



## THE KANSAS CITY ADVANTAGE: LIVABILITY

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan Area Population (2005)	1,900,000	Brisbane, Sacramento, Charlotte, Portland
Urban Area Population (2004) <sup>1</sup>	1,485,000	Portland, Novosibersk, Goiania, Marseille, Leeds-Bradford
Urban Land Area: Square Miles	675	Montreal, Cincinnati, Sydney, Mexico City
Urban Land Area: Square Kilometers	1,750	
Population per Square Mile	2,200	Brisbane, Boston, Cincinnati
Population per Square Kilometer	850	
*Continuously built up area		

21 May 2006

### Description

Kansas City is a truly genuine bi-state urban area (Figure 1). In most bi-state urban areas, the state with the largest city is strongly dominant in economic activity and population. Examples are Chicago, Illinois-Indiana, Cincinnati, Ohio-Kentucky (and Indiana), Louisville, Kentucky-Indiana, Memphis, Tennessee-Mississippi (and Arkansas), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania-New Jersey (and Delaware and Maryland), Portland, Oregon-Washington and St. Louis, Missouri-Illinois.

However, things are much more balanced in the Kansas City area. Approximately 60 percent of the population lives in Missouri, where the central city, Kansas City, Missouri is located. There is also a Kansas City, Kansas, but it has always been considerably smaller than its Missouri neighbor. Most of the suburban population is in Kansas. In the northern part of the urban area, the Missouri River forms the boundary between the two states. The river then curves through the core of Kansas City, Missouri, just north of the downtown and River Market (below) areas. The Kansas River meets the Missouri River at the bend, flowing from the west.

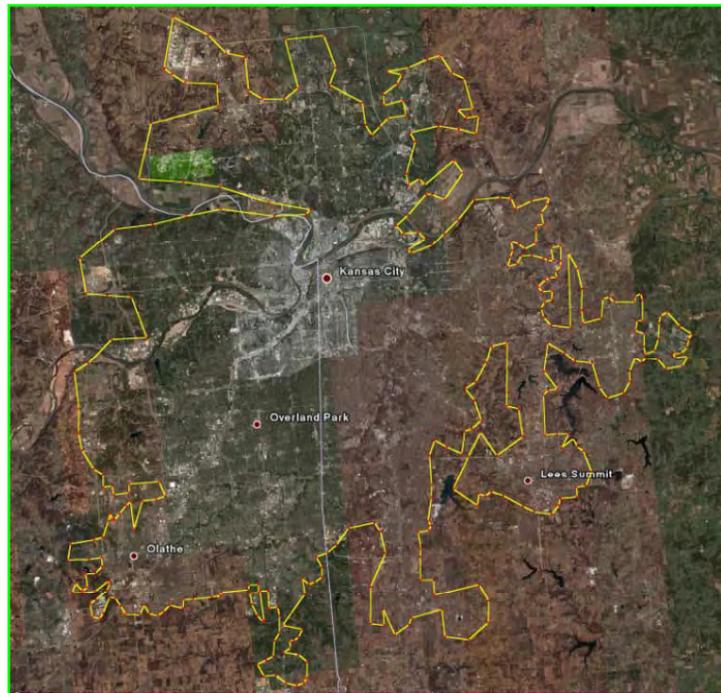
In much of the southern area, the state border is State Line Road, which at intersections has Missouri street signs on the east side and Kansas street signs on the west side. Effective urban planning and coordination is indicated by the fact that many of the streets on one side of the border continue into the other with the same street names.

<sup>1</sup> This is a new Demographia estimate based upon satellite photographs and population trends. This compares to a population of 1,362,000 and a land area of 584 square miles, as reported in the 2000 United States Census (based upon census tracts rather than satellite image analysis). The 2004 Demographia estimate includes the Lee's Summit urban area, which was separate in 2000.

## The Midwest's San Francisco

Kansas City is known as the “city of fountains.” It is a surprising place for people who have not previously visited. It is home to some of the nation’s finest parks and monuments and the greenery (in season) beside major roadways is stunning. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that if Kansas City were located on the coast, it would be called San Francisco.

For decades, the Midwest of the United States has not been a favored location, as growth has been concentrated in the Sun Belt of the South and West. Kansas City, well west of other midwestern urban areas, was easy to overlook. However, what the Kansas City area lacks in locational advantage is increasingly compensated for in livability. The reason is that coastal urban areas, whether Portland, Los Angeles, Boston or New York implement land use and transport policies that make life more difficult and expensive and are beginning to drive people away.



