



SPIN CYCLE

The Medium of Transit

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The invention of the washing machine freed millions of people from the labor intensive and time-consuming task of cleaning clothes. I do not know a single person who continues to wash their clothes by hand. In fact, I never did. Instead, like most people, I blissfully shift my attention to something else, letting the machine do its work. Countless hours, endless possibilities, given to us by something most of us regard as a basic, yet necessary, household item.

As I look around and marvel at other household items, I so carelessly take for granted, I wonder, what's next? Is there a future ahead of us where washing machines are as archaic as pay-phones on street corners? Probably not, washing machines aren't normally found on streets, but I'll tell you what is, a car. They're everywhere. In fact, city streets today are almost always designed for today's automobile and very rarely are they designed for us.

Now, I'm not suggesting one day soon we'll have streets completely free of cars and other automobiles as they zoom by flying overhead, no,

that'd be outlandish. But what I am suggesting is the possibility of compromise between pedestrians and self-driving cars, otherwise called autonomous vehicles (AVs). AVs have a similar opportunity to do what the washing machine did for us not so long ago by giving us the invaluable gift of time, eliminating commutes.

Before we figure out teleportation, most people will need to continue traveling to work. But, like the washing machine, as we let the machine do the work, we're free to divert our energy elsewhere. However, unlike the washing machine, there are direct ramifications of shifting into the autonomous world.

As I mentioned before, streets are designed for today's car. Although AVs provide the same result as today's car by getting someone/something from point A to B, designing streets for AVs differs slightly. AVs biggest advantage is safety, their instant decision making can prevent countless traffic deaths while managing to do more.

An AV's remarkable precision means it doesn't require the same lane width allotment as

human-driven vehicles. Road and parking lot square footages will decrease as guidelines alter to meet the AVs less stringent parameters. AVs will be able to get more people from point A to B quicker while simultaneously reducing congestion and infrastructure needs.

What bunk beds did for bedrooms, AVs will do for our cities, "there's so much room for activities!" Imagine the possibilities of all that wasted dead space given to surface parking in our urban cores. If we're lucky, all AVs will run on electricity, producing little, if any, carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Wider sidewalks will run wild with lush flora as antiquated surface parking readapts into park space and other uses. Impervious paving potentially begins to decrease, scaling down the effects of stormwater runoff and the urban heat island. An obtainable urban oasis is the reward for overhauling outdated modes of transportation.

All this praise is not to say there aren't potential negative effects to an autonomous transportation network, because there are. Whether you like it or not, research from the Boston Consulting Group via Bloomberg Philanthropies suggest AVs could replace conventional cars by 2035.¹ Autonomous transportation is coming. Lack of foresight in transitioning to autonomous transportation could compound on the mistakes of the past, increasing: pollution, congestion, sprawl, and weakening mass transit systems.² People are the true stakeholders, not large corporations constantly trying to dictate our needs, "...the choice between a utopia and a dystopia will ultimately depend on who can make the decisions," a lesson from

famed urbanist Jane Jacobs.³ The sentiment that we, specifically Americans, “love to drive...hate transit...want to live in suburbs... [and] chose the automobile long ago,” holds no merit. As more Americans move to denser and walkable communities it’s unclear whether Americans would continue to choose car culture if they were provided with alternatives.³ We have an opportunity at a do-over and without visualizing a blank canvas, filling it with the dreams of our utopia, we fail to reverse the mistakes of our past.

The irony is, were this utopia to become a reality, there’s little architects would do to create it. The architectural profession has spent the last decade attempting to rectify and implement new urban ideals into practice. After decades of design experimentation, the rapid pace of technology

surpasses architecture, again moving the goalposts.

The leaping bounds of advancement in technology continue to surprise us all. Imagine technology responding, struggling even, to keep up with architecture. Instead, we, the architects, move the goalposts. Anticipating a world of AVs gives us the gift of a new washing machine. Shifting our attention to the problems of tomorrow as we blissfully let the machine do its work.

1. “Taming the Autonomous Vehicle: A Primer for Cities.” *American Planning Association*, Produced by Bits and Atoms for Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Aspen Institute Center for Urban Innovation, 2017, www.planning.org/knowledgebase/resource/9137796/.
2. Shaver, Katherine. “City Planners Eye Self-Driving Vehicles to Correct Mistakes of the 20th-Century Auto.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 21 July 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2019/07/20/city-planners-eye-self-driving-vehicles-correct-mistakes-th-century-auto/.
3. Coren, Michael J. “America’s Transportation Do-over Could Be a Utopia or Dystopia. It’s up to Us.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 6 Sept. 2019, qz.com/1688676/self-driving-cars-could-turn-the-us-into-a-utopia-or-dystopia-its-up-to-us/.