from which it supposedly benefits. Read ahead to see the degradation of the landscape and cityscape, the debasement of our environment and health, and the erosion of our personal and national economy by the car culture. Access for All was the title of a pioneer plea for human mobility two decades ago. Today’s sequel should be called Access for Whom?

FROM JANE HOLTZ KAM 1997
ASPHALT NATION (NEW YORK: CROWN PUBLISHERS).

The Geography of Inequity

"As soon as people become tributaries of transportation . . . the contradictions between social justice and motorized power, between effective movement and higher speed, between personal freedom and engineered routing, become poignantly clear."

—Ivan Illich, Energy and Equity

"I went to join the revolution, but I couldn’t find a parking place.”

—song on National Public Radio, April Fool’s Day 1993
employees who lack decent transportation to get to work. The tales, often horror stories, multiply, high among them a blind colleague’s harrowing trip when the bus he was riding in Phoenix broke down, depositing him by the highway to take the long walk home. “My fourteen-year-old son sees the bus go by and he calls it the ‘loser cruiser,’ ” says planner Anton C. (“Tony”) Nelessen. But those in “loser cruisers” are the lucky ones. In Vail, Colorado, downtown merchants rejected buses altogether, voting down a sales tax for transportation to carry their resort workers home.

Being physically relegated to the back of the bus ended with the civil rights struggle. But those symbolically relegated to the back of the bus become second-class citizens in a mobile society. Hank Dittmar, director of the Surface Transportation Policy Project, put it in historical perspective: “Some 40 years ago, Rosa Parks sparked the greatest social change of my lifetime by refusing to sit at the back of an Alabama bus. Today Rosa Parks might find bus service nonexistent in her community. Or she might find that people of color were the only passengers on the bus.”

Even low-income neighborhoods fortunate enough to have trains or streetcars tell tales of service run amiss—of broken escalators for hospital-bound Harlem riders, of a Chicago elevated train so broken down that the transit authorities attached an empty car at one end to buffer bumps. Peruse fact and fiction and a paint-by-numbers portrait emerges. Paul Auster draws this view in his novel *Leviathan*. “Dozens of cars drove past the house, but the only pedestrians were the very old or the very young, little children with their mothers, an ancient black man inching along with a cane, a white-haired Asian woman with an aluminum walker.” A racist and inequitable society heightens poverty. A car-dependent one underscores and enhances the divide with a lack of mobility.

**The Stuck Society**

The problem is not just that the poor are carless. Some of the most affluent Americans own no automobile. It is that a society that shorts public transportation in favor of the private vehicle deprives the poor of any other way to move. It is not merely that the down-and-out
lack automobiles but that our highway-oriented public policy has fin-
nanced the outward-bound corporation; it has funded the house at
the end of the road and separated the poor from jobs that can be
reached only by car. We have done so for so long that those most
abused by the chronic injustice of a car culture can no longer pin-
point its pains.

Ricardo Byrd, director of transportation programs for the Na-
tional Association of Neighborhoods, sees the consequences of car-
dependency for the poor. “If you ask people if there is a transportation
problem in the hood, they’ll say no,” he muses from his Washington
office one summer day. “If you ask them, ‘Are you interested in talk-
ing about transportation?’ they’ll say no,” he goes on. Then he
pauses. “If you ask them, ‘What are your problems?’ they’ll say,
‘Well, man, I can’t get to the hospital.’ If you ask them, can they get
to their jobs or housing, they’ll say, ‘Oh yeah.’”

Last Exit Isolation

Red Hook, the storied South Brooklyn longshoremen’s enclave of A
View from the Bridge, On the Waterfront, and Last Exit to Brook-
lyn, is a case study of the isolation and inequity of the car culture.
Now devoid of its former shipping, the racially mixed neighborhood
(49 percent African-American, 41 percent Hispanic, 8 percent white)
is the quintessential stockade of the auto age. Cut off by three high-
ways—the Gowanus Expressway, the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and
the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway—and punctuated by a 1939 public
housing project, it is an impoverished peninsula.

