THE PERFECT COMMUTE

Tearing Down an Urban Highway Can Give Rise to a Whole New City

ALEX MARSHALL
April 20, 2014

I'm standing in the middle of a five-mile linear park in downtown Seoul called Cheonggyecheon. Around me, children play and laugh beside a man-made gurgling stream, which includes remnants of the natural one that used to run here. This is the new reality created in the mid-2000s, when Seoul tore down an elevated, interstate-style highway built in the late 1960s through the heart of downtown.

A before-and-after shot of Cheonggyecheon. Image courtesy of Reuters (left); Bankoo/Shutterstock.com (right)

The highway removal and park creation were part of a series of changes that widened sidewalks at the expense of car lanes, turned a huge traffic circle into a circular green park, instituted a public bicycle system, reorganized bus lines, and improved and expanded an already excellent subway system (including retrofitting lines with glass platform screening doors and linking it to buses with a unified payment system). Now visitors to Seoul experience a very different city, one focused on walking, biking, and public transportation rather than cars.

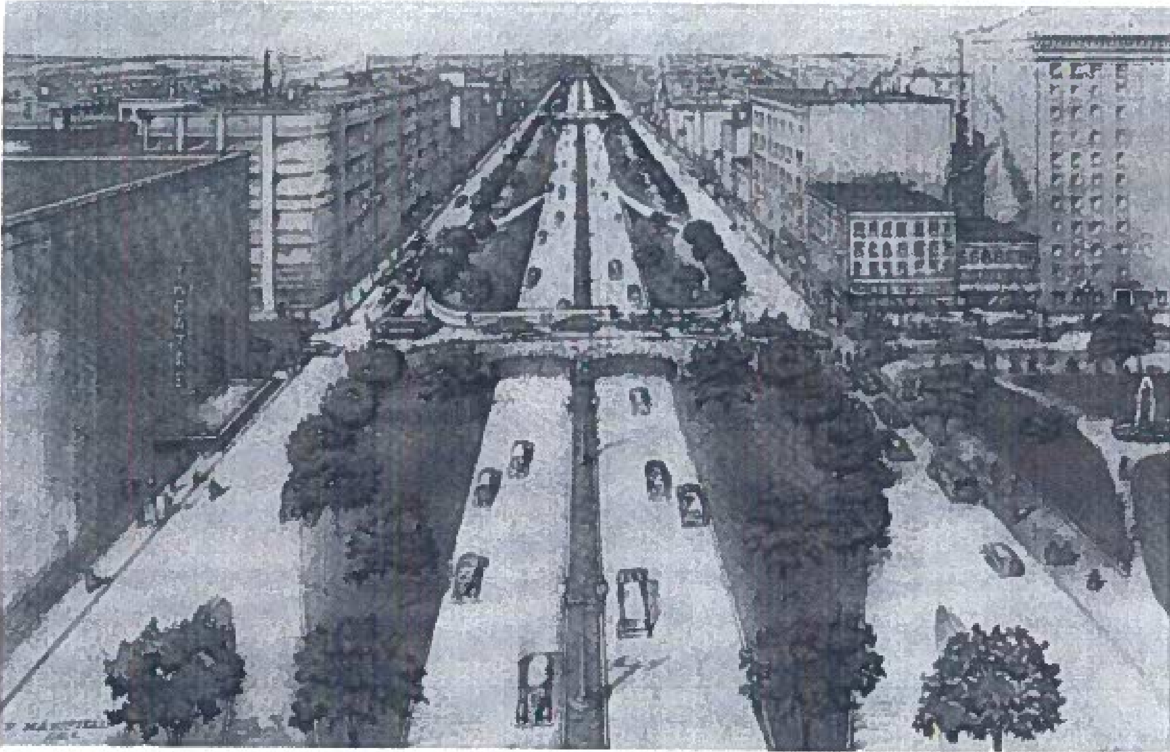
How getting from here to there is changing forever.

This transformation in Seoul represents the drive to reorient cities toward people. As depicted in the recent and excellent documentary film *The Human Scale*, it's a movement that now stretches from Melbourne to New York City, from Copenhagen to Chongqing. It means restoring streets and sections of cities that were lost to car-oriented changes. It also means new changes — such as public bike programs, municipal broadband, and market-oriented parking — that were not around a century ago.

Part of this movement is tearing down or substantially modifying what I call "apple corer" highways, those that tear directly into old city centers and were mostly built in the first few decades after World War II. Portland, San Francisco, and Milwaukee have torn down some. Other cities like Syracuse are considering it. And as Seoul shows, it's not just an American phenomenon.

