

# End of the road: Uber and millennials help US cities cut car addiction

The growth of car-free homes, a drop in driver's licences and increased car-sharing could all be signs of a move away from the automobile

**Matthew Wheeland**

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If all goes according to plan, next year construction will begin on a 30-storey residential tower in Austin, Texas. Nothing new in the daily life of a booming city, except for one thing: the apartment tower will offer no parking spaces to residents.

Whether you gauge it by the growth of car-free homes, a steady drop in drivers' licences for younger age-groups, or the rise in car-sharing, metropolitan areas across the US have lately made strides in getting residents out of - and rid of - their cars.

In Austin and elsewhere, what's made this possible? The short answer is technology: it's hard to overstate the impact ride-hailing services such as Uber and Lyft have had on urban transportation in the past five years.

Those technologies arrived amid a renewed emphasis by city and regional planners on improving public transit and encouraging non-car modes of transportation.

"Technology plays a big role in how transportation works here in Austin," says Austin Nelsen, a vice-president for Nelsen Development and the project manager for developing The Avenue tower. "Our [targeted] residents are people who live downtown, work downtown; they're not trying to travel seven miles to north Austin to go shopping. We're trying to help build a dense, liveable and walkable city - and I think that's what a lot of cities are striving to do right now."

If you live downtown, you can use a ride-hailing service to get around quickly and relatively cheaply. If your destination is farther afield, those same services - or car-sharing schemes such as Zipcar or the Austin-based Car2Go - can get you there. And perhaps most importantly of all from a long-term perspective, these services can solve what's known as the "first mile, last mile" problem: getting people from their front doors to transit without needing their own car.

Living in, working in and visiting cities without a car eases the demand for parking, which in turn allows city planners to slow or stop the construction of new parking facilities - an about-face that makes buildings such as The Avenue possible.

In 2015, the city of Chicago eliminated parking ratios for new residential projects within a quarter mile of transit. The Austin city council similarly eliminated off-street parking requirements for its downtown business district - the future home of The Avenue tower - in 2013. A crowdsourced

map created in 2015 identified 93 cities in North America that have eliminated, or are considering eliminating, parking minimum requirements.

“[In most cities], there’s a perception that you can’t find a parking spot right where you want to go, so there’s no parking,” says Lindsay Bayley, a senior planner at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. “But what we find in communities is that there’s underutilised parking - we just do a poor job managing it. Requiring developers to build parking when there is underutilised parking is not the best policy.”

There are many reasons for cities to eliminate these parking requirements. For one, it’s inordinately expensive to build parking spaces - Bayley estimated a cost of \$30,000 per space, while Nelsen priced it at \$40,000 - which increases the cost of living in those buildings and discourages affordable housing.

A recent study from the Center for Neighborhood Technology found only two-thirds of parking required by building codes was ever in use at one time. “That really hurts affordable housing,” Bayley says. “If you are building affordable housing [and you have to include parking], you will move toward cheaper areas, pushing the developments into a few neighbourhoods.”

The other big factor behind the car-free shift extends beyond the thriving cities of Austin, Chicago, Portland or San Francisco is millennials. Signs abound that the younger generation has a different relationship to car ownership.

A 2014 report by the US Public Interest Research Group found that young people were driving less, driving shorter distances and using more transit, biking and walking to get around. And while naysayers hypothesised that those trends arose from the global recession and high oil prices, ongoing studies show young people are buying fewer cars and getting fewer drivers’ licences than ever before.

“Part of it is just due to finances - people can’t afford to purchase cars,” says Catherine Duffy, chair of the American Planning Association’s transportation division. “There’s also a shift toward experiences, with people wanting to be around a lot of stuff [as they are in cities]. And also, studies have looked at people’s dependence on mobile phones as a way to have freedom rather than needing a car to see friends.”

Young people are the target market for ride-hailing services: a 2014 survey from UC Berkeley found that 73% of such rides were taken by 15- to 34-year-olds. And although Austin is in the midst of a showdown with Uber and Lyft over the regulation of drivers, San Antonio resolved a similar, four-month shutdown last year.

Whatever the long-term outcome in Austin, it highlights the fragile state of affairs as city dwellers’ relationships with the automobile evolve. “I’m still kind of mind-blown about the shutdown,” says Nelsen. “We still have Car2Go, but [not having Lyft and Uber] is detrimental to my lifestyle, and the lifestyle of the city.”

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