



# Kansas City: Car City, USA

For most of my adult life I lived in Kansas City, and for most of my life before that my family considered it home. Even though life took us to Minnesota, Oklahoma, Nebraska and mid-Missouri, we always looked at KC as home. Following college, I lived for 17 years in Midtown KC, including 10 where I ran a business. My time there included a Presidency of [AIA-KC](#), board membership on numerous civic groups, and even a [mention](#) by the [Pitch](#) in the “Best of KC” issue.

So you could say I know the area well, and have given much time, energy and thought to its current condition and future. I’ve advocated as best I knew how, which by my own admission has had mixed results. Sometimes my urgings were tactful and well received; sometimes they were less-tactful rants that were duly ignored. Often I was given a polite platform to express my views and lead discussion, but was personally frustrated by the slow pace of change.

My issues have always been wrapped up in KC’s wholesale acquiescence to the car culture. That mindset runs completely counter to how I wish to live, and what an increasing number of people are looking for in a community. It’s not that I’m anti-car. I’ve owned a car continuously since I was 16 years old. But what I don’t want is to be held hostage by that car. I prefer to live somewhere that allows me to live a rich and full life primarily by walking, biking and using public transportation.

Like a lot of people in my generation, I grew up with suburbia. Even when we lived in small towns, we lived in the newer, suburban-style section of town. While that was what I knew, I also felt there was something about it which I didn’t enjoy. It was only when I was able to travel as a young adult that I fully understood what

it was that I was missing. It's a tired cliché, but a couple of trips to Europe, and a few books and magazines later, and I knew that what I most disliked was the complete reliance on the car that we have in most of the US. And nowhere is that more true than in the Midwest.

In the book [Nine Nations of North America](#), Joel Garreau brilliantly analyzed the cultures and geography of the continent in ways no one had been able to articulate previously. He labeled much of the heart of the US as the “Breadbasket” with KC as its capital. I've always felt he really nailed it.



Joel Garreau's Nine Nations of North America

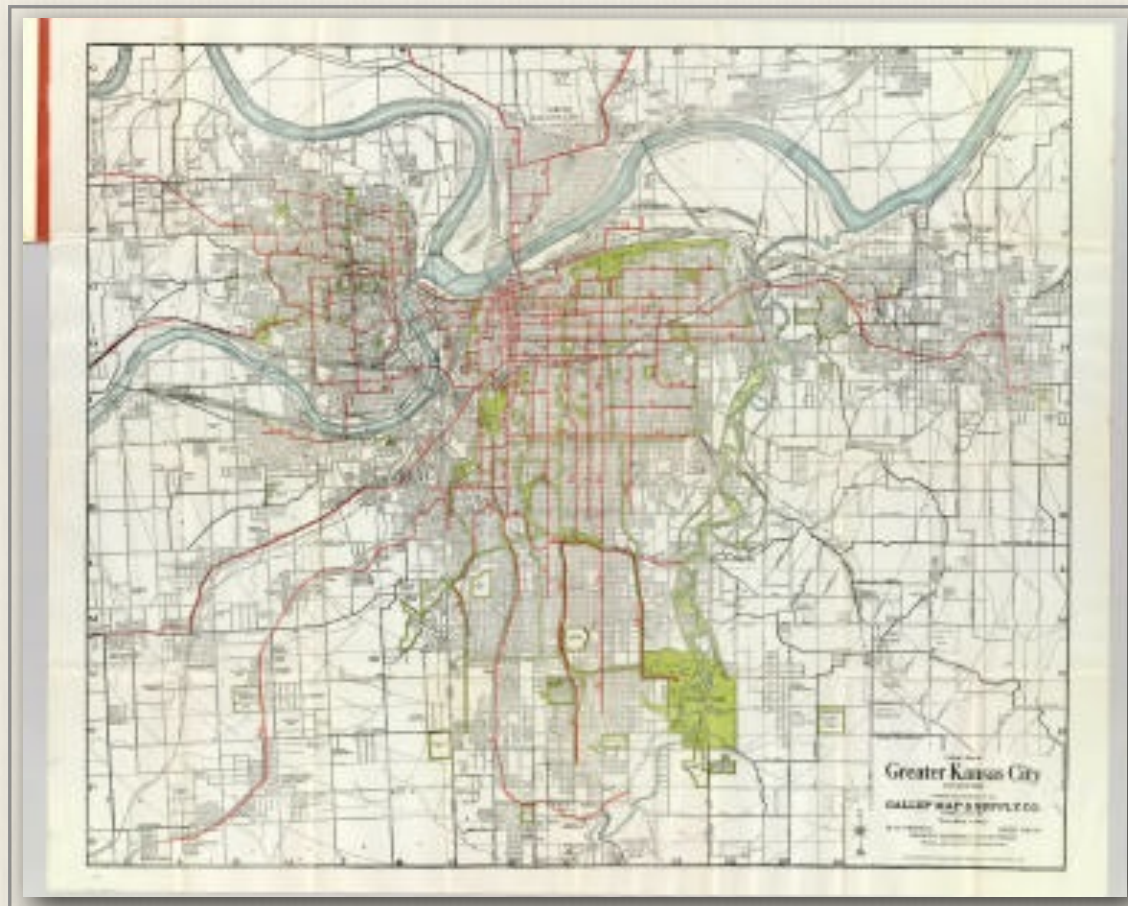
As the capital of the Breadbasket (or just what I like to call the Midwest), KC is also, in my opinion, the capital of the car culture in America. There's really no disputing its status, even though in pop culture we tend to think of the NASCAR-loving South, the wide-open spaces of Texas or the freeways of southern California. If you need some convincing, here are a few nuggets for you:

- KC has the highest number of [freeway lane miles per capita](#) of any city in the world. St. Louis is 2nd, but KC has 20% more than St. Louis even.
- The region continues to plan for more freeways. A proposed western outer loop is again being seriously considered by the region's planners, as is a

long-sought highway along the Missouri River east of downtown to Independence

- While there is still peak-hour congestion in some areas, the metro area consistently ranks as the least-congested of any major metro in North America.
- Johnson County, KS, the second most populous county in the region, is set to eliminate all bus service since there's no local source of funding.
- All civic amenities, including the airport, all of the professional sports stadiums, the zoo, botanical gardens and more have been spread across the region, instead of concentrated into one or a few locations. All of them are drive-up, drive-off destinations. The biggest pastime for football and baseball games is tailgating in the enormous parking lots. The airport is unique in large cities, in that it is a drive-up to the gate design.
- The downtown freeway loop is perhaps the tightest such loop in the country, effectively turning downtown into a single exit off of the freeway.
- Parking is free even in the most densely populated destinations, such as Country Club Plaza. Even in downtown, parking is as cheaply priced as any large city in the country.
- All redevelopment in the urban core, even in downtown, has typically accommodated suburban amounts of parking as an expectation.

Of course, like many cities in the US, it wasn't always this way. At one time, KC was a densely populated, vibrant city with one of the largest streetcar systems in the country. Downtown was a lively mix of shopping, businesses and residents that was everything we aspire to today when we talk about walkability.



**KC's once-extensive streetcar system**

---

My own hope over many years has been to see KC reclaim the urbanity it used to have a couple of generations ago, when it was the subject of [popular songs](#). That urbanity would be the magnet that would attract and keep those people who, like myself, want an excellent option for a walkable lifestyle.

KC has always had great potential to do this, because of the skeleton left by previous generations. But when it has come time to make a choice, the city has always chosen the car culture instead. I talked about this very notion when I wrote a piece called, [“Does KC really want to be a city?”](#) back in 2003 for the [Kansas City Star](#) in their Midwest Voices column.

The city does have some truly great moments of urbanity. The Plaza is beautiful, and mostly a good place for walking. From Brookside to Westport to Crossroads and Downtown, the spine of the city has some attractive buildings, a few nice parks, and a slew of great restaurants, coffee shops, businesses etc. And, that spine is a far better place now than it was in 1993, when I first moved in to Midtown.

But the problem remains that there is no critical mass anywhere that even approaches a complete, walkable neighborhood or two. The destinations are spread so far that even dedicated walkers eventually become drivers. And let's face it, driving and parking even in the urban core is very easy.

The question for KC is really – what does the future hold? As a former longtime resident, I was always part of the discussion asking, “what distinguishes KC?” What does KC have that no one else does, and how can the city market that?

The reality is, the most defining element of KC is that it is Car City, USA. It's an exceptionally easy place to drive around and find parking. As a result, it's the least-densely populated major city in the country.

A legitimate question to ask is: is this a problem or an asset? Should the region and city double-down on the car culture, or should it aggressively try to change this? If the idea is to make change, it needs to be understood why, what the results will be, and what the financial implications are.

I have maintained for my entire career that KC needs to change, and needs to change aggressively. My position is that the future demands it. The combination of demographic and generational changes, peak oil concerns and climate change all will shape our cities in ways that we cannot imagine today. But what we can conclude by looking at all of these issues is that the future will not wait for cities that are spread-out to the hinterlands. In a back-to-the-future world, the 21st century city will be a place for walking, biking and public transportation.

KC could stake a claim for this future easier than some places, because of what remnants are still left from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The larger downtown/crossroads areas, and Westport/Plaza should be the economic incubators and engines of the next generation. Those two areas are large enough and compact enough to be complete places to live, work and play. At a bare minimum, everything should be done to make that a reality, and quickly.

But then, this is the viewpoint through my lens. Many others, especially those civic leaders who've been guiding the city for 30, 40 years or more would disagree with me. They might be in the camp that we should double-down on the car

culture, because that is what people really want, it's what the region has invested in, and those future warnings are nothing but siren songs.

I will admit: they could be right. I could be wrong.

I doubt it, but it's possible.

Regardless, I'm no longer a KC resident, so this is really about what current and future residents and leaders will work towards. For years, city leaders have ignored the pleas and haranguing of those who care most about the city. Whether it's the Urban Society, the Downtown Neighborhood Association, the Urban Core Group or many others before them, it's been a consistent struggle to work against the car culture. At virtually every turn, civic and business leaders have chosen to suburbanize the city ever more.

But this question about the car culture is THE central question for the region's future. There's simply not enough money to simultaneously invest in freeways and a real public transportation system. The two systems do not co-exist. To build a real walking and biking city will require making choices that do in fact make driving and parking somewhat painful. Future regional projects such as the airport, the stadiums and more will have to be looked at through different lenses. Transitioning from one system to the other will be difficult for a lot of people and companies, and some will leave. Many will question the decisions, as happened when the city ripped out its previous infrastructure to become the car city it is now.

All cities across America, and to some extent the entire world, are facing these choices. The issues of today are not those of 1950. And yet, no city faces a more difficult look at these choices than KC. Split equally between two states, politically divided (some would also argue culturally) and spread out geographically like none other, the task seems daunting. What is the future of Car City, USA?

copyright 2013 Kevin Klinkenberg

[www.kevinklinkenberg.com](http://www.kevinklinkenberg.com)