**Figure 1:**  
**The Kansas City Urban Area**

### Livable Kansas City

Kansas City has been honored as one of the nation’s most livable cities.<sup>2</sup> For good reason. Unlike many other urban areas, in Kansas City a large share of households can still afford to buy their own homes, which for many is the means for entry into the economic mainstream. Moreover, they can travel from home to work with relatively little traffic congestion. This also makes automobile based air pollution less of a problem.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mostlivable.org/>.

Kansas City's livability is illustrated by a comparison with unaffordable and congested Los Angeles and Portland, both of which have engaged in excessive land regulation while failing to provide sufficient new highway capacity to meet growing demand.

**Housing Affordability:** Historically, urban areas throughout the United States (and Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Ireland) have had median house<sup>3</sup> prices below 3.0 times median household income.<sup>4</sup> In Kansas City, this “median multiple” remained below 3.0, at 2.7 in late 2005.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, recent years have seen excessive land regulation has driven “median multiple” far higher in a number of markets. Much of the relative increase in price is because the homebuilding industry has not been allowed to respond to the demand for new housing, as a result of more stringent government land regulation. Portland has been an international ideological leader in restrictive land regulation, the purpose of which is to control suburbanization (pejoratively called “urban sprawl”).<sup>6</sup> In Los Angeles, the strong housing demand combined with a web of costly regulations has produced what may be the most unaffordable housing market in the world. Kansas City's advantage can be illustrated by calculating the median house prices that the Portland and Los Angeles median multiples would produce, compared to the actual Kansas City value. The Kansas City housing affordability advantage is illustrated in Figure 2. Kansas City has a median house price of \$159,000. At Portland multiples, the median house price would be nearly \$250,000, while at Los Angeles multiples, the median house price would be \$1,025,000.

**Travel Time:** Peak hour travel times are also better in the Kansas City area. This is principally because the authorities responsible for roadways --- both in Missouri and Kansas --- have effectively expanded capacity in response to rising demand. On both sides of the state border, the freeway system provides a large mobility grid, which is well supported by a strong grid of high-capacity arterial streets. This is in keeping with a tradition established by Harry S. Truman, who as a Jackson County judge (county commissioner) undertook to provide paved road access throughout, long before he aspired to the Presidency.

In contrast, there has been little expansion of roadway capacity in Los Angeles in Portland. In the case of Los Angeles, the problem is that nearly one-half of the planned freeway system was cancelled, which is the principal cause of that urban areas intense traffic congestion. In Portland, as in land use, the problem is ideology, in this case anti-automobile ideology. Local officials believe that they can transfer demand from cars to transit, thereby making substantial road capacity unnecessary. Billions of dollars have been spent in this pursuit, and to little avail.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, peak hour traffic delays are greater in Los Angeles and Portland. In Los Angeles, a trip that would take 30 minutes in uncongested conditions took more than 52 minutes in 2003,

---

<sup>3</sup> The median is different from the “mean” or average. The median house price is the “middle” house price. As many houses are more expensive as are less expensive. The median is preferable for measuring affordability, since it is not influenced by exceedingly high cost houses, unlike the mean or average.

<sup>4</sup> See the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey*, <http://www.demographia.com/dhi-ix2005q3.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Atlanta, Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston, among the fastest growing large urban areas in the high-income world, have also managed to maintain housing affordability, with median multiples below 3.0, as homebuilders are allowed to provide sufficient new housing to meet the demand. The same is true of many other markets in the United States and Canada. See <http://www.demographia.com/dhi-ix2005q3.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> This has been unsuccessful. Even in Portland, there is a strong movement of residents to areas outside the portion of the metropolitan area subject to the strongest regulation. It is possible that these anti-suburbanization regulations have led to more remote suburbanization rather than the more compact urban areas they seek to encourage. See <http://www.demographia.com/db-porugbmigr.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Despite this spending, the automobile market share in Portland has fallen somewhat since 1983, before the major transit investments were made (see <http://www.publicpurpose.com/ut-pt20trend.pdf>). Per capita driving has risen at a rate among the highest in the nation (see <http://www.publicpurpose.com/hwy-pcvm8297.htm>).

according to the Texas Transportation Institute Travel Time Index. In Portland, the same trip would take 41 minutes. In Kansas City, peak period drivers lose an average of only three minutes compared to uncongested conditions, with a travel time of 33 minutes. The Kansas City travel time advantage is illustrated in Figure 3

Kansas City's peak period travel times rank fourth best in the nation out of the 37 urban areas with more than 1,000,000 population evaluated by the Texas Transportation Institute. Further, among urban areas that are growing, Kansas City ranks first. Kansas City's growth is discussed further below.

