

THE URBAN FRINGE: Two World Truths

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In our business one of the things we're supposed to do is discover truths. World truths are best. On some days I discover two or three of them. There are also days when I discard them, two or three at a time. Over the years, a few have remained and it's important, I think, that they be shared. Two world truths follow.

Traffic Is Not a Problem

Cities that are obsessed with the movement of cars and spend a lot of time and money trying to avoid or solve traffic problems are invariably less livable than cities that don't.

The traffic in Rome is really screwed up and it doesn't seem that the Romans spend a lot of time trying to solve the problems. Certainly they don't widen streets or build new bridges or freeways or anything like that. It's a terrific city. In an hour a stranger knows that he's perfectly safe on the streets. You just walk wherever you want to, purposefully, directly, being careful not to pay attention to the cars, and you know you'll be perfectly safe. They'll miss you. But don't confuse them by trying to figure out what they're going to do because they don't know what you might do and you could get hit. The drivers know about traffic jams. They know the rules will change daily as to where they can and cannot go; they find new ways to get places, ways that work for about two days. They complain a lot. They adjust. Everyone adjusts. They know that there's no real way to solve the problem unless you want to do that at the expense of something really important, less countable than traffic, like say the Coliseum, or the Piazza Navona, so they adjust. Mussolini, I'm told, wanted to put a road through the Piazza Navona, and look what happened to him.

Life takes place on the streets and in the piazzas and it's possible to talk over an espresso at the bar about the rotten traffic mess and how it's getting worse. The traffic jams make it livable. People get where they're going, roughly on time. What else do you want?

The French worry a bit more about traffic than the Italians. They still have pretensions of world power and leadership and associate that with being up to date, so Paris, though a really classy city, isn't as full of life as Rome. They'd have done better not to have screwed up part of the Seine with that speedway.

San Francisco, where they stopped building freeways in the nick of time, is more livable than Los Angeles. They worry like crazy about moving cars in Los Angeles, and they spend a lot of money. What has it gotten them? More problems. Cleveland was once a real city until they spent money on traffic instead of on the city. There are freeways all over San Diego and they widen streets at the first sign of a traffic jam. I've never seen such wide streets. Sidewalks are narrow. Every person I've ever met there has one of those Thomas Map guides because they'd be lost without one. They spend their time figuring out where the street is that they want to get to and how to get from here to there, instead of actually being wherever there is. Phoenix has lots of roads but it's not a city anymore. It's a developed area. That lady was wrong, there is a "there" in Oakland. It's Phoenix that has no "there."

The guys who call themselves real thinkers on this subject admit privately, and maybe in small seminars where regular people aren't allowed, that traffic congestion can't be solved. It's like parking. So they talk about management.

I was driving on a freeway outside of Rome yesterday, a Sunday, and there was clearly too much traffic for the two lanes painted on the concrete. All of a sudden there were three lanes, and then four. People had turned a two-lane highway into a four-lane highway until the traffic thinned out. They adapted. In Los Angeles they would have widened the freeway—and it would still be jammed.

How come whenever I find a city or a street where the traffic works, like in Rome, or those really nice boulevards in Paris, like Avenue Montaigne, where it's tough to figure out how things work at an intersection, or the narrow streets of downtown Philadelphia, or the really steep streets in San Francisco, how come whenever I find a place like that some traffic engineer tells me it doesn't work?

If you're into worrying then it's okay to worry about traffic. But just don't do anything about it or you'll make where you live worse. Better yet, just come to understand that traffic isn't a problem and you'll see, your city will be better.

Parking Is Not a Problem

If you frequently go to a very crowded, congested area you always find a parking space with ease. If you seldom go to that same area you will rarely find a parking space when you do.

This truth was revealed to me in the North Beach section of San Francisco. I used to go there often, to have coffee, to meet friends, to shop at the Florence Ravioli Company, to eat at Tomasso's, the North Beach Restaurant, the Washington Square Bar and Grille, some other eateries no longer there, and just to walk around. North Beach is a crowded area and there aren't very many places to park if you have to get there by car. But that never stopped me from going and I always

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found a spot. If I was supposed to meet someone I'd rarely be more than five minutes late.

Then I left the City for about four months. When I returned, I couldn't find a place to park in North Beach and I was damned if I'd use a garage on Vallejo; a matter of pride. At first I concluded that a lot more people must be driving there; more cars and fewer places. But it wasn't long, maybe a week or two, before I was finding parking spaces again with ease. Even today it's no problem.

When I go to the symphony, pretty regularly, I can plan to arrive outside about five minutes before it starts. I know I'll find a place to park, even if there's an Opera that night across the street and a recital up the block, at the Museum. There are four particular spots that I know will be vacant and waiting for me; one of them at least. And there are more, a bit more chancy, but they're there.

Sure, a few, just a few of those spaces have colors painted along the curb: a red here, a yellow or a green there, or sometimes a white. I have never known what they mean. Some have the letters S.F.P.D. on them, and I figure that must mean "Saved for Planning Director," and I was once one of those. In any case, ticket-givers in any sane city¹ don't give tickets at all the possible places and it's only a matter of time before you understand where and when they do and don't. But, most of the places where I park are unpainted.

So what does this mean? It means that, regarding parking, if you want to go somewhere, or need to, you find a way, you adjust, everybody adjusts, even the system adjusts. It means that paying a lot of attention to parking is a waste of time and energy. It's one of those problems that takes care of itself. If you don't pay attention to it, it goes away and that's the best thing to do because if you think much about it, it's unsolvable and places with lots and lots of parking are usually lousy places to go anyway. If absolutely no parking exists at a place you'd like to be, you'll find another way to get there. There is a lot of room to park in the desert or in the asphalt around most shopping malls that I see. There is not much in North Beach, and there are a lot of people there.

So don't worry about parking. It's really not a problem.

NOTE

¹Berkeley, California does not fit into any category. There, they have at least one parking patrol person for every two parking spaces, and that's reason enough not to want to live there.