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Auto Ex-Machina. Fodder for Post- car Imaginaries

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Abstract

As cities increasingly seek to reduce car dependency, vast areas of urban land dedicated to automobility become available for reuse. This article examines how the spatial surplus of the automobile can be reimagined as a frontier for post-car imaginaries. Artistic provocations such as Wolf Vostell's 1969 Fluxus artwork *Ruhender Verkehr*, an Opel Kapitän encased in concrete, challenged automobility by occupying parking space, prompting a broader question: what becomes of car space in post-car cities? Environmental transitions and shared mobility open opportunities to reclaim it as multifunctional urban commons: parks, housing, playgrounds, and community hubs. Initiatives such as Peckham Levels and R-Urban interventions in London and SCADpads in Atlanta demonstrate the potential of adaptive reuse. Repurposing car-dominated infrastructure carries social risks of gentrification, though it provides an alternative to large-scale "creative destruction." Re-envisioning these spaces addresses housing shortages, carbon footprints and community fragmentation, sparking ideas for a post-car urban futures.

Introduction

In the centre of Cologne's traffic lanes stands 'Ruhender Verkehr' (Stationary Traffic), Wolf Vostell's 1969 Fluxus artwork: an *Opel Kapitän* entombed in the very material that modern cities pour to accommodate cars: concrete. This artwork and 'Concrete Traffic', made one year later in Chicago (Figure 1), were conceived to usurp a parking spot, thus mocking automotive dominance. Similar to other artists within the Fluxus movement, Vostell encapsulated its core principles by orchestrating Happenings and Aktionkunst.¹ His artworks were intended to disrupt daily life and wedge their way into the urban environment. In fact, both 'Ruhender Verkehr' and 'Concrete Traffic' were built in parking lots amidst the crowd. The latter work was revived in 2016, paraded around the streets of Chicago and parked in the University of Chicago Campus. Unfortunately, 'Ruhender Verkehr' was too much for the German automotive society and was shoved on a road median between opposing traffic lanes in Hohenzollernring, defeating its entire conceptual purpose. Vostell's interventions triggered vital reflections: what if the artwork remained blocking traffic; what if all automobile space were blocked, and if so, what should be done with the inherited car space as cities move toward reduced car dependency?



Figure 1. *Conservation specialists work on the underside of Wolf Vostell's Concrete Traffic_ 1970: Chicago, April 5, 2016. Photograph by: Stephen Murphy. © The Wolf Vostell Estate.*

From this tension between disruption and reinvention, a new spatial narrative begins: the concept of this paper, *Auto ex Machina*, emerges as a response to these questions, transforming artistic provocation into architectural and urban reflections. *Auto ex Machina* connects to the ancient Greek theatrical concept ‘Deus ex machina’, which consisted of lowering an actor (deity) with a mechanical crane that intervened to conclude the plot. Our title suggests resolving the urban ‘plot’ by adding a slight twist to the original story, removing the automobile or machine itself. The title plays with the prefix ‘ex-’ and the redundancy of *Auto*, which takes *Deus*’s spot, and the Italian word ‘macchina’, which commonly designates ‘car’.

If the role of the automobile is increasingly questioned, what narrative can we consolidate for the space created around it? Across contemporary cities, vast areas of land remain dedicated to automobility infrastructures – parking lots, underground car parks, curbside parking, etc. These spaces form a hidden layer within the modern city with potential future uses. Research shows that cars remain parked approximately 95% of the time (Shoup, 2005), transforming large portions of urban space into a spread-out storage facility. With the slogan “You are not stuck in traffic. You are traffic”, *What the Street!?- The Mobility Space Report*, an interactive data visualization platform designed by Michael Szell and Stephan Bogner in 2017, calculates how many square meters cities allocate to different transport mediums, specifically cars, trains and bikes. In Amsterdam alone, nearly eight million m² of public space is devoted to driving infrastructure and over one and a half million to parking. Bigger European cities' data are even more shocking. London places amongst the top European cities in terms of space allocated to automobiles, with parked vehicles occupying well over 14 km² of roads and streets, an area roughly equivalent to ten Hyde Parks, with more allocated space to cars, with a whopping twelve million m² of uniquely street parking space (Barrett, Wills and Washington-Ihieme, 2020).

