

# Points of View

## Accessibility: The Lifeline of Livable Communities

by Casius Pealer, Assoc. AIA

Accessibility is a hot topic today, in part due to the 10-year anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But accessibility can also take on a context bigger than buildings—in and among our communities as well. Think about the social changes wrought by busing school children across social strata. And consider how lack of public transportation has shaped the exclusive growth of the suburbs.

The issue of accessibility in the community hit home for me when I worked with a youth group here in St. Vincent for a few months last year. Some of the girls wanted to get basic computer training in data entry, and one finally was accepted into a government-funded program. Halfway through her training, she realized that while she could get a job, it wouldn't pay enough once she factored in the roundtrip bus fare to Kingstown, the capital city. And there just are no computer jobs out here in the country.

She quit the educational program. That was not the best solution from my perspective, but all I could offer was a theoretical argument about the abstract value of an education—an argument that hadn't worked her entire life. To her and to many of her friends, this experience was concrete proof that the obstacles are too great, even if you have an education. Accessibility—or lack thereof—proved the deciding factor.

### Toyota minivans rule

Public transportation on St. Vincent and most of the Eastern Caribbean Island nations is composed of small Toyota



The crowded main bus stop in Kingstown, St. Vincent's capital city.



PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

A citizen searches for her car in the country's first formal parking lot, recently opened.

minivans. Any given one most often is packed with more than 20 adults, crying babies, boxes of bananas, and even the occasional propane tank of cooking gas—all enveloped by deafening music, screeching tires, potholes like you've never seen, and steep cliff edges you hope you never see. I'm uncomfortable, rushed, sweaty. So is the person beside me. I often wish I didn't have to get up when a person behind me wants to get out, or have to hold someone else's child on my lap. But overall, it's excellent—by far the most intense and in-your-face experience on the island.

Another great thing about St. Vincent's transportation system is that there are no separate school buses for kids. Van drivers pick up kids along with regular van riders, though the kids pay half price. Because there are so few schools, students are bused all over the island (it's not really that small), so a number of van drivers make special runs to different parts of the island in the morning and afternoon. One van driver said that he used to attend the Marriaqua School (in my village) and had to come from the other side of the island. Now that he has his own van, he does a special run for those kids from his old village, even though it is out of his usual route. He's helping to create a seamless community in a necessarily fractured world.

### Two different worlds

I recently took a leisurely ride up the Windward Coast with a United Nations volunteer in his air-conditioned, U.N.-issued

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jeep. We listened to classical music. The people along the roadside seemed to live in an entirely different world, and indeed they do. I believe that this volunteer's efforts in these communities will always reflect—and perhaps even reinforce—these two different worlds. I further believe the same strict dichotomy exists in all communities where public and private transportation exist in two different worlds. These are inherently not “livable” communities, because they are fractured. (I also think that by doing nothing other than squeezing myself into one of those Toyota vans every day, I can achieve more toward developing a truly livable community than all the experts in jeeps the U.N. can muster.)

Fractured communities do have advantages. For instance, here on St. Vincent, everyone seems to know everyone. There is crossover, sometimes through arranged carpools, but more often through hitchhiking. One of my friends, Ras John, drives a big purple truck and willingly goes out of his way to pick people up and drop them off, whether he knows them or not. As a result, people shout out to him wherever he goes, mainly to say hello and offer implied thanks.

In the U.S., hitchhiking is risky, as is any form of erasing barriers between yourself and people you don't know. If we truly

want livable communities, we need somehow fewer of those barriers.

### **Just get on the bus, Gus**

So—if you don't already—I encourage you to ride public transportation to work once in a while. Don't do it to save the ozone layer (an abstract concept); do it to build community (a personal act). This means you may have to take a risk and initiate a conversation with someone.

More importantly, ride the bus or train to your next public project site and see how a large percentage of people are going to experience the work you're doing. Again, initiate a conversation.

Knowing where the bus stops is different from riding the bus. To be a part of a community, you can't just be an isolated part. To build a livable community, you have to live in the community.

*Casius Pealer, Assoc. AIA, is a community development volunteer with the U.S. Peace Corps. His current project is an e-commerce Web site to allow people worldwide to buy local crafts directly from the artisans, [www.gligli.com](http://www.gligli.com).*

*Pealer will be a regular contributor to AIArchitect on livable community issues throughout this year. ■*