

No, We Still Don't Need Drive-Throughs

COVID-19 has upended the restaurant business. And cities around the world have scrambled to figure out what they can do to help the sector adapt and survive. One disappointing outcome of this scramble has been a resurgence of interest in drive-through restaurants. As [Fast Company reported in early September](#), we've seen the restaurant of the future, and it looks like this nightmarish Burger King:

[View fullsize](#)



Image via Burger King

Chains that already have a drive-thru model have leaned heavily on them to drive business: for example, drive-thru now [accounts for 90% of total sales](#) at Wendy's. And they're taking their cues for the future from this trend—just read the *Fast Company* piece:

Ask any fast food company, from Taco Bell to McDonald's, and [they will tell you](#): COVID-19 accelerated everything....

Nowhere is that more evident than in a series of new stores Burger King plans to start building next year—where the car is treated like royalty.

.... [C]hain restaurants are investing in the higher-margin, higher-demand drive-through instead of dining rooms. (And Burger King is anything but alone in this regard—as [we detailed in a recent feature](#), this trend is happening across the industry.)

Yet the idea that this is the "restaurant of the future" is more than a little dismaying. Especially because [there's been a growing trend in recent years of cities actually restricting the creation of new drive-throughs](#)—for multiple very good reasons. I'm here to say that despite the pandemic, those reasons are still valid.

[View fullsize](#)



Image via Wikimedia Commons

No doubt there will be strong pressure from chains on city planning departments to approve their new, drive-through-heavy, [template designs](#) even in urban environments where they're not appropriate. Cities should be prepared to resist that pressure. But will they be? Or will they buy into the simplistic notion that the drive-through, thanks to COVID-19, is now the future?

If they do buy into it, it'll be because of the natural human tendency to overreact to temporary circumstances with far-reaching solutions—typically the first solution that comes to mind, feels good, and is politically or practically feasible in a hurry. A good example is the widespread adoption of "security theater" measures shortly after the September 11 attacks. Even though many of the changes likely did nothing to enhance traveler safety, they were driven by the need to appear to be "doing something" rather than a sober analysis of risks, costs, and benefits.

The pandemic equivalent of this seems to include the rush in some quarters to declare that anything that fosters socially-distanced consumption is an unqualified good, regardless of its other downsides or trade-offs. And because cars are the dominant way we currently avoid breathing the same air as other people, this simplistic mindset threatens to reinforce auto-centric policies and design assumptions, at the expense of everyone who doesn't or can't drive. And of our cities' resilience, financial and otherwise.

If someone in your city is telling you that the drive-thru is now the inevitable future of the restaurant biz, here's what you tell them:

1. DRIVE-THROUGHS ARE A BAD FINANCIAL DEAL FOR CITIES.

View fullsize



Total value of the “Old and Blighted” block: \$1,104,000. Total value of the “Shiny and New” drive-through Taco John’s block: \$618,000.

A drive-through is a markedly low-returning land use, in terms of the tax revenue it brings in versus other uses of the same land. It just so happens that the article that first brought Strong Towns to many readers' attention way back in 2012 was [a proof of exactly this concept](#): a brand new Taco John's in Brainerd, Minnesota, when you actually do the math, is significantly less valuable than even a fairly drab, run-down strip of small local storefronts.

The reason is simple: the amount of [non-place](#) a drive-through restaurant requires is massive, and this drives the value down. It's not just the driving lanes and parking lot; it's things like stormwater buffers that end up being required to make up for all that asphalt.

2. DRIVE-THROUGHS ARE TRAFFIC NIGHTMARES.

A nice side-by-side example on Southdale Circle in Edina. That T-Bell likely generates more traffic than the 185-unit apartment building behind it.

Despite being lower-taxed residential, the apartment generates 1.4x as much property tax as the T-Bell (per acre — or 6.7x total). pic.twitter.com/jLjJQldPXZ

— Sean Hayford O'leary (@sdho) [August 25, 2020](#)

The flip side of revenue is expenses, and drive-throughs also impose more costs on your city than a lot of other things that could occupy the same piece of land. One reason is that they are absolutely massive local traffic generators. Sean Hayford

Oleary made [a striking comparison on Twitter](#) between a Taco Bell and a 185-unit apartment building: which do you think brings in more revenue per acre? Which do you think is responsible for more traffic?

It's an odd quirk of Your Brain on Cars™ that it's rare to see a groundswell of NIMBY opposition to a new Taco Bell because of traffic, but nearby traffic impacts are a common theme of the opponents of new apartment construction. Go figure.

In the worst cases, a drive-through not only generates a ton of local traffic, but it is so poorly designed and configured to accommodate this influx that it creates hellish back-ups on the adjoining street. The [now-locally-infamous “Carbucks”](#) in St. Paul, Minnesota ought to be a cautionary tale. But did the Carbucks experience deter St. Paul from recently approving a conditional use permit for a Taco Bell drive-through, two blocks from a popular light rail and rapid bus station? No, gentle reader, no, it did not. (You can read St. Paul planning commissioner Bill Lindeke’s [excellent take-down of this decision on Streets.mn.](#))

I suspect a big part of the reason is the unexamined notion that we somehow “need” these drive-throughs—not least now that sit-down dining is not an option for many.

3. DRIVE-THROUGHS ARE PEDESTRIAN NIGHTMARES.

A drive-through makes for a miserable environment to walk, ride a bike, or use a wheelchair or other assistive mobility device. Every driveway access to or from the street is a potential conflict point where crashes can happen, because it's a site for unexpected behavior. Drivers may not be looking for people on the sidewalk, or someone may not expect the vehicle in front of them to brake.

