Lessons from a Study of Major U.S. Downtowns

by Kenneth A. Halpern

The steady disintegration of the central city in America has been a direct consequence of a clearly established, if unwitting, national policy since WWII. Although in recent years signs of resurgent strength are evident in the downtown areas of American cities, there are still enormous problems ahead. One major problem, not easily solved, lies in the demography of the older, larger American city. In most metropolitan areas, the suburbs are now richer and more powerful than the cities they surround. The power comes from the collective numbers of people in the suburban ring, now often greater than those in the center city, and effectively represented in Congress.

Much of the money for the good suburban life is still earned in the downtown areas of cities. Suburbs, many of which were subsidized to begin with through FHA (Federal Housing Administration) low-interest home loan guarantees and federally funded highways that get the suburbanites to and from the downtown, further exploit the wealth of the city through their exclusionary zoning practices, placing the burden of maintaining the poor solely on the city. Shadrach Woods, the late well-known American architect, opined, "suburbs are neo-colonists."[1]

Looking more closely at the downtowns of nine cities recently surveyed for urban policy design (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Boston, Atlanta, Minneapolis), several things contradictory in nature and often dealing with transportation are apparent. For example, the three and a half million people who must be in these nine downtown areas to make a living are

---

This article is reprinted from the book *Downtown USA* by Kenneth Halpern. The author holds the copyright.

Kenneth Halpern is currently the Director of the Mayor's Office of Midtown Planning and Development in New York City. He holds a B. Arch. with distinction from the University of Minnesota and a M. Arch. in urban design from Harvard University. He has taught at several universities and was Fulbright Professor of Urban Design at the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota, Columbia.

exposed daily to inordinarily high levels of pollution largely caused by the automobile. Without radical changes in transportation policies, especially regarding use of the automobile in the heart of downtown areas in large American cities, any other improvements to the downtown will be cosmetic at best.

Many cities of moderate size, like Minneapolis and San Francisco, have tried to ameliorate the negative impact of the automobile through urban design changes in the city's infrastructure. Minneapolis prohibits the automobile on its main shopping street—Nicollet Avenue. And San Francisco has reduced the automobile capacity of Market Street. Despite Boston's stated program to ban the automobile from a 10-block area of its downtown, no American city, including Boston, has effectively placed restrictions on the use of the automobile downtown as have literally scores of European cities in their entire centers.

Ironically, the downtowns of the two largest cities in the U.S., New York and Chicago—whose downtowns function only because 80 percent of Chicago's commuters and over 90 percent of New York's commuters use public transportation—have only recently begun to implement a modest plan of street closings in their centers to benefit the high number of pedestrians and public transportation users (State Street in Chicago and Broadway as it passes through Times Square in New York will both be closed to the private automobile). Yet it is Chicago and New York, perhaps more than any of the other cities surveyed here, that desperately need reorganization of surface transportation priorities to favor the pedestrian, public transportation, emergency services and pick-up and delivery of goods. Considering that mid-town Manhattan is an area of only one square mile in a region of 12,000 square miles, it would seem reasonable that a few streets in mid-town could be reserved primarily for the one million people who work in that tiny area, especially since over 80 percent of them arrived at work by means of underground transportation systems and must walk to their destinations.

MORE FUNDING FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Part of the reason for the dilemma is simple: more federal money is available to build highways than to improve public transportation; a lot more! Between 1956 and 1976, 38,000 miles of interstate highways were built in the U.S., while from 1945 to 1970 less than 20 miles of subways were built.[2]

According to John Hirton, deputy administrator of the Urban Mass Transportation Administration, "Since 1946, federal, state and local expenditures for highways and roads have totaled $361 billion."[3] Included in this figure is the $65 billion already poured into the interstate highway program that was originally estimated to cost $27 billion and will receive another $35 billion if the highway lobby gets

its way. In 1973 alone, $24 billion was spent on highways. Hirton also said, "More than one fourth of this was raised by property or general taxes (non-user) and constitutes a clear public subsidy."[4] In contrast, federal grants for public transportation in 1973 totaled only $650 million.

