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Car bans are the future in vehicle-clogged cities



Car bans: Your city could be next

Manatees, fittingly called “sea cows,” drift languidly through the shallow ocean at 5 mph, munching on plants and fattening up to 1,300 pounds. For much of 2019, the sluggish creatures swam faster than New York City’s 14th Street bus, the M14A. The bus typically inched across car-clogged Manhattan at around 4 mph — so slow that local transit groups crowned M14A the [slowest bus in The Big Apple](#).

Yet in early October 2019, the maligned 14th Street buses were bestowed a change of fate. The city banned private vehicles from driving — or, more aptly, sitting in bumper to bumper traffic — on 14th Street, a route striking straight through the heart of Manhattan. For 16 hours a day, essentially only buses and trucks are now allowed on a vital stretch of 14th Street. A sea of polluting, honking automobiles has parted; the municipal buses can taste freedom.

The results are no joke. According to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's latest numbers, 5,000 more people rode the bus each weekday after the ban started, and travel times across the most congested portion of 14th Street were slashed by over 35 percent. In December 2019, average bus speeds [doubled](#) from the previous December — to speeds *even faster* than a manatee.

In our growing cities and urban places, where more and more Americans are [expected to settle](#) in the coming years, cars don't always have to be dominant, just because for the better part of a century, they have been. One lane of traffic can, generally, carry between 600 to 1,600 cars per hour. Yet a lane for buses transports between 4,000 to 8,000 people each hour, [according to the National Association of City Transportation Officials](#). Car bans aren't rebellious or radical — they can be positively logical.

“You're seeing something long overdue in realizing that we have to undo the dominance of the car in order to create space for the modes that can most effectively carry people,” said Steven Higashide, the director of research at TransitCenter, a public transit organization.



A bus passing on 14th Street in Manhattan, New York.

Zlata Ivleva / Mashable

The car bans are, gradually, rising. Four months after New York City prohibited cars on 14th Street, San Francisco closed a long stretch of Market Street — [the city's main boulevard](#) — to private vehicles, too. In 2018, Seattle [closed bustling 3rd Avenue](#) to cars for 13 hours a day. Oslo, Norway banned cars in the heart of the city, [trading parking spaces for bike lanes](#). Barcelona's [famed new "superblocks"](#) have transformed car-dominated roads into inviting, walkable paths. In response to San Francisco's Market Street ban, the *Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board [called on the mayor](#) to consider car-free streets in the nation's second-most

populous city. “To fight climate change and design healthier communities, cities have to reclaim streets from cars,” the Times wrote. Soon after, a Los Angeles councilman asked the city to look into a [car ban along a 1.5-mile stretch of Broadway](#), a bustling artery in downtown LA.

“There’s a sea change coming, and I’m glad to see it,” said Sarah Kaufman, the associate director of New York University’s Rudin Center for Transportation.



Vicky Leta / Mashable



Vicky Leta / Mashable

Car bans aren’t just about getting places faster. Urban dwellers don’t have to tolerate car-choked streets where pedestrian deaths in the U.S. are [sharply on the rise](#). People don’t have to huff lung and [heart-damaging car pollution](#) in perpetuity. The U.S. transportation sector doesn’t have to be the nation’s [largest emitter of heat-trapping greenhouse gases](#). (Fifteen all-electric buses already run on 14th Street, and overall gas-powered buses [emit 33 percent fewer greenhouse gases](#) per passenger than cars.)

“We are in a period of awakening over safety, quality of life, and the nature of our physical environment,” said Martin Wachs, a transportation historian at the University of California at Los Angeles’ (UCLA) Department of Urban Planning.

At 2:30 p.m. on a recent Thursday, high schoolers filled the back of a 14th Street articulated bus, a long one that looks like it's been extended by an accordion. Everyone shuffled on quickly, because you can now buy your ticket before the bus arrives. And then, we were off. The bus came close to 20 mph as it cruised down 14th. But, critically, it didn't get stuck behind a train of idle cars. It just kept rolling. This wasn't always the case.

“Last summer it took me 25 minutes to go a mile,” said Danny Pearlstein, the policy and communications director for Riders Alliance, an organization that promotes reliable public transit in New York City.

“It won awards for being incredibly slow. Now, it's a star.”

“It's night and day now,” he said. “It won awards for being incredibly slow. Now, it's a star.”

Transforming 14th Street didn't take any extraordinary effort or the [techno-futuristic transportation dreams of a billionaire](#). Just new signs and paint, to emphasize the bus lane. “It amazes people what can be done with paint,” said Pearlstein.

Kicking cars off the road might seem like progress. But it's more like turning back the clock a century, before automobiles annexed the streets. “We're just righting a historical wrong,” said Doug Gordon, who moved to New York City in 1998 and hosts the podcast *The War on Cars*.



