

# THE CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE CULTURE

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Parked side by side in one of the nine parking garages in the Kansas City Country Club Plaza are a pristine silver Tesla plugged into the wall and a battered red Ford pickup truck. This juxtaposition reflects not only the variance in visitors to the Plaza, but also how radically different and yet fundamentally similar subcultures that develop under the greater American car culture can be. Picture the owners of these vehicles: who are they? Two distinct people of different classes come to mind, each with their own unique, likely opposing values. Fundamentally, a Ford truck and Tesla are both automobiles with the same purpose—transportation—and yet they reflect distinctive subcultures. This is because the United States is a nation built around cars, and our culture highly regards both models as material objects and greater symbols of American values. The drivers are similar in that they are wealthy enough to literally and metaphorically buy into American automobile culture. Americans have a romantic association between freedom and driving, but in the United States today we have been limited by automobiles, paradoxically removing our freedom of choice. Car culture and the creation of suburbia, as promoted by J. C. Nichols, led to automobiles becoming a necessity by changing the structure of our cities through urban sprawl, plus government regulations and subsidies that encourage driving. By encouraging driving above every

other method of transportation, our society has become auto-dependent and uses transportation as an obstacle for social mobility that further disenfranchises those in poverty.

Automobiles have historically served as indicators of wealth and status both in everyday life and in popular culture. The mere act of owning a personal automobile was a statement of wealth and class until Henry Ford made the more affordable Model T that increased demand and made the automobile more accessible to the masses (Alvarez). Today, owning a particular brand or model of vehicle is still a statement of wealth considering the disparity between the price of a used, mid-sized car and a new, luxury sports car. Each automotive brand has a distinct subculture of devoted consumers, and stereotypes have been assumed about these subcultures to the point where cars are often used in media as indicators of a character's values and socio-economic status. To return to the example from the beginning, when you ask someone to picture the owner of a Ford and the owner of a Tesla, there is a clear distinction between the two. Likely, the owners of these vehicles are pictured as men, but men with different values, careers, and lifestyles based on the stereotype of the All-American, working-class Ford driver and the environmentally conscious, wealthy Tesla driver. These stereotypes are often reinforced by the brand itself in commercials and social media messaging.

Automobiles were once thought of as merely a fad for the wealthy, but J. C. Nichols built the Plaza in Kansas City with automobiles in mind as a model for the nation (Country Club Plaza: History and Significance). This was a bold endeavor, as he would be creating the first shopping mall designed to accommodate consumers arriving via automobile. To give Nichols credit as an innovator, he was right that automobiles were more than just a passing fad. In the US alone, there are more than 30 automotive brands (Gould, Skye, and Zhang). J. C. Nichols is also responsible for suburbia as we know it today, with aesthetics focused on landscaping and curved streets. What Nichols did

was stray away from the traditional, straight gridded street system and instead opt for a hierarchy of streets in which there are major roads for faster travel. Roads then gradually get smaller and allow for less mobility as they become more local. As this trend caught on, almost no new housing developments were built on a traditional grid system from the 1950s to the 1980s (Badger). In "Urban Roadway Classification," Gerry Forbes demonstrates how the traditional road classification systems are based on "mobility and access functions of roads." The American Institute of Architects (AIA) uses a classification system that names roads based on how they connect communities, and uses terms that people within American culture can recognize, such as "highway" and "avenue." It should be noted that the American system has significantly more roadway terms than some other countries, perhaps suggesting the importance of roads in American society since a society's understood language can be reflective of its culture. At the top of the hierarchy of roads is the principal arterial road which allows the fastest travel and typically runs for statewide or interstate travel. These principal arterials are then linked by minor arterials that are fed by collector roads, which in turn are fed by small, local roads for slower travel that end in cul-de-sacs or residential streets (Forbes 2). This slows traffic in residential areas and reduces through traffic, but it also creates what we now refer to as the urban sprawl and suburban isolation, as more roads are necessary to travel.

J. C. Nichols is responsible for another staple of suburbia: the idyllic cul-de-sac. According to Sara Steven, during his development of the Plaza neighborhood, J. C. Nichols was a "key player" and advocate in the creation of cul-de-sacs, which later were promoted by the Federal Housing Administration. A cul-de-sac is a street, typically residential, that minimizes through traffic and reduces the speed limit by nature of it being a dead end. Due to the decrease in the prevalence of people who "do not belong" in the neighborhood, as well as slower driving, parents may feel as if it is their moral responsibility to opt

for a home on a cul-de-sac as opposed to one in the city. Buyers will go out of their way to spend an estimated twenty percent more on a house in a cul-de-sac (Nielsen). In reality, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that young children are in more danger of being backed over by a car than being hit by through traffic (15). In a cul-de-sac, there are plentiful opportunities for a child to be a victim of a backover, as most cars exit the driveway in reverse. The creation and advocacy for the cul-de-sac was not the only way, however, that J. C. Nichols and the United States government changed the way we live and travel through the structure of our cities.

