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# Public Transportation and Anti-Consumerism

Challenging Car Dependency  
with Anti-Consumerist  
Principles

## Introduction

Automobiles dominate the American landscape, shaping not only how cities are built, but how lives are structured. Current car-oriented infrastructure devalues the traveler without an automobile: walking on the sidewalk of a major road is often uncomfortable, with ruptured walkways made cramped by the grim curb that separates you from a barrage of mad drivers. When these frenetic machines occupy ninety percent of the allotted public traveling space, it becomes clear that roads are designed to discourage the pedestrian. Every time the sidewalk abruptly ends at an intersection, you are implicitly told that you don't belong there. There is no positive relationship to be had with one's environment nor community when both demand isolation behind glass and steel.

“Voluntary Simplicity”, coined by Richard Gregg in 1936, within the environmental movement, is distinguished by its promotion of balanced inner and outer growth. It aims to take on a major transformation of traditional American values, of which many are derived from consumerism and consumption. [1] Moreover, it preaches a lifestyle designed to reshape society on a much more human scale. This is of significance to the promotion of public transit and development of walkable cities: it's about bringing our created environment back to a human scale, with stores, walkways, and public spaces designed for a person, rather than a car.

Public transit, when aligned with the values of voluntary simplicity, doesn't just provide an alternative to driving. It offers a reorientation of daily life away from isolated consumption and

toward shared experience. It challenges the core logic of consumerism by removing the need for private ownership as a prerequisite for mobility. Anti-consumption, as a framework, critiques not only the products themselves but the systems that make them feel indispensable. Car dependency thrives on this illusion— producers and advertisers collude to sell transportation as a lifestyle, equating freedom with 0% APR and \$6/gal premium 91-octane. Public transportation resists this narrative by making mobility collectively accessible and affordable, rather than individually commodified. Anti-consumerist practice, in this context, is not about abstaining from use, but rather rejecting and reclaiming systems that profit from engineered necessity. New developments grounded in these values represent more than aesthetic shifts, serving as infrastructural refusals to the default condition of modern life. Here, this policy brief shall examine how car dependence was structurally and culturally embedded into the American landscape. Furthermore, it shall use anti-consumerist principles as a tool for economic disengagement with fossil fuel products, and the rebuilding of human-scaled systems of movement.



Public transit helps reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, which are caused by people driving cars. It also reduces noise and light pollution and increases the economic productivity of cities by lowering the amount of time people spend in traffic and reducing the amount of fuel burned. [2]

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## Origins of Car Dependency

Between 1919 and 1929, gasoline taxes rapidly expanded across the United States as a solution to rising highway construction costs that traditional revenue sources could no longer meet. [3] Though it wasn't federally mandated, all forty-eight states had adopted the gas tax, as falling oil prices enabled a raise of tax rates without a discernible increase in the price at the pump. This obfuscated the very existence of the tax to the consumers, as it required minimal administrative oversight since it was collected from wholesalers, not the consumers. [4, 5]

Highway spending grew from 2 to 25 percent of total state budgets, and gasoline tax revenues displaced property taxes as the dominant source of highway funding in many states. [4] Its financial resilience was exemplified during the Great Depression, with gas tax revenues rising nearly 120% as other revenues, naturally, declined. [3] As such, state officials began to divert gas revenues toward more essential services like public education, social welfare programs, and general government operations. This diversion was not a carefully planned policy shift, but a reactive effort to offset collapsing revenues from property and income taxes and to maintain basic state functions. This resistance provoked strong backlash from the automotive and road-building industries: in just two years, The National Highway Users Conference— now known as American Highway Users Alliance— had formed in response to the slowing of highway expansion. Their lobbying spurred the adoption of constitutional amendments in twenty-five states that locked gas-tax revenues into highway spending. [4]

Highway expansion was strategic. Developers compared traffic volume against gas-tax revenue generated per mile to determine if further construction could be self-funded. In exploitable areas, this approach enabled a self-replicating system in which increased road construction led to more traffic and higher gasoline consumption, which in turn produced more revenue for further expansion. By 1956, Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act and the Highway Revenue Act, which fully funded the interstate system, and mandated uniform construction standards. [4] The legislation raised the federal gas tax by one cent and established the Highway Trust Fund, permanently linking gasoline tax revenues to interstate construction and insulating them from future political scrutiny. [3, 5] This structure ensured uninterrupted highway expansion, even as project costs rose and public resistance increased. The system entrenched a feedback loop in which growing gasoline consumption guaranteed continued investment in road infrastructure, while minimal reallocation to public transit left car dependency intact.

