# Where will the speed culture lead us? A critical reflection on strategic urban transport policies in light of empirical evidences

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## Introduction

Throughout human history, "speed" has been valued and associated with success and progress; because speed has a practical and functional advantage for human life and survival. Since the beginning of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation, people have always been told (and have largely accepted) that travel is getting faster, and this speeding up will make life better for everyone. Therefore, transportation planners have generally interpreted speed as a positive thing. Moreover, when the first automobiles entered the cities (from the mid-1920s) it became the dominant mode of transportation in many cities, and few people doubted whether "speed" was good or bad. They simply assumed that "faster is *always* better". In this (often unspoken) assumption, urban transport policy during the 20th century has mainly focused on faster roads and increasing (off-street/on-street) parking for the ever-increasing number of cars. In contrast, slower transport such as walking and cycling were implicitly seen as "outmoded" or associated with a hindering of progress and thereby (commonly) ignored in most transport policies.

Nonetheless, these days, urban road transportation systems in many big cities and especially metropolises have reached the peak of their carrying capacity. Therefore, in many countries, there are drastic changes in the focus of urban policy from planning only for the speed of "motorized" traffic towards paying more attention to alternative (non-motorized) modes that can be more safety and healthy, accessible, and reliable. For instance, transportation planning and traffic engineering have realized that the advantages of speed (especially in residential streets or busy commercial areas) are far more than its disadvantages. So, it shifted from maximizing speed to minimizing the speed of motor traffic in these areas.

Due to the devastating consequences of speed on the one hand, and the critical reactions of numerous researchers against the concept of "speed" on the other hand, reasons and arguments have been put forward today that have greatly changed the way we look at such an issue. This article tries to explain why and how lived experience in the city is largely contrary to the goals that "speed-oriented" urban transportation claims. Then, the analytical results of these specific studies from many countries can provide new horizons for urban policymakers, urban planners, urban designers, urbanists, and people of our urban society to be able to solve (wicked) problems related to traffic and urban transportation much more efficiently.

## Methodology

In this article, the assumptions, propositions, or standard arguments about the advantages of speed for urban social, economic and environmental conditions have been reviewed and criticized. For the aims of this article, first, the main assumptions and propositions in policy-making, modeling and planning of urban transport (3 cases), as well as the dominant view (conventional beliefs) of citizens in this field (10 cases) are extracted from various sources, classified, and then tested in light of empirical pieces of evidence. By using this method, the lived experience of the city could be subjected to a critical and reflective evaluation against the taken-for-granted assumptions and arguments in urban transportation policies. Moreover, it would be possible to in general find out which policies and strategies (increasing the speed or decreasing the speed of urban transportation) have been able to improve urban health, save time and help to enhance the economic and social condition of our cities. The basic idea of this article is that the dominance of the culture of speed in urban life and a speed-orientated transport policy on the configuration of the city in practice and the long term through changes in many ways ultimately would lead us to inefficient, fragile, unhealthy and unsustainable cities.

## Discussion of Results & Conclusions

For urban transport planners, the speed of traffic has been considered as the main criterion of the success of their plans; at least because it will save time, increase accessibility, increase productivity in economic activities, social efficiency, and comfort of individuals and households. Despite this, the findings of this article based on empirical pieces of evidence (from a holistic and long-term perspective) showed the opposite of such dominant assumptions and claims. The results in this article from the analysis of some of the most important assumptions (3 fundamental cases) and alleged propositions (10 main cases) show that the speed, as assumed, has not always been beneficial; because although in theory and model, speeding up may improve many aspects of people's lives, but in reality, when speed increases, the city also has changed in response to it and has imposed a wide range of costs, so that increasing the speed often increases the travel distance and the loss of time, money, and health in the city.

Moreover, this speed culture and speedy lifestyle have had other (obvious and hidden) effects and costs that neutralized the assumed advantages. The analysis of this article based on empirical evidences from international research shows that the city reacts to the increase in speed. This reaction (e.g., via reducing density, sprawl, traffic congestion, transportation poverty, reducing economic efficiency and urban livability) has significant negative effects on people and environment health, city economy, and urban lifestyle that lead us in the long term to inefficient, fragile, unhealthy and unsustainable condition. Hence, this article applies the idea that "faster is *not always* better" to cities.

As a result, recently, the supporters of healthier, sustainable, and slower urban transportation intend to change the "speed culture" in cities by choosing smarter approaches and proving that contrary to our common assumptions, speed can rob our time, money, and health. They consider speed as a problem and not a solution. These new groups of researchers (who have been the focus of this article) are seeking to

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challenge the hegemony of "speed" in urban spaces. For them, the pursuit of speed in cities is increasingly seen as futile and outmoded. In contrast, 'slowing' is seen as a way to achieve the goals of the cities we would like to live in. For example, the "Slow Cities" movement (as an alternative) paradoxically shows how urban planning and policy centered on "slow" modes of transportation (as a way out of the culture of hurry and anxieties about time famine) reduces time pressure and it shifts our trajectory to a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle in cities.

**Keywords:** speed culture, car, urban transport, slow cities

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