of the Artists, Penguin Books, New York 1987, p.19.

what was already given in potentiality. Modern design is creative; disengo was imitative; the modern designer is a creator; the renaissance artist did not make something from nothing. The modern designer confers actuality to the fevered dreams of his reason. The Renaissance artist like his predecessors drew out or made manifest what was latent in nature or creation.

Why is being aware of this distinction important? First, it helps one avoid the tendency to invent traditions for utterly modern and fairly recent phenomena.[3] So for example, grasping the distinction allows one to avoid the trap of believing that all cities have been designed; that there is no fundamental distinction between Fez and New York. Awareness of the distinction can puncture the illusion that experts can design walking as they now do city streets. The second reason for being aware of this distinction is that it serves as a lever to burrow beneath related assumptions such as space, speed and needs that are as distinctively modern as design.

4.0.   <u>Space</u>

What is the raw material that modern urban designers use and that carfree cities will be based on? Is not redesigning something called "space" the basis of the output of designers and visionaries whether hyper cities or eco-cities?

Now the idea of space is a fairly modern invention. It is certainly around by the mid-17th century. It is the stuff in which Newton's gravity exerts force. It is the stuff out of whose infinitesimal partitions Liebnitz's calculus fabricates mathematical limits. It is the indifferent, homogenous, insensible stuff of Cartesian analytical geometry. On such a mathematical and abstract surface, anything depicted is only a variable-whether city, house, road, or park. Space is the basic tool of the designers trade. Space can be designed; its volume filled or emptied; it is in the world of space that mountains can be flattened, rivers damned, and valleys covered over by landfill. It is from the Cartesian grid on the architect's drawing board that both the eco-city and the industrial one emerge. Space is the stuff peeking through the grid-lines of an architectures blueprint; the white spots between the scale models of houses, bicycles paths and green fields that is displayed on the desk of the futuristic city planner. The idea of Space therefore presupposes that the *where* of people who move, shit, breathe, and sleep is an abstract volume that can be designed; and that people are as plastic as the space they are made

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[3] The conceit, now common among so-called eco-designers, that 'design is not necessarily human' identifies what they do with the consequences of 'evolutionary nature' and 'Mesopotamian Man'. It is an example of how intellectual traditions are invented. In this case, late 20th century prejudices are foisted on 'nature' and 'men, when they first began to live together.' Therefore, art is believed to imitate 'nature' once again. These eco-designers forget that the 'nature' they imitate is made up in the scientific laboratory or already confined in designed spaces. It seems of the first importance that busters know what they speak about.

to occupy. Designed spaces are therefore made up, constructed, or manufactured and people are molded to fit into the designers' dream. Space is nonsense; literally, it cannot be touched, smelt, heard or tasted. Space forces the disunion of the senses: for example, what might be 'seen' in space may not be tasted or heard. Space forces the disorientation of the senses: for example, the "where" that I see from a moving train is a simulation and not sensible reality.

But as the physicist-historian Max Jammer has pointed out, for the entire Western tradition until the early modern period, space did not exist as such.[4] Rather, people were in place and places were peopled. Houses reflected the gendered nature of its inhabitants; paths and streets marked out the biographies of those who, in treading there, gave them shape; the Parthenon and the Church expressed the marriage between heaven and earth. The late medieval map was not a representation of latitudes and longitudes. Instead, imagine a map of the world drawn with Jerusalem at the center, the forests and towns that marked the road to Jerusalem and mostly empty spots in between. The medieval map in Europe was different from that in Baghdad, which was oriented by Mecca. Each depicted the inhabited world and reaffirmed that the ways of inhabiting or dwelling are incomparable, each way of inhabitation generates a slightly different map of the world, as it were. In this sense, places were formed out of habits and ingrained habits engendered distinct places —each one dissimilar to the other and yet each one appropriate and fitting to its people. Whether spaces are greened or cemented; the soil beneath it can no longer carry the traces of the people who tread over it. Spaces design out Places. Placeless spaces radically disallow people from staining their soil.

