

1. Crossed Perspectives



Leaving the Car ?

Between Elinor Whidden (Artiste)
And Jean-Marc Offner (Urbaniste)

21 March 2013

A Canadian photographer and a French urban planner discuss the future of cars. Given the technical and environmental constraints of car use, they consider the car's place in our societies, our imaginaries and its impact on our ways of life.

01. The petrol-driven car is still very much at the center of today's mobile society. Will this situation last?



Elinor Whidden

My heart of hearts says 'no', and my work is based on the idea that there will be this post-Freudian/empire time when all of this will be gone. But as a Canadian, I also know that this view is simply not shared by North American society. Saying that there will be a time when the car is obsolete is almost like a political stance, because there is such an obsessive belief in the automobile here, and because so much energy is being put into new fuels – with the development of fracking and tar sands – and 'green' car technologies.

When I look at empirical evidence that actually takes into account externalities like social, environmental and climate issues, for me it's a no-brainer: it's impossible and unsustainable to continue in this direction. But somehow, my North American society continues to believe and invest in it with absolute abandon, despite what I see as very clear evidence that it's impossible.

Ideally, I'd like to see shift away from single occupant vehicle use. There may still be petrol-powered vehicles in the future, but I hope they'll be more collective, more for public transit. In other words, that four people in a house won't wake up in the morning and drive four different cars to four different locations.



J. O

In the United States, there are even more cars than driving licences! Not only has the car's status gone from that of a family resource to that of a personal possession, like in Europe, but people often have several different types of vehicles: a small Japanese car to get around town, a 4x4 to go trout fishing... It's only normal that a cultured, civilised artist should relish the prospect of the automobile becoming obsolete at some point in the future...

However, Canada, like the United States, has been built on the principle of an abundance of natural resources: space and fossil fuels. It will take a few decades before the idea of rarity is accepted!



Jean-Marc Offner

Yes, it will last: the car, certainly; petrol, most likely. It would be nice to be able to announce that a "turning point" had been reached...it's even tempting, given the number of "weak signals", to declare the end of the car civilisation.

However, the qualities that underlie its universal success are still with us: versatility, autonomy, performance. Our mobile societies continue to set great store by a tool that is so well adapted to our needs and desires in terms of travel. Clearly, the car has a number of flaws: it's expensive (though its relative cost is constantly decreasing); every year it takes more than a million lives and leaves nearly 50 million people injured (although this collateral damage, curiously, is well-tolerated); it pollutes the air (though less and less); and it consumes scarce resources, space and energy (although space is only scarce in densely-populated urban areas).

Technological innovation will enable petrol to be replaced in part by other energy sources, and petrol consumption per kilometre to be reduced. Social inventiveness will lead to a more mutualised approach to the car, e.g. car-sharing and car-pooling. When you consider that cars are normally only occupied by their owner and are parked 95% of the time, there is room for improvement!



E. W

It is regrettable to hear someone from Europe (generally a more socially forward-thinking society than North America) state with such assurance that the car will most certainly last. However, if we continue to entertain the privileged expectation of travel, ignore the “collateral damage,” and find new ways to minimize the harm, I have to agree. Collective use of the car in North America will be difficult to inspire because the car persists as a symbol of freedom and independence.

02. What will our future mobilities be like? Will there be a return to the means of travel used by our ancestors?



Elinor Whidden

I believe that our future mobilities will be much more diverse, in terms of modes and distance. I believe this can play out in two ways.

One is very hopeful and exciting. There are new technologies, for example, that provide healthcare services for people living in remote rural areas, enabling them to teleconference with a specialist in a major city. It's mobility, but not physical mobility. Another positive initiative would be for urban planners to design cities that have more public transport and pedestrian throughways. This would allow for greater diversity and options in terms of how we get around.

However, I have concerns regarding the flipside of this diversity, that it won't be based on an equitable split between rich and poor and that mobility will be determined by class, and hence a return to the ways of our ancestors; between those who can still afford to drive as prices rise (which I believe they will) and lower income people who cannot. So there will be diversity, but I hope it's planned in equitably manner and not by income level.



J. O

Class mobility is already a reality. Those who travel most also have the highest economic and cultural capital. Is there a risk of this social divide becoming wider? Up to now, new technologies have simply made communication tools more complementary ('my mobile phone enables me to handle my travel arrangements more efficiently'). However, a more restrictive digital world could indeed lead to 'house arrest', while *de visu* experience becomes an activity of the elite.



