

# Design That Drives Us Crazy

**The premise:** That driving in Boston is always bad, but in some places it's even worse. Sometimes it's bad design. Sometimes it's bad signage or badly coordinated traffic lights. Sometimes it's dumb policy. Sometimes it's a piece of roadway that was designed 50 or a hundred years ago to handle a much smaller volume of traffic going at much slower speeds. But whatever the reason, certain intersections or interchanges are reliably, inherently nightmarish. These places feel not just ill-conceived but dangerous. They're the places that make drivers grit their teeth and pray.

**8:30** Cambridge. Driving west along Mass Ave, entering Harvard Square. Goal is to get through the Square and turn up Garden Street.

Travel in right-hand lane to avoid cars double-parked on left.

Now move into left lane to avoid getting trapped in right-lane underpass, while going very slowly to merge with speeding cars coming from behind on another road on the left.

**8:32** Waiting at traffic light. Arrow turns green; move forward. But cars to the right of you have simultaneously received a green light; as you try to move right across three lanes of traffic, those cars are equally urgent in their desire to move left across the same lanes.

Blue car abruptly changes lanes and cuts you off.

Bus suddenly cuts from right to left lane heading for underpass.

Cars zoom by in right lane so you can't move over.

Tan car honks at you.

You start, stop, swear, fleetingly imagine a utopian intersection where drivers with conflicting entry and exit points don't all get green arrows at once.

**8:33** Your green arrow quits long before the mess has time to unsnarl. Cars coming along Mass Ave from Porter Square now get green light and energetically launch themselves into the m $\acute{e}$ l $\acute{e}$ e.

**8:36** Still in Cambridge. Intersection of Brattle, Mason, and Ash Streets. Cars entering intersection from four different directions, three of which have stop signs. Cars traveling on Brattle toward Harvard Square and curving left onto Mason do not have a stop sign — but the driver waiting at one of the other stop signs has no way of knowing that. He starts across the intersection. Sudden braking, people inside cars looking scared and angry, glaring at each other in self-righteous confusion before driving on.

**8:47** Traveling west on Soldiers Field Road in Newton, about to attempt entrance to Mass Pike. Start to make a big turn to the right.

Cars merge in from left.

More cars merge in from another road on the left.

And then a third road of four lanes of fast-moving traffic merges in from left. Those cars are trying to move from the left to the right-hand lanes. You need to get



▲ Photo by Joan Wickersham.

over from the right to the left.

Now 10 lanes of traffic from at least four different directions are suddenly weaving together and splitting off, a high-speed minuet happening on a very small dance floor.

**8:48** A woman in a silver SUV makes eye contact: she will let you cut across. But no, turns out she was just making eye contact.

**8:49** Good thing you know to get into far left lane before you reach Mass Pike entrance ramp, because the only sign appears too late to alert anyone who didn't already know which lane to choose.

**9:07** Route 95 South, just after the Route 9 exit. Sign announces that travel is permissible in breakdown lane from 6–10 AM and from 3–7 PM on weekdays. Calm, official-sounding tone of sign makes you briefly doubt your suspicion that this is wacko policy.

**9:09** At the moment, traffic happens to be fairly light, so no one is driving in the breakdown lane — which is lucky because a broken-down car is parked in it, lights flashing, hood up, owner pacing nearby looking anxious. You don't blame him.

**9:12** Get off highway to reverse direction. Get on again; a speeding black car whips very close by you on left, honking. Yikes. It was traveling in the breakdown lane and crossed your entrance ramp at 75 mph just as you were feeling your way up to the highway.

Calm, official-sounding tone of sign makes you briefly doubt your suspicion that this is wacko policy.

**9:20** Traffic on 95 North is heavy, moving slowly, except in the breakdown lane, where it's whipping along. A car ahead of you is trying to exit — it needs to speed up to enter the rapid flow of the breakdown lane and somehow simultaneously slow down to safely navigate the curving mouth of the exit ramp.

