

Pittsburgh

New York

Texas

Dealy and Gula in San Diego



CROOZIN' WITH A:BC

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There is a gap of energy usage in the world: the United States uses 24% of the world's energy with only 5% of the population. Only in the past 40 years as American cities have gotten flabby on the edges and empty in the middle has that gap emerged to be our country's biggest source of global embarrassment. An uncanny "white flight" from downtowns of America infested our culture with sprawl and car dependency in the late part of the 20th century, and only now are we beginning to understand the connection between the attraction of healthy urban cores to the happiness of our people and the earth.

At the center are teams of people around the country that spark, create, mold, envision and navigate the changing path of urban centers. In the fall of 2002, Action:Better City decided to hit the road for seven months to meet these people in 34 cities around the country that would make their cities more attractive. Watching them transform their communities, perhaps we can learn how to become team players that can shape American cities in the future.

week 6 07 january 2003 las vegas

Las Vegas rises out of the sand quickly, and sometimes I think it should just sink back in. The Las Vegas Boulevard "Strip" cleavage tantalizes with its lights, circus acts, and \$10 buffets, but behind the scenes, behind the stage set, and behind the fancy hotels, the sweaty derriere of Vegass dumps you into a world of homelessness, pawn shops, abandoned mini-malls, and libertarian state politics. In fact "Las Vegas" isn't really "Las Vegas" after all: the majority of the glitz lies outside of the city limits in "unincorporated Clark County." That translates into "quick permits" by the state's "neo-liberal" hands-off "government" for the next motel shaped like New York City. Next bachelor party, you'll be bringin' your buddies to Unincorporated Clark County to drink, gamble, and pick a nice gal to exercise with. We spoke with the Real Las Vegas' urban planner, Margo Wheeler. We have officially nominated this exhausted woman for Action:Better City's Person of the Year: she transferred from her position as a Los Angeles County urban planner (frying pan) to her position in Las Vegas (the fire). She wanted to leave this place and join our trip, but the Croozer is packed to the gills with all of our moisturizing lotions to get our skin through the rest of the desert.

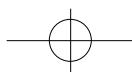
weeks 11 03 feb 2003 texas

Everybody's talkin' 'bout Texas, because there's a lot of Texas to talk about. In fact, there's actually two states of Texas. Simply categorized: Old Texas, and New Texas. The Old Texas is the land of reverence for the earth. Respect for the land was the rule: a man knew God's will and Mother Nature's moods. The modest communities grew to protect their heart and soul: the town center. Under Live Oaks, people stop to chat and clasp hands to trade stories of neighbors' cattle. The luscious green Old Texas is alive and well in the scores of small towns that dot the countryside. Under the bright Texas stars, Old Texas is served by Lyndon B. Johnson, Stephen F. Austin, Lloyd Bentsen, and Daniel Boone. Together they roam through the Texas wild flowers, fighting for the dignity of Humankind.

The New Texas brings shiny new Chevy

Tahoes and Ford Explorers to the thousands of asphalt prairies that lead to the bumper-to-bumper air-conditioned Promised Land. Those pesky potholes jiggle beer bellies just enough to chafe waistlines near that Texas-shaped belt buckle. Mother Nature barely penetrates the brownish afternoon sky as commuters road-rage their way across a franchise-filled suburban nightmare. The spokesmodels for New Texas, headquartered in Houston, are Karl Rove, Tom Dealy and Enron. Together they roam offshore tax havens, still claiming that economics "trickle down".

The two states of Texas collide in Austin. Struggling to keep its history alive, the boot-stompin' rock-a-billy state capitol is quickly succumbing to the ever-growing drive-in culture of New Texas. As national chain vultures circle in the sky, the local mom-'n-pop business leaders attempt to circle the wagons for a high





OTHER PLACES

Croozzer

Boston

Gula

Salt Lake City



noon showdown at 6th and Lamar. Stevie Ray Vaughn (Old Texas) versus King of the Hill (New Texas). With Karen Hughes and the state G.O.P. as the referee team, dark clouds may be looming over Austin. Citizen groups like LivableCity, Keep Austin Weird, and the Downtown Austin Alliance may be staging a 21st century Alamo.

week 15 02 mar 2003 atlanta

All we'd heard of Atlanta was racial tension, highways, CNN, sprawl, traffic, air conditioning, segregation and the Olympics. But we were surprised to find active downtown neighborhoods with good streets and progressive ideas. Midtown is one of the best examples of an adaptive re-use neighborhood filled with all the standards: dense housing, pedestrian scale retail with coffee shops, book stores, newsstands, galleries and a community theater.