**Traffic Congestion:** There is little that people enjoy less than traffic congestion. As Peter Gordon and Harry Richardson of the University of Southern California have shown, less dense suburbanization dilutes traffic congestion and is the principal factor in the superior mobility of US urban areas in relation to international competitors.<sup>8</sup> The Kansas City area's low density produces such an advantage. There are 40,000 automobile miles per urban square mile in Kansas City, compared to 64,000 in Portland and 132,000 in Los Angeles. The Kansas City traffic congestion advantage is illustrated in Figure #4. Moreover, there is every reason for Kansas City to retain its traffic congestion advantage. Many of the freeway and arterial street rights of way have plentiful room for expansion.

**Transit's Role:** The comparative lack of traffic congestion in Kansas City's may be surprising in view of the small transit market share. It is estimated that transit's market share is a miniscule 0.7 percent, one-third of Portland's paltry 2.5 percent.<sup>9</sup> More than 94 percent of Kansas City area households have vehicles available. The share of households without vehicles in the Kansas City area is 34 percent below the national rate, 11 percent below the Portland rate and 41 percent below the Los Angeles rate.

Approximately 1.1 percent of Kansas City commuters use transit to get to work, well below the national figure of 4.6 percent.<sup>10</sup> So few people ride transit to work in Kansas City that the Paris regional metro line (RER) between Chatelet and Gare de Lyon carries more people in five minutes during peak. Even more than most US urban areas, including Portland and Los Angeles, Kansas City has emerged as a "post-transit" urban area. The imperative for local officials would appear to be to make automobility available to the small percentage of households still without it, so that the area's lower-income households and the overall economy might be more prosperous.<sup>11</sup>

### **Urban Renaissance: No Peers**

The central city of Kansas City, Missouri has emerged as one of the most spectacular US examples of urban renaissance. Kansas City was one of the nation's largest cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, as a result, developed a substantial stock of large commercial buildings from that era. During the 20th century, many of these buildings were abandoned or fell into disuse. Now, like core areas from Milwaukee to Chicago, Seattle, Minneapolis and even St. Louis and Pittsburgh, there is substantial core redevelopment.

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Gordon and Harry W. Richardson, "Prove It: The Costs and Benefits of Sprawl," *Brookings Review*, Fall 1998.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.publicpurpose.com/ut-uspt1983share.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> American Community Survey 2004, United States Bureau of the Census.

<sup>11</sup> Research indicates that automobile availability is crucial to elevating low income households into the economic main stream. With cars, low-income households, like middle and higher income households, have the opportunity to access better jobs, better shopping and other activities. For example, see Margy Waller and Mark Alan Hughes, "Working Far from Home: Transportation and Welfare Reform in the Ten Big States," Progressive Policy Institute, August 1, 1999.

Approximately 10,000 new loft dwellings are either now occupied or planned for construction in the downtown and River Market areas. Older, disused office and warehouse buildings are being converted into apartments and condominiums. Unlike Portland's Pearl District, this development is occurring throughout the downtown area and nearly exclusively involves refurbishment of existing buildings. This is possible due to downtown Kansas City's large stock of buildings available for this purpose.

The most intense current activity is in the River Market area, between the Interstate-70 freeway and the Missouri River, directly north of downtown. There is also considerable activity in the Garment District, on the west side of downtown. This area also includes Quality Hill, which is an earlier redevelopment that includes many newly constructed town homes. The adjacent River Market, Garment District and Quality Hill District represent an area of nearly one-half square mile.

On the west side of downtown, the Power and Light project will also add many loft dwellings. One large, 15-story building is nearing completion in the Power and Light District.

Further to the south, many large, old single-family houses have been or are in the process of being refurbished. Many of these, like the formerly vacant commercial buildings to the north, had been abandoned and boarded up. A new commercial center, including a "Costco" and "Home Depot" has opened in the area.

Further, Kansas City is evidence that the central city revitalizations that are taking place represent a general trend. Contrary to some claims, large urban core redevelopments are occurring both with and without major transit investments, such as light rail or streetcars. In Kansas City (as in Seattle), impressive urban redevelopment has occurred in the absence of any such system.

The extent of redevelopment in central Kansas City appears to be greater than that underway in any urban area of similar size and is among the largest in the nation for urban areas of any size.

