



Urban Renewal for the 21st Century

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There's a revolution afoot. A revolution in city planning that reinforces the attributes that makes cities great - dense mixed use buildings, pleasant pedestrian friendly streets, efficient mass transportation and interesting mixed use public spaces. This revolution de-emphasizes the role of the automobile in the dense urban environment, challenging the conventional wisdom that cars are essential to moving people around the city.

None of these ideas are new, indeed many point out that this is just going back to the pre-1920s organic urban development that was in place before the automobile obsession of the last 85 years. Cities did pretty much as much they could to open themselves up to the automobile, but issues of traffic congestion, pollution, pedestrian/cyclist deaths and noise/honking have persisted and worsened over time. The tide is now shifting against the automobile in the urban environment. Not because drivers are finally willing to sacrifice their automobile for the public good, but because the public is finally realizing that they have been sacrificing their lives and the quality of their lives for an illusory economic benefit.

A [new report](#) released in February at the Urban Center (Madison and 51st Street) gives hard data to support this shift. It showed that passenger automobiles serve little to no economic function in the Manhattan Central Business District (Manhattan CBD = South of 60th Street). Key Findings below:

1. Cars clog traffic / Waste Public Space: Personal automobile comprise 60% of the vehicle trips in the CBD (the rest are a mix of buses, taxis and commercial trucks / vans). Cars use ten times as much space per person mile of traffic as compared to buses. They also pollute the air, cause injuries/deaths, and impede the movement of other more efficient transportation modes.
2. Cars Provide Little to No Economic Benefit to the CBD: Only 14% of shopping trips to the CBD are taken by car compared with 72% by foot, mass transit or both. About 60% of trips by car into the CBD from the East River Bridges are merely to go through it. In fact many avoid going through Staten Island because of the high Verrazano Bridge toll (\$9), versus the free East River Bridges.
3. Car Commuters Have other Options: 90% of auto-commuters have a mass transit option, but drive because it is faster, more comfortable and/or they have free parking at work. When travel time is the same, but have to pay for parking people take mass transit. When the travel time is the same but people have free parking, they drive for convenience. Government employees have some of the highest car-commuting rates (33% vs. 10-13% of CBD commuters) in the city because they have free parking permits.

Tomorrow I will post some ideas on how to start using this data to inform policy decisions - Any ideas from our readers?



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