One study, "Community Design and How Much We Drive" by Wesley Marshall and Norman Garrick, found that people who live in more sparse, treed communities spend about 18 percent more time driving than do people who live in dense grids. This may sound like a mild inconvenience, but the distance between where you live and major locations such as school, work, stores, and medical centers is significant when you do not have consistent access to transportation. With the way our cities are structured, walking to most locations is simply not possible. To use Kansas City as an example, if you live near 18th and Vine, it is a fifteen-minute drive to the nearest Walmart. From 18th and Vine, the Country Club Plaza is also about fifteen minutes away, but Walmart is the location of choice for this example because it is an inexpensive big-box store commonly accessed by people within the lower and middle classes. Stores on the Country Club Plaza, conversely, fall more within the budget of someone in a higher socioeconomic class. According to Google Maps, it is about a forty-five-minute bike ride to Walmart from 18th and Vine, give or take traffic. On foot it is a two hour and fifteen-minute trip, assuming you are able-bodied, take the path Google lays out, and walk at an average speed. Public transit would take fifty-five-minutes on three different buses, sitting through 50 different stops. This is at 2 pm, assuming that all the buses are on time, stops are short, and you're able to walk between stops when you

change buses. These estimations are all just one way. Keep in mind that eventually, the bus stops running, so a late-night emergency trip for diapers or medication is not possible. Using a ride-share service such as Uber or Lyft would be just as quick as driving yourself, but it costs about 9 dollars, plus a tip. The most viable option outside of a car would be to bike, but not everyone is physically capable of doing so. The second most viable option would be public transportation, but not everyone has two and a half hours (at least) to dedicate towards a single shopping trip, especially for those who are in school or at least one job. In "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility," Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren found that commute time is "strongly correlated" with upward social mobility. This marks access to transportation as one of the first and most important obstacles to achieving upward social mobility. Urban sprawl has made our society auto-dependent and therefore disenfranchises people who do not have access to an automobile.

The availability of parking, much like quiet, suburban roads, has become another key selling point for housing that drives the price up for buyers and influences the structure of our cities. A map of the Country Club Plaza specifically dedicated to showcasing parking options displays nine free multi-level parking garages, and if those were somehow not enough, valet parking and street parking are also plentiful. This is not a new hallmark of the Plaza. When J. C. Nichols created the Plaza in the 1920s, it was only a 30-acre project, but 46% of that land was dedicated to streets and parking lots (Euston). This was revolutionary at the time, as commercial buildings rarely provided any sort of space for parking cars. In the 1960s, city governments began directing private individuals and property developers to construct parking spaces on their property. This reached the point at which the construction of apartment housing complexes without parking was downright outlawed in big cities (Shill 46). This norm stretches beyond housing to commercial areas with massive parking lots that cover

“more than a third of the land area,” and cities such as Des Moines and Houston “are estimated to have 7 and 30 spaces per resident, respectively (Shill 45). When we can no longer fit any more parking spaces on the ground level of venues, we build upwards. Parking garages are a common sight in universities and urban areas, where parking is otherwise a commodity that comes at the price of metered spaces or passes costing upwards of a hundred dollars, such as at UMKC. Despite their convenience, parking garages still cause issues by directing traffic flow across sidewalks, further exacerbating the pedestrian issue discussed earlier. When parking is a necessity for residency and business, public or private, and each parking space takes up at least 300 square feet, urban sprawl becomes worse as more space must be dedicated to temporarily storing vehicles.

Not only is driving promoted through media and the structure of our cities, it is also subsidized by law. In J. C. Nichols’s time, Americans chose to drive because they wanted to. It was a matter of novelty and convenience, but the demand was created by consumers nonetheless. Today, consumers do still continue to buy into the automotive industry and create demand, but the government reinforces this demand by literally paying people to drive themselves to work instead of taking alternative, more environmentally friendly methods of transportation. According to a combined report by the TransitCenter and Frontier Group, the US government spends “7.3 billion per year” through taxes encouraging people to drive to work. According to the IRS, there is a tax break of up to two hundred and seventy dollars a month for employee or employer-paid parking in 2019, which has gone up fifteen dollars since the 2017 TransitCenter report. In comparison, the transit tax benefit is at two hundred and fifty-five dollars a month but only applies to employer-provided mass transit passes. Drivers can also deduct miles driven for work at fifty-eight cents per business mile driven, which is an extra benefit on top of that aforementioned parking deduction that is not provided to those who commute through public

transportation or other alternative methods. Biking to work maxes out at twenty dollars per month, and there is no tax benefit to walking to work. The transportation sector is responsible for 55% of nitrogen oxide emissions (among other emissions), which cause air pollution and lead to increased vulnerability to asthma and the development of other chronic lung diseases (Environmental Protection Agency). Reducing the rate at which we drive could help reduce these emissions. Our society has become more concerned with the environment in the past decade, and yet is taking minimal action to subsidize more environmentally friendly ways to travel. Public transit is part of the transportation sector and therefore responsible for emissions; however, it is more efficient to have one bus carrying upwards of fifty people than 50 separate cars on the road creating traffic congestion and worsening pollution.