**9:24** Move into breakdown lane, just to

see what driving there is like. A car comes up fast and close behind you, while a slower truck moves up the entrance ramp to your right. Without the usual cushion of the breakdown lane, the diagonals of the merger have been shaved off into an abrupt and unforgiving right angle. The truck merges in front of you and you brake to slow down, hoping the guy behind you has good reflexes.

**9:40** Back on the Mass Pike, heading east this time. A chance to experience Exit 17 in Newton/Watertown from the opposite direction. Fiendish. Two lanes of traffic on the exit ramp, merging into four lanes of fast-moving cars sweeping around from the left. You wait for a pause, venture out, and cross several lanes of traffic to get from right to left while other cars move across those same busy lanes from left to right. This is why you would not want to run with bulls in Pamplona.

**9:50** Pull off road, park at Whole Foods, get coffee, and wait for hands to stop shaking. Get back on road.

**10:32** In North End near Haymarket, trying to get on Storrow Drive heading back toward Cambridge. Remember you once succeeded at this, starting around here somewhere. Follow signs for 93 North, looking for more signs for Storrow Drive West. Suddenly you are on Zakim Bridge heading for Concord, New Hampshire. No idea how that happened (great view of Bunker Hill Monument, though).

**10:37** Get off in Somerville at Sullivan Square intending to get back on 93 going in the other direction. No apparent way back onto highway. No signage. Venture under highway and drive for a while, eventually discovering mess of unmarked roads. Decide to turn left on one of them — but it's a good thing you're stopped at a red light, because the road you were about to turn into suddenly fills with oncoming cars, thus revealing itself to be an unmarked one-way street.

**10:42** Take another unmarked left and hope for the best. Find yourself on the



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Monsignor O'Brien Highway, which may or may not be good but at least it gives you a moment to breathe. Science Museum is coming up on right. Nice cultural asset for city, but you vaguely remember it can be tough to drive around there though you can't at the moment remember exactly why.

**10:44** Oh yes — now you remember.

**10:45** You happen to notice a tiny "Storrow Drive" sign affixed to a utility pole, and move back into right-hand lane which has apparently resumed its original function as a highway traffic lane after a brief, quixotic interlude as an entryway to the museum parking garage.

**10:50** Getting off Storrow Drive. Unexpected fork in the middle of the exit ramp. Then a "Fenway" sign to the left, and a "Fenway Park" sign to the right.

**10:54** Heading up Boylston Street (you think) toward Museum of Fine Arts. Many cars honking. At you? At one another? Arrive at an intersection where

you know MFA is off to the left. A sign tells you MFA is on the right.

You decide to split the difference and go straight ahead.

## Heading up Boylston Street (you think) toward Museum of Fine Arts. Many cars honking. At you? At one another?

**10:56** Hospitals on all sides. You have no idea where you are or where MFA is, when you suddenly spot a small sign on the right telling you that the MFA is to the left.

**11:05** Turning from Fenway onto Charlesgate East. A friend told you that it was always a nightmare trying to get onto Storrow Drive from here, but you follow the signs and have no trouble. False alarm. Proof that while some of these scary spots are universally and unequivocally harrowing, some are more subjectively bad.

**11:10** Heading back to Cambridge across the Larz Anderson Bridge, and turning left onto Memorial Drive. Two lanes of traffic, but suddenly the right lane will fill up with parked cars. You know this and so you move into the left lane well before it happens.

But there's another car ahead of you in the right lane, a green station wagon with an out-of-state license plate, and you can't tell if that driver is aware of what's ahead. You have to drive as if that driver is innocent and about to be shocked out of his or her wits, at which point that car will suddenly swerve in front of yours.

Sooner or later he or she will notice those parked cars, but when?

Slow down. Drop back. Wait to see what will happen. ■

Joan Wickersham is the author of *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), a National Book Award finalist. Her website is [www.joanwickersham.com](http://www.joanwickersham.com).



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