

Ecozoic Infrastructure

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Bringing humanity into the Ecozoic era will require a bevy of large-scale changes. Perhaps as important, however, as rethinking the composition of our economic, religious, political and educational institutions is the deceptively simple act of incorporating more nature into our daily lives. In terms of public infrastructure, the degree to which many will accept ugliness in exchange for seeming convenience and functionality is remarkable. We allow broadcast towers to despoil ridgelines and oceans of asphalt and concrete to mar the landscape, and many resign themselves to living or working in sterile, windowless rooms. Yet built spaces can be aesthetically enhanced, both through better architecture and by incorporating greenery. Sadly, beauty is often overlooked as a criterion when designing the spaces in which we live, work and travel. Even when people do notice opportunities to improve their human-made surroundings, they tend to feel powerless to do anything about it.

It is natural for humans to want to congregate in cities—it's something we've been doing since the agricultural revolution made urban life possible. By many measures, a modern city dweller has a smaller ecological footprint than a suburbanite or rural resident. Urban infrastructure is highly efficient, accommodating large numbers of people on a small amount of land and consuming less energy per person as each goes about his or her daily tasks. Furthermore, being the social creatures we are, living alongside many of our fellow humans is generally preferable to a more isolated existence. Yet, in cities, access to greenery often comes at a premium and is regrettably viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity. All too often, particularly in Western societies, living in the city, for all but the wealthiest, means sacrificing—to varying degrees—the splendor of being surrounded by living things, and instead living amidst masses of brick, concrete, asphalt and steel.

Among the ubiquitous examples of unaesthetic transportation infrastructure in the United States is North Capitol Street in

Washington, DC. Originally designed for horse-drawn vehicles and rail-bound streetcars, the street follows the line of longitude on which the US Capitol sits, so that its iconic dome can be seen when looking south from as far as three miles away. In an effort to maximize the flow of traffic (primarily benefitting commuters driving from the city's northern suburbs), the street was widened and transformed around 1950 into a mini-highway, with a cloverleaf intersection and two long underpasses cut into the ground. Now, instead of a tree-lined approach to the Capitol that is built into the fabric of the surrounding neighborhoods, much of North Capitol Street is an unappealing concrete behemoth that seems to impose itself against the will of the land.

The supersizing of America's asphalt-and-cement transportation infrastructure is directly linked to our over-reliance on the automobile. Until the twentieth century, our dwelling places, from large cities to small towns and rural villages, were laid out so that most daily activities could be accomplished on foot. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, expansive, interconnecting rail transportation networks were the default mode for longer trips. Since the 1920s, however, Americans became veritable slaves to their cars. Railroads and public transportation—more energy-efficient and accommodating to the landscape than highways—strengthen society by bringing people in contact with one another, in contrast to the alienating effect of the private automobile. The car's proper function is to provide access to remote areas, allow the carriage of large loads, and to provide short and medium-distance livery service to complement the public transportation network. America has blindly let the car far outgrow this niche, with disastrous consequences for the quality of our lives. Instead of designing transportation to serve communities, we have come to design our communities to serve a mode of transportation.

The Ecozoic transition will entail re-sewing the fabric of our communities with green infrastructure. If social and environmental impacts, including aesthetics, took their rightful place amongst the considerations that are integral to the process of planning and designing cities, towns and regions, our culture's lamentable disconnect between form and function would disappear. This process begins with people simply paying attention to what is around them, comparing reality

to their own concepts of what makes for a pleasant place to live and work, and then acting to bring reality closer to the ideal. Both human society and the non-human community would benefit if people simply noticed, and improved, their surroundings. The minimum task for all who wish to create a livable, sustainable future, is to make his or her own corner of the world greener and happier, and then work with others to similarly enliven public spaces and reform the way we get around.

The evolution towards the Ecozoic begins right in our own backyards and on our streets.