5.0.   <u>Speed</u>

Like they do of space, both highway engineers and eco-designers take 'speed' for granted. The first usually want to increase the average speed on the roads. They are fixated on increasing vehicular throughput through space. The second understand that speed limits are the decisive criterion for political deliberations on transport. They rightly want to calm the beast that is transport ("traffic calming") and fight to reduce road miles knowing that is one way to get rid of cars ("traffic evaporation"). Therefore it is obvious that defenders and busters take contrary positions on the issue of speed. The one is for fast food, fast cities and fast cars; the other for slow food, slow cities and slow motion.

Both Aristotle and Aquinas knew of motion and movement. They did not know speed. The ancients were right: we cannot <u>know</u> speed even though it can be arithmetically

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[4] Max Jammer, <u>Concepts of Space</u>, Dover Publications, New York, 1956.

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measured. Speed is a non-sensible scientific construct. It is defined as a ratio of spatium/tempus: distance over time. Jean has suggested that it was Galileo who invented this fantastic notion. Galileo mathematically joined two heterogeneous dimensions. He related distance to time as if these quantities are of the same kind. This scientific blindness to incommensurables is something we have become familiar with but still cannot comprehend. After all, dividing feet by seconds or miles by days makes as much common sense as multiplying apples with oranges.

Belief in speed induces vertiginous confusion. As long as the idea of speed is a fixed point of one's mind-set, motion is homogenized. Abstract and entirely conventional measures of space are piled on top of similar measures of time. Once speed is constructed, donkeys can be compared to feet, cars to beetles, and bicycles to lizards. When speed is taken for granted, slow is only a lesser quantity than fast. Speed creates the illusion that motion can be purely quantitative; a mere change in location.

Motion was traditionally understood as change towards perfection; that is qualitatively. Unlike moderns for whom movement is a measure of abstract time; for Aristotle, time was the number that measured movement. For us, children take a little less time to develop than underdeveloped countries; the oak takes longer than the vine. For us, cars go faster than men on their feet because all are measured by abstract clock time. Yet, at least metaphorically, we are aware that each entity has its own time. The oak grows towards its perfection with a rhythm and tempo that is different from a vine; we may still say with Cicero, that it is not yet the time of this rosebud to bloom. Second, for Aristotle, both motion and rest though heterogeneous were equally fundamental and complementary. However, since Newton, there is only motion. Rest does not occur except when motion is forced to cease; and it is little wonder that contemporary societies are designed in endless motion. When according to modern science rest is unnatural, how can scientific society find a moment of rest?

Distance in non-sensual space, moments in insensible time constitute the fetish of speed that even slowbies reaffirm by their dissent. In contrast, the idea of speed, whether slow or fast, is perhaps not the same as "early" or "late." It is true that one can be early for an appointment by half an hour. But it is just as usual to refer to one's lateness to dinner in relation to when one was expected to arrive. For example, I had hoped to see my mother sometime last year—and the days of last year stretched out and folded around the intensity of my longings. The intensities of personal intentions, of hope and desire that support "early" and "late" and bend the time of the clock are washed out when people are made to goosestep to its indifferent tick-tock.

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6.0.   Needs

The separation of untouchable space from unfeeling time in which abstract distances and indifferent moments can be measured was not fully established at the time of Shakespeare. When his characters say, "give me more space" they mean "give me more time." But Shakespeare stands witness to another, equally fundamental shift in assumptions. In King Lear, he has the daughter Regan meet her father who is banished to wander the heath. There he stands, almost naked, tormented, some have even said that he has gone mad. Today, King Lear might appear as that homeless smelly drunk who sits talking to himself on the doorstep of your apartment building. King Lear's anguished pleas and raving screams of dispossession, of injustice and unfairness finally gets to Regan. She asks him, "what is it you need?" For a moment, the former King regains his regal stature and bearing. He replies famously, "O, reason not the need." I understand his refusal to be reply as marking the beginnings of a fundamental rupture in the notion of justice: that between giving a man what is his due and satisfying his needs.