Red Hook overlooks Manhattan, yet it could be the longest trip in
New York for some 13,000 inhabitants, says Philip Kasinitz, a soci-
ologist at the City University of New York who documented the
problem. “You can see Manhattan but you can’t get there,” he says.
“People find it hard to take jobs,” says Kasinitz, charting the prob-
lems of public housing residents. “They have to sprint across a three-
lane highway which goes under an underpass and walk three blocks
through a hostile Italian community to get to the subway.” That’s
just to get in or out of the center of the neighborhood, says Kasinitz.
To get from the farthest part of the project or beyond demands an
extra two bus stops. Unsafe without a car, public housing residents
may stay out until six or seven in the morning to avoid the trip home
in the dark.

Red Hook’s isolation has given it a perverse “end-of-Western-
civilization” chic to the artists and activists attracted to its
warehouses. Nonetheless, working life for the old residents is an op-
pressive circle. The highways that destroyed the neighborhood
caused its emptying. The emptying produced low density, which un-
dercut public transportation and kept income down. The low-income
inhabitants lack money to buy a car and hence find work, and, thus,
the neighborhood deteriorates further. It is a cycle. A few years ago,
Kasinitz conducted a survey at the South Brooklyn Local Develop-
ment Corporation, an employment agency interviewing out-of-work
community members applying for jobs. Three hundred people came
looking for work, but only 9 percent of the adults had driver’s li-
censes. “Here’s a place that hires a lot of truck drivers and this
agency couldn’t place them.”

Most urban areas don’t have that hiring capacity. For forty years
two out of every three new jobs have been exported to the suburbs.
Funds have gone to roads, not bus or rail; to private homes, not
walkable city apartments; to corporations in the distant suburbs, not
inner-city industry. Carless city dwellers get handcuffed to home and
hence cut out of the workforce. While the world perceives poverty as
a result of carelessness, it is dependency on the car that is the culprit.

With suburban jobs now outweighing urban ones by large multi-
plies, the center city poor lack, as the Ford Foundation summed it up,
“Access to Opportunity.” The inequity begins in the very first search
for a job and extends to daily life. “You speak of job opportunity,
[but] they don’t have a clean shirt, much less physical transportation
or literacy skills,” observes Michael T. Savage, deputy director of
HUD’s Economic Development. “You have jobs over here. You have
the community over there. Transportation is one of the overlooked
arts in economic development.”

“I was standing on a rail platform,” Ricardo Byrd went on
describing his experience on another day. A man offered a job tip to a
woman friend as they stood waiting. The job seeker responded with
just one question: “How close is it to the bus?” “That was her first
question,” said Byrd. “Her second question was ‘How much do they pay?’ Even Byrd was surprised at transportation’s place at the top of the woman’s list.

Byrd also recalled the case of a factory looking to relocate near the U.S.-Mexican border to take advantage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). When the would-be builder looked at a site in a Latino community, he saw a highway. A wonderful highway it was, he told Byrd, the ultimate in accessibility. But he shook his head. “These are minimum wage jobs,” said the employer. “How can my riders get to work?” For another Southern plant—a spanking new factory not one-quarter mile from low-income housing—it was still no-go. “It’s one of the high crime areas,” he said. No one would stand at the bus stop on the street outside the project. No one would provide a transportation feeder to circle into its threatening maze. Fear of the streets, bad weather, distance, and sporadic service made the bus a bad trip.

Organizers of the model recruitment program of the Church Community Jobs Commission have also explored the problem. Seeking to link their African-American church in Oakland with AT&T job hunters, they watched the applicants dwindles when would-be employees learned that they would need a car to get to work twenty miles away. The most burdened bear the double burden of inaccessibility. In the end, poor transport does not issue from poverty, but lies at its very roots and sustains and perpetuates it.