At the same time, environmental and energy transitions and the growing critique of car dependency, especially within the boundaries of cities themselves, have begun to destabilise the long-standing hegemony of the automobility discourse. Budding ideas of degrowth, shared mobility, and declining car ownership suggest the emergence of post-automobility futures (Braun & Randell, 2022). Reclaiming car-dominated urban land as multifunctional commons is essential for post-car imaginaries.² While the (potential) reuse of these urban infrastructures is central to constructing post-car imaginaries, such spatial transitions are not inherently emancipatory. Without embedding these transformations within frameworks of mobility justice, urban commons governance, and more-than-human

“You are
not stuck in
traffic. You
are traffic.”

considerations, the claiming of parking and traffic space risks reproducing socio-spatial inequality through processes of green gentrification and land-value extraction.

This paper examines how the spatial surplus of automobility can be reinterpreted as a frontier for post-car urban imaginaries, specifically within a European context. We open up the question of how the spaces historically dedicated to automobility can be reappropriated to support a socially and ecologically diverse city, using examples of artworks and provocations as boundary-blurring, porous and key drivers for re-imagining a future city.

Throughout the text, examples of reappropriation and ideas for future projects are discussed and combined with theoretical analysis drawing from automobility studies, urban political ecology and critical urban theory. These different perspectives frame automobility as a technocratic and socio-political regime imposed on city and lifestyle imaginaries, which continue to prevail strongly today. Particular attention is given to large European cities that historically dedicated extensive space to car infrastructures and are now beginning to confront a post-car transition. The article examines the historical context of the birth of the automotive city and the ideological foundations of the automobile hegemonic regime. It goes on to analyse the spatial consequences of automobility, especially through the fragmentation of urban functions, further exploring how residual spaces produced by this system may become sites for new urban commons and alternative forms of collective urban life.

The Arrogance of Space

The twentieth century saw one of the biggest physical remodelling of cities. Highway networks were adapted to the automobile in the period between wars (Giedion 1948, 43) and architecture succumbed to a technocratic and impersonal modernism, which, far from remaining within the architectural imagination of Le Corbusier (*Ville Radieuse*, *Plan Voisin*) and other urbanists such as Robert Moses, extended its claws to the way people conceived life and freedom. Traffic engineers that shape-shifted into urban designers sought to reorganise the fundamentals of spatial order in favour of the autonomous machine, clinging to an ideal of the modern city as a mechanised utopia of speed (Sheller & Urry 2000; Virilio 1977). However, the rise of the automotive city was not led uniquely by post-war imaginaries or even consumer demand, but by political and economic elites that promoted this transformation by dismantling streetcar systems and planning cities around motorised transport: “automotive interest groups, led by General Motors, conspired to foil the free market by acquiring street railways,

scrapping them, and substituting buses and, ultimately, urban highways” (Norton 2008, 10). As public transit declined, residents were left with few alternatives but private cars. Automobiles had conquered the streets. Early twentieth-century streets had functioned as complex public environments where everyday social life intersected with multiple forms of mobility, including pedestrians, streetcars, cyclists, and horse-drawn vehicles. This delicate ecology of shared spaces was progressively transformed by the rise of the automobile imaginary. What followed was an extended process of adaptation of urban infrastructures, legal frameworks and public attitudes reconfigured around the idolisation of motorised movement. As Peter D. Norton notes, this shift required as much of an ideological campaign as a technical one, redefining pedestrians as ‘jaywalkers’ and normalising the idea that the streets belonged first and foremost to cars (Norton, 2008).³ This restructuring was further reinforced through the modernist doctrine of functional zoning, promoted by planners and architects associated with the CIAM4 in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. As cities industrialized and urban populations expanded, government control over land use increased (Hirt 2018). Modernist planning proposed a rational separation of urban activities into distinct zones for dwelling, working, recreation and circulation. Ideal and conceptually strong, promising an efficient and orderly everyday life, it resulted in a dispersed landscape of commuting. Jane Jacobs, an early detractor of technocratic city planners, criticised this urban model that meant eroding the diversity and vitality that characterised successful cities. She argued that strict zoning within the city created dead urban spaces (Jacobs 1961).