### **Business Centers**

As is typical of large pre-World War II urban areas, the downtown area is very concentrated and was historically the largest commercial district. Kansas City's downtown has become far less dominant in recent decades, having lost its major department stores, while most job growth has occurred outside. However, a considerable portion of Kansas City's job growth has occurred in areas close to the core. The Midtown area, anchored by Crown Center, has large office buildings and hotels and is located approximately one mile south of downtown. The Country Club area is another two miles south of Midtown and is anchored by the Country Club shopping center often thought of as the world's first large suburban center. Unlike many older shopping centers, Country Club remains as vibrant today as when it opened.

At the same time, there are expansive suburban office and commercial developments throughout the area. Perhaps the largest is in the Overland Park, Kansas area.

### **Quality Residential Areas**

As in other high-income world urban areas, virtually all residential growth has been in suburban areas. New development can be found along the complete periphery of the urban area. For example, large tracts of high-quality new housing are being developed in the Overland Park, Kansas area. New

entry-level housing can be seen in exurban Grain Valley, Missouri, to the east. Grain Valley exhibits what had to be inevitable --- typical new suburban houses with elements of new urbanism added on. Many of the new houses in Grain Valley are indistinguishable from the suburban housing that has been built for decades, except that they have new urbanist front porches.

The suburban areas are typically characterized by the large back yards that a recent University of South Australia study associated with better child health.

Kansas City area residents rate their residential neighborhoods highly. The latest American Housing Survey<sup>12</sup> data indicates that 10 percent more Kansas City residents rate their neighborhoods as a “10” on a scale of one to 10 than residents of the entire nation. Kansas City area residents give their neighborhood a “10” rating a 34 percent more than Portland residents and 42 percent more than Los Angeles residents.

Perhaps surprisingly, despite Kansas City’s greater use of cars, they are less obvious on the landscape than in Portland and Los Angeles. The American Housing Survey indicates that only 9.6 percent of households report bothersome traffic or traffic noise in their neighborhoods. By contrast, bothersome traffic or traffic noise is reported by 54 percent more of households in Portland and 65 percent more in Los Angeles. Angeles. The Kansas City neighborhood quality advantage is illustrated in Figure 5.

Cars are more obvious in Portland and Los Angeles because more of the urban form must be given over to automobile infrastructure in medium density urban areas (like Portland) or higher density urban areas (like Los Angeles) than in lower density urban areas like Kansas City. The automobile density in Los Angeles is 140 percent higher than in Kansas City. Portland’s automobile density is 42 percent greater than Kansas City’s. The Kansas City advantage in car density is illustrated in Figure 6.

### **The Kansas City Advantage**

The Kansas City’s advantage is simply that aspiring households can afford to buy their own homes, they will spend considerably less time in traffic, and their neighborhoods will be less prone to disruption from traffic. That the housing in the Kansas City area is larger and on larger lots than Los Angeles or Portland is just “frosting on the cake.”

### **A More Competitive Kansas City**

There are indications that Kansas City’s advantages are already translating into new growth. For decades, the Kansas City area has grown much more slowly than urban areas farther to the west and south. While the southern growth continues, as restrictive land use policies have been avoided and housing affordability maintained.

However, more people are beginning to move to Kansas City, perhaps drawn by its superior housing affordability and favorable traffic conditions. Between 2000 and 2005, Kansas City received more than 17,000 new residents from other parts of the nation. By comparison, high housing cost San Diego and Denver, long among the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation, saw 98,000

---

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of the Census.

and 19,000 residents move away respectively. High housing cost Minneapolis-St. Paul, long the growth leader in the Midwest, lost 11,000.<sup>13</sup>

The Kansas City advantage may be the reason for this turnaround. It may only be the beginning.