On top of this, you have the "wasteland" factor: people on sidewalks feel most comfortable when there is a space-defining, hard edge to follow ([a psychological phenomenon called thigmotaxis](#)), such as a continuous wall of storefronts. Driveways break up this wall, and create an imposing and unpleasant environment to walk through.

There are few things that can more quickly sap a street's appeal as a [walkable commercial destination](#) than a drive-through or two.

4. DRIVE-THROUGHS JUST AREN'T NECESSARY. THE NEEDS THEY MEET CAN BE MET IN OTHER WAYS.

The most common argument against restricting drive-throughs—other than the simple "Some people like them," which shouldn't hold water against the obvious harm them

do to the surrounding environment and your city's finances—concerns people with unique needs that are served by a drive-through arrangement.

- Maybe you have a disability and going inside the business is a significant hassle, unsafe, or impossible for you.
- Maybe you are high risk for COVID complications for one or more reasons, and so you are really are not comfortable going in, even just to stand in line for take-out.
- Maybe you are a parent with a young child, who is spared by the drive-through from the need to unbuckle your kid from a car seat and get them into a stroller all while averting any meltdowns.

What I would say here is don't fall into the trap—or let your local leaders and advocates fall into the trap—of conflating "Solving Problem X is necessary" with "Solution Y is one way to solve Problem X, and therefore Solution Y is necessary."

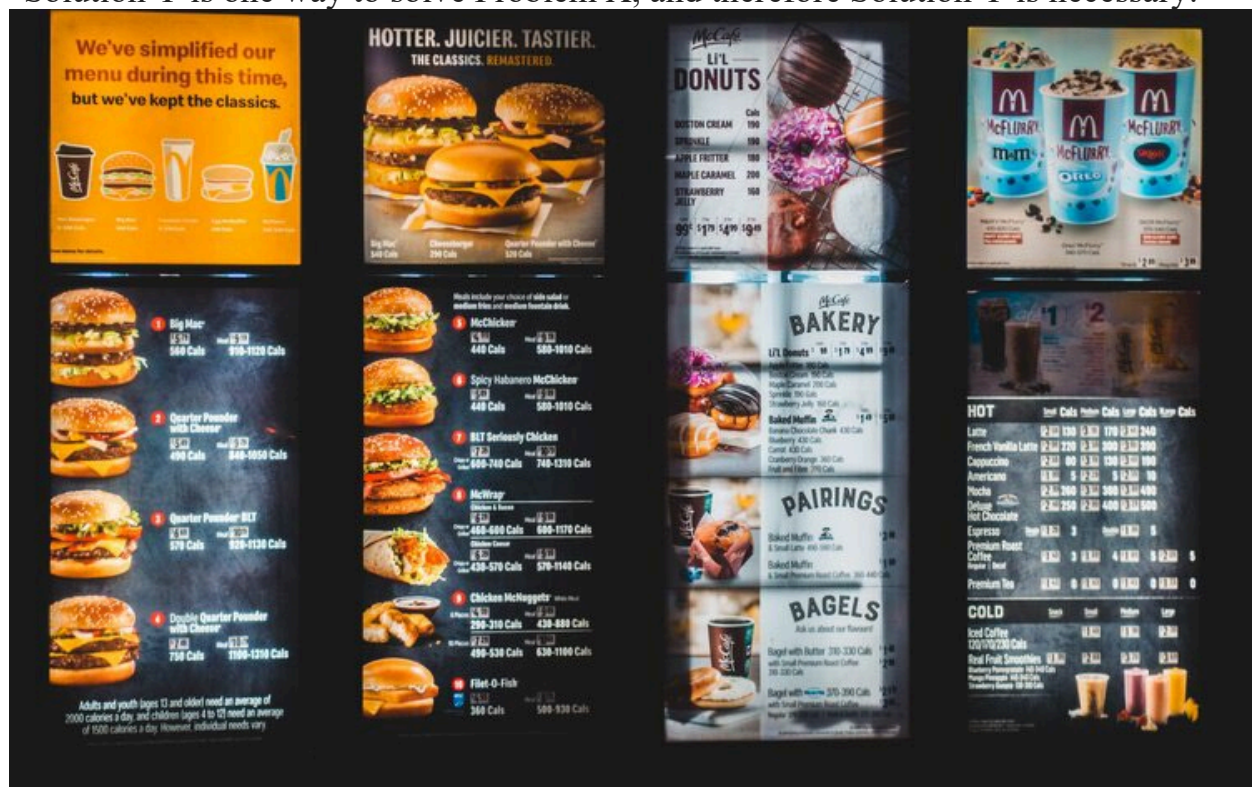


Photo by [Erik Mclean](#) on [Unsplash](#)

There are a lot of ways to meet these needs, when we start to get creative. Establishments are doing creative things with take-out windows, or similar makeshift solutions such as putting a table at your restaurant or coffee shop's front door and letting it serve as the take-out station. Curbside pickup is now common at many stores, so that you can wait for your order in a nearby parking space without leaving

your vehicle (or unbuckling that car seat). In an urban environment where many businesses do not have their own parking lots, I would extend this and say an employee will deliver your order anywhere within a couple blocks of the restaurant. You could wait on a park bench if you want! Delivery within a very localized area can easily employ technologies such as bikes, scooters, or even (let's take a page out of famously car-centric fast-food chain Sonic's book here) roller skates to speed up the process.

Jaime Izurieta, an architect and urban designer who is [an expert on storefronts](#), has written a thread [suggesting a number of directions](#) that these innovations might take. They will be local and responsive, but the point is that there are lots of ways to address customer convenience, social distancing, and a range of mobility issues within a walkable urban environment.

The drive-through just happens to be the tool that a certain set of corporate chains have already adapted to their needs and business model. It's one that comes with heavy downsides for cities, so don't let COVID be the reason your town thinks twice about limiting or banning new ones. You'll be fine without them.