

A (Transportation) Tale of Three Cities

A right-wing businessman is elected as mayor of one of North America's largest cities in an era of fiscal restraint and an increasingly politically conservative climate, both locally and globally. This man, with clearly held beliefs that the primary purpose of streets is to move cars, and with a strong dislike of streetcars, urges city council to sell off its extensive streetcar system during his first term.

A view from outside the main entrance of the Detroit Packard Plant. Photo by Hillary Fox.

By Nancy Smith Lea, Director, Toronto Coalition for Active Transportation

Anyone caught up in the current turbulent swirl of Toronto's transportation politics may mistakenly conclude the aforementioned describes Mayor Rob Ford, elected in 2010, not Albert Cobo, elected in 1950 as Mayor of Detroit.

DETROIT – ENDLESSLY FASCINATING

As a kid growing up in southern Ontario, lots of horror stories abounded about Detroit. I was, and remain, endlessly fascinated by its spiraling decline and the notoriously dramatic scale of its "white flight" (mass migration of whites from cities to suburbs). As a city-lover and an ardent proponent of active transportation, I have also found it ironic that Detroit's inextricable link with the auto industry can be traced back as a root cause for its decline.

I'm not alone in my preoccupation with Detroit. Last June, I found myself waiting in great anticipation amongst 300 cyclists in a Windsor parking lot at the foot of the Ambassador Bridge. The annual community-led Bike the Bridge ride would take us over the bridge and into downtown Detroit. What I discovered throughout this unique journey surprised me.

Detroit is a city that many don't want to be reminded of. The rise and fall of "Motor City" is often a conversation stopper. Impoverished and dangerous, it confirms some of the worst fears held by the suburban middle class about the inner city. For downtowners, it serves as a constant unsettling reminder about the fragility of thriving urban centres.

Detroit in the 1950s was an elegant city, full of promise and excitement, not unlike Toronto today. A pinnacle of human achievement, Detroit was the first to pave its streets in concrete, had the most complete streetcar system of any American city, gorgeous art deco buildings, bustling main avenues, and people streaming there to take advantage of endless job opportunities.

Today, just over 700,000 people live in Detroit, but at its peak in the 1950s the population was close to 2-million. The scale of the rapid decline of its downtown and the extent of its sprawl is unprecedented, but seeing Detroit by bicycle gave me the opportunity to appreciate a character and history that goes beyond a one-dimensional story of ruin and decay. It was an emotional experience to cycle by Detroit's derelict houses and shuttered stores. Vast stretches of downtown Detroit are food deserts, and as a cyclist I became keenly aware of this because small businesses provide essential services for cyclists and pedestrians.

But what really moved me was the evidence I saw of a strong community spirit. Detroit citizens have stepped up to fill the gaps for even the most basic missing services. On a voluntary basis, they have launched community bicycle projects and community gardens, provided van services to supplement their flagging public transportation system, renovated abandoned houses and painted murals. We rode through the most famous of these — the Heidelberg Project, a 25-year internationally acclaimed art project where several blocks of abandoned houses have been reclaimed and transformed by local artists.

At the federal level, investments are being made to revitalize Detroit's waterfront, install bike trails, and 60 years after their removal, streetcars are making a comeback. Construction for light rail service is anticipated to begin this year.

Detroit is probably not going to be hitting any travel destination top ten lists anytime soon, but it was at one time an economic and cultural leader, and while we can learn from what other cities are doing well, it is just as important to know why some have faltered. Last year, PBS released a documentary *Beyond the Motor City* that explored Detroit's transportation decisions, how inextricably linked they are to Detroit's decline, and how they could lead the way to its revival. According to Robert Fishman, professor at the University of Michigan, "if you only see the failure, you're not seeing [Detroit's] real history and you're not seeing the real future." Detroit's transportation achievements were impressive but all their eggs were in one basket — the automobile. This unbalanced approach was doomed to fail.



Detroit Dies Hard by Ben Smith Lea taken on the Bike the Bridge ride.