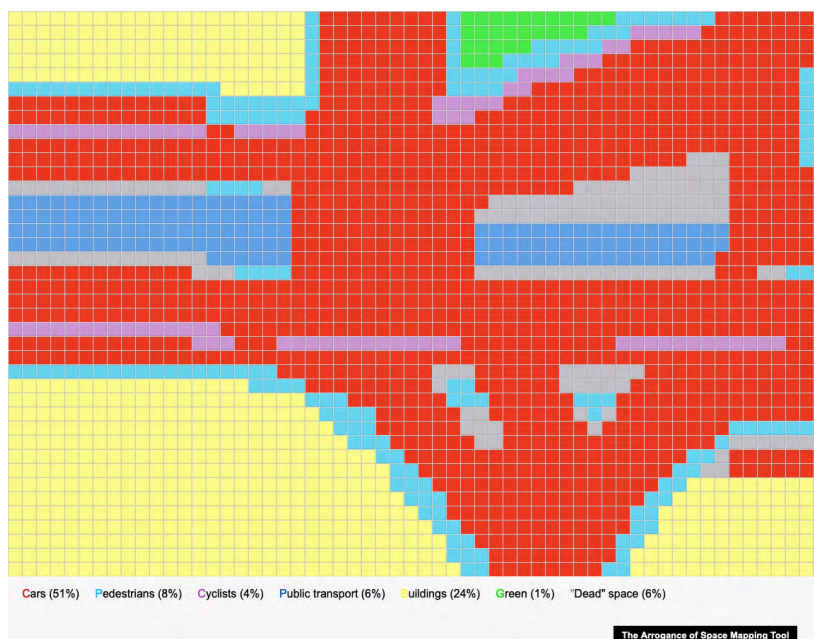


Figure 2. One of the Author's street in Köln created with *The arrogance of space Mapping Tool*, 2026. Credit Carmen Armenteros



Figure 3. Professor emeritus Hermann Knoflacher leaving *Technischen Universität Wien* with his ‘Gehzeug’ or ‘Walkmobile’, 2025. Photograph by: © Kleine Zeitung.

As pedestrians and cyclists were being progressively confined to the margins of even wider roads and larger intersections, the meaning of what urban mobility specialist Mikael Colville-Andersen calls ‘*the arrogance of space*’ becomes clear. The term refers to the unequal distribution of urban territory between cars and other forms of mobility, where the majority of street space is allocated to private vehicles despite the fact that they only represent one category of urban user. To represent this, he created a free online mapping tool where anybody can upload a bird’s-eye view of the street they live in and calculate the amount of space dedicated to different categories: cars, pedestrians, dead spaces, green spaces, cyclists, etc. Colville-Andersen mentions in an interview how “obscenely arrogant the amount of space given to automobiles [is]” (Colville-Andersen 2020), and stresses how the current state of the arts is more of a transportation dictatorship rather than an urban democracy,⁵ as seen by all the red space drawn in the example, created by the authors, of their own street (Figure 2). We can clearly see the dimensions of circulating cars in the jocular 1975 action of Hermann Knoflacher’s memorable ‘Gehzeug’ or ‘Walkmobile’ (Figure 3) and in many more cyclist-friendly activist actions throughout Europe subsequently.⁶ Knoflacher, a civil engineer and professor at the Vienna University of Technology, developed a ghost-car structure consisting of a wooden frame and some straps. In an interview with DIE ZEIT newspaper, he describes the car as a virus that settles in the brain and totally reverses the code of conduct, value system and perceptions of space (Die Zeit 2007), to the extent that degraded urban environments are normalized. The arro-