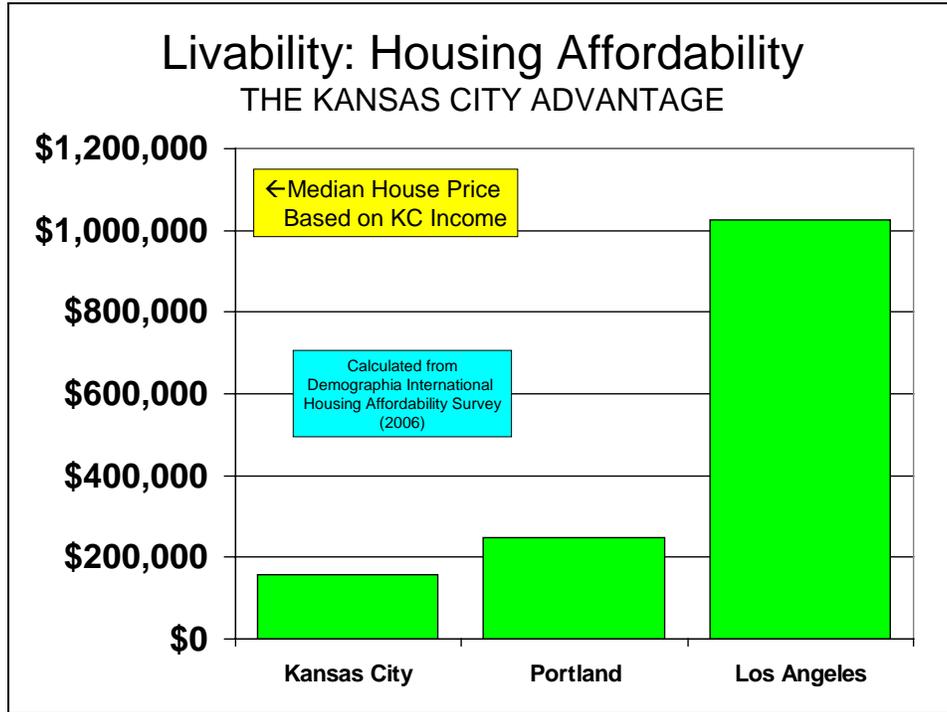


Figure 2

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.demographia.com/db-domigrsum.htm>.