The gas tax remains an “invisible tax”, embedding cars into our daily lives by redirecting state budgets and reshaping land use patterns. [4] Entire communities were split by highways, with public dollars disproportionately supporting suburban sprawl and divested from public transit. [3] Consumers were deliberately made unaware of their tax dollars' allocation, and subjected to wavering prices, thereby disempowering the sovereign consumer. This is the creation of artificial dependence upon which automobiles and its byproducts depend.

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## Anti-Consumerism

Our lives are centered around spending. When was the last day you remember when you didn't buy something. I don't just mean getting a sweater from H&M or a new phone case off Amazon, I mean spending money for an item to be used— be it your rent, this week's groceries, or, maybe gas? You wouldn't necessarily consider these to be purchases, but rather expenditures out of necessity. You have to pay for rent— you need a place to sleep. You have to buy groceries— you require food to function. And you need to buy gas— you have to drive to work tomorrow morning in order to afford next month's cycle of inflated rent and overpriced groceries. Our role as constant consumers is an illusion of choice as we are placed in a maze of institutions designed to extract profit from their very existence.



Barbara Kruger's 1987 work *I Shop Therefore I Am* critique of consumer culture by parodying René Descartes', "I think, therefore I am." [6]

The result of this maze's dominance and longevity in American culture has created a consumer society, one in which "individual lifestyles and identity [have] become linked to consumption activities." [7] This is the creation

of the consumerist mentality. The negative externalities of this phenomenon are as follows: One, self identity is tied strongly with consumption and is therefore based on accepting consumption. Two, self identity's merger with product consumption creates dependency. Three, this dependency, and subsequent addiction to consumption, are callous, yet, fortuitous contrivances that enable a positive feedback loop in which consumers are relegated to fulfilling their pernicious roles. [7]

Since the end of the second World War, developed nations began a collective economic transition into late-stage capitalism, a social and economic structure identifiable by, but not limited to, dominance of multinational corporations through globalization, widespread commodification, and consumerism. [8]

*"Consumerism is now deeply embedded in world political and economic structures."* [7]

The ongoing collusion of producers providing limited options for consumers, and advertisers generating artificial excitement for said options, facilitates its transfusion into mainstream media and legal codification, which in turn further powers the transnational corporations that influence, fund, and profit from the producers. This tightly interwoven network of global actors elevates consumerism to a dominant global ideology— so embedded into our psyche that breaking from this corrosive thinking feels almost illogical. This consumerist mentality is solidified, and intentionally enables the conceal-

ment of the environmental destruction and human exploitation required in both production and consumption. As these institutions become reliant on the consumerist mentality to persevere the onslaught of moral and environmental objections, they further protect their economic interests and entrench consumption-driven values worldwide. This entrenchment is from which the aptly named “anti-consumerism” movement arises. Its core principles center around the rejection, reduction, and reclamation of the consumption process. [9] It is these aspects of anti-consumerism through which critiques of auto-reliance shall be presented.

**Rejection** can come in the form of relatively simple and straightforward activities. For instance, a homeowner opting to grow their own vegetables in their backyard is a rejection of the ecologically harmful agricultural industry. It is practicing rationality and emphasizing their sovereign power as a consumer by making an environmentally conscious choice. The same principles can be applied to the auto industry. Simply walking to a grocery store that is only a mile away is an objective implementation of rejection under the anti-consumption umbrella. However, there are severe limitations to this approach that leave it unviable. With an average walking speed of three miles per hour, this one mile adventure entails over 40 minutes of walking, with the second leg requiring you to carry your groceries all the way back home. Compare this to the two minute car ride that comes with a trunk to place your items afterwards. The impracticality of rejecting cars outright is not simply a matter of personal convenience, but a structural one. Cities were not designed around walkability— they were