“The transportation costs associated with all this mobility are regressive” in the view of Alan Hughes, author of “The New Metropolitan Reality.” In the modern city, work, shopping, schooling demand travel. “And what for most people is a low-density lifestyle becomes for the poor and low income a set of costly barriers.” Everyone suffers from the automotive sources of pollution, congestion, and other such exactions, of course. The less fortunate can neither flee nor adjust to them with flexible work hours, telecommuting jobs, or the extended arm of the cellular phone. A “concentration of poverty and de-concentration of opportunity,” as Hughes phrases it.

Lately, advocates have sued to right inequities in the mass transportation system itself. They claim that while the well-to-do have secured more commuter rail service, the impoverished have faced cutbacks. In 1994, a twenty-five-cent fare raise and the end to a bus pass in poorer neighborhoods, coupled with the allocation of a few hundred million dollars to a suburban rail project, roused the Los Angeles Labor/Community Strategy Center to secure the services of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. Together, they sued the transit authority for class bias, discrimination against people of color, and malfeasance. They argued that, since the bus riders made less than $15,000, had no car, and were nonwhite, the malapportionment of funds reflected bias.

A year later New Yorkers addressed the transportation equity issue by protesting steeper bus and subway fare hikes for urban versus suburban commuter rides. The Urban League and Straphangers’ Campaign filed an antidiscrimination suit charging “class warfare.” They based their argument on the same principles of bias, that the price increase violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act by misusing African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans—the majority of city transit riders.

Sometimes subtle, sometimes blatantly biased location policies pit budgets for sleek transit lines like Metro in Washington, D.C., or the Green Line in Los Angeles against buses. For years racist policies have compounded the issue of poor public transportation; from the Red Line in Boston to the MTA Central Light Rail Line in Baltimore to L.A.’s new subway, officials have shifted transit lines to separate the impoverished minorities from the wealthy.

Advocates from other cities have rallied to correct the problem of the racial injustices involved. Yet for all the validity of their search for equity, pitting the affluent commuter against the inner city bus rider ignores the fact that each is subject to the inequities of the automobile age. In a world bereft of decent public transportation, the rich and poor grapple for fragments when they should be allies against automobile dominance.

Captive Lives

“Captive rider, captive labor,” was the conclusion of Sandra Rosenbloom’s study of the spatial constraints on women’s employment, based on low-skilled women in Tucson and Phoenix. “Spatial entrap-
ment" was the term with which another study described the impact of distant jobs, costly cars, and feeble public transportation on the mobility of African-American women. Maps from the Bureau of the Census show an overlap—"spatial coincidence" in the jargon—of households in poverty, female-headed households, and households without an automobile.

The welfare plan drafted by Bill Clinton early in his presidency acknowledged the cost of dependence on the car. By raising the value of the automobile to allow welfare mothers from $1,500 to $4,500, Clinton tacitly acknowledged the high entry fee needed to find work. In fact, his welfare "favor" reflected the punishment of a world unworkable with less than two hundred horsepower—and a $4,500 entry fee—a world where upkeep on a car may cost as much as raising a child, where physical distance and poor transportation keep the marginal from finding child care, jobs, or needed services at all hours. Such distressed systems are not merely ill served or underserved. With the weekend curtailments of mass transit, they're scarcely served at all.

The pursuit of services, shopping, movies, or health as well as wealth is onerous. A Boston City Hospital report recording dropouts from a prenatal care program cited transportation as the patients' single largest complaint. Richard J. Jackson, director of the Center for Environmental Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, remembered his stint watching sick African-American children one afternoon in an emergency ward. "The mother was there," he recalled one incident. "She didn't call a cab. She didn't drive to the hospital. She took one or two buses there." And the next day "if she didn't work, her co-workers might think it was unrelated to the transportation issue," he said.

Not only jobs but also services, health high among them, are out of reach of those without transportation. With 9 percent of households lacking cars altogether and still others running clunkers, access to doctors, hospitals, and clinics is arduous. Dealing with an unsound transportation system affects choice, health, welfare, and livelihood to further paralyze the poor.