The difference between giving what is due and satisfying needs is subtle and yet fundamental. "Giving what is due" is a formula of justice that remains unquestioned at least until the time of Shakespeare. Each one is owed what is due to him; and those who know him know what is due to him. I knew of a beggar who would thank his benefactor by saying "I am pleased to have given you the chance to fulfill your duty today." The idea of "due" implies that people in their place knows what is proper and fitting for each one of them. What is proper for the old Eskimo in the last days of her life is different from what is fitting for the old French peasant who is no longer able to till the soil.

The idea of need is radically different. Need implies that all people everywhere are the same as strangers to each other.[5] To be mirrors of each other, they must be reduced to the lowest common denominator—something like a King Lear on the heath. 'Needs' presuppose men and women stripped of their cultural and social clothes; as a biological animal. "Needs" suggest that people are merely defenseless and helpless human beings. Now it may be scientifically true that people are human beings when stripped of all their attachments, affiliations and alliances; but that would mean that even the aborigines of Australia were not human. Marshall Sahlins reports that these people did not only pass more time in leisure than even the most wealthy in our societies, but also that they did not have needs as we would be inclined to think of people who wore a loincloth at most.[6]

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[5] Michael Ignatieff, The Needs of Strangers, Penguin Books, New York, 1986.

[6] Marshall Sahlins, Stone Age Economics, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973.

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Needs are plastic and fueled by envy—it is no wonder that needs are never satisfied. The rich man needs his second car just as the poor man needs the tram. Needs are imputed by experts and professionals—it is no wonder that people do not know what they need. Just as it is the transportation engineer who defines the needs for mobility, it is the teacher defines the needs for schooling. By the mid-20th century, professional associations determine, usually through supposed quasi-scientific criteria, what a person needs. One should not then be surprised that needs are defined in terms of commodities and services that must be purchased: the need for housing, for mobility, for healthcare, for schooling are all ways of making people dependent; of forcing them to be clients.

It has become something of a fashion in the last two decades to include the client in professionalized need-making and need-satisfaction. Just as students can evaluate their professors and can choose from a menu of courses, so also the community is invited to urban planning sessions where highways and carfree zones are being designed. Opinion polls, customer satisfaction ratings, and scientifically designed questionnaires are some of the mechanisms that integrate the client into the language and mind-set of the expert. This only convinces the client that he can be an expert of himself; that he can better analyze his mobility needs than the transportation engineer can. The co-opted transportation client no longer questions the very silliness of 'the need for mobility'—he only debates whether cars, trains, planes, buses or bicycles best satisfy it.

7.0.   <u>Designed Spaces</u>

I have offered today a rough sketch of four shaky pillars that support the foundation on which both car busters and car defenders want to build their dreams. The ideas of 'design,' of 'space,' of 'speed,' and of 'need' prop up the foundations of both the asphalt desert and the city to be built in it. Let me reaffirm Jean and I travel on almost the same path as you all and that our criticism of the idea of design and its supporting prejudices are intended to support your efforts. Let us therefore recall that the streets we want to reclaim are those that still abound in the *favelas* of Brazil and the slums of Bombay; in the neighborhoods of New York and Toronto that Jane Jacobs described; the streets that were a commons on which kids played, women hung their clothes to dry, grandmothers chattered, vendors sold their wares, men tinkered with their tools and on their houses, and all smelled the dinner being cooked next door.

Unfortunately, I like many of you have no home. I am temporarily housed in the US, and have friends and family who are residents in cities from Cochin to Cuernavaca. Traveling across these distant shores, I am haunted by a sense of *deja vu*: cities look much the same regardless of latitude and longitude. Buildings, highways, rest stops, metros, trams

lines, shops and offices, all dressed up in cement and brick. Of course, one city has more slums than the other; one different historical monuments that the other; one more green spaces than the other. In Berlin, the green spaces that have replaced the acres of barbed wires and cement do not make it any less a no mans land. Most cities have become a packaged destination for tourists or a familiar landscape for its residents. Each also induces the strange feeling of *deja vu*: of having seen it all before. Spaces designed to be free of cars are certainly less familiar but for all that no less similar to each other. Allow me know to give you a few examples of what carfree spaces look like.