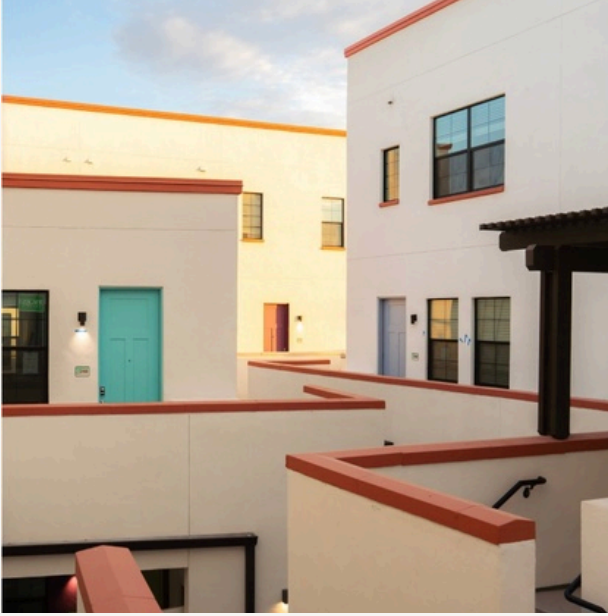
built around highways, single-family zoning, and sprawling subdivisions where even the most basic errands require vehicular access. This is why rejecting car ownership entirely can often feel like opting out of society itself. A walk to the grocery store might seem like an easy act of resistance, but in the vast majority of the U.S., there is no sidewalk, no shade, and no store within a mile. It’s not that people don’t want to walk, it’s that they weren’t given that option. Thus, the burden of anti-consumption cannot fall solely on the individual; it requires a built environment that enables rejection in the first place.



Slide from “What makes for a ‘strong town?’” - TEDx Talks [10]

## Case Study: Culdesac

Rather than fighting the symptoms of car dependency with isolated behavior changes, Culdesac, a neighborhood in Tempe, Arizona eliminates the problem at its root by refusing to accommodate cars altogether. The development offers no parking for residents and instead centers its architecture around pedestrian access and community interaction. It is a purpose-built, car-free neighborhood located just outside Phoenix, Arizona, an unlikely setting given the region’s reputation as “a sprawling, concrete incursion into a brutal environment” (and one of the least sustainable cities in the U.S.) [11] Designed with intentional rejection of automobile infrastructure, Culdesac spans 17 acres and will eventually house around 1,000 residents across 760 units. [11] The development



Terrace of the Culdesac neighborhood apartment complexes. [12]

blends Mediterranean architectural elements—described by the designer as “positively European, somewhere between Mykonos and Ibiza”—with practical features tailored to its desert setting, including shaded paseos and tightly clustered buildings that foster social interaction. [11] The structures, referred to as “fabric buildings”, encourage shared public spaces and a communal environment. [11] Residents are given access to public transportation, Lyft credits, e-scooters, and e-bikes in an aim to combat the isolation of car-centric development. [11]



The architecture and courtyards of the Culdesac neighborhood. [11]

Moreover, it offers a model for re-integrating “third places” and community cohesion into American urban life. Here, urban planning becomes a compelling realization of anti-consumption, with zoning infrastructure representing the largest barrier to car-integration. [11]



The newly unveiled ‘lectric Avenue’ in the community, and bike parking within Culdesac’s community courtyards. [11]

This empowers the sovereign consumer. It disrupts the control producers hold through limited options and manipulative advertising that obscure the exploitative nature of car production. Consumers are free to act consciously rather than reactively to survive in an infrastructure designed to dissuade alternative transportation.



Rendering of courtyard in Culdesac Tempe. [13]

## Public Transportation

Public transportation embodies both **reduction** and **reclamation** within the anti-consumerist lens, aligning strongly with the values of voluntary simplicity (VS). It emphasizes frugality and asks whether purchases promote activity and self-reliance or induce passivity and dependence. [1] Public transportation removes the need for car ownership and associated expenses, like gas, insurance, and body-shop repairs, while enabling mobility. Transit systems designed for comfort and functionality increase users' willingness to commute via public transportation, suggesting that simple, shared infrastructure can satisfy needs typically addressed through private consumption. [14] This shift encourages participation in a shared public service rather than individual ownership, thus supporting a lifestyle focused on “being and becoming, not having.” [1]

