Editorial

URBAN DESIGN International (2012) 17, 157–158. doi:10.1057/udi.2012.15

Henry Ford's first Model-T Ford 'automobile' rolled off the Detroit production line in 1908. In the century that followed the motor car has come to dominate not only the planning and design of urban environments but also the everyday experience of urban space. The car is a near ubiquitous presence in most contemporary cities, negotiating with greater or lesser success the extensive infrastructure of flyovers, ring-roads, multi-lane interchanges and intra-urban traffic management systems provided to facilitate the driver's journey from A to B in the shortest possible time. Retrofitting the older areas of cities to make them accessible to cars typically involves the destruction of historical neighbourhoods and the separation of communities that lie either side of planned thoroughfares, interventions which usually create barriers to pedestrian movement. (The coming of the railway a century earlier caused a similar dislocation.) Cities that were developed from the second half of the twentieth century did so on the basis of the assumption by planners of rapidly increasing car ownership. The large-scale urban super-grids that resulted can efficiently regulate flow of traffic (at least in the models) but too often at the cost of Balkanizing the urban environment itself into fragmented neighbourhood zones, characterized by their relation to the road system rather than to the urban centre.

The unprecedented personal mobility made possible by the motor car explains its continual popularity as a consumer product that has been genuinely revolutionary in terms of its impact on social organization. With the arrival of the car in Europe rural communities that had survived in relative isolation for centuries were rapidly opened up as their inhabitants gained access to the world outside and newcomers moved in without losing touch with the city. Another reason for the widespread appeal of the car is that a high degree of personal mobility has traditionally been the preserve of those with high social status. In its early days, 'motoring' was a genteel activity for the leisured classes – to be enjoyed by those who could afford it and admired from a distance by those who could not. This history may help

explain why, in many rapidly developing countries, the current European and North American enthusiasm for 'walkability' in urban design can seem rather unaspirational if not regressive. In many other parts of the world the assumption is that anyone who has earned the money to escape the chaos of the street would naturally seek to spend it on doing so.

In second decade of the twenty-first century the car remains a potent symbol, both of personal liberty and the aspirations of modernity. However, as anyone who has ever sat for any time trapped in a long queue of stationary traffic will testify, the car can sometimes seem a paradoxically old and even primitive technology – the compensations of air conditioning and stereo-surround sound notwithstanding. It can also be lethal, not simply through the number of fatalities worldwide caused by road accidents but also in environmental terms by increasing air pollution and contributing to climate change through CO₂ emissions. Despite these all-too-evident drawbacks the car is too much an integral part of contemporary urban life and the revenue and employment it generates too essential to the modern state for its popularity to wane significantly in the foreseeable future – short perhaps of some apocalyptic scenario – even if such an outcome were desirable. Instead, the concern of urban designers must be to properly understand and to mitigate the deleterious effects of the car on the socio-economic sustainability of urban environments. The worst outcomes can be avoided by working towards the better integration of strategic and design-level planning decisions, particularly in relation to the implementation of public transport schemes, and by advancing designs that promote a mixture of land uses over origin-destination models for which the car is, inevitably, the indispensable adjunct.

A car-dependent city is one that may be considered *anti-urban* in serving to separate the mobile population (those with cars) from the less mobile population (those without cars) with the effect of denying access to the economy of the city to those who need it the most close at hand. It goes without saying that the relationship of the

car and the city needs to be urgently rethought if a sustainable model of urbanism is to be generally realized. It is largely in response to car-based paradigm of urban design that the current concern with 'liveability' and 'walkability' has arisen. The articles presented in this edition touch on these issues in a variety of ways across a range of thematic and area-based subject matter.

Khaled Ahmed's article is concerned with the design of low-income social housing in Cairo, Egypt, specifically the inadequacies of government policy in this area. His critique of the designs themselves leads him to argue for a greater understanding of the living needs of their intended occupants.

Mike Biddulph's extended article presents the results of a major research project into the liveability qualities of UK residential streets that have been designed consistently with Woonerf design criteria. These guidelines are intended to promote space sharing between different road users with the intention of improving safety and increasing social interaction by encouraging diversity of use. One finding of Biddulph's research is to show how the effectiveness of traffic calming schemes and speeding regulations are related to overall quality of the street design.

Farhana Ferdous uses space syntax techniques to provide an historical analysis of the spatial morphology of the retail or 'bazaar' streets in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. These streets have emerged as the major commercial centres of Dhaka over a long period of time. Ferdous argues for the importance of understanding the long evolution of the historical road network for informing contemporary design interventions.

McCahill and Garrick present research on the relationship between the extent of car (automobile) ownership in 12 American cities and the amount of urban land given over to car parking. They find that where levels of car ownership are high this tends to restrict the amount of

land available for development. The broader implication is that cities with less car dependence have fewer constraints on economic growth.

Paul Stangl's article focuses on the methodological question of how best to model the connectivity of neighbourhood designs in order to assess their pedestrian walkability. The research presented enhances a model of route-directedness developed by the author and gives result of an initial review of proposals for land subdivision in a neighbourhood of Phoenix, USA.

Finally, Kim and Forester's article provides an American perspective on the design-review process, with an evidence base drawn from extensive interviews with participants. The authors distinguish four key roles that the design review staff play in the review process. These extend beyond the activity of design review itself to the creation of an *ethos* that facilitates effective cooperation between different built environment professionals.

The difficulty with motifs as generic as 'liveability' and 'walkability' is that they can appear less than sensitive to the specific socio-economic and political (not to mention architectural) contexts in which design decisions need to be implemented – also emphasizing why an inclusive-collaborative approach to the urban design process is so essential. Ascribing normative values to activities in the abstract ('walking-good', 'car journeys-bad' and so on) does not in itself help improve the quality of urban environments. Probably, the best way to stop good urban design intentions from hardening into unreflective and potentially counter-productive dogma is never to stop drawing inspiration from the rich complexity of the city itself.

Sam Griffiths
UCL Bartlett School of Graduate Studies,
London, UK.