Jean-Marc Offner

The longstanding nature of (highly capitalistic) infrastructures often leads people to think that behaviour also remains unchanged. And yet, even when the underlying network/support structures remains the same, the network/service aspect (i.e. the way these infrastructures are actually used) changes. The typical passenger on the Paris Metro or the London Underground of today is not the same as in 1900.

Instead, our mobility behaviours are most likely going to diversify. The "mono-modal" (or car-dominated mobility) most often seen in Western countries will give way to more sophisticated strategies, from both the point of view of transport supply and travel practices.

This reorganisation should result in a double rehabilitation:

- of slowness (taking a boat instead of a plane, using an electric bicycle instead of a car), once people have collectively realised that speed doesn't actually save time but merely consumes more space (not to mention its financial and energy costs);
- and of the use of our legs (walking and cycling), whose efficiency remains unmatched today.

From this point of view, yes, we will be readopting some of our ancestors' ways.



E. W

While I agree that our mobilities will diversify, I question the longstanding nature of automobile infrastructure. In Canada, many of our bridges and highways have been improperly maintained. Fiscal mismanagement combined with road damage from climate change has left crumbling infrastructure, causing closures, accidents and death. If we want to continue to use these structures - even for different and varied modes of transport - we need to either reinvest in this infrastructure or rethink it.

03. What place would the car occupy in such a future? Will it become an art object, a curiosity, or will it be completely forgotten?



Elinor Whidden

The car will never be forgotten. It's had such a monumental social, political and economic impact on society in the past 100 years that there's no way that it will be forgotten. But I believe that how it will be remembered will be very much based on the extent to which the current crises become exacerbated.

What I mean by that is that I do see a shift away from the car, but a time when automobiles are not used as they are now can either be planned and prepared for (so that there is public transportation for everyone) or it can be ignored. The crisis will occur if we just continue to drive with abandon, refusing to believe that anything will change. Then – as a result of climate change, the depletion of resources or because petrol prices have become unaffordable – people suddenly realise they can no longer use their car, and that there's nothing to switch to as an alternative. There would be outrage.

So, one option would result in a quaint nostalgia for the 'silly old days' when we drove cars, whereas the other would result anger, potential social unrest and a much more critical social situation.



J. O

Culture allows for a great deal of things to be handed down from one generation to another. France's high-speed TGV trains are the descendants of steam locomotives, because books and films have preserved that experience over time. The perfume of nostalgia will duly find a suitable outlet: electric cars, car-sharing, public taxis... History goes on!



Jean-Marc Offner

The change might indeed be found in the trivialisation of the car as an object. Nevertheless, it won't be forgotten; its overwhelming past and future importance rules out any likelihood of amnesia. But, yes, it could be given a different function solely based on its utilitarian uses. There are a number of indicators to support this theory, such as a relative loss of interest among young people as regards driving licences and car ownership in Western Europe – NDLR, but with a corollary interest in the digital universe.

Does the car still play such an important role in contemporary culture? It certainly does in the United States - a world of wide open spaces, road movies and Edward Hopper-styled service stations. In Europe, it's less likely. The car clearly provided the structure for post-World War II economic development, but without ever really earning a place in social representations.

Children continue to play, a bit, with small cars (and trains). The World Motor Show continues to be a success. But our fascination with the automobile is now similar to that of the "electricity fairy". Socio-economic realities have replaced fairy tale magic.



E. W

Understanding how the car will be remembered is contingent on understanding what it symbolizes to a society. Because the car never really earned a place as a social expression in Europe, this may allow Europeans to remember the car differently than Americans; less painfully and less personally. Such is our cultural investment in the car as a symbol of individual freedom. As such, moving from this ideological position to one of utility will require the creation of a new national narrative for North Americans.

Associated Thematics :

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Elinor Whidden

Artiste

Canadian artist Elinor Whidden's work combines sculpture, performance art and photography. She has exhibited throughout North America and has received numerous grants and awards. With a Masters of Fine Art graduate from the State University of New York at Buffalo, she obtained a Bachelors of Fine Art degree from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

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Elinor Whidden — Car-carrying adventures

Video by Elinor Whidden

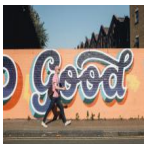


Jean-Marc Offner

Urbaniste

An urban planner and policy expert, Jean-Marc Offner is the managing director of a-urba, the urban development agency of Bordeaux Aquitaine, and of the Science Po Urban School. He was previously the director of the Technical, Territorial and Societies Laboratory (LATTIS) and, prior to this, was head of the Urban Development-Transport-Environment Department at France's École des Ponts et Chaussées.

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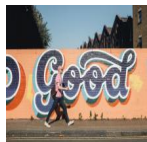
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