The federal government is ultimately responsible for the short-sighted aspects of this one-sided program. Having helped hook Americans on driving to work, only the federal government has enough money to unhook them. Enforcing clean air standards coupled with more money for public transportation is one approach, but the federal government still has an inordinately strong bias toward funding highways. Even the Environmental Protection Agency now says it has yielded to local pressures and will no longer try to enforce clean air measures (although many environmental groups are suing cities to carry out previously agreed-upon standards). This might have been different had bus and subway riders been as effective a lobby as the auto manufacturers and oil companies.

HIGHWAYS ARE RARELY IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Despite the amassed knowledge of the problems and inadequacies of highways, several cities persist in investigating completion of existing systems. The lesson from viewing older cities such as Boston, New York and Chicago is that massive highways serve fewer than 30 percent of the incoming commuters at an overwhelming and unnecessary cost (both in terms of dollars and environmental, burdens not totally unrelated) that is rarely in the community's interest. Says William Ronan, former chairman of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, "If the Long Island Railroad were discontinued, 29 one-way lanes of highway from Long Island to New York would be required to handle the commuter load currently served by the railroad."[5] Only a national program of conservation that simultaneously encourages the use of public transportation will help.

Los Angeles functions—barely—because it has multiple centers, avoiding the heavy concentration of jobs at a single point, a common trait of older U.S. cities. The intensification in recent years of certain of these centers in Los Angeles, including its "downtown," is a cause of concern to planners. With Los Angeles' almost complete dependence upon the automobile, the increased density might tip the balance and make the entire highway system, already at peak capacity, completely unworkable.

Quite the opposite of the situation in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago are completely dependent upon public transportation. It is therefore incredible that these cities are only in the past year beginning to stripe exclusive bus lanes in their respective downtown areas. Even Houston has exclusive bus lanes downtown! While buses account for less than three percent of the vehicles on New York's

streets, they carry over 40 percent of the surface passengers and are forced to compete with the private automobile for space.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION MUST BE MODERNIZED

Another problem is that New York and Chicago's subways are among the darkest, dirtiest, most dismally depressing subterranean environments ever created by man. Although many straphangers must ride them to and from work, they abandon what are multi-billion dollar systems at all other times, mainly due to the perception that they are unsafe (which may be directly related to their foreboding appearance). While New York and Chicago do have a few modernized subway stops, steps must be taken soon to up-date their entire subway systems as Boston has already done. In fact, Mayor Koch of New York committed the city in 1978 to just such a program. The expansive subway networks of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston remain the key in these particular cities to a cleaner, healthier environment.

The commitment to new and improved public transportation must include programs to induce more drivers out of their automobiles and into buses and subways. Some of these inducements can be direct: increased taxes on gasoline and downtown parking. Some can be less subtle, such as closing streets to private automobiles. Attention, too, must be given to the role major employers can play as van and carpooling and other such programs in Houston suggest.

An indirect approach can come directly from the auto insurance companies. At present, auto insurance premiums in large cities are staggeringly high: Boston $950 per year; New York $720 per year; Chicago $520 per year. Many who own automobiles in these cities have viable public transportation alternatives but may feel obliged to use their automobiles as they have already spent so much money on insurance alone. Among other factors, insurance rates depend upon the type of vehicle being insured, the city in which it is driven, the driver's age and overall driving record. Given the fluctuating nature of insurance rates, it would seem that the costs could be substantially reduced for the automobile owner who uses public transportation during rush hours; that is, the insurance would not cover the automobile during those hours. This would be of benefit to insurance companies and auto owners alike. During the five-day work week, 40 percent of auto accidents, including 28 percent of fatal accidents, occur during the six hours that constitute the morning and evening rush hours (7:00-10:00 a.m., 3:30-6:30 p.m.). Besides the increased protection of life and limb, the savings to the motorist should more than offset the cost of using public transportation.