There are those, such as my friend and old colleague Earl Swift, who say urban highways are here to stay. They carry too many cars to be removed, says Swift, and hey, people love their cars! But these tear-downs are part of a package of changes to make cities more livable and people-centered. These new changes can be seen as a course-correction to what cities did to themselves in the 20th century to accommodate cars.

It's also helpful to realize that these city-stomping highways were never on solid policy ground. Swift says inner-city highways trace back conceptually to the seminal 1939 federal report, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*. My favorite illustration from that report shows a multi-level set of roads, including a sunken highway, plowing through Parisian-looking blocks of an old-style urban city. The series of surface and sunk lanes are probably a thousand feet wide. But only a few cars roll on them, (hey, traffic's no problem!) and there is not a parking lot in site. Walking across this moat is inconceivable.



Courtesy of Toll Roads and Free Roads.

All of these features point to conceptual flaws at the heart of the original interstate program. I live within a few blocks of one of these sunken highways — the Prospect Expressway in Brooklyn that master builder Robert Moses bore right through a neighborhood of row-houses — and it's a hellish environment.

A few keen observers realized this way back in the 1950s. Soon after Congress approved the Interstate Highway Act, people began opposing the part of it that prescribed highways through cities. Swift describes this well in his excellent book, *The Big Roads*. The always astute Lewis Mumford, author of the prophetic 1958 article "The Highway and the City", called the inner city highways something that would create "a tomb of concrete roads and ramps covering the dead corpse of the city." San Francisco halted the Embarcadero and several other highways in 1959.

Perhaps most significantly, President Dwight D. Eisenhower tried to stop the apple-corer highways once he realized they were in the plan that flew under his name. Eisenhower's Commerce Secretary, Frederick H. Mueller, suspended work on the city highways while Eisenhower's public works coordinator, General John S. Bragdon, attempted to redirect highways around or beside cities. This effort was for naught, but it remains telling.

History aside, there are several reasons why it's wrong to believe that no alternatives exist to urban highways. First of all, traffic is not some sort of fixed volume. People drive cars, and if a highway isn't there, they may take a bus or bicycle to work. They may telecommute, or they may sell their suburban home and move to the city. There is no set number of driver, for which you build roads.

American cities are in the midst of a cultural shift away from the traditional love of cars.

Secondly, big apple-corer highways decrease mobility as much as or more than they increase it. The limited access highway usually cuts across a grid-style street layout, sealing off surface avenues like a blowtorch cauterizing veins. Tearing down a big-city highway may actually improve traffic because it gives designers a chance to break open surface streets and restore overall circulation.

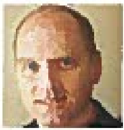
Finally, American cities are in the midst of a cultural shift away from the traditional love of cars. As detailed in a recent report by U.S. PIRG, Americans are driving fewer and fewer miles per capita every year. Even more significantly, getting a license is less of a rite of passage for young people. Instead, many are romanticizing the city and its urban ferment. When was the last time you saw a television show that portrayed the suburbs non-sarcastically?

All this means there is no fixed limit on the number of highways we can tear down or substantially modify. It depends more on political will and specific bureaucratic factors. Almost every major city has an apple-corer highway, sometimes several, that can be torn down, decked over or boulevardized.

Seoul shows how the process is both challenging and possible. When I was there in 2012, Kim Gyeng Chul, president of the Korea Transport Institute and one of the architects of the reforms, showed me around. He said the biggest opponents to tearing down the old freeway were the heads of companies headquartered in the high-rise buildings, who were driven straight to their offices in chauffeured cars. He also described how regular folks remembered when the highway was a symbol of modernity and progress. Through years of what sounded like Portland-style public meetings, opposition was won over or worn down, and the highway was torn down and the new park built. All this in just a few years. The mayor of the city at that time, Lee Myung-bak, went on to become president of South Korea in 2008 based in part on the success of his transformation of Seoul.

This is not to say that the only good highway is a dead one. But the ones that plow through neighborhoods and seal off waterfronts are truly destructive. And as Americans rush to embrace city living, I'm enough of a contrarian to remember the charms of the suburbs, which are increasingly a good deal (at least as far as home prices). But should we tear down the inner-city freeways? Yes. Can we? Yes again. What is needed is a game plan for doing it, and a coherent vision of the city that will emerge in their absence.

This article is part of 'The Future of Transportation,' an Atlantic Cities series made possible with support from The Rockefeller Foundation.



Alex Marshall is the author of several books, including *The Surprising Design of Market Economies*(Texas 2012) and *How Cities Work* (Texas 2000). He is a Senior Fellow at the non-profit urban planning group, the Regional Plan Association in New York City, and a regular columnist on transportation and economic development for *Governing* Magazine.