PORTLAND – ON THE RISE

At the other end of the country, Portland, Oregon has had a very different transportation history. Portland has experienced steady growth since 1850, but just over half a million people live there, making it a much smaller city than Detroit or Toronto.

Similar to Detroit, Portland removed its extensive streetcar system in the 1950s. Like Detroit, the streetcar is now making a comeback. Streetcar service began again in 2001, and streetcars are now an integral part of the greening and revitalization of Portland. In a recent trip to Toronto, Sam Adams, Portland's mayor, praised Toronto for having the foresight to preserve its downtown streetcar tracks in the 1970s when other cities, including his own, were scrapping their trolleys.

A couple of planning policies make Portland unique in North America. In 1971, Oregon passed what is believed to be the first Complete Streets Policy in North America. This bill required that bicycles and pedestrians be included in any new road, and allocated one percent of state highway funds to make it happen. As a result, Portland is now considered the most bicycle-friendly city in the U.S. Also in the 1970s, Portland established an urban growth boundary to protect rural lands and prevent urban sprawl, similar to those found in many European cities.

Key figures in Portland's path to sustainability were Mia Birk, President of Alta Planning, and Congressman Earl Blumenauer, both advocates for public transit and bicycles. Speaking at TCAT's Complete Streets Forum 2011, Birk summed up Portland's transportation trajectory. "Portland was once polluted, degraded and near abandoned like a lot of cities in North America. But we chose a different path and are simply ahead of where many cities are towards balanced, sustainable, transportation systems."

TORONTO – A REALITY CHECK

In December 2010, one month after being elected as Mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford announced: "Transit City's over and the war on the car is over, and all new [transit] expansion is going underground." Transit City, the ambitious light-rail transit plan launched in the previous term of Council, could have resulted in up to 150 kilometres of new light-rail spread across 25 Toronto neighbourhoods. Mayor Ford's planned subway extension plan is 18 km long and according to Pembina Institute "would cost more than twice as much, per kilometre, than building new rapid LRT lines."

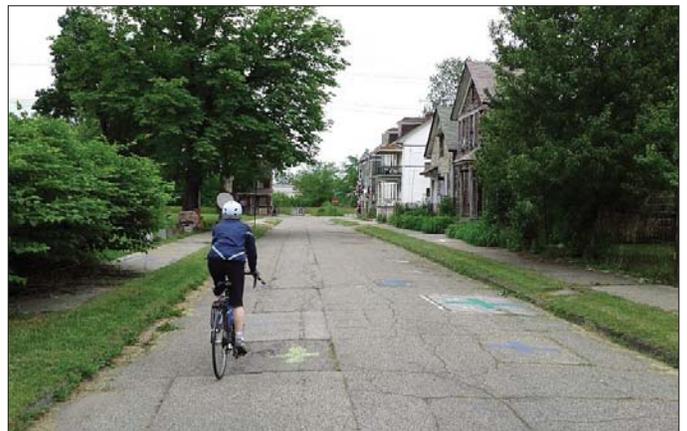
*Top: A streetcar travels through downtown Portland. Photo by Robert Crum.
Bottom: Cycling through Heidelberg Project by Michale Canzi.*

In July 2011, after two days of heated debate in City Council, Mayor Ford's new bikeway infrastructure priorities, with its emphasis on building bike paths in parks and removing existing bike lanes on major arterials in an attempt to get cyclists out of the way of cars, received a majority vote. At a time, when cities around the world are recognizing the importance of complete streets and a balanced approach to transportation, Toronto is moving in a different direction. Time will tell if this direction is moving us back in time, or just sideways.

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Putting the unhelpful "war on car" rhetoric aside, however, there are signs that Toronto has not become completely derailed. In fact, Toronto's recent transportation decisions have resulted in a large investment in both public transit and active transportation. At the end of the day, the debates have not been about *if* but *how* the money is to be spent to facilitate people moving by transit and by bike.

Even though Toronto in 2011 bears some uncomfortable similarities to Detroit in the 1950s, it's important to take the long view when it comes to cities. Cities sometimes falter and at other times they thrive but, as Detroit demonstrates, strong community spirit is the base that cities rely on to survive whatever storms come our way.



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