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The Too-Fast Lane



Speed demons: Crossing the Walnut Street Bridge and continuing west, drivers begin to treat the street like a racetrack, often disregarding pedestrians and cyclists. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

How poor planning encourages high-speed driving in West Philadelphia.

by Steve Conn

In the past few years, several pedestrians and cyclists have been hit by cars on Chestnut and Walnut streets in the neighborhood of Penn and Drexel. At least one of those died of his injuries.

That these tragedies, caused by reckless drivers, could have been avoided goes without saying. More to the point, however, these "accidents" were anything but accidental. They were the inevitable result of the way Chestnut and Walnut streets have been designed as they run through West Philadelphia. That design needs to change.

Follow me west on Walnut: After leaving Rittenhouse Square, where the traffic is thick and slow-moving, cars are launched onto Daytona-by-the-Schuylkill. Across three full lanes, they accelerate in order to catch the timed lights that begin at 33rd Street. Coming out of Center City, cars routinely reach speeds in the 40s. I was in a cab once which hit 50 mph. And they don't slow down. Not until Walnut Street ends at 63rd.

Walnut Street, and its eastbound twin Chestnut, have over the years been turned into mini-expressways. Drivers on these streets behave accordingly -- they routinely drive much faster than the posted speed limits, they become aggressive, jockeying for position against other, equally obnoxious drivers. And they pay little attention to small matters like pedestrians crossing streets or bikes trying to share the road. Predictably, some of those latter unfortunates get run down in the Walnut Street rush.

But the damage these two streets have inflicted on us is not limited to broken bones and crushed bikes. Designed as they are only for the convenience of drivers who want to get in and out of the city as quickly as possible, Walnut and Chestnut streets sit as ugly scars across the body of West Philly. They sever the natural connections between neighborhoods and thus inhibit their revitalization.

Just west of the Schuylkill, both these streets have become gloomy and inhospitable. The two bridges that span the river are PennDOT surplus highway overpasses that offer no comforts for those who walk across them. There are some new developments just over the bridges (the Left Bank apartments, the proposed WXPN complex), and these are quite exciting. Yet even with them the area remains grim until about 33rd.

Further west, Walnut Street in particular was once home to vibrant neighborhoods, both black and white, whose residents lived in houses that ranged from neat and tidy to downright elegant. Over the past generation, the Walnut Street Freeway has facilitated the deterioration of much of this corridor.

Go visit the Restaurant School, whose campus occupies some gorgeous, late 19th-century houses on Walnut Street. Then notice the strip mall which has popped up just to its east. Catering entirely to car traffic, this bit of urban ugliness



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d. On Walnut Street, however, it is so out of place, so inappropriate as

Chestnut Street has devolved in places into a shabby mix of car washes,
e.

Walnut and Chestnut have become such barriers to the life of West Philadelphia that they have resisted even Penn's otherwise heroic efforts to re-energize the area. The variety of Penn's programs in University City have largely had their effect south of Walnut, though its students and staff continue to get hit on Walnut and Chestnut. Indeed, the stretch of Walnut that runs from 38th to 40th is perhaps the bleakest part of Penn's own campus.

Bad as it has become on Walnut and Chestnut, the damage here could be easily undone. Put simply: Slow the traffic down.

More specifically, make the traffic on both streets run in both directions. Perhaps two lanes running east and one west on Chestnut; two lanes west and one east on Walnut. This would eliminate the timed lights on the streets, and with those gone drivers would no longer have an incentive to make the jump to hyperspace as they travel through West Philly's neighborhoods.

With slower traffic would come fewer collisions. With a safer pedestrian environment, would come, well, more pedestrians. And with more pedestrians would come even safer streets, more life and a renewed sense of what neighborhoods really ought to be.

All this new urban activity on the sidewalks of Walnut and Chestnut would provide the perfect excuse to repave those sidewalks where they need it, and to replant the trees which are as much a part of West Philly as the houses and the neighborhoods.

By taming Walnut and Chestnut streets, Wild West Philly would become a little less wild.

Steve Conn is a member of Design Advocacy Group and is teaching in the history department at Temple University this year.



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