PLANS FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

As to other issues related to urban design, only Philadelphia of all the cities surveyed has a comprehensive plan for the city's development,

which has been followed officially since 1961 and unofficially since 1947—and it shows!

With the exception of lower Manhattan, New York and San Francisco do not have comprehensive plans. Instead, they have taken several urban design features typically illustrated in comprehensive plans and written them into zoning laws. While many of the urban offices set up were consolidated under budgetary cutbacks, the urban design controls in New York remain legally binding on all new construction.

THE CASE FOR ZONING

Zoning should be a creative tool for regulating new construction to ensure that future buildings are responsive to existing environmental conditions. It seems clear that many cities should re-evaluate their bonus systems to better correlate the zoning incentive to the true needs of the center. In many cases though, cities ought to insist that a building have certain obligatory urban design features without resorting to incentives. The intent of zoning incentives works only when the zoning's basic limit is at a threshold where the developer wants to build more than the zoning allows. Of the cities surveyed, only Boston, San Francisco and New York have established clear zoning policies that work this way: the developer usually builds according to the city's urban design criteria in order to get a bonus to build a slightly bigger building.

Zoning can also be instrumental in saving landmarks, but it is no substitute for a clear public policy to preserve the city's cultural and architectural heritage. Where local governmental interest or appreciation is lax, as in Chicago, citizens should have recourse to state and federal programs that are strong enough to prevent destruction of recognized landmarks.

Since it now appears that many center cities are reaching a sort of population equilibrium (at least for a few years), zoning bonuses can no longer be relied upon as a tool to create the kind of open space necessary in the center and other, more direct means will have to be used to provide this needed space.

RETURN TO THE CITY

In the last 20 years, urban renewal, though harshly more disruptive than it needed to be, has at least shown the willingness of middle and upper income groups to live in the city, especially near downtown. While this may not be a consideration in cities like Houston (with control over 2,000 square miles, middle and upper income groups are in the city by default), it is very much a part of thinking in cities like Philadelphia, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston and New York where politicians seek middle and upper income housing as a way to increase the city's tax base.

In Philadelphia's Society Hill area and San Francisco's Golden Gateway Center, the housing is affordable to middle and upper income groups only, but is nonetheless an integral part of the city fabric which is accessible to everyone. The Houston Center project and Chicago's Lake Point Towers, however, would portend a future where these income groups live in fortress-like enclaves, often in locations which exploit the city's natural beauty and only serve to make the surrounding streets deserted and unsafe. In the absence of more humanistic attitudes of developers and their architects, zoning could be used to insist that future housing not be so exclusionary, at least in appearance and ground-floor use.

Battery Park City in New York, if ever built close to its original intent, will show how a city can provide a well-planned environment accessible to and inhabitable by a diverse population.

No doubt the downtowns of the nine cities considered here as well as other American downtowns can be revived as attractive places for business if new opportunities are seized upon to establish urban design structures that can give grace and beauty to the urban center, providing urban life with the dignity and amenity that characterizes so many cities outside the U.S. American downtowns can become vital organisms that integrate shops, offices and apartments with parks, plazas and a sensible transportation system that conveniently and comfortably moves passengers and allows for effective delivery of goods and services.

TRANSPORTATION POLICY A MUST

But if central cities are to become workable, livable places, politicians will inevitably have to make tough and costly decisions, many of which will be related to reorganizing transportation priorities. Implicit is the need for the cities to exert more control over the land the city directly administers, the more than 50 percent mostly in sidewalks, streets and parking. The cost of not making these decisions and establishing a coherent urban design policy for the downtown will be even greater, with a continued exodus of jobs and continually deteriorating, demeaning and unhealthy environment.

REFERENCES

1. Shadrach Woods, *The Man in the Street.* Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1975, p. 90.
2. "Sic Transit ...," *The New York Times,* July 28, 1976.
3. John Hirton, "The Bias in Transit Planning," *Modern Railroads,* May 1975.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*