

Can Cars Save Downtown?

May 4,
2015

U.S.

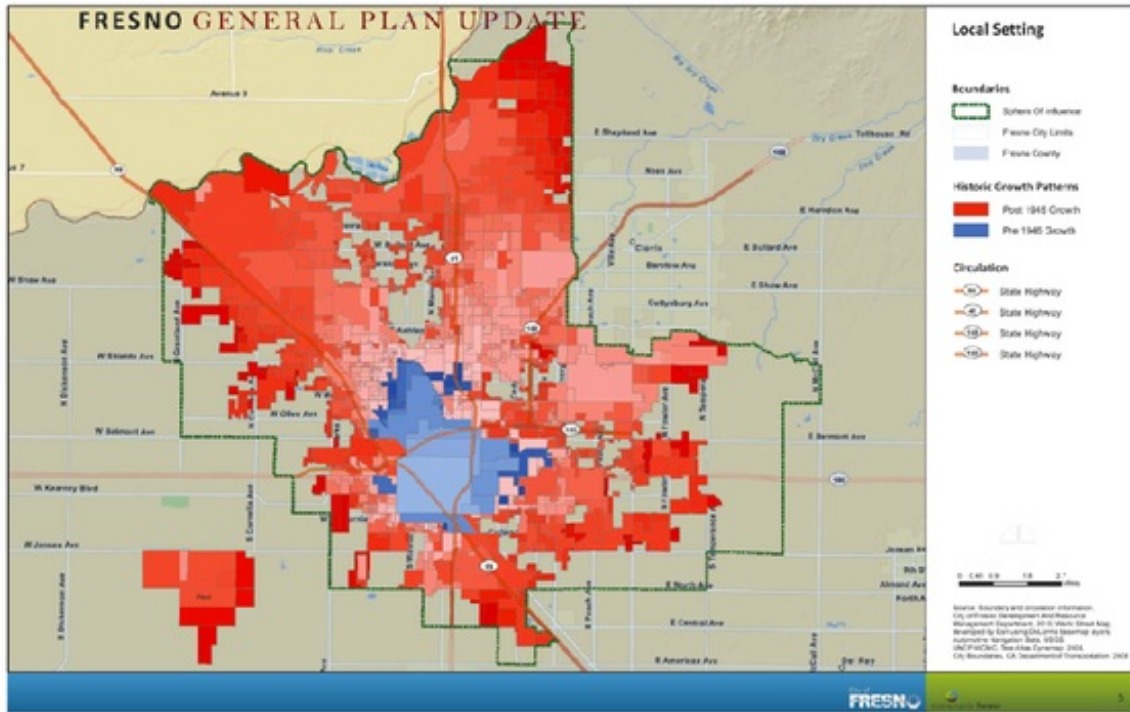
Fresno, California prepares to rip up its landmark pedestrian mall and replace it with a street.



Fresno's Fulton Pedestrian Mall in 2011 [David Prasad / Flickr](#)

Everyone knows that cars, freeways, and automotive-borne sprawl helped kill America's traditional downtowns. That's a process we've seen in every corner of the country—for example, in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Everyone outside the city associates Allentown's travails with the [Billy Joel-eulogized](#) closure of the steel mills. But people in the city know that the shut-down mills were actually in (nearby) Bethlehem. Allentown's [main problem](#) was not overall collapse but rather suburban sprawl, which it is now [working tirelessly](#) (and inventively) to offset.

Fresno, California, as we've noted, is as stark an example of the destructive power of sprawl as anyplace in the country. This map, which I used [when introducing](#) the Fresno story, shows the city's pre-War War II, mainly downtown development in blue—and its post-war sprawl in red.



City of Fresno

That map hangs in [Mayor Ashley Swearingin's](#) office, which is one indication of her administration's commitment to offsetting the sprawl and reviving the downtown. I've talked about that in several [previous installments](#), especially "[Stages of a Downtown Comeback](#)," "[Fresno Kicks off its Campaign](#)," and "[How Did Nice Downtowns Get That Way?](#)"

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The video below is one more tool used by the public-private pro-downtown alliance in Fresno to make its case. For me, the less interesting part of its message is the one on which it begins and ends: that is, the importance of *believing* that things can change. I understand that emphasis, since a self-limiting self-image of Fresno, as a loser city in a winner state, is something real (as discussed [here](#)).



