

# The love affair is over

America's relationship with the automobile is changing.  
The transportation beat has to catch up.

BY MICHELINE MAYNARD

*Illustration by Jeffrey Smith*

In January 2013, more than 5,000 journalists from 62 countries poured into Cobo Convention Center in Detroit, as they do every year, for the North American International Auto Show. They rubbed shoulders with colleagues from *Car and Driver*, which prints 1.2 million copies a month, shared by its nearly 10 million readers. ¶ Spread among them were some of the 19 editors, writers, and reviewers from *The New York Times'* Wheels blog

(which the paper shuttered in October), and the 25 who cover the industry worldwide for *Bloomberg News*, including seven stationed in Detroit. Based on the media attention, it might have been 1960, when America's Big Three automakers dominated the industry with a 90-percent market share. And four years after his administration's \$82-billion rescue of General Motors and Chrysler, President Obama is still touting the bailout as a signature economic accomplishment. "We saved the American auto industry," Obama declared in a speech in September.

But the industry that Obama saved, and that all those journalists cover, has been shrinking from its dominant place in American life for nearly a decade, even though that reality has yet to really sink in.

Economic and environmental concerns, along with dramatic social shifts, have caused Americans to begin to rethink their dependence on automobiles. Driving, which has been on

more or less an upward slope since the end of World War II, has dropped from the peaks of last decade. Teens, glued to their mobile devices and chauffeured by helicopter parents, show little interest in getting their licenses. Cities are racing to add bike-sharing programs in order to gain cachet with their growing populations of young residents. At the same time, communities both large and small are competing for the billions of public-transportation dollars that the Obama administration has been doling out.

Modern American society has been shaped around the car. The cities that swelled after World War I—like Detroit, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Houston—grew because automobiles let them. Cars have been the reason behind everything from our transportation infrastructure to our suburbs and shopping centers. The car, and the allure of the open road, came to represent the very essence of America: freedom, individuality, mobility. "What the automobile industry did





other, the way they viewed space and the way they used space," says Kevin Boyle, a professor of history at Northwestern University. "There was no need to build upward, because you could build outward."

Rethinking all this is a massive undertaking, one that must contend not only with the practical and economic aspects but also the emotional and political fallout. Urban planners and transportation specialists, sensing that the 21st century will be their moment, paint fanciful and sometimes farfetched pictures of redesigned communities, built for pedestrians, with driverless vehicles guided by smart grids and charging stations plentiful as bike racks. That Jetsons-like utopia aside, there is real change taking place and momentum is building.

In Boston, always a pedestrian- and public-transit-focused city, only about half of trips from the metropolitan region now take place by car. New York's Citi Bike system

hit seven million miles traveled September, less than four months after it started. Detroit, whose identity is inseparable from the auto industry, has fought a determined battle to get federal money for a light-rail system. Meanwhile, investors are racing to pour money into Uber, the mobile-phone application that allows its customers to find the closest available taxi.

Media coverage of America's transportation story, though, seems oddly stuck in the last century. We hear about chunks of concrete falling from aging bridges, sinkholes swallowing cars on city streets, and see heart-stopping footage of overloaded highways. Occasionally, a piece on electric cars or bike sharing will bubble up to the front page or pierce the comedy consciousness of Jon Stewart, whose June diatribe about the "dangers" of Citi Bike delighted transportation advocates, who were happy for the attention.

But this transportation revolution is unfolding mostly under the radar. There is no charismatic champion of alternative transportation among the hopelessly gridlocked policymakers in Washington who can provide regular hooks for media coverage. In fact, transportation proponents are frustrated by the scant attention the infrastructure debate gets in Congress, which only acted to end mushrooming flight delays after last spring's sequester when East Coast airports became bogged down.

It is a largely local and regional phenomenon, and while newspapers, television, and public radio have dipped into the topic, the coverage is led by specialized websites and blogs. Of course, daily journalism has never been that good at recognizing the signals that stories are reaching critical mass, and different sides of newsrooms are notoriously bad at sharing information that might turn smaller stories into big ones. With newsrooms' staffing and ambitions curtailed by financial stress, "transportation"—broadly defined—is a neglected beat, while automotive coverage, which still brings in the ad revenue, remains strong.

