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CITYSPACE

Get Your Damn Car off the Sidewalk

**Alley Oops: Cars impede
pedestrian traffic in this narrow
lane near 21st and Arch streets.**

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

And other impediments to walking around.

by Steve Conn

A few weeks ago I went to have dinner with friends in beautiful Fairmount. I was bringing my two small kids along and thus had to drive my car. It was a Friday night, and we circled for quite a while before we found a parking spot.

As we walked to our destination, I realized it would have taken me much less time to park the car had I only known what the locals seem to know: If you can't find a spot where you want one, just pull your car up onto the sidewalk. They are so broad and elegant in this neighborhood, and a perfect size, really, for a car.

We had to walk around three such obstacles in the space of two blocks, and I recalled one description of Philadelphia as the "most walkable city in America, where no one wants to walk." Not even a block or two from a (legal) parking spot.

Each week this column provides a small lesson on the nature of good urban design. Good urban design is not simply or even primarily a question of aesthetics or taste. Rather it consists in the myriad ways we give shape to the urban environment so that it can function as one. That means creating buildings, spaces and systems that permit people to pursue our private lives while experiencing the joys of sharing public spaces as well.

As I stumbled past the cars parked on the sidewalks of Mt. Vernon Street, however, I was reminded that good urban design really comes in two phases. The first is the design part itself. Architecture, landscape architecture, traffic patterns, public transit systems all should pass this test: Do these things contribute to or detract from our shared urbanness?

The second part of good urban design, and surely the less sexy part, is its maintenance, upkeep and nurture. No piece of design, no matter how innovative or inspired, can survive its systematic neglect.

Take the humble sidewalk. There is nothing more urbane than a sidewalk. It provides a route of transit at the pedestrian speed that enables you to enjoy the daily urban pageant. It can also be a place to socialize for those whose doors open onto them. In Philadelphia, sidewalks in many neighborhoods serve as places for trees and everything they contribute to our urban environment.

Put a car -- or several -- in the middle of the sidewalk, however, and you might as well have torn it up. Parking a car on a sidewalk is like storing your garbage in the front hallway. It stinks up the whole house.

Likewise, for those of us who live in West Philadelphia, the trolleys are a marvelously efficient form of transport. Until someone double-parks a car on the tracks, an event that occurs daily on the No. 13 line that I take. I realize most Philadelphians believe that the right to double-park is guaranteed by the City Charter, but in fact double-parking on the trolley lines takes a piece of great urban design and ruins its efficiency. As a result, a number of people, after too many experiences getting to work or back home late, simply decide it's more reliable to drive.

It annoys me that so many people are so cavalier with our shared urban spaces; it makes me angry that the SUV from Jersey has blocked the curb cut by parking illegally, forcing me and my stroller out into traffic. But I'm truly baffled at the indifference this of those who are supposed to enforce the rules guaranteeing the proper functioning of our shared urban spaces. No one observes the speed limit on Kelly Drive or West River Drive, thus recklessly endangering all the bikers and joggers who are truly enjoying the place. No one ever seems to get a ticket for speeding. Or for blocking a trolley full of people, or for pulling a car up onto a sidewalk.

This indifference is no better at higher levels of officialdom.

on regulations exist to balance the rights of individuals to shape their
is best for the city as a whole.

stment (ZBA) and the Historical Commission tend to use the word
istration does when describing its environmental policies.

Just as Bush wants to "balance" the rights of people to drive gas guzzlers with the rights of oil companies to despoil the Arctic, the ZBA and Historic Commission have too often decided to "balance" the right of someone to demolish a part of the city's past with the right of someone else to put a parking lot on top of it.

Victories for good urban design in this town are hard fought. Each time we permit good urban design to be degraded, however, we turn victory into defeat, thus making the city less and less workable and less and less livable. We all suffer individually, and we suffer collectively as people simply get fed up and vote with their feet.

Good urban design only works if we all agree to make it work.

In other words, get your damn car off the sidewalk and stop blocking the trolleys.

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

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