Not only do these low-income lunchpails use twice as much mass transit as upper-income people, their bus trips take twice as long in traffic on surface arteries clogged with cars and interrupted by stops to mount and discharge. Fully two-thirds of the 8.5 billion transit boardings in the mid-nineties were on such poky trips.

For all the swifter service of a dozen streetcar cities, the divide between the carless and the car laden has accelerated with the velocity of a Grand Prix racer. In Southern California, homes with two or more cars rose from 7 to 70 percent of households in the past four decades. Those served by public transit toad water at 4 percent, the study Efficiency and Fairness on the Road: Strategies for Unsnarling Traffic points out. As a result, one car serves every three poor people in Los Angeles, compared to the national average of one for every single man, woman, and child.

Elsewhere, the situation is comparable. Those with the most money travel the most. Those with less travel less. In New York City moderate- and low-income households drive one-fifth the miles of those who earn incomes over $40,000. This great mobility divide widens the gap between the haves and have-nots throughout the nation.

Home away from Help

The outmigration spurred by federal funds for highways and homes since the 1920s, when suburban car owners split off from urban public transportation riders, has enhanced divisions of race and class. Subsidized, car-based segregation by race and microsegregation by economics has heightened plantation politics, perpetuating urban poverty. Such walls of poverty, structured by the car culture, constrain black well-being beyond the public abuse of racism or any personal shortcomings.

The misappropriation of moneys to the car culture plays out in rural America too. Poverty-stricken West Virginia, for example, shows how the car culture afflicts the rural landscape. A new four-lane highway, so-called Corridor H, threatens the region's country amenities and comeliness. Promoted by the powerful Senator Robert Byrd, claiming to aid the most disadvantaged, this pork barrel project would gnaw the graceful hills, degrade farmland for useless roads, and encourage strip malls at the expense of small stores. Like
the coal mining that cut raw and ugly gashes in West Virginia’s hills, the road would debase those least able to sustain a living. Nonetheless, roadmongers persuade the disinherited to opt for a quick financial fix that will destroy their heritage and livelihood.

Since World War II auto-centric policies have eroded the nation’s public transportation agencies, now receiving one government dollar for every seven handed to the car. Transportation and home ownership subsidies for the motor suburbs and deprivation for the city centers contributed to the 37 million Americans in poverty entering this decade, the highest percentage in more than a quarter century. And, as the decade continues, basic transit services shrink and fares increase, draining mobility for low-income and minority Americans. In the end our transportation triage undermines the poorest cohort of the country; it helps create the underclass that impoverishes, erodes, and segregates the larger nation.

**Split Riders, Split Society**

Following a bus stop shoot-out by teenagers in the parking lot of the Trumbull Shopping Park, the mall owners prohibited the inner-city buses that deposited them there. Other carless visitors to the two-hundred-store mall were also excluded. “Security,” said mall operators. “Racism,” residents protested. “A subtle apartheid that is really going to hurt the handicapped and elderly the most,” one transit board district member insisted.

“Who cut off the buses, I’m going to have to stop shopping here,” said one passenger. “The problem is the people in Trumbull don’t want blacks and Puerto Ricans coming to their mall. Who else uses these buses?” she asked. Despite the insistence by the lawyer for the transit district that stopping bus service would violate the constitutional rights of assembly and equal protection under the law, service was cut. Two months earlier, the Seven Corners Shopping Center in Falls Church, Virginia, had also tried to halt bus service from Washington, D.C., because of construction plans. In this case Washington’s Metro said no. The forty-year-old bus stop mall that officials would shut was the nexus of sixteen transit routes where some two thousand riders transferred, many of them immigrants.

Not only the cost of a car but the insult of the road it travels on hits low-income Americans hardest. “White men’s highways through black men’s bedrooms” went the saying as road builders bulldozed fragile communities for the interstate system. The swaths cut by roads and expressways through the cheapest tracts of land displace and isolate the down-and-out and even their moderate-income neighbors. “In the ‘40s and ‘50s, it was the tracks which reinforced racial and income segregation and displacement,” a 1990 study on marginal communities by the National Economic Development and Law Center noted, “but in the 1960s, ‘70s and ’80s, it has been the freeways, highways, and their accompanying borderline office-commercial development which displaces, segregates, and divides communities.”