gance of the space taken by automobiles aligns with what a dominant urban imaginary looks like. French philosopher and urbanist Paul Virilio stated that “*there is no democracy, only dromocracy*”⁷ (Virilio 1977, 69), positing that modern political power is determined by speed and mobility systems. The automobile is, as Virilio puts it, a producer of speed (Virilio 1997) and a motor of imagination, albeit currently not the ideal one. As Nick Dunn puts it, the real problem of imagining a future city lies in what he calls the ‘imaginative lock-in’: the tendency of dominant urban narratives to make certain futures appear inevitable or difficult to create alternatives for (Dunn 2018). In this sense, automobility has generated such powerful visions that it has narrowed the spectrum of what can be conceived, ‘locking-in’ a particular future. However, Dunn also argues in favor of non-pragmatic imaginaries and unmanageable utopias, for these possibilities and “epistemological boundaries of separating fiction from non-fiction are far more porous than often recognized” (Dunn 2018, 378). Hence, imagination is vital in reshaping the material conditions of urban space. It is within this premise that artistic and performative interventions can operate and work towards a post-car imaginary. In the case of artist Benedetto Bufalino, this takes the form of a playful yet critical reconfiguration of the automobile itself. He explores exactly the opposite of speed by exploiting the motionless quality of parked vehicles in a seemingly mocking way and reimagining them by giving them new uses: cars morph into ping-pong tables, pizza ovens, swimming pools, seating areas, chicken coops, athletics tracks and plant vases. Much like ‘Ruhender Verkehr’, these humorous artworks change the way vehicles are perceived and invite passersby to engage with the hidden possibilities within the terribly ordinary and polluting automobiles.



Figure 4. *La voiture Jacuzzi*_La voiture de police poullailler_La piste d'athletisme sur les voitures_Les voitures peleuses, 2014_2013_2020_2021. Photograph by: benedettobufalino.com/

Jane Jacobs argues that automobiles are often blamed for the destruction of cities when the real problem always lies in planning ideologies that prioritise them over urban life (Jacobs 1967). Streets tend to flourish when shops, workplaces, housing and public amenities exist within easy walking distance of one another. The vitality of city life was maimed by the fragmentation of neighbourhoods into monofunctional environments. Accommodating more cars creates a self-reinforcing cycle: widening roads, building highways, and adding parking spaces encourage more driving, which in turn generates further demand for road space. This process ultimately results in the erosion of cities, spreading activities farther and farther apart, diminishing urban diversity, weakening public transport and severing walkability.

At the beginning of the book *Speed and Politics*, Virilio asks if asphalt is a political territory. Robert Braun and Richard Randell's analysis of automobility⁸ provides a compelling response to this question. They conceptualize automobility as an ontopolitical formation, suggesting that the infrastructures of mobility actively produce the social order in which they operate: "*The automobility imaginary is an indexical ontopolitical imaginary; it is both a reality-constructing apparatus and the reality constructed by that apparatus*" (Braun & Randell 2022, xxii). Asphalt thus becomes political territory insofar as roads, parking infrastructures, and circulation networks materialize and stabilize the social order of automobility. This ontopolitical order also extends into the everyday environments of housing, insinuating infrastructures of circulation and parking within domestic space, generating a spatial surplus that reveals the contradictions embedded within its own system.

Post-Car Housing Estates and Other Urban Struggles: Laboratories of Transition

Post-war public housing estates in European cities provide a critical site of observation to examine post-car transitions: built around a modernist automobility-enthused paradigm, they now reveal how the obsolescence of traffic infrastructures opens spaces for reappropriation while exposing mobility shifts as inseparable from wider struggles over housing, health, land value, and inequality. In the geography of European cities, the allocation of land to traffic infrastructures closely mirrors patterns of socio-economic imbalance. Air pollution and environmental burdens are disproportionately concentrated in neighbourhoods where young families are more likely to live, while more affluent and older populations tend to reside in less polluted areas. In Britain, the communities that experience the highest

