

# PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS?

ZACK FURNESS, AUTHOR OF THE FORTHCOMING BOOK ENTITLED 'ONE LESS CAR: BICYCLING AND THE POLITICS OF AUTOMOBILITY', POSES SOME WELL-MEANING QUESTIONS AT THE MOBILE CLASS...

In the early 1960s, a technology historian and public intellectual named Lewis Mumford stood out as one of the most vocal critics of urban automobile transportation in the United States. In particular, he saw the ever-increasing use of cars as one of the main factors deteriorating social life in cities and he posed a question that is as relevant today as it was almost a half-century ago: "Does the city exist for people, or for motorcars?" Mumford was certainly not the first person to call attention to the everyday problems associated with urban driving or the development of vast landscapes around the automobile, but as a prominent writer and intellectual in New York City he influenced a wide range of activists, scholars and city planners who have been instrumental in rethinking America's collective obsession with the automobile.

Automobiles can undoubtedly provide solutions to certain people's transportation problems, and it is also true that the customs, cultural practices and rituals associated with cars are as interesting and diverse as the people who use them throughout the world. Moreover, there are certainly places where cars are the only logical form of mobility because of constraints posed by weather, geography, a lack of public transportation and/or bicycling infrastructure, or the basic demands posed by an economic system in which time equals money. But the allure of the car is hardly about the mere process of getting from point A to point B... Indeed, the production of decades of TV commercials, galaxies of print advertisements, archives of promotional films, and forests of literature have not been intended to simply advocate a faster way of getting to work or an easier way to haul food and kids to (or from) the market. Rather, such techniques have historically been used to sell something much more expansive than the automobile itself – an entire ideology and belief system associated with personal transportation and the values of

autonomous mobility (auto-mobility). The core principles associated with this paradigm are familiar to most, and they are not altogether different than when US bicyclists first advocated for the construction of 'good roads' and highways in the 1890s. They are: freedom, independence, and above all else, the importance of being 'modern'. These are all fabulous principles, in theory, but more often than not the appeal to such grand ideas are used to mask the realities of a system in which the 'freedom of the road' most commonly translates as "GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY!"

The ideology of automobil-ity, as it were, is thus not only the desire to own or need cars but the myopic belief that things always have been and always will be this way. Consequently, instead of asking critical questions whether cities should be designed for people or cars, or whether 'freedom' means proliferating a transportation system that marginalizes the poor, decimates the environment and stands as one of leading killers of people under 25 (worldwide), we are too often placated by the idea that driving is always a luxury, if not the product of a romantic 'love affair' that countries like the US supposedly have with the car. Similarly, instead of asking what it really means to live in a 'modern' world, or whether it's wise to promote simplistic individual solutions for complex social problems like mobility, we are too easily smitten with the idea of driving shiny new cars down shiny new roads...

There are clearly no easy answers to these questions.

But it seems like we all need to start asking them, debating them, and thinking critically about how something as mundane as getting from point A to point B can severely impact the ways we live and our ability to collectively imagine something different. Perhaps most importantly, we should probably figure out what we mean when we talk about 'progress' these days...instead of just trying to drive there really fast. **RFI**