The roads not only belt threadbare communities, putting them on the “wrong side of the tracks,” but they create the ghetto itself. The blight and traffic they cause, the ceaseless noise and fumes, sack the weak. The visual detritus of the motorized world is dropped on their doorsteps. Their mean streets hold the repair shops and car washes, the spray paint services and tire marts, the muffler stores, auto parts dealers, and glass vendors. Body shops, used car lots, and parking lots are their neighbors. It is these precincts of poverty that endure the abandoned gas stations, old garages, and vacant lots. It is the poor and communities of color who are bombarded by toxic “hot spots” loading residents with pollutants. Car and bus emissions—carbon monoxide, particulate matter, lead deposits—sit on their stoops.

The phrase used by the environmental justice movement is “disproportionate siting.” While it is the auto age that creates such poisonous debris, it is disproportionate siting that puts six of Manhattan’s seven diesel bus depots, all carcinogenic, in Harlem. Already a partial valley bounded by highways, northern Manhattan serves as a basin where asthma, frequently caused and intensified by such conditions, is the most common diagnosis in the emergency room at Harlem Hospital Center. A concentration of some 80 percent of asthma deaths occurs mostly in such vulnerable neighborhoods in New York City, California’s Fresno County, Cook County in Illinois, and Maricopa County in Arizona. The 1994 study “Not Just Prosperity: Achieving Sustainability with Environmental Justice” showed
that zip codes and jobs correlate with nearness to waste sites. In other words, exposure to such waste and environmental toxins matched race and income. This is the classic case of rich people polluting onto poor, spurred by the auto age's pollutants and spatial segregation.

While the poorest levels of society suffer from roads, highways erode the living standards of those less far down the ladder. As frail neighborhoods crumble in the shadow of the highway, they lose their property value and tax benefits. The crumbling exit ramps, the colossal columns, and the gloomy underbellies accentuate the shabbiness of some dwelling places and undermine the labor to improve others. The area surrounding the Cross Bronx Expressway, which slices through several neighborhoods, is typical. "You gotta do something about mess," the Bronx News headlined one article as the borough filed suit to force the city to clean and maintain the community. The "mess" was discarded tires, refuse, litter, wild plant overgrowth and corrugated cardboard boxes that spilled across a community ravaged by the highway at its edge and the arteries jutting everywhere. The weedy parking lots and barren spaces, the trash, graffiti, and pot-holed streets that the highways breed maim the homes, parks, and shops of older urban neighborhoods.

Anti-highway crusaders have taken up the cause to stop such highways. When the Loma Pieta Earthquake damaged the structure of Oakland's Cypress Freeway in 1993, the Church of the Living God Tabernacle and the Clean Air Alternative Coalition filed suit to cancel its rebuilding. "The areas near the proposed route were 92 percent people of color," No Sweat News, the organization's newspaper, reported. "Freeways have caused high cancer rates in the communities alongside them and high incidences of lead in the brains of our children living in these communities," said the group's dynamic leader, Chappell Hayes. In fact, the soil in parts of West Oakland's target zone crisscrossed by highways qualified as an EPA Superfund site for its lead contamination. The coalition's suit claimed that the proposed freeway violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in any federally financed project. Since 90 percent of the interstate was to be paid by the U.S. government, highway infrastructure more than qualified, attorneys argued.

"The brunt of the proposed project's negative social, human health and environmental impacts—including those associated with noise and air pollution, the dislocation of persons, the condemnation of homes and businesses, the chilling of economic development, as well as the disruption of the life of the community—will be borne by minority residents of West Oakland, including plaintiffs."

Little more than a year later, Hayes, the galvanizing plaintiff, died of cancer. The road, with a very few concessions to the community, was on its way. Caltrans, the state highway agency, offered token recompense. The coalition's question remained unanswered: "Why is it worthwhile spending $750 million on the 1.5 mile Cypress Freeway, so that wealthy drivers can save a couple of minutes getting from Castro Valley to downtown San Francisco, but not worthwhile to spend $1 million to improve AC Transit to allow low-income better access to jobs and education?"