The Downtown area is not quite as revitalized and was most impacted by "white flight" forty years ago but is changing. A few corporations, wealthy developers and a local college have shaped the development downtown: CNN, Home Depot, Atlanta Hawks, Coca Cola, Georgia Tech and the Olympics. With this new development came new amenities such as a park, clean streets, landscaping, a downtown grocery store, improved transit stations, downtown ambassador system, new zoning, downtown lofts and more safety.

weeks 24 05 apr 2003 detroit

Downtown Detroit has been shamefully abandoned by everyone. After a successful launch of the automobile industry, the city set the pace for the conversion to military equipment and helped win World War II. The racial strife that followed divided Detroit into black and white. The cowardly whites fled to the safety of the suburbs, while the discriminated blacks were left in an urban wasteland. That wasteland remains today as physical evidence to racial cowardice and irresponsibility. Beautiful stone and terracotta-detailed high rises support the plywood industry by providing thousands of broken windows to fill. The streets are occupied by lone African-American drifters and hurried, frightened Caucasian SUV drivers. General Motors, in the company's limited urban wisdom, constructed its headquarters and funded a convention center on the water edge of town. Overlooking the separation from downtown by a large highway, the complex only served to pull even more energy from downtown. Salt was officially applied to the city's wounds with the construction of a rooty-tooty monorail that guides conventioners safely above the streets into the safety of the third floors of corporate offices scattered throughout the urban core. There is some truth to the Seattle Monorail's campaign slogan "Rise above it all". Unfortunately, the "it" is the lifeblood of community- city streets and urban reality. Motown has become Notown, and the Saffron Croozzer, however sad, moved on.



week 28 13 june 2003 salt lake city

Finding the reason a city exists is one of the first steps in understanding a city's growth. For most cities, the answer is fur trading, cattle drives, railroads, ports, military, natural resource or trade of some kind. Not so in Salt Lake City. The Mormons settled in this area that had only one tree, a harsh climate and isolated from other cities via any transportation or trade. Salt Lake City is the only city in the United States created solely for religious purposes. The difference is pretty obvious when walking around the downtown; all the energy lies in Temple Square. Walled off by a ten foot concrete wall, the two block "town center" contains the Tabernacle, Temple, Administration Building, Joe Smith Memorial Building, three "visitor centers," sculptures, fountains and five young missionaries on each corner eager to show you the way.

Since the Mormons laid out the city on a grid surrounding Temple Square with extremely large blocks and streets, the light rail fits nicely in the middle of the street without any traffic implications. The streets are wide enough that the light rail line and station sit between four lanes of traffic, parallel parking and a turn lane. When the signal says WALK, you need to RUN in order to make it across the street in time. Surprisingly, in a city with a small population and low density, low parking costs and not much traffic congestion, the rider-ship has tripled the original projections. The Downtown Salt Lake City Alliance hopes



to capture some of the excitement with more downtown residents so they can leave the city open past 5:00 p.m.

The trip of 21,000 miles in a 1985 Toyota Van and 210 nights away from home led us to find hope. We learned how change starts with one idea. It could be the Dallas developer who heads up a committee to improve an historic street slowly forgotten or the activist in Boston who fights for public park space in the big dig project. Every city has a story to be told. We just need to start listening. [IA](#)

Roger, currently an Architect with Mithun Partners in Seattle, has directed four films with Action: Better City regarding urban issues of connections, town centers and contextual studies in the Puget Sound. He alternates between yellow or red pants depending on the day.

Dayna has been involved in the real estate development industry for the last 14 years. She dove into Action: Better City with the "Connections" film and followed with "Where's Your Town Center?" She enjoys travelling in a van and sleeping in cheap motels.

Action: Better City is dedicated to fostering and exploring the ideas that link Seattle and its environment, the connections of its downtown neighborhoods, and the potential for unique public spaces.