That's why I decided to launch *Curbing Cars: Rethinking How We Get Around* ([www.curbingcars.com](http://www.curbingcars.com)) with a successful Kickstarter this past summer. For me, the project, which looks at all the reasons why people are driving less and what it means to the auto industry, is the bookend to the conclusions I reached in my 2003 book, *The End of Detroit: How the Big Three Lost Their Grip on the American Car Market*, in which I warned that one or more of the car companies was in danger of going bankrupt. Unfortunately for the industry, and for thousands of people who lost their jobs, my prediction came true in 2009.

Since then, with the rescue of GM and Chrysler, car plants rehiring (albeit at much lower pay), and sales rising once more, the media's perception has been that everything got back to normal. But the new normal, in terms of transportation, is swiftly becoming something very different than what this country has experienced since Henry Ford made it his mission to marry automobiles to the American Dream a century ago.

## Driving light

Many Americans, especially those whose pocketbooks are stretched to the limits, have embraced something the LivableStreets Alliance in Cambridge, MA, calls "driving light." That doesn't mean abandoning cars altogether, but using them when needed and choosing other options, like taking the bus, walking, renting a car, or relying on ridesharing as part of a transportation portfolio. For some families, that means eliminating a car from the family fleet. Others are getting along without cars completely, although that's highly impractical for people in many parts of the country.

It's a lot easier to get along with fewer cars, or just one car, when one member of the family works from home, as 20 million Americans do (including me). Transportation is the second-biggest household expense, behind a mortgage or rent payments, and relatively easy to nip. The average cost of a new car is now above \$31,000, versus \$12,750 in

1993 (the equivalent of \$20,636 in today's dollars). Cutting back has also been made easier because of the emergence of what experts call "collaborative consumerism," or the sharing economy.

In 2009, I wrote a story for *The New York Times* that examined the fledgling driving-light movement, although it didn't have a name at the time. I talked to people who had given up cars, and to some others who were testing out a new service called Zipcar, launched by an entrepreneur in Boston. It charged an annual fee, which let members rent cars by the hour. Back then, Zipcar had 300,000 members. Now it has 900,000 and is owned by Avis. Zipcar is far from the only hourly rental choice: nonprofit car-sharing programs have popped up in a number of cities, and major carmakers like **BMW** are making vehicles available by the hour.

These shifts are having a noticeable impact. Researchers at the University of Michigan and elsewhere cite statistics that driving (in terms of miles driven) has dropped 5 percent since it peaked in the US in 2006. Americans are taking fewer trips in their cars and driving shorter distances when they do get behind the wheel. Because the country is so big, it takes years for any social change to reflect itself in statistics. Just a plateau in driving would be a significant development, but an actual drop in driving by the owners of the country's 240 million registered light-duty vehicles is potentially earthshaking for Detroit, for policymakers, and for urban planners.

Northwestern's Kevin Boyle sees a bit of back-to-the-future in all this. "More and more people want to live in center cities," he says. Toyota officials say they've noticed the suburbs-to-city trend in many cities across America. These reverse pioneers had enough of distant suburbs and surrendering their free time to long commutes. They also want to reconnect with people, rather than be alone in their cars. Boyle sees this as exactly the opposite of his parents' generation, who escaped cities in droves after World War II. "In some ways, they want to return to the 19th-century model of cities like Chicago and New York," he says.

The most noticeable aspect of this is 20- and 30-somethings who have transformed neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Detroit. But plenty of Baby Boomers also are moving back downtown, once they become empty nesters, where their new lofts might have just one parking space instead of the three spots in their garages. Boyle says the permanence and character of urban places have become attractive in an ephemeral world in which news headlines are outdated almost as soon as they are tweeted.

