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Streets for Whom? The Fight Over Space on Oakland's Gentrifying Commercial Streets

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# CAL-IN-SACRAMENTO FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM, FALL 2022

## DIVERSITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CALIFORNIA

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In the spring of 2021, IGS launched a two-year Diversity and Entrepreneurship Fellowship as part of the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship program. Now in year two, IGS and the Matsui Center are proud to showcase students' original research on the challenges and opportunities facing women- and POC-owned small businesses and diverse entrepreneurs in California. This series includes op-eds, blog posts, policy briefs and other research products. Learn more at <https://igs.berkeley.edu/matsui-center/fellowships/cal-in-sacramento>.

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## Streets for Whom?

### The Fight Over Space on Oakland's Gentrifying Commercial Streets

Sam Greenberg

July 30, 2022



Bus stop and bike lane during construction on Telegraph Ave. on October 26, 2020. Credit: Robert Prinz

“Bike lanes kill businesses and they’re only used by gentrifiers!” This is the common refrain city planners confront each time they plan for new bike infrastructure on a commercial corridor—especially when they have to remove parking spaces or traffic lanes.

But reallocating street space away from drivers and to people outside of cars is not the disaster many Oakland businesses fear it is. At worst, bike lanes have no effect on business volume and gentrification. At best, a well-connected citywide bike network in Oakland would spawn a new flow of eager customers and, more importantly, prevent traffic deaths. Additionally, allowing merchants to turn parking spaces into parklets for outdoor dining is an easy way to give businesses more space to expand and accommodate more patrons.

Yet many Oakland merchants worry that losing parking spaces and traffic lanes could hurt their bottom line. I spoke to Kesepe Yohannes, who has owned Asmara, an Eritrean restaurant in Oakland's rapidly gentrifying Temescal district, for almost forty years. Asmara is located right on a segment of Telegraph Avenue that was recently given a controversial “road diet,” including protected bike lanes separated from traffic by parking and parklets.

Yohannes says that “this kind of design is a disaster,” and he’s opposed it from the beginning. Taking parking spaces away from drivers makes them less likely to come to Temescal and patronize businesses, in his view. “Oakland is not Europe...for us, we have to have parking.” Yohannes says he does not see many cyclists using the new lanes on Temescal.

But down the street, another merchant tells a different story. Nigel Jones of Kingston 11—a Jamaican restaurant on another section of Telegraph in rapidly gentrifying Uptown—says the problem isn’t too many protected bike lanes, but too few. He says officials aren’t committing hard enough to building a connected and safe bike network in Oakland and making sure drivers

don't park where they shouldn't. "My point is that if you're going to do it, commit to it. We're in the in-between so nobody's winning, and so everybody hates it."

In other words, by building bike infrastructure in a piecemeal fashion, there is no usable *network*. As a result, the infrastructure the city *does* build is made far less useful.

But in the meantime, are existing, disconnected bike lanes hurting already-strained businesses—especially POC-owned businesses like Kingston 11 in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods like Uptown? Jones doesn't think so. To him, merchants who blame bike lanes for decreasing their business volume are "looking for a scapegoat." Yohannes was unable to say whether bike lanes affected his business because the Temescal road diet coincided with COVID-19, an extraneous factor disrupting his business volume.

The data back up Jones's line of reasoning. When Eric Jaffe aggregated [twelve different studies](#) exploring the effects of redistributing right-of-way space from motorists to cyclists, he found that "they all reach a similar conclusion: replacing on-street parking with a bike lane has little to no impact on local business, and in some cases might even increase business."

A separate question that is just as important is whether bike lanes worsen gentrification in vulnerable neighborhoods like Uptown and Temescal, putting residents and disproportionately POC-owned businesses at risk of displacement. When I asked Yohannes and Jones, neither saw bike lanes as a cause of gentrification; Yohannes, who opposed protected bike lanes, said they are "a separate issue."

And this makes sense; pointing to shiny green bike lanes as a cause of gentrification may be easy, but it misses a far more important problem that will be far more difficult to solve: rents are rising because of an unprecedented housing shortage that continues to worsen.

It is also important to remember that people of color are [disproportionately affected](#) by traffic violence; "Black Americans [die] at more than 4 times the rate for White Americans while cycling," according to a recent study in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine. [33 people](#) were killed in traffic deaths in Oakland in 2020. A lack of safe infrastructure for people outside of cars is the real equity issue in diverse neighborhoods throughout Oakland.

Building protected bike lanes and improving pedestrian crossings—even if both sometimes require sacrificing parking spaces—is non-negotiable if we are serious about addressing traffic violence, which disproportionately kills people of color.

Making Oakland into a safe and accessible place for people outside of cars is a goal the city must commit to, rather than continuing to build small projects in a piecemeal manner. Jones, who moved from Jamaica to New York when he was 16, misses the big city's walkability. "I walked from all the way Uptown to Downtown, in Greenwich Village, eating pizza on the street and stuff like that and seeing everybody on the street. And it was great, it was *fun*."

Jones desperately wants Oakland to be as fun and accessible as New York for people outside of cars. One way to start is turning parking spaces into parklets for outdoor dining; even Yohannes, who worries about a lack of parking on Telegraph, loves his parklet and prefers it to the single parking space it replaced during COVID. Jones has been trying to build a parklet of his own, but the city's complicated permitting process has made it difficult to do so.

But even if we all agree on building parklets, Oakland and other cities must go further. To make businesses accessible to people outside of cars, city leaders must be bold and commit to reallocating space in the right-of-way to make streets safe for their most vulnerable users. Building bike lanes one block at a time may give politicians ample ribbon cutting photo opportunities, but it's often barely more effective than building nothing at all.