

*Asphalt Nation: how the automobile took over America and how we can take it back*  
by Jane Holz Kay; University of California Press, Berkley, 1997 (paperback 1998),  
418 pages, £14.95, \$16.95.

This book is probably of more value to Europeans than North Americans. The story of how the automobile took over America is told very effectively, but the advice proffered about how it can be taken back strikes this reader as optimistic. However, the book has considerable potential utility for European readers as a cautionary tale.

For many decades Europe has followed doggedly in the tyre tracks of the United States in its growing dependence on the car – but, measured in terms of car ownership per capita, most European countries continue to lag a persistent two or three decades behind. The experience of North America over the last twenty or thirty years, especially of its older, eastern cities, is likely to prove a good guide to the problems that Europe will experience if it continues to try to catch up.

This is a stimulating, thought-provoking work in the honourable, tradition of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs. And this is why it is also a depressing book. Jacobs (in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961), and Mumford (in *The Highway and the City*, 1963), and other earlier pre-war writers quoted by Holz Kay, foresaw the bleak consequences of America's growing enslavement to the car. They were convincingly, eloquently prescient, and America paid them no heed. Holz Kay reinforces their message and maps out an attractive alternative direction for transport and planning policy – and most of America remains oblivious.

Her main prescriptions are zoning regulations to compel higher urban densities, subsidized mass transit, a halt to road-building, and higher taxes on motoring. She offers attractive examples of what might be achieved by such a package of measures. But her examples remain small islands of sanity and civility in a rising sea of car dependence. The 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act has not perceptibly slowed the relentless growth of America's car population and its dispersal into America's Edge Cities and the rural areas beyond.

The further west one travels in America the more it was built for the car, and the more difficult it becomes to reduce dependence upon it. However lavish the subsidy that might be provided for new mass transit schemes, public transit will remain for most Americans a form of transport that they must get in their cars and drive to. And there is not yet a serious space constraint; there is still, by European standards abundant room for new suburbs, shopping malls and roads to serve them. And the more dependent the country becomes on the car, the stronger becomes the resistance to paying higher taxes to use it. Holz Kay quotes Mumford on the plight of American cities in the mid-1970s: "Make the patient as comfortable as possible. It's too late to operate" (p.266). Sadly, she provides ample reason to believe that this prescription is even more valid today. With more than 95% of personal travel done by car, most of the country is so far gone – so spread out – that few realistic alternatives to the car exist.

Throughout Europe the degree of dependence on the car now is comparable to that of the United States in the 1970s. It might, just might, not be too late to operate. The rhetoric of European transport planning now acknowledges the need to reduce

dependence on the car, but effective action has yet to follow. Europe's car population continues to grow and few politicians have yet found the courage to call for a reduction in their numbers. The best that can be said for the efficacy of the new rhetoric is that things are getting worse a bit more slowly.

Jane Holz Kay's book should be read by all European transport policy makers. The lagged parallels with America's experience are alarming and instructive. It might, just might, shake them out of their state of oblivious complacency.

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