A 14th Street bus cruising in the evening.

Zlata Ivleva | Mashable

Indeed, the first cities were dominated by foot traffic, not cars. City dwellers walked, played, and transacted business in the middle of dirt roads, noted UCLA's Wachs. But then came horse-drawn carriages. And these sound like they were even worse than cars. "Streets were filled with horses, dead horses, and horse flies," said Wachs. Horses made cities filthy, and resulted in sometimes gruesome accidents with pedestrians. "Streets weren't exactly paradise prior to the automobile," said Wachs. And soon enough, the horse-powered carriages began to fill the roads. One day in 1885, an engineer [tallied 7,811 horse-drawn vehicles](#) traveling by a corner in downtown Manhattan.

Then, the automobile arrived. "When people welcomed the automobile, they thought they were welcoming something cleaner and safer," explained Wachs. But it turned out cars were awfully polluting, too, and posed a dramatic danger to people.



When Jack Morse, a tech reporter at Mashable, bikes down San Francisco's Market Street on the way to work, he sees a big difference now.

"Market Street used to be this death gauntlet of taxis, cars, buses, and trolleys," said Morse. And there still are buses and trolleys — but cars have been eliminated from the frenetic boulevard. "It feels markedly, noticeably different, and it feels markedly, notably safer," Morse said.

"Pedestrians no longer have to dodge cars," he added.

In the U.S., it's becoming increasingly deadly for people to share streets with cars. Cheryl Walker, the Federal Highway Administration's associate administrator for safety, [wrote this year](#) that a car almost struck her in a crosswalk, rather than stopping at the stop sign. It was a near miss. "I stopped in my tracks just short of the point where we would have collided," she said.

A glowing Market Street.

U Schools / Getty

Thousands of Americans aren't so lucky. In the U.S., pedestrian deaths have shot up by a whopping 53 percent since 2009. In 2018 alone, cars killed 6,283 pedestrians. In Los Angeles, after four years of trying to completely stamp out traffic deaths, the city saw [134 people and 19 bikers killed](#) in 2019. "Globally, roads are deadlier than HIV or murder," [wrote](#) *The Economist*.

Today, pedestrians are increasingly exposed to [larger, tank-like vehicles](#). Unsurprisingly, many of these bigger vehicles, SUVs, bludgeon more Americans each year, [according to the Governors Highway Safety Association](#). That's because when a sedan strikes a person, they have a better chance, at least, of rolling off the hood, explained NYU's Kaufman. "But an SUV might kill them," she said.

Today, city dwellers have to contend with the promotion and glamorization of ever-larger SUVs and trucks, like Elon Musk's dystopian-influenced Cybertruck, made with "Ultra-Hard 30X Cold-Rolled stainless-steel structural skin," and a giant electric Hummer promoted by LeBron James during the Superbowl. Human bodies don't stand much of a chance [against these monsters](#).

6,283

Pedestrians killed in the U.S. in 2018

Federal Highway Administration

53%

Increase in U.S. pedestrian deaths since 2009

Federal Highway Administration

But on roads that prohibit cars, walkers and bikers have a safer reality, like on San Francisco's Market Street. "A big part about cycling is you feel the city doesn't care about you — it can feel really dehumanizing," said Mashable's Morse. "This [car ban] is a nice step from a city that's trying to put its citizens first."

"City officials recognize that cities are for people," said Kaufman, "even though [cities] were taken over by cars 100 years ago."

It's not our fault that vehicles have grown so dominant. In many places, driving is the only way to get somewhere. "I'm a scholar of public transit, but I would never blame someone for taking a car to work because designers designed our city this way," said Jacob Wasserman, a researcher at UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies.

Take, for example, Los Angeles. "LA was once the streetcar capital of the nation," said Wasserman. The iconic red streetcars were, in fact, the nation's largest electric railway. Why, in the early 1900s, before the first plane ever took flight, electric trains transported Angelenos to the beach!

Yet the forward-looking electric rail was abandoned, and a labyrinthine system of concrete freeways built. (Now, Los Angeles is trying to catch up with its electrified past. Four years ago, the city opened up a new rail line to the beach, with [eager Angelenos carrying paddle boards on the train](#). LA has hopes of even constructing a train below, near, or beside the nation's [worst-trafficked freeway, the 405](#).)

But building out train lines are multi-billion dollar projects that can take years, if not decades, to construct. That's what makes buses so essential — specifically buses that have their own lanes, like on 14th and Market streets.





Top: Lower East Side Manhattan in 1885 | Bottom: An electric train headed to Redondo Beach, in southern LA County (1948)

Top: Getty Images | Bottom: LA Metro Library and Archive

“Buses can operate like rail, just without the tracks,” said Wasserman.