levels of pollution – despite contributing least to emissions – are among the poorest (Mitchell & Dorling 2003). The spatial organisation of post-war cities and in the 60s-70s demonstrates how motorised infrastructure has shaped urban form, encroaching on domestic life, as residential estates built at the time reflected the modernist separation of pedestrian and vehicular circulation, dedicating ground-level space to cars and relegating human activities to elevated walkways, corridors, and podiums. As Matrix Group's feminist interpretation of the urbanism of housing estates noted, this created "an environment designed to enhance the norm of individual mobility [...] a male, white, middle-class norm" (Matrix 2022, 41), establishing a dual-level spatial hierarchy. Today, however, this hierarchy is divergent: while ground-level parking will lose functionality due to future declining car dependency, we can already observe common spaces such as walkways and open areas supporting multiple uses. By retaining flexible identities, they hint at their potential as sites for post-car interventions. The spatial surplus of automobility is now empirically visible. In the UK, national surveys show that over half of domestic garages no longer store cars (RAC Press Team 2021). Although car ownership increased in previous decades, larger vehicles and the growth of multi-car households often led garages to be used less for parking and more for fulfilling other needs. Additionally, since 2019, London's population has grown by 1%, while car registrations have fallen by 2.5% (Transport for London 2024). As a result, garages are repurposed as hobby rooms, home gyms and storage areas. The infrastructure of automobility persists physically while declining functionally – a spatial residue awaiting political direction. Teviot Estate, in north-east London, provides a telling example of these dynamics. Built in 1955 by Poplar Borough Council, it is now part of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, five minutes away from Canary Wharf, effectively cut off from the surrounding area by a railway line and a busy dual carriageway. With 88 garages for 535 homes, roughly one garage for every six homes, the estate sits below the average parking provision of its time. Yet, even this limited garage stock is underused: Tower Hamlets Council owns 161 empty garages, most of which are now employed as storage, workshops, exercise spaces, or converted rooms. This aligns with broader trends across London, where of 53,640 council-owned garages, 41% remain empty, and in some boroughs – such as Ealing, Havering, and Brent – vacancy exceeds 70%. Such surplus spaces, already noted by developers as Property Partner in 2017 through a Freedom of Information request, could potentially accommodate approximately 16,000 one-bedroom homes, demonstrating the double-edged opportunity of public reuse versus speculative

“Reclaiming car-dominated urban land as multifunctional commons is essential for post-car imaginaries.”

development of underutilised parking infrastructure (Sharman 2017). The SCAD Pad project tested this idea: the Savannah College of Art and Design (Figure 5), prototyped 12.5 m² micro-apartments to be installed in unused parking spaces of a multistorey car park in Atlanta, to create affordable housing in dense cities, prototyping a small village in the parking garage providing each unit with a parking space-sized private patio, alongside a community garden and an artificial-turf park.

In other European contexts, flyovers, ring roads, and car parks were embedded in working-class neighbourhoods and public housing estates, which functioned as urban shields against the byproducts of transport infrastructure, such as noise, pollution and spatial fragmentation. Lancaster West Estate in North Kensington, in London, exemplifies this condition in relation to the Westway, a 1960s elevated motorway that cut through the surrounding urban fabric, later integrated into the ambitious and never fully realised Greater London Council's Ringways scheme. Being composed of three linear housing blocks oriented toward internal green spaces, its configuration creates a protected residential interior while forming a built edge towards the surrounding infrastructure. Because these estates had to absorb the negative impacts of transport infrastructure, struggles for better housing have historically been inseparable from efforts to secure safer and healthier open public spaces. Both address the same structural issue: how urban land is allocated, and whose needs it prioritises. This is reflected in the convergence of initiatives such as *Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen* and the *Berlin Autofrei* referendum, with the former challenging land allocation and the latter reclaiming space from private cars for greener public uses. Across Europe, housing activists have repeatedly highlighted the contradiction of municipalities claiming land scarcity for affordable housing while maintaining extensive areas of underused asphalt for parking or road infrastructure, turning parking land in or close to residential estates into a contested frontier where climate transition and housing justice converge. In the 70's, UK movement *Homes before Roads* highlighted these inter-linked issues, successfully interrupting the Ringways project to prevent the replication and intensification of postwar landscapes dominated by traffic. Most recently in London, the Westway Trust emerged as a community response to the Westway flyover. The Trust transformed residual land beneath the motorway into community-managed facilities and open space, operating as a form of counter-infrastructure that reclaimed space previously dominated by transport engineering. Post-war housing estates have become critical sites for post-car transition.