But for people outside the city, the news value of this video may be its emphasis on another theme we've heard discussed by mayors, business people, city planners, and others all across the country. And it is a surprising theme. Now-struggling downtowns may need *more* accommodation for cars, not less, in order to revive.

I sketched out some of that argument in Item Number Two in [this post](#). This video addresses it directly: namely, can it make sense for a city to rip out a historically important, [artistically acclaimed](#), pedestrian-only shopping mall—and turn it into a street once again, as part of a civic "improvement" plan?

Before we began these travels, I would have assumed that the answer had to be, "No." Now I understand why cities like Fresno are saying, "Yes." This video will give you an idea of why we've changed our minds.

Update: Several readers have written in with variants on, "that video didn't tell me enough about how bringing in more cars would help," or "where are people going to park?" etc.

For as much detail as you could possibly want on the origins, pluses, minuses, and ramifications of this plan, I direct you to two previous Fresno posts by me, [here](#) and [here](#), plus a detailed article about the plan in [Landscape Architecture magazine](#), plus the mother lode itself, the multi-hundred-page latest [Fresno General Plan](#). Agree, disagree, or both, but don't say we're not giving you the details!

- Previous James Fallows Post [Build Your Vocabulary, 'Ass Baton' Edition](#)
- Next James Fallows Post [Fresno to South Bend to Louisville: The Elusive Elements of Civic Success](#)

U.S.

ISIS Takes Credit for the Texas Attack

While officials have yet to address the group's claim, the Garland shooting is the first act of terror on American soil claimed by the Islamic State.

About the Author

- [James Fallows](#) is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and has written for the magazine since the late 1970s. He has reported extensively from outside the United States and once worked as President Carter's chief speechwriter. His latest book is [China Airborne](#).
 - [Email](#)



Most Popular

- [The Dangerous Myths Surrounding Charlie Hebdo](#)

Two recent events—the spectacle of Garry Trudeau, the *Doonesbury* creator, [attacking a group of murdered cartoonists](#) for offending his sensibilities, and [the protest](#) organized by a group of bien-pensant writers against the PEN American Center for planning to honor those cartoonists [tonight](#) in New York—has brought the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy back to public consciousness. So has [the failed attack](#) Sunday in Texas on a group of anti-Islam militants staging a Prophet Muhammad cartoon contest, though, unlike *Charlie Hebdo*, the organization that sponsored the Texas event is run by an [actual anti-Muslim extremist](#) who, I'm proud to say, is a personal nemesis of mine.

Much has already been written about both the Trudeau and PEN controversies. I particularly recommend [David Frum on Trudeau](#), and [Katha Pollitt](#) and [Matt Welch](#) on PEN, as well as [this fine op-ed](#) by Andrew Solomon and Suzanne Nossel, the president and executive director, respectively, of the PEN American Center. These represent only a handful of the many dozens of writers who have risen in defense of free speech, and of *Charlie Hebdo's* right to lampoon religion.

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- [The Onion Is Not a Joke](#)

The Onion had a problem: It fell behind the times. The mock newspaper hadn't printed an issue on actual paper since 2013, and in the period since, it never redesigned its website. As the media world changed—as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* adapted the ways they published stories online—*The Onion* lost a key satirical weapon. Visually, it no longer looked like many of the publications it parodied. And so, like it had done many times before, *The Onion* tagged along.

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- [Work Is About More Than Money](#)

Work is normally discussed in financial terms: Does a job provide enough money to make ends meet? To plan for a secure retirement? What happens to those who face prolonged periods without a paycheck?

But work—and unemployment—is also an emotional experience, shaping how people think of themselves and how they relate to those closest to them. This terrain is the focus of sociologist Allison Pugh's new book, [The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity](#).

I recently spoke with Pugh about what this means for American workers, society, and public policy. A lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

Rebecca J. Rosen: A central premise of your research is that work is about more than money—it's also about identity and relationships, particularly within a family. How does work shape us beyond our bank accounts?

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