Another set of statistics has gotten even more attention than the overall driving decline: the significant drop in the number of teens on the road. In 2008, when I was covering the auto industry for the *Times*, I came across data showing that fewer than 30 percent of teenagers got their licenses when they turned 16. Like pretty much everyone else in the 1970s, I lined up with my high-school classmates to take driver's-education classes the summer I was eligible. I passed my driving test a few months later. Not today's students. According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, still only half of teens have a license by the time they graduate. Even a year



**Pedal power** New York's Citi Bike system hit seven million miles traveled in September, less than four months after it started.

later, just 73 percent have passed their driver's test, compared with 85 percent in 1996.

Two big policy changes have caused these numbers to drop, along with a broader social development. First, half of states require students to take formal driver's education, but many school districts, led by those in Ohio, which made it optional in 1992, have dropped the classes, citing the expense and insurance concerns. That means students have to pay for commercial driving classes, which can cost hundreds of dollars. Moreover, a large number of states have tightened restrictions on teen drivers in an effort to reduce accidents and drunk driving. Some limit the hours when a teen can drive a car or require them to be accompanied by an adult until they turn 18.

Beyond that, some teens simply aren't interested in making the effort to learn to drive. They're overloaded with homework and school activities, and would rather spend whatever free time they do have online, texting, and video-chatting with their friends. Once, to escape their parents, they had to get behind the wheel. Now they can just turn on their devices.

Gas prices, which have hovered at or above \$3 a gallon nationally for the past three years, also are playing a role in keeping kids off the roads, especially when it is so hard for teens to find jobs. Beyond that, driving aimlessly around town, as youngsters did in *American Graffiti*, isn't as attractive if they can't show their friends they did something cool. "It has to be Instagram-worthy," a 20-something man in Modesto, CA, told NPR's Sonari Glinton.

The vast public-transit construction project that's going on all over the country has contributed to this shift, too. To be sure, older East Coast cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington have subway systems, as do

Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. But the public transit in many parts of country has been limited to buses and perhaps surface rail. Now, money is flowing again for transportation projects. The most endearing are streetcars, which are coming back to LA and in the works for Minneapolis, Tucson, Atlanta, Kansas City, and Charlotte. Bigger transit projects are under way as well, like the Second Avenue subway in New York City, the Silver Line subway for Washington, and San Francisco's Central Subway tunnel.

### **A bicycle built for you**

Transportation advocates would like to go well beyond urban projects and develop a meaningful high-speed rail system for the United States. Early on, Obama named it one of his top priorities, and lovers of the Eurostar and Japan's *Shinkansen* crossed their fingers that fast trains might finally be headed for American tracks. There isn't significant progress yet on that score. Instead, all over the country, a slower, more basic form of transportation is popping up: bicycles.

New Yorkers, used to dodging taxis, maneuvering around tourists, and peering down tracks waiting for subway trains, probably can't believe what's happened to Manhattan. The hottest form of transportation in 2013 is the rental bike. Citibank bought the naming rights to the bike-sharing program launched by Mayor Michael Bloomberg as the crowning event in his tenure. These systems charge by the hour, or riders can purchase an annual membership (more than 85,000 have signed up so far). This allows them to pick up a bike in one part of town and drop it off when they are finished (there are stiff fines for riding off with one). New York was years behind other major cities in rolling out a bike-sharing program: Boston, Washington, and even Chattanooga, TN, had systems first. But once New York got bike

sharing, it suggested the concept had finally taken hold in the US. With the addition of Chicago and the Bay Area Bike Share program in San Francisco, the bike-sharing fleet doubled in 2013, according to the Earth Policy Institute, and it is set to double again in 2014.

Thirty-four cities and 30 college campuses have some kind of bike-sharing system. Again, as with trains and other public transit, the US has a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the world. Wuhan, China, has more than 90,000 bike-share bikes, versus just 6,000 in New York. Paris, which has the world's third-biggest bike-sharing system, has a bike for every 97 residents. Bikes are so numerous in Copenhagen that there are dedicated paths with free bike pumps and traffic lights to regulate the cyclists (features that are starting to appear in the US, as well).