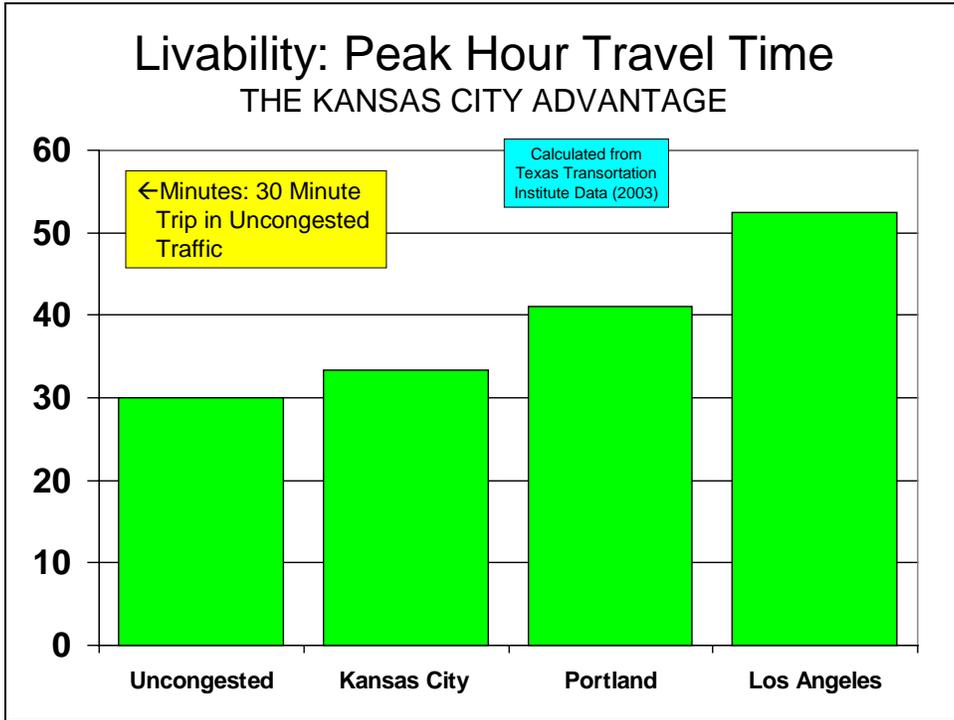


Figure 3

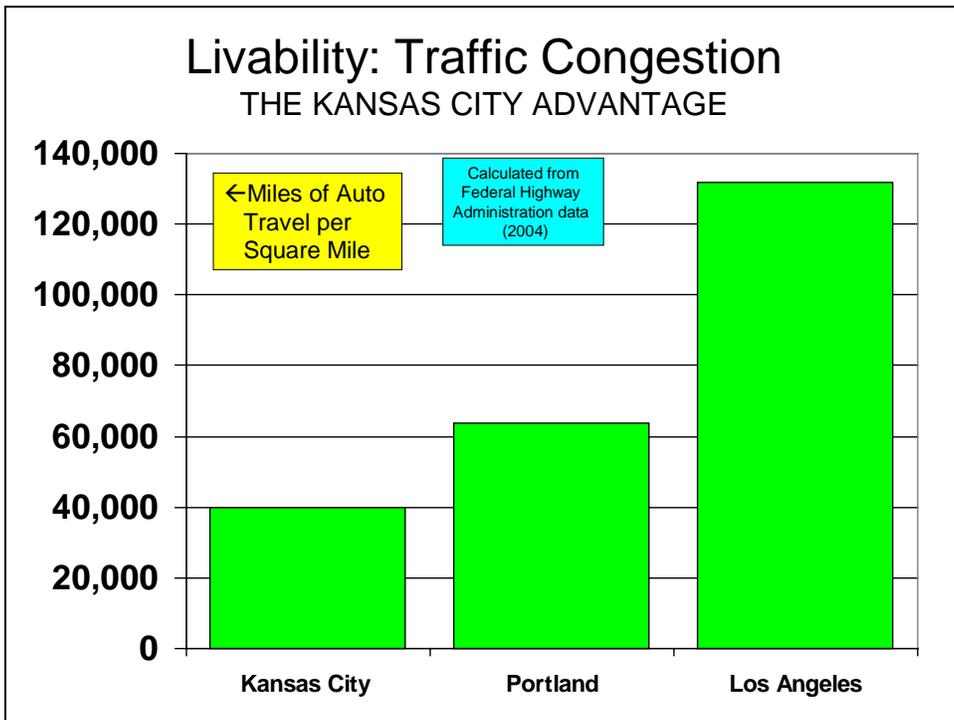


Figure 4

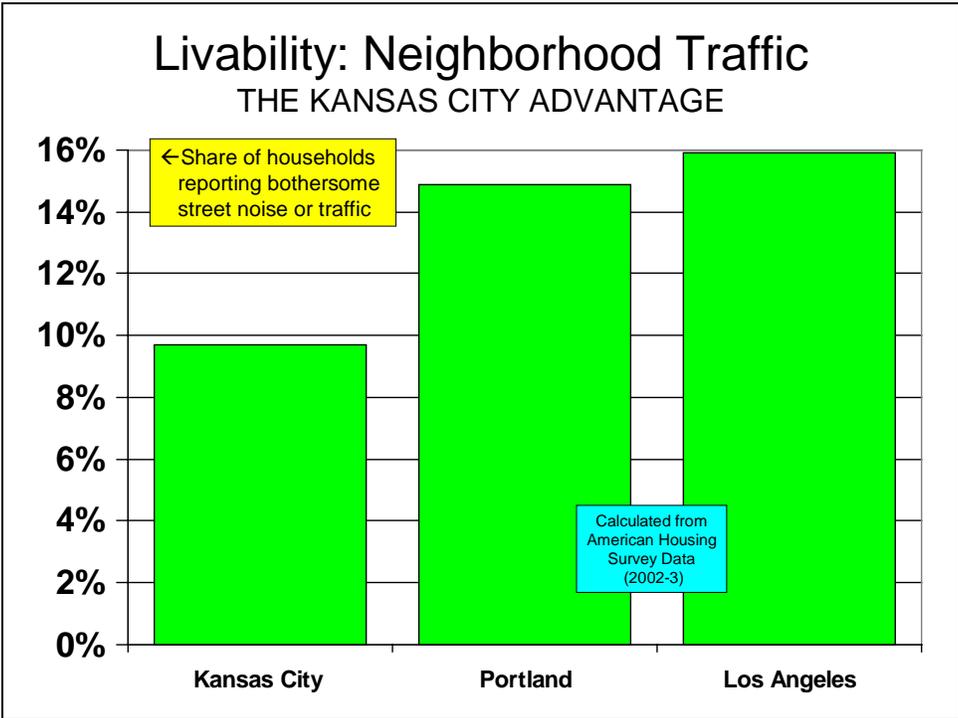


Figure 5

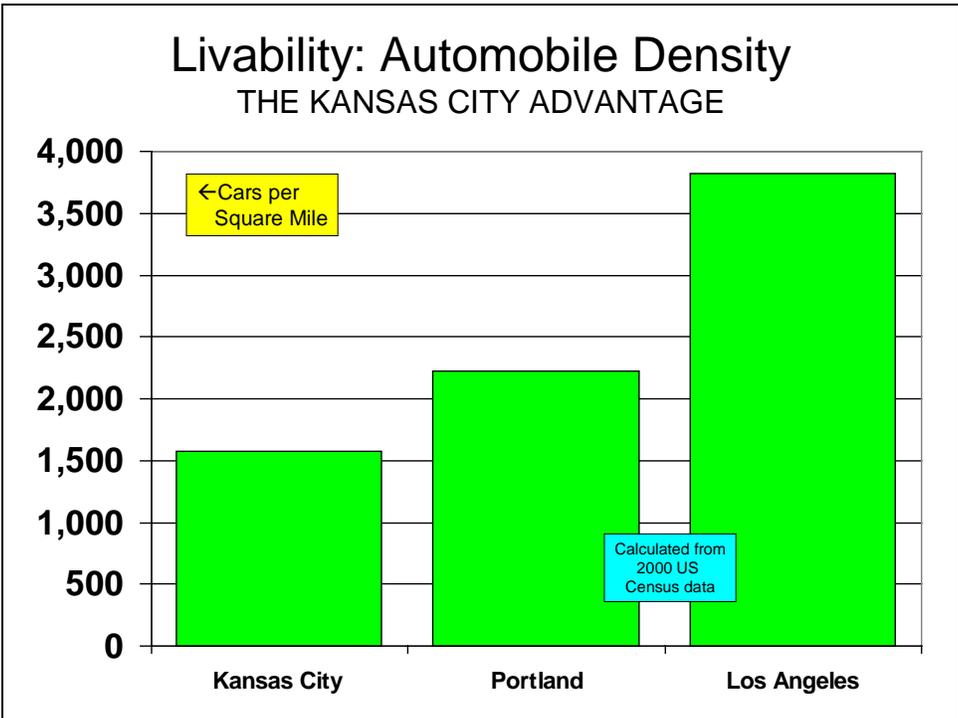


Figure 6

## URBAN TOURS BY RENTAL CAR: ABOUT THE SERIES

*Urban Tours by Rental Car* offers perspectives on urban development obtained by automobile tours through urban areas. Rental cars are not the favored method for visiting cities, especially those outside one's own country. Instead, tourists and urban planners favor packaged tours or local public transport systems. Both are splendid ways for seeing the city as it used to be --- the very reason for most tourist visits. The historical core areas contain monuments, prime government and religious edifices and quaint neighborhoods that are often centuries old. This is particularly important to tourists from the newer urban areas of the American, Canadian or Australian West, where history extends not far before World War II. It is further understandable that few tourists travel thousands of miles to see the newer suburban areas that look very much like home. But most tourists do not profess to be students of the urban area.

For the urban planner interested in understanding the whole urban area, it is not enough to study the core alone, regardless of its architectural attractiveness, romanticism, history or affirmation of an individually preferred life style. No one, regardless of the depth of their education can develop reliable conceptions from an unrepresentative sample, and urban cores are the very essence of unrepresentative samples. Both public transport and packaged tours miss the larger part --- the expanse of sprawling residential and business development that rings virtually all major urban areas. They may be of little interest to many urban planners, but they should be.

Stripping away regional architectural facades, one might as well be in the suburbs of Phoenix, Portland, Perth or Paris. Here, the automobile is king, because no public transport system has been developed that can effectively serve destinations outside the core (at least at a price any society can afford). While public transport market shares are higher in European suburban areas than in the New World, much of the difference is attributable to lower incomes and less automobile access. Indeed, public transport's principal weakness, lack of automobile competitiveness, is itself a contributing factor to the rising motorization occurring from the suburbs of Copenhagen and Nagoya to the suburbs of Lagos and Mumbai. To oversimplify this phenomenon as being a "love affair with the automobile" is the equivalent of saying that Singaporeans or Brazilians have a love affair with air conditioning. Human beings prefer comfort to discomfort and they prefer free time to time over which they have no control.

It is no wonder that tourists return to the United States thinking that all Paris looks like the second arrondissement (less than one percent does) and that urban planners think all of Milan looks like the architectural treasures that surround the Cathedral. In fact, the sprawling suburbs of Europe, Japan, Canada and Connecticut resemble one another in many ways. For any seeking to study the urban area in its entirety --- not just the favored haunts of core-dwelling elites --- there is no alternative to "getting behind the wheel." Thus, "urban tours by rental car."

