

GUEST ESSAY

Something Has Changed on City Streets, and Amazon Is to Blame

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Between 1961, when the social critic Jane Jacobs published “The Death and Life of Great American Cities,” and the Covid lockdowns of 2020, it seemed the residential neighborhoods of Washington, like those of certain other, mostly Eastern cities in the United States, had discovered the secret of happiness and safety in the automobile age: narrow streets.

By law, two-way residential streets in Washington are supposed to be 34 feet from curb to curb, but many are a few feet narrower. The average car is about six feet wide, so parked cars on either side constrict a roadway quickly. Once you account for mirrors, swinging doors and the occasional mis-parked minivan or S.U.V., the two lanes of moving traffic might have only 13 or 14 feet of road space to work with. Drivers can move freely but cautiously, braking to pass. For Jacobs and other urban theorists, that’s perfect — these are not neighborhoods that shortcut-seeking motorists consider worthwhile to barrel through, or where playing children need to fear sudden surprises.

This delicate balance of functionality and inconvenience has been upset. In recent years, and especially since the onset of the pandemic, something has changed on city streets — not the streets themselves but the implicit social agreement that determines how they are used.

The internet is largely to blame. Waze and other navigation apps have channeled impatient motorists into unpromising-looking byways. But even more consequential has been the quantum leap in e-commerce, which has brought hundreds of thousands of vans onto the streets. They're big. FedEx's Freightliner MT45s and Amazon's Ford Transits, Mercedes-Benz Sprinters and Ram ProMasters are all about eight feet wide. Streets that were tight but passable have often wound up blocked off.

This is more than a quality-of-life issue. As with disputes over bicycling rights and privileged parking access for users of certain alternative fuels, it raises a political question about the use of our roadways. We find ourselves in a de facto negotiation over how Amazon and other delivery networks will compensate the country for their partial takeover of the publicly funded road system that makes up a large part of their work space. Concessions can and should be extracted from Amazon. But the public's leverage is weak, the political dynamics are complex and the alternatives are fewer than they used to be.

One can lament the shortsightedness that brought this state of affairs about. The 1992 Supreme Court decision *Quill Corporation v. North Dakota*, since overturned, absolved companies from collecting sales tax in states where they did not have a physical "nexus." The Internet Tax Freedom Act of 1998, which blocked new taxes on internet access, also contained language banning "multiple" and "discriminatory" taxes on e-commerce, further tying states' hands. The upshot was an enduring advantage for internet retailers over bricks-and-mortar stores.

That outcome, though deplorable, is not easy to undo. With half a trillion dollars in annual sales and billions in profits most quarters, Amazon is among the largest employers in many states, and the very largest employer in the richest state: New Jersey. Internet commerce has hollowed out the storefronts of old commercial zones and rendered them useless for anything but face-to-face services such as pouring espresso and painting nails. Those bricks-and-mortar businesses that Amazon and others eliminated were not just market competitors at an individual level — collectively, they provided an alternative retail infrastructure that might have allowed regulators to drive a harder bargain with Amazon.

Adding insult to injury, the big internet retailers have taken great advantage of a communal resource. The real estate that Amazon and other vendors require to make their deliveries is not private but public. We faced a smaller version of this problem with the surge of urban lunch trucks a decade ago. In many cities restaurant owners complained that the trucks were being allowed to undercut them by commandeering public property, while carrying a far lighter burden in rent, regulations and taxes.

The problem with big deliverers is not only larger, it's also more acute, for they can often use public property at a discount. Since the turn of the century, New York City has reportedly given about \$750 million in parking ticket discounts to UPS, FedEx and other companies that run up huge double-parking bills. Philadelphia has long shown leniency to double parkers, too (although that is reportedly changing).

In theory, the solution to the problem is simple: charge more for double parking and police the abuse more effectively, perhaps with the help of high-tech apps and road sensors that closely track the movement and location of delivery trucks. That is not so different from the way E-ZPass assesses tolls for the use of highways, bridges and tunnels.

However it works, policing e-commerce on the road will require trade-offs. Consider an example from Philadelphia. Many residents have complained about trucks parked along a new waterfront trail in the city as they load in front of a Dave & Buster's. In an interview on the website of the public radio station WHYY, the city's deputy streets department commissioner, Richard Montanez, pleaded for understanding. He noted that the outlet had brought a new purpose to what had been an abandoned warehouse. "Dave & Buster's was there prior to the city building this trail, and now trail users want the Dave & Buster's gone," he told WHYY. "We understand what the community wants, but the community also wants jobs. It's a very delicate balance."

Fair-mindedness in cases like these means paying heed to gentrifying lifestyle nags and speculative developers — but without reflexively favoring them over established residents and entrenched interests. The politics of repurposing roads looks like the politics of anything else over the last decade or so: a tense battle between a bunch of elite planners doubting the public's wisdom and a seething public doubting the elite's legitimacy.

Bikes are another example. Based on fleeting declines in car traffic during the Covid lockdowns, many zealous city councils made a big bet on bike lanes. To put it less delicately, they cynically transferred the benefit of lots of public property from car commuters and small retail businesses to bike-riding elites and corporate e-businesses. American drivers are bound to take any new road regime poorly. If recent history is anything to go by, they will understand it as a class-based politics aimed against those who can't afford real estate within biking distance of the city center.

"Why don't we ask the 'no cars!' people how they get their groceries and general supplies?" asked one correspondent in the Inside-Booster, a Chicago community newspaper. "I would venture to guess they are Amazon Prime members, and we can thank their delivery trucks for clogging up our community by double parking while making their deliveries."

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