Designing for people in an era of self-driving cars

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Planning students attempt tactical urbanism

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Page 1

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Viejo-nuevo San Francisco
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Shaping the cities we want to see
William Riggs, Melissa Ruhl, and Nico Larco

There has been much dialogue of late on the role self-driving, autonomous vehicles will play in shaping the future of our cities. At the heart of this dialogue, planning and design professionals are trying to understand the part they will have in shaping urban form and designing sustainable cities. It seems certain that autonomous vehicles will change the way we live; therefore, planners and designers should work with even more dedication to mold our cities into the kinds of places in which we want to live.

Over the past year, we have engaged a number of professionals, academics, and policy makers on the topic of future urbanism — something we refer to as Urbanism Next. Initiated by a team at the University of Oregon’s Sustainable Cities Initiative, the idea is to systematically explore city development, form, and design in a future reality — one with more robots and artificial intelligence — that may change how we approach urban sustainability, resiliency, equity, and livability. This process has led to a series of topics and ideas that form important considerations for policy makers, practicing planners, and designers in California and beyond — because the ‘future reference’ is here now. Three topics (among many) are outlined below as a starting point for policy action and consideration.

What policy considerations should be made for auto-serving land uses?
What should be their future? What should be the future of parking? Clearly, if we move to an era of fewer owned vehicles, there are implications for locations for gas stations, servicing facilities, and parking lots/structures. Planners and policy makers need to begin considering adaptation of uses and the ability for zoning to respond, perhaps through overlays or changes in use types. They should consider local standards and whether buildings can be planned as car-free, or if parking and design aspects around mobility can be transitioned or adapted to other uses — perhaps retail or other active street frontages that are supportive of multi-modal goals.

What about retail and warehousing?
How will changes in retail — specifically a shift to e-commerce and omni-channel retailing — affect urban form? We are currently experiencing one of the largest numbers of store closings and retail labor reductions in the country’s history, fueled mostly by the rise of e-commerce and a shift in how retail operates. This will change the size, location, and number of brick-and-mortar stores, will have a significant effect on urban vitality, is already causing a shift in the size and location of urban warehouses, and will put additional strain on transportation systems.

What is the future of the ‘complete street’?
With the rise of the sharing economy and the imminence of autonomous vehicles (AVs), streets could undergo a profound transformation. Already, ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft are crowding urban curbs even as they make on-street parking less relevant for businesses. With AVs, more efficient movements could increase roadway capacity. AV services could make vehicle ownership anachronistic, decreasing the total vehicle fleet while introducing a new road user: zero occupancy vehicles. Parking demand could vanish even as curb demand explodes. To ensure that future streets are better than today, we need to continue widening sidewalks, building bicycle facilities, and prioritizing transit, while we plan for more roadway capacity, lower parking demand, and higher curb demand.

These topics provide a platform for policy development and design. To that point, we invite your ideas and feedback via email or in person. For those who are able to attend, we will have an extensive dialogue on these issues at the Automated Vehicles Symposium (AVS) 2017 in San Francisco July 11-13 and would encourage you to participate (see more at http://bit.ly/2quLE50). (continued on next page)
Designing for people in an era of self-driving cars (continued from previous page)

One thing is sure: a lack of certainty about the future is not an excuse for inaction. Planners need to begin working now to shape cities for people, and not just wait to see how vehicular technology dictates urban form. We need to shape the cities we want to see.

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Submit your nominations for the 2017 APA California Award Program soon (or never)

Nominations are due by noon on Wednesday, May 31, 2017

The APA California Awards Program encourages quality in planning and increases the public’s awareness of the planning profession by recognizing outstanding achievements in the planning field. Each year, the APA California Chapter bestows Planning Awards to honor the most outstanding efforts in planning. Many planning efforts recognized at the Section level are submitted for nomination to the State Chapter for recognition. Information on the Awards Program can be found at http://bit.ly/2quUNFi.

Peninsula will get affordable housing. “Between July 2017 and June 2019, San Mateo County will receive about $160,000,000 in revenues from the Measure A half-cent sales tax approved in 2012, and $43.75 million of it will be allocated to increase the supply of affordable housing for seniors, formerly homeless veterans, and working families that can’t afford to pay the market rate. Since 2012, the county has spent, as part of its affordable housing initiatives, a total of $56.5 million on new housing and on preserving rental housing. Of that, about $20.4 million came from Measure A funds.” —David Boyce, The Almanac, http://bit.ly/2rvyLPX

“Percent for art is fine,” says Mary Miss, the first artist-in-residence at New York City’s Department of Design and Construction, referring to popular programs that set aside 1 percent of capital project budgets for public art (as in Montreal, http://bit.ly/2rjjrGd), “but usually you come in after the fact and late in the game. In the past 30 years, just 337 ‘percent-for-art’ projects have been installed in New York City, while thousands of construction and infrastructure projects have been undertaken in that same time.” —Jen Kinney, Next City, http://bit.ly/2rjaEUI

“Caltrain’s future is too important to leave to patchwork deals every year. We need to do the spadework for a permanent solution. A way forward might be special legislation, similar to bills that created BCDC or Golden Gate Transit, that lays out a clear mandate and process to develop a design and financing mechanism for the complex and resilient transportation system we need to support our Peninsula economy while strongly protecting our environment and walkable communities.” —Former Palo Alto Mayor, Yoriko Kishimoto, Palo Alto Weekly, http://bit.ly/2rjshDB