**War of the Dinosaur**

In southeastern Washington, D.C., on streets shaded by trees and bordered by the blue green boundary of the Anacostia River, highway officials have tried to cut through yet another minority community, this time to build Barney Circle, a traffic rotary. Images of dinosaurs decorate the trim brick houses and "Stop Barney" bumper stickers appear on cars. Before "environmental racism" entered the national consciousness, before the Beltway was built, before Washington was a self-rulled district, this African-American neighborhood near Capitol Hill lived in an embattled state fighting against an inner belt that would have destroyed it. In one of the nation's major freeway fights, the activists mostly won.

Again in the mid-1990s, however, a fateful document came out of the drawer and onto Federal Highway Administration and public works drawing boards. The $20 million East Leg project, a mile-long, six-lane highway and bridge, revived old emotions. "The last of the 1960s fights, the first of the 1990s," Christopher Herman, an EPA planner who spends his days dealing with international issues, calls the group fighting the déjà vu battle at his doorstep the "Citizens Committee to Stop It Again." In the spring of 1995, the Federal
Highway Administration set forth its environmental assessment on the Barney Circle interstate, which was slated to chisel off parts of Anacostia Park. “While D.C. is severely short of funds, and Metro is raising prices and slashing service, the [Mayor Marion] Barry Administration still supports this road”—a road for suburban commuters and Beltway bypassers, said the District of Columbia’s Auto-Free News.

A month after the Sierra Club and the Washington legal firm of Covington & Burling had filed suit, Herman pointed to the narrow strip of pasture at the water’s edge, near the city’s first African-American boathouse, threatened by the linkage to Interstate I-295. Though the area is supposedly protected, this road, allowing some 86,000 cars to pass the open space each day, has progressed. This time, however, fearful city highway engineers tried a public relations ploy. “This is a project for the community,” the engineers said. “We want to take traffic off the streets.” They made it a point of pride to absolutely prohibit condemning residential structures, says Herman. Instead, they took the neighborhood’s green space. Hiring their own researchers, the activists made still one more discovery: they found that the road would not only hurt the district streets, but cause still more traffic, the study found, congesting the city by throwing extra vehicles onto Independence and Pennsylvania avenues and bringing still more cars to the neighborhood it would supposedly protect. Herman took me along the “senseless” route. “A scam,” he says.

Such routes are not senseless to those who use them, of course, only to those whose vulnerable neighborhoods they traverse. In Atlanta the most powerless neighborhoods were forced to see and smell two thousand chugging diesel buses carrying 1996 Olympicos, but they had to beseech MARTA, the city’s transit agency, to serve their own West End. In impoverished West Dallas an eight-lane highway threatened an equally needy neighborhood.

There Goes the Pocketbook

Adding financial injustice to vehicular inequity, neighborhoods afflicted by highways make car ownership pricier there. Higher insurance rates stem in part from theft, blight, and accidents in such road-impacted neighborhoods, in part from insurers’ racist and class biases, which adopt a policy with benefits for “preferred” drivers. In turn, higher prices make finding a paying job more arduous and add to such blight. Racist redlining is compounded by the proximity to freeways, the scourge of abandonment, and highway and housing policies that nurture suburban lifestyles. No matter that the poor are particularly ill served by car-oriented policies, they pay automotive taxes along with those well served. In New York City, for instance, low-income households drive one-fifth as many miles as wealthy ones. The gas, excise, and other taxes they pay, much of which go to the car, are the same percentage, however. Calculating expenditures on gasoline as a percent of income, the lowest 10 percent of households pay four times what the top 20 percent pay. It is typical that the poor pay sales taxes, gas taxes, and other subsidies for highways while they drive the least.