However, as Petzer et al. note, changes in mobility patterns often show a discrepancy between spatial allocation and spatial appropriation, with mobility transition outpacing infrastructural transition, leaving unresolved the question of how urban spaces once dedicated to cars might be reimagined and reused (Petzer 2021). In the Teviot Estate, London's efforts to reduce car dependency through investments in public transport resulted in the opening of a new DLR station in 2007 in Langdon Park, providing more access to the public transport network. Yet the legacy of car-oriented policies and designs continues to shape spatial redevelopment in the area. This tension is evident in the Teviot Estate's renewal plans. Although 161 existing garages are reportedly underused, the scheme still proposes 126 new parking spaces, while former garage sites are planned for high-rise housing. It is within these redundant existing car spaces that R-Urban intervenes, temporarily converting underused car parks and garages into a vegetable garden and ecological workshop space. The intervention unfolded within a historically diverse neighbourhood, where the 2011 census report records a high proportion of residents of Bangladeshi descent. In this context, reuse provided a site for encounter, despite operating in the slippery field of temporary initiatives. Underused garages, parking courts, and residual open spaces serve as opportunities for experimentation with alternative social or ecological practices without requiring permanent transformation, but impermanence is frequently utilised within urban regeneration plans to anticipate processes of gentrification. In an informal interview with one of the authors, Andrew Belfield of R-Urban notes – referring to the diagram by Bishop and Lesley in their *'The Temporary City'* (2012) – that it is possible to distinguish between two forms of temporary activity: an instrumental temporariness, as a managed suspension aimed at preparing a permanent development, and a constant temporariness capable of coexisting with stable activities within the urban fabric. This distinction becomes critical in areas undergoing regeneration, such as the Teviot Estate under proposals led by the housing association Poplar HARCA. R-Urban positions its work within the second category, activating existing spatial surplus as a commons rather than treating the estate as a site awaiting transformation, while remaining relocatable within the estate so that activities can move and adapt to residents' needs over time.

Creative Invasion vs Creative Destruction

Post-car interventions, such as pedestrianization schemes, traffic calming measures, and greening, are not politically neutral: the same spatial qualities that make former car space a potential area for commons-making also expose

it to capital revaluation. While historically struggles for healthy open space – first in the 19th century sanitary discourses, later in the 20th century environmental campaigns for housing justice – were inseparable from demands for decent and accessible housing, contemporary mobility transitions can also act as catalysts for a “third wave” of gentrification, as theorized by Neil Smith (Smith 2002), contributing to rising land values, accelerating the displacement of working-class populations, consolidating gentrification as a generalised urban strategy, delineating a new urbanism with a different balance between public interests, local, state and private interventions. Post-pedestrianization areas of Barcelona’s Superilles (Superblocks) – a government-funded initiative started in 2014, converting vehicle-dominated intersections into pedestrian spaces – have undergone sociodemographic changes consistent with gentrification dynamics. Compared to the citywide average, throughout the programme, these areas have experienced a greater increase in residents originating from the global North and in individuals with higher educational attainment, alongside a more pronounced decline in the proportion of older adults (Villar-Abeijón et al. 2025). In this context, ‘greening’ may play a leading or complementary role in the restructuring of urban socio-spatial hierarchies. A comparative research across 28 European cities identifies a strong and robust association, persisting for at least a decade, between greening interventions implemented in the 1990s–2000s and subsequent gentrification processes observed between 2000 and 2016 in 17 cases (Anguelovski et al. 2022). If originally the sociologist Ruth Glass depicted the phenomenon as the invasion by the bourgeois class, it’s now the “creative city” (Smith 2002), which stresses the urban landscape. In this sense, in some contexts, it can be argued that certain forms of gentrification may temporarily shield areas from more aggressive models of urban redevelopment. In defiance of any post-car imaginaries, some regeneration schemes for residential areas in South London (such as Aylesbury Estate) opened local streets to car traffic in the newly built estate, in areas previously dedicated only to pedestrians. Unlike large-scale “creative destruction” (Harvey 1988) strategies – which rely on demolition and clearance of the existing built environment in favour of new construction to capture surplus value – some gentrification processes operate through revaluation and adaptive reuse. Rather than erasing the existing built fabric, they conserve and repurpose it, shifting its economic value and social function while preserving or partially conserving the physical structure. Although socially exclusionary, such dynamics may, in certain cases, present an alternative to more extractive forms of regeneration that depend on intensified environmental impact.

