The Four Most Important Words in Planning

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It has been said the three most important words in the English language are "I love you." It's difficult to argue with this proposition, for more love in the world could certainly make it a better place. In a similar vein, this article makes a case for what may be the four most important words in urban planning. As bold as it may first seem, this four-word phrase could represent the most meaningful shift toward improving our communities, and even our lifestyles, since World War II. First, an introduction to set the stage for this assertion.

In American society we live with an enduring legacy of our sense of self-worth being closely linked to our passion for mobility. It is not difficult to chart how transportation systems have affected American society, although the size of the "chart" may be surprising. Its general historic impact has been more than significant; it has been incredible.

It is not hyperbole to conclude the growth of the United States has been led by the development of its transportation technologies. The settlement of the New World by the Spanish explorers, the French traders and British settlers was all based on new navigational skills of the Europeans in the sixteenth century. Development of the "Northwest Territories" in Ohio and beyond was initiated with the building of the National Road, the first reliable route to cross the Appalachians. The Erie Canal provided a dependable water route through a split in the mountainous divide in central New York State and served as transport for thousands and thousands of settlers to Michigan, Ohio and Indiana. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Rocky Mountains were crossed by the transcontinental railroad, opening the fertile valleys of California to development, followed by a rapidly expanding network of rail lines linking the Pacific Coast to the rest of the continent. Whether by road, water or rail, transportation led development.

During the twentieth century, Henry Ford and the production of his Model T made individualized transportation available and affordable to ordinary citizens, and the "Good Roads Movement" brought a comfortable and convenient transportation network to everyone's back door. More recently, the development of modern aircraft and the creation of the passenger airline industry effectively shrunk the size of the world, and access to anywhere on the globe became a trip of hours, rather than days or weeks. The impact of transportation on the historical development of this country cannot be overstated.

Transportation has also had an impact on our cultural lifestyle, for it has allowed us to become the most mobile society in the world. This mobility has made us a restless people. Whether in the eighteenth or the twentieth century, new roads and new routes tempted us to new land, keeping alive the American frontier spirit of moving ever further out and taming raw land, whether Midwest farmland or suburban lawns.

But this mobility has come at a price. Perhaps urban historian Lewis Mumford said it best when he described the trade-offs we are willing to make to our automobile culture: "Future generations will perhaps wonder at our willingness, indeed our eagerness, to sacrifice the education of our children, the care of the ill and the aged, the development of the arts, to say nothing of ready access to nature, for the lop-sided system of mono-transportation, going through low-density areas at sixty miles an hour..." According to planner Andres Duany, who has looked critically at our love affair with the automobile, if an individual spends one hour commuting each way every work day, he will have spent eight weeks in his car every year. This means by the time his child is eighteen years old, he will have spent three years of his child's life in his car rather than at home.

Transportation systems also have had a major impact on our cities. In many American cities, more than 50 to 60 percent of the land area is given over to transportation through roads and parking areas. In Detroit, for example, a city that has been emptied of center city residents by the convenience of its downtown freeway system, there are thirteen parking spaces for every resident. By comparison, in the city of Amsterdam there is one parking space for every three people. We have dedicated too much of our cities to the automobile.

Our transportation systems, primarily the automobile and the trucking industry, have also had significant impact on our environment. The greatest and most critical impact has been the deterioration of air quality caused by automobile and truck emissions. Although unleaded gas and more fuel-efficient engines have significantly reduced pollutants emitted per vehicle-mile, we have offset that through the increase in number of vehicle-miles traveled each year.

Transportation also has had a huge impact on our national economy. By looking at the largest industries in this country—automobile manufacturers, oil companies, construction companies, hotels, travel and leisure—we see that virtually every one is closely tied to the transportation industry. Many have argued that we need the transportation industry to keep our economy going, and economic advisors often have reasoned that a sluggish economy could be reinvigorated most quickly through a major investment in new transportation, typically through the construction of highways or new mass transit systems.

However, the cost of building transportation systems has risen precipitously, including expensive road construction and maintenance or costly and underutilized transit systems. But our willingness to pay for this expensive infrastructure remains firm, especially when the true costs associated with such construction are veiled through less conspicuous means like the gas tax.

And there is less reason for optimism if one looks overseas. It is becoming more and more clear that our love affair with the automobile is not remaining primarily an American obsession, but that China and India, with their enormous populations, are also adopting the automobile as a symbol of success in their cultures.

Clearly the threat to our environment, our communities and our comfortable lifestyle are real, and imminent. The question we must face squarely at this point in time is, What can lead us to solutions? To answer that question, the focus must be put on our use of the automobile.

It must be understood the automobile has much to offer our society as it has been shaped over the decades. Wilfred Owens of The Brookings Institute described why we prefer driving our car over alternative modes:

> "The reason for preferring private over public transit is not, as often alleged, the perversity of the consumer or his ignorance of economics. ... the basic reason why most urban trips are made by automobile is that the family car, despite its shortcomings, is superior to any other method of transportation. It offers comfort, privacy, limited walking, minimum waiting, and freedom from schedules or routing. It guarantees a seat; protects the traveler from heat, cold and rain; provides space for baggage; carries extra passengers at no extra cost; and for most trips, except those in the center city, gets there faster and cheaper than any other way."