“I live across from a housing project,” says Michael Vandeman, a California physicist and wildlife advocate who gave up his car and speaks heatedly, lacerating highways as the killing fields of animals. But he is equally humanistic as he sees one car per household in his neighborhood, and “many times, these cars are up on blocks,” awaiting service. Deprived of regular, reliable service, burned with more fallible, less safe, older vehicles, the owners are too poor to give proper care or buy insurance. “Ghettomobiles” is the nickname for these junkers with shattered taillights, rusted doors, and other signs of ill maintenance. If, as officials claim, 10 percent of old cars exhale 50 percent of our pollution, those with less money for repairs send more such toxins into their own environs.

Snuffing out Cities

A population immobilized by the car culture hurts the urban poor the most where they live—in the inner city. With almost a third of Americans recorded in central cities at the last census, the fate of the destitute and the prosperous nation that enfolds them is enmeshed. Some 35 percent of the needy inhabit the nation’s thirteen largest cities, and the car-sacked landscape encircling them has reinforced their segregation today as it has for the three decades since historian
Robert Fogelson explored the taproots of the Los Angeles Watts riots in *Fragmented Metropolis*.

It was not wealth per se that bothered us in the Reagan-Bush era of mushrooming millionaires but the fact that “the wealthiest 20 or 30 percent of Americans are ‘seceding,’” as Labor Secretary Robert Reich has observed. They are withdrawing into separate, often self-sufficient suburbs, where they rarely even meet “members of non-wealthy classes, except in the latter’s role as receptionists or repairmen.” What really bothers Americans, Mickey Kaus argues in *The End of Equality*, is class segregation. For if the car is that “perfect executive decompression chamber,” as the Lexus ad people put it, what does life in this ultimate isolation booth on sequestered highways leading to insular communities do to political life?

“There are no rallies. There are no neighborhood walks. There are no encounters with the public,” a reporter described the 1994 electoral campaign. Removed from “the other,” abandoning the personal—the public—side of politics, we absorb mostly television messages—the lines paid for by special interest groups or wealthy backers. Quarantined by the car culture, we barely notice that the privacy of the automobile leading to the detached suburb at the end of the highway has created the malaise of the good-hearted. Ours is an automobile-driven isolation so pervasive that its implications seldom surface. Social inequality, Kaus writes, “is at the core of liberal discontent.” Yet, it is “subliminal.”

The private sphere is where the principles of the marketplace, i.e., rich beats poor, dominate. Public space is where the principles of equality of citizenship rule. But public space, the stage of social life, is destroyed by our auto-oriented design that nullifies walking and intermingling. Sequestered by income, deprived of parks, bankrupting Main Street for malls, we no longer rub shoulders with our neighbors, rich or poor, deprived or thriving, that tousled mix of age, race, and experience. All of the same breeds fear of the other, and the everyday intercourse of public life, the plural, multicultural world of a civil society, vanishes.

Once it was otherwise. “With a nickel I’d get to Queens, twist and zoom to Coney Island, twist again towards the George Washington Bridge—beyond which was darkness,” novelist Leonard Michaels once recalled. “I wanted proximity to darkness, strangeness. Who doesn’t, indeed? The poor in spirit, the ignorant and frightened.” Who doesn’t? All of those rendered unfeeling by the car’s banishment of the diversity, the street life of urban America. Crime reigns when such streets are empty. Incivility stems from lack of public space. Neglect comes when money heads outward, following the drift of drivers in their private cars to their vacuum-sealed surroundings.

Isolating the Other

A “homeless vet” waves a sign beside the exit ramp as we pass him in Los Angeles. A pathetic figure, he attracts my gaze. Not so my companion’s. The vet’s dog, caked with dust, is a “good prop,” says my otherwise humane friend behind the wheel. Compassion fails in the antiseptic ambience of the automobile environment. No sweat. No sight of the poor.