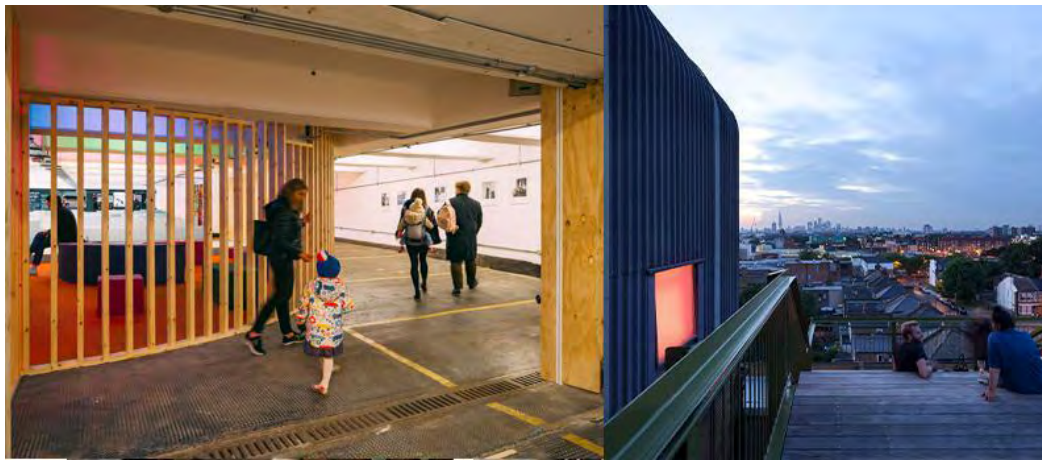


Figure 6. *Peckham Levels*: London. Photograph by: Tim Crocker and Peter Landers.

This logic of adaptive reuse in the service of both urban life and landscape is evident in the Peckham multi-storey car park in South London (Figure 6). Built in 1983 for a Sainsbury's supermarket and earmarked for demolition under the New Southwark Plan, it became the focus of local mobilisation. Since 2015, the Peckham Vision Campaign successfully argued for its retention, particularly to preserve the panoramic views it offers across London from its roof – views threatened by proposals to replace the nearby Aylesham Centre with a 20-storey tower. The building was subsequently listed as an Asset of Community Value and featured in the National Trust's 2017 campaign on protected views. Today, the former car park accommodates Peckham-plex cinema, Frank's Café, and Peckham Levels, converting the existing empty space into a 6-level complex of studios, workshops, and co-working spaces designed to support artists and creative entrepreneurs. What was once infrastructure dedicated to automobility has been reprogrammed as a cultural and economic hub, attracting users from across the city and new economic activity (Habiba 2023). Yet this adaptive reuse also prevented a more extractive redevelopment model, with the structure embodying an apparent paradox: a car park that safeguards a landscape, representing a negotiated form of urban change. The addition of the Peckham Observatory – an elevated steel-framed walkway designed by Cooke-Fawcett architecture studio – further reinforces this shift, transforming the rooftop into a public vantage point over south London: a previous car infrastructure becomes a guardian of London's landscape and of the visual access to the city.

Not reducible only to heritage, roads, car parks and housing estates are also sites of ongoing negotiation between infrastructure, ecology, and equity. Post-car transitions are highly visible in these estates, turning once-defensive designs into potential urban commons.

Urban Commons

As automobility infrastructures lose relevance within city trends and politics, the spaces they once dominated – housing perimeters, car parks – become fertile grounds for post-car city experiments, turning their physical structures into urban commons that rethink productivity and ownership. This transformation echoes David Harvey’s critique of Garrett Hardin’s *The Tragedy of the Commons* (1968). Rather than viewing commons as resources that inevitably degrade through collective use, Harvey argues that the more serious threat lies in unregulated capital accumulation, which expands productivity in ways that simultaneously erode the very conditions that sustain it, including land, labor, and shared urban space. Post-car transitions are not merely environmental shifts; they are land reallocations. The automobility regime created a spatial surplus: car space is now a latent urban capital. Harvey, therefore, calls for “creative ways to use the powers of collective labor for the common good” to transform spaces once organized for extraction (Harvey 2012, 87). The history of car infrastructure itself reveals how mutable these spaces can be. The earliest surviving multi-storey car park, built in 1902–03 for the London Motor Garage Co. at 33–37 Wardour Street in London, a three-storey structure for 200 cars, today functions as a pub. What was once dedicated to storage and circulation has been absorbed back into the city’s social life. Closed in 2008, the runways and the terminal of Berlin’s Tempelhof Airport have since been repurposed as the public Tempelhofer Feld park and for mixed cultural uses, and although there have been attempts to privatize the site, these were blocked by citizen initiatives that successfully preserved the historical layout and public accessibility, opening it to wider cultural and outdoor life. Its multifaceted reuse exemplifies a shift from the ‘right of way’ – the logic that privileges movement and vehicular priority – to the ‘right to occupy’. Following the paradigm that Aaron Betsky proposes in one of his chapters, ‘Squatting, installing, activating’ (Betsky 2024), the collective and imaginative occupation of the car space is a first step towards reappropriation and adaptive reuse in the service of an inhabited heritage. In this sense, what Richard Sennett and Pablo Sendra describe as “infrastructures of disorder” (2020) becomes relevant in a post-car imaginary. Rather than rigid, mono-functional systems, such infrastructures enable overlapping uses, informal adaptations, and the recombination of networks – social, ecological, and energetic. Post-car spaces loosen the functional determinism of modernist mobility systems and, open to collective reinterpretation, could operate in disorder, as an indeterminacy capable of supporting urban commons.

