

✱ THE HORRORS PERSIST

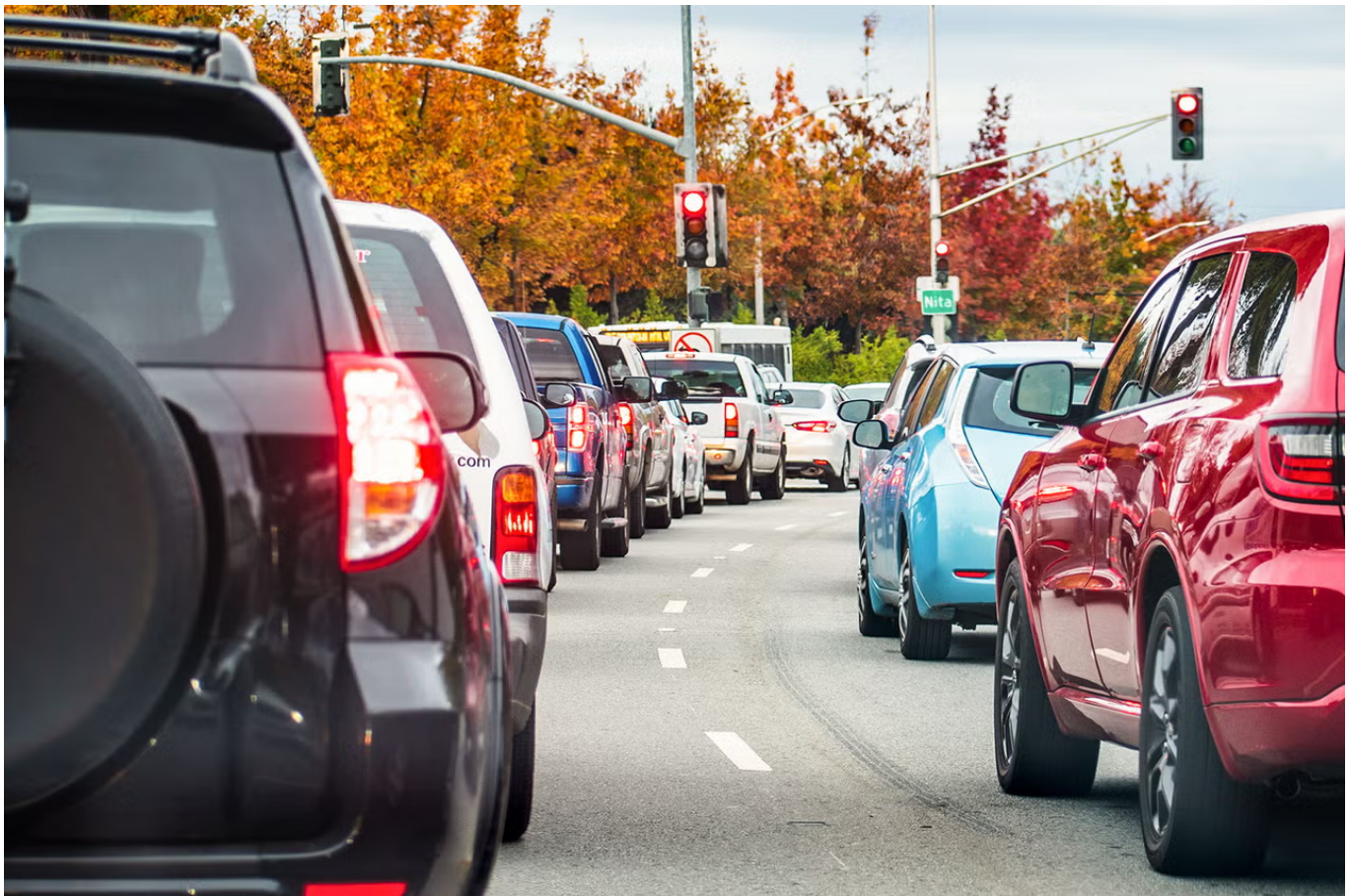
METROPOLIS

How to Fix America's Dangerous Roads

The wrong people are in charge.

BY HENRY GRABAR

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Later this month, San Antonio is having a block party to celebrate the renovation of Lower Broadway. Long a sun-soaked, seven-lane racetrack, the street is emerging from four years of construction with wider sidewalks, bike lanes, ADA-accessible crosswalks, on-street parking, and street trees.

Until it hits I-35, after which point Broadway is once again a hot, sprawling Texas highway, even as new development springs up alongside it.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. In 2017, voters in the state's second-largest city overwhelmingly approved funding to redesign the whole street, including these two miles north of the interstate.* City leaders pulled in federal money, and by 2020, they had \$113 million ready to go.

Then the Texas Department of Transportation pulled rank, reneging on an agreement to hand over control to the city. Their reasoning? No vehicle lane could be removed. The city manager called it "a complete about-face." The mayor said the decision was "illogical" and "absolutely unnecessary." Six years of planning went out the window, and by last year, Broadway was "no longer our project," the city's public works engineer said. Other voter-approved changes to state-owned roads had also been sent back to the drawing board. The Texas GOP platform now includes a "Freedom to Travel" plank that opposes the "Vision Zero" plans (which aim to eliminate traffic deaths) as well as any "mandate" to "shrink auto capacity, or intentionally clog vehicle lanes to force deference to pedestrian, bike, and mass transit options."