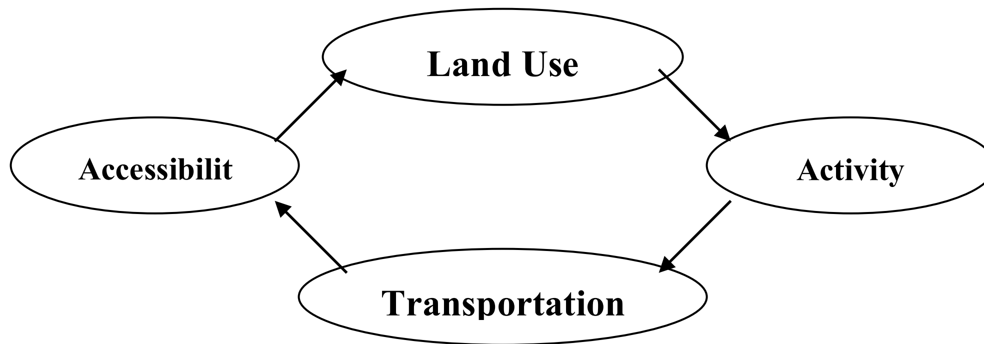
Should we look for an alternative, such as rail transit systems? Many large American cities have built sizable and successful transit systems. Washington, D.C.’s Metro carries thousands of passengers each day in comfort and convenience. Portland, Oregon, has altered its urban growth patterns through its MET light rail system. San Francisco’s BART system services the Bay Area well, although it took an earthquake that destroyed the Bay Bridge to realize its current ridership numbers. New York City has a high percentage of its commuters ride the railways, subway and other transit systems on a daily basis. Even Los Angeles is spending great sums to offer a subway system to its commuters. Increasingly, it can be shown these systems are becoming successful in terms of ridership and provide efficient commutes to many residents of these urban areas. It can be argued that many urban transit systems work.

The problem is that these systems are not solving the larger problem of too many cars driving too many miles on roads that are well over capacity. To appreciate why not, one must understand the principle of "latent demand." Applied to our traffic situation, this concept postulates that if government offers more roads to relieve congestion, we will drive more, and over longer distances, until the additional roads are again filled. In other words, we can't build our way out of congestion, because there is a latent, or pent-up, demand to become even more mobile if the transportation infrastructure makes available the means.

Transit systems provide an alternative to the automobile, but the relief to the road system is soon negated by additional commuters willing to move further away from their jobs and commuting longer distances. The roads once again fill to over-capacity during rush hours and no real headway has been made. This is not only frustrating to transportation planners, who try to provide more highway lanes (In Atlanta there was a proposal for a highway system 44 lanes wide.), but also to environmentalists who assume better transit systems will provide relief from the detrimental effects of too many automobiles. In spite of what urban planners try to do, the relief always seems to be one technological solution away.

Which brings us to the four words referred to at the beginning of this article. Thus far, virtually all of the discussion relating to transportation and land use and environment and global warming, and so forth, has been oriented to finding solutions relating to technological advancement. There is an inherent belief that we can "engineer" our way to a solution.

However, the real crux of a solution is one based not on new technologies, but on a shift in lifestyle. As a society, we must re-educate ourselves to look at our individual relationship with our urban environment in a different way. We must begin a long process of seeing the spatial connection to our personal world in a more intimate way.



Most of our problems with transportation are linked closely with land use. As shown in the diagram above, land use directly affects transportation by creating an activity and, in turn, transportation directly affects how we use our land by giving accessibility. Land use leads to transportation and transportation leads to land use; the two are inevitably linked in a cycle of growth. The greater the separation of land uses, the greater the need for transportation to provide accessibility. However, if we can begin to encourage primary land uses to be in closer proximity, then the stress on our transportation systems will be relieved.

Two of the primary land uses integral to our daily lives are our residence and our workplace. Throughout the twentieth century, there was felt need to live at a distance from work. This was a legacy of the dirty smokestack jobs of the nineteenth century, when residential areas were zoned to be separated from industrial land uses for health reasons. The wealthy could afford to buy land in the surrounding countryside, out where the air was clear, so they moved out. After World War II, the government subsidized suburban housing and roads, and families at almost all economic levels moved to the urban fringe as the country went through its great period of suburbanization. We are still in that era, as is evidenced by the abundance of new homes being built outside of virtually every large American city. Through our attitudes and policies we have separated our homes from our workplaces, and seem to give esteem to those who are able to do this most successfully. We like to recognize the achievement of those who successfully live farthest out. The ultimate goal, it seems, is to live on land that has never been used before, to claim it and secure it.