Buses might not be as sexy as illusions of flying taxis, driverless cars, and hyperloops. But buses have a significant edge on these techno-futuristic whims. They exist.

“The innovation we need is not technological, but innovation in public planning,” said TransitCenter’s Higashide.

Take, for example, the potential of truly self-driving vehicles. Autonomous cars, unleashed into wild, chaotic, city environments, will still clog city streets, even if the vehicles prove they can one day drive safer, faster, or more efficiently than humans.

Critics surmise that day may never come, though companies like Alphabet’s Waymo have received [Arizona state permits for vehicle testing](#) of fully self-driving vehicles in [intensely analyzed, carefully mapped, limited, local areas](#). “People closest to the technology say that it may be many decades before we have that, if ever,” stressed Higashide. As a 2019 [Washington Post story](#) exposed, self-driving computer programs aren’t close to reliably predicting how pedestrians behave, as evidenced by a self-driving research Uber — an SUV — striking and killing 49-year-old Elaine Herzberg as she walked across a Tempe, Arizona street on a clear night in 2018. (Since the accident, Uber now [requires two trained “specialists”](#) to sit in the front seats of its self-driving test vehicles; the cars are no longer driving themselves.) To get self-driving cars right, “...we will end up wanting our cars to be as intelligent as a human,” [writes](#) veteran roboticist Rodney Brooks. That will take an undetermined amount of time.

Bustling New York City.

Instead of hoping for techno-remedies, cities can clear lanes for public transit — whether buses, trolleys, or trains.

There aren't many drawbacks, if any, to the recent car bans in New York City and San Francisco. The car ban has had a "negligible effect" on streets around 14th, said Higashide. It's expected [to be the same](#) for Market Street. In large part, people choose non-driving options if they're attractive — like how people have [widely ditched cars in Oslo](#).

Historically though, some businesses have argued that a vehicle ban, or streets turned into pedestrian walkways, might drive customers away, explained Camille Kamga, a transportation researcher at The City College of New York. This seems illogical, and it is. Closing streets to cars usually *drives up* foot traffic by and into stores. "It gives back streets to the people," Kamga said. When New York City permanently closed down parts of perhaps the world's most famous plaza, Times Square, to vehicles, there was opposition. Now, there's more people entering stores, he said.

"People are afraid of new ideas," said Kamga. "Now, lots of people like it."

Beyond people with mobility limits, it's unclear who would ever voluntarily drive down 14th Street to enjoy 14th Street. Cars simply aren't necessary to indulge the eclectic goods and services offered by the likes of 14th's Crocodile Lounge, Papaya Dog, Namaste Bookshop, an uncountable number of drug stores, Joe's Pizza, Artichoke Pizza, Williamsburg Pizza, or Bravo Pizza.

The 14th Street car ban is a year-and-a-half test, a rather massive "pilot project" to see if it works. So far, the city seems thoroughly pleased. "The reviews are in, and the 14th Street busway has been a huge success," Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer said in a statement. "Ridership is up, travel times are down, and the 14th Street area is more pleasant and lively for all who traverse it." And right on the heels of SF's Market Street car ban, a leading city transit official has [called for cars to be "purged" from Valencia Street](#), a hip boulevard teeming with bars, bakeries, and bookstores.



Top: Taxis on 5th Avenue | Bottom: Cars lined up on 5th Avenue.

Top and Bottom: Zlata Ivleva | Mashable

At first, it will seem weird to those encountering a street no longer dominated by cars. Fourteenth Street felt bizarre to me in the twilight during the tail end of rush hour. I stood on the double-yellow line, dead center in the road. The atmosphere wasn't polluted with engine noise and horns. "I was walking down the street and heard a baby crying in a stroller across the road," said Gordon, of the car podcast. "You can hear street performers."

It also might feel odd to stroll across a crosswalk and not have the grill of a car, waiting to turn right, breathing on your leg. "Vehicles have taken over our streets, so people assume vehicles have the right of way," said Kaufman.

Car bans might be disconcerting for some drivers, too, who may have spent their entire lives unaware that 14th Street and Market Street were built for foot traffic, long before the first automobile hit the road. "Drivers definitely feel very entitled to every inch of public space — they feel entitled to every last piece of it," said Gordon.

Alas, change is afoot, though cars are still largely supreme. After a century of car dominance, both citizens and governments alike have recognized there's a better way to live. Why didn't we realize this all earlier? That's a good question, said UCLA's Wachs. "Why do certain foods become popular?" he mused. No matter. People-friendly streets and a desire for unpolluted surroundings are increasingly en vogue. More cities are, if slowly, seeing the light. "That's the way society evolves," Wachs said.



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