Engaging with transit rather than personal vehicles also reinforces the VS value of human scale. The alienation produced by large-scale institutions withers environments that are comprehensible, participatory, and locally grounded. [1] Transit, when designed with human needs in mind (i.e. bike racks and other “biophilic design”) offers more than a ride; it becomes a public commons that fosters interaction and mutual visibility. [14] Features like added greenery and workspace not only reduce stress, but also improve the mood and sense of safety of passengers. [14] In contrast to the isolating experience of commuting alone in a car, transit spaces, when properly designed, can help individuals feel connected to their environment and to others, fulfilling the VS value of scaling down systems to foster more

human-centered experiences. [1, 14]

Self-determination, another core principle of voluntary simplicity, is reflected in the shift away from car dependency. VS advocates seek control over their consumption and life direction, resisting dependency on large institutions that dictate the terms of everyday life. [1] Car ownership creates long-term financial entanglements that limit flexibility. Transit use, especially in environments that prioritize rider well-being, empowers individuals to opt out of these structural entrapments. Improved transit design directly increases riders' sense of autonomy and satisfaction, reducing the stress associated with commuting and offering a form of mobility not governed by private ownership or fossil fuel extraction. [14] Choosing transit becomes an act of reclaiming control over one's daily rhythms.

Furthermore, intentional use of public transit fosters ecological awareness by confronting the



*Roaming Underfoot*—a series of shimmering flower mosaics by Nancy Blum—were put on display in New York's 28<sup>th</sup> Street subway station. Aiming to turn the unassuming space into a “delightful place to enjoy during every season,” Blum incorporated local blooms into her design, making this site-specific installation a particularly fitting homage to the world-famous city— and the flowers that call it home. [15]

externalities of car culture: pollution, climate change, and unsustainable land use. Voluntary simplicity includes recognition of the finite nature of earth's resources and a moral imperative to share them equitably. [1] Environmentally mindful design enhances well-being while signaling a broader ethic of sustainability. [14] This ecological attentiveness is not merely symbolic; it alters behavior. When users experience stress reduction and emotional uplift from riding in spaces that prioritize nature and shared use, they become more likely to choose and recommend public transit: thus, transit becomes more than infrastructure. It becomes a practical application of ecological ethics and a path toward reshaping collective behavior. [1]



The green stops in Białystok, Poland were one of the innovative architectural projects awarded in 2019's *Polska Architektura XXL Plebiscyt*. [16]

## Conclusion

Car dependency in the United States is not the result of individual preference, but the product of deliberate infrastructural and fiscal design. The gasoline revenue that enabled modern-day car infrastructure was created using our taxpayer dollars. As such it should benefit us, and not be a burden to which we are forced to adapt. The

gas tax is emblematic of how self-perpetuating car-dependency is, and its consumerist nature. The more the public spent on cars and fuel, the more tax revenue was generated to build additional highways, further entrenching the necessity of driving. Additionally, the more you spend into it, and consume car products like gasoline, the more you justify continued and repeated expenditures, a la sunk cost fallacy. The power of the sovereign consumer has been nullified to create the consumerist mentality, a thought-process that is unconcerned with alternative options. In this way, car culture is not merely a lifestyle, but an economic positive feedback loop that requires resistance. As such, anti-consumerism provides a valuable framework for challenging this arrangement, but it falters when deployed in isolation. Acts of rejection, like walking instead of driving, are powerful in theory but largely unsustainable under current urban conditions. The spatial organization of American cities renders such choices inefficient; the burden of resistance cannot outweigh the burden of consumption. The responsibility cannot be placed solely on individuals when the infrastructure punishes those who attempt to reject consumption. To make anti-consumerist values viable, they must be embedded in policy and design, not only in isolated communities, but through systemic planning that reorients the built environment around people rather than vehicles.

To reduce car dependence, both infrastructure and perception must be transformed. Policymakers must shift funding priorities away from highway expansion and toward public transit, bike networks, and pedestrian infrastructure. Land-use policies must be reformed to support mixed-use development,

enabling communities where essential services are accessible without a vehicle. Public transit must be treated as a civic right— funded, dignified, and integrated— not as a last resort for those without other options. Investment in transit systems that emphasize comfort, safety, and environmental design can reconnect individuals to public space, reinforce collective identity, and weaken the illusion that mobility must be purchased privately.

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