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That last part is a bit of Republican culture war goofery, but the situation transcends politics. No matter what city you live in, the most dangerous road is run by the state, and there is not much you or your local elected officials can do about it. From the street, this conflict is invisible; for city governments, it's inescapable.

“Some cities really struggle under this,” said Ryan Russo, the director of the National Association of City Transportation Officials. “State DOTs are unaccountable, not transparent, they like things the way they are. They’re in the habit of building expensive infrastructure for cars and that’s what they continue to do.” Russo learned, as the head of the Oakland Department of Transportation, that a city street that dipped beneath a freeway needed a state permit, which called for 12-foot-wide lanes, which meant no bike lane for Oaklanders on the underpass.

These conflicts are often about minute infrastructure changes like that—the sort of design changes that barely register as design, but always require taking space from cars. Shade trees, narrowed lanes, and shorter crosswalks often play into these “road diets.” The safety benefits can be significant, mostly from the way these tweaks slow down traffic. It’s not a coincidence that the most dangerous road in America is run by the state of Florida; nearly 2 in 3 road deaths in urbanized areas occur on the small fraction of streets that are managed by states, according to a NACTO analysis of federal data.

One problem is that the traffic engineer’s tool kit is focused on making streets safer for people in the cars, but not around them. “There’s legitimate reasons why we think more space on the side of the road is safer, and the best way to protect people is as much space as possible on both sides of the road” said Wes Marshall, a civil engineering professor at the University of Colorado–Denver and the author of *Killed by a Traffic Engineer*, which was published in June. But in an urban context, he said, that “clear zone” is where the bicycles and pedestrians are.

Furthermore, road safety is not a zero-sum game that benefits either pedestrians or motorists. Highway engineers typically view street trees as “immovable fixed objects,” and they can be a deadly adversary in a car crash. But in addition to their environmental benefits, street trees can signal to drivers that they need to slow down—making everyone safer, behind the wheel or not.

The other rationale for redesigning streets is economic development. In most small towns, Main Street is a fast-moving state road with no on-street parking for local businesses. A slower, shadier Main Street can draw people out of their cars, creating foot traffic for local businesses. For merchants, on-street parking can be the difference between a passing motorist and a customer. But state DOTs usually oppose on-street parking, since it takes a lane from cars and slows down the remaining traffic.

These technical disputes mask a larger philosophical divide. State highway engineers want to move as many cars as possible through a given space. That is how they measure their

success; anything that interferes—including new buildings, which might provoke traffic, as well as lower speed limits—must be scrutinized. City planners, by contrast, see streets as places to be, from storefront to storefront.

This distinction has gotten a lot of attention over the past decade as cities attempt to heal the scars of planning around cars. Charles Marohn, the founder of the Strong Towns movement, coined the term “stroad” to describe these hybrid thoroughfares, which strive to simultaneously offer the high speeds of a country road with a street’s density of roadside destinations. This model is “the futon of transportation,” he wrote: “just as a futon is neither a particularly good bed nor a particularly good couch, a stroad is neither a particularly good road or a particularly good street.”

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More often than not, these thoroughfares are the responsibility of a state DOT. “Whenever I am asked to help resuscitate a city or town center, before doing anything else, I run in a panic to Google Maps to see which, if any, of the downtown streets are state property,” the planner Jeff Speck wrote in his 2012 book *Walkable City*. “Then, if there are many, I adjust my fee up and their expectations down. Because dealing with the state DOT almost always means that the outcome will be a disappointment.” (Another problem: Most town planners, given the power relation between city and state, are not nearly so forthright about their beef with highway planners.)

Some experts say these relationships are improving. Two years ago, the D.C.-based urban-planning nonprofit Smart Growth America launched a “leadership academy” for state transportation planners around the country to try out experimental infrastructure in so-called quick builds. In Waterbury, Connecticut, for example, state and local officials worked together to narrow lanes and shorten crosswalk distances on Grand Street downtown, slowing traffic by 10 percent. (Then the project was removed, and traffic speeds rebounded.)

Another sign for optimism, observed SGA’s Heidi Simon, is a new U.S. Department of Transportation program, Safe Streets For All, which subverts the traditional relationship between states and cities by doling out road money directly to cities and towns for the first

time. (The U.S. DOT is run by a former mayor, remember.) Last week, for example, Detroit got a \$10 million SS4A grant last week to reduce car crashes on MDOT-managed Gratiot Avenue—a big corridor in the Motor City’s “high-injury network.” It’s an interesting inversion of the politics of housing, where progressives in state legislatures are trying to strip local control over zoning to permit more housing.

Better still is last year’s agreement between Chicago and the state of Illinois, which allowed the city and state to put together a preapproved infrastructure tool kit that it can deploy without consulting the Illinois Department of Transportation on each individual project. That includes basic stuff like curb cuts, as well as 10-foot lanes—another proven safety improvement that state traffic engineers have traditionally resisted.

Still, it can be slow going. Last week, 62-year-old John Corcoran was killed by a car while riding his bicycle in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The city has been building protected bike infrastructure at a rapid clip, but the street where Corcoran was hit, Memorial Drive, is under state jurisdiction. Activists say the state agency has not moved fast enough to fix a dangerous road. 📌

Correction, Oct. 4, 2024: This article originally misstated that San Antonio is the fourth-largest city in Texas.

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