Does this privatism, this death of shared space, breed the death of common concern regardless of race and class? Does it account for the death of public life? Certainly the car and the single-use suburbs it serves breed the solitary pattern that makes us lose what yet another critic of the social order, Ron Powers, has called the “last great place.” The pubs, the coffee shops, the communal college vanish. Cordonning us from community life, the car accentuates an environment of exclusion. The mall café is our vacuous symbol. Its umbrellas lack breeze or sun; its security guards manning the escalators to handcuff spirited teens; its architectural island walled by the automobile, offers access only to the licensed shopper. No public realm here.

I remember a sign I saw next to a shopping center. “Areas in this mall used by the public are not public ways, but are for the use of the tenants and the public transacting business with them,” said the large print, “Permission to use said areas may be revoked at any time.”

“Revoked at any time”?

Places that “revoked” their publicness revoke our citizenship. No city can be revoked. No true community can be a private way. Written or unwritten, these Keep Out notices are the virtual charter of the car’s kingdom, of a fortressed America that breeds spatial inequity. The mall is that kingdom’s moated castle. In New York a woman
was arrested for breast-feeding in a mall and then released. “Breastfeeding: A Civil Right,” said an editorial. Not according to the mall owner. “This week Governor Mario Cuomo signed a bill that protects a woman’s right to breast-feed her babies in public and private in New York State. Why, one might wonder, does any state need such a law.” Why indeed? But it wasn’t the first time, the editorial went on, describing a second nursing mother arrested, reflecting the editorial writer’s protest against “the prejudice against women.”

The writer hadn’t heard or seen the Keep Out signs that have been posted around America. No stray “loiterers,” thank you. Entry is at the disposal of the private owner and patrolled. Keep out Salvation Army Christmas kettle bearers. Keep out picketers at malls across America. Keep out those who don’t look quite right. The rules are written for owner and occupier alike. Even store owners and workers suffer from the exclusivity built into their turf through the restrictions on their own time and style. Tyson’s Corner, the vast upscale shopping arena in northern Virginia, insists that shopkeepers not put For Lease or For Sale signs in their windows lest they suggest less than a sunshine spirit of prosperity.

Compounding our flight from the poor, the gated community off the road insulates access and shrinks public space still further. The tyranny of its own majority reinforces homogeneity. Heritage Hills, a condominium development in Westchester County, north of New York City, barred the school bus from traveling through the complex. Roped off into segregated segments by the spirit of exit ramp America, even those who share income, class, and color lose access to the diversity of age and activity as they succumb to the look-alike ethos of the car culture. Can it be less than meaningful, then, that, as auto sales boomed in the 1970s and 1980s, Woodstock Nation evolved into Cocoon Country? At one extreme, we have urban centers as depositories for the needy with their urgencies for food and shelter—their hands outstretched as they stumble into the path of the prosperous. At the other, we have affluent auto-bound America sequestered by color, income, and age.

Somehow, the agony of this traumatic split in mobility is ignored. “We are seeing the final democratization of travel” jumped out at me from a report one day as I compiled the numbers and the faces left behind by our asphalt nation. This rhapsody for the late auto age stopped me in my tracks. It was written by a data consultant waving the flag of personal freedom as the frontispiece of the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey. “We are seeing the final democratization of travel as young and old, low income populations, and women make immense strides in personal transportation,” the consultant, Alan Pisarski, wrote. Democratization? Doesn’t the reality of an immobility register on his screen? Strides? Look at the social consequences for the vast population. Ask the poor, ask the carless, ask the old and the young (with an estimated 80 million Americans in just these two categories). Ask the Americans denied mobility and access to the system altogether. Ask the 9 percent of households who have no car. Ask yourself, your friends, your family. Do they see strides in these decades of rampant motorization?

The saying goes that a good society takes care of its people at the three most critical times in the human cycle: in the dawn of life, in the darkness of life, and in the twilight of life. A car-based society cripples all three—those in the dawn of life, the young; those in the darkness of life, the poor and disabled; and those in the twilight of life, the elderly. We are all young once and will all grow old. At one time or another in our lives, we are majority and minority alike. We suffer ourselves and, in the circle of caring, suffer yet again when those we care about are hurt by a car-dependent society.