

## Age doesn't bestow grace

*European cities are beautiful, vital and convenient because leaders work to save best features and reduce traffic*

Jay Walljasper

My infatuation with cities began on a visit to Montreal more than 20 years ago. I was enchanted by picturesque squares, sleek subway trains and the intoxicating urbaneness all around. Sitting up most of the night in sidewalk cafes along Rue St. Denis, I marveled at how different Montreal felt from the cities I had known growing up in downstate Illinois. In my childhood, street life was what happened in the parking lot between the store and your car.

Appropriately enough, it was on my honeymoon that my love affair with cities grew deeper. Julie and I toured the continent – Paris, Venice, Milan. We came home wondering why American cities didn't instill the same sense of wonder.

The conventional wisdom is that European cities are so attractive because they are so much older, with street plans locked in place before the arrival of the automobile. But something more is at work.

What explains the fact that most European cities gracefully end at some point, giving way to green countryside at their edges, unlike the endless miles of sprawl in America? How is it that public life and street culture feel so much richer in France or Germany and Austria?

The answer lies in the way Europeans think about urban life: They have a clear set of public priorities and urban policies that respond to these priorities. Rather than accepting increasing auto traffic and creeping suburbanization as the inevitable march of "progress," as many Americans do, Europeans defend the vitality of their hometowns. Historic neighborhoods are protected, transit systems improved, pedestrian zones expanded, green spaces preserved, bike lanes added and development guidelines enacted to head off ugly outbreaks of sprawl.

The central train station in the Dutch city of The Hague provides an example of

European urban priorities. In America this building would qualify as one of the world's wonders. Not for its ultramodern architecture; we have suburban office parks from Tampa to Tacoma that can match it for glitz. The building's basic function is what dazzled me. The electronic schedule board tracked more than 20 trains departing every hour for destinations all over the Netherlands and Europe. Streetcars wheeled right into the station, unloading and loading throngs of commuters. An underground parking facility accommodated 3,000 bicycles. All this in a city about the size of Chattanooga.

In Amsterdam, where only 20 percent of trips are by car, 36 percent are on foot, another 31 percent on bikes, and 11 percent on public transit. But that's not good enough for the Dutch. Voters in Amsterdam approved an ambitious plan to eliminate most automobiles in a three-square-mile section of the center city, an idea later adopted in a number of other Dutch towns. Increased public funding has been invested in railroads and light rail, and major employers are now required to locate new facilities near transit stops. New housing and commercial developments are not approved without close scrutiny of the consequences for congestion.

Copenhagen rivals Paris and Amsterdam for charm with its lively streets, tidy parks, vibrant neighborhoods, cosmopolitan culture, relaxed cafes and cheerful citizens. That city works because of inspired thinking and hard work in response to real-world urban conditions. The first things a visitor notices about Copenhagen are the bicycles, a good train system and an extensive network of pedestrian streets. This civic equipment, missing in too many American cities, helps to make Copenhagen a pleasant, relaxing, comfortable place. It's not just the luck of an ancient city unsuited for modern roadways. Indeed, Copenhagen is not older than most East Coast American cities; it was completely rebuilt after 1807, when the British navy burned it to the ground.

It also is the happy result of sensible urban planning with a strong emphasis on making the town attractive to pedestrians. Since 1962 when a street in the heart of Copenhagen was closed to traffic, planners have added additional blocks to the lively pedestrian zone each year, eliminated parking spots and turned traffic lanes into bike lanes.

Gradually, Copenhagen transformed its noisy, dirty, exhaust-choked downtown into a pleasant spot where people like to hang out.

In America, urban decline is generally attributed to our overwhelming preference for suburban amenities. But planning departments in Copenhagen and other European cities view the inner city as an incubator where young people and immigrants can live cheaply as they launch careers. If they choose to move to bigger homes in outlying areas to raise families, this is interpreted not as the failure of city life but as a sign of its success.

There's not reason why more of our cities can't follow suit, transforming themselves from conduits for cars into places for people. The first step is finding new ways for Americans to look at the urban places where so many of us still live. We need to fall in love with cities again.

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