Coverage of bike sharing, like many of the other pieces of the driving-light phenomenon, falls into a gray area for news organizations. The stories might show up anywhere from the front page to the metro section to sports. Jackie Douglas, executive director of LivableStreets in Cambridge, says that while the volume of transportation stories is rising, the coverage is broad, not deep. "Sometimes it's great, sometimes it's not so great," she says.

As a transportation advocate, Douglas is frustrated that journalists tend to look for conflict in stories, rather than for the public-service aspect of education and information. "We'll see someone involved in a fatal bike crash, and it's primetime news," she says. "People will point to that and say, 'Oh, it's a crazy bicyclist. Were they wearing a helmet?' as if it's the biker's fault."

She and others in the field turn to one another, and to the internet, as their primary sources of transit news. One often-mentioned source is The Atlantic Cities, the urban affairs site run by *The Atlantic* (disclaimer: I have written for Atlantic Cities since 2011). Another is the Streetsblog family of sites, covering transportation topics in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. A number of NPR outlets collaborate on Transportation Nation, based at WNYC in New York, and there are a variety of other sites, some focusing on public transit, others on gear, and still more on transportation planning.

The individual model for mainstream media transportation coverage may be a former assistant city editor in Montreal named Andy Riga. In early 2009, he was asked by his paper, the *Montreal Gazette*, to begin covering the overhaul of the formidable Turcot Interchange, used by 300,000 motorists per day. The three-level interchange, built for Expo '67, links three highways and provides access to the Champlain Bridge over the St. Lawrence River. The massive project is now projected to cost \$3.7 billion, and is Canada's equivalent of Boston's Big Dig.

Riga had just begun that task when the Bixi bike-sharing program was announced for the city. "I decided to cover it," he says. Then bike paths became a bigger issue, "so I threw that in." More recently, Montrealers have become focused on pedestrian safety, and Riga added that to his portfolio. The idea of a multimodal transportation reporter makes sense for Montreal, often considered the most European city in

North America, ranking No. 11 on Danish bike blog Copenhagenize's list of the world's bike-friendly cities. "Everybody drives, or cycles, or walks, or uses transit, or a combination of them," Riga says. "There's real interest on the part of our readers."

His coverage goes beyond consumer journalism. Over the last three years, Riga has been tangling with the Montreal police department over access to statistics on crimes against people and property for every subway station in Montreal. Like Douglas at LivableStreets, Riga says he's surprised at the lack of news organizations that have followed his lead. "I really do think you have to have an editor who understands this is important, even as newsrooms shrink," Riga says.

The people who get it pop up in some surprising places. In January, Jalopnik, the unabashed car-enthusiast site (to which I have contributed), tackled the topic head on in a story called, "We May Have Already Hit Peak Car, And That Means We Are All Doomed." The story was based on a finding from Quartz, the business-news site, which reported that driving was dropping not just in the US but also in a number of countries. For automakers, such a development was "potentially catastrophic." And it certainly could be for the media, whose revenues and readership depend on attracting people who are enthusiastic about automobiles and the industry.

All those reporters at the auto shows—and the editors who send them—should take heed: For a growing number of Americans, the automobile is becoming fundamentally less central to their lives. Northwestern's Boyle makes a salient point: "The wonder of this industry was that manufacturers managed to sell a product nobody needed, and a society built up around it," he says. "Humans got along without it for a long, long time."

Of course, it's tempting to dismiss the shift as a byproduct of the Great Recession. Many auto industry officials believe that young cyclists and transit riders will join their parents in buying minivans and crossover vehicles as soon as they have their own children. Likewise, it's hard for people who were raised to lust after powerful engines and shiny sheet metal to believe their kids won't eventually be seduced. Yet everything I'm hearing from my college-age nephews, the undergraduate and graduate students I've taught, the people who submit their stories to Curbing Cars, and the conversations I've had in airports and at conferences tells me there's definitely something afoot when it comes to attitudes about automobiles. We've seen people rethink many aspects of American society, from what they view on TV to gay marriage to climate change. Much of that happened gradually, with the media figuring it out only after the shifts were taking place.

In this case, the audience may be way ahead of the story.

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