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Hate Freeways? You Aren't Doing Your City Any Favors

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A growing literature trumpets the news that cities around the world are tearing down freeways.

The authors of these articles cite the Embarcadero Freeway along the waterfront in San Francisco; the elevated West Side Highway beside the Hudson River in lower Manhattan; the Central Artery in downtown Boston; and the Park East Freeway near the center of Milwaukee.

The most conspicuous recent case has been the Alaskan Way viaduct that runs along the waterfront in Seattle, and where demolition started in late 2011. Outside the U.S., examples include the Gardiner Expressway in Toronto and the Cheonggyecheon in Seoul.

The usual conclusion drawn from these accounts is that these urban highways were a mistake from the outset and that they should be torn down to create spaces for people instead of cars. Unfortunately this reading of the story mischaracterizes what is actually happening and draws the wrong conclusions for current public policy.

In fact, very few freeways are being removed. What is happening instead is that a few ramps and dead-end road segments are being removed, and small portions of freeways, particularly elevated highways in sensitive locations, are being rerouted into tunnels or transformed into boulevards. In Boston, for example, the elevated highway was replaced by a tunnel, which is also the plan for Seattle. In San Francisco and New York, they were replaced by surface boulevards.

Comparison to Rail

These changes are not new or revolutionary, and they certainly don't prove that the construction of urban freeways was inherently a bad idea. Exactly the same process happened with steam railroads in the 19th century and rapid rail transit in the early 20th century. Very few observers today would deny railroads and elevated transit lines allowed for an enormous growth in the mobility of people and goods and helped fuel a substantial rise in wealth. At the same time, these lines were often built cheaply and quickly without due consideration of the effect they had on the areas adjacent to them, the way they displaced homes and businesses, increased noise and pollution, erected barriers between communities and created safety hazards for vehicles trying to cross the tracks.

Over the last 100 years, a huge amount of money and energy has gone into minimizing these problems by eliminating grade crossings, decking over railroad lines, moving large freight yards farther out of town and replacing elevated transit with subways. In most cities, railroads have been tamed to the point where most residents, at least those who don't have to live adjacent to them or negotiate grade-level crossings, rarely think of them as over scale and hostile intrusions into the urban fabric.

Highways have brought many of the same benefits and most of the same problems. It is easy to forget today how difficult and wasteful of time and fuel it was to try to drive anything but short distances across any urban area before the interstate highway era. The new ring roads allowed long-distance traffic, especially trucks, to bypass the core, and express roads within the built-up area allowed residents access to a vastly increased number of jobs, retail establishments and places of recreation. It is not a coincidence that the creation of the national superhighway network coincided with one of the most impressive eras of economic expansion in American history.

Spawning Suburbs

In the case of city centers, it has become a cliché that the freeways allowed people and businesses to leave for the suburbs. It is true that freeways helped spawn suburban shopping centers and office parks, but it is also true that without these roads many downtowns might have fared even worse. As early as the 1920s, outlying business districts, like Englewood and Uptown in Chicago or Hollywood and Glendale in Los Angeles, were already starting to draw a substantial amount of business away from the old downtowns.

That is why central-city advocates pushed so hard to bring express roads into the very heart of the city after World War II. By radiating from this core, the highway network did a great deal to keep downtowns at the center of urban transportation systems even in the face of new hubs like airports.

The urban freeway did bring with it undeniable problems, almost all of them similar to those created by the railroads, and after the initial burst of urban highway building in the 1950s and '60s there was a sharp reaction.

The most famous early anti-highway agitation was the campaign against freeways in San Francisco starting in the 1950s and specifically against plans for the Embarcadero Freeway, which would have cut off increasingly gentrifying neighborhoods from the waterfront. Several freeways were removed from the city's transportation plan, and construction on the Embarcadero Freeway was stopped dead in its tracks. After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the small remaining portion was demolished and replaced by a boulevard.

Highway revolts elsewhere were also successful in stopping projected freeways, often the ones that would have gone through the most affluent areas of American cities. These anti-highway movements, like the protests that accompanied the construction of public housing, were partly based on self-interest and not-in-my-backyard sentiments. They also pinpointed real problems. A great many of the roads did create social and environmental problems.

Repair, Don't Remove

In response, engineers and transportation planners started to create more sensitive highway designs. By the time many of these new proposals were made public, however, sentiment had swung so far that even these greatly improved proposals -- such as revised plans for the Crosstown Expressway in Chicago or Westway in New York -- were defeated.

Although conspicuous, the pieces of freeway that are now being replaced or removed are quite small. The vast majority of the urban freeway network still stands because these roads have done what they were supposed to do, carrying heavy traffic that otherwise would need to thread its way through city streets.

There is no practical replacement for them. Outside of the central areas of New York, Chicago and a few other cities, public transportation carries only a tiny percentage of trips in any American metropolis. Short of massive rearrangements of our urban fabric and dramatically higher densities, neither public transportation, bicycles nor walking can replace the automobile. Our urban areas are just too large, and urban dwellers too unwilling to give up the enormous benefits that automotive mobility has given them.

Chicago's Experience

For all these reasons, while some segments of freeway are coming down, in other places incomplete pieces of the highway system are being slowly filled in or new roads proposed. Stopping the Crosstown in Chicago in the 1970s, for example, did very little to help the neighborhoods through which it was supposed to pass.

These neighborhoods continued to lose population and jobs. Traffic was instead funneled onto the overcrowded freeways that run immediately adjacent to the Loop. Not surprisingly, there have been a number of calls in recent years to create some kind of high-volume road along the old Crosstown alignment.

The replacement of urban freeways with less intrusive roadways is something that should be widely reported and celebrated. New, less expensive methods of tunneling, quieter and safer vehicles, and rising land values in reviving central cities all point to an era in which the urban freeways of the postwar years can be tamed to create the cleaner, healthier city that everyone wants. Characterizing the current movement as any kind of wholesale removal of urban freeways, however, is inaccurate and demonizing them as inherently a bad idea, is counterproductive.

It's time to end the freeway revolt and push for policies that will expand mobility of all kinds, while reducing the detrimental side effects.

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