



Peer Reviewed

Title:

The Real Cost of Freeways [Forum]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 11\(2\)](#)

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Publication Date:

1997

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kz0r56n>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, cost, freeways, streets, Norman Bel Geddes, Milwaukee, John Norquist

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The Real Cost of Freeways John O. Norquist

Fifty-seven years ago, Norman Bel Geddes, the father of the interstate highway system, issued a warning. “A great motorway has no business cutting a wide swath right through a town or city and destroying the values there,” he wrote in his book, *Magic Motorways*. “Its place is in the country.”

Would that Bel Geddes’ admonition had been codified instead of the 90 percent federal highway funding share that pays for divided limited access roads that cities would never finance on their own. Highway contractors, state bureaucrats and pork-barrel politicians still work hand-in-hand to chop up cities with miles of high-priced concrete — confirming Bel Geddes’ warning.

Many Milwaukee residents, business owners and municipal leaders are opposed to the highway lobby’s latest plan to spend \$1.32 billion to reconstruct a multi-level interstate interchange and add lanes to a 13-mile East-West stretch of Interstate 94 from the heart of the city, alongside city neighborhoods and through homes and businesses to suburban Waukesha County.

Milwaukee has been down this traumatic road before. In 1966, the same disregard for the fabric of urban life led to the construction of another highway, Interstate 43, right through 8th and Walnut, the city’s African-American commercial and cultural hub.

Few thought twice about it. Certainly no one with power did. Lawyer and State Representative Lloyd Barbee picketed the first bulldozer in protest of what he called the “dirty ditch.” But his action was futile, and the once-proud “Bronzeville,” Milwaukee’s little version of Harlem’s 125th and Lenox, was removed without a trace, except for an annual remembrance in a nearby park. The Regal Theater, the Flame Night Club (where Duke Ellington once played after hours), and the tobacco shop and shoe repair with Representative Barbee’s office above, are forever gone.

Milwaukee’s Italian community, concentrated in the Third Ward just southeast of downtown, wielded more clout than Bronzeville. The Italians operated Milwaukee’s still vibrant wholesale food district. So when the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) decided to construct another Interstate leg, I-794, through the Third Ward, the Italian residents resisted, at least for awhile.

Ultimately the supporters of “progress” prevailed, but not until WisDOT and the county agreed to place a monument to the demolished Church of Our Lady of Pompeii, which had been the spiritual center and chief landmark of the Italian community. Two years after the elevated freeway was built, the neighborhood had declined so fast that the city contemplated turning the remains of the Third Ward into a pornographic “combat zone.” Happily, that plan failed, and today the Third Ward prospers, except for those portions next to the noise and smell of the freeway, where most buildings have crumbled or been razed for surface parking lots.

The lesson taught by the losses of these neighborhoods is that cities are devalued by the freeways meant to enhance them. Cities thrive on the mingling of ideas and cultures that, in turn, spawns innovation and builds our economy. The divisive physical design of freeways works against this valuable process.

Some argue that more freeways reduce congestion by moving vehicles faster. What they

fail to take into account is that freeways induce more and longer trips until so many more people drive that congestion and pollution become worse than ever.

Highway proponents argue, often successfully, that more roads are the only practical option; that rail cannot be considered as an alternative because it is rail is old-fashioned, is not flexible enough, costs too much and is too late, since urban sprawl is already the reality.

This ignores the fact that when roads become congested, buses stop too, whereas a rail transit system can move large numbers of people calmly and efficiently on its separate right-of-way. It gives this choice to a certain number of people who will change transportation modes immediately when transit becomes available. More important, people who have not yet developed transportation habits will have the opportunity to build transit into their lives. They can choose to live near a transit line, choose not to spend money on that second car, or choose the compact neighborhoods that transit tends to generate.

In most American cities, including Milwaukee, rail transit is gone, but where it still exists — Boston, Portland, Atlanta, San Diego and elsewhere — you'll find viable downtowns and lively neighborhoods.

Rediscovering the value of avenues, boulevards and streets is another alternative to freeway building. Unlike freeways, which only function to carry vehicles, an avenue adds value to the city. If the avenue is built to meet a variety of public and private needs, land values along and near it tend to increase. Milwaukee's Forest Home Avenue, the Bronx's Grand Concourse, L.A.'s Wilshire Boulevard and Chicago's Michigan Avenue have benefited from great investment and impressive increases in property value.

"Freeways" are not only of limited use but are expensive and elaborate. Milwaukee's Marquette Interchange, designed in the 1950s and built in the '60s, cost \$81.7 million to build (in today's dollars that would be \$378.6 million). Rebuilding it to today's standards is estimated to cost up to \$460 million — only 30 years after the "freeway" was constructed. The rest of the system needs to be replaced, too. So this gift of the federal government joins many other federal gifts that never stop costing.

ISTEA, assuming that it's reauthorized, should shift more money into rail, bus and other transit options that genuinely give all residents, visitors and workers real transportation choices. Cities and especially the low-income residents clustered in core neighborhoods need options that will help get them to jobs that are moving to the suburbs. Highway expansions paid for with federal funds that cater to suburban sprawl may doom the success of welfare reform if transit for the unemployed is not a top federal priority.

What cities need is choice, options and local authority to spend a fair share of federal transportation funds that will enrich cities and their surrounding neighbors. Portland and Toronto, with their balance of rail and roads, have shown us that Bel Geddes was right, and that it is not too late to look to him for guidance. But disregarding his wisdom will only fuel the futile attempt to build our way out of congestion, using the public's money to hurt cities, where much of that very money is generated.

—John O. Norquist, in his ninth year as Mayor of Milwaukee, is a board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism.

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