<http://www.rentalcartours.net>

<http://www.demographia.com>

<http://www.publicpurpose.com>

Downtown



Downtown



Country Club District



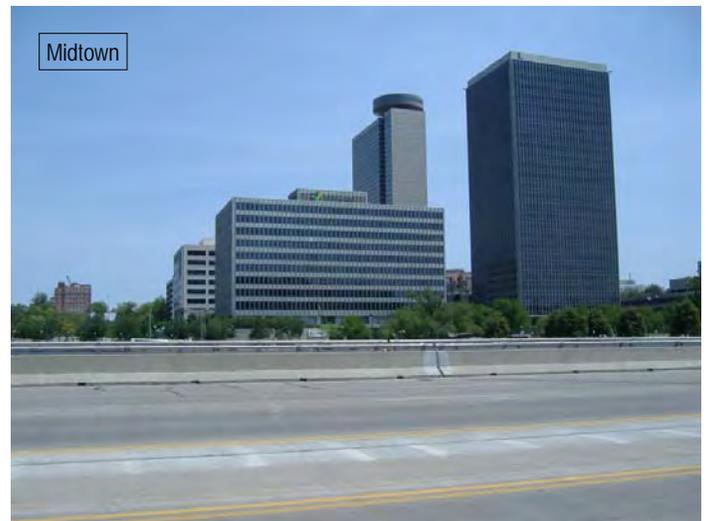
Country Club Shopping Center



Midtown



Midtown



Country Club District



Country Club District



Country Club District



Downtown Development



River Market



River Market



River Market



River Market



River Market



Quality Hill



Parking for Loft Development



Garment District Development





Garment District Development



Garment District Development



Loft Building  
in  
Power & Light  
District  
(Back)



Loft Building  
in  
Power & Light  
District  
(Front)



City  
Hall:  
Kansas  
City, MO



Jackson  
County  
Courthouse:  
Kansas  
City (MO)

Boulevard  
Midtown



Boulevard  
Country Club



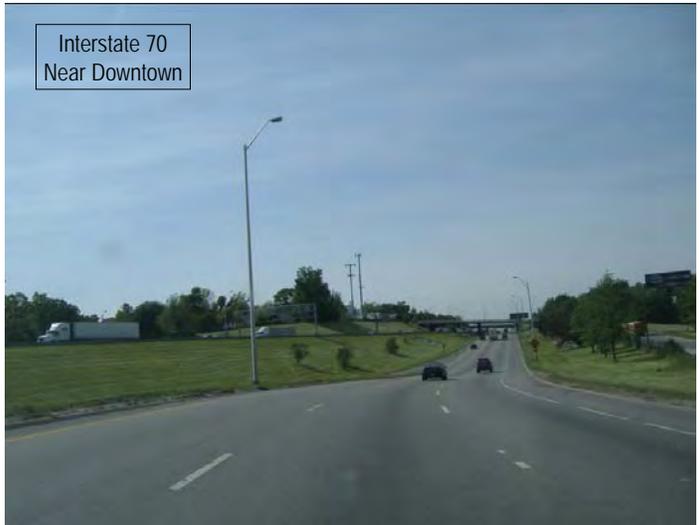
South Side Street  
Near State Line (MO)



Inner Suburban Street  
Kansas City (KS)



Interstate 70  
Near Downtown



Interstate 435  
Widening  
Overland Park





Interstate 470  
Lees Summit



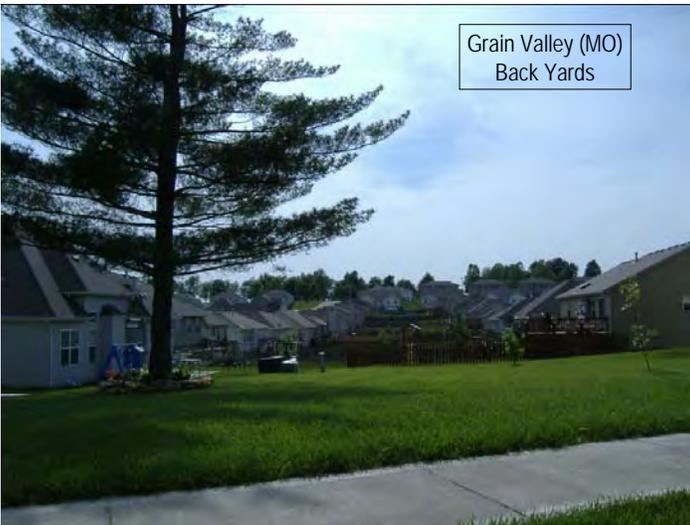
Grain Valley (MO)



Grain Valley (MO)



Grain Valley (MO)  
New Urbanist Front Porch



Grain Valley (MO)  
Back Yards



Multi-Family Housing  
Grain Valley

Overland Park (KS)



Overland Park (KS)



Overland Park (KS)



Overland Park (KS)



Overland Park (KS)



Overland Park (KS)  
Back Yards

