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Right to Move

The fact of the matter is quite simple: there is systemic discrimination in urban planning. It is not a rarity, nor is it invisible. Rather, it sits quietly atop the streets of the American city, hiding in plain sight. Within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a self-proclaimed “yardstick by which we measure right and wrong” – all humans are declared to be born with “the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.” There is a right more integral, though, and that is the right to move in general, to have the same access to the wonders of their resident city as their peers. The truth is, even in a prosperous city in a prosperous nation, classism and ableism leave countless people in the absence of this right, and it doesn’t take much examination to determine how.

As a byproduct of its sprawling design, the average American city makes car ownership mandatory. With the ever-expanding distance between the urban core and the suburbs, the city becomes dominated by cars. As roads widen, sidewalks disappear, and liberty for people without cars disappears with them. This is no small population, either; as of 2015, nearly one third of Americans did not own a driver’s license.

With a high initial price combined with the costs of fuel and repairs, car ownership is a heavy burden for those who do not boast a high income. It’s for this reason that almost two thirds of transit riders have a household income below \$50,000, and more than twenty percent make less than \$15,000. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people who walk and bike to work are significantly more likely to have low incomes. The idea that pedestrian and cycling infrastructure is only a luxury for wealthy families is a dangerous myth; this infrastructure is crucial for the well-being of the most vulnerable members of our society. If we really want to break the cycle of poverty, we can no longer afford to mandate the existing costs of transportation.

Unfortunately, poor city planning does not limit itself to class discrimination. People with disabilities often suffer the most in a car-dependent city. As Jeff Speck eloquently explains in his book *Walkable City Rules*, “most visually impaired people can move independently only

while walking, and they are effectively disabled by communities that mandate cars for getting around.” While there are still options for the visually impaired, their implementation is often sloppy. Though generally overlooked, the brightly colored, dotted patterns on sidewalks near intersections are a common example of these options. Those patterns are part of a system called tactile paving, which aims to warn those with visual impairments when they are about to encounter a hazard. In this case, the hazard is an intersection. Not only are these scarcely distributed, they commonly fail to serve another crucial purpose: to point people in the right direction. The dots, called blisters, on these portions of the sidewalk, should be arranged in rows that point directly to the destination on the other side of the street. This way, someone using a white cane knows the direction they need to walk to make a safe crossing. However, in many places, these blisters are arbitrarily rotated, potentially causing an unsuspecting pedestrian to find themselves in the center of a busy intersection. Inconsistencies like these make the whole system useless. If you can’t trust some of them, you can’t trust any of them.

Curb cuts, or the ramps cut into the curb between the sidewalk and the street, are another common accessibility feature that we take for granted. They’re a welcome addition to the sidewalk when carrying heavy objects or pushing a stroller, but for those in wheelchairs, they’re a necessity. This phenomenon is known as the curb cut effect, the idea that technology designed for the margins of society can help everybody.

Ed Roberts contracted polio at age fourteen, relying on an iron lung to stay alive. He was paralyzed below the neck, only able to move two fingers on his left hand. In 1962, he was turned down from U.C. Berkeley, not for academic reasons, but because they weren’t sure where they could fit an iron lung. Eventually, they decided to repurpose a patient room at the campus hospital, and Roberts was finally accepted. His story began making headlines, inspiring more paralyzed students to apply to Berkeley. Before long, his campus hospital became the headquarters for a group of organizers called the Rolling Quads, whose purpose was to advocate for the idea that people with disabilities had civil rights. Luckily, by the time Roberts was in graduate school, disabled students could zip around in power chairs, a technology that was recently invented to assist wounded veterans. These gave students the freedom to leave their wheelchair attendant behind, but they still had to deal with curbs.

In 1971, the Rolling Quads showed up at the Berkeley City Council and demanded that the city build curb cuts on every corner, a motion that passed with a surprising lack of resistance. This movement eventually led to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), mandating access for people with disabilities in all places open to the public, which is why we now see wheelchair lifts on buses, ramps along staircases, elevators with reachable buttons, and low service counters.

Despite the incredible progress made by Roberts and the Rolling Quads, implementation today is still lacking. I live in one of the most walkable neighborhoods in my city, and curb cuts are still disappearing without a trace on the streets surrounding my house. The city should be accessible to everybody, regardless of ability, and regardless of class. Unfortunately, this isn't a reality, and it's no surprise that we are not hearing the voices of the disadvantaged at city meetings.

The solutions to these injustices are not elusive. Every investment in walking, biking, and public transit, such as widening sidewalks and adding protected bike lanes to streets, lessens the need for a car and opens up the city for the differently abled. As simple as these solutions are, they still make many lawmakers uneasy. Why is that?

Mobility advocates are used to hearing that walkability is an unrealistic economic goal that will end up costing the city too much money for too little in return. Unfortunately, people hear these falsities and run with them, but if they would stop to look at the statistics, they would quickly find the opposite. America's most walkable metros generate 49% more GDP per capita than its least walkable metros. A study in Baltimore has discovered that compared to highway investments, every dollar spent on pedestrian infrastructure created 57% more jobs and every dollar spent on bike infrastructure created 100% more jobs. The city of Copenhagen similarly estimates that every mile driven by car costs the city 20 cents, while every mile biked earns the city 42 cents. Not to mention, these improvements cost a fraction of what our roads cost. The explanations for these statistics are numerous. Increasing the mobility and range of people with lower incomes helps support businesses all over the city, and any person, regardless of income, is more likely to enter a store when walking or biking past it than when driving past it. The economic excuse is precisely that, an excuse.

There is a far more severe objection to walkability, and that's the question of gentrification. It is true that walkability drives up the property values in neighborhoods, so many worry that this supposedly helpful infrastructure will push people out of their homes. This is a result of conflating development with displacement. Gentrification is inevitable. Neighborhoods change, and it should not be our goal to leave every neighborhood in the state that we found it in, especially in poorer neighborhoods, where gentrification leads to decreases in violent crime. Displacement, on the other hand, is not inevitable. Cities like Boston and Philadelphia have introduced programs that allow longtime homeowners to cap or freeze their property taxes. As a simpler solution, displacement can be limited by building attainable housing projects in developing neighborhoods. Development, when done responsibly, doesn't lead to displacement, and instead opens the city for people from all walks of life.

It's easy to feel helpless in situations like these, but there is so much more that we could be doing. The simplest way to spread the word is to point out these injustices where they exist. Show your friends the places where tactile paving fails. Bring attention to where curb cuts don't exist. Additionally, be a voice for the voiceless. The people who are suffering the most are not the ones showing up to city meetings and town halls. The ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" strike marvelous images of freedom and prosperity into our minds. These ideals are only attainable if we all possess a fundamental human right: the right to move.