This mind-set is where change must come, first in attitude and then in policy. We must adopt a new paradigm for our society. This new paradigm doesn’t rely on the typical solutions. It doesn't require new light rail transit lines. It doesn't require walking or biking more. It doesn't require giving up a larger automobile, if that is most appropriate for individual circumstances. It doesn't require living in the city if one prefers the suburbs or the country, and it doesn’t require living in the country if one prefers the city. With all the solutions that have been written about in the last few years, this is one of the simplest and least expensive. It may take time to accomplish, but then we've

taken quite a bit of time to create the current mess, so it should be expected to take a while to get back out of it.

This paradigm shift is based on four simple words, which if followed can have major impact on our cities and communities. This phrase represents simply a change in view, a change in lifestyle, and a change in attitude. The four words are: “Live closer to work.”

This solution has virtually no cost to the public sector connected with it, and is a matter of an adjustment in thinking and educating the public, rather than financial or lifestyle sacrifice. It will not lead to a poorer lifestyle, but for most to a richer lifestyle. And it will regenerate our cities, the most important resource we have as a society and culture. It truly can be a win-win situation.

In some ways, these four words may seem almost heretical. One would ask, Why should the government tell me where I can or cannot live, or where I can or cannot work? But our various levels of government have been doing that from the beginning, by deciding where roads would be built, or sewer lines constructed, or zoning boundaries delineated, or schools located. Over the past century, the government, through a myriad of policies, has continuously encouraged us to travel farther and farther between our everyday activities. There has been plenty of land and economic incentives supporting this expansion of our urbanized areas, and as a society we seemed to prefer it that way.

But we must recognize that the long-term impacts of this separation of what should be seen as complimentary land uses—where we live and where we work—is no longer viable. We must be encouraged, through the most forceful means of coercion possible, to bring these two uses into much closer proximity. If more and more of us decided to live closer to where we work—and this is a decision we must make individually—the result would be relief from many of our urban ills.

One of the arguments many of us give for living outside the city and far from our workplace is that such housing is more affordable. The greater amounts of land in each expanding concentric urban ring means lower property costs, and thus lower housing costs. Yet a recent study completed by the Center for Housing Policy found that one-way commutes of as little as 12-15 miles cancel any savings for lower-priced outer-suburban homes. Barbara J. Lipman, author of the study, states, "Even if you save a couple of hundred dollars a month on your mortgage, it doesn't nearly outweigh the costs of the cars you are driving."[1]

[1] Washington Post, October 12, 2006.

It is recognized many will argue they cannot move their residence to be closer to work for a variety of relevant reasons. If this is the case, the following is offered as a corollary—“Work closer to home.” If families can’t change the location of their residence, then they should consider changing the location of their workplaces.

Many will respond, “I can’t afford to move or to get another job. I must keep the status quo.” In response, it is important to understand these changes are not expected overnight. It took a century or two to create the sprawling land uses we have now, and it may take decades to correct this imbalance. But the process of re-educating the public needs to begin, and there are some who could begin the process even now, especially if given the proper incentives. Our government gave incredible funding and a large package of incentives to encourage us to move away from our workplaces. They should now provide the necessary corrective measures.

This policy—"Live closer to work."—does not mean residents must abandon the suburbs to return to the center city. At this point in time, workplaces are scattered across the urban map, and in many cities jobs have followed residents to the fringe, where land is cheap and regulations are light. It simply means the American public must be schooled on the concept that living close to your workplace is a beautiful thing.

It is recognized there are other means to a similar end. The use of alternative fuels could address some of the problems of commuting, through less pollution and less reliance on foreign oil. Much could be accomplished by having more multi-purpose trips, where a number of destinations are aligned along a route that allows for greater efficiency. The ability to work from home, a personal situation becoming more common in the age of high-speed internet, would reduce the commute to zero, the best of all possible scenarios. All these would be helpful steps as well.

Our traditional view has been one oriented toward increased consumption as an American ideal. When George W. Bush was asked what the American public could do after the tragedy of 9/11, his answer was, “Consume more,” for this best represented the strength of the American people. This orientation toward consumption as representing success is one of the primary reasons we have not better been able to reflect, as a society, on our impact on the world around us. But maybe it is time for us to change our attitude and recognize a new standard of what is meant by success and accomplishment.

The point is, our society needs a new orientation. British economist E.F. Schumacher, in his book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*, argued for a different way to look at success. In a section he labels “Buddhist Economics” he explained, “…the modern economist… is used to measuring the

'standard of living' by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is 'better off' than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption."[2]

We must learn to recognize the beauty of a life not based on "More is better," but one based on "Less is more." Walking to work, buying groceries from a neighborhood store, and letting your kids ride their bike to activities rather than being chauffeured, are activities that today are too rare, but that represent a healthier way of life. It is possible to get there, not by relying on new technologies, but by readjusting our way of looking at our environment and our personal role in it. It all can begin with the simple phrase, “Live closer to work.”

[2] p. 54.