Conclusions

This article has argued that a transition towards a post-automobility future is an ontological problem that relies on a shift of politics and imaginaries as much as an ontic problem of the automobile and its concrete structures by themselves. Urban planning and functional zoning have resulted in fragmentation and have proven to be the death of diversity and liveliness of cities.

Across European cities, the surplus spaces of automobility reveal an underlying potential for reuse: underused garages, decrepit multistory car-parks, flyover undercrofts, redundant car parks and oversized roads for cars. Post-car imaginaries transform this material legacy into a site of experimentation, where the infrastructure of automobility becomes a tool for collective agency to create housing and urban commons. Artistic and performative practices play a crucial role in actively producing and testing alternative futures operating as instruments of imagination that intervene directly in the material fabric of the city, opening it for reinterpretation. As Dunn suggests, reclaiming urban imaginaries is essential “as a means of questioning the present and demonstrating that what we think may be impossible is possible” (Dunn 2018, 383).

This paper is not claiming any degrowth in the amounts of cars manufactured, but rather an increase in the observable political and spatial tendencies within city policies to prioritise public transport, cycling infrastructure, and pedestrianisation, processes that gradually displace the spatial dominance of the automobile and lead to a progressive erosion of car infrastructures. Paradoxically, the streets of our future cities may just start looking like they did at the beginning of the 20th century. The question today is therefore not whether cars will disappear entirely, but whether the land they have monopolized will be reclaimed as a speculative frontier or as a collective inheritance, challenging risks of gentrification. Possible futures lie in the capacity to reuse car space in ways that consider urban diversity. Reclaiming automobility infrastructures invites a shift from the ‘right of way’ toward the ‘right to occupy’ or the right to dwell, gather, play, grow and collectively shape urban environments.

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Endnotes

- 1 Translated as Action Art, it served as an umbrella term for Performance art, Happenings and Viennese Actionism.
- 2 While closely related, this paper distinguishes between Braun and Randell’s post-automobility futures as systemic transitions in automobility regimes characterised by the dismantling of automobility as a dominant order and an ontological shift beyond car-dependent ways of living, and post-car imaginaries as the more cultural and speculative visions, often small-scale practices through which such futures are imagined.
- 3 Motor calamities were extremely normal beginning in the 20s, the automobile industry (“motordom”) reshaped the public understanding of traffic safety in order to protect the future of cars in cities. Through influence over newspapers, statistics, education campaigns, and safety programs in schools, motordom promoted the idea that pedestrians also bore responsibility for accidents and that streets were increasingly spaces for automobiles.
- 4 Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne
- 5 Do it yourself here: <https://cyklokoalicia.sk/arrogance/>
- 6 See Biker’s Day activists in Riga (2014); Extinction Rebellion ‘Gehzeug’ actions in Dortmund (2020), Bonn and Freiburg (2022); Dott e-bike campaign in London, Paris and Brussels (2022)
- 7 Dromology (from greek δρόμος meaning race or racetrack) is a term coined by Paul Virilio as the “science of movement and speed” whereas Dromocracy is a form of politics that involves a control over speed and circulation. Whoever controls the fastest systems controls power.
- 8 Automobility refers to a complex socio-technical system composed of automobiles, infrastructures, industries, and cultural practices that together structure and reorganize space, time, and everyday life in modern societies (Urry 2004; Sheller & Urry 2000).
- 9 The term ‘guardian’ is here used both in its literal meaning, and in the legal definition of a temporary ‘caretaker’ who lives in an empty property.