When people come to visit me in Central Pennsylvania, I sometimes take them to what we call "Amish Country." There, the occasional horse and buggy on macadam's road are a tourist curiosity—like animals in a petting zoo. I sometimes also take them to the inner ring of Penn State University, which the administration has decided to close to all cars but their own. Penn State offers subsidized bus passes for those willing to park their cars in distant lots and be bused into campus. They can also walk or cycle, which is encouraged as a healthy lifestyle. For $19.99 you can purchase a 'pedometer,' which will record the 10,000 daily steps necessary for good cardio-vascular health and weight loss. People there now walk for the reasons of health and administrative ease; not because that is what they naturally do. Like the Amish, you can observe walkers in their designated zones; you can even get close enough to study their reactions to you.

Beirut, devastated by 17 years of Civil War, is now crowned by a $30 billion downtown-almost entirely reconstructed to be carfree. Restaurants, offices, residential units, historical monuments are all cheek-by-jowl framed in the traditional looking yellow sandstone of the Mediterranean. The souks and bazaars this downtown simulates were also carfree. But the new carfree design is very expensive which ensures that it is a privilege reserved only for the few. What was once done by everyone, has now to be paid for. Walking has become a designed and expensive commodity.

The medieval city of Bologna like the lazy island of Ischia, were both once carfree. Today, despite their narrow roads, winding curves, and blind corners, pedestrians are confined to the arched footpaths of Bologna and have almost disappeared from Ischia. Despite an architecture that is radically different from the avenues of Paris or the Strasses of Berlin, the sheer number of moving vehicles has marginalized pedestrians. Designing new streets for carfree cities that resemble those of Bologna or Ischia can only move pedestrians on the paths designed for them. People will have to walk where they are allowed to and told to walk.

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In Oakland California, the mayor's office is part of the City Plaza that is carfree. As you enter the expensive complex designed for mix-use, high-density occupancy, you cannot shake off the feeling that you have entered a computer-generated space. It is all designed to human scale: scientifically composed color schemes grace the storefronts, waterfalls and commodious stairways abut glass fronted offices that reflect the California sunshine. One immediately suspects that the beautiful people walking, chatting and eating in the plaza have made a previous appearance: as digitized caricatures in the architect's CAD program. People are designed into carfree spaces as design elements or variables. Their movements and actions can no longer be distinguished from that of puppets run on invisible strings.

8.0.   Dwelling[7]

        In raising a red flag in the conversation about designing carfree cities, we are fully aware of the Leninist question: "what is to be done?" We sympathize with the reaction of car busters to the asphalt desert laid down by previous generations of architects, city planners, urbanists and engineers. The justified anger of car busters can however be blind: sometimes the anger which fuels resistance can tighten the chains that enslave. This is particularly true if and when, as we have argued, carfree designers share the same assumptions of those who have erected that horror.

        Dwelling is an art and each people dwelt differently—from the cliff-hanging Dogon to the marsh-Arabs in Iraq. In designing spaces to satisfy needs by changing the speed at which people are moved, car busters run the danger of deepening the enslavement of people. They would be the advance party of the new transport system in which men, women and children believe that it is natural to live in space, be consumed by needs and be in an incessant speed race against cars, buses, and trains.

        There are those who say that there is no practical way of going back to the time when people dwelt. Doubtless they are correct. There are others who say that there is no other way than going forward by dreaming new dreams and building them. We disagree. These others promise to design the where of people better than their predecessors. They promise to involve people in the 'design process.' But since their promises of a golden future are based on laying designs on what people can do for themselves, they are no different from their predecessors who uttered the same promises once before, when the asphalt desert was being laid out. When facing a chasm it may be better to stop. If it is not possible to go back, it is surely folly to go forward. It may be better to stop and reflect deeply on recovering and nurturing those fragile places still leftover; to seek places here and now in the interstices of the spaced out city.

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[7] For Dwelling and its counterfeits, consult Ivan Illich, "Dwelling" in Mirror of the Past (Marion Boyars, London: 1992) and H$_2$0 and the Waters of Forgetfulness, (Heyday Books, Berkeley: 1985).

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