The danger of driving does not only impact our society through the environment. When cars were first taking to the roads in droves in the later 1920s, society was built around the pedestrian. If there was a street, you could cross it. Kansas City was the exception, and is credited with inventing the concept of "jaywalking" in 1912 (Brown). "Jaydriving" did not catch on in quite the same way; we instead tend to refer to incidents involving vehicles as "accidents," subtly shifting the blame away from the driver through the gentler term. The invention of "jaywalking" is the first example of society shifting from being built for the pedestrian to built for the automobile. The stop sign did not even appear until years later, but the precedent was set. Streets are highly regulated now with plentiful signs, traffic lights, and designated crosswalks, but pedestrians are still at high risk every time they step onto the street. Vehicles are safer than ever before for the driver and passengers, but pedestrians are all but ignored in US vehicle safety regulations. In 2008, the United Nations designed regulations to protect pedestrians, which has been adopted by forty-four countries as of 2015 but has been ignored by the United States (Shill 63).

Just one year after the updated report on pedestrian regulations was released by the United Nations, the United States hit a 25 year high in pedestrian deaths, in which a pedestrian was killed in a traffic crash every 1.5 hours (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Cars are the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 1 and 44, as documented by the CDC in 2010. The US Department of Transportation reported that 5,967 pedestrians were killed in 5,900 crashes in 2016. It is easy to attribute these fatalities to alcohol, weather, dark environments, or even blame the pedestrians themselves for failing to cross at a designated crosswalk at an intersection, but another factor that is often under-examined is vehicle design.

Cars are built to dominate the road, promising safety for those fortunate enough to be behind the wheel, but further endangering pedestrians for the sake of unnecessary aesthetic structures and slipping through the loopholes of government regulation. The pedestrian, who could be anyone from a driver simply crossing the road after leaving their car, to a child, or a person who is walking to work because they cannot afford a car, is regarded as less important by automotive manufacturers and government agencies responsible for their regulation. In the United States, manufacturers are focusing on building taller, heavier trucks and vans as opposed to smaller, safer cars. In the 1920s, Henry Ford's Model T was the most affordable car on the market, and was dangerously designed with a tall, flat front, with a tin frame separating the driver from the gas tank (Alvarez). We have thankfully since relocated the fuel tank from beneath the driver's seat, but many of the vehicles built today still have tall, flat fronts and rigid pieces. Greg Shill explains the trend in dangerous vehicle design by referencing The Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards published by the federal government, which set requirements for a vehicle's average mile per gallon (MPG). Cars are required to get a higher MPG than a category of vehicles known as "light trucks," so manufacturers find that cars are less appealing to make because they have a more stringent



requirement on MPG. The category of "light trucks" was originally reserved for work vehicles as an exception, but today "encompasses pickup trucks, sport utility vehicles, and minivans," which are taller, heavier, and pollute more than the average car (Shill 58). These CAFE standards, as Greg Shill reasons, are why 69 percent of the new car market now consists of vehicles that fall within this "light truck" category (58). The World Health Organization explains that when hit by one of these vehicles, such as a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV), the pedestrian does not ride over the top of the vehicle but instead is pushed forward by the tall, broad front and then underneath the wheels. In head-on collisions with shorter vehicles, tall vehicles such as trucks and SUVs tend to drive over the smaller vehicle and crush the occupants inside (Shill 58). A "light truck" is only a safe vehicle so long as the car does not roll over and the safety of those outside the vehicle is ignored. The federal government is one of the primary backers of the automobile industry, and therefore should take responsibility for standardizing safety regulations in the decisions of automobile manufacturers.

J. C. Nichols may not have known the full extent of what he was putting into motion when he took advantage of the new market and the rising popularity of the Model T by creating a shopping center and residential neighborhoods dedicated entirely to the automobile. Nevertheless, his impact has been profound on the physical and cultural shaping of the United States. Today, those in lower socioeconomic classes experience cultural strain when they are unable to achieve the culturally defined American goal of achieving wealth and success because they do not have access to reliable transportation. Cars are responsible, in part, for urban sprawl, commute time, and accessibility to resources such as jobs and healthcare, and are therefore also responsible for creating a wedge between different socioeconomic backgrounds and reinforcing economic inequality. Automobiles are ingrained in our culture as a symbol for the American Dream, in our cities as suburbia and sprawling, dead-end roads separate us, and in

our law as we are subsidized to drive. Urban planner Jeff Speck said it best in a National Public Radio interview: "Your car is no longer an instrument of freedom but a prosthetic device." By becoming more reliant on automotive transportation, the very thing that gave Americans the freedom to travel in the 1900s, we have paradoxically become more entrapped by it as transportation is now a determining factor in upward mobility. We became an auto-dependent culture by choice, but the option to choose has since been rescinded as it has become a requirement to function in society, mandated by culture and government regulation. Our culture will remain car-centric and auto-dependent until our nation changes on an institutional level.

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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

### Context

1. What do you know about J. C. Nichols' impact on Kansas City? Do his contributions to car culture and city planning fit into what you already knew, or complicate it?
2. What surprised you about this essay? Have you ever considered how deeply car culture impacts the U.S.?

### Style

1. How does Francis' focus on Kansas City support their larger claims about car culture in the U.S.? Is this focus effective? How so?