Streets No Longer the Sole Purview of Cars:
In communities up and down the West Coast and in parts of the East Coast, a new concept is simplifying street design and bringing cars, bicycles and pedestrians together to share the same space. Street surfaces are at the same level as sidewalks, curbs are eliminated, and trees, vegetation and even public art is extended into what is usually the domain of the automobile. Traffic engineers’ firm belief that safety can only be achieved by separating pedestrians and autos is being successfully challenged.

Granville Island in Vancouver, British Columbia, experimented with shared space many years ago in a mixed-use retail/industrial/residential context. There, pedestrians, cars and trucks mingled on a single thoroughfare. It worked! Somehow, everyone instinctively knew what to do, they were alert, vehicle drivers moved slowly and carefully, and pedestrians moved over when necessary. No one got hurt.

According to the New Urban News, this concept, called “shared space” is showing up in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Santa Monica, and other cities on the West Coast. In the East, shared space can be found in Cambridge, MA, New York City, and others. And in the middle of the country, it has popped up in new development in St. Charles, MO and Buena Vista, CO.

In Santa Monica, a team of architects, traffic engineers, city staff, and neighborhood residents worked together to develop a shared space concept on three blocks of residential Longfellow Street and several connecting streets located near heavily-traveled Lincoln Boulevard. The 40–foot right-of-way on Longfellow Street is currently covered with asphalt and has no sidewalks.

The team came up with a plan for a “living street”—a landscaped corridor where pedestrians may happily coexist with motorists. Autos occupy a single, 14-foot-wide, asphalt-paved lane in the center of the street. When vehicles approach each other, one of them will have to yield. On-street parallel parking lines the paved area. Here asphalt will likely be replaced with decorative, permeable concrete pavers so that runoff water can seep into the ground. Beyond that will be 5-foot wide pedestrian walkways lined with trees and native, drought-tolerant grasses and shrubs.

Colored, patterned concrete is proposed to extend across intersections, to emphasize the pedestrian character of the street. If this experiment is a success, Santa Monica’s city leaders are open to installing more shared streets in the future.

In San Francisco, a narrow passage called Linden Street in the Hayes Valley neighborhood has been redesigned. The project is financed by a developer and has received the support of the City. The plan is to repave the narrow roadbed in patterned, colored concrete, level with the sidewalks. Planters and recycled curbstones will differentiate places where people can gather and sit. This project is conceptualized as a landscaped community gathering space — a living room in the street where cars, pedestrians, and bicyclists all have equal footing.

While in the U.S., much of the experimentation with shared-space design is occurring on alleys and other streets with light vehicular traffic, a street in downtown Sacramento is an exception. Pedestrians there share space with cars on 13th Street, between J and L Streets. This 2-block section of the street is narrow and level with the sidewalk. Lanes curve around a decorative fountain located in its center. While the area is primarily asphalt, the street is decorated with inlaid brick patterns extending across the street in several places. Bollards and seating define areas to be occupied solely by pedestrians.

Lined by the Sacramento Convention Center, two hotels, and several restaurants, this is a commercial street. However, cars tend to slow down and stop for pedestrians. The open, public space feel to the street seems to encourage pedestrian priority. There is eye contact between the two with the overall effect being that of a highly civilized place.

Patrick Siegman of Nelson\Nygaard, a frequent speaker at LGC events, points out that in the U.S., Americans have been operating in shared spaces — very drab ones — for decades. “Most large parking lots — for example, those at shopping centers and grocery stores — effectively function in ways that are very similar to shared spaces on European shopping streets,” he observes. It’s nothing new!
A Unique Opportunity to Address Climate Change: If driving is not curbed, carbon emissions from transportation are projected to be 41% above today’s levels by 2030. At the same time, the potential to shift trips to lower-carbon modes is huge: The 2001 National Household Transportation Survey found that 50% of all trips in metropolitan areas are three miles or less and 28% of all metropolitan trips are one mile or less – these are distances that could easily be traveled by foot or bicycle.

The International Panel on Climate Change recommends modal shifts from driving to walking, bicycling, and transit as a key mitigation strategy. Yet 65% of even very short trips in the U.S. — under one mile — are made by car. This is largely because our streets as they are currently designed, support cars but make it dangerous and/or unpleasant to walk or bike.

Billions of dollars will soon be provided to local governments through their Metropolitan Planning Organizations to build, improve and maintain streets. This provides an opportunity to address climate change by making sure that new and repaired streets, funded with this money, are designed to serve pedestrians and bicyclists — not just cars.

In 2008, the California State Department of Transportation issued a policy to support biking and walking on State roads—Deputy Directive 64. It says, the Department views all transportation improvements as opportunities to improve safety, access and mobility for all travelers in California and recognizes bicycle, pedestrian, and transit modes as integral elements of the transportation system. The directive applies to all planning programming, design, construction, operations, maintenance activities and products on the State highway system.

Many District-level staff may be unaware of this measure. Because a portion of the stimulus dollars are directed to Caltrans, city and county officials are advised to request that any monies spent by the State in their Districts be consistent with Deputy Directive 64.

Local governments throughout the country are also adopting policies to accommodate all modes of travel. The concept, known as “Complete Streets,” asks transportation planners and engineers to consistently design and alter the right-of-way with all users in mind.

Experience shows that over time, complete streets and similar policies can yield highly impressive results. In 1993, Portland became the first city to adopt a complete streets plan for the purpose of addressing global warming. The City’s goal was to reduce emissions to 10% below 1990 levels by 2010. They significantly exceeded this target, achieving per capita reductions 12.5% below 1990 levels by 2005. New transit investments and continued improvements to the biking and walking infrastructure also helped Portland keep money in the local economy and grow jobs. In 2005, their carbon savings were worth between $28 million and $70 million annually.

Boulder, CO has also been working to create a complete street network for some time, completing over 350 miles of dedicated bike facilities, paved shoulders, and a comprehensive transit network. Between 1990 and 2003, fewer people in the city drove alone, more people bicycled, and transit trips grew by an amazing 500%. The reduction in car trips has cut CO₂ emissions in Boulder by an impressive half a million pounds a year.

A number of cities around the country have more recently adopted complete streets policies. Among them are the cities of Seattle and Chicago. Chicago’s policy states, “The safety and convenience of all users of the transportation system — including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, freight, and motor vehicle drivers — shall be accommodated and balanced . . .” In the Sacramento area, the cities of Sacramento, Davis, Folsom and Roseville have all adopted complete street policies.

Last year, California’s legislature got into the act with AB 1358, signed into law by the Governor on September 30, 2008. This measure requires cities and counties, upon revision of the circulation element of the general plan, to identify how the jurisdiction will provide for the routine accommodation of all users of the roadway including motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

California cities and counties will have $2.5 billion to spend on transportation in the next few months, primarily directed at upgrades and maintenance of existing roads. There are many compelling reasons for including complete streets measures in the design and construction of these local projects — residents will have more choices regarding how they travel. In addition, complete streets are cost-effective and keep more money in the local economy; they improve pedestrian safety and encourage healthy and active lifestyles; and they make a highly effective contribution to reducing greenhouse gases.

For more information about complete streets, visit the website of the National Complete Streets Coalition at www.completestreets.org.

Quote of the month: “Our transportation policy must solve our nation’s energy and climate threats, not exacerbate them.” — Natural Resources Defense Council Federal Transportation Policy Director, Deron Lovaas