

These Americans really know how to have fun, my sister told me after visiting her newly acquired relatives-in-law in the U.S. Of course, she was treated with Universal Studios, roller-coaster rides and such amusements, but her comment was about the joyous mood and spirit of small parties getting around. I fully agree to this, having had several good conversations with a bunch of Americans around the tables of Northampton. This old town is situated on the hills of New England and has many characteristics a European would appreciate: beautiful vistas on distant mountains, a varied street pattern exposing well preserved quality buildings, a center sprawling with restaurants and other small businesses, some dwellings and many important institutions (of which Smith College seems to have taken the presiding position).



With cars come traffic signs. Northampton, MA.

So much more surprising it is, to a European, that the main street is loaded with cars, many en route through the town to other locations, others stacked along meagre side-walks, as if all those smashy cafés had no interest in outdoor seating. Any European town of this size (around thirty thousand inhabitants), would have at least one pedestrian street at its core, while car traffic would be diverted to bypasses or a ring road system. The arguments for more pedestrian areas are usually: Walkers and bicycles takes less area than cars. You will find ten to twenty times more people per area on foot when they have left their cars. And in the crowd, you are more likely to interact socially. Also, a bit of walking is appreciated by most people as it is a simple form of

physical exercise available to anyone.



Ten bikes, one car. A minor street in Malmö, Sweden.

Walking pace allows people to meet and stop for a brief chat without causing a traffic jam. Conversely, intense car traffic in a city core has some drawbacks: The noise makes it more strenuous to communicate between people, and shouting to each other is not the best form of dialogue. The risk of accidents hinders folk from moving freely over a street. Especially children and elderly people are thus discouraged from going to a downtown center where cars roam around everywhere. The exhaust gases from engines are neither nice nor healthy. Heavy car traffic is inconsistent with permanent dwellings and forces young families to move out of the city center. Thus the city lacks some important segments of population, making it less interesting to visit. After all, what attracts people is basically the variety of other people!



Amsterdam mixes its city inhabitants with visitors.

Confronted with the idea, my American friends exclaim: *Pedestrianisation would kill any American city! That was tried in the 1970's in some city centers, and it became a bore, failing everywhere it was implemented.* Now, I think this goes for the single use central business

district, which is tedious regardless of beautiful street arrangements. I contend a thriving downtown should have inborn population to appear attractive to visitors. A stroll down town watching shop windows and doing errands should, in my view, include meeting other people at random, sitting idle for a while on a café watching other folks. But, among the swift Americans, it seems that the mere word *pedestrian* invokes feelings of disgust, dementia and disability. Listen to any American film and you will hear the sound of banging car doors, in action movies followed by the shriek of rubber against asphalt. So unlike the sliding doors of European public transport! These folks are not inclined to trotting *le trottoir* in elegant ways, the very concept *Citta slow* seems romantic and exotic to them. Apart from the intimate love of the automobile, the Americans seem to have difficulties in enjoying the public townspace for its own virtues.



Cars in a well defined public space. The main renaissance square in Kristianstad, Sweden. Northampton does not have a square, although it is as old as my Swedish hometown (1664). So where do common events take place: the Saturday brass band playing, the open-air market, the display of touring exhibitions, the demonstrations of political views, the youth theatre performances? How come some of the best restaurants in Northampton are installed into trivial box-shaped buildings along the strip mall? This would be almost inconceivable to a European, where location is as much belonging

to the architectural context as to the address.



Not a neighbour in sight. Wrentham outlet shopping with 170 stores, MA .

The Americans move around in a door-to-door fashion, every other being a car door. The streetscape of their small towns is a result of adherence to this car-proximity principle. The streets are wider, the walkways are thinner, the parking lots are vaster - so the attractions of the city are spread out. A glance at the ordinary map of Northampton town gives evidence of this disinterest in public space: the syntax of the street network is drawn, but no blocks or buildings.



The Main Street in Karlshamn, Sweden open to cars during the period 1912-1985.

It would be easy to slip: *We Europeans are much better in making liveable streets than you Americans!* But here I remember what my expatriate sons have remarked to me, in another argument: *It is not inferior Pa, it is different.* What is different more than attitudes and perceptions? History of course. Here are things to investigate, and I am sure my new American colleagues will help me in that. They are really loveable, especially in small parties (the bunch that fits in a car or two)!

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