A City Made for People, Not Cars: Lessons From Venice

By Anna Kuell

The quiet feels almost foreign, a peaceful alternative to the ceaseless traffic and car horns that define Rome, my home for the past few months. In Venice, I am attuned to the water lapping against the banks of the canals, footsteps hitting the ancient cobblestone streets, and the unintelligible chatter of the people I pass by. Each sound is somewhat distant — an echo not a siren. I could easily tune any of it out — but why would I? In Venice, people, not cars, set the pace of life. During my two-day stay in the floating city, I could not shake one specific persistent thought: what do we lose by letting cars, rather than people, lead the way?

The 118 small islands that make up Venice are connected by 438 footbridges crossing 177 canals—a world apart from intersections and highways. Venice's roots stretch back to the 5th century when people seeking refuge from invasion took shelter in the Venetian Lagoon's marshlands. To build a sustainable city on unstable islands, the Venetians drove long wooden piles deep into the earth, creating a solid foundation that remains remarkably resilient today. This unique, water-bound design shaped a city that, from the start, was built for the people.

Venice has remained true to its origins. Just like the ancient Venetians, visitors today cannot use anything on wheels while on the island, no mopeds, bicycles, buses, or even strollers can traverse the city's winding alleyways and many staircases. Venice can only be navigated by gondola, ferry, or foot. As I explored the island, I noticed that the absence of cars allowed the character of the city to flourish; there was a lack of tension and noise pollution that characterized cities dominated by cars. Venice isn't silent, but without car noise, other sounds have space to exist.

Since the start of the twentieth century, the automobile has reshaped many cities, particularly in the United States. They have made it possible for us to travel great distances in little time and while this represents technological progress, it has created new challenges. Chiefly, the needs of cars have often been chosen over the needs of communities. In Los Angeles, freeways carve through neighborhoods, isolating communities, and making commutes hours long. In my own city of Chicago, the Dan Ryan Expressway comes to mind: an 11-mile-long, 14-lane highway sometimes referred to as "segregation by design." In the 1960s when the highway was built, 64% of the displaced population were Black, despite Black residents making up only 23% of the city. The highway, in effect, cut off the South Side and Chinatown from the rest of the city, creating a physical line of segregation and highlighting the government's prioritization of convenience over community and equality. Further examples can be found in cities like Houston and Saint Louis which have followed the trend, prioritizing highways over communal and green spaces. Car dependency has resulted in an inescapable isolation as people are rarely afforded the time or proximity to interact meaningfully with their neighbors.

Unlike Venice, where cars were never part of the equation, other cities had to make conscious decisions to reduce car dependency. On a recent trip to Amsterdam, I was astounded by the overwhelming presence of bikers; most of the city was not even accessible by car. Bike lanes crisscrossed the city creating an accessible grid for its residents. I knew that bicycles were a big thing in Amsterdam (they made a caricature of the city, littered across postcards and cheesy tchotchkes for sale in souvenir shops) but I was not aware that the Dutch had, in effect, phased out the need for cars by implementing bike lanes and cheap, easy, reliable, and widespread public transit options. Desperate to know more about this unfamiliar lifestyle, I did some research: In

Amsterdam, *Bloomberg* reports that roughly two-thirds of transportation in the city takes place on a bike and only 19% of the city's residents use cars on a daily basis. Other European cities like Copenhagen where, according to *Lonely Planet*, bicycles outnumber cars, are attempting a car-less, or at least a less car, reality as well.

While Venice and its residents thrive without cars, replicating this model in the U.S. would be a significant challenge. American cities with their sprawling suburbs and expansive road networks, prioritize speed and convenience. Modifying pre-existing U.S. cities to be pedestrian-centric would require serious financial investment, political coordination, and a huge cultural shift toward valuing slower, community-centered living. Not to mention that the vast geographical size of many American cities, compared to Venice's compact layout, makes the proposition of such a transition daunting.

The physical and emotional benefits of walkable cities were palpable in Venice. Numerous studies have found that residents of walkable neighborhoods are less likely to suffer from obesity and related health issues. Beyond physical health, studies show that access to community is essential for overall well-being and positive mental health. In conversation with researchers at the University of Galway, *Forbes* reported, "Walkable urban and suburban village-like places not only lead to happier, more connected communities that are better for the health and well-being of people, but are also better for the planet." Walkable cities create opportunities for social interaction by encouraging residents to move through their neighborhoods with intention.

In car-centric cities, efficiency is prioritized above all, often at the expense of quality of life. The automobile has facilitated modern life but also distances us from one another—subtly discouraging face-to-face interactions and reducing communal spaces. Cars have become so

integrated into our day-to-day lives that most people do not even know the sacrifice they are making. In contrast, Venice feels like a place of genuine community. Unhindered by traffic and busy roadways, people lingered in the city's many piazzas, alleys, and on the banks of the canals.

I spent a few hours in Burano, an island in the Venetian lagoon, on the evening of October 31st. I ordered a glass of wine and sat outside on a restaurant patio and watched as families and their kids, dressed in Halloween costumes, went from storefront to storefront trick-or-treating. Across the square, someone had set up a speaker and was playing songs like *Monster Mash* and Michael Jacksons' *Thriller*. Burano is home to fewer than three thousand residents. It is known for lace making and its brightly colored homes. With these multicolored homes as their backdrop, I watched from my perch at the restaurant as kids ran across the square and adults chatted and sipped on beverages. The mood was jubilant yet relaxed; I felt like I was witnessing a genuine community.

I struggle to come up with an example of such a profound, fully-encompassing community in the United States. I can only think of microcosms of community; the concrete beach in Chicago where people picnic, swim, and lounge; public parks; and college campuses. But there is a difference. In Burano, the resident's destination *was* the piazza and piazza alone. I got the impression from the familiarity in the movements of residents and how the shopkeepers recognized each child by name that this was not a special occasion for Halloween festivities but a frequent, if not daily, occurrence with a little extra spooky flare. In the U.S., it seems like people are only stopping by communal places en route to different and more purpose-driven destinations; walking the dog through the park after work, or stopping in the quad on campus to make a phone call before going to class. Venice offers a glimpse into a reality where cities are

designed on a human scale, made for the convenience of the pedestrian rather than an engine.Venice challenges the assumption that cars are a necessity.

Yet, Venice's design is not without its own challenges. Like many coastal regions around the globe, Venice's future is precarious. Rising sea levels, frequent flooding, and the wear of time threaten the very foundations of the city. Sinking at a rate of 0.8 inches per year, some experts have even suggested that Venice could be underwater as early as 2100 if current trends continue. Several methods are being used to mitigate damage and protect Venice, including a series of modules that hold back water from entering the city's main canals. Local committees and organizations like UNESCO are committed to persevering the magic of this human-centered city for as long as possible. It will require not only a commitment to tradition but also innovative solutions.

After my departure from Venice, I found myself questioning the way we shape our cities and ultimately our lives. The city without cars, where movement is intentional and community is not sacrificed for speed, left me wondering how, if possible, could we reclaim more of this human scale in car-dependent cities. Once I returned to Rome, Venice's influence lingered with me, reminding me that convenience and speed should not come at the sacrifice of community. In a world where cars seem as necessary as the air we breathe, Venice is a poignant reminder that cities are built not to be traveled through but to be lived in.

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