It's time to redesign Venice Boulevard and other roadways like it. By Nathan Cherry, AICP
As the city began to grow in earnest in the first half of the 20th century, the Red Car light-rail system anticipated growth along major corridors.

VENICE BOULEVARD

IS ONE OF AMERICA'S ICONIC ROADS, a 25-mile-long arterial that starts at the Pacific Ocean and then meanders through the west side of Los Angeles, traversing numerous communities as well as downtown. The boulevard derived its name from Venice, an old beachfront district that originally served as the city's playground and later developed a national reputation for, shall we say, eccentricity.

In the car culture of Los Angeles, Venice Boulevard is vital because it moves thousands of Angelenos through the city. It is the city's primary east-west arterial. It is also a state highway—SR 187—that runs parallel to Interstate 10 and forms major intersections with its north-south counterparts as one travels east or west.

Venice Boulevard is quite busy at all times of the day and into the late evening. It's vital, but it's also somewhat dysfunctional—increasingly congested, rarely fun to drive—a major roadway with automobile throughput the primary objective of its design. Walking or biking along it are quite difficult because of the speed of the cars and lack of accommodation. I know because my family and I use it frequently to get to work, school, soccer and swimming practice, and shopping destinations.

However, with a bit of work, Venice Boulevard and its kin could be vastly improved.

Rail to roadway

At the turn of the 20th century, grips, gaffers, and other members of the film industry and other working-class people would descend on Venice by streetcar for the weekend. Once there, they would stay in tiny bungalows or apartment houses and walk to restaurants and shops and sunbathe on the beach.

Back then streetcars shared the road with buses and cars, providing cheap transportation all over the city. The first streetcar system in LA dates to 1874.

By 1914, the famous "Red Cars" of the Pacific Electric Railway could take you from downtown to the outer reaches of the LA basin, plus San Bernardino, Santa Ana, San Pedro, the San Fernando Valley, and beyond. One of the most popular routes, the "Balloon Route," ran from downtown through Hollywood, Santa Monica, Venice Beach, and Redondo Beach and back to LA via Culver City.

Much of this route used what is today Venice Boulevard. At its peak, this huge system consisted of 1,150 miles of track covering four counties and 900 cars. In 1944 it attracted its highest ridership: more than 109 million passengers.

After World War II, however, the explosive growth of LA, lack of public money to keep up the existing lines, the enormous increase in automobiles, and the freeways that were built to accommodate them all conspired to kill the Red Cars. Streetcars were ripped out of the rights of way, often replaced by left-turn pockets. With the addition of three lanes of traffic travelling each way, the major arterial street was born.

Venice Boulevard is now an arterial road. It is one of only three street types al-
The amount of open space per resident in LA is among the lowest in North America. Turning arterial streets into multimodal corridors provides a "green grid" where alternative modes of travel are accommodated and encouraged, sustainable power provided, and new opportunities for public and private investment are created through the city.

lowed in LA (along with four-lane collectors and two-lane local roads); seven-lane arterials occur at roughly one-mile increments throughout the vast Los Angeles Basin. Major arterials that run east to west include Sunset, Wilshire, Santa Monica, Pico, Olympic, Venice, Washington, Slauson, Florence, and Imperial.

Just get me there, will you?
Most Angelenos commute by car, in part because gasoline and cars are still relatively cheap in the U.S. This fact, of course, has all kinds of unintended consequences.

By LA standards, my commute is relatively short in distance and time—18 miles each way, roughly 45 minutes per trip—but it could be longer if I took the freeways, which are generally congested most of the day. I avoid freeways as much as possible, preferring to travel on surface roads. Arterials often have coordinated traffic lights, so traffic tends to move pretty quickly along these streets.

However, because the freeways are always full, the arterials are being pressed into service as commuter routes, resulting in congestion and increased threats to pedestrian safety. Many intersections along Venice Boulevard carry more than 125,000 cars a day.

Further, major arterial intersections are notoriously dangerous, as pedestrians, bikes, and buses all vie for space with cars. Accommodating left turns is especially difficult. A typical traffic light sequence allows for both oncoming and perpendicular traffic movements, but also left-turning movements from both directions, resulting in a shortened walk signal. Pedestrians are challenged to walk 100 feet or more within the span of about 20 seconds. Every year, doz-
ens of pedestrian and cyclist deaths occur from oncoming traffic conflicts with cars.

I tell you all this because we Angelenos spend a lot of time in our cars wondering what the future of these auto-oriented streets could have been and what they will be. Is there a way for us to simultaneously solve our traffic and mobility problems, create new open spaces, and accommodate future growth in a fashion that is imaginative, sustainable, and a source of pride?

How will LA accommodate even more growth, and, given the poor quality of our streets and open spaces, what does the future hold for us if we do not look at the humble arterial road yet again?

Redesigning the street
Many cities have rethought the design and administration of their major roads to better accommodate multiple modes, integrate streetscape improvements, and encourage reinvestment by the private sector. Street networks in New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and London all have undergone significant changes to promote transit-oriented development and a more sustainable urban lifestyle. Why not Los Angeles? If we could do this, what a message it would send to the world about the city’s ability to think about and realize a greener future.

Critical to redesign is rethinking the left-turn pocket. Roughly 20 percent of the road right-of-way is taken up with the area required for left turns every three blocks, but only a tiny percentage of traffic movements are left turns. These left turns slow down traffic and limit our ability to accommodate other transportation modes in the roadway. Why can’t we rethink this? If the number of left-turn options were reduced by half—occurring every six blocks instead of every three—or even eliminated from the road design, traffic would move more swiftly, pedestrian safety would be enhanced, and other modes could be accommodated.

With a median that is freed up from this left-turn obligation, light rail or articulated buses could run along a median that
is a green, accessible open space. Served by stations every quarter mile (roughly a five-minute walk), this center median could be heavily landscaped and include convenience retail, walking trails, and even sustainable power generation.

Bike lanes could also be integrated into the median, thereby accommodating two additional modes within the same public right-of-way without affecting automobile throughput. Examples of this design exist in many cities, including St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, Beacon Street in Brookline, Massachusetts, and Fitzroy Street in Melbourne, Australia.

Additionally, reducing the size of the travel lanes from 12 feet to 10 feet and eliminating on-street parking during peak travel times would enable the arterial to deliver an equal or perhaps even higher level of service in terms of traffic throughput. The sidewalks on each side of the right-of-way also need significant design attention; options include adding street trees and convenience retail, Wi-Fi, additional lighting and cafes, newsstands, and other services at key intersections.

All of those would stimulate pedestrian activity and promote general redevelopment along the entire transit corridor over time. Eventually, major streets could become "third places," providing additional services and amenities beyond just travel corridors from work and home. This could capture further increased property value along the corridor, improving the tax base and helping to pay for infrastructure improvements over an extended period of time through tax increment financing.

Moving forward
To most people, Los Angeles means car culture, movies, and the beach. But if you talk to people of a certain age who grew up there, you will definitely hear about a time before freeways, when a network of rail lines and electric streetcars connected all of LA, Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties, where orange groves dotted the landscape, and Los Angeles was as much a "garden" as a "city." In recent years, fond memories and perhaps extreme freeway gridlock have made the Red Cars again gain favor.

As the transit authority's new light-rail lines now follow routes often very close to those once traveled by the old Red Car lines, this seems an opportune time to stop and think about what kind of city we want and how moving around the city might change in the future.

Combining transit improvements within the right of way with other features such as expansion of the pedestrian and bike network, new trails and other open spaces, green power generation, and convenience amenities not only will make movement through the city more efficient; they will completely transform the city for the better.

Nate Cherry is a vice president of RTKL Associates and the coauthor of Grid/Street/Place, published by APA Planners Press and available at APAPlanningBooks.com.